

San Giacomo Apostolo Church and Parish Complex – Ferrara, Italy

Essay by Lily Cmerek

The San Giacomo Apostolo Church and Parish Complex is located in the city of Ferrara, Italy, and was designed by Miralles Tagliabue EMBT¹. The \$5 million project emerged from a design competition in 2011, and the architecture firm's win was actually a surprise because the aesthetic goal of EMBT's design revolved around attempting not to make it emulate a church². The building is comprised of 1,583 square meters, or approximately 17,000 square feet, of space, which includes 600 square meters of garden space and various rooms, such as classrooms, annexes, a side chapel, and a baptistery, that surround the central area in which the altar is located¹. The Church and Parish complex, finished in 2021, was built in order to cater to the growing congregation in Ferrara and have an integral role in "creating identity within the local community by promoting socialization, education, and interaction"³.

Firstly, it is important to note that the design was influenced by the fact that the area is prone to earthquakes. With the typical masonry used in church buildings, such as those constructed in the Renaissance era, the structure is likely to be damaged in an earthquake. So, the San Giacomo Apostolo Church is a more lightweight structure; it is still made up of concrete, but the concrete is reinforced².

The most prominent feature of the building is its thin, undulating roof, which was inspired by hot air balloons. In terms of materiality, it is composed of concrete with a layer of copper placed on top that follows the contour of the concrete. The initial idea for the main material of the roof was actually timber, which would have made it resemble EMBT's Naples Underground Central Station, but it turned out to be too costly⁴. So, instead, non-structural wood elements were placed under the concrete in a crisscrossing fashion, allowing the originally planned look of the ceiling to be partly accomplished. The roof sits on steel struts that are concealed in glazing bars, supportive pieces of metal that are placed in between glass panes². So, the roof and walls are separated by windows, which gives the effect that the roof is floating.

Another main feature is the interior walls and exterior façade. In the central area of the building is raw, exposed concrete walls, which not only offers the space a natural look that contrasts beautifully with the wood components, but also cuts down on material expenses. This is due to the lack of certain processes that are usually associated with concrete elements in a building, such as covering the concrete with other materials and applying agents that produce a desired texture. There is also a giant cross that is positioned above the central room of the church, which is held in place by being firmly planted into the concrete walls. It was made with wood that was taken from the city's old town hall. The façade that covers the majority of the church is composed of plaster and red brick, and these two materials are arranged in an alternating pattern, creating a vertical striped effect. The bricks have been placed in such a way in order to produce "a pointed surface," comparable to the brick work of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, which is also located in Ferrara⁵.

Cited Sources:

- 1 https://www.archdaily.com/975287/san-giacomo-apostolo-church-and-parish-complex-miralles-tagliabue-embt?ad_source=search&ad_medium=projects_tab
- 2 <https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/15430-church-of-san-giacomo-apostolo>
- 3 <http://www.mirallestagliabue.com/project/san-giacomo-church/>
- 4 <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/san-giacomo-apostolo-church-and-parish-complex-benedetta-tagliabue-embt>
- 5 <https://www.dezeen.com/2022/01/13/embt-san-giacomo-apostolo-church-ferrara-undulating-copper-roof/>

