



RUI LOBO

*THE  
COLLEGES  
OF JESUS  
AND ARTS  
OF COIMBRA  
(1542-1759)*

eldlarq

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## *Introduction*

The College of Jesus of Coimbra occupies a prominent place in the history — and architectural history — of the Society of Jesus in the world. It was founded on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1542 and, according to Francisco Rodrigues, was the “first college of the Society,” a notion that today can be stated with some certainty. However, this term “college” did not as yet refer to a set architectural type, but rather to an early organized community, made up of Simão Rodrigues de Azevedo, one of the Society’s founders, and twelve other priests, or “apostles,” who installed themselves in houses in the north end of the newly opened *Rua Nova de São Sebastião*, now *Rua dos Estudos*, in the upper part of the city.

Nevertheless, the actual construction of a new building, a “college” in the architectural sense of the word, was not long in coming. As early as 14<sup>th</sup> April 1547, the first stone of the majestic building that we can still observe today was laid down. Yet, the construction of the College of Jesus was a slow process (to which was added the building of the neighbouring College of Arts from 1568), which went through successive alterations and revisions. This is why we have considered it important to write an architectural history of this complex throughout the more than two hundred years of its continuous construction. In fact, the building would only be effectively finished at the time of the expulsion of the Jesuits from the kingdom in 1759.

The reconstruction, over time, of the physical evolution of large architectural complexes, erected over several centuries, is a fundamental basic framework in our attempt to understand the design intentions that were being implemented at each moment and to have a reliable idea of the existing reality at

each stage. Only then is it possible to have an accurate sense of the importance of certain buildings for the material culture of each era.

A few years ago, we carried out a study of this type for the College-University of the Holy Spirit (*Espírito Santo*), of Évora,<sup>1</sup> which allowed us to unveil the formation process of that building in a sequence of six successive construction phases, starting from 1554, the date of the entry of its first Jesuit residents, up to the “*anno horribilis*” of 1759, which represented the end of the Society’s first stage in Portugal. In this new study that we now put forward, we will proceed with a graphical record of the evolution over time of the Jesuit complex of Coimbra, also carried out from six axonometric perspectives, based on the existing written and iconographic documentation.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental information regarding the construction of the Colleges of Jesus and Arts in Coimbra was systematized by Fausto Sanches Martins in his doctoral thesis.<sup>3</sup> In this extensive piece of work, the previously established data, from the research of Francisco Rodrigues<sup>4</sup> and Mário Brandão,<sup>5</sup> was added to by a significant amount of information resulting from the systematic analysis of the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (ARSI). An early design layout for the Coimbra complex, kept at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, in Paris, was also released. In a parallel study, we ourselves disclosed this design in our 1994 final work to obtain the degree in architecture, and which was later published as a book.<sup>6</sup> We dated it as being from 1568, corresponding to a phase in which the Jesuits sought to integrate the construction of the College of Arts with the College of Jesus, which had already been commenced.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned systematization, however, we do need to accompany the record of chronological

data with an interpretive reading of its consequences in spatial terms, meaning a graphical record of the building's evolution. For instance, since the collegiate church is an essential part of the daily life of an active and militant religious congregation such as the Society of Jesus, it is important to try to understand where the "provisional church" mentioned in the documents (and which existed for almost eighty years) was actually located. This is the sort of data which is significant to the understanding of the relationship of the building both to the surrounding city and to the men, some of them famous, who inhabited it.

Finally, it is important to bear another fundamental piece of information in mind. The College of Jesus, located next door to the only "full" Portuguese university, was the training school for the vast majority of missionaries, Portuguese and foreign,<sup>7</sup> destined for the provinces of the "Portuguese Assistance" of the Society, including Brazil, Goa, China and Japan. In addition, such prominent figures as Manuel da Nóbrega, José de Anchieta, Christopher Clavius, Pedro da Fonseca, Francisco Suárez, among others, lived within its walls. Hence the central role it played in the history of the Society of Jesus as a whole. And that is why it is important to visually understand what the building they inhabited looked like, along with the physical layout of the university quarter in which they lived and went about their daily business.

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