



Art history: C17th to C19th

Christ Church, Spitalfields

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

Spitalfields was a hotbed of non-conformism, but also of political opposition to the government.

Peter Guillery:

Most of the population was poor and many of them wouldn't have bothered going to church at all.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

The building of the church was an attempt to stamp the authority of the Anglican Church over the Baptists, Quakers, Huguenots, a great variety of dissenting sects who existed in this area.

Christ Church Spitalfields

Dr Elizabeth McKellar, The Open University

Christ Church arose out of an act in 1711 called 'The Act for Fifty New Churches in the Cities of London and Westminster, and suburbs thereof', so this act was passed because of the great expansion of London from the 1660's onwards.

Peter Guillery, Author, *The Small House in C18th London*:

Part of it was about getting people to come in and worship but that wasn't really the only message, the only point. The 1711 act was very much aimed at stamping the state's presence on the areas to impress with the sheer munificence and magnificence of big, expensive buildings.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

The Fifty New Churches Act, because it had a relatively high level of funding, provided a tremendous opportunity for Hawksmoor and other architects to really experiment with the church form and its possibilities in a way that, you know, hasn't really been possible before or since.

Of the fifty churches that were planned under the act, only twelve were ever built.

Sant' Andrea al Quirinale

Gian Lorenzo Bernini

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

Nicholas Hawksmoor was one of the main architects of what is called the 'English Baroque'. Now the English Baroque is a very much a very particular version of a style that was widespread in Europe at this time and is most associated with catholic France and Italy.

Saint Mary le Bow

Christopher Wren

Saint Vedast

Christopher Wren

Saint Margaret

Christopher Wren

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

The English version is less flamboyant than the continental one and unlike the continental one it includes specifically native elements.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

Well here we're looking at the West Front of Christ Church and Hawksmoor's amazing design. The building is all about the possibilities of stone. The act specified that the new churches were to be built of stone, unlike Wren's city churches, which were largely built of brick. These were to be magnificent and therefore made of the most magnificent material. The building starts off as a rectangle at the lower levels and then tapers up, culminating in the spire, so there's a series of levels and transitions as you move up the building. Now above the main body of the church where the nave is we have a huge portico on the front in the form of what is normally a window feature, a Venetian window, and Hawksmoor has taken this feature and blown it up to gigantic scale and stuck it on the front of the building, so he's expanded something that would never normally be used in this way. Now above that we then have a slimmer rectangular block and that is the belfry where the bells were housed. This is about at least twice as tall as it needs to be so, again, it's something blown up into a gigantic scale, and so these series of rectangles moves up, culminating in the spire. Now the act specified that all these churches were to have towers or steeples so that they could be seen from miles around. Now those are actually medieval features and that's why we get something in a rather different idiom on top of the building, whereas lower down we have these more classical features, but notice the only columns are those on the portico. As we move round the building what had looked like a solid slab of stone, possibly going all the way down the nave from the front, in fact we'll see is just an illusion of a top storey on the building and it is, in fact, a slimmer slab placed up there with this great hollow carved out in the side, and so we get a wonderful view here of the kind of sculptural way that Hawksmoor works the stone. He's using it very much like a sculptor to make dramatic, grand, three-dimensional effects.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

The idea of the building was to be overwhelming and it does this at a number of levels. It does it at the townscape level, in that it establishes this extremely strong focal point within the area so that the presence of Anglicanism across Spitalfields is now unmistakable. Then the architecture does it in terms of the approach down Brushfield Street, the one angle in the 18th century where you could see the building well by creating this, you know, incredibly powerful West Front, and drawing the passerby in through that great portico and, if you like, that process then continues once you get into the church. As we stand under the organ loft our view into the nave is actually screened by two columns and we can't see the nave fully, and then we step through those and the great scale of the space opens up the immense height, the columns that go through three storeys, giant order columns.

Peter Guillery:

These buildings were designed to wow people in no uncertain terms. The use of stone, hugely expensive, and the sheer size of the buildings speaks to these intentions.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

Well we're looking here to the East end, which is the key focal point of the church, as we saw as we came in, come in through the West doors, and all your attention is visually directed down to the East end. Now there are two very, very important things sited here in the East end. The first one is the altar and the reason the altar is so important is that it is the site for the Communion rite in Anglican practice, so Communion is central to Anglican practice. The other very important elements that were sited at the East end, which unfortunately we can't see now, are the pulpit which would have been on one side, and the reading desk on the other side.

The reading desk's rich decorative carving complemented its stone surroundings.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

The idea of the columns is to try and complicate what is essentially a rectangular box. It introduces another layer into the building, so he's trying to introduce added drama, complexity, theatricality in what otherwise would be a very simple, and possibly slightly boring white box, so what he does is he uses the columns as a sort of inner screen around the building so we get a sense of volume and depth going back behind them.

Peter Guillery:

Nicholas Hawksmoor was an architect who thought deeply about how to deal with context and to deal with history, and to compromise as well. Compromise might seem a funny word when we're talking about a building as stonkingly big and expensive as Christ Church, but they drew on the layout of churches in the area that had been acceptable to people of non-conformist beliefs, layouts that weren't so processional and is east-west.

Fournier Street Chapel, interior, 1869

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Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

He bunches up the columns at four points to create this inner square and a north-south axis running across the east-west axis, and that axis is also marked by two doors, one of which survives, and so they also provided entry ways into the building.

Peter Guillery:

There were to start with North and South entrances which would have meant that there were walkways between the pews, east-west and north-south, but the planning of the internal architecture anchors a kind of central space and cuts across the east-westness of the design.

More evidence of this complexity can be seen from the gallery at a higher level.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

From the gallery we get a different view on the building. We can see the detailing at the top of the columns on what's called the entablature that run back into the walls, and we can also see these coffered vaults which help introduce that cross-axis against the long axis of the nave. The galleries themselves are very significant because they were introduced to essentially cram in as many people as possible. Part of the requirements of the act were that the churches were to be capacious, that they were to hold a lot of people, and this is what the galleries do, besides providing these excellent viewing points, and this introduces us to the notion that the churches should not be just good for hearing but also for seeing. It was important that everybody could see the East end where Communion and the action is taking place, as it were.

How well did Christ Church stand up to the requirements of the 1711 act?

Peter Guillery:

Clearly, it is the biggest building in the area and it would have made an impact on anybody passing through. Whether that impact was positive or negative, it's hard to measure.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

In terms of creating a powerful architectural symbol it achieved its purpose extremely well. However, in terms of creating a strong Anglican community in the area, it didn't achieve its purpose so well, and non-conformism continued to be numerically greater than Anglicans and that is the pattern longer term as well.

Peter Guillery:

Influence of Hawksmoor's 1711 churches I suppose arguably is nothing like what it might have been, simply because very few architects thereafter got the opportunity to design on as grand a scale.

Dr Elizabeth McKellar:

This, if you like, is a period of great experimentation and freedom in exploring the possibilities for a new style of church, but the model that was then adopted in the 18th century didn't use these very individualistic approaches. It actually developed a formula which, in a way, is more akin to Wren city churches, and that became the dominant building type through the 18th century.