

Report

To: The Vicar
Date: 12 February 2010
Subject: St Andrew's Church – *Building for the Future*
Appraisal of the architects' suggestions, Options A-G.

Summary and conclusion

The view that I have reached, after careful consideration, is that none of the suggestions can or should be considered beyond this point; all should be rejected. I say this because none of these proposals appears to me to be more creative than what we already have as instruments for the generation of a loving community.

We clearly need something, but in my estimation these plans take away more than they give. They are a muddle. I therefore recommend that we start again. This is exactly what happened when the first plans were considered for the 1980s extension.

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Introduction

1. Along with several others, on the wish of the PCC I have been asked by the Vicar to appraise the plans recently produced by the architects Purcell Miller Tritton, and to comment upon them. Before doing so, in case some do not know, I should say that I have been worshipping in St Andrew's for over 25 years, that I was closely involved with the design of the first extension to the building, and that I am a chartered architect with an unusual amount of experience in re-ordering and extending churches.
2. I was not the architect for the first extension. That was Robert Maguire and Keith Murray. With Peter Hammond they had started in the 1950s what was later called the Liturgical Movement, and I believe it may be helpful, as an introduction to this report, to reflect on some of their observations. In his book *Liturgy and Architecture*¹, Hammond said:

One cannot hope to design a satisfactory church unless one is prepared to face fairly and squarely the question of what a church is for: and the answer to this simple question is by no means simple, or so universally recognised, as is commonly supposed.

3. In defining his answer, Hammond set about describing what a church was not, and should not be. He said²:

We have to get behind the idea of a church which has dominated western architecture since the Middle Ages, and which has distorted our liturgical thinking and our piety. It is necessary to go back to the sources of Christian tradition in order that we may lay hold afresh on the essential meaning of the house of God as a shelter for a worshipping community gathered around an altar. Splendid and evocative as the cathedral symbol was, it obscured this primary function of the church building as a house for corporate worship. In the cathedral concept, as the Bishop of Reno remarks, 'it was the structure itself which assumed priority. It was the fortress of faith, the stronghold of religion, the rhetorical assertion of the temporal triumph of Christendom.

4. It fell to Maguire & Murray to express the nature of the church building in positive terms, which they did succinctly in the introduction to their review *Modern Churches of the World*:³

Like all the other material things the Christian Church uses, church buildings are not essential to the Church's life. If this is forgotten churches quickly become an end in themselves, a danger to the life they should serve. Yet the Church uses material things; especially those things which

1 *Liturgy and Architecture*, Peter Hammond, Barrie and Rockliff, 1960: Chapter 1, page 7.

2 *Ibid.* chapter 9, page 166.

3 *Modern Churches of the World*, Robert Maguire & Keith Murray, Dutton Vista, 1965.

are apt because of their intrinsic symbolic significance. The bread and the wine which Christ chose to use in the last supper already had a deep meaningfulness, to which he gave a new dimension in the context of thanksgiving. When the Salvation Army forms a circle on a windy street corner it also uses a form with deep-rooted meaning. A place is made by the circle of people (where before there was only placelessness) for the time of the service; a centre is created. In the very simplest form a church is built...

...What distinguishes a church from a circle of people or an arranged kitchen is that where these set apart a place for a short time, a church is permanently set apart for worship...

...The Roman Catholic church and the Friends' Meeting House have this in common: they are both built as places of meeting, between man and man and between men and God...

...Once a building has been set apart for worship it acquires these meanings; as with bread and wine, they are inherent. If the meanings are not made manifest in the architecture, then the symbolic means of architecture will be 'speaking' of something different, and there will be a conflict, an implied negation. Churches cost a lot of money; the expense is only justified if one believes that the building in all its implications can and should be creative in the life of the Church. Otherwise it would be better to use the school hall or any other kind of building not set apart.

