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The Sacred Architecture of Josep Lluís Sert

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Abstract: An unknown aspect of Josep Lluís Sert (Barcelona, 1902–1983) is his deep engagement with Christian spirituality, particularly following his American exile. This perspective is beautifully reflected in his religious-themed projects, among which historiography has highlighted the church of Puerto Ordaz (Venezuela, 1951), the Chapel of St. Botolph (Boston, 1963–1968), and the Carmel de la Paix Chapel (Mazille, 1967–1972), designed, respectively, before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. Using these three well-known projects as a starting point, our aim is to expand the discussion around this topic to encompass the entirety of Sert's sacred architecture. The contributions of Sert to the design of modern religious architecture are analyzed in this study, firstly through the distinctive aspects of his architecture, such as its urban scale and interactions between various plastic arts, and secondly through his theological references. This study is based on Sert's original drawings, as well as specific bibliographic sources and articles from specialized journals. At the same time, it seeks to highlight an aspect of the architect that, despite the significance and brilliance of his designs, has received little attention until now.

Keywords: Sert; sacred architecture; liturgical reform; modernism

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1. Introduction

José Luis Sert (1902–1983) is considered to be one of the pioneers of modern architecture in Spain. Through the GATCPAC, the Catalan section of the Group of Spanish Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture, and the AC magazine promoted by the group, he maintained contact with the European and global architectural avant-garde, eventually presiding over the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM) from 1947 to 1956.

Exiled from Spain after the Civil War, Sert developed his professional activity in the United States. He first settled in New York, where he primarily worked on urban projects for Latin American cities. Later, he moved to Cambridge, MA, to direct the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he practiced under Sert, Jackson, and Associates. In 1981, he was awarded the AIA Gold Medal.

Like GATCPAC, Sert was strongly linked to the ideals of the Republic. Among other examples, Sert, together with Luis Lacasa, designed the Spanish Pavilion for the Republic at the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, for which Picasso painted *Guernica*.

The government of the Second Spanish Republic did not have particularly good relations with the Catholic Church, and Sert, coming from an aristocratic and Catholic family, distanced himself somewhat from the institution. It was not until his exile in the United States that the Catalan architect reconsidered his beliefs regarding the faith he had received as a child, finding within it a space that did not require him to abandon his social and political ideals.

In her biography of Sert, María del Mar Arnús, the Catalan architect's niece-in-law, writes the following:

> "*(. . .) his Catholic faith was strengthened, though based on the premises of the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, whose works he owned in their entirety. His book Building the Earth had deeply impressed him. I remember discussing it with him on occasion. A strong religious sense, nurtured by his mother, resurged fervently. He attended Mass on Sundays with Moncha, who had always been a devout practitioner, and his daughter María Paz.*" (Arnús 2019, p. 209)

There is further evidence of Sert's religiosity. Oriol Bohigas, in his published memoirs, highlights the relationship between the architect and the Catalan theologian Raimon Panikkar (as does Arnús in her previously mentioned work), as well as with the Capuchin friar Mn. Llimona, whom he describes as Sert's spiritual director upon his return from exile (Bohigas 2014, p. 529). J. K. Birksted, in his book on the Carmel de la Paix, cites several accounts of the Catalan architect's religiosity, including those of Jack Williams (a former collaborator of Sert in his Cambridge studio), Mother Marie-Thérèse (prioress of the convent), and John P. Boles (auxiliary bishop of Boston) (Birksted 2013, pp. 28, 67).

The complete works of Sert, published by the Miró Foundation (Sert et al. 2005), include three religious buildings: the Church of Puerto Ordaz (1951), the Chapel of St. Botolph (1963–1968) (Table 1), and the Carmel de la Paix Convent (1967–1972) (Table 1), the only one of the three to be built. Using these three works, recognized by historiography, as a starting point, the aim of this article is to encompass the entirety of Sert's sacred architecture, much of which was never realized. By analyzing their common characteristics, the goal is to enable further in-depth studies of each work through more specific analyses.

The church project for Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz (Figure 1) was published in 1953 in *Architectural Record* (Sert and Wiener 1953) and *Liturgical Arts* (Sert 1953)—the most comprehensive text written by Sert on religious architecture—and later in *Chiesa e Quartiere* in 1958 (Longhi 2015, pp. 30, 31). It also features prominently in the key monographs on Sert (Bastlund 1967; Freixa 1997; Sert et al. 2005).

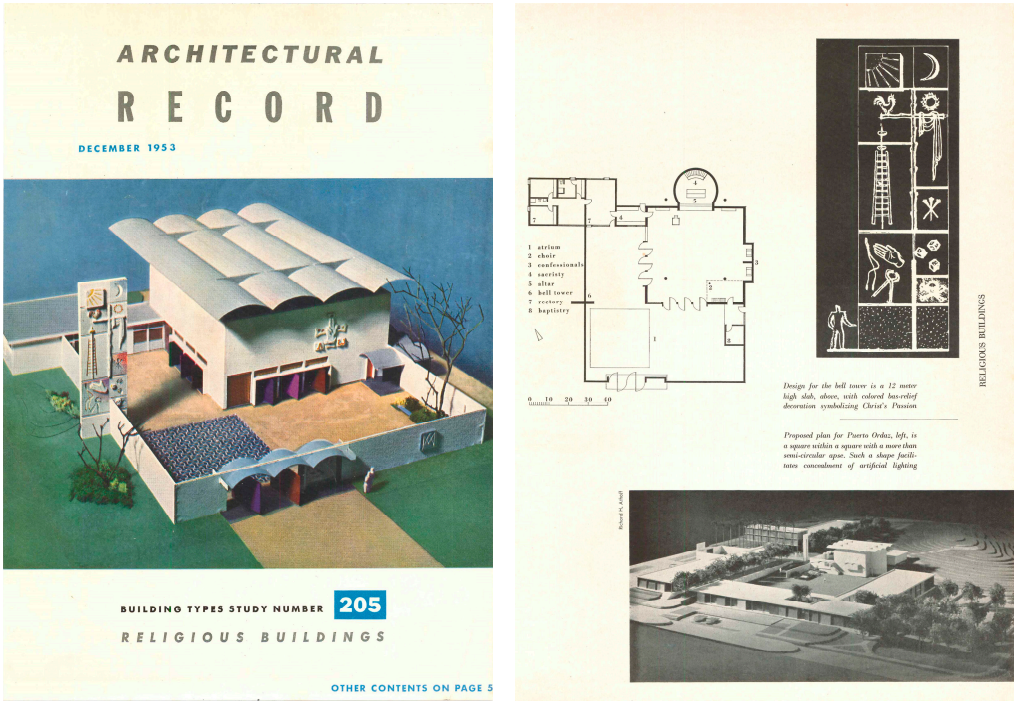


Figure 1. The Church of Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz in the cover and pages of 1953, *Architectural Record*, vol. 114, nº 6.

This church represents the final episode in a series of chapels included in all the projects by Town Planning Associates (TPA, Sert's office with his American partners in New York) for various cities in Latin American countries. These can be found in the Sert and Wiener archives, as well as in numerous publications, such as issue 33 of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (Wiener and Sert 1950). As Freixa states in his monograph:

> "*[. . .] the preliminary designs included written and graphic materials. Notably, there was an emphasis on visual presentation, always in terms of design.*
>
> *The approval of the pilot plan was always the subject of serious debates, but once accepted, it provided the planners with a solid foundation for the development of the master plan. This plan focused on the remodeling or creation of entire urban segments, in detail, bringing its level of definition to an almost architectural scale.*" (Freixa 1997, p. 57)

These are buildings predating the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. However, in all of them, the concerns outlined by Sert in his "Nine Points on Monumentality" (Sert et al. 1943) are evident, in addition to responding to his ideas and, more generally, those of the CIAM on the modern city (Sert 1942; Tyrwhitt et al. 1952).

In the case of the church for the Boston Government Center, dedicated to St. Botolph (Figure 2), the situation is entirely different. It builds on the experience of the previous churches (the projects for Latin America, especially the last typology designed for Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz), but at a different moment in the liturgical development: although it predates the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), it is after *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and therefore already open to the reforms of the liturgical movement.

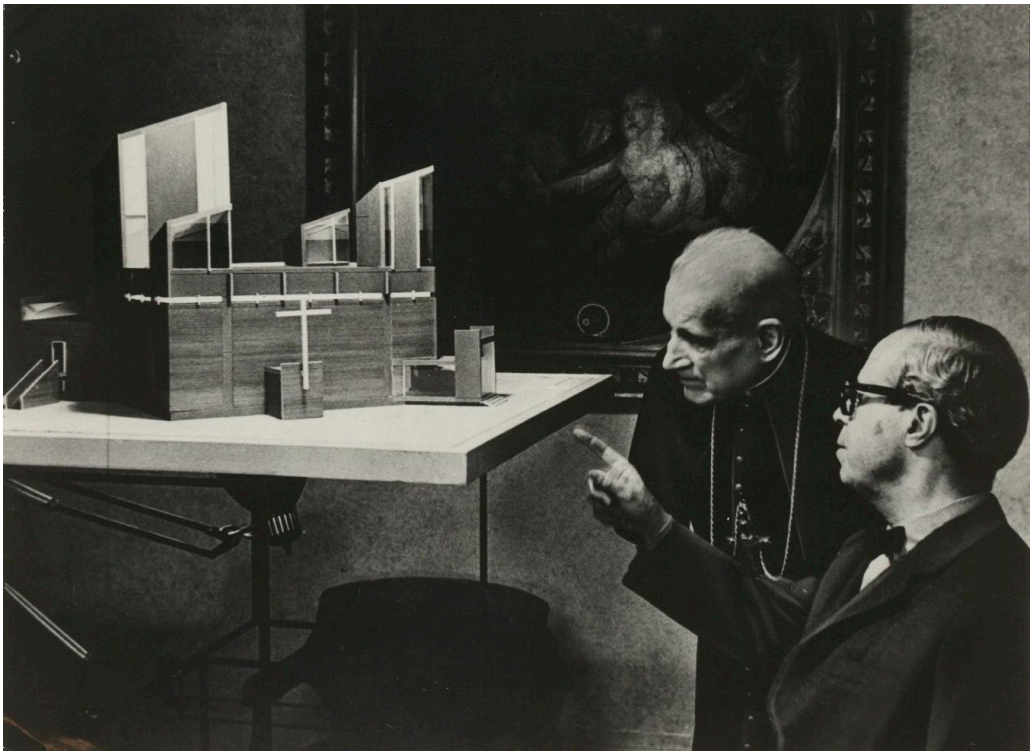


Figure 2. Josep Lluis Sert showing St. Botolph's model to Cardinal Cushing (1963). Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD).

