



Designing the suburban church: the mid twentieth-century Roman Catholic churches of Reynolds & Scott



Robert Proctor

Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

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ABSTRACT

The pioneering modern movement, liturgically centred, church architecture of the mid twentieth century has become increasingly well documented and understood. Yet, for a long time before the Second Vatican Council most architects and clergy rejected this movement, maintaining traditional approaches and architectural forms. The basilican type dominated Roman Catholic church architecture in mid twentieth-century Britain, drawing loosely on Gothic or Byzantine and Romanesque models, and widely built in the new suburbs of expanding cities. As a typical landmark feature of such suburbs, the conventional church demands to be taken seriously and understood. This article draws on recent work on suburban and middle-class culture to interpret a body of such churches by a prolific firm of church architects, Reynolds & Scott of Manchester. It makes use of a hitherto unexplored archive of the practice's drawings, an interview with a surviving partner, parish and diocesan archives, and consideration of many of the buildings. The conventional basilican church can be reassessed through this evidence. It presents a type of creativity and a design approach that differ from the values embraced by modernism, but that nevertheless engage with the modernity of the suburb in a complex hybridity between the modern and traditional, the sacred and the secular, religious and domestic cultures, the particular, the transnational and the universal.

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The mid twentieth-century international modern movement in church architecture has recently become increasingly well documented, and a narrative of progress has become established in which pioneer architects and clergy built *avant garde* churches exploring ideas about lay participation and community through modernist architectural design principles.¹ Yet in characterising the twentieth-century church through such a narrative, it is easy to overlook the architecture of the overwhelming majority of new buildings that represented the typical experience of the modern church for most people at the same period, against which the modern movement aimed to distinguish itself. This article aims to rectify this imbalance by moving away from the canonical and *avant garde* to reassess the ordinary and typical, setting aside the

value judgements that accompany the formation of a canon of progress. What might be called the 'good-typical' church can be seen as the product of no less thoughtfulness and creativity than the modernist church, though it may require an alternative frame of analysis to see this: one in which the church's typical situation in the social and geographical setting of the twentieth-century suburb becomes a significant factor. To this end I focus on one firm of architects, Reynolds & Scott of Manchester, one of the most prolific but least known church designers in mid twentieth-century Britain, whose archive of drawings is examined for the first time here, and whose surviving partner, Brian Mooney, was interviewed for this article.²

The Roman Catholic church of St Ambrose, West Didsbury, in Manchester, opened in 1958, is typical of Reynolds & Scott's mid

E-mail address: r.proctor@bath.ac.uk.

¹ R. Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975*, Farnham, 2014; E. Harwood, *Liturgy and architecture: the development of the centralised Eucharistic space, Twentieth Century Architecture 3* (1998) 51–74; R. Hurley, *Irish Church Architecture in the Era of Vatican II*, Dublin, 2001; A. Longhi and C. Tosco, *Architettura, Chiesa e Società in Italia (1948–1978)*, Rome, 2010; V. Young, *Saint John's Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space*, Minneapolis, 2014.

² Sixteen sets of drawings on microfilm were studied for this article (the originals have been lost). The archive has recently been deposited at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections (MMUSC). For a database of Roman Catholic churches see Patrimony Committee of the Bishops' Conference and English Heritage, *Taking stock: Catholic churches of England & Wales*, <http://taking-stock.org.uk>, 2005 to present, accessed 2 February 2017.



Fig. 1. St Ambrose, West Didsbury, Manchester, 1954–1958. Source: author's photo.

twentieth-century churches, and is also typical in many ways of British Roman Catholic churches of this period (Fig. 1). It is suburban in location, set on the edge of an area of inter-war neo-Tudor houses, looking towards a modest post-war Garden Suburb-style estate of local authority housing across the road, and achieves an ideal of mid century Roman Catholic church architecture following 'traditional' lines. Indeed, all Reynolds & Scott's churches are sited in suburbs, sometimes in older areas of inter-war private or local authority housing, and many in post-war peripheral housing estates.

