

THE MONASTIC DWELLING AND THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE AS DETERMINANT VALUES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAN JOSÉ

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the existing relationship between architecture and the Benedictine tradition from the notions of *dwelling* of Martin Heidegger and the *spirit of place* of Christian Norberg-Schultz, embodied in the Benedictine Abbey of San José (Güigüe, Venezuela), designed in the eighties by the Venezuelan architect Jesus Tenreiro Degwitz.

This work, considered as a National Cultural Property, is an evidence of both the transmission of a heritage (tangible and intangible) and a continuous process of its own transformation. Thus, the building is presented as a synthesis of the historical and traditional relations, materialized in the contemporary condition of architecture; manifesting as the witness and the result of a process largely determined by the nature of the Benedictine coenobitical practice. Regarding this, we will deal with a conception of space linked to the tradition and life of its inhabitants as well as the historical and geographical characteristics of the place.

INTRODUCTION

The religious and monastic architecture has been one of the main interpreters in the dynamic of the historic and cultural development of towns. In it, the principles of tradition are filtered and synthesized in architectonic systems which prove both the transmission of a heritage and the constant process of transformation (innovation) of itself as well.

To this effect, the Benedictine Abbey of San José (Guigüe, Carabobo State, Venezuela) appears to be the synthesis of historic and traditional relations, materialized under the contemporary condition of the architecture of the eighties, designed by the Venezuelan architect Jesús Tenreiro Degwitz.

To approach this work, we want to determine the relations existing between architecture and the Benedictine tradition from the philosophical reflections of dwelling and architecture as a place derived from the text *Build, Dwell and think* by Martin Heidegger and about the notion of spirit of the place or *genius loci* by Christian Norberg-Schultz.

The monastic culture of Dwelling

The study of the interaction of the subjects in the architectonic space obeys to a kind of anthropological research (which is also part of architecture), it points out psychological, social and cultural features present in the location, conception, building and use of a determined space.

In this study we claim to examine “how dwelling can determine and be expressed in the dwelled object” (Enciso, 2006), due to the fact that in the architectonic field, “when people talk about living unseparately they refer to dwelling and we think indissolubly about a dwelled spaciality for this use.” (Enciso, 2006).

The approach of the anthropologist Francisco Sánchez in his work *La Liturgia del Espacio* (The Liturgy of Space) (1990) and that of the Benedictine philosopher Frederic Debuyst, entitled *Il genius loci cristiano* (2000) were very useful to explain this idea. Sanchez deals with the unavoidable relationship existing between space and culture. Debuyst examines the contemporary monastic space from the notions of Heidegger’s *dwelling* and Norberg-Schultz’ *genius loci*.

Dwelling is expressed through all kinds of acts or ways of proceeding which imply all the senses, in this way, “the space dwelled can be identified, used and imagined as the scenario of man’s social and individual behaviour” (Enciso 2006).

Related to this, the specific way the Benedictine Order has to organize and understand the monastic life is present in its conceptions of privacy, meditation, discipline, hierarchy, hospitality, among others; which are materialized in the space constructing, shaping, giving a connotation to it (Sánchez, 1990). By doing this, we find the building as the witness and result of a process, determined mainly by the character of the Benedictine coenobitical practice, that is (paraphrasing Heidegger), through “the way the Benedictine monks are in earth”.

This monastic dwelling is signed by the ideal of being a monk (the one, the solitary), and by the particularly *ora et labora* monastic binomial. These two dimensions of the monastic dwelling are expressed in movements, in ritual acts. These acts are specified in the Rule San Benito redacted in the fifth century and they are presented as useful doctrinal lineaments for the realization of the monastic life. The practical character of the Rule ranges from the interior organization of the monastery and the monks’ activities to the time division of the liturgy celebration. It can be said then that the Rule activates and strengthens a particularly Benedictine dwelling.

This dwelling which has as fundamental feature the action of guarding, rests in the being of men, in their way of being in the earth, under the sky and in front of the divinities. This union has been named Cuaternity and human beings enter it through the dwelling. Hence, “the mortals dwell in the way they take care of the Cuaternity in its essence.” (Heidegger, 1994).

This *dwelling* is present in the monastic life experience as “a dwelling in front of the divine” (Crippa in Debuyst, 2000, p.1), which discipline of monastic state comprises a way of guarding and preserving the pureness of the heart to reach the ideal of surrender oneself to the Lord, to become one with Him. To do this, the monk remains in a community in which “he will reach his personal integration –human and spiritual- (or he will constantly try it at least), in the daily sharing with his brothers, through the brotherly living together and the conscious and attentive collaboration with them” (Weidner and Martínez, s/f, p. 20). We can also add that the monk dwells the earth, cultivate it and build in it, paying attention to the signals of the nature and the state of the weather; this monastic disposition is determined also by the Rule.

