

COVENTRY

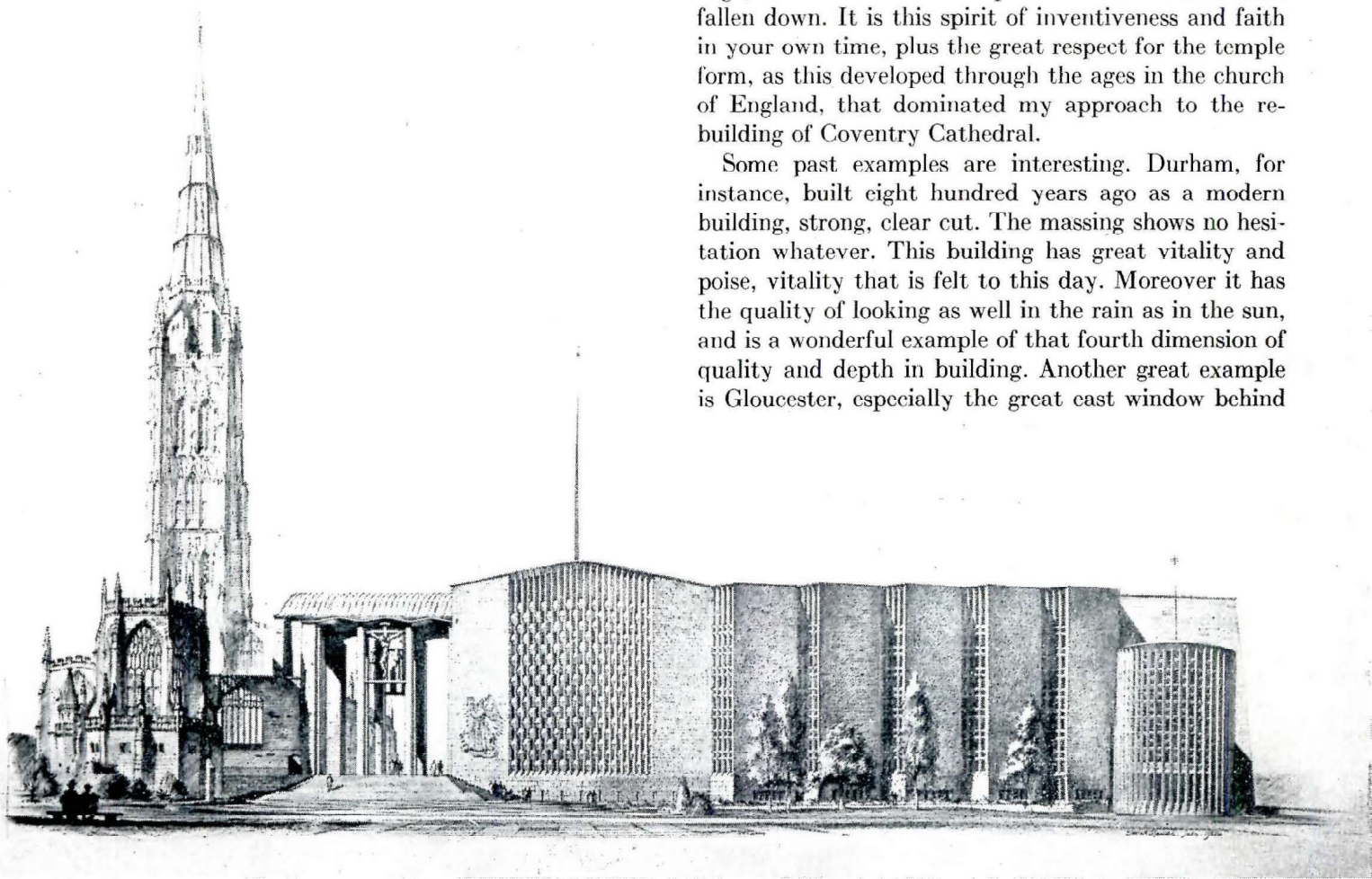


A CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION OF CATHEDRAL TRADITIONS

A RARE ASSIGNMENT TODAY, the design of a cathedral poses some problems for contemporary architecture. This design for the new Coventry Cathedral, to replace the one bombed out, represents a thoughtful effort to develop, in modern materials and methods, the traditional thinking on church concepts and inspirational necessities. It was chosen from 219 schemes in competition. On the following pages the architect relates his reasoning. — Ed.

A CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION OF CATHEDRAL TRADITIONS

By Basil Spence, O.B.E., A.R.A., A.R.S.A.



WHY did you design a "modernistic" cathedral when there were so many wonderful examples of pure gothic architecture in England which could be your model, giving perfect opportunities for a detailed copy? This question was often put to me during the last three months, while I was travelling through Canada.

