


## Modernity and contemporaneity in dialogue with the heritage. The life of two worship spaces in Lisbon: Santa Isabel's church and Rato's chapel

*La modernidad y la contemporaneidad en diálogo con el patrimonio. La vida de dos espacios de culto en Lisboa: la iglesia de Santa Isabel y la capilla do Rato*

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### ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, the artistic and architectural interventions carried out in the church of Santa Isabel and Rato Chapel, in Lisbon, brought to the debate the overlap of different narratives in these two different spaces of worship: the first, is a parish church preserved by the earthquake of Lisbon (1755), which had its liturgical space redesigned before the Second Vatican Council; the second, is a private chapel annexed to a 18th century palace that became a symbolic worship space for students and engaged young professionals since the 1970s. Enriched with the work of either well-known artists or, sometimes, anonymous architects, the two case studies show us the life of monuments, where Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture participate in preserving and enhancing their cultural value. At the same time, the liturgical and pastoral activities are shown to be the engine behind successive interventions.

### KEYWORDS

Contemporary Art, Liturgical Organization, Parish Church, Student's Chapel, Vatican II.

### RESUMEN

Desde la década de 1960, las intervenciones artísticas y arquitectónicas realizadas en la iglesia de Santa Isabel y la capilla do Rato, en Lisboa, trajeron al debate la superposición de diferentes narrativas en estos dos diferentes espacios de culto: el primero es una iglesia parroquial que sobrevivió al terremoto de Lisboa (1755), cuyo espacio litúrgico se rediseñó antes del Concilio Vaticano II; la segunda es una capilla privada anexa a un palacio del siglo XVIII que se convirtió en un espacio de culto simbólico para estudiantes y jóvenes profesionales comprometidos a partir de la década de 1970. Enriquecidos con el trabajo de artistas conocidos, o a veces, de arquitectos anónimos, los dos estudios de caso nos muestran la vida de los monumentos, donde el arte y la arquitectura moderna y contemporánea participan en la preservación y mejora de su valor cultural. Al mismo tiempo, se muestra que las actividades litúrgicas y pastorales son el motor de las sucesivas intervenciones.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Arte contemporáneo, organización litúrgica, iglesia parroquial, capilla de estudiantes, Concilio Vaticano II.

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary artistic and architectural interventions carried out in many catholic churches bring to the debate the overlap in the same buildings of different narratives corresponding to the understanding of the church identity in different historical periods and, nowadays, the role of the church in the city. As a contribution to this debate we present below two successful examples of interventions made in two buildings of different size and character, the church of Santa Isabel and the Rato Chapel, both in Lisbon.

Attention is given to the pastoral and liturgical motivation of the renewals in each case, as well as to the answers brought by architects and artists between the 1960s and present date. It becomes apparent that, beyond preserving the buildings, they added value to them, from both the point of view of their welcoming service to the believer's communities and of their relationship with the surroundings and the citizens.

### IGREJA DE SANTA ISABEL - CHURCH OF SANTA ISABEL

With the growth of the city, Saint Isabel, a parish of 20 000 souls, has evolved rapidly from a parish of the suburbs with corresponding social structure, becoming a central parish, with impact in the center of the city (...). In order to fulfill the demands of the life of the Church, together with the renewal of its interior, it has been integrated in a parish complex (Leal 1965, 185-187).

In 1955, ten years before this text appeared, the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon Manuel Cerejeira wrote in a pastoral letter that a church was not just a place of worship, referring to the need for ancillary spaces to carry out pastoral activities (Cerejeira 1955). Even if some churches were large enough to accommodate relocated population or growing communities, in many of them the complementary spaces were missing. According to a preliminary report on the process of parish division in Lisbon, the parish of Santa Isabel had its own church building which needed intervention ([Patriarchate of Lisbon] 1957). The church dated from the first half of the eighteenth century and its construction, begun in 1742, had been affected by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Most of

