

Yesterday's Church of Tomorrow

St. John the Baptist, Ermine Estate

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Abstract

Consecrated in 1963, the parish church of St. John the Baptist is a major contribution to ecclesiastical architecture of the second half of the 20th century. This avant-garde building is the central feature of the Ermine Estate in the provincial city of Lincoln. Its importance lies in combining innovative minimalist architectural thinking with advanced liturgical planning. The structure was designed by an architect largely invisible in architectural history, Sam Scorer, and a structural engineer, Hajnal Konyi. It consists of an impressive hyperbolic paraboloid roof made in reinforced concrete. Its form was fashionable and functional (romantically rational). It gave an impression of contradicting laws of gravity. It summarizes the post-war excitement with engineering. The paper contains a discussion about contradictions and discontinuities that occur in the story of this intriguing architectural precedent.

Ermine Estate

St John the Baptist is one of the central features of the Ermine Estate, Lincoln. The council estate located approximately 2km north of city centre was built mostly in one campaign (1952-58) by the local authorities as a response to post-war housing shortages. This has resulted in a largely uniform design. Most of the housing was built in a Modernist-influenced style with little or no external ornaments, mainly in red or yellow brick. The housing is mainly two storey and semi-detached with some rows of two-storey houses, bungalows and three-storey apartment blocks (Heritage Connect, 2011). Currently it accounts for 9% of Lincoln's urbanized area (Jackson, 2009:65). It is significant for its scale and distinguished by its meandering streets.

Currently the Ermine Estate scores high on deprivation index. The Minster Ward it is a part of is in top 20% on the Multiple Deprivation Index in England (City of Lincoln Council, undated:22).

Not a Temple

In 1963, when St John the Baptist was completed, its parish had a population of about 10,000. This included about 160 families who were regular worshippers. The small community '*did not want to build a temple*' (Lincoln Central Library). John Hodgkinson, a later vicar of the church and a project commissioner, stated in an interview (ibid):

This is not the medieval age when temples had to be big and expense was not spared as a means of worshipping God. To-day we are more aware of the millions that are starving and dying. We have not tried to build a temple but a tent.

Commission

St. John the Baptist was commissioned by Rev. John Hodgkinson over a cup of tea he shared one afternoon with Eric Scorer, a clerk to Lindsey County Council. Scorer showed the vicar an image of a yet unbuilt church in Welwyn Garden City. It was very modern. It was designed by his son, Sam Scorer, a young and talented architect. Sam Scorer studied at the Architectural Association, the most progressive architecture school in Britain at the time (Menin & Kite, 2005:23). As a member of an editorial board of PLAN, a radical, socialist architectural students' journal he wrote:

We shall never get more than a minimum standard, bye-law, packing case jumble sale architecture unless there is an educated appreciation and demand. It is the duty of architects and architectural critics to create this demand.
(1948:36)

After graduating in 1949, Scorer worked for a year as an assistant to George Grey Wornum, who had designed the RIBA building in Portland Place and was the winner of the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture in 1952. From 1954 Scorer was a partner of Denis Clark Hall – who was a distinguished architect, the winner of the *News Chronicle School* competition at Richmond in 1936 and who in 1950 acted as an assessor for the Hunstanton School competition, won by Alison and Peter Smithson. This choice caused a sensation in the architectural world.

Design team

St John was designed in consultation with a structural engineer, London based Hungarian refugee Hajnal Konyi, ‘*affectionately admired in Lincoln as “that Honjie Konjie”*’ (Scorer 1973:18).

It was built by Simons, a local contractor. In a book about the business’ history a caption reads: ‘*St John’s would probably not be contemplated today – but at the time was much admired in architectural circles*’ (Chatburn, 1990: 18). It won Simons its first Craftsmanship Award from the East Midlands Architects, Surveyors and Builders Consultative Board.

Wider cultural context

In the 1950s architecture was strongly aligned with utopianism and sociology; and it was an unquestionable belief that new planning and architecture could solve social problems and lead to a betterment of the society.

Ten years before planning for the new church began, Maxwell Fry had written the introduction to the *Architects’ Year Book 3* (1949) titled ‘The Architect and his time’. He expressed his concern about Modern architecture. Modern architecture was mainly concerned with problems of low-cost housing, and also with the realities of urban planning in industrialized communities. Architects excluded the need for spiritual

qualities (10) and they were being accused of intellectual remoteness (10). But this rationality was not consistent. Fry continued *'the original engineers' aesthetic derived from logic has now become intertwined with the illogic of subjective preference, which (...) is the architect's response to the many-sided pressures of his life and one that makes his contribution to the creation of a sufficient symbol of greater value'* (11). There was a tension between professional self-interest and the common good; the paradox of an individual design and a rational and cost effective solution.

