

NEW CHURCHES RESEARCH GROUP

ARCHITECTURE & CHRISTIAN MEANINGS

by

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The Church lives. It lives corporately in doing these things: it baptises; it expounds and teaches; it offers the Eucharist; it gives praise. These things can be done in any convenient place. You can baptise in a river

a river; with grass banks

you can teach on a mountain

a rugged mountainside; Mount Athos

or from a boat

a fishing boat; a little from the shore

and you can offer the Eucharist on any table.

whitewood kitchen table

The Church needs to do these things. But as necessary acts they do not demand special places: not special places in order to remain the corporate acts of the Church.

But of course there is the weather, which is often against you. And there are, from time to time, people who are against you, people who want to put a stop to what you are doing. And so it is, and has been, convenient for the Church to have shelter and security.

a Roman house

This usually means buildings.

Now shelter and security are matters of convenience. It's preferable to have them, but not essential. To be conveniently housed--merely conveniently housed--the Church requires very little of a building.

A Ministry of Works precast concrete hutment

You see, we have buildings which will serve. Our technological equipment can now produce very economical structures, designed to meet minimum levels of convenience with the least amount of material and effort.

To be conveniently housed, the Church requires a more or less uncluttered space, big enough to contain its members in the particular place, and safe against weather and aggressive intrusion. You can have it more tasteful

a small prefabricated timber hall

and retain the advantages of prefabrication. Some may think it will then rank as architecture. We also have buildings of what is called 'traditional' construction

a brick hut on an airfield

which will meet the requirements. But then of course we always have had buildings of traditional construction.

a Kentish barn

In all these buildings you can use tables, and chairs, and reading desks, and little platforms, and bowls of water. And so you can do all the things that the Church needs to do. By arranging your furniture with skill, you can do them very conveniently; and since all the furniture can be movable, you can use these buildings for other purposes in between. So if convenience is the criterion, we do not need to build special places called churches.

If we feel a need to do so, it must be for other reasons.

distant view of a Gloucestershire village: houses and church

There are special places called churches in the smallest villages. Ever since the house-church, the Church seems to have felt this need, and to judge from the architectural evidence, it has felt that a church should have something--a quality--which sets it apart from other kinds of building.

Do we still feel this need?

May we not be taking something for granted in continuing to build churches? May we not be acting on a mere assumption that this is the right course, because of a habit of mind?

The authors of this paper do not think so. But we do think that there are those who have reduced their approach to church-building to such an intellectualised state that, if they were to face the true implications of their own approach, they would have to deny this need. For the need is essentially a thing felt; deeply felt and absolutely valid. (We must ask whether, in these days in which we pride ourselves on being such rational creatures, we really allow ourselves the recognition of our feeling.)

Just now I mentioned a quality which sets a church apart from other buildings. This is not a stylistic quality; it is not to be found in any particular stylistic feature. It does not reside in pointed arches, otherwise the churches of Ravenna or of the City of London are not churches at all. Nor does it reside in steeply pitched roofs, nor in towers and steeples, nor in any of the other devices which architects attach to their designs in an attempt to give them a semblance of 'churchiness.'

Neither is this a quality which merely distinguishes a church from other kinds of building.

We believe that the need felt to build special places called churches is in fact the need of man to set apart a place, in a stricter sense.

To set apart  
to consecrate or hallow  
to give over completely  
to offer up.

Jacob set up a stone and said "How terrible is this place: it is the house of God and the gate of heaven."

Stonehenge is a set-apart place. So is the Greek temple.

the temple of Nike Apteros at Athens

The idea is obviously pre-Christian. It is probably as old as

man himself; but we cannot condemn it as pagan, any more than the idea of setting apart certain days for commemoration and re-enactment. In fact the concept has a direct parallel in the setting apart of time.

a month from the Calendar: Sundays in red

The Church sets apart--gives over--Sunday. And in setting apart Sunday, the rest of time (the six weekdays) are not thereby dismissed. We accept quite readily that the periodic occurrence of Sunday has the opposite effect: it symbolically makes over the whole of time.

