

ŠÁRKA: A PLACE OF SERENITY



António Rocha Leite

Studio Landscape & Architecture | Henry Hanson | Mikael Ekegren

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**FAKULTA
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Introduction

The present portfolio is relative to an architectural design in Divoká Šárka natural park, in Prague. The project takes part of the studio topic Seeking Serenity, instructed by Henry Hanson and Mikael Ekegren.

The work process was divided into two phases: the first one, theoretical, based on my experience during my stay in Prague, supported by the readings of Genius Loci - Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture, by Christian Norberg-Schulz, Landscape Narratives, by Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton, and my personal choice of a chapter of the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians. It consisted of a conceptual approach to the sense of serenity through the living of space.

The second part of the work was the design of the intervention itself in Šárka, which was the course of transition between the city of Prague and the natural environment of the park, culminating on a small non-religious chapel, for visitors to enjoy and contemplate the surrounding landscape.

The whole process of this project was also a pursuit of serenity.

Concept development

The conceptual part of the work had its foundation on a walk in Prague along the river, which changed its route because of determined events. It was an unknown way, aimless, just going down the river with no expectation. At first, the river guides the direction of the walk, but suddenly, the two towers of Vyšehrad appear on the skyline and make me feel the need to go there, even though I don't know what to expect.

In the beginning of this theoretical task, I was asked to choose a non-architectural piece of art that could bring me the idea of serenity. I took an excerpt of the letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, which I can relate to this pursuit I've been doing.



"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, 13

As a catholic, the certainty of love is something that reassures me, in which I can find the serenity. But to have it, I must search for it. The pursuit of love is not a clear and constant way; it has some highs and lows, it has movement, dynamic, mystery, and it needs patience. Without love, I am nothing, so I need to find it, I need to get to it. Can this walk be a pursuit of love? What it constantly calling me?

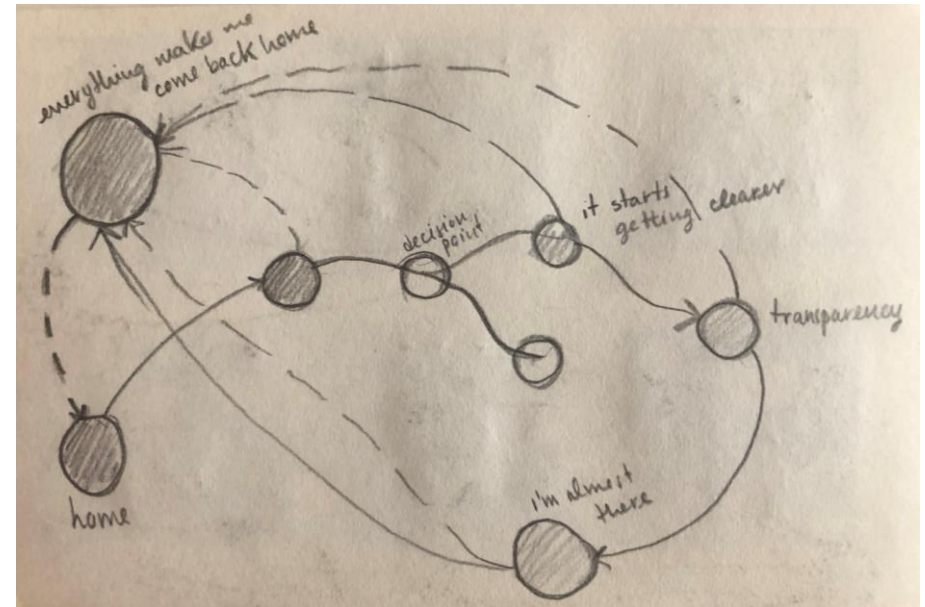
At some stages, there are decision points where I must choose my route. I start looking for a way to go to Vyšehrad, and as I get closer, the cathedral is becoming clearer, contrasting with some moments of mystery when the façades of the riverside buildings cover the horizon. I still don't know exactly where I'm going, but I feel it calling me.

When I am even closer to Vyšehrad, I start hearing the ring of the tower bells, and it becomes louder and louder on each moment as I walk. That sound now belongs to the path, and it starts guiding me as well along the way. In Genius Loci, there's the definition of the vesper bell, taking part of the poem A Winter Evening, as a symbol that reminds us of the common values, a thing which is orientating us through the space.



The environment influences human beings, and man needs symbols that represent life-situations. This noisy phenomenon reminds me of the church near my house in my hometown, Porto, and it makes me go back to the memory of what I left there before coming to Prague.