A volume of *Architectural Review* from 1959 contained articles about two of Scorer's buildings; Motor Showroom and Garage in Lincoln and the church in Welwyn Garden City (the proposal which had convinced Rev. John Hodgkinson). In the foreword the editor wrote on the essence of modern architecture:

*In spite of all the advances it has been made in recent years (sic), modern architecture is still a closed book to all but those who practice it. **The good buildings are not there because people want them, but because for one reason or another their architects have been allowed to do what it seems right to them to do. Irrespective of whether anyone else is interested.***

Design stages

The first architectural proposal for St John the Baptist aroused consternation with the Parish Committee. It was a minimalistic concrete egg with a flamboyant interior, balancing on a plinth. The architect from the beginning wanted to discuss with the Parish Committee fundamentals, such as belief in God, and the purpose and function of a church (Hodgkinson, 2010:7).

In order to design the building the concepts of the church as the 'People of God', the 'Body of Christ', and a community, had to be redefined. The new structure was to represent a *'Tent of Meeting, rather than a static temple'*. This image was evoked from the Old and New Testament; it was the place where pilgrims would pass through this world 'travelling lightly (free of excess baggage) to the promised land' (8).

Hodgkinson recalls *'the emphasis was very much on church as people rather than a building'*; the function of the church building was to protect the community from the elements.

The building's plan took its shape from a simple sketch representing a focal point of some activity (for example a speaker in Hyde Park). Sam Scorer asked Rev. John Hodgkinson to draw how he imagined people would gather around. The drawing showed circles of people in the front and a row of people at the rear. In St John the Baptist the layout follows this idea. The curved pews are set theatrically on a gentle slope facing down towards the centre of the church, encircling a raised altar. The raked floor creates good sight lines. In the centre, at the lowest point of the church, is the font. It symbolizes the step into the water of baptism. Both the altar and the font are in a minimalist and primitive style and both are cast in concrete. The altar is free standing and there is no chantry or screen.

Budgetary restraints

The parish had '*precious little money but plenty of determination*' (LCL). The campaign to raise the funds was extremely intensive (Hodgkinson, 2010:9). A large part of the budget was raised by the efforts of parishioners and by donations. Towards the end of the construction process the collection plate was extended to the city, and beyond. Simons, the contractor built the main elements, but some work was done by worshippers. The excavation of the site was begun by Canon Cook, Sub-Dean of Lincoln Cathedral. He operated a large digger 'with great dexterity'. Bob Thomas, a railway driver, was a major contributor, spreading forty truck loads of soil with a shovel (ibid). The parishioners were responsible for building the pews, decoration and landscaping the site. It certainly gave the community the feeling of ownership.

The main body of the church was built for £24,000. £2000 (which is over 8% of the built cost) was dedicated to a special art work the architect wanted to incorporate to '*illuminate the whole building*'.

Hodgkinson mysteriously states '*This was the act of faith which resulted in the magnificent East window by Keith New, filling the church with colour, light and mystery*' (LCL). Keith New was also responsible for the stained windows at Coventry Cathedral. The abstract composition fitted into an industrial patent glazing system and presented the theme of the '(R)evelation of God's plan for man's redemption'.

Hyperbolic paraboloid

St John the Baptist's major feature is a gracefully sweeping, tent like, concrete roof. It is supported at only two points and it encloses a large area free from columns – a flexible uninterrupted *functional* open plan.

Between 1954 and 1963 steel was only available through a rationing system devised by government, and concrete shell roofs were used widely as a method of roofing even over comparatively routine buildings (Anchor, 1996:381-389).

The single saddle shape or – technically speaking – hyperbolic paraboloid – or for short – hypar, was not new. It is a form of a double curved surface, the geometry of which is generated by straight lines. This property makes it fairly easy to construct with a formwork of straight planks. The shape is a continuous plane developing from a parabolic arch in one direction to a similar, but inverted, parabola in the other. The main idea is that these structures behave as two systems of arches, one in compression and one in tension. The mathematical principles of hypars were understood years before, but the advances in shell concrete structures made the geometry exploitable. The building method was largely developed by Felix Candela in Mexico in 1950s. Le Corbusier used hyperbolic paraboloid in Philips Pavilion for the Expo'58 in Brussels. It was also used for ordinary buildings such as farming pavilions, halls, and houses. It was a high-tech solution executed via low-tech methods. Before St John the Baptist, Scorer and Konyi employed this construction method on three previous occasions: at Ilkeston, at Markham Moor along A1 and at the Brayford Pool in Lincoln. To the best of my knowledge they were the authors of the first concrete hyperbolic paraboloid in the UK.

