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# Urban churches in an infrasecular landscape: three case studies from the Anglican Diocese of London

Church architecture is an overlooked barometer of urban life. It holds up a unique mirror to economic models, demographics, cultural and ritual practices, and aesthetic movements in late modernity. In turn, the changing complexion of secular society has had a marked influence on the type and style of Christian architecture in the twenty-first century. This article explores the dialectical relationship between church architecture and secular society within recent critical frameworks, examining, in particular, the value of infrasecular geographies as an alternative to the post-secular lens. The infrasecular model is used to frame a reading of three recently completed schemes within the Anglican Diocese of London, which have been selected to offer a snapshot of new church architecture. These comprise a purpose-built church, a refurbished Grade II\* listed church, and a 'church' which operates within a custom-made boat. All three have been promoted by the Diocese of London as successful initiatives within the Church's growth strategy and all three were sufficiently high profile to be covered in the national and architectural press. In reading these churches as markers of wider shifts in the urban landscape, the article agrees with David Goodhew that, 'the many studies of modern London that airbrushed out churches (and often faith in general) present a seriously incomplete picture'.<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In 2017, St Francis at the Engine Room opened its doors as the first purpose-built Anglican Church in London for forty years.<sup>2</sup> While St Francis is a church, it is also *not* a church, as its Priest Missioner Andrew Williams emphasises: 'This is not a church with community facilities attached. This is a community centre first, and one of the things we will do is church. There's a subtle difference'.<sup>3</sup>

Such cognitive dissonance might have been problematic for worshippers at what may have been the last purpose-built church in London: Holy Trinity in Hampstead completed in 1978 by the little-known church architects Biscoe and Stanton (Fig. 1). However, the same worshippers might also find their own church increasingly perplexing. Holy Trinity, a modest red brick church (in the most conventional sense of the word) which now operates under the ambiguous name 'Lighthouse', will soon be replaced by a '500-seat worship and performance space, a large gym, a street café, rehearsal and meeting

Figure 1.  
Holy Trinity, Hampstead, Biscoe  
and Stanton Architects, 1978,  
photographed in 2021, courtesy of  
Sirj Photography



rooms, teaching and study spaces, offices, sheltered accommodation for vulnerable people and staff housing’.<sup>4</sup> Plans for the £11 million ‘Lighthouse’ have been drawn up by the Stirling Prize-winning practice Haworth Tomkins.

Both St Francis and the Lighthouse are multi-layered entities which ask worshippers to understand them on a range of temporal, spatial, and conceptual planes; as such, they are part of an emerging phenomenon in the urban landscape. These ‘churches’ reflect a new religious market place, in which various denominations and faith groups compete for potential worshippers who now actively choose between different spiritual ‘products’ and may move flexibly between them. The Anglican Diocese of London recognises this and has borrowed from consumer capitalist models in reshaping the Church. As a result, it has seen unprecedented growth.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a study such as this would have presented a very different picture of church architecture: the sharp fall in Anglican worship was reflected in the low number of new churches being built across Britain and in limited investment in refurbishments, which focused largely on maintenance. In contrast to congregational decline in the rest of the country, the Diocese of London has grown steadily throughout the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> The growth in the number of worshippers has been matched by an observable investment in church buildings, which appears to be part of a focused strategy by the Church that recognises the power of architecture to both facilitate worship and also operate as a powerful branding tool. Though this is comparable to programmes of radical change in the past — notably in the 1960s and 1970s — the recent shifts reflect a markedly different

approach to worship and community. The word 'church' with a small 'c' is used expansively in this article because the Church (with a large 'C') has employed architecture in creative ways that move far beyond conventional buildings. Indeed, the type of architecture being commissioned by the Church today reflects a new notion of 'church' as a concept as well as a building.

This article presents three case studies from East London (all within the Diocese of London) to make a close reading of new ways in which the Church is using architecture and how these both reflect and impact upon secular society. Though it is possible to apply some of the points extrapolated from these case studies to other British cities, London can be considered singular in a number of ways that undergird this research: in high land and property values, population movement, demographics, and cultural complexity.

Analysis of the case studies is situated within the infrasecular critical framework suggested by the geographer Veronica Della Dora, which reveals ways of understanding contemporary Anglican churches in the urban landscape. In turn, the case studies shed light on the utility of infrasecular geographies as a methodological tool in architectural discourse.

## **New perspectives on faith architecture in late modernity**

### *Post-secular, desecularisation, and infrasecular*

Discourses on contemporary Christian architecture in the West have raised questions about the nature and place of religion in late modernity. Conventional wisdom supposes that religion is in decline in Europe and much of North America, but this has been disputed by scholars who argue that the secularisation theory misses the rise of both fundamentalism and religious pluralism. In her analysis of the rise of 'no religion' responses in surveys, Linda Woodhead warns against conflating 'no religion' with either atheism or agnosticism and suggests that beliefs in a cosmic creator, personal spirituality, and the presence of a soul are widespread in the secular population.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is clear that religion persists in all forms of public and political life in liberal democracies. Jurgen Habermas suggests that in advanced Western societies, 'religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernisation is losing ground'.<sup>7</sup> For Habermas, the failure of post-enlightenment secularism to secure the end of religion, as Max Weber anticipated, implies a 'post-secular' condition.

For some, however, the term 'post-secular' is problematic.<sup>8</sup> In his recent volume on the Anglican Church in London, David Goodhew applies the term 'desecularisation' to contemporary London in place of 'post-secular'. This choice, he explains, was determined by the lack of precision that the generalised term 'post-secular' offers, which fails to capture 'what is happening on the ground to church congregations'.<sup>9</sup> 'Desecularisation', on the other hand, gestures towards an active process that is being stimulated by migrant communities whose culture and heritage are anything but secular and whose burgeoning presence is changing the religious complexion of London.

