

Jessie Castle Metlitski, Jack Coughlan Associates On behalf of the Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral

CONSERVATION CONSULTANT: JESSIE CASTLE METLITSKI, BA MUBC

Jessie Castle Metlitski studied History of Art and Russian at Trinity College, Dublin and subsequently worked in St. Petersburg, Russia for two years, one of which was spent working with an architect on the repair and renovation of historic buildings in the city. She returned to Ireland to take a Master's degree in Urban and Building Conservation at University College Dublin, which she received in 1998 with a dissertation on the conservation of stone sculpture on medieval buildings in Ireland. During this time she was involved in a project to catalogue and conserve the collection of loose medieval stone in the crypt of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. Following her graduation from UCC Jessie worked with Duchas - the Heritage Service on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage and also with a Dublin-based private conservation practice during which time she prepared a Heritage Council funded report on St. Colman's Cathedral. Jessie joined Jack Coughlan Associates in March 2001 where she specialises in the research and recording of historic structures. She has recently undertaken additional further education on the subject of historic interiors, at the University of York, the Dublin Civic Trust and the National Museum, Copenhagen.

Just before joining Jack Coughlan Associates I completed a report on St. Colman's Advisory Sub-Committee which was commissioned and funded by the Heritage Council. This report included a chronological history and development of the Cathedral, a record of the interior and exterior and a discussion of the significance of the building. I had access to the Diocesan Archives which were being catalogued by Sr. Cabrini at the time, and was advised by Richard Oram,

Mr Richard Oram, MBE, from Newcastle, Co Down. A self-employed consultant architect who was formerly a senior architect with the DOE's Environment and Heritage Service, and sits on the Historic Buildings Council of the DoE (NI). Special interest in ecclesiastical buildings and has published a book entitled Expressions of Faith – Ulster's Church Heritage.

Our report submitted as part of the appeal for the Friends of St Colman's Cathedral was based on the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2004 and the Planning and Development Act 2000, in addition to our extensive in-house experience and our ongoing consultancy work for the Dept of the Environment, local authorities, architectural practices and private individuals. Jack Coughlan Associates is an RIAI Grade 1 Conservation Practice which received the RIAI Silver medal for Conservation in 2005 for the conservation and restoration of Fenn's Quay terrace in Cork, which resulted in the publication of a best practice guide. We also received an RIAI award in 2005 for the conservation of St John the Baptist Church in Kinsale in addition to the Opus Award for Conservation for the former Waterworks buildings in Cork City.

In house:

3 RIAI Conservation Architects

2 Conservation Consultants with MUBC qualification

Significance of the building and the meaning of a Protected Structure

There has been much debate on the extent of Pugin's involvement in the construction of St Coleman's and whether his intentions were carried out by his partner George Ashlin. I would firstly like to clarify why this debate is not relevant to our discussions at this hearing. The firm of Pugin and Ashlin only worked together for the first year of the construction of the cathedral, following which the partnership dissolved. Although it appears that Pugin continued to collaborate with Ashlin on the project until his death in 1874, George Ashlin must be credited as the architect who oversaw the construction of the exterior and interior of the cathedral until its completion, – which is in itself is a remarkable feat and quite unusual for a cathedral - and also as the architect who had a significant hand in the design of the building. It is important to understand that the planning application we are discussing today involves St Colman's cathedral as it was built and finally completed in 1919.

The argument over authorship of the design of the interior is of interest, but is not critical – the existing fabric is the issue.

The architectural, historical and social significance of this building, as constructed, is universally recognised and it is the physical evidence of this building which is the subject of this planning appeal, rather than the precarious argument of Pugin's original intentions or how the cathedral may have differed had Pugin lived to see more of its construction. While the study of drawings and archival information forms an important role in gaining an understanding of the building, this material should not be used to attempt to undermine the importance of cathedral as it survives today.

St Coleman's Cathedral is a Protected Structure – which is defined in our current legislation as 'any structure or specified part of a structure which is included in the RPS'. RPS Number 10016001

In turn this 'structure' is defined as 'any building, structure, excavation or other thing constructed or made on, in or under land, or any part of a structure', and is expanded to include:

- a) the interior of a structure
- b) the land lying within the curtilage of the structure
- c) any other structures lying within that curtilage and their interiors
- d) all fixtures and features which form part of the interior or exterior of the above structures

It should also like to clarify here that there are no categories or grades of protected structures under the Act – a structure is either a protected structure or it is not. Therefore, the fact that the interior of St Colman's Cathedral is not specifically mentioned on the current Cobh Development Plan or in the current RPS is in line with current practice and the current legislation. Since the 2000 Act, details of particular sections of a Protected Structure are not given on the RPS as the whole structure is afforded equal legislative

protection by the Act unless a declaration under Section 57 has been issued ascertaining details of the nature and extent of the protection.

