



## St. Bride's Church by Gillespie, Kidd & Coia

A short essay on St. Bride's Church, a comparison with other modernist ecclesiastical buildings and how their architecture celebrates the rituals and identity of the communities they serve.

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A fuller appreciation of historic and modernist church architecture has great relevance to architects in the present. Much can be learned from our legacy of church buildings and their response to worshippers and the religious Christian ritual. By referencing the architectural qualities of Gillespie, Kidd & Coia's St. Bride's Church in East Kilbride and comparing them to other influential ecclesiastical buildings I will show why the study of church design is highly informative. Critically I will answer the question: how does the architecture of St. Bride's Church relate to and celebrate the rituals and identity of the community it serves.

St. Bride's Church is known as a remarkable piece of modernist liturgical architecture produced by perhaps the most influential Scottish practice of the era. Located in the new town of East Kilbride, the church was built as a modern place of worship, with an architecture which combines art and building to create narrative and meaning. A celebration of form, function, and of place. East Kilbride became Scotland's first designated "New Town"<sup>1</sup> under the Clyde Valley regional plan signed after the Second World War. The plan would see the relocation of people from conditions of over-crowding in Glasgow. The construction of the first building began in 1948. St. Bride's Church has an important social and spiritual value not only for the local people but as a Scottish landmark, an icon of modern church architecture. East Kilbride became a beacon, sacred, different from secular.

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<sup>1</sup> Britain's New Towns, Anthony Alexander, 2009 Routledge



In terms of place, St. Bride's has a special siting. It is literally 'on top' of East Kilbride. It rises beyond the 180m contour level on the belt of the west of Scotland where the climate is consequently colder and windier. This is apparent on all elevations of the building, the textural brick looking weathered and beaten. St. Bride's choice of site denotes that it would be the "jewel-in the-crown"<sup>2</sup> of the new town. On top of a hill, the building would be honoured with a high sense of presence suggesting the important role it would play, not only for the new-town people of East Kilbride, but for people who would use the church - the Parish. All buildings which made up the whole architecture of St. Bride's were grouped around a central piazza. The sacristy, campanile tower, the church house and the main church building sat adjacent to the piazza urging it to be used as a gathering space for people. In the piazza, the materials used are tarmac with red brick inserts, the same material as the church walls, forming a radial pattern defining the main entrance to the church.

Professor Andy MacMillan in his church architecture had a clear interest in the development of the 'wall' of which its sheer gravitas and massiveness was significant to a commitment to Christ. Nonetheless, this architecture was of an experiment, part of a post-war aesthetic that was frugal and monastic in appearance and appropriate to the mood of the nation. Alvar Aalto's influence is apparent in the building's use of brickwork detailing and its overall expressive form. MacMillan was committing to a popular tradition of Aalto's and of Mackintosh, taking inspiration from rural and vernacular Scottish towers, enormous solid and voids, subtractive of form, of mixed proportions, no clear line of symmetry and

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<sup>2</sup> St Bride's Church, East Kilbride, Feasibility Report, 2012 RMJM



striking in their landscape. St. Bride's wall, internally and externally, is massive in terms of its construction, with brick facing both outwards and inwards and brickwork in between. Rendering the building basically a structural brick 'box', it allowed games to be played in the articulation of detail on the wall surfaces, i.e. the horizontal brick banding on the elevation and the niche voids created internally. St. Bride's structural 'box' is a metaphorical and literal 'load-bearing' structure, the only curve in the building is at the entrance, intending to draw you in. The whole architecture is based on the golden section, which can be identified speculatively from the curve at the entrance. The building's proportional system must be paying homage to Corbusier's module, but also to early renaissance classical church architecture.

The golden section is an underlying classical proportional system used famously by architects and designers alike. The golden section can be discovered all over nature and it is a belief that it is the DNA of nature, of God's hand. The use of this system is believed to be important in design and in buildings around the world you can see that there is a shared notion that a building must be proportionate in the eye of God. The golden mean can be found on a Benson & Hedges cigarette packet<sup>3</sup>, or on an Apple iPhone for supposed commercial advantage, test proving that people are more attracted to proportional form. Therefore, it is no surprise to find the same proportional systems in plans and elevations of St Bride's by Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, a true advocate of experimenting with proportional systems in religious architecture.

