

The Church of Notre Dame de France, London W1

Re-ordering a 20th-century listed church

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The recent re-ordering of the distinctive mid-20th-century listed church of Notre Dame de France in Soho is an example of a successful compromise.

In September 1998, the Secretary of State listed a further 28 post-World War II churches following a national three-year survey. Among that number was the distinctive church of Notre Dame de France in Soho (Grade II). Designed by Hector Corfiato with Thomson and Partners, the church was built between 1953 and 1955 in the heart of the West End, on the site of the seriously bomb-damaged brick and iron church of 1868 designed by Louis Auguste Boileau for the French community in London.

Corfiato's church is circular in plan, like its predecessor as well as the original building on the site, Burford's Panorama of 1789. Unlike Boileau's church, however, the present one comprises a generously proportioned daylight circular central space contained within a tall arcade of 12 bays, the plain, classical reconstituted stone columns of which support a perimeter gallery above an ambulatory, baptistery, side chapel and vestries.

The significance of the church was twofold. First, its liturgical plan – with the principal altar and sanctuary located within the main body of the church, on the east side of the circle – reflected the influence of the Continental Liturgical Movement some ten years before the major liturgical reforms brought about by the Second Vatican Council; and second, the interior was enhanced by a coherent series of modern art works influenced by the French 'Art Sacré' movement.

The art works include murals on the walls of the side chapel by Jean Cocteau; a fine large tapestry in the easternmost bay by Dom Robert de Chaumac, woven in Aubusson; sculpture and other carved stonework by Georges



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The Church of Notre Dame de France, London (Grade II). One of the two original ambos, or pulpits (above), reconstructed and relocated behind the new sanctuary adjacent to the newly created space around the new tabernacle.

The Church of Notre Dame de France, London (Grade II). The original altar set in the newly created elliptical sanctuary with the new tabernacle, containing the wafers consecrated at Mass, set on the pedestal beyond.

Saupique and his students from the Paris École des Beaux-Arts; and a mosaic by Boris Anrep set into the front of the altar in the side chapel, concealed for many years and only revealed during the recent re-ordering.

Of particular relevance in the original design, both liturgically and artistically, were the matching ambos, or pulpits, set to each side of the original wide sanctuary where it projected furthest into the body of the church: one with incised motifs and the names of the four great prophets and the other with incised symbols and the names of the four evangelists.

Proposals for substantial re-ordering of the church were put forward by the parish community from 2001 onwards, based on a literal interpretation of the Catholic Church's current liturgical teaching. Those consulted, such as English Heritage, Westminster City Council and The Twentieth Century Society, were confronted with proposed alterations

that would have resulted in the loss of key features of the interior: the architect Corfiato's original principal altar, ambos and fine marble communion rails. Collaborative discussion during the first six months of 2002 between the architect Gerald Murphy, the parish, English Heritage and the Archdiocese of Westminster Historic Churches Committee, however, led to significantly amended proposals. These gained the support of those consulted as well as the formal approval of the Historic Churches Committee in July 2002, and were subsequently implemented.

Those consulted had consistently accepted the liturgical desirability of locating the principal altar closer to the congregation and supported the proposed creation of a small space behind the proposed new sanctuary for a new tabernacle set on a pedestal (replacing the original tabernacle that had been placed anomalously for some years on top of the font).

Those consulted argued strongly, however, for the retention and re-use of the original altar at its original size. They thus welcomed the preparedness of the parish to adopt this approach in the final scheme; they welcomed, too, the creation of a new, modestly elevated elliptical sanctuary, with ramped access, the altar at its centre, and the relocation of the original communion rails to the side chapel.

Similarly, those consulted argued strongly for the retention *in situ* of the original matching ambos against the strongly expressed view of the parish that current liturgical practice dictated that only one ambo was necessary. This difference of view was resolved by the agreement of the parish carefully to dismantle, relocate and reconstruct both ambos to positions near the curved wall behind the new sanctuary and to provide a wholly new ambo within the new sanctuary.

While aspects of the detailed design of some of the new works may be open to criticism, the overall scheme may be regarded as a successful reconciliation between the perceived liturgical needs of today and the retention of elements of a distinctive 20th-century listed church.