Similarly the Church sets apart people.

an Athonite monk

The existence of the monk, living a life dedicated entirely to God, does not invalidate the lives of those of us who live in the world. Once we come to terms with the fact of his existence, our own way of life (ministry, or prophetic function) takes on new meaning.

The Church sets apart time: the Church sets apart people: the Church sets apart place.

a small, marvellously perfect Byzantine church

But: if you admit that this is a symbolically valid thing to do, you have then a situation which must be faced. Because once you set apart a place, you have (whether you like it or not) a physical thing with symbolic content.

This cannot be escaped, firstly because some symbolic quality inheres to a greater or lesser degree in all things made by men, and secondly because the act of setting apart is itself a symbolic act. Therefore the place set apart--in the Christian context a church--will necessarily have greater inherent symbolic value than most other things made by men.

M.O.W. precast concrete hutment

The Ministry of Works standard precast concrete hutment is not acceptable as a church because it has a symbolic content contradictory to that of a set-apart place. It is symbolically the most neutral building we have, it may be used for any purpose you choose, it is a building for nothing in particular, and it speaks of its own indifference. It is a remarkable achievement; because in its very neutrality it is a building with emphatic symbolic content.

Now man is still a symbol-maker and a symbol-user.

a British 30 m.p.h. roadsign

Communication, for example, by visual means other than the printed word becomes increasingly commonplace.

an algebraic equation

The roadsign and the algebraic signs are, perhaps, obvious examples of symbols. The most interesting thing about them in this context is that they are only symbols; they have no purpose to serve except their symbolic purpose, their purpose as the vehicle of meaning. They articulate and present meaning, and that is our definition of a symbol. But although they are totally symbol, and nothing else besides, they are very limited in their scope; the meaning they present is marginal in relation to life and its deeper realities. There are things all around us, on the other hand, which have other primary purposes, things in their own right and not made primarily as symbols, which paradoxically have far more profound symbolic content. They speak to us, as it were, even though we may not consciously be aware of the fact.

We say, 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

a sliced, wrapped loaf; 'Wonderloaf'

The sliced wrapped loaf is what bread is today, as a physical fact, to a great number of people. When we say the Lord's Prayer, we use the word 'bread' to signify a full range of meaning. Basic sustenance. The necessities of life. Work, physical and spiritual security. This range of meaning is still felt and understood. We talk about the 'breadwinner of the family,' and Marie Antoinette's bad joke has not yet become obscure. And so: if the meaning of the Lord's Prayer is still quite plain to us, and if the sliced wrapped loaf is bread as many people know it, why is the image on the screen offensive in this context?

It is simply because it has a symbolic content which is not expressive of these deep-rooted meanings. It is expressive of other values. It feels wrong.

This is quite independent of whether or not the bread itself is good. It has to do with its look.

a foundation stone, before laying, in the studio

Why do we lay foundation stones? Foundation stones have never had any practical significance. They are no more useful than any other bit of the wall of which they are a part. Today we build with many techniques, many of which have little or nothing in common with masonry techniques. We still lay foundation-stones.

the same stone, being laid by a workman and a bishop

A foundation stone is a thing 'set down' in a place. Once you have set it down, everyone feels that a building has really started. It is the moment for rejoicing. You set down the stone and you go and have a party.

the same stone, laid at a corner, at ground level

It is not quite the same thing if you unveil a thin stone tablet pinned on the wall when the building is half built. A foundation stone has a symbolic job to do. It needs to be a good four-square block of stone which can be laid properly

with a real trowel. A corner-stone.

'Behold I lay in Sion a chief corner-stone, elect, precious.'

The physical characteristics of the object must be congruent with the intended symbolic values.

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However rational we like to think we are, we do not remain unmoved by the symbolic power of the things around us. This is a fact which the advertising agencies have been quick to grasp, and to exploit.

an American car advertisement: car on country bridge, lightly clad girl lying alongside with leg in air; ambiguous caption

An object with a quite ordinary purpose, that of getting from A to B as fast as possible, is seen to have an emphatic symbolic content of a perhaps surprising kind.

a Greek ikon

This ikon represents the three angels who appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre. For the eastern Christian it has deep symbolic content--meaning--speaking of the Holy Trinity. Notice the angels; and notice the sacrificial animal in the foreground.