When I am going up the hill to reach the castle, I can no longer see the cathedral, but I am constantly being guided by the path and its points of reference, and also by the great sound of the bells. Therefore, I know I am going in the right way. Finally, through the trees and bushes, I find the whole cathedral, while the bells are loudly ringing, and I get that strong feeling of returning home, being in this environment.





In *Genius Loci*, Norbert-Schulz tells us the story of a man who had to leave Berlin, his hometown, and returns after the war, looking for the house where he grew up. Returned, he finds it completely destroyed, and feels that he has lost the memories of his childhood. But then, he recognizes the pavement of the sidewalk of the street where he used to play with his friends, which makes him have the sense of belonging again. In my case, it's my first time in Prague, a city where I find everything unknown, far from home, and where I can't stop missing my family. But suddenly, there is something in this place that brings me back the memory of my home, my origins and who I am. I now have a feeling which I can only name in Portuguese: *saudade*, the grateful memory of someone or something that is missing. It's a good feeling, which makes me think that I actually belong to this city, where I can find my home and my safety.



As Norbert-Schulz says, the senses of orientation and identification are keys for the feeling of belonging to a certain place. Man needs to know where he is and experience an emotional security in space. He is constantly looking for a meaning to the environment he lives in, developing a "schemata" since his childhood which determine all future experiences in places with different environmental properties. To concretize the *Genius Loci*, architecture comes into being when a total environment is made visible.

Site analysis

Through the process of the design, I visited Divoká Šárka for three times. In each one, I took different paths to get to know the place. The first contact with the park, next to McDonald's, has a big edge that separates the built from the natural environment, where I can have a big panoramic view of the highest peaks. When going down the hill, I get into a new atmosphere, such as if I was getting into the woods. Looking back, I can no longer see the city, immersing into a natural green place.

Šárka is a quite dynamic park, with lots of different paths and atmospheres through different moments. We can walk on the valleys along the calm river, as well as we can climb to the highest points and have great points of view of the surrounding landscape.



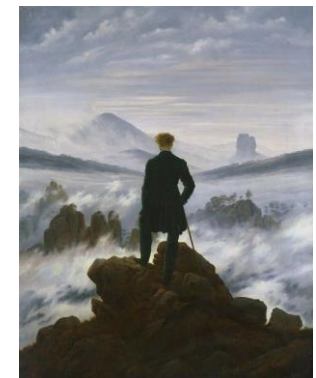
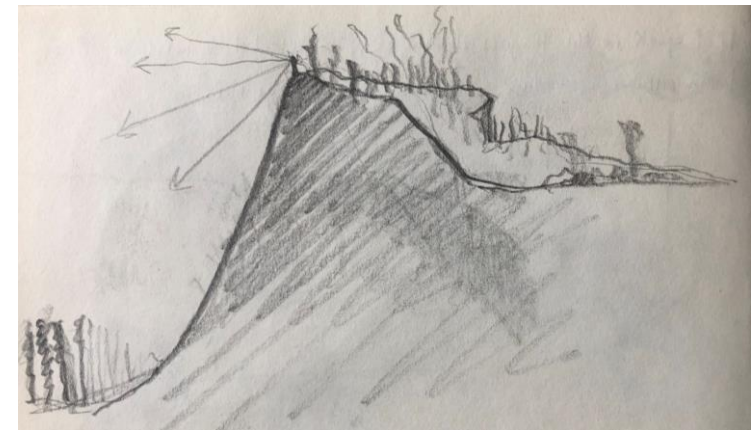
Map of the first visit to the site





In an attempt to find my connection with the sense of serenity, I looked for the places where I could be in peace and where I would abstract myself from the noise of the city of Prague and just be contemplating nature and its immensity. The peaks, where I could have the biggest views of the natural horizon, were the ones that I found the most relevant, permitting a constant connection with the various shades of green in the landscape and also with the infinity of the sky.

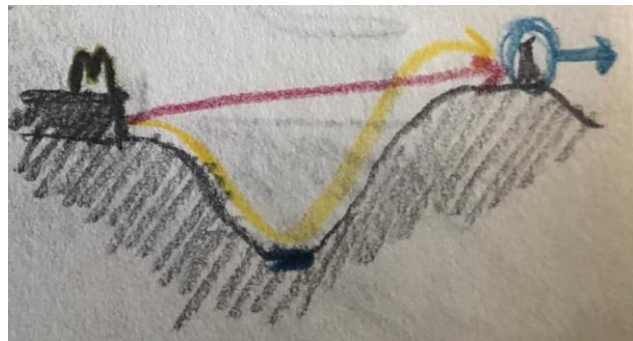
However, this task of designing an architectural intervention in Šárka brings a lot of questions with it. What does Šárka truly need? How can this natural park be complemented with architecture, and how can it enrich it? How can architecture help us finding serenity in a place where which already has many moments of serenity?



