**Lorenzo Grieco**

# Multifunctionality and Ecumenism in Post-War British Church Architecture: Two Projects by Martin Purdy

ARTICLE

*Britain; Liturgy and Architecture; Multi-purpose Church; Martin Purdy; Ecumenism*

**/Abstract**

**In the years following the Second World War, Christian liturgy underwent significant transformations, largely influenced by the Liturgical Movement. Within the Church of England, these changes found expression in the designs of post-war Anglican parish churches, which became pivotal spaces for community engagement. This text explores the developments that led to a greater involvement of the congregation in the liturgical rites, with notable effects on the functional layout of sacred spaces. It then considers the specific urban contexts of the New Towns and suburban areas, where new churches assumed a vital social role, integrating extra-liturgical functions within parish centres and dual-use buildings. The adoption of multiple functions within a single structure gave rise to the concept of the "multi-purpose church," exemplified by SS Philip and James in Hodge Hill, Birmingham, a project developed by architect Martin Purdy in collaboration with the Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture at Birmingham University. Lastly, the ecumenical centre in Skelmersdale, designed by Purdy's firm, APEC, exemplified the idea of not only concentrating diverse functions but also uniting different denominational communities within one building, sharing spaces for worship. For such buildings, the principles of inclusivity and spatial flexibility became crucial design criteria, aimed at engaging believers—sometimes of different faiths—and fostering a collective identity through the new worship facilities.**

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## Liturgical Renewal in the Church of England

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Church of England underwent a significant transformation. Understanding this change requires looking at the theological and architectural movements that had already shaped it long before the Second World War.

Already in the first half of the nineteenth century, a renewal of liturgy and architecture was advocated by some members of the Catholic wing of the Church of England.[1] They were influenced by the ecclesiological theories of the Cambridge Camden Society, an association for the study of ancient architecture, with a particular interest Gothic architecture, established within the Oxford Movement.[2] Founded in the 1830s, the movement grouped members of the higher clergy in favour of a liturgical revival and the restoration of religious orders dissolved by Henry VIII. In the first half of the twentieth century, Anglican renewal movements, influenced by the wider international Liturgical Movement, found their strongest footing within religious orders such as the Anglican Order of Saint Benedict. Figures like the Dominican scholar Gregory Dix played a key role in this revival, arguing in his seminal work, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, that the structure and rhythm of worship were just as significant as the words themselves.[3] He identified four fundamental actions at the heart of the liturgy: the offertory, prayer, fraction, and communion. Dix's work had a profound influence on Anglican liturgical reform, reinforcing the importance of structure and symbolism in worship and shaping the Parish Communion movement.

Founded in 1949, the movement drew heavily on the writings of Arthur Gabriel Hebert, an Anglican monk of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham, Nottinghamshire, whose publications provided key theological foundations.[4] These included *The Parish Communion* (1937) and the bulletin *Parish and People*, launched in 1950, both of which articulated the movement's vision for a renewed liturgical life.[5] In particular, the Parish Communion movement championed a communal ethos, emphasising the spiritual essence of the Eucharist while sparking debate on the ideal liturgical setting. It sought to replace the fragmented Sunday service—where an early morning communion was followed by a later, communion-less matins—with a single, unified mass at around 9 or 9:30, marked by music, full congregational participation, and a shared sense of purpose. This approach, initially considered progressive in

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1 This article is dedicated to the memory of Elain Harwood (1958–2023), an architectural historian who brought a fresh and personal perspective of twentieth-century English architecture and church buildings. Thanks to Andrew Bailey and Bob Andrews for their valuable testimonies on the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre.
For an overview: Louise Weil, "Liturgical Renewal and Modern Anglican Liturgy", in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, volume IV. Global Western Anglicanism, c. 1910-present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50-67.

2 Christopher Webster, John Elliot, eds., *'A Church as it Should Be'. The Cambridge Camden Society and Its Influence* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000).

3 Gregory Dix, *The Shape of Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945).

4 Christopher Irvine, *Worship, Church and Society. An exposition of the work of Arthur Gabriel Hebert to mark the centenary of the Society of Sacred Mission (Kelham) of which he was a member* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1993).

5 Arthur Gabriel Hebert, ed., *The Parish Communion: a book of essays* (London: S.P.C.K., 1937).

Fig. X

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the post-war years, was only endorsed by the National Evangelical Anglican Congress in 1967 and remained dominant until the rise of charismatic worship in the 1980s. The Parish Communion also introduced the idea of the 'Parish Breakfast,' a social gathering after mass, fostering community life in purpose-built parish halls adjacent to the church.[6]

