Kate Jordan

Beyond the Pale: Reading the White Interior in Contemporary Church Refurbishments

ARTICLE

Church Architecture, Refurbishment, Conservation, Secular, Whiteness

/Abstract

Historic churches are an integral feature of British cities, serving not only as places of worship but also as cultural attractions that draw growing numbers of secular visitors. In recent years, several parishes in London have employed celebrated architectural practices to renovate their historic churches with the intention of raising the profile of these buildings. An observable trend in such refurbishments are whitewashed interiors often replacing previously colourful schemes. This paper explores whether a current trend for white interiors suggests new directions in the social and religious cultures of Christianity. For example, do white spaces offer neutral territory for encounters between the sacred and secular, appealing to both worshippers and cultural tourists alike? Do such design schemes reflect a growing move away from collective congregational worship and towards private spirituality and contemplation? The paper presents three recently refurbished historic churches in London as case studies through which to explore these questions: St John-at-Hackney; St Augustine's, Hammersmith; and St John's Waterloo. The selected case studies offer examples from both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, suggesting possibilities for reading the trend as an expression of ecumenism. In conclusion, the paper asks whether austere white schemes, such as those presented in the case studies, offer unifying spaces for different worshipping and non-worshipping communities, or whether, as the Catholic priest and architectural theorist Peter Newby suggests, the emptying out of narrative content has stripped them of the 'full immersive experience' of Christian worship.

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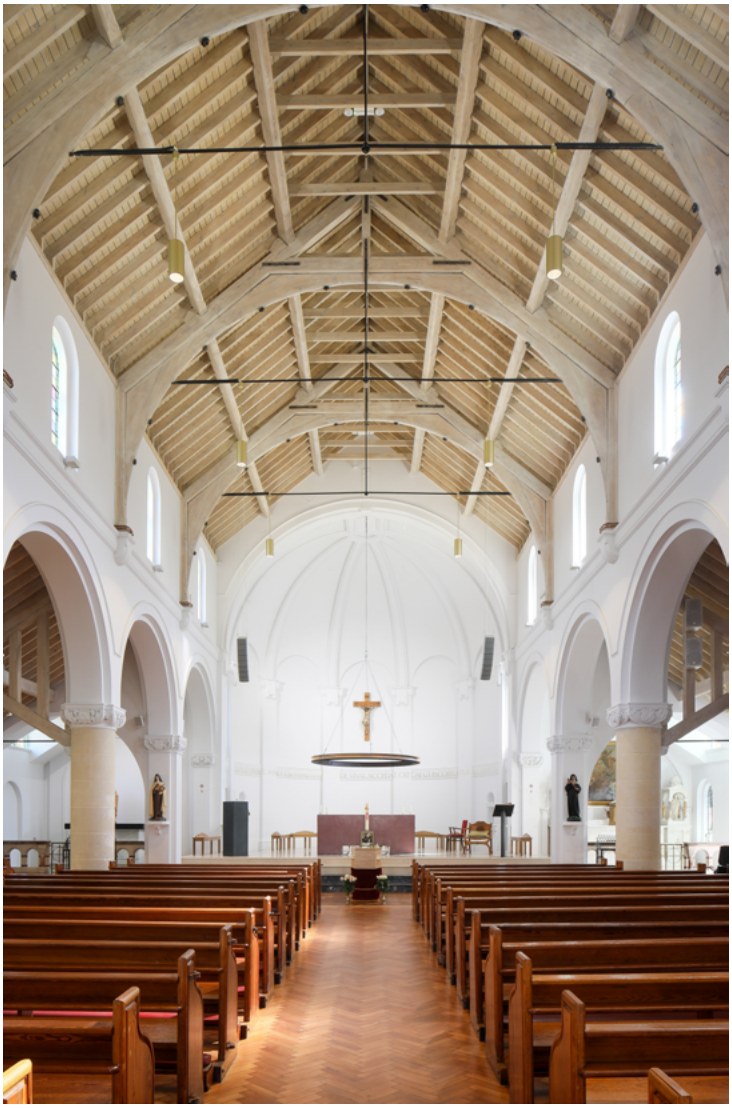
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/20221

