

The Capela do Monte (Hillside Chapel) of Álvaro Siza Vieira Monte da Charneca, Barão de São João, Lagos, Portugal

June 2018

Context

The Monte da Charneca Center, scheduled to open in early 2021, is a privately funded initiative that will offer visitors to Portugal's Algarve region a peaceful, spirit-restoring retreat. Conceived by a Swiss-American couple who have lived in the area since the mid-1980s, the Center has as its focal point a non-denominational Christian chapel designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning architect Álvaro Siza, who also has advised on the Center's master plan. The Capela do Monte (Hillside Chapel) opened in March 2018 just before Easter.

Seven typical houses, sensitively restored over the past 30 years with a local heritage architect, already form the renewed core of Monte da Charneca, a farming hamlet that like many others in the region fell into abandonment and ruin. In addition to encompassing the seven houses, the 7-hectare Center (17.3 acres) has its own water supply, is energy self-sufficient through solar power, and maintains an orchard with citrus, almond, fig, and olive trees. The next phase of development will add a handful of new residential structures in a consistent architectural style, along with facilities to help revitalize traditional agricultural activity and welcome visitors. Together with the Siza chapel, these elements will make the Monte da Charneca Center a destination for spiritual retreats, conferences, eco- and agro-tourism, and rural holidays, only 10-20 minutes from the beaches and historic sites of the Algarve coast.

In 2016, Álvaro Siza accepted the commission to design the Capela do Monte as the focal point of the Center, at the highest point on the property. Siza has spoken about the beauty of the site, his desire to create a design in the Algarve where he has never before realized a building, and his pleasure at being asked for what he calls "a pure architectural project."

The beige-colored Capela do Monte can be reached only by way of a foot path. The one-story structure, with a footprint of 10.34 x 6.34 meters (34 x 21 feet), is built without electricity, heat or running water, relying on natural ventilation and materials (insulated brick, limestone and tiles) to keep it cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Siza has designed the chapel's cross, altar, bench and chairs, all produced by the Oporto-based carpenters Serafim Pereira Simões Sucessores, and has made drawings for murals depicting scenes from the life of Jesus, realized in tile by the Portuguese company Viúva Lamego. A churchyard (or *adro*) of roughly the same size as the building extends the chapel to the west.

Design Brief

Project	Capela do Monte ("Hillside Chapel")
Name of private compound	Monte da Charneca
Area/region in Portugal	Barão de São João, Lagos, Algarve
Architect	Álvaro Siza Vieira
Design Team	Álvaro Siza 2 Arquitecto SA: Carlos Leite Pereira, Oporto Gabinete de Organização e Projectos, Lda (GOP): Jorge Nunes da Silva, Oporto Frederico Mendes Paula, Ricardo Correia, Lagos
Dimensions	Dimensions of chapel: 10.34 m (w) X 6.34 d (m) x 6.70m (h) (33.92 x 20.80 x 21.98 ft) Square metres 65.2 m ² (701.80 sq ft)
Materials	Special insulated bricks Portuguese Limestone (cream color) Tiles from Viuva Lamego

Manufacturers

Joaquim Sequeira Vieira: JSV Lda, Lagos
Andorinha Lda: Joaquim Marreiros da Silva, Vitalino Tomé Duarte, Sandro do Carmo, José Manuel Gonçalves, Lagos
Madilagos: Paulo Arantes, Lagos
Tiles: Viúva Lamego: Duarte Garcia
Woodwork: Serafim Pereira Simões Sucessores, Lda (SPSS): José Simões
Stonework: Mármore e granitos Augusto Sousa (MGAS)

Design Concept

For both the clients and the architect, the inspiration for the chapel was the surrounding countryside and the position on the top of the hillside. People visiting the chapel must walk up a path to reach the structure.

As the Algarve is similar in climate and topography to North Africa, Siza looked to the architecture of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who pioneered the use of natural ventilation systems. The chapel has no electricity, heating or running water. It relies on natural ventilation and the structure itself to keep the building cool in summer and warm in winter.

The chapel is well integrated into the surrounding dry and natural landscape; no surrounding trees or bushes have been removed to build the chapel.

Building Features

Natural ventilation is provided through an opening in the lower southwest corner of the building, as well as a large double window.

Orientation: The building is on a direct east-west access, with the entrance door on the southern side.

A churchyard/pátio (or “adro”) of 61.89 square metres extends the building to the west.

Interior elements

Tile murals: The chapel features three tile murals, drawn by Siza and produced by the Portuguese tile factory Viúva Lamego, depicting scenes of the life of Jesus Christ: his birth (112cm X 182cm), his baptism (126cm X 182cm) and his death (112cm X 182cm)

Another small tile panel includes a verse from the Bible in Portuguese that inspired the vision for the chapel: *“I will bring these people to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer” (Isaiah 56:7).*

Cross: The 2.30m high cross was designed by Álvaro Siza and produced by the Oporto-based carpenters SPSS

Altar, bench and chairs: all designed by Álvaro Siza and produced by the Oporto-based carpenters SPSS