

Re-ordering of St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, Co. Cork
Planning Appeal Reference Number PL53.214338
Statement by Prof. Cathal O'Neill to Oral Hearing
2/3/2006

In my introduction on Tuesday I briefly outlined our proposals and described the submissions by the DOE and our response to it.

Today I wish to explain more fully our approach to the project as follows under a number of headings:

1. Briefing
2. Research & analysis
3. Design process

1. Briefing

The Brief given to me by the client was comprehensive and was made up of the following sections:

- Summary of Recommendations
 - Re-Ordering of the Interior*
 - Extend the sanctuary area forward 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 areas originally designed as shrines
- The Liturgical Context (extract)
 - "There is a need for visibility and audibility on the part of those who lead the liturgy

- There is a need to promote a sense of unity between the presiding minister and the other members of the assembly
- There is a need for space for the dignified performance of liturgical celebrations, which frequently require movement and procession from one place to another
- There is a need for clear visibility of, and adequate space for the Altar, Cathedra, Chair and Ambo”

- The Heritage Context (extract)

“The re-ordering of the interior of an historic Cathedral is a process of conservation of a living entity rather than the preservation of something frozen in time. In St. Colman’s Cathedral re-ordering demands great sensitivity to the integrity of the building and requires that an appropriate balance be found between the conservation of heritage and the liturgical requirements”.

- St. Colman’s Cathedral (extract)

“In the liturgical context of the Second Vatican Council the following internal features in St. Colman’s need to be addressed:

- 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 the 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 diocese 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 eg 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) in its present location is not visible to the congregation. The chair is a sign of the bishop's teaching authority. It is a key symbol in a Cathedral and should be prominent and visible.
- The present, temporary, moveable, wooden, altar is inappropriate 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".

Appendix 2

Bishop's Brief (extract)

"A church is a place of worship. Even though we use the term "church" to describe the building, the building is not really the Church. The worshipping community of faith are. We know this to be true. We are the Church. Among the symbols with which liturgy deals, none is more important than this assembly of believers. The church building must be seen both as the house of God and the house of the people of God. The church building should reflect the liturgical needs of the people who gather there. They also express the theological perception of the believing community".

Appendix 3

Covenant with Heritage Council

A copy of a covenant between the Trustees of the cathedral and The National Heritage Council of Ireland was attached, which provided for a grant of money towards the restoration and in exchange the Trustees agreed that the items listed in this appendix would be treated as described below. (only items affected by the proposals are quoted here)

(b) The timber screen on either side of the chancel. The screen on the north side containing the cathedra may be altered to allow a clearer view of the cathedra. Alternatively, the cathedra may be relocated.

(g) The floor of the chancel may be extended outwards towards the nave to allow more space in the chancel for concelebrated Mass. This will cause some circulation problems due to the raised level of the chancel floor relative to the adjoining floors. The Council would like to be consulted when and if this work is carried out.

(h) The existing marble altar rails, and particularly the beautiful brass gates which form part of them, are worthy of preservation. It is accepted that some alteration to these may be necessary - for instance, if the chancel is moved forward as mentioned in (g) above and also to achieve the open vista from the nave to the altar. It would be The Heritage Council condition that at least a significant portion of the altar rail, say in front of the side altars, be kept in position and that the remainder and all of the gates be preserved and possibly used elsewhere in the cathedral.

(k) The baptistery on the north side of the entrance screen is very fine and should be preserved intact, although minor alterations, to allow for seating or screening could be considered.

Appendix 4

Technical sub-committee report

With reference to floor finishes the sub-committee view was that existing finishes should form the basic vocabulary of the finishes in the extended sanctuary and that these new finishes should blend in with the existing. The sub-committee expressed a concern that the newness of the reordered work should be suppressed in order to blend in the new and the old.