Narratives

St John the Baptist was the subject of many articles in the Ermine News, the parish newspaper, and the Lincolnshire Echo. A number of narratives were used to explain the process, the form and the details; the underlying ideas were the home-like character of the place, truth (the truth of the representation and the truth of the style), lack of imitation, and functionalism.

The space was to improve the quality of the worship so that the parishioners would go back to their homes with their *'reactions quickened and sharpened, so that [they] can*

recognise holy things outside as well as inside'. The architecture enabled people to gather around. Hodgkinson expressed (LCL) the building had the effect of making people feel that they belonged to the church, even though it did not look like a church.

The design team (the architect and those responsible for the life of the church) disregarded the idea that in the building of a church one could ever simply imitate the past. Imitation – according to Hodgkinson – *'was easy and comparatively dangerous. It was indeed quite possible to have an imitation of the Christian life'*. *'We can make it like a little cathedral'*. He wrote *'That is a temptation. The suburbs of the cities of this Country are littered with terrible warnings of the danger of this kind of thing'* (ibid).

Hodgkinson wanted his parishioners to literally pause and ask themselves *'is this pattern of church life related to what I am as a person now living in 1963? Is this kind of picture of Christian Holiness related to people who live in the world of 1963, accustomed to new dimensions of human life and exploration of the Universe?'* (ibid).

These fears were characteristic in ecclesiastical architecture. St John the Baptist was built at the time when most of the newly built churches exhibited a combination of Modernism and preference towards neo-Gothic. An editorial of the *Church building* (1964) journal saw it as a result of inadequate research and the weaknesses of existing advisory bodies. It was feared this attitude was likely to prove an even greater embarrassment to the Christian community than the Gothic revival itself.

Function

Instead of mimicking Gothic style, the church was to be functional. Hodgkinson reminisced: *'The old church was very cluttered up with various objects and they [the designers] arrived at a principle that nothing would be included unless it was used'* (LCL). He explained *'None of you would include any item in a factory or a warehouse unless it functioned and that was the line we took. We wanted the church to be functional'* (ibid).

Instead of having a separate lectern and pulpit, it was decided to combine the two and not to *'clutter it with a cross and candles'* (ibid). Hodgkinson expressed that he thought that people often ignored crosses if they saw them when they were out. He stated *'they*

did not do much for them'. 'It was felt that the cross on the altar was unnecessary so the only one in the church was the processional cross, which was purely functional. (...) it was not intended to be there for decoration' (ibid).

Functionality was an imperative, form must follow function. The architect's priority was to ensure that the building he designed functioned well. Whatever he wished to express aesthetically and emotionally must not interfere with the fitness of the building to fulfil its purpose; at least theoretically.

In the post-war period, concrete shell roof buildings were fashionable. No self-respecting architect would be without one. The hyperbolic paraboloid shell could be taken to symbolize or summarize the post-war excitements of engineering (Boyd, 1958:295). Hypars were '*Fashionable Yet Functional*' (*The Times*, Nov 02, 1962:8), '*fantastically functional*' (*Church Building*, 1963:3), '*purely functional*' (LCL) and '*economical to erect, flexible in use and sculpturally exciting*' (*The Times*, 1969:V). Hypars offered a tangible sense of lightness and gave an impression of hovering in space and contradicting laws of gravity. They embodied the ideals of engineering: lightness through efficiency. And they were exciting because they were not expressions of mass-production techniques, and they were anti-universal (Boyd, 1958:306).

The devotion to functionalism, and the frequency of the use of the word 'functional' is puzzling, amusing and mostly sophisticated (plausible but fictitious). Today the church has many additions and *not so* functional decorations: kids' corner, flowers, pictures on the walls, a table with leaflets etc.

In *Words and Buildings* (2004) Adrian Forty differentiates seven meanings of the word 'function'. One of them is 'Function' in the English speaking world 1930-60 – an 'indiscriminately' used 'catch-all term for "modern architecture"'. '*(It was the principal term through which the polemic about modern architecture was conducted*' (187).

Forty gives a great example of the ambiguous role of the word 'function' from *The International Style*, the book by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's which accompanied the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1932. Hitchcock and

Johnson wanted to win approval for Modernism in the United States. They intended to do so by cleansing it of its political agenda. They used the word ‘functional’ as a derogatory attribute which described those features of European Modernism they wished to reject – its scientific, sociological and political assertions. But in order to present their version of modern architecture as a solely stylistic phenomenon, they had to invent a fictitious category of ‘functionalist’ architecture with which they associated all work with reformist or communist tendencies. They described ‘functionalists’ as those for whom *‘all aesthetic principles of style are... meaningless and unreal’* (35). Forty points out that it bore little relation to what had been happening in Europe. Hitchcock and Johnson’s account of the ‘functionalists’ way of working was a caricature of Adolf Behne’s carefully balanced argument about functionality. Behne criticised his contemporary German Expressionists: *‘satisfying the particular client is one important function of architecture that the European functionalists usually avoid’* (1926:92 quoted in Forty, 187).

