



# The spirit of the Catholic *aggiornamento*: architecture, dialog and active participation

*El espíritu del aggiornamento católico: arquitectura, diálogo y participación activa*

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## RESUMEN

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council aimed, in the words used by Pope John XXIII, the *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church. The inseparable complementariness between the concept of resourcing and of openness to a new world led to a change of the paradigm of the *church temple* to the *house for the living stones*. It is in this context where it comes to light the opportunity to explore the contributions of two non-Christians architects: Aldo van Eyck, and Lina Bo Bardi. In their works and especially in their thoughts it is possible to recognize an elective affinity with the spirit of the Christian *aggiornamento*.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Historical Present, House of the Living Stones, Active Participation.

## ABSTRACT

El Concilio Ecueménico Vaticano II buscó —en las palabras utilizadas por el Papa Juan XXIII— el *aggiornamento* de la Iglesia Católica. La complementariedad inseparable entre los movimientos de refontalización y de apertura a un nuevo mundo dio lugar al cambio de paradigma del *templo eclesial* a la *casa de las piedras vivas*. Es en este contexto en el que entendemos la oportunidad de explorar las contribuciones de dos arquitectos no cristianos: Aldo van Eyck y Lina Bo Bardi. En sus obras —y especialmente en sus pensamientos— es posible reconocer una afinidad electiva con el espíritu del *aggiornamento* cristiano.

## KEYWORDS

Presente histórico, casa de las piedras vivas, participación activa.

## THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

In December 8th 1965 ended the Second Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church (1962/65) at the Vatican City State. The meeting aimed, in the words used by Pope John XXIII, the *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church. A new perception of the world and the purpose to adapt the tradition of the Church to the new conditions of our time, led to a change of the paradigm of the *church temple* to the *house for the people of God*.

In the foreword to the French translation of the Cardinal J.H. Newman (1801/90) sermons *Le secret de la prière*, Louis Bouyer writes in 1958: «Newman is the living example of a return to the sources that is being talked about so much these days and this should be, for the Christians, the secret of the unique modernity independent from any time changes: This or the essential, the eternal part of the faith, is endlessly renewed because we find it in its Spring and express it always in the same manner, directly to its contemporaries» (Gy 1995, 36).

Pierre-Marie Gy (1922-2004) relates the words of Newman to another formula from Yves Congar (1904/95), where the latter says: «The Christian tradition is the presence of a beginning in all its history (...) We could compare the tradition to a river that outpours from a fountain and immerses numerous countries; or also to a tree that grows and bears branches loaded with fruits: The more it rises towards the sky, the more it needs to cling to its roots» (Gy 1995, 36). Both formulas summoned by Pierre-Marie Gy reinforce the belief that one of the most important ideas of the Second Vatican Council is the inseparable complementarity between the concept of *resourcing* and of openness to a new world. The interdependency between these two concepts is opposed to a conception merely static of tradition. For Gy, the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council has, by its very nature, a place in the correlation between the time of the events and the time of mentalities, the short term and the long term.

The place of liturgy and its function within the living tradition is in the long term, and this is why, Gy believes, the reforms also need time «to assimilate simultaneously the multiple layers of liturgy and the experience of the Christians» (Gy 1995, 43). We permanently displace ourselves, Gy adds, between short term and long term, «between a world that changes quickly and the deep mentalities that do not change any

faster than before, nor can these change any faster» (Gy 1995, 43).

The relationship between the religious and philosophical concepts and the theoretical speech on architecture of the 20th Century has in itself the opportunity for an investigation. The emergence of a new thinking on religious architecture is also a consequence of the investigation made regarding the writings and works of non-Christian authors that met, in the 20th Century, the programmes and practices of the religious architecture of Christian tradition.

It is in this context that it comes to light the opportunity to explore the contributions of two non-Christians architects: Aldo van Eyck (1918/99) and Lina Bo Bardi (1914/92). In their works as in their words it is possible to recognize an elective affinity with the spirit of the *aggiornamento* set out at the Second Vatican Council. We need to understand the past in the light of the historical present, repeatedly said Lina Bo Bardi: «When facing the historical present, our task is to give shape to a new present, *a true one*, and to do so we do not need to have the deep knowledge of a specialist, but rather the ability to understand historically the past, to know how distinguish what will be of use for today's events. (...) In fact, the past does not exist, what exists is the historical present» (Rubino and Grinover 2009, 165).

The historical present, which is as unpredictable as the wind that blows wherever it wants, is opposed to a tradition built based on an exclusive interpretation of the history of man, of the architecture or of the Church.

To freeze history, to Lina Bo Bardi, is the same as «to coerce an epoch by imposing it embalmings of plaster and cardboard, it means to ignore the tiring and painful progress of mankind that the incompetence, the dilettantism and the ignorance reverse by kilometres each centimetre it manages to conquer forward» (Ferraz 2008, 11).

