

Sacred horizontal line: the *Chapel of Nossa Senhora da Conceição* by Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli

Sagrada linha horizontal: a Capela Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Paulo Mendes da Rocha e Eduardo Colonelli

Sagrada línea horizontal: la Capilla de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de Paulo Mendes da Rocha y Eduardo Colonelli

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Abstract

This article examines the project by Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli for the Chapel of *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, built in 2006 on the grounds of Francisco Brennand's ceramics complex in Recife, in northeastern Brazil. Horizontality, a rhetorical figure frequently invoked by Mendes da Rocha, mediates, in this project, the relationship between the intervention and the pre-existing structure, while also serving as a poetic motif for the new ensemble. The chapel serves as a pretext for reflecting on other interventions carried out by the architect. The study analyzes the design operations, with particular attention to the relationship between the intervention and the existing building, suggesting that historical hierarchies are transcended by the understanding that coherence within the new ensemble is the ultimate goal to be pursued. As supporting references, the study draws on architect-authors such as Carlos Lemos and Alexandre Alves Costa, who frame the discussion within the field of design, as well as theorists who contribute to the proposed critical framework, including Sophia Silva Telles, Cesare Brandi, and Gustavo Giovannoni.

Keywords: Paulo Mendes da Rocha; Intervention in pre-existing structure; Chapel architecture.

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o projeto de Paulo Mendes da Rocha e Eduardo Colonelli para a *Capela de Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, construída em 2006, na propriedade de cerâmicas de Francisco Brennand, em Recife, no Nordeste do Brasil. A horizontalidade, figura retórica convocada frequentemente por Mendes da Rocha, media, neste projeto, a relação da intervenção com a pré-existência, ao mesmo tempo em que se oferece como motivo poético do novo conjunto. A capela serve como pretexto para refletir sobre outras intervenções realizadas pelo arquiteto. O estudo analisa as operações de projeto, com atenção especial à relação entre intervenção e edifício existente, sugerindo que as hierarquias históricas são transcendidas pela compreensão de que a coerência no novo conjunto é o objetivo final a ser alcançado. Como suporte, recorre a autores-arquitetos como Carlos Lemos e Alexandre Alves Costa, que localizam a discussão no campo do projeto e teóricos que complementam a construção crítica proposta, como Sophia Silva Telles, Cesare Brandi e Gustavo Giovannoni.

Palavras-Chave: Paulo Mendes da Rocha; Intervenção em pré-existência; Arquitetura de capela.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el proyecto de Paulo Mendes da Rocha y Eduardo Colonelli para la Capilla de *Nossa Senhora da Conceição*, construida en 2006 en la propiedad de cerámicas de Francisco Brennand, en Recife, en el noreste de Brasil. La horizontalidad, figura retórica frecuentemente invocada por Mendes da Rocha, media en este proyecto la relación entre la intervención y la preexistencia, al mismo tiempo que se ofrece como motivo poético del nuevo conjunto. La capilla sirve como pretexto para reflexionar sobre otras intervenciones realizadas por el arquitecto. El estudio analiza las operaciones proyectuales, con especial atención a la relación entre intervención y edificio existente, sugiriendo que las jerarquías históricas se ven transcendidas por la comprensión de que el objetivo final es alcanzar la coherencia en el nuevo conjunto arquitectónico. Como soporte, se recurre a arquitectos-autores como Carlos Lemos y Alexandre Alves Costa, quienes sitúan la discusión en el campo del proyecto, así como a teóricos que complementan el marco crítico propuesto, como Sophia Silva Telles, Cesare Brandi y Gustavo Giovannoni. existente, sugiriendo que las jerarquías históricas son transcendidas por la comprensión de que la coherencia en el nuevo conjunto es el objetivo final a alcanzar.

Palabras clave: Paulo Mendes da Rocha; Intervención en preexistencia; Arquitectura de capilla.

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.

Matthew 16:18¹

1 Introduction

One of the most effective metaphors for the constructive challenge involved in working with pre-existing structures was offered by Fernando Távora (1923–2005), a theoretical guide of Portuguese modern architecture in the second half of the twentieth century². By stating that his architecture pursued something akin to the chemical notion of a compound rather than a mixture, Távora suggested that the complexity of real-world data and design actions should yield a single new whole, a new element, distinct from the parts that generated it.

Thus, no prior hierarchies are to be defended: pre-existence and intervention are equivalent parts of the same whole. In other words, the intervention must be capable of transforming the space so as to render it something new, suited to its new condition of use.

It is within this same theoretical framework that Paulo Mendes da Rocha (1928–2021) operates. The author of a vast number of interventions in existing buildings, his work offers rich material for reflection on the subject³, although the parallel between the two architects is here established solely as a theoretical device employed by this article.

This study focuses on a specific work: the *Chapel Brennand / Nossa Senhora da Conceição* (Recife, Brazil, 2007), a project that prompts reflection on strategies that confront, simultaneously, the particular requirements of the program and the conditions of the pre-existing site. To that end, the text draws on a reading of these same strategies in other works by the architect, mediated by theoretical authors whose contributions help to elucidate these design actions.