Another alternative is offered by Della Dora who proposes ‘infrasecular geographies’ as a way of capturing the multi-layered co-existence of religious, secular, and hybrid practices. Della Dora suggests that the term ‘post-secular’ implies a teleology that inadequately capture the intricacies, depth, and simultaneity of the contemporary faith landscape:

The term ‘infrasecular’ might be more effective than ‘postsecular’ in capturing the complexity of a society in which the secular and the religious coexist, overlap and compete. [...] [The prefix] ‘infra-’ indicates something that is posed below or between something else. [...] It can at once designate a substratum and an interstitial space, something that lies underneath and in-between binaries.<sup>10</sup>

For Della Dora, the post-secular lens also misses the nuance of ‘what counts’ as religion and what religious or sacred space constitutes. Of particular significance to this study is Della Dora’s account of hybridity and mixed-use spaces (focusing on British churches):

Converted and ‘multi-function’ churches call for new ways of conceptualising sacred space attuned to a new infrasecular context. In other words, we need new vocabularies to narrate these spaces; we need a lexicon that captures simultaneity and fluidity, while retaining focus on material specificities. Sacred space needs to be approached not as a static thing, nor as a disembodied set of practices and discourses, but as an assemblage, always made and remade.<sup>11</sup>

Della Dora’s infrasecular model has recently been adopted by scholars in both geography and theology. Louise Platt, Rebecca Abushena, and Robert Snape, for example, employ the term as a heuristic for reading the intersections between leisure and religion. The authors conclude that Della Dora’s model offers an effective contextual bed:

Our findings indicate that the adoption of infrasecular as a theoretical lens to leisure may be essential in order to keep pace with the changing social, political and legislative landscape [...].<sup>12</sup>

Though Platt, Abushena, and Snape foreground the term by including it in the title of their article, they use it speculatively by placing the prefix ‘infra’ in parentheses. The term is used without such qualification by John Bryson, Lauren Andres, and Andrew Davis, who directly engage the infrasecular in their research on Covid and virtual church services, suggesting that the term has a particular resonance for online spaces:

Participation in a virtual service from home represents a moment in which the home is given another meaning as it is temporarily transformed into another form of infrasecular place incorporating religious and secular functions; home linked to home as a shared set of linked infrasecular places.<sup>13</sup>

This article recognises the growing significance of the term ‘infrasecular’ to the disciplines of geography, social science, and theology and suggests that it might offer similarly productive contributions to architectural discourses.<sup>14</sup> It is certainly the case that, with regards to attentiveness to the built environment, ‘third’ spaces and lived experience, and analysis of the intersections between sacred and secular, the infrasecular paradigm offers the most useful frame for this research.

### *The religious marketplace and neoliberalism*

The death and life, to borrow from Jane Jacobs, of Anglican churches in London traces the rise of the free-market economy, shaped by consumption and choice, and the transition from an authoritarian to a liberal social structure. This shift is described by Émile Durkheim as the move from 'mechanical solidarity' in which homogenous groups are controlled by repressive sanctions to 'organic solidarity' in which morality and social practices are formed by a liberal consensus.<sup>15</sup> Durkheim later used religion as a litmus test of this shift and identified a trajectory which saw the end of structured, organised religion, and the unfolding of new forms of worship which foregrounded the individual.

While, as Habermas emphasises, organised religion has not disappeared, sociologists of religion in late modern European societies have identified a new 'religious market place' in which individual 'consumers' pick and choose from a range of different faiths and practices, which are as likely to include quasi-religious offerings such as alternative spiritualities and wellbeing therapies as traditional practices. David Harvey and Giselle Vincett propose that:

It is increasingly possible to openly identify as a Christian or Jew or Buddhist and, at the same time, participate in alternative spiritualities events. [...] [C]onsumers (of religion as much as of other 'goods') seem more indicative of the flavour of the contemporary moment than those whose religiosity is constrained within clear normative, dogmatic and institutional boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

The emergence of a Durkheimian form of religiosity can be mapped closely onto both the rise of consumer capitalism and in the primacy of individual agency produced by counter-culturalism, civil rights, and social democracy. As Grace Davie suggests:

Specifically, the many and varied forms of 'spiritual' now present in Britain must be taken into account, as must the increasing tendency towards bricolage — that is the building of individual packages (both religious and spiritual), which reflect the diversity of late-modern lifestyles rather better than historic forms of religiousness. And once started, the logic of choice is relentless. It is almost certain to include a range of secular options which are as diverse as their religious counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars have suggested that some religious communities have synthesised the 'logic of choice' with the logic of the market and self-consciously employed the tools of consumer capitalism in growing their churches. Stephen Lanz and Martin Oosterman, for example, demonstrate the ways in which 'entrepreneurial' religious groups have been adept at building congregations and embedding new sites of worship:

[...] [U]rban religion should be defined less as pockets of resistance and shelter against retreating states under neoliberal restructuring programmes than regarded as a constitutive force of urban modernity and of neoliberal urbanism.<sup>18</sup>

Robbie Goh has also examined the way that churches have forged new relationships with capitalism that extend beyond the theology of the 'prosperity gospel' and towards sophisticated business models:

It might be said that many of the factors that drive global cities — global capital flows, cosmopolitan cultures, people movements, tourism, rapid social change, a

vibrant public sphere including in cyberspace, a sociocultural buzz — are also the factors on which some Christian ministries piggybacked to great growth in terms of financial and congregational numbers [...]<sup>19</sup>