Design criteria

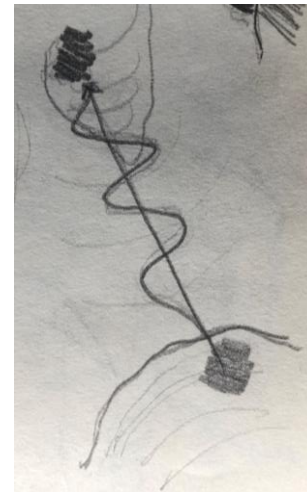
Walking in Prague towards Vyšehrad revealed distinct ways of reaching one goal. The constant movement, uncertainty and mystery created a great dynamic along the different moments of the path, reproducing various senses during it. That need and desire of pursuing something motivated me to introduce the idea of choreography in the process of designing. I wanted to offer to Šárka this path of discovering ourselves, our serenity, and returning to our origins. Reading Landscape Narratives, we understand that the order of experience, rather than the physical composition, gives meaning to the sequence, “where one chooses to begin and end a story profoundly alters its shape and meaning”.

Le Corbusier said that “the purpose of architecture is to move us”. On the walk to the castle, there was a point in the horizon that moved me and changed the direction I was taking, to search for something I needed to find. For that, I started making my own way to get to it, always having the towers as my reference. In the middle, there were a lot of decision points, where I was free to choose which way to go. That is exactly what I wanted to have leading the transition between Prague and Šárka. So, the first phase of our path would have a first element, with a great presence in the landscape, guiding the visitors, but ensuring their freedom of taking their own way, by taking their decisions.





Returning to Vyšehrad, I can remember the moment when I couldn't see the cathedral anymore, and I began to guide my path by hearing the ring of the bells and by following the constant points of reference which had appeared during the course. Here, I can't see my final goal, but the way I'm taking becomes the motivation to go on, with the certainty of reaching a safe place. It is not a direct path, but a dynamic one, with movement, highs and lows, insides and outsides, silence and noise. All of this is guiding the second phase of the pursuit of serenity in Šárka.

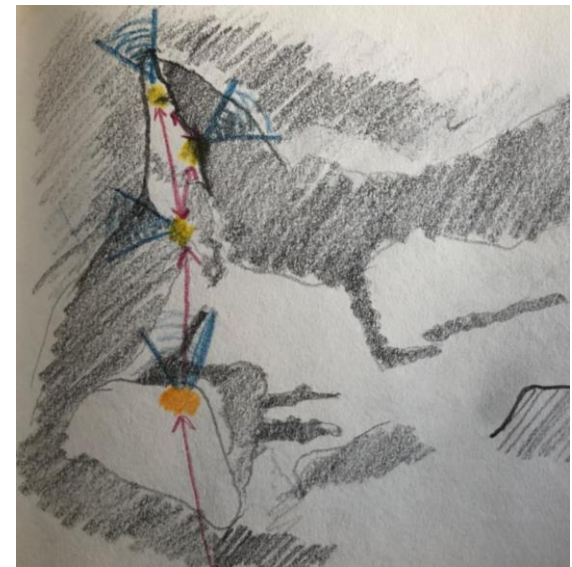


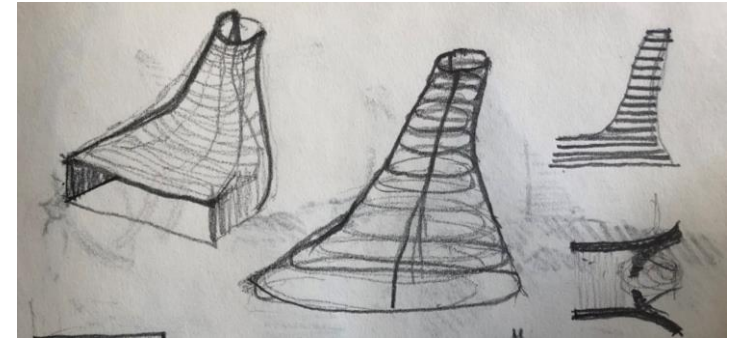
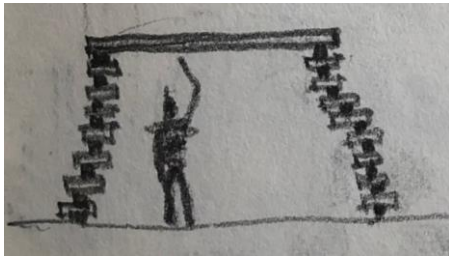
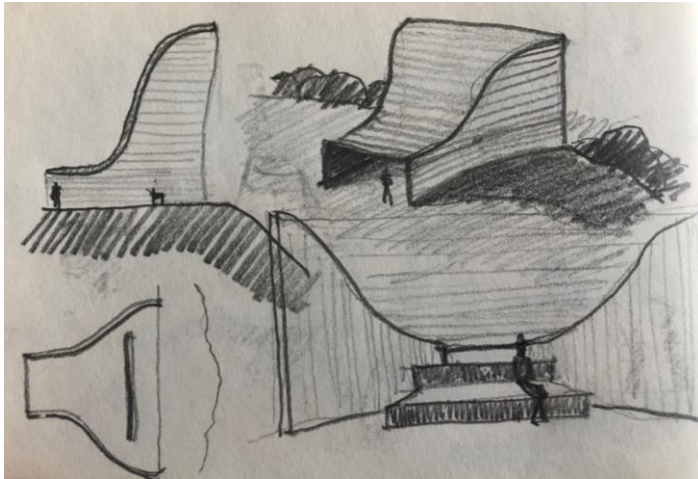
The idea of designing a chapel came from the will of giving the park a quiet place for meditation and contemplation. A place where people can meet with their selves, with their spirituality, far from the day life's rush, being connected with the landscape and the sky, finding the serenity in nature. The intervention in the landscape becomes very challenging by the impact that it has in its character, which changes by different factors, determined by the material and formal constitution of the place. It's important to consider how are the boundaries which define that place, how it rests on the ground and how it rises towards the sky (Genius Loci).