In this paper I explore the significance of whiteness in the interior refurbishment of historic churches in London. I suggest that there is an observable trend for interior designs that employ whiteness thematically, often involving the painting over of colourful schemes and the removal of art works. Though this paper focuses on London, I have also visited a number of sites in the UK and some in Europe and the points I make may be extrapolated more widely. To examine this trend, I have refined my research to focus on three recently refurbished historic churches in London, two from the Anglican communion and one Roman Catholic. I will use these examples to investigate the claim made by the architectural theorist and priest Peter Newby about white minimal churches. On these Newby suggests that "the modern architectural desire for spiritual space [lacks] visual imagery and therefore raises the question whether such interiors may be described as Christian space" [1]. Newby's discussion centres on one of the following case studies, St Augustine's Hammersmith, but his points apply equally to my other case studies, St John-at-Hackney and St John's Waterloo.



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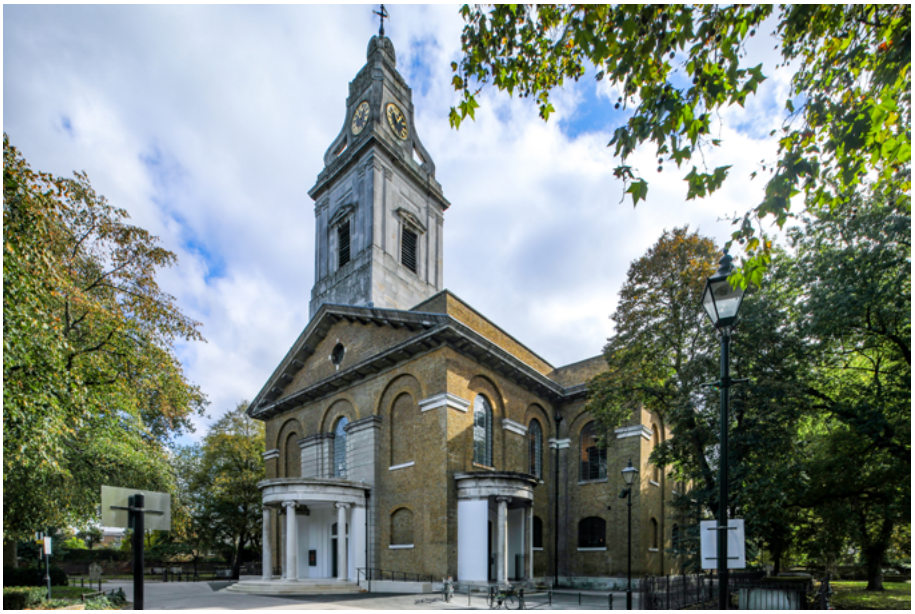
I want to start, then, by thinking about what Newby means when he suggests that such interiors might be considered 'spiritual' rather than properly Christian spaces, which is a controversial claim. In his article "Immanence and Immersion", published in 2018, Newby makes the distinction between Christian and spiritual spaces, arguing that the latter has become increasingly prominent in recent years. In doing so, Newby does not discuss whiteness separately from minimalism; rather the two are conflated in what he calls "imageless and cool spaces"[2].

Newby's observations about churches such as St Augustine's reflect my own and the paper that follows draws from interviews, site visits and research published over the last five years. I have been increasingly interested in the theological significance of whiteness in contemporary church architecture and

1 Peter Newby, "Immanence and immersion: Peter Newby visits two Catholic Churches where recent reorderings pay close attention to symbolic detail in pursuit of an immersive experience," *The Free Library*, 2018 https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Immanence+and+immersion%3a+Peter+Newby+visits+two+Catholic+Churches...-a0547989319 (last accessed November 2024).

2 Newby, "Immanence and immersion: Peter Newby visits two Catholic Churches where recent reorderings pay close attention to symbolic detail in pursuit of an immersive experience".

Fig. 1
St. Augustine's Church, Hammersmith, refurbished by Roz Barr Architects, 2018 (courtesy Sirj Photography).



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the extent to which, as Newby suggests, this gestures towards spirituality as a category that is distinct from religion. The prevalence of white purpose-built churches – not just in the UK but across the world – is an ecumenical trend that certainly deserves closer attention. In this paper, however, I will focus on the act of transforming historical churches into spaces that overlay new cultures of worship onto traditional ones.