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<sup>3</sup> Enlightenment, Paul Stallan, 2012 Stallan-Brand



Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut is an obvious architectural precedent<sup>4</sup> in the conception of St. Bride's. The form of its architecture, its expression and narrative are comparable to that of St. Bride's. They are so similar yet different. Both churches are situated on the top of a hill, each elevation visible from below at all angles. The chapel at Ronchamp's "metaphorical pedestal"<sup>5</sup> intending to play an important role in the construct of their community and St. Bride's, likewise. Their orientations, however, contrast. The Chapel at Ronchamp's entrance facing north and St. Bride's to the east. This is significant in how the user is greeted with light, a reference to how, on arrival, one would be greeted by the owner of the house, in this case God. In studying the Ronchamp Chapel, niche voids are created on the elevation facing you on entering the building. These voids do not face *direct* sunlight but still allow dramatic plays on light to enter the building via jewel-like hand-painted windows in comparison. It is clear where St. Bride's takes precedent in the articulation of the east wall. Light, also, pours through the roof of St. Bride's which is essentially invisible in comparison to the roof of The Ronchamp Chapel which is an enormous and over-sailing roof. It eerily feels like it is floating, hesitant to land on Corbusier's enormous loadbearing walls, almost visually more loadbearing than the walls of St. Bride's. Nonetheless, the roof similarly allows light to pour through the clerestory formed by the roof's bow. The idea here is that plays on light created by both GKC and Corbusier are made to heighten the sense of the user, to be more appreciative of God's presence.

In churches, windows tell stories through different forms of expression, sculpturally or symbolically. Traditionally, stained glass windows portray holy people holding items of

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<sup>4</sup> Local Heroes, Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, 2016 WINHOV

<sup>5</sup> AD Classics: Ronchamp / Le Corbusier, Andrew Kroll, 2010 ArchDaily



religious symbolism. The architecture of church window design is evidently important in contributing to religious ritual and the identity of the community. Whether it's the story of Jesus, birth and rebirth, or the celebration of a holiday such as Christmas or Easter, or in the case of Ronchamp's Chapel evoking the awe of God, windows evidently contributing to religious ritual and aiding the identity of the community it serves. Ronchamp and St. Bride's alike have a masterly way of provoking this idea.

There is a substantial difference between the architects of GKC. MacMillan, as mentioned before, was deeply interested in the wall whilst Isi Metzstein seemed more interested in ideas of the 'frame'. This is apparent when you compare the architecture of St. Bride's and a church design explored by Isi the previous year. St. Patrick's is a church in Kilsyth with a manifestation of Isi's interests. You can see that there is significantly more focus in the articulation of the frame at St. Patrick's contrasting to the activity in the wall at St. Bride's. In terms of their design intent, however, there is a relationship between Andy's church and Isi's. Although one took ownership of a church design more than the other, their influences were different but still embraced an architecture that celebrated the ritual and identity of the community.

There is a marked difference between the sacred form of the church and the secular form of the church house. The presbytery is intentionally low as if to be part of the landscape, the church itself is vertically more prominent. Variation in level in the architecture is thought out, and is a play between the daily life, and goings-on between the church house and the main church building. In contrast, Ronchamp's church house is set onto the hill out of site.



Speculatively there must be a relation here, between churches, a narrative – that one building is about daily life, and the other a visitation of God, the house of God.

In terms of material, the Chapel at Ronchamp is mainly made from concrete “to give expression to an extraordinary loftiness of spirit”. On the other, use of material at St. Bride’s was important to Andy MacMillan. St. Bride’s has a basic palette of predominantly three materials; concrete, copper and Victorian sewer brick. The primitive use of material here, like Corbusier, was a belief that a naked architecture evoked the monastic, frugal mood of the era, which was brutal and “gained considerable momentum in the United Kingdom” after the Second World War in which Gillespie, Kidd & Coia were key participants. Studying this is key to our understanding that the architects built designs that had a deep consideration for the mood and identity of the church’s users and the townspeople of East Kilbride.

The incorporation of art at St. Bride’s is more like ‘found-object’. Statues such as the likes of the Virgin Mary can be seen dynamically placed into wall-voids in a manner that almost seems casual. French Catholic priest, Peres Courtier, gave Corbusier the freedom to experiment with Ronchamp’s Chapel design, “believing that modern art could rejuvenate the church...”<sup>6</sup> so much so that Corbusier went on to advise Courtier again on La Tourette where articulation of light in the roof is in the form of light-cans clearly seen similarly in an elevation of St. Bride’s. There may at first be no apparent theology in the placement of holy objects in the church or even an idea that the voids were designed with an intent to

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<sup>6</sup> The Le Corbusier Guide, Deborah Gans, 1987 Princeton Architectural Press



display sacred items. However, by studying modernist ecclesiastical architecture we can see that the liberty given to architects at the time was enough to be permitted exploration of liturgical architecture in this sense. It is evident that there is a clear relationship between St. Bride's and the Chapel at Ronchamp in terms of liturgical precedent study.

Conclusively, there is a manifestation of ideas between both architects, Corbusier and MacMillan, in their buildings. It is tragic to our nation, and the importance of the modernist architecture that many of Gillespie, Kidd & Coia's were eventually demolished and their firm went into liquidation in 1987. This is a misunderstanding of influential community-serving buildings and a Scottish practice of architectural prestige. The freedom to experiment with church-reviving architecture was so important to the two architects and this is apparent when we study two buildings from the same era in comparison to one-another. St. Bride's Church embodies the opaque spirit of the community, in terms of form, orientation, material and expression, where considerable precedent comes from Ronchamp's Chapel which portrayed similar ideas. St. Bride's architecture undoubtedly celebrates the ritual and the identity of East Kilbride.