Proposal development

The initial idea of the first element of the composition was to make it as a viewpoint for the rest of the designed structures. It wouldn't be the contemplation spot itself but would prepare the visitor for what was going to happen then, as a mark of the beginning of the path. For the people who are coming to Šárka, it would work as tower in the middle of the landscape, with a great presence on the top of the hill, motivating people to move and go further to discover what's beyond.

At first, I was thinking of designing three different chapels in different spots on the hills, having a visual connection with each other and distinct points of view to the surrounding green landscape. Later, I decided to simplify the composition, focusing on the path between the main elements, reducing them to only one meditation place, not so worried with the shape of it but with the character it brings to the space.

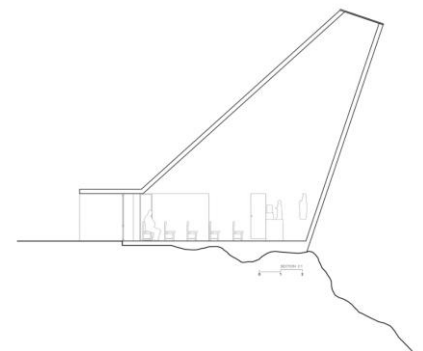
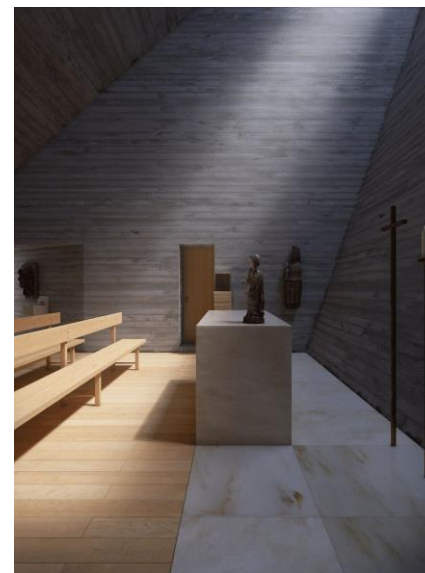
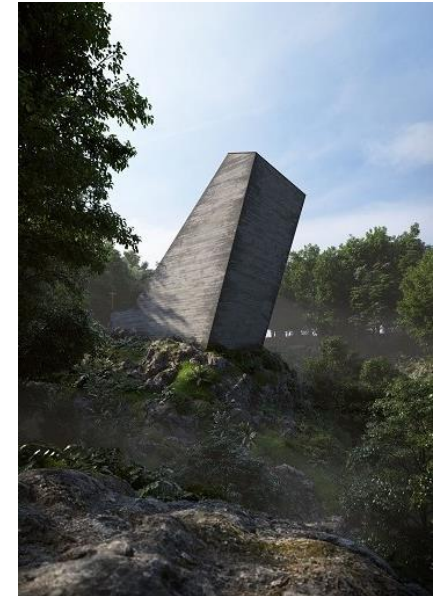




Sketching the tall construction of the project, I thought of designing a wooden structure which would invite the visitors to enter and sit down to observe the composition beyond. People would get through a low human scaled space which would open up to a larger space with benches for them to sit.

