

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, BOW COMMON

The Story



150 years ago, the Bow area of East London was built up after centuries of being no more than common grazing land (hence the name Bow Common). The coming of the railway lines, and the two canals nearby, guaranteed the growth of a working population clustered near to vital transport links.

The first St Paul's, Bow Common, built 1858

To serve this growing population a grand and lofty Victorian Gothic church was built in 1858, with a great spire and a huge stained glass window at the west end. This first St. Paul's, Bow Common became a real focus for the neighbouring community. Then disaster struck during the Blitz of World War II and in 1941 incendiaries gutted the church, reducing it to a shell. But thanks to War Reparation funds, a new church could be built.

The Vicar, the Revd Gresham Kirkby, was a young radical who drew like-minded people about himself. At that time there was a serious re-evaluation in progress among churches and architects as to the function of a church, and how its building should express its deepest purposes. Interest was stirring at that time in the earliest forms of church architecture and in exploring the very roots of Christian worship.



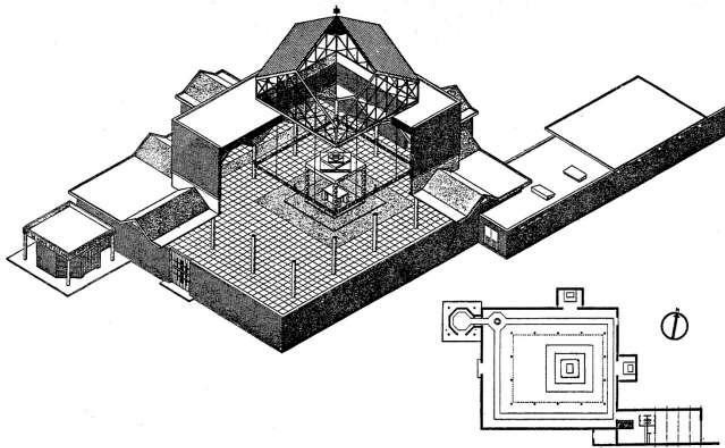
Revd. Gresham Kirkby

Thus churches were being built in Europe with central altars and minimum division between priest and people. These ideas passionately concerned Fr. Kirkby but he was not impressed by the new buildings he saw abroad. And so he approached a designer in his early 20's – the late Keith Murray – whose work had impressed him in a local commission at St. Katharine's Foundation Chapel. He and the equally young & gifted Robert Maguire, an architect, worked from 1958-1960 to build the church – regarded widely as the most significant post-War Church in Britain. In 2013 it won the National Churches Trust Diamond Jubilee award for the best church since 1953



*Robert Maguire
onsite in 1958*

This was the most radical and pure expression of a movement which focused on the way the building would be used, and upon the relations of the gathered worshipping community, together around the altar as one Body, in relationship with God.



Original drawing showing layout

Robert Maguire wrote:

‘We were trying to build a church which would encourage true relationships in the liturgy – priest to people, people to one another, priest to God and people to God, the worship of the whole Church together. Encourage, but not cause; because it is only people coming together with understanding and faith which bring those relationships to life.’



Font reflecting light from the lantern

Architectural heritage

In form, the building is basically a stack of three diminishing cubes with ancillary spaces added at the sides. Maguire and Murray's defining geometry was that of two bounded areas – contained by the exterior and barely broken bounding walls and also by the inner 'transparent' encircling line of columns. These columns surround the worshipping area around the altar, and outside the columns are areas serving the varying needs of the Christian community - a space in which the whole common life of the worshipping community could be lived out - and from which they would then go out into the world.

Benches were designed to be easily moveable so that they could be set aside or re-arranged according to need.

The roots and antecedents of this building's design run deep; to classical forms and the Renaissance Revival, to the fundamental geometry of square and circle, influences owing a debt to Brunelleschi, Palladio, Bramant, and further back, to the churches of Torcello, to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and to the great Pantheon in Rome.