5. That test, whether the building or church (with a small c) is creative in the life of the Church (with a capital C) is the one that I shall use in my appraisal of these seven designs. But before doing so, I would like also to refer to the Bible reading notes *Encounter with God*, and to the reflection written by Fran Bennett OBE for 25 January. She was commenting on 1 John 3:11-24:

The question of 'what is Church?' and 'how to be Church' in the twenty-first century currently exercises many in the Western church. Increasingly relegated to the margins and seen at best as an anachronism, we are faced with fundamental questions about how to be, what structures we should have, and the nature of the leadership needed for this time. Debate about the merits of large or small churches is fuelled by the message that numerical growth is the main measure of success. Disillusioned, some are giving up on 'gathered church' altogether. Others are moving into settings that provide mystery and anonymity, evidenced partly in the more recent growth of cathedral attendance.

6. And as Bennett goes on to say, John takes us right to the fundamental

demonstration of what it means to be a community of faith: for the hallmark of the Church is a loving family⁴.

7. I find it easy to adopt these ideas; they seem natural to me. But although I have looked carefully at the plans, I cannot see that the architect has been briefed to care for them. I shall deal presently with each plan in particular, but I should say at this stage that none will carry my recommendation.

The original building

8. It is difficult to find complimentary remarks about the work of Mr A R G Fenning, FRIBA, the architect of the early twentieth-century construction. Famously, Nikolaus Pevsner describes it disdainfully as being

*Norman, of all the improbable styles. Rock-faced, large, and rather mechanical-looking,*⁵

echoing the description given shortly before it was built, by a parishioner:

*The proposed Norman church will look elephantine, 'dumped down' amidst twentieth-century North Oxford villas, and besides I think the comparative simplicity of the services at St Andrew's a cogent reason for a more cheerful style of architecture...*⁶

Mechanically, the church fulfilled its function to house a large number of people in one space. But there is no escaping the accuracy of these comments. As it was built St Andrew's was, as Peter Hammond said at the Consistory Court when giving his expert opinion in support of the Maguire & Murray extension, that "fortress of faith", the very antithesis of a building in service to the community.

9. But if the exterior of the building with its heavy doors and piggy-eyed windows was a rebuff to the community, alas it did not do much to stir the hearts of those inside. It is, of course, in the cathedral style, a modern basilica built before any concession was made to the importance of gathering around the table. The 'pull' to the east is irresistible, and in consequence we are stuck with stage and proscenium dais, and with views of the backs of many heads. It is not ideal, but we are used to it.
10. The original church-builders had insufficient funds to complete the building. The tower was never built, and it was not until the 1960s that the kitchen and two other rooms were built in the north-west corner. Pews, thankfully, were omitted from the design and replaced by chairs. But the omission of the plaster and decorations to leave the dull yellow stock bricks exposed put any hope of creating a joyful worshipping space firmly out of reach.

Natural lighting

4 1 John 3:11, 23-24.

5 Pevsner's *Buildings of England : Oxfordshire*, 1974, p. 289

6 *Living Stones*, Paula Clifford, 1990.

11. With small windows, natural lighting is limited. On sunlit days, supplementary lighting is not required; but on dull days, the practice is nearly always to turn on the lights. If the walls were to be plastered and decorated (or even painted without the plaster), the amount of artificial light required would be reduced. But even the ceiling would be improved if it were to be repainted. From the cracks and where the paint has flaked, it looks as though the ceiling still has its original coat of paint. Reflectivity could be increased considerably by re-coating paint that is close on 100 years old.

Artificial lighting

12. Originally lit with electric pendants, these were replaced with much improvement by tungsten-halogen incandescent lamps with a bright luminosity and good colour rendering. But the limited life of these lamps and their high mountings was too great a safety risk, and they were replaced only a few years ago by long-lasting discharge lamps of insufficient power and extremely poor colour rendering. Reading small print under them is difficult for the elderly, and the lack of light contours and shadow is disquieting. The narrow-emission spectrum of the discharge gases makes people look ill. What was a drab hall has been even further dulled by this inappropriate bucket lighting scheme, with the separation of the stage and auditorium accentuated by the contrasting use of bright incandescent lamps which successfully highlight the separation of the ‘business end’ from the people.

