THE RUINS OF WAR: COVENTRY CATHEDRAL RESURRECTED

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Community, identity, and stability are aspirations for any society, all three analogous to prosperity and all three symbolically represented from time to time in the built environment. The construction of permanent settlements gives a society a stable and familiar environment where a sense of community can develop and eventually evolve into an identity. We consciously and unconsciously allow cities to allegorize who we are as a community, but more often than not, this sentimental connection to our environment isn’t realized until its permanence is threatened. Historic preservation is not a human need, but a societal one, a human constraint that has developed alongside the development of civilization. The need to preserve can only materialize out of the deep grief felt by losing what was once a constant part one’s identity. Once that grief is felt, the stability of the entire built environment comes into question, and it’s at that point that the need to preserve develops within a society and the ensuing battle against time begins. The once immortal building now seems as fragile as our own lives, and nowhere is this more evident than in the midst of war where both the living and built environments can be lost in the blink of an eye.

The Coventry Cathedral, located in Coventry, England, has seen its fair share of hardship, but the devotion of its congregation has ensured its preservation. The earliest cathedral on the site, dedicated to St. Mary, was founded as a Benedictine community in 1043 by Lady Godiva and the Earl Leofric and then elevated to a priory and cathedral upon the transferring of the Catholic Bishop’s see to Coventry.¹ It was demolished during the reign of Henry the Eighth in 1539 while his dissolution of the monasteries was sweeping across the country.² A second Anglican parish church, dedicated to St.

² Ibid.
Michael, was raised in its place and was elevated to cathedral status in 1918 when the modern diocese of Coventry was created as an extension of the Church of England.3 This gothic cathedral would stand for nearly 500 years, only to fall to a new reign of terror: Hitler’s air raids on England.4 “The second cathedral church of St. Michael at Coventry was burnt out by Hitler’s incendiary bombs on the 14th of November 1940,” stated Basil Spence, the architect charged with restoring the ruin.5 The air raid left nothing but the outer shell and spire of the gothic structure (Figure 1). While the congregation mourned the destruction of their beloved cathedral, they never gave up hope of it remaining their familiar place of worship. Mass was continued amongst the ruins of war, out in the open air as an act of defiance (Figure 2). The altar was resurrected from the “fallen masonry and the charred cross of two burnt members from the medieval wood roof.”6 The scenario of sacrifice was only too befitting for the church. It evoked an emotion from the people of Coventry that would enable them to confront its resurrection with a more open and daring mind. The new church wouldn’t just replace the utilitarian use of the previous one but would stand as a ruined memorial against the evils of war. This invigorated philosophy could not have been more eloquently put than by Hugh Casson, a noted British architect of the time and author of the below quoted article “Ruins for Remembrance.”

Save us, then, some of our ruins, not as moral warnings, not as symbols of vengeful memory, but as places of rest and worship, and above all as reminders of the sacrifices, the gallantry and the faith of those who fought and died, many thousands of them

3 Spence, Phoenix at Coventry, 2.
4 Ibid.
6 Spence, Out of the Ashes: A Progress through Coventry Cathedral, The Beginning.
among these very stones whose existence today is a testament that they did not die in vain.7

The need for a new cathedral was undeniable, but what that new cathedral would look like was up for debate. On the morning after the catastrophic attack, Provost Howard made a promise to the people that a new cathedral would stand on these hallowed grounds once again.8 “In March 1941, the Cathedral Council, comprising the Bishop, Assistant Bishop, the Provost, the honorary and residentiary canons, the Archdeacons of Coventry and of Warwick, and representatives of the diocese and the cathedral congregation met for the first time since the November raid” to discuss a plan of action.9 Provost Howard took the reins of the project and sought advice from “the cathedral architect, Randoll Blacking, and the secretary of the Central Council for the Care of Churches (CCC), Francis Eeles” as to what approach to take in the reconstruction.10 Of course these two men had very differing opinions, ranging from the conservative to the radical. Francis Eeles saw reconstruction as the solution, disliking the effect of the ruins, while Randoll Blacking favored a new construction alongside the ruins that would reflect the current times.11 Although their opinions were opposed, both men urged Howard not to hold a competition because they needed an architect who would uphold the Church’s standpoint.12 Despite receiving additional advice from the CCC, Howard reached out to Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and hired him as the project