It should be noted that the selection of theoretical authors arises from the discussion of the project itself; thus, the conventional academic sequence of preceding case studies with a review of the critical literature is here inverted. As this reflection takes place in the specific field of Architectural Design, this inversion is intended to foreground the discussion of procedures that define the architect's approach when working with pre-existing conditions.

Three projects, discussed in this article, anticipate the operations carried out in the chapel. These operations summarize a stance without concessions, without yielding to logics external to the new equation created. Whether it is necessary to invert the circulation system and remove the existing window frames (*Pinacoteca do Estado*), occupy the central courtyard with a technical tower (*Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*), or resize the roof of a historic gallery (*Praça do Patriarca*), the action becomes imperative. Respect is directed toward the new whole and toward the spatial qualities, both technical

¹ The authors have translated this and all other non-English citations hereafter.

² The formulation was originally made as a memorial for the *Casa de Ofir* project — not exactly an intervention on a pre-existing building, but rather a definitive inaugural experiment of a set of design procedures that brought vernacular construction techniques closer to modern spatial logic. Casa Dr. Fernando Ribeiro da Silva Ofir, 1958. Available at: <https://tavora100.pt/pt/works/casa-dr-fernando-ribeiro-da-silva> (Accessed 19 October, 2024).

³ See especially the master's thesis by Maira Rios (2013).

and poetic, that define the coexistence between the new and the existing, rather than toward a fossilized memory of an object that no longer exists.

It may be anticipated, in summary, that the construction of Távora's "compound" is a shared objective of all the works mentioned herein, and a position more or less directly defended by the other authors cited precisely for their agreement on this point.

2 Paulo Mendes da Rocha: intervention in pre-existing structures

Decades of practice in working with pre-existing structures, often under the supervision of preservation bodies (ICOMOS, UNESCO, and their local counterparts), have helped to establish a broadly accepted international understanding of basic intervention rules: ensuring the reversibility of the original building, avoiding falsification by making interventions distinguishable, accepting transformations when they improve functionality and maintaining general harmony within the ensemble⁴. These basic principles allow for a wide spectrum of action, depending on a nuanced understanding of their applicability. The pursuit of "respectful" interventions that sacralize the pre-existence is the most common and least risky approach.

This is decidedly not the path taken by Paulo Mendes da Rocha. For him, the pre-existing structure is read as a design datum, a contributing virtue within a broad equation that integrates program, use, and construction in a framework of equivalence. If the solution demands a robust intervention, there are no evasions. The answer is given with the vigorous clarity of one who seeks a compound, not a mixture. There is no hesitation in inverting access routes, reconfiguring voids, or removing construction elements that have lost their function: the rule is set by the new whole that emerges.

It is precisely this untouchability that constrains intelligent attempts to make use of vacant historic buildings. There is no middle ground: either you touch it or you don't, the recommendation to 'touch lightly' cannot be taken seriously. (Lemos, 2004, p. 3).

Carlos Lemos makes this statement regarding the intervention project for the *Estação da Luz* building, adapted by Paulo Mendes da Rocha to house a museum⁵, but it could just as easily apply to the adaptation project for the *Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo*, located next to the station and transformed a few years earlier.

Although this article focuses specifically on a chapel, a project that is particular in scale and in the symbolic demands of its program, it is important to introduce some considerations about the architect's broader approach in this field. Several examples⁶ illustrate this trajectory, beginning with the *Pinacoteca* itself.

⁴ The formulation of Charters stands out as a theoretical and methodological instrument for acting in pre-existing situations. See, for example, the *Athens Charter* of 1931 (INTERNATIONAL MUSEUMS OFFICE, 1931) and the *Venice Charter* of 1964 (ICOMOS, 1964).

⁵ *Museu da Língua Portuguesa*, São Paulo, 2000-2006. Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Pedro Mendes da Rocha and team (Carla Seppe, Juliana Suzuki, Daniela Marcondes, Bartira Ghoubar, Francisco Gitahy de Figueiredo, Eduardo Spinazzolla, Pedro Milan).

⁶ For further in-depth study, the following are recommended: Ruth Verde Zein (1999); Evelise Grunow (2017), Rafaela Arcoverde and Fernando Moreira (2019); Maira Rios and Fernando Viegas (2021); Daniele Pisani (2013); Catherine Ottondo (2013).

The eclectic building designed by Ramos de Azevedo in the early twentieth century was transformed in 1998⁷ by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Eduardo Colonelli, and Weliton Ricoy Torres. The operation, extensively studied, subverted, or more precisely, updated, the building's circulation logic. The expansion of Avenida Tiradentes and its conversion into a major traffic artery leading into the city center necessitated relocating the building's entrance to its southern side. This condition defined a new circulation axis traversing the two internal courtyards, now reconfigured. Additions to the building (metal walkways, staircases, and elevators) form a set of artifacts immediately identifiable with the building's new use, explicitly recognizable as belonging to the present moment. Likewise, new steel-and-glass roofs redefined the courtyards' potential, transforming them into appropriate exhibition spaces. Furthermore, the existing window frames, which had previously shielded the courtyards from rain and cold, were deemed unnecessary and removed. Following the same rationale, the remaining windows were individually assessed and either restored or replaced according to the new usage equation.

