

APRIL 2026

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CONVENTO DAS BERNARDAS

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IN THE CITY OF TAVIRA, A STREET BEARS THE NAME OF PORTUGUESE ARCHITECT EDUARDO SOUTO DE MOURA. IT'S NOT JUST ANY STREET, BUT THE STREET THAT RUNS ALONGSIDE ONE OF HIS MOST REMARKABLE RESTORATION PROJECT, THE CONVENTO DAS BERNARDAS

Words: WILL KÖHLEN



THE FORMER convent, once home to the Cistercian Order, embodies more than five centuries of layered history. Commissioned in the early 16th century by Manuel I of Portugal, it grew to become the largest convent complex in the Algarve. For over 300 years it functioned as a religious and communal residence for Cistercian nuns. These women were not only devoted to spiritual contemplation but also gained regional renown for their artisanal production – particularly egg-based sweets and toffees – as well as small religious objects.

Architecturally, the Convent adhered to the principles typical of Cistercian design: sobriety, clarity and geometric discipline. Its square plan, organised around cloisters and a central church, reflected the order's emphasis on enclosure and introspection. The spatial experience was one of quiet rhythm and controlled light, where architecture reinforced a life of contemplation. Like much of Portugal's built heritage however the Convent did not escape the catastrophic impact of the 1755 earthquake. While Lisbon bore the brunt of the devastation, the shockwaves reached far into the Algarve, severely damaging Tavira and its surrounding structures. The Convento das Bernardas was partially destroyed; its carefully ordered geometry disrupted by the forces of nature.

And yet, even in ruin, fragments of its former grandeur endured. Most notably, the monumental entrance portal – executed in a late Gothic or Manueline idiom – survived both

the earthquake and subsequent transformations. To this day, it remains a defining architectural gesture, mediating between the building and the city, and standing as a silent witness to centuries of change.

From sacred space to industrial machine

After the dissolution of religious orders in Portugal in 1834, the Convent entered a radically different phase of its existence. Sold at public auction, it was acquired by an industrial entrepreneur who converted the complex into a pasta factory. The rhythms of monastic life – once defined by prayer and silence – were replaced by the mechanical cadence of production. Spiritual labour gave way to industrial utility.

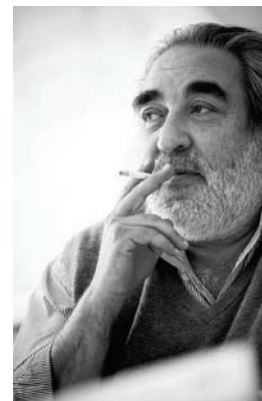
Over time, however, the building fell into decline. Its vast spaces, once carefully maintained, became increasingly dilapidated. Eventually, the property came into the hands of the development company Entrepots, which recognised both its historical significance and its latent architectural potential.

Rather than opting for demolition or superficial renovation, the developers chose a far more ambitious course. They commissioned architect Eduardo Souto de Moura – already internationally acclaimed – to undertake the restoration and adaptive reuse of the complex. The task was to transform a centuries-old convent into a contemporary residential ensemble of 76 apartments, ranging from compact studios to generous three-bedroom units, while preserving the building's historical integrity and adding a new architectural layer. The project was completed in 2012 and sales began. In addition to the apartments, the complex has two swimming pools, one of which is a saltwater pool in the courtyard.



Everywhere you look there is an architectural triumph that has taken an ancient property into modern day life, while always respecting the past and the features that represents. The Convento das Bernardas is the work of Pritzker Architecture Prize winner, Eduardo Souto de Moura





Eduardo Souto de Moura earned the European Prize for Architectural Heritage Intervention in 2017, confirming the project's status as a benchmark in adaptive reuse.

Architecture as dialogue

What architect Souto de Moura achieved here is extraordinary. Despite the substantial interventions required to meet contemporary standards of living, he succeeded in preserving the introspective, almost monastic atmosphere of the original structure.

Openings are inserted with surgical precision into the thick masonry walls, allowing natural light to penetrate deep into the interior without undermining the sense of enclosure. Circulation spaces unfold with a quiet logic, while materials are used with a restrained elegance that enhances rather than competes with the historic fabric.

The newly-added wing, facing the market side of Tavira, is a particularly subtle intervention. Rather than asserting itself, it aligns harmoniously with the existing structure, echoing its proportions and material language while clearly belonging to the present. The dialogue between old and new is handled with exceptional sensitivity – neither nostalgic nor aggressively contemporary.

It is hardly surprising that Souto de Moura was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2011, often referred to as the Nobel Prize of architecture. His work is consistently characterised by restraint, contextual awareness, and a profound understanding of materiality – all qualities that are fully evident in this project.

