

Headington Baptist

New build replaces old Oxfordshire church



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2

Towards the end of the 20th century the members and leadership of Headington Baptist Church took the brave decision to replace the church building that had been their home for over one hundred years, writes *DAVID GRINDLEY*, of *David Grindley Architects*.

The church believed that their mission was to continue to serve the community from their current location. This required an intensive

development of the site to accommodate the brief for a new building to seat 200 for general worship with expansion to a congregation of 250. In addition the church required a range of meeting rooms to accommodate their children's work, the creation of a hall for youth work (located underground) and a lounge with associated kitchen. This lounge located directly off the entrance hall is the hub of the building acting as a cafe area following services and as a key space for outreach events.

The Church is located in the Old Headington Conservation Area, on the eastern edge of Oxford, and forms part of the rich and varied streetscape of the Old High Street. The design seeks to be a sensitive insertion into this generally residential street scene whilst giving sufficient expression to its unique public function as a Baptist Church. This balance has been achieved through both form and material. The stair-tower, double-height entrance canopy and clerestory



3

1> Headington Baptist Church, 1927

2> Headington Baptist Church 2003 before demolition

3> Sanctuary

4> View from The Croft



4

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windows give clues to its status and function whilst the use of ashlar Bath stone walls relate the building to its context, in particular, to the Priory opposite.

The Baptist tradition is not one of overt symbolism and the new building seeks to reflect this heritage in a simple and practical construction. The new church also avoids stylistic references to the existing buildings but relates to the underlying scale and rhythm of the context through the legibility of the architectural form. This clarity of form, honesty of expression and use of natural untreated materials is an integral part of the design philosophy. In contrast to the context the building has some large areas of glazing, particularly to the entrance and lounge, to create an open and inviting building.

The existing street contains a diverse range of predominately two storey buildings from various periods each individually reflecting the language of the period. The new church building maintains the two-storey scale by organising the small scale meeting rooms and crèche along the High Street frontage. The elevation to The Croft, a narrow street to the rear of the site, is single storey responding to the informal nature of the area. Here the design continues the theme of the existing coursed rubble stone boundary wall to define the edge of the site. The roof is stepped to reflect the two functions of sanctuary and lounge with the former articulated from the boundary wall by a range of roof windows.

The aspirations of the church, the response to the constrained site and restrictive planning requirements, influenced the organisation of the building into a main worship space (sanctuary) with crèche, lounge and kitchen filling

Placing church in context



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5



6



7



8

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the available ground floor space. Meeting rooms are located on the first floor overlooking the Old High Street with access from a gallery overlooking the sanctuary. The gallery forms part of an important threshold and is distinguished by a high-level clerestory window supported on birch plywood panels.

To maximise the use of the ground floor space for the principal rooms, a basement level has been introduced to accommodate a hall/meeting room for children's and youth

work, together with the toilets, storage and service areas.

The sanctuary is conceived as a simple white space that is animated by the changing play of natural light. The walls are bathed in light from continuous roof lights that articulate the junction between the roof and walls. A more complex lighting arrangement, combining natural and artificial light, defines the main circulation route and gallery. Here, a series of plywood structural panels act as diffusers to the clerestory windows.

In contrast to the natural light, diffused from above, the artificial light is supplied by uplighters, which are attached to a stainless steel lighting bracket projecting from the gallery structure. At night the large areas of glazing, especially at the entrance and at high level transform the church into a beacon.

The Sanctuary is considered as a flexible space with worship arranged in an east west



9



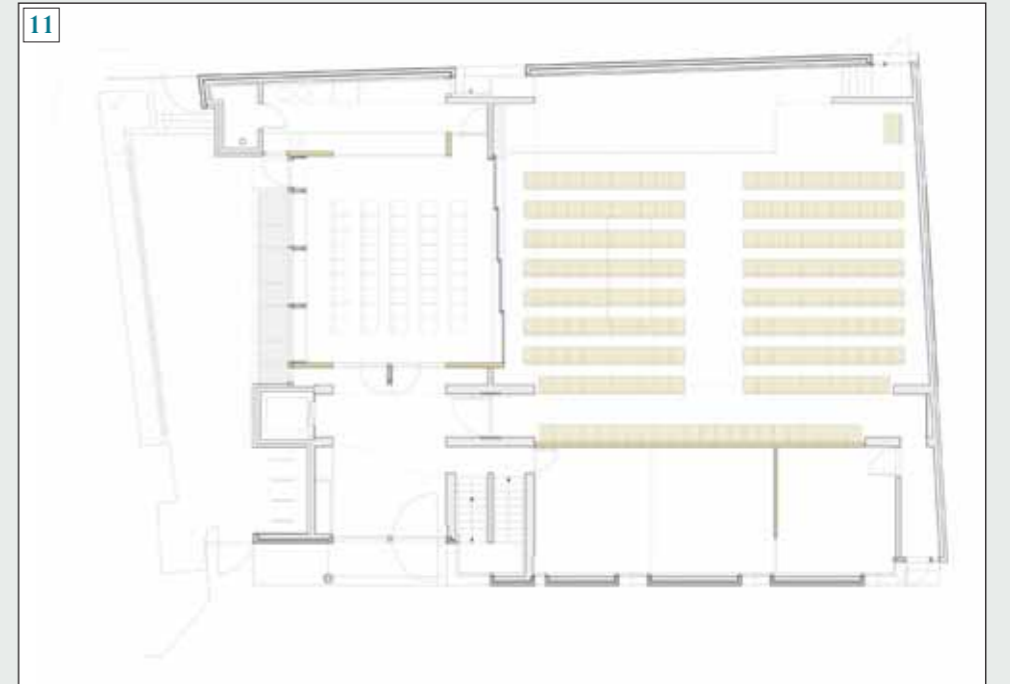
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or north south orientation. The church is currently laid out in the east west orientation with the stage and worship band located under the lower part of the roof. This allows the gallery to be used for additional seating. For special events when the whole building is opened up to include the lounge for additional seating, the chairs will be rotated and the stage placed on the north wall. The Riding Lights Roughshod Company successfully used this arrangement recently for a performance at the church. At other times the sliding screen between the sanctuary and lounge has been opened for community activities including barn dances and Fair Trade coffee mornings.

A palate of simple, natural, through coloured materials have been chosen to

respond to the context. These are used and detailed to express their intrinsic qualities.

The monolithic stonework and oak of the Old High Street elevation gives the building a solidity and a permanent foundation for the ministry of the church. The stone is incised to accommodate movement joints and other constructional features. The incisions to the stair tower can be seen to form a cross, as does the galvanised steel frame supporting the entrance screen. This transparency of the main entrance with views through to the lounge demonstrates the openness and welcome extended to the local community. The materials are chosen to allow the building to mature naturally, with the untreated oak slowly turning grey and the stonework developing a natural patina to mellow into this historic context. ■



11

- 5> Main entrance Old High Street
- 6> Entrance at night
- 7> Sliding doors
- 8> Sliding doors
- 9> South elevation at night
- 10> Lounge
- 11> Ground floor plan