The Act requires that a protected structure be of special interest under one or more of 8 categories which include non-architectural interests such as social and historical. While the architectural and artistic interest categories are clear in relation to the cathedral, the building also has a social and historical interest as a focus of the spiritual sentiment of the community, but also for the local communities direct connection with the construction of the building, a large part of which was financed by the families of people who are today members of the congregation. Given that the cathedral was completed less than 100 years ago, the social interest continues to be very strong, and the community's continuing concern for the future of the building is evident in the support given to the funding of the restoration work to the building.

The Dept of the Environment Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines state very clearly that:

‘The **purpose** of protection – the control and management of further changes to a structure – should be borne in mind when evaluating those special interest categories which may not relate directly to the physical fabric, such as historical, social and cultural interests.’

Good Conservation Practice

While the legislation states that the Planning Authority shall respect liturgical requirements in reaching a decision on an application for alterations to the interior of a protected structure that is regularly used as a place of worship, **it is not to the exclusion of the remaining legislative requirements pertaining to a protected structure.**

The legislation clearly states (Planning and Development Act 2000) the planning authority, and the Board on Appeal, shall, **in addition to any other requirements of the Act**, respect liturgical requirements.

There should not be an assumption that because the liturgical requirements must be respected that the architecture be disrespected. The two do not need to be mutually exclusive.

It therefore follows, that best conservation practice must be followed at all times. There are a number of points I would like to discuss with regard to best conservation practice and how this has been applied in the case of St Colman's Cathedral.

Firstly, the applicants have stated on numerous occasions that ‘the proposed re-ordering is part of a long term programme of conservation works’. It can not be reasonably argued that the permanent removal of original interior fixtures and fittings and the alteration of the original plan form of the cathedral can be termed ‘conservation’. Although there are different approaches to architectural conservation and restoration, it is generally agreed that ‘conservation’ is the action taken to prevent decay. When original fabric has been

lost or badly damaged and is replaced with new, using appropriate materials, the process is known as 'restoration'. However, the removal of original fabric in a historic structure and its replacement with new fabric of a different material and design can not be termed either 'conservation' or 'restoration'.

The applicants have referred to the proposed re-ordering work as Phase 5 of the conservation programme. I have not been able to source any documentation which mentions or outlines the content of this Phase 5 – all available material only notes 4 phases, all of which clearly refer to conservation and restoration work – there is no reference to any alterations to the interior in the documents I viewed.

It is claimed by the applicants that the conservation works, which they assert include the re-ordering works, are being funded by the Heritage Council. While it is correct that the Heritage Council funded conservation works in 1995-96 (£125,000) and 1999 (Roof - £8,937) and the Carrig Report in 2001, none of this funding was linked to the re-ordering works which had not even been designed at the time funding was granted.

Good conservation practice, in particular when dealing with a building of the size and significance of St Colman's, requires a multidisciplinary team of consultants in order to ensure a deep understanding of the structure, its history and importance. Keeping comprehensive documentation and records of the building and the conservation works prior to and during the works is also accepted practice.

An independent report was commissioned from Carrig Conservation and funded in early 2001 by the Heritage Council, while Mary Hanna, then Architecture Officer of the Heritage Council was a member of the St. Colman's Advisory Sub-Committee. [This advisory Sub-Committee pre-dated the Historic Churches Advisory Committee of Cloyne which was set up following the Planning Act of 2000] Mary Hanna was concerned that no record of the cathedral existed and that insufficient research had been carried out regarding the history of the cathedral, despite the fact that Phase 3 of the conservation work was underway. There was also concern regarding the removal of interior items from their original location, and the increasing potential of loss of original fabric as part of re-ordering works which were being discussed for the future. It was felt that a full record of the exterior and interior of the cathedral, including all fittings and fixtures, be made as a matter of urgency. In addition, it was requested that the report discuss the significance of the cathedral, in particular with reference to the interior.

Apart from the Carrig report of 2001, which was selectively quoted as part of the planning application but not credited, no further independently prepared documentation relating to the cathedral was included in the planning application. Most notably, there was no Architectural Impact Assessment to clarify the impact of the proposed works on the existing interior.

While it is understood that a Historic Churches Advisory Committee was established in accordance with the 2000 Act, and that there was also a 'Briefing Committee' prior to

this, there are no publications, reports or other documentation included in the planning application and the views or advice of the individuals involved are nowhere expressed.

With regard to the consultation process as part of a programme of conservation work and interventions to a Protected Structure or building of architectural significance, there appears to have been some confusion as to the role of consultation. Consultation with the local authorities, the public, other professionals, etc. should be carried out in order to **inform** the conservation programme and the design of the proposed interventions. There is little merit in proposing consultation **after** all major decisions have been made with regard to the building

Likewise, it must be the aim of the consultation process that the views expressed are incorporated into the scheme in as far as is possible. The Heritage Council's covenant, signed by the Trustees of St. Colman's cathedral in 1995 and correspondence to the Friends from the Heritage Council was always clear on the importance of consultation.

The consultation process in the case of St. Colman's needed also to address the concerns of the local community and the cathedral's congregation as it is a building in constant public use whose upkeep is funded by this community.