9 Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain, 22.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 23.
12 Ibid.
The CCC was very unhappy with this appointment and criticized Scott on everything from his proposed design ideas to his “ignorance, as a Catholic, of Anglican liturgy.” Despite the criticism, Scott carried on with his new assignment and produced his first set of proposed drawings in February 1943. The scheme was met with a cool reception, especially from the newly appointed Bishop, Neville Gorton, who unexpectedly favored a more modern design in the hope of attracting a younger congregation. Scott’s proposed “heavily buttressed neo-Gothic building” that incorporated a partial reconstruction of the ruins by “adapting the ruined apse as a Lady Chapel and the remains of the nave serving as a cloister” was too reminiscent of the old design and lacked the airiness that Gorton was looking for (Figure 3). The bureaucracy of the Church paired with the indecisive opinions of its high ranking members eventually pushed Scott to submit his resignation as the project architect. The future of Coventry Cathedral was on the verge of collapse, and the only way to solve the design dilemma now was for the Cathedral Council to reluctantly host a design competition.

In January 1951, eleven years after the cathedral was attacked, the conditions for the design competition were released. Although local opinion still favored a restoration or a replica, the Bishop, the Provost, and lay members of the Reconstruction Committee still saw an opportunity for the use of contemporary architecture to “capture the imagination of a new generation of church-goers and provide a powerful focus for the

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid, 25.
19 Ibid, 40.
public spaces of the city."\textsuperscript{20} The conditions did not flat out state that the ruins needed to be preserved, but the inclusion of various photographs of the current state of the old cathedral along with a measured drawing of the remaining tower hinted that some type of preservation and incorporation would be favored.\textsuperscript{21} In fact, by this time, local interest in preserving the ruins as a memorial was rapidly growing. Each November, the ruins were ceremoniously used during a service to commemorate the victims of the Coventry Blitz.\textsuperscript{22} By 1947, the rubble within the skeletal nave was cleared away and lawns were laid.\textsuperscript{23} In 1948, a sliver-plated cross of nails was added to the rubble altar, and the words “Father Forgive” were etched into the ruined walls.\textsuperscript{24} In reality, the preservation of the ruins versus complete reconstruction solved many of the cathedral’s underlying problems by following the new mindset that post-war Britain was beginning to personify. For the first time, mass destruction in bombed cities was being communicated to the public in the form of “commissioned images of damaged buildings for inclusion in wartime exhibitions.”\textsuperscript{25} This new form of wartime propaganda used architectural ruins as “visual equivalents for ruined lives,” embedding the seed for the possibility of ruins as memorials (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{26} The commissioned images also “informed the public about churches and monuments they had scarcely noticed” before the war, providing a renewed interest in the “postwar rebuilding and town-planning process.\textsuperscript{27} No longer was complete reconstruction or restoration the only answer to the destruction of war. Damaged churches naturally offered the perfect backdrop for the

\textsuperscript{20} Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain, 41.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 45.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Nicola Lambourne, War Damage in Western Europe, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 107.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 114.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
conceptualization of “death and resurrection – after the endurance of such suffering, the rebuilding of the church would follow and good would thus triumph over evil.”

Not just the cathedral’s congregation, but the people of Coventry could build a new cathedral that exemplified their ability to prosper after disaster. For them, the ruins would remain not only as a testament of their strength, but as a memorial to what was lost. On the wave of this revolutionary thought, 219 designs were submitted to the Council with seemingly every possible treatment of the old cathedral’s ruins touched upon.

With no lack of disinclination or church politics, the Coventry Cathedral design competition finally came to an end on August 15, 1951 when the architect Basil Spence was announced as the winner. The British architect’s unexpected win quickly propelled him into the public spotlight. Although not every member of the church’s senior leaders approved of Spence’s modern design, his “enthusiasm for modern materials and methods of construction, coupled with his understanding of the spirituality of church architecture” proved to resonate with the younger clergy and the general public. Another key element was Spence’s willingness to collaborate with the Church. He realized that the execution of the design would involve listening to the naysayers of the clergy and the Cathedral Council instead of right out rebelling against them as Sir Gilbert Scott had done. Spence’s patience for cooperation was particularly tested when Bishop Gorton became involved with modifications to the layout of the chancel and its relation to the altar, a move that significantly altered Spence’s vision of

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29 Campbell, *Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain*, 47.
32 Ibid.
the altar and its incorporated tapestry art.\textsuperscript{33} Despite the struggle between architect and client, Basil Spence’s ability to envision a cathedral that would serve the people of the now while symbolizing the past, enabled him to give post-war Britain what it needed and in effect establish himself as one of the most prominent British architects of his time.

