

THE PARISH OF
ST PATRICK'S
KILSYTH
1865 - 2015

THE
DARMANEST
CRUCIFIX

150TH ANNIVERSARY



The Dârmânest Crucifix

In 1964, in preparation for the construction of another new building for the Catholic Church in Scotland, Gillespie Kidd and Coia (GKC) the Glasgow architectural practice ordered a matching set of church artwork for the interior of St Patrick's Kilsyth.

Jack Coia, the eponymous head of the practice was the '*charming and forceful*' personality behind the company and was subsequently the winner of the RIBA Gold Medal in 1969 for outstanding quality and achievement in architecture which put him in the exalted company of architectural giants such as Lutyens, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. It was said at the time that much of the credit for this award came from the recognition of the outstanding design for St Peter's Seminary in Cardross. The GKC partnership had already undertaken 35 commissions to build churches for the various diocese of the Catholic Church in Scotland and was to go on before the practice was to close its doors in 1978, to build a total of 41 churches and chapels of various sizes throughout the country. Two years after the opening of St Patrick's Kilsyth, Coia was also to be appointed CBE in 1967 followed by honorary degrees from the Universities of Glasgow (1970) and Strathclyde (1976).

St Patrick's Kilsyth was late in the history of the practice being the 6th from last in this long line of ecclesiastical commissions and by this point in time the distinctive modernist style of the creative force within the company which lay with Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan had become clear. Many of the features visible in St Patrick's were also visible in other churches of the same family.

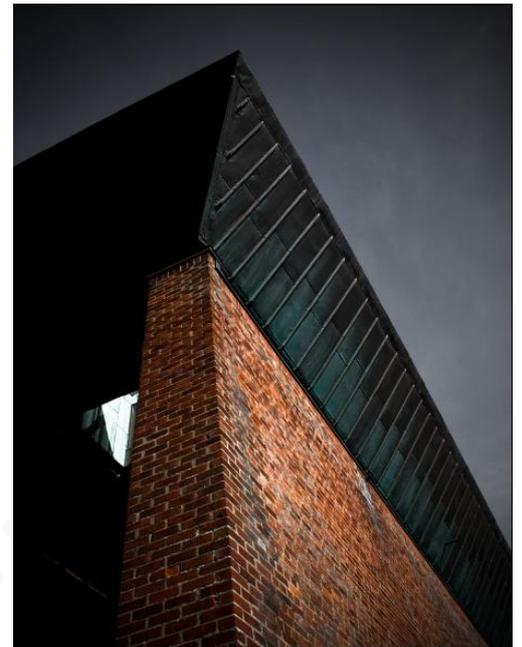
The set of artworks for St Patrick's Kilsyth consisted of a major crucifix for the main sanctuary, a statue of Our Lady, a statue of St Patrick (left), a minor crucifix for the mortuary chapel and 14 stations of the cross. All of these were commissioned as a set, the work of a single artisan. The stark design of the set in plain white wood without any form of paint or decoration was in keeping with the modernist and minimalist design of the building but it was also a metaphor for both the austere post war era in which the building was commissioned and it was also an echo of the iconoclasm of the reformation where Catholic ostentation was rejected in favour of puritanical Spartan bleak and unembellished ecclesiastical interiors.

The Catholic church in Scotland in the 1960's was undergoing an unprecedented expansion, opening in some years, one new church a month in each diocese all over Scotland. The so long so poor, working class, mainly 2nd or 3rd generation Irish were now emerging as an established middle class of the country and moving outward from the confines of city tenements to the outskirts and suburbs of Scotland's new towns and even rural villages. In turn, the Church had to respond to this migration of its people, establishing new parishes in historic burghs, in some cases not previously dignified with the presence of a Catholic place of worship since the 1500s. It was therefor with some sense of discovery and wonder that the local history of a place was often investigated to uncover what facsimilia of its Catholic past was left after almost 400 years of Reformation, iconoclasm and repression.



