

Modern architecture as a current place for the encounter with God Eloi Aran. T113-Taller d'arquitectura. Living Stones. Zurich. 4/5/19

Summary

"How can a modern church be the witness of the faith if it is "uglier than a sin"? The purification of modern religious architecture has "thrown out the baby with the bath water"? If the new houses of modern architecture were considered "machines to live", can we read works such as "Notre-Dame du Haut", by Le Corbusier, as "machines to pray"? These are some of the questions that we will answer in discussing some examples of modern and contemporary religious architecture."

Text:

Good afternoon to all of you, thank you very much for having invited me to the "Living Stones International Camp." I often say that I am an architect, theologian and educator, but, first and foremost, I think I am a "pastoralist", in the sense that I try to respond to the invitation in the letter from Saint Peter saying "Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope "(1Pe 3,15). That is why I especially acknowledge and feel particularly close to the work carried out by Living Stones. It is one those organizations that, if it did not exist, we should have to create it.

I have known the previous speaker, Bert Daelemans, for a long time. In fact, he is also co-author of my first book on modern religious architecture: "Towards an architecture of hope." Having talked to him to avoid duplicating concepts and examples, we have decided to adjust our presentations. Therefore, the announcement and title of this communication will focus on the experience developed with my partners in T113-Architecture Firm in Barcelona. I have chosen seven representative examples which have been named according to a topic of interest. I think that, if you accompany me with your attention in the analysis of the projects, you will have more tools to communicate the value of the modern sacred heritage to your listeners.

1_ Search for a new Court of the Gentiles. Reform of the access chancel to the Basilica of Santa Maria del Pi.

We begin this testimonial route with the reform of the access chancel to the Basilica of Santa Maria del Pi, one of the referents of gothic architecture in Barcelona. When we access a church, we often find that we have to "put ourselves in the closet", that is to say, we have to go through a wooden element that acts as a visual and sound barrier, but that does not serve as an access experience nor does it give visibility to the temple. This project came to our firm after another firm of architects had proposed an intervention closer to a chancel of a bank office or shopping centre rather than of a church. It lacked a reflection on how to access a temple and what message to convey.

The idea of the project was to create a narthex space, as if it were the "Court of the Gentiles", taking advantage of the structure that separated the space under the choir of the church from the main nave. This space acts as a "pillow" between the sacred space and the profane, allows controlled access to the temple, gives visibility to the interior of the temple and lodges, in a new showcase, to the "gegants del pi" (which are some very important figures of the city folklore).

Another aim of the proposal was to make a catechism about the three initiation sacraments of Christianity, just at the entrance of the temple. On the left there is the baptism chapel, on the right you can access the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament and, beneath the choir, visible from the street and extending its arms throughout the space, there is a great cross of pine wood that refers to the name of the temple and the sign of chrismation in the sacrament of confirmation. Thus, the way to access the temple is also a catechesis on how to access the Christian faith and, also, how Christianity is related to the popular culture of the place.

2_ Transform the concrete into a window beyond. Reform of the parochial church of SaintJohn The Baptist in Reus, Tarragona

The second case deals with a neogothic church that was left unfinished due to the Spanish Civil War. The last section of the main nave was walled until the beginning of the nineties, when a modern intervention was made that surrounded the temple with a new construction of reinforced concrete, leaving the church as a kind of wreck of the past. As a result, a large concrete wall appeared as the culmination of the inner vision of the temple, perforated by a small opening as if was an apse that was covered with a curtain because, surprisingly, it was used as a storage space.

The parishioners complained and said that they could not pray facing a "wailing wall", so the intervention consisted in providing a proper story to the temple, transforming the concrete wall into an open window towards the transcendent and the hope. The previous hole has been hidden by a modern altarpiece with scenes from the life of Saint John the Baptist in panels that recalled the vertical composition of the Gothic. Later on, Josep Minguell, the specialist in mural painting who had designed the altarpiece, was asked to transform the background into an immense desert as a metaphor for the life of the saint. The painting does not deny the concrete, in fact the pieces of the joints can still be seen, but it transforms it.