In the *Pinacoteca* (Figure 1), Paulo Mendes da Rocha effectively writes his manual of practices for intervening in pre-existing structures, articulating his criteria with remarkable clarity. The building must be understood as an entity in transformation, within a process that must, above all, preserve coherence among its parts, existing and new, which are equally important. There are no predetermined hierarchies; the actions must be deliberate and precise, with the sole limit being the quality of the final result.

Another reference project is the (unbuilt) proposal for the renovation and expansion of the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes* (Figure 2) in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The building carries deep historical symbolism, celebrated both for its architecture and its contents, yet it is riddled with technical inadequacies affecting its functioning. The proposal, developed in 2005⁸, addresses the new requirements of the complex in an uncompromising way: the central courtyard, a typological solution for lighting and ventilating buildings occupying an entire city block, is filled with a new tower, the definitive solution to the museum's shortcomings.

The original building is restored and freed from all functions except exhibitions. On the floors corresponding to the original layout, the tower extends the exhibition areas; on the other levels, rising to match the height of the neighboring *MES*⁹ building, it houses the technical programs required. The new construction, a metal structure with large spans resolved through alternating trusses, is conceived as a swift operation compatible with the building's continued operation. Located at the center of the block, the tower would blend with the surrounding vertical skyline, without altering the perception of the historic façade.

⁷ *Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo* (1998). Team: Eduardo Colonelli, Ana Paula Pontes, Marina Grinover, Silvio Oksman.

⁸ *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes* (2005). Team: Metro Arquitetos (Martin Courullon e Gustavo Cedroni).

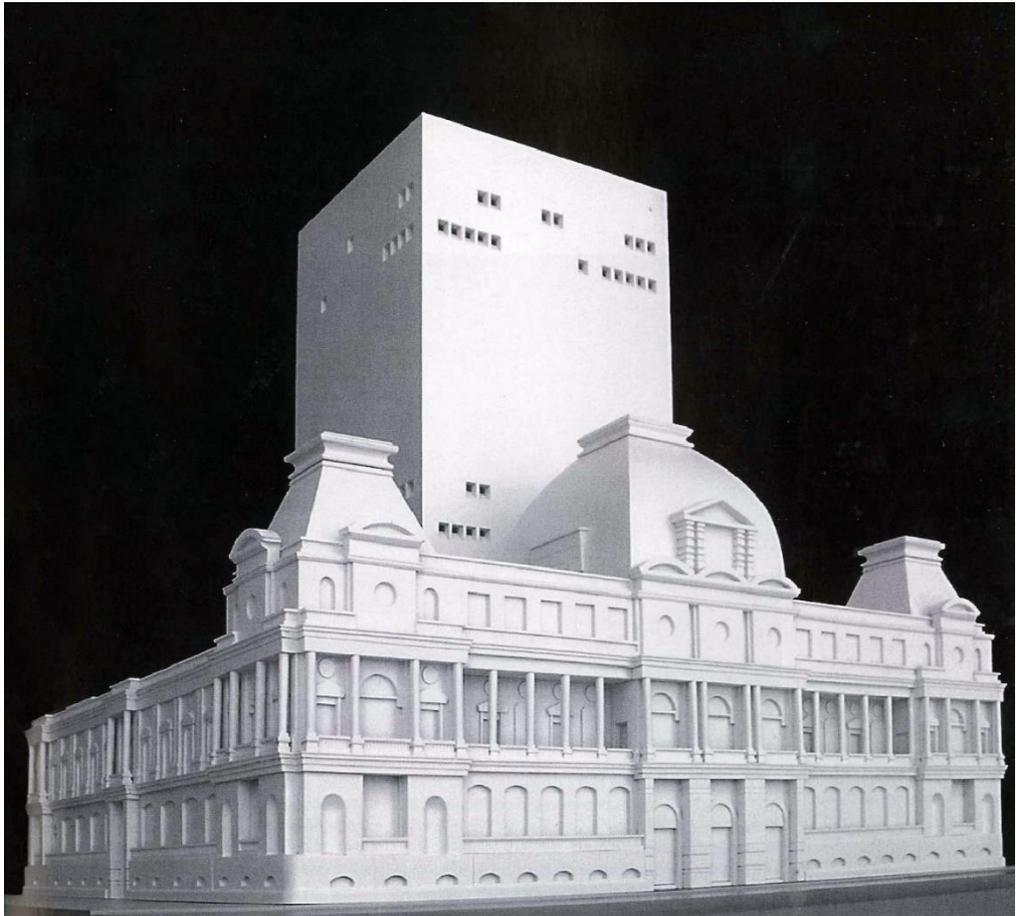
⁹ *Ministério de Educação e Saúde*, (Ministry of Education and Health) today the Capanema Palace, designed by Lucio Costa and team, based on an original scheme by Le Corbusier, in 1936; an inaugural icon of Brazilian modern architecture, located just a few blocks from the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*.

Figure 1: *Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Eduardo Colonelli and Weliton Ricoy Torres, 1998.



Photo: Nelson Kon (1998). Reproduced with permission.