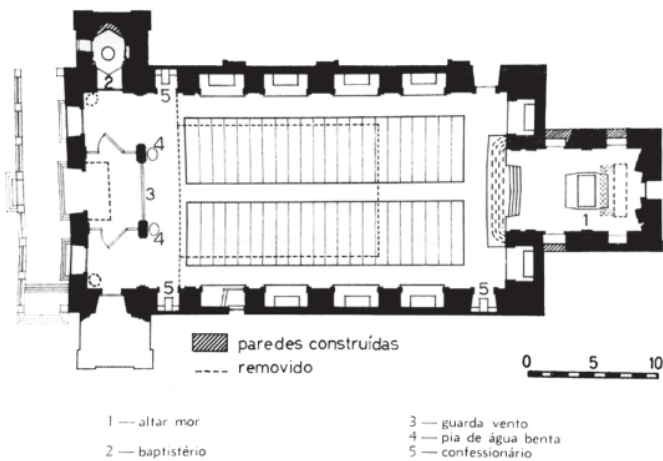
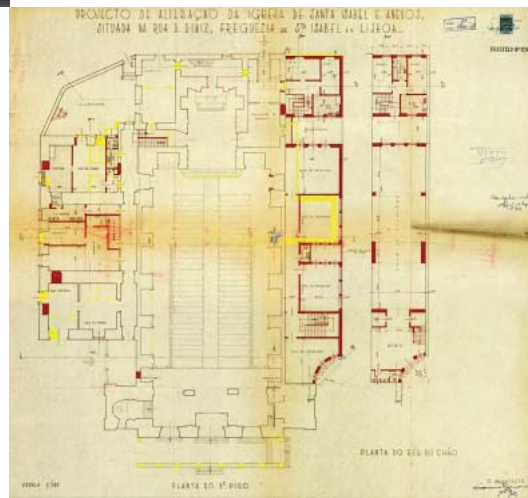
the work campaign was carried out under the protection and patronage of the first Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon, Tomás de Almeida (1670-1754), during the reigns of king João V and king José. Academic investigations carried out during the last church's restoration campaign attribute the sketch to Carlos Mardel (ca. 1695-1763), the Hungarian architect and military engineer, who authored a remarkable set of works in the Portuguese capital, among them the plan for the reconstruction of the Baixa de Lisboa (co-authored with Eugénio dos Santos), the Mãe de Água reservoir, at Amoreiras, and the Águas Livres Aqueduct, both recognized as national monuments in 1910. So far, the character of church of Santa Isabel has not been perceived by Direcção Geral do Património Cultural (the General Directorate for Cultural Heritage) and it remains absent from its list of classified and protected heritage.

The history of Lisbon churches along the last century was marked by an awkward state policy that aims at the safeguard and promotion of medieval and Manueline monuments while giving little attention to those of other periods. This was much promoted by the regime *Estado Novo*, which considered Manueline and medieval buildings as symbols of foundational authenticity. The concentration of worship spaces in the city center, and their small size in view of the identified needs, would eventually lead to demolishing a significant number of churches. Santa Isabel church was spared, given its generous size and the existence of adjoining areas that could be converted to new uses (Fig. 01).

In 1958, a project signed by Samuel Tavares Quinilha, an architect graduated at ESBAP, proposed the beneficiation of Santa Isabel. The program, developed in U-shape around the body of the church, consisted of catechesis, meeting rooms, kitchen soup, mortuary chapels, parish residence, etc. The parish hall, then created, would become a privileged space for meeting and brainstorming, having hosted several important meetings, among them some organized by MRAR, the important Portuguese Religious Art Renewal Movement. The descriptive memory of the architectural project considered the removal of the fence that enclosed the churchyard, an option



Fig. 01. Santa Isabel Church, Lisbon, ca. 1959.  
 Fig. 02. Samuel Quinilha, project to change the church of Santa Isabel and its annexes, Lisbon, 1958.  
 Fig. 03. António Freitas Leal and Diogo Lino Pimentel, renovation project for the church of Santa Isabel, Lisbon, 1960.



that would not be realized. As for the interior of the church, nothing was said in the document, although the demolition and construction plan revealed the intention of removing the balustrade (Quinilha 1958) (Fig. 02).

