

section through the chapel into the garden

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Carmelite Priory, Kensington, London

Niall McLaughlin

The Carmelite monastery is a surprising secret. A rather gloomy modern church stands on a busy junction of Kensington Church Street. Beside it a doorway opens onto a passage leading in to the depth of the block. Here you find a Victorian priory looking into a lovely little cloister garden. Everything is enclosed by dense residential development; it is like stepping through to another world.

The church represents the public vocation of the monks who minister to a large and diverse parish. The priory and its garden form their private realm. Life is structured around community and contemplation. The Carmelite Order began with a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel, and extended into Europe during the time of the Crusades, where it was shaped by the reforming influence of two Spanish Saints; St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila. They gave it the defining characteristics of contemplation and poverty.

Our practice has been working almost continuously on the Kensington Priory buildings since 1990. Most of the work involved consists of invisible stitching and mending. However, there is also a process of changing the balance of the way in which the buildings work through a series of discrete insertions. Small-scale alterations have a potential to amplify beyond their own situation. Sometimes the effect is to change the way in which the buildings are used, but more typically the intention is to reveal latent connections. Symbolism and the site can be tied together into new natural arrangements. A useful metaphor is that of a heart pacemaker; something which is discrete, smuggled in, and which reinforces latent rhythms in the organisation. This article will describe two of the inserts in turn, the chapel and the sacristy.

The Chapel

A room in the priory has a doorway out to the garden, and so was chosen for the monks' private chapel. A distinction is used in monasteries between the chapel as a symbol of paradise and the cloister as a more literal vision of paradise. It is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats' poem *Sailing to Byzantium*,* where the "sages standing in God's holy fire" are contrasted with the "sensual music all neglect" of the

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* W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*, from *The Collected Poems of WB Yeats*, (Macmillan; London, 1933.)



The Annunciation by Fra Filippo Lippi

THE OXFORD REVIEW OF ARCHITECTURE



chair within the chapel

plan of the chapel

1. door from priory
2. door to garden
3. altar
4. ambo
5. tabernacle
6. celebrant's chair
7. twelve chairs
8. reredos
9. window seat
10. statue podium

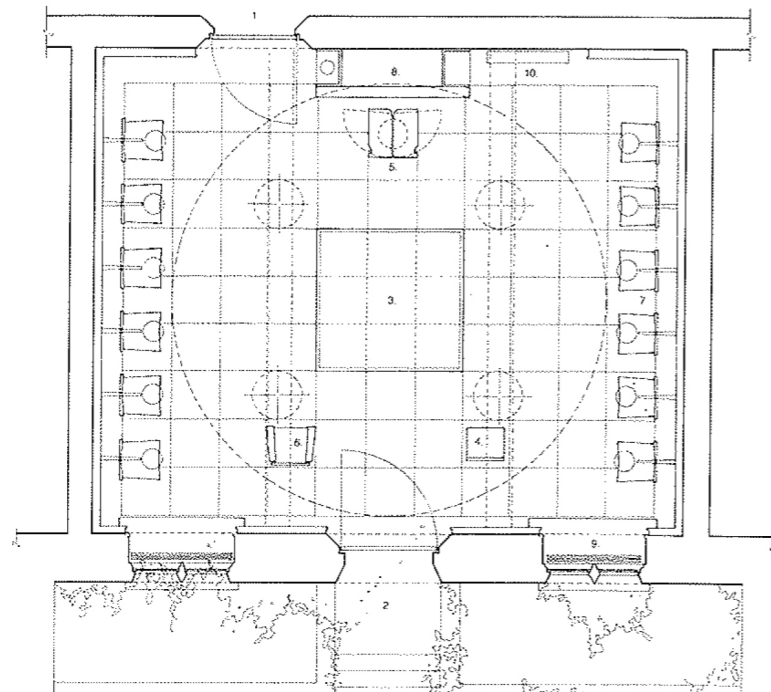
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natural world. We wanted to work with that contrast. Stable platonic forms within the chapel are therefore consciously set against the wild profusion of the garden beyond.

The room already had a plain distinction of its own which was unlikely to benefit from comprehensive alteration. The task was to raise this ordinary space to sacred status. Look at the painting of the *Madonna and Child with St. Francis and Liberale* by Giorgione. This is typical of a genre of religious painting which locates the sacred space of heaven by drawing a screen around it, often brocade or precious fabric. The everyday landscape is seen beyond in all its humdrum activity. Within the screen the prophets, saints and iconic figures of religious life are seen to deport themselves formally in the rigid hierarchies of paradise. In our garden room a screen was made of honey coloured beeswaxed stucco. It rises to just above head height, a common datum in many Renaissance paintings. Our screen is thus intended to draw a consecrated space within its enclosure.

