

# Andy MacMillan & Isi Metzstien

*pertaining to Gillespie, Kidd & Coia*

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The title of this essay may strike a level of controversy. I believe it is crucial to give Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstien the overarching credit for the followings buildings I will discuss; hence they own the title. However, it would be disrespectful and absurd not to recognise both were architects for the Scottish based firm ‘Gillespie, Kidd and Coia’. In order for one to truly answer the question, ‘How does idea and experience relate to each other in the architectural work?’, I believe this can only be achieved through analysing and dissecting a singular building in-depth whilst relating to other built forms by the same architect for clarity. This way, it will be possible to seek more profound into the architect’s ideas and intentions and make a crystalline relation to the building’s real-life experience. In this case, I will discuss St Brides Roman Catholic Church located in East Kilbride by Gillespie, Kidd and Coia. I am incredibly lucky to have experienced this building’s magnificent features and overwhelming forms on numerous occasions. To initiate my research into Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, I was fortunate enough to organise a tour with Father Rafal Sobiezuik – Parish Priest of St Brides - where I gained extensive knowledge of the building and a first-hand point of view from someone who lives within. Fr. Rafal gave me special permission to formally photograph the extents of the Church. My photographs from the tour will show a significant presence within the essay to assist with the ideas discussed.



Gillespie, Kidd & Coia were one of 'Scotland's most heralded twentieth century architecture practices.'<sup>1</sup> The modernist Glasgow based firm were extraordinary pioneers in creating some of the most notable works of ecclesiastical architecture during the post-war period across Britain, most of which pertained to Scotland.<sup>2</sup> The firm originated in 1830 under the name of 'James Salmon & Son' by Scottish architect James Salmon. John Gaff Gillespie joined the practice in 1891 when at the time, the son of James Salmon ran the firm. Gillespie's pivotal role within the firm, 22 years later in 1903, was named partner and the firm was changed to 'Salmon, Son & Gillespie'. In 1898, William Alexander Kidd joined the family-run practice. However, a few years later, in 1913, Salmon exited the firm, thus leaving Kidd to step up to named partner with Gillespie in 1918. Amongst all of the radical name changes, Englishman Giacomo Coia, famously known as Jack Coia, joined the firm in 1915 at the inexperienced age of 16, where he grafted as an apprentice. Following Gillespie and Kidd's inevitable death, Coia assumed control of the practice in 1927, thus gaining the renowned name 'Gillespie, Kidd & Coia' that we are familiar with today. Through Coia's relation to the Glasgow School of Art and his distinctive personality, the firm hired many young passionate designers.<sup>3</sup> In 1945 history witnessed Isi Metzstein join the firm at the age of 17 as an apprentice, much imitating Coia's beginnings. Nine years later, in 1954 and Isi was reunited with his friend, Andy MacMillan, when he was hired at Gillespie, Kidd & Coia. The architects, more notably the firm, rose to prominence in 1966 when they inherited creative control over the practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Devlin, Fr Tom, 'Our Building' St Brides East Kilbride, accessed 17/03/21

[http://www.sbek.org/building/our\\_building.html](http://www.sbek.org/building/our_building.html)

<sup>2</sup> Editor unknown, 'St Brides Roman catholic Church', National Churches Trust, accessed 16/03/21

<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/places-we-helped/st-brides-roman-catholic-church>

<sup>3</sup> Rodger, Johnny, Andrew MacMillan, Isi Metzstein, and Jack Coia. Gillespie, Kidd & Coia: Architecture 1956-1987 /.

Glasgow: The Lighthouse, 2007 - Page 12

Isi Metzstein OBE was born in Berlin in 1928. At the age of eleven, he was sent to Britain for a better life, where he was brought up in Clydebank by a new family. He claims to be 'Glaswegian by adoption'.<sup>4</sup> After living a remarkable life, which impacted many people through architecture, he sadly passed away in 2012 after a long illness. The award-winning architect taught at many architectural institutions, The Mackintosh School of Architecture being the most prominent.<sup>5</sup>



*Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein pictured together at Gillespie, Kidd and Coia.*  
<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/ellis-woodman-on-the-legacy-of-andy-macmillan>

Andy MacMillan was born in 1928 in Glasgow. 'Professor MacMillan studied at Glasgow School of Art while working for Glasgow Corporation's Housing Department and the East Kilbride New Town Development Corporation during the 1950s.'<sup>6</sup> MacMillan received many titles for his architectural works, those being OBE RSA FRIAS RIBA. MacMillan gained much respect and prestige throughout his career; this recognition was translated into his Head role at

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, Clare, 'Isi Metzstein (1928-2012)', the Architectural Review, created 14/02/12, accessed 17/03/21

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/isi-metzstein-1928-2012>

<sup>5</sup> Editor unknown, Glasgow School of Art, accessed 17/03/21, <https://www.gsa.ac.uk/about-gsa/our-people/honorary-graduates/m/metzstein-isi/>

<sup>6</sup> Editor unknown, Glasgow School of Art, accessed 17/03/21 <https://www.gsa.ac.uk/about-gsa/our-people/honorary-graduates/m/macmillan,-andy/>

the Mackintosh School of Architecture between 1973 and 1994 and his teaching of Architecture at the University of Glasgow.