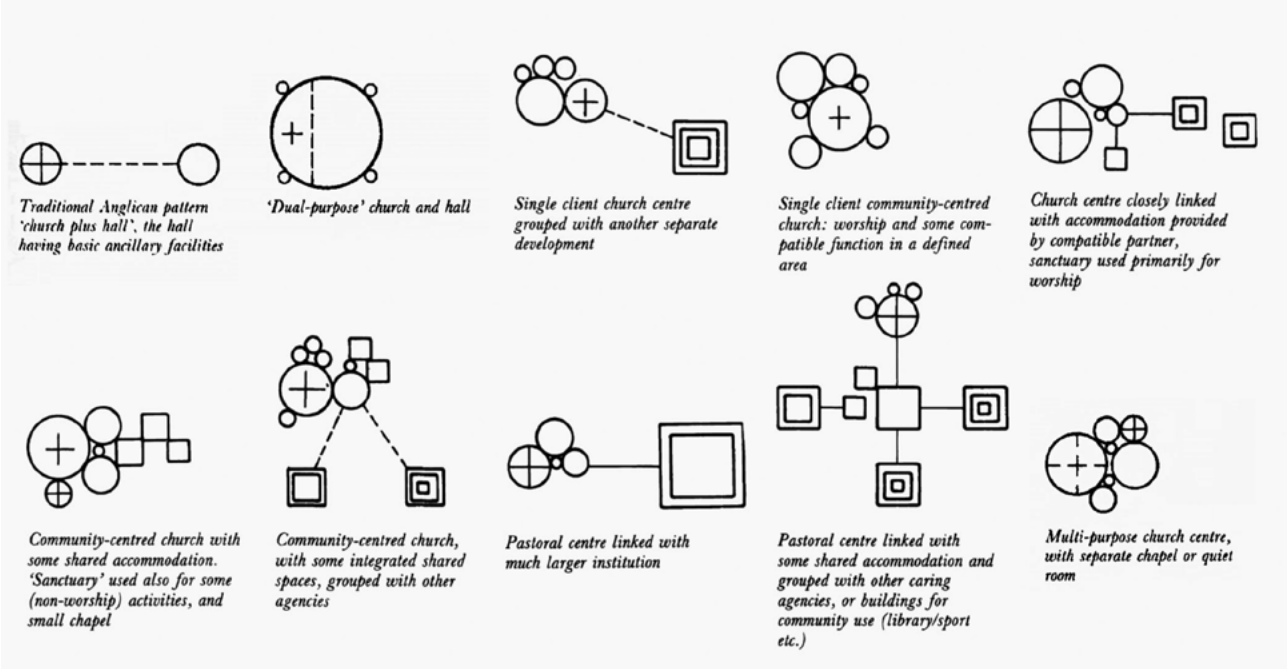
The architectural impact of these liturgical shifts was profound. As in contemporary Catholic design, the altar took on a renewed centrality, while the choir space became a focal point of worship. A striking example is St Paul's, Bow Common **[Fig. 1],** in London's East End, completed in 1960 by architects Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, both members of the New Churches Research Group, an interdisciplinary forum for exploring the relationship between worship and design.[7] Praised by Anglican priest Peter Hammond in his 1962 book *Liturgy and Architecture*, the church was conceived with a strong communal ethos. Its rectangular plan featured a continuous walkway, interrupted only by the baptismal font at the entrance, while the sanctuary was defined by a bold suspended metal candelabrum, with the altar placed beneath a canopy: an arrangement that reinforced both liturgical focus and spatial cohesion.[8] Although dedicated spaces for secular community activities were relatively limited, the garden, enclosed by the church, parish house, and meeting hall to the south, functioned as a generous open-air gathering space. Drawing on monastic tradition, the courtyard introduced a sequence of open and semi-enclosed

6 Hebert, *The Parish Communion*, 181.

7 On the architects, see Gerald Adler, *Robert Maguire & Keith Murray* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2012).

8 Peter Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1960), 4th ed. 1963, 111, 113-114.

Fig. 1
St Paul, Bow Common, London, by Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, exterior view (© The Courtauld).




areas, subtly negotiating the boundary between public and private. This flexible arrangement allowed the space to adapt to different uses, reinforcing its role as a focal point for communal life.



## New Functions for New Areas

In Britain, the post-war period witnessed a profound transformation driven by demographic changes, the reconstruction of city centres ravaged during the Second World War, and advances in transportation technologies. These developments led to a decentralisation policy that encouraged people to move away from city centres to suburban and newly developed areas, such as the large settlements made possible by the New Towns Act of 1946 and the Housing Act of 1952. The planning of these New Towns and housing estates around industrial centres was accompanied by provisions aimed at fostering community well-being, though the implementation of these plans often faced considerable delays.

In a context where the integration of work and daily life was often fragmented, religion played a pivotal role in cultivating a sense of belonging and influencing various aspects of citizens' lives. The social significance of the new parish churches stood in contrast to their peripheral locations, as they were predominantly built on the outskirts of towns. This strategic positioning aimed to reduce land acquisition costs, particularly for community projects, while also allowing for future expansion in response to demographic changes. In these areas, where services were often scarce, the parish church became a crucial piece of infrastructure, merging sacred space with additional extra-liturgical functions to serve the wider needs of the community.

If additional functions had been linked to the church centre, their integration could have been more fluid, as demonstrated in the diagrams drawn by architect

Fig. 2
Aggregation schemes from Martin Purdy, *Churches and Chapels: A Design and Development Guide* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1991).

Martin Purdy and featured in his 1991 book *Churches and Chapels: A Design and Development Guide*.[9] The book offered guidelines for the design of Christian parish centres, drawing from the collected experience of Purdy's work as a church designer for the firm Architects Planning and Ecclesiastical Consultants (APEC), established in 1969 with Peter Bridges. Purdy's diagrams demonstrated several combinations of aggregation for religious complexes, showcasing different ways in which additional functions could be incorporated seamlessly into the design **[Fig. 2].**

Depending on the level of integration between these functions, two distinct approaches to conceptualising churches and their associated parish centres emerged during the 1960s and 1970s.