A cinematic courtyard

At the heart of the complex lies a courtyard that feels almost cinematic in its composition. Moorish and medieval atmospheres intermingle around a lushly landscaped pool, framed by greenery

and slender palm trees. The space evokes the sensorial richness of an imagined Orient – something akin to the narrative world of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

This courtyard is both tranquil and theatrical: a carefully orchestrated environment in which history and imagination coexist. One of the most striking architectural moments occurs at its far end. Here, a precisely framed opening directs the gaze outward toward the salt flats – the salinas – where a solitary tree stands in quiet isolation. This subtle gesture transforms the surrounding landscape into an integral part of the architectural experience. The horizon becomes a living painting, constantly shifting with light and season.

Such refined interventions earned Souto de Moura the European Prize for Architectural Heritage Intervention in 2017, confirming the project's status as a benchmark in adaptive reuse.

Crisis and opportunity

For the developers, however, recognition came too late to secure immediate commercial success. The global financial crisis had severely impacted the real estate market, and sales of the apartments stagnated. Legal disputes with financiers further complicated the situation, bringing the project to an almost complete standstill.

Eventually, the bank assumed control of the remaining properties and relaunched them onto the market in 2017.

At that time, my wife and I were searching for a home in the Algarve. When a real estate agent introduced us to the complex, ►

we were immediately struck by its architectural quality. Yet the experience was not without its surprises. The interior dimensions – approximately 60 square meters – felt noticeably smaller than the exterior footprint of around 95 square meters, largely due to the convent's massive historic walls.

For us, at that moment, it proved just slightly too compact. And yet, the apartments were undeniably compelling: beautifully finished, intelligently laid out, and often featuring elegant mezzanines connected by sculptural staircases. For investors in holiday properties – or for those seeking a truly unique dwelling – this represented a rare and fleeting opportunity, the kind that presents itself perhaps only once in a lifetime.

Taming the 'Wild Animal'

In interviews, Souto de Moura has offered a revealing insight into his design philosophy, drawing an unexpected parallel with the German artist Joseph Beuys. He often refers to Beuys' 1974 performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which the artist spent three days enclosed in a gallery with a wild coyote.

Wrapped in felt and deliberately isolated from the outside world, Beuys sought to establish a relationship with the animal. By the end of the performance, the coyote was eating from his hand. For Souto de Moura, this serves as a powerful metaphor for architecture. A building, he suggests, is like a wild animal – something that must be approached with patience and understanding. It cannot be dominated; it must be "domesticated" through dialogue.

The Convento das Bernardas was, in his own words, such a creature: complex, unpredictable, shaped by centuries of history and decay. The architect immersed himself in the building, famously walking through its spaces at night, contemplating its atmosphere and, while smoking a lot of cigarettes, listening to what it demanded. Each architect, like each artist, develops their own way of taming the wild. 🐾

Will Köhlen, who writes regularly for AlgarvePLUS, worked as a consultant in architecture and urban planning in the Netherlands, Africa (Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and South Africa) and the Caribbean (St. Maarten). He now lives in Olhão and participated in the book The Smell of Olhão, which he produced together with Arthur van Amerongen, Edwin Hagendoorn and Nelli Konstantinova. The book, like his Cubist Architecture in Olhão and The Architecture of Olhão: Monuments, Modernist & More, is for sale in several shops in Olhão.

At architectouralgarve.com you can find information – in English and in Dutch – about architecture in the Algarve, with special attention to mid-century modernist architecture. You can also download Will's books and the Self-Guided Architecture Walking Tours that he offers through the app STQRY (currently there are nine tours including Faro, Olhão, Tavira, Vila Real de Santo António, Fuseta, Loulé and Portimão and one tour of Huelva in Spain).

A hidden world – and a nearby counterpoint

Today, visiting the convent is not entirely straightforward. Located near Tavira's market hall at the edge of the historic centre, the complex functions as a gated community. Access is typically restricted to residents and guests – unless, of course, one is fortunate enough to slip inside, as I once did. On that occasion, while showing the site to friends, we arrived at the closed gate just as a resident was leaving. The gate remained open just long enough for us to place a foot between it and quietly enter – a small, conspiratorial gesture that only heightened the experience.

Such improvisation is unnecessary, however, if one wishes to visit another remarkable architectural project nearby: the Biblioteca Municipal Álvaro de Campos. Designed by João Luís Carrilho da Graça, this building stands opposite the small chapel of Ermida de São Sebastião.

Constructed on a challenging triangular plot, once the site of Tavira's prison, the library integrates rather than erases the past. The original façade has been preserved and incorporated into the design, forming the boundary of a calming courtyard garden. The result is a building of quiet sophistication. Whitewashed walls, warm Corten steel, and carefully-composed outdoor spaces create an atmosphere of calm reflection. It is a place where architecture, memory, and daily life intersect.

There is something deeply poetic here. Surrounded by the remnants of confinement, one cannot help but reflect on the lives once lived within these walls – the 'caged' individuals who, like Beuys' coyote, underwent their own process of domestication before being released back into society. As you leave the library, do not rush. In the entrance hall, a discreet staircase leads to a large window that perfectly frames the Ermida de São Sebastião. It appears almost unexpectedly – a final, composed image, like a window into the world – offering a moment of quiet reflection before you step back into the city.

The Biblioteca brings together the old and the new, seamlessly

