



arquitectura, símbolo y modernidad

ARQUITECTURA, SÍMBOLO Y MODERNIDAD

Edición a cargo de
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Timelessness of symbolic space in religious buildings

Paula André; Fátima Filipe

In the first half of the twentieth century, Portuguese architecture was modern and traditionalist. Considering the international wave of modern architecture Portugal like other countries of Europe searched for a national architecture. The fundamentals and the tools to build a modern Portuguese architecture, as well as the intense debate around these two operative concepts that materialize into an exemplarily and symbolic space of modernity: the church of Fátima. In 1933 the Patriarchate commissions architect Porfirio Pardal Monteiro (1897-1957), the design of the new Church of *Nossa Senhora do Rosário de Fátima* to be built in the *Avenidas Novas* (new avenues) of Lisbon. For this project the architect Pardal Monteiro had the support of his colleagues Raul Rodrigues Lima (1909-1980) and Antonio Couto Martins (1897-1970) and two architecture students who worked in his studio: Faria da Costa and Fernando Batalha. For the constructive and iconographic program Pardal Monteiro had the support of the Benedictine monk Don Martin from the Mont-Cesar Abbey of Louvain, and also the collaboration of sculptors and painters that translated this church into a true "synthesis of the arts" according to the Corbusian description. The church structure built of reinforced concrete and lined with limestone and marble, assumes its volumes which are well established and accentuated by a flat roof deriving an influence from the church of Notre Dame de Raincy (1922-23) by architects Auguste and Gustave Perret. The architect Pardal Monteiro stated that he wanted to provide a service to the nation and national art, by conceiving a rigorous design based on tradition but a

progressive building representing the most advanced and technical possibilities of their time¹. The church affirms a deep constructive sincerity and “a scrupulous care to acknowledge frankly what is utility or necessity, and the concern of giving each useful and necessary element expression acknowledging her purpose with the elegance and the values from the aesthetical point”². Stil, the architect considered that he had designed a church that did not exclude certain traditional and local elements: wanting to make a “modern Portuguese church”³.

In 1933 the Government leader António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) in his speech at the inauguration of the National Propaganda Secretary, created with the goal to create, develop and promote one art with markedly national character, states that: “great mission holds about you the Secretary – even if only what interest is national, because everything that is national will interest you”⁴. Already in 1932, Oliveira Salazar, attaching great importance to architecture, looking for a new image of the regime, and investing in public buildings, stated that it would be an excellent time to give a certain unity to the official architecture. The modernist writer and journalist António Ferro (1895-1956), the conciliator of the modern with the traditional, *metteur en scène* of popular culture, who knew well the *mussolian* model, proposed the creation of a new style, unmistakable, but Salazar replied, “away from me the ridiculous pretense of creating a style or a style to inspire. I’ll be glad if the works are to be portuguese or simply beautiful...”. He complained that the portuguese architects strove not more on creating “a type of buildings, for public buildings, which is within our time, but simultaneously within our race and our climate”. Noted that the architects followed with “too much subservience, the tendencies from abroad with little concern to their adaptation to our environment”⁵. “O Século” newspaper releasing news of the building of the church, stated that it was the “first major religious building constructed in modern style in Portugal (...) the most bold architecture work of our time in Portugal, and the first that despite its modern structure corresponds inside, all the liturgical prescriptions `even considering that it was´ always

1. Porfírio Pardal Monteiro: “A Igreja Nossa Senhora de Fátima”, *Revista Oficial do Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos*, (Lisboa), nº 6, (Agosto / Outubro, 1938). p.192-211.

2. Memória descritiva, Processo de Obra nº 47 105, 1934, Arquivo Municipal de Lisboa.

3. *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. Nº 6, (Maio, 1934), p.89.

4. “António Ferro. Biografia”, in, *Fundação António Quadros. Cultura e Pensamento*. Acesso a 13.06.2014 [<http://www.fundacaoantonioquadros.pt>]

5. António Ferro: “Salazar princípio e fim” in, *Salazar*, Lisboa: Edições do Templo, 1978. p.203.

in the religious monuments that the civil and military architecture received inspiration”⁶.

