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Alvaro Siza and Santa Maria at Marco de Canavezes

Patrick Lynch

At Marco de Canavezes, 40km east of Porto, Alvaro Siza's church of Santa Maria sits within the garden of an old farm, the spring of which feeds a fountain that fills the courtyard beside the crypt with the loud crash of water and the violent disruption of broken splashes of light.¹ A cypress tree sits forlornly in the lower courtyard, around which steps rise up, creating an informal route to the church above. The lower ground floor crypt-story is faced in granite and seems to grow out of the topography of the site, fusing the farmyard walls into a rock or plinth.

From outside, the eastern end of the church is defined by two concave curves. On the inside these seem to compress the space towards the presbytery, focussing one's attention upon the tabernacle and acting as a form of natural perspective whilst recalling the Baroque churches that originated in 17th century Portugal. Baroque, of course, is a derivation of the Portuguese terms *barocco*, originally used to describe a misshapen or deformed pearl.²

The cave within the battered granite base, is lit from above with a pale steady light and from without by the rhythmic oscillation of a broken column of water. The crypt

is subtly reminiscent of a Rococo chapel, and the role that water plays is surely not accidental, recalling as it does the tradition of Marian chapels in Portuguese Baroque architecture³ and the fusion of Christian and pagan symbolism in Neo-Platonic humanism.

Maria is typically depicted in 'rocky' chapels as if she is (pearly) light falling onto and emerging from a grotto. She is symbolic in Renaissance painting of divinity and of the fecundity of the natural world.⁴ The elision of light and water is evocative in Marian symbolism of both the sea (*maria*) and baptism, and with the church itself – both literally and figuratively – being seen as a protective (oyster) shell. Pilgrimage and refuge also typify Marian devotion, as well as the simultaneity of death (crucifixion) and life (baptism). These extreme contrasts typify material and spatial hierarchies in Baroque spaces, which are often fused to create an image of ground and sky mediated by rhythmic movement. This iconography is particularly clear in Siza's church.

In this instance, a change in level situates the entrance to the church on the crest of a hill, one story above the garden and the crypt. This difference is articulated also in the contrast between the white stucco render on the facades of the nave as well as in the difference between the rough exterior and the smooth slick light of the interiors, which are predominantly lit from above. One is intensely aware of being situated in between a lambent ceiling and a rocky ground.

The church is accompanied by a two-storey parochial centre that sits facing the western doors of the church, forming a series of deep thresholds between the dusty piazza and the variously scaled rooms within. Discrete spatial volumes, and definite, more or less specific situations are established by shadows and by niches; territories are implied by steps in the walls, and in the variations in the borders of horizons and territories.

Freedom of movement between the buildings continues within the anterooms of the parish centre, which are generally freely accessible when it is open in the summer months, although the co-existence of defined spaces is at once clear and also intimated and sensed rather than absolute. A double-height meeting room is announced by changes to the height of marble skirting boards rising, becoming wainscoting. Doors rise up, step back from the common parts of the plan, away from the staccato rhythm and movement implied by the staircase. The beat of a football in the desert-like piazza marks time during weekday afternoons.

The 8m tall oak doors of the church are opened at funerals, and the west afternoon sunlight reaches in and touches the altar. Inside, the church is cool, the nave a simple rectangle. A baptismal font sits beneath a tall roof light that forms a tower of air and light, whilst the bell tower sits on the other side of the tall entrance forming a seemingly solid shaft of space that defines the entrance. Above head height, the north wall billows outwards like a broken pearl, cut by two clerestory windows.

One is struck by the resonance between the abstract material qualities of the space and the figural material qualities of the equipment within it. At two places this contrast comes together to provoke movement of thought from contemplation towards comprehension, without ever fully resolving itself into an image. Reflective, polished oak floorboards direct one's eyes towards the sacristy. Oak chairs sit on this oak ground like coiled, reclining figures.