The first approach saw the sacred building primarily as a place for worship, with a clear emphasis on the church's role as the focal point of spiritual life. It advocated for the idea that churches should stand apart from the surrounding urban fabric, as monumental complexes that were immediately recognisable and visually distinct. This prominence was not merely a matter of aesthetic preference but was rooted in ethical considerations—namely, the belief in the importance of shared beauty within sacred spaces.[10] Rather than adopting the utilitarian forms of industrial buildings, churches were encouraged to draw inspiration from the grandeur of cathedrals, with the belief that such design would provide the working class with one of their few direct encounters with art. Moreover, in contrast to polyfunctional buildings, uncertainties persisted regarding the willingness of the faithful to engage with parish centres, even in their leisure time. These ideas found expression in the design of liturgical spaces, which maintained their distinct autonomy, with extra-liturgical functions relegated to smaller volumes, often constructed separately from the main church building and frequently added at a later stage. For instance, architect Gerard Goalen advocated for this approach, as exemplified in the design of the Catholic Church of Our Lady of Fatima in the New Town of Harlow..[11] Similar principles were evident in its almost symmetrical Anglican counterpart, the church of St. Paul designed by the Humphrys and Hurst studio **[Fig. 3]**.[12] Both buildings emerged as striking landmarks, their massive volumes and cathedral-like forms asserting a visual dominance over their surroundings. In each case, the parish centre was positioned at the rear of the site, intentionally separated from the main liturgical space by a low, connecting walkway.

The opposite trend sought to integrate the functions of the parish centre with the church, creating a multi-use organism designed to foster community and reduce building management costs. The first degree of this integration was seen in the dual-purpose churches that spread across the UK after the Second

9 Martin Purdy, *Churches and Chapels. A Design and Development Guide* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1991).

10 Gerard Goalen, "The House of God", *Churchbuilding*, no. 2 (January 1961): 3–5.

11 Gerald Adler, "Our Lady of Fatima", in *100 Churches 100 Years* (London: Batsford, 2019), ed. Susannah Charlton, Elain Harwood, and Clare Price, 84; Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975* (London: Routledge, 2016), 289–91.

12 Des Hill, "St Paul", in Charlton, Harwood and Price, *100 Churches 100 Years*, 78.

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World War, largely for economic reasons. These buildings typically featured a large hall with the sanctuary at one end, which could be screened off during non-religious activities. Notable examples include the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Harlow, designed by Maguire and Murray, and several churches by Michael Farey in London's suburbs.[13]

## Cathedrals Versus Civic Centres

While Peter Hammond, in his seminal *Liturgy and Architecture*, contended that style was secondary to functional planning in church design, the debate surrounding the architectural language of churches in new areas was both vibrant and multifaceted.[14] From a planimetric standpoint, the integration of multiple functions within a single complex often resulted in flexible spaces, adaptable outside worship hours. Multifunctionality was expressed architecturally through a departure from visual unity, favouring volumetric groupings that reflected the varied internal spaces. The inclusion of secular functions, alongside shifting cultural priorities, encouraged the emergence of a new style—more suited to urban settings, less monumental, and distinctly functional.

The exploration of polyfunctionality and temporality in church buildings in new

13 Adler, *Robert Maguire and Keith Murray*, 89–93; Michael Farey, "The Church Centre", *Churchbuilding*, no. 2 (January 1961), 6–10.

14 Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture*, 169–70: "It is high time that churchmen awoke to the fact that serious architects to-day are not primarily concerned with questions of style, or with the pursuit of a contemporary idiom."

Fig. 3
St Paul, Harlow, by Humphrys and Hurst, 1957-1959, exterior view (photo: the JR James Archive, University of Sheffield).

areas prompted a wider discussion on the architectural approach best suited to convey these principles. For example, in a lecture at the Derby Diocesan Clergy School on April 26th, 1962, George Every, of the Society of Sacred Mission at Kelham, examined the architectural nuances necessary to support both liturgical and social change within ecclesiastical spaces.[15]

In his discourse, Every reflected on the challenge of constructing churches in new estates, where congregations often formed gradually. He argued against the immediate construction of large churches for small congregations in new areas, deeming it a misstep. Instead, he advocated for the establishment of several smaller churches, where a sense of participation could be fostered through an "intimate togetherness."[16] Moreover, he recommended a phased approach, advocating for the construction of small-scale buildings initially, prioritising the creation of an appropriate Eucharistic space, with additional areas added incrementally as the congregation grew and its needs evolved over time. [17]

Despite Every's preference for smaller spaces, he ardently advocated for the construction of buildings that conveyed a sense of permanence and solidity. His rationale stemmed from the desire to balance the informality of certain rites, such as the administration of the Eucharist without an ordained priest. By imbuing these spaces with a sense of enduring solidity, Every sought to elevate the solemnity and reverence of the rituals, highlighting their significance despite their informal nature:

"We do need churches, with church buildings symbolizing permanence and solidity, but on a small scale, prepared to be left behind in another movement of population. […] The more informal, the less sacerdotal, our assemblies and eucharists may become, the more important it is that the room, the naos, should convey the flock the sense of being contained in the wholeness of the church."[18]

On the flip side, Canon Michael J. Jackson's discourse at a conference held in Leeds in September 1961 explored the intersection of sociology and church architecture.[19] Jackson examined the evolving role of the church within industrial society, particularly in the context of new settlements. He noted how the dissolution of traditional geographical unity—where communities were centred around a common locality—had shifted the church's focus. No longer anchored solely by physical proximity, the church began to prioritise a more functional approach, where its role was defined less by its location and more by its capacity to serve the diverse needs of a dispersed and changing population. This shift had significant implications for parish organisation, prompting a re-

15 George Every, *The Setting of Liturgical Change / Building for Change in the Liturgy / Appendix: Forward from the Font. Two lectures given to the Derby diocesan clergy school on April 25th and 26th, 1962* (S.l.: New Churches Research Group, 1962).