But although in 1938 the Church of Fátima have received the Valmor award, its construction had generated controversy. The Lisbon Patriarch Cardinal Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira (1888-1977) by announcing the construction of a modern architecture church designed by an architect who had declared to be laic⁷ created a particularly active environment of rejection in the figures of the writer and lawyer Tomaz Ribeiro Colaço (1899-1965), President of the National Society of Fine Arts, colonel Arnaldo Ressano Garcia (1880-1947), the architect Raul Lino (1879 - 1974) and Oliveira Salazar who considered bold and uncharacteristic Church. To Tomaz Ribeiro Colaço the “New Church is ugly, very ugly. (...) We must say it quietly so that the error is not repeated”. Error accepted because the church had been erected in the “Avenidas Novas” (New Avenues) zone “of unbearable ugliness”⁸. In an open letter to the Patriarch Cardinal, Ribeiro Colaço said: “from the New Church is entirely absent the portugueseness - and because the beauty of any large building have always been, and they will be, essential characteristics certain obedience, certain interpretation, certain reflection, some imponderable fusion between the material volume that was erected and the climate, the atmosphere, the history, the language, the land, the colorful spirit of the nation where it was raised” . The Lisbon Patriarch Cardinal did however defend the work of the architect Pardal Monteiro in the *Revista Oficial do Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos* by stating:

“we desire to erect the new church of Nossa Senhora de Fátima, if it would satisfy these three conditions: be a Church; be a modern church; be a beautiful modern church. About being modern, we would not expect it to be anything else. To blindly copy from other art forms, would make the work artistic archeology, but certainly not living work of art. It is no wonder that artistic renewal in the new Church, is done amidst protests. We’re never introduced without the art forms, subject (as all that is human) to fatal changes of time”¹⁰.

6. Jornal O Século, 12 Outubro de 1938.

7. Pardal Monteiro invited the Belgian Monk D. Martin and his aide tried to be updated of liturgical renewal movements through the Renewal of Religious Art (MRAR).

8. Tomaz Ribeiro Colaço: “Arquitectura e Religião. Carta aberta de Tomaz Ribeiro Colaço ao Sr. Cardeal Patriarca de Lisboa” *A Arquitectura Portuguesa*, (Lisboa), III série, ano XXXI, nº 47 (1939), p.19-22.

9. Ibidem, p. 23.

10. “Cardeal Patriarca (D. Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira)”, *Revista Oficial do Sindicato Nacional dos Arquitectos*, (Lisboa) nº 7, (Novembro / Dezembro, 1938).p.186.

This debate would lead that the *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* magazine published the *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* Church, and the very Pardal Monteiro claimed that what "is most typically modern in the new church of N. S. de Fátima is not as many, if not almost all, suppose, its plastic expression but interpretation of the program, which may be aptly translated when the requirements of liturgical order for each of the elements are known that, under the functional point of view, makes up a church"¹¹, this is, reviving the modern, referring to the modern and portuguese.

To this environment of rejection, the use of reinforced concrete, consequent outward expression of the flat roof contributed greatly and was taken by the conservative sector of the regime and the church as a foreign symbol of modern architecture. In the first half of the twentieth century, the flat roof was the image and symbol of modern international architecture, this is, of the new architecture. His refusal and the use of a traditional pitched roof was understood as a conservative, nationalist and anti-modern attitude. In this context we find, first defendants of the flat roof, that enjoy the fresh air, the sun, good views, exercising, taking breakfast, dance. On the other hand, those who viewed the flat roof as meaningless to the current housing that had logic in southern countries, but did not make sense in Northern and Central Europe, where it is necessary to protect from rain, snow and ice. They also emphasizing the banality of horizontal coverage and refusing their systematic adoption. This demonstrates that modernism claimed the flat terrace as one identity element of architecture, that is going to be present either in the arguments to support or the arguments against, and the dilemma of the flat roof is directly related to the clash of modern architecture versus traditional and international architecture versus national.

Thomaz Ribeiro Colaço, considering the features of modern Lisbon had acquired a foreign character, stateless, asked: "how can we accept that in Lisbon and across the country that we stack up crates of Moscow, Munich, from everywhere less than Portugal?"¹². The critical to the import of foreign models and the fight against the architectural uniformity was also present in *Arquitectura Portuguesa* magazine, where we find this complaint:

11. Porfírio Pardal Monteiro, op. cit., p.192-211.

12. Ribeiro Colaço, *Arquitectura Portuguesa*, (Lisboa), nº 38, (Maio, 1938). p.9.

“the modernist architectural feature of the art, see a building in Paris, London, Moscow, New-York, Lisbon or Beijing, is seeing nearly a standard-type stabilized by routine, by plagiarism or by conventions that limit the ability to create and compose, following an individual expression. Smaller countries, like ours, are the most affected by the restriction of the medium and therefore we have not seen a feature creation that has not been imported from abroad”¹³.