From this project, we come to the conclusion that postmodern man still needs mediations. A smooth wall, as Romano Guardini said about the church of Corpus Christi designed by Rudolf Schwarz in 1928, may be silence ... but this silence must somehow be "inhabited". In this project, we learned the importance of directing or orienting the celebration and Christian prayer, a fact that modern architects sometimes do not take into account.

3_ “When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door”. School oratory reform for Jesuits-Clot, Barcelona.

What we learnt from the previous case helped us to design a small school oratory for a school of the Society of Jesus in Barcelona. On this occasion, I got inspired by a fragment in a writing of the philosopher Simone Weil about the Christian meaning of the studies that reads as follows:

"The key to a Christian conception of studies lies in the fact that prayer is made up of attention. Prayer is the orientation towards God of all the attention the soul is capable of. The quality of prayer resides, for many, in the quality of the attention. The warmth of the heart cannot replace it"

For the philosopher Simone Weil, when she considered the relationship between interiority and studies, she concluded that an attentive student is a soul that prays. Therefore, the classroom can become a meeting place with the transcendent, in accordance with the most ignatian saying of "finding God in all things", but this does not rule out that this same attention can be applied to the explicitly religious knowledge and living, specifically in a space for school prayer. From here, we extracted two verbs: concentrate and guide. What is the Church but an assembly, a concentration, which responds to an external call, the orientation? This double movement also responds to the Eucharistic dynamics: we met in the Name of the Other who summoned us and later on disperses us again.

Since the room is very small and of square plant, a suitable spatial resource is the concealment or dematerialization of the corners by means of partitions that do not reach to touch each other, since the limit is not seen, or become curved. For that reason, since we access from one of the corners, we proposed to emphasize the vision of the diagonal of the space, which is its longest dimension, by placing the tabernacle in the corner opposite to the entrance. The corners opposed in this diagonal are curved to be able to accommodate a running bank that also acts as storage furniture.

As for the ceiling, we proposed to gain as much height as possible and to build a false ceiling in the form of two triangles resulting from the division of the square by its diagonal. These triangles were built of flexible material, a fabric, so that they could work as light diffusers of the light that would originate between them and the current ceiling. Its triangular shape, the fact that they do not reach the corners and that they have a certain tilt emphasizes and marks what is most important in the oratory: the tabernacle, apart from being an evocative image of the Holy Spirit who plans over the space (Gn 1, 2).

4_ Recover the arkhētopos as a mystagogical space. Reform of the lateral chapel of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar.

For personal relationships, it is very important to take care of those original places, or arkhētopos, to return to them at the time of meaning search. What

serves for personal relationships, also serves for the relationship with Jesus Christ and for the religious institutions, so that this was the backbone of the reform of the Chapel of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar, in Barcelona.

The current space of the chapel had a plaque on one of the access steps with the inscription "Here begged Sant Ignatius of Loyola", referring to the two years (from 1524 to 1526) during which St. Ignatius took grammar studies with master Ardèvol (Autobiography number 54-55). Virtually this is the only space that remains of the Ignatian Barcelona, since the house where he was lodged was demolished by the construction of the present Princess Street, and the place of study was demolished to build a well-known square called Plaça de l'Àngel in the 19th century.

The idea of the project relies on transforming a purely informational space into a mystagogical space that, at the same time, is a finish point to the Ignatian pilgrimage. That is why a minimalist and significant intervention has been carried out by cleaning the chapel and "lowering the saint". A new sculpture of the saint was carved and set near ground level; so that the new statue's feet touch the ground and its eyes look towards the altar, thus inviting today's pilgrims to pray besides him by sitting in the new running bank. To help increasing a bigger impact, two devotional elements have been arranged in the small cavities existing in the wall: a wooden statue of the Virgin of Aránzazu and a reproduction of the medallion of the Cross of Tort of Manresa, in representation of two of the places where the saint used to pray. The intervention is completed by a wooden lectern with a screen where a documentary is being projected, and a small mobile altar, also made of wood, exhibiting the logo of the Company of Jesus.

