

Sacred Geometry: St. George's Round Church, 1800-1827 — Saint George's Round Church

Jan 11 Written By Samuel Landry

Our plan for today is to meditate on this sacred building, St. George's Round Church. To speak about this church (or, indeed, any) is really just to speak of prayer. What I mean by prayer is the movement from a lower kind of life to a higher kind, but all the same, a movement by what is proper and present to that lower life. As we pray, we pray according to our nature—with words, on our knees, in a sanctuary we can see, smell, and touch—but the our prayer, all the same, looks beyond the corporeal, and even beyond the psychic to the divine ground of our being. So prayer, a way of looking from lower to higher, but looking according to the nature of the lower. But, how does a building pray? The answer is, according to its own nature, with its own language—the language of its space, architecture, design, logic, and symbolisms. This means that one of our primary tasks this morning is to begin to learn to listen for and respond to the language of St. Georges Round. There will be three parts to this process. First, I will briefly tell you the story of the early days of the Round Church—what we know and what we don't know. Then, we'll consider the Round Church in the context of the ancient tradition of building round sacred structures. And finally, we'll meditate on the particular architecture of the Round Church itself and attend to the prayer which is ever present and potential in its sacred geometry.

The Story of the Round

As we begin to think about the Round Church in its early years, 1800-1827, the first question might be, why just these early years? Why stop at 1827. The answer is very crucial to our conversation and is probably one of the most profound moments in the history of this church—perhaps even more profound that its fire and reconstruction in '94. In 1827 the language and logic of The Round Church was fundamentally altered. In 1801, when they held the very first service in this church, it did not have a chancel or a porch; it was actually round, the western wall, featuring a huge three-part palladian window, continuing right across the chancel's entrance today and completing the circle. [slide of painting] As I said, this fact is the source of the most interesting questions related to this church building—one of the things that really makes this place special. There are many questions to ask. What is the significance, 27 years after the construction of the church, of removing the massive Palladian windows—one of the churches most striking features at the time—, busting a hole in that side of the building, and adding another space? What is the theological, liturgical, and ecclesial significance of this decision? The reason why we are only thinking up to 1827 is because in order to answer any of these questions we must have a sense of what the Round Church was actually like in those early days. What was the logic of the space without chancel? How was the space used? How were the pews organized? What was the liturgy, formal or informal? Why was it built this way in the first place? Was the initial design meant to be expanded? How did the congregation think about the building and its design? In order the comprehend the conversation happening between these two versions of the church—with and with out chancel, round and round-ish—we must first get to know the characters involved. Today we will get to know the character that existed between 1800-1827, and perhaps at another time we can think about the other and the transition.

I mentioned a series of pertinent questions: how was the space used?; how was it organized?; what was the liturgy?; what did it mean to the German congregants?; and so on. Unfortunately, almost all of these questions are, from a historical point of view, impossible to answer with certainty, however, this kind of “impossibility” is often the catalyst for truly exciting inquiry; so, off we go.

The first place to turn with the kinds of questions we are asking is the historical record. As it happens, this record is very thin. What we know about the German congregation's transition from the Dutch Church to the Round is mostly conjectural. This becomes clear, first of all, if one browses the St. George's collection at the Public Archive. The oldest records at the archive include various letters and documents from the 18th century: the congregation's original ledger used for recording the new elections and appointments of wardens, and even a vestry meeting book beginning in the year 1799, the year before construction on the Round began, together with the register of pew rentals. Perhaps most exciting for the present topic are the old papers documenting repairs done over the years which I am convinced were once folded up and sealed in the ball beneath the weather-vane; these documents include the list of materials and prices used in the initial construction, the contract drawn up for the completion of the interior in 1820, and on to the various kinds of maintenance accomplished through to the mid mid 1900's. However, what are missing, even in the weather-vane notes, are any original architectural plans, any references whatsoever to who designed the church, any information about how the space was used in its early days, about how its pews were organized, or any record of any conversation describing the rationale of the “round” design (even in the meeting book documenting the years of the construction and move). What we do have are records of long conversations after Houseal's death about the congregation's hopes of finding another German minister, and pages and pages documenting the new church's pew rentals. In other words, we have absolutely no way of knowing for sure how the pews were organized (in the round, west facing, some other way?), but we know exactly who sat in which pew (wherever it was), when, and how much they paid. All the same, let us try to summarize the story.

