

St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh

A Heritage Impact Study & Review of Planning Application

(Planning register reference no.: 05/52040)

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1. Background & Scope of this report

This report was commissioned by the friends of St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh. It expresses the informed views of Jack Coughlan Associates, Architects and Conservation Consultants.

The aim of the report is to examine the significance of St. Colman's Cathedral, review the planning application and the proposed alterations to the building (set out in Planning Application reference no. 05/52040), and indicate the impact of these proposed changes on that significance. The process followed was to review the planning application documentation, including objections to the proposal, and carry out documentary and physical research on Cobh Cathedral, its architects and designers, and on other Gothic Revival churches and cathedrals.

The planning application generated widespread opposition from parishioners and others, resulting in a significant number of objections from both private individuals, and from respected bodies such as the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, An Taisce, the Irish Georgian Society and the Pugin Society. These objections were on a range of grounds, including heritage issues, and also whether there exists a compelling liturgical necessity for the proposed changes.

The scope of this report excludes an analysis of the liturgical requirements of the cathedral as a place of worship, but it does discuss the need for permanent physical alterations as an issue for further investigation and clarification. Some objections also questioned the funding priorities for Cobh Cathedral, however this report does not comment on this matter, except to note that site visits indicated the need for conservation work to substantial areas of historic fabric, including to the interior.

2. Description of St Colman's Cathedral & historical background¹

Augustus Welby Northmore (A.W.N.) Pugin (1812 - 1852) was *'the most important exponent of the Gothic Revival in English architecture'*². He was responsible for bringing scholarship to the design and detailing of Gothic Revival architecture. His aim was to evoke the splendour of medieval churches and cathedrals, and his ideas dominated architecture in the second half of the nineteenth century. His eldest son was Edward Welby (E.W.) Pugin, (1834 - 1875) who, in 1860, took as his Irish partner George Coppinger (G.C.) Ashlin (1837 - 1921), a Cork architect with offices on South Mall.

The commission for the design of St Colman's was won in competition by the firm Pugin & Ashlin, but the design has been largely attributed to E.W. Pugin; the foundation stone was laid in 1868. Due to increasing work loads, the Pugin and Ashlin partnership was disbanded in 1868 when the architects decided to divide their work between England and Ireland, with Ashlin, who had a flourishing practice in Cork, taking responsibility for the Irish commissions. Although they collaborated on the works to St Colman's, Ashlin was responsible for the completion of the Cathedral, which celebrated the first Mass in 1879; In 1902 Ashlin formed a partnership with former pupil Thomas Aloysius (T.A.) Coleman (1865-1950), with this partnership responsible for the final phase of works to the cathedral. The spire was completed in 1915, and the consecration took place in 1919.

The firm of Pugin and Ashlin specialised in Catholic ecclesiastical work. During the years 1860-68, Pugin & Ashlin designed or altered over two dozen churches and chapels. Their masterpiece, St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, was begun in the last year of their partnership.³

In 'Architecture in Ireland 1837-1921, Jeremy Williams discusses the Pugin & Ashlin partnership with regard to Cobh Cathedral: St Colman's Cathedral was *'Edward Pugin and George Ashlin's most important commission, won in 1867, the year that Ashlin married Pugin's sister Mary.... Though the partnership broke up in 1868, Pugin and Ashlin continued to collaborate on the cathedral, so it could be said that the commission took up the rest of both their lives. Pugin's concept; Ashlin's supervision and decoration..... Cobh is the only Irish Catholic Victorian cathedral to remain unchanged by liturgical agitation of the last thirty years...'*⁴

By the 1860's, Gothic Revival was firmly established as the most popular architectural choice for Catholic Churches in Ireland, and this style was selected as the proper expression by many diocesan committees, including

¹ Historical information from 'A report on St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh' for St Colman's Advisory Sub-Committee, Carrig, 2001.

² Phoebe Stanton, *Pugin*, London, 1971.

³ 'A Victorian partnership – the architecture of Pugin & Ashlin' by Frederick O'Dwyer; Page 55; in '150 years of architecture in Ireland' RIAI 18399-1989; ed John Graby; 1989; RIAI.

⁴ A companion guide to Architecture in Ireland 1837-1921; Jeremy Williams; Irish Academic Press, Dublin; 1994; Pg 72

Cloyne. St. Colman's uses French Gothic models, particularly inspired by the cathedrals of Rheims and Amiens.

It is one of the great second generation of Catholic high Victorian Gothic Revival works in Ireland. The building is cruciform in plan, with an aisled seven-bay nave and two eastern chapels in each transept. The columns to the nave are of red marble with white marble and limestone bases and carved Portland stone capitals. The spandrels are covered with diaper carving of a shamrock motif and carved stone medallions. The high chancel arch is supported by clustered columns, as is the triforium.