This was also true of Kilsyth. Since the 1830's there had been a notable population of expatriate Irish who showed concern that they nurture their Catholic faith in their new-found land. By 1846 it was recorded that the Catholics of Kilsyth walked to Campsie, the village of Lennoxton, to take part in the life of that newly established Catholic Parish there. The history of local Catholic saints such as St Mirin, whose cell and well lie in the hills above Kilsyth and St Machan whose remains still lie under his long ruined medieval chapel in Campsie Glen as well as the location of other ancient churches and the rich history of local pre-reformation clergy in the story of Scotland became a popular Victorian antiquarian pastime.

By 1865, Kilsyth had a Catholic Church of its own but after almost 100 years by the early 1960's this small, traditional stone built building, which had been engulfed by an almost disastrous fire on at least one occasion was no longer fit for the size of the Parish which had to cater for 1500 active Catholics and who craved a building fit for their needs and their numbers.



**'Overhang' © Jon Marc Creaney – Architect,
Photographer and friend of St Patrick's Kilsyth.
Born April 1971, died November 2011 aged 40 RIP.**

On 17th March 1965 after a one-year construction project the new St Patrick's church was opened by His Eminence Gordon Joseph Cardinal Gray. Able to accommodate 600 people in one sitting, the scale of the building was epic and the ambition of the modernist statement that it made was forward looking and progressive. This was a Catholic community saying that we may have been away – but we are back and back for good! Today the building remains the only grade A listed building in the town and is by far the most modern looking building even after having stood for more than 50 years.



St Patrick's Kilsyth pictured in 1965. This photo by kind permission of the GKC Archives at the GUSA ©

By the end of the 20th century however, this new St Patrick's building in Kilsyth had been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair. This had come about partly by some of the flaws in the functional engineering of the building - a well know feature of the GKC buildings – mainly due to dealing with drainage of water from the large span of the roof and the emerging building standards in how to withstand the wet Scottish climate. The parish priest at this time, Fr Gerry Hand, managed to put together a financial restoration package which would save the building and extend its life for another 50 years.

This project started in 1999 and continued over the whole of the year 2000. The parish community was decanted to use the local Catholic School for many services of worship and the hand of Christian friendship was extended by the Burns & Old Parish Church of Scotland in an historic gesture of interfaith co-operation, where Saturday night vigil Mass was said, for just over a year, inside an active Church of Scotland church building. A generous act of tolerance and friendship unthinkable only a generation beforehand and for 400 years previously!

It was only when the building work had been completed and the Church building re-opened, that it became apparent that the 5 works of art commissioned by GKC in 1964 had become 4, as the minor crucifix was missing! No trace of it could be found and the population of the Parish eventually came to the realisation that it was unlikely ever to discover what had happened to the last missing item of the set. The only sign of the missing crucifix were 4 ugly holes in the wall of the mortuary chapel where once it had hung.

In the years since the restoration of St Patrick's, the Scottish Architectural community have belatedly come to recognise Isi Metzstien and Andy MacMillan as elder statesmen and highly influential figures of Scottish architecture. After a highly successful 2007 exhibition at the Lighthouse in Glasgow where a retrospective appreciation of their work was hailed, they were recognised also by Glasgow University, gaining an honorary degree which they were awarded on behalf of the Glasgow University School of Architecture based at the Glasgow School of Art.

Since then, in May 2008 they were both nominated as inaugural joint winners of the RIAS Lifetime Achievement Award and in December 2008 were named as joint winners of the prestigious RIBA Annie Spink Award for Excellence in the development of Architectural Education and Teaching in Scotland.

A few years before the death of Isi Metzstein in 2012 they were both invited back to inspect St Patrick's now in its post restoration state. They were pleased with the quality of the outcome but observed that the building had been '*softened*' by the use of decor, plants and banners and that the stark intent of the design had been diluted. Isi has since died in January 2012 and Andy also passed away in August 2014. With their death came an outpouring of recognition of the works of the GKC practice. It is said that in terms of modernist ecclesiastical design, it is the most important body of work in Europe arguably only surpassed by the great Mario Botta's works in Germany, Italy and Switzerland. As appreciation for the works of Gillespie Kidd and Coia grows around the world there are a more and more visitors to these buildings each year and St Patrick's Kilsyth is emerging as

one of the most important of these works – still in its intended form and still in daily use as a Catholic place of worship.



