

Architecture, Art and Technology in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Arantzazu

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Abstract

In Spain, the architectural development of the fifties, is included within the second stage of autarky in the country favoured by US aid, loans from European banks for the purchase of goods, and the beginning of tourism expansion and improvement of external relations. In this context, the Basilica of Arantzazu was completed in 1954, a real turning point in the Spanish architectural historiography of the 20th century.

Part of the archived documentation on this project has not been published yet, and will be showed for the first time in the paper of Congress, because it is interesting for the light it sheds on the construction process (real architecture, beyond considerations of architectural theory) of the Basilica of Arantzazu.

Introduction

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Arantzazu is a building that brings together in an architectural project, the artistic concerns and technological development in an outstanding manner:

- On its architecture. The basilica of Arantzazu is original and essential. An empty facade compresses access to a mythical cave, discovered under a chorus that pushes the mystery of the appearance wrapped in wood and stained a light unapproachable.
- About its art. The history of Arantzazu is a true cultural field, from the point of the personalities of culture and arts related to this project. In particular the construction of the new sanctuary, in the international debate about the integration of arts in architecture, attracts some of the biggest names on the national scene: Francisco Javier Saez de Oiza and Luis Laorga, Eduardo Chillida, Javier Eulate Nestor Basterretxea, Lucio Muñoz, and, of course, Jorge Oteiza. A team that connects squarely with the concerns of a Franciscan community committed to the Basque cultural identity in which blunted personalities such as Bitoriano Gandiaga and Luis Villasante

- Regarding technology, the memory of heating, ventilation and acoustics is two thirds of the total project documentation. What guarantees the interest and concern of the architects to integrate these issues in the project from the very beginning.

Despite being an extraordinary work, the result of the privileged mind of Oíza with the invaluable contribution of Laorga, they continued to pursue their intellectual process, it has been replicated as it is a closed path, being a special type (one temple) and by an incredible figure of architecture (and, therefore, difficult to repeat).

1. Architecture

After the sanctuary fire in the forties, an extraordinary adventure will start. Some of the most remarkable people of the artistic and intellectual fields of the fifties in the Basque Country, Spain and international countries can be found in this experience. People such as Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza, Jorge Oteiza, Lucio Muñoz and Eduardo Chillida among others, completely connect with the concerns of an opened, dynamic and engaged Franciscan community where personalities like Bitoriano Gandiaga and Luis Villasante were starting to grow up. The biggest sign of these successful relationships, its materialization, is the basilica. It is a unique work where culture, spirituality and nature are integrated once again. The rigour of labouring the stone or timber, the sincerity to face tradition and the possibilities that it can offer to artistic shapes, like the Latin cross floor plan, all them give as a result an outstanding work. Its modernity (never pursued as an objective by itself) transcends the particular case and, from the own values of Franciscan spirituality and the Basque culture, deepens into the unexplored possibilities of the relationship between the plastic arts and its integration with architecture. And making all these facts forestalling the spiritual renovation of the Second Vatican Council.

The linguistic universality of arts is conducted through the common materials that work as a humanized mirror of the natural environment where they are placed. That two-way path of arts and society that P. Francastel developed brilliantly and that here exhibits particularly that physical and emotive engagement with the land and traditions. An engagement that reviewed from postmodernism thinking or even better, from overmodernity, put Arantzazu in an enviable situation to reflect about its being and the main problems and discussions that are proposed nowadays and that, likely, will set the foreseeable cultural path.