A tall processional bronze cross sits on the northern Gospel side to the left of the altar, and a *Cathedra*, or Bishop's Chair, sits to the right. There is a strong contrast between intricate timber furniture and the scaleless, waxy light of the upper curved surfaces, so that the latter dissolve into shadow and cloudy, peripheral focus; whilst the furniture seems to

become extensions of your body, a rhythmic armature of postures and gestures. Siza has avoided all explicit religious symbols he claims, although one can see small crosses in some of the handmade tiles marking the sites of each sacrament. Behind the altar, two pale, weak columns of light appear in the gloom, and one realises or remembers that they drop light down onto the face of someone in a coffin in the crypt below. A faint sound of splashing water rises up from the pool beyond the crypt. A body on a cross is implied by the absence of matter each side of the thin vertical shafts of light.

At the moment in the Mass when one first kneels, attention is almost always upon the actions of the priest, upon the altar, and upon the Eucharistic prayer. At St Maria, attention towards the 'sacred mysteries' is balanced by a peripheral sensation of light entering from the South via an enormously long horizontal slit window set 1.2m off the ground. Midday sunlight falls through this slot into the church. A northern Portuguese landscape of arid hills and scrubland, and cars and petrol stations, and small houses come into view.

At the end of this thin slot of sight, light falls onto an old, paint-flaking half-scale statue of the Virgin holding the infant Christ, patron of the church and human link between the numinous and the material realms that Christian belief co-laminates. Traditionally, statues of the virgin sit on the opposite side of the altar and are set within a niche or held above head height on a shelf or bracket. Here she looks at the congregation at their eye height, and is sat exactly at the threshold between the sacred topography of the presbytery, situating prayer and worship in a frank encounter with the fragile actuality of the everyday world beyond the church. Similarly, the gospel is read from a simple lectern that grows up from the timber floor of the church. In contrast, the golden cross sits upon the presbytery, hovering between matter and light.

At Santa Maria, the horizon of ritualistic worship is counterpoised with a worldly horizon that is shockingly close by. The immateriality of light above and beyond the altar is counter-poised with the rhythm of sunlight and of one's view of the material world beyond the chapel. In experiential, and geometric terms, its centre is displaced. In his book *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, David Leatherbarrow describes what he calls 'aliocentric architecture':

'Always a matter of degree, the individuality of a building, like that of a person, is measured by its participation in shared conditions. With this observation in mind, one can also say that the disintegration of urban order is the precondition for the building's object like independence. More positively, the dependence assumed in both sharing and privation suggests that the building is codetermined by conditions that are not of its own making. This means that the definition of a location involves a corresponding dislocation, a centering of the building outside itself. Orientation is nothing other than the acknowledgement of this *ecstasis* or *aliocentricity*.¹⁵

Siza's placement of the statue of Mary reminds us that the relationship between architecture and sculpture continues to refer us to spaces beyond their immediate location. A rhythm of associations and spatial counter-points is established which suggests that architects' and sculptors' work might be understood as fundamentally spatial, and essentially communicative. Communicative space is oriented, in ritualistic and everyday terms, towards situating particular historical circumstances (political conflict, human suffering or hopes, etc.) with respect to the conditions that are common to all i.e. universal. In other words, it reveals the primary conditions of urbanity.



View from the garden looking west towards the crypt.

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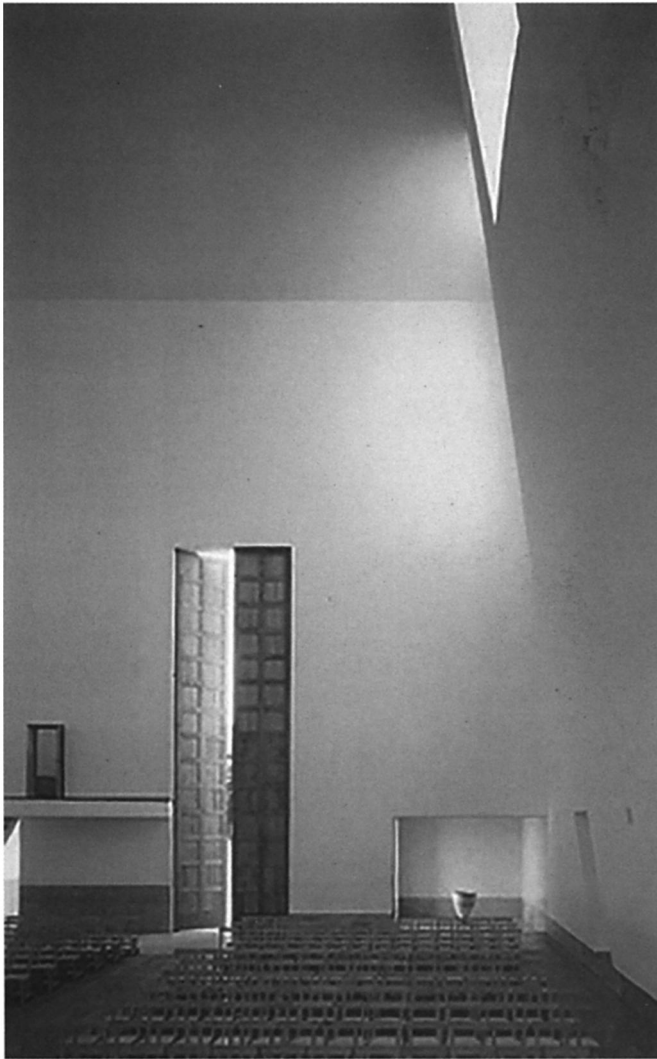