Heidegger reveals that this dwelling is preserved while it takes its essence to things and these things guarantee the Cuaternity in themselves, as things are, let them be. The mortals protect and take care of the things that grow up, erect properly the things that do

not grow. Guarding and erecting is building in the strict sense. *Dwelling* while it guards (truly) the Cuaternity in things, is, in this sense (truly), a *building*.” (Heidegger, 1994).

From this *monastic dwelling* the builder receives the direction to erect places – monastery, and at the same time, the *buildings* erected this way mark the monk’s dwelling taking him to his essence and giving a house to it. This is confirmed by the architectonic relevance which the monastic edifications have shown through the centuries.

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

The concept of *genius loci* developed by Christian Norberg-Schultz shows that all the places – natural or built ones- have their *spirit* and that it is forged in the historic course of the place.

To the relation between man and construction previously mentioned, we add now the surrounding, and from its mutual correspondence, we can refer to the concept of *existential space* and to its qualitative and vital character which is not determined in purely physical terms (Norberg-Schultz, 1999, p. 225).

This *existential space* is constituted by *existential meanings* which “are inherent to life itself and emerge from the relation between natural human properties, processes and actions” (Norberg-Schultz, 1999, p. 225); to experience these meanings in the environment surrounding him is one of the essential needs of man. When this happens “the space becomes an ensemble of “places”. The term “place” then determines something known and “concrete” while “space” indicates the most abstract relations among places” (Norberg-Schultz, 1999, p. 223).

The places “are focus where the meaningful events of existence are experienced, but they are also starting points, orientation and conquest bases of the environment” (Norberg-Schultz 1999, p. 226). Respect to this, “being in a place” constitutes something further than a location event, thus it implies the identification if the inhabitant with the specific character of the places, the journeys and the zones related.

The existential meanings reveal and make concrete as “characters”, these characters are materialized as *things*, and these things being themselves as place, guard the Cuaternity. For this reason it can be understood that “when a character is made concrete through the formal articulation, the world becomes closer” (Norberg-Schultz, 1999, p. 227), making the existence meaningful through architecture.

Respect to the environment character, it has been considered as the *spirit of the place* which as we mentioned at the beginning refers to the *genius* which is forged in the historic course of the place or which emerges from nature itself.

This concept leads us to two more meaningful aspects of the tradition of the religious and monastic architecture; first of all, the concretion of culture of the *crisian dwelling* in the most antique constructions (the house-church and the primitive Constantine churches), indicating the original conception of the Christian life and its communitarian dimension, revealed in the orientation notion and the feeling of identity among the faithful; second, we have the particular sensibility of the monks in the election of the appropriate zones to settle the monasteries. Taking into account these two aspects, Debuyt (2000) poses the specific existence of a *christian genius loci*.

The essence of this *christian place spirit* is present also in the monasteries, but catalyzed by the determinations of a Rule and an abbot. In this way, the monastic road

included new meanings that made their way of living more complex, which is present in their edifications.

To Debuyst, the monastery is a “complete human and Christian place”, the majority of the examples built present a *genius loci* derived from its complex and at the same time singular character; its particular presences make almost all of them, inique (2000, p. 55).

The complex character is given by an internal complexity that corresponds to the numerous and varied activities the monks have developed through the time. Besides, this complex character is evident in a *spirit of the place* that expresses completeness, totality and synthesis that strengthens from an own interiority that guards the liturgy, seeks for loneliness and protects the closure of the community.

This tendency to the introversion reaches its balance with other of the monastic principles previously mentioned, the dialogue with nature and landscape.

It is known the discernment made by the monks in the search of an appropriate location for the practice of the monastic life; as a consequence, its foundations reveal a particular sensibility towards the *genius of the place* and their admiration of nature as a creation of God, placing them frequently to zones with a marked geographical and natural seal. The monasteries were usually established as relatively isolated units, and in general, it is there where they build and transformed the space generating a *place*.

The historic relationship of the christian monastery constructions with the natural surrounding has had a double slope which distinguishes between the western monastic architecture from the eastern monastic architecture. In both cases, the most of the constructions have been made with an inner character, turned to the interior but allowing the visuals occupy a meaningful position in front of a panorama with its own beauty. The difference is in how they are implanted in the land, with a morphology of geometric tendency in the first case and organic in the second case.