16 Every, *The Setting of Liturgical Change*, 22.

17 According to Every, the room, which should feature an altar positioned away from the wall, a sedilia, and a font, needed to be large enough to accommodate around a hundred people standing, with fewer able to kneel or sit. If the congregation increased, a school or club could be used for Sunday liturgy. If the increase was stable, then it was possible to add aisles to the chancel.

18 Every, *The Setting of Liturgical Change*, 23.

19 Michael J. Jackson, *Sociology and Church Building. Tex of a talk given at a Conference at Leeds, September 1961* (S.l: New Churches Research Group, 1961).

evaluation of the centrality of parish buildings and the wider mission of the Church. Jackson also questioned the traditional ideals of permanence and grandeur in church architecture, suggesting that the opulence and durability of such buildings might be at odds with the transient nature of modern life:

"At least a provisional nature is suggested for the church building: whether the sumptuousness and durability of many churches is not a contradiction here is another question. In any case the building requires to express something of the Church's incompleteness and sense of having no abiding citizenship in this world. Prefabricated techniques and buildings might therefore have sociological as well as theological support."[20]

## Missionary Plans and Ecumenism

In the expanding urban landscape, religious buildings were more than infrastructure: they became vital contributors to the cultivation of communal identity. However, in these evolving urban areas characterised by rapid population growth and frequent turnover, establishing a traditional parish system was often impractical. The conventional parish model relied on a strong bond between the parish community and the surrounding urban community, which was difficult to achieve amidst the flux of urban development. To address this challenge and foster a shared identity, new development areas were designated as mission areas.[21] Within these mission areas, groups of priests collaborated with local authorities and social agencies to create the necessary social infrastructure for establishing a parish community.[22] Once the conditions for establishing a new parish were met, particularly in the initial phases of low-density New Town developments, new parish churches were constructed alongside their accompanying parish buildings.

During missionary expansion, flexibility and multifunctionality became essential principles in in gradually forming religious communities.[23] Prior to the establishment of permanent parish churches, missionary plans often included pastoral units. These units typically combined residential quarters for staff with a ground floor dedicated to a range of pastoral activities, including worship, social support, and educational initiatives for children. While these units operated with a degree of autonomy, they were integrated within a larger institutional framework, such as a major parish church or an ecumenical centre. The ecumenical centre, representing a broader Christian unity, sought to accommodate various faith traditions within the region, promoting a sense of collective identity that transcended denominational boundaries. This concept of an interdenominational space mirrored the rising momentum for religious unity,

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20 Jackson, *Sociology and Church Building*, 4.

21 Alfred R. Shands, *The Liturgical Movement and the Local Church* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1959).

22 Ronald Smythe, Susan Harrison, 'The New Town Mission Field', *Churchbuilding*, no. 5 (January 1962), 14-15; See also the evangelical initiative summarised in *Evangelical Strategy in the New Towns. Report of the Evangelical Alliance New Towns Study Groups* (London: Scripture Union, 1971).

23 National Plan for a Christian Centre, *Churchbuilding*, no. 29 (January 1970), 3–6.

championed by global organisations like the World Council of Churches.[24] This burgeoning interest in religious unity fostered the shared use of church buildings across Britain, a practice formally enshrined in the Sharing of Church Buildings Act of 1969. From the 1970s onwards, it reflected a shift towards ecumenical cooperation, with sacred spaces serving a collective purpose.[25]

In addition to spaces for worship, both traditional and ecumenical, the centre provided facilities for youth activities, offices for various Churches, consultation rooms, recreational areas, and essential amenities. The sharing of churches emerged as a pragmatic response to the multiculturalism of post-war British society, further influenced by recent waves of immigration, especially in industrial areas.[26] However, beyond its socio-cultural implications, this approach was primarily driven by economic necessity. The construction of new religious buildings posed a significant financial burden, which was alleviated interdenominational collaboration.

The need to consider parish creation in new areas and the potential for sharing church buildings was already advocated by Gilbert Cope of the Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture. He wrote extensively on this issue, stressing the need to rethink traditional church construction and the importance of understanding the community's behavioural and functional needs. This led to a different conception of parish building spaces, organised according to their function and their continuous integration within the urban community. In a 1965 memorandum, Cope used diagrams and analyses to argue for the integration of three fundamental units: the worship room, other functional spaces, and housing for clergy.[27] He suggested these units could be combined in various configurations and dimensions, based on local needs, and advocated for extensive functional research on church layouts to support this integrated approach. Furthermore, he emphasised the necessity of delving into issues such as liturgical requirements, functional utility, missionary context, and ecumenical concerns to inform comprehensive decision-making in church design. Central to Cope's argument was the assertion that perpetuating the division of Christendom in new urban areas was both financially wasteful and theologically undesirable. Instead, he advocated for a collaborative approach that transcended denominational boundaries, reflecting the imperative of unity and harmony within the Christian community:

"It is both financially wasteful, humanly frustrating and theologically undesirable to perpetuate in new areas the present division of Christendom: in a phase of growing together in harmony every denomination must ask itself heart-searching questions about the desirability of setting up its own exclusive

24 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, Book 3: The Ecumenical Century, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids, M; Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996).