The young architects were given to opportunity to express their newfound architectural language through Roman Catholic Churches due to Coia's close relationship with Archbishop Mackintosh and the diocese<sup>7</sup>. Some of their early works include St Pauls, Glenrothes; St Charles, North Kelvinside; St Mary of the Angels, Falkirk; St Brides, East Kilbride; St Patricks, Kilsyth and Sacred Herat, Cumbernauld. After establishing themselves through these churches, the firm started branching out into the commercial side of architecture, where they designed many schools, universities and office buildings. St Peters Seminary in Cardross is claimed to be Gillespie, Kidd and Coia's most notable and renowned works, with St Brides Church in East Kilbride being an arguable contender.



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<sup>7</sup> Rodger, Johnny, Andrew MacMillan, Isi Metzstein, and Jack Coia. Gillespie, Kidd & Coia: Architecture 1956-1987 /.

St Brides Church in the new town of East Kilbride was built in 1963 after receiving the commission in 1954. It is known to be the largest Roman Catholic Church built by the firm, facilitating a congregation of up to 800 people.<sup>8</sup> After the demolition of the unmissable campanile, the Church still goes unnoticed as it stands proudly on top of the hill overlooking East Kilbride. The Church continues to fabricate much controversy within East Kilbride and

the architectural profession.

Nicknamed 'Fort Apache' amongst many of the older generations within the town, of which are opposed to the overwhelming



<http://stallanbrand.com/projects/st-brides-church-and-presbytery/>

brick façades; however, no one ever seems to seek a deeper understanding of the architect's intentions and ideas to connect with the building truly. After experiencing what the building has to offer and genuinely connecting with the divine lighting, one will be forever in favour of the brutalist treasure. To get a clear understanding of MacMillan's and Metzsteins design philosophy and architectural ways of doing things, we must analyse St Brides Church's integral components, which sets their buildings apart from the rest. The Configuration of plan, the Light Canons and the Entrance.

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<sup>8</sup> Rodger, Johnny, Andrew MacMillan, Isi Metzstein, and Jack Coia. Gillespie, Kidd & Coia: Architecture 1956-1987 /.

The configuration of plan at St Brides is notably different to most Scottish churches. Typically the interior consists of a symmetrical congregation with an elevated gallery towards the back of the church, which acts as an overflow for busy congregations. However, St Brides challenges this convention by aligning the main asymmetrical congregation to the left whilst spanning an elevated gallery along the east wall. This is particularly clever as underneath the elevated gallery is a sheltered cry chapel that is slightly higher than the main congregation and is considerably closer to the altar than most Scottish churches. MacMillan and Metzstein wanted to practice Catholicism's true values through their architecture by uniting and including everyone with the order of the mass. This was incredibly successful through their thoughtful configuration, which enriches the spiritual experience within. MacMillan and Metzstein cleverly play with bricks and mortar to define space and areas of religious importance without the insertion of walls and partitions. The mesmerising brick flooring guides you to the heart of the church with a sense of tranquil. The dynamic duo has carefully considered the materiality of the building. The windowless brick façades help to limit the distractions within the church. During service, it is challenging to not indulge in prayer and connect spiritually with the transubstantiation... unless you adore the artistic brickwork like myself. Ironic?





After entering through the main entrance, one is greeted with the original baptistery site, which has now been reconfigured into a piety stall and an accessible wheelchair ramp. Over the years, the baptismal font has travelled all over the church due to the priest's preference. It lies to the east of the altar, where its prominence and importance are seen from anywhere in the Church, absolutely integral for a baptismal ceremony. Attached to the church building's south wall is a slim cantilevering viewpoint that overlooks the entire Church. To access this

viewpoint, one must climb to the top of the spiral staircase and travel through the roof structure on a wooden plank. If the church is ever lucky enough to host the Pope, this may oppose some issues if the service was to imitate the ending of Sister Act. The sacristy and presbytery form a piazza outside of the main church building. MacMillan and Metzstein cleverly positioned the buildings in such a way that it protects and shields the church yet invites and draws the public off the streets. It is evident through their careful consideration of the interior's configuration and positioning of the buildings that one will have an impactful experience upon visiting St Brides.