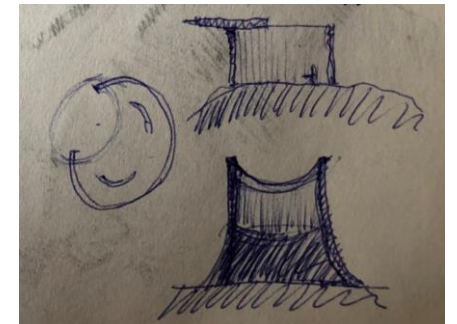
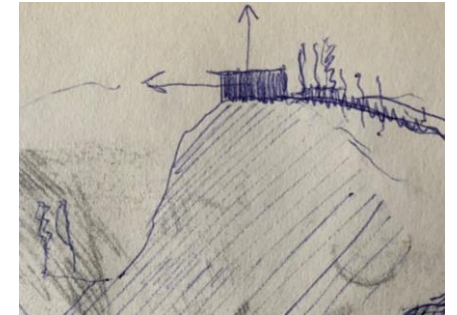
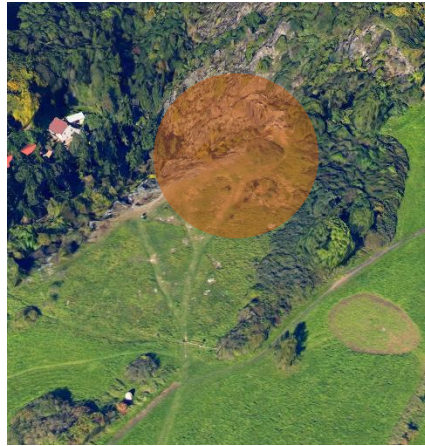
I had some architectural references of buildings which had explored the use of wood, such as a chapel in Braga, Capela Árvore da Vida, by Cerejeira Fontes Architects, with a very dynamic and malleable structure of wooden slats, which allows the light to enter the space in a very filtered way. I could also find in Cohen Chapel, by Joaquim Portela, an inspiration for pursuing the character of this first structure.

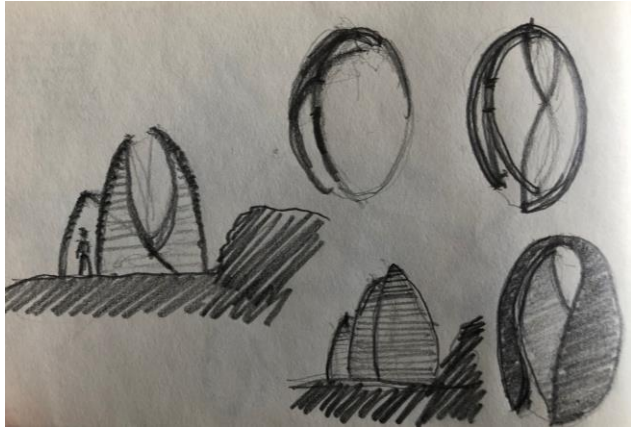
Cerejeira Fontes Architects
Capela Árvore da Vida, Braga, PT



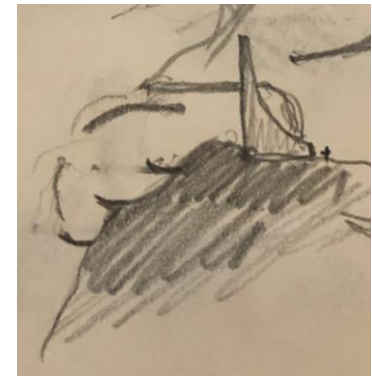
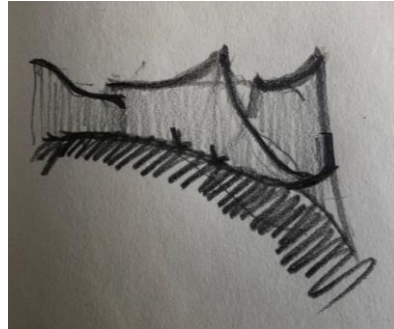
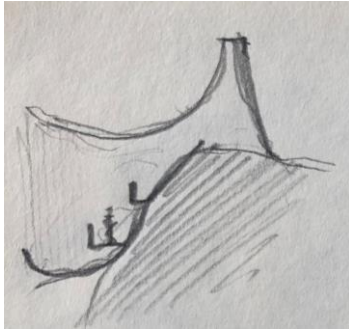
Joaquim Portela
Cohen Chapel, Swiss Alps

After the viewpoint element, located in the highest point of Šárka, we start to go down the hill where the path begins to lead us to the chapel. Now, we can't see our final goal anymore, while getting into nature. Firstly, I wanted to design a hidden chapel, that wouldn't be seen by the visitors of the park, but then I understood that there was no need to hide it. The challenge was to achieve a transition from the crowded park to the silence of the "sacred" place, just like the example of a church in the city, which has a great impact on the urban space, but, when getting inside, becomes a quiet and unique place. So, I had to give a meaning to the path, that would progressively become more silent and spiritual.