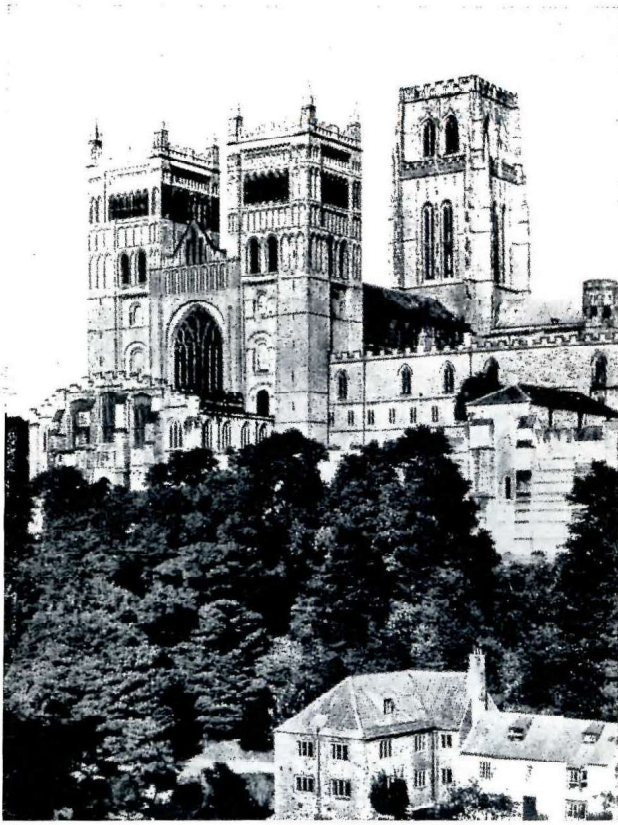
The answer is simply that I have studied these ancient cathedrals very carefully, being a Pugin student, for knowledge of Gothic was absolutely necessary before the prize could be awarded; and what I have tried to do is to apply what I thought to be the underlying principles of our own native architecture here in Britain.

Gothic architecture displays certain qualities, perhaps the most arresting of which is that their buildings were always modern when they were built, displaying a strong faith in their time, invention and courage. Things were done sometimes without adequate knowledge, with the result that spires and even vaults have fallen down. It is this spirit of inventiveness and faith in your own time, plus the great respect for the temple form, as this developed through the ages in the church of England, that dominated my approach to the re-building of Coventry Cathedral.

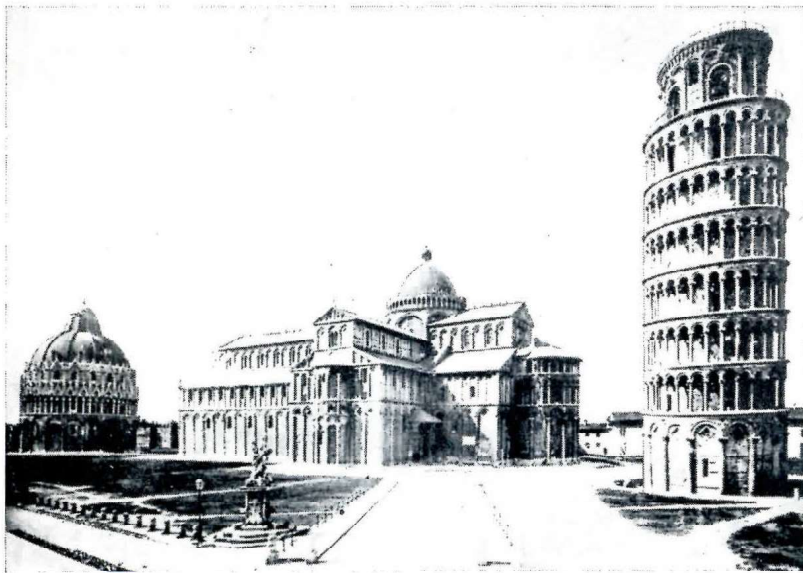
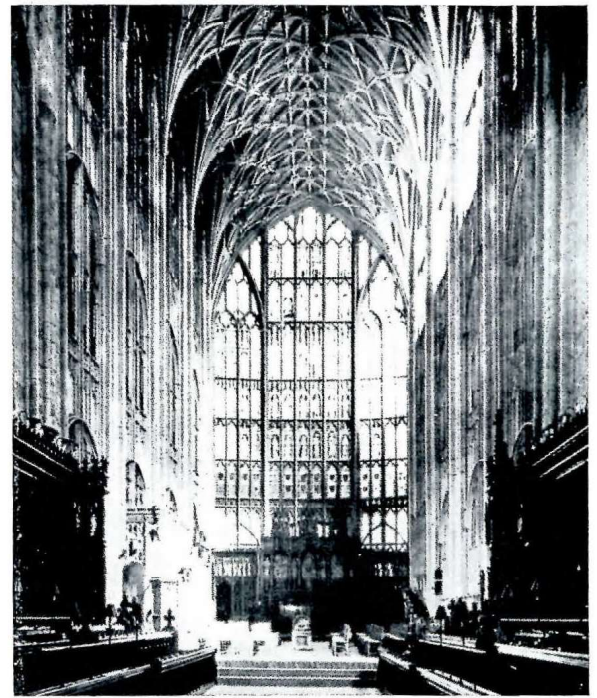
Some past examples are interesting. Durham, for instance, built eight hundred years ago as a modern building, strong, clear cut. The massing shows no hesitation whatever. This building has great vitality and poise, vitality that is felt to this day. Moreover it has the quality of looking as well in the rain as in the sun, and is a wonderful example of that fourth dimension of quality and depth in building. Another great example is Gloucester, especially the great east window behind

