From Mission Hall to Church: Theology, Culture and Architecture on a South London Estate

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ABSTRACT In the UK, small faith buildings of “ordinary” appearance, occupied by Christian congregations who reject ideas of sacred space, have tended to be passed over by the historical record and continue to be overlooked by some heritage professionals. The primary significance of these humble buildings is not located in the acquisition and possession of symbolic artefacts and adornments, nor in architectural gestures designed to indicate the holiness of a space, but rather in the lack of such things, and in the deliberate maintenance of the ordinary and the functional. This article takes as its case study a former mission hall situated on a South London Estate, occupied by a church called The Bridge from 2010 to 2022. Considering the building in the wider social and historical context of urban mission halls, the article explores how The Bridge Church embodied Reformed Protestant theological beliefs about spaces of worship to suit the setting of a London estate in the twenty-first century, with modesty and utility demonstrated in their building inside and out.
designed. Taking architectural merit as a key indicator of value, it is sometimes assumed that spiritual meaning is only invested in such sites by users who take either a substantive view (the belief that there is necessarily an indwelling presence of God in the building) or a situational view (the belief that the building becomes sacred over time through human production). More everyday spaces inherited, occupied and maintained by faith communities who reject the idea of sacred space as only substantive and situational, tend to be overlooked on the premise that there is little intentionality or theology on display in their form and appearance. Interpretations that prioritize the grand and the sacred risk excluding the stories and perspectives of a myriad of communities that occupy more ordinary places of worship in the present day.

If symbolic architectural gestures and a congregational belief in sacred space are the criteria for interest, a modest church building on Battersea Bridge Road in South-West London appears unworthy of attention (Figure 1). Constructed for London City Mission (LCM) as a
non-denominational “Christian center” in 1972–3, the building has been in use by The Bridge, a local community church, for the last ten years until it was demolished in November 2022.

Inwardly and outwardly, the building was unadorned and functional. Brick-built and comprising a double-height hall, a meeting room, a kitchen and offices, its long elevation fronted onto a busy A-road. Yet, with no distinguishing features or iconography to indicate that it was a church, most passersby and many locals alike failed to notice the building, let alone identify its function. While outsiders passed over this non-descript hall, for those who have been actively involved in the life of the church, this building holds an emotional significance linked to a recognition of the contribution it has made to the making of the church community and the fostering of relationships in which the sacred is located. In this way, the building's everyday appearance was consistent with a deep biblical theology that might otherwise be missed if congregants and church leaders were not able to speak for themselves on record. This article explores the culture and theology that has produced such a lack of iconography, of grand architectural gestures, and of conventionally understood esthetic beauty in The Bridge Church's Battersea building.

Though relatively ubiquitous, low-key Christian buildings constructed in the twentieth century have only been cursorily attended to by the historical record, and their high rates of demolition in cities have compounded the problem—thus, testimonies of their urban congregations are lost with them. But to reflect the reality of UK church experience in the present day, some account must be made for the swathe of “unexceptional” halls that are still occupied by small groups of worshipers who do not view the spaces they occupy as sacred. Such a utilitarian understanding of spaces of worship has most frequently been associated with nonconformist Protestantism and traces a long, well-attested heritage back to the Reformation.2 This view has also been historically exemplified in buildings such as mission halls—which have been broadly overlooked by existing scholarship.3 Therefore, this case study of a former mission hall situated on a South London Estate and occupied by a non-denominational Protestant church, begins to address this gap in research. First, drawing on the archives of LCM, the article situates the building in the wider social and historical context of urban mission halls to show that there is in fact meaning in its architectural ordinariness; second, it seeks to give voice to the existing congregation, allowing them to explain the significance of their building in their own terms. Interviews with church members have been obtained through personal connection with the author, who is both participant and observer, having been part of the congregation for several years as well as being related to the pastor by marriage.

The Mission Hall
The architectural and cultural identity of the Battersea building is intrinsically linked to the history of mission halls, a building type
traditionally distinct from churches in their architecture and nature. The present church building was in fact built as the latest iteration of a mission hall that was erected and re-erected by LCM in this area of north Battersea from around 1896. A para-church organization begun in 1835, LCM was founded to bring the Christian message to the poorest and least-reached areas of London, employing urban missionaries to work in specific locales as well as industries, such as that of taxi-drivers. Missionaries were supported in their work through the construction of purpose-built halls intended to enable larger gatherings of people than “cottage meetings” in homes would allow.

