



Basil Spence (1907-76)

was Britain's best-known architect of the mid-twentieth century. Trained in Scotland, he achieved fame as an outstanding exhibition designer at The Festival of Britain in 1951. The same year, as winner of the competition to design a new Coventry Cathedral, Spence became a household name. He was knighted in 1960.

Spence played a leading role in post-war reconstruction, designing schools, housing, universities, civic centres, and eleven parish churches. He differed from many architects of the period in his concern to integrate buildings with their surroundings, his interest in symbolism and imaginative use of artworks. Spence wrote that his priorities were a sense of scale, a feeling for materials and the sensitive enclosure of space. These are evident in the design for Coventry Cathedral, his most personal work.

In his book *Phoenix at Coventry* Spence described the Cathedral as 'a plain jewel casket with many jewels inside.' Nevertheless, its design and structure are complex. Its exterior walls are of a similar pinkish sandstone to the ruined medieval Cathedral, with which it is linked by its porch. The internal walls of concrete blocks are roughly rendered as a background for stained glass and tapestry. Slender concrete columns supporting a delicate web of vaulting and a timber ceiling canopy lead the eye towards the high altar and Graham Sutherland's *Christ in Majesty* beyond. While the layout is reminiscent of the gothic past, the sophisticated technology, contemporary artworks and superb finishes are unmistakably of their time, creating an eloquent monument to Britain's recovery from war. Spence received the Order of Merit on the Cathedral's completion in 1962.

In 1954 Bishop Gorton asked Spence to prepare an inexpensive yet dignified Church design for areas of the Coventry diocese where the population was rapidly increasing. Spence conceived a much-simplified Cathedral in miniature: a well proportioned pavilion-like structure, impressively tall given its restricted budget. Stone or brick construction would have been unaffordable, so the walls were cast in large sections using an economical concrete mix. This produced a robustly textured surface, like those of the nearby housing estates built by the same contractor. The walls were whitewashed, but internally the ceiling's simple chequer pattern introduced an element of colour.

The general layout of the Church itself, the adjacent hall and the belltower were capable of considerable variation to suit different sites. The Church's gables could be either solid or glazed like the Cathedral's West Window. Both gables of St Chad's, Wood End are glazed, while the chancel gable of St Oswald's, Tile Hill serves as a backdrop for Gerald Holtom's appliqué hanging *St Aidan and St Oswald* corresponding to the Cathedral tapestry. St Chad's and St Oswald's possess crucifixes designed by the sculptors Eric Gill and Carroll Simms, just as the Cathedral is distinguished by Jacob Epstein's *St Michael and the Devil*. Like the Cathedral, many of the furnishings were designed by Spence's office to ensure they complemented their surroundings. St Chad, St Oswald's and St John the Divine, Willenhall, were all consecrated in 1957. St John's remains closest to its original condition; its hall survives intact whereas those of the other two have been re-built.



St Chad's



St John the Divine



St Oswald's

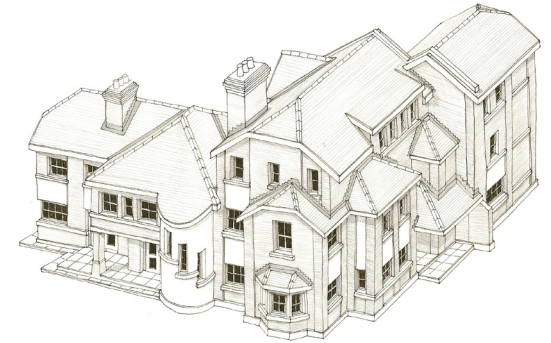
Text by Louise Campbell and David Walker as part of a research project 'The life and work of Sir Basil Spence 1907-76: architecture, tradition and modernity,' based at the University of Warwick and funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.



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To register your interest visit:

<http://members.riba.org/arch-house/reg.asp> or
www.architecture.com

The Natural House is an art & architecture project introducing CBT (clay built technique) in England.