In this project, the entry of natural light will be fundamental, and it will be tasked with highlighting the color accents on the white walls characteristic of Sert's architecture through the stained glass windows of the skylights. This strategy, widely explored in Gothic architecture, had already been tested by the Catalan architect in the Chapel of

St. Bernard at the Maeght Foundation (Birksted 2004, pp. 78–79). For the design of the skylights, he would also draw on a resource derived from his knowledge of architectural history, specifically the *Transparente* of the Toledo Cathedral (Figure 3).

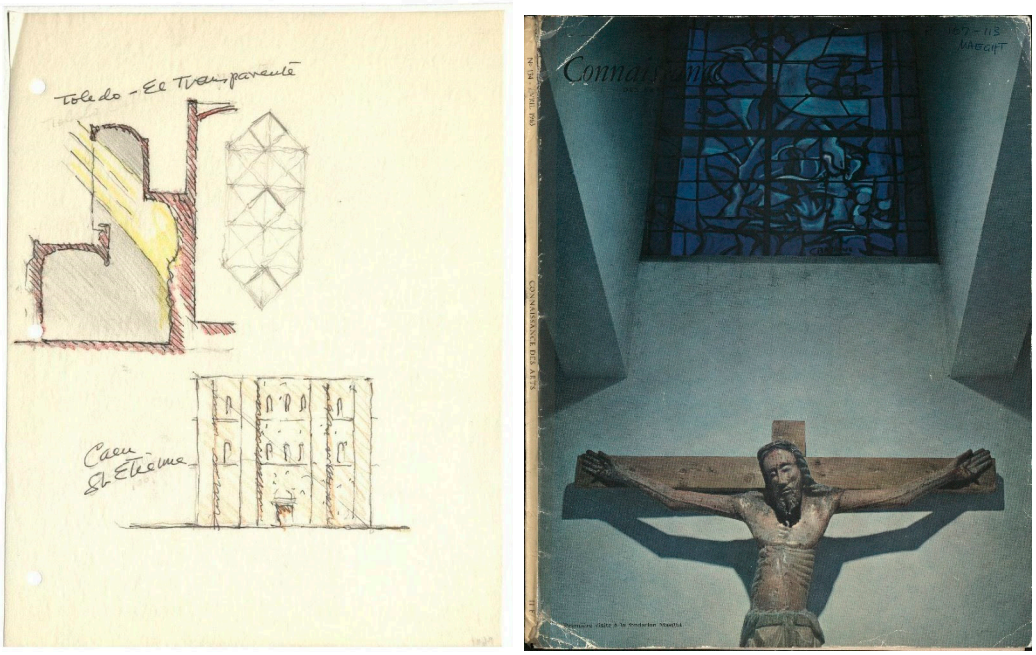


Figure 3. Drawings by Sert with references for the Chapel of St. Botolph (**left**); skylight of the Chapel of St. Bernard on the cover of *Connaissance des Arts* (1963) (**right**). Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

The chapel dedicated to St. Botolph was published in *Liturgical Arts* in 1967 (Sert, Jackson, and Associates 1967) and in *Architectural Forum* in 1965 (Sert and Karas 1965), as well as in the key monographs on Sert's work.

Finally, when the project for the church at the Boston Government Center was nearing completion, the last religious-themed work arrived at the studio: a Carmelite convent in Mezille, France (Figure 4). This project is widely published, not only in monographs on Sert's complete works, but also in specific editions of the project, particularly following its restoration (Héritier 2008; Birksted 2013; Brulé et al. 2020). After an initial version of the convent following the typical scheme of a building around a cloister with a rectangular-plan church, clearly referencing the nearby La Tourette convent, the design soon shifted to a pavilion-based layout for the cells, with a main building at the entrance that includes the chapel.

In the Carmel de la Paix, the space intended for the chancel became the chapel itself. The design is completed simply with the entry of skylight and color accents on the white walls through two stained glass windows.

This central plan element, which can be expanded or not by a main nave depending on the seating capacity requirements, along with the skylight and color accents on the white walls, are constants in Sert's sacred architecture, in addition to the always prominent presence of the crucifix, a figurative reference within the space.

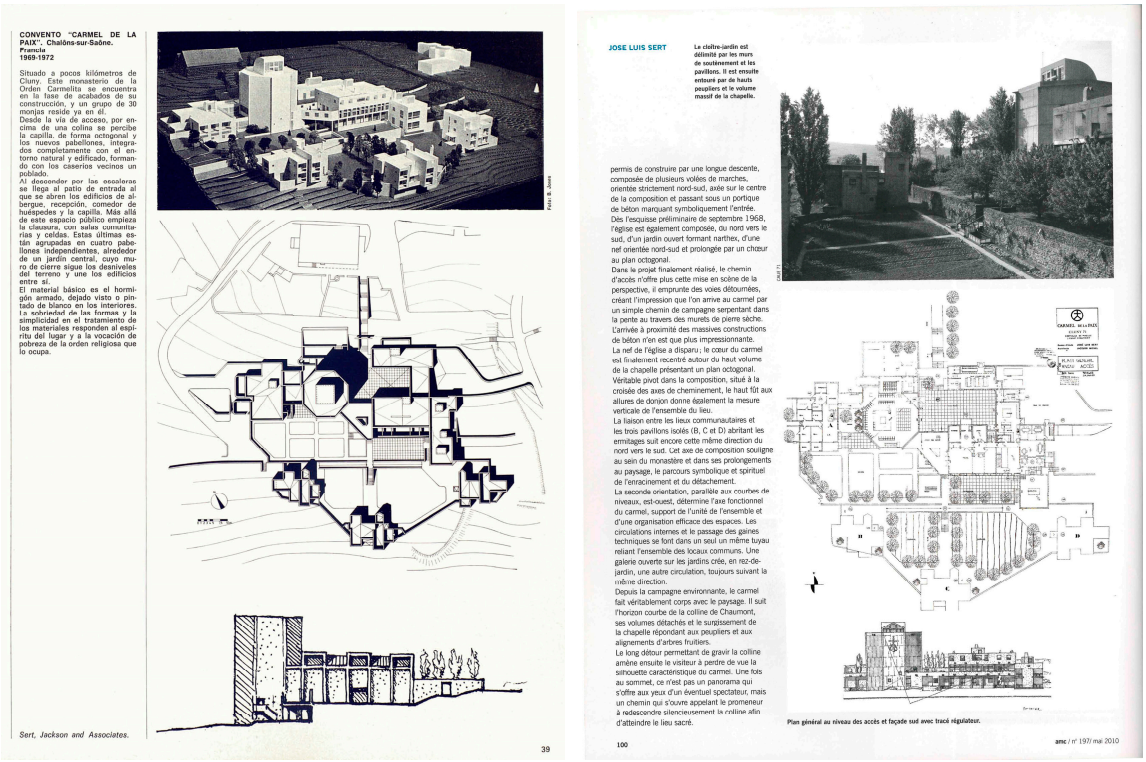


Figure 4. The Carmel de la Paix was published in issue 93 of *Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo* (1972) and in issue 197 of *Le Moniteur Architecture* (2010).

2. Results, Materials, and Methods

Based on the materials found in the bibliography, archives, and visits to the built works, our aim is to analyze the evolution of all Sert's sacred architecture projects, which will be presented as the results of our research in this section. Later, in the Discussion, these projects will be contrasted with the architectural theory developed by Sert in his writings and lectures, as well as with the theological sources that may have influenced him.

Regarding the bibliography, in addition to the previously cited titles, we highlight: (Rovira 2000; Costa and Hartray 1997; Sert et al. 1979; Tarchópulos Sierra 2022; Wasson-Tucker 1947; Bujosa Rodríguez 2014). As for the archives, we mainly highlight the Sert Collection at the Frances Loeb Library, consulted during stays in the last two weeks of August 2023 and 2024, although materials from the Wiener archive, COAC, and the Miró Foundation were also consulted. Regarding visits to the built works, these were carried out in January 2024 (with respect to chapels, only the Maeght Foundation chapel and the Carmel de la Paix chapel were built, both in France).

In light of these materials, we can also define at least two phases in Sert's sacred architecture, which coincide with his two offices in the United States. During the years in New York, church designs were developed as part of urban plans for Latin American cities commissioned to the TPA. In the years during his office in Cambridge (Sert, Jackson, and Associates), the designs for the Chapel of St. Bernard for the Maeght Foundation, the Chapel of St. Botolph for the Boston Government Center, and the Chapel of Carmel de la Paix in Mazille were created.

2.1. Churches Designed by the Town Planning Associates

The church typology developed in the urban projects of the TPA underwent an evolution. The case of *Cidade dos Motores* (1944–1946) (Table 1) represents an initial attempt, somewhat naive and ill-defined, at approaching the type of sacred building that, starting

with the second project, that of Chimbote, will establish a pattern that evolved through a back-and-forth process, eventually leading to the more consolidated typology seen in Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz.

In any case, the most consistent elements in the churches designed by the TPA—the bell tower and the structure of columns supporting a roof that allows for light to enter (thus freeing the enclosures from this function, which can be blind, always without openings)—are already present in the *Cidade dos Motores* project (Figure 5).