The closure and impending demolition of the present building in 2022 removed the last physical traces of LCM’s long engagement in the area. LCM occupied 260 mission rooms and halls in London at the turn of the twentieth century. But after war damage and city redevelopment had ravaged the built environment, only a quarter remained in use by the 1960s and a new model for ministry was adopted soon after. Mission hall activity was merged and located in a smaller number of “Christian centers”, which held onto the seed of the original mission hall esthetic and aims but sought to concentrate human resources. Having a permanent space out of which mission activities could operate was still deemed of sufficient worth in the 1970s to construct new buildings to replace some of those demolished, using funds available to LCM as a result of compulsory purchase. In recent years, LCM have renewed their efforts to dispense with their estate, seeing buildings as a liability and drain on their diminishing resources which might otherwise be channeled into salaries for urban missionaries.

120 Battersea Bridge Road was built as one of the first of LCM’s new Christian centers of the 1970s. It is integrated into Surrey Lane Estate (built 1970–3), with the Ethelburga Estate (built 1963–5) adjacent. This working-class area of Battersea was once dominated by riverside industry. In 1896, LCM acquired a “mission room” on Surrey Lane from the Wesleyans. It was the sort of location that LCM was drawn to, with a growing local population of skilled and unskilled laborers alongside pockets of deprivation. The room was superseded by a temporary corrugated iron mission hall built nearby a decade later. This too was replaced. A permanent brick structure was erected on the same site in 1931, to designs of Walter Oscar Langbein, RIBA (1870–1951), architect to Southwark Cathedral.

After the compulsory demolition of this previous hall, Battersea Christian Centre on Battersea Bridge Road was opened in 1973 and proved to be a blueprint for future centres. Designs for the final rebuilding, which was executed without the lounge and coffee bar, were produced by John D. Ainsworth and Associates. Ainsworth was a talented young architect and town planner who had recently completed another small non-denominational Christian-hall-cum-youth-center in the local area called Providence House (Figure 2). His approach was intensely practical, seeking to produce a building that was fit for purpose,
durable, within a modest budget, and with no obviously “Christian” architectural gestures.\textsuperscript{10} The simple halls appear to have been designed to discourage users from ascribing qualities of “holiness” to the space. Ainsworth’s ideas clearly found sympathy within the governance of LCM, for he was also appointed architect of LCM’s new headquarters ahead of a high-profile competition shortly thereafter, in 1972.\textsuperscript{11}

London City Mission was not the only Christian organization that built and occupied urban mission halls in the UK in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Wesleyans, Mildmays and other church denominations also had a hand in the construction and maintenance of halls, each with their own particular flavor and organizational structure, but sharing the core intention of enabling the spreading of the Gospel to those who had not heard it before and especially amongst those who were not church-goers.\textsuperscript{12} Punctuating streets of densely occupied cities, urban mission halls flourished across the UK in the nineteenth century as the evangelical “home mission” grew in urgency and the population of cities rapidly expanded. Interdenominational co-operation was increasingly common in this context and was boosted by the religious revival of 1858–62.\textsuperscript{13} By the 1880s, one commentator declared, “East-End
Mission, West-End Mission, Mission halls, Mission schools, Mission chapels, Rescue Missions, Temperance Missions ... Missions are in the air."

Mission halls as a building type had their own esthetic qualities. Until the mid-twentieth century, halls were usually composed of one plain, brick-built single-storey hall detached from surrounding buildings and with a gable roof. Sometimes a corrugated iron shed was put up initially, to be replaced with a permanent building sometime thereafter, as was the case in Battersea.

The poor standard of maintenance of the halls was disparaged by Charles Booth who remarked on their “chronic shabbiness”, noting that mission halls tended to be the “poorest and most disreputable building” in the “poorest and most disreputable streets”, though there were some “bright exceptions”. Beresford Pite’s Grade II listed Paget Memorial Mission Hall in Islington might later have been counted among them (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Paget Memorial Mission Hall (built 1910–11), Kings Cross, Islington January 2022. Photo by the author.
From a high point at the end of the nineteenth century to a rapid decline after the Second World War, mission halls have silently disappeared from the inner-city locations they once occupied. As a group, they have been largely ignored as a category of faith building by some architectural historians and heritage professionals for whom it is all too easy to prioritize the remarkable existing religious buildings over “everyday” demolished ones. But, taken as a whole, the prevalence of mission halls was, at one time, remarkable, and their ordinary architecture far from accidental.16