the altar and the choir. Built in the middle of the fourteenth century and replacing a Norman choir, it showed the wisdom of the ecclesiastical authorities in encouraging the latest methods of design and construction, as the Romanesque architecture which it replaced was mostly wall and little window, whereas now this beautiful cathedral has a great east window 70 feet high and 40 feet across.

But England alone does not hold all the examples. An architect must throw his net wide. Let us look at



Among the cathedrals which gave inspiration to the author include Durham (left) for its "great vitality and poise"; Gloucester (below), "especially the great east window"; and Pisa (below, left) for the clarity of its grouping and its "quality"



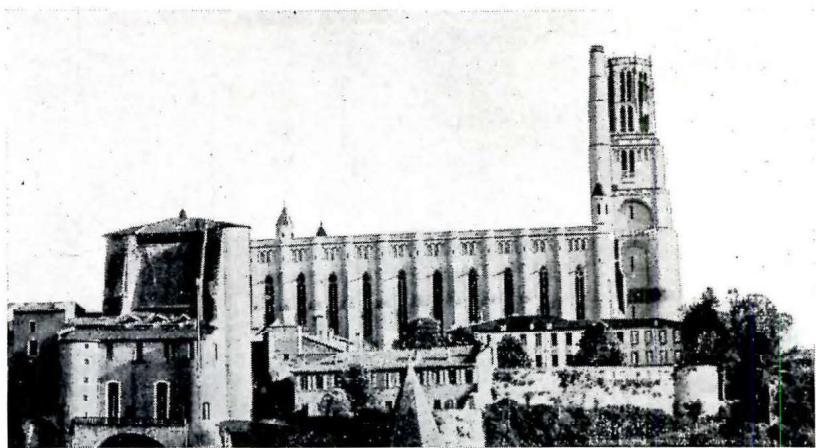
Pisa with the four elements, the basilica, the baptistry, the campanile and the campo santo, placed together with Grecian clarity and exactness, buildings that group in the third dimension and possess the fourth, quality.

At Ravenna, too, there are buildings which inspired me greatly, St. Apollinare in Classe, which is just outside Ravenna, built many hundreds of years ago as an early Christian basilica. This has for its massing a simple dignity of immaculate proportion and fenestration. The elements are all clearly defined, but externally

it does not say much. It is a dignified building with an invitation to enter. It is the interior which matters, for here is the altar and it is here where men worship. The altar is enshrined in the most beautiful and dignified material, culminating in the apse, which is one of the most lovely mosaics I have ever seen, still a blaze of colour and as brilliant today as it ever was. The interior is rich with marbles and is flooded with a soft golden light through the alabaster windows. This building truly functions. Entering, the great surprise sweeps the



Also Ravenna (left) — “the altar is enshrined in the most beautiful and dignified materials”; and Albi for its impressive grandeur



visitor off his feet and turns him from a common visitor into a worshipper. It is this philosophy of design which had a strong bearing on the line I took in the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral.

Very similar also is the effect at Albi in the south of France, a romantic town dominated by the cathedral, which is on the highest ground, standing there like a great hen with little chicks around her. But when you walk up to the cliff-like walls there is an impressive grandeur about the exterior, which is perhaps lacking in many other examples; it is severe and very dignified. It is only when one enters that the real magnificence of this building is appreciated. The philosophy is the same as that at Ravenna.

When I received my conditions for the rebuilding of Coventry, while I was in Edinburgh, I read them and was tremendously stimulated. I would like to quote the preface written by the Bishop and the Provost.

“The Cathedral is to speak to us and to generations to come of the Majesty, the Eternity and the Glory of God. God, therefore, direct you.

“It is a Cathedral of the Church of England. In terms of function, what should such a Cathedral express? It stands as a witness to the central dogmatic truths of the Christian Faith. Architecturally it should seize on those truths and thrust them upon the man who comes in from the street.

“The doctrine and the worship of the Church of England is liturgically centred in the Eucharist. The Cathedral should be built to enshrine the altar. This should be the ideal of the architect, not to conceive a building and to place in it an altar, but to conceive an altar and to create a building.

“In the Anglican liturgy it is the people’s altar; the altar should gather the people, it should offer access for worship and invitation to Communion.

“With the altar — in the unity of worship — there is the preaching of the Gospel among our people of Coventry and the interpretation of the Word.