Central altar, ciborium and lantern

Brutalism



Concrete is used for the church roof

The Church is often referred to as New Brutalist. Brutalism is a movement in architecture that flourished from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. The term originates from the French word for 'raw' in the term used by Le Corbusier to describe his choice of material *béton brut* (raw concrete).

Examples are typically fortress-like, with a predominance of exposed concrete construction, and in the case of the 'brick brutalists', ruggedly combine detailed brickwork and concrete. There is often an emphasis on expressing in the whole-site architectural plan the main functions and people-flows of the buildings and creating an architectural image that communicates strength, functionality, and frank expression of materiality.

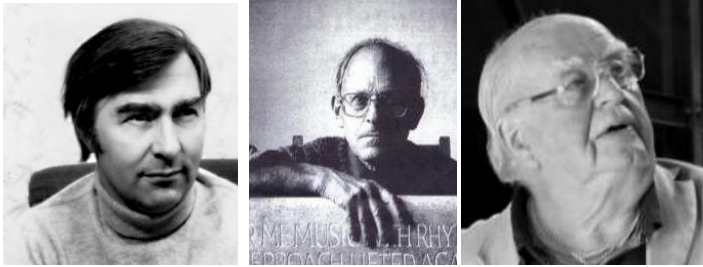
The Mosaics

Around them Murray and Maguire drew other young and gifted workers and designers. The mosaics encircling the walls are the work of Charles Lutyens, great-nephew of the architect Edwin Lutyens, carried out over a period of five years after the church had already been opened for use.



detail from an Angel of the Heavenly Host mosaic

The mosaic cycle of the 'Heavenly Host' was an intended and integral part of the church as designed, and the original intention was for Keith Murray to create this work, but this proved not to be possible as Maguire and Murray moved on to other commissions. The work was then given to Charles Lutyens, an artist who had exhibited his work but never created a mosaic before.



Keith Murray, Ralph Beyer & Charles Lutyens

Charles reflected on how to represent the 'Heavenly Host'. In the Christian and Jewish tradition angels have various functions and duties. Some act as Divine Messengers. Others surround the Divine Being with ceaseless worship and praise, these are the 'Heavenly Host' - who were to be represented on the spandrels prepared above each of the pillars to receive them.

Charles Lutyens visited the island of Murano in Venice, famed for its production of mosaic tesserae, and chose 700 colours as the palette from which he would work. He began in 1963 and during the next five years Charles worked on this huge expanse of 800 square feet, day by day, piece by piece, saying "I had placed each individual tessera with feeling and intuition, allowing the colours, as it were, to 'call me.'"

Twelve angels make up the mural, and each corner represents an elemental creature for Earth, Air and Water and an abstract for Fire.



Charles completing the mosaics in 2011

He finished this enormous work just as the funds ran out, but in his mind the work was unfinished and so to express his dissatisfaction he left a small patch of raw cement up in the south-west corner. After 43 years, at the age of 78, he added the missing piece; here was final closure on this work, with the second eye of the 'Earth Creature' being finally 'opened', now to look out upon the church and its ongoing life through the initials 'CL' (Charles Lutyens) which now form that eye of the Earth Creature.

Lettering



Beyer's Lettering around the porch

Ralph Beyer was apprenticed to the sculptor and typeface designer Eric Gill and was also taught by sculptor Henry Moore. He is recognised for developing lettering from a craft tradition into an art form. His lettering work on Coventry Cathedral is said to be the most significant work of British public lettering of the 20th century.

The lintels of the entrance porch bear a statement from the Book of Genesis, 'Truly this is none other, But the House of God, This is the Gate of Heaven.' Beyer handcrafted each letter and imprinted each in the wet concrete.

He also carved a large anchor into the sacrament altar, an early Christian symbol.

How the Church is used



Stitches in Time tapestry exhibition

In 1998 the Victoria & Albert Museum's *Shamiana, the Mughal tent Exhibition* revealed the ability of this building to be more than a liturgical space.

