

CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST
COIMBRA, PORTUGAL
2025–2015

A church dedicated to St. John the Baptist
that is solid as a rock from the outside
and fluid as water from the inside

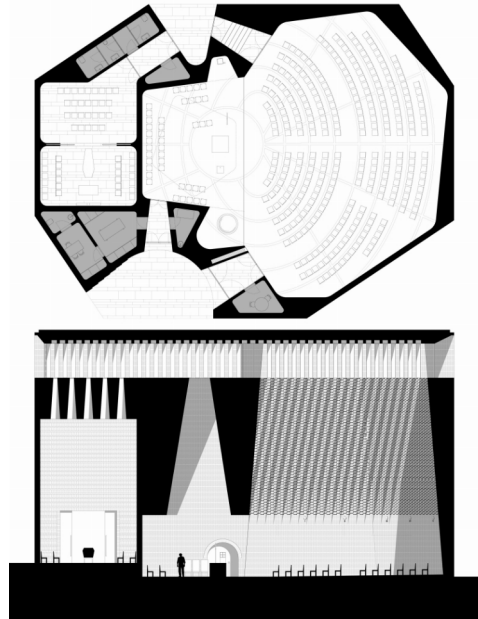
The project for the church and parish centre of Saint John the Baptist is located in the south overspill area of the city of Coimbra. The rectangular plot slants westwards and is confined to the south by the main avenue of the urban development scheme and by a steep man-made slope towards the north.

The programme consists of a church with mortuary chapels and a parish centre, which are located at opposite ends of the plot, generating a square that opens south to the city, while naturally bound to the north by a cliff face and the dramatic backdrop of its geological strata. Proposed as a 'Court of the Gentiles', the square created by the buildings is intended as a community gathering place in a broad sense — a space for celebrating open-air Mass and holding theatre performances, musical shows, fairs and other events.

From a design perspective, the aim was to create a building whose objectified simplicity and solemnity make its presence evident as a Catholic church. The design references not only the Portuguese Romanesque sensitivity coined by Albrecht Haupt as 'grounded' or *chã*, based on simplicity and restraint of form, but also on a tactile and tectonic expression able to reconcile modernity with a spiritual pathos — that very same empathy of form and space identified in religious works by the likes of Schwarz, Lewerentz, Távora or Van der Laan.

The building is conceived as a compact mineral prism that stands barely touching the cliff while creating a space-in-between, a space of tension between masses. By contrast, the interior is devised with an inspiring fluidity, combined with dramatic shifts in height, from the overhead assembly room to the low-lying altar. As a whole, the building is dense and archaic from the outside, and fluid and welcoming on the inside.

The use of solid brick as an all-encompassing material — both for the church building and the parish centre, and in both cases on the exterior as well as on the interior — is a decision determined not only by economy but also based on a series of attractive qualities, namely low maintenance costs, optimal acoustic performance, high thermal inertia and a refined physical and tactile presence. Here and there, an evocative *aggiornamento* in the pattern compositions of the brick bonding is sufficient to obviate the use of other decorative or finishing materials. The fact that brick is the predominant local material, and that its colour is also close to the reddish texture of the cliff, naturally incorporates the ensemble into the landscape and the community alike.



Location: Coimbra, Portugal

Client: Parish of Saint John the Baptist of Coimbra

Scope of services: Architecture

Project brief: Church and parish centre

Gross floor area: 1,700 sq. m

Construction cost: EUR 1.8m (estimated)

Project Status: 2015 (shortlisted competition, 1st prize) – 2025 (estimated parish centre completion)

Rendering: 4+Arquitectos