Edward Pugin's churches were simply planned, with spacious and unobstructed interiors, well-lit from the clerestory, with shrines and confessionals on the aisle walls and side chapels flanking the chancel area. The high and unobtrusive chancel arch and the open layout provided an emphasis on the main altar. At St Colman's Cathedral, the nave, triforium and clerestory arcades all run across the transepts, providing a deliberate emphasis on the visual sweep to the altar, rather than on the crossing. As is common to all the great Gothic churches of France, the inspiration for Edward Pugin's design for the cathedral at Cobh, transepts are short and unobtrusive, secondary to the nave with architectural emphasis leading the eye eastwards from the nave to the sacred sanctuary area, terminated by an elaborately decorated altar and reredos.

The interior floors are of hardwood herringbone parquet, passages to the nave, aisles and along the altar rail are of mosaic; the side chapels have mosaic floors, as does the baptistery with marble to the Pieta chapel floor. The level of the chancel is higher than the nave and transepts and is reached via steps on the sanctuary side of the altar rail. The floor is covered with mosaic, with a large central design of the Christian monogram I.H.S. surrounded by the symbolic beasts of the four Evangelists, with further motifs of passion flowers, shamrocks, and bishops' coats of arms.

The sanctuary is divided from the transeptal chapels to each side by a carved oak screen; the bishop's throne, to the left of the high altar, is incorporated into this screen, with a large canopy projecting over the seating area.

3. Statement of Significance of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh

St Colman's Cathedral, the Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Cloyne, is listed on the Record of Protected Structures, (RPS no. 10016001), and is recorded in the Development Plan of Cobh Town Council 2005-2011. The listing of the building as a 'protected structure' includes, inter alia, the interior of the structure, and all fixtures and features which form part of the interior and exterior of the structure.

It is a building of international significance for its outstanding architectural, historical, artistic, technical, cultural and social merit, and for its association with the architects Edward W. Pugin, George C. Ashlin and T.A. Coleman.

It is a major landmark, on a dramatic and prominent site overlooking Cork Harbour, and it visually dominates the town of Cobh because of its size, form and position. It is a fine example of a Gothic Revival cathedral, one of the great second-generation of Catholic high-Victorian Gothic Revival works in Ireland. It is a building much-visited by both those with architectural interests and general tourists to the area. In addition, it is a building constantly included in architectural histories and theses on Irish and European architecture and church building.

It is the most prestigious commission of the well known and distinguished architect E.W. Pugin, whose architectural designs derived from the ideas developed by his father, A.W.N. Pugin, one of the most important proponents of the Gothic Revival style of architecture, who promoted Gothic Revival architecture as the only true Christian architecture. The wealth of published material attests to the high level of academic and general interest in the Pugins and the Gothic Revival style of architecture.

The interior is well designed, spatially pleasing and elaborately decorated. It is significant for its wealth of detail, intactness, and for the high quality of the craftsmanship which was carried out by Irish and European firms which specialised in ecclesiastical work in Ireland and abroad. Many original drawings signed and/or dated by G.C. Ashlin have survived for the interior details, including for the brass communion gates to the altar rail (dated 1891, in the IAA), the pulpit (1894, in the Diocesan archives), the mosaics and furniture. In accordance with the ethos and design approach of the Gothic Revival movement, buildings were designed as a complete entity with interior fixtures and fittings considered to be worthy of the highest level of craftsmanship, and often designed by the architects themselves. This was the case at St. Colman's Cathedral which has rarity value for the level of intactness and completeness of its interior. It is the only Catholic Victorian Cathedral interior in Ireland not to have been reordered.

The building is also significant for the level of documentation relating to its construction – there are 520 drawings for Cobh Cathedral in the Irish Architectural Archive (IAA) collection, comprising contract drawings, sketches and working drawings, from 1867–1919. Further documentation is held in the

Diocesan Archive in Cobh, including signed drawings by Ashlin, ledger books and correspondence between Ashlin and the bishops of Cobh Cathedral.

The building of St. Colman's was an ambitious project which took 50 years to construct and decorate, and it was extremely expensive, at that time perhaps the most expensive Catholic church constructed in Ireland, budgeted at £25,000 in 1867, and costing £235,000 on completion in 1919. Surviving ledgers kept by the Clerk of Works, Charles Guilfoyle Doran, provide an insight into the numbers of men and required skills necessary to complete such an ambitious building project. Doran kept very tight control over the quality of the work completed, sometimes to the annoyance of others. Letters between Ashlin and Bishop McCarthy dated to January and February of 1889 show the architect defending Doran's demanding character and explained that there was no one in whose ability he would have as much confidence⁵.

It has significant associations with the architects Pugin, Ashlin and Coleman, and also with the three bishops who oversaw the work: Bishop William Keane (1854-1874) who commenced the project; Bishop John MacCarthy (1874-1893) and Bishop Robert Browne (1894-1935) who supervised much of the detailed work.