The winning design embraced the duality of the project. He carefully balanced the new with the old by pairing a heavy, almost fortified, stone exterior that harkened back to its gothic predecessor with a light modern interior that embraced the use of materials such as glass and metal (Figure 5).\textsuperscript{34} Spence also introduced the use of modern religious art in both the interior and exterior spaces in order to further bridge the gap between the traditional perceptions of a cathedral with his new avant garde approach. In Spence’s own words, “The shell of the building which survived has inspired millions of visitors by its eloquent and fragile beauty. The new cathedral grows out of the old. The porch links the two buildings-as the ruins stand for the Sacrifice so the new cathedral speaks of the Resurrection.”\textsuperscript{35} The plan of the new cathedral stands perpendicular to the ruins, connected only by the aforementioned porch, a departure from the original reconstruction ideas born out of Scott’s scheme. The columns of the five bay porch were designed to mimic the rhythm of the pillars and window openings in the opposing ruined walls of the nave (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{36} The porch contains the threshold for the new cathedral, which stands as a transparent screen etched with modern interpretations of

\textsuperscript{33} Campbell, \textit{Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain}, 92.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 58.
\textsuperscript{35} Spence, \textit{Out of the Ashes: A Progress through Coventry Cathedral}, The Plan.
\textsuperscript{36} Campbell, \textit{Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain}, 54.
Christ, his prophets, and the angels (Figure 7).37 The glass screen was seen as way to visually keep the connection of the new and old unobstructed and by even allowing for a physical connection on fair weather days when “all five doors can be opened for processions.”38 Spence also treated the ruins as a vessel for which open-air sermons or performances could be held by dividing the open space into grass and paved sections.39 The final act of conversion was the transferring of the rubble altar and cross that had been constructed in the days after the raid to the new cathedral, completing the emotional journey from the anguish of the devastation to the ecstasy of the consecration of Coventry’s new cathedral (Figure 8).40

Coventry Cathedral had a massive impact on Basil Spence’s life. Up until the design competition, work was hard to come by in the architect’s homeland of Scotland, forcing him to look to England for commissions.41 He split his personal and work life between Edinburgh and London, but a full on move to London and the expansion of his office there was prompted by the winning of the design competition. Whether Spence liked it or not, he was now seen as a public figure and a leader in Britain’s recovery. The cathedral, which had been the most seriously damaged historic monument in Britain at the time of its collapse and the most damaged church at the end of war, presented the perfect opportunity for a paradigm shift in the view of post-war recovery, a propaganda

37 Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain, 126.
38 Spence, Out of the Ashes: A Progress through Coventry Cathedral, Looking Out from the Cathedral through the Screen.
39 Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain, 60.
40 Ibid, 58.
41 Phillip Long and Jane Thomas, Basil Spence Architect, (Edinburgh: Trustees of the National Gallerlies of Scotland, 2007), 27.
fueled topic that had already been mewling about the public realm long before the designation of Basil Spence as Coventry’s savior.⁴²

In the years immediately following the destruction of Coventry Cathedral, Britain, much like France, began to allude to a new found positivity of the war’s destruction as an “opportunity for the development of new styles of architecture and town planning.”⁴³ While there was voiced opinion for faithful reconstructions, such as Churchill’s plea for the reconstruction of the damaged House of Commons, a more radical approach to recovery was simultaneously being publicly displayed at the “Rebuilding Britain” exhibition at the National Gallery in 1943.⁴⁴ In the same year, The Royal Institute of British Architects also published recovery proposals in Towards a New Britain.⁴⁵ The problem was boiled down to “reconstruction or new construction, to preserve or to relinquish, pious revival or bold design.”⁴⁶ The natural inclination was to restore architecturally and historically significant buildings, such as St. Paul’s Cathedral in London which sustained minor damage in both world wars, but for many of the other churches across Britain, a lack of an immediate response to recovery left the buildings in ruin for several years, making the feasibility of restoration almost impossible.⁴⁷ Coventry Cathedral stood as a ruin for over a decade before the economic and political ground work was laid for its resurrection. Although some churches were forced to remain as ruins by material and financial barriers, there was a movement for memorialized ruins as early as 1943 when the “ruined church of St. Andrew’s in