In the last decades of the 18th century North End Halifax continued to grow with the city, and so did the German Congregation at the Little Dutch Church. The congregation's minister at this time was the Rev. Bernard Michael Houseal. Houseal was a very learned man—he could preach in English, French, Dutch, and German; he was a respected Loyalist exile from New York, beloved of the Prince, and an active minister from his arrival in Halifax 1784 until his death in 1799. When Houseal arrived he was a Lutheran—perfect for the German congregation—, however midway through his time in the north end he traveled to London to be ordained priest. It's not clear if this was for reasons financial (the congregation struggled to pay him), ecclesial (freedom in sacrament—the congregation already owned the silver communion set, but had no one ‘in house’ to serve with them), or theological (the lines between Lutheran and Anglican are both pronounced and blurry here); probably, as with many such things, it was an odd mix of all three. Either way, Houseal was thus the congregation's first German minister and also—unifying the parish's odd union of traditions—its first Anglican Priest. Since there is no discussion of the Round's plans in 1799 minutes following at his death, it is fit to infer that the design for the new church would have been drawn up during his regime. The only thing beyond conjecture worth noting for our discussion is the fact that whoever designed the Round Church, whatever the process of determining its form, and whatever it's architecture meant to the congregation, the leader of the congregation at the time was a man of great learning, intelligence, and station—he would have appreciated this new church very much.

Together with the Rev. Houseal there were other illustrious characters hanging about at this time—all of them suspects in the search for the plans and design of the early Round Church. The crucial figures are Joseph Frederick Wallet DesBarres (buried under this church), Prince Edward the Duke

of Kent (stationed at the navel base down the hill), and William Hughes, the royal engineers' Master Carpenter. The design of the Round Church has been attributed to each and all of these men—each of them worthy candidates in their own way; all the same, there is no proof one way or another, only conjecture. However, for our purposes, instead of attempting to discover a name or personality to whom we can attribute the design, it is simply worth noting that when the Round Church was built, it had numerous qualified admirers and advocates.

The “corner stone”—not really possible in a round church—was laid on April 10, 1800 and the first service was held on July 19, 1801. While there was on-going construction right through to 1827, this first year's bout of building established the essential structure of the church, with her three tiers, her circular pattern, and her architectural significance—whatever that is—present in her design.

The most reliable source we have for determining the form and function of the Round church in these early years are the historical notes of Cannon Cunningham [find photo of the man], rector at St. Georges from 1900-1936. In the year following his retirement he began to publish a series of historical expositions on the Parish which continued in serial in the parish magazine until the early 1940's. He included many details about architecture and liturgy that are helpful for us. On the one hand, Cunningham, having joined the parish 100 years after its construction, does not make him a particularly primary witness. In addition it is not always clear what his sources were—the early stories about the building are often myths and legends surviving in the congregation, or Cunningham's own conjectures. However, if we consider how these kinds of traditions work, he was the last rector who would have known parishioners—anyone in their late 80s who grew up in the church—who could have remembered the original round. Or, if there were no witnesses like this, the church would have had many members whose parents or grand parents could have told them stories of these early days. It's clear that Cunningham took these kinds of myths and legends very seriously in his notes, and thus they provide us with the last glimpse of what the Round church might have looked like in its first years. Drawing Cunningham's comments, together with the speculative drawings done during Fr. Petite's regime, we may begin to visualize what this church was like.

Let me read the most exciting excerpt:

It is in the interior . . . that the chief charm of the architecture of St. George's exists. [The interior] was originally a complete circle of 60 feet in diameter with the pulpit, a three storey one, in the centre. The main aisle, four feet wide, led from the door on the East to near the pulpit where it widened out to a circle of 15 feet diameter, and then continued on at its original width of four feet to a high palladian window at the West, below which is probably where the Altar or Communion Table stood (although a tradition says it stood at the base of the pulpit). [add slide of a triple-decker] The Clerk sat at that point, the prayers are read from the middle elevation, and the sermon was delivered from the top. . . . Outside of the central opening, the pews were arranged in circles, the two outer rows being raised one and two steps respectively, above those in the body of the Church; and in front of these two rows ran a secondary aisle that separated them from those on that level, while a radial aisle ran from the central opening, one to each of the four windows on the two sides. (Chapter VI, in *St George's Parish Magazine*, July 1939).