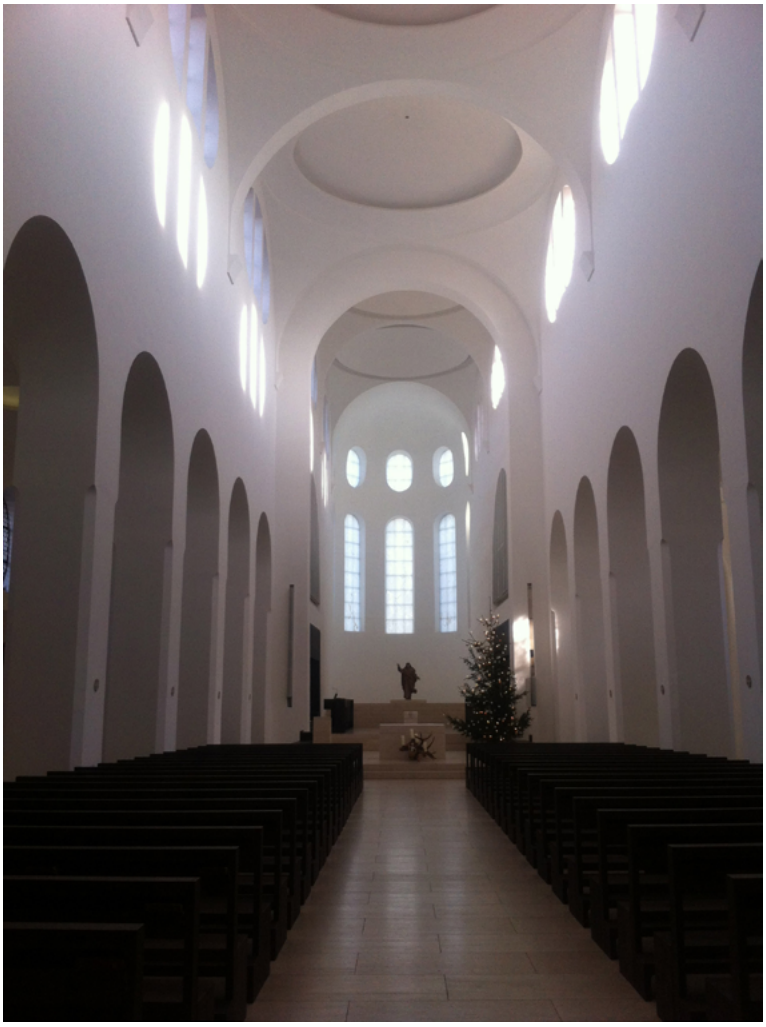
Of course, churches, like all buildings, are dynamic and colour schemes reflect changing tastes and ideas. At St Mel's Cathedral in Longford, Ireland, for example, the refurbishment following a fire in 2009 was a departure from the original interior and now features a predominantly white scheme, which contrasts the distinctive blue limestone columns.[3] Such change is entirely consistent with the evolution of churches as living buildings: over time churches such as St Mel's are added to, edited, restored, refurbished and adapted. The superimposition of different aesthetic styles, cultures and rituals characterises historic churches and, in the case studies I discuss, I will explore earlier refurbishments and design schemes. Each historical phase of a church's life can be read in meaningful ways: the iconoclastic whitewashing of medieval churches, for example, tells us a great deal not only about the protestant reformation but also about the social and political turmoil of the 16th and 17th centuries. In the same way, I will argue that whiteness in church architecture reveals more than simply interior design tastes in the twenty-first century: the choice to paint St Mel's white following its reconstruction was not simply the whim of the architect. Instead, I suggest, whiteness tells us something about the particular religious and social conditions of the twenty-first century in Western Europe and the Anglophone world, and possibly beyond.

The first example that I would like to examine is the refurbishment of St Augustine's, Hammersmith which was completed in 2018 **[Fig. 1]**. A partner-

3 Marese McDonagh, "Restoration in Longford: raising St Mel's Cathedral from the ashes," *The Irish Times*, September 26, 2013, https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/homes-and-property/restoration-in-longford-raising-st-mel-s-cathedral-from-the-ashes-1.1539806 (last accessed November 2024).