The primary motivation for the architectural form of mission halls appears to have been cultural and social rather than theological. LCM’s directors constituted Anglicans and nonconformists who held a range of views on the question of church architecture and sacred space. Regardless of their differing ecclesiological positions, all seem to have agreed on the form mission halls were to take. With their particular emphasis on reaching the urban laboring classes, in 1884, LCM considered that “small, cheap, unpretending mission halls” might be preferable to “splendid churches and mediaeval-looking chapels”, because “such edifices... are far from fitted to gather in the poor”.17 The lack of architectural ambition in mission halls was deliberate, driven by a desire to distinguish them culturally from church buildings and to appeal to the laboring classes who generally felt excluded from loftier spaces occupied by those of a higher social status with different work patterns, styles of dress and speech.18 In general, regardless of when they were built, mission halls tended to be economical, homely and with few visual traces of religious symbolism. One of the key drivers for such ordinariness was the intention to serve those unskilled workers coming from a non-church-going culture.19

The social focus of LCM’s outreach to the working classes and urban poor is maintained to the present day and complements the vision of The Bridge Church which sees itself as a church for the people of the local estates. However, LCM’s original intention in the nineteenth century was also that mission halls should be clearly distinguished from churches. Halls were not intended to be repositories of emotional significance or attachment, and, in keeping with this aim, mission buildings did not present as symbolic spaces. It was imagined that people who became Christians through the mission halls would then untether themselves from the people and place in which they had come to know the Lord and transfer their affections and allegiance to a well-established church, one which would inevitably look more obviously like a religious building. Mission halls were spoken of as “nurseries for the churches”, never a challenge to them, yet this was exactly what many became. Those converted in mission halls tended in fact to cleave closely to them, to the extent that some missions operated as defacto churches with missionaries effectively functioning as working-class pastors. This trajectory was not officially supported and, despite the long ongoing struggle of many mission
halls to remain distinct from the form of a church, there was no accommodation made for their changing nature within the strategy of LCM.\textsuperscript{20}

Against this background, when the new Battersea Mission Hall opened in 1973, an LCM missionary noted that “what the area really needs more than anything is a local church” (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{21} This statement was made in spite of the fact that two grand Anglican churches, St Mary’s and St Mary le Park were situated within ten minutes walk of the hall. The missionary understood the continuing cultural divide between the two St Mary’s and LCM congregations. In 2011, the ambition for the Mission Hall to become a place of worship became a reality with the initiation of The Bridge Church, which was given a lease for the building after LCM decided to close its center. LCM initially continued to support a missionary attached to the Church and acted as benevolent landlord. The Church was formed through a partnership between LCM and Co-Mission, a church-planting network of trans-denominational Reformed Evangelical churches. LCM itself is non-denominational, uniting Anglicans, Baptists

Figure 4
Rear elevation of The Bridge Church, 120 Battersea Bridge Road with Ethelburga Estate behind, February 2020. Photo by Shahed Saleem.
and other nonconformists around what they understand to be the key truths of the Christian gospel and avoiding secondary issues of controversy, of which buildings and their form can be one. Perhaps as a result of this, the theological significance of their mission halls has never been explicitly articulated. When surveying the minutes of management meetings through the decades, it is striking how little attention appears to have been paid by LCM to the meaning of mission hall architecture. This issue was subordinate to the practical provision of spaces that best enabled the preaching of the word of God to gathered groups of working-class people. It seems to have been a matter of little debate that a plain unadorned building might serve this end best.

The Battersea mission hall was broadly left by The Bridge Church “as found”, inherited with minimal changes to both interior and exterior so that the shift from mission hall to church building was hardly a conversion in the common sense of the word. The location, existing spaces and esthetic were seen as fit for purpose, appearing “of” the estate and so “for” the people of the estate. Pastor of the Church, Tom Dowding, explained his appreciation for the building as “the sort of place where people from the pub [across the road] would feel at home…you don’t have to change your culture, you don’t have to become a specific type of religious person, who wears their Sunday best [to come in]”.22

