

Refurbishing St. Mary's

Notes of an Architect

Kevin Blackwood B.Arch., MRIAI

As we now celebrate the completion of what has been a very exciting and interesting project of refurbishment over the past six years, it is certainly worthwhile setting out in some detail what has been done in this very beautiful church.

St Mary's was founded in 1839. It started off as a single aisled structure with earthen floors; over the next seventy years it rapidly increased in size and stature to become more or less what you see today and, indeed, it was regarded as the second most important church in Dublin after the pro Cathedral, several auxiliary bishops having resided and served as parish priests here.

It is indeed a wonderful building with its cut-stone facades; it's beautiful tower with its external ornamentation of gargoyles and pinnacles, which can be seen from many parts of the south city, as well as its stained glass windows some of which are quite wonderful as are several of the other internal features.

Despite maintenance over the years the church was in need of serious repair work. There was water ingress into the fabric of the building; slates were falling as were bits of masonry. These issues had to be addressed immediately and a programme of roof repair was initiated. On opening up the roof it was also found that the main beam over the sanctuary was in a perilous state and in need of the most urgent repair to avoid collapse.

As part of the roofing work we repaired the pointing at the top of the tower and carried out stone repairs to the wonderful gargoyles and also cleaned the west façade. Dry rot was also a problem; fortunately due to the excellence of craftspeople we were able to carry out the repairs *in situ* thus not endangering the stained glass.

After all this work had been done- and a lot of money spent - there was still much to do but the building fabric was at least sound. Other problems to be addressed were the inadequate heating system and the need for efficiency, the outdated electrical services and poor lighting levels, and this before we got to the decorative state to the church and other details.

Much thought went into the replacement of the heating system as we wanted the new system to be efficient, yet not obscure some of the decorative features which were currently the case with, for example, the wonderful pillar and column bases. We also did not want to lose the parquet flooring which represents another layer of history applied to the church. Many systems were studied and we reached the conclusion that trench heating as you now find it in the church would be best suited to our needs.

The seating in the side aisles had been lost and we felt that it was important to restore this space. We designed new benches to line the walls on which people can sit, while the rhythm breaks up the linearity and also conceals the new radiators within. The space now feels positive and allows for the Stations of the Cross to be fully appreciated. Other design issues

were the return of the baptismal font to its original location and the reordering of the toilet area to make it universally accessible.

A lighting system had to be worked out that would pick out all the wonderful features of the church such as the plaster ribs and bosses on the ceiling while reflecting their shadows; the moulding of the columns, the gold sparkles from the mosaics of the sanctuary, and of course the fine altar area in general and the carefully crafted windows, while at the same time providing sufficient light levels to comfortably read in. We studied several other churches and, indeed, even went to London to look at other church lighting examples as well as engaging the expertise of specialist lighting designers here in Dublin. The electrical services have been renewed and a state of the art fire alarm system has been installed

The paint scheme for the refurbishment was the subject of a lot of thought and discussion. We felt it was important that the colour should be neutral as if to imitate stone as would most likely have been the original design intent in the nineteenth century. We felt this would allow the features such as the stained glass windows, the rich green and brown marbles and mosaics of the sanctuary area, as well as the richness of the stone and plaster mouldings stand out in their own right. However, we did not base our design decision solely on what we felt was right but researched the historical records and also carried out a paint analysis on the sanctuary area, as we knew there was an underlying decorative scheme here which had been painted out at a later stage, although for historical and conservation purposes we have left exposed a very small section of it which can be seen on the right of the rib vault over the main altar. Richard Ireland who is one of these islands leading plaster and paint conservators carried out this analysis and also assisted us with the final paint selection.

Finally, we have also addressed the external landscaping issues replacing the much patched concrete with limestone flags and cobbles. While we have had to accommodate a certain number of car parking spaces we have tried to minimise these which has allowed us to plant birch trees to create an avenue like effect which we feel will soften the overall hard landscaping and tie together the softer landscape elements of St Mary's Road and Haddington Road and also the small parish park or garden. We have also opened up the grounds to the Parish which were occupied by the garages, creating during summer months. It is important to say that a project like this is very much a collaborative undertaking of architects, engineers, specialist advisors and most importantly the Parish representatives whose input was crucial as they advised, steered, and also sometimes objected to proposals made in order to reach a successful outcome for all concerned.; the people not to be forgotten are the craftspeople who have worked on this project to make it what we see today.