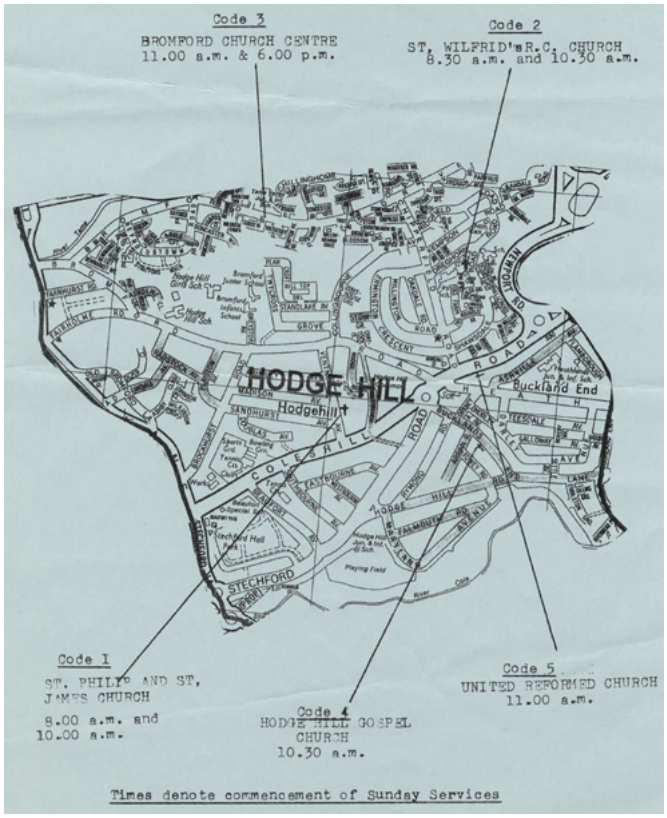
25 On shared church buildings, see Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church*, 308-318.

26 Edward R. Wickham, *Church and people in an industrial city* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957).

27 Gilbert Cope, *Church Buildings in New Areas* (London: New Churches Research Group, 1965).

centre in a new housing area."[28]

In an article published a couple of years later in the *Architect's Journal*, he reconsidered ecclesiastical buildings in new areas, on the basis of an analysis of pastoral activities.[29] He identified three possible ecclesiastical building types for New Towns, each responding to varying population densities: the town centre church, the pastoral centre, and the worship centre. The town centre church, situated in the denser urban core, would prioritise function over aesthetic considerations. Cope argued that a church integrated with the civic centre would better serve the community than a mini-cathedral. The pastoral centre, for less densely populated areas, would be a small facility for meetings and occasional worship, primarily acting as a satellite of a larger worship centre. The worship centre itself would function as a parochial hub, combining residences, a church, and ancillary spaces. Ideally ecumenical, it would serve as a truly "multi-purpose" facility—distinct from the dual-purpose church hall, which Cope found too rigid for specific events. A multi-purpose church, by contrast, would accommodate regular worship, para-liturgical activities, and concerts without extensive internal modifications.

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## The Multipurpose Church: SS Philip and James, Hodge Hill

Cope's article heralded a new trend in British church architecture, focusing on integrating both religious and secular activities within the same building. This approach led to the development of multipurpose churches, such as SS. Philip and James Church in Hodge Hill, completed in 1968 and demolished in 2008.[30] The church was located in a suburban area of Birmingham, about 7 kilometres east of the city centre, which had grown rapidly in the post-war period **[Fig. 4]**. Despite the presence of a church hall in the area, which had accommodated the local primary school since 1952, it was insufficient for the growing population.

Reverend Dennis Ede entrusted the project for the new church to the Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture, established at the University of Birmingham. The design process involved students, professors from the

28 Cope, *Church Buildings in New Areas*, 4.

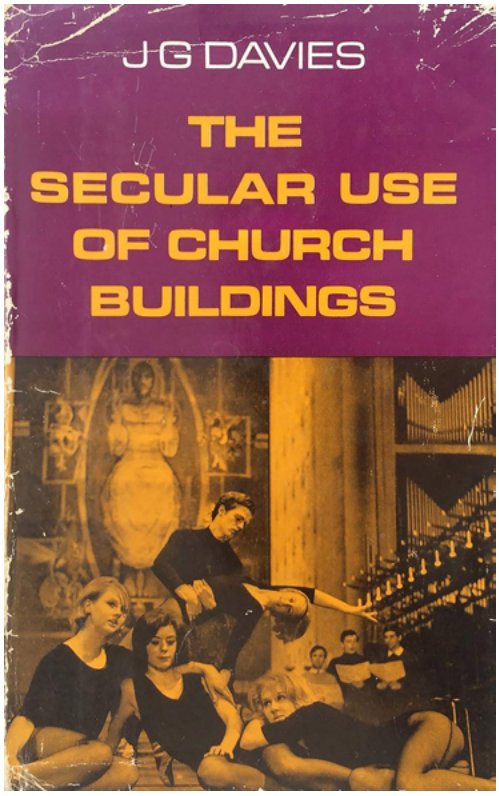
29 Gilbert Cope, "Pastoral Centres", *The Architect's Journal* (September 20, 1967), 763-766.

30 On the church see: Reinhard Gieselmann, *Contemporary Church Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 146-149; Elain Harwood, "Liturgy and Architecture: The Development of the Centralised Eucharistic Space", in *TheTwentieth Century Church,* ed. Roland Jeffrey (London: Twentieth Century Society, 1998), 74; Michael Gilman, *A Study of Churches built for the Use of Congregations of the Church of England Between 1945 and 1970 and of their Effectiveness in Serving the Needs of their Congregations Today,* (PhD Diss., University of Sheffield, Sheffield, 2000), vol. 2, 311-315.

Fig. 4
The Hodge Hill area with indications of the main churches and the service hours (Private Archive).