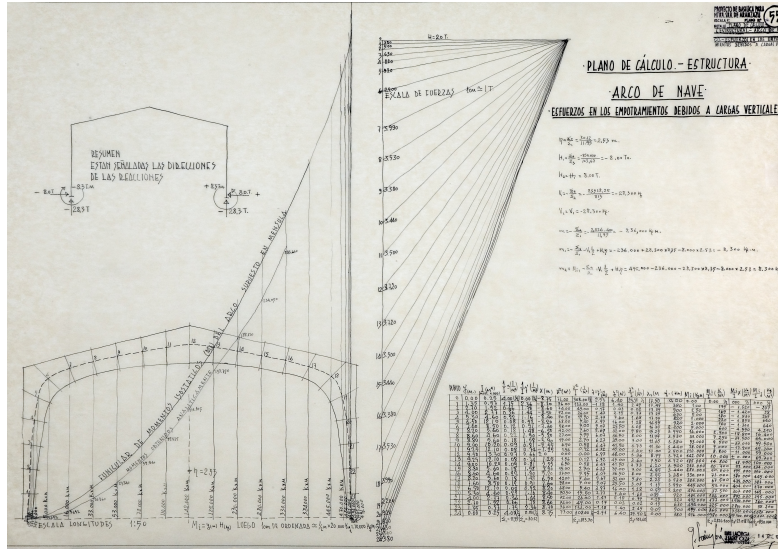


Fig. 1: Structural plan calculations calculated by the architects themselves.



Fig. 2: External view from a model.

2. Art

At the end of 1950, the General Assembly of the UN, repealed the resolution of 1946 by way of which that same institution had “recommended” to the member countries withdraw the ambassadors and accredited plenipotentiary ministers in Madrid. The next year, the first steps to the integration of Spain in that institution thanks to the United States took place. It meant some kind of external openness. It was, without doubt, controversial (as it was reflected in 1953 with the film *Bienvenido Mister Marshall* by L. García Berlanga), but it was translated into qualitative changes in social and cultural life anyway. In fact, although the mismatches of the Spanish reality were exposed more specifically, it was also possible to get involved, in some way, to the argumentative paths of the moment in Europe, like those that affected the new expectations that fine arts in general (and architecture specially) were facing after the Second World War.

To all these facts, it must be added an uncommon spotlight of some architects in the Spanish culture. Likely, because among their graphic sources, with their architecture magazines, new formal currents of design had arrived. Those renewed thoughts helped to restore the formal universe of artists of the most diverse disciplines. It must be remarked that after the Second World War, there was a concrete acknowledgment to ‘architecture’ as a leader at the expense of painting, sculpture or, the best known, applied arts. Documents like The Athens Charte justified that reality. Up to this moment in the 20th century, the dialectical speech where theorists and experts of architecture focused on, was the importance of the structure of the buildings, its symbolic function or the implementation of pure geometrical volumes. This speech had been enriched with the new aspirations created by a renewed humanism.

In this way, the cultural traditions of Italy, France and Spain joined in a speech with many common points. Lucio Costa’s or Alberto Sartoris’¹ thoughts are good examples of that agreement. Without doubt, because once again, history had booked a main role for arts and artists:

“The creator artists have now the possibility to impose their inventions with the tools that they have made by themselves. Provided that (and it is an essential point) they are shown with intelligence and regarding an appropriate style, an extremely important mission is assured for them”².

And here it is, that new commitment, rediscovering that “magic”, regarding plastic arts, had to start to solve the problem of the integration of fine arts in architecture so that its art wasn’t only a representative object of beauty and

¹ A. Sartoris, “Perspectivas acerca de la integración de las artes en la Arquitectura”, in *Revista de Ideas Estéticas*, nº 64, 1958. Vid. para las relaciones entre A. Sartoris y España, M. Navarro, “Alberto Sartoris y el itinerario de la modernidad en España”, en *Los años 50: La arquitectura española y su compromiso con la historia*, Pamplona,, E.T.S.A., 2000, pp. 265-274.

² A. Sartoris, Op.cit. p. 265.

harmony, not only a visual art, but a livable art: “an art that is at the same time, more magic, more captivating, wiser, more specific and broader”³.

