

INTRODUCTION

St. Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Co. Cork is generally regarded as one of the most important Gothic Revival structures in Ireland. Designed by the renowned English architect, Edward Pugin, in partnership with his brother-in-law, George Ashlin, in 1868 and constructed between then and 1915 when the imposing spire was completed, the building expresses perfectly, through its siting, proportions and structural coherence, the architects' love and understanding of French Gothic form. An architect called to work in this environment today must be conscious of the inherent quality of the building and will seek to find resolutions which may be conducive both to the legacy of the past and the requirements of today.

Restoration and Conservation

The most Reverend John Magee, Bishop of Cloyne, established the Steering Committee in 1991 to guide the full restoration and conservation of the cathedral and appointed Boyd Barrett Murphy- O'Connor as architects in consultation with David Slattery historic buildings consultant. Extensive work has been completed to date including re-slating of the entire roof, re-pointing, cleaning and repairs to the stonework, repairs to the stained glass and the statuary and remedial work to the steelwork in the belfry. Internally the famous carillon has been restored, new electrical and heating systems installed, the mosaic flooring repaired and the interior stonework in the apse and chancel area repaired and cleaned. This programme of work was funded by the faithful of the diocese and the parish of Cobh, Cork County Council, the Heritage Council of Ireland, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and The Islands, the EU Heritage Fund and numerous private, public and corporate benefactors.

Reordering

The Restoration was substantially complete by December 1998 at which time the Bishop appointed a Briefing Committee to advise on the reordering of St. Colman's. His term of reference to the committee were as follows

1. To undertake a study of what is required by the Second Vatican Council with regard to places of worship
2. To consider how best the entire building can be arranged for liturgical use with regard to the norms of the Second Vatican Council.
3. To note very carefully the limits which the architectural heritage of the building will impose on any change which is being considered.
4. To convey its decisions to him together with recommendations with regard to the design team not later than the end of February 1999.

The briefing Committee presented its recommendations to the Bishop on 22nd February 1999 and the following is a summary of the points related to reordering:

Reordering of the interior

- Extend the sanctuary area into the nave.
- Create a permanent altar on the extended sanctuary.
- Utilise existing pulpit as ambo, if possible.
- Position new cathedra facing the congregation.
- Locate vesting sacristy at base of tower.
- Pieta Chapel should function as mortuary chapel.
- Locate two new shrines in area originally designed as shrines.

Following the recommendations of the Committee, the Bishop appointed an Arts & Architectural Advisory Committee who pursued the normal selection procedures including advertising in the national press short listing of candidates and interviews which led to the appointment of Professor Cathal O'Neill & Associates, and they in turn engaged Professor Alistair Rowan, Professor of History of Art at University College Cork as a consultant.

Design Analysis

The design for the reordering is based on the dual requirements of liturgy and architecture. The central theme of the liturgy is that of a congregation gathered around the altar. The importance of the community of people and their close and dynamic relation with the sacrifice is the main thrust of the liturgical guidelines and is reiterated throughout the documents attached to the briefing. The Briefing Committee listed the following internal features in St. Colman's which needed to be addressed within the liturgical context of the Second Vatican Council.

- “The present separation of the sanctuary from the Assembly in St. Colman's does not facilitate the active and full participation of the laity in the liturgy. The separation of the chancel from the nave was designed for a monastic style liturgy in which the members of the congregation were the silent spectators of a liturgy performed in the sanctuary. This traditional separation of the chancel from the nave was changed by the Second Vatican Council with its vision of the unity of the sacred ministers and the laity in the celebration of the liturgy. As the mother church of the dioceses St. Colman's should be the dynamic leader and exemplar of the living liturgy of the Church.
- The existing sanctuary with its temporary altar is not spacious enough for the great liturgical celebrations in the diocese in accordance with the Second Vatican Council e.g. the

ordination/installation of a bishop, the ordination of priests and deacons, the Chrism Mass, Chapter Masses and concelebrated Masses.

- “The bishop’s chair (cathedra) is not visible to the congregation in its present location. The chair is a sign of the bishop’s teach authority. It is a key symbol in a cathedral and should be prominent and visible.
- “The present, temporary, moveable, wooden, altar is in appropriate for a heritage cathedral. Its placement on the existing sanctuary obstructs the view of the beautiful sculptures on the old high altar. A new permanent altar is essential. The altar should be the focal point of the entire church.
- “The pulpit, while an element of great artistic beauty, is seldom used. It also restricts visibility of the existing sanctuary from the side aisle”.

From an architectural viewpoint the problem is to reinstate the spatial authenticity of the Gothic Revival plan, having regard for the architects’ original drawings and his known love of the Gothic principles to which he devoted his life. Fortunately, there is a large amount of original documentation available and many buildings from which we can interpret his architectural intentions and his stylistic preferences. Research for this project involved the study of over 5000 original drawings in the Irish Architectural Archive, analysis of St. Colman’s and other important work by Pugin and Ashlin, a study of Ann Wilson’s “Visions Materialised: The Building of St. Colman’s Cathedral, Cobh (1868-1917)”, consultation with the historic and conservation expert Professor Alister Rowan, and visits to many of the reordered cathedral in Ireland and on the continent.