As for the new statue of Saint Ignatius, it was made of bronze and weighs about 200 kg. Saint Ignatius, dressed as a pilgrim, sits with an empty and partially extended hand towards the visitor, reminding us of the student who used to beg; while on the other hand, as it corresponds to the representation of a founding saint of a religious order, he holds the book of the Constitutions of the Company of Jesus. The feet are bare to suggest the sacredness of the space and the human contingency. The whole figure takes a vacated form to indicate the man who empties himself to welcome the mystery that is celebrated on the main altar of the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar.

5_ To Plastically reflect the Spiritual Exercises. Chapel of St. Ignatius of Loyola in the sacerdotal residence of the Sacred Heart of the Jesuit Fathers in Barcelona.

If in the previous case we recovered for prayer a unique space in the history of a religious order, here the Cave of Saint Ignatius was recreated in modern language with the goal of finding a way in which the space spoke for itself and invited to live the Spiritual Exercises.

The project is placed in an elongated rectangular piece where the presbytery was originally arranged at one end of the entrance. The space was naturally

illuminated by a set of three high windows on one side, while artificial lighting was concentrated two meters below, leaving the rest of the space in the dark.

The intervention consists of four panels that start suspended from the wall opposite the windows and grow, bending, towards the light. These panels represent the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises and the symbolic representation is achieved with a spiritual topography in the form of an altarpiece made with sackcloth, since St. Ignatius was known popularly in Manresa as "the man of the sack" in reference to his pilgrim clothing. The panel of the first week acts as a reception space, so that, taking advantage of the absence of a window, the false ceiling is lowered to create an atmosphere of spiritual concentration and the invitation to humility from the week that culminates with the triple colloquium with the crucified (EE.EE.62ss). The panel of the second week represents the contemplation of the two flags (EE.EE.126ss) with the three steps of humility. The third panel is where the new presbytery is set, aiming at a more intense participation of the assembly, given that it is where the contemplation of the Passion of Christ is proposed. This panel is presided by a cross cut in sackcloth to visualize "how the deity hides" (EE.EE.196). The fourth panel represents the empty sepulcher and the resurrection and it is where the tabernacle is arranged.

On the other hand, facing the four panels-cave and below the windows, there is another horizontal corridor where the profile of the Montserrat mountains is depicted, as if we had been able to recreate the state and the original views of the Cave of Saint Ignatius in Manresa. The statues of St. Ignatius and the Virgin of Montserrat are found at the beginning and at the end of the panel and accompany the exerciser (the person doing the spiritual exercises) throughout his or her journey. On the front walls we can find the representations of the texts of the "Principle and Foundations" (EE.EE.23) and the "Contemplation for Achieving Love" (EE.EE.230ss), which are the entry and exit frames of the ignatian spiritual journey.

6_ To diversify the pastoral activity in a school church. The reform of the church of the Lestonnac School in Barcelona.

The next case takes us to a school church. The reform of the church of Lestonnac School in Barcelona, carried out during the 2017-2018 school year, responds answers to the desire of adapting and updating the sacred space; the creation of different environments of pastoral work in the pre-existing volumes; and, finally, to give visibility to the educational centre's ownership charisma.

Regarding the celebration space update, the old presbytery was demolished to create a new axis mundi with a central presbytery made with a wooden platform. This new layout allows the occupation of four of the eight side chapels with banks, allowing for a more participative and collective celebration due to the form of a "T". To reinforce this new centrality, a suspended circular baldachin has been added, which is traditionally linked to the metaphorical image of the "open sky", from which a processional crucifix hangs and under

which the three elements of liturgical furniture are arranged in triangular shape under the projection of the circle: the seat, the altar and the ambo.