Figure 2: Expansion of the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Metro Arquitetos, 2006.



Source: Metro Arquitetos Associados Archive. Reproduced with permission.

A third significant example is the intervention proposed for the *Praça do Patriarca* (Figure 3) in the historic center of São Paulo (2002¹⁰), one of the few urban voids preserved in the city's historic core, today surrounded by skyscrapers that have replaced the original low-rise fabric. Repeating the geographical pattern typical of cities of Portuguese origin, São Paulo was founded on the crest of a hill between two rivers. *Praça do Patriarca* forms the primary access to the Anhangabaú Valley, concluding the axis that crosses it via the *Viaduto do Chá* and marking this level change with a gallery connecting the two elevations.

The gallery, built in the 1930s as part of the viaduct works, originally featured a central access volume designed by architect Elisário Bahiana (1891–1980), around which streetcars would turn at their terminus. With the removal of the streetcars and buses to lower levels, the gallery entrance became an inconvenient ornament in the middle of the square. The proposal called for restoring the original paving and installing a new canopy over the square, prioritizing it over the gallery entrance.

Figure 3: New canopy, *Praça do Patriarca*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha.



Photo: Nelson Kon (2022). Reproduced with permission.

The canopy functions as a new architectural element that, by its scale, redefines the existing void in multiple dimensions: in use, by creating a covered public space; in scale, by re-signifying the void as the conclusion of a significant urban axis; and in visual terms, by framing new perspectives on the existing city. Without hesitation, the intervention affirms the ensemble's new condition, disregarding the supposed primacy of non-essential elements: the statue of José Bonifácio, the “Patriarch of Independence” from whom the square takes its name, was relocated to the side, facing the city's zero milestone, with its back to the new canopy.

¹⁰ *Praça do Patriarca* (2002) Team: Kátia Pestana, Giancarlo Latorraca, Marcelo Laurino, Martin Courrulon, Eduardo Colonelli and Silvio Oksman.

In both cases, the underlying principles recall the debates on restoration in the second half of the twentieth century, filtered in Brazil largely through the thinking of Cesare Brandi¹¹, for whom intervention must begin with the recognition of the work of art. This recognition, broadly understood, governs the interaction between object and observer (or user, in architecture's case), requiring an awareness of the object itself.

It will be immediately apparent that the special product of human activity to which we give the name 'work of art' is such because of a singular recognition that comes to consciousness: a recognition doubly singular, both because it must be made each time by an individual, and because it cannot be motivated in any other way than by the recognition the individual gives it. (Brandi, 2004, p. 27).

If an intellectual effort is necessary for a work of art to materialize as such, one may suppose that restoration – or, in architectural terms renovation, intervention, or alteration – is fundamentally a discursive act, reconfiguring the ensemble's equation. Returning to Távora's metaphor, creating the "compound" is to recreate the work of art in its new state. From this awareness comes the architect's freedom to act, provided that it is exercised "with a critical and scientific awareness of the moment in which the restoration intervention is carried out" (Brandi, 2004, p. 100).

This "critical and scientific awareness" is divided into two complementary sets of factors. The first concerns recognition of the work's specific conditions (materiality, use, cultural value), which guides a significant part of the response; the second demands an expanded reading of its artistic validity, consciously approaching the original author's intentions and, without hierarchical distinction, those of the new author.

By re-scaling the *Praça do Patriarca* through the demolition of its original canopy and the installation of a new one, or by occupying the historic courtyard of the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes* with a technical tower, Paulo Mendes da Rocha places the artistic intention of the proposal radically in the foreground. This approach both respects and transgresses, in equal measure, the original equation in transformation. In Brandi's words, it seeks the "re-establishment of the potential unity of the work of art [...] without committing either an artistic or a historical falsehood, and without erasing any trace of the passage of the work of art through time" (Brandi, 2004, p. 33).

In other words, the process mobilizes both critique and scientific reasoning, but is fundamentally mediated by an artistic intellect aware of its condition in time and history.

A useful comparison can be drawn from another artistic practice: music. Lorenzo Mammi (2017) recalls that the most celebrated interpretation of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the canonical synthesis of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), was recorded on a piano, not a harpsichord, by a musician who deliberately altered tempos and phrasing in explicit subversion of the work's historical understanding. Glenn Gould, the Canadian pianist (1932–1982), became renowned for the artistic assurance of his interpretations, thereby affirming that the work and its performer form a binomial capable of producing something new, renewed with each performance¹².

¹¹ With the due clarification that the approach to Brandi is made by the authors of this article, without our knowledge of any reference to him made by Paulo Mendes da Rocha.

¹² It is suggested to watch the recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au7QkVg61VM> (Accessed 26 August 2025).

The comparison, however, requires caution: intervening in a building is not an ephemeral art; a poor performance does not destroy a musical piece. What matters here is the freedom of action in the example: it is not an act of disrespect to reinterpret a work, provided it occurs within a critically grounded artistic framework. It is within such a framework that we approach the *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel*, just as we have previously approached the *Praça do Patriarca* and the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*.