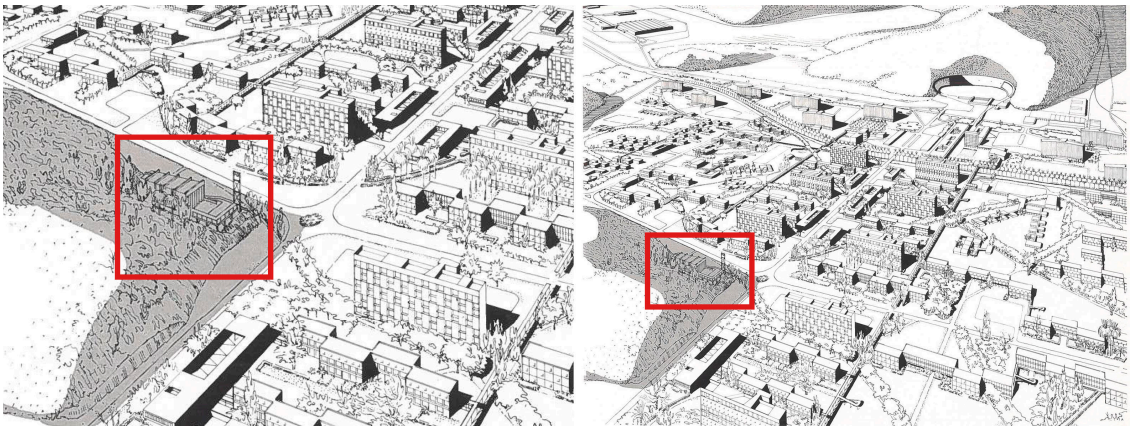


Figure 5. General view of the Urban Proposal for *Cidade Dos Motores* and close-up view of the Church. The red box highlights the church. Image from *Cuadernos de Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, nº 93, p. 6. (1972).

In the first and more defined design, that of Chimbote (1946–1950) (Table 1), an attempt is already evident to distinguish the area of the chancel from the rest of the nave, both in the design of the civic center or cathedral church and in those of the less prominent ones. The walls would be curved in all cases, but whereas in the nave they create deep directional lines, in the chancel area they form a kind of semicircular closure. It is noteworthy that, despite being churches predating the liturgical reform, there is a clear intention to separate the altar from the walls of the chancel, placing it at the center of the sacred space. The bell tower takes the form of a totem or monolith in a T-shaped plan. The baptistery is located at the entrance of the central nave, defined by a greater curvature of the wall at the corner of the nave (Figure 6).

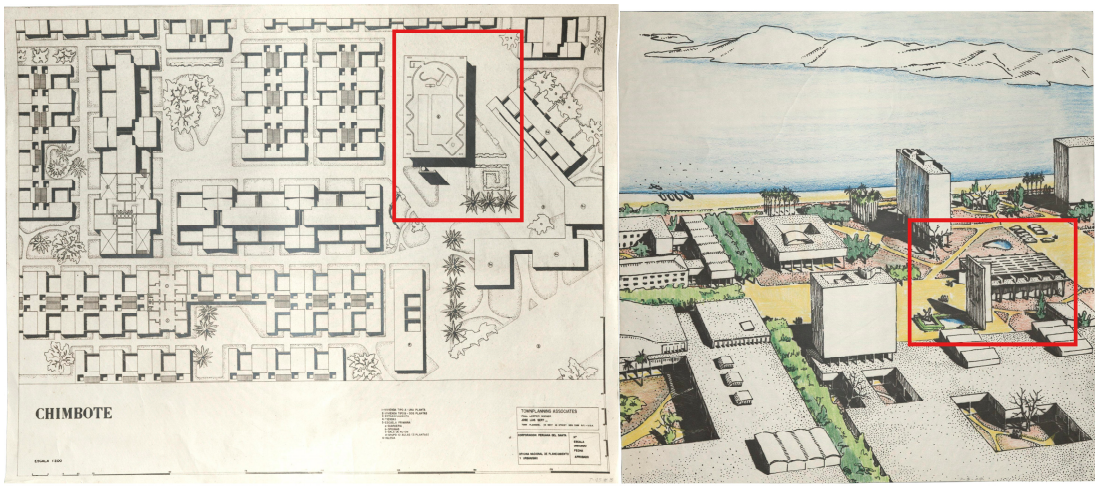


Figure 6. (1948) Plan and aerial view of Chimbote. The red box highlights the church in both drawings. Original drawings by the TPA. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

In Lima (1947–1948) (Table 1), since it was a pilot plan for an existing city, there is no church design for the more consolidated areas of the city. However, there are some preliminary designs for growth areas such as San Cosme, where, despite the more urban than architectural scale, the same scheme as in Chimbote is evident. In this case, the bell tower is not separate, but is connected to the church building through a sort of colonnade, similar to the design in *Cidade dos Motores*.

In Tumaco, Colombia (1948–1949) (Table 1), the only church is the one in the civic center, but it was developed only as a basic project, including a model. In an initial version, the undulating walls of the central nave in Chimbote are removed, and the roof is simplified to perpendicular vaults. Only the chancel, which is in the shape of a cylinder open to the town, and the baptistery, which is also cylindrical but located outside the nave, have walls that obstruct the view. The entrance is defined by the horizontal plane of the choir's floor slab, functioning as a portico. Even the bell tower loses its materiality and is reduced to a triangular plan metal bar tower. However, this exception is brief, and the undulating walls are soon reinstated. In this same period, coinciding with a time when Sert acknowledged that he followed the work of Félix Candela[1] closely, there is an experimentation with a more expressive roof, enlarging the curvature of the first and last vaults and extending them to the ground, at least through ribs at their ends (in the central section, they remain high enough to allow for passage underneath). The bell tower returns to the T-shaped monolith form, for which there are some iconographic sketches thanks to the plans and the model (Figure 7).

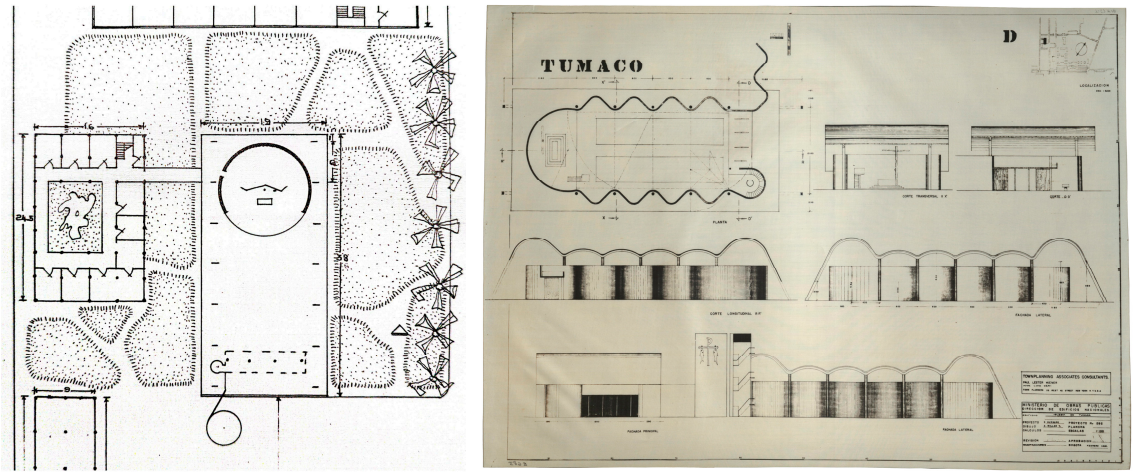


Figure 7. Tumaco: first version (**left**) and final version (**right**). Original drawings from the TPA. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

The next project is the pilot plan for Medellín (1948–1950) (Table 1). As in the Lima plan, no new churches are proposed for the city center, since there are existing ones (including the cathedral). However, churches are proposed for the new residential units. Although the drawings do not exceed the urban scale, it is possible to see how there is uncertainty between the bell tower in the form of a monolith (as in the final version of Tumaco or in Chimbote) or a more tower-like structure (as in San Cosme, Lima). Regarding the roof, one of the versions appears to move the columns outside, and, according to more detailed drawings, it seems that contiguous vaults perpendicular to the nave were considered similar to the first version of Tumaco. Due to the scale of the pilot plan, there are no references to the interior distribution (Figure 8).

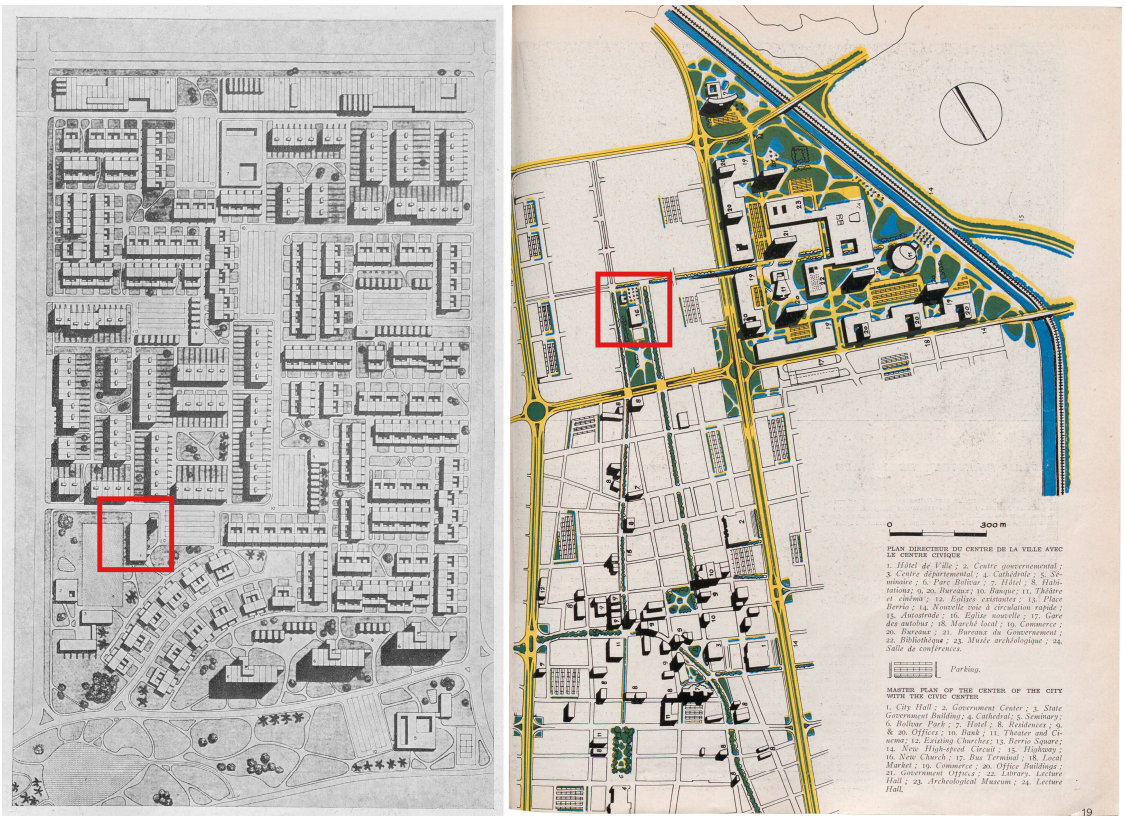


Figure 8. Plans for the housing unit (**left**) and city center of Medellín (**right**) in 1950–1951, *Architecture d'Ajourd'houi*, nº 33. The red boxes highlight the churches.