St Colman's Cathedral has cultural value for its capacity to illustrate the development of Irish society: it can be seen as a symbol of the new confidence of the Irish Catholic Church in the nineteenth century, and a physical expression of the growing sense of national pride and identity at that time. Its decoration reflects the antiquarian scholarship associated with the Celtic Revival movement.

It also has high social value, as the focus of spiritual sentiment for the community, and it is a symbol of the community's identity; it is regarded with great affection by the community, evidenced by the level of objection to proposals to alter the building. In addition to this is the Cathedral's connection to the Irish diaspora worldwide, the descendants of the immigrants who were called upon to fund the ever-increasing cost of decorating and furnishing this building to the standard of Pugin and Ashlin's original vision.

⁵ 'A Report on St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh' for St Colman's Advisory Sub-Committee; Carrig, 2001.

4. Description of the works proposed in the planning application

The planning application lists the proposed development as follows:

- a) extending the sanctuary area into the nave;*
- b) removing and partially relocating the existing altar rails;*
- c) creating a permanent altar on the extended sanctuary;*
- d) providing a new cathedra facing the congregation;*
- e) locating the vesting sacristy at the base of the tower;*
- f) converting the Pieta Chapel to a mortuary chapel*
- g) reducing the area of the predella of the Altar of the Crucifixion in the south transept and the Altar of the Holy Family in the north transept*

The extension of the sanctuary and the moving of the altar rails will involve lifting and relaying portions of the mosaic to the nave and sanctuary and providing additional mosaic to match the existing as required.⁶

⁶ Planning application on behalf of the Trustees of St. Colman's Cathedral, dated 15th July 2005.

5. Impact assessment of proposed works

The proposed works, as outlined in the planning submission compiled by Cathal O' Neill and Associates Architects, will result in a very high level of intervention to this building, a major loss, relocation, or storage on an indefinite basis of original fabric, modern additions in a differing architectural style, and a change to the fundamental use and perception of space in a Gothic Revival cathedral. The outcomes of these changes will be damaging to the character of an almost entirely intact Gothic Revival cathedral of international significance, and the irreversible loss of original fabric of the highest quality of craftsmanship.

In a situation where such severe damage will result to fabric and spaces from the proposed works, it is considered reasonable from the planning and development perspective that interventions be carried out only where absolutely necessary. The section of the report below will discuss the works outlined in the planning submission, and highlight the impacts these interventions will have on the significance of the building. There is, however, also a need to discuss the general approach of the planning submission to the works outlined, the overall design approach and the justification for the proposed works.

Perhaps the most controversial claim, which we refute, in the planning application is that the proposed works, once implemented, will result in bringing the cathedral's interior closer to Pugin's original vision for St. Colman's, as expressed in the drawings for the cathedral which are housed in the Irish Architectural Archive. In the planning application Cathal O' Neill & Associates state:

'Fortunately, there is a large amount of original documentation available and many buildings from which we can interpret his [Pugin's] architectural intentions and his stylistic preferences'.

Interventions to such an architecturally significant building based on absolute liturgical need is one argument, but for planning to be sought on the grounds that the current architect is in a better position to interpret the original wishes of Edward Pugin than the architect George Ashlin, Pugin's professional partner, friend and contemporary who subscribed to and implemented the Gothic Revival ideals of the Victorian era, is untenable. This is especially so because the proposed interventions are so clearly at odds with the architectural ideals of the Gothic Revival era, and also with the Gothic architectural style in general. This will be discussed in more detail below, but any proposed work within the Cathedral should be based on an understanding of the Gothic Revival and what its followers were trying to achieve in the use of this style for ecclesiastical architecture.

The Gothic Revival was a European architectural movement with origins in mid-18th century England. In the 19th century, increasingly serious and scholarly neo-Gothic styles sought to revive medieval forms, as distinct from

the classical styles which were prevalent at the time. A.N.W. Pugin, Edward Pugin's father who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1835, was a principal source of the theological and artistic commitment to Gothic architecture. He wrote and published extensively on the subject. In *Contrasts* (1836), Pugin expressed his admiration not only for medieval art but the whole medieval ethos, holding that Gothic architecture was the product of a purer society. In *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), he suggested that modern craftsmen seeking to emulate the style of medieval workmanship should also reproduce its methods. Pugin believed Gothic was true Christian architecture, boldly saying "*The pointed arch was produced by the Catholic faith*". The various groups and organisations existing at the time who supported the Gothic Revival movement, the Tractarians, the Ecclesiological Society, etc., agreed that medieval Gothic was the distinctive bearer of English spirituality; the spiritual creation of medieval artists and craftsmen. The renewal of worship and faith, they believed, demanded the recovery of authentic Christian space, the space of the Gothic church. Behind this conviction lay not only medieval romanticising but, more importantly, a sacramental understanding of space. The renewed interest in sacramental theology among this movement, led principally by A.W.N. Pugin, placed an increasing importance on symbolism and the belief that space, art and decoration express spiritual values and shape those of the participant, ie. the worshiper.