3 Sacred horizontal line

The chapel takes form atop the ruins of a 19th-century manor house, likely the residence of the Barão of Muribeca and headquarters of the *São João Mill*, located on the Santos Cosme e Damião estate, which today houses the ceramics factory run by the visual artist Francisco Brennand (1927–2019) in Recife¹³. The ruins occupied one of the plot's vertices, a sort of clearing in the riparian forest that protects the area from interaction with the Capiberibe River, the terminus of the productive complex that operated there.

As a first premise, it is necessary to define the interpretation by Brazilian architectural culture of the concept of *partido* (design concept). The term – imprecisely defined in other languages – summarizes the synthesis of intentions that materialize a certain project, already manifested in its formal and material expressions. In a way, this concept directs architectural making with a kind of prior synthesis, anticipating the result of a notoriously long process. Our interest is not in judging the method but rather in recognizing that the notion is firmly established in the Brazilian design imagination – especially regarding production between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo – the need to invent a gesture that summarizes the complexity of decisions: a sketch, a section.

Those who have had the chance to attend a lecture by Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012) understand the procedure: on a blackboard, masterfully synthetic drawings are materialized, summarizing the full strength of a built object in two or three lines. Paulo Mendes da Rocha did not share the same obsession with synthesis; he navigated broader discourses to justify his action. Nevertheless, the founding decisions of his projects are often reducible to defining sections that guide the project's path, a guiding action from which all others emanate.

It is impossible not to recognize the virtues of this procedure, a strategy that, from the outset, can guide the multiple project decisions toward a common goal, a *partido* that ensures the coherence of all its parts as a whole. At the same time, it addresses Vitruvian demands for symmetry, a way to attribute logic and harmony among the pieces composing the ensemble.

Having made this parable, we can return to the chapel project: there is a determining action that, on the one hand, organizes all others and, on the other, synthesizes all the demands of the project brief. The Portuguese professor Alexandre Alves Costa – emeritus professor at the University of Porto and colleague of Távora, which allows us to affirm there are no coincidences here – once defined Brazilian architecture poetically as a horizontal line lifted from the ground¹⁴ (Costa, 1998). The chapel makes us agree.

¹³ For the complete project, see <http://www.epaulistano.com.br/capela-brennand.html> (Accessed 26 August 2025).

¹⁴ "Brazilian architecture is a horizontal line raised from the ground, a simple and delicate statement of hope for the future, an irresistible force dissolving the poor and oppressed past, the foundation of the homeland, abstract, metaphysical" (Costa, 1998, p. 73).

A horizontal line with multiple meanings, as we will see. A technical action with the predominant force of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's work, without material or spatial subterfuge: a new slab, supported twice, occupies and reinaugurates the previously ruined space without daring to touch it. The operation, a decision guided by constructive prudence, clearly distinguishes the contemporary intervention from the pre-existence, making the non-support sing¹⁵, a continuous horizontal slit that creates a second horizontal line, immaterial and powerful. It is the materialization of the action itself, the weight of the intervention diffused by the possibility of drawing a slit of light, as supposed by Catholic tradition.

The image of the horizontal volume that floats, despite the mass of concrete that materializes it, inevitably leads us to another project by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, with the same program: the *São Pedro Chapel* (Figure 4), built in Campos do Jordão (1987). The discussion about pre-existence also guides this operation, since it is an annex to the *Palácio Boa Vista*, the summer residence of the governor of São Paulo State, a work resulting from a historical pastiche in 1964. Mendes da Rocha's intervention does not establish major points of contact with the building but chooses to take advantage of an existing level difference, marked by a stone retaining wall that separates the palace's access level from a garden overlooking the valley view below.

Figure 4: *São Pedro Chapel*, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, 1987.



Photo: Leonardo Finotti (2011). Reproduced with permission.

The level difference allows us to observe the first operation that justifies this approach: the roof volume – a concrete slab transformed into a horizontal volume, albeit irregular in plan – unexpectedly approaches the retaining wall line, creating a clear tension due to its low height¹⁶. Between the retaining stone and the slab, a glass enclosure ensures the

¹⁵ Reference to the aphorism by Auguste Perret, “L’architecture, c’est l’art de faire chanter le point d’appui,” incorporated into Brazilian architecture. See TERRES DE FEMMES. 31 May 1933. Conference by Auguste Perret. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3wyRoJK> (Accessed 6 August 2025).

¹⁶The roof volume results in a 2.05 m-high face; the void between it and the access level — that is, the ceiling height of the entrance lobby — is limited to 2.20 m. These proportions create the described tension.

autonomy of the two heavy elements and controls access from the upper part, a vestibule that soon becomes a nave, with seating that descends to the altar and the view, designed to avoid the main spatial construction element, a large circular pillar. The steps adapt to its presence, asking permission to overcome the level difference and, in this uneasy negotiation, create seats whose attention turns to many things beyond the mass, since the hypnotic landscape is always present¹⁷. The spatial operation is simple and robust: the central pillar supports the roof block, a 2.05 m tall package, ribbed along its height, that spans over the level difference, joining the two existing levels separated by the retaining wall; in the roof projection, a set of glass frames, maximally transparent, repeats the roof's shape down to the ground at both levels; the irregular transparent figure seems to support a "stone," the massive roof¹⁸.