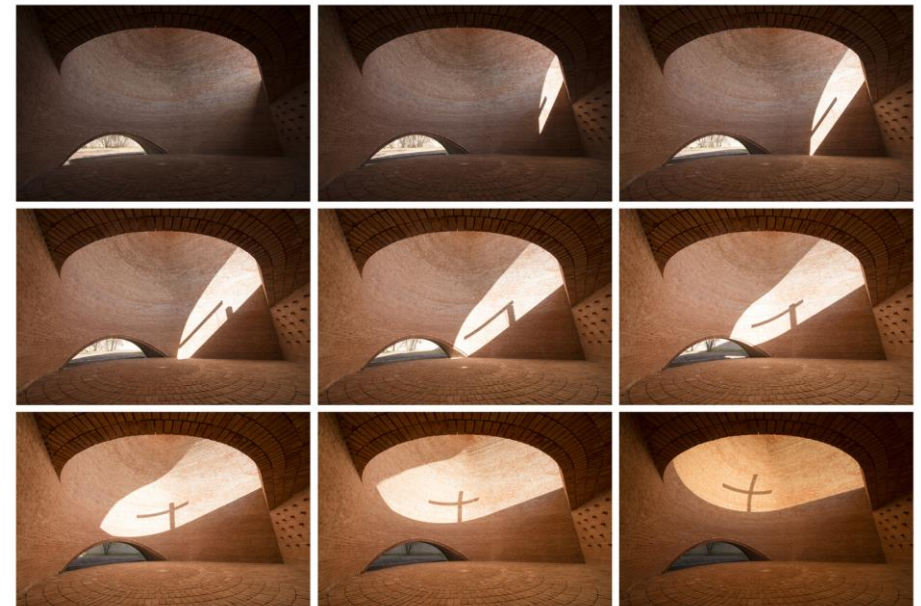
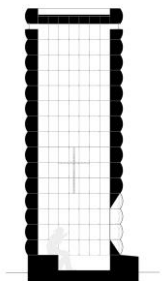
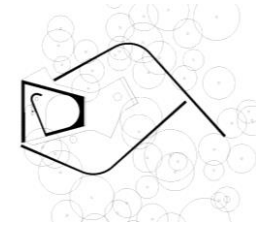




The search for the shape of the chapel had various stages, but the idea of connecting it to the landform, understanding how it lays on it and how it rises, was permanent. The construction would have a first small space, a nartex, that would invite people to get into it, with a very controlled light, creating a calm and quiet atmosphere. Then, the chapel would open to the landscape in the form of a Greek theatre, built into the hill, always with a ample view to the natural environment and the sky.

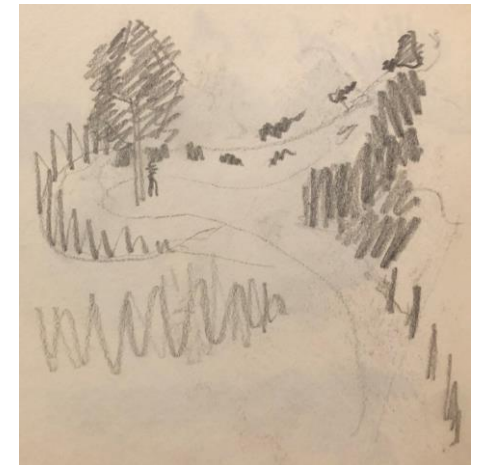


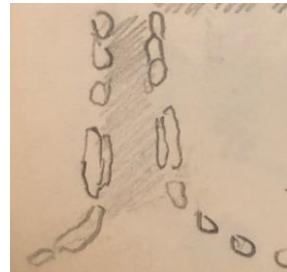
John Pawson
Wooden Chapel, Lutzingen, Germany



Nicolás Campodonico
Capela San Bernardo, La Playosa, Argentina

The small built additions guide us all the way to the chapel. At first, the path is limited by wooden stakes setting the rhythm of the choreography along the course. They lead us through the trees and bushes of the sight, creating movement and mystery, revealing different points of view and moments of inside and outside, ups and downs, ambiguity and clarity. The wooden structures begin to turn into stone points as if in metamorphosis, suggesting different stages of the path.