From this description, we may imagine an interior floor plan that might have looked something like this [slide] with a cross-section something like this [slide].

Now, the question is, how do we think about it? It is, first of all, useful to summarize the details we

are working with. We know that the congregation that built the Round was still that very odd mixture of Lutheran and Anglican—perhaps more potently on the Lutheran side than on the English. This means, from a historical point of view, that the liturgy of the word was much more significant for them than the liturgy of the table. Their time spent together in this church was spent declaring the word made flesh, in song and sermon. We also know there were very capable and influential minds—like that of Houseal—involved in the process of its design. The significance of this fact for us is simply to embolden our search—what ever the Round Church is, it is not an accident. We also have a best guess at how the interior was organized—although I must stress again the conjectural nature of Cunningham’s signposts here. Finally, and most importantly, we still have the building herself. The building tells us that it was designed after the style and patterns of Andrea Palladio, the Italian renaissance architect, (this will tell us more about how to interpret the architecture). And, let us not forget, we know for a fact that the Round is . . . well, roundish, and this fact is not insignificant; for it situates the church in a long history and tradition of round churches that has a consistent iconography and use of space.

Historical Paradigms

Every inquiry about round sacred structures in the west must begin with the Roman Pantheon—the oldest surviving rotunda and the beginning of our history. The Pantheon which was rebuilt by Hadrian in the 2nd century was dedicated to the celestial gods, or, as its name suggests in the greek *pantheon*, to all gods. Constantinus, a well traveled soldier in 357, found the Pantheon to be “like a rounded city region, vaulted over in lofty beauty.’ As the historian William MacDonald points out, Rome, for Constantinus, would have been the “Temple of the whole world,” and within the pantheon positioned at the centre of this empire, the whole world was united: “Rome was the temple of the whole world, and the Pantheon the temple of all that was Roman” (Macdonald, 24). Another ancient witness from the historian Dio Cassius tells us: “because of its vaulted roof, it resembles the heavens,” (from Macdonald, 76). The Pantheon is a microcosm, an image of the whole world seen from the perspective of the gods. But, it is also very human. This vision of the gods is sanctioned by the man Hadrian, who as emperor acts as a divine mediator between the order of the heavens and the potential chaos of human life. We find it very easy to be suspicious of empire, but we must remember that Roman citizens, especially in the “Barbarian” outskirts, worshiped Hadrian freely. He brought about unity in multiplicity, sustained order over disorder, brought the heavenly to earth, and while enthroned, as he sometimes was, in the pantheon itself, he guarded by his sacred reign the presence of the gods to the Roman people—these are, as I said, the qualities of a mediator, a man standing between heaven and earth. Here is the crucial point for us: the Pantheon is a vision of the world in which the heavenly and earthly are brought together by the authority of a divine mediator.

If that sounds suspiciously Christian to you, it’s because by the time of the Christian Roman Empire, it was. The only reason the Pantheon has survived is because it was converted from a place of polytheistic worship to a place of Christian liturgy—and it is still used in that way to this day. This cohesion and transition from pagan to Christian is evident from the tradition of Christian (and Muslim) rotundas stemming from the pantheon and into the medieval periods. In the Christian version the rotunda is still a vision of the world transfigured as it were by the heavens, but this time the mediator is Jesus Christ, the man who stands between heaven and earth because he is the God-man, containing all of heaven and earth in himself, revealing the course and perfection of nature by departure and return of divine grace in his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension; and also in his promise of the holy Ghost, the presence of Christ to the Church that carries on his work of mediation, seeking the completion of the heavenly vision of redemption and righteousness here on

earth, in Christ's name. Christians have thus taken on the conversion of the Pantheon in this way from antiquity to the present. However, let us focus on one particular adaptation of the Roman Round—that of Andrea Palladio.

As it is said, Palladio is “the most imitated architect in history” (Macdonald 112). Palladio himself sought the imitation and perfection of the architecture of the ancients. The Pantheon was one of his favourite buildings—there are numerous drawings of the temple in his very famous books on architecture. Palladio's own tribute to the Pantheon is in Maser, built from 1579-1580. As it happens, this is also, of all Palladio's works, the structure to which St. George's bears the most resemblance.

