

[S17]

50 Years after the Second Vatican Council. Taking the Modern Church into the 21st Century

Sven Sterken

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN, BELGIUM

Thomas Coomans

RAYMOND LEMAIRE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION, HEVERLEE; FACULTY OF ENGINEERING,
KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN, BELGIUM

Luc Verpoest (Respondent)

FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE, KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN, BELGIUM

50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) came to a close. Although this gathering of the Church hierarchy essentially ratified ideas that had already found their way amongst progressive Catholics in many respects, it infused a spirit of innovation and liberation throughout the Christian world. The Council's central idea, namely that the Catholic faith would be better expressed by collective worshipping rather than individual devotion led to a fundamental rethinking of the church as a building type. It was no longer to constitute a monument to the glory of the Divine but a piece of social infrastructure fostering community building along Christian values. Its internal organization was to encourage the active involvement of the faithful in the celebration and bridge the traditional (hierarchical and spatial) gap between the clerics and the laity. As a consequence, in the 1960s, church architecture became a field of creative experimentation; many architects enthusiastically broke away from tradition and introduced new spatial concepts, expressive shapes and novel structural principles in their designs.

Given the very large amount of church buildings that were constructed in the decade after Vatican II, the new religious paradigm had a significant impact on the built environment of the welfare state of the 1960s – not in the least in the sprawling suburbs. Today, this enthusiasm and experimental vigour are long gone. Apart from the general secularizing tendency and the competition with other religions, Christianity is also affected by a severe institutional crisis. Moreover, attendance

at church services has dropped to a historical low. The resulting number of redundant church buildings is one of the most tangible results of this unpropitious climate. The future of this vast architectural patrimony constitutes a key challenge for today's Church leaders and civil society as well as for the design community. This session maintains that this phenomenon of redundancy particularly affects the more experimental churches of the post-conciliar period. Because of their young age and their location in peripheral and low-density suburban areas, these churches are not as firmly rooted in the collective memory as their older counterparts. As a consequence these buildings are not yet "heritagized": scholarship on their architectural significance is limited, their social and cultural values have not yet been made explicit and financial support to do so is often lacking. As a result, these "modern" churches suffer from a lack of appreciation by the general public while restorations and transformations are often carried out negligently. The fact that many of these buildings were realized with cheap materials and according to experimental construction methods causes them to age badly and to require onerous maintenance. The literature on the various aspects of adaptive reuse of religious buildings (social, cultural, economic and technical) is generally based on experiences with "historical" churches, i.e. the traditional typologies and the familiar (neo-)styles. This session therefore seeks to broaden the scope of this expertise by examining to what extent the existing know-how on adaptive reuse is applicable to the post-conciliar Christian churches from the 1960s and early 1970s.

The variety in perspectives adopted in this session's papers not only testifies to the impressive aesthetic and liturgical diversity of post-conciliar church production, it also allows us to uncover some of the mechanisms behind this plurality. All authors stress that, apart from architectural paradigms or particular theological ideas, the program (and thus the analysis) of a church building always transcends the purely religious. In their paper, Ariel Luís Lazzarin and Renato Luiz Sobral Anelli show, for example, how the *Espirito Santo do Cerrado* church by Lina Bo Bardi in Uberlândia, Brazil, was conceived (and functioned) as an instrument of local empowerment in the context of Liberation Theology and the bottom-up democratization movement it supported through the so-called "base groups". Also, in the paper by Elisabeth Urbán and Zoran Vukoszávlyev, the parish church appears as a site of conflict. The suppression of Catholicism behind the Iron Curtain created a context where clinging to tradition became an act of resistance since openly embracing liturgical and aesthetic renewal was simply impossible. The contrast with the *Senhora da Boavista* church, analyzed by João Luís Marques, could not be bigger. Part of the newly laid-out *Boavista* neighbourhood on the outskirts of Porto and entirely designed by famed modernist architect Agostino Ricca, it featured not only housing slabs and office buildings but also amenities that were meant to infuse the scheme with a sense of urbanity such as shops, a luxury hotel, a swimming pool, a cinema and ... a church. The prominent presence of this religious equipment in the heart of such a private

real estate operation is telling for the (then) prominent position of the Catholic Church in Portuguese society. Quite surprisingly, the multi-purpose church is the only part of the public amenities that is still fully operational today. Its concept, namely that of a platform for communal activities based on a shared spirituality (rather than a place exclusively reserved for the cult), which was promoted by the Second Vatican Council, is also highlighted by Eva Weyns in her paper on the *Blijde Boodschap* church in the Parkwijk in Turnhout, Belgium. Although this church has nothing of the architectural *bravura* of Ricca's – the church forms part of a public housing scheme – it provided a modest but crucial infrastructure in the associative life of the local community. Finally, on the basis of a morpho-typological analysis of the interaction between urban planning and church building in modern Barcelona, Alba Arboix-Alió and Cristina Jover Fontanals illustrate the importance of churches in the structuring of the urban fabric and public space. As they rightly state, the debate on the future use of churches should not be limited to their architectural dimension but rather focus on new modes of appropriation and usage; indeed, considering the church space as an extension of the public realm opens up a whole new field of possibilities.