When the ethos and ideals of Gothic Revival ecclesiastic architecture, as outlined above, are placed in the context of the interior of St. Colman's Cathedral, the inappropriate nature of the proposed extension of the sanctuary area into the nave can be fully understood. It is specious to claim that the relocation of the altar from the chancel area to the nave from the chancel, the rearrangement of the Gothic form of the cathedral's interior and the loss of the fittings and fixtures accompanying the original arrangement has in some way '*regard for the architect's original drawings and his known love of the Gothic principles to which he [Edward Pugin] dedicated his life*'.

The above points referring to the Gothic Revival's spatial integrity, symbolism and furnishings have been discussed by many of the parties who objected to the current planning application including :

The Pugin Society
Louise Harrington, Conservation Officer, Cork County Council
An Taisce
Alda. C. A. Tighe B.Arch R.I.B.A.
Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral

5.1. Extension of sanctuary into the nave, removal of altar rails, and creation of a new permanent altar within the nave.

Proposal

It is proposed to extend the sanctuary into the nave. This work proposes:

- removing part of the existing sanctuary floor, and providing an extended sanctuary at lower levels,
- removing the existing steps up to the sanctuary and forming new steps
- removing in its entirety the existing altar rail and gates, and partially reusing the rail and gates in a different location and in a different configuration, and indefinitely store those parts of the altar rail not reused
- removing mosaic flooring, relaying some parts of this material in a revised form and position, and indefinitely store the remainder.
- replacing the existing modern altar with a new altar in a new location in the nave

Commentary

The altar rail and gates extend for the full width of the nave and transepts, and divide the sanctuary from the nave. The white marble communion rail with red marble pillars was constructed by Pat John Scannell, of Douglas Street, Cork, who was paid for the work in 1892. The brass gates, also dated 1892, were constructed by J & C McGloughlin of Dublin⁷, the same company responsible for the gates to the Dublin Museum (1890, designed by Dean) and the external grille to the west door of the Honan Chapel in Cork (designed by W.A.Scott). The gates repeat the motifs of shamrocks and passion flowers seen in the mosaics. The central pair of brass gates are centred on the nave.

The present configuration has a flight of steps to the east of the altar rail which delineates the separation of nave and sanctuary along the line of the chancel arch. The applicant claims that the proposed reordering works would restore the sanctuary to its original appearance, however this claim is incorrect. The separation of the chancel from the nave is a significant design element, as emphasised in the Heritage Council funded report on St. Colman's Cathedral, 2001:

'...the demarcation of the sanctuary and the nave, represents both a point of union as well as of division set to accentuate the special nature of this space and to protect it from profanation. It is here that heaven and earth, man and God are spiritually united. This statement could not be more clearly evident than in the cathedral at Cobh. The soaring chancel arch decisively concludes the rhythm of the nave arcade and announces the mystical nature of the space beyond. The grammar of this statement is provided by secondary elements, the steps, the communion rails, etc. The skill of the architects has been in the

⁷ Described as 'the leading art-metal foundry' in Dublin in *The Honan Chapel: a golden vision*; Virginia Teehan & Elizabeth Wincott-Heckett p. 76.

*creation of a harmony of parts such that this dramatic message seems quite natural and totally inevitable.*⁸

Part of the rationale offered by the promoters for the proposed works is 'to reflect Pugin's original intentions' on the basis that 'the architect's original vision was somewhat diminished during the prolonged period of construction' and that, due to his death within a few years of the start of construction, 'the loss of his guiding talent may have contributed to the uneven standard of design and workmanship of the interior finishes and the omission and addition of some significant features'⁹.

The applicant suggests that evidence of Pugin's design intent is provided by the Pugin and Ashlin perspective drawing of the interior, which does not show an altar rail between the nave and chancel. The applicant suggests that the altar rail was 'added' in 1892, and notes that it creates a barrier between the congregation and the place of worship. In fact, this separation was the design intent of the architects and is clearly defined in the drawing by the change in level between the nave and chancel/side chapels.

In Gothic architecture the sacred areas of the chancel, choir or sanctuary are marked off by means of a physical barrier in the form of a change in level, an altar rail or even a rood screen which obscures the area reserved for the ordained clergy from the nave. During the Reformation in England rood screens were abolished by law and many were removed and destroyed, but again found popularity in the period of the Gothic Revival. A.W.N Pugin was particularly passionate about the necessity of their use in Catholic churches and wrote a treatise on 'Chancel Screens and Rood Lofts' in 1851. In it he wrote, '*for if any man says he loves Pointed Architecture and hates screens, I do not hesitate to denounce him as a liar, for one is inseparable from the other, and more inseparable from Catholic arrangement in any style, Byzantine, Norman, Pointed or Debased.*'

The fact that Pugin & Ashlin's interior perspective sketch does not show an altar rail or pews does not indicate that the architects did not intend these to be provided, and this is a disingenuous use of historical material. Such fittings and fixtures were considered a given for any functioning Catholic church of this period. Pugin, or any other Victorian architect, would not have designed a Gothic Revival Catholic church without an altar rail. This hierarchical demarcation between chancel and nave continues to be made in churches to this day.¹⁰

⁸ 'A report on St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh; Carrig with Richard Oram; 2001;Page 9

⁹ Report on the re-ordering of the sanctuary and other works at St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, Co. Cork; Professor Cathal O'Neill & Associates, July 2005, submitted with planning application.