The third Colombian project was in Bogotá (1949–1952) (Table 1). In the pilot plan, in collaboration with Le Corbusier, no new churches were designed (as in other pilot plans for existing cities, the existing churches in the city were considered), but again, in the residential units, the TPA team developed some models. The church design itself does not appear very developed, but in the schools, an archetype was introduced that would be worked on in later projects. Specifically, in the plan for Quiroga, a basic project design was developed for an educational facility around a rectangular courtyard, within which a circular-shaped chapel was placed, attached to one of the courtyard's boundaries (Figure 9). In front of the chapel and connected to it, but already within the courtyard's limits, there is an elevated roof supported by four columns consisting of parallel vaults joined together and to the columns by horizontal beams crossing perpendicularly. Under this roof, a multipurpose space is generated, which, according to the project, could serve various functions: meetings, cinema, gymnasium, cafeteria,. . . and church. In the latter case, the chapel, with a central plan and altar in the middle, would function as the presbytery, and the adjoining multipurpose space would serve as the nave. In an earlier and less architecturally developed version, the elevated roof extended beyond the perimeter wall by one module. This type of roof, which would become prevalent in later church designs in Latin America, had already been considered for public buildings in the Chimbote project.

The last Colombian project is for Cali (1949–1950) (Table 1). Once again, we find a pilot plan that does not define the church building at an architectural scale. It is worth noting that in the development of the civic center model, a main church or cathedral was planned where a square-shaped area is attached to a rectangular space, with the shorter side of the rectangle matching the dimensions of the square. It is understood that the first volume, the central plan one, would serve as the presbytery, and the rest would function as the nave.

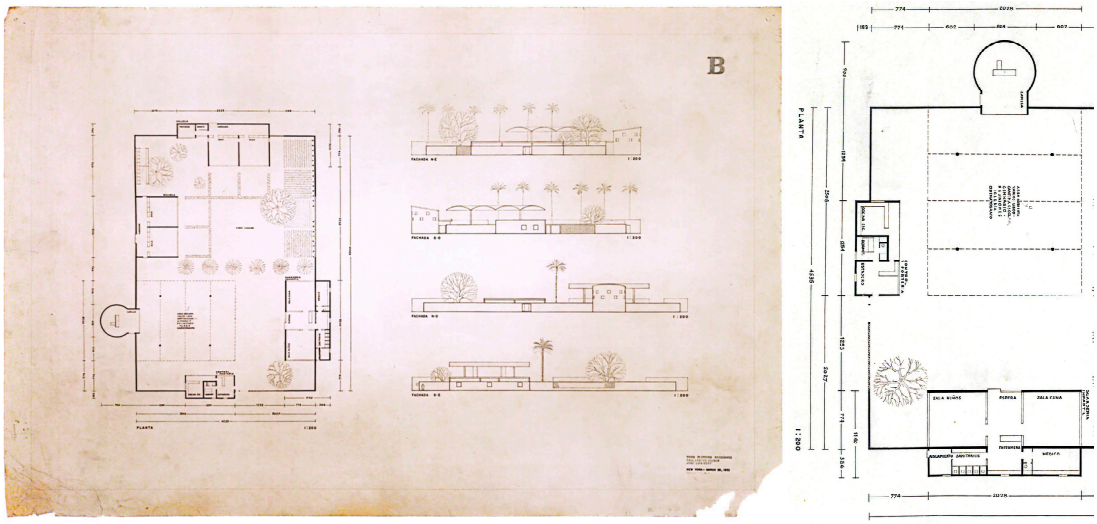


Figure 9. Left: Plan and elevations of the school in Bogotá. **Right**: Detail of the plan of the school showing the church. Original drawings from the TPA. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

The next country where the TPA worked was Venezuela, for the Orinoco Mining Company (OMC), which commissioned them to assist in designing two towns: Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz (1951) (Table 1). One was intended to house workers from an iron mine, and the other was to serve as a port city for shipping the mineral. Both towns included plans for a church with a courtyard, similar to the school with a chapel developed for the residential units in the Bogotá Plan (such as Quiroga). This prototype would become the most developed by the TPA for Latin America, as they were also commissioned for architectural consultancy on the civic center project in Puerto Ordaz, particularly for the church planned within it. This is the most detailed sacred architecture project Sert had completed up to that point, and it is also the most widely published in magazines.

The basic geometry of the church in the Puerto Ordaz project is a square, which houses the main nave of the church. This is expanded by an L-shaped courtyard, extending the original square according to the proportions of the Modulor. The presbytery, described by Sert as "*ultracircular*" (with a larger arch than a semicircle), would be open towards the nave at its upper end, resembling an apse. Both the nave and the presbytery are protected by a roof of vaulted ceilings on pillars, elevated above the limits of the walls to allow for light and ventilation. This type of roof, as mentioned earlier, had been envisioned as early as the Chimbote project for covering public buildings (Figure 10).

In the case of the Pomona neighborhood project in Venezuela, there are no precise data on sacred architecture typologies. However, in the Quinta Palatino project in Cuba (1954) (Table 1), the same typology developed for Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz can be seen, although it is only presented at the urban scale.

2.2. Churches Designed by Sert, Jackson, and Associates

The next sacred architecture project Sert would take on, after his Latin American experience and once settled in Cambridge, was the Chapel of Saint Bernard at the Maeght Foundation (1958–1964) (Table 1). This project, the first in this theme to be built, was still before the Second Vatican Council.

Once again, the starting point is a square plan, which in this case houses both the presbytery and the single pew in the nave. The roof of this square consists of two quarter-circle skylights facing away from each other: one above the altar, oriented south, and the other above the pew, oriented north (Figure 11). The square is extended by a contiguous

entry module, maintaining the original footprint of the Romanesque hermitage, which serves as the foundation for the new chapel (Maeght 2014, pp. 181–87).

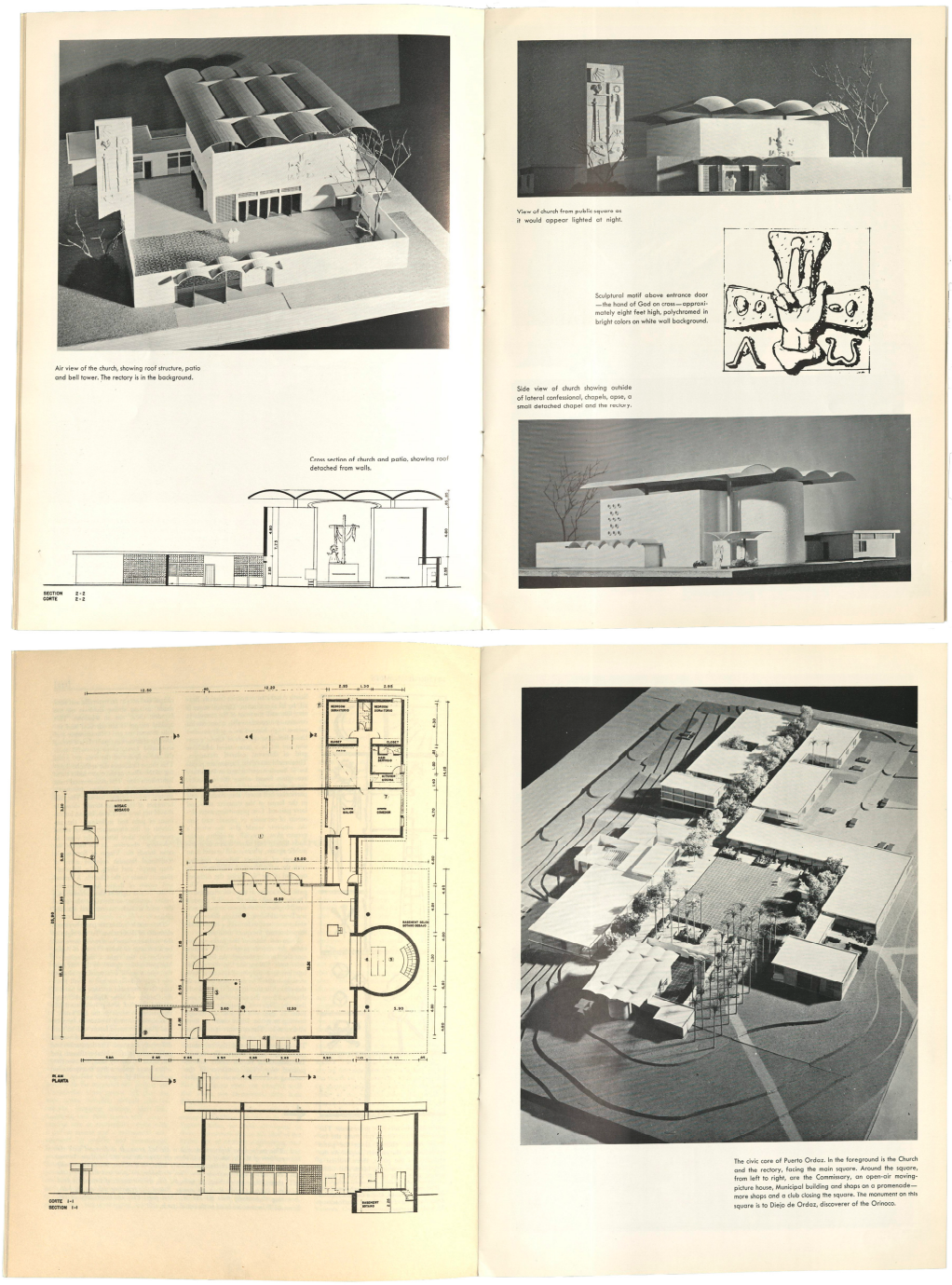


Figure 10. Plans and photos of the proposal for Puerto Ordaz and Ciudad Piar in (August 1953) *Liturgical Arts*.

The stone altar is supported by two concrete arms perpendicular to the wall to which they are firmly anchored. Above the altar, a Romanesque crucifix donated by Balenciaga serves as the altarpiece. Above this, in the skylight, a stained-glass window featuring a bird design by Braque.[2] Below the altar, the step of the presbytery is made from the same stone.

