

José Ignacio Linazasoro
About Valdemaqueda. Designing a sacred space.

Abstract

The Church of San Lorenzo in Valdemaqueda is located 65 km far from Madrid, in the Sierra de Guadarrama, 20 km far from the Escorial. It was designed and built by architect José Ignacio Linazasoro between 1997 and 2001. It is a small but intense work. This short essay describes the design process and the references that the architect took into account during the project.

Keywords

Sacred space — Memory — Light — Material — Romanesque

When I was commissioned to design the Valdemaqueda Church, the first thing I thought about was the character the sacred space should have, if seen through modern eyes.

Ever since I was very young I wanted to design a church, a temple. My first architectural experiences were small Romanesque and pre-Romanesque churches for which I was attracted by their size and their mysterious and deep light.

It seemed to me that these sacred spaces were more contemporary, closer than the imposing Gothic cathedrals or the spectacular Baroque churches.

I saw the same mysterious expression much later in the work of modern architects such as Le Corbusier, Lewerentz or Van der Laan, in their dimly lit churches, their ancestral references and their bare buildings.

When designing the Valdemaqueda project, I decided from the outset to avoid any kind of spectacle, bright light or ornamentation. I also decided to avoid any expressiveness based on spatial or technological exhibition.

I wanted to design an interior, first of all an interior, like the rural Romanesque chapels, full of mystery, of expressiveness of the ineffable, of Pascal's hidden God.

I had to design a small space, in a rural setting, far from urban centres. A mountainous place in the Sierra de Guadarrama which divides the two highlands of Castile.

This is a region of the Iberian Peninsula whose character is always identified by its austerity and its tendency towards mysticism. A place, therefore, appropriate for such an experience. I decided from the outset to give the space the maximum intensity with the least possible means, as had always been done in Castile in its small sacred buildings, monasteries and convents.

**Fig. 1**

José Ignacio Linazasoro, Church of San Lorenzo, Valdequada. The interior space. Photo by José Ignacio Linazasoro.

I was also interested, as in those small pre-Romanesque Mozarabic churches I referred to, that access was always from the side, never from the axis of the main nave, thus generating an internal route more complex and less direct towards the altar.

I remembered the churches of San Miguel de Escalada, or Santiago de Peralba, always in hidden and remote places in deep Castile. But especially I thought of San Baudelio de Berlanga, of that unique space presided over by a single majestic column in the shape of a palm tree that occupies the centre of the space. There too, to reach the altar through the darkness, you have to turn 90°. A space illuminated only by two windows, a unique and wonderful space that I have always tried to imitate, without succeeding at all.

**Fig. 2**

The ermita de San Baudelio de Berlanga, Caltojar, 11th century.

All these sensations had been crowding into my memory since ancient times, although at that moment they had been reinforced by new references I had received when I visited Ronchamp or St Peter in Klippan. There I felt, despite the time that had passed between those buildings and the buildings in my memory, the same world of sensations, as if there had been a temporal jump between these new experiences and my memories; a temporal jump towards my first experiences which, in short, were the most profound, despite the knowledge, later accumulated, of the works of the great masters, ancient or modern.

I remember Christmas 1997, sketching continuously, almost obsessively, because it seemed to me that I was faced with the unique possibility of synthesising my deepest desires in a single, almost extreme space.

I drew and drew, even making small models in an attempt to synthesise experiences that came from afar but which only then saw the possibility of being realised.



I already thought, and still think, that light is the fundamental material for composing a space and in the sacred space light is also transformed into a symbolic element. Light conveys a way of feeling space through symbolic connotations.

I still believe, as I did then, that our feeling of sacred space is not close to that of the Gothic age, with its stability, with the security of living in the figurative paradise conveyed by the stained glass windows of the cathedrals, nor the rational, serene space typical of the Renaissance, of Redeemer by Palladio. But not even in Reims, in *douce France*, or in wealthy Venice, but in Castile.

That is why I kept thinking about the Romanesque, in its dense, dark, mysterious, dimly lit spaces. It was also my first experience of sacred space, the one I had experienced on my youthful excursions through the lands of Navarre or Castile.

In a time of disbelief, of uncertainty like the present, the light of the Romanesque also expresses those feelings, those doubts in the face of the ineffable. The same as one feels at St Anne's in Düren by Rudolf Schwarz or at St Peter's in Klippan by Sigurd Lewerentz.