¹⁰ In the *Institutio Generalis Romani Missali (2000)*, which currently governs the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass, article 295 reiterates that an hierarchical demarcation is to be made between the chancel and nave of the church [Presbyterium locus est ubi altare exstat.Ab aula ecclesiae opportune distinguatur aut per aliquam elevationem, aut per peculiarem structuram et ornatum]. While it is no longer specified how that demarcation is to be made, they do not exclude altar rails let alone order their removal. Indeed, the norms mention the possibility of a higher floor level, a special structure or ornament.

The altar rail separating the sanctuary from the nave had a secondary function as a communion rail where communicants knelt to receive the Eucharist from the priest, a symbolic meeting of heaven and earth. European Gothic churches of the 12th and 13th centuries, as well as Gothic Revival churches of the 19th century were fitted with screens and rails of various types from carved timber to decorative wrought iron to delineate particular areas of the church. In addition to the chancel area, side chapels for example were often screened off from the main nave. Edward Pugin, despite the inspiration he drew from French Gothic cathedrals, produced a Victorian cathedral at Cobh rather than a replica medieval building. The cathedral is, for the most part, not divided into compartments using physical screens but rather by utilising architectural expression. The aim of the design was to draw the eye from the nave to the glory of the sanctuary area. While Edward Pugin had moved on from the more staunchly medieval designs of his father, and did not use rood screens in his churches, the division between the sanctuary area and the nave, both symbolic and physical, was of no less importance.

Furthermore, it is known from the building accounts and ledgers for St. Colman's that the altar rails were one of the first elements of the interior of the cathedral to be made and fitted. Work stopped on the cathedral due to lack of funds between 1883 and 1889, following which only the high altar was commissioned before the altar rails. Ashlin's design drawing for the brass gates of the communion rail, held in the IAA, is dated 1891, and Pat John Scannell is paid £30 for his work on the marble communion rail in February of 1892. That these elements were completed before the first Mass was offered at the high altar in December 1893, indicates how fundamental they were considered to be to the completion of the interior.

The planning submission describes the work carried out by Ashlin as inferior. However, this is clearly not the case, and he was a highly regarded architect:

'When George Coppinger Ashlin (1837-1921) was elected President of the RIAI in 1902, he was arguably the leading church architect in the country. He was bringing to completion the cathedral at Cobh (then known as Queenstown), begun in 1868 and one of the grandest and certainly the most costly Irish ecclesiastical building of the Victorian era'¹¹

Furthermore, the craftsmen used for fitting out the interior were renowned for their ecclesiastic work, and included Messrs Mayer of Munich for stained glass, Ludwig Oppenheimer for mosaics and many notable Irish sculptors, cabinet makers, stone carvers and metal workers. Mayer and Co. were regular suppliers of fittings to Gothic Revival churches in Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe, as well as to churches in the United States. Some of the churches they provided glass for include J.J. McCarthy's Maynooth College Chapel, Tramore Church, Edward Goldie's St. Thomas a Beckett

¹¹ 'A Victorian partnership – the architecture of Pugin & Ashlin' by Frederick O'Dwyer; Page 55; in '150 years of architecture in Ireland' RIAI 18399-1989; ed John Graby; 1989; RIAI.

Church in London, and A.W.N.Pugin's St. Mary's Church in Othoxeter. Oppenheimer is known, in this country, for his mosaics in the National Museum in Dublin, the Honan Chapel in Cork, and the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Clonard, among others. It is interesting to note that many of the craftsmen employed at Cobh also worked on other buildings associated with Pugin and Ashlin, most notably SS Augustine and John on Thomas Street in Dublin and SS Peter and Paul's Church in Cork, where the stained glass windows provided by Hardman of Birmingham (responsible for 36 clerestory windows among others at Cobh) were made to Pugin's designs.