The remodeling of the church would follow an autonomous project developed by architects António Freitas Leal and Diogo Lino Pimentel, two active members of MRAR. The first, a founder of MRAR, was (along with João de Almeida) the author of one of the first modern churches in the country, Santo António de Moscavide (1953-56), while the second, was back in Lisbon after his training internship at Bologna's *Ufficio Nuove Chiese*, with the architects Giorgio Trebbi and Glauco Gresleri. Diogo Lino Pimentel would become, in 1961, the first Technical Director of SNIP (Secretariat of the New Churches of the Patriarchate of Lisbon), a position he occupied for over 50 years. The proposal developed by those two architects in the early 1960s sought to answer the problems identified: distance between the faithful and the altar, far and high placed; fragmented assembly, limited by physical barriers (balustrade); bad location of confessionals; poor natural lighting.

To fulfill its mission, this church of the eighteenth century needed a deep remodeling which, in addition to mandatorily solving its precarious state of conservation, should answer different demands, from social and cultural requests in the framework of the pastoral plan, to those of liturgical character (...). Only by responding correctly to all these quests, i.e., to the realities of its contemporary mission, would the church of Santa Isabel remain alive. And as a living church, a church of our times, with the marks that affirmed it as such, integrating all the contributions that kept it up to date throughout its life which do not contradict its present use (Leal 1965, 185).

The altar separated from the altarpiece, but still in the chancel, together with the unification of the nave space, suppressing balustrade and level differences, were the main innovations of this pioneering project that earned the support of priests and liturgists. The original altar, a large monolith counterpointing with the chancel's altarpiece, was moved to the sacristy.

A paneled wooden set topping the original altarpiece and the throne was endowed with a new curtain designed in unity with the carving (Fig. 04). In this way, the presence of the altarpiece was reduced, highlighting the new altar table and its suppedary, both made of stone, placed as an island in the center of the chancel, as documented by Robert Chester Smith's photograph taken for his studies on «Carving in Portugal» (Smith 1963). This solution resembles that already rehearsed by the same author in the church of Santo António de Moscavide.

The centrality of the altar of Santa Isabel was reinforced by the axially of the organization of the presbytery. A close look at R. Smith's photographic record makes it possible to reveal other aspects of the celebratory mode and the pre-conciliar liturgical rite — for example, the placement of the tabernacle on the altar. Later the tabernacle would be transferred to a chapel, freeing the altar for the liturgical celebration *versus populum*.

The pulpit in the middle of the nave was kept, though no longer used. Instead of a single ambo in the presbytery, two reading shelves were executed, one for the Epistles and one for the Gospel. Their design, like that of the web of communion, was reduced to simple and light metallic structures that did not disturb the reading of the new altar. The place of the presidency, with no special prominence, was displaced in relation to the axis of the composition, which was topped by the processional cross located between the altar and the altarpiece. The floor of the nave was raised canceling the initial sectorization of the space. The railing of the lateral aisles, once occupied with multiple confessionals, was removed and the fewer confessionals relocated to places of greater privacy. It is also worth noting the effort in the containment in the decoration of the side chapels, expressed in the careful selection of images present at the cult, as well as in the removal of crucifixes and reduction in the number of candlesticks of the old altars. The baptistery, located near the entrance, was also the object of minor intervention. The entrance to the church was endowed with a modern wind barrier consisting of frosted glass supported by a metallic structure, which allowed the natural light



Fig. 04. Presbytery of the Church of Santa Isabel, Lisbon; original situation in 1958. António Freitas Leal and Diogo Lino Pimentel, Refurbishment of the presbytery, 1960.