In a similar way, Aldo van Eyck became aware that the dialectic inherent to the polarities, such as past and present, classic and modern, constancy and change, simplicity and complexity, organic and geometric, constitutes the necessary condition for true development of the contemporary architecture. At the end of the XI CIAM Congress (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in 1959, at the Dutch city of Otterlo, Van Eyck summons three great traditions: classical, modern

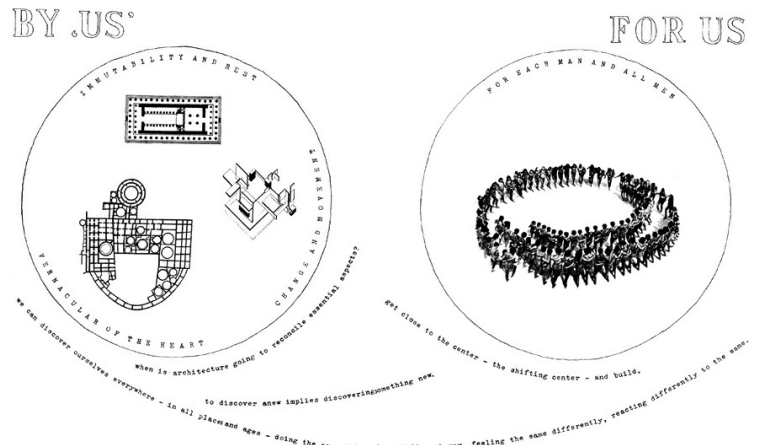


Fig. 01. Aldo van Eyck, *Otterlo Circles Diagram*, 1959.

Fig. 02. Men leaving Kano market (Nigeria) carrying their latest purchase: a new roof for their house, 1951.



and vernacular. The way he presents them, using a diagram that would become known as «Otterlo circles» (Fig. 01), implies the consideration that these three traditions should reconcile with each other in order to develop an architecture with a potential rich enough to face the complex reality of the contemporary life (Strauven and Ligtelijn 2008, 2). To the concept of classical, he associates the scheme of Parthenon, evoking the ideas of immutability and rest. To the concept of modern, he associates a project of Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), evoking the ideas of change and movement. And lastly, to the concept of vernacular of the heart he associates the plan of a small village in the Algerian desert evoking the idea of collective behaviour. The first circle, related to the phrase «By Us» articulates with a second circle which he identifies with the phrase «For Us». In this last circle, Van Eyck places the image of a tribal dance of the Indians Caiapó; a group living in the Brazilian Amazon. In the cyclic movement of the dance, Van Eyck identifies the idea that architecture deals with a complex and constant process of transformation of the human reality, i.e., «not only with what it is different from the past, but also with what remained the same» (Strauven 1998, 2).

Each place, each circumstance, each object, results of the transformation of other places, other circumstances and other objects, in a cyclical *continuum*. The Caiapó dance, the codomain of the three traditions, places architecture face to face with the invisible, overcoming the simple construction of circumstantial relationships. This domain is, for van Eyck, the starting point to understand architecture as an art to build places to the *homecoming*: the home, we add, of interiority, of hospitality, of community.

## THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING STONES

In an article of 1972, the Jesuit priest Antonio Lopes (1926-2007) recalls the *dream* of Karl Rahner (1904/84) where the Christians of the future would be *Christians in the diaspora*. In line with the conciliar conception of a poor Church, in service to the world, the Jesuit priest asked: «Is it our pastoral action yet addressing a society that is vertiginously dissipating or that has already disappeared in many sectors?» (Lopes 1972, 15). As opposed to the cyclical return of a symbolism excessively monumental —over bound to the object and with an ambiguous sacredness— emerges

the priority of the house for the *living assembly*, the place for the openness to the Other, endlessly close and endlessly different.

Understood by Philip Markiewicz as the centre line between the body and the cosmos, transforming the Earth in a habitable place, the architecture enables the retirement or the shelter of the world. It is the «place of this proximity (...), the alterity or the meaning of things, the Other» (Markiewicz 2006, 6-9).

The idea of a construction without a physical description, as opposed to what happened to the Jerusalem temple —thoroughly described in Exodus 26— is probably the biggest idiosyncrasy of the Christian *locus*.

The planning and statics of a building built with living stones remains, in its indetermination, a mystery (Fig. 02).

The same mystery of the words of Lina Bo Bardi who, at the end of the Second World War, states: «It was when the bombs demolished the buildings, and the buildings made by men, that we understood that the house must exist for the *life* of Man, it must serve, it must comfort; it must not reveal, in a theatrical display, the useless vanities of the human spirit» or even «the home is who inhabits it, it is man himself» (Ferraz 2008, 10).