Considering St Brides Church consists of gigantic windowless brick façades, it may be questioned how does light enter the building? MacMillan and Metzstein revolutionised the very delicate concept of intertwining daylight with spiritual experience. Very much like Tadao Ando's 'Church of Light' in Osaka, Japan, where the architect heavily relies on daylight and concrete to create an exceptional spiritual feeling within the building.<sup>9</sup> MacMillan and Metzstein wanted light to enter the building in a very particular and careful way. "Interviewed on Radio Scotland twenty-five years ago, in a programme which celebrated the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Andy spoke of the technique of pushing out beyond the building's envelope in order to capture more space and more light."<sup>10</sup> They designed three copper 'Light

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<sup>9</sup> Furuyama, Masao, 'Ando', Slovakia, Taschen, 2016, Pages – 36/40

<sup>10</sup> Devlin, Fr Tom, 'Our Building' St Brides East Kilbride, accessed 17/03/21

[http://www.sbek.org/building/our\\_building.html](http://www.sbek.org/building/our_building.html)

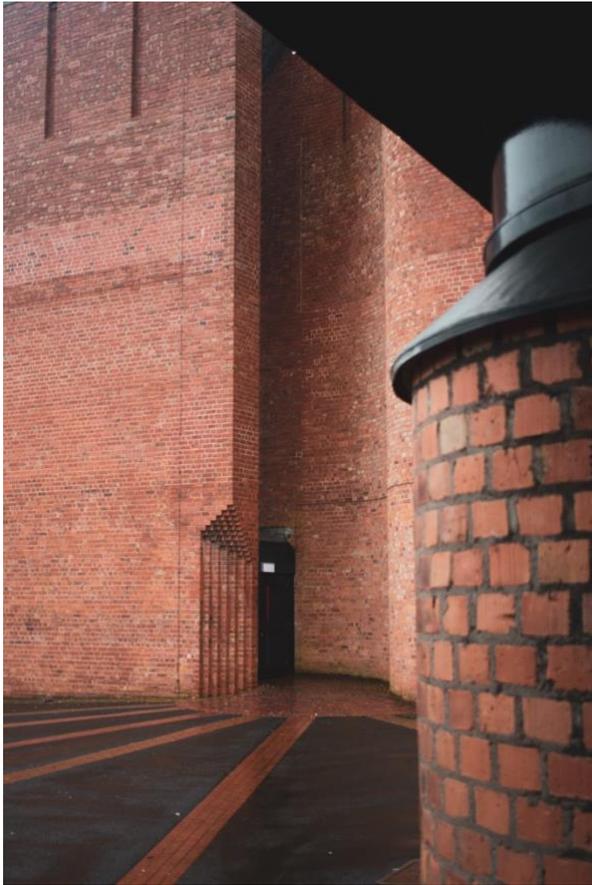


Cannons' that direct sunlight through the roof and onto three areas of religious importance within the Church. The first being the alter, the second being the entrance where Our Lady stands and the third being the elevated speaker's pulpit. With the soaring brick facades not letting any light penetrate the interior, these three individual streaks of light play incredible importance during the order of the mass. It reminds us of the importance of the Church and why we are there. With the rest of the interior being dark, it is visible from the congregation the areas we should focus on. MacMillan and Metzstein designed and articulated this with significant consideration; however, I believe the experience is much more powerful than they ever anticipated it would be. My photography of the interior has been edited in black & white; I felt this would emphasise and highlight the powerfulness light has within the building. Growing up a catholic and experiencing many churches, none have offered the same spiritual experience that this building does. Often catholic churches are overly saturated with colossal stain glass windows, which distract you from what is important. St Brides Church gets straight to the point and literally highlights our attention to the transubstantiation taking place.









St Brides Church is widely identifiable for its abstract, main entrance. The architects designed the façade so that the brickwork separates halfway, creating an opening; however, it continues to intertwine with each other to hide the entrance and create a false impression that it's a solid façade. The deliberate attempt to hide the entrance attracts your attention more than it would if it was a standard opening. This may only appeal to those who look for it, thus only inviting those trying to gain access to the church. The main entrance faces onto the piazza, where the architects designed a sunburst effect with the brickwork, imitating the 'radiation of light'.<sup>11</sup> The rays of brickwork extend across the piazza, joining the three buildings together through materiality and space. Standing in the piazza, one will instinctively follow the 'radiation of

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<sup>11</sup> Editor unknown, St Brides Church East Kilbride – Gillespie, Kidd and Coia, The University of Sheffield, accessed 15/03/21 <https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/matter-reality/brick/group-e1/r1>

light' to soon find themselves entering the church. Above the doorway is a substantial vertical window that allows light into the church and directs streaks of light onto the original baptismal site, which is now the piety stall. The very thoughtful ideas and considerations by MacMillan and Metzstein contribute remarkably to the experience within the building. It is through their artistic brickwork and unconventional openings that one will be truly connected with God and Catholicism.





Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein perfected the art of creating an exceptional experience within their buildings. It is through St Brides Church in East Kilbride that we can relate their ideas and intentions to the experience that one may enjoy within this building. The church remains relevant in today's society as we see many buildings across the town, imitating its materiality and form. Although it is undoubtedly controversial, it serves an essential purpose within the town. Its architectural presence unites people from all over practising Catholicism. Its exclusive-like form somehow brings people together better than any other church I have experienced.



*\*Images above demonstrate the surrounding buildings imitating the materiality and form of St Brides Church, thus emphasising its importance within the community.*



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## Illustrations

Photographs without reference attached are my own personal photographs. Shot by Nikon D3400 and post edited using Adobe Creative Cloud.