But the truth is that this debate would lead to the following year, Colonel Arnaldo Ressano Garcia had manifested against the participation of great modern artists in the *Exposição do Mundo Português* and all were “advised” to produce portuguese art.

However, Pardal Monteiro considered that the modernity of the new church stemmed from the interpretation of the program, the requirements of the liturgical order that translated into the composition of the interior space, revealing an abiding pattern and continuity with tradition. The spacious interior of the church updates the basilical plan from the early Paleochristian era. For the architect that aspect of the project was the largest architectural problem that he had studied, not because of the complexity of the program, but by extraordinary simplicity and abundance of accumulated examples over two thousand years.

For the architect Pardal Monteiro, the challenge of the project of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Fátima, was also to be an exercise of thinking a symbolic and liturgical space, about the various historical examples of religious architecture that marked the different historical eras, an exercise of synthesis that resulted in the work built and launched the discussion on religious and on the modern architecture in Portugal.

The case of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Fatima demonstrates that the symbology of a religious space comes from the permanence of a character defined and established in paleochristian period and that became timeless. Is this timelessness, underlined by the architect Pardal Monteiro, which we intend to bring to today Lisbon.

So, this study case is an opportunity to analyse the continuity and timelessness of the morphology of the religious space. Our goal is

13. Axial: “A Liberdade na Arte”, *Arquitetura Portuguesa e Cerâmica e edificação Reunidas*, (Lisboa), Ano XXVIII, 3ª série, nº 9, (Dezembro 1935), p.9.

to advance this analysis by presenting an interrogative academic exercise of a project of a symbolic space with the challenges raised by the building of a church in the 3rd millennium.

Taking advantage of an exercise launched within the Final Project of the Master of Architecture of ISCTE-IUL, whose subject was *The Architecture and the City: What if the entire central area of the Portela Sacavém was destroyed by a disaster*, in 2014 Fátima Filipe projected a church (*Parish and Social Complex of Portela Sacavém*) to be built in *Portela Urbanization*. Portela Sacavém Urbanization is located on the outskirts of Lisbon, near the airport, and was built between 1965 and 1979. The author of the project was the architect Fernando Silva (1914-1983) that designed a satellite urbanization where he searched for ways to respond to modern life.

The project *Parish and Social Complex of Portela Sacavém* that we present, reflects the study and reflection on the symbolic space over the liturgical space, like the project of architect Pardal Monteiro for the church Nossa Senhora de Fátima. But in the case of the project that we have developed and present, given its hypothetical nature, was carried out a bit like the utopian projects of the architects of the Enlightenment, which developed projects as a pretext for an exercise in architectural reasoning. Thus, the project presented here also allows the questioning of various contemporary problems of the church of the third millennium and continue the discussion of the religious symbolic space.

The interest and curiosity about the development of the hypothetical design of a symbolic space, begins with the interest in the history of religious architecture, that is always changing through ambiguity and continuity. The draft of a symbolic space par excellence such as the religious space requires a thorough simultaneous knowledge of their past and the present, in terms of architecture and also liturgy.

The liturgy, with the passage of time was adapting and modifying itself according to the evolution of society, while looking for elements that express the sensible world and “help in living it together”¹⁴. The developed project is based largely in parochial and social services, as more Catholic religious spaces of the twenty-first century based on their community service, not only in religious act, but mostly in

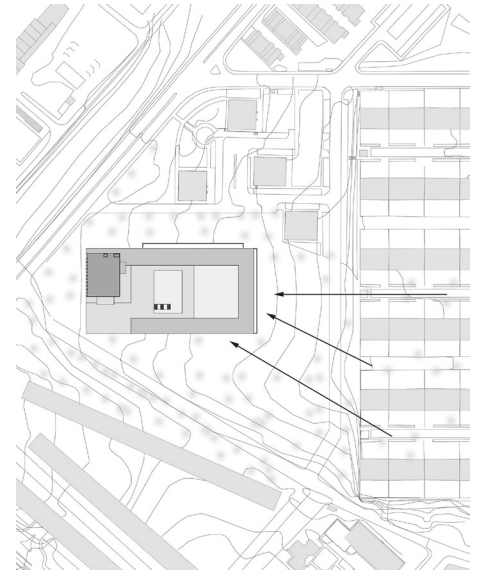
14. “Artes menores ao serviço da liturgia”,
Movimento de renovação da arte religiosa:
Boletim. p. 1