Goh's close reading of the highly successful (in business terms) Hillsong and New Creation Churches sheds some light onto the practices of some branches of the Anglican church, with which they share a conservative theology. Of particular interest to this study is the New Creation Church's investment in prestigious 'life-style' architecture. Goh points to the New Creation Church's plans for a futuristic multi-million pound 'lifestyle hub'.<sup>20</sup>

The future of the Anglican Church (and others) rests on a perception that it needs to compete for worshippers who may not have any tribal loyalties and that it must appeal to a market which now values, as Davie suggests, the experiential over the cerebral.<sup>21</sup> The new worshipper, accustomed to living simultaneously in the virtual and physical world, is able to metabolise space in new ways and expects architecture to deliver multiple uses: buildings that offer cafes, community centres, concert venues, and even yoga studios have wider appeal than those which simply provide liturgical space. To employ Davie's oft-cited phrase, this shift in worship is characterised as a move from 'obligation to consumption'.

### *Aesthetics and style*

While the current trends in church architecture reflect observable shifts in worship, radical reinterpretations of space and aesthetics are not a new phenomenon in the Church of England. In 1957, the clergyman Peter Hammond formed the New Churches Research Group (NCRG) with the intention of exploring the relationship between modern architecture and ministry.<sup>22</sup> The group's objectives resembled those of the Cambridge Camden Society, established in 1839 to explore the theological significance of the Gothic style and to promote its use.<sup>23</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, the modernising directives of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that followed the NCRG had a transformative influence not only on Roman Catholic architecture but also on churches of all denominations, accelerating the implementation of many of the NCRG's ideas. These included a move towards more flexible spaces, a greater integration of community facilities, democratic liturgical ordering and the use of modern styles.<sup>24</sup>

In the later twentieth century, style began to lose its significance — indeed, by the turn of the twentieth-first century, the title of Peter Anson's *Fashions in Church Furnishings* published in 1960 appeared eccentric — few words seemed less compatible than 'church' and 'fashion'.<sup>25</sup> The rise of award-winning religious architecture in recent years, however, invites us to revisit the notion of 'fashion' in relation to places of worship, and to consider what it articulates about the social, theological, and cultural role of the Church. Despite the fact the field is growing and that there is a substantial body of scholarship on the meaning of nineteenth and twentieth-century Christian art, serious critical attention has yet to be paid to emerging trends in Christian architecture in the UK. This may be because little has been made within the





Figure 2.  
Interior of St Augustine's Catholic  
Church, Hammersmith, renovation  
by Roz Barr Architects, 2019,  
photographed during renovation in  
2018, courtesy of Sirj Photography

Church to theorise new architectural approaches (as Hammond and his predecessors had done), thus readings of new styles must be speculative.<sup>26</sup> One significant observation, however, is that 'white and light' in the design of contemporary churches is now considered. Almost universally, appropriate. Detailed examination of this fascinating question is beyond the scope of the article, but a glance at the ascendancy of 'white and light' is necessary in understanding the case studies.<sup>27</sup>

Over the last five years, an increasing number of churches are being built or refurbished (as opposed to restored) in London. The large majority of those already completed have employed design schemes that emphasised the introduction of light. Most often these involved enlarging and opening up space to maximise natural light, stripping away as much religious 'clutter' as possible and painting the interior white (Fig. 2).<sup>28</sup>

While it now seems axiomatic to many architects that a 'spiritual' space should be light, there is no theological basis or historical tradition of this in Christian architecture. Indeed, the opposite is generally true of Victorian gothic churches where, for example, the lighting of votive candles works precisely *because* the space is dark. Evidence for the undigested view that Christian space is empirically aligned with 'light' is suggested only as recent as 2018 in an edited collection of architects' own responses to the sacred, which proposes that, 'light symbolizes divinity and God himself [and] therefore became a focus not just of architects but also of their historians'.<sup>29</sup>

Such publications reflect the growing interest of the architectural press in religious architecture.<sup>30</sup> The magazine, *Dezeen*, for example, published a 'Top Eight Churches of 2020' feature, which show-cased a range of minimalist white spaces from across the world, including the Diocese of London's floating church, 'Genesis'.<sup>31</sup> Also influential are the public relations machines of



architects such as Peter Zumthor and John Pawson, who have both designed internationally acclaimed Christian architecture. Pawson, in particular, has been a key influence in the construction of a contemporary style in faith buildings, not least because the rather nebulous adjective 'spiritual' is often used to describe secular minimalist architecture. The recent volume *Built up towards the light: John Pawson's Redesign of the Moritzkirche in Augsburg* (co-written by Pawson) details his austere refurbishment of St Moritz Church and is significant in embedding this aesthetic and establishing Pawson as its high priest.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps even more striking is the diminishing presence of Christian iconography in new churches. In some contemporary schemes, this has been written into the brief, while in others, crucifixes and statues have been quietly relegated or replaced by commissioned pieces of contemporary art.<sup>33</sup> The architectural historian Andrew Crompton's work on multi-faith spaces offers useful ways of reading this shift away from conspicuous iconography. Because the rooms that Crompton discusses serve a range of faiths, walls are, necessarily, required to be blank.<sup>34</sup> The emerging 'fashion' for empty white spaces in church architecture offers a similar blank canvas, upon which worshippers from diverse backgrounds can project their own religious and spiritual tastes. In this way, church architecture might be responding, purposely or not, to the new religious marketplace by creating spaces which allow each individual and personal interpretation of spirituality to be as valid as the next — in precisely the way Durkheim anticipated, and Davie and others have described.