The chapel has a small vestibule at the flat palace square level, which gains the air of a churchyard and fully develops into a descending slab that overcomes 3.00 m. Thus, only the robust pillar, with the transverse choir, interrupts views of the landscape; the created volume is populated by elements: the seating, the altar, and the choir—a small reinforced slab behind the large pillar. The sacristy concludes the space, taking advantage of the retaining wall's level difference and thus abdicating from its participation in the spatial construction¹⁹.

The *partido* is clear and rigorous, allowing us to point out kinship with the clarity and rigor of the Recife intervention. With a license for a provocative interpretation: the horizontal line, a tension created in both projects, gains a stronger expression due to the buildings' program. Catholic tradition has always demanded technological advances reaching toward the sky—from Gothic ogives to Viollet-le-Duc's pinnacle on *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1864), from the infinite verticality of Auguste Perret's tower in *Saint Joseph Church* in Le Havre (1945–64) to the zenithal opening of Peter Zumthor's dramatic *Bruder Klaus Chapel* (2007). Mendes da Rocha offers a deliberate counterpoint: there are no vertical intentions. Only the horizontal line raised from the ground—a procedure that accompanies much of his work but here could be described as an act of insubordination, the agnostic desire not to gaze at the sky.

Yielding to temptation, perhaps the right course is to resume direction and sketch an explanation that rescues the ubiquitous citation to the sea, to the horizon line of memory of the Capixaba architect, son of an engineer specialized in hydraulic and naval topics²⁰.

¹⁷ The architect informally stated that it is necessary to summon our memories in order to develop our projects, and that the cut slab of the chapel referred to a fragment of the *Basilica of San Marco* in Venice, where, in the vast nave, robust cylindrical pillars often become an obstacle for the faithful attending the mass.

¹⁸ The idea of a "flying stone" is repeated in other projects by the architect, especially the Brazilian Museum of Sculpture (MuBE). The lecture "*MuBE 03: Concepção Estrutural*" [MuBE 03: Structural Design] by Professor Mario Franco from FAU-USP, who was the structural engineer for the museum project, is recommended and available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UC1Lyfb0fbo> (Accessed 20 August 2025).

¹⁹ The curator of the Art Collections of the State Palaces of São Paulo, Radha Abramo, made a point of including artworks in the chapel that refer to the common practice of historic churches and were revived by Brazilian modernity. These include: a painting by Glauco Pinto de Moraes beneath the choir slab, sculptures by Elvio Becheroni and Domenico Calabrone, and even a mass composed by Julio Medaglia in ode to Saint Peter, performed at the inauguration of the work. The reflection of the painting under the choir, along with the other architectural elements, enhances the kaleidoscope of fragments of palace, skies, and forests, suggesting the paradox of the nave slab's levitation despite being anchored to the giant pillar.

²⁰ A brief personal anecdote is worth mentioning. During a work meeting attended by two of the authors of this article, Paulo described the awe he felt while on a boat journey in the Brazilian countryside, where from a distance he could see the "impressive" construction of a coffee barn—narrow and very long: a horizontal line in the landscape. It was a project by his

Architectural critic Sophia Silva Telles tangentially corroborates this statement: “Paulo Mendes da Rocha’s projects escape figuration because they are programmatic propositions. They are actions, not forms” (Telles, 1998, p. 116).

And since actions are of interest to this article, through them we return to the approach to the chapel in Recife.

The creation of the horizontal line is defining. It establishes the legibility of the new operation – uniformly distinguished from existing elements – while creating a green horizon of light, a continuous aura around the prayer space (Figure 5). The solution is designed by a slab supported on the chapel’s central axis, a trapezoidal beam that completes the alignment of two opposite pillars, taken as the basis for the design of the choir on one side and the altar on the other. Externally, the slab extends in two beams to the new bell tower, created as the only symbolic (ecclesiastical) license of the ensemble: a tower that, vertically, announces the chapel’s existence from afar.

Figure 5: Nave of *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli, 2006.



Photo: Leonardo Finotti (2011). Reproduced with permission.

The project defines two perimeter paths. The first is external: the recreation of the original building’s porch, delimited by successive arches which, lower than the internal volume, ensure the chapel’s due prominence. The discontinuous remaining arches gradually reveal the central volume, protecting it from the exterior and inviting circulation around it – a contemporary adaptation of a classical temple’s peristyle. This condition is repeated inside the volume: a glass panel conditions, with its low height, the chapel’s enclosure and creates, as a result, a second continuous circulation along the original external walls. With all external openings maintained and access through each of them allowed, the glass regulates the entrance points to the nave without limiting the visual presence of both the

father, a kind of machine-building designed to heat drying platforms and allow the movement of the vast roof for exposing the coffee beans to the sun.

exterior – filtered by the rhythm of the openings – and the vigorous materiality of the stone masonry.

