

The Architectural Significance of St. Stephen Walbrook

An address given on the occasion of the 350th Anniversary of the laying of the Foundation Stone.

An occasion such as this reminds us, first of all, of how fortunate we are to have a building with such a rich and well-preserved historical record: That it was begun in December 1672, six years after it had burnt down to the ground, was personally supervised by Wren, and completed at a cost of £ 7,692 by the end of 1679, are all uncontested facts borne out by the archives and by the building itself. Similarly uncontroversial and oft-repeated is the opinion that it is the most architecturally accomplished of Wren's churches in the City, with a plan which ingeniously reconciles the longitudinal thrust of a traditional nave with the vertical, centralising force of a large dome.

However, despite the clarity of the historical record, and the profusion of architectural commentary over the intervening centuries, its significance as a church – that is, an architectural vessel for worship – has rarely been acknowledged. The general tendency has been to view St. Stephen's as a work of geometric genius which only happens to be a church. Thus, Sir John Summerson interpreted it as 'a study in architectural logic' whose 'architecture resolves itself like a Euclidean theorem with extraordinary simplicity and grace'. Continuing in the same vein, Kerry Downes described it as a work of geometry 'mysterious and magical', 'accessible to 'the worshipper and the agnostic alike'.

According to this view, the communion table, the pulpit, and the tall box pews – which once occupied most of St. Stephen's floor plan – were recognised as the only specifically Christian elements of its fabric. Meanwhile, its generic (if masterfully resolved) Classical ordonnance and detailing seemed to provide little warrant for traditional Christian readings.

What I would like to do today is share several meditations on the religious topography of Wren's design, which I firmly believe would have been legible to the believers of his day, as I hope it will be today.

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Perhaps the best place to start our journey is by re-imagining the impact of St. Stephen's interior at the time of its completion. Ascending the steep stairs from the bustle of Walbrook, the visitor would have found himself standing in a dark sea of 5ft-high box pews, with but a single unencumbered aisle running down the middle. Taking his seat in one of the box pews, which obscured most of the church's pavement and column pedestals, as well as any fellow congregants, his gaze would have been inexorably drawn upwards to the light-filled dome. As today, the dome with its luminous lantern would have dominated the impression, drawing one's first glance and remaining ever present as the eye begins to wander.

I am reminded here of the Byzantine historian Procopius, who, upon seeing the newly completed dome of the Hagia Sophia in 544, described it as 'appearing not to be founded on solid masonry, but suspended from heaven by a golden chain'. A similar suspension of belief is called for at St. Stephen's, whose architecture, like that of the Hagia Sophia, 'is essentially a *hanging* architecture,' its vaults 'depending from above without any weight of their own' (as Otto Demus put it, referring to the Byzantine exemplar).

As our gaze begins to cascade, down the coffered surface of the dome and across its cantilever cornice, it finally settles on the eight richly decorated arches which form a sort of inverted crown round the main space. The principal four open up to receive the cruciform vaults of the nave and transepts, while the remaining arches (punctuating the diagonals) give onto clerestoried squinches. This multiplicity of vaulted forms, taken in one bay at a time, yet seamlessly integrated with each

other and the surmounting dome, calls to mind that 'house of many mansions' which the Gospel of John promises to all believers.

Within this suspended landscape, the four light-filled corners stand out as points of almost unbearable concentration. For one thing, that is where the effigies of the four evangelists were to be found emblazoned in such great continental models as St. Peter's in Rome and the recently completed Val-de-Grâce in Paris. While St. Stephen's sail-like squinches bear no such images, their presence is not hard to imagine.

Next in this descending hierarchy, our eye lands on the four columnar triplets found beneath each squinch; These in turn form a palisade of twelve evenly spaced columns, whose significance – whether tribal or apostolic – could hardly have escaped Wren's contemporaries. The twelve columns, joined in the nave by another quadruplet, also demarcate a line beyond which the magnificent vaults of the crossing give way to flat ceilings. It is thus that our eye is finally brought to rest in the relative darkness of the flat-ceiled perimeter, having grasped, in one fell swoop, the manifold excrescences of the domed main space.

That such a compelling (yet gentle) sense of upward movement; of religious drama without histrionics, could have been created over such a staggeringly simple ground plan is perhaps St. Stephen's chief glory. As far as I am concerned, this is heaven in a box, a man-made microcosm on par with the heavenly visions of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Having said that, St. Stephen's is not an easy work to penetrate. Unlike so many churches before or since, it demands our attention without giving us an easy way in – no picturesque layers, no stain of time, no comforting imagery, nothing indeed but the heavenly hierarchies englobed in white-painted plaster and flooded with unadulterated light.

Still, it is by no means overwhelming; what it seems to do is make one's mind completely alert while putting one's body at ease. That is what sets it apart as not only a work of Genius, but of Grace, and indeed, as a fitting object of contemplation. For to contemplate, in its original sense, is to gaze upon a sacred precinct with one's attention undivided, in wait for mysteries not so readily given to us in the daily rhythm of life.

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