It would be possible to replace the existing modern altar with a new altar of higher quality and better craftsmanship in a manner sympathetic with the existing cathedral. However, the proposal to relocate the altar to the crossing on an extended sanctuary is not appropriate for a Gothic Revival cathedral, and is at odds with the architectural expression and symbolism of the building. The suggestion made in the planning application that the '*extended sanctuary needs to be integrated both in plan and section with the original chancel to reflect Pugin's original intentions*' and that there is a need to '*reinstate the spatial authenticity of the Gothic Revival plan*' is misguided. The present cathedral, with its demarcation of the sanctuary and the nave, the architectural climax of the interior in the chancel area reflecting the climax of the liturgy, the chancel arch decisively concluding the rhythm of the nave arcade and announcing the mystical nature of the space beyond, is the perfect expression of symbolism of Gothic Revival churches. This almost formulaic use of architectural symbolism is used in Gothic and Gothic Revival churches throughout Europe. The proposed relocation of the altar on an extended sanctuary beyond the boundaries of the chancel area would be a major intervention in a conventional church plan, where every space is designed with a particular purpose in mind. It is salutary to note the quote below from Edward Pugin's father regarding the re-locating of altars, from '*Recollections of A.N.Welby Pugin*' by Benjamin Ferney, Architect, FRIBA, London 1861.

He was extremely angry in finding that his buildings were no sooner completed than they were subject to mutilations through the indifference of those entrusted with their care, and expresses himself with much indignation:

'I regret to say that there seems little or no appreciation of ecclesiastical architecture among the clergy. The cathedral I built, at Enniscorthy, has been completely ruined. The bishop has blocked up the choir, stuck the altars under the tower!! And the whole building is in a most painful state of filth.'

5.2. The design of sanctuary extension

Proposal

The planning application proposes a new sanctuary layout using a semi-circular design to form an extended sanctuary and for the proposed new steps within the existing sanctuary.

Commentary

The existing cathedral emphasises the east-west axis, and the current demarcation between the nave and sanctuary is formed by the altar rail and the straight flight of steps behind. The proposed scheme incorporates a design layout alien to the existing building, and, should the extended sanctuary be constructed, should be reconsidered to use a sympathetic new design that does not overpower the original (scale, form, material, colour). Submissions from the Cork County Conservation Officer and from the Pugin Society note that the proposed design is out of character with a Gothic Revival church, by its use of neo-Classical forms such as semi-circles, rather than Gothic forms.

However, the proposal to project into the nave space with a permanent structure is damaging irrespective of the form this projection takes. One anomaly is that part of the design basis for the revised layout is to increase visibility, yet the proposed scheme places the altar at a lower level than at present. It is proposed that the new sanctuary be constructed from *in-situ* concrete, underlying its intended permanency and lack of reversibility.

The planning application notes the proposed integration of an automatic wheelchair hoist with the steps of the sanctuary at the termination of the central aisle. This proposal is not shown on plan, and there is no information provided on how mechanical and electrical services will be provided to this location. There is the unaddressed question of how this will be provided in an architecturally sympathetic way in the location proposed. We suggest that an integrated equity access strategy for the cathedral as a whole should be considered to address issues of wheelchair access along with access for the visually impaired, etc., rather than addressing these in a piecemeal way.

5.3 The removal of mosaics

Proposal

The proposal is for the removal and relaying at right angles of the mosaic panels dividing the aisles and nave; the removal and relaying of mosaic paving to the west of the altar rails c.1.6m to the east; the dismantling and storage of existing mosaics between the altar rail and chancel; the removal and relaying of part of the decorative mosaic within the sanctuary c.1.6m to the west of its current position, and at a lower level. New mosaic flooring to match the existing is proposed for the lowered and extended sanctuary.

Commentary

The proposed extension of the sanctuary into the nave requires dismantling and covering significant sections of the existing mosaic work, designed by Ashlin and created by the renowned Ludwig Oppenheimer of Manchester, who was responsible for the elaborate mosaics to the shrine and the floor of the chancel area (1892), and by T.C.Edwards of Ruabon in Wales, who executed the simpler mosaic work to the nave, aisles and transepts (1894-7). Oppenheimer worked on a number of significant projects in Ireland, including the mosaic floors to the National Museum of Ireland in Kildare Street, which opened in 1890 and the floor of the Honan Chapel in UCC. Oppenheimer were 'artists in mosaics for church decoration', and advertised in the 'Irish Catholic Directory'. As noted above, the mosaics at St. Colman's Cathedral were one of the first interior elements to be commissioned when the emphasis was on the completion of the sanctuary area in order to allow Mass to be celebrated in the cathedral at the earliest possible date.

Although it is clear that the extension of the sanctuary would require the covering of the area of mosaic directly below, the removal of the mosaics to the transepts appears unnecessary either for the construction of this new sanctuary or indeed for the liturgical use of the cathedral. The relocation of the altar rail in front of the side chapels results in the loss of decorative mosaic floors and appears to be based on a design preference rather than on a functional or liturgical need. The planning application suggests that the continuation of the aisle mosaic paving across the junction of the transept and nave to join the paving at the altar rail contributes to the exclusion of the transepts from the main body of the church. As explained above, the transepts were not designed to form an integral part of the nave, and the continuation of the nave arcading as a curtain wall across each transept defines the architectural emphasis which leads the eye from the nave to the chancel area. The orientation of the bands of patterned mosaic work in the building at present is not a design 'fault' or 'accident' but a continuation of the east-west expression of the building. The issue of the loss of these mosaics has been discussed by other parties, including the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, who, in their submission recommended amendments which would mitigate the proposal and allow for the retention of more original mosaics than currently proposed (between the altar rails and the columns). They also request further information on the locations and methods of storage of marble and mosaic items. However, we note that any proposal to permanently remove original mosaics into storage rather than retain them *in situ* is of dubious worth: the main value of the materials is in their current form and location, not as items in storage or as display material.

