



## St Paul's Architecture: The Architectural and Spiritual Legacy of St Paul 's

See also: [www.stpaulsknightsbridge.org](http://www.stpaulsknightsbridge.org)

**The spiritual aspect of a beautiful space is something we often immediately understand, and yet rarely articulate. It is strange to think how in recent years there has been a fear of our spiritual needs, even though it is acknowledged that the spiritual is an essential part of our rational make up. There is a disparate and obvious need for places to fulfil these spiritual needs and the architectural legacy of St Paul's is ideally placed to grow to meet them.**

### The Heart of Knightsbridge Village

As the first foundation stone was being laid for St Paul's in 1840 (consecrated 1843), there was no need to worry about a healthy, social attendance, as St Paul's soon became the spiritual heart of the village of Knightsbridge; with such success, in fact, that it attracted a wide and notable congregation. Lord

John Russell regularly attended (prime minister 1846-1852) and the Duke of Wellington, who lived within the parish at No1 London, is alleged to have remarked to the congregation, "every one of you has taken a tub this morning," notable indeed, given the limited sanitation at the time.

In 1900, Lady Randolph Churchill married Captain George Cornwallis-West and the register today has the signature of the witness, her son Winston. Services were held throughout the war and even extended to being held in the Knightsbridge tube station. At this time, the vicarage was lent rent-free to FANY (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry) many who served behind enemy lines and included the undercover agent Odette.

These traditions remain and importantly, it retains its prime, geographical place at the heart of the now 'urban', village of Knightsbridge. The FANY memorial service continues to this



day for example. Memorial services for Barbara Hepworth, sculptress, and Rose Macaulay, novelist have been held here. In the 1950s, the then Queen Elizabeth occasionally accompanied by Princess Margaret attended and the current Queen attended in 1992.

However, what does it mean for St Paul's to remain the spiritual, heart of Knightsbridge today? Great wars have been won since the church's consecration; religious, economic and political balances and demographics have evolved since the 19th and even 20th centuries; our personal demands of and investments in each have changed and continue to change significantly even within the youngest life spans.

## Scale and the Individual

Our aspirations for spiritual fulfilment and elevation, while different than in previous times, appear undiminished. At the individual scale, our personal aspirations and comforts must be

addressed and uplifted. At the larger scale, the excitement and participation of audiences and congregating groups need to be catalysed and inspired.

One of the requirements identified from the Parish Council's 'Away Days' is to develop spaces that allow 'one-on-ones' to take place in an intimate and protected setting, or for small groups to gather, with the possibility for a Sunday School, possibly a crèche and a 'Green' (music practice) room.

At the larger scale, an ambulatory is proposed as a space to decant into at the interval of a musical event in the church itself, as a reception space for a wedding or where one congregates after a service.

## Dynamic Space

The spatial drama and means of spiritual elevation of the great Christian cathedral and chapel naves are well documented.



The nave of the Gothic church developed a spatial system of a strong forward rush of space down the nave followed by an immense vertical movement. The nave was where the congregation were allowed, and in front was the rood screen blocking off the public from the religious clerics in the more sacred Chancel. This is seen across Europe including King's College, Cambridge and St George's, Windsor.

The Renaissance church tried to put the congregation back at the centre of the celebration and the focus became less of a rush forward and upward – altars came forward, rood screens were rarer and the vertical 'frames' of the columns demarcating one's progress to the east end lost emphasis. Palladio's Il Redentore, Venice and Bramante's, Tempietto, Rome are some of the most well-known examples.

By the late 19th century, elements of these were clearly visible in many parish churches, and St Paul's architecture and ritual gathers from both traditions. The rood screen is still there, but

quite transparent and services invariably include audience participation in front of the screen with the congregation typically invited to the High Altar at critical points of the service.

A circumambulatory has both a historical precedent and an architectural drama of its own. At the same time, the proposal for a secular walk around the outside of the church is to allow a perambulation and tie together the two ends of the church without interrupting the sacred space of the church proper.

The ambulatory's physiology is brought to life by how we choose to occupy it, whether one needs to 'walk and talk' or just 'walk'. The entrance to the side ambulatory is linked but can be independent to that of the church itself. Needless to say it is intended to be secular and inclusive and the drama can be interpreted as such and this is part of its wider attraction. In the Christian tradition, the ambulatory or its cloister may be seen as the inspiration for this. Incidentally in both Muslim and



Hindu traditions, the pilgrimage of perambulating (often in the direction of the sun) is also shared. The Stations of the Cross depicted around the main body of St Paul's progress from the door of the vestry at the NE corner of the nave, in order around to the side chapel.

The proposed ambulatory is seen as an open series of spaces rather than a corridor, preserving the privacy of the vicarage, but still opening out at the east end beneath the garden onto a larger room, to be understood more as an Orangery or grotto than 'conference centre' or 'wedding reception room', although both functions would be suited here. The lower sub-garden level also gives the opportunity to refurbish and enhance the Columbarium (converted in 1960).

## Light and Stained glass

The opportunity to experience and be lifted by wonderful light is sorely missed in today's society. Thankfully, it is celebrated

at St Paul's and is an essential element to elevating the spaces. Iconographically, stained glass windows were employed as the metaphor for 'God's light' giving life to us and God being seen through us (the figures in the glass being brought alive by the light streaming through them). Again, other traditions (and other arts) celebrate the sculpting of light and used correctly can bring inclusive interpretations as well as bringing the architecture to life.

## Acoustic Space

St Paul's links to music are particularly strong and it is an important element of the church's future. Many have argued that the music of the medieval, Christian church developed in accordance with the architecture that surrounded it. The reverberation times and layering of the choral voices would exploit these qualities. The absorbency of the materials and the shape of the space all have a hand in this. The effects of 'electronic space' allow greater flexibility and a wider variety of music



types to be played, recorded and replayed. The BBC recordings undertaken at St. Paul 's clearly benefit from the electronic technologies. The inclusion of spoken liturgies adjacent to sung ones has also demanded new means of achieving clarity over the ages, and the pulpit is a reminder of this development.

The size of space is important too, and both the intimacy of smaller spaces or intimacy of larger spaces both contain important sound characteristics which need to be carefully tuned to their intended use and location. At the larger scale, the Chapel at Ronchamp in France by Le Corbusier, the architect described the small, pilgrimage chapel as addressing the acoustic landscape and that the facades were designed to reflect this. The urban landscape has its particular acoustic and in many instances we may wish to create acoustic 'shadows' as well as accept and enjoy moments from our external environment.

## Conclusion

St Paul 's is welcoming and elevating, not just in its Christian rituals and iconography, but also in its values and one's experience of it. As it grows, its richness as a spiritual heart needs to be augmented by spaces with a beautiful interplay of scale, dynamism, light and sound. To fulfil our 21st century demand for inclusive, spiritual elevation in our daily lives it is also necessary. And the challenge and opportunity is all the more apparent, as these attributes are rare to find in the cacophonies of today's world.

© Paul Vick  
[www.paulvick.co.uk](http://www.paulvick.co.uk)