

# The Shell of Faith in the City. The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Gio Ponti

ARTICLE

*Gio Ponti, Form, Shell, Faith, Serenity*

## /Abstract

To design a church is to redesign religion, as to redefine religion, noted Gio Ponti in his text entitled *Architettura e Religione*. The evolution of Christian church building in the 60s paved new design paths for many reasons. One of the accents of the Second Vatican Council (1965) was the relationship of the Church of Rome with art and culture. Through a broader reform a modernized ecclesiastical planning was promoted. The perception of the shell as a characteristic of the temple is revised by design, weaving a new web of relationships.

Churches are buildings whose life is longer than the life of other utilitarian buildings. Gio Ponti designed subversive shells that were aesthetically innovative and that could respond to future social perceptions. The research focuses on the architectural shell, as the applied feature of Ponti's architecture, associated with the transcendental content that governs the ontology of the ecclesiastical temple. The shell expressed the new regime of free choices associated with both technological developments and its personality and positions regarding the relationship between architecture and faith. At the same time, the morphology of the shell contributed to the reformation of the identity of the church building, but also of the city itself. The essential dynamic expression of faith through the clear lines of the shell, combined with the balance interrupted by the complexity of the surface, combines the sacredness and play of Ponti's form, creating an open dialogue that subverts the inner meaning of faith.

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The evolution of Christian church building in the 20th century was linked to disengagements concerning the dogma's relationship with society and institutions through an effort to attract believers to a new framework of free exchange of ideas. The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965), as part of a wider reform, promoted the modernization of ecclesiastical buildings through a series of architectural competitions, highlighting the relations of trust between the Church of Rome and modern culture. At the conclusion of the Council, an attempt was made to separate a body of immutable liturgical rules from objects of theological interpretation that could change over time, such as the church building. The initiative to conduct architectural competitions triggered reflection with very interesting results and indications of a substantial renewal, with the church building acquiring new urban signage and a new cultural role, such as the urban capacitor.

The church building is an issue of architectural design, which is of particular importance in the composition of the identity of the city's fabric. It is a design theme, whose specificity highlights a capacity for dialogue and organic integration into the urban or natural context. It is worth emphasizing that it has always had a prominent public character and a special cultural and spiritual role.<sup>1</sup> The construction of a church was not only about technical parameters, but rather focused on the question of spiritual duration. In the first decades of the 20th century, the design of a church was not just an enclosed application of predetermined rules, especially regarding the built shell. The overall perception of the predetermined character of the shell reveals a different relationship between the architect and the community of believers. A ceremony can be conducted regardless of its building commitment, as Faith is not the same as the building shell.<sup>2</sup>

A shell structure, as the name suggests, is defined as a convex, often asymmetrical form, which in many cases resembles a shell. As a form it distributes external forces as methodical load-bearing structures. It is the borderline between aesthetic and structural stability, presenting a complete material and physical experience through shapes and surfaces that touch certain sensations or memories of sensations. In the case of ecclesiastical architecture, the shell expresses a sense of freedom to members of the religious community, as it produces a spiritual dialogue. Each shell is subject to a specific valuation each time, due to its lively, participatory and interactive nature. The shell, in these cases, is reduced to a spiritual fact, through the personal thoughts it forms in the citizens.

As a form, it is at the same time a code of communication, as well as the church building itself, which is not just the institution that hosts a ceremony, but conveys its inner meaning. Faith may not have a form or it may have infinite forms. Similarly, the church building can be a room with four walls and a ceiling

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1 Edward Sövik, *Architecture for worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1973), 116.

2 Andreas Giacomacatos, *Η αρχιτεκτονική και η κριτική – Architecture and Criticism* (Athens: Νεφέλη, 2018), 139-141.

with the necessary elements to perform a ceremony, but it can also have the form of a “unique object of architecture” under the thought of Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, the unique objects of architecture are structured objects in which “architecture expresses, means, renders a kind of complete, tectonic form”.<sup>3</sup> They are unique pieces that cannot be interpreted through conventions. They are not products of visual seduction, they connect, mediate and project meanings.<sup>4</sup>

It is customary for architectural projects to be treated according to their functionality, but also whether they promote or hinder the purposes they will serve. From this perspective, the church, theoretically, can have infinite forms, and each shell could be suitable for this purpose, since it projects spiritual values in the place where a sacred service takes place. The church building begins to develop independently of a control that has to do with a commonly accepted design logic or that conventionally responds to the generally accepted religious sentiment associated with conservative adherence to standards that distance church building from contemporary design concerns.

In his text *Architettura, Religione* (Architecture, Religion), the Italian architect Gio Ponti emphasizes the need to abandon superficial theological and religious conventions in general that are the result of “spiritual inertia”.<sup>5</sup> Design-wise, he proposed new typologies, based on the subversive capabilities of the building shell. The range of possibilities of the shell was combined with both the technological developments of the time and Ponti’s personality, while taking into account the characteristics of the built environment that each project would be part of.