A comparison between Pugin’s drawings and the finished building suggests that the architect’s original vision was somewhat diminished during the prolonged period of construction which lasted almost fifty years and coincided with the shift in public taste from Gothic to Romanesque. Pugin died within a few years of the start of the construction and 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.

For example, Pugin’s perspective drawing of the interior shows a bright uncluttered space, uninterrupted by altar rails as it flows from the nave to the chancel with the sunlit floor marking the crossing of the transepts. The gradual change in levels is achieved with two platforms of approximately equal area connected by a flight of three steps placed some distance behind the chancel arch. Pugin’s original contract drawing shows iron filigree screens and gates through which light filters to the side chapel unlike the heavy opaque timber screens now in place. The change in plan to the present one, where the flight of five steps cuts across the building in the line of the chancel arch and the subsequent addition of altar rails in 1892 which project into the nave and transepts and terminate in an unresolved junction with the side walls, creates a barrier between the congregation and the place of celebration.

The transepts, an integral element in Gothic architecture, are compromised by the intrusion of the altar rails which diminish their spatial quality and inhibit their usefulness to the congregation. Another slight but

significant detail contributes to the exclusion of the transepts from the main body of the church, namely the continuation of the aisle mosaic paving across the junction of transept and nave to join the paving at the altar rail.

The level of the daylight in the interior is not as intended: the clerestory lights shown in Pugin's sketch have been reduced by approximately 20% in height and the addition of extensive stained glass which Ashlin unsuccessfully resisted combined with the later addition of storm glazing has diminished the light quality of the interior.

Design Proposals

The extension of the sanctuary and the placement of the altar at the crossing at the nave and transept is inevitable if the primary needs of the liturgy are to be fulfilled. This move, together with the reinstatement of the transepts by relocating the altar rails, gathers the congregation around the altar and increases significantly the number of people who have a clear view of the sanctuary. In architectural terms the extended sanctuary needs to be integrated both in plan and section with the original chancel to reflect Pugin's original intentions. To this end it is proposed to combine the extended sanctuary in the nave with a portion of the existing chancel for form a space of appropriate size with a new semi-circular flight of steps in approximately the same location as Pugin's connecting to the upper chancel and high altar beyond. The original reredos and the tabernacle will be retained in their present position. The result is a finely proportioned space located directly under the chancel arch, the most dominant and significant structural element in the cathedral, with the altar placed at the important junction of nave and transept. The plan shape of the extended sanctuary is curved to address the congregation on three sides and stepped at the sides to articulate the free-standing columns. A new cathedra is placed in a prominent position against the chamfered face of the chancel pier with a clear view of the entire space. A new ambo will be on the same side, again with excellent visual connection to the people. The existing cathedra will be retained in the body of the church. A processional cross will be placed adjacent to the altar. A president's chair would be provided on the opposite side to the ambo. An automatic hoist for wheelchairs will be integrated with the steps of the sanctuary at the termination of the central aisle to give the disabled dignified access to the main level of the new sanctuary.

Designs for all the sanctuary furniture will be prepared by selected artists recommended by a sub-committee which has been appointed for that purpose.

Four portions of the altar rails and four gates will be used in front of the four side chapels set back in line with the columns and the remaining altar rails will be stored on the gallery. The double centre gate will be relocated in front of the mortuary chapel and the two single gates will be combined to form a double gate serving the sacristy. The mosaic paving to the nave will be lifted and re-laid in new locations to accommodate the changes and additional mosaic to match the existing will be provided as required. The portion of the mosaic in the side aisles which currently runs across the face of the two transepts will be

removed and re-laid at right angles along the west edge of the two transepts to serve the side doors. The marble predellas, one step high, in front of the altars in the two transepts will be removed as their present position is an obstruction to circulation. Where mosaic is obscured by new work it will be protected and preserved.

It is proposed to accommodate a vesting sacristy in the room at the base of the tower (south narthex). The cabinets for vestments and vesting tables will be moveable to allow other uses for the room.

The Pieta Chapel will be used as the mortuary chapel and has been provided with a wider gate to facilitate movement.

Summary

The reordering of St. Colman's will complement perfectly the ambitious works of the restoration and conservation and satisfy the requirements of the Briefing Committee, especially the new relationship between the sanctuary and the congregation.

Our aspiration is to clarify the architectural language and devise appropriate forms for the elements which will inspire through their artistic integrity the full extent of the liturgy and will resonate with the existing space and fabric of the buildings

The Requiem Mass for Bishop McCarthy in St. Colman's in 1894 was attended by Fr. Stephen C. Ashlin, brother of the architect, who showed remarkable prescience in a letter to the Bishop-Elect when, describing the occasion, he wrote

"I thought that Queenstown Cathedral looked very fine on the day of the Monthly Memorial. It is a pity we had not more space for the apse. It looks to me always somewhat cramped. I think I heard the architect say that it in the future might be extended".