Natural House

CBT is a modern technique of building houses/buildings using primary materials such as clay, straw and water. This is sustainable and carbon neutral and is an excellent technique for self-builders!

This year sees phase one of The Natural House commence as part of Architecture Week 2007.

The workshops will give attendees the basics of CBT and either cover how to choose the right clay to build your own home in CBT or how to build light clay bricks.

These are hands-on workshops and participants can get very messy so it is recommended that suitable (old) clothing and old shoes be worn.

The workshops will take place in three locations:

Acton Scott Historic Working Farm, Acton Scott, Nr Church Stretton, Shropshire SY6 6QN
Public Open Days: 15, 16, 17, 19 June, 10am – 4pm
School Day: 18 June (to be booked in advance), 10am – 2pm

Compton Verney, Warwickshire CV35 9HZ,
School visits only 18,19,20, 21,22 June (booked out already)
Phone: **01926 645560**
e-mail: learning@comptonverney.org.uk

The Festival of Xtreme Building, Corner of Moor St Queensway and Priory Queensway, Birmingham B4 7LN
Public Open Days: 20,21,23,24 June, 10am – 4pm
School Day: 22 June (to be booked in advance), 10am – 2pm

You want to learn more? You can contact us in the following ways:

Web: www.thenaturalhouse.co.uk
Email: thenaturalhouse@gmail.com
Phone: **07939 863 797**

Floating Cities - Hidden Architecture

A celebration of our hidden architecture. Taking the structures and buildings of the canal side from Coventry to Birmingham as inspiration, to create individual structures which can be floated out onto the canal. Canal architecture is often hidden and overlooked when once it was an important part of a city's industry and transport network. In both urban and rural settings we will be looking at beautiful and interesting modern and historic buildings lining the sides of the water, aqueducts, tunnels and bridges making up the fabric of the Canal. This project hopes to use the canal to inspire creativity, reinvestigate these buildings and look at contemporary uses of the canal.

Aimed at young people from 7 different areas of the canal aged between 12-18 to encourage planning and building skills. Young people invited from local children's groups will firstly take part in a walk looking at architecture in the area, making sketches and taking photographs of inspiring buildings to use later to create their own models using paper. The models will be colourful and ethereal being lit from the inside with tea lights and then later floated on the water.

Workshops at:

Birmingham Basin
possibly 2 workshops
Salford Junction
Fazely Junction
Atherstone
Hawkesbury Junction
Coventry Canal Basin

FLOATING CITIES
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Architecture Week 2007

15-24 JUNE 2007

Organised by a partnership of Arts Council England, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Architecture Centre Network. Architecture Week is the national celebration of contemporary architecture. Now in its 11th year, Architecture Week has involved hundreds of organisations, and engaged thousands of people of all ages, and from all walks of life.

Architecture Week 2007 will be taking place from 15 - 24 June 2007, with events spanning a wide range of contemporary arts and culture, coming together in celebration of a built environment. This year's theme is:

'How Green is our Space?'

focusing on critical issues of climate change and sustainability, and aiming to inspire people to think creatively about the spaces around them.

The Coventry and Warwickshire Society of Chartered Architects is pleased to support the activities of local artists during Architecture Week. The CWSCA is the local branch of the Royal Institute of British Architects. It is organised by a branch council, consisting of local RIBA members acting on a voluntary basis. The objective of the CWSCA is the advancement of architecture, and the Society meets this objective through talks, presentations and training, open to members and guests, along with activities run in conjunction with local schools and education organisations promoting architecture amongst young people. Anyone wishing to find out more about the branch and its activities, or wishing to become a member of the RIBA, should visit:

www.architecture.com for more information, or contact the branch chairman, Oliver Brock, at olly@brockcharles.com



Coventry and
Warwickshire
RIBA

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ARCHITECTURE WEEK 2007