This paper attempts to present and interpret the morphological vocabulary of the church shell designed by Ponti, through the architect’s positions on architecture and religious architecture in particular. The architectural shell is interpreted as an applied feature of Ponti’s architecture, linked to the transcendental content that governs the ontology of ecclesiastical structure. At the same time, it explores the idea of synesthetic experience and the paradoxical ability of the shell of Faith to externalize and internalize a contemplative feeling, through a morphological dialogue within the city, but also through the spiritual monologue that each believer inspires to develop.

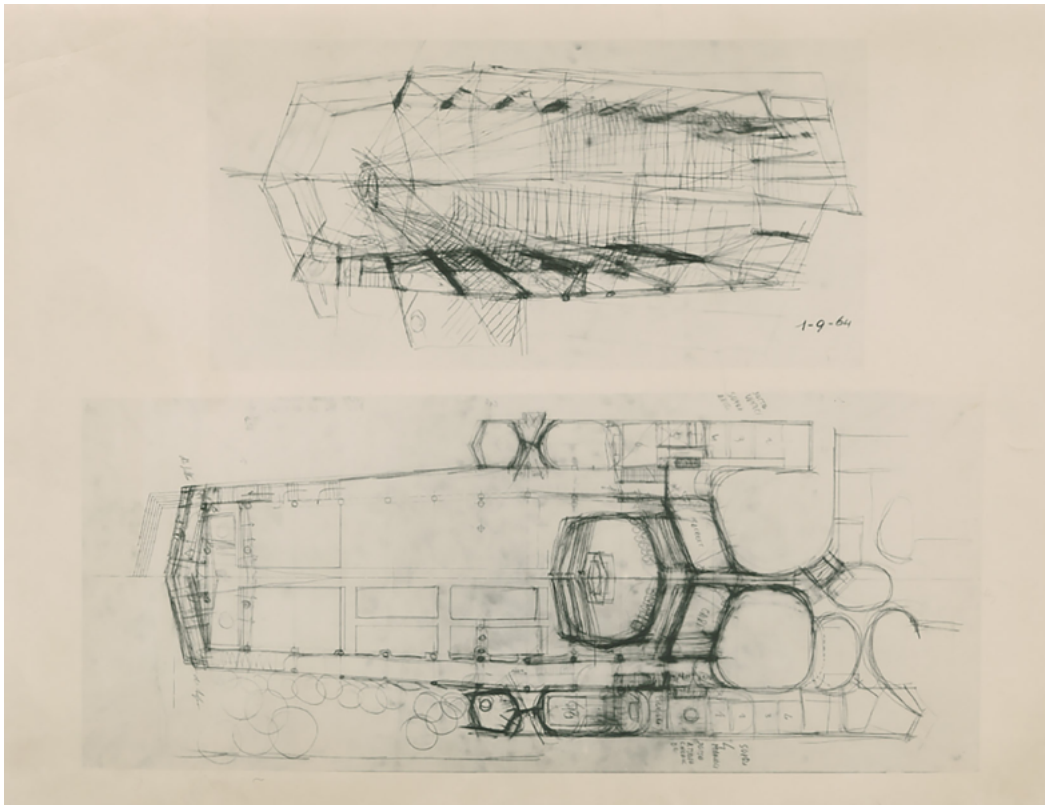
## The Shell as a Crystal

With the expansion of cities and urban centers, Christian churches adopted the methods and construction styles of the area and era they addressed. They were inspired by the city itself and its characteristics in order to be able to express spiritual values that they would reward with lasting beauty. Ecclesiastical archi-

3 Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *Τα μοναδικά αντικείμενα – The Unique Objects*, trans. Νίκος Ηλιάδης (Athens: Futura, 2005), 14.

4 Jean Baudrillard, *The system of objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 91-93.

5 Gio Ponti, *Amate l’Architettura* (Genova: Società Editrice Vitali e Ghianda, 1957), 261.



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texture did not have a single technical style, nor was it based on any particular method of construction. The importance that would be given to decoration or the emphasis on a material was not something that would absolutely determine the monumentality of the building. An overemphasis on material aspects began to be an element that could reduce spiritual aspects. This was a concern that preoccupied the architects of the time, as well as Ponti, who tried to respond to the concerns of his time regarding the depiction of the church, but also the way of expressing true spiritual emotion, through the search for a recognizable and valid form.<sup>6</sup>

The fifties were for Ponti a period of experimentation, research and expression. Ponti sought its finite form and functional materiality through multiple visual connections that would emphasize architectural experience through element interactions. The finite form with the functional orientation, was a form with unity and coherence, that would give meaning to architecture and was expressed through the building envelope. The shell was a form that expressed the unique relationship between architecture and sacredness. In an attempt to approach Infinity, Ponti attempted to approach the Unlimited through permeability.<sup>7</sup> In one of the theoretical texts he wrote, *L'architettura è un cristallo* (*Architecture is a Crystal*), Ponti stated that "the cathedral is a diamond"<sup>8</sup>. Before we analyze this phrase further, the starting point of this special and inspiring finding is of particular interest. The idea of the image of an "Architecture as a crystal" was

Fig. 1  
Gio Ponti, Sketch of the diamond shaped floor plan of the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi al Fopponino (© Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio Storico Eredi Gio Ponti).