The half-light of an interior in the middle of the bright Castilian plateau evokes a feeling of emptiness, but at the same time allows us to experience the yearning for Totality that Miguel de Unamuno talks about.

And light is the vehicle through which this desire is experienced. If we don't control light, if we don't take into account its evocative capacity, every space is anodyne. But in the case of sacred space, it is important to hide its source, so that the space is autonomous from the outside world.



Beginning with the reflected light, all the elements that make up the architectural space, such as the structure or the construction, can be highlighted. However, I have always escaped, in all my projects, the unjustified structural exhibition, but at the same time I have always thought that in the structure, in the construction, there is the origin, the principle of architecture. I have never been interested in the “sculptural spaces” of many modern churches, let alone those that present themselves as a structural exhibition. As Van der Laan stated, the act of lifting a stone vertically symbolises the human presence in the Cosmos. It is the triumph of reason over the inexorability of Nature.

From its origin, the construction arouses an idea of superimposition of elements. In order to build a shelter, a house and the temple, symbolically the house of the gods, a trilithic structure must be formed.

A structure that is present in Valdemaqueda in its most ancestral, most primitive version: the Valdemaqueda church is above all a house, a living space, the very idea of home.

This is why the structure is not treated here as something merely functional, a support, but as a principle of overlapping elements. This overabundance of elements evokes a overabundance which belongs to the world of architecture: colonnades, architraves which refer to a tectonic origin but which overcome it by multiplying, making themselves constructively superfluous. In Valdemaqueda, in addition to overlapping each other, forming a bidirectional framework, the concrete beams – simulating old wooden beams petrified by the action of time – are also overlapped by other wooden beams, suggesting a “successive” operation.



An apocryphal story, invented, but necessary to symbolically introduce the passing of time.

A single pillar, perhaps superfluous and repetitive constructively, though not spatially, orders and directs the interior space, dividing it and, in a sense, multiplying it. It is another manifestation of the overabundance of architecture.

The light brings out the entire structure, placing it against the light and illuminating only the walls. These are immersed in a light whose origin remains hidden, unless you look under the skylights, close to the walls.

A sacred space must first be a timeless space. I have a particular rejection for churches that claim to be modern. Actuality does not belong to sacred space. In the configuration of that timelessness, the traces allow us to express the wear and tear that the passage of time produces.

This is why the interior walls of the single nave in Valdemaqueda – or perhaps two naves divided by a single pillar? – have a rough texture, resulting from a soft, almost transparent coating on the brick with which they are built.

And the concrete beams, as a material similar to a stone consumed by time that is reflected in the imprint of the formwork, also have that same roughness, that same nakedness of the walls, as if they lacked the coating. A form of “unfinished” as expression of timelessness, of permanence, like that seen in the columns of Selinunte without an old coating, but still standing.

Timelessness understood first as memory rather than as the absence of the action of time. An idea that takes us back to the Romanesque period, to its bare walls that have lost ancient wall paintings. I now recall the interior of the church of Giornico in Ticino and how Peter Märkli absorbed its atmosphere in the nearby, beautiful, archaic La Congiunta Museum.

To this density of references, concentrated in a limited space, as happens even more intensely in San Baudelio de Berlanga, Valdemaqueda adds the coexistence of the new with a real pre-existence, with a permanence: that of the old apse of the original church which has disappeared. In this case an exercise bordering on the paradoxical has been proposed, between harmony and contrast.

This apse is Gothic, but a rural Gothic, a wall architecture, more Romanesque than Gothic: no lightness, no transparency, closed by stone walls and with only one side window, still Romanesque.

With my project I also tried to respond to this architecture through an even greater archaism: no vaults, no heights, an even lower, more primitive, more archaic construction. The new was then older, more atavistic.