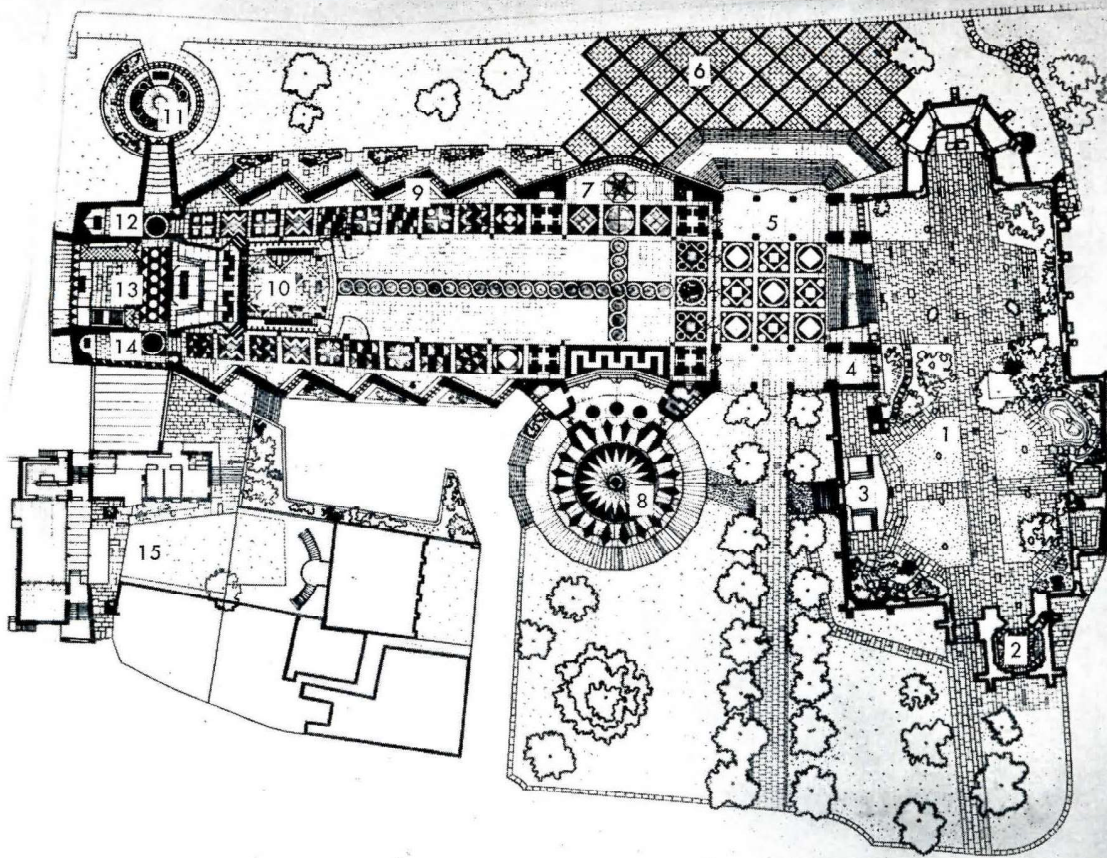
“The theology of the Cathedral we put before you to direct your thought. Prayer will be with you from the

Cathedral Crypt and from the Diocese of Coventry. May God be with you in this great matter.”

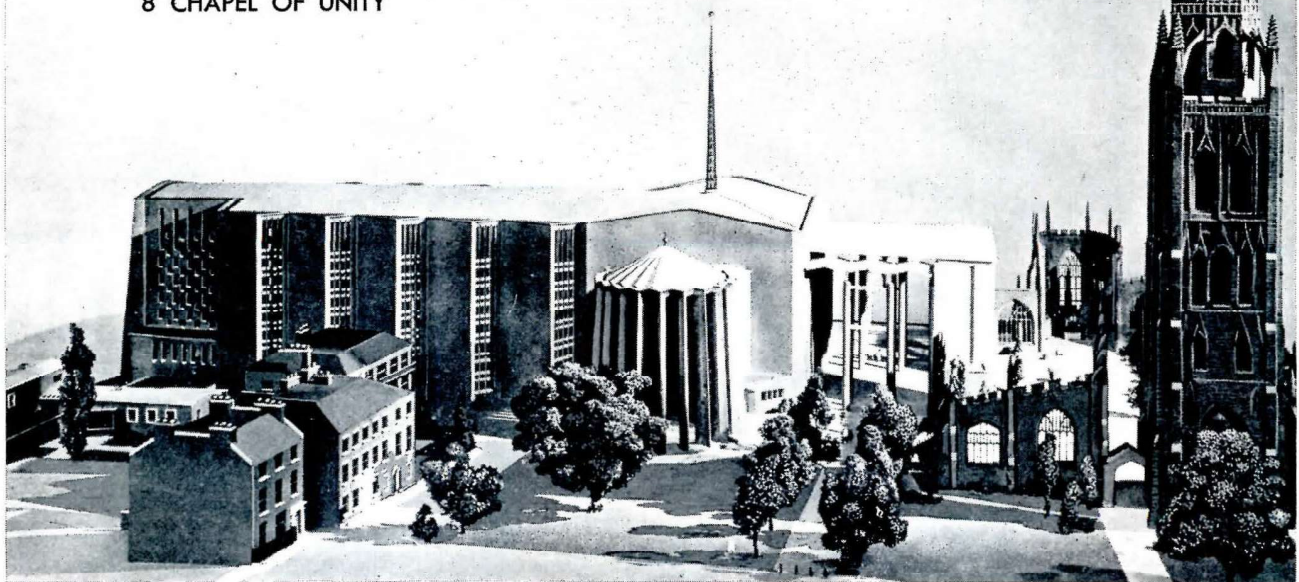
I determined at once to visit the site and see for myself. This Cathedral, as we all know, was bombed during the first of the great German air raids on Britain. It was destroyed by fire bombs on November 14th, 1940. There was great loss of life and property, but when I set foot in these ruins I realized I was walking on hallowed ground. Instead of the beautiful six hundred-year-old roof, this cathedral, because a cathedral it still is, has the skies as a vault. This feeling of reverence was intensified when I walked up to the altar which was erected during the war by a stone mason, from the stones which had fallen from the upper parts of the cathedral. Behind it is the charred cross made of beams that had not quite burnt out. This is an eloquent symbol, and a relic of faith during Britain’s darkest hour, and I must admit to feelings of deep emotion when I saw this and read the words carved behind — “Father forgive.”