As the papers in this session show, the fact that Christian religious practices and their sites increasingly are becoming heritage confronts us with two challenges. On the one hand, it raises the question regarding the (advisability of) conservation of the original characteristics of these buildings in a context where their original religious significance is increasingly evaporating. On the other hand, the time has come to consider this heritage beyond the focus on its religious meaning and explore the modern church from a more prospective point of view. As the authors in this session show, typical characteristics of this heritage are its non-monumentality, the attempt to blend with the surrounding built environment and a more abstract approach to religious symbolism. Moreover, in the post-conciliar period, church buildings were often conceived to accommodate also other functions than only religious services; hence they are often firmly rooted in the social and cultural life of the neighbourhood. By contextualizing these features and discussing how they can be relevant in a context of adaptive reuse, these papers provide important keys for speculating about the potential of this patrimony as a social, cultural and spatial resource for the 21st century.

Senhora da Boavista, a Church by Agostinho Ricca for the 21st Century

João Marques

CENTRO DE ESTUDOS DE ARQUITECTURA E URBANISMO, FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE,
UNIVERSITY OF PORTO, PORTUGAL

This work focuses on a pilot district, designed and built by private enterprise in Porto (Portugal) from 1962, at a time when the city grew in several expansion bubbles, particularly as a result of a large-scale housing plan promoted by the municipality.

It is a project of modern design for a neighbourhood of the emerging upper middle class, jointly conceived by one single architect, consisting of housing, offices, shops, a luxury hotel, a swimming pool, a cinema, a church and parish centre and a kindergarten (not built), all arranged around a central garden.

The project for the church, designed in detail from 1974, would only be completed at the end of the 1990s, with the construction of the parish and social centre. This clearly post-conciliar church abandoned the longitudinal plant to build a cozy, familiar and flexible space, with an architectural language marked by the dominant concrete, softened by stained glass, wood and white marble.

Recent work on the archive of the architect Agostinho Ricca (1915-2010) allowed a deeper reading of this global project by making evident the care taken from the initial studies, throughout the development of the project (which involved many recognized artists) and until the construction phase.

The project was developed at different scales, from the urban area to furniture design, from the choice of the church location to the mobile altar proposal. The sliding doors in the church allow the use of the Sunday liturgical space for concerts and conferences. The originally requested auditorium gave way to a multipurpose room used nowadays as recreation space for children of catechesis. These are some of this building's keys to success, which were to the profit of the whole community.

The different choices in the course of the project reflect a deep understanding of the architectural discussion in that period. Having visited modern churches in central and northern Europe, Ricca refused the huge structures of traditional parish centres.

It is worth noting that the present church, the most flexible public building from the ensemble, is the only one that remains in use nowadays. This paper aims to reveal the success of this project of Portuguese religious architecture of the second-half of the 20th century, which is still capable of serving the population at the beginning of the 21st century.

1. FRAMEWORK

The modernist architect Agostinho Ricca (1915-2010), student and teacher at the Fine Arts School of Porto, designed the Our Lady of *Boavista* church (Porto 1974-1999), when he was 60 years old.

In the late 1950s, the expansion towards the outskirts of the city was the highest priority. The city suffered from a general housing shortage and poor housing conditions. This was the background for the changes that began to take place in more remote areas of the city, with small detached family houses giving way to new housing blocks. This important moment caught the attention of the Bishop¹ as the opportunity for the church to henceforth play an active role in the city's life by helping create a more coherent social urban grid. The city master plan of 1962

forecasted more religious facilities to be built. A few years later, new churches and parish houses were commissioned according to the renewal principles of the Vatican II Council².

To the west of the city, following the construction of the freeway leading to the then recent *Arrábida* bridge, new land became available for housing.

2. THE PROJECT

"Graham", as the site is known, was an old textile industrial estate that operated until the late 1950s. The Dehonian community settled then in the old factory site converted into a seminary³. With the *Boavista* project came the opportunity to integrate an emerging upper-middle class matrix into a new area, basing it upon a diverse and generous design programme. In 1959 Ricca was invited by banker Cupertino de Miranda to review the initial neighbourhood proposal⁴, and submit his own design. He proposed a long office and housing block in the west area of the site, devoting the eastern sector to leisure, a hotel and other facilities. This proposal is evidence of how far we'd come since the times of the council housing estates.