Since then the church life includes exhibitions from *Stitches in Time*, celebrating the needlework tapestries by local people to *Stones of Menace* – an exhibition exploring brutalist architecture. Large single artworks have been enhanced by the space, particularly the iconic statue by Charles Lutyens *The Outraged Christ*, later in Liverpool Cathedral.

The dazzling, 'Angel', 2004, by Rose Finn-Kelcey, was a prize-winning installation made from thousands of shimmer disks covering the western wall and could be seen reflecting the movement of wind and sunlight on the London skyline.



Angel 2004, by Rose Finn-Kelcey

At other times you will find Sales and Bazaars going on. The church is used as an ideal space for conferences and community purposes, concerts or suppers, dance or performance projects, as well as by Pentecostal fellowships - all are embraced and given dignified and appropriate space in this remarkable building.

The best Modern Church

In the BBC TV series, *Churches, How to Read Them* (2010), Dr. Richard Smith presented a remarkable array of British Churches from Saxon times to the present day. St. Paul's, Bow Common was chosen to represent the best of 20th Century church architecture.



Award for Best Modern Church

In 2013, the National Churches Trust, the Twentieth Century Society and the Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association organised a search for the best Modern church in the UK.

Awarding the prize to St Paul's, Bow Common, the judges said they had sought uplifting architecture that celebrated Christianity and churches that best responded to changes in religious liturgy and practice.

In 2016, repairs were completed with thanks to generous support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the All Churches Trust and also the Wolfson Foundation, Rank Foundation, and Garfield Weston Foundation, ensuring this remarkable church for years to come.

Last Word from Robert Maguire

Robert Maguire, pictured here visiting the church in 2010, described his intention:

'I designed the building as 'liturgical space', informed by how I saw the nature of liturgy as the formative activity in realising the community as the Body of Christ.

Later, and now, I would call it 'inclusive space', space that enables everyone within it, wherever they are, to feel included in what is happening, wherever in the space that may be.

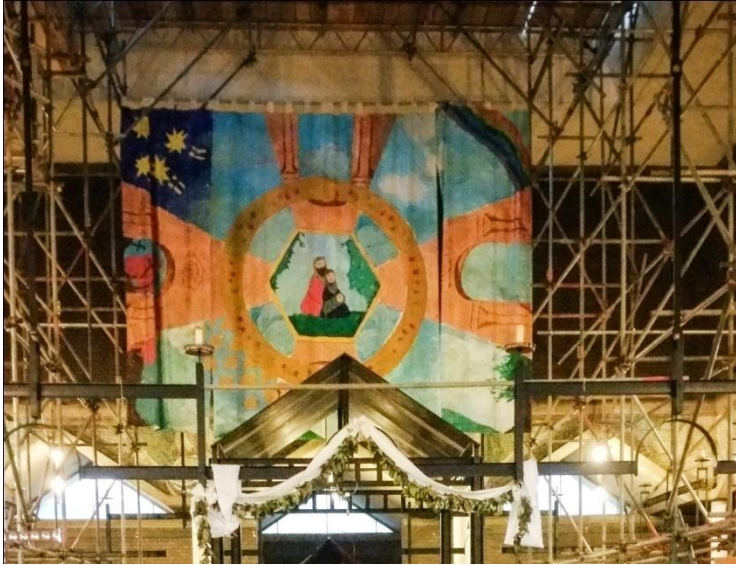
So this quality naturally extends inclusiveness to anything the community wishes to do in the building, and the building should lend itself creatively to community-building of any kind. '



Robert Maguire in church



Palm Sunday procession along the brick path



Repairs 2015 -16 with picture painted by the church school, hanging amid the scaffolding.

*The material in this booklet is based on the work of
Prebendary Duncan Ross
For more detail on any topic, please visit
www.stpaulsbowcommon.org.uk*



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