Now things speak symbolically. They can speak

a modern Christmas card: three baby girls with wings and haloes, and a skipping lamb

of displaced meanings and degraded values.

an English suburban street

This suburban street might be anywhere in England. It speaks clearly of a way of life and the values involved. Of isolation, and escape: "I will go and live in a house from a romantic bygone age. If I cannot afford to have my house detached and set deep in private grounds, then I will at least have it semi-detached. I will pretend that my neighbours are not really there. I will build a fence between my ground and my neighbour's. I have my front garden beautifully kept, and on it I may be judged. Because, in so far as my neighbour does exist, he exists in order that I may appear respectable to him."

a place-name sign: all curly wrought iron and a coat of arms

This is a very respectable place to live. The 30 m.p.h. sign said "You are now entering a restricted zone, reduce your speed to 30 m.p.h." This says "You are now entering Bromley." But it conveys very much more besides. It was intended to, otherwise the good citizens of Bromley would have been content with the ordinary Ministry of Transport place-name sign.

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So you see: if you are going to build a church--if you are going to set apart a place--you are going to create a thing which speaks. It will speak of meaning, of values, and it will go on speaking. And insofar as it speaks of the wrong values, it will be destructive.

This not only concerns the attitudes of those outside, but also the understanding of those within. A church building is formative of the life of the church. There is clearly a responsibility here.

The responsibility has been misunderstood. The misunderstanding can be summed up in the words "I like a church to look like a church." "Look like" is not a recognition of reality. It makes a demand for a sentimental image, for the world of make-believe.

a certain 'modern yet gothic' church

This unreality has a symbolic manifestation in architecture. There is a great deal of it about, because it is of course a very attractive and pleasant occupation. Architects have sought for stylistic overtones; gathered a series of architectural forms which call up historical associations.

a certain 'modern' church

The lack of architectural seriousness in the resulting buildings is the give-away. These are caricatures of churches. The values symbolised by these caricatures are destructive; destructive of the life of the Church.

The architect's retrospective justifications--and architects are very skilled at retrospective justifications--betray the appeal of sentimentalism.

a new church in a New Town

We quote: "We have taken advantage of the traditional Gothic inspiration--slender columns and wide span arches--but interpreted them with modern methods." This not only contains meaningless statements, but can be applied equally well to Paddington station, or nineteenth century exhibition halls.

exhibition hall: cast iron and glass

All this groping about is extremely wasteful. But it is not only wasteful; it is dangerous. Damage is being done to the Church.

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Our homes are expressive of, and formative of, our ways of life.

a village green: tightly packed houses round the edge

These houses are expressive of a way of life. These are all very simple and unassuming and they are close together. As a whole they form a little Town Planner's dream, because they give you something which is extremely difficult to get in any

New Town. You might describe that something as community. This group of houses wasn't formed like this for reasons of taste or because of fine ideals: community created it, the mutual interdependence, and acceptance of that interdependence, of village life. And of that it is expressive.

tenement courtyard, with access balconies, washing, women chatting

This perhaps happened the other way round. A benevolent trust created these homes, according to an ideal. That the ideal is now outdated is no reason for us to condemn it. The point is that here again is something of community, and in the midst of squalor. The building is formative of that, and when these people are rehoused in hygienic new houses in a New Town, they will miss it.

a pair of semi-detached suburban houses

These houses are again expressive of a way of life in which, particularly, interdependence is not acknowledged. There is an air of self-sufficiency about them

a gaunt Georgian farmhouse

as indeed there is about this. But with this difference: this is a lonely farmhouse, and the way of life of a farming family is in many respects self-sufficient.

Houses tend to be expressive of an entity--a way of life, and its values.