The above-mentioned seminary received, during the 1960s, many Italian priests, among them priest Giulio Carrara, later responsible for commissioning the *Boavista* church in 1974⁵.

Ricca's original scheme comprised two main volumes, courtyards and a detached clock tower. The main square beside the church did not form a churchyard. The church wasn't meant to be the main feature of the public space. Instead, buildings such as the cinema, the hotel and the residents' club were the key pieces, and it isn't without some grief that we see them in a derelict state today.

The church project would only be completed at the end of the 1990s with the construction of the parish and social centre. We obtained a better grasp of the history of the design development by going through over 220 drawings in the architect's archive. The church became a very discreet beautiful building, set back from the hotel street facade and lower than the surrounding ones.

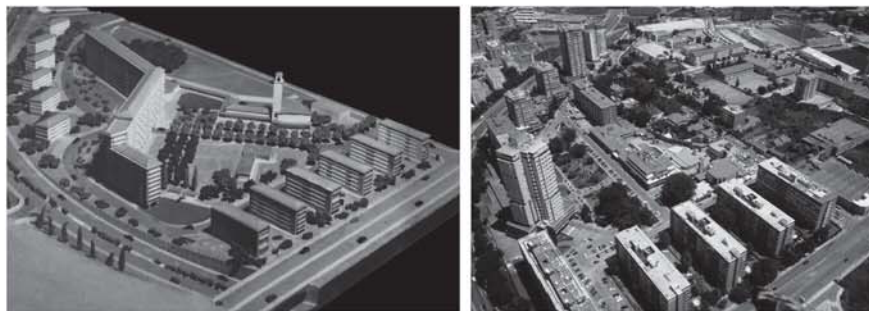


FIGURE 1. Agostinho Ricca, Boavista Neighbourhood, Porto, Portugal, initial proposal model and aerial view. © Agostinho Ricca Archive, Teófilo Rego 1950s, Luís Ferreira Alves 1990s.



FIGURE 2. Agostinho Ricca, *Nossa Senhora da Boavista* church, Porto, Portugal © Ricca Archive, Teófilo Rego 1980s.

The first church proposal was a lower building, with few openings. Identically, the parish house was almost completely self-enclosed. Archive sketches illustrate that a more open elevation was proposed to the internal area of the site, making it strongly resemble a house. It's safe to say that Ricca conceived this building as he would design a house⁶.

Some religious buildings lack the sense of domestic feeling and unity that the Church seeks to transmit. Ricca had this in mind. The entrance is a welcoming space, with a seat and a low canopy over marble flooring. In the interior, the dining room communicates with the outside garden and there's even a fireplace, which Ricca always included in his housing projects. All of these details bear meaning in architecture.

Ricca integrated knowledge acquired abroad, when he visited many kindergartens and community buildings, into the design of the Sunday school rooms. In the central meeting area, a foyer covered by pyramid-shaped roof lights, is similar to the ones in the Residential Club/Hotel⁷.

3. THE CHURCH, THE CORE OF THIS LARGE HOME...

The *Boavista* church wasn't the first church committed to⁸. From books and magazines, like *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'Hui* and *Werk*, he collected examples of what was being built throughout Europe. His personal library is a mirror of his refined taste and reveals the reason why he travelled so frequently.

Ricca, particularly interested in the worship space, whether Catholic or Protestant, in his first long professional trip abroad in 1949, visited modern Swiss churches, like those in Altstetten and Basel (*Johanneskirche*)⁹. In the 1960s he found in Justus Dahinden's work the meaningful qualities that meant so much to him: the communal spaces organized around the altar and the predominant presence of concrete, timber, and light. These were key elements that he applied in the *Boavista* church and were also present in the two other later churches he designed¹⁰.

In his project description one reads:

*We want to build a church that, despite looking different from the traditional buildings of its kind, would still be unequivocally recognized as a space for worship and prayer, full of mystical sense. Eventually, this came to influence the general scheme proposed. We had to choose materials that helped to carry the message through.*¹¹

The Committee for Sacred Art reviewed the first design, issuing some concerns regarding the building's identity, the welcoming areas, the flexible use of the space and internal organization. The committee stated that a small cross should be added to the façade and the choir balcony should be deleted. The deep chancel that resembled too much a theatre stage was mitigated, as a compromise to get the community closer and more participative in liturgical ceremonies. The altar wasn't aligned with the centre of the congregation and there was no central aisle dividing the community. This was introduced later on, in the construction phase. Ricca also designed the church furniture. The seats distributed in a shell-like layout reflected a feeling of communion. The separation of the main liturgical hall from the holy chapel was an idea of the committee and Ricca's design responded in a functional way, proposing the separation by folding doors. The parish hall and services located in the crypt weren't approved. Like the liturgical areas they should have natural light and ventilation.