6 Richard Mellor, *Modern Church Design* (London: Skeffington & Son, 1948), 10-14.

7 Nathan H. Shapira, "The Expression of Gio Ponti," *Design Quarterly*, no. 69/70 (1967): 8.

8 Ponti, *Amate l'architettura*, 40.

more of a prediction, which would be expressed as an ideal of essence.<sup>9</sup>

The analogy with crystal, from a simple conceptual metaphor, evolved into a literal one, through its design practice and especially through ecclesiastical architecture. According to Ponti, the likening of architecture to crystal concerns the essence of architecture, as an image that combined purity with order, stillness with the endless silence and charm.<sup>10</sup> In the case of ecclesiastical architecture, he combined the spiritually (divinely) “eternal” with human order and rigor, through closed forms, complete by thought. The coexistence of the divine with the human is the starting point for the design of ecclesiastical buildings, but at the same time it is at the point of communication between the ecclesiastical shell and the city.

Architecture as crystal, is a pure architecture, pure in the crystal sense, that is, penetrating, but at the same time closed and exclusive, due to the shape it carries. As Ponti states, openness and absoluteness rest on the fact that architecture rejected unfinished forms because “Architecture begins and ends”.<sup>11</sup> The nature of architecture is such, according to Ponti, that it represents something definitive in time and matter. Like a crystal, it appears among the space that surrounds it, while time continues to pass and remain stable [Fig. 1, 2].<sup>12</sup>

In Paul Valéry’s essay *Les coquillages* (The Shells) it is stated that

A crystal, a flower, or a shell stands out from the ordinary disorder that characterizes most perceived things. They are privileged forms that are more comprehensible to the eye, though more mysterious to the mind than all the others we see indiscernibly.<sup>13</sup>

The poet in this passage understands crystal as an aesthetic category. The concept of crystal expresses a material dimension of architecture. The crystal is transparent and the transparency also marks the reflection of the surface and the forms that permeate the architectural form. It is characterized by a transparency that marks the city in a different way. At the same time, it presents the paradoxical ability of architecture to be simultaneously reflective and at the same time mysterious and closed. The crystalline image, that he presents can be explored in different ways in his work, as light, as reflection, transparency, but also as a closed form connected to nature or as a vessel for internal reflections or, better, reflections concerning Faith, in the case of ecclesiastical architecture.

Crystal is one of the characteristic shapes found in the architectural shells of the facades of the churches of Ponti. In the shell of the church of San Francesco al Fopponino (1961-1964), the crystal in the shape of a diamond is used as a geometric opening that surrounds and almost isolates parts of the sky. The area where it was built was unexploited and the shell contributed to the

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9 Ponti, *Amate l’architettura*, 428.

10 Ponti, *Amate l’architettura*, 38-40.

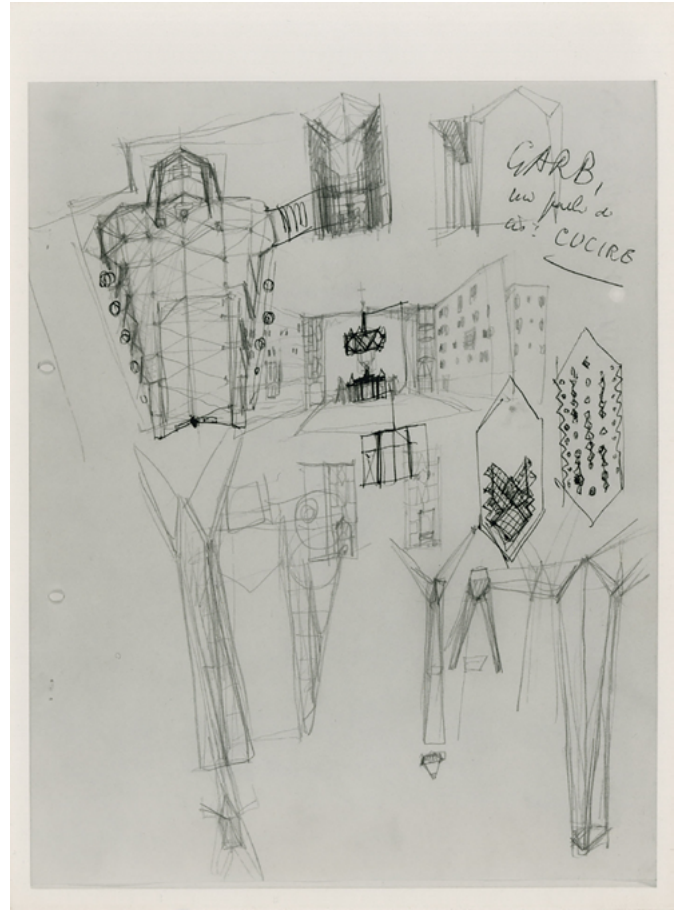
11 Ponti, *Amate l’architettura*, 29.