The dais

13. The proscenium dais has been successful. Given only temporary life by the Chancellor in his consent, it has lasted because nobody has found reason to complain about it. There is no doubt it has improved the way in which president and leaders communicate with the congregation. Even so, it has a shortcoming in that it was devised without providing sufficient room for a music group and singers. In consequence the face-on-face arrangement ensures that the front few rows of seats are generally underpopulated – space that could be taken up by the musicians if only the front of the dais was adapted by enlarging it at its south end, both to the south and to the west.
14. There is another shortcoming of the dais. Firstly it is not compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (“DDA”). The lack of a ramp can be excused by the practice of bringing bread and wine to the disabled in the congregation; but this would not suffice on other occasions.⁷ More immediately, and obviously, is the difficulty that the ambulant disabled have with the steps, and the lack of high contrast for the visually impaired.

Seating

15. It may have been a happy misfortune that we have never been encumbered with pews and furnishings that preclude any use of the main church other than for services, but the church-furnishers’ blue chairs that we have, being non-stacking, do little to assist in providing for a joyful and flexible

space. Close stacking chairs are nowadays both comfortable and very neat when stacked.

Recommendation

16. In any scheme for the improvement of the church, I believe the improvement of the main worshipping space should be given priority. It appears from the plans that it has been given none. It cannot be successfully re-ordered, but in all the areas that I have described, it can significantly be improved.

The 1980s extension : 'Building the Kingdom'

17. The decision to extend the building to the west with the scheme described by one city councillor as building "a tin whisk around a brass colander" came slowly, following twenty years of consistent growth in the size of the congregation. The rooms available for teaching children were too few and too small; the parish room was too small, and the kitchen was insufficiently sized to be equipped properly.
18. Three early schemes designed by Maguire & Murray were considered and rejected. The first was for a daring but expensive division of the main church hall, placing the worshipping space upstairs with small rooms below. It failed because it was thought not to be affordable, but there were also concerns that there would be very little daylight in the downstairs rooms. The two others were schemes on the south side, but both were also considered extravagant, with little or no improvement to the existing plant. The City planners were consulted, a visiting officer commenting that an extension on the south side "would face no difficulty with approval". Even so, the PCC rejected all of the proposals and the architect was told to start again.
19. The scheme which then emerged is the one that was built. The objectives were as follows:
 - a. Maximum accommodation within smallest envelope;
 - b. Building opened out with view right in;
 - c. Minimum circulation space;
 - d. Plenty of storage;
 - e. Lavatories;
 - f. Supervised entrance;
 - g. Ministry room on the traffic-way;
 - h. Comfortable, warm, homely environment;
 - i. Worship space over-spill;
 - j. Replace organ and reclaim gallery;
 - k. Low maintenance;
 - l. Low running cost;

- m. Good light;
 - n. Realistic attitude to development in conservation area;
 - o. Halve the cost, at least.
20. That these requirements were generally met is self-evident, but the investment of time and effort in achieving what was wanted was high. Firstly, extending the building to the west was recognised at the very outset as being a scheme that would inevitably be rejected at local planning level, and probably by the diocese (which it was). However, advice was given that the chance of success on appeal with both planning and faculty would be better, but that it would take two years. An appeal was therefore lodged before the City Council had decided the application, anticipating that it would be refused, and every effort (massive letter writing campaign, neighbourhood meetings etc) was made to sway the inspector in favour of the application. The design was deliberately self-effacing, taking as much land as was thought possible.
21. At every stage of the process, the congregation was kept closely involved in the process, and asked to contribute to it. A large notice board was erected in the church, giving weekly bulletins of progress, and seeking views openly and widely at every step. Once a week a prayer meeting was held in which questioning from everybody was invited, and discussion made; then God's guidance was sought for the direction of the whole project, and thanks given for progress made. As it happened, the architect was also praying.
22. The weakness of the extension can be found in the following areas:
- a. The L-shaped room is an awkward shape;
 - b. The room opposite the kitchen is miserably dark;
 - c. The room above that is inadequately supervised;
 - d. The use of the balcony, being an escape route, was never properly thought through, and the organ speakers were never screened;
 - e. Storage space in offices and small rooms was inadequate;
 - f. Sound break-out effectively prevented the parish room being used independently of the church without disturbance;
 - g. The major space of the church hall was not properly refurbished;
 - h. The separation of the front porch from the stair hall by the old arched opening should not have been kept;
 - i. Non-stacking chairs were chosen. (This was, in fact, a separate exercise from the construction work.)
23. A few notable strengths are:
- a. There is an "open" feel on the route from front door to main church hall, allowing the layout of the building to be quickly assimilated;
 - b. The parish room is flexible, working well for meeting and greeting, or more formally;

