

# THE PUGIN SOCIETY

REGISTERED CHARITY No 1 074766  
<http://www.pugin-society.org>

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HON. SECRETARY: PAM COLE

The Town Manager  
Cobh Urban District Council  
Carrig House  
Cobh, Co. Cork  
Ireland



11<sup>th</sup> August 2005

Dear Sir,

## **COBH CATHEDRAL: PLANNING APPLICATION 05/52040**

The Pugin Society wishes to comment on the planning application (05/52040), submitted to you as planning authority for the re-ordering of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, the major Irish work of the architect E W Pugin (1834-1875). Our representative last visited the cathedral on 7 July and had the background to the application explained to him by the planning consultants, although, despite asking to see them, the drawings were said to be not then available. The Society has written on more than one occasion to the Bishop offering to make available our expertise to assist in his deliberations, but this offer has not been taken up. We have had to rely on the copy of the applications sent to us by the Friends of St Colman's Cathedral.

One of the most vital roles of the Pugin Society, founded in 1995, has always been to protect and preserve buildings and artefacts by members of the Pugin family, and to give planning and conservation advice when necessary. As the leading body of expertise, scholarship and research on the works of the Pugin family, the Society is well placed to make an authoritative comment on these proposals. In addition, our expert, Dr Rory O'Donnell, is himself the acknowledged authority on the work of E W Pugin, and many years ago was responsible for hand listing the Ashlin and Coleman drawings which formed the first substantial accession to the Irish Architectural Archive in 1978. He therefore strongly challenges the claim in support of which extracts from the 1869 contract drawing are produced. Naturally these show a simplified sanctuary arrangement on plan and section, precisely because these were merely the first contract set. Pugin would have gone on, in further contracts, to elaborate both the levels and the furnishing of this end of the church, which, in the event, was achieved by his partner Ashlin and finally by Ashlin & Coleman. This was absolutely standard architectural practice particularly that of C19 Catholic church building, and especially in Ireland, where almost every cathedral was elaborated in subsequent phases. Pugin's intentions are exactly fulfilled in the east end of the cathedral, as can be seen by comparison with other churches he completed in England. His intention, when the practice split in 1869, was that Ashlin should have

full control over the completion and furnishing of the church, which is precisely what happened. The fact that the 1869 drawings show very little furniture detail in the sanctuary, and no altar rail, is because it was the intention of the architect to leave those for subsequent phases. Equally, the perspective of the interior of the church, showing no benches and no altar rails, is once again the architectural convention of the day; professional perspectivists, in this case no doubt Coleman, routinely left out such furnishings in presentation drawings like these. So the argument, whether naive or duplicitous, that historical sources cited show this scheme as a return to anything like the architect's original intention falls away. Rather than returning this to Pugin's original intention, this scheme tends to replicate the disastrous mistakes made at Armagh cathedral and so many other cathedrals over the last two generations.

The scheme itself, as proposed, is an improvement on many such which have so reduced the importance of Ireland's Catholic Cathedrals since the Second Vatican Council. The high altar is retained in its entirety, as is the layout of the sanctuary (but not its levels) and the pulpit. However, with existing levels altered, the sanctuary is brought forward through 1 V-z bays into the transept. The price of all this disruption of historic floor levels and the removal of the gates and altar rails that currently divide the sanctuary from the transept. It would seem that the Celtic interlaced mosaic, which currently defines the footspace between each bank of the aisles and in front of the altar rails, and also the Celtic/classical interlaced floor in front of each of the side chapels, are to be either lifted, or more likely built over, so that the orientation of benches in the transept can turn to face the new sanctuary. The altar rails to the side chapels would be set back closer to the arches of each, and those to the sanctuary removed completely. This is a very high price to pay for reorientation of furniture in the transept, and this aspect should certainly be reconsidered and attempts to mitigate the impact investigated. (This would be much easier to follow if drawings simply showing the proposed alterations to floor layouts and patterns were, submitted, separate from the furnishing alterations.) Further alterations proposed consist of cutting back the steps (and is it the steps only?) of the north and south transept chapels, and arranging the Pieta chapel as a vesting sacristy. The existing plan of the cathedral shows none of the fixed furniture in the south narthex chapel, and therefore the impact of the proposed vesting sanctuary on this space is not clear. This must be made clear, as the south narthex is an important space and was certainly furnished by 1916, as the details in the *Guide* (2000 edition) show.

What are the proposed materials and floor surfaces of the new sanctuary? And why in such a strictly and learnedly Gothic Revival building introduce step concave and convex half-circle profiles taken from classical and Baroque architecture rather than those arranged at right angles? No information is given on the new furniture. Is it being modernistic? Or designed by artists? And why not Gothic?

Overall, the Society's advice is that the application be refused because of its cumulative and intrusive, as well as (it would appear) non-reversible, impact on the architectural/historical, cultural and religious integrity of the major building of the practice of Ashlin & Coleman and certainly the most important design of E W Pugin.

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We are also particularly shocked at the tendentious use of the historic archive by the applicant and his advisors, as well as by the low value which they seem to set on the cumulative importance of the furnishing of this church in the great second generation of the Catholic High Victorian Gothic Revival in Ireland.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Dermott  
Chair, The Pugin Society