Andy MacMillan (left) and Isi Metzstein (right) revisit St Patrick's in 2007 (photo by kind permission of Kieran Dodds ©) with the main crucifix in the sanctuary of St Patrick's visible behind them.

It has become therefore of some considerable concern and regret in recent years, not only to the parish but also to the Arts and Heritage Association of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, that this artistically and historically important collection of commissioned artwork within an important GKC church is now incomplete.

Regrettably in more recent times a well-meaning but flawed restoration of the statue of Our Lady has covered it in oil or varnish rendering it visibly darker than the rest of the set. An act of unfortunate if unintentional vandalism – you would never, after all, varnish a Chippendale chair!

And so it came as fantastic news recently that the missing minor crucifix had been rediscovered!

In the early 2000's a group of Edinburgh based Catholic volunteers went to Romania to assist with practical aid to this long forgotten European country which had been under the yoke of Communist rule throughout the 20th Century, where human rights and religious freedom were suppressed in the brutal regime of Nicolai Ceausescu. This, by now poor and marginalised country, was once again open to the rest of Europe and like many other charities, the group from Edinburgh set off with food, medical aid and also aid for the Catholic Church in Romania to help re-establish itself. They were bound for the town of Dârmâneșt in the east central mountains of Romania 200 miles north of Bucharest close to the border with Moldova.



The Catholic Church of Darmanest.



The GKC Crucifix in Dârmâneșt

Amongst the gifts for the people of Dârmâneșt was an old crucifix that had come into their possession as '*surplus to requirements*' somehow and might make a suitable gift to the local Catholic Church in Romania. For over a decade no one thought any more about this small act of benevolence.

One day in 2015 a parishioner from St Patrick's was chatting to a Catholic friend in Edinburgh about the missing crucifix, who as it happened, had been on this trip to Romania over 10 years before.

Days later, the friend who had remembered this lamenting story about the one piece of missing artwork from the set, had taken the trouble to look out his photos of the charitable trip to Romania in his youth. There, amongst the photos of the people they met and the churches they visited, was the minor crucifix of St Patrick's Kilsyth, commissioned all those years ago by GKC partnership!

At least now we know what has happened to it! It is comforting to know that if the cross cannot actually be with the rest of the original collection of art works commissioned for St Patrick's Kilsyth, then at least it is being used – as it was intended - to decorate and beautify the inside of a Catholic church in a far-off land. No one in St Patrick's begrudges the people of Dârmâneșt their cross, in fact it is hoped that the crucifix might one-day act as a bridge between the two parish communities to get to know each the other better – perhaps a parish trip from St Patrick's to Romainia or vice versa would be a fitting outcome!

This tale however, serves as a warning to all involved in the custodianship of the artwork and heritage within our churches, not least our parish priests! To know the value and the history of an item of church artwork or heritage before it is moved, '*restored*' or even gifted away in what might seem like a good idea at the time, is absolutely key.

There are many demands of our priests these days and they cannot be expected to know everything. We can however expect them to consult more widely & more wisely when it comes to maintaining the historic patrimony of OUR parish churches of which they are custodians as they pass through - they are duty bound to listen to the counsel of those who are in a position to advise!



The sanctuary of the Catholic church in Dârmâneșt.



This is the only known photo of the Dârmâneșt cross in its original home at St Patrick's Kilsyth from 1965 to 1999.



This is the original location of the Dârmâneșt Crucifix which has now been replaced by the cross of '*Christ triumphant over death*' which was a gift to St Patrick's Kilsyth from the Kearny New Jersey Celtic Supporters Club in 1965. Sadly, the holes in the wall behind the new cross are still visible.

Photo above - Holy Thursday evening 2016. The Mortuary Chapel is used as the Altar of Repose for the Blessed Sacrament.