supporting society and its parishioners. This social and community aspect of religious spaces, which has emerged in the twentieth century, comes also in support of the Catholic religion, trying to evict a non religious act from the society, but instead, has it's support on their various stages of life. The religious act not only passes the symbolism of the act of celebration, but also for the symbolism of solidarity and the participatory act in a society and community.

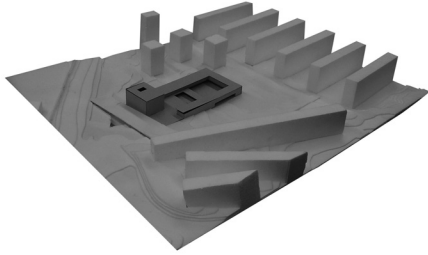
In the third millennium, the act of solidarity and participation to the community in different areas has a very symbolic character to the population, so it has an impact on daily life. It has a practical symbolism, mutual support, humanitarian and real, unlike the religious symbolism of space, a symbolism of faith, transcendence, unrealistic, theoretical and psychological, sensory symbolic facts, in which increasingly denotes a decrease in population and believer of Christian faith, and the social and community aspects also help to create a more believing community in Christian symbolism.

The site setting of the Parish and Social Complex of Portela Sacavém (Fig. 1) is sustained in the orthogonal language of urbanization, creating continuous lines from the residential buildings, where the extension of a void between them ends at the beginning of the public building. It is envisioned that the entire project is surrounded by a green structure that separates a little, the religious building of its surroundings and attempts to emphasize a certain character of internalization, trying to break some visual relationships.

The program is divided, in a general way into areas of social support, parish and church spaces, and distributes mainly on two levels (Fig. 2). According to this phase of the exercise, the first level is the arrival of the parish / community center that is facing towards Portela. On this level most public program develops. The exterior is composed of two cloisters, a first more exteriorized to stay and pass, that is open to the exterior through two of its sides, which are marked by a rhythmical sequence of blade pillars that allow permeability and at the same time block certain angles of view. It is from this first cloister that views towards the rooms of sunday school and youth activities. The second cloister is where is the main entrance and where it's possible to access the upper level by an exterior staircase. This cloister



1 Site setting of the Parish and Social Complex of Portela Sacavém [Drawing made by Fátima Filipe, June, 2014]



2 Parish and Social Complex of Portela Sacavém model [Model made by Fátima Filipe, April, 2014]

is marked by round pillars that punctuate a rhythm. The distribution of spaces in the cloister where the project is rhythmically referenced is a symbolic act that reflects an element that accompanies various stages of religious architecture, where the cloister is a timeless topic that was being discussed primarily in convent projects. The pillar / column that continually have structural function but at the same time marking paths, enclose spaces, appeared before the early Christian buildings, are also timeless elements used in architecture. On the second level are the most private and administrative activities on which stands the church. The building forms a U shape, where the Church is at the highest point and at the end of one arm and its volumetric stands out from the remaining set.

One of the principles of this exercise is that the building turns on to itself, where the exterior walls don't have visible openings. All the openings that can be observed are facing inwards. The northern facade openings were thinking to input light and ventilation, but the same are concealed by an indented plane.

In 1957, according to a ministry of religious art, published in the 4th *Boletim do Movimento de Renovação de Arte Religiosa* offprint, Lisbon Patriarch Cardinal Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira said that despite various disagreements with modern architecture in religious space there are values that can say "modern". These values are most notable from notions of functionality of the church space, and based on the response of the temples to the convenience of the faithful, so that they have better vision and can participate in the religious act. According to the statement quoted in the report "may a a modern church shine by the beautiful simplicity of its lines, but which should escape bad taste in ornamentation and avoid the reflection of egligence in its design and implementation"¹⁵.