12 Ponti, *Amate l’architettura*, 41.

13 Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 92.

smooth integration of the church into the urban area, which was under development. At that time, Milan was more exposed than other cities to the transformations of modernity.

The asymmetrical shell combined with the hexagonal floor plan invoked the concept of finite form. The shell extends beyond the boundaries of the building by connecting the church with the adjacent buildings of the parish, allowing Ponti to form an image of an urban scene of religious character, thereby intensifying the interaction of the different elements. Geometric figures are used to welcome believers both physically and spiritually. At the top, they are piercing and lead to the sky, while at the bottom, they lead visitors indoors. They are arranged in such a way as to project an overall experience. The shell has two different sections, the central one that includes the diamond-shaped openings and is like an independent section and the extensions left and right that are built at a lower height compared to the central part. The openings contrast with the weight borne by the size, giving a feeling of lightness. At the same time, these openings create a play with light and shadow, both internally and externally, with the shape of the diamond reflected as a shadow when light passes through it. The result is even more impressive indoors with the use of stained glass. According to Lisa Licitra Ponti, Ponti perceived each figure he designed differently. Each form of the work had its own distinct expressiveness and was the result of a "structural invention".<sup>14</sup> In the case of a church in San Francesco, the heart of the work was defined through the contrast of transparency/opacity as the one between the "outside world" and the place of worship.<sup>15</sup> Ponti attempted to convey to the interiors the feeling of being inside the crystal. Every surface he uses is clean and geometric, with the roof built through levels highlighted by geometric corners. Crystal-shaped windows reflect and refract light, and as we move through the space, we can notice an ever-changing color palette as white light disintegrates. The stained-glass windows create the feeling of prism through the spectrum of colors they reflect. The light patterns are shaped by the shell, which with its openings, conveys the feeling of day and day in space. There is the liveliness and ephemerality of the day, but at the same time there is the sense of absolute and constant, due to the strict geometry which creates an almost supernatural atmosphere.



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Fig. 2  
Gio Ponti, Sketch of the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino. The sketch presents the crystal shaped ceiling along with diamond shaped windows with some details on them and the a depiction of the shell (© Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio Storico Eredi Gio Ponti).

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978* (Cambridge – Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 200.





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When it comes to decoration, according to Lisa Ponti, Ponti believed that decorating a church is a living process that is constantly being reformed. Possibly, part of this living process is the light itself. Ponti, towards the end of his life, wanted to make some interventions in the decoration. He wanted to place light papier-maché figures, which would float in the air and around the altar, aquariums among the greenery and flowers.<sup>16</sup>

Architecture, as crystal, is a mirror of natural laws. This is the role of the diamond motif, which extends to the adherent parish buildings, creating an effect that expands the space on the one hand and on the other conveys penetrating what is happening in the sky, offering the very “precision ecstasy” in the sense of illusion. The diamond shape is repeated in the windows designed by Christoforo De Amicis in the seventies. An effect is created by vertical slits that accentuate the shapes of diamonds which are framed by coated diamond-tipped ceramic tiles made by Ceramica Joo, producing multiple reflections through the smooth grey glass surface [Fig. 3, 4].

In the text “Experience and Poverty” (1933) Walter Benjamin refers to the modernist aesthetics that gave rise to glass as reflective, visible, functional but also dark. Ponti transforms the geological reference to the crystal into an artistic and architectural reference through the unique charm of transparency, light and the immaterial that it potentially expresses. In this sense, crystal unravels worlds that are not visible, constituting a subversive source of inspiration. Glass, like crystal, are “enemies of lies” and property, Benjamin says, quoting Andre Gide “who wished he owned to become opaque”.<sup>17</sup> This could be another symbolization of the crystal in its use in Ponti’s ecclesiastical architecture, presenting Faith as a refuge to truth, which is immaterial and exists beyond any material good, beyond any technological, scientific and tangible reality.

Ponti tried to connect three facades into a single one through the shell, attempting to form a spectacular pattern that appropriates the sky.

Fig. 3  
The shell of the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino's church, Milan (© Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio Storico Eredi Gio Ponti).

Fig. 4  
San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino, Milan. Details that present the ceramic plates by Ceramica Joo (© Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio Storico Eredi Gio Ponti).

16 Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 218.

17 Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty/Gesammelte Schriften,” *Die Welt im Wort*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, (December 1933): 213-219, [https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/benjamin\\_experience.pdf](https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/benjamin_experience.pdf).



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At the same time, he used the material from the ceramic tiles in such a way that it “looks lighter” but also larger than it actually looks, through the use of large openings. At the same time, ceramic tiles in combination with the use of openings transform the work into “Autoluminous”, that is, that it itself has its own lighting.<sup>18</sup>

In the architectural shell the image of the crystal oscillates between the monumental, the natural expression of crystal shapes, the gloss and permeable, but also the symbolic. For Ponti “architecture is made to be looked at”.<sup>19</sup> He designed the shell of the temple in such a way that it is a visible part of the city, but at the same time summarizes its character and meaning within the city. In the case of the architectural shell, the work, the crystalline image has a double meaning, on the one hand it is a reflecting surface and on the other it is a surface with depth. Ponti concludes that one meaning merges the other, embodying the different ways of perceiving Faith, between the subjective and the religion-predetermined view of Faith.