Fig. 05. António Freitas Leal and Diogo Lino Pimentel, wind guard and confessionals of the Church of Santa Isabel, Lisbon, 1960.



to penetrate generously in the interior of the church complementing the artificial illumination, which was also altered. This wind barrier also rendered the entrance more welcoming, thanks to the reduction of the height of the doors when compared to the monumental spans of the building. This space was also fitted with informative panels integrated in the wind barrier, which testified the rich dynamics of the parish community (Fig. 05).

The project comprised from the design of furniture to liturgical objects, from the benches for the faithful to the candlesticks of the Holy Sacrament candle and lamp. It also extended to the execution of new imple-

ments and vestments designed by Madalena Cabral with the collaboration of Rafaela Zúquete, inspired on the study of the *L'Art Sacré* magazine and on contacts with Swiss production of the 1950s.

More than in a current restoration work, all the authors sought the renovation of the building, giving continuity to its original mission, although reinterpreted with the challenges of contemporaneity. In an integrative gesture of all times, they argued that conservation should seek the architectural unity of the building, opposing the mere stylistic unity. They sought to add new value by giving life to a building they understood as a 'classified monument' but

‘dead’ because unable to meet the challenges of that moment. These were central ideas in the reflection on the criteria and methodology of intervention, gathered both in the interview with architect António Freitas Leal in the Pastoral Information Bulletin (1963) and in the article of the magazine *Arquitectura* at the end of 1965 — the very year of the conclusion of the Ecumenical Council Vatican II (1962-65). Beyond the testimony of the authors was the «Critical Analysis in the Light of the Recent Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy» (Rosa 1965, 1) covering the following themes: the accesses, the space of celebration, the sanctuary, the baptistery. The same article made known documents issued by the Patriarchate of Lisbon, in particular we recall the «Regulation for the Conservation and Restoration of Buildings of Worship of the Patriarchate of Lisbon» (1964) — documents produced by two organisms then created in the framework of their mission: SNIP (1961) and the Commission of Sacred Art (1963). The pioneering approach to Santa Isabel’s solution would make it exemplary in the context of post-conciliar liturgical reorganization orders.

Still in the 1960s, an international publication on this latter intervention in the church of Santa Isabel would be carefully prepared for the Italian magazine *Chiesa & Quartiere*. Unfortunately, the publication of this magazine was suspended before this and other articles on Portuguese religious architecture were published.

Being a living monument, new changes have been made over the most recent times, notably replacing the 1960s solution with a new presbytery. The altar and reading shelves were removed. The solution of a provisional nature was devised by architect Gastão da Cunha Ferreira. The presbytery advanced to the nave in the form of a black carpeted platform supporting a new altar table and an ambo made of sturdy metal profiles and wooden surfaces, surrounded by the community and accessible from all sides. The chancel gained new use: the throne curtain was opened, the former tabernacle took the place of the former altar table of the 1960s, and the presidency was located under the triumphal arch (Fig. 06). In 2005, Gastão Cunha Ferreira developed a similar solution

for the *Basílica da Estrela* — a national monument in Lisbon. The presbytery also advanced to the intersection of the transept. Twelve years, however, also this solution was abandoned. Ambo, altar and presidency would return to the chancel, according to a project thus commissioned to architect Teresa Nunes da Ponte. The broad understanding of the way materialization of liturgical participation would allow the most varied essays, with advances and setbacks, in the organization of the celebratory space. In the case of Santa Isabel the most easily recognized transformation was the advancement and reconquest of the altar’s centrality, sometimes exploring the malleability of the solutions. Take, for example, the celebration of Holy Thursday where the seating arrangement is changed and the central aisle is replaced by a large banquet table (Alves 2011).

The ceiling painted dark blue to make the space cozier in 1960, would be the object of a careful intervention in the new millennium. Michael Biberstein, guest artist, in love with Tiepolo’s work and eager to restore the original architectural project in Santa Isabel, dreamed of a hazy but luminous sky, «a cosmic sky» capable of «provoking the viewer into a state of peaceful contemplation» (Biberstein 2010) — an open-air church (Pereira 2016), an open-air square, we would say. The idea was presented with a 1:8 scale model, first in an art gallery, within the framework of the Lisbon Architecture Triennial and later in the church itself. Unknowingly, the artist reinterpreted the theme that had once filled that ceiling, as documented in photographs found in the process of this investigation.