The proposal to lift, and relay at a lower level, parts of the existing mosaics (the large central design of the Christian monogram I.H.S. surrounded by motifs of passion flowers, shamrocks etc.) is likely to result in an unacceptable loss of original fabric. It is also contrary to good conservation practice to relocate original materials: it would be more honest and better conservation to retain the existing materials *in situ* by covering over them, and to lay new flooring where required, rather than adapting the existing materials. We also

note the poor colour match of repair patching to existing mosaics used at the entrance to the church, as an indication of the potential damage to the historic scheme in the reordering.

5.4 Provision of a new cathedra facing the congregation

Proposal

The proposal intends a new cathedra to be installed against the column forming the chancel arch.

Commentary

No design details have been submitted of the proposed new cathedra, presider's chair or ambo, so no consideration or discussion is possible about the proposed materials, style etc. However, we believe that these can be designed in a contemporary manner so as to respect the existing cathedral. The issue at question is the appropriate location for these, and the proposed location of the cathedra at the chancel arch is inappropriate for the reasons expressed previously.

5.5 Locating the vesting sacristy in the mortuary chapel

Proposal

The proposal is to a change of use of the mortuary chapel to a vesting sacristy.

Commentary

Traditionally, the mortuary chapel is placed in the west end of the church or cathedral, facing the baptistery, and this is the location selected at St. Colman's Cathedral. The planning application does not discuss any proposed alterations to the space, apart from the addition of a curtain and removable furniture. Although it is possible for the change of use to be carried out in a reversible manner, there is some concern that the proposed change of use could prefigure further alterations: for example the need for washbasin, WC etc.

5.6 Converting the Pieta Chapel to a mortuary chapel

Proposal

The proposal is to convert the existing Pieta Chapel to a mortuary chapel.

Commentary

The Pieta Chapel is a mortuary chapel used for the obseques and lying-in-state of a deceased bishop, and is located immediately over the crypt. At St Colman's Cathedral, this was used as the mortuary chapel for all parishioners as a temporary measure only until the tower was complete. As noted above, traditionally the mortuary chapel is placed in the west end of the church or cathedral, facing the baptistery, and this is the location selected at St. Colman's Cathedral.

The proposal is prompted by the decision to convert the mortuary chapel to a vesting sacristy. The planning application does not discuss any proposed alterations to the space, apart from the proposal to remove and relocate the altar rail and provide wider gates by reusing the existing central brass gates, which would be damaging for the reasons discussed above.

5.7 Reducing the area of the predella of the Altar of the Crucifixion in the south transept and the altar of the Holy Family in the north transept.

Proposal

The proposal is to remove the existing marble predella in front of the existing altar transepts for the stated justification of improving circulation.

Commentary

The proposal to cut back the existing predella appears to be required because of the extent of the floor space to be occupied by the proposed extension of the sanctuary, and the decision to reorient the seating layout within the transept. This illustrates the detrimental knock-on effects of the proposed reordering into other areas of the cathedral. The proposed changes are not essential, and it must be possible to reorganise the circulation, if such is required, using less intrusive methods which do not result in the loss or distortion of original fabric.

5.8 Removal of existing pews

Proposal

It is proposed to remove 11 pews into indefinite storage, and to reduce the length of 8 pews to suit the proposed new layout.

Commentary

The proposed removal and changes to the pews is necessitated only by the extension of the sanctuary and the desire to re-orient the furniture. The removal of the pews into storage constitutes a possibly reversible change; however, physically altering the length of the pews is a permanent and irreversible change. Options to retain the pews in their current form should be considered.

6. Conclusions & Recommendations

This report finds that the proposed changes to St. Colman's Cathedral would compromise its architectural qualities, and have a substantial negative impact on the character and fabric of cathedral. There is no doubt that the architectural integrity of the cathedral would be irreversibly damaged by the proposed changes.

The authenticity of an historic building depends to a large degree on the integrity of its fabric and design. The removal of historic fabric, and the alteration of historic spaces, no matter how carefully the work is carried out, will have an adverse effect on the appearance of the building, and will seriously diminish its authenticity. It will also reduce its value as a historical document. One of the tenets of conservation is reversibility, and best conservation practice dictates that changes to significant fabric or spaces should be made only as a last resort, and as a temporary measure, and made in such a way that they can be reversed at a later date. The changes proposed for St Colman's Cathedral are, for the most part, intrusive and irreversible and therefore do not allow for the restoration of the cathedral to its original state by future generations should liturgical requirements or preferences change.