We could say that it is a way to re-approach the concept of “synesthesia” as expressed by Baudelaire, that is, to shape a personal experience, inviting the one who sees the church to enter into a spiritual creative process that unites many senses together. “Synesthesia” is a phenomenon that characterizes experiences in which certain senses belong to a sense, or a way that connects certain senses and occurs regularly under specific stimuli. It is, that is, the production of a reaction when receiving a stimulus to another sense, such as the sensation of a color when smelling a perfume.<sup>20</sup> Through crystal, the expression of Faith is prism, both through the play of light and shadow, as well as the empty and the complete, the subjective and the objective, the divine and the human. As Ponti says: “Ideas are reflections in ourselves of a universe of ideas, reflections of

Fig. 5  
San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino, Milan. The interior of the Church. The altarpiece “The Canticle of the Creatures”, 1975, oil and tempera on canvas, 12x8 m, accompanied in the central nave by 8 triptychs made on panels measuring 3.95 x 2.90 m between 1979 and 1984, painted by Francesco Tabusso (© Archivio Francesco Tabusso).

Fig. 6  
San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino, Milan. The altar of the Church. The altarpiece “The Canticle of the Creatures” presents itself as a new and fresh interpretation where the beauty and the height of the message of the “Poverello” are expressed above all through “Franciscan” things: the undergrowth that with its luxuriance alludes to life, the vibrant mirror of the stream that is the projection of its conscience, the trees that cut the entire vision; in the middle of the large painting, with that absorbed (© Archivio Francesco Tabusso).

18 Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 226.

19 Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 207.

20 Charles F. Roedig, “Baudelaire and Synesthesia,” *Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly*, no. 5-3 (1958): 123.



the past and the present, reflections of what we see"<sup>21</sup> [Fig. 5, 6].

The shell presents elements of the tectonic dimension of architecture. Kenneth Frampton, arguing for this dimension, explained that the term tectonic did not refer to a structural and material application, but to a poetics of construction as it could be applied to the visual arts. According to Frampton, the tectonic object appears in two ways. The first includes the structural element, which emphasizes its static role and cultural status, and the second includes the representation of a structural element. The tectonic dimension concerns the morphoplastic application of the presence of a structural element, which is the essence of the architectural form.<sup>22</sup>

In explaining his argument, Frampton referred to Marco Frascari's position on detail as presented in *The Tell-the Tale Detail* (1984). Dictionaries may define detail as a small part relative to a larger size, but in architecture, such a definition is contradictory. In the details, the possibilities of innovation are developed, because they can be material joints or even connections. According to Frascari, details are the direct result of the multiple reality of functions in architecture. Of particular interest is his view that "the art of detail is really the union of materials, elements, components and structural parts in a functional and aesthetic way".<sup>23</sup> The complexity of this art of joining is such that a detail that performs satisfactorily in one building can fail in another for very subtle reasons.

The shell, acting as a carrier of meaning, connects with the senses and rewards the visual, tactile and direct and indirect experiential experience. Textures, tectonic volumes and materialities unfold a network of meanings. Ponti harnesses the materiality and physical and symbolic potential of crystal to present mutating sensations of the movement of light and shadow. In other words, the detail is crucial for how the work will be interpreted. To realize this in its full entirety, the work must be observed from different angles and at different moments of day and light. Ponti approaches architecture as an applied art, with the shell being his personal statement, through the morphoplastic vocabulary



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Fig. 7  
San Francesco d'Assisi al Foppino, Milan. Interior detail showing the characteristic diamond shaped windows and the way light comes through the stained glass creating a prismatic effect (© Archivio Francesco Tabusso).

21 Gio Ponti, *In Praise of Architecture*, trans. Giuseppina and Mario Salvadori (New York: F. W. Dodge Corporation, 1960), IX.

22 Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda in Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 519-521.

23 Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda in Architecture*, 501-502.



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of crystals. Form a harmonious bond between the existing ancient presence of the 17th century, with the new cult structures, the imposing character of the shell and the buildings facing it. He subversively interpreted through the shell the Romanesque-Lombard culture of the Aeolian facades, utilizing the three-day shape of the shell and the hexagonal shape of the diamond. In this way, Ponti utilizes the shell as an element of dynamic interaction and interactions, between the present, the past and the future [Fig. 7].

The shell may not only be treated as a visual unit of *gestalt*, but can also be seen as a result of collaborations. Seen as a detail, as set by Frascari, it concerns the union of materials, elements, components and structural parts in a functional and aesthetic way. At San Francesco al Fopponino each element blends with the other, through a network of collaborations. Understanding the shell occurs at different levels of sensations. The shell acts as a mediator or even as a direct expression of Faith. From structure to expression, its interpretation becomes a way of producing signs.