This artistic intervention, carried out between 2010 and 2016, integrates the conservation and restoration works conducted by Atelier Appleton and Domingos Arquitectos, and NC Restauro-Nova Conservação. Remodeling of the presbytery is foreseen, with a new presidency, along with the restoration of the side altars.

Notice how much the whole process highlights the added value that Fine Arts can represent in valuing, even architectonically like in the present case, the historical heritage that one intends to renew and, therefore, keep the church alive.





Fig. 06. Gastão Cunha Ferreira, arrangement of the presbytery of the church of Santa Isabel, Lisbon. Holy Thursday celebration, 2019.  
Fig. 07. The sky of the Church of Santa Isabel, Lisbon, before the 1960 renovation. The sky of Michael Birberstein, 2010.  
Fig. 08. Santa Isabel Church, Lisbon, at present, 2019.

## CAPELA DO RATO - RATO'S CHAPEL

We now approach the second case study, a set of recent interventions in what was the chapel of the palace that oversees the square called Largo do Rato, in Lisbon. The palace, contemporary of the reservoir of Mãe de Água (Water Mother), at Amoreiras, was erected in the last quarter of the eighteenth century at the request of Luis José de Brito, accountant of the Royal Treasury. In the first half of the nineteenth century, already property of new owners, the palace would undergo profound works of improvement and expansion. The grounds of an adjoining old factory would give way to a raised garden limited to the east by a new extension of the palace. This would be created in a language different from the pre-existing body but in perfect continuity with it.

The project, attributed to Manuel Joaquim Coutinho, architect of Casa do Infantado, included a chapel devoted to Nossa Senhora da Bonança (known as Capela do Rato) with longitudinal development along old Calçada da Loiça, nowadays Calçada Bento de Rocha Cabral. The space of worship is hidden behind a rhythmic 19-span façade and is only denounced by the small central portal of classic taste, surmounted by the pediment and cross (Carita 2000). Although the chapel did not claim to be an autonomous body of the palace, the simplicity and rigor of the façade, with a late Pombaline taste, gives a great harmony to the entrance, which is the only door designed for this new wing of the nineteenth century (Fig. 09). The access of the owning family to the gallery of the chapel, above the entrance, was guaranteed by the interior of the palace. This high space, front to the altar and main altarpiece, guaranteed the family modesty in the liturgical celebrations.

The Patriarchate of Lisbon would gain access to the use of the chapel in the 1940s, by testamentary will of the heirs of the last owner family — the Marqueses da Praia e Monforte that name the Palace. By the end of the 1950s, part of the nascent wing was already used by the Catholic School Youth, as documented by the legalization process of the changes in the student chapel facilities existing in the Lisbon municipal archive. Pastoral needs had led to a change in the use of the old chapel's surrounding compart-

ments. In the process nothing is said about the organization of the liturgical space, although a reference is made to the creation of direct access to the meeting rooms (Madeira 1959). It should be added that, since the seventies, the palace is mainly occupied by the headquarters of the Socialist Party.

Portuguese historiography is increasingly recognizing the importance of the Catholic Action movements, particularly those of students, in contesting the dictatorial regime. Informally, under the dictatorship, some Church spaces made possible the learning of democracy and civic engagement, creating privileged spaces where freedom was possible. Combining the experience of faith with social commitment, the struggle for justice and peace was animated by the echoes of encyclicals, such as *Pacem in Terris* (1963) or *Populorum Progressio* (1967). The impact of a vigil that brought together young Catholics against the Colonial War in Capela do Rato at the end of 1972 (Araújo 2004) is especially relevant in this context. Among the protesters, we highlight the presence of architect Nuno Teotónio Pereira, founding member of MRAR.