The next church commissioned to Sert's studio was for the Government Center in Boston (1963–1968), which was under development during those years. This commission was developed in parallel with the Second Vatican Council.

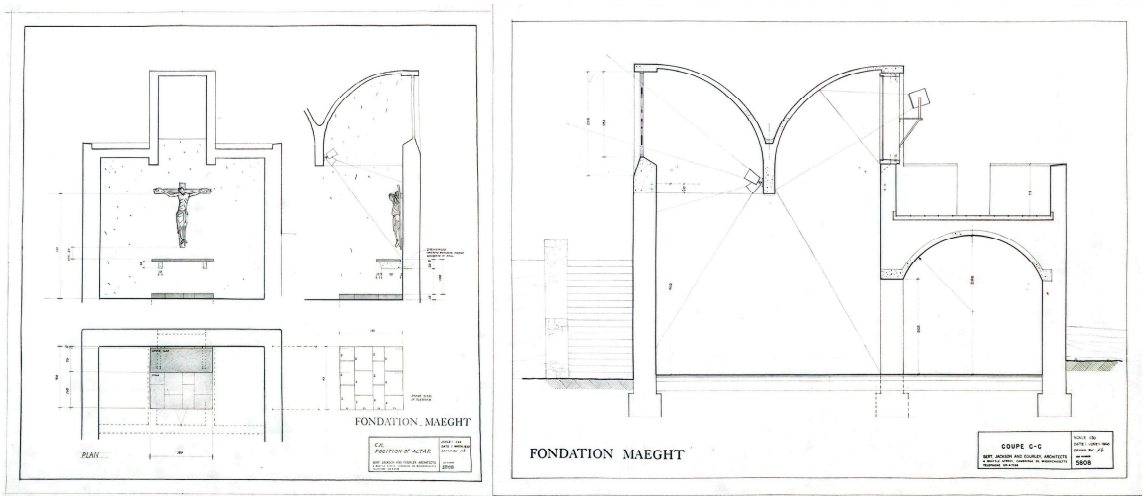


Figure 11. Sert, Josep Lluis, 1961, '*Original Plans of the Chapel of the Foundation Maeght*'. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

The starting point for the design is the central square plan. In the early versions, two squares rotated 45 degrees around their centers overlap, creating an octagon at their intersection (Figure 12). Ultimately, the design settles on a square rotated so that its diagonal forms the main axis of the church. At one end of the axis, a smaller square is rotated 45 degrees to form the entrance (in earlier versions, this also included the baptistery). At the other end of the axis, another square houses the presbytery (intersecting with the nave) and the Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

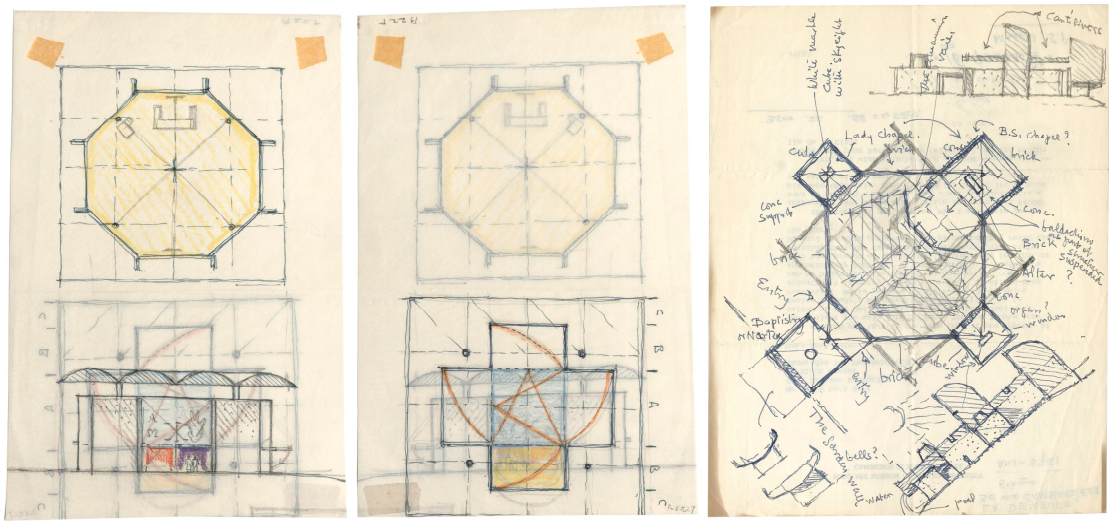


Figure 12. Geometric shapes of central plan for churches: on the left and center, two faces of a tracing paper that can be folded, from the Puerto Ordaz project; on the right, two squares in plan rotated 45 degrees, delimiting an octagon, from the San Botolph project. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

From the beginning, the light is planned to be from above. The first versions start with a semicircular skylight like the one at the Maeght Foundation, later moving to square-sectioned parallelepipeds cut diagonally (in some versions, a skylight of this type covered almost the entire roof, and in other versions, several skylights of this type were distributed across its surface). Finally, the skylights are placed at the vertices of the rotated square floor plan. The rest of the perimeter lighting comes from a subtle elevation of the roof above the church's perimeter walls (Figure 13).

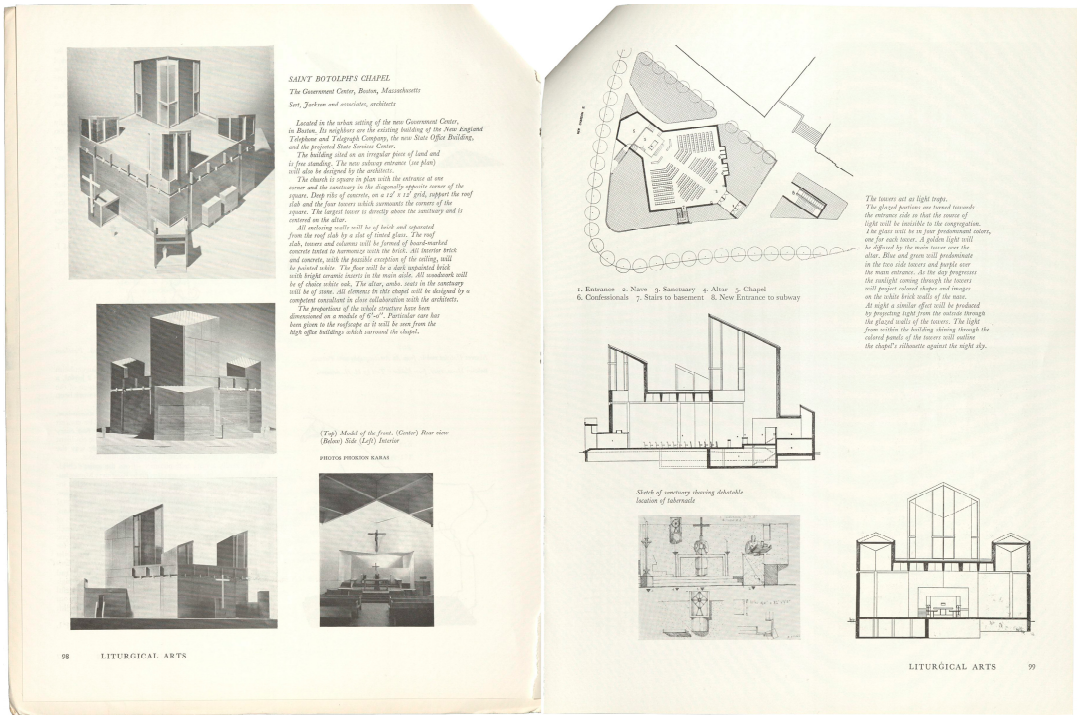


Figure 13. St. Botholp's, plans and photographs of the model in February 1967 *Liturgical Arts*, vol. 35 n° 2.

The interior of the church is planned to be flat, with both the brick perimeter walls and the concrete structure, while the notes of color come from the skylights: warm colors for the main axis (reddish tones in the entrance skylight and golden tones in the presbytery skylight) and cooler colors in the other two (greens and blues).

The composition of the presbytery is based on placing the altar in the center, allowing for celebrations on both sides of it. The wall that divides the presbytery from the Blessed Sacrament chapel does not reach the ceiling. It houses the embedded tabernacle and serves to bridge the level difference between the two spaces. The only figurative element is the cross, as seen in the model and some sketches of the presbytery, both in elevation and section.

After the Boston project, which, despite being developed down to the last detail, was never executed, the final sacred architecture project arrived at Sert's office. It was the largest in scale and would ultimately be built. This project is a convent for Carmelites in Mazille (1967–1972), and we will focus on the chapel, given the subject of this work.

The first sketch suggests a convent around a cloister, like the nearby La Tourette, where the church occupies one side of the cloister. In this sketch, the architect's intention to place the altar in an intermediate position between the church or nave for the congregation and the choir for the nuns is already clearly evident. Adjacent to the altar would be the sacristy (Figure 14).

As soon as the program for the Carmelite community was received, the project was developed based on pavilions for the cells, connected by walls that enclose the convent space (Birksted 2013, p. 10). At the highest point of the site, the entry point, is the largest pavilion containing the common areas, including the chapel. The first version of the chapel maintains a rectangular floor plan with a large skylight over the last module (of a length equal to the width of the rectangle, i.e., square in shape) which would house the presbytery and the choir (Figure 15). This module would soon be redesigned to have an octagonal plan inscribed within the width of the rectangular nave (that is, the octagon resulting from the intersection of the square presbytery module and its 45 degree rotation, a design approach already explored in the Latin American projects and for the church of San Botolph).