There must remain a considerable question over whether the potential gains hoped to be achieved by the increased functionality are worth the permanent damage proposed to a building of international significance. There also appears to be some question over whether the proposed permanent physical alterations are an expression of a particular desire rather than of compelling liturgical necessity, and one of the objections to the proposed reordering (by Fr Gabriel Burke) provides a detailed argument against the changes on these grounds. There appears to be an urgent case for a review of the liturgical necessity of the proposed changes by an independent authority, and for further clarification over which parts of the proposed changes, if any, are required on liturgical grounds, and which are not.

It is surprising that, having survived intact for so long after the damaging wave of alterations to historic churches and cathedrals carried out due to particular local interpretations in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, St Colman's Cathedral should now be subjected to the kind of permanent and irreversible alterations that have marred so many historic churches, particularly in Ireland. Every effort should be made to ensure that the liturgical requirements of the Catholic Church can be accommodated without the spatial and architectural alterations proposed. In our considered view, the proposed scheme does not *'...ensure that the appropriate balance is struck between the protection of the architectural heritage and the need for the continued use of the protected structure as a place of worship'*.¹²

¹² Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities, Chapter 5.

The internal fittings and fixtures within St Colman's, including the altar rails, mosaics, and the sanctuary, should be regarded as important and integral components of the original conception of the building, rather than as added-on elements with a lesser value.

Insufficient detail has been provided in the planning application to allow for a proper consideration of the proposed methods of carrying out the work. The application does not, for example, include any drawings or details for the mechanical and electrical services to be installed or for the wheelchair lift to the new sanctuary. Likewise, it is not stated whether or not the pulpit or the choir stalls are to be retained *in situ*. Furthermore, there must be some question over how successfully the existing mosaics can be lifted and relaid. Although some mitigating works could be considered to reduce the impact of the proposed works, for example to ensure the retention of a greater amount of existing fabric and finishes *in situ*, the cumulative nature of the proposed changes to the spatial layout and uses of the building are essentially damaging, and we believe that these mitigating works would provide only a minor concession to the heritage values of the building.

Forty years after the closing of the second Vatican Ecumenical Council and countless re-orderings of historical churches, there is much international debate on the interpretation of the Vatican II recommendations with regard to historic churches and cathedrals. The many publications, articles and conference proceedings which discuss the issue of re-ordering of churches have arisen from an increasing uneasiness worldwide at the loss of historic fabric in the name of Vatican II. One such publication, *Reconquering Sacred Spaces*, published in 2000, was a result of an exhibition held in Rome and jointly organised by Stroik's Institute of Sacred Architecture and the Agenzia per la Citta de Rome. Forty architects and artists were involved from Europe and the U.S. Many of the buildings showcased use the language of Classical or Medieval architecture, with an emphasis on symbolism and the articulation of the sanctuary, altar, tabernacle, confessional, altar rail and shrines. This exhibition is just one example of the increasing interest in the more traditional forms of church architecture, which reflects the more general understanding and appreciation of historic buildings and conservation worldwide. In a sense, this reaction to the modernist ecclesiastical buildings of the past fifty years and the growing interest in historic church forms reflects very much the Pugin era of Gothic Revival almost two centuries ago. A recognition of the changing fashion for and styles of architecture over the centuries should be kept in mind when proposals for irreversible interventions to highly significant buildings are considered. We note that several cathedrals in Ireland have recently undergone a second phase of post Vatican II reordering works, for example St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh (2002) and St. Aidan's Cathedral in Enniscorthy (1994); some of these works included the reinstatement or reconstruction of original historic features removed in the previous reorderings.

As St. Colman's Cathedral is recognised as a building of international significance, its ongoing use should be discussed in an international context.

The vast majority of re-orderings of historic buildings have taken place in Ireland and America, with a significant amount in Britain. However, in mainland Europe, the Gothic buildings which so inspired Pugin and the Victorians have remained in continuous use for centuries, including Notre Dame de Paris, Chartres, Amiens, and Toledo Cathedrals, to name but a few. Their historic, architectural and social significance is recognised and Mass has continued being celebrated successfully without recourse to major interventions. Many of these cathedrals are medieval Gothic buildings, where altar rails and even massive rood screens have remained *in situ* while the primary function of the building as a place of worship has not been compromised. In many cases the original use of the sanctuary area is maintained. In others, where rood screens are particularly elaborate and totally obstruct the worshipers' view into the sanctuary area, new altars, some elevated, have been placed in front of the screens but importantly, the interventions have not resulted in loss of original fabric or removal of fixtures and fittings. Furthermore, the interventions have been carried out in a way which allows for total reversibility. We strongly recommend that this minimalist approach be adopted when considering the proposed changes to the sole remaining intact 19th century Catholic cathedral in Ireland.

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