Palladianism is the perfection of classical architectural language of geometry and symmetry. For Palladio it often seems as if the consistency of a building's logic was more important to him than the building's practical use. This fact focuses our understanding of the language of round churches—the logic of the architecture is inherent in its geometry. The physical proportions are a revelation of what lies beyond—they are a prayer.

In the modern period neo-classicism brought the rotunda-ideal to all of western architecture, and not only in sacred applications. More or less explicit imitations of the Pantheon became common across Europe. Our focus here will be the way that this universalization of the round expanded and sharpened its theory. In 18th c. France—this is now just decades away from the conception of St. George's—the “visionary architects” of the period drew up plans for totally impossible buildings that soaked in the symbolic potential of spheres and circles. For Boullée, the crucial figure in this school, as he writes in an essay on the art of architecture, “Our buildings--and our public buildings in particular--should be, to some extent, poems. The impression they make on us should arouse in us sensations that correspond of the function of the building in question.” The aim was to use architecture to articulate the immaterial in the encounter between the shape and form of the building and the senses of the one experiencing it. This means that the significance of the building was in the dynamic relation between the building and its perceiver—a kind of conversation. The building works upon those who approach it.

The Round Church Itself

This summer, as visitors came into the church for the first time, their experience often followed the same pattern. The guest would, first of all approach the church from the outside, drawn in by its startling three-tiered structure. The shape of the building always leads them to the front doors on Brunswick street; and this is fitting—it is the entry way into the logic of the building. Moving from noticing and contemplating the exterior to its entrance at the lowest point is the beginning of the building's prayer. Then, as they came through the doors, they slowly climbed the steps, anticipating what they would discover reaching the top—an ascent into the Round's vision of the world. The first sight is right down the centre isle to the Alter at the back of the chancel—focusing their vision so to speak. Then, once through the interior doors, they begin to look around—but they never stop under the gallery—the building pulls them into the middle of the room beneath the expanse of the dome and illumination of the central light. This is the primary moment of revelation—an entry into a new way of seeing the world. As I said, this is the path many of the guests this summer took. It's as if the building takes its visitors on a journey from outside to in and then back out again. In Margaret Visser's book on sacred architecture she puts it this way: “Churches are laid out with a certain trajectory of the soul in mind” (4). The pattern and logic of this spiritual trajectory in the Round Church is our last topic of the afternoon.

The Round Church—like most of the other buildings we looked at—is composed of two geometries that are both structurally, and symbolically co-inherent. The first, which is visible in the three tiered outward structure of the church, is the image of a cosmos held together within the providential comprehension of its triune creator. The second, which is visible in the vaulted interior, is an image of the structures of divine revelation made manifest in creation. These are really two perspectives of the same thing—the world seen from eternity, and the world seen from time. The two together depict the one reality of Christ as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end; a total vision of the world transfigured, a revelation of creation in the image of Christ.

The outward facing geometry is present in the Round Church's familiar three tiered structure. The whole church rests on a 60 fifty foot, circular foundation, the weight of which leans in on a large central foundation. It's first cylinder rises up and is covered with a flat porched roof (the slopping roof on the first tier wasn't added until later). The second cylinder, rises from the porch and then closes with a curved roof. At the top of the roof the curve flattens out to a second porch and a third tier with a domed cupola ascends to the Round Church's full height.

It is simple enough to point out that the three tiers of the Round evoke the triune God. And indeed, to all who approach the Round for worship, its trinitarian layers are likely the most striking feature. However, the three-part architecture is not simply a tribute to God, three in one. We know this from our consideration of the Pantheon and the tradition following—round Churches *are* depictions of the cosmos; and we can see that St Georges is no exception (slide with sphere): the three-layered structure of St. George's is depicting a cosmos held together within the trinity god. It is true that the interior of the Round also invokes the cosmos, but it is important to point out that it is only from the *outside* that you can see the sphere suggested by the church's shape: the width of the church and the height to its second tier are more-or-less the same. Again, this is not apparent from inside—it's unique to the exterior perspective: Creation *in* God. To put it simply, there is a little world held within the Round, resting firmly on the central foundation and topped by the cupola: "Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth" (Isaiah 40.21) And also: Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2.20-21). We might say that the world is both crowned by and resting upon Christ, who is the cornerstone and head the Church. Furthermore, this world is built up and supported in the life and logic of the Trinity itself; the triune tiers are the necessary structure by which we see the existence of this cosmos at all. The whole of this exterior geometry, in short, depicts the confession from Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the first-born of all creation;
in him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or principalities or powers
— all things were created through him and for him.
And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. (Col. 1.15-17)