I went to the site and looked out through the ruined windows over the ground reserved for the cathedral, and in a flash I saw in my mind’s eye a beautiful new one growing out of the old, keeping the ruins as an integral part of the whole scheme. The picture I saw was a sparkling and beautiful altar at the end of a long vista backed by a great picture, the body of the nave spread out in front of the altar, but I did not see it clearly because in front of my eyes floated the bodies of the saints and the martyrs and it was through their bodies that the altar could be seen. We all know the price of this new altar — 1200 people killed and many, many more maimed and injured for life, 5,000 homes wiped out even with the people in them, 60,000 homes damaged, apart from the tremendous industrial damage. So the new altar will be seen through the saints and martyrs.

I took back with me to Edinburgh this idea seed, which continued to grow from that moment. Part of the new accommodation required is a chapel of unity where all church denominations could worship. This is a won-



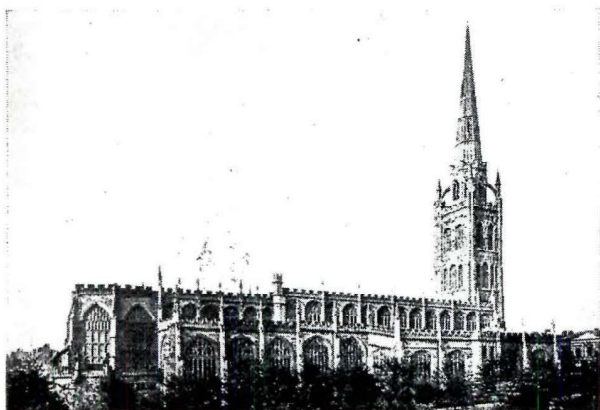
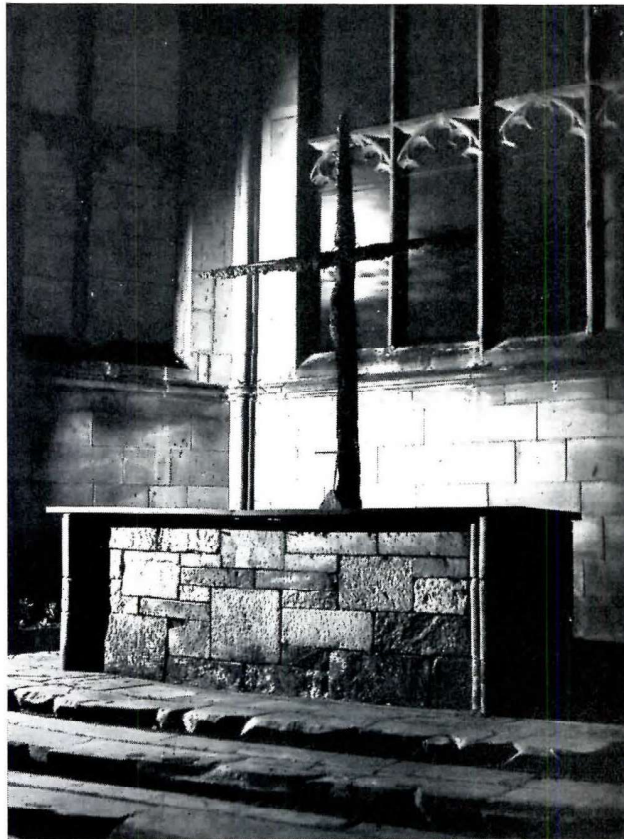
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|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 CATHEDRAL RUINS | 9 HALLOWING PLACES |
| 2 TOWER | 10 CHANCEL |
| 3 OPEN AIR STAGE | 11 GUILD CHAPEL AND CHAPTER HOUSE |
| 4 CRYPT CHAPEL ENTRANCES | 12 CHAPEL OF THE RESURRECTION |
| 5 ENTRANCE PORCH | 13 LADY CHAPEL |
| 6 FORECOURT | 14 CHILDREN'S CHAPEL |
| 7 FONT | 15 CHRISTIAN SERVICE CENTRE |
| 8 CHAPEL OF UNITY | |