The use of 'style' as a critical lens is hampered by its proximity to the architectural canon, but it offers, nevertheless, a valuable tool for understanding churches. The rapid shift from the historicism and pastiche that characterised new church architecture of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s to a culturally ambiguous modernism reveals a great deal about levels of confidence and the transition from a backward-looking to future-oriented Church.

### **'The Mission-Shaped Church': Anglicanism in transition**

Much has been made, as mentioned in the introduction, of the impressive rise of the Anglican Church in London. The success of the Church has been driven by a number of strategies that were developed in the early 2000s and laid out in the *Mission-Shaped Church Report*, published in 2004. By the time the London Church Census was published in 2012, the number of worshippers had risen by 16% and the number of churches by 17%.<sup>35</sup> As Davie notes, written into the strategies laid out in the 2004 report was the significance of choice. In a sub-heading of the report entitled 'Consumer Culture', the Church recognises the potential pitfalls of the consumer society but also, importantly, its value to the missionary movement:

A network and consumer society presents a particular challenge to Christian mission in general, and to questions of the missionary shape of the Church in particular. A network society can both connect and fragment. It can include and exclude at local, national and global levels. Mobility can provide freedom and

opportunity, but it is also a force that destabilises society by undermining long-term commitments.<sup>36</sup>

### *Church plants and growth*

Central to the development of growth initiatives is Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) which is, in physical form, a Victorian parish church in Kensington, West London, and, in conceptual form, a network of churches across the country. HTB, which is closely related to the popular Alpha Course, is a growing faction within the Anglican Church and part of the charismatic evangelical tradition, comparable with Hillsong Church described by Goh. The HTB network churches (of which there are at least thirty in London, including the Lighthouse) and the form of energetic worship delivered by its clergy are popular with under 30s and have a successful track record of conversions. Though the demographic of worshippers is often ethnically mixed, the HTB hierarchy and founding congregation are largely white, professional, and affluent. This has been a factor in HTB's ability to network, develop business models, and finance creative initiatives through generous donations.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most successful enterprises that HTB has promoted is the practice of 'church planting'. This involves moving a core group of dedicated worshippers from a thriving parish to 'plant' a new congregation in a church with declining numbers. The new group establishes a dynamic presence in the community that either converts or brings in people from the area who are attracted to the style of worship. Church plants have been key to the success of the Diocese and are now a cornerstone of growth strategies. HTB is also keenly attuned to the cultural value of churches and is actively involved in the restoration and refurbishment of landmark churches through their 'Church Revitalisation Trust'.

Church planting and related initiatives such as 'Fresh Expressions' (an umbrella term for any innovative or creative idea of 'church' that might be delivered within a diocese or parish) acknowledge the challenge of transient and atomised populations; it is clear that legal parish boundaries no longer reflect that way that Londoners inhabit the city and can restrict expansion. Though traditional communities are still vibrant in many areas, the Church recognises that fewer people now set down permanent roots in one area. This is particularly true of young people who are vital to the growth of the Church, and new church plants are often located near universities or in places with a high concentration of young people. Though the intention with church plants is to establish a local worshipping community, the Church acknowledges the value of high profile or prestige churches (informally known as 'honeypot' churches) that draw worshippers from all parts of London and beyond. These churches are typically successful at attracting and raising funds. As Davie points out, charismatic evangelicalism as a tradition is more closely tied to notions of active choice and consumerism.<sup>38</sup> It is also important to note that this wing has the fastest growing number of worshippers in the Anglican Church.<sup>39</sup>

Though the expansion of church plants and fresh expressions has contributed to the rising number of worshippers, it has also drawn criticism from some quarters of the Church who see this as a threat to existing churches. The Rev Dr Alison Millbank of the 'Save The Parish' campaign suggests that the new 'mixed ecology' of worship represents a capitulation by the Church to 'market values and managerialism'.<sup>40</sup>

### *New business models*

The rising number of new churches and high-specification refurbishments in the Diocese of London raise questions about funding and budgets. Although donations and congregational tithes have risen in recent years, these have not delivered sufficient funds to pay for ambitious projects, even where church grants and Heritage Lottery Grants are used to augment funds.<sup>41</sup> Churches have had to explore new business models and individual clergy has been encouraged to apply entrepreneurial skills to the challenge of raising money. Many churches have been able to capitalise on their existing buildings by such initiatives as hiring or renting out rooms, or doubling up as concert venues. However, one valuable source of revenue that churches in some parts of London have been able to unlock is land. Church law currently allows parishes to sell land for maximum value, which has enabled some churches to strike deals with developers to build residential units. In some cases, developers have negotiated a low quota of affordable housing in order to generate large profits, which in turn contribute to church building schemes. Though there are historical precedents for the sale of church land for private housing, the development of specific models which release money via expensive residential developments is a recent phenomenon. Such practices are not unique to London; the new business models dovetail with those identified by Lanz and Oosterbaan in other global cities which have built churches through: the development of new speculative housing markets, the privatisation of public services, the creation and private regulation of urban spaces for the purpose of capital accumulation, and the strategy of 'capitalising on social capital'.<sup>42</sup>

### **Three churches in the Diocese of London**

The case studies that follow are all located in areas of East London that have recently been intensively 'regenerated'. All are set within new private housing developments and are in socially, ethnically, and economically mixed areas with transient populations and high numbers of young people. Importantly, all of the areas are, arguably, undergoing some level of gentrification. It should be noted that extensive refurbishments and reordering of Anglican churches are not restricted to London nor is the expansion of fresh expressions and church plants. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the rise of Anglicanism in London is a singular phenomenon which, in order to be fully appreciated, needs to be situated in the particular economic, social, and cultural landscape of the capital.