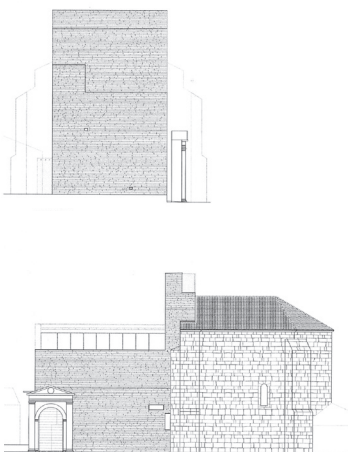
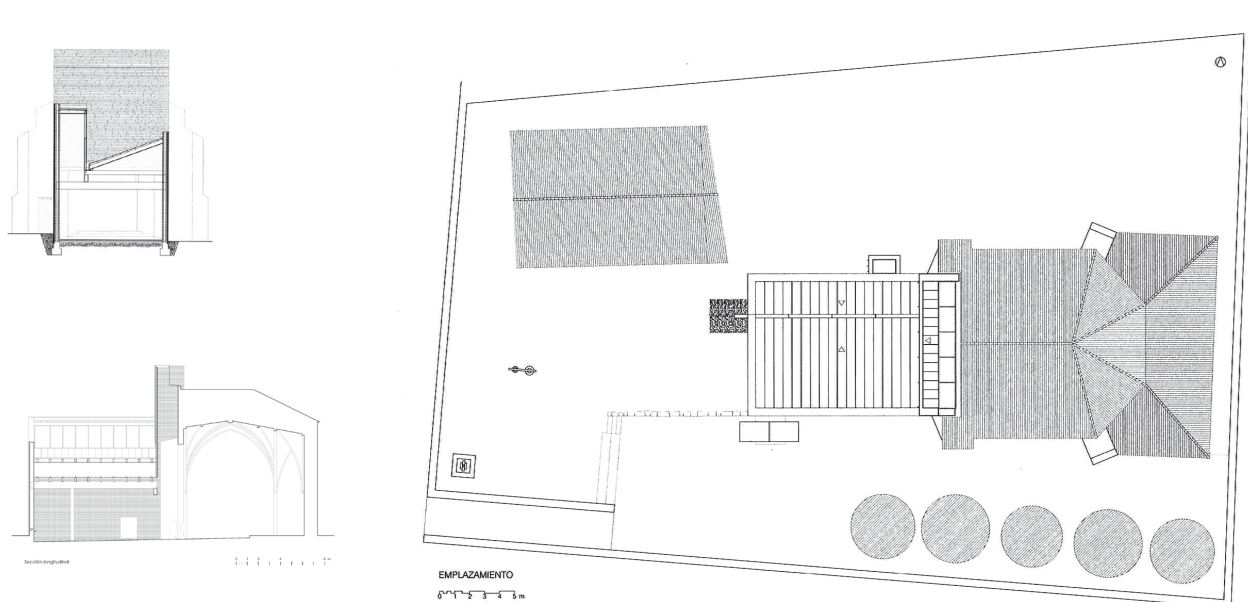
I was also recalling, in making these kinds of reflections, how the relationship between new and pre-existing is produced in certain constructions that never ended up replacing others and that now remain as two incomplete elements, side by side. This is the case of the Cathedral of Plasencia in Extremadura or the two cathedrals of Beauvais, always the new part higher than the old.

Something similar happens in Valdemaqueda, only the old part is higher than the new one, more ‘modern’ than the one now added. The old is now the ancient and the new the archaic.

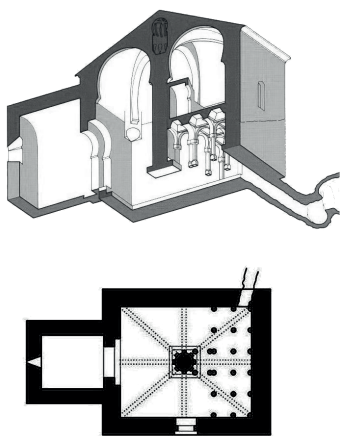
Bramante, who found a similar situation in Santa Maria delle Grazie, managed to achieve a new unity between the original dark Gothic church and the illuminated rotunda that was added.

Figg. 3 a-b-c-d-e-f-g

José Ignacio Linazasoro, Church of San Lorenzo, Valdemaqueda. Photo by Javier Azurmendi.

**Figg. 4 a-b-c-d-e-f**

José Ignacio Linazasoro, Church of San Lorenzo, Valdemaqueda. Planimetry and elevations.

**Figg. 5 a-b**

The ermita de San Baudelio de Berlanga, Caltojar, 11th century. Axonometric section and plan.

In Valdemaqueda the emphasis was on the meeting point, through the highest skylight that unifies and at the same time separates the two bodies of the church, between which a continuity is established at the same time, through a common wall covering.

The apse represents the conclusion of the path through the church, from the side door and there the simple but beautiful Renaissance altarpiece marks the end of a path that is emphasised through a slightly sloping floor towards the altar.