View towards the parochial centre looking west, with the church on the right.

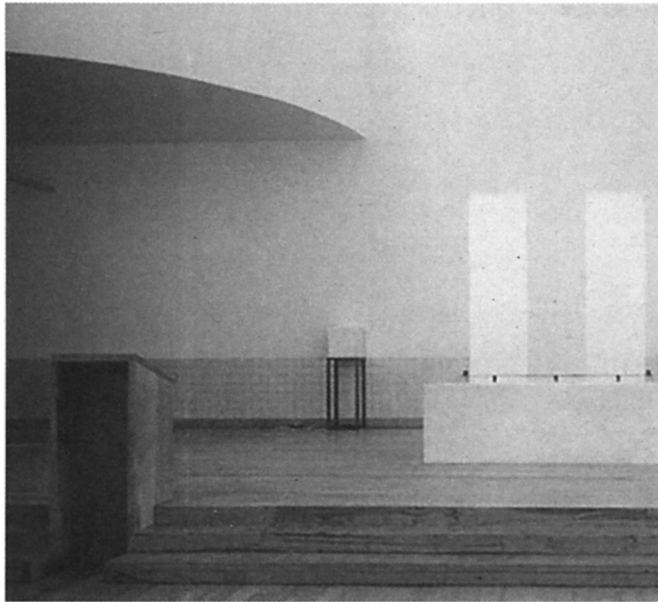
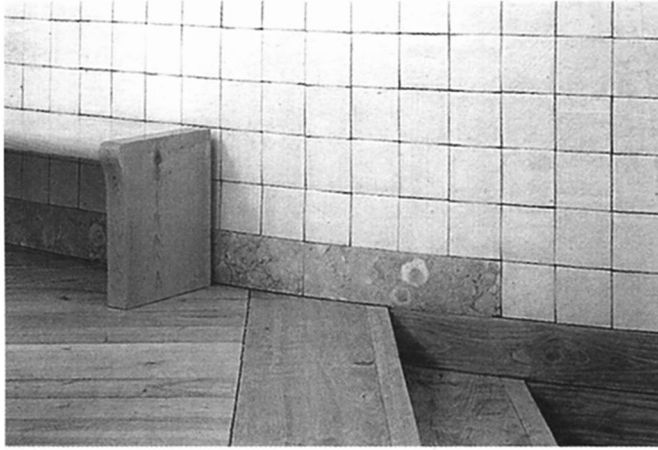


View towards the west façade of the church with the parochial centre on the left.

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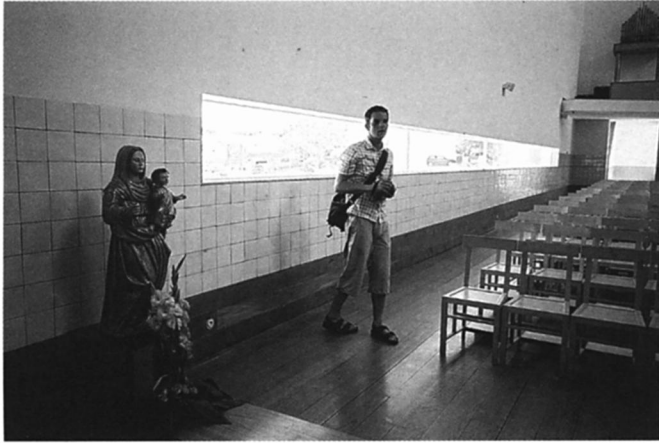


View from the nave looking back towards the west doors with baptistry on the right.