University of Birmingham, community representatives, and the diocese. The lead architects were Martin Purdy and Denys Hinton of the Birmingham School of Architecture. Hinton was already an affirmed church architect, having previously designed several church buildings in the Midlands.[31] Purdy studied architecture at the Polytechnic of Central London and the University of York before earning a PhD at Birmingham University, where he later began collaborating with the institute.[32]

A key influence on the design was the Institute's director, Anglican theologian John Gordon Davies. At the time of the church's construction, Davies was working on his book *The Secular Use of Church Buildings* (1968) **[Fig 5]**.[33] In this work, he revisited the secular activities traditionally conducted within religious buildings, advocating for their reintegration into modern church life. Davies argued that the multifaceted, extra-religious functions of the church, rooted in its historical use, could engage the broader community during their leisure time. In this sense, he historicised an extra-liturgical activity that, when adapted to industrial society, became crucial to the post-war church's missionary aims. Although his reconstruction of history was not without its flaws, the book had a lasting influence, shaping the flexible layouts of church spaces during this period. Its principles also guided the design of the new SS. Philip and James Church.

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The original design for SS. Philip and James aimed to preserve the existing church hall, repurposing it for extra-liturgical activities. However, in 1966, a fire destroyed the building entirely, leading to a revaluation of its functions, prompting their integration into a single, cohesive structure. The design process itself was extensive, beginning in 1964 and continuing through to the start of construction in 1966, with further revisions made in response to the fire.[34] The process involved discussions between the architect and the diocese, a course with lectures and debates for the community, parishioner visits to other recently built churches, discussions with local authorities, sociological surveys, and debates on the church's design and functions. A diagram detailing the planned activities, their schedule, and necessary spaces was created to establish the building's final functions.

Special attention was given to defining the range of activities that could take place in the worship hall, in addition to regular and extraordinary celebrations. The general principle was that any secular activity in which every Christian

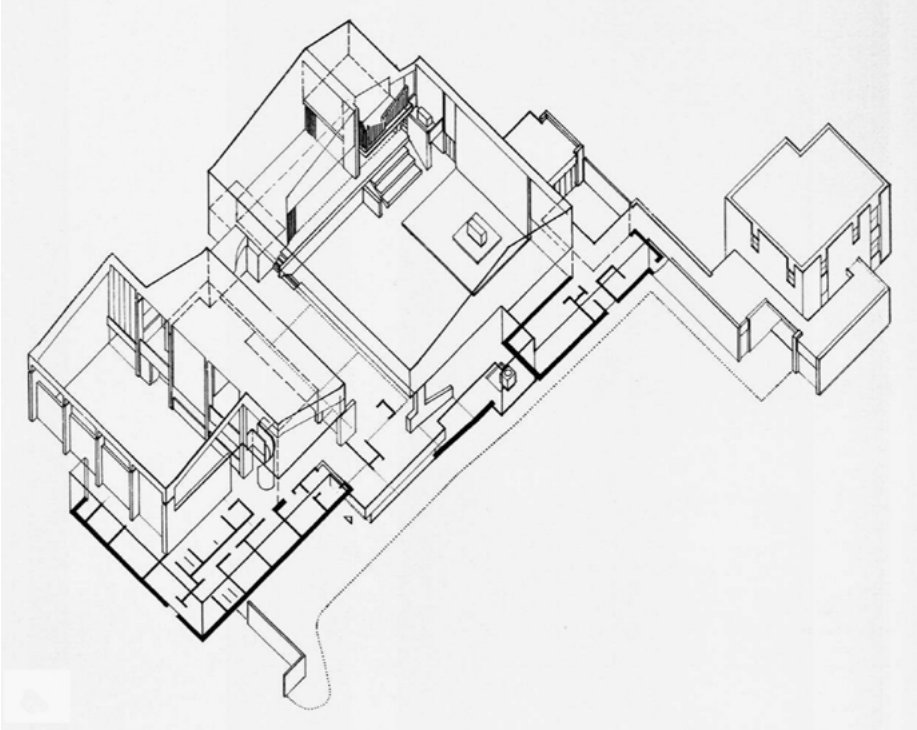
31 Among them, St. George in Rugby (1962–3), considered his masterpiece. See the obituary "Professor Denys Hinton: Architect", *The Times* (April 3, 2010), retrieved from https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/professor-denys-hinton-architect-qhlg8xd9x0h (last accessed May 2024).

32 See the obituary "Martin Purdy", retrieved from https://www.apec.ac/martin-purdy-obituary/ (last accessed May 2024).

33 John Gordon Davies, *The Secular Use of Church Buildings* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968).

34 The process is described in John Gordon Davies, ed., *Hodge Hill – St Philip and St James. The Multipurpose Church* (Birmingham: The University of Birmingham, 1971).

Fig. 5
Cover of John Gordon Davies, *The Secular Use of Church Buildings* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968).



could legitimately participate could be conducted in front of the altar: theatrical performances, concerts, slide and film screenings, dances, meals, games, and gymnastics. The resulting building perfectly fit the idea of a 'multipurpose church'.[35] The main difference between the multipurpose church and the dual-purpose church laid in the blending of activities: liturgical elements, such as the font and altar, were left exposed, reflecting the belief that because the sacred and the secular were two facets of the same reality.

The layout of SS. Philip and James consisted of interconnected volumes, topped by pitched roofs with skylights that flooded the interior with natural light [Fig. 6]. The eastern volume housed a bar, a game room, and various services, while the western volume contained the worship area and stage. In between, a long lounge could be opened up to connect to the sanctuary. The baptismal font was housed in a transparent alcove. Behind the altar, compact rooms housed a quiet room and sacristy, while a corridor connected to the priest's residence, built separately due to differing funding and schedules. In front of the altar, positioned on the west side, the worship space could be expanded by opening a partition into the lounge, thereby increasing the church's versatility.