- c. Other rooms in the extension are generally pleasant;
- d. There is always somewhere to sit and chat;
- e. Storage spaces have been carved out ingeniously;
- f. Perimeter heating is comfortable;
- g. Shelter is provided by the external doors, and all external joinery is protected from the weather;
- h. The view into the heart of the church from the street works well, not only for regular users of the church (who will glance into the parish room to see who is there before entering) but also for newcomers. Here is an extract from an email recently forwarded to me by the Vicar:

I am writing mainly for information and encouragement. After the 11.15 service this morning I was sitting at the end of the parish room waiting for F... to give me a lift home. An oriental (Japanese or Chinese?) lady sat down beside me and after a bit I spoke to her and introduced myself and asked if she lived here or was visiting. She said she lived here but had never been to the church before so I expressed interest and asked which was her usual church.

She said words to the effect: "Oh I don't go to any church but I walk down this road nearly every day and whenever I pass this church something is going on. I have never seen that before - churches always look so shut but this seems so busy all the time. So I thought I would see what a service was like!"

As you can imagine I followed this up as best as I was able and suggested filling in the cards etc. etc. but she was young and attractive and some one else came along in the middle and broke in - so I didn't push things. I shall pray for her - but I wanted you to know so that you can let appropriate "welcomers" etc. know that this sort of thing is happening. I didn't want her to feel "chased" but simply said that it would be lovely to see her again next week.... The sermon was just perfect for such a "guest" - really tackling the existence of God in the great I AM of the Burning Bush.

The 'Case for Space'

- 24. The *Case for Space* examined whether there was a need to expand our church plant, and if there was, how that could be achieved. It seemed a remote exercise, and although I knew that a conclusion and recommendation had been reached, for what I would readily accept as being entirely my own fault I never discovered the reasoning or the facts behind the recommendation to press on. I therefore find myself asking:
 - a. What are our numbers, and what are the patterns of change? (For

what it is worth, my impression is that numbers have been static for 18 months or more.)

- b. Has a space audit been undertaken? To what use is each of the rooms put, how populated are they and over what periods? (This should include all the rooms, including the main hall.)
 - c. Do we have an efficient booking service, ensuring maximum use of the plant that we have?
 - d. How are our staff deployed? What are their reasonable demands for space and privacy?
 - e. Have space shortages been particularly identified, and have we worked out what additional area would meet that demand? (This may, of course, include the converse of surplus.)
 - f. Is there an ideal quotient for staff requirement based on size of congregation? Can we ascertain this from our own experience and has research been conducted elsewhere?
 - g. Can the area of the worshipping space and ancillary areas be similarly calculated? Are there any rules of thumb?
 - h. How does our preferred liturgy impinge on the arrangements? Where, for instance, is the ideal baptistery, and what form does it take? What is the desired progression of the congregation before, during and after regular worship? How do we best cater for festivals, weddings and funerals? How much room does each person need for worship? Do we encourage dancing?
 - i. We now have the Terrapin huts. How much of a remedy have these provided?
25. There have also been questions and opportunities for planting and expanding elsewhere. But again, and I blame myself, I do not know how the decision-taking has been justified. Questions keep returning, including:
- a. St Giles' Church is by all accounts faltering, some saying it is failing. Should 100 of us go there and encourage spirit-filled Biblical ministry in a prime location for evangelism? (This must surely be the least expensive option.)
 - b. Phil & Jim School is ideally placed to serve the new communities built on the strip of marshland east of Port Meadow. Has the possibility of using this Church of England school as a meeting place been utterly exhausted?
 - c. Talbot Lodge has twice been up for sale in the last 10 years (I think). Have we compared the cost of purchase, alteration and refurbishment (which could be offset in part by letting, for the place is vast) with the cost of new construction at £3m?

26. Out of this haze of uncertainty, we learned that the case for space was accepted. We heard that a firm of architects was appointed with a project manager (for what purpose I cannot imagine), and we were informed that many tens of thousands of pounds were required in fees.