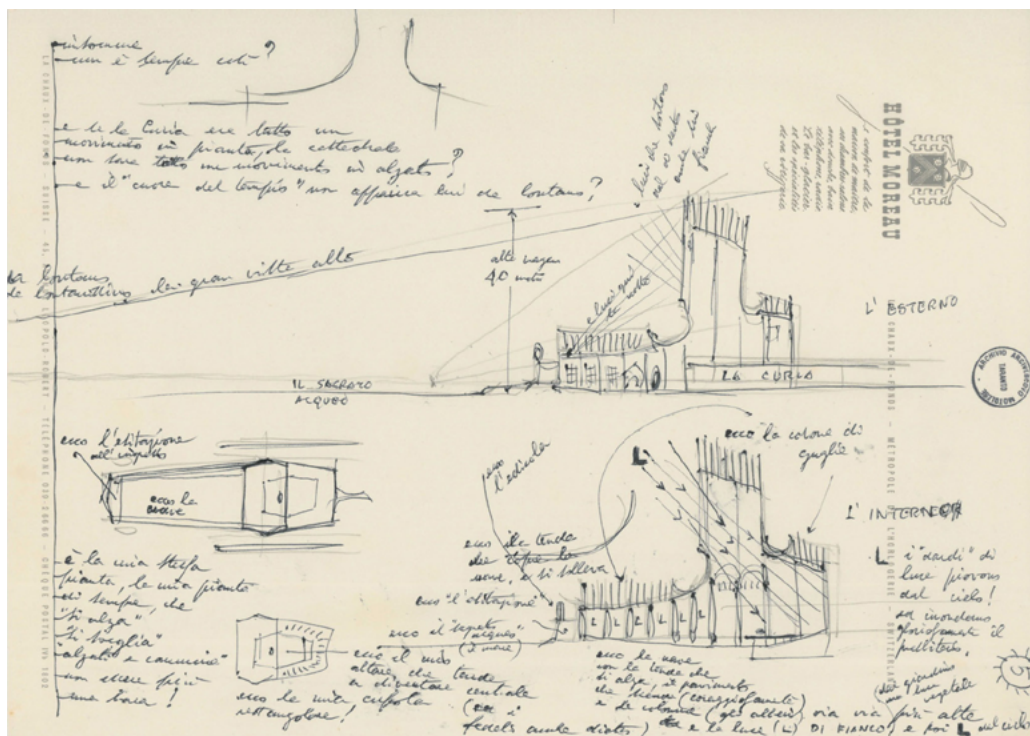
### The shell as Transcendence

Examining its mediating role, it can on the one hand be the borderline between dualisms. According to Ponti, “the church is divine and human,” while religion belongs to the wonderful, which happens naturally.<sup>24</sup> Ponti concludes that religious art, perhaps even religious architecture, is not a fact of art, but a fact of religion.

The shell is utilized by Ponti as a purely expressive element, bearing signs

24 Ponti, *Amate l'architettura*, 262.

Fig. 8  
La Concattedrale Gran Madre di Dio in Taranto, 1970 (© Ufficio Diocesano per i Beni Culturali Ecclesiastici dell'Arcidiocesi di Taranto).



and point systems to bring out new traces of spiritual orientation. In 1971, Gran Madre di Dio Cathedral in Taranto (1964-1970) was completed on the city's new expansion axis. Ponti sought a design language that would combine the tradition of the strict Romance churches of Apulia with his personal style. He ended up designing a cathedral, with a white plaster shell, inspired by the Mediterranean habit of plastering houses. At the same time, because he has connected the Divine, with the elements of nature, air, water and green vegetation, he attempted to revive the experience of the place of spirit. To evoke even more of a place of spiritual gathering, he excluded the use of complex morphological materials, such as the ceramic tiles he had used in other churches. Through the use of reinforced concrete, he attempted to make a modern interpretation of the bare Romanesque stone used in religious buildings, but also in the city [Fig. 8].<sup>25</sup>

Ecclesiastical architecture is designed for the present and the future, even when it elaborates on ideas of the past, with the aim of defining the eternal. Thus, Ponti opposes the temporary character of a technologically advanced material construction. He designs a shell, where his materiality is abstract, i.e. without material references, aiming at an expression of the "eternal". It builds the time, with architecture transcending use. As mentioned above, Ponti sought the intersection between function and substance, where form is finite and its existence rests more on the values it professes than on its function. In "Amate l'architettura", he says that reinforced concrete architecture is pure as crystal, because it is a clear mirror of natural laws. It is the result of an on-site processing of natural elements, such as water [Fig. 9].<sup>26</sup>

Fig. 9  
Gio Ponti, Sketch showing various views of the temple with notes surrounding it. The sketch was presented in the exhibition "Gio Ponti e la Concattedrale di Taranto 1970-2020" (© Ufficio Diocesano per i Beni Culturali Ecclesiastici dell'Arcidiocesi di Taranto).

25 Mauro Pratesti, *Gio Ponti, Vita e percorso artistico di un protagonista del XX secolo* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2015), 130-132.

26 Ponti, *Amate l'architettura*, 42.





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Fig. 10  
Photo during technical work  
inside the temple (© Gio Ponti  
Archives / Archivio Storico  
Eredi Gio Ponti).