In the small church conceived by Aldo van Eyck for the Moluccan community in Deventer (The Netherlands, 1986/92) and in the church of Espírito Santo do Cerrado conceived by Lina Bo Bardi in Uberlandia (Brazil, 1976/82), echoes the poetic expression of Markiewicz: «I like to let the old walls talk. Each stone, in its place, bears the plan of the architect. It achieves nobility by its placement in the building; but this added value comes from the initial qualities of wild stone of which it remains fully dependant. Besides, has it ever been a completely wild stone? I cannot stop thinking of the creation of the World, this Plan that was before all plans. The raw material is not an absolute beginning. Before this, there was a thought, a project, a wish. Is the architect —which Aristotle designates as the one who owns the knowledge of the end of the plan— more sensitive to perceive, at the moment of the creation, the invisible mystery of the Great Architect? (Markiewicz and Ferranti 2005, 18).

The experiences developed in the first half of the 20th Century, and where the liturgy reencounters in a creative way the architecture, reinforced the idea of the

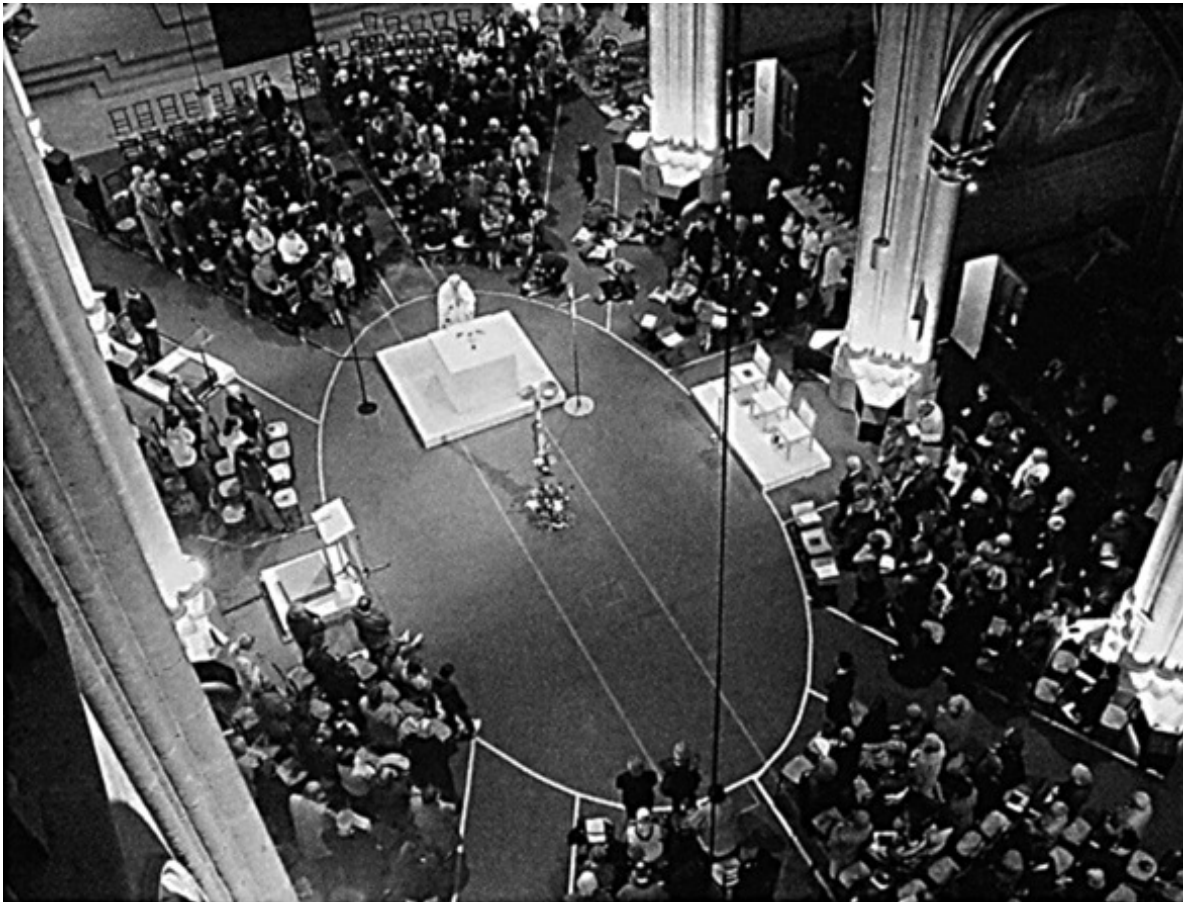


Fig. 03. Jean-Marie Duthilleul and Etienne Tricaud, St. Ignatius church (Paris), 2001.

primacy of the assembly, the primacy of men over the object. The idea of a temple, or of an exceptional building, meets in the metaphor of the *spiritual home* the catalyst of a new orientation. The return of the designation of the word *church* to the reunion of men around the idea of participation in the construction of a superior unity is perhaps one of the marks of the 20th Century religious architecture.

## ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Joseph Gelineau (1920-2008), a Jesuit priest who participated in the process of the liturgical readjustment of the church of St. Ignatius in Paris (Fig. 03), has devoted much of his investigation to the theme of the liturgical assembly and to the idea of the active participation in the celebration, two of the major aspects of the reform conceived in the Second Vatican Council. In a text, integrated in the magazine *Espace. Eglise, art et architecture*<sup>1</sup>, under the title *Quand les hommes se rassemblent*, Gelineau places himself before the complex problematic of the creation of a space for the celebrant assembly.

In a time of reforms and of *ressourcement* such as ours —Gelineau states— the temptation is to go back to the ancient forms understood as more pure, simpler and more authentic. However, he thinks, this is a simplistic vision of the problem. Nowadays it is not only necessary, but desirable, to search for more significant ways to refer to the human gestures and behaviours that give meaning to the rites, questioning through the historical present, the process of creation of a space for the liturgical assembly.

The way how we place ourselves before this problematic, without running out its complexity, through a set of questions elaborated by Gelineau (1985, 23), aims to propose a reflection to be developed:

—If the liturgical assembly, small or large, constitutes the first symbol of all celebration, in what way does space enables this kind of meeting?

—In the Liturgy of the Word, do we wish to depend on the word of a specialized protagonist, or do we wish to also actively participate in this process? How can we receive and give expression to a word that comes also from the outsider?

—If the orientation towards God implies a relationship with the invisible, the intangible, what kind of space enables this collective expression, by suggesting the «invisible presence of the receiver?»

—How do the present assemblies perceive (positively or negatively) the unquestionable exercise of a power, revealed, in space, the excessive bipolarization between the ministers of the cult and the rest of the community?

—Is the shared meal, in fact, the greatest symbol of the Christian cult? How can we make intelligible its symbolic dimension in liturgy when the disposition of the assembly in the Eucharist remains identical to the celebration of the Word; when the scale of the altar and of its placement evokes more the scenographic form than the shared meal or, as Gelineau questions, «when the preparation of the table for the meal is reduced to a set of mechanical gestures, almost practical?»

In November 2013, the 3rd International Conference on Contemporary Religious Architecture was held under the theme *Beyond the sacred building: architecture and evangelization*. The conference embraced a new model of participation, confirming the exercise of architecture as a territory of investigation. The challenge consisted in thinking and planning a small space of silence and prayer, adjustable to several urban circumstances. This place should foresee the possibility of receiving several kinds of celebration, with a program that we understood as open to ecumenicism. It should value the polyvalence, the mobility of the construction, as well as its iconic ability, rethinking the place of the religious architecture in the contemporary world.

Our proposal, thought in the form of a project (Fig. 04), reflected the doubts and the restlessness we felt as we approached these final considerations: «A place for quiet and silence. Can an object question human indifference? The metaphor of the world's assembly?» (Miranda 2013).

To conceive and to draw places for interiority, for hospitality and for community, open to the other, endlessly different but endlessly close, should fit the immeasurable love of the Christ who, in the thought of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922/75), is divine: «From a religious point of view, for me, who have tried to recover into my laicism the characters of religiosity, two naively ontological aspects are important: The humanity of Christ is summoned by an inner strength, by an invincible thirst for knowledge and for verifying knowledge, without fear of scandal and contradiction, which places the divine metaphor in the threshold of the *metaphoricity*, until it becomes ideally a reality» (Pasolini 2005, 272).



Fig. 04. Bernardo Pizarro Miranda, Chapel of the Blessed, 2013; project.





## NOTES

(1) Quarterly magazine, founded in 1977, published under the supervision of the French National Board for Sacred Art, issued by the Portuguese National Center of Liturgical Pastoral (CNPL). Its publication ended in 1983. The members of the editorial board were, among others, Joseph Gelineau, Jean-Yves Hameline (1931-2013) and Pierre-Marie Gy.

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## SOURCE OF FIGURES

Fig. 01. Strauven and Ligtelijn 2008.

Fig. 02. George Rodger (Magnum Photos).

Fig. 03. *Chroniques d'Art Sacré* 87 (2006).

Fig. 04. *Actas del Congreso Internacional de Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea* 3 (2013), [www.arquitecturareligiosa.es/index.php/AR/issue/view/5](http://www.arquitecturareligiosa.es/index.php/AR/issue/view/5).