2. Research & Analysis

The research for this project goes back a long time; for my clients over ten years and for our firm just over four years since we were appointed in October 2001. But, in a way my preparation started almost 50 years ago when, in 1957, I enrolled in the Illinois Institute of Technology's Masters Degree Program and for my thesis proposed a design for a new cathedral for Dublin, supervised by Professor Mies van der Rohe. He introduced me to the work of Rudolf Swartz, an early 20th century architect, whose inspirational buildings and writings seek to show how the configuration of gatherings of people can influence events. In the intervening years, I have observed this phenomenon and am convinced of its relevance. On my most recent visit to Milan to see the restored Last Supper by Leonardo di Vinci I realised the significance of the grouping with the Apostles gathered around Jesus rather than at either side of a long table with a host at one end.

Our research on this project includes:

- St. Colman's Cathedral:

We studied the interior, sketching the elements and commissioning a photographic and dimensional survey and the making of spatial models to examine the interplay of volumes

I was impressed with the spatial sophistication. The nave is the dominant space extending at a constant height from the west door to the apse in the east. The cube like transepts which are the same height as the nave form a secondary axis lit by the south gable window. The side aisles and side chapels provide tertiary spaces linked directly to the transepts and create a pleasing spatial composition which determines the character of the building as much as does the surface decoration, fittings and furniture. In my view the flight of steps at the chancel arch and in particular the unbroken line of the altar rails are a discordant elements in the composition. Furthermore the arbitrary location of the rails is out of place in the well ordered structural grid of the.

- Drawings and documents:

Fortunately a large collection of drawings were available in the National Archive and more in the Diocesan Archive, together with many records including correspondence. With the help of the archivist Sister Cabrini we learned about the progress of the building. Also Ann Wilson's thesis "*Visions Materialised: The building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh (1868-1917)*" was most useful in identifying artists and dates.

We observed discrepancies between the original drawings and the built condition not only in matters of detail but in the spatical relationships. In the built form the transparent wrought iron screens and gates have been replaced with virtually opaque timber screens. Whereas Pugin's sanctuary was stepped gradually from nave to high altar with the front portion of the nave of the same level as the side altars, the sanctuary is now six steps above the nave and three steps above the side chapels. The altar rails are not shown on the original drawings and if they had been it is unlikely that there location would have been so arbitrary or unresolved.

- Consultants:

We worked closely with Professor Alister Rowan who we had appointed as historical consultant on the project. Pdraig Murray (my partner) who has extensive experience in the design and techniques of architectural conservation provides on going advice. In addition, we met with leading experts in the field of architecture and conservation including those from The Heritage Council, Local Authority, specialist contractors and conservators. A full list is included in our response to the Appeal.

A number of mosaic and stone specialists were consulted in Ireland and Britain and as a result we are confident that lifting and reusing the mosaic as well as matching old and new is altogether feasible.

- Other buildings:

We visited many buildings over the past four years, including other work by Pugin, and re-ordered churches and cathedrals in Ireland and abroad.

I have chosen a small number of important buildings which have been re-ordered to demonstrate different approaches.

1. The Padua Cathedral

This remarkable building built between 1232 and 1307 is widely regarded as the foremost example of Romanesque architecture in Italy. This very radical design was carried out 1997 and has been hailed as an outstanding re-ordering and has led to the appointment of the same architect to re-order Pisa Cathedral.

2. Milan Cathedral 1385 - 1485

The extensive re-ordering of the interior was executed using materials similar to the original but distinguished by their form.

3. Notre Dame Paris 1163 - 1250

We also reviewed our own work in this field and although we are not "church architects" we have been responsible for two re-orderings, the Pro Cathedral in Dublin and Milltown Parish Church, also in Dublin.

In the Pro Cathedral we designed a new stone floor over the extended sanctuary, removed the rails at the front, reconstructed the altar and tabernacle and, by simplifying the arrangement of the choir seating and reredos, brought the congregation, which had always surrounded the sanctuary, into closer contact with the Liturgy.