Fig. 2
St. John-at-Hackney, original church completed to design by James Spiller, 1794 (photo by the author).

ship between Roz Barr Architects and the parish priest Father Gianni Notarianni, the aim of this project was to remove the colourful layers of paint, creosote and carpeting and expose the raw materials of the church. The aesthetics of the scheme were more than simply visual, as the architect Roz Barr made explicit in an interview with the author. "There is an honesty to our approach", Barr claims, "that aims to celebrate this urban room and create a more optimistic and purer interior"[4].



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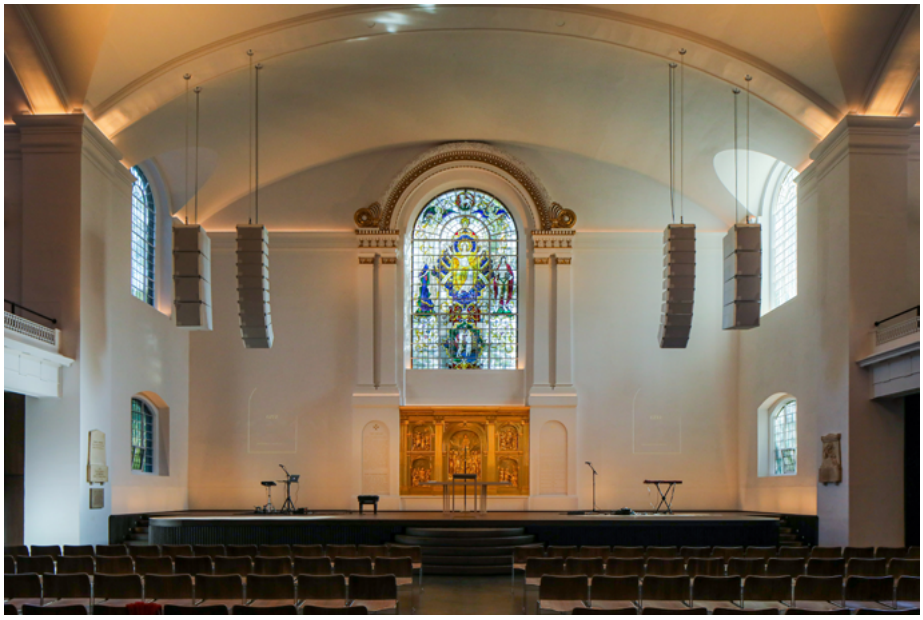
Built between 1915-1916, the church was founded by Augustinian Priors and continues to be served by the order from the neighboring priory. The original building is a solid but relatively prosaic example of early twentieth-century Neo-Romanesque, typical of its era. In the century following its completion, the interior of the church was redecorated in a succession of styles. In 2012, Father Notarianni, secured funds to begin the first phase of a major redevelopment of the site and Roz Barr Architects were appointed to undertake the work, beginning with a significant overhaul of the interior. By the time the renovation commenced in 2018, as many as six-layers of paint had been applied to each internal surface, including the stone piers, the roof timbers were stained dark brown, and the internal colour scheme was dominated by the sky-blue apse and red-carpeted chancel floor. The most striking element of the Barr/Notarianni refurbishment was the introduction of light into the space by stripping the roof timbers and treating them with a white oil to create a uniformly pale colour scheme. The limestone columns and timber floors have also been stripped and sealed. As I have noted elsewhere, the intention was to create a rationalised, readable space that generates a sense of unmediated spirituality[5]. Importantly, when I asked the architect – a self-identified atheist – how she had translated the brief, she emphasized that, though she wasn't religious herself, she wanted to capture her own interpretation of spirituality. This sentiment, which I have heard expressed often by architects working on churches, aligned – somewhat surprisingly – with the objectives of Father Notarianni, who has a background

4 Kate Jordan, "Truth and Light," *The RIBA Journal*, August 16, 2018 https://www.ribaj.com/buildings/st-augustines-church-refurbishment-hammersmith-religon-roz-barr-architects-kate-jordan (last accessed November 2024).

5 Jordan, "Truth and Light".

Fig. 3
Moritzkirche, Augsberg, refurbished by John Pawson, 2013 (photo by the author).