The slab, exposed concrete revealed in its natural condition, coexists with the stones, clad externally and left untreated internally. In both cases, the material contrast is explicit; there are no gray overlaps between the two objects. Externally, the white cladding is recreated as a tool to guarantee the waterproofing and stability of the existing fragments. Here too, the action demands decisiveness: the decision on what to keep (among cladding, frames, and other constructive elements) is subject to recognition of the whole, the condition of the new work of art created (Brandi, 2004). The existence of a ruined building is the reason for the intervention, which consolidates vestiges that allow historical recognition of the object -such as the arcade fragments of the porch or the untouched openings of the existing apertures (Figures 6, 7, and 8).

It is in this sense that eventual removals, demolitions, or – in more specific terms – *desbastamentos* (paring down) of the original building are justified. Returning once more to the stance adopted in *Praça do Patriarca* or the *Museu Nacional de Belas Artes*, the decision is justified by a general argument of totality, which makes certain reminiscences of a whole that no longer exists superfluous or incongruous. Returning to the Italian theorists, it is fitting to recall Gustavo Giovannoni, who reminds us that:

The possibility of paring down must be considered from the viewpoint of maximizing light and air that a partial demolition can offer [...], the perspective effects resulting from the new framing that will be composed, and also circulation reasons. (Giovannoni, 2013, p. 156).

Figures 6 and 7: *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli, 2006.



Photo: Leonardo Finotti (2011). Reproduced with permission.

Figure 8: *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel.* Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli, 2006.



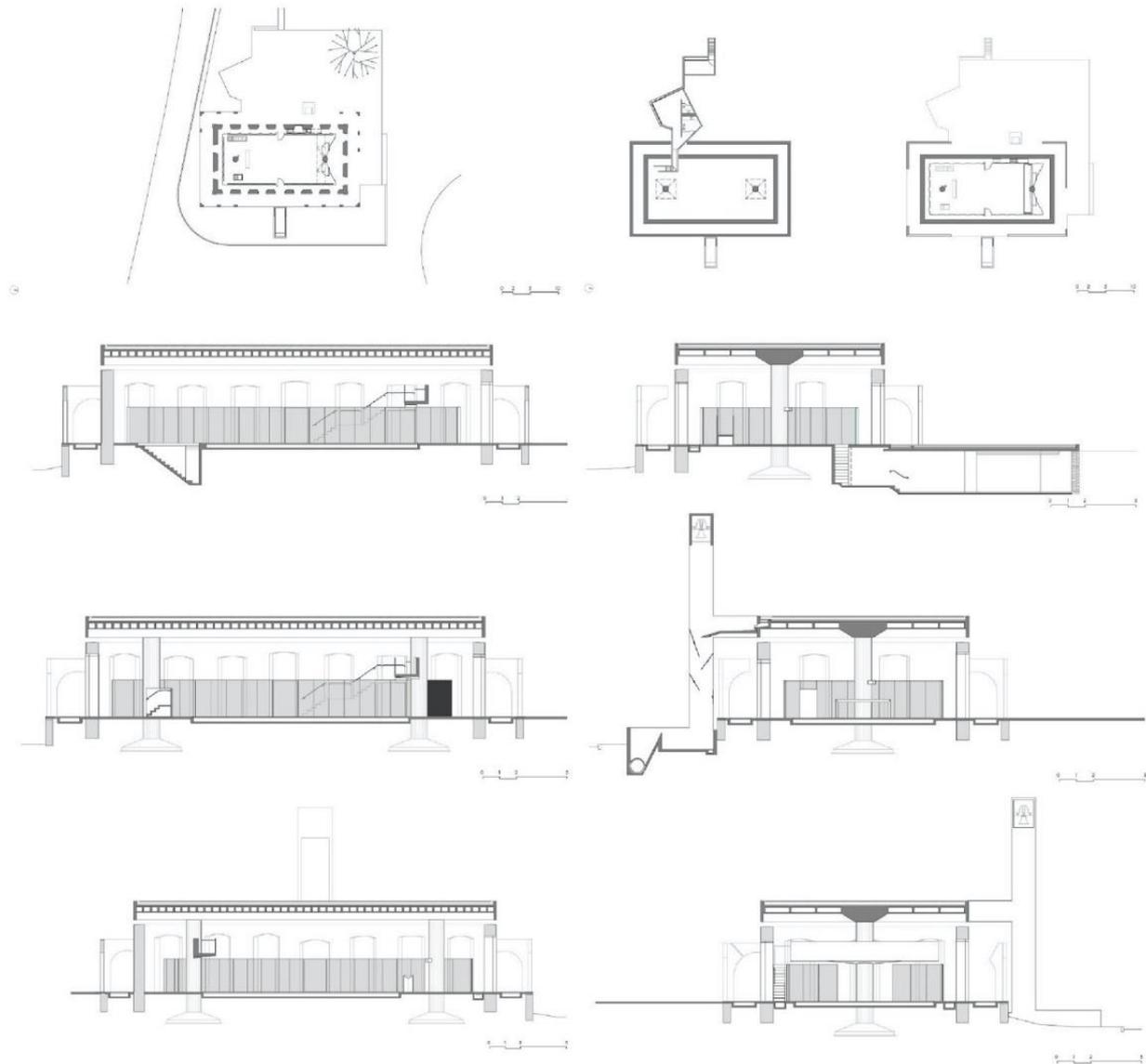
Photo: Leonardo Finotti (2011). Reproduced with permission.