Walter Gropius revised his account of the Bauhaus (the school he founded) to make it sound more humanistic: *‘Functionalism was not considered a rationalist process merely. It embraced the psychological problems as well’* (1959:97). Forty concludes that, while the term ‘functional’ was contested throughout the described period, and there were attempts to extend its meaning or give it a greater precision, at no point did a comprehensive definition emerge (Forty, 2004: 187).

Sam Scorer’s generation of architects stretched the word ‘functional’ even further away from its earlier meanings: *‘the word “functional” must now include so-called irrational and symbolic values’*, declared Alison and Peter Smithson (in 1957) (1982, 82). In 1951 the Smithsons, the self-appointed heroes of British Modernism, entered the design competition for Coventry Cathedral. The proposed scheme was an enormous open plan space covered with a flat hyperbolic paraboloid, a form, according to the Smithsons, *‘quite unsuitable for a church unless handled in a very special way’* (*Church Building*, 1963:3). In the exhaustive Architects’ Report they explained how *function* (the word ‘function’ is in Italics in the original text) determined the choice of structure and their intentions:

It is hoped by the competitors that the building of this cathedral will finally explode the fallacy that Modern Architecture is incapable of expressing abstract ideas and will prove that only [‘only’ in Italics in the original text] Modern Architecture is capable of creating a symbol of the dogmatic truths of

the Christian faith and 'thrusting them at the man who comes in from the street' with the dynamism that so great a Faith demands. (12)

Even though Basil Spence was the architect of the Coventry Cathedral, the Smithsons' model is on permanent display at the V&A Architectural Collection.

St John the Baptist was the subject of a handful of articles in national magazines concerning architecture. The journal articles focused mostly on technical aspects of the structure and planning; one of them is an insulting letter published in *The Architect and Building News* (1963):

Sir – I am sure that the design of this church will shock most ordinary people. Did the architect have his inspiration on wet Monday after an acute attack of indigestion? But perhaps having seen TV pictures of hurricane damage in America he seized his set-squares and compasses and exclaimed Archimedes-like 'I've got it'. In short is this architect cocking a snook at traditional architecture and intentionally initiating the new 'typhoon' period – at the expense of his Lincoln victims?

In the local press no one complained.

Nine years after the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* and Alison and Peter Smithson's *House of the Future*, St John the Baptist was named as the *Europe's Church of tomorrow*. According to Pevsner (1989:71) it was the first church in Lincolnshire to break the tradition of the Gothic revival. It was revolutionary. The church represented a direct victory over historic architecture. It also continues the Modernist tradition of honesty of the materials and rationality derived – paradoxically – from 19th century Viollet-le-Duc's interpretation of Gothic. It is a major contribution to ecclesiastical architecture of the second half of the 20th century. The building's importance lies in the fact it combined innovative minimalist architectural thinking with advanced liturgical planning. According to the *Telegraph* (2004:13-16) it is one of the 100 most loved churches in the UK.

In spite of limited national coverage the building received in architectural publications, now since 1995 St John the Baptist is a grade II* listed building. It is one of only 424 post-war listed buildings in England. This means it has been recognized as being of special interest and of national significance. A building might be listed if it has

fulfilled its original brief, it is designed with flair, sensitivity and attention to detail, and it offers technological innovation as well as design finesse, and if a clear idea was worked all the way through with a consistency of quality down to every detail (Hardwood, 2000:4). It has a statutory protection.

St John fulfilled its original brief. It is still like home for many parishioners. It does not look Gothic and it is functional – the structure is rationally functional and its functionality includes irrational and symbolic values. In spite of how inappropriate hyperbolic paraboloids seemed to be for a church building, according to the Smithsons, it had been handled in a very special way indeed. It provided the open space the congregation wanted, as well as the narrative of a modest tent on a pilgrims' path. The importance of the technical innovation was that it was not very important. The church was its people and the rest was a distraction. This minimalist idea worked all the way through. The community gathered around St John seems successful. It works as a community hub. The event calendar is busy. Over 25% of the congregation lives outside of the parish's boundary. They come to St John's because of the churchmanship (Diocese of Lincoln, 2011). A tourism ministry is maintained by volunteers who keep the church open in the mornings during the summer months. Destination architecture for the local (and increasingly national) architectural tourism.

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