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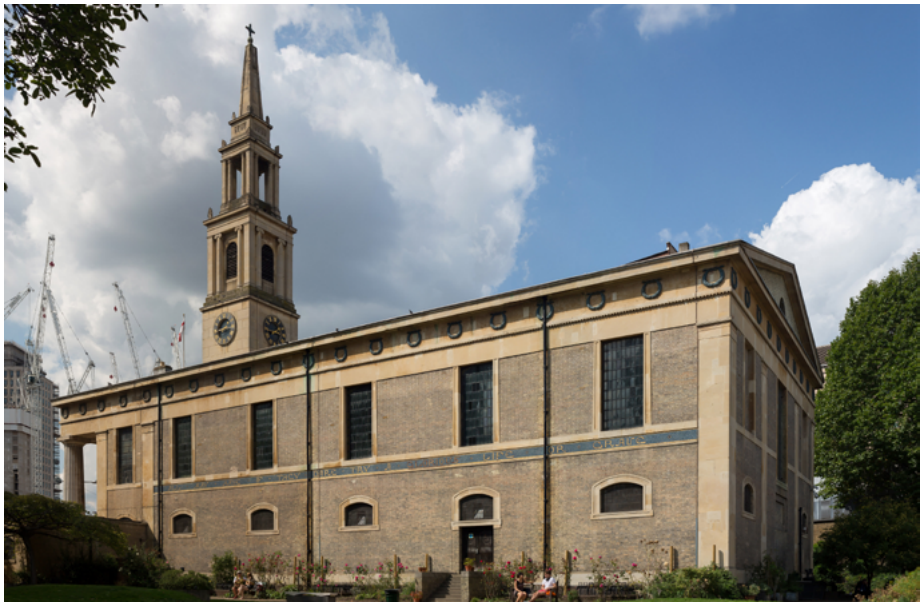

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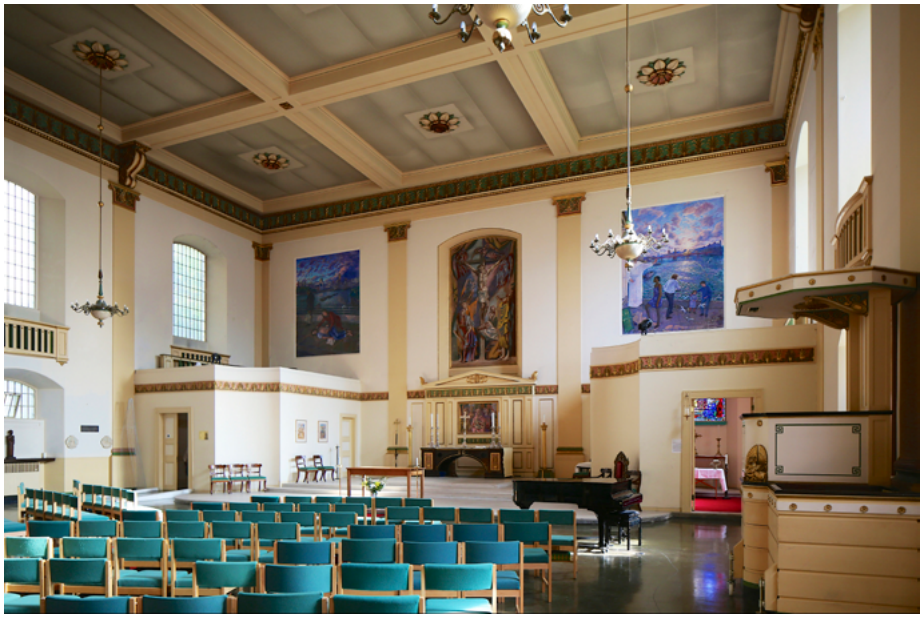