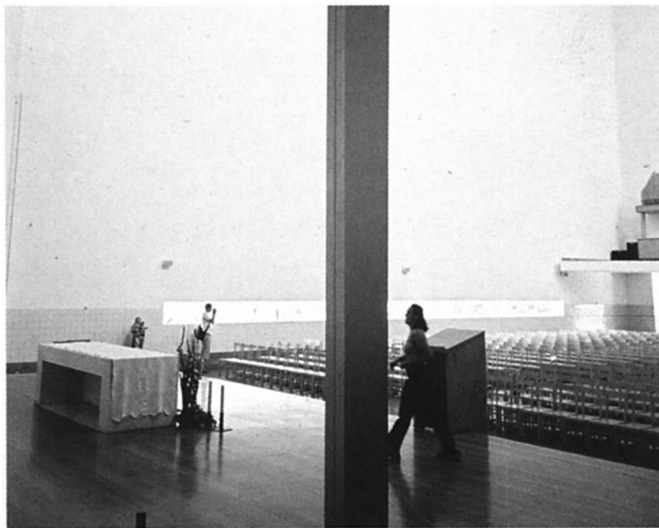


Topography and equipment of the presbytery.

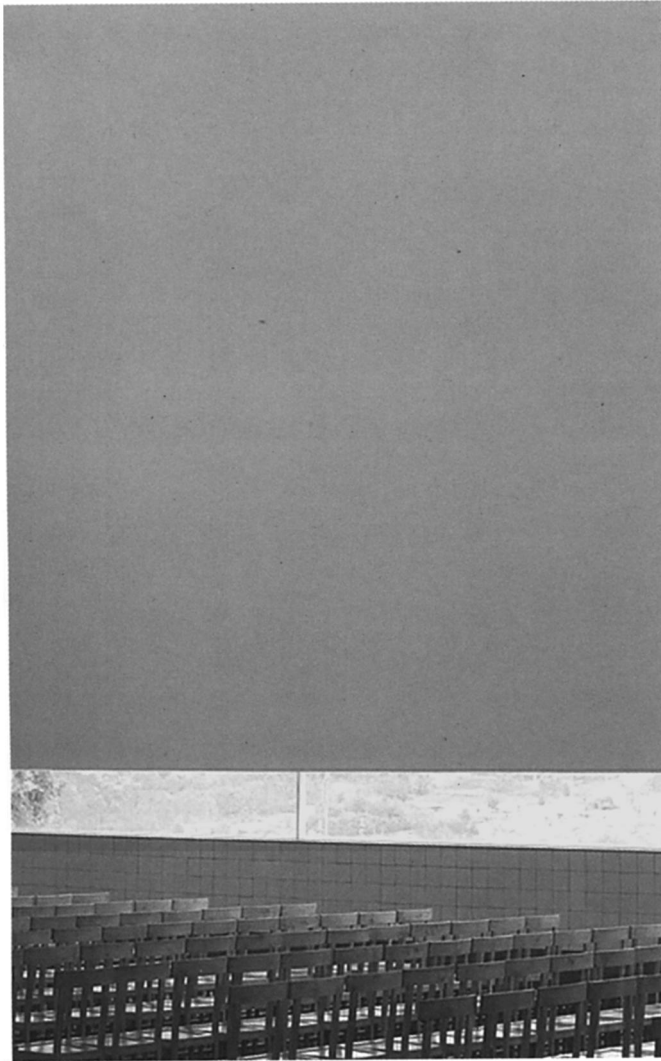
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View of the Hodegetria statue of the Madonna.