Because, to close the circle, those same analysis sides, in 1915, are those that can be found behind a forum of great transcendence in the theoretical reflection field, the “Sesiones de Crítica de Arquitectura” (Meetings of Architecture Criticism), organized by Carlos de Miguel, head of the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* (National Architecture Magazine). In the issue of February, Francisco Asís Cabrero made a read conference about the Basilica of Arantzazu y la Merced⁴. Among the opinions and thoughts shown there, we want to focus on the debate born due to the implementation of the Latin cross floor plan in both churches. According to Cabrero “inertia of baroque architecture (...) rejected at heart and respected on the shape”, while Sáenz de Oiza explained very well the overcoming of that dilemma between modernity and tradition when remarking that a project like Arantzazu could not be solved with a unique utilitarian criteria. Afterwards, he continued his speech, reaffirming his own conviction that Arantzazu would be “modern if it didn’t have a cross floor plan; but, I repeat, I believe that making true modern art is not stop making, just because, what the centuries have enshrined, and going for the change of fierce innovation”⁵.

We must place the Grupo de Arantzazu (Group of Arantzazu) under those parameters. During some years, since 1950, the group met in Oñate a broader group of sculptor architects and avant-garde painters around the restoration works of reconstruction of the basilica of Arantzazu, a contest won by Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oriza and Rafael Laorga in architecture and Néstor Basterretxea and Pascual de Lara in painting. Afterwards, Agustín Ibarrola and Javier de Eulate, the main responsible for the stained glasses, were included. Finally, Jorge Oteiza⁶ was the responsible for sculpture. Indeed, in the issue number 120, December 1951, of the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, the successes of the Milan Triennial were recognized with Jorge Oteiza’s article entitled “La investigación Abstracta” (The Abstract research). Although there were also more reactionary proposals, what is unquestionable is that the phase started in 1951 was going to be characterized by the debate figuration/abstraction or, if preferred, representational art/non-figurative art⁷ and by the debate of the integration of arts in architecture or, at least, by the reflection about the interrelationship of arts that is started with Arantzazu as the most paradigmatic case.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ F. Asís Cabrero, “Las basílicas de Arantzazu y de la Merced”, en *RNA*, nº 114, 1951, pp. 31- 43, where both the conference and the posterior debate were included. In the same issue a work of V. Eusa was analyzed, “San Antonio de Zaragoza”.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 39

⁶ M. Cabañas Bravo, *Política artística del franquismo*, Madrid, CSIC., 1996, p. 76. The activity was stopped three years later, not being finished until 1969.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