The geometric disposition considers a general domain of the relation form-function-meaning in any implantation (Conenna, s/f). The rigidity of its straight angles contrast with the landscape, imposing itself to the surroundings. However, this has not implied a total ignorance of the properties of the place, taking into account climatic factors, sunning, wind direction, among other factors.

On the other hand, the organic tendency presents particular solutions for each case, since it depends mostly on the land where it is placed, adapting itself to the particularities and topographic variants, what makes it more natural and autonomous (Conenna, s/f).

The rigidity which can be attributed to the Benedictine constructive tradition respect to the natural surrounding has varied in the last decades. Debuyst denotes a growing attention towards the specificities of the surroundings, becoming apart from a narrow closure and manifesting a great liberty in the relation with the nature and landscape (2000, p. 75).

HOW THE MONASTIC DWELLING AND THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE DETERMINED THE *CONSTRUCTION* OF THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAN JOSÉ

The Benedictine life reached Venezuelan lands during the Gomez regimen. The first monks arrived at the San José del Avila Parish (north to Caracas) from Germany in 1923.

This foundation located at the bottom of the Avila was growing progressively developing a pastoral, educative and social character in the middle of the community where

it was inserted. In 1964, the foundation was raised to the rank of abbey through a decree of the Vatican.

Güiguë and the search of the ideal place

In the community of San José del Avila, we find a change in the course towards 1979 and 1980, as a cause of progressive reflections made concrete in important decisions which purposes demanded to live with a greater faithfulness the values of the Benedictine life. To reach this objective required the retirement of the community from the city of Caracas, which did not offer the best conditions in the immediate surroundings, zone which long ago had enjoyed of an environment ennobled by its location near the Avila mountain and which was transformed from the construction of the perimetral road of La Cota Mil at the end of the seventies. That time Caracas already had big problems derived from its metropolitan condition: wide extensions of poor houses (ranchos), traffic, services collapsed, crime increase, etc.

With this panorama, the community searched for a zone which would give them an appropriate environment for spiritual absorption, distinctive characteristic of the monastic charisma. In 1981, a piece of land was elected, it was located on a hill in the outskirts of Güiguë in Carabobo State.

Placement and context

In those outskirts of the town of Güiguë, it was found a piece of land of seventy hectares over the hill of El Hatico, which gathered the necessary conditions to the development of the monastic life.

This hot and wet zone (though shaded by the breeze), full of light and pure air, it became convenient due to its quality of zone appropriate for agriculture. On the other side, its distance from the urban chaos, and its spectacular view which heads to Valencia lake and the Mountain Range of the Coast, giving an appropriate environment for the contemplation and silence.

The total extension of the piece of land is characterized by a varied topography. Only one part of the abbey (the church and the cloister) is settled directly on the ground; the rest of the edification rests on structural shields that pose organically on the topographic irregularities.

The edification is arranged in correspondence with the direction of the sunning. In some areas, the protection of the sun incidence has been more important, this aspect influenced in its specific location inside the building. The solution adopted was to place them parallel to the east-west axis, so the sun does not face its facades directly, making them climatically comfortable.

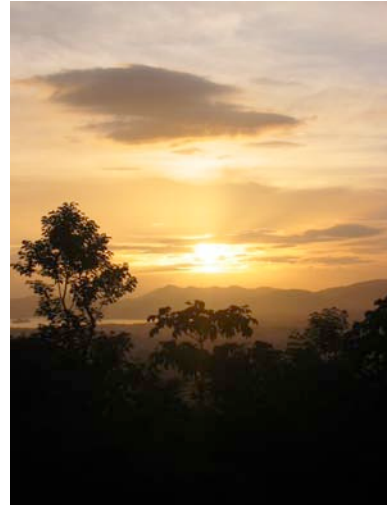
On other side, the maximum advantage of the air flows has exerted a notable influence in its general configuration; thus the main areas of the edification are separate one from the other, they are aligned in extended thin branches, convenient to be crossed by the air flows and to take advantage of the views. Respect to this, the northwest angle of the edification has as a privileged visual to the Valencia lake and the Coast mountain range, meanwhile the rest of the facades enjoy of a view of irregular topography full of vegetation.

The particular configuration of the edification extends over the piece of land with the intention of reaching a mayor possible interaction with these landscapes.

