

CASE STUDY

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St David's, Islington: Comprehensive church redevelopment September 2016



St David's today

Summary

In 2013, the Anglican church of St David, Holloway in the London Borough of Islington re-opened after a comprehensive redevelopment. The improvements were funded through the redevelopment of adjacent church land for private and social housing, as well as a significant fund-raising exercise by the Parish. This £4m scheme is a story of revival, redevelopment and partnership. It has seen old buildings brought back into active use to strengthen the mission of the church. A strong income stream from renting out space also supports the future mission of the church.



Contents

1	Context
2	Decision to redevelop
3	Redevelopment process
4	The outcomes
5	Ongoing management and use of church spaces
6	Lessons

1 – Context

The Parish of St Mary Magdalene and St David, Holloway is an Anglican parish situated in the heart of the London Borough of Islington. It was ‘rebranded’ as Hope Church Islington at the re-opening of St David’s in 2013. The Parish includes Highbury Corner and the Arsenal Stadium along with Pentonville Prison and the main campus of London Metropolitan University. Much of the area is residential, including a significant proportion of Council/Housing Association housing, with some private housing too.

There are two churches within the parish, run by one integrated team under the name “Hope Church” – St Mary Magdalene’s is the larger church on the busy Holloway Road and St David’s is situated on a quieter residential street. This case study is about St David’s.

The church of St David was first built in 1869 to serve the rapidly growing population of the area and enjoyed over a century of lively activity. However, by the 1970s the congregation was dwindling and eventually in 1984 the church was closed, deconsecrated and the buildings declared as redundant.

During the early 1980’s the church had been shared with a large Greek Orthodox congregation who used the building on Sunday afternoons, drawing a congregation from across London. This congregation continued to meet, even after Anglican worship ceased, and eventually this arrangement was formalized by the Diocesan Property team, who granted a 20 year lease at a very low rent from 1984. The Greek Orthodox community made good use of it for nearly 20 years, making two attempts to buy the freehold of St David’s over that period, before eventually buying and moving to permanent premises of their own nearby in 2004. This move could have been the end of St David’s. However, an unfolding story in the neighbouring church hall was to prove a source of hope.

In 1992 St Mary Magdalene had established a community project (The Paradise Project) in St David’s Church Hall, adjacent to the old church, and had also sent around 30 people to re-start a church congregation in the same building on Sunday mornings.





St David's before the redevelopment

Over the following decade, the congregation held steady. In the early 2000's, Bishop John Sentamu confirmed that the then curate should stay on as Associate Vicar. The assurance of stable and longer-term leadership is thought to have been a major catalyst in subsequent church growth and St David's number rose to about 50 people (adults and children). The hall was well used through the week, often rented out for community uses or in use by the Paradise Project or the church; the renewed St David's congregation became used to using the same informal space for lots of different kinds of activities – it helped to shape their identity.

As the congregation and community activities grew though, it became clear that the old church hall was not going to be large enough.

2 – Decision to redevelop

In 2004, when the Greek Orthodox church vacated the main church building it became empty. The growing St David's congregation resolved after much discussion to take on the church building again and refurbish it to make it 'fit for purpose' for the 21st century and able to accommodate a growing congregation. The decision was not taken lightly, nor was it inevitable.

There was great trepidation at first at the thought of taking responsibility for the church again, particularly given how much investment it needed. It also required a feat of imagination as the church – though in reasonable repair – was arranged in a very formal style which did not fit the character of St David's congregation.

Nevertheless, after much prayer and discussion, the church's leaders at St David's developed a vision of how the church might be 're-born' to serve the present mission of the church and decided to attempt it.

The project benefited from the expertise of the Revd Jonathan Rust, who was a Curate at St David's from 2000 – 2003 and then stayed on to become their Associate Vicar (and remains on the leadership team today). From the outset, he project managed the process of redevelopment for the church, drawing on his previous professional background as a Development Surveyor for several large private-sector property companies. When the Parish appointed a new Vicar in 2006, Revd Paul Zaphiriou, he also fully supported the work and has continued to do so.

3 – Redevelopment process (2004 – 2013)

The project to redevelop the church took 9 years in the end, finally opening in its new form 2013. It is a case study in persistence, but the final outcome was worth the wait.

The evolution of the vision

The original idea was to demolish the old church hall and to replace this with a new hall with some housing (for sale) above it, to help to pay for the project. The main church would not have been a significant part of the project.

After exploring a number of options, the church agreed that it should be more ambitious and should involve the main church building in the project too as this would allow a larger project that would deliver much more space.

Some discussions were held with the Greek Orthodox church about whether they might be interested in being a partner, to share the refurbished church, but in the end they preferred to purchase their own church building elsewhere in the local area.

After further consideration of options, the congregation agreed an outline plan to demolish the old church hall and use that part of the church's site to build new private and social housing. This would generate a significant amount of capital



which could also be used to encourage further grants and donations, which would all then be used to fund a comprehensive refurbishment of the main church building. The aim was to achieve a comprehensive redevelopment of the church site, retaining as much of the structure of the old church building as possible, but fully refurbished and remodelled. The parish was ambitious in its financial targets from the start – wanting to maximize the additional funds that could be ‘levered’ in alongside the land sale proceeds.