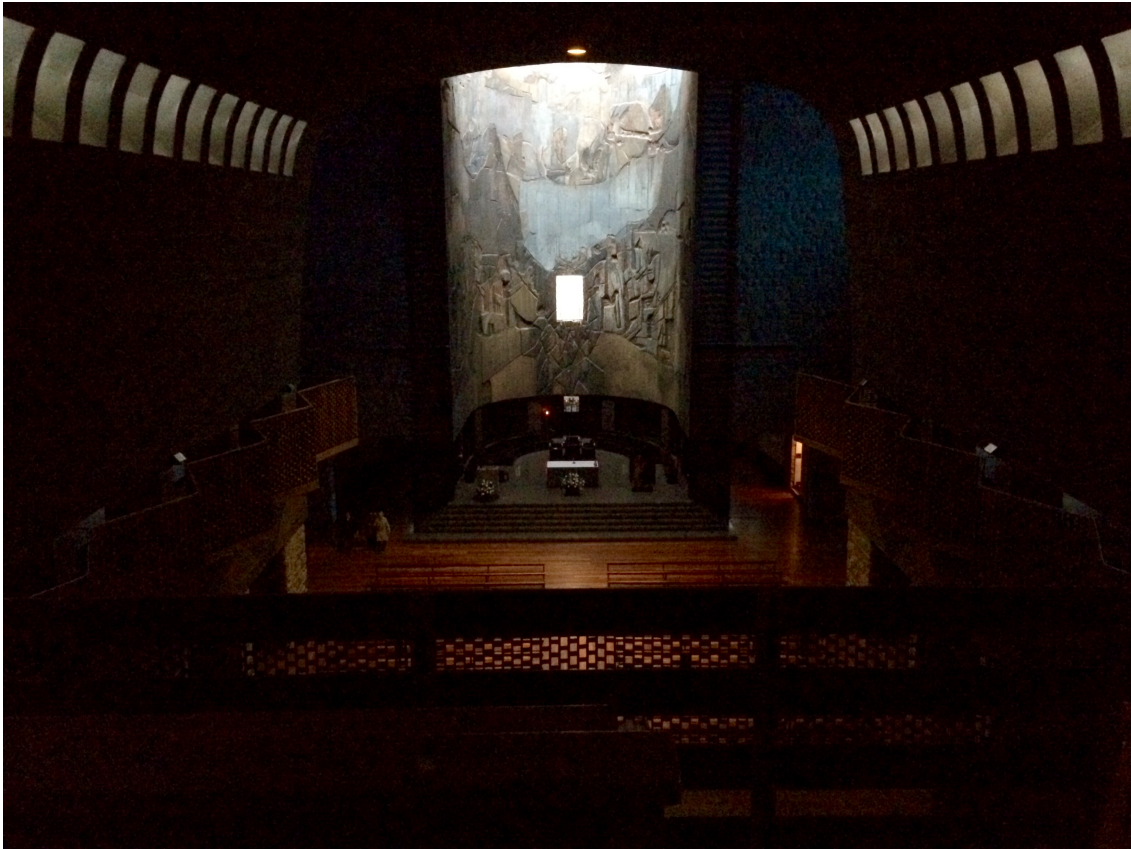


Fig. 3: Internal view of the Sanctuary.

2.1. The Group of Arantzazu?

Although the current criticism rejects the existence of the “Group of Arantzazu”, in some way, this mention shows very well the exceptional and, on the other hand, very natural character of what seems to be an inimitable meeting. It is also true that regarding the history of the project of the new basilica from the fifties to the eighties, it can be understood what is unavoidable and the logics of that meeting. Ultimately, it is the consequence of the short number of architects and plastic creators that were starting to know formal resources of modernity during those years. However, it is remarkable that among those few people, the number of Basque artists that were emerging in promising careers was high. Those brilliant careers would be confirmed years after. This is also the reason for the great relationship with the project of Arantzazu, created as a symbol of that cultural revolution based on a back to the roots, to find the own identity that bothered so much Oteiza or Chillida. “I became Basque in Arantzazu” Lucio Muñoz, the Madrid painter, said. And he did it mainly because he reached the project with Oiza and in a phase where the conceptual guidelines of the project were clear. But it is also true that Oiza, Oteiza and Chillida had gone to Madrid, Europe and America enriching their theoretical and cultural universe as an essential milestone to rethink the importance of their roots and give them a meaning that transcends from the particular to the universal.

We find a group of artists aware about their capacity to change the coming evolution of arts in the 20th century. But they also believed that they were able to influence directly in society and culture. Arantzazu offered to these creators a reflection made work, a modernity based on the preterite and the essential of Basque culture that, in this case, was directly joined with Arantzazu history and the Franciscan spirit.

2.2. Eduardo Chillida

In 1954, the same year when he receives the Honour Diploma in the 10th Milan Triennial⁸, and due to Oiza's lead, the timber doors designed by Laorga are rejected and the assignment is made to Chillida. Eduardo Chillida was not part of the "Group of Arantzazu", but his involvement in the project explained that, whether the assignment was made in autumn 1954, in spring 1955 the doors made with wastes of Zumaya's port and sheets of "Patricio Echeverría"⁹ were installed. It is commonly accepted by the criticism the similarity of its design with the collages on paper made during those years by the sculptor. But, moreover, one of the constants that determines his work from that moment can be found: the relationship between space and matter so important in the architectural conception of the sanctuary.