According to this, we can consider as determinant factors of the disposition of the programme and the morphological character of the monastery, to the singularities of the zone, the topographic, climatological and sunning conditionings. In this sense, the implantation of the edification generates an ineludible link with the landscape.



Small lagoon to the south east of the abbey



Valencia's Lake from the abbey. Sunrise

Benedictine Dwelling and Architectonic Programme

Establish correspondences between the dwelling particularities of the community of San José and the architectonic programme of the edification was a basic need in the elaboration of the project and after making it, it can be affirmed that they are clear and conclusive.

Accepting the existence of a common programme of areas inherited through the monastic and Benedictine constructive tradition, we find it maintains the Abbey without relevant alterations. The presented changes in our case of study are registered in the way of organizing those areas inside the totality.

The Abbey has a dwelling area of 4000 m² approximately which can be divided in two big areas where the public and the private are combined: in the first, the Benedictine hospitality vocation is developed, it receives the guest and the occasional visitor, and in the second the practice of the cloister is revealed as a way to guard the heart (Fitzpatrick, s/f) and to a dwelled loneliness.

Panoramic view of the abbey
from the southeast
Photo: Beda Hornung osb



From the monastic and Benedictine constructive tradition, the conception of the cloister is kept as a unifying element of the monastery, around it are located the other dependencies, but the innovation of the Abbey of San José strives in the way these dependencies are distributed from the centre.

This nucleus works like the organizational generator of the composition; it establishes the order and indicates the limit, the concretion of a particular space where only the members of the community can enter. It is conformed by a patio with garden, a gallery which connects the spaces around it: the refectory, the capitular room, the recreation and music rooms, the nursery and the study room.



Cloister



Gallery

The cloister as articulator of the monastic dwelling has been understood traditionally as a place for spiritual absorption where the monks circulate to pray and meditate, in the middle of a serene atmosphere. This relaxing environment is perceived in the Güigüe cloister, but its use as nucleus of circulation is distinguished. From it, four zones are derived: the church, the hospice, the monks' cells and the services area. This precise and organized spatial conception reveals coherence with the ruling Benedictine spirit of order, simplicity and clearness.

The dynamic *ora et labora* deprives in the development of the edification and the north and south wings materialize this binomial, with the church and the services area respectively.

The church occupies the most important place inside the Abbey, its function and the expressive individuality outstands in the architectonic ensemble show it this way. The conceptions of the dwelling of God and the assembly of guests come to a third conception which reveals the church as “the place of the new theophany” (Plazaola, 1995, p. 121). The liturgical acts held there by the monks and the christian assembly are a signal of it (*Opus Dei* and Eucharist).



Bell tower. North view



Inside the church

The hospice area refers to one of the ancient benedictine activities, the hospitality. The Rule persuades to receive the guest like they receive Jesus Christ, but it is also clear, that it does not have to disturb the monks' life; therefore, the spaces occupied by ones or the others are explicitly marked. (San Benito's Rule, p. 150). This aspect is also registered in our case of study because the hospice is apart from the areas designated to the exclusive use of the monks.

The area designated to the monks' cells comprises a zone of intimate character. The ancient Benedictine monasteries used big common dorms which made them different from the Abbey which presents individual cells, which also have exceptional views over the lake.

CONCLUSIONS

The implications of coupling of the millenary Benedictine tradition of life, work and praying to the present demands of the community of San José and to the place of implantation, generated a very particular configuration of the building which is not registered totally, in typologies constructed previously to this objective.

From this particular configuration we can point out firstly, the totalizing condition of the edification from the organizing element which makes possible the organization. Such condition becomes in a deep Benedictine conviction: the institution of an order, based on the Christian values, order created in the Rule by San Benito.

We observe this sense of order (as human character), in the general configuration of the Abbey and particularly from the cloister, like the expression of a community of monks who live in cloister, under the Rule and an abbot.

On other side, the orientation of the edification has in its existence a cosmological sense of natural character comprised from the disposition of its wings respect to the cardinal points. Even though it is necessary to remember the practical character present in such orientation, it cannot be denied its cosmological pretension, that is, the intention to relate the part-the Abbey- with all in the universe.

In this total dimension of the edification, we point out its condition of unitariedad and completeness, which we perceive from a theological point of view, that is, supernatural character. Thus, we come in front of a superior plane, understood from the cosmological relation previously mentioned, that is, the relation of the universe and its parts (represented in this case by the Abbey) with the divine world. These relations show the colligation of the Cuaternity, the spirit of a community which in the search of God longs for becoming one with Him, and the *construction that it dwells*, reveals it this way.

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