The chapel is used for the celebration of the mass. This has a strong parallel with the Last Supper where the twelve disciples gathered around a table with Jesus. Early Christian gatherings took the form of a meal in a private house. Changing demands have transformed the domestic character of this celebration in most religious buildings. However, in this tiny private chapel it was possible to



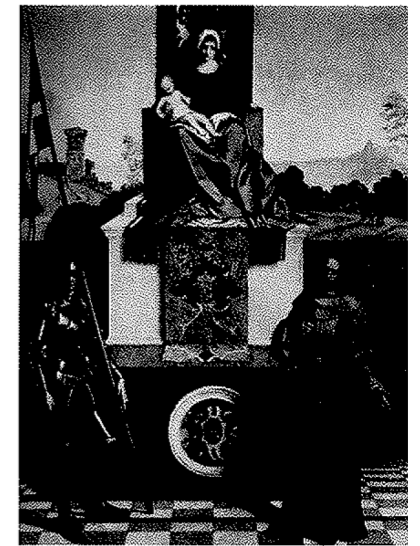
configure the space as a more explicit memory of these intimate occasions. We arranged chairs around a central altar. They were tailored to hint at human proportions in such a way that there are twelve presences constantly suggested in the space.

The ambition was to fuse materials and symbols. It is possible to make details which comfortably contain all sorts of underlying meanings without any overt use of religious reference. The tabernacle that we designed is a good example of that process. A tabernacle is a container for the consecrated host; theologically this is understood as the body of Christ. As such the tabernacle has the undertones of house, temple or tomb. Medieval churches often used the plan form of the circle inscribed inside the square to symbolise the tomb of Christ. Hence our tabernacle is a cube of solid oak with a gold-lined cylinder hollowed out of the inside. The external form of the cube is intended as an echo of Adolf Loos' sketch for his own tomb, the fluting on the podium underlining this allusion.

One of the monks told us that the act of approaching the tabernacle was the most precious and intimate of his day. This was developed by turning the act of opening into one of embrace. The only breach in the pure external geometry of the tabernacle is the handle let in to each side. By putting your arms around the cube you find the handles, and pull them apart to split the object in two. It opens out like a great chestnut; fittingly, since the symbols of tomb and seed pod also have overtones of resurrection.

A range of building materials was used which was intended to mediate between the received sense of decorum of the monks, and our own formal ambitions. Everything tended towards gold and amber in order to underline the contrast with the garden beyond. Pure forms were used throughout; cubes, cylinders, cones, discs. The intention was to make a sense of permanence and calm, a still centre in which to gather around. The chapel tends to be made of stucco, brass, gold, limestone, oak, leather, silk and hand blown glass. Light fittings were designed which cast the blowing swirls created during the glass-making process as a pattern onto the floor.

The process of teasing out connotations through detailing has its risks. The twelve light fittings over the chairs were intended to act like late-Gothic baldachins, little turrets above head-height which extended the scale of the seated celebrants. Perhaps they do, but I am told that some visiting abbots made cruel remarks about hairdressers.



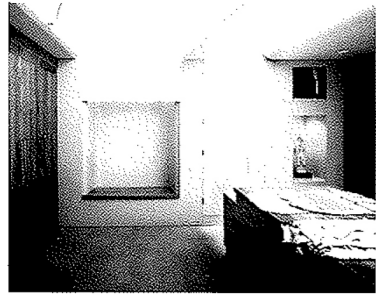
Madonna and Child with St. Francis and Liberale by Giorgione

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view from the chapel to the garden



interior of the sacristy

The Sacristy

If the chapel is about stillness and communal gathering, then the sacristy in the Kensington Priory is about passage. A conventional sacristy is a space, contingent to the altar of a church, where the priest vests, where precious objects are stored, and where altar wines and oils are kept. It also functions as a small public office for the formalities at weddings, christenings and funerals.

There was a left-over space lodged between the parish church and the old priory, located at the bottom of a light-well and overlooked by ten-storey apartment blocks. The space had almost no daylight, but was nevertheless converted for use as the new sacristy. Its site matched our understanding of its function as a threshold between the ordinary world of the priory and the sacred space of the altar. The priest hence leaves the priory through a gable wall and enters the sacristy. He then washes, vests, prays, and goes through another door in the church wall before emerging beside the altar prepared for the ritual.

