



Parish Church in Lecce

by Conrad Thake

The city of Lecce, located in the southern heel of the Italian peninsula, is associated with highly ornate [baroque](#) palaces and churches, their facades overlaid with elaborate decorative carvings in the local limestone.

In stark contrast, the new [parish complex dedicated to San Giovanni Battista](#), or St. John the Baptist, is the antithesis of all the excesses of the baroque. It stands out as a pure modern architectural statement, its assemblage of white forms and masses clearly delineated and devoid of any superfluous elements.

The architects [Franco Purini and Laura Thermes](#) created an iconic building according to a rigorous Rationalist credo that is historically indebted to the pioneers of Italian modernism, [Giuseppe Terragni](#) and Adalberto Libera. The spirit of [Le Corbusier](#) permeates the design, as do the ideas articulated in his seminal book *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches* ([When the Cathedrals Were White](#)).

The parish complex was built on the outskirts of Lecce, in close proximity to the stadium quarter, an area characterized by nondescript, low-cost public housing and vast expanses of alienating open spaces. The new complex has an important urban role to fulfill in creating a new point of public reference or *genius loci* for the local community. [>>>](#)

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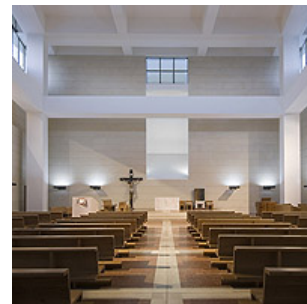
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The [San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) in Lecce, Italy, was designed by [Franco Purini and Laura Thermes](#).

Photo: [Moreno Maggi](#)
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A central feature of the [parish complex](#) is a sanctuary space with clerestory windows.
Photo: [Moreno Maggi](#)
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Parish Church in Lecce

[continued](#)

The building volume comprising the main body of the church, and a lower horizontal wing containing the sacristy, weekend chapel, and offices, are planned around a series of open spaces that includes a pedestrian piazza, an inner court, and the *hortus conclusus*, a compact meditation area marked by the presence of a solitary olive tree.

Architect Franco Purini, an accomplished graphic artist and architectural theoretician, is fully conscious of the process of reconciling public spaces and building to the collective memory of the local community. In his book [Sette paesaggi = Seven Landscapes](#), a compilation of his personal drawings and writings, he reflects upon the fact that "the first landscapes against which architecture measures itself are those present in the memory of its inhabitants. Private and invisible scenes but this does not make them any less decisive than real ones in the definition of form and nature of places and buildings."

Purini's earlier graphic works, although adhering to a rigorous formal language, tended, according to [Manfredo Tafuri](#), to a "figurative extravagance that was at times approaching [Piranesian](#) 'excess.'" Since the 1980s, Purini's work has matured and spurned all that is redundant. The Lecce parish complex exhibits a latent structural complexity that is reflected in geometry by overlapping grids. However, this complexity is intrinsic to the structure and does not detract from the overall geometric clarity and logic.

The forms of Thermes and Purini's "white cathedral" shimmer in stark contrast to the backdrop of azure-blue Mediterranean skies. The external absence of color and the lack of material textural contrasts on the building was a conscious decision undertaken to convey an all-embracing sculptural quality. As Giò Ponti has stated in his compilation of personal reflections, [Amate l'architettura](#):



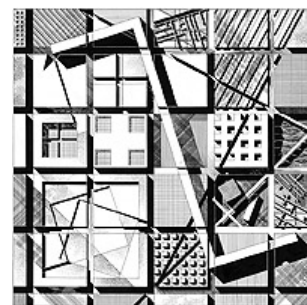
SUBSCRIPTION SAMPLE

The ribbon of windows and the cantilevered roof of the rectangular [church building](#) hint at the sanctuary's skewed plan. Photo: Massimiliano de Meo [Extra Large Image](#)



Stone adorns the walls and floor of the sanctuary space.

Photo: Massimiliano de Meo [Extra Large Image](#)



Graphic art by Franco Purini hints at themes behind the design of the [San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#). Image: Franco Purini [Extra Large Image](#)

POPQUIZ

"Architecture, a plastic and abstract fact, is colorless — if you prefer, has no color. We can conceive of it in terms of color (or colors) and material (or materials), but if we want to consider it or judge it purely as architecture, in its architectural essence, in its architectural validity, we must consider it colorless, just like sculpture or like the volumetric phenomenon of a crystal. Therefore architecture is naturally white."

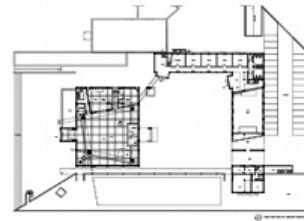
The dominant component of the parish complex is the main sanctuary, whose plan would be square except for an angled north wall. The adjoining daily chapel, sacristy, and stairwell fit together on the other side of that angled wall to form an overall rectangular-plan building. The internal structural framework of four reinforced concrete columns horizontally interconnected by a series of high-level deep beams creates a rational open gridlike structure that introduces an element of geometric complexity and tension in an otherwise stable cubic form.

The filtration of natural light is one of the main generating forces. Sunlight streams through an upper-level strip of clerestory windows and an elevated chamber projecting behind the altar wall that allows the penetration of indirect light. The latter mechanism is the modern interpretation of the baroque-era concealed light chamber so effectively devised by [Gian Lorenzo Bernini](#) in the Cornaro chapel.