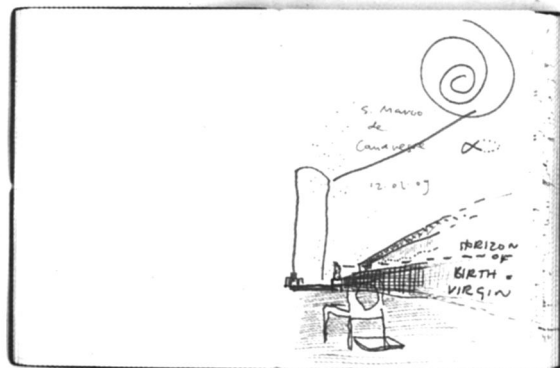
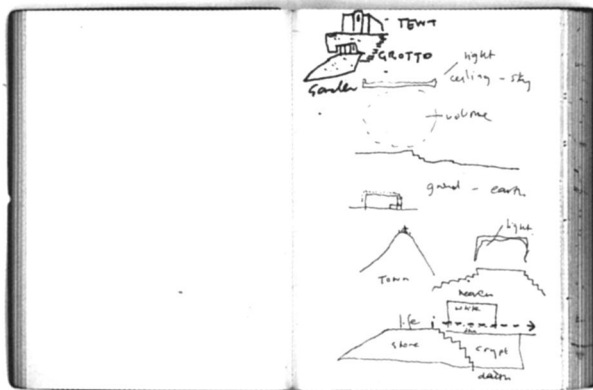


The presbytery and nave viewed from the threshold to the sacristy.



View of the horizontal window.

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Sketches of Santa Maria showing the structure of the iconographic topography and the role that the sculpture of the Virgin plays in articulating this symbolic situation.

Notes

1 N. Higino, *Garden and Mortuary Church of Saint Mary: Alvaro Siza Vieira*, Marco de Canaveses, Cenateca, 2001, p. 44. Higino was a priest, he is now an academic, and he was Siza's client for the church. See also: <http://alvarosizavieira.com/1996-church-of-macro-de-canaveses>.

2 H. Bauer, *Barock: Kunst Einer Epoche*, Berlin, Reimer Verlag, 1992, p. 9: '*Der Ausdruck kommt nach einigen vom portugiesischen barocco (rohe, ungleich geformte Perle)*'. For a discussion on the role of rhetoric in Baroque style see P. Lynch, *The Theatricality of the Baroque City*, Verlag Dr Müller, 2011. This was originally my Master of Philosophy dissertation in The History and Philosophy of Architecture, Cambridge University, 1996. José de Paiva suggests that the first mention of baroque is indeed in relation to pearls: 'Tudo pode ser verdade porque ho aljofare que de cà vai, e as perolas he grosso, e redondo, e em toda perfeiçam, e o que della vem das indias sam huns barrocos mal afeiçoados, e não redondos, com agoas mortas', Garcia da Orta, 'Da Margarita' in: *Coloquios dos simples*, Goa, Ioannes de endem, 1563, colloquy 35, fol. 139v.

3 Jose de Paiva notes, 'The connection of Mary and the sea has, in sense, always been there, though of course historically it is entirely

based on wordplay. We see this throughout the Middle Ages in the Latin play between the word *mare*, *-is*, and in the pl. *maria* (lit. 'seas') and *Maria*. The connection to water is there too in medieval iconography either relating to Mary, or the baptism of Christ. This develops with the multiplication of medieval pilgrimages to Marian shrines – finally coming to identify the pilgrim himself with the shell, under the protection of Mary. In the fifteenth century, this takes a turn with the maritime expansion, under the patronage of Henry the Navigator; and by 1500 we are dealing with churches like *S. Maria de Belém*, the foundation of which is availed by the Papal *Bula inter caetera*, and built for mariners as they arrived in Lisbon from the expeditions to the indies. The aim of the sea expansion was made explicit in the sails bearing the cross of the Order of Christ, and could be described as religious, political and commercial. In the *Lusíadas*, a Renaissance epic poem published in 1572, Camões describes it as 'the expansion of the empire and the faith'. In line with Franciscan interpretation, the expansion was now seen as leading potentially to a fifth empire, in this case a Christian one, following the empires of Antiquity.' email, 8 March 2014.

4 H. Sedlmayr, 'Zur Charakteristik des Rokoko', *Manierismo, Barocco*,

Rococo, Rome, Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1962. See also N. Miller, *Heavenly Caves: Reflections on the Garden Grotto*, Boston, Allen and Unwin, 1982.

5 D. Leatherbarrow, *Architecture Oriented Otherwise*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2009, p. 11.