### *St Francis at the Engine room*

In 2017, St Francis at the Engine Room, the first of an initiative to found one hundred new worshipping spaces in the Diocese and the first purpose-built church in London for forty years, was officially opened by the Bishop of Edmon-ton.<sup>43</sup> St Francis is located in the recently completed Hale Village housing development in Tottenham. The foundation of the new church was designed to establish a parish in an increasingly densely populated area and also to create unity within the wider community. This was motivated, in part, by the police shooting of Mark Duggan in 2011 and the ensuing riots.

To enable the building of the church, the Diocese of London persuaded the developer of Hale Village, Lee Valley Estates, that a community church could be provided as the statutory element of community benefit in the development, rather than the secular community centre which had been planned. Funding for the £3 million initiative, developed in association with Newlon Housing Trust, London City Mission, and the London Borough of Haringey, was provided in combination by the developer, donations and a grant from the All-churches Trust.<sup>44</sup> Despite being called a 'church', St Francis is simultaneously a community centre, nursery, workshop space, and café; it also offers a weekly programme of 'regular community activities' that includes yoga and 'zen mindfulness'. Indeed, being a place of worship is not considered by the Priest Missioner Andrew Williams as its primary function.

This is technically a Diocesan 'church plant' (rather than a plant from another church) but might be better considered as a 'fresh expression', which was initiated with the intention of becoming a formal parish church, which it achieved 2020. In its early incarnation as a 'fresh expression', the church operated from a temporary building while the missionary team built connections with the community and grew the congregation through initiatives such as a pop-up café and activities such as football, art workshops, and trips to the beach. As a result, the church has been successful at bringing together diverse groups and securing an inclusive worshipping congregation which includes Baptists, Anglicans, and Ethiopian Orthodox.<sup>45</sup> The current congregation is drawn, almost entirely, from the local community (95% walk to the church) and is demographically mixed, including black African heritage, Caribbean, Eastern European, and Asian worshippers, as well as two white worshippers who have lived in Tottenham throughout their lives.<sup>46</sup>

There is little in the architecture, either internally or externally, to indicate that this is a church (Fig. 3). It occupies the ground floor of a block of flats and comprises a series of rooms, some of which are permanently let (the nursery) or operate as a franchise (the café); it is therefore hard to tell where the physical 'church' begins and ends. As such, it is less a visible presence in the landscape and more an integrated element, both literally and symbolically embedded within the community (Fig. 3).

Internally, the white walls of the room within which worship takes place are adorned only by a specially commissioned reredos entitled 'The Eternal Engine' which was created by the artist Graeme Mortimer Evelyn (Fig. 5). Evelyn, a practising Buddhist, spent nine months living in Hale Village in order to hand carve

Figure 3.  
External view of St Francis at the  
Engine Room, 2017, photographed  
in 2021, courtesy of Sirj  
Photography



Figure 4.  
Café in St Francis at the Engine  
Room, photographed in 2021,  
courtesy of Sirj Photography



the MDF panels of the reredos and draw inspiration from the local community, history, and environment. For instance, the palette of the artwork is drawn from the external colour scheme of Hale Village. This is currently accompanied by an artwork produced by Evelyn, which is on loan from Gloucester Cathedral. The artwork is a contemporary depiction of the Stations of the Cross but, to avoid a sense of the traditional, the separate panels have been arranged in a rectangle rather than around the room; Williams is keen to avoid any explicitly Christian visual references.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 5.  
St Francis at the Engine Room  
illustrating liturgical configuration  
of space, photographed in 2021,  
courtesy of Sirj Photography

Early plans for the interior of the church had been for a more formal and identifiably liturgical space with a permanent altar and thrones, reflecting the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the parish. After his arrival, Williams chose a different path. The custom-made altar that he commissioned, which can be reassembled to create a larger square altar, is kept in a small space behind the main room (which functions as a sacristy and a chapel) and is brought out for services only. Though the room is flexible enough to allow for any configuration, Williams prefers to position the altar against a side wall, rather than in front of the reredos, and arranges the chairs in horseshoe fashion around it. The space contains all elements necessary for formal worship but these are largely hidden: the baptismal pool to the right of the entrance, for example, is concealed under the floor. Only a simple halo-like light above it gestures to its presence.

The opening of the new church by the MP David Lammy was covered in the national press because of its mission to bring together the community, the connections to the Tottenham riots, and the fact that it was the first new Anglican church in London for almost half a century.<sup>48</sup> The somewhat unassuming building did not attract the attention of the architectural press, however.

### *Genesis*

In 2020, the Diocese of London unveiled 'Genesis', a boat moored on the Lee Navigation in Stratford, which serves the existing East London parishes of St Mary of Eton and St Paul Old Ford as a 'floating church' (Fig. 6). Though Genesis was pitched as something of a novelty, it was not, in fact, the first (or only) floating church in the Diocese of London; St Peter's Barge in Canary Wharf has been serving City workers since 2004. The Church commissioned the architectural practice Denizen Works to design the boat, with the



Figure 6.  
External view of Genesis, Denizen  
Works, 2020, photographed in  
2020, courtesy of Sirj Photography



Figure 7.  
Interior of Genesis, Denizen Works,  
2020, photographed in 2020,  
courtesy of Sirj Photography



requirement that, in contrast to St Francis, it be a 'conspicuous presence' in the landscape. The budget for the boat was £650,000 and most came through Diocesan funds with a grant of £10,000 from the Allchurches Trust. Denizen Works' response to the brief was to design a modest-sized canal boat which featured a distinctive kinetic roof which is intentionally reminiscent of organ bellows and glows like a lantern when internally lit. The interior comprises a kitchen and an assembly room with separated window seats that give a sense of aisles and bays (Fig. 7). The ply seating can be arranged in a 'pew-like' configuration or informally. Visually, the space is austere — the walls



are clad in a pale timber and the only decoration is a v-shaped wave-like motif that appears sparingly throughout the interior and exterior. A halo-like oculus casts light over the flat-pack custom-made altar, which is stowed away when the assembly room is in secular and community use.<sup>49</sup>