You all must know this of your own living rooms or studies. After moving into a bare room, you know the point at which the room has become 'yours;' when you feel at home in it. It has become symbolic of your way of life, and it responds to you. For others, it corresponds to you. It reflects not only what you do but what you are.

In the room, you have created an environment out of your way of life and its values. This will speak to others, but above all it will 'feed,' as it were, your way of living. This is why it is important to you. It is sympathetic.

And when we say that it will speak of you, your values and your way of life to other people, we must add that while this is inevitable, it is also quite incidental. If a room is decorated and furnished only for the purpose of impressing others, it not only becomes a hollow sham; it becomes destructive of life. One can go further and say that for this to have happened, the way of life itself must already have become shallow, and that is the reason for the character of the room. There is a sympathetic relationship between any manifestation of life (or, for that matter, any denial of life) and the kind of environment which it tends to create.

There is, then, something more in the building of a church than the provision of a sentimental image.

The church building must arise out of the life of the Church; the life lived.

You may say: This is all very well, but how in practice are we to achieve that?

Unlike the example of the living-room, the Church does not usually create its own environment by direct action. For various practical reasons there has to be an agent, the architect. The architect's special function is to create environments through an understanding of the ways of life they are to serve. The danger, obviously, is that the architect may instead create an environment which serves only his own fantasies.

Now our post-war schools are the architectural result of new educational life.

### a new school

Educationists and teachers recognised the value of school buildings which affirmed the values of their approach to education, and the best of our schools do affirm these values. They are not sentimental, and they are not on the other hand institutinnal. They are a direct and positive expression.

But the great developments in school-building since the war are often explained only in terms of the application of so-called scientific method; of research and of practical application of the results. This is presented as an intellectual process.

Now much research has been done, and it has been made generally available to architects. As a result there has been an improvement in the average quality of schools, and yet only a very small number of them can be said to be really good schools. These really good schools have been designed by those few architects who have understood, by those who have been concerned with and have committed themselves to the values of education. And so they have been able, through their deeper understanding, to give expression to those values.

But while they are good architecture, they are certainly not great architecture, and this is something which has disturbed architectural critics, especially humanist critics, considerably, because the values of education are very high in the humanist scale.

Professor Rudolf Wittkower has written: "In contrast to 19th century classical architecture, Renaissance architecture, like every great style of the past, was based on a hierarchy of values culminating in the absolute values of sacred architecture."

Here, we think, is a possible clue to this dilemma. School-buildings, or for that matter, hospitals, libraries or civic centres, are concerned not with life at its roots, but with important yet peripheral aspects of life.

The church building--sacred architecture as Wittkower calls it--is concerned with life in its ultimate reality.

Our churches could be architecture more than any other building can be architecture. And yet they are not. They are more the sentimental Christmas card than the ikon.

### the chapel at Ronchamp

Even our very great architects are capable of producing the sentimental image. Brilliant, original; yet still the sentimental image.

Where then, can we start?

We must concern ourselves with the things which are done; done by the Church as a body, the things through which the Church lives its life. We must try to understand the meanings of these things. These meanings achieve symbolic expression in and through the church building, the building which serves the Church in what it does.

As an example of this, we will briefly consider baptism.

#### 4th century font, cruciform, with steps down

St. Paul writes "...we who were taken up into Christ by baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our baptism, we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence. We have to be closely fitted into the pattern of his resurrection, as we have been into the pattern of his death."

This font, made in the fourth century, conveys strongly the idea of going into the death of the cross and rising again.

#### the baptistery of the Orthodox at Ravenna

Now partly because of the early custom of naked baptism, the building of baptisteries as separate rooms developed, and it is today often considered necessary to provide a baptistery as a space separate from the main body of a church, or at least railed off from it.

As a result, we now have a number of baptisteries being built in which the font is behind a glass screen; glass because, in our new liturgical awareness, the font is regarded as something which the People of God should be able to see, to encounter as a reminder of their baptism whenever they come to the church.