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⁴² Lambourne, War Damage in Western Europe, 47.
⁴³ Ibid, 95.
⁴⁴ Ibid, 96.
⁴⁵ Ibid.
⁴⁶ Ibid, 177.
Plymouth was transformed into an open-air church intended as a fitting memorial (Figure 9)."48 The church was later reconstructed, but another church in Plymouth, Charles Church, was left as a memorialized garden ruin that still functions as one today.49 Basel Spence’s design, both romantic and modern, was well suited for the mood of the period.50 The design proved that “wounded churches could stand metaphorically for the wounded populations of bombed cities, just as they had done during the war, when civilian deaths were alluded to indirectly in reports of architectural damage” yet still meet the programmatic needs of the present day congregation.51 The ideals established by Spence at Coventry Cathedral would continue to be played on into the late 1950s as such churches as the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche in Berlin were constructed with ruins acting as “commemorative foils to new structures (Figure 10).”52

Concurrently with Spence’s victory at Coventry in 1951, the Festival of Britain, a series of pavilions situated along the South Bank of London designed to invigorate Britain’s recovery, was constructed and included the Sea and Ships Pavilion which was also designed by Spence.53 Fearful of being typecast as an exhibition designer, Spence saw the commission at Coventry Cathedral as “a means to return to serious architecture and to the conventional road to architectural success,” as well as another project to reunite Britain in the postwar years.54 The same insecurities that underplayed the Festival were at play in Coventry, and in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s words, “Spence’s competition design was equally calculated [as the Festival] to reassure a

48 Lambourne, War Damage in Western Europe, 180.
49 Ibid.
50 Campbell, Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain, 254.
51 Lambourne, War Damage in Western Europe, 182.
52 Ibid, 180.
53 Ibid, 76.
54 Ibid.
nation shaken by economic crisis and deeply worried by the Korean War.”\textsuperscript{55} Spence undoubtedly lived up to the Archbishop’s words, but despite the overall acclaim of his design as “one of the great projects of post-war Europe,” Spence was overly critical of his design and often stated that by the time the bureaucracy of the church design had subsided and the cathedral was finally built, the building was marked by a completely different context that lacked the emotional intensity of the years immediately following the war (Figure 11).\textsuperscript{56} An architect will always face criticism, especially from himself, but the positive impact that the cathedral had on the war torn town of Coventry is undeniable. Upon visiting the cathedral with Basil Spence, the writer and historian Lewis Mumford rejoiced that,

Many people will be coming to Coventry now just to admire the way a modern architect, using only modern means imaginatively but humbly, can bring into being a structure that does justice to a traditional institution while visibly uniting it with the fresh life of our time.\textsuperscript{57}

The long awaited consecration of Basil Spence’s resurrected Coventry Cathedral finally gave the people of Coventry closure and hope for the future after the madness of World War II by providing a “much-needed symbol for the city.”\textsuperscript{58} While their sense of community never diminished during the uncertain aftermath of the cathedral’s demise, their sense of identity had been put to the test. An already geographically isolated, yet powerful country, “the Coventry blitz exacerbated anxiety about Britain’s increasingly isolated position and triggered fears about the fate of other cities” vulnerable to Hitler’s

\textsuperscript{55} Campbell, \textit{Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain}, 78.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 255.
\textsuperscript{57} Spence, \textit{Out of the Ashes: A Progress through Coventry Cathedral}, Coventry Cathedral by Lewis Mumford.
\textsuperscript{58} Campbell, \textit{Coventry Cathedral: Art and Architecture in Post-War Britain}, 247.
unrelenting air raids.\textsuperscript{59} Although having their physical environment so violently ravaged was shocking for a country that had reluctantly entered the war in the first place, the people of Britain had been down this road before. They were not immune to the cruelties of war, and for the first time, they had the opportunity to learn from past experience and have a public discussion on their path to recovery. Public officials, church leaders, architects and everyday citizens began to understand the significance that their built environment held and became increasingly concerned with preserving these religious relics of history in their current conditions “as architectural fragments in the midst of urban reconstruction” instead of “resurrecting architectural monuments” out of the ruins of war in the hope of hiding the pain of loss.\textsuperscript{60} The concerns of the preservation field were no longer decided upon by the elite but were influenced by the demands of the people whose lives were identified by the urban fabric around them. The future of ruined churches became the perfect controversy to ignite the debate of reconstruction versus memorialized ruins, and the status of Coventry Cathedral enabled it to become the poster child for the movement.