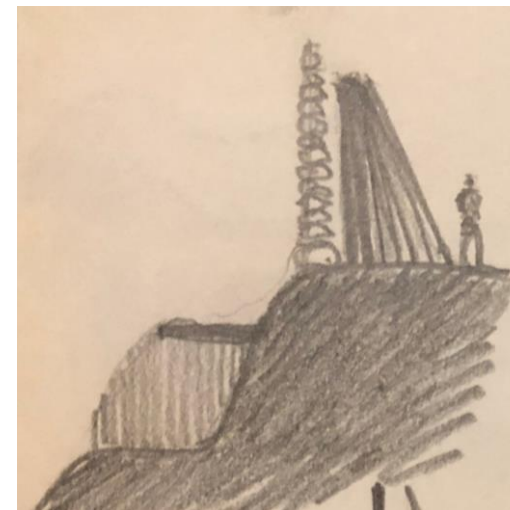
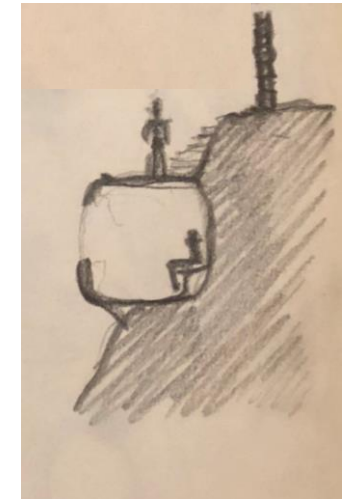




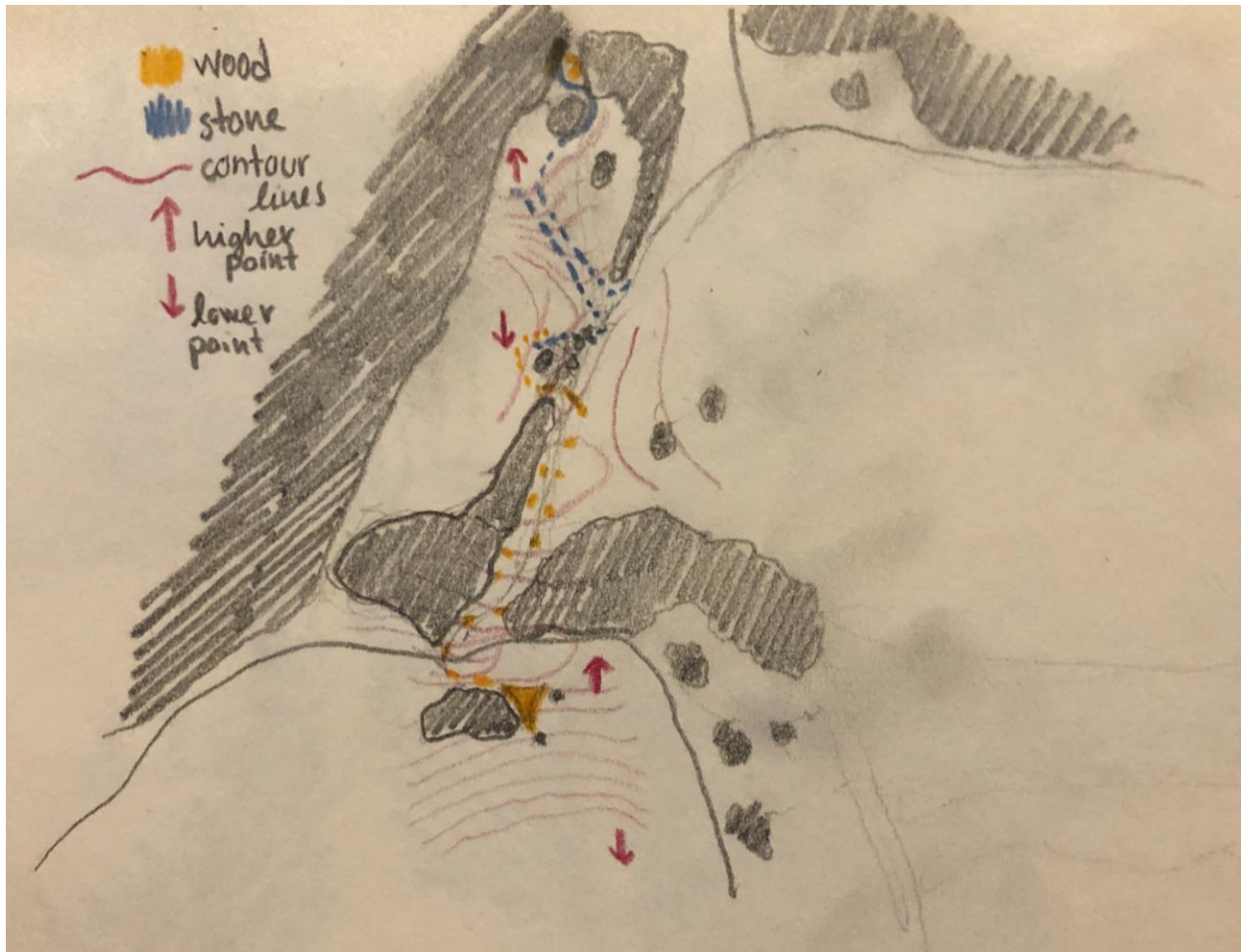
When we start climbing again until the chapel, the stone elements tend to be more and more and even more concentrated. At some points, we can also have the view covered by the height of the stones, where these even become benches along the path.