The design and planning rollercoaster

The church originally decided it would appoint architects to design a scheme, secure planning permission and then sell the residential land to a developer, whilst managing the church refurbishment themselves. However, as the process unfolded, the church encountered a number of challenges and had to change its approach. The story of designing the scheme and securing planning permission is one of regular progress and regular setbacks – it was certainly not straightforward.

Four firms of architects were interviewed and one was eventually appointed in 2005. After over a year of working together, and following an internal restructuring within the architectural firm, it became clear they did not have the necessary experience or interest to produce strong designs for the church element of the project. A severance deal was eventually negotiated, which was “painful and expensive”.

After a second competition, a new firm of architects was appointed – Matthew Lloyd Architects. This this meant further fees and redoing work, but there was a much better and creative working relationship between this firm and the church – who also had had previous experience of working on church buildings. Their design work subsequently lifted the project ‘out of the ordinary’ and has contributed to a distinctive and very high quality redevelopment.

The feasibility and design process took several years and was funded mainly by a mix of charitable grants with some support from the church’s own funds.

Part way through the design process, the Parish also purchased a small plot of land adjacent to the church from a neighbouring landowner which enabled a larger housing development. This opportunity to increase and improve the scope of the scheme was almost lost when a local developer attempted to ‘gazump’ the parish at the eleventh hour of the negotiations, but the vendor was convinced to stick by their agreement with the parish, and the site was acquired in 2006. The £150,000 purchase price was partly covered by a loan to the Parish by the Diocese of London, and was repaid when the scheme concluded.

The challenge for this project was not only designing a scheme that would deliver good quality, flexible church spaces but also that would enable the development of sufficient housing to pay for the project. The local planning authority was also interested in securing affordable housing as part of the redevelopment. This was an important social outcome (which the church supported) but it was one that also reduced the financial viability of the project. There were therefore a number of tensions to be managed in designing the scheme to meet the various objectives. It



also took some time for the local planning authority to recognize the community benefit of what the church was ultimately trying to achieve – at the outset it was viewed primarily as a commercial housing scheme- and so the social benefits required clear communication by the church.

Initial attempts to negotiate planning permission in 2007 were not successful, so in early 2008 the church decided to change tack and bring a developer in early as a partner to help them secure planning permission together (rather than finding a developer after permission was secured). The contract was tendered and won by Thornsett, a family-firm of developers seeking to gain experience of small and medium-sized redevelopments in London.

There are various ways of structuring development projects. In this case, the Parish entered into a 'conditional contract' with the developer. The Parish agreed to sell to the developer a long lease (retaining the Freehold) for the land on which the housing would be built, conditional on securing planning permission for both the housing and the church elements of the project. The price for the land was a capital sum (£2.8m which the church would use to fund the redevelopment of the main church building), as well as an agreement that the new housing redevelopment would contain a Vicarage and two Parish flats which would be leased back to the Parish.

Together, the church and Thornsett revised the scheme again and sought planning permission. Firm support was indicated by Planning Officers, who stated in their report that "bringing such a community venture to this area is a tremendous benefit in its own right," and firmly recommended approval. However, to the immense disappointment of the Parish, it was refused on the grounds of design of the residential block (too high) and insufficient social housing. After several months of further discussions and negotiations with the planners, and separate discussions with councillors, the scheme was revised and three planning applications submitted simultaneously, offering different building heights for the housing and different levels of affordable housing; despite the Planning Officers changing tack, and recommending refusal of all three applications, the 'middle' application was granted planning permission by the Planning Committee in 2009.

The successful outcome of this phase of the project was all the more remarkable given the major global financial crash which impacted on the UK from 2008 onwards. It created a difficult financial environment for Thornsett to operate within, but they chose to persevere with the project.

Construction

The housing was delivered first by Thornsett over an 18 month period in 2010 – 2012. They contracted with a firm of builders to do this after a tendering exercise, but the builders unfortunately went bankrupt early in the construction phase, as part of the impact of the wider financial crash. A different firm of builders were eventually brought in to replace them, after a second tendering exercise. The church received its money for the residential site when the flats were completed and then tendered their own separate contract for the works to the church – which was ultimately won by the same firm who had completed the flats. The construction



work in relation to the main church building was delivered in 2012–2013, with the whole project handed over in two phases – all finished by the of the late Autumn of 2013, when the church opened with its first service in November that year.

Subsequent ‘snagging’ (delivering the finishing touches and identifying any faults to rectify) took longer than expected and has been managed by the church’s premises manager. On this scheme it has not been a trivial exercise and some issues have required further expenditure.