It is only because Christ is before all things that by him all things consist. This exterior vision of the church is primary because it depicts the primary reality—the life of the trinity—that makes our reality—the life of the church—possible. This is depicted in an architectural way by the relation between the out side and in. Note two things. First, how different the inside space is from the out,

but also how necessary, in a structural way, the outside is to the in. It contains it, supporting it from without, holding it comprehending it, and making it possible. This is the relation between eternity and time, between the life of God in himself, giving himself to himself in creation, and the revelation of God as himself seen within creation. Or, as Dante puts it:

In this heaven there is no other Where
Than in the Mind Divine, wherein is kindled
The love that turns it, and the power it rains.
Within a circle, light and love embrace it,
And even as this turns so doth all others;
but that kingdom, he who embraces alone commands. (Dante, Paradiso, 27)

Once we have passed the thresh hold, from eternity to time, into the world God creates by his sustaining power, we may discover the mode by which we relate to that God.

Thus, the interior of the Round Church is a depiction of the logic of revelation. It does so by embodying that revelation. It is an image of the holy city. Consider this passage from Revelation:

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he that talked with me had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof. And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal. (Revelation 21.10-14)

This is the city the Round Church depicts. It is a vision of the world patterned after God's own self-revelation to it. Consider how the dome of the sky is supported by twelve beams: "You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2.19-20). Consider how the chandelier, the image of the sun, hangs in the midst of the room, just above the location of the original pulpit, dispersing its divine light through the word preached to the people. It is also exciting to note that the original chandelier actually sat a little lower, putting it right at the very centre of that sphere contained by the external structure—another link between outside and in.

In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.
His going forth is from the end of the heaven,
and his circuit unto the ends of it:
and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. (Psalm 19.4-6)

Speaking of the sun introduces a final but most important consideration. How is the architecturally significance of this space related to how it was used?

Liturgy and Mediation: Old and New

The Round Church was designed to be a space for the preaching of the word made flesh, in sermon and in song; a space for the declaration of the truth that the structure of the church itself proclaims: “He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:18-20).

We learned earlier about the possibility that in the early days of this church all of the pews followed that pattern of those on the outer ring, facing inward. And, at the very middle of the room, beneath the illumination of the chandelier—our image of the sun, source of divine light and revelation—was the pulpit, the station of declaring the truth of the gospel. In these days of low-church anglicanism of a very lutheran flavour Preaching was the primary activity—the declaring and receiving of truth —, and the architecture both supported and revealed what is profound about that activity. It is tempting to think we have progressed beyond these primitive protestants who had not candle light, incense, chancel, nor high liturgy, but I want us to consider the significance of this congregation’s activity in itself. To do this, think first, for a moment, of our own liturgy—we begin with the sacrament of the word, and when we move to hear the gospel lesson, what do we do? We process, from heaven to earth, as it were, from Chancel to Round, to the very middle of the room—the old location of the pulpit—then we all turn in our pews, imitating for a moment the old circular configuration, and we receive the good news of the gospel. Before the reading, we say, “Glory be to thee, O Lord,” honouring the heavenly source of all revelation, and after we say “Praise be to thee, O Christ” recognizing the way that heavenly source has become for us flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The whole truth of the Christian faith is crystallized in that moment. The revelation of God as Christ turning us back to God again. This is the moment that the German congregation lived in. With their collective gaze gathered at the centre of this church, they, for hours on end, enjoyed the redeeming presence of Christ, made available in the sacrament of the word. A baptism in gospel, as it were. Here we are at a conclusion of sorts—the recognition of this early congregation’s central activity: the word active in our midst. But, the question of how things change when bust a hole in the wall will have to wait for another time.

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