But whatever you make, whatever you do, will speak; and if you put a font behind glass, it will look like objects do when behind glass: that is, it will look like a museum object. It will cease to have the very vitality you wish to convey.

If dying and rising with Christ is seen as being central in the meaning of baptism, is not the most expressive single physical symbol the waters of baptism themselves?

#### a pool, with a smooth surface

But if you want to make water explicit as a symbol you need quite a lot of it. It is no use having a teacupful in a bird-bath. And if you have a lot of water, you can make it symbolically explicit either by putting your water in an expressive architectural context, or by using it expressively in the rite. Or, of course, both.

In the western Church we seem generally to have opted for the first. The western font is, at its best, basically nothing more than an expressive context for water. But in the Eastern Church, the second alternative seems to have been taken.

#### plan of a Byzantine church

Baptism takes place in the centre of the church, under the dome, in a portable font. It is big, and holds a lot of water.

The baby-or adult for that matter-is stripped naked, and dunked three times. Right under.

a baby being lifted out of the bath

The naked human body. Completely immersed in, and drawn out of, a lot of water. It is an image which sticks in the memory.

mosaic, the Baptism of Christ, from the church at Daphne

And overhead, on the pendentive of the dome, the constant reminder, whenever you come to this place set-apart.

In the Western Church, we have, mostly, a different rite. And we have, for many hundreds of years at least, chosen to use water in a different way: to make it expressive by giving it an architectural context, the font.

the font at the church at Bow Common

By relating the font in some way or other to the door of a church baptism is not only recalled to those who enter; its position at the entry to Christian life is emphasised and also its continuing meaning throughout that life; for the meaning of baptism then has, so to speak, to be negotiated afresh each time before going on to the eucharistic space of the church.

But when we speak of relating the font to the door of the church, we do not mean merely putting it down on the plan near the door and hoping for the best. A true architectural relationship means more than that. The problems of designing for a meaningful liturgy are not just a matter of putting things down on a plan so that people can see well and hear well and be near to this or that centre of activity. It is a matter of achieving real, living relationships by using real architectural means.

Most of the theoretical discussion of church design now centres on the drawing of plans. In fact, at the moment the plan seems to be the only thing which is being considered. But plans are not buildings; buildings are three-dimensional things, they are essentially spatial in character. You cannot design a building only on a plan, not considering its spatial organisation.

You will see that in order to start designing for baptism, the architect who is concerned must be informed about the meaning of baptism, and about its relationships to other aspects of the life in Christ. And so there are two distinct issues.

The first is: the theology of baptism and of its relationships to other aspects of the Christian life. That gives you the first principles. That is not our job as architects, although as Christian laymen we ask a lot of awkward questions.

The second issue is: so to understand the meanings of those things; and then, so to understand the nature of architecture as the vehicle of meaning, that architecture can be created. That is the responsibility of the architect, as architect.

These two issues apply throughout the design of a church. They place a responsibility firstly on the Church as a whole, a responsibility to attain a better understanding of itself. And then in particular on the architect, to share in this understanding and also--and this is no small matter--to under-

stand what architecture, his own job, is about.

When we speak of understanding, we do not mean merely an intellectual appreciation, but an understanding with the whole mind, which means also having a feeling for these things.

Just as the pastor achieves such insight through his actual work, through meeting the realities of his work by contact with people in real situations, so also the architect achieves understanding through working in real situations. Intellectual speculation, without true contact, is already bringing us dogmatisms such as that about the desirability of geometrically central altars. The architect must try to achieve a real meeting with the Church as it exists in any particular place for which he is asked to build.

It might be assumed that one matter in which the architect will have achieved an understanding is in the handling of physical materials, since these are the stuff with which he constantly works. This cannot unfortunately be said to be always true. Intellectualisation is as rife here as elsewhere; it is something to which the modern architect is particularly prone.

The architect must have a feeling for the character of materials and the character of forms. The form and material of an altar are, for example, easily seen as vital to its symbolic nature. But so are the precise form and materials of the walls or any other part of the building itself. Some materials have such a pronounced character that their appropriate use is easy to appreciate.