Although the author refers to a more urban scale – which would precisely apply to comments about *Praça do Patriarca* – it can be assumed that the notion of *desbastamento* (or de-densification) implies, in the case of the chapel, subtraction of existing elements justified by the creation of a new and more appropriate composition.

As a final important action, the project resolves a sacristy at a lower level, beneath the new plaza created beside the main body. The volume is gently invited not to participate in the main equation, not to interfere with the balance created between pre-existence and the new defining horizontal piece; it repeats the condition of crypts that remain underground and carry away from view the priest's mundane activities.

The created plaza establishes the domain enclosure of the new ensemble, a churchyard won on the plot, identified by the pavement that unifies the various proposed elements (the main nave, recovered arcades, the baptistery, the access to the sacristy). It therefore gains autonomy and reaffirms independence both from the factory complex and from the terrain's natural condition, in an effort to define a new geography shaped by the project (Pisani, 2013) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel.* Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli, 2006.



Source: Eduardo Colonelli Archive. Available at: <http://www.epaulistano.com.br/capela-brennand---memorial.html>. Accessed em 27/11/2024.

The notion of *partido* in architecture, already mentioned, presupposes the simultaneous or concatenated resolution of various project demands by a single action. The burial of the sacristy is a telling example: justified by Catholic tradition, it frees the protagonism of the action in the nave (new slab and pre-existence) while drawing, with its roof, the new external plaza which, in turn, adjusts the implantation of the new ensemble. Complementary solutions such as ventilation openings²¹, lighting, and accesses become project diversions, managed with the seriousness the global solution demands.

²¹ Reference should be made to the proposed ventilation solution: due to the constant winds, the project suggests installing an air intake system along the sides of the platform on which the chapel is situated, and a supply system through the gaps in the nave's raised floor. This ingenious solution multiplies and regulates the entry of fresh air without conflicting with the spatial arrangement proposed.

Informally recalling from memory the contact some of the authors of this article had, to a greater or lesser degree, with the architect, it is worth highlighting his attention directed at the concept of annex, to which he referred when recalling the *Tower of Pisa* (Bonano Pisano, 1173) or the chapel of the *Palácio do Alvorada* (Oscar Niemeyer, 1957). The formation of a secondary body that owes its existence, both formally and functionally, to the main element—although it takes part in the formed ensemble. An annex is not necessarily a dispensable block: it is a compositional part of the ensemble, although kept away from any protagonism. This secondary condition allows distinct spatial explorations since the license to break implicit rules of the ensemble is given by the hierarchy of the composition. More than that, it seems sensible that annexes fulfill a distinct, proper logic, even if restricted to their complementary condition.

It is in this sense that the design of the chapel's sacristy is interpreted—a buried room with geometry that deliberately escapes the regularity of the main body—asserting its formal independence from the set of rules created by the project to fulfill its equation. The annex is a license to the *partido*, the exception that makes the discourse of the rule more eloquent, a recurring strategy in his work.

4 Final remarks

In conclusion, after analyzing the general and particular aspects of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's action on pre-existences, it remains to affirm that the natural complexity of the architectural program and the umbilical relationships it builds with the building's materiality (both new and existing) are confronted within the boundaries proposed by the architect himself. Hierarchies are maintained only to guarantee the protagonism of spatial decisions: fundamentally, the creation of the horizontal surface that frames the light and creates the sacred space. From this definition, the solutions align in respectful formation, without unnecessary shyness or adherence to outdated ideas of heritage. Pre-existences and interventions are tributary to a central action whose highest objective is the creation of a work of art, in Brandi's terms, which in this particular case passes through the sacralization demanded by the program itself.

The awareness that transformation is a condition for the architect's action proposes a retrospective reading of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's work, pertinent to his actions in historical contexts but not only. If this article focuses on a particular work – with diffuse attention to others that reaffirm the arguments – it is worth saying that the same interpretation can be extended to projects that do not face pre-existence but combat supposed hierarchies in favor of the desired transformation.

Particular attention is due to the architect's relationship with geography, intentionally manipulated in projects such as the *Casa do Butantã* (São Paulo, Brazil, 1964), the *Osaka Pavilion* (Osaka, Japan, 1970), or the *Museu Brasileiro da Escultura e da Ecologia – MuBE* (São Paulo, Brazil, 1995). Returning to Lemos, there is no way to “touch lightly” (Lemos, 2004). Architecture supposes transformation, and this responsibility must not be lacking. The project's interaction with its constraints ignores any metric of subservience: the building does not adapt to reality; it takes possession of its place by transforming what is necessary for the existence of this new ensemble.

Beyond the subliminal suggestion of new research exploring the topic, this observation repositions the intent of this article, to interpret a project of intervention on pre-existence (Figure 10) as a design action that respects procedures forged over a vast and productive

career. Looking at these procedures – even if this costs less in-depth focus on specific theoretical issues, notably in the field of history – is the objective of the text, particularly attentive to architectural making.

Figure 10: Altar of *Nossa Senhora da Conceição Chapel*. Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Eduardo Colonelli, 2006.



Photo: Leonardo Finotti (2011). Reproduced with permission.

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