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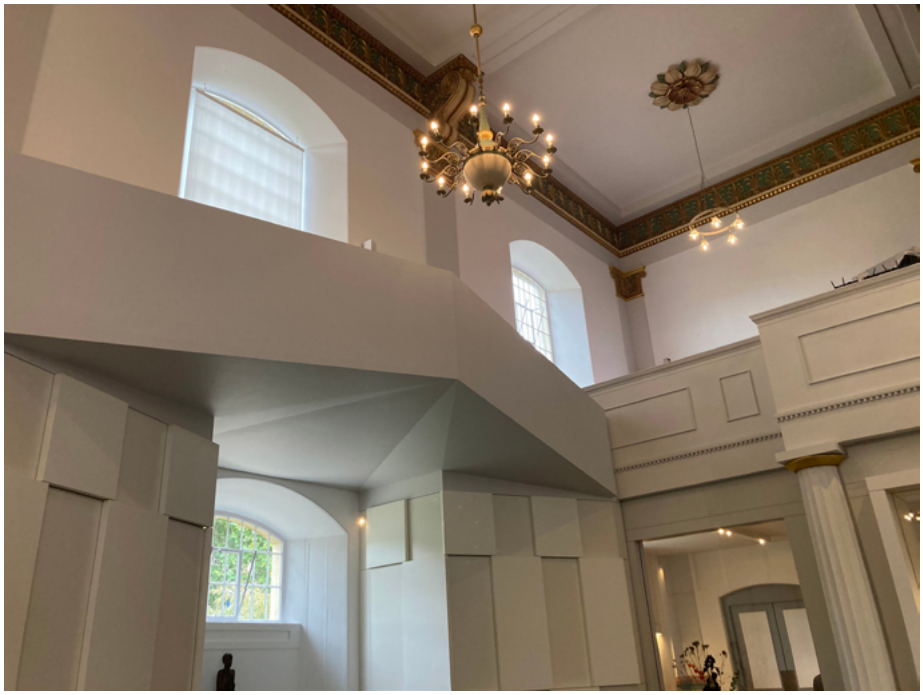
Fig. 4
St. John-at-Hackney, refurbished by John Pawson refurbishment, 2020 (photo by the author).

Fig. 5
St. John's, Waterloo, original church completed to designs by Francis Octavius Bedford, 1824. Katie Chan - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0 (source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=62180923).

Fig. 6
St. John's, Waterloo, refurbished by Thomas Ford and Partners, 1950 (photo by the author).



as an artist. Indeed, the aesthetic vision for St Augustine's is a genuine collaboration between sacred and secular visions of spirituality.

Similarly, the refurbishment of St John-at-Hackney, brought together the vision of the new Rector with the architect responsible for the interior design scheme, John Pawson **[Fig. 2]**. The £6 million refurbishment of this Grade II* listed church saw much of the interior stripped out and the walls painted white. The church, which was originally built in 1794 to designs by James Spiller, had been remodelled in the 1950s by the noted church architect N.F. Cachemaille-Day, to include a Festival of Britain-style colour scheme and fittings. In 2017 the newly appointed Rector Al Gordon was keen to bring the church up to date and introduce some architectural prestige. He engaged Pawson, known for his minimalism and fondness for white, to design the scheme. As Pawson's only religious project in the UK, St John-at-Hackney may be considered an architectural landmark. The completed interior has much in common with Pawson's austere refurbishment of Moritzkirche, Augsberg, which was rebuilt in 1946 by Dominikus Bohm and remodelled internally over the course of the twentieth century **[Fig. 3]**. The Moritzkirche refurbishment involved, in Pawson's words, the "meticulous paring away of selected elements of the church's complex fabric", in much the same way that elements were excised at St John-at-Hackney (Pawson 2024). The completed project has won acclaim for its sophisticated and highly photogenic white aesthetic **[Fig. 4]**. Though the refurbishment cannot be described as radical, it is perhaps surprising that the complete removal of the Cachemaille-Day fittings and decorative scheme met with little objection from any heritage bodies, including statutory consultee, the Twentieth Century Society.[6]

Fig. 7 St. John's, Waterloo, refurbished by Eric Parry Architects, 2022 (photo by the author).

6 Kate Jordan, "Victorian values: past and present in the refurbishment of London's historic churches," *Journal of Architectural Conservation 29*, no. 1 (2023): 20-39.