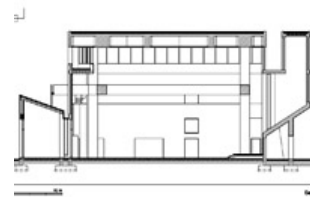
At the Lecce parish, the natural light projected onto the open pillar-beam structural framework casts an ever-changing kaleidoscope of light and shade onto the outer wall enclosure. Light filters through slits cut through the masonry walls of the main hall that are internally clad by local stone. As [Louis Kahn once wrote](#), "The sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building."

Set well inside the sanctuary's walls are four massive columns arranged in plan to form a skewed quadrilateral. The volume defined by the columns extends vertically beyond the surrounding building enclosure. A flanking stairwell is characterized by the successive series of flights of stairs that seemingly defy gravity as they are suspended in mid-air.

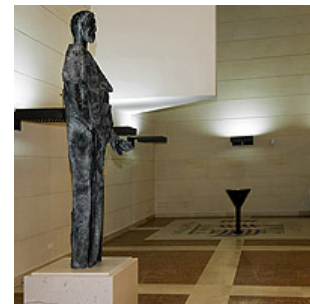
The stairs structurally cantilevered from the side walls create a visual image that is analogous to Escher's complex illusionistic graphical works. The architectural image



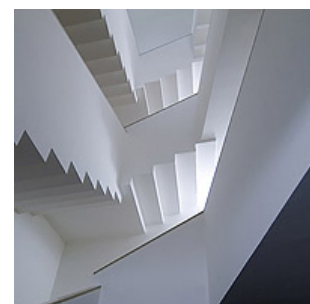
[San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) ground-floor plan drawing.
Image: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes [Extra Large Image](#)



[San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) east-west section drawing through the sanctuary and foyer, looking north.
Image: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes [Extra Large Image](#)



The baptismal font stands in one corner of the sanctuary space.
Photo: Moreno Maggi [Extra Large Image](#)



Stairs inside the [church](#) recall the visions of M.C. Escher.

conveyed would not be amiss in one of Purini's own "Piranesian" images inspired by the famous *Carceri d'invenzione* series (*Imaginary Prisons*). As Purini himself expounded in *Sette paesaggi*, "the drawing represents the medianic exploration of the shaded side of reason and, contradictorily, the scene of an ideal landscape in which the architect believes he will be happy."

The open-sided bell tower placed at the far edge of the public precinct is a wall-strip element extrapolated in three dimensions. It provides an elegant counterpoise to the horizontal building mass of the sanctuary. A cubic entrance vestibule to the church hall serves as a kind of transitional threshold that separates the sacred realm from the profane.

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Photo: [Moreno Maggi](#)
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The rear facade of the [church](#) features two large downspouts set symmetrically around a centered lightwell.

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The San Giovanni Battista parish church complex in Lecce is explicitly modernist in inspiration. The focus is on the exploration and poetic experience of space. White forms enclose spaces that are modeled by the variations of natural light. As the late Canadian architect [Arthur Erikson once remarked](#), "With light as the palette... we can bring soul and spirit back into architecture and perhaps find our own souls in the process."

[Conrad Thake](#) is an architect, urban planner, and historian based on the Mediterranean island of Malta. He has a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley and was recently admitted as a member of CICA, the International Committee of Architectural Critics.

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SUBSCRIPTION SAMPLE

Within the [building's cubic volume](#), and defined by the sanctuary's irregular shape, is a kind of upper-story balcony that overlooks a forecourt.

Photo: Massimiliano de Meo [Extra Large Image](#)



Roman ruins in the city center of Lecce, Italy.

Photo: [Carlton Browne](#) [Extra Large Image](#)



SUBSCRIPTION SAMPLE

The baroque facade of Lecce's [Basilica of Santa Croce](#).

Photo: [Flickr user Yellow.Cat](#) [Extra Large Image](#)

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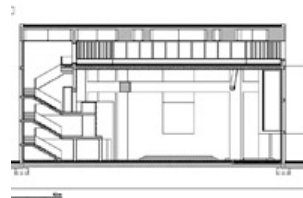
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For commentaries on the architectural works of Purini and Thermes dating to the early 1980s, refer to Accasto, G., "Le cose nella casa. Considerazioni su un'architettura di Franco Purini e Laura Thermes." Lotus International, no. 40 (1983): 74-79; F. Purini, "Casa del farmacista di Gibellina (Sicilia): un cantiere nel sud", Lotus International, no. 40 (1983): 80-89. Also, Dal Co, F., "Francesco Purini e Laura Thermes. 65 abitazioni a Napoli" in Casabella 47, no. 494 (1983): 2-11.

Project Credits

Project: San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex, Lecce, Italy
 Client: Archdiocese of Lecce
 Design Architect: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes, with Adriano Cornoldi
 Structural Engineers: Enzo Pierri (church), Andrea Cinuzi (bell tower)
 General Contractor: Fratelli Marullo/ Calimera (Lecce)
 Site Supervision: Raffaele Parlangei
 Art: Armando Marrocco, Mimmo Paladino

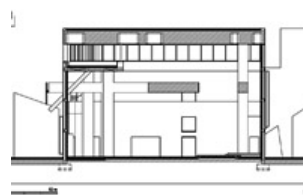
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[San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) north-south section drawing through the sanctuary and stairs, looking east. Image: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes [Extra](#) [Large Image](#)



[San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) north-south section drawing through the side-entry corridor and sanctuary, looking east. Image: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes [Extra](#) [Large Image](#)



[San Giovanni Battista Parish Complex](#) east-west section drawing through the sanctuary just inside the south wall, looking north. Image: Franco Purini and Laura Thermes [Extra](#) [Large Image](#)

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