Faith in buildings

Launch of 'Religion and Place' project

A new national research project has been launched to study the architectural diversity of places of worship and assess their impact on the historic environment

Many an English skyline is crowned by the towers and spires of churches. This prominence is reflected in the national record of listed buildings of special architectural and historical significance and most publications on historic buildings in England. Buildings of non-Christian faiths, however, remain seriously under-represented in the literature and are rarely listed unless they coincidentally occupy an historic building from an earlier era. The Jamia Masjid on the corner of Brick Lane and Fournier Street in London's Spitalfields, for example, is listed not for its status as a mosque but because it was built in 1743 as a Huguenot chapel and also served as a Methodist chapel and Jewish synagogue. According to *The Muslim Directory 2001–2*, there are an estimated seven hundred mosques in England, of which only one, the Shah Jehan in Woking, has been listed in its own right. Significant Jewish communities had been established by the 18th century in London, Liverpool and Plymouth, following their expulsion from England in 1290 and readmission by Oliver Cromwell in 1655. Only a few synagogues, however, have been listed, and some of the finest have already been lost.

Rationalising the building stock

All over England, places of worship are under pressure. The declining population in many towns and city centres and the dwindling congregations pose an unprecedented threat to ageing historic buildings. The drift to the suburbs is by no means a new phenomenon and, indeed, in the past has helped to fuel the development of new residential neighbourhoods. In 19th-century cities, churches and chapels were often in the vanguard of such growth, as no new neighbourhood was complete without its place of worship. While Victorian clergymen lamented their lack of success in getting everyone to attend church or chapel, levels of attendance were far higher than today, when only an estimated 7% of the population attends on a regular basis. Consequently, most towns now have far more churches than are required, an ironic reversal of the situation in the early years of the 19th century when the numbers of churchgoers far exceeded the number of pews available to accommodate them.

Princes Road Synagogue, Liverpool. Grade II by W & G Audsley, 1879, for the Old Hebrew Congregation, built in one of the city's most fashionable areas. Liverpool's oldest Jewish congregation no longer lives in Toxteth*

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Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking. A Grade II building of 1889 by W L Chambers*

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Most denominations are reviewing their building stock, with redundancies and even demolitions on the increase. Some faiths face particular problems in this regard. The prohibition of the use of transport on the Jewish Sabbath, for example, means that the Orthodox find it difficult to maintain an historic synagogue in an old inner city neighbourhood once the majority of the congregation have moved to a distant suburb.

New uses for old buildings

Church and chapel redundancies can, however, be a cloud with a silver lining, and the recycling of these buildings has a long history. In the 1880s and 1890s immigrant Jewish communities took over failing chapels, and in the 1980s and 1990s Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus moved into vacated churches, chapels and synagogues (see Reeve, 36–7). For the Muslim communities of England, conversion of an older building is far from ideal, as the accurate orientation of the mihrab towards Mecca is essential for prayer. As communities put down roots, the church, chapel, synagogue, mosque, mandir or gurdwara helps to express community confidence and to define cultural and religious identity. In numerous towns, familiar religious landmarks are being joined by newer silhouettes.

Changing uses of the historic fabric

Countless congregations continue to maintain their historic places of worship in the face of mounting difficulties and financial constraints. Many historic churches and chapels are unsuited to the liturgical requirements of the 21st century, with an emphasis on participatory worship involving the whole family. Altars have been moved from the east wall to the centre of churches, pulpits are rarely used and fonts have been moved out of baptistries. The flexibility of moveable seating is often favoured over fixed pews.

The Victorian church was strictly a place of worship, with all other activities held in the church hall or mission room. Today, the loss of many subsidiary buildings means that community activities (concerts, the crèche, the fellowship group, the luncheon club) – an increasingly important part of the mission of the church in the 21st century – must often be accommodated in the fabric of historic buildings not designed to house them. Reordering is one area in which heritage and mission can come into direct conflict. In addition, the Disability Discrimination Act represents a new set of challenges.

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The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, 105–115 Brentfield Road, Neasden, London Borough of Brent. The mandir is the first traditional Hindu temple in Europe built according to the ancient Shilpashastras (the treatise on temple architecture), using nearly 4,000 tonnes of Italian and Romanian marble, carved by Indian craftsmen

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St Clement's Church, Beaumont Street, Liverpool, 1844. Its unremarkable exterior belies its extraordinary pre-Tractarian interior, with a shallow chancel, distinctive box pews and double-decker pulpit

New research project

A new English Heritage research project, 'Religion and Place', has recently been launched to address some of these issues. Following a pilot project in Woking, work has begun in Liverpool and will be carried on in Coventry, Leeds and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The project aims to raise awareness of the architectural diversity of places of worship in England and to assess their impact on the historic environment, past, present and future. The project will also ensure a better representation of non-Christian places of worship in the debate on the management of the historic environment. □

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