

One of the wonders of the modern world

This unfinished chapel is already a marvel of church design, says Michael Duggan

The Chapel of Christ the Redeemer sits atop a hill overlooking a serene stretch of the Thames in the deer park of the Culham estate near Henley. Designed by the architect Craig Hamilton, the chapel was consecrated by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor in December 2015. In order to explain the chapel's purpose, the trust behind it invokes architectural historian John Martin Robinson: "The aim of church art is to express divine beauty through human endeavour and thereby help turn men's thoughts to God".

The architecture critic Gavin Stamp has heaped praise on this "beautiful building", composed in the language of classicism, but full of "subtle originality". The Architecture Foundation has described it as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, "without recent parallel". Trained eyes visiting Culham will spot its ancient Greek models, such as the temple at Bassae (a favourite of the architect's), along with allusions to Michelangelo, whom Stamp calls Craig Hamilton's "expressive muse". There are deliberate homages to the Italian master's Laurentian Library and the Capella Medici in San Lorenzo.

Untrained eyes like mine need help in appreciating these finer points, but can still marvel at the overall effect. The chapel has an air of simplicity, yet it teems with detail. It takes its place peacefully in the pastoral landscape, while quietly transforming it. Small in scale, it is monumental in feeling. There is a tremendous sense of unity, but none of uniformity. Above all, the chapel is much more than a formal exercise: the very stones exude an atmosphere of intense care, reverence and devotion.

I find it hard to know where to start (or end) in describing the riches it contains. But there can be no doubt that most visitors will leave with Alexander Stoddart's massive statue of Christ the Redeemer, seated and pensive, permanently imprinted on the mind's eye. John Martin Robinson, writing in *Country Life*, has speculated about its impact on the viewer perhaps matching that of the lost statue of Zeus at Olympus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

There is evidence everywhere of fruitful collaboration between patrons, architect,



Culham Chapel, near Henley: the very stones exude an atmosphere of devotion

sculptor and clergy, builders and stonemasons, craftsmen and craftswomen. The elliptical staircase made from Ballinasloe stone, leading down to the pillared mortuary crypt, is stunning.

Among the treasures in the Lady Chapel (also underground) are a bas-relief depicting the Virgin lying in the lap of her mother St Anne, making for a haunting prefiguring of the Pietà and inspired by a da Vinci cartoon in the National Gallery; and a statue of the Madonna and Child in which the infant Christ offers his mother a biscuit, another poignant prefiguring, this time of the Eucharist. Both use gilt and painted bronze and both are by Alexander Stoddart. The Memorare beautifully carved into the wall is by Lida Cardozo Kindersley.

The kneelers in the main chapel are the work of Bulgarian needleworkers. In the baptistry, there is a triptych painted by the architect himself. This room also contains the chapel's only example of stained glass: a semi-circular lunette of St John. The loft has its own vaulted, gilded and coffered ceiling from which trumpeting angels look down on an organ designed by Mander of Bethnal Green. (The liturgy of consecration included five motets composed specially for the occasion by Sir James MacMillan.)

A number of recurring motifs catch the eye. There are urns to be found on the exterior, in the crypt, and, as an allusion to Christ's first miracle at Cana, in the altar rail. The priestly stole is another motif found throughout the building. Like the

urns, it symbolises different things according to context.

One of the other influences on the design of the interior has been Westminster Cathedral. The words inscribed on the half dome of the apse at Culham – *Domine Jesu Rex et Redemptor per Sanguinem Tuum Salva Nos* – appear on the tympanum over the main door at Westminster.

What boggles the mind slightly is that the chapel is not yet finished. Over the next 10 years, life-size statues of the Apostles will come to occupy 12 empty niches on the internal side walls. St Cecilia and St Sabina will take their places on corbels projecting from the portico façade, and a frieze depicting the Sermon on the Mount will eventually appear above the main entrance.

When I attended Mass recently, I took my place alongside a mixture of local people, visitors from abroad, men working on the estate, staff of the trust and the patrons themselves. The chapel springs from a wish that, as the website puts it, it "will bring spiritual joy, comfort and hope, as well as deepening the faith and love of all those who worship in it, over many hundreds of years to come".

In this sense, therefore, the work has truly only just begun.

Mass is normally held on the last Sunday of the month and on Holy Days of Obligation. See culhamchapel.co.uk