Like St Francis at the Engine Room, Genesis occupies an ambiguous physical and conceptual space somewhere between a church, a community centre, and an events venue. Though it will be moored at the Olympic Park for the next five years, the long-term plan is for it to sail up and down the Lee Navigation. In terms of its parochial status, it might be considered either a church plant or a fresh expression of St Mary of Eton and St Paul Old Ford. Some elements of Genesis' ministry are explicit; however, this is a space for people of all faiths and none to join conversation and share food. It has a broad Christian ethos and offers Anglican services for a limited number of worshippers at a time, but its main provision is flexible community use. At the request of the Diocese, there is no Christian iconography anywhere on the boat and, when the flatpack altar is dismantled, there is nothing to say that it has a liturgical function. Part of this design specification is expedient — the London Legacy Development Corporation does not allow any single faith buildings within its boundaries — but part of it probably understands that religious ambiguity is more attractive to the hybrid consumer than certainty.

Designs for the church were released to the press a year before the anticipated completion, gathering much attention. By the time the church opened (delayed considerably by the pandemic), it had garnered enough interest to ensure that it was widely covered in both the architectural and national press, with the broad consensus being that the inventive and visually arresting 'lantern' roof was highly successful in delivering the 'conspicuous presence' that the client requested.

To employ an appropriate metaphor, the aim of Genesis as an enterprise is to dip a toe in the water and test the level of interest from the local community who are freely invited to come in and look around. Though Rev'd Dave Pilkington is clear that this is not technically a Christian space, in reality it has a missionary objective: this is an increasingly densely populated area without a permanent church. What is clear is that the eye-catching, contemporary design has been used to attract 'unchurched' people who may be put off by something ecclesial in appearance.

### *St John at Hackney*

It is appropriate to the themes of the article to open this case study with the caveat that the Church of St John-at-Hackney was renamed 'SAINT' in 2021, a few months after it reopened in 2020 following a major refurbishment. The new name, however, does not simply refer to this church but to four other East London churches, which fall under its auspices. For the sake of clarity, this article will revert to the original name and refer to the individual church using the shorthand 'St John's'.

The church, designed originally by James Spiller in 1792, serves a socially and economically mixed parish in the London borough of Hackney (Fig. 8). In

Figure 8.  
St John-at-Hackney, designed by  
James Spiller, 1792, restored by  
Thomas Ford & Partners and John  
Pawson, 2020, photographed in  
2020, courtesy of Sirj Photography



addition to being a parish church, St John's has also been a noted concert venue for some years attracting high-profile acts. Though this provided a steady income, the building required significant repairs which were beyond the means of the collection plate. In 2015, then Rector Rev'd Robert Wickham, secured a National Lottery Heritage Grant and engaged the practice Thomas Ford and Partners (TFP) to undertake a relatively modest restoration and refurbishment. Following his departure in 2017, the parish invited Rev'd Al Gordon to found a HTB church plant, which would largely deliver charismatic evangelical services. Gordon had a more ambitious vision for St John's and approached first David Adjaye, then John Pawson, to collaborate with TFP on the refurbishment. Costs for the new designs, which required the community spaces within the church to be relocated, rose far beyond the grant. A private developer Thornsett was engaged to help generate money through the building of high-specification residential units on neighbouring church land. Thornsett had already completed a number of mixed residential and church schemes, including an award-winning renovation of St Mary of Eton,



which allowed churches to invest significant sums of money into either new buildings or refurbishments. The community spaces that had formerly been housed in the church were now part of the residential scheme named Hackney Gardens (Fig. 9). The completed refurbishment of St John's cost somewhere in the region of £6 million, largely financed by the sale of land.

Though large sums were spent on repairing and restoring the building, a great deal was also spent on the interior refurbishment, which was led by John Pawson who developed the 'design concept' (Fig. 10). In the early 1950s, the interior had been renovated by the noted Anglican architect N.F. Cachemaille Day with a section of the church underneath the gallery screened off to conceal the community space. The new refurbishment reinstated the original Greek Cross plan by removing the screens. Under the galleries, the walls are panelled in dark oak and the original reredos and surrounding text — the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Commandments — have been re-gilded and lit so that they glow. The altar sits on a large stage which doubles up as a chance for formal worship. At the front, the steps are designed to pivot and tuck under the stage during performances. Suspended above the

Figure 9.  
Hackney Gardens, DLA Design  
Group, 2020, photographed in  
2020, courtesy of Sirj Photography





Figure 10.  
Interior of St John-at-Hackney,  
restored Thomas Ford & Partners  
and John Pawson, 2020,  
photographed in 2021, courtesy of  
Sirj Photography



Figure 11.  
Video installation at St John at  
Hackney by Es Devlin, 2021,  
courtesy of Sirj Photography

stage are two immense speakers which serve not just concerts but also the dynamic services that HTB offers.

The church now has two fonts. The original has been moved into a chapel which houses a video installation depicting skylscapes from across the world by the celebrated set designer Es Devlin, and also some medieval and Tudor memorials removed for safe-keeping from the neighbouring St Augustine's Tower (Fig. 11). A new, simple font, designed by Pawson, is set in front of a vertical slice of light in the panelling (Fig. 12). Pawson also designed a new altar, lectern, and processional cross, as well as the bar at the rear of the church which will serve concert-goers. The walls and vast expanse of 1950s vaulted ceiling are painted white.