A new window is opened in the wall of the extension, through which a grazing light penetrates and is reflected in a wooden frame. This window responds in modernity to the old Romanesque window in the apse.

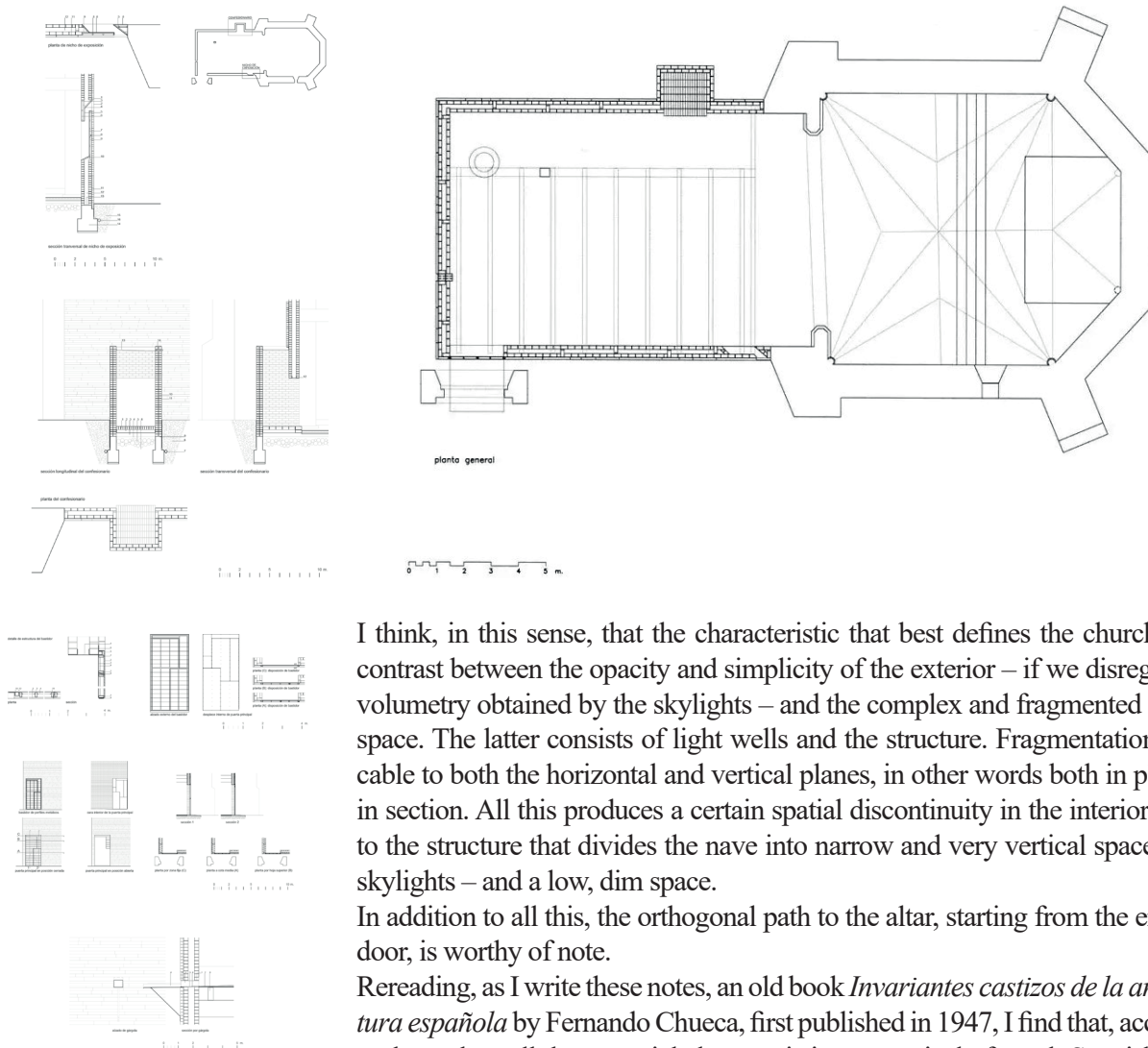
The confessional, open on the opposite wall to the north, receives a cold zenithal light that contrasts with that coming from the skylights through which the walls are lit.

Another window, in this case a small window, the only one from which the outside space can be seen, illuminates the stoup, a polished granite stone. The window simulates a star in the middle of a dim place.