This flexibility allowed for the maximisation of space utilisation, fostering a vibrant sense of community engagement that extended beyond religious services. This was vividly captured in the photographs featured in a special 1970 edition of *Manplan*, a publication by *Architectural Review*, dedicated to religion [Fig. 7].[36] These images showcased the diverse range of activities and gatherings facilitated by the church, illustrating its role as a hub for both spiritual

Fig. 6
St Philip and St James, Hodge Hill, Birmingham, axonometric drawing (source: Reinhard Gieselmann, *Contemporary Church Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1972).

35 Davies, ed., *Hodge Hill – St Philip and St James*, 9-10.

36 "The Present State of Church Building", *Manplan*, no. 5 (March 1970), *Religion*, 216, 217.

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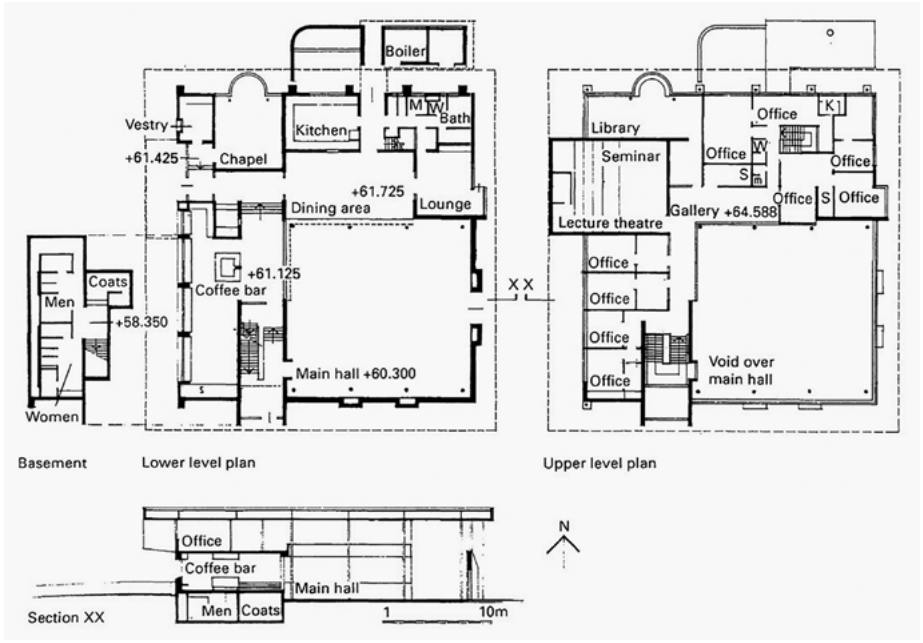


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and secular interactions. From worship ceremonies to various lay events, the building exemplified a dynamic fusion of sacred and profane realms, embodying the evolving needs and aspirations of the local community. The photographs remain as poignant reminders of the vibrant existence of this structure, which, despite its bold and experimental design, was demolished in 2008.

## A Church for All: The Ecumenical Centre, Skelmersdale

In Skelmersdale, a suburban area developed to alleviate overcrowding in Liverpool, the Church of England, alongside the Methodist, Baptist, and United Reformed Churches, collaborated to establish an interfaith centre, which opened its doors in 1973.[37] Designed by Martin Purdy and Peter Bridges, who had

Fig. 7
St Philip and St James, Hodge Hill, Birmingham, interior view (source: *Manplan*, no. 5, March 1970.

Fig. 8
Ecumenical Centre, Skelmersdale, by APEC – Architects Planning and Ecclesiastical Consultants, plans and section (source: Martin Purdy, *Churches and Chapels: A Design and Development Guide* (Oxford: Butterworth, 1991).

37 Martin Purdy, *Churches and Chapels*, 20.

formed their partnership at the Birmingham University Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture, the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre was their inaugural project.[38]

Departing from the conventional separation of secondary functions into detached volumes, the architects consolidated all activities within a single, three-level structure **[Fig. 8]**. Constructed predominantly from prefabricated elements, including steel pillars and corbelled beams, the centre featured a striking main worship area free from central obstructions. Internally, the exposed pillars contributed to the space's aesthetic, while externally, they were concealed behind an independent masonry facade punctuated by expansive fenestration, including a distinctive ribbon-window on the upper part of the worship hall **[Fig. 9]**. This double-height worship space featured an upper gallery equipped with curtains that could be drawn to accommodate additional seating as needed. Movable furnishings, including the altar dais, ensured adaptability for various occasions. Encased within a thick parallelepiped roof, steel beams supported the structure, imparting a modern civic aesthetic reminiscent of medical facilities, libraries, or even bowling alleys.

The centre's versatility extended beyond religious functions to encompass a wide range of activities, including worship, concerts, games, and community events **[Fig. 10]**. Additionally, the building housed various welfare agencies and administrative offices, transforming it into a vibrant community hub where individuals from diverse backgrounds could converge. This deliberate design ethos aligned with the state's mandate for neutrality in community centres, as outlined in a 1944 Report of the Ministry of Education, which aimed to foster inclusivity and unity while mitigating sectarian divisions within neighbourhoods.[39]

In summary, the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre stands as a testament

38 On Bridges: Martin Purdy, *The Ven. Peter Sydney Godfrey Bridges* (February 24, 2015), retrieved from churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2015/20-february/gazette/obituaries/the-ven-peter-sydney-godfrey-bridges, (last accessed May 2024).