2.3. Javier Álvarez de Eulate

The stained glasses mean an item of doubtless spotlight in the architecture of those years, given its capacity of metamorphosis a solid wall into a source of light. These plastic possibilities of the wall of light had already been explored since the gothic and becomes a key point within the context of the debate about the integration of arts in architecture because it means the absolute symbiosis of architecture and painting. Javier Álvarez de Eulate was taught in the Academia de San Fernando and, being a Franciscan, he knew at first hand the possibilities of that technique. However, he had entered the competition to paint the walls of the basilica. The jury did not consider it a good solution, choosing a more punctual solution (similar to what happened with Agustín Ibarrola). The jury for this competition was made up of Oiza and Laorga, Oteiza, Daniel Vázquez Díaz and Secundino Zuazo, although it was discontinued due to the Provincial Pablo Lete's¹⁰ death.

The Franciscan community assigned him the design and execution of the stained glassed of some spans which shape was not still defined. His work, in

⁸ The chronicle of it was gathered and published in the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*.

⁹ *Chillida en San Sebastián*, Donostia, 1992, pp. 490-491.

¹⁰ Pagola, op. Cit., pp.87-91.

words of Eulate, could be defined like: “Expressionist Synthetism”¹¹ among the plastic possibilities that the abstraction language offered.

2.4. Nestor Basterretxea

His convoluted and complex involvement with the project of Arantzazu finishes with the sign of the final contract for the decoration of the crypt in 1983. Despite the explicit support of Jorge Oteiza, the painter had not received any assignment in three decades. During those years, the painter had tried thoroughly to decorate the apse. So many years since the first sketches implied a definitive change of concepts. A change that was translated into an expansion of the programme and a bigger ambition when talking about the exploration of expressive values of painting, shape, abstraction, a plot and colour hardly strident that find in the limits of the crypt an oppressive strength of the matter that seems to be in competition with. Indeed, the result is very close to soviet realism that so much repercussion had had in the two previous decades in Latin America. The creative energy of the painter finds its shape among the foundations of Arantzazu, announcing with released strength the history of the synthesized humanity in eighteen curved sheets.

2.5. Lucio Muñoz

In June 1961 the basis for the competition to finish the apse of Arantzazu are published. The period is more favourable for this commitment mainly due to the liturgical renovation backed by the Second Vatican Council and, in some way, by the definitive support of the Dominican José Manuel Aguilar (head of the movement of sacred art at that moment). The jury was made up of Muñoz Aguilar, the architects Luis Alustiza, Fco. Javier Sáenz de Oiza, Rafael Laorga, Ramón Vázquez Molezún and Modesto López Otero, the painters Francisco Cossío, Godofredo Ortega Muñoz and Daniel Vázquez Díaz, the sculptor Eduardo Chillida and the art critic Enrique Lafuente Ferrari. A prestigious jury that awarded with first prize to Lucio Muñoz and with other five awards to different creators. The group of materials created for the competition as well as the models of the awarded proposals make a compound of great historic-artistic interest.

But returning to Lucio Muñoz¹², we are talking about one of the most remarkable persons of what has been known as “Spanish informality” that immediately connects with the space and natural environment of Arantzazu. Once again, matter and space, nature and arts in a perfect symbiosis.

In this personal experience, the identification process with Arantzazu, with its nature, with its art and spirituality, is captured in that outstanding wall of 620

¹¹ Isabel Monforte, *Arantzazu. Arquitectura para una vanguardia*, Donosita San Sebastián, 1994 gathers Eulate’s personal testimony about his stained glasses.

¹² *Lucio Muñoz. Madera de Fondo*. Madrid, Ministerio de Asuntos exteriores y cooperación, 2004.

square meters, where the timber and colour, the texture and light, transfer the fusion to the spectator with this environment. As we will see later, this is one of the essential points about which the exhibition will work.

2.6. Jorge Oteiza

When the relationship between Oiza and Oteiza¹³ is analysed, it is surprising to find some symmetry, mainly because of the transcendence of the first and the latest Oiza's work where both of them collaborate. Those works enclose, like a symbolic parenthesis, a unique and difficult relationship. But above all, a relationship based on a mutual understanding of their creative processes.