derful idea, worthy of strong architectural expression. I felt that this chapel could express unity and strength, and looking for a symbol to express it, I chose the star — a great star which will form a pattern on the floor, as the Star of Bethlehem was the first sign of Christian unity.

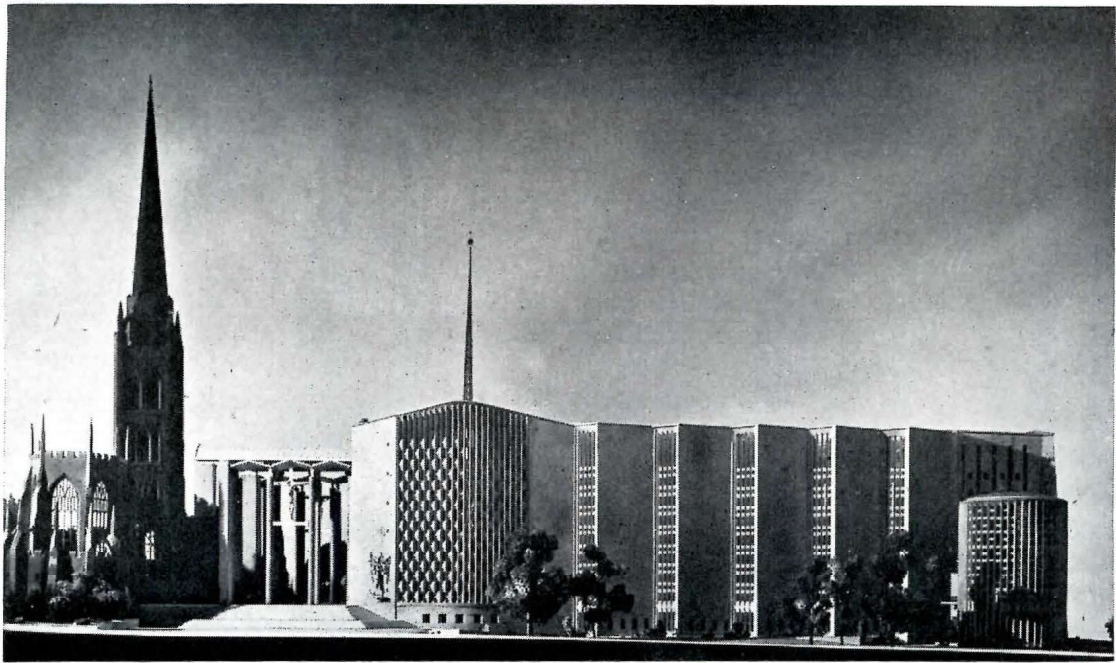
So opposite this chapel inside the new cathedral is the font. Because the font represents birth and virility and the rebirth of this cathedral, it is a very important feature. The font has a cover, a tall spire-shaped form, which rises to 80 feet. Behind it is a great window of 198 little windows. In each of these, I hope to have stained glass designs representing the saints in infancy, and the window will be carried out in the clear pure colours of birth and innocence.

People entering the cathedral first will see no other windows apart from this one, but their eyes should be drawn toward the altar, and beyond it to a great tapestry over 80 feet high and over 40 feet across. On this, in brilliant colours will be woven the figure of Our Lord seated in the glory of the Father with the four beasts, exactly as Saint John the Divine describes in his vision of the fourth chapter, Book of the Revelation. This tapestry is being designed by Graham Sutherland.