Unlike LCM, the leaders of The Bridge Church are explicit about their approach to the theological meaning of the building as well as its social relevance. The Bridge Church is aligned with the nonconformist (or non-denominational) tradition, leaning into Calvinism and the Reformed movement.23 Influenced by figures such as John Calvin, Reformers in the sixteenth century saw a need to return to the “pure” ways of the early church, guided by scripture and “untainted” by the papacy. For them, idolatry was an insult to God, cultic objects were an attempt to domesticate him, and depictions of God were contrary to scripture; reducing an irreducible God to a fallible image was offensive to him.24 Reformed churches have also been influenced by the Westminster Confession of Faith’s 1647 entreaty that God is to be worshipped everywhere, therefore, any building is suitable for worship.25 So there is important freedom in the Reformed tradition when it comes to buildings, though, where purpose-built, meeting places have been typically characterized as simple, plain and functional, inside and out. This has been called an “artistic silence” by some, but, while mostly lacking in religious art, such buildings are not without architectural meaning, and services not devoid of imagery.26 Reformed congregational space is intended to prioritize preaching without distractions, as well as facilitating baptism and the Lord’s Supper, two potent “living and symbolical” forms of imagery worked out through the gathered church.27 For important sixteenth-century reformer Heinrich Bullinger, “the places where the faithful meet are to be decent ... everything is to be arranged for decorum, necessity, and godly decency.”28
Through the centuries, though many Reformed Protestant churches have assented to the ideals of spatial functionality, plainness and the prioritisation of preaching, their application to different spaces of worship has resulted in a variety of architectural forms and styles. In the past, the generally ornate church buildings acquired and converted by Reformed churches were oftentimes subjected to radical alterations, but more recent architectural responses to existing buildings have been nuanced by geography, evolving ecclesiological views and social setting. Radical conversions are not always necessary. How might a Reformed congregation respond to an existing mission hall on a South London Estate in the twenty-first century? The circumstances of The Bridge Church offer a contextualised approach, with modesty, utility and the everyday evidenced inside and out (Figures 5 and 6). In shifting use from a mission hall to a church, the building’s significance is not located in the acquisition of symbolic artifacts and adornments or new architectural gestures, but in upholding the lack of them, in the continuation of the ordinary and the functional. The apparently improvised aesthetic should not be interpreted as unintentional.

The Church and the People
At the final service in the building before its 2022 demolition, church member Funmilola Campbell prayed, “We thank you [Lord God] that The Bridge is not a church that is built with bricks and mortar, but it is each individual person here.” The Pastor himself later stated that “the church is the people.” The simplicity of this statement belies a rich theology that takes a holistic view of scripture. It positions the lived experience of congregants and their ordinary building in the context of a Reformed nonconformist interpretation of the bible which understands the gathered church to be joined together in deep relational fellowship through Jesus, who symbolises the holy meeting the profane, and the divine with the ordinary. Indeed, the New Testament regards individuals within the church to be “living stones … built up as a spiritual house” with Jesus as “a precious cornerstone.” In this way, a focus on physical space is displaced by a focus on the person of Jesus and his relationship to believers. For members of the Church, to dwell with God does not require a particular physical space, but rather an acceptance of Jesus and his sacrifice.

When interviewed, Pastor Tom Dowding articulated the beliefs of many Reformed nonconformists, that Jesus can be understood as the true “temple” – a place where God dwells with his people. From this perspective, the Garden of Eden is taken to be the first temple, a sort of sacred space. After Adam and Eve’s disobedience and expulsion from the Garden, the rest of the Bible can be seen as the story of how God sought to restore his relationship with his people after their corruption and sin. This view traces several iterations of built temple spaces and systems which were, in various ways, only partial in reuniting God and man until the birth of Jesus, when the temple ceased to be spatial and became embodied. The
built temples that came before were shown to have become idolatrous, “a shadow of the heavenly things” that were often mistaken for the things themselves and “holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true

Figure 5
Entrance lobby of The Bridge Church with main hall to right, February 2022. Photo by Shahed Saleem.
For Pastor Dowding, adorned church buildings filled with symbolic artifacts and static visual imagery distract from Jesus himself, and can even give a faulty representation of the one for whom scripture gives virtually no physical descriptive record. Shaped by their nonconformist sympathies, this LCM-affiliated congregation is concerned that, in traditional church buildings, people might superstitiously focus on the artwork and miss the message.

For congregants, this theological position is worked out implicitly. None of the users interviewed regarded the ordinariness of the church building as detrimental to their faith. Yet few seemed to place as positive a value on the cultivation of its ordinary architecture or lack of Christian imagery as the Pastor. That the building’s architectural form was secondary to the congregational relationships was clear. Responses to the building were entangled with emotional connections to it as a site of memory, important for the gatherings and events that took place in it, and its symbolic meaning as a “home from home” and facilitator of community, rather than for its architecture or esthetic presentation. One member of
the Church noted that, “[the building] was where my faith was re-affirmed, where I found friendship ... it enabled me to ... find a place I could call my spiritual home. And apart from my own house, this building was my other home...” For one of the local young people brought up attending the Church, the building was important enough for him to have made a virtual copy of it in the world of Minecraft, one of only two Battersea buildings he replicated, his home being the other.