#### a pile of squared stones

Here are some stones: consider the nature of stone. Now to make a foundation stone out of wood is a contradiction not only in verbal terms but in visual terms as well. It is quite obviously to destroy its symbolic character entirely. That is easy to see: but it is not so easy to see that whenever you design something, there are materials which are appropriate to the purpose, and others which are not. And even if you have chosen an appropriate material, you can give it a form which will be inappropriate to either the material or the purpose, and in so doing you vitiate the symbolic presentation of meaning.

The choice of appropriate form can be shown in this very simple example.

#### a 30 m.p.h. roadsign

This roadsign again. This sign has only one simple job to do. It says what it has to say with great economy and therefore clarity, which is important for the fast-travelling motorist. In some way the circle seems to lend extra weight to the number thirty. Perhaps it has to do with a connection between circles and the number three, or with the roundedness of the forms of the three and the nought. However that may be, it is a successful signal because of its form.

Now recently we have acquired this one.

#### a 40 mph roadsign

The 40 has been put in a square, which by itself certainly gives emphasis to the number forty. Square: four: forty. But the square sits inside the old circular perimeter borrowed from the 30 sign. The red part of the sign is not readily assimilated as a form: it is merely the bit left over when you put a square in a circle. The effectiveness of the signal is reduced; it is a bad signal because it is a bad symbol.

the 40 m.p.h. roadsign, redesigned

If the 40 were to be surrounded by a straight-forward square red border, as the 30 is by a circular one, the signal would have the same clarity as the 30 sign has. And the two meanings would not be confused.

This is, you may say, merely an exercise in the study of perception. The matter of symbolic appropriateness does of course go far deeper than this. Consider the nature of candles.

a Paschal candle

Central in the tradition of the Church is the symbolism of light. Our Lord used this symbolism of light on many occasions. And developing from the lamp carried in during the Berakah, the blessing of God in Jewish domestic worship, we have the paschal candle--lumen Christi--and we have the baptismal light; lights carried at the Gospel to signify the Light of the Word; lights at the altar; candles lit as an expression of prayer.

a group of votive candles

Light as the expression of joy at times of festival. And consider: we put candles on our birthday cakes. For the symbolic expression of the meanings of these things, we use candles. A candle gives light: so does an electric light bulb. We see in the candle a significance which the electric light bulb does not have, and so is manifestly unsuitable for this significant purpose.

But this is not to say that an electric light bulb has no possible symbolic function as a source of light.

the electric lighting fittings at the church at Bow Common

It is merely limited: perhaps it is that it is light, but not fire.

So, in the architectural elements of a church, we have to use those characteristics of form, material, and so on, which signify. Not those which depend on romantic association, but those which have inherent symbolic value.

a Greek theatre: Delphi

In the Greek theatre, relationships are set up between actors, chorus, and spectators, and these relationships are given by the spatial form. The relationships are fixed, and this is no inconvenience to Greek drama because the relationships are precisely those which are required. There are those who think this arrangement suitable for a Christian church, and we will say this: if you build a church with circular, raked

seating, you will get a place where people watch something being performed. They may be gathered around, and they may be able to see well and to hear well: but that will not turn them into participants. They will be very-well-catered-for spectators.

the interior of a circus

An arena is an arena. It sets up a set of relationships, and you cannot change those relationships without changing the spatial form itself.

We must beware of easy and obvious solutions, because the relationships needed in a church are peculiar to Christianity, and in their architectural manifestations must be expressive of the nature of the Church.

Now those who have a concern for preaching take their responsibility seriously. A verbal expositon must not only strive towards the truth, but also to be precise in its use of verbal symbols; aestheticism is rejected in obedience to the Word of God. The verbal structure of the liturgy itself is now also seen as vital. So is the structure of its meaningful actions. Though perhaps not so central, what the church building conveys is also formative. It speaks, constantly, and in so doing it also must be as precise as possible. If it is not, it will affirm meanings and values other than those of the Church.

There is a responsibility here: the only way to avoid it, is to have no building at all.