The Brief

27. The brief, we are told, is shown on the site plans. And so it is. But if this is a brief, then for a project of this kind it is the briefest and the least informative that I have ever read in my entire career. Where is the budget? What use are the rooms to be put to? How many are required? How many staff members are to be accommodated? What, if any, is the projected growth of the congregation? If this is the only information that the architects have been given to work with, then the expectation is that they must see in the dark.⁸
28. It is therefore unsurprising that the architects have been floundering about, making the haphazard suggestions shown in the presented plans. It is self-evident that they have had no idea of what they are about. In my view, none of the suggestions can or should be considered beyond this point: all should be rejected. I say that because, when I ask the question in each case, “Can I see this extended building being more creative than what we already have in the generation of a loving community?” the answer, without exception, is “no, it will take away more than it adds”. We clearly need to do something, but it should not be the adoption of a fundamentally flawed design. Weigh up the value of each of these Options, and in each case the balance tips heavily the wrong way. We need to start again.
29. I shall therefore be brief with my particular observations.

Option A

30. In this scheme, six existing small rooms are lost. The gain from four is 1/12th extra worshipping space; from the remainder, circulation space.
31. Use of the land is wasteful.
32. The current ideally placed parish room is lost, to be replaced by a similar sized meeting room to which an excursion has to be made. The function will not transpose to this new location. There is a smaller room above. Both rooms have insufficient height.
33. There is a large amount of circulation space, but no node to take bearings from or to make a natural place of gathering and meeting.
34. From the little that can be seen of the architecture, I have deduced that there would be two reversed-slope or “winged” roofs facing Northmoor Road. The chances of such a proposal gaining acceptance from the Council or the Diocese I rate as being slim.
35. The prayer room is not sufficiently supervised.
36. There is a problem with fire traps.

8 I have not been asked to comment on process, and do not do so. However, I would say generally that a project manager or an architect, aware that they were working to an inadequate brief, should either point that out or else work closely with the client so as to reach a sufficient definition of the client’s requirements.

37. The crèche is vast. I see no justification for this, and no justification for a crèche garden.
38. I cannot see the purpose of having a confused and divided entrance.
39. Views into the church are lost.

Option B

40. Six of our existing rooms are again lost, but the gain in the worship space is degraded by hanging an extended gallery over it. (It should perhaps be recognised that the NW and SW corners were removed from the church hall not only to provide space, but because the sight-lines from those far corners, to the chancel, are poor.)
41. Use of the land is wasteful.
42. The sunken extension will provide less nuisance to neighbours, but is considerably more expensive.
43. Youth rooms and external balconies overlooking back gardens are likely to be considered intrusive by neighbours and planners.
44. The alterations to the gallery will deprive the nave of an important source of daylight.
45. The large meeting room is off on a limb.
46. The circulation space is extravagant
47. Views into the church are lost.
48. The outside shelter is lost.

Option C

49. This design is joyless. The entrance can be likened to a railway terminus; entirely the wrong kind of journey.
50. Circulation area is vastly wasteful.
51. Noise break-out will be a problem
52. Same shortcomings with the meeting room as Option A.
53. The prayer room is insufficiently supervised.
54. The corridor along the exterior of the building and the use of the land are an improvement, but the balcony will be seen as a potential nuisance.
55. Balconies and children do not go together.
56. Fire strategy appears not to have been thought through.
57. Views into the church are lost.
58. Pushing the entrance into a half bay of the church hall will clash with the architecture.
59. I think the spiral stair must be a joke.
60. The outside shelter is lost.
61. There is no flower room and there is insufficient storage

Option D

62. Rooms lost as before with space under being degraded by an extended balcony.
63. This will not get planning permission or a faculty in a thousand years – too high, too far forward, and too aggressive.
64. No flower room.
65. A good prayer room – but dare I say, this time too public?
66. No storage.
67. Vast circulation areas which manage, nevertheless, to be constricting (and so, dangerous).
68. Noise breakout will be a nuisance.
69. Natural light is lost from the south and west sides of the church.
70. The view into the church is lost.
71. The outside shelter is lost.
72. The building elements look exposed to the weather – maintenance will probably be high.