Ricca reviewed the project accordingly, as demonstrated by sketches and drawings. All those changes brought the design closer to the final built work.

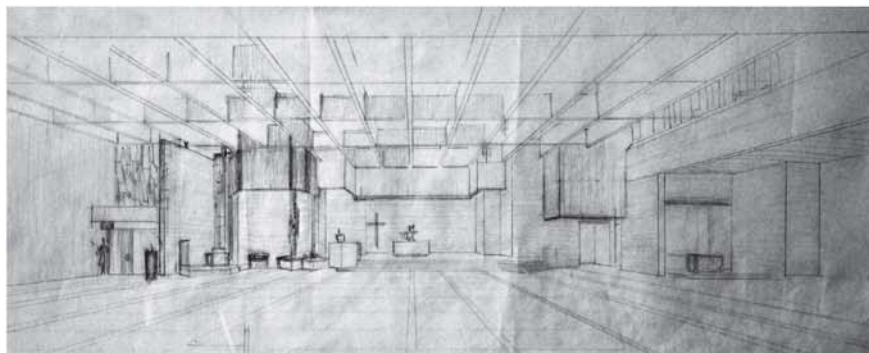


FIGURE 3. Agostinho Ricca, Nossa Senhora da Boavista church, Porto, Portugal, interior perspective. © Agostinho Ricca Archive, Agostinho Ricca 1975.

It's worth noting how Ricca integrated into the design the ideas of welcoming and mystery we mentioned before. The entrance to the church is not a straightforward transition. One must go up a few steps, then through a sheltered link connection that prepares the visitor to enter the liturgical space. Once inside, our eyes fix on the stained glass window and then shift towards the altar. The dense and comfortable carpet in the central aisle invites one to walk up to the altar, thus uniting the timber hall's floor with the marble of the chancel.

Ricca conceived the neighbourhood, drawing each of the buildings. In the church project he went through all scales, from the building to the furniture.

For the holy chapel he detailed the altar, a marble block reminiscent of an ancient ceremonial stone. This piece contrasts with the main altar – a sculptural piece in copper, like the ambo, very rich in detail. Concerned about a more functional side, Ricca added a set of wheels to allow it to be moved, in case the main room was used for functions other than liturgical services, thus answering the committee's request for a more flexible use of the space.

The attention given to detail in this building is impressive. Notice the presence of the white linens in the composition and how they fold over the softened edges of the altar, elegantly and enhanced by the natural light.

A poetic feeling comes to our minds when thinking of such an image, recalling Gaston Bachelard's words:

*...Everything breathes anew,
the cloth is white,
the cloth, this handful of whiteness was enough to anchor the house in its centre"¹²*

30 years after Ricca began designing the Boavista church, already in his 1990s, work was yet to be completed. The pipe organ was missing¹³. Ricca then sketched what it should look like. Being as much passionate for music as for architecture, he dreamed of a pipe organ occupying a high noble space in the room – after all, music was an inseparable component of architecture, as he pointed out in 2001 when presenting his book:

To Paul Valéry, mute buildings [...] have no Architectonic interest (and, in cities, they are always the majority). Those that "speak" are the ones that adequately serve the purpose they were designed for. But those that "sing", they are the high examples of the great Architecture – that of transcendent beauty¹⁴.

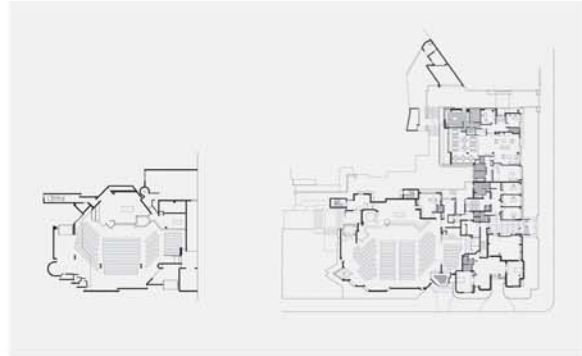


FIGURE 4. Agostinho Ricca, Nossa Senhora da Boavista church, Porto, Portugal, plans – 1st and final solutions. © Agostinho Ricca Archive, Helena Peixoto 2013.