Visually prominent against the everyday backdrop of the city, St Ambrose could be interpreted as representing certain cultural aspects of the Catholic Church often attributed to this period: first, a tone of 'triumphalism', of new-found confidence in the articulation of a distinct identity following the gradual repeal of anti-Catholic legislation since the nineteenth century; and, second, an ideal of the 'fortress Church', its boundaries guarded by, for example, denominational education, evident through the siting of this church and many others alongside a Catholic school.³ Both of these terms have been applied to describe the Catholic Church of the

twentieth century before the Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, and as all but a few of Reynolds & Scott's churches were designed before 1965 their eschewal of modernism may be held to typify this pre-conciliar attitude. Yet these churches' relationship to their surroundings suggests an alternative view: they can instead be interpreted as projecting an image congruent with the suburb rather than imposed upon it.

In considering the church in the context of the suburb I draw on recent scholarship on suburban religion and architecture. Claire Dwyer and David Gilbert's work on contemporary expressions of faith in the suburbs provides insights into the interactions between suburban and faith geographies. Considering the Church of England's inter-war church-building programme, for example, they see an institutional response to perceived suburban conditions, 'an attempt to remake suburbia' by affirming a village church and parish ideal to confront the supposed alienation induced by the expanding modern city. At the same time they argue that this challenge to suburbia co-opted the material culture of these churches' modern surroundings.⁴ Likewise, Gretchen Buggeln's study of three mid century American architects in *The Suburban Church* attributes the buildings with conservative and homely characteristics, and argues for the church's importance in generating communities in otherwise fragmented suburban societies.⁵

The suburb itself has been examined with increasing sympathy, beginning with Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley's *Dunroamin*, whose multiple readings of the semi-detached house suggest material for interpreting church architecture.⁶ Roger Silverstone has turned suburban clichés into a celebratory theorisation of consumerism, conservatism and domesticity as the characteristics of suburban modernity, while Michael John Law's work on inter-war transport demonstrates that technological modernity dominated suburban mindsets even as it was absorbed and domesticated by consumers.⁷ Reynolds & Scott, and the parishes whose churches they designed, can be seen as participants in the suburban culture characterised in such studies. Yet their churches also transcend the immediate context of the suburb. They are complex hybrids, between tradition and modernity; between the sacred and the secular, the numinous and the domestic; between immediate and global contexts; between high architecture and the vernacular.

This investigation of the relationships between a design process and a suburban culture considers the architect as an interpreter of the client's intentions, against some geographers' and historians' positions extenuating the designer's agency in emphasising a broader social production of space. A building is the creative output of a person or practice as well as a reflection of the wider desires of its community of owners and users.⁸ Focusing on the architect does not mean rejecting a wider purview, but acknowledges other actors in the design process and the later remaking of a building in use.⁹ Reynolds & Scott's churches were clearly the result of negotiation with parish priests and bishops. They were often decorated and changed after their initial construction, and they were received and

⁴ C. Dwyer, D. Gilbert and B. Shah, Faith and suburbia: secularisation, modernity and the changing geographies of religion in London's suburbs, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013) 403–419.

⁵ G. Buggeln, *The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America*, Minneapolis, 2015.

⁶ P. Oliver, I. David and I. Bentley, *Dunroamin: The Suburban Semi and Its Enemies*, London, 1981.

⁷ R. Silverstone, Introduction, in: R. Silverstone (Ed.), *Visions of Suburbia*, London, 1997, 1–25; M.J. Law, *The Experience of Suburban Modernity: How Private Transport Changed Interwar London*, Manchester, 2014.

⁸ J.M. Jacobs, A geography of big things, *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006) 1–27.

⁹ J. Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, London, 1993; J. Hagen, Architecture, symbolism, and function: the Nazi Party's 'Forum of the Movement', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010) 397–424.

³ M.P. Hornsby-Smith, *The Changing Parish: A Study of Parishes, Priests and Parishioners after Vatican II*, London, 1989, 23–27; M.P. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholics in England: Studies in Social Structure Since the Second World War*, Cambridge, 1987, 21–22; A. Hastings, Catholic history from Vatican I to John Paul II, in: A. Hastings, *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, London, 1991, 1–13; R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951*, Oxford, 1998, 286, 288.

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