The small 19th century parish church in Milltown had been added to in 1930 with a longer rectangular room parallel to the existing creating an awkward duality

which had not been resolved by the 1975 re-ordering. Furthermore, the floor level was below the street and was prone to flooding. In a radical design we designed a new sanctuary on the side wall at right angles to the former position, provided a sloped floor, relocated the columns and made a new main entrance from street.

- **Conservation:**

In parallel with our other research, we were concerned to adhere to good conservation principles as proposed by the appropriate Charters. Our objectives were

- to continue to maintain the fabric and intended use of the building,
- to retain where possible existing finishes and decorative elements in-situ,
- to record in detail, through measurement and rectified photographs, any original elements to be removed, and their retention in storage on site,
- to achieve reversibility, where new elements are introduced, for example, the new sanctuary floor will be constructed on a separating membrane, and be floored in suspended pre-cast concrete units;
- to distinguish between original and new fabric, while being sympathetic in bulk, form, scale, character, colour, texture and material,
- to record, and place in publicly accessible archives, the full extent of the work.

We examined sight lines in plans and section and identified the optimum position for the altar and the layout of pews. We consulted with a firm specialising in stage lifts and we have prepared a drawing illustrating the operation.

3. Design Process

At the time of our appointment, our clients had in place a temporary sanctuary and altar constructed in timber. It was used in conjunction with the existing sanctuary to which it was connected by a bridge resulting in an awkward connection. We designed an extension to the existing sanctuary was carried forward into the nave at the same level. This resulted in a sanctuary of an adequate size but the shape was unsatisfactory and the area to the front was too narrow to allow movements around the altar. Furthermore, the excessive bulk of the extension with its flight of six steps carried around into the nave was very obtrusive and was not conducive to interaction between the congregation and the ceremony.

Another idea was to extend the existing sanctuary at a lower level three steps above the nave which resulted in a much less obtrusive intervention. However, the larger sanctuary requirement had not been fulfilled and the effective area of the sanctuary was in front of the chancel arch. Furthermore, the appearance was unsatisfactory, akin to a trussed-out stage used in the theatre with the junction line of the new and old occurring under the arch.

At about this time we revisited Pugin's drawings in the Archive and looked again at the levels which he had proposed

In our next design we chose this level for the sanctuary extension replicating his proposed section with its gradual ascent from the nave to the High Altar rather than the abrupt change of five steps at the chancel arch as in the existing. By taking Pugin's idea and extending the lower level of the sanctuary forward, a larger integrated space at one level was obtained, sufficient to meet the liturgical requirements and at a level which would cause the least visual impact on the space.

The arrangement provided an opportunity to gain access to the side chapels which were now the same level as the sanctuary, but to achieve this a section of the choir seating would be removed and the screens made to slide or rotate. On reflection, it was decided that the integrity of the set of three screens and choir seating would be compromised and

that there was no liturgical need for access to the sanctuary directly from the side chapels or the sacristy.

The choice of floor finish to the sanctuary was considered at great length. In the early scheme a stone paving of suitable colour and texture to complement existing mosaic was proposed for the extension with the present mosaic retained elsewhere.

In the later scheme it seemed more reasonable to use matching mosaic in the extension with an appropriate membrane distinguishing new from old.

In the final scheme, where a substantial portion of the existing mosaic is to be retained, of which approximately half will be at a lower level, it is proposed to use matching mosaic to achieve a unified effect. The vertical dimension is a critical fact in determining the bulk of any intervention and our judgement is that the visual impact of this proposal was acceptable as the new work is almost entirely in the ground plane.

All the schemes were presented to the various committees and sub-committees of the diocese, scrutinised and discussed in detail. Following the appointment of the Historic Committee of Architectural Conservation for the diocese as prescribed in the planning guidelines, the proposals were submitted and approved and we were instructed to lodge the application.

Cathal O'Neill 2nd March 2006