Fig. 11  
The main altar is made  
of stone. The part facing  
the faithful is covered  
in green painted iron, so  
as to recall the seabed.  
The apse painting, depicting  
the theme of the Annunciation,  
with the images of  
the Madonna and  
the Archangel Gabriel, are  
painted by Gio Ponti himself (©  
Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio  
Storico Eredi Gio Ponti).

Fig. 12  
Detail from the interior of the  
Church that presents the way  
that light is reflected from  
the openings of the shell (©  
Gio Ponti Archives / Archivio  
Storico Eredi Gio Ponti). Fig. X

Ponti's Cathedral is characterized by a rectangular building, divided into two parts, the "ship" and the "castle". The "ship" is the lower part of the cathedral, while the "castle" is the shell, which is the most distinctive element of the building even from afar. Ponti raised the shell like a sail form, with about 80 windows in the hexagonal shape of the diamond, with openings flooding it with light. Light is presented as a moral value, as a call for spiritual thought or even contemplation, in order to "illuminate" the soul by the light of Faith.<sup>27</sup>

Ponti uses many different references to design the shell. It invites the visitor to experience a series of elements in their full material essence, both from the first level of observation and on a spiritual level. Through the shapes, it draws the attention of sight. Assigning a privileged position to vision does not mean at the same time rejecting the rest of the senses. Instead, Ponti uses vision, through the penetration of the gaze and the contemplation of natural elements, to stimulate the other senses. The material that bears the shell and the way it is structured on it can be treated as a unit of meaning, promoting a system of meanings that is multiple, varied and contradictory. The contradiction may also concern the external-internal relationship of the building itself, contributing to the plurality of meanings. Due to the presence of elements acting simultaneously. According to Robert Venturi, multi-level simultaneous perception can form a more vivid perception [Fig. 10, 11, 12].<sup>28</sup>

Gaston Bachelard in his work *Poetics of Space* (1958) states that dynamic forms are supported through a dialectic of the hidden/obvious. The exterior and interior in combination with the use of geometry activates fields of perception of the form.<sup>29</sup> The unexpected coexistence of entities and relationships, the selective change of scale and the unpredictable discontinuities are some of the techniques in which Ponti attempts through the shell to make the church building a subversive aesthetic factor of the narrative of a city (historical, social, cultural, economic). In this way, the phenomenon of a multifaceted and vibrant city is enhanced, developing a dialectic with incompatible terms between its elements, interweaving levels that emphasize on-site conjunctural conceptual variations. The shell visualizes a double code of meaning. The first concerns the construction in contradictory conceptual terms with the external environment, while the second is related to a closed, almost self-referential, communicative system concerning the morphological field without narrative and material continuities.

In the text *L'architettura e il tempo* (Architecture and Time), Ponti argues that architecture is judged through the passage of time, so special attention should be paid to the material. The architect must predict the course of the project in time, because the project does not actually end when it is built, because it has an

27 Pratesti, *Gio Ponti, Vita e percorso artistico di un protagonista del XX secolo*, 132-133.

28 Robert Venturi, *Η πολυπλοκότητα και η αντίφαση στην αρχιτεκτονική* (Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture) (Athens: Αρχιτέκτονας Σωκράτης Κατσούλης), 1977, 27.

29 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 108.



active role in the city. Through the shell, it transforms and extracts meanings.<sup>30</sup> Time is an element of work and these meanings. The significance of the shell as an architectural gesture in Ponti's ecclesiastical architecture can be fluid. In other words, it evolves into a field of open transformation, through morphological systems of self-regulation, openly in progress. The essence of the "House of God" does not change, what is essentially changed is "the Shell of Faith", whose vision is changed by the evolution of society over the years. The form of the shell can emerge as a factor capable of contributing to the evolving character of the city. It is, perhaps, one of its self-regulating mechanisms, which visualizes a specific system of architectural language of each architect, which converses with the existing environment of the city, organizing a sensory experience.

In the summer of 1984, Ponti, in a letter to Alessandro Mendini, complained about the outcome of the Concattedrale di Taranto.<sup>31</sup> Although on the day of the cathedral's inauguration, residents supported Ponti's vision to cover both the shell and the surrounding area with plants and trees, over time, it was as if the original idea had been forgotten.<sup>32</sup> Now, instead of seeing the sky through the shell, the gaze falls on the emerging buildings. At the same time, the water mirror, which once radiated the shell on, was now empty, and until recently, there were graffiti on it. Time has evolved as a corrosive mark on this work, which for years has been ravaged, introducing social rather than religious concerns. In 2017, Lisa Licitra Ponti told *La Repubblica* that her father's wish was not to remember him for the Pirelli skyscraper, but for Concattedrale, which was his last architectural project.<sup>33</sup>

In 2019, an attempt was made to return the church to its former glory through a series of years of restorations.<sup>34</sup> The shell is now emerging through residential buildings and parking lots that have surrounded the area in recent years. However, the Concattedrale continues to stimulate the imagination, remaining in Bachelard terms, "a haven for daydreams" that invites those who see it "to seek to define existence and in this way, to transcend all situations, to render a situation of all situations" that of Faith.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Ponti wrote that "Designing a church is a bit like redesigning religion, redefining its essence."<sup>36</sup> It seems that for Ponti, the place of worship is shaped by the

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30 Andrea Canziani, "Gio Ponti: architettura, tempo, materia," *Restauro Archeologico* 30, no. 1 (2022): 76.