There was an environment that called for the best of ourselves as Christians. Father Alberto [the chaplain] did some remarkable homilies. PIDE always watching, was never able to arrest him because, despite making a clear denunciation of the situations in Portugal, he kept a language always close to the Gospel of the day, so that he could not be accused of political intervention. He just proclaimed the Gospel message (Moita 2014).

The ecclesial dynamic generated around *Capela do Rato* in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the time of the pre-democratic transition, would in itself justify the collective recognition of its symbolic interest. However, it is also interesting to consider the urban and architectural value of this particular chapel of the nineteenth century which, unlike many of its contemporaries, has come to the present day. The solution of a chapel integrated in the new wing of the palatial buildings, almost unrecognizable in street reading, was in line with the much desired discreet church presence in the city that was being discussed since the mid-1960s, and would become present in





Fig. 09. The new palace with chapel, at Largo do Rato, Lisbon, 1900 ca.

Fig. 10. The rotation of the liturgical organization in Capela do Rato, Lisbon, 1970 ca.

Fig. 11. The interior of the Rato chapel, Lisbon; the heritage of a student chapel.



the standard program of parish churches developed by SNIP. In a document defending a poor church in the evangelical sense associated with the dimension of service, one reads:

the Church presents itself as a servant. It does not impose, but rather propose itself to the world. Also the church-building should not impose itself, but simply propose, fitting discreetly in the urban context. Thus, it is not the ostensible monumentality that should characterize it, even if the location may allow or favor monumental solutions (Pimentel 1966).

With regard to the organization of the liturgical space, this family chapel converted into a student's community chapel is undoubtedly a good testimony of a compromise solution, attentive and respectful of the architectural legacy (Fig. 10). In fact, the interior space dominated by stucco work with fake marbled and golden notes, in line with the taste and technique of the nineteenth century, did not inhibit the radicality of a Christian community experience in the 3rd quarter of the twentieth century.

When there was an altar in the back, [the chapel] had the dignity of the builder. But it had no functionality (...) the church becoming very long. (...) Therefore, a study was made (...) seriously considering theological, architectural and technical arguments! And, eventually, the altar was put nearby. (...) But more is needed (Neto 1970).

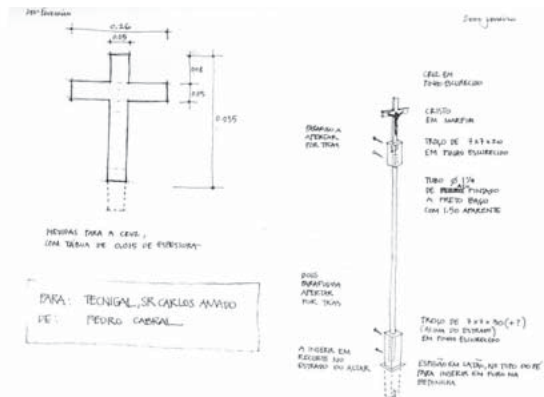
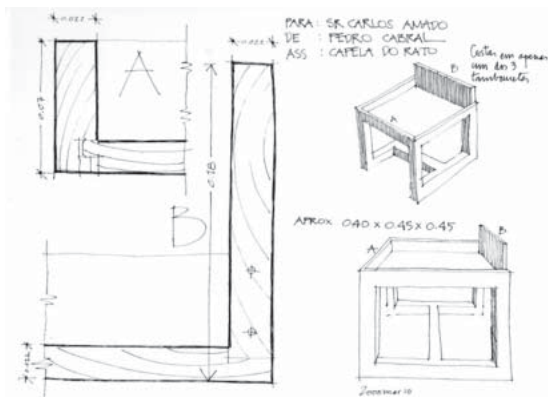
The testimony of Father Alberto Neto, charismatic assistant of JEC between 1965 and 1972, explains the changes introduced in the chapel space. The present interior organization is characterized by the centrality of the altar under the dome in the transept, involved by the community, heir to the reorganization of the 1970s. In a 1990s television report (Ramos 1990) we may still identify the provisional solution tested: fluorescent lights, wooden chairs, tabernacle placed by the altar table (in a corner of the transept), damask fabrics that served as background for the placement of images that filled the once empty altarpieces (Fig. 11).