Regarding the actual exercise of the church space, its higher volume is idealized for different reasons: to stand out from the rest of the project, to be seen from a long distance, so that the interior space is amplified, and finally acquiring a monumental spatiality that rises towards heaven. Opposite the entrance is planned a reception area and a churchyard. The shape of the church is based on two of its sides in a mirror of water whose entrance is created

15. "Pastoral sobre Arte Sacra", *Movimento de renovação da arte religiosa: Boletim*. Separata p.3

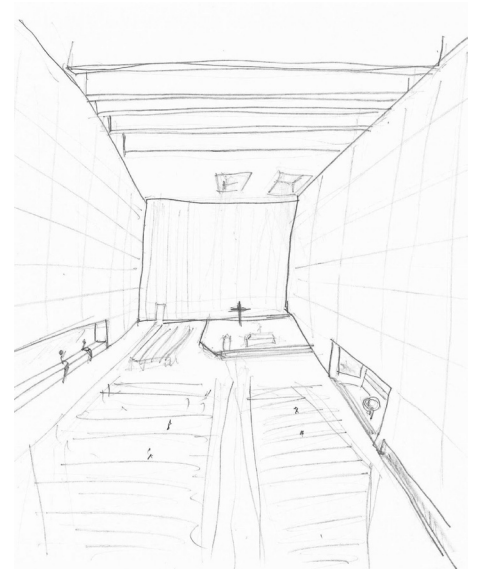
by a wide walkway above it. Water is used here as an expression of purification on the way to the liturgical act, and a symbol of transcendence, due to its floating appearance.

The present baptistery is characterized by an exterior volume regard to the main volume nearby the water and located on a lower level of the church floor. This looks for a visual relationship with the water level, since water is the element that characterizes the baptismal act, its visual relationship is also done with the altar and the assembly because of its great symbolic importance that it has in Catholicism, being separate but at the same time part of the whole space.

The supporting spaces such as the sacristy are in the north, where the ceiling height follows the volume of the parish complex. The interior of the Church is characterized by a rectangular shape where the altar is on the opposite side of the entrance.

Observing different projects from different eras of religious architecture, it is conclusive that an element that has always been found in continuity and at the same time is timeless is the symbolic center of the religious space. Despite the geometric center of the religious space plans that vary according to the project, they symbolically center towards the unique and exclusive symbol of all times of religious architecture, the altar. The altar should be the focal point of any space. A basic principle of the organization of religious space, which has higher exaltation in the modern movement and that has been advocated since the Second Vatican Council, is the disposition of the assembly “around” the altar, to receive the same and giving faithful good visibility and greater interaction during the liturgical act, an opposite principle to the longitudinal plan. The altar is the main element of the religious space where everything comes from and where everything converges. The altar is the place where the faithful surround and are distributed to participate in sacred office. The modern concern is based on “giving all the importance and prominence to the altar (with the shrine), making it truly the vital center of the church, while on the other hand, bringing closer the assembly of the faithful and the church to it”¹⁶.

Cardinal Manuel Cerejeira stated that “the most beautiful architecture is one that performs its function with more sincerity,



3 Church of Portela Parish and Social Complex [Sketch made by Fátima Filipe, June, 2014]

16. Ibidem, p.3

more drive, more simplicity". Religious space should be designed with simplicity but with unity, where materiality is the key to generate a space with symbolic nature that welcomes the faithful, that shows a noble space that represents their religion, "the sense of permanence is reflected in the appearance of the building and is enhanced by appropriated choice of material elements, that should convey an image of durability"¹⁷. The chosen materials for the materialization of space are reinforced concrete which gives strength and timelessness, wood that will provide comfort and welcome the faithful while stone and iron, provide a character of nobility and strength. Another essential element to the symbolic load transmitted in the religious space is light. This "is not only a symbol of ascension, but also of the Divine presence. The idea of God as light is old and appears in Christian tradition through Neoplatonism"¹⁸. So one can understand that the light is a timeless and continuity in the design space of the religious element. The light in this hypothetical space will be present at a lower level on the sides of the church, but its peak is the overhead light that propagates on the altar area, increasing the symbolic and divine nature of it. (Fig. 3)

Despite the religious space being in continuous change according to the stylistic changes, society changes and religion itself, there are elements that are timeless and remain in permanent continuity in the projection of catholic symbolic spaces that remain in the architectural thought in the third millennium.

17. Diana Roth. A luz natural como elemento compositivo na arquitectura contemporânea. p. 77

18. Ibidem, p. 9 - 10