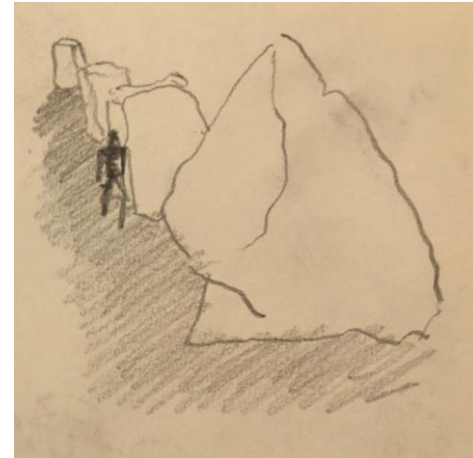
Reaching the peak, we can finally have a great view over the immensity of the landscape, and we are led to go towards the chapel, which turns into a much more defined shape while it rises from the ground to the sky.

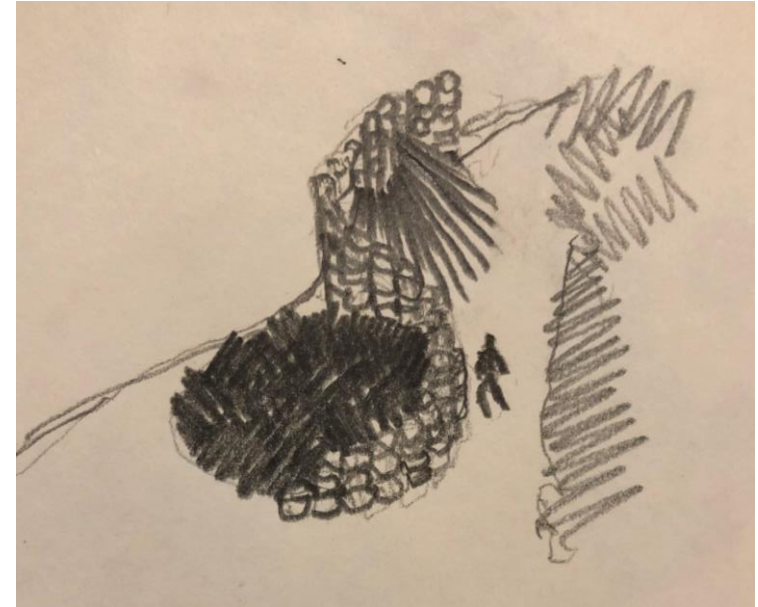
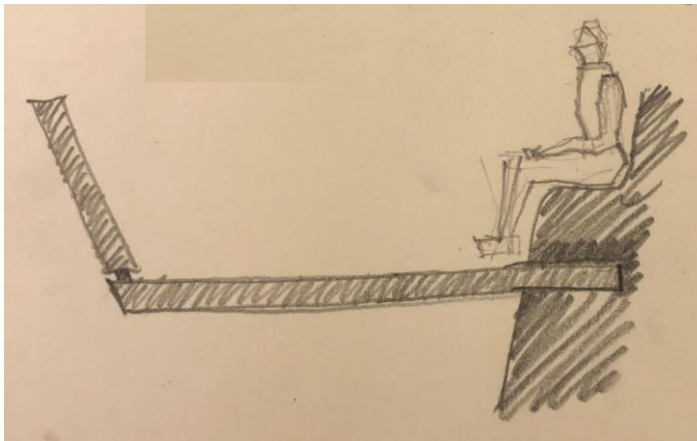
The stone finally meets with the wood again, and they both constitute the materiality of the chapel.



Final proposal







Closing remarks

Seeking Serenity was a very challenging process during the whole semester. Man does not only design architecture. He designs character, spirit, feelings, mystery, movement...

This constant pursuit of serenity was very important for me to include who I am in my way of thinking architecture. I felt the freedom to talk about what I believe, and also to decide what I really want. As in every path of my life, I am always confronted with decision points, that can take me towards anything. That conscience makes me want to know more, to walk my path, and to always go further.

In my Erasmus experience in Prague, I could find home in a lot of different places. I found my orientation and identification with this city, and I will bring all these memories with me back to Porto. Maybe this feeling of SAUDADE for Prague will always be present in my life journey.