REFERENCES

- BACHELARD, Gaston, *La Poétique de l'Espace*, Paris, Presses Univ. de France, 1958.
- COMMITTEE FOR SACRED ART, *Parecer sobre o Ante-projecto*, Porto 22h March 1974, Porto Diocese Archive.
- MARQUES, João Luís, *"Viagens e Memórias. Arquitecturas do 'Centro'", Agostinho Ricca: Arquitectura, Obra e Desenho*, Lisboa, Uzzina Books, 2015, 28-31.
- PEIXOTO, Helena, *A Luz nas Três Igrejas de Agostinho Ricca*, (supervisors: João Luís Marques and José Alberto Lage), Porto, FAUP, 2013.
- RICCA, Agostinho, *Memória Descritiva*, Porto, Porto Diocese Archive, 14h June 1974.
- RICCA, Agostinho, *"Somente duas Palavras [2001]"*, *Agostinho Ricca: Arquitectura, Obra e Desenho*, Uzzina Books, 2015, 142-143.
- "Seminário Apostólico Padre Dehon", *Voz do Pastor*, Ano XLII, No. 9, Porto, 24th March 1962, 1.
- "Visita do Superior Geral ao Seminário Padre Dehon", *Voz do Pastor*, Ano XLIII, n. 11, Porto, 6th April 1963, 5.

NOTES

Assignment co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) through the COMPETE 2020 – Operational Programme Competitiveness and Internationalization (POCI) and national funds by the FCT under the POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007744 project.

- 1 D. António Ferreira Gomes (1952-82) and the apostolic administrator D. Florentino de Andrade e Silva (1959-69).
- 2 11 of the now existing 26 parish churches in Porto were inaugurated in the second half of the 20th century: 5 replaced smaller churches, 2 were provisional chapels in council housing estates and 4 were built in new areas of the expanding city, being handed over to religious orders: Dominicans, Capuchins, Claretians and Dehonians (*Nossa Senhora da Boavista*).
- 3 "Seminário Apostólico Padre Dehon", *Voz do Pastor*, Ano XLII, n. 9, Porto, 24th March 1962, 1.
- 4 The first proposal for this site was a design by Nikita Gröer (son of the polish urbanist Ettiene Gröer) and it consisted of a series of blocks perpendicular to the adjacent *Boavista* avenue. A long 10 storey building divided the site in two. To the north, a series of smaller parallel blocks was proposed at an angle with the freeway. To the south, the school, the kindergarten, the restaurant and the commercial services were connected to the church, which was the scheme's most predominant building.
- 5 The Italian priest Giulio Carrara (1930-) was ordained in Bologna in 1958 at Cardinal Lercaro's time, to whom building churches on the outskirts was an opportunity not to be overlooked.
- 6 An archival picture of a house that Ricca designed in the early 1950s can be used to analyze the general principles that the architect employed in his work, which he continued integrating in many projects since, the church being no exception. There's a large garden, extending all the way to the walls of the house, a terrace over an extension of a lower single storey volume, and an inviting and welcoming porch. These very elements can be found in the church and parish house project. It seems that the garden is missing but drawings reveal a garden, which hasn't been built. Although the inner garden wasn't built, green spaces surround the building, which soften the junction of the concrete walls with the ground.
- 7 Recently rehabilitation works replaced this glass structure, ignoring the architectural value and the unity of the buildings.
- 8 In the research process we identified *Monte da Virgem* church (Vila Nova de Gaia) a 1940s project with clear affinity with G. Muzio churches, with whom A. Ricca worked in the city council master plan office. Later versions, from the 1960s, show a spine scheme with a double-pitched roof and exposed masonry walling. Ricca aimed to merge together traditional construction techniques with a modern way of design, something that the architects of the Portuguese Movement for Renovation of Religious Art were also exploring at that time. A. Ricca was not a member of this movement.
- 9 Cf. João Luís Marques, *"Viagens e Memórias. Arquitecturas do 'Centro'", Agostinho Ricca: Arquitectura, Obra e Desenho*, Lisboa, Uzzina Books, 2015, 28-31.
- 10 St. António Sanctuary, Vale de Cambra (1986-93), Sagrada Família Church, Chaves (1994-).
- 11 Agostinho Ricca, *Memória Descritiva*, Porto, Oporto Diocese Archive, 14h June 1974.
- 12 Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace*, Paris, Presses Univ. de France, 1958, 62. Free translation.
- 13 The existing pipe organ does not correspond to Ricca's design. It was built in 2004 by a Spanish organ maker Joaquín Lois Cabello from Tordesilhas.
- 14 Agostinho Ricca, *"Somente duas Palavras [2001]"*, *Agostinho Ricca: Arquitectura, Obra e Desenho*, op. cit., 143.