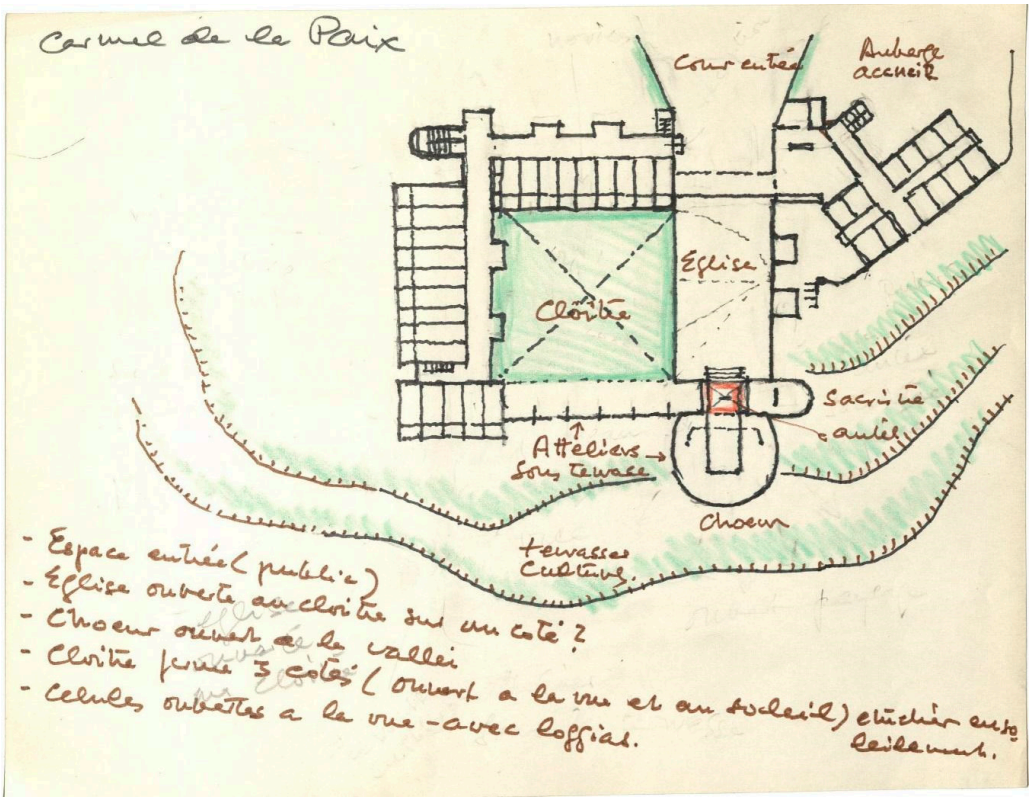


Figure 14. First proposal for the Carmel. Original drawing by Josep Lluís Sert. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

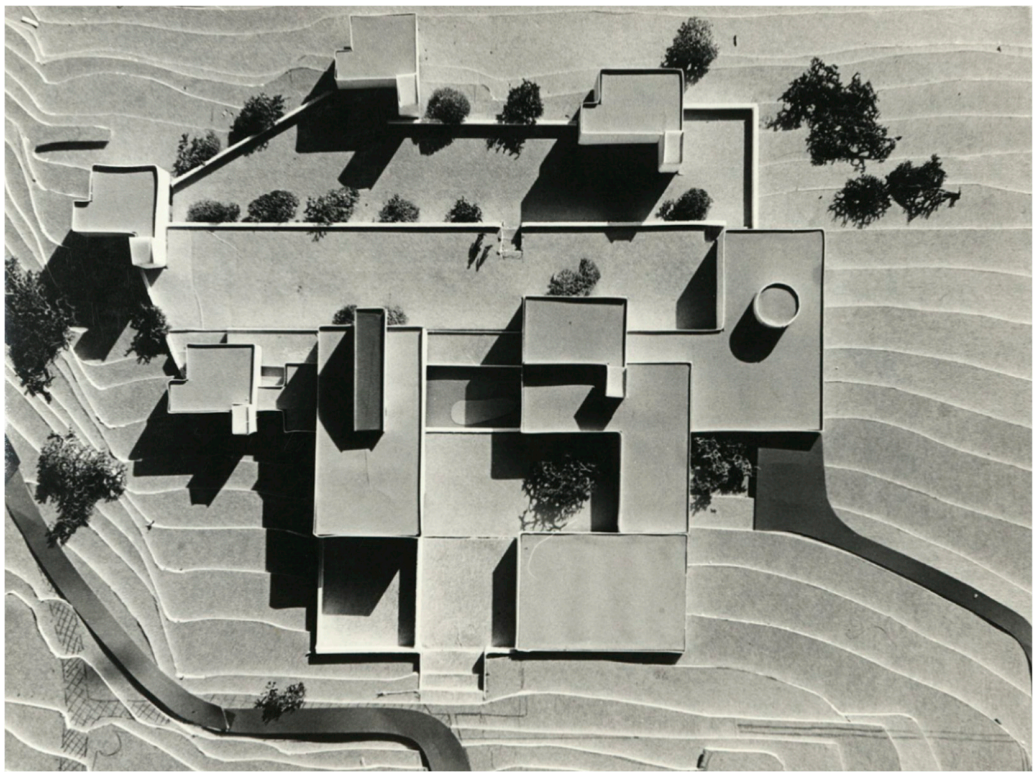


Figure 15. Photograph of the model of the first version of the Carmel with pavilions. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

This module, now with an octagonal floor plan, is studied in different ways to bring in natural light from above (Figure 16), generally through various skylight proposals: the initial one, narrow and triangular in section; a version of the same skylight with a cruciform plan; a skylight in the shape of a cube, making the presbytery module pyramid-shaped to transition from an octagonal base to the square plan of the skylight; a lantern skylight with four sloping sides; and finally, the definitive skylight, semicircular, similar to the one in the chapel of the Maeght Foundation, but obviously larger in size.

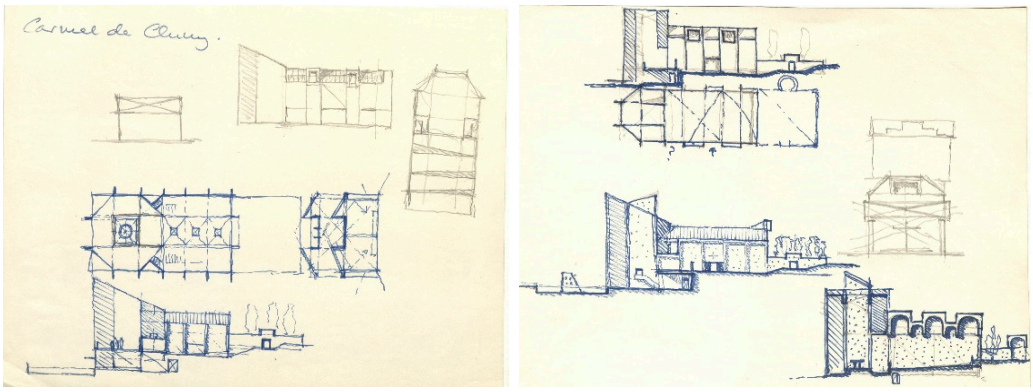


Figure 16. Drawings by Sert for the Carmel chapel. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

Parallel to the development of the presbytery module along with the choir, the '*église*' or nave for the congregation will also evolve. Sert first experimented with adding lateral skylights in various versions, and later reduced the nave by expanding the initial courtyard to function as a narthex, fitting the entire chapel into the now octagonal module of the presbytery and choir (Figure 16). Finally, he slightly reduced the courtyard to create, between the triangles of the Blessed Sacrament chapel, the entrance, and the sacristy, a kind of choir—not for the religious community, but to expand the capacity for external attendees. This element allows for communication with the sacristy and the Notre-Dame de la Paix chapel, also solving the height differences (Figure 17).

By housing both the altar, the religious community, and the rest of the faithful in the same space (with an octagonal floor plan), no further elevation differences (such as steps or similar) will be made: under the altar, simply a rug. The position of the altar will tend to be at the center of the floor plan in Sert's different arrangements, especially when the final placement of the sacristy next to the entrance allows for part of the sisters to surround the altar from behind (only they will enter the chapel from that side) and from the south side, from where they also ascend from the garden and the other pavilions. The congregation, situated around the entrance, will end up surrounding the altar from the north and west. However, since both the benches and the altar are made of wood and thus movable, as well as the pulpit and the cross (the only figurative element of the chapel, aside from the icon located in the sanctuary), they would eventually be rearranged as seen today and in the photos from the inauguration, with the altar placed against the east wall and all the seats facing east, both for the nuns (in the foreground) and the congregation (in the background).

The light will enter primarily through the skylight, adding color accents to the white interior space, supported by stained-glass windows designed by Isabelle Rouault (Birksted 2013, pp. 101–4). Two glass panels in the south and west facades are oriented towards their respective courtyards, but more to give the space a sense of openness than for the need for views, as curtains are planned to block them. They do, however, contribute to lighting, although not colored.

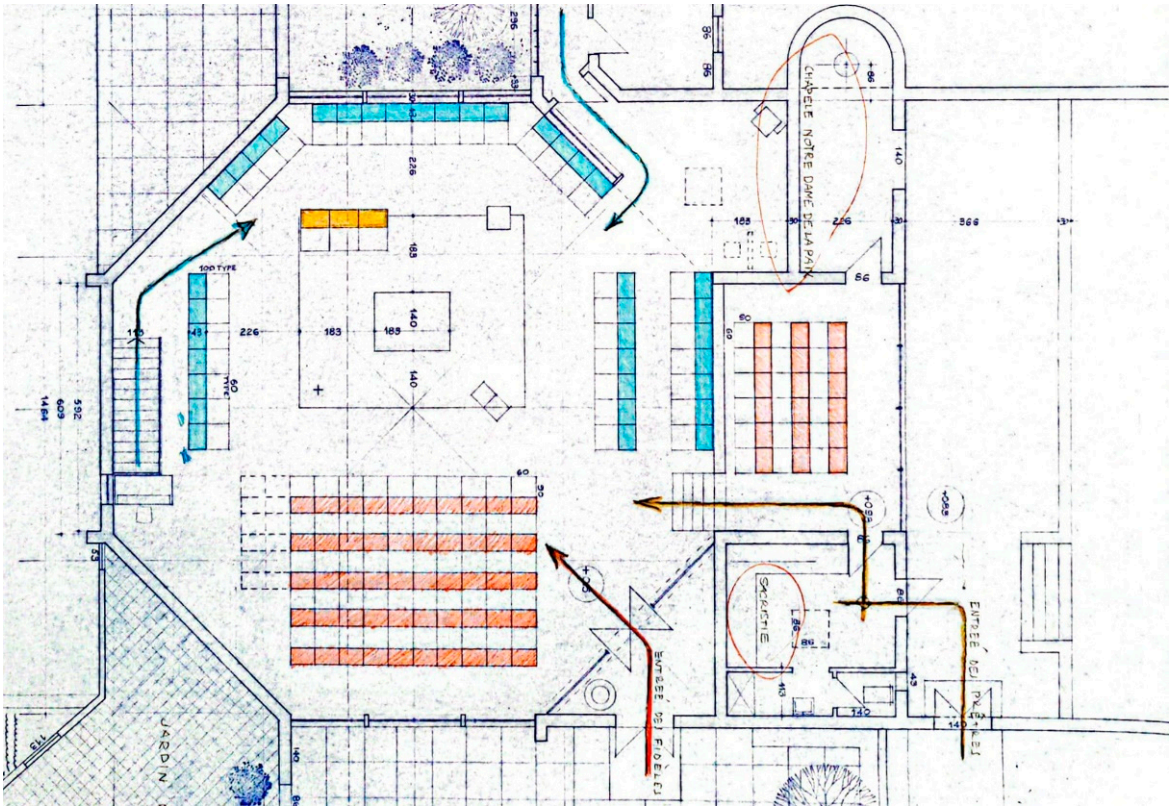


Figure 17. Final configuration of the Carmel chapel space. The arrangement of the furniture, including the altar and the cross, being non-fixed, may vary. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

2.3. Table Summary

Table 1. Summary of the information described about the different churches and chapels designed by Josep Lluís Sert.

