

Architectural associations: memory, modernity and the construction of community in East London

By Jane Garnett

As part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, a showcase for post-war national revival, East London was chosen as the location for an exhibition of ‘live architecture’. Part of Poplar – a dockland area devastated by wartime bombing – was designed as an ideal neighbourhood, to be rooted in community needs rather than abstract aesthetic dogmas. Controversial, however, both in its original plan and in its subsequent development, the project highlighted ongoing political and economic as well as conceptual tensions between urban planners, architectural modernists and the local inhabitants who were the focus of social reconstruction. A key challenge was to reconcile new and old – ideals of improvement and affection for the past. This challenge of course is fundamental to the relationship between architecture and memory more generally. And ideal-types of neighbourhood change. In the early 1980s the Jagonari women’s centre, set up initially as a resource for local Bangladeshi women, teamed up with a feminist architectural co-op to design a building in Whitechapel Road. Part of a broader reaction against uncompromising modernism, this project was a particularly successful product of the contemporary community architecture movement, a key remit of which was to respond to growing ethnic and religious diversity. Designed through consultation, it had inclusive and secular resonances: window grilles evoking Islamic ornament, juxtaposed with London brick; a ‘South Asian’ courtyard and a fictive belltower echoing both Asian buildings and Victorian schools.

In East London from the 1950s to the present, extensive redevelopment and demographic flux have contributed to often heated



Jagonari Women's Educational Resource Centre, Whitechapel Road.
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debate about how historical pasts should inform the futures to be constructed. Christian churches, historically symbolic markers in the landscape, have presented particular challenges in a changing cultural context. My focus here is on architectural projects related to faith tradition and ideas of community which have confronted modernity in East London from the second half of the twentieth century.

An important feature of the Poplar display was the rebuilt Trinity Congregational Church on East India Dock Road – a substantial structure of concrete and glass, with a tall brick tower. Replacing an imposing chapel on the same site which had been a local landmark, the new church incorporated the old church bell, the only thing to survive the Blitz. The church complex included a hall, offices and clubrooms, to embody its wider community role. This multi-functionality was to be characteristic of modernist church architecture in this period, which, in constructively emblematising the modern church's social engagement, yet risked the visual merging of churches into a generic municipal landscape of public buildings. One critic claimed that Trinity Church was known locally as the laundry.

Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, the architects commissioned at the same period to rebuild the nearby Anglican church of St Paul's, Bow Common, were well aware of this risk, and worked with the Anglo-Catholic, politically radical vicar to create a church which would be liturgically distinctive and symbolic of the spiritual as well as material character of the congregation and neighbourhood. They did not want the church to be confused with a community hall. Centrally-focused, with a corona and lantern over the altar, the church incorporated a processional path around the perimeter, in order to give a sense of movement, as well as recollecting the long-standing processional tradition of the parish. Industrial materials were used, not just for economy, but to root the church in its socio-economic context.

Praised for its conceptual sophistication when it was consecrated (1960), by the late 1980s its relationship with the local environment was more problematic, not least because of massive South Asian and predominantly non-Christian immigration into the area. What part could such architectural rhetoric play in constructing community? The vicar from the mid-1990s to 2013, himself Anglo-



St Paul's, Bow Common, interior. ©Jane Garnett

Indian, re-imagined the church as a means of intercultural dialogue. Collaborating with the V&A to mount an exhibition of tent panels embroidered by British South Asian women, or commissioning a shimmer-disc installation to light up the facade, he recaptured in new circumstances and new idioms the architects' original concern to ground the church in the particular culture of the place. These artistic projects revitalised the architecture, and by association the long-standing social and, indeed, anti-racist tradition of the parish whose processional culture had been deployed in the 1950s to paint over the first 'Keep Britain White' slogans. Since the 1980s the Anglican Church as a whole had been self-consciously reinventing itself as a counter-cultural and socially critical voice, building on its historical legacy as the church of the territorially-constituted parish, not of a particular 'gathered' religious community. This was emblematised by the moral and political critique *Faith in the City* (1985), which provoked the hostility of Margaret Thatcher, and by the intensification of inner-city neighbourhood renewal.

Out of this same critical climate in the 1980s came a series of architectural projects in East London, both religious and secular. Amongst Anglican initiatives, prominent was the rebuilt St Bartholomew's, East Ham, consecrated in 1983 – a brick and glass church on a busy arterial road near the Edwardian town hall and the high street. Its deliberately understated architecture, merging into the street, and combining church with cafe, nursery, health centre and social housing, conveyed the message that the Anglican church was at the heart of the neighbourhood, not just for churchgoers. Initially the only external marker of identity was a sculpture of a family group. The font, the only element from the old church, was made visible from the street, the urban traffic from within. The architectural associations are with modernity and urban ministry for those brought up in Britain at any point from the 1960s, and with recognisably Anglican tradition for more recent immigrants from Africa or South Asia. Until recently the church shared its worship space with Coptic, Jamaican Pentecostal and LGBT churches, and the local Labour MP held one of his weekly surgeries in the cafe on what was acknowledged as community-orientated territory.

Bromley by Bow Centre, a conversion of a 1950s Congregationalist church and nineteenth-century Sunday school, bears intriguing



John Bridgeman, 'Family Group', St Bartholomew's, East Ham. ©Jane Garnett





St Bartholomew's, East Ham, view to the street.

Paula Haughney, 'Mythical Creature', Bromley by Bow Centre.

Bromley by Bow Centre, church and nursery. All images ©Jane Garnett

comparisons to both the previous cases. Also on a major local route, it too combines the church with other community functions, including a cafe and studios for artists and craftspeople. Here the church itself was redesigned to incorporate a nursery. Visible from the street, stone angels carved in one of the newly-built workshops fly over the space. Upstairs is a 'quiet room', used by both Christians and Muslims. The Centre, formally separate from the church, though with crossover of personnel, has evolved around a reclaimed park to include a pioneering holistic health centre bound in with adult education, advisory services and social enterprise. A 'connection zone' with computers now forms the entrance foyer. The social production of art – sculpture, mosaic and stained glass – has been seen from the beginning as a fundamental agent of conversation and empowerment. Architecturally permissive, even disorientating, the Centre has responded to local pluralism by offering varieties of engagement, as well as explicit room for experimentation and dissent.

Each of these spaces of Christian association has reconfigured it in an increasingly religiously plural and secular context. Geographically situated on older sites, they evoke old and create new memories of Christian social and political activism. Building on their historically-rooted neighbourhood visibility, they set up freer associations – visually and conceptually – to resist hegemonic ideas of community and to encourage the forging of different connections. □