In the demolition of the building, rather than suffering an erasure of it from the imaginary, as might be expected given the theological focus on the person of Jesus, there has in fact been a concretizing of it. Another Church member acknowledged the tension between the form of the building and her experience of worshiping within it with her family:

The building itself I’ve never particularly liked just because I don’t look at it and see a real church ... [But] I think once you go in through the doors ... it had a great feeling to it ... from the outside I do just see it as quite ugly but I guess it’s what it contained and the memories that it contained that makes you feel sad that it’s gone ... and it’s the one place we’ve come to regularly as a church. So, it’s not the building itself, it’s what it signifies and the people I associate with it.

People are imagined in this space, tied to it through memories built up over the long term. One member who claims a long association with the building, knowing it first as a mission hall and then as a church, found that the Church’s recent move to meeting in a school on Sundays clarified her understanding of the building. She reported that:

Generally, the building doesn’t have any spiritual significance for me, but I’ve known it since I’ve been a child and so it holds lots of memories. The fact I wrote “God is love” in chalk on the outside and it’s still there ... it’s on the wall outside, you can still see it, really faint and I remember writing it when I was ten and I was worried someone was going to tell me off. So, I think for that reason [the building is significant], more nostalgically than spiritually ... But I think being here [in a school] has just cemented that feeling, because being here is no different to being over there, the “spiritualness” of the building is not as important as before [to me]. But if you asked me [about the spiritual significance of the building] before we moved here, I’m not sure what I would have said, even though I knew that it was just a building, yeah ... and now it’s clear it’s not the building [that has spiritual life] it’s the word, isn’t it? The building is just a facility to aid us in the gospel.

For the congregation, the building is an anchor in the imaginary for memories of the remembered gathered church. It is a place associated with the construction of Christian belief facilitated through
internal relationships which embodied communion with God through Jesus, the true temple.39

Conclusion
With demolition of their building closely following a period of disuse and unsettlement precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, The Bridge Church could have given up meeting in person altogether. Rather than relocating their services to a nearby school hall, the Church might have continued to focus on reinforcing online practices of gathering established and enacted during various lockdowns. But this approach would overlook the theological importance of the embodied church, gathered together in space and time, for in this sort of physical fellowship the sacred is truly located. The Battersea building should therefore be understood as a “profane” space which prioritised the sacred via relationships, first to Jesus and through him to other members of the church. Anything material or architectural that might prove a distraction from this was minimized. The resulting low-key, ad hoc aesthetic was significant and
full of meaning. All about the church building were signs of the ordinary, from an exterior that shrank back from making any grand statements, to a simple plastic chair or chipboard bookshelf, all evidence of the everyday and the functional, pointed to Jesus and the greater good of communion with him (Figures 7 and 8). Furthermore, this case study demonstrates how entwined theology and culture are in these types of small former mission halls, for the very same signs of ordinariness that evidence a particular theological belief are also reminders that this was a Christian building specifically fitted for its social housing estate context. The building’s value was not located in grand typological signals, but in its understated social responsiveness. In this humble building, a seeming absence of meaning is therefore shown to be the opposite, and the divine is found in the ordinary and lowly.

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**Notes**

8. WLHS, WBC/9/1/2/53; Wandsworth Planning Applications (WPA), 72/9149.


22. Tom Dowding (Pastor of The Bridge Church), in discussion with the author, May 18, 2022.


29. Spoken prayer by Funmilola Campbell, The Bridge Church, February 13, 2022.

30. Tom Dowding, Pastor of The Bridge Church, in discussion with the author, May 18, 2022.


32. Genesis 3:8. See for example: John Frame, Systematic Theology, 387; ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); G. K. Beale, The Temple and the Church’s Mission; G. K. Beale, Mitchell Kim, God Dwells Among Us.

33. 1 Peter 2:4-7 (NIV). See also Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV).

34. Genesis 3:8 (NIV); Genesis 2:16-17 (NIV); Genesis 3:6 (NIV); Genesis 3:23-24 (NIV).

35. Hebrews 8:5 (NIV); Hebrews 9:24 (NIV).


37. Tom Dowding, Pastor of The Bridge Church, in discussion with the author, May 18, 2022.

38. Rachel Whip (church member), in discussion with the author, June 8, 2022.


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