31 Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 278.

32 Licitra Ponti, *Gio Ponti The Complete Work 1923-1978*, 250.

33 Lorenzo Madaro, "Taranto, sos per la Concattedrale di Gio Ponti: 'Il capolavoro è divorato dal degrado,'" *La Repubblica*, August 30, 2017, [https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/08/30/news/taranto\\_sos\\_per\\_la\\_concattedrale\\_di\\_gio\\_ponti\\_il\\_capolavoro\\_e\\_divorato\\_dal\\_degrado\\_-174162882/](https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/08/30/news/taranto_sos_per_la_concattedrale_di_gio_ponti_il_capolavoro_e_divorato_dal_degrado_-174162882/)

34 Constanza Rinaldi, "La Concattedrale di Gio Ponti riemerge dopo il restauro," *Corriere della Serra, Living*, March 6, 2019, <https://living.corriere.it/architettura/concattedrale-gio-ponti-taranto/>

35 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 155.

36 Ponti, *Amate l'architettura*, 266.

meaning of the rituals towards approaching faith and approaching the divine.<sup>37</sup> The question of the construction of the shell of faith is undoubtedly complex and demanding for the architect, who is confronted with both history and the strong tradition of religion. The image of the “House of God” had already been formed, and this is one of the challenges Ponti had to face. Ponti was called upon to give insight into something very personal and esoteric, at a time when individuality was treated with seriality. The church was perhaps the only institution that treated the individual as a whole and not as a mass. As Luigi Moretti had stated, the church is an intangible structure, “the rest, the place of assembly and presbytery, the attached buildings are indispensable accessories of people in their everyday, worn-out life and religiosity.”<sup>38</sup>

The shell was used as a bond between beauty and God’s love. Through the geometry of the crystal and the symbolism entrusted to him by Ponti, he expressed a “pure” and “transparent” spiritualism, creating a new environment for communication with God, rooted in the past. Each element communicated this connection, while as a whole it transmitted spiritual and material union. The hexagonal shapes combined with the use of material, expressed clear, pure images of worship with a “timeless” content, that is, without special information that would disorient. Architecture as a crystal presents an aspect of architecture as a new form of order in the universe, which creates urban and spiritual bonds, not in the way predetermined by religious tradition, but through the formation of subjective and personal codes of communication.

In the article *Il Fastigio della Cattedrale (The Pinnacle of the Cathedral)*, Moretti states:

Still to read on the horizon of man’s destiny the possibility of serenity and to raise its image in our cities is an act of poetry, of high religious feeling, I might even call it Christian charity. It is not by proliferating and distorting still further the grey images of today’s world in apocalyptic mirrors that we can lend a hand to those who suffer. Hope always points to a goal and often reaches it.<sup>39</sup>

Architecture as a crystal may be an act of Faith for Ponti, turning the geometry of the shell into the birthplace of spiritual experience. As he wrote in his article *La Religione, Il sacro, (The Religion, The sacred)* “Religious architecture belongs first to religion and then to architecture: this is what I have always believed”<sup>40</sup>. Ecclesiastical architecture was not only treated as an expression of the collective needs of the faithful in the field, but also as a personal, individualized need of the believer that has more to do with the unfolding of the soul. The “sacred space” escapes recourse to a typology, giving space to the observer for his own,

37 Andreas Giacomacatos, “Η μορφή της πίστης στην εποχή μας – The form of faith in our era,” *To Brima*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.archetype.gr/blog/arthro/i-morfi-tis-pistis-stin-epochi-mas>.

38 Luigi Moretti, “Il Fastigio della cattedrale,” *Domus*, no. 497 (April 1971): 11.

39 Moretti, “Il Fastigio della cattedrale,” 12.

40 Gio Ponti, “La Religione, Il Sacro,” *Domus*, no. 497 (April 1971): 15.

personal and more direct dialogue with God. As Ponti stated, "The architect should participate in the creation of an architectural expression, that I believe should be pure, without decorative implements that might disturb the meeting between man and God."<sup>41</sup>

The shell of Faith in the city marks the point of hidden hope expected from communication with the Divine. According to Read Herbert, "The artistic activity might therefore be described as a crystallization from the amorphous realm of feeling, of forms that are significant of symbolic."<sup>42</sup>

It is on the verge of symbolic discourse, religion and art, and its interpretation is a consequence of one's personal way of thinking.

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41 Gio Ponti, In *Praise of Architecture*, trans. Giuseppina and Mario Salvadori (New York: F. W. Dodge Corporation, 1960), 255.

42 Read Herbert, *The Icon and the Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness* (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1965), 18.

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