Option E

73. Rooms lost and nave space degraded by extended balcony.
74. Parish room is reduced in size by 2/3.
75. Large meeting room is off-route and will not be used as well as the parish room – no natural gathering place.
76. Insufficient storage. (A corridor does not make a store.)
77. Prayer room poorly supervised
78. Offices and youth rooms ineptly placed
79. Fire trap
80. Noise break-out
81. Loss of natural light
82. View into the church is lost

Option F

83. This scheme involves the entire demolition of the 1980s extension. The NW corner is not pretty, and will be scarred.
84. The existing basement has been overlooked.
85. A basement store is expensive. If storage is needed for stacking chairs, it should be close by and on the same level.
86. WCs or ablution rooms for an army?
87. A music room without a window.
88. Inefficient use of land.

89. Fire and escape strategy flawed
90. Loss of natural light
91. Reception and ground floor operation manager's office is in the right place, but the prayer room next door will not last. Does the operation manager need a second upstairs office?
92. Better position for the crèche, but can its size be justified?
93. If a second separated hall is required (in the way that south side is separated), the large meeting room shown will not serve this purpose.
94. Are seven "youth" rooms needed?
95. Neighbours won't like the balcony.
96. Lost outside shelter.

Option G

97. This scheme also involves the entire demolition of the 1980s extension, but then apparently replacing it unnecessarily.
98. Loss of four rooms and any gain in worshipping space compromised by circulation.
99. The new entrance to the church is not inviting. Outside shelter is lost.
100. The appearance of the whole will be such as to attract general disapprobation.
101. Replacement parish room is too small.
102. Entrance strategy is dull.
103. The basement is expensive, but there is greater justification for sinking the youth halls into the basement than storage.
104. Loss of light.
105. Prayer room insufficiently supervised.
106. Fire and escape strategy flawed.
107. Meeting room has a good height. It is also in the best place – but why is it not linked to the church?
108. This is the only option with a flower room.

A way forward

109. I have not measured any of the proposed options. But if the quality of the new-build is to be lasting the cost will be high. We are told that the area of each scheme is approximately 1,000m². Building costs for a scheme such as this will be between £2,000 and £2,250/m² at today's prices. To that must be added professional fees, probably coming in at 15% or thereabouts, leading to an overall cost of £2.3m to £2.6m. To that must be added VAT, bringing the cost up to a range of £2.7m to £3.0m. For a near assetless organisation, it is prudent also for there to be a 'secret'

contingency fund which none of the consultants know about, of between 5% and 10% of the overall liability depending on how brave we wish to be. Realistically we have therefore to prepare for a budget of between £2.8m and £3.3m for this scheme.

110. If we were to obtain construction tenders in the next 12 months we would probably get a very good price (represented by £2.8m to £3.3m), but I doubt whether the congregation presently has the appetite for it. It would be useful to compare the last major fundraising (£400k, or £850k at today's value) and compare that with the level of general annual giving in the late 1980s.
111. I therefore believe that the better way forward is to examine efficiency in the ways I have mentioned and not to give up on church planting – and even to consider migration.
112. Meanwhile, I trust we shall make an application for the renewal of the temporary planning consent for the Terrapins. We should keep the roof repaired to stop them melting away. I would assess the likelihood of obtaining a second extension low. Enforcement proceedings would probably not be exercised however while an application either for renewing the current application or for a permanent solution was being considered. At some stage soon the congregation must be informed of the likely write-off of the value of the Terrapins.
113. If (and perhaps when) the congregation decides it is up for further building, then I would recommend that the appointed architects read the extension that we already have, for it was designed as the first phase of the south-side extension. The distance from the main hall of the church to the new (smaller) hall on the south side should be reduced to a minimum by placing a new opening in the south wall. The new hall should be tall for acoustics but not double-height so as to allow light into the south aisle. Two storeys should be built next to 16 Northmoor Road for smaller rooms, lit, so far as possible, from the east and the west. Care should be taken so as not to cause a nuisance to our neighbours. What we already have should be kept. Affordable accommodation should be included if there is a recurring need to house youth workers and others. There should be room enough, if we can afford it, for two one-bedroom flats as well as a galleried hall, extra rooms including a kitchen, and greatly improved lavatory facilities.