In a painting called *The Annunciation*, by Fra Filippo Lippi, an angel and a mortal face each other. The formal problems caused by the confrontation of the domestic and the supernatural are solved by the use of a loggia, a clearly architectural element. The picture is completely bisected vertically by the threshold. There is a strange sense of interruption suggested by the disembodied hand and the angel's wing. In our design for the Kensington sacristy, the transition from the domestic world to the altar entails fording a line of light which bisects the room. Daylight is intended to arrive with all the drama of heavenly visitation. The ceiling therefore wraps north light around itself, it shields the priests from overlooking, but it also serves as a memory of the gorgeous angel's wing.

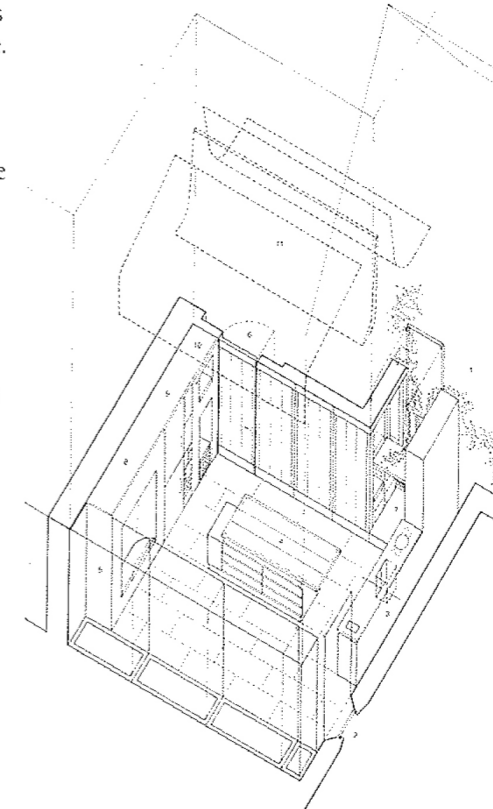
Threshold conditions in the sacristy are typified by reversals of order. In contrast to the chapel, the composition is structured using inversions and asymmetries. There is a recurring theme of spirals, and many of the details were intended to openly reverse expectations. All of this was meant to give a sense of a room between two worlds, a place of passage. The drawers to the left of the sink are a simple example of this design thinking. They are arranged in a spiral and are related by proportion to each other. Although identically presented, each of the drawers opens with a different action, playing tricks with the instinct of your hand.

Sprayed mdf fibreboard is used as a neutral surface finish to pick up reflected light from the priest's vestments, which are laid out on the counter directly under the

roof light. The colours change for different feast days; scarlet, purple, moss green, gold, white, and electric turquoise. Light floods on to the garments from above, and is reflected around the room ensuring that the space changes on different days as various colours irradiate the walls. The walls themselves are conceived as stores with spaces carved out for cupboards, seats, and a little vaulted space for the relic. The insides of the cupboards are lined in oak, a reversal which is intended to underline the preciousness of the contents. Hence the plain exteriors conceal bright robes, linens and jewelled objects. A light beneath a bushel.

The tiny gap that existed between the two buildings was opened to bring a peep of south light in from the garden. To emphasise its warmth, the depth of the wall is lined in oak. There is a small seat, a bookshelf and a desk in this space. It is raised one step up off the floor of the room. The jambs surrounding the window are concealed so that the eye reads the transom and mullion as forming a large asymmetrical cruciform. It reminds the priests of the Cross and me of Lewerentz.

The work in the Kensington Priory is very carefully detailed and crafted. The challenge of this project was to maintain a sense of naturalness in the presence of such intense allusions and bespoke-making of the building. Both the close detailing and the layering of reference can tend to crowd out the direct spatial experience of the architecture. For me, the aspects which work best seem to be those that appear least worked over, and the clumsiest formal moves are those which have resulted from a kind of literalism in translation. I have great affection for the twelve chapel lights. They did not come off quite as intended, but by slipping the close control normally exerted by the design process, they exert a jauntily surreal presence and the room seems warmer for it.



axonometric of sacristy

1. cloister garden
2. door to priory
3. cabinet for wines and linens
4. vestment counter
5. vestment cabinet
6. door to altar
7. window seat, bookshelf, desk
8. concelebrants seat
9. altar objects
10. relic cabinet
11. rooflight and baffles above

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