The painting over of St John-at-Hackney's original design scheme and removal of its 1950s fittings to ostensibly evoke the original spirit of the church, has much in common with my final example, St John's Waterloo. Here the alterations to the interior did prove to be more controversial and, although the scheme is overwhelmingly white, it is certainly not as austere as either the architect or the Rector had wished. The compromises that were finally reached were the result of a campaign to save the 1950s interior design scheme. The original Greek Revival building, designed by Francis Octavius Bedford in 1824, was one of four churches in Southwark built to celebrate the end of the Napoleonic Wars [Fig. 5]. St John's underwent a series of subsequent renovations: first by Reginald Blomfeld in 1885 then by John Ninian Comper in 1924 and, finally, following significant bomb damage during the blitz, by the Southwark Diocesan architect, Thomas Ford in 1950. The 1950 refurbishment saw a new Greek-inspired decorative scheme; the creation of two chapels; a lectern, altar and 'double-decker' pulpit; and the installation of a mural by the artist Hans Feibusch, whose work appears in many of Ford's churches. St John's was designated the official Festival of Britain church in 1951, a move that formally endorsed the interior design scheme and established its historical significance [Fig. 6]. Indeed, the current listing description focuses equally on the original building and 1950s interior.

In 2015, the diocese decided that the church required updating to meet its burgeoning needs as both a place of worship and concert venue. The practice Eric Parry Architects, noted for their award-winning refurbishment of St Martin-in-the-Fields, was engaged to undertake the refurbishment. The architects drew up plans for a major overhaul that would see most of the 1950s interior stripped out: the two chapels would be removed and new galleries constructed either side of the nave, reinstating those that had been lost in Thomas Ford's remodelling. In addition to this, the 1950s fittings and artwork were to be removed, with only the Feibusch mural being retained. The Twentieth Century Society challenged the plans on the basis that Thomas Ford's decorative interior was central to the historic value of the church. However, despite the Twentieth Century Society's criticism, both the architect and vicar of St John's, Canon Giles Goddard, continued to defend the new scheme. The dispute led to a Consistory Court Hearing in 2016 which resulted in the Chancellor of the Diocese of Southwark upholding the Twentieth Century Society's objection. The reworked plans were finally granted a faculty in 2018. However, though the new scheme (completed in 2022) was more sensitive to the Thomas Ford refurbishment, much of the original decor was lost, including the murals either side of the reredos. The Festival of Britain colour scheme was largely repainted white, with some details picked out in pale grey and gold [Fig. 7].

What all three of these examples have in common, as this paper emphasizes, is that white is used thematically in the interior design, in all cases replacing a colourful design scheme and in some cases the removal of artwork and fittings. One could reasonably argue that, in the case of St John-at-Hackney and St John's Waterloo, the minimal white schemes restored the Georgian spirit of the

Fig. X

original 18th century Protestant churches. But the same cannot be said of the Roman Catholic Neo-Romanesque St Augustine's. And it cannot be said of other examples of historic churches in the UK that have been similarly refurbished with a coat of white paint replacing polychromatic colour schemes.

At St Matthews, Bishopbrigg in Scotland, an early example of the work of Gillespie, Kidd and Coia, the practice Page\Park Architects were engaged to extend and refurbish the church. The completed interior features white walls, a white altar and pale timber seating. The whiteness is punctuated only by a blood red stripe behind the altar, in a similar fashion to the deep red ceramic altar at St Augustine's.[7] Similarly, the refurbishment of St Mary's Church in Andover, constructed between 1840 and 1846, focused on the 'decluttering' of the interior, which comprised the removal of the pews and their replacement with pale timber seating to compliment the newly painted white walls.[8] Comparable schemes are also seen across Europe. Examples include the refurbished interior of the Hernádkak Reformed church, near Miscolc in Hungary. Here the practice Studio Bunyik repainted the yellow walls, woodwork, timber pulpit and altar white, and replaced the dark timber pews to create an "all-white puritan interior"[9].

The case studies that I have examined raise some serious questions around changes in conservation practices, but they also say something about the visual culture of worship and how this has shifted in late modernity. Peter Newby sheds some interesting light on this in his reflections on St Augustine's Hammersmith:

The interior of the church has been painted white and the roof beams have been bleached. The visual effect of so much white has been to re-emphasise the Romanesque architectural antecedents of the church, something that had been hidden behind the coloured interior. The simplicity of forms and the coolness of the interior reaffirms the modern architectural desire for spiritual space, but the lack of visual imagery raises the question whether such interiors may be described as Christian space.[10]

Much has been written on the historical significance of whiteness in churches but as an architectural theorist and a Catholic priest, Newby's perspectives offer valuable insights into its theological basis. For Newby, a truly Christian space needs to immerse the worshipper in the act of prayer. He suggests that:

The Catholic Church has always placed an emphasis on visual imagery found in painting but also on the enclosed spaces that allow for the celebration of sacra-

7 "St Matthew's Parish Church: Page\Park Architects has sensitively refurbished and extended a post-war church designed by Gillespie Kidd & Coia near Glasgow," *Architecture Today* (May 2022).