On the outside, the church is monolithic, austere and mono-material. There is nothing to reveal its interior space. I was also thinking here of San Baudelio, of his austerity so Castilian, so similar on the outside to Muslim marabouts. As there, only a door, in our case a Renaissance one, recovered from the old church that has disappeared, interrupts the continuity of the wall. A door that separates itself from the wall, however, as if it were an archaeological find reconstructed as an autonomous construction. The lithic wall is made of narrow and elongated pieces of stone of different thicknesses and textures to give it liveliness and reduce monotony. In this way, the wall also harmonises with the old wall of the apse, worn and weathered by time.

In the distance, the silhouette of the new temple stands out thanks to the profile given by the skylights

A final reflection arises again, now in retrospect, from the analysis of the finished building, from the result of the design process.



Figg. 6 a-b-c

José Ignacio Linazasoro, Church of San Lorenzo, Valdemaqueda. Plan and technical drawings.

I think, in this sense, that the characteristic that best defines the church is the contrast between the opacity and simplicity of the exterior – if we disregard the volumetry obtained by the skylights – and the complex and fragmented interior space. The latter consists of light wells and the structure. Fragmentation applicable to both the horizontal and vertical planes, in other words both in plan and in section. All this produces a certain spatial discontinuity in the interior thanks to the structure that divides the nave into narrow and very vertical spaces – the skylights – and a low, dim space.

In addition to all this, the orthogonal path to the altar, starting from the entrance door, is worthy of note.

Rereading, as I write these notes, an old book *Invariantes castizos de la arquitectura española* by Fernando Chueca, first published in 1947, I find that, according to the author, all these spatial characteristics are typical of much Spanish architecture derived from the Spanish-Muslim tradition.

In fact, I had already referred in this essay to my interest, since my youth, for San Baudelio de Berlanga or Santiago de Peñalba, both Mozarabic churches. But now, following Chueca, I could also mention among many others, both for fragmentation and light: the Oratorio del Partal in the Alhambra or the marvelous and tiny early Christian church of Santa Cristina in Lena, located in the mountains of Asturias.

I say all this because it calls into question the possible influence on this church of the Nordic world and, more specifically, of the churches of Lewerentz, more precisely of the church of Klippan, and not because I am now interested in denying this possible influence – in fact I consider myself a great admirer of the work of the Swedish master – but because the facts point us towards another type of architectural value.

Let us highlight two fundamental differences: neither Valdemaqueda's light nor its fragmented space – “quantum”, Chueca would say – has anything to do with the “black light” nor with Klippan's spatial unity and continuity. The single pillar in Klippan centralises the space, while in Valdemaqueda it divides it. It is curious that until this moment, until the re-reading of this rare and, in a certain sense, masterful book, I had not noticed all this. Certainly because Valdemaqueda is a very personal, autobiographical and intuitive project, and the references appeared throughout the design process without having been deliberately researched.

There is, however, a fine, very concise, precise essay by Francesco Venezia, published in “Casabella” in 2002, shortly after the church was built, which seems to confirm these impressions. Venezia visited Valdemaqueda with me and wrote the article shortly afterwards. In his article, among other things, he talks about light and the Castilian landscape.

For all that, I finally ask myself the question: isn’t Valdemaqueda after all a profoundly Castilian chapel, an example of architecture that, from an essential version, expresses a set of references that almost always re-emerge in my projects?

José Ignacio Linazasoro (San Sebastián, Guipúzcoa 1947) is a Spanish architect based in Madrid. He graduated in 1972 from the Faculty of Architecture of Barcelona (ETSAB), where he also received his PhD in 1980. In 1977 he began his academic career at the ETSA in San Sebastian. Between 1983 and 1988 he was Professor of Architectural Design at the ETSA of Valladolid. He currently holds the same teaching position at the Escuela de Arquitectura de Madrid and holds lectures as Visiting Professor in several international universities. Since 2005 Linazasoro collaborates with Ricardo Sánchez, with whom he founded, in 2011, the studio Linazasoro&Sánchez Arquitectura SLP. Linazasoro's major projects include: Ikastola in Fuenterrabia (1974-1978); the housing complex in Mendigorria (Navarra, 1978-1980); the reconstruction of the Church of Santa Cruz (, 1985-1988); the University Library of UNED (1989-1993) and the Faculty of Economics in Madrid (1991-2003). Linazasoro's works have won numerous national and international awards.