39 Ministry of Education, *Community Centres* (1944), 7-8, from James Greenhalgh, *Reconstructing modernity Space, power and governance in mid-twentieth century British cities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press

Fig. 9
Ecumenical Centre, Skelmersdale, by APEC – Architects Planning and Ecclesiastical Consultants, rendering of the exterior (source: APEC Archive).

to the collaborative spirit and forward-thinking vision of its designers, Martin Purdy and Peter Bridges. Their innovative approach to church architecture transcended denominational boundaries, creating a space that serves as a dynamic hub for worship, community engagement, and social services. By embracing contemporary design principles, the centre embodied adaptability and inclusivity, welcoming individuals of all faiths and backgrounds. As a beacon of unity and cooperation in a diverse society, the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre exemplifies the enduring relevance of ecumenism and the transformative potential of shared spaces in fostering harmony and mutual respect.

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However, despite its profound significance and enduring impact, the future of the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre hangs in the balance. In recent years, efforts were made to adapt the building to modern needs, including the installation of a lift, the glazing of the landing overlooking the main Space, and the extension of the chapel. The extended chapel, which was rarely used for worship, may have been required due to a desire among church members to revert all worship to a separate, 'sacred' space. However, funding ran out before the renovations could be completed, and the onset of COVID-19 further disrupted these efforts, leading the congregation to gradually disperse to neighbouring churches, making it difficult to restore Sunday worship services.

The demolition of SS Philip and James and the challenges faced by the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre underscore the fragility of church buildings and the difficulties in maintaining communal spaces that once embodied shared values and aspirations. As discussions about its future continue, the two cases serve as poignant reminders of the need to preserve and adapt places that foster unity, diversity, and collective identity in an ever-changing urban landscape.

## Conclusion

The trajectory of Anglican churches and parish centres in the post-war period unfolded a complex narrative, shaped by both religious and societal

Fig. 10
Ecumenical Centre, Skelmersdale, by APEC – Architects Planning and Ecclesiastical Consultants, exterior view (source: Skelmersdale: A New Town Project Archive).

2017), 162: "The community centre is not intended to serve as a substitute for home, church or other traditional rallying points of social life […] [The community centre] can supply an absolutely neutral meeting place […] Nearly all other social agencies […] tend to draw people together on a corporative basis. In the community centre […] they should meet as individuals."

transformations. At its heart, this evolution marked a shift from an inward, individualistic approach to religion towards a more communal and inclusive ethos. Central to this transformation was the reconsideration of liturgical space, echoing developments seen across various denominations. The revival of communal practices, such as the shared act of Communion, alongside innovations like the Parish Breakfast, redefined the role of the church as not just a place of worship but as a dynamic centre for community engagement and social cohesion. Parish centres, as extensions of this vision, became focal points for these activities, symbolising the church's commitment to addressing the broader needs of its congregation and the surrounding community. In parallel, there was a gradual decline in the monumental scale traditionally associated with churches, replaced by a shift towards multifunctional spaces that could accommodate both sacred rituals and secular community functions. These parish centres, with their adaptable design, became central to this new church model, fostering a sense of shared identity through their varied offerings of worship, social interaction, education, and more.

This evolution mirrored broader societal shifts, where spirituality became just one element of a wider array of services offered to citizens—albeit one of the least economically viable. As urban landscapes transformed in the late 1960s and 1970s, the rise of shopping malls and entertainment venues in city centres highlighted a shift in societal priorities. In this context, religious buildings were increasingly relegated to the urban periphery, signalling the challenges faced

Fig. 11
Ecumenical Centre, Skelmersdale, by APEC – Architects Planning and Ecclesiastical Consultants, interior view from the gallery (source: Skelmersdale: A New Town Project Archive).

by organised religion in maintaining its relevance in a rapidly changing cultural environment. Yet, within these challenges lay a narrative of adaptation and resilience. Anglican churches and parish centres evolved not as remnants of a past era but as vibrant spaces meeting the diverse needs of their communities. They became places where tradition and modernity coexisted, where sacred and secular functions merged, and where the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment was interwoven with the drive for social cohesion. Indeed, the trajectory of Anglican churches and parish centres in the post-war period reflected broader societal transformations—a testament to the enduring ability of faith to both shape and adapt to the communities it served.

The vision of these buildings as dynamic, evolving spaces now stands in stark contrast to their current fate—many having been demolished or fallen into neglect. Once symbols of innovative spiritual practices and communal integration, their decline may reflect the ongoing changes in religious and social landscapes. Factors such as declining church attendance, increasing secularisation, and shifting urban priorities have all contributed to diminishing their relevance. The use of experimental construction techniques, which often made maintenance more challenging, coupled with economic considerations—particularly in the UK where profitable redevelopment frequently leads to the demolition of older structures—has further hastened their removal. Paradoxically, the very adaptability that once defined these buildings has led to their redundancy. Their demolition is not a contradiction but rather a continuation of the cyclical process of change that these spaces were designed to reflect. Religious buildings, much like the communities they serve, are markers of their time—shaped by and responsive to the social currents of their era. As those dynamics evolve, these spaces inevitably become obsolete, revealing the complex relationship between architecture, community, and the forces of societal transformation.

Fig. 12
Signing of the building contract for the Skelmersdale Ecumenical Centre, 1971. Peter Bridges standing on the left, and Martin Purdy, wearing glasses, looking down on the right (Andrew Bailey's Archive)

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