8 "St Mary's Church Andover," Malcolm Fryer Architects website https://www.mfryer-architects.com/st-marys-andover (last accessed August 2024).

9 Noémi Viski, "Puritan, yet elegant church interior designed by Studio Bunyik," *Hype & Hyper*, August 26, 2021, https://hypeandhyper.com/puritan-yet-elegant-church-interior-designed-by-studio-bunyik/ (last accessed November 2024).

10 Newby, "Immanence and immersion: Peter Newby visits two Catholic Churches where recent reorderings pay close attention to symbolic detail in pursuit of an immersive experience".

Fig. X

ments. These two along with music and words create a full immersive experience that has narrative content. It is this 'something to say' that becomes lost in imageless and cool spaces of so much contemporary religious architecture. Every revealed religion does not simply illuminate the human condition, it also answers its questions, quells its fears and points towards its consummation.[11]

Of course, it is important to emphasize here that Newby is a Catholic priest discussing a Catholic church. But two of the examples that I have highlighted above (St John-at-Hackney and St John's Waterloo) are Anglican. In both cases, they have undertaken similar refurbishments that literally whitewash elements of the church's history (in both, the significant changes to the decor made during the Festival of Britain in the 1950s). This perhaps suggests that the trend for white interiors crosses denominations and speaks to a wider shift in Anglican, Catholic and indeed other mainstream churches across the UK. Of course, it is necessary to make a distinction between removing images and repainting original colour schemes – Peter Newby doesn't dwell on whiteness itself. But none of these examples have selected different colours. The act of bringing them into the twenty-first century has not simply involved a new colour scheme or the removal of visual imagery, it has specifically introduced whiteness.

We might speculate a number of reasons for this, but I suggest that key among them is the distinction that Newby makes between the religious and spiritual. The shift in late modernity towards the spiritual is something that has been documented by sociologists and historians of religion, who argue that 'spirituality' is increasingly understood as a related but separate category from religion and may be experienced by people of all faiths and, importantly, of none. A natural extension of this shift is that many parishes have reinterpreted the church as both a building and concept that should embrace all visitors (worshipping or otherwise) and celebrate the universal rather than cultural face of spirituality. For sociologists and theologians charting the growth of personal spirituality against the decline of formal Christian worship in the West, the shift from religious to spiritual can be mapped onto the dominance of the consumer economy and rise of individualism; a phenomenon that has been described by the philosopher Grace Davie as "believing without belonging"[12]. Here, the interests of faith and secular communities have coincided to produce a religious marketplace in which churches now vie for worshippers who are accustomed to choice and who curate their own devotional practices. These independent worshippers move between churches and are likely to share the view that spirituality is universal. For such worshippers, the white church is a space that allows them to project their individual version of spirituality on the blank walls and operates as a lingua franca that enables congregants, across denominations and continents, to understand one another.

11 Newby, "Immanence and immersion: Peter Newby visits two Catholic Churches where recent reorderings pay close attention to symbolic detail in pursuit of an immersive experience".

12 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

Perhaps this is a good thing. If the notion of a universal spirituality now characterises late modern religion, then it might seem obvious to aim for a spatial and aesthetic neutrality that can be understood by diverse worshipers. Perhaps in the twenty-first century whiteness has come to be accepted as the most appropriate metaphor for 'honesty', as Roz Barr's decorative scheme at St Augustine's implies. Or perhaps, as Newby suggests, whiteness constitutes a cleansing of distinctive, denominational visual cultures and the decline of immersive, collective Christian worship: the loss, in Newby's words, of 'something to say'. On this last point, however, I take a slightly different view. For me, this new chapter in the long history of whiteness in church architecture does have a great deal to say about tastes, practices and beliefs in the twenty-first century. It's just a question of whether we like what it's saying.

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