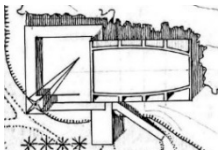
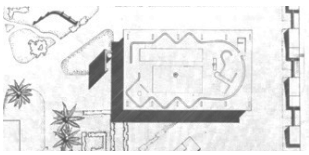
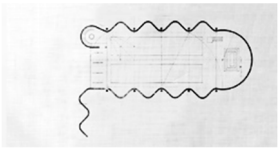
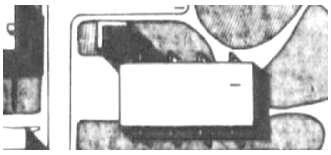
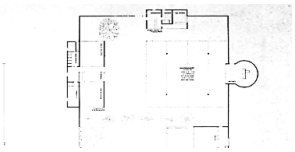
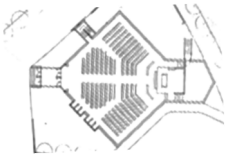
Project	Definition Scale	Model	Built	Chancel Shape	Shape of the Nave	Main Ingress of Light	Altar Position	Plan
Cidade dos Motores (1944–1946)	Urban scale	No	No	No data available	Rectangular	Between main and lateral nave	No data available	
Chimbote (1946–1950)	Preliminary Project	Yes	No	Semicircular	Rectangular	Lattices in the roof	Centered	
Lima (1947–1948)	Urban scale	No	No	No data available	Rectangular	No data available	No data available	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Project	Definition Scale	Model	Built	Chancel Shape	Shape of the Nave	Main Ingress of Light	Altar Position	Plan
Tumaco (1948–1949)	Preliminary Project	Yes	No	Semicircular	Rectangular	Between roof and walls	Centered	
Medellín (1948–1950)	Urban scale	No	No	No data available	Rectangular	Between roof and walls	No data available	
Bogotá (1949–1952)	Preliminary Project	No	No	Ultra-circular	Square	Between roof and walls	Centered	
Cali (1949–1950)	Urban scale	No	No	Square	Rectangular	No data available	No data available	
Ciudad Piar, Puerto Ordaz (1951)	Preliminary Project	Yes	No	Ultra-circular	Square	Between roof and walls	Centered	
Quinta Palatino (1954)	Urban scale	No	No	No data available	Square	Between roof and walls	No data available	
Fundación Maeght (1958–1964)	Detailed Project	Yes	Yes	Square	Square	Two opposed skylights	On one side	
San Botolph (1963–1968)	Detailed Project	Yes	No	Square	Square	Four skylights in the corners	Centered	
Carmel de la Paix (1967–1972)	Detailed Project	Yes	Yes	Octagonal	Octagonal	Centered skylight	Centered	

3. Discussion

The churches and chapels designed by Sert are always part of a larger urban composition. As he himself mentioned in several of his writings, these types of buildings are one of the possible facilities within neighborhood units. In fact, larger churches can be included within higher-ranking entities than the neighborhood unit itself.

The church is a public facility and an identity-defining element of the community, and, therefore, it should be part of the heart of the city or urban core (Sert and Mumford 2015, p. 19). It is important for the church to have an element (usually a bell tower, as in Sert's churches for Latin America) that serves as a landmark, just as bell towers have historically served in architecture, standing apart from each other (Sert and Mumford 2015, p. 106), unlike the concentration of high-rise buildings in the financial centers of some contemporary cities (Sert and Mumford 2015, p. 120).

From the example of these buildings of the past, Sert finds a way to approach the necessary monumentality in modern design as well (Sert et al. 1943). In the absence of a bell tower, an element that protrudes above the building can fulfill this function, such as the skylights of the Chapel of San Botolph, or the entire volume of the chapel, as in the case of the Convent of La Paix, like the library of the Miró Foundation.

In the monument in particular and in his entire religious work in general, Sert finds the opportunity for his longed-for relationship between "Architecture and the Visual Arts" (Sert and Mumford 2015, pp. 41–46), as he explained in 1954, or, in other words, "The relationship between painting and sculpture with architecture" (1951), "The integration of the visual arts" (1955) (Sert and Juncosa 2011, pp. 33–48). Sacred architecture and its implementation in the city can serve as "Places of encounter for the arts" (1975) (Sert and Juncosa 2011, pp. 57–68).

A recognized example of this aspect is the collaboration with Hans Hofmann for the Chimbote Project. Mumford's thesis is that the lack of understanding may have been because, for the architects, the monument had to be part of the overall architectural composition, while for the painter, it had to be able to have autonomous identity (Costa 2004, p. 65).

For Sert, the artwork in sacred architecture must be integrated into the project, its composition, and its intentions. This is how the churches of Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz were designed: the bell tower with symbols of the Passion, popular in Latin America; the ceramic of Saint Francis next to the entrance gate; the monogram of the Virgin on the far right of the main wall; the relief of the cross with the hand of God at the top of the main facade of the building; and the chapel of Our Lady of Fatima on the rear facade of the building (Sert 1953).

Similarly, in the chapel of the Maeght Foundation, the stained glass window depicting the Paschal Announcement through the White and Purple Bird, by Braque (1962); the stained glass of the Cross and the Rosary, by Raoul Ubac (1963); the Stations of the Cross in carved slate, also by Raoul Ubac (1961–1963); and, outside, the granite sculpture of Saint Bernard by Eugène Dodeigne (1968). These original pieces, commissioned for the chapel, are combined with the Romanesque crucifix donated by Balenciaga as a retable, and the remains of a Romanesque bas-relief at the chapel entrance.

In the church of San Botolph, the figurative elements were never fully defined, aside from a few specific sketches hand-drawn by Sert himself. As indicated in the article from *Liturgical Arts*, a consultancy was involved in working in collaboration with the architects (Sert, Jackson, and Associates 1967). The most defined element would possibly be the tabernacle with an ostensorium, embedded in the wall that separates the presbytery from the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, for which Sert used the tabernacle of San Clemente as a reference, according to a handwritten note by Sert.

In the case of the Carmel of La Paix chapel, the initiative for collaboration did not come from the architect, but from the painter Isabelle Rouault (Birksted 2013, p. 101). Sert accepted the offer after researching and studying it, and he arranged the stained-glass windows on the west-facing façades and in the southern skylight, without figurative composition (the concrete cross of the skylight was designed by the architects, while the stained glass filled the empty spaces). The function of the stained glass was to bring color to the white walls of the interior.

Regarding the position of the altar, as noted, it occupies a central place within the presbytery, even in churches designed for projects in Latin America prior to the Second Vatican Council. However, these are not altars designed for celebrating "coram populo", as seen in the section of Figure 10. Only in the Chapel of Saint Bernard for the Maeght Foundation is the altar placed against the wall.

For the San Botolph project, developed concurrently with the Council, we find a handwritten note by Sert himself asking, "Altar to be accessible for all sides?", and in the same note another statement, "Frontal altar: NO".

In any case, we have not found evidence of whether he closely followed the liturgical debates during the Council or what his references were in this regard. We can only infer from the projects themselves. Furthermore, as López-Arias points out, strictly speaking, the sacred space was not extensively addressed during the Council; rather, it has been in the subsequent literature that this topic has been, and continues to be, developed (López Arias 2021).

As for the theological references, we know that the greatest influence on Sert was the French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, of whom he had all his works, particularly his text *Building The Earth* (Arnús 2019, p. 209). In this work (Teilhard de Chardin and Lindsay 1959), it is stated:

> "*Between Man and Woman, a specific and reciprocal power of sensitization and spiritual fertilization seems in truth to be slumbering still, and calling to be released in an irresistible upsurge towards everything which is truth and beauty.*"

This search for truth and beauty will be present throughout Sert's work, particularly in his sacred architecture.

On the other hand, Teilhard's work does not extensively address liturgical aspects. Additionally, as Cuénot mentions, he was scarcely influenced by other thinkers, except as catalysts (Cuénod 1966, p. 132). In his *Hymn of the Universe* (Teilhard de Chardin 2004), the first chapter, "The Mass on the World," is more of a "Christic humanism", as Alfredo Fierro defines it in the prolog of the Spanish edition we cite, or a work of a mystical nature, rather than an attempt at a liturgical text.

One characteristic of Teilhard's theology is its Christocentrism, as described by Father Colomer (Colomer i Pous 1963), an idea that would also be shared by Agustín Udías (Udías Vallina 2007). Federico Ruíz, after commenting on Mooney's text about the Mystery of Christ in the work of the French theologian (Mooney 1967), states that "as is well known, Christology in Teilhard's work is everything" (Ruiz Salvador 1969, p. 210).

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that the sacred space in Sert's architecture tends to be centrally planned, with the altar (the place of consecration) at the center and, next to it, the crucifix. Christ, truly present in the Eucharist, and Christ represented in the throne of the Cross—a cross that Sert describes in the following terms:

> "*The monumental cross of the altar is of coarse driftwood, sported with bright colors. The cut branches of the wood should show. It should not be a soft Cross, but an instrument of pain and suffering -the antithesis of the chromium plated metal crosses that have become the vogue in "modern" churches.*" (Sert 1953, p. 113)

This exaltation of matter, which we read in the description of the cross, is transferred to the other construction elements of the temple: concrete with its texture, through specially selected formwork, alternated, for example, with brick, as in the Chapel of San Botolph; or stone on the exterior and plaster on the interior of the Chapel of San Bernardo. This respect for the texture and properties of the material is a general characteristic of Sert's work, which, in the context of his sacred architecture, harmonizes perfectly with Teilhard's theology. Leandro Sequeiros, in his article on the early works of the French Jesuit, specifically referencing one of the chapters of *Hymn of the Universe*, states: "In the background of Christ in Matter lies an intimate reflection on the presence of Christ in the material reality" (Sequeiros 2016, p. 457).