War is the ultimate catalyst in society. Throughout history, the rage of humanity has put man on his knees, only to lift him back up again like a phoenix from the ashes and give him the opportunity to be reborn. As difficult as it may be, societies tend to believe that out of complete loss comes progress. The resulting devastation of war forces paradigm shifts in all aspects of society, including historic preservation, which can lead to unforeseen benefits. No region has experienced this unexpected growth more than Europe. In an area where the significance of preservation as a societal aim was realized

\textsuperscript{60} Lambourne, \textit{War Damage in Western Europe}, 182.
by its people and government long before the United States, war has not only damaged individual buildings, but has decimated entire cities. The ravages of war initiated two separate movements in the evolution of historic preservation as a field. Countries left with the task of reestablishing their sense of community and stability reacted to the devastation according to the philosophies of the time, producing two very different viewpoints on historic preservation: reconstruction versus memorialized ruins.

One such philosophy that was discussed contemporaneously with the resurrection of Coventry Cathedral was the explanation of social domination within a new critical theory that was born out of the philosophy and social criticism written by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their 1944 book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.\(^\text{61}\) The following passage from their book describes man’s internal struggle with depicting his past:

Book XII of the Odyssey tells of the encounter with the Sirens. Their allurement is that of losing oneself in the past. But the hero to whom the temptation is offered has reached maturity through suffering. Throughout the many mortal perils he has to endure, the unity of his own life, the identity of the individual, has been confirmed for him. The regions of time part for him as do water, earth, and air. For him, the flood of that-which-was has retreated from the rock of the present, and the future lies cloudy on the horizon. What Odysseus left behind him entered into the nether world; for the self is still so close to prehistoric myth, from whose womb it tore itself, that its very own experienced past become mythic prehistory. And it seeks to

encounter that myth through the fixed order of time. The three-fold schema of myth, domination, and labor is intended to free the present moment from the power of the past by referring that power behind the absolute barrier of the unrepeatable and placing it as the disposal of the present as practicable knowledge. The compulsion to rescue what is gone as what is living instead of using as the material of progress was appeased only in art, to which history itself appertains as a presentation of past life.\textsuperscript{62}

The parishioners of Coventry Cathedral, like Odysseus, had survived the perils of war, had faced their own mortality, and came out of the experience with a new definition of self-identity. These resilient people chose not to reconstruct their beloved cathedral, but instead, to memorialize its existence as an example of the forlorn nature of war. They were not willing to forget the past, but they refused to let the past define their future. The people of the community demanded the preservation of the ruins “whose total disappearance would sever a link with the past, and deprive us of something which might be precious to posterity.”\textsuperscript{63} These survivors had discovered that the built environment does not define us as individuals. Instead, we as individuals assign definition to the structures we inhabit and utilize on a daily basis, and without this emotional connection, buildings are nothing more than the materials of which they are constructed.

The cities which men make reflect their souls. Those who have mean thoughts of themselves and their fellows will build mean and ugly cities, and those who respect themselves and their fellows and desire a worthy life for all citizens will build cities

\textsuperscript{62} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 32.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Bombed Churches as War Memorials}, 5.
which express their spirit and are an abiding witness of their quality to those who come after.⁶⁴

Buildings can be reconstructed, memories and emotions cannot. Best to let the ruins of their old cathedral entomb their memories of a more innocent world, so that their new cathedral could house their hopes for a brighter and more peaceful future.

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⁶⁴ *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*, Foreword by the Dean of St. Paul’s.
APPENDIX OF FIGURES

Figure 1-Coventry Cathedral (view from the west of the ruined interior) c. 1940

Figure 2-Wartime Service in the Ruined Cathedral
Figure 3-Bird’s-Eye View of Proposed Cathedral Based on Sir Giles Gilbert Scotts’ Plan c. 1944

Figure 4-John Piper, “Coventry Cathedral, November 15th, 1940” (oil on canvas over panel) c. 1940
Figure 5-Basil Spence, Design for Coventry Cathedral (pencil and gray wash) c. 1951
Figure 6- Coventry Cathedral (from the ruins of the old cathedral)

Figure 7- Entrance Screen at Coventry Cathedral (engraved by John Hutton)
Figure 8 - Coventry Cathedral (view towards the altar)

Figure 9 - St. Andrew’s, Plymouth, England
Figure 10- Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche, Berlin, Germany

Figure 11- Basil Spence and Provost Howard c. 1953
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