In 1951, in the moment when the building is finished, contacts between the architects and Jorge Oteiza had already taken place so that Oteiza made the sculpture. That year, he gets the Honour Diploma in the Milan Triennial and he takes part in the first Hispano-American Arts Biennial held in Madrid. From the very first moment, he identifies the apostleship like "dynamic centre and goldenly proportional", making an explicit reference to the main theme of the congress held that year on the occasion of the Milan Triennial about the "golden section". Between 1951 and the precautionary suspension of the project, the sculptor starts a personal process of reflection that is partly gathered in his testimony to the magazine *Aranzazu* in 1952:

"I would like to make a good choice in this work and conciliate the formal requirements, of which I am part due to my experimental vocation as sculptor of this era, with the religious properties, of which the religious feeling is part of and I may say that the artistic feeling, of the people of my region".

3. Technology

The execution project of the new Basilica of Arantzazu, approved in June 1952, included an austere, simple, tight-budgeted air-conditioning installation, which not only fits in with the project, but clearly supports the architecture it serves. This installation was finally carried out in 1968, and is still working (with its virtue and defects) as it did when it began.

The archived documents of this project are fascinating thanks to the light they throw on the construction process (true architecture, beyond the realms of architectural theory) of the Basilica of Arantzazu¹⁴.

The heating, ventilation and acoustic records of the Arantzazu project, which make up two thirds of the total documents for the project, show the full development of the project (thus confirming Sáenz de Oíza's knowledge of air conditioning installations).

¹³ Pilar Muñoa, Oteiza. *La vida como experimento*, Zarautz, Alga Memoria, 2006.

¹⁴ César Martín-Gómez et al. "Heating and Ventilation in the Basilica of Arantzazu". *Architecture Research*, 2015; 5(1): 1-9.

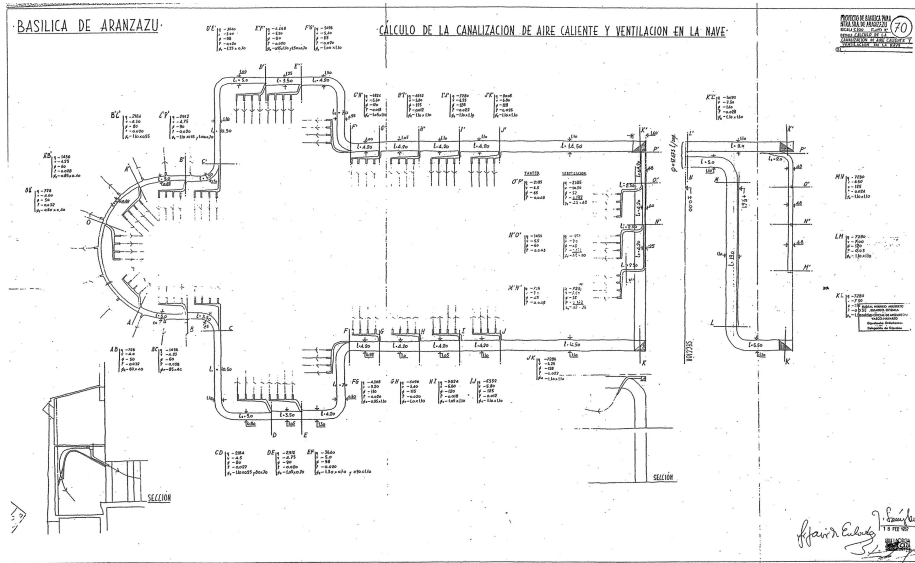


Fig. 4: Air conditioning ducts (recirculation) and ventilation of the crypt of the Basilica of Arantzazu

In fact, the translation from Spanish and the account of this documentation makes up most of this article, as the fact that what is described is so interesting and never before published in spite of being clearly explained, demands that it should be better known. For instance, apart from some specific terminology, the description given by the architects (not engineers) of this installation could well be that of a modern-day installation.