All of these three elements have the same material and compositional language that incorporates symbolic elements of Christ: the cross carved on the surface of the altar, the merging of the letters alpha and omega at the base of the ambo, and the symbol of the chrism perforated in the backrest of the seat. The liturgical novelty lies in the disposition of these elements in the presbytery. The seat is shifted to the back and in the axis of the central nave and the ambo and the altar are put at the same level, but a bit forwards. The ambo and the altar also include pieces of the old altar as if it were a jigsaw implying the two parts of the Eucharistic celebration: the table of the Word and the table of Bread and Wine.

Regarding the multiplicity of environments for pastoral work, the wooden presbytery retreats to the feet of the Blessed Sacrament, at the centre of the frontal wall, and separates itself from the new presbytery by means of a mobile wooden grandstand accessible from both sides. This grandstand allows, on the one hand, to adapt the celebratory space or the new space of the Blessed Sacrament depending on the number of users and, on the other hand, to use it as a class, choir singing or concelebrations. The space of the old choir has also been adapted by demolishing the pre-existing grandstand to design a classroom of interiority or other activities, which is accessed through the new cancel that acts as a narthex and allows its use independently from the rest of the church, as well as opening new visuals from the outside.

Finally, the charisma of the religious order is reflected in several elements throughout the intervention. On the right side of the Blessed Sacrament space, the mosaic of the emblem of the order discovered during the reform work has been placed. This is the last vestige of the church designed by Joan Martorell since practically almost everything else was lost during the Spanish Civil War. On the left side of the same area, a restored image of the founder of the order has been placed and a vinyl with a vineyard landscape linked to its history with inscriptions of the Parable of the vineyard and the vine shoots (Jn 15). Special furniture has been created for the lateral chapels which act as mobile altarpieces, with coloured pencils and institutional or biblical motifs on the front and whiteboards at the back. In the lateral chapel to the right, the background theme is a natural landscape that evokes the topography of Palestine, from the desert of Judea to Galilee - that is, from the cross to the resurrection -, including the slogans "Fill in your name," "Reach out your hands" and "Keep the flame alive". In the lateral chapels to the left, the theme is an urban landscape that evokes the skyline of Barcelona and deals with the celebration of the Presentation of Mary, the feast of Saint Joanna of Lestonnac, the founder of the Company of Mary and the relationship of the institution with the City of Barcelona.

We are happy that this project has been selected for the most important architecture competition in Spain, the FAD awards.

7_ Find God in non-places. Ephemeral Chapel project (III International Conference of Contemporary Religious Architecture, Seville)

Within the III International Conference of Contemporary Religious Architecture, which took place in Seville in 2013, there was the possibility of participating in a contest of ideas about the design of a transportable chapel to bring the Good News to what the anthropologist Marc Augé called "non-places" or spaces of super-modernity.

The proposal of my firm, which ranked second in the contest, was entitled "Religare", a Latin word from which the word "Religion" comes and which means to create ties of communion. Based on the etymological meaning of the word and the call of Jesus to his first disciples (Mt 4:19), we proposed a space of Catholic cult and prayer formally recognizable with a forceful gesture inspired by Ichtus, the fish, symbol of the first Christians.

Constructively, materials have been chosen to build this space inspired by the fisherman's image: a wooden platform that becomes the base, the boat, and a multiform envelope created by two curved layers of metallic mesh, the nets, supported by sticks.

The building, due to its flexible morphology, allows duality in use: a welcoming space in the inside, in such a way that we feel surrounded by the nets in a space where we can be, see, feel and pray. And on the outside, however, a space is created that opens up and holds celebrations of greater capacity. Its easy access, with double entry, is a subtle transition from the urban environment reinforced by the presence of the cross.

The project could be located anywhere: it could be set in an urban centre as well as a park. At the same time, if necessary, different forms of the envelope can be created using the modulation of the metal mesh in different ways. This proposal meets the requirements of polyvalence, transportability and iconic capacity.

Thank you for your attention. I will be able to answer any questions you have in the workshops that will take place afterwards.