In addition to the major facelift, St John's has also undergone a social and cultural transformation. The church employed the design agency OMSE to produce the branding, merchandise, and website (for which OMSE won a *Creative Review* award). A neighbouring microbrewery is now part of the church 'family' and provides drinks for concerts in 'SAINT' branded cans. Plans are in place to open a café and to produce and sell honey from the apiary in the church garden. The press release for St John-at-Hackney emphasises that this is a 'cathedral of creativity' which, in the words of Gordon, will be 'playing its part in a spiritual, social and cultural renaissance in East London and beyond'.<sup>50</sup>

An indication of the type of worshippers who attend St John's now is offered by the two screens either side of the entrance, bearing the OMSE-designed logo and showing a selection of video stings, featuring the largely young faces of the congregation. The fact that many worshippers appear to arrive from beyond East London suggests that St John's might have been conceived as a 'honeypot' church although it appears to have retained many of its original

parishioners and has a high proportion of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic worshippers.

Being the first church scheme completed in the UK by John Pawson and housing the first permanent artwork by Es Devlin, the scheme attracted a great deal of publicity and, as an exercise in public relations, this project has been an immense success. It is clear that Gordon has employed many of the entrepreneurial and networking skills that are characteristic of HTB clergy.

### Churches in an infrasecular landscape

If the aim of this study was to suggest an emerging renaissance in church architecture in London, there would be evidence to support this. Each year has seen more architectural awards for new church schemes, more money invested in high-specification refurbishments, and more celebrated architects and artists being commissioned to work on these. There can be little doubt that architectural practices are increasingly interested in the growing field of faith architecture (illustrated by the shortlisting of Cambridge Mosque for the 2021 Stirling Prize) and more religious communities are seeing the benefits of investing in headline-grabbing designs; the prizes and publicity are undoubtedly a useful part of the evangelising toolkit. The purpose of this research, however, is to examine how the contemporary Church responds to current social conditions and how a reading of this might support Della Dora's infrasecular model.

The complex relationship between contemporary churches and the secular is expressed in their embeddedness in the market economy. Criticism of Anglican business models from outside the institution demonstrate the extent to which they conform to Lanz, Oosterbaan, and Goh's picture of Christianity in the neo-liberal landscape. At St John-at-Hackney, for example, the Hackney Gardens development was lucrative but also generated controversy over the way that church land had been used to finance the project. Oliver Wainwright noted that only eight out of the fifty-seven units at Hackney Gardens are affordable, which is well below the minimum required by Hackney Council. In defence, Thornsett's Director Bernadette Cunningham has argued that affordable housing should not be the sole consideration and that the development delivered community facilities as well as the church refurbishment, as these were used to offset affordable housing.<sup>51</sup> Such dialogue, generated by the creation and use of sacred space between clergy, developers, and secular commentators, supports Della Dora's suggestion that: 'Infrasecular sites of worship are better contextualised not as territorially fixed entities defined against secular space, nor as empty vessels filled with meaning, but as third spaces [...] [and] points of convergence of different objects, people, stories and memories'.<sup>52</sup>

The nebulous boundaries between the sacred and the secular are expressed not just conceptually but also materially at St Francis, which as part of a larger secular building cannot be physically disentangled from its setting. An intentional ambiguity around purpose and function is also captured by the floating church Genesis which is neither a conventional building nor occupies a phys-



Figure 12.  
New font by John Pawson, 2020,  
photographed in 2021, courtesy of  
Sirj Photography

ically bound space. While St John-at-Hackney is visually identifiable as a church, the renaming to 'SAINT' and extension of the 'brand' across five parishes deliberately blur its curtilage. Moreover, the fact that the interior was *specifically* redesigned as a space which is simultaneously a secular concert venue and a worship space is suggestive of the ambiguous 'trojan building' described by Goh — one which inserts its functions or objectives by stealth.<sup>53</sup> All three are purposeful exercises in liminality, designed to some extent to entice by confounding expectation. This article argues that such sites are best understood through a 'paradigm able to bring to light the "stuff in between"', rather than models which view the sacred and secular as discrete categories that occasionally converge.<sup>54</sup>

Creating attractive Christian architecture that is explicitly designed to appeal to religious and secular alike, merging the distinctions between the two, is consistent with the objectives that Davie has identified. For example, the removal of community spaces from St John-at-Hackney was effective in allowing the nave to accommodate more worshippers and paying concert-goers. It has also significantly improved the aesthetic quality of the interior. The visually enhanced space, combined with the new art installation, has been designed and promoted to attract a range of visitors beyond the worshipping congregation. Here, the blank walls invite individuals to project their own versions of spirituality, or not, onto the space, rather than allowing the architecture to dictate how it should be read. The minimal Christian iconography in all of the case studies also highlights changing attitudes towards identity, history, and tradition. In St John-at-Hackney only the reredos and stained-glass window remain in the main body of the church, and the relegation of the original font speaks audibly to those people who would like the space to look like a concert venue but perhaps less to those people who want to, or indeed used to, worship in a place that feels like a church.