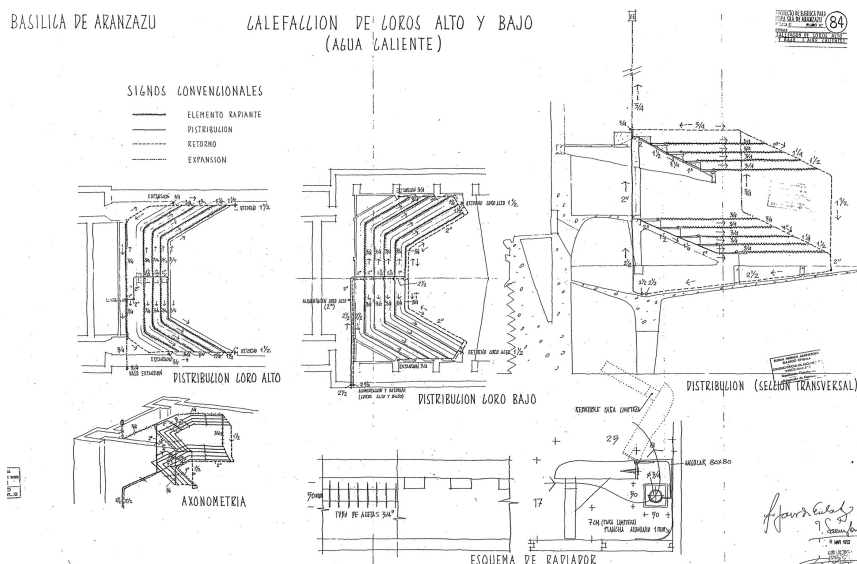


Fig. 5: Heating through finned tubes in choir and retro-choir (not executed) of the Basilica of Arantzazu

The records on the Basilica of Arantzazu make this project even more outstanding. Unfortunately, the project does not represent the spirit of global analysis of the questions on projects that architects, as professionals, should ask themselves.

The data presented on Arantzazu confirm the design possibilities of architecture with air conditioning, that is, with a concept that integrates the whole building process, without undervaluing any of the parts that make up the building.

The acoustic study of the nave (in which both the origins of the sound –organ and choir voices– and the characteristics of the different surfaces within the nave) are also included in the execution project, because, as can be seen throughout the many cases analysed in the authors' research, those architects who take air conditioning into account in their projects are also interested in the acoustic performance of their buildings. This is a professional attitude that makes these architectural pieces even more valuable. Compare the study of this case with, for example, the main hall in the Capitol Building or the conference room of the Patronato Juan de la Cierva.

The Basilica of Arantzazu represents the turning point for air-conditioning installations in Spanish architecture. However, what we have described would be difficult to replicate; it is a kind of *cul de sac*, as it was a one-off commission (a church) erected by an incredibly brilliant tandem of Sáenz de Oíza and Laorga, and so practically unrepeatable.

4. Conclusions

The austerity of its execution and the fact that it continues to be used add even more value to their design, where the common sense and logic of the application of technology to modern architecture are outstanding.

The basilica is a triumph of multidisciplinary architecture, taken in the Renaissance sense, and of logics applied to technology. It is an example of holistic humanistic design, with a virtuosity that is essential in the tortuous world of contemporary architecture.

We believe that the history of Arantzazu is a unique cultural site. And we claim it not only from the view of culture and arts people involved in the project, but from the possibilities that the photographic, musical and documentary resources may offer. We could even go further on and claim that nature, technology, culture and spirituality are the central elements that define the history of Arantzazu. In fact, it is the balance between the integration of nature and artistic creation one of the nodal points, if not the main one, of the privileged and *natural* incorporation of Arantzazu to the fiery cultural context of contemporaneity. A juncture where simplicity and radical modernity of San Francisco de Asis' message, settled on the basis of the search for peace and harmony with nature and aimed, in the current cultural context, to stablish fruitful relationships among the different cultures and religions (Interreligious Meeting of Asis, 1986) and to obtain universal ethic values from the singularity

of peoples (Nature Ethic, Earth Chart) offer a whole actuality and allow redesigning properly the importance of Arantzazu regarding texts like the new Pope Francis' Encyclical Laudato si (2015).

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