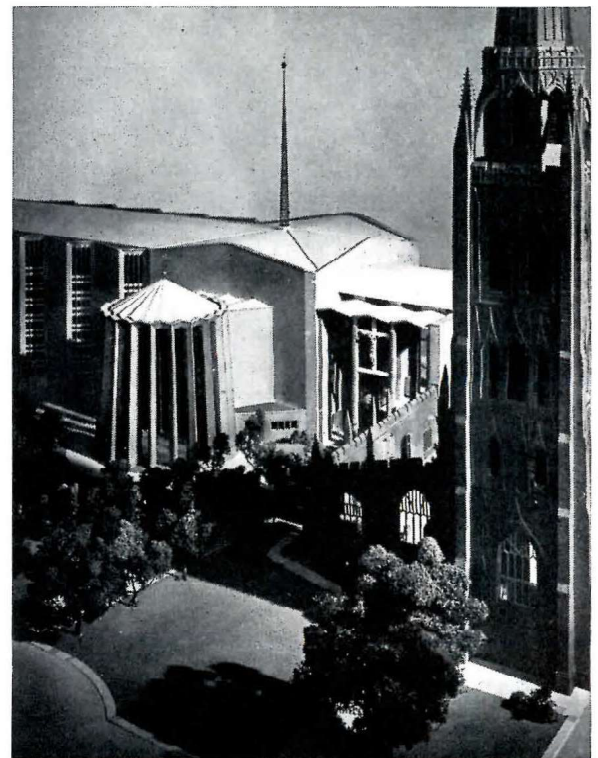


From Coventry Mr. Spence found inspiration in the simple altar built by a stone mason in the ruins of the cathedral, "a relic of faith during Britain's darkest hour," and from the ruins themselves, which he insisted be preserved as an integral part of the scheme for the new church





"... I saw in my mind's eye a beautiful new one growing out of the old . . . a sparkling and beautiful altar at the end of a long vista . . . but I did not see it clearly because in front of my eyes floated the bodies of the saints . . ."



As you walk toward the altar you will realize that the windows reveal themselves as you reach them, because they are blotted from view by cliffs of stone, and you will only see them as you pass them.

There are five pairs of windows 70 feet high on opposite sides of the nave, each pair representing an age of man. The first pair grow from our birth — and represent childhood. These are strong virile windows in stained glass, strongly patterned. The colour is predominantly green and other colours allied to green, such as yellow and blue. These will present the young shoots growing out from the ground to the full height.

The next pair shows childhood growing into manhood and womanhood, the age of passion and strength, and these windows are predominantly red.

The next are the middle life with the experiences of middle life represented by the colours of the rainbow, some dark, some light, some brilliant and some dull.

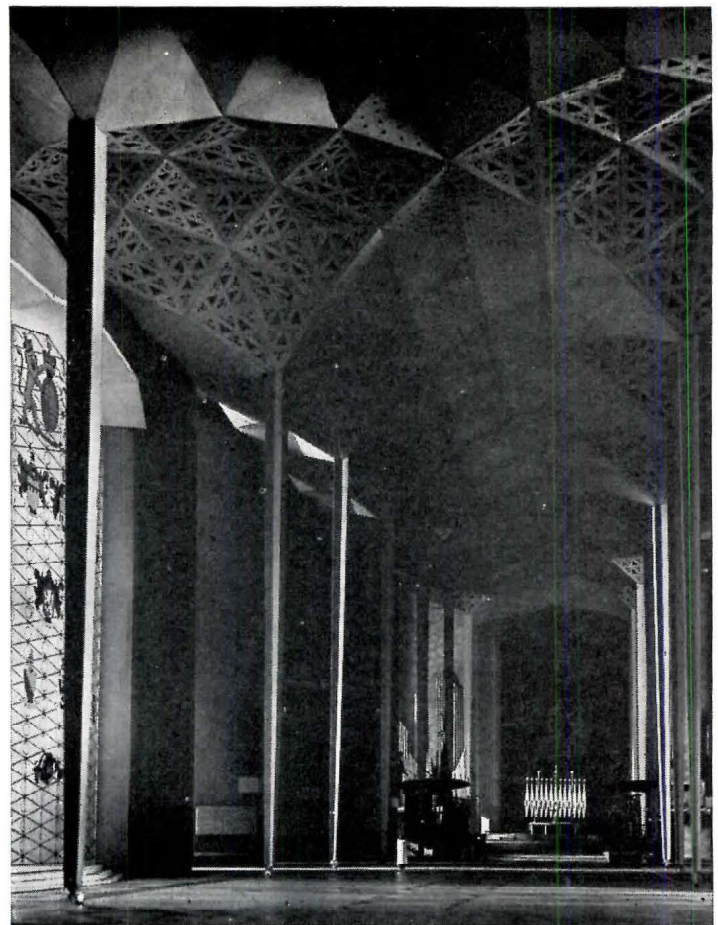
Still going toward the altar, the next pair represent the richness and wisdom of old age and are deep blue and purple, flecked with gold.

You will notice that the windows are gradually becoming darker and richer as you move toward the altar; the last pair represent the after-life. These are the altar windows of golden glass. The light from these windows shines directly on to the altar, so as you approach the holy table there will always be this aura of golden light around it. But when you reach the altar and turn around, for the first time you will see all the windows at once. I do not know of a church so far built that does this. As you know life, you experience the present and can look back into the past, but you cannot see the future. But when you reach the altar, the whole pattern is revealed for the first time.

The two ranges of windows leading up to this climax represent on the right, the perfect side which is God, and on the left, the "man" side, a reflection of the perfect side but imperfect in its reflection, as man is always striving for perfection — rather like trees reflected in a pool disturbed by the wind. One is the truth and the other is rather an uncertain reflection of the truth. But at the altar both are joined in a blaze of glory.