Towards that altar where the bread and wine are consecrated, accompanied by the cross, all gazes converge. There will be no other elements to distract attention or any other focal points. The sunlight, which is not only necessary for visibility but also serves as proof of the participation of the stars in the liturgy and, with its movement, in the words of Alberto Campo, *constructs time* in architecture (Campo 2009, p. 48), will enter primarily from above, in a way that does not distract attention, which must remain focused on the presbytery. Any other openings at the height of the occupants will serve to provide additional light or potentially expand the space, but will always be positioned behind. This sunlight, as experienced through the stained-glass windows in the Chapel of the Maeght Foundation, will be responsible for adding color to the interior, which, otherwise, will always be painted white—the color of the poor, in Sert's own words (Birksted 2013, p. 53).

The other theologian with whom we know Sert had a relationship, Raimon Panikkar (Arnús 2019, p. 209; Bohigas 2014, p. 529), although not strictly a liturgist, did write about the subject, particularly focusing on the importance of ritual in his anthropological and theological thought. For Panikkar, the temple would be more like a creature, in which divinity dwells, and the world as a place of relationship between the two.

In *Culto y secularización* (Panikkar 1979), which gathers ideas from *Secularization and Worship* (Panikkar 1970) and *Man as a Ritual Being* (Panikkar 1977), the ritual is described as something without which humans cannot live, referring to it as a "cosmic liturgy." These rituals do not have to be detrimental to secularity; rather, they should be close to human life.

Although Panikkar does not specifically reference this, the fact that the buildings of the churches and chapels designed by Sert follow formal archetypes that can be used in buildings with various purposes aligns with this universality. However, the realization of the archetype will not only be for its function (in this case, liturgical), but also for its geographical, cultural, and identity characteristics, etc., because the sacred space must reflect the spirit of its time and culture.

In this way, the roof of parallel vaults joined by two beams supported by four pillars, which in Peru served as a market (Figure 18), in Colombia can serve as a school, and in Venezuela for a church, but adapting in the configuration of the entire building (openings, ventilation, materials, and construction techniques, and, above all, ornamental and figurative elements) to the characteristics and customs of each use and place (Sert 1953, p. 113). Similarly, a semicircular skylight can serve for a painter's house in the Mediterranean, an art center in Barcelona, a library in Boston, or a chapel in eastern France, or an octagonal tower can serve both for the Miró Foundation library and for the Carmel de La Paix church.

This dimension of the sacralization of secular realities is shared by Teilhard, according to Andreas Gonçalves Lind (Lind 2023), who, after noticing the influence of Teilhard in a text from *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ratzinger 2001), adds the following quote from the same author:

> *"The function of priesthood is to consecrate the world so that it becomes a living Host, so that the world itself becomes liturgy: that liturgy should not be something parallel to the*

reality of the world, but that the world itself should be transformed into a living Host, that it should become liturgy." (Benedicto XVI 2009)

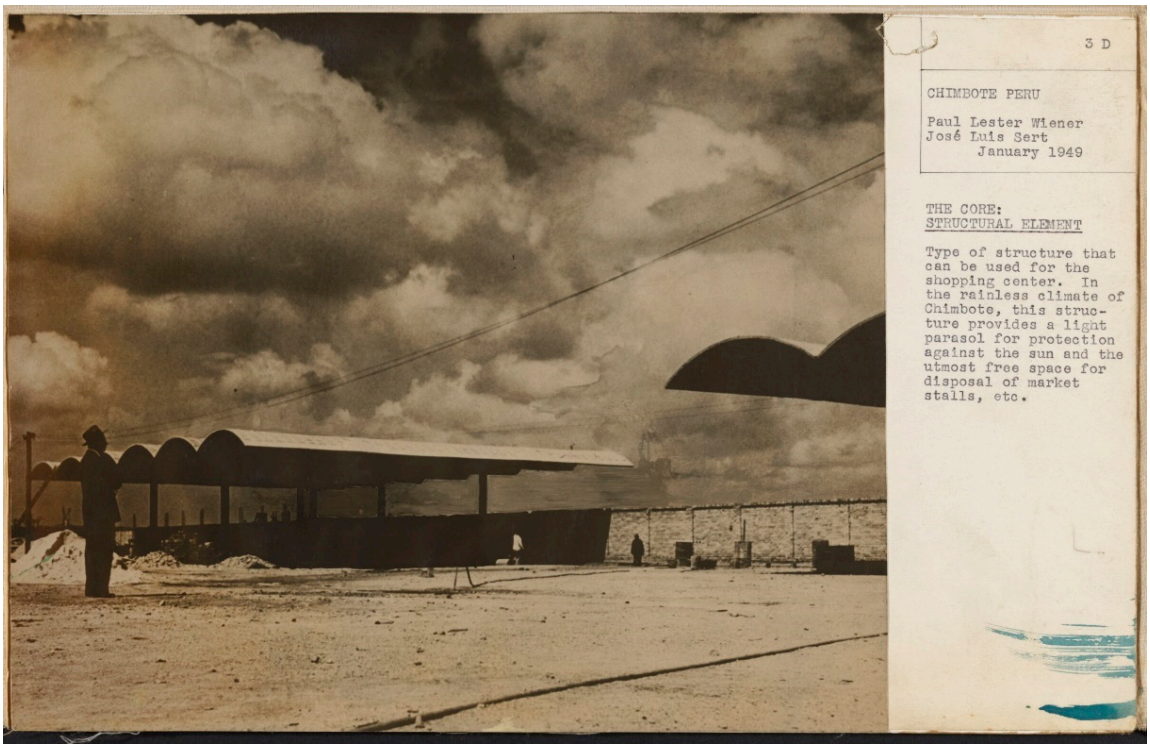


Figure 18. Photograph of a roof included by Sert in his exhibition on the Chimbote project for CIAM VII. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD.

Finally, the only point where Sert did not manage to carry out his architectural ideas and ultimately gave in to the client's request is in the interior of the Carmel of La Paix chapel. This was not only because the altar, being designed as mobile, ended up being placed against the wall opposite the visitors' entrance, allowing only the celebrant to pass through (this position was never adopted in the various versions drawn by Sert)—but also for something more permanent: the architect's intention to emphasize the materiality of the exposed concrete through low-angle lighting on the walls. The Carmelite community not only rejected this idea (the lights were placed in the area of the skylight), but they even covered the exposed concrete with a finishing material (Birksted 2013, pp. 105–7). In the letters between Sert and the prioress from 29 November and 2 December 1970, one can see not only an esthetic disagreement, which was absent in other parts of the convent where there was total agreement (even for the exposed concrete as an interior finish), but rather a difference in spiritualities. Perhaps the little interest Teilhard de Chardin showed in the works of the Carmelite Saint John of the Cross, despite being recommended by close friends (Gregorio de Jesús Crucificado 1967, p. 362), is similar to the lack of enthusiasm that Mother Marie-Thérèse had for raw concrete in the interior of her convent chapel, despite the strong harmony she shared with the architect in other parts of the convent (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Interior view of the chapel at Carmel de la Paix, where the white-clad walls, rather than exposed concrete, can be observed. The wooden crucifix, the Blessed Sacrament chapel, one of the stained-glass windows, and the choir area with the garden in the background are also visible. Courtesy of Eloi Aran Sala.

4. Conclusions

As a summary, we can conclude that the sacred space in Sert's work is centrally planned, with the altar at the center. This space is expandable according to the needs of the congregation, either through a nave designed for that purpose (like at Chimbote, Tumaco, Bogotá, Cali, or San Botolph) or through courtyards (like at Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz, Quinta Palatino, or the Carmel de la Paix).

Natural light enters primarily from above, avoiding openings at eye level that could distract attention, as can be seen in all the projects for which we have sufficient data to deduce it (10 out of the 12 projects).

The interior of the church is white, respecting and even enhancing the texture of the materials. Subtle accents of color are added in certain areas to highlight them, like at Chimbote or at Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz, or else the light is directly colored through the stained-glass windows, like the chapels for the Maeght Foundation or the Carmel de la Paix.

The iconographic elements from the other visual arts reflect the culture of the faithful community and are integrated into architectural design (Sert 1953). There is no traditional altarpiece, and the iconographic reference is always the crucifix, which occupies a central position next to the altar, as can be seen in all those projects that go so far as to define this aspect: Chimbote, Tumaco, Ciudad Piar and Puerto Ordaz, San Bernardo, San Botolph, and the Carmel de la Paix.

All of Sert's church projects are part of larger urban-scale projects. Except for the Government Center in Boston, these urban-scale projects are also led by his office.

He designed an archetype that met the conditions to serve as a sacred space, but not a specific church typology. The same archetype, in different contexts and with the appropriate auxiliary elements, can serve other purposes (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Library of the Fundación Miró at Barcelona. Courtesy of F87 Arquitectura Ingeniería.

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Notes

1 In his writing "Felix Candela: Architect, Ingenious Engineer" (The Josep Lluis Sert Collection, Hollis ID: 000603276), Sert acknowledges that, from the mid-1940s, when he first heard about Félix Candela, he became increasingly interested in his work to the point of eventually becoming friends. For example, Sert commissioned Candela to design the structure of the Presidential Palace in Havana.

2 The artworks present in the chapel are described on a plaque inside. In addition to the 12th-century Christ donated by Balenciaga, there are Romanesque remains from the 12th and 13th centuries found during excavations in southeastern France. As for commissioned artworks for the chapel between 1962 and 1963, there are two stained glass windows created by Charles Marq: one above the altar, designed by Georges Braque and titled *White and Purple Bird* (1962), and the other symmetrically placed, designed by Raoul Ubac and titled *The Cross and the Rosary* (1963). The twelve stations of the via Crucis, carved in slate, are also the work of Raoul Ubac (1961–1963), and the granite sculpture of St. Bernard at the entrance to the chapel is by Eugène Dodeigne (1968).

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