

An Taisce – The National Trust for Ireland

^7) Reply To: The Secretary at the address below  
(~) Reply To: The undersigned

Planning Officer, Cobh  
Town Council, *Town Hall*,  
Cobh, Co. Cork

18th August 2005 *Planning*

*Reference: 5/52040 Proposed alterations to St Col man's Cathedral Cobh*

A Chara,

We wish to make observation on the application sought by the Trustees for alterations to St Colman's Cathedral, a protected structure, which is currently before you for decision.

St Colman's Cathedral ranks as one of the most important Victorian buildings in Ireland. It was begun in 1868 and finished in 1917, and as a result it is the product of a very significant and formative phase of Irish history. Its style is neo-Gothic and typically nineteenth-century in its level of elaborate and expansive ornamentation. Its iconography is partially modelled on French mediaeval models like Notre Dame de Paris, but is also heavily influenced by phenomena such as the nineteenth-century 'Devotional Revolution', and by the extensive antiquarian studies carried out in Ireland as part of the Celtic Revival.

The sheer size and drama of the building demonstrates the triumph of the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of the Penal era, and its wealth of shamrock and other emblematical Irish imagery proclaims the strong sense of national identity which emerged during this period. It is a hugely valuable record of a particular historical place and time, and as such should be treasured and protected for future generations.

The "*reordering*" proposed will cause irreversible and unacceptable radical changes to the fabric of the building. The existing sanctuary floor is to be extensively cut into, with the result that a complex and beautifully executed ceramic mosaic floor, designed specifically for the cathedral by the architect George Ashlin, and made and laid by Ludwig Oppenheimer of Manchester in 1892, is to be removed, and partly replaced further to the west. Technically, it is doubtful whether the expertise exists in Ireland to carry out such a procedure, even if it were justified, and it would certainly be extremely expensive and pose unacceptable risk to the mosaic.

The altar rails are also to be cut up and '*redistributed*'. The historical justification proffered for this is an early architect's projection of the cathedral which shows no altar rails. This engraving, however,

also uses a distorted visual perspective in order to convey an enhanced sense of space, and shows no seating. The image is a romantic one, produced to heighten interest in the project and raise funds. No nineteenth-century architect designing for the Roman Catholic Church would have ever contemplated producing a church which would not have a communion rail

The building as executed departs considerably from the original 1868 contract drawings - mainly in elevation rather than plan, and is generally more complex and elaborate. Most of these changes were initiated in 1871, when E.W. Pugin was still alive, and not after his death, as has been claimed in the proposals. To use E.W. Pugin's original vision of St Colman's to justify the present proposals is inappropriate and dishonest - Cobh Cathedral, like all buildings, is the product of a complex net of historical, socio-economic and religious circumstances, not just the architect's original vision, and is all the more worthy of protection for that reason.

The architects of St. Colman's set out to produce a Victorian building, not a mediaeval one, contrary to the claims made in the proposal for re-ordering. They borrowed the vocabulary of mediaeval gothic, but the church was carefully planned to conform precisely to the post-Tridentine liturgy in use in the nineteenth century. Unlike mediaeval churches, which are boxed off into compartments, Cobh has a clear visual sweep from the narthex to the elaborately-decorated apse, rivetting the viewer's attention on the altar, which is of the Benedictine style pioneered by E.W. Pugin. From the west, the effect is of looking down a tunnel to the light at the end, and this is cleverly emphasised by the fact that the transepts are almost invisible because of the nave, triforium and clerestory arcades running across their entrances without a break. This too is a characteristic of the architecture of Pugin and Ashlin, as is the shallow and almost rudimentary nature of the transepts themselves.

This emphatic and extremely deliberate emphasis on the long axis of the church means that the proposed changes will completely destroy the architectural coherence of the building, resulting in visual chaos. Pugin and Ashlin created no architectural focus at the crossing (unlike, for instance, William Burges in St Fin Barre's in Cork), and attempting to establish one by extending the sanctuary floor, removing the altar rails and introducing furniture, will result in a visual conflict with the existing layout.

As mentioned above, Cobh Cathedral was not designed merely as a mediaeval pastiche, but as a functioning nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church, in line with the directives of the Council of Trent. Since Vatican II, liturgy requirements have changed, and the layout is considered not to be convenient for the present ritual. However, there is absolutely no doubt that liturgy requirements will change yet again - as they have done several times in the last two millennia - and it is indefensible to use them to justify making irreversible and expensive changes to an important historic structure such as St Colman's, especially when they are so unsympathetic to its style and destructive to its fabric.

We respectfully exhort that this permission request should be declined.

We request acknowledgement of this *submission* under Article 28 (4) Planning and Development Regulations 2001

Thar cfoeann An Taisce, Corcaigh

Is nriose le mess