As an instance of this, the wisdom window on the man side represents a great and beautiful chalice as the most beautiful thing a man can make in his wisdom. This is a strikingly rich window showing this chalice studded with jewels and brilliant in purple, blue and gold. But on the God side, the window represents the lily of perfection as the miracle of planting a seed. Something so perfect as a lily growing cannot be imitated and even under a microscope the lily is still perfect.

A cathedral in England has a greater purpose than a church in which only to hold services. The Cathedral will open every day and must speak all the time, even when there is no sermon to be heard or anthem to be listened to. It must speak itself. The object of this cathedral is to turn the visitor who may go into the cathedral alone for a half hour's peace — to turn him from a visitor into a worshipper.

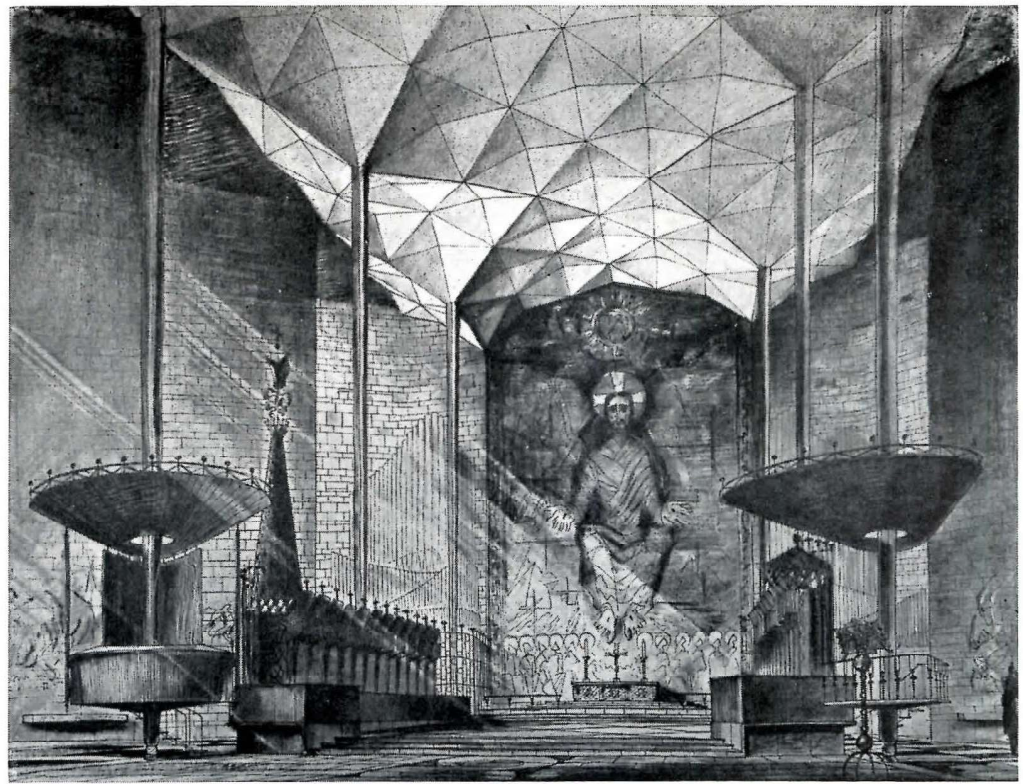
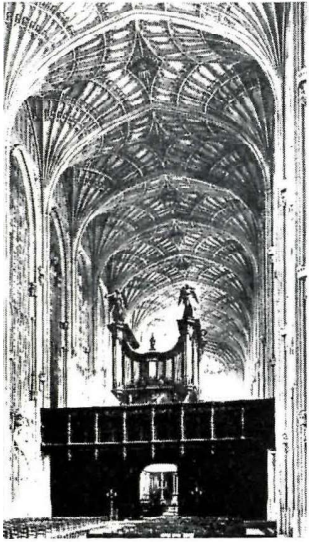


Work has already started. The glass, which is possibly one of the largest single commissions for stained glass ever given, has already started. When these windows are shown to the world, it will be realized that the artists in the Royal College of Art are recreating the spirit that existed when the glass was put into Chartres and in York and Canterbury. These windows are contemporary but they pay great respect to the past, and knowledge from the past is used as an inspiration and a stimulus.

The tapestry designs by Sutherland are well advanced, and this brilliant English artist will produce a tapestry for what must surely be one of the most difficult problems any artist in recent years has had to face — an ecclesiastical subject on the vast scale of 80 feet high and 40 feet across.

Work has started too on the great west screen of engraved glass. The artist, John Hutton, has been designing and experimenting with glass engraving for the last year. This wall of glass is larger than the tapestry.

The organ, which should in itself be a work of art, has been ordered; and it may be worth while noting that the Canadian College of Organists has already donated \$30,000 towards this. And finally, the stone for the Cathedral is being cut now, and we hope to start on excavations and site during April 1954.



The vault will be a free standing structure within the building, of concrete on 14 steel columns or legs resting on crystal balls. The author mentions in his notes the inspirational quality of the vault in King's College Chapel, Cambridge (shown at left)