The Architectural Heritage Guidelines are also very clear that the planning authorities should ensure that they themselves have access to appropriately qualified, competent specialist advice on any development likely to impact on a protected structure. This advice might come from in-house conservation staff or from independent consultants. It is not clear the level of independent expertise sought by the Town Council. The only report on record is that of the County's Conservation Officer, whose advice was disregarded.

Best conservation practice and the impact of the proposed works on the interior of St. Colman's:

The methodology:

Reversibility

One of the guiding principles of architectural conservation is the use of processes which are reversible. This is very clearly stated in the Architectural Heritage Guidelines, so I will therefore quote directly:

Ideally, permitted works which affect the character and special interest of a protected structure should be reversible and such works considered temporary.

However, the guidelines go on to state that:

The reversibility of proposals is an important conservation principle, but should not be used to justify inappropriate interventions.

The extension of the sanctuary area involves the removal of large areas of mosaic which were laid in the 1890s. In addition to this intervention affecting the character and special interest of the interior of the cathedral, there is also a serious question as to whether this

work can be effectively carried out without major loss of original material. The report from the mosaic restoration specialists Trevor Caley Associates Limited, submitted by the applicants, is very clear about the unreliability of the removal of these mosaics as they are set in a very hard fixing mortar. They note that it will be necessary to use power tools to cut the mosaic in to sections and state:

We have a great deal of experience in removing and reinstating mosaic works from lime-based (weaker) mortars. Previous attempts by others to lift mosaic from cement-based adhesive has proved unsuccessful. For this reason we are very cautious...

In our report prepared for the Friend's appeal to the Board, we acknowledged that any extension to the sanctuary area would require the covering of the area of mosaic directly below, but that the removal of mosaic appeared to be unnecessary either for the construction of a new sanctuary or indeed, for the liturgical use of the cathedral. It was noted that it would be more honest and better conservation to retain the existing mosaics *in situ* by covering over them. The applicants responded that this would clearly not be possible as the level of the new sanctuary would be lower. Furthermore, it is proposed that the new sanctuary be constructed from *in-situ* concrete, which further underlines its intended permanency and lack of reversibility. **I must stress that the new sanctuary, as proposed, reflects a design preference rather than a liturgical need, and that the current design will involve the irreversible loss of fabric.**

The Architectural Heritage Guidelines also stress the need to avoid incremental damage and state that thought must be given by the planning authority to the potential cumulative impact of works to the character of protective structures. In St. Colman's the extension of the sanctuary area as proposed will result in the removal of a large section of the altar rail, the removal of mosaics from their original position, the cutting back of timber pews, and the removal of the predella to the altars in the transepts.

Appendix 2 of the Heritage Council Covenant states that:

The existing marble altar rails and particularly the beautiful brass gates which form part of them are worthy of preservation.

It goes on to state that:

It would be a 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 the remainder and all of the gates preserved and possibly reused elsewhere in the cathedral.

The current proposal does not retain any of the altar rail in its original position, and therefore **does not abide by the terms of the Heritage Council covenant.**

Minimum intervention

A second principle of architectural conservation is **minimum intervention – in other words, as much as necessary should be done, but as little as possible.**

In granting planning permission, a planning authority should be satisfied that works are necessary – whether these works are repair works to the fabric or adaptations to the

structure to allow it to perform a new or enhanced function. This principle relates not only to secular buildings, but also to ecclesiastical buildings. Therefore, only essential interventions should be considered.

Because a building is a Protected Structure in Ireland, it does not follow that this building must be forever frozen in its current state, although the architectural significance of the building in question, and the level to which it is intact in its original state, will dictate the level of appropriate intervention. However, if it is decided that additions or other alterations should be allowed, **these should not cause damage to the fabric of the structure, whether in the long or short term.** (From Guidelines). This principle is equally relevant to an ecclesiastical building; particularly one such as St. Colman's where the original interior remains almost completely intact.

The covenant with the Heritage Council states, in the final paragraph, that:

The objective should be to accommodate all necessary liturgical changes with the least possible interference with the architectural quality and heritage value of this superb building. Unfortunately, the current application does not meet this objective.

Finally, with regard to the legislation and the Planning and Development Act 2000, we are in agreement with the applicants that the word 'respect' may not imply 'automatically prioritise over all other considerations' but that it should be interpreted to mean that the planning authority and the Board would need to have compelling reasons to prevent a religious denomination reordering a place of worship. (McCutcheon response p. 17).

In the case of the proposed re-ordering of St. Colman's Cathedral **there are very clear compelling reasons for the current reordering proposals not to be permitted.** The work will involve irreversible loss of fabric to one of Ireland's most important buildings, a building where the construction of each element of the interior and exterior was supervised from start to finish by one architect, George Ashlin, with significant elements completed to the design of E.W. Pugin, and where master craftsmen were employed. There is no doubt that the architectural integrity of the cathedral would be irreversibly damaged by the proposed changes.

This landmark building, which is so impressively large for a small town such as Cobh, was constructed during very difficult times in our country and was built with the support of a local community without whose determination it may never have been completed.