This was not the express intention of the architects. According to Stefan Dold, project architect at John Pawson, the aim was not to roll out Pawson-brand minimalism such as that at St Moritz but to return the space as closely as possible to its original Georgian design and low-church spirit.<sup>55</sup> But in doing so, the scheme washed away centuries of accretion which capture the dynamic traditions of the church and its human history; as such, the design conceptually resets the church's calendar to year zero, which is a move that perhaps allows contemporary visitors, particularly younger ones, to understand it better. Two schemes that are currently under consideration will see similar refurbishments of listed London churches by award-winning practices: a proposal for St John's, Waterloo by Eric Parry (Fig. 13) and another for St Anselm, Kennington by Dow Jones Architects. In both cases, criticisms might be mounted that the whitewashed, decluttered spaces will erase important elements of the church's history.<sup>56</sup> Such aesthetic shifts support the readings made by Davie, Woodhead, and others of individual spiritualities determined by the 'logic of choice' which explicitly reject dogma and tradition.

Though a similar appeal to cultural and historical anonymity can be read in the white walls at St Francis at the Engine Room, these might be parsed



differently. Here the intention seems less to produce an architecture that impresses and more to create a space of inclusion. The blank walls help to generate a welcoming space for the diverse worshipping community at St Francis, which is an approach less interested in allowing individuals to project their identities and more concerned with including alternative traditions and communities. Such an approach might be compared with the multi-faith spaces in shopping malls and airports described by Crompton. It is noteworthy that the only permanent artwork that has been installed at St Francis was created by an openly practicing Buddhist artist — a commission that sends a clear signal that the church embraces some measure of the inter-faith hybridity described by Vincett and Harvey. Beyond being an altarpiece, 'The Eternal Engine' does not convey any legible Christian iconography — indeed, despite the artist having drawn influence from the Holy Trinity, the design also resembles a series of mandala, as shown in [Fig. 5](#). Whether the lack of obvious Christian imagery matters or is even noticed by the new worshipping community has not been tested in this research so remains an open question.

The floating church Genesis sits somewhere between St Francis and St John's in its appeal to both secular visitors and Anglican worshippers. The explicit aim

Figure 13.  
'Festival of Britain' interior at St John's, Waterloo by Thomas Ford & Partners, 1951, where plans by Eric Parry will see the original colour scheme painted white and the murals to either of the central Hans Feibusch painting removed, photographed in 2013, courtesy of Sirj Photography



of the floating church is to serve a range of religious and secular functions within one space, and the decorative scheme attempts to conceptually straddle these different objectives. The deliberate lack of Christian iconography, the blank walls, and flat-pack altar reflect its temporary mooring to a physical site and express the same resistance to tradition, as St Francis and St John's. All three capture something of the ambivalence that the Church feels towards its historical identity. Though perhaps employed for different reasons, the design schemes chosen by the three case studies might be said to highlight 'the contemporaneous co-habitations, clashes, and intersections between different forms of belief and non-belief which we see and experience on a daily basis'.<sup>57</sup> Such sites require readings that acknowledge and understand these 'co-habitations, clashes and intersections' as well as an appreciation of the specific forces that continue to drive change in the Church of England.

There is much to say about the impact of the Covid pandemic on churches and the phenomenon of online worship that has followed in its wake, but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this in detail.<sup>58</sup> It is clear that shifts to virtual spaces have had an impact on the 'architecture' and design of some websites in order to make these in some way commensurate with physical spaces. This has been achieved effectively at St John-at-Hackney where the strong corporate identity allows the visual brand to be woven through both the building and website — indeed, the church's logo depicts the chapel door (such is the unity of brand and space, it is hard to tell which came first, as shown in Fig. 11). Of significance to this study is the extent to which a complex relationship between the physical and imaginary church pre-existed online worship. In this matter, it is significant that, in his description of the newly opened St Francis at the Engine Room quoted at the beginning of this article, Williams uses the word 'church' as both a noun and a verb. As this article aims to illustrate, 'church' might simultaneously contain any number of meanings — spatial, virtual, material, and imaginary — and thus supports Della Dora's conceptualisation of infrasecular geographies.

## Conclusion

Each of the case studies above casts light on the dialectical relationship between church buildings and secular society and, in so doing, reinforces the need for new critical frameworks. This article suggests that the infrasecular lens offers valuable ways of evaluating the dynamic late-modern landscape, which can account for the co-existence of sacred and secular, religious hybridity, and emerging forms of cultural and financial transaction. All the case studies above can be convincingly framed by Della Dora's conceptualisation of the infrasecular, which 'shifts attention from time to space; from progression and consecutiveness to simultaneity and coexistence'.<sup>59</sup>

Of particular significance to this study is Della Dora's description of English churches that simultaneously fulfil a range of religious and secular purposes as 'fluid infrasecular spaces' or 'third spaces' which are 'constantly open to

processes of hybridisation, to the re-negotiation of boundaries and of cultural (and religious) identity'.<sup>60</sup> As this article has demonstrated, all of the three case studies are exemplars of this model of 'third space'. Each understand their role as both a building and a concept. In each, the secular and community functions are at least, and in some cases more, important than the liturgy, thus confounding expectations of what a 'church' is. Each understands itself both imaginatively and materially as an extension of secular society. Each, whether explicit or not, is woven into the consumer economy. Finally, each may be read as both an interstitial space and a site of cognitive dissonance.

Architectural discourse is often constrained by its own disciplinary methods, or by an anxiety to *avoid* methods that, depending on political leanings, might invoke the canon at one end of the spectrum, or poststructuralism at the other. This article has shown that cognate disciplines offer productive ways of gathering together an assortment of methods under a new rubric. Here, for example, the framework offered by infrasecular geography allows a space for discussing 'style' as a social and theological category, rather than one that is principally bound to the canon. Similarly, neoliberalism becomes one vital strand in a complex but disciplined reading, rather than a lens in itself. At a more local level, the article reminds us that architecture is often deceptive: while Anglican churches appear to provide an immutable bond with the past, many are in quiet but transformative dialogue with the present.

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