



'A ship of souls': the solid stone drum of Bishop Edward King chapel in Oxfordshire. Below, its 'crystalline' interior. Níall McLaughlin; Denis Gilbert

# The answer to their prayers

The craft and care of Níall McLaughlin's elliptical, light-filled chapel for Ripon College could almost make believers of us all...



Rowan Moore

Bishop Edward King chapel, Ripon College, Oxfordshire

There is a view of architecture that it is religion by other means. The standard histories used to be dominated by churches and temples, and ideas on the subject have been shaped by proselytisers such as John Ruskin and Le Corbusier, whose books sound like prophetic tracts. "Visionary" is used to describe architects of above average wilfulness, and "vision" is applied to over-optimistic regeneration projects, as if they were something out of the Book of Revelations.

Things sometimes thought to be signs of serious architecture, like permanence, geometry and symmetry, are particularly characteristic of religious buildings. Also the idea of "integrity" or "truth" – that is that the structure that holds the building up is revealed and undisguised, that there are unities of thought, action, material, space and detail.

This version of integrity is now a dispensable luxury in most new construction, where the investment logic of developers and the commercial logic of contractors rule. It's easier to throw up standardised frames, wrap them in standardised cladding and not worry too much about how everything hangs together. And, as the forces of global capital pummel old ideas of architecture into submission, religious

buildings can look like their last refuge. So it is with the Bishop Edward King chapel at Ripon theological college in Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, designed by Níall McLaughlin. It stands in an area soaked in absurd quantities of beauty, with a huge copper beech dating to 1710, other ancient trees, fields that it's obligatory to call rolling, and gothic revival collegiate buildings in a stone that can only be called honeyed. The £2m building itself is crafted and considered; it makes ideas physical; it has intentions and carries them out in its space and matter.

From the outside you see an elliptical drum in solid stone, smooth at the bottom, then corrugating into a texture of alternating rough and cut surfaces that looks like something woven, before finishing with a top layer of glass set behind fragile stone fins. It is paradoxically heavy and light, a bastion and a boat, a wall and a drape. It has presence, but doesn't dominate. It has affinities with the all-timber Saint Benedict chapel by the Pritzker-winning Peter Zumthor, although McLaughlin mentions a less famous influence, a postwar German architect of churches called Rudolf Schwarz.

Smaller shapes gather about the drum, including an entrance that is deliberately low and dark, suppressing expectations before you reach the high, light-filled interior of the ellipse, within which a ring of 34 slender timber columns grow upwards, develop branches and intersect in a cross-crossing vault. McLaughlin calls this space "crystalline", meaning that it's symmetrical in two axes, but he then offsets it with less orderly extensions: an off-centre window to catch the view over fields, a space for the tabernacle, a half-enclosed chapel, horse-shoe shaped, for the sisters of



the Community of John the Baptist, who have recently sold their old home in another part of the county and come to share this site with the college.

The interior has several materials – stone, lime plaster, concrete, the laminated larch of the columns, furniture in ash – but they share a similar hue, a sort of (Caucasian) skin tone which, as on a human body, gives unity to multiple variations. It shows off the play of light which in the end is the chapel's main event. While designing it McLaughlin made a video of the way sunlight filters through surrounding trees, and the chapel attempts a constructed equivalent. Light comes through the upper ring of glass, and through oblique sources, and animates the chapel's layers and

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surfaces. As clouds move across the sky outside, the interior inhales and exhales sunshine. As it brightens and dulls, its features stand out from and then recede into their background.

McLaughlin tells stories to explain the architecture, as does the Rev Canon Professor Martyn Percy, the principal of the college. The building is a ship of souls, a retake of an old idea contained in the Latin origin of the word "nave". Then again, the ceiling above the timber branches dips slightly towards a central keel-like line ("carinated" is the technical term), as if there were another boat floating above, which McLaughlin says is prompted by a 1,000-year-old Celtic story.

He cites the writings of Richard Sennett on early Christians who struggled to reconcile a desire to wander, and give up fixed places, with the building of permanent churches. They created ambulatories, zones of walking, like the one McLaughlin has made between the ring of columns and the outer wall. The resemblance of the outer stonework to cloth refers to the writings of Gottfried Semper, a wiser and saner contemporary of Ruskin's, for whom every construction technique was an imitation of an earlier craft, with weaving one of the oldest of all.

Percy, for his part, talks about "the different spiritual textures people have to live with", which the physical textures of the building represent. For him it embodies a broad, moderate church, "not minimalist Protestant and not archi-tatty Catholic". The use of an ellipse, a geometrical figure with two centres, allows worship to focus on either the rituals of the eucharist or on the spoken word: the altar is placed on one centre, the lectern on the other. The seating plan is "antiphonal", with two banks of congregation facing each other; the chapel's layout and acoustic also allows conversational rather than declamatory voices.

The stories about boats and weaving have some charm, and help with a perennial difficulty for architects – how to justify a design, how to choose one approach over another – but they begin

to cloy. I'm glad when McLaughlin says that, in the end, "you have to leave these narratives behind. You have to abandon a building to the world and let it gather its own meanings. It's no good standing at the corner and telling people what it means." In other words, you don't have to know anything about Semper or boat myths to appreciate the spaces.

As someone as certain about the nonexistence of God as I can be about anything, I feel a touch disoriented by a new space devoted, with conviction, to making the opposite case. At the same time it speaks a spiritual Esperanto common to most churches built in modern times – reluctant to show damnation, miracles or apotheoses, or even a too-literal crucifixion, it works more abstractly with light, form, material and nature, in a quasi-gothic of soaring lines and tree-like structure. Can't it be more explicit? Can't it say exactly what it means? No, given the ambiguities of modern religion, it can't.

But the uncomplicated fact about this chapel is that it's lovely – as much as the copper beech, the rolling fields and the honeyed stone. It is poised, tuned, and well made, a close reflection of the desires of its users and the intentions of its architect. The clients were prepared to pay, for example, an extra £50,000 for concealed fixings in the roof structure, rather than visible bolts, because they realised that they were essential to the success of the whole.

It helped that the sisters did well by selling their old home, proceeds of which went to funding the new building. They took a tithe from the workings of the property market, of the speculations of capital, to achieve a kind of architecture that the market doesn't often permit. It's a pertinent question how its qualities might be transferred to a harsher outside world but, meanwhile, the main thing is just to enjoy them.

Online 

Bishop Edward King chapel – more pictures: [observer.co.uk/new-review](http://observer.co.uk/new-review)