The provisional solution would be revised from the 1990s, under coordination of eng. João António Lamas and orders from Father Jose Manuel Pereira de Almeida. One of the most obvious changes was the

relocation of the tabernacle to its original position, creating celebratory paths that complement the centrality of the altar. The new lighting highlights the artistic quality of the stucco attributed to Manuel Afonso Rodrigues Pita, being one of the first of his works in the capital (Mendonça 2017). The judicious choice of stackable chairs ensures the desired adaptability, allowing the space to host different events (cultural evenings, musical and artistic installations) which counterpoint with the elements of the sanctuary. The altar table, amber, presidency and the processional cross (this with an antique ivory Christ) were designed as moving pieces of wood of great simplicity and are arranged on a simple wooden stand identical to the floor of the chapel. This set was designed by architect Pedro Cabral who carried out an informal but careful project, not subjected to external scrutiny by the community that celebrates there.

Artistic pieces were introduced in the chapel with orders issued in the framework of the project Contemporary and Sacred Art, curated by the chaplain (Marujo 2010), the distinguished priest and poet José Tolentino Mendonça, recently nominated Cardinal. Throughout the liturgical year (in 2010), and integrated in the existing altarpieces, different art works emerged: the Angel of Berlin, by Lourdes Castro, When the Second Sun Arrives, by Rui Moreira, and Pentecost, by Ilda David. These pieces demonstrate the challenges that culture and time impose to the pursuit of Good, Truth and Beauty, ways to «build bridges that bring into dialogue faith and thought, the sacred and the arts, today and the future, believers and non-believers» (Mendonça 2009) (Fig. 12).

In 2012, a dense but soft carpet designed by architect Pedro Ressano Garcia, in multiple shades of blue would be added — a small sky on Earth. This piece, produced in Denmark, in harmony with all surroundings, would dignify the space between altar and presidency, par excellence place for participated communion and celebration of blessings. Besides, in this chapel everything has been thought of. Take a look at João Carmo Simões' small project; the offering boxes «without handles, without sides (...) to pass from hand to hand» (Simões 2016). More recently,



in 2018, the same author would reinforce the poetics of the liturgical space by proposing to replace the colored glazed skylight with another one, made of brass and clear glass.

Besides of marking strongly the center of the chapel, this skylight, the only entrance of natural light into the chapel, allows the contemplation of passing clouds. Like in the famous Pantheon of Rome, this is a way of experiencing the most permanent of history — time and reading time in space, at the same time dialogue and openness to the outside world, in a place between heaven and earth.

## EPILOGUE

The present article reminded us the recent history of these two worship places of recognized patrimonial value, highlighting the way they serve their communities and the city. Enriched with the work of either well-known artists or, sometimes, anonymous architects, the two case studies show us the life of live monuments, where Modern and Contemporary Art and Architecture participate in preserving and enhancing their cultural value. At the same time, the liturgical and pastoral activities are shown to be the engine behind successive interventions — the life of a worship space.

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Fig. 12 (on both pages ). Interventions in the presbytery and assembly of Capela do Rato, Lisbon, by Pedro Cabral (furniture and designs), Pedro Ressano Garcia (carpet), Lourdes Castro (Berlin Angel), 2012.

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## SOURCE OF IMAGES

Fig. 01. Lisbon Municipal Archive; photo by Armando Maia Seródio.

Fig. 02, 04a. Lisbon Municipal Archive.

Fig. 03, 05, 06a, 07a, 09. Author's collection.

Fig. 04b. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian Archive/Fundo R.C. Smith.

Fig. 06. Laurinda Alves 2011.

Fig. 07-08, 10. Photo by Paulo Catrica.

Fig. 11. RTP Archive.

Fig. 12. Photo by Capela do Rato.