4 – The outcomes

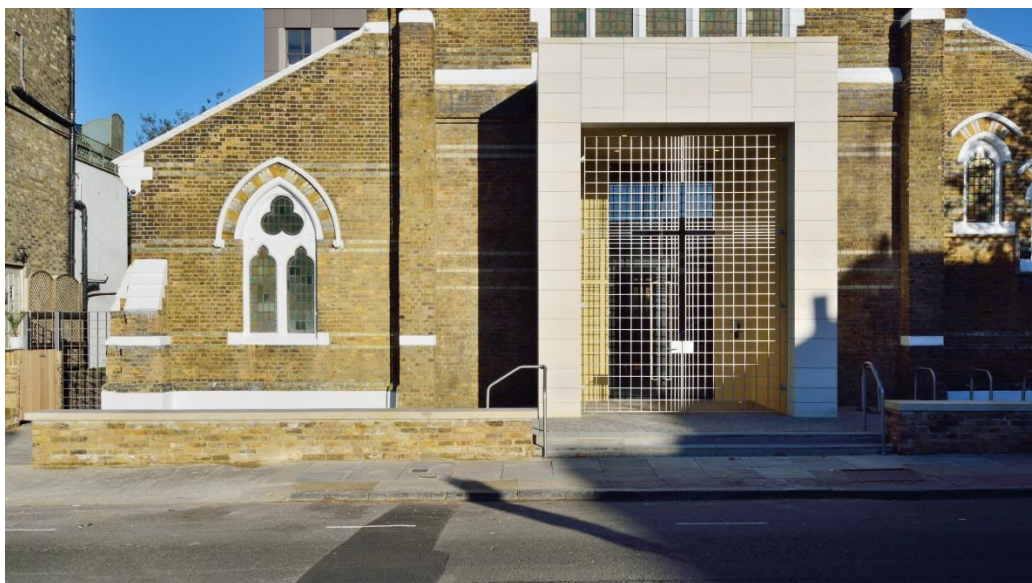
i) Physical outcomes

The **refurbished church** now includes:

- On the ground floor – A well equipped commercial standard kitchen, toilets, offices and a prayer room, together with an attractive reception area and the main church worship space
- Upstairs – Two floors of space, wrapped in a ‘u’ shape around the main worship space, currently used by The Courtyard, a specialist school for children with autism, which is part of St Mary Magdalene Academy, the local Church of England secondary school
- In the basement – a suite of 7 classrooms and a separate ‘cinema room’ were created, currently also being used by St Mary Magdalene Academy for teaching purposes during school hours, but by the church and other community groups during evenings, weekends and school holidays. Various uses included Church children’s groups, youth club, holiday clubs, teaching and training for outside organisations, film nights, parties and other social events and prayer meetings.
- Two parish flats – a one-bed flat which is part of the church complex and a two-bed flat which is part of the adjacent housing development.

In the neighbouring **seven storey housing block**, there are 30 private flats (which were sold), 9 social housing units managed by a Housing Association and the church also owns a four-bedroom Vicarage flat and a two-bedroom flat for it to use as a parish flat.

The scheme subsequently won a design Award at the LABC Awards for Building Excellence 2014.



ii) Financial outcomes

The redevelopment of the land for housing resulted in a £2.8m capital payment from Thornsett to the Parish. Thornsett also paid nearly £100,000 to the local planning authority as a S106 contribution to local community infrastructure.

The church redevelopment cost over £4m, so the church had to fundraise £1.6m in grants and other sources to cover the full cost. This was broken down as follows:

Sale of long leasehold interest in Residential site (old church hall)	£2,800k
Parish reserves/sale of small site at St Mary Magdalene	<u>£510k</u>
Grants	£395k
Personal giving (church members)	£95k
VAT Rebate	£480k
Interest/investment of capital (short term)	<u>£70k</u>
Total Cost	£4,400k

iii) Social outcomes

The St David's congregation moved into the church in 2013. In many ways this was a fresh start for the church, after having spent several years worshipping as part of St Mary Magdalene's. The group of people who came to St David's included some who had previously worshipped in the old church hall, but also new people as well.

Today St David's has approximately 40-50 adults and children meeting on a Sunday morning – a diverse group including many families – and there are 40-50 adults meeting on a Sunday evening, predominantly aged between 20-35. Together with its sister church St Mary Magdalene's, it runs activities for older people, for parents and toddlers, for students, concerts, open air jazz concerts, outreach events like Soul in the City and even an (outdoor) Pet Service.

The new church building has been a resource for the wider church, used for Deanery and Area conferences, services and socials. Other north London parishes regularly use it as a base for retreats, PCC away-days, etc. A national inter-faith conference on the use of religious buildings has been hosted there, as well as regional conferences of church building refurbishment and management.

The parish's original vision of creating a space that affirmed to local people that they were valued and of worth has been achieved in a number of ways, through hosting local community events and celebrations, meetings, music rehearsals, etc. More proactively, the church has opened its doors to provide a community ceilidh, an art exhibition, film showings and open house. Youth and children's groups regularly enjoy the bespoke community space. St David's has shifted local perceptions of church accommodation as being simply a cheap, cheerful and perhaps slightly quirky alternative to other community halls in the area, to being desirable, quality, attractive accommodation that is inviting, high-quality, and which is capable of affirming those that use it.

The flexibility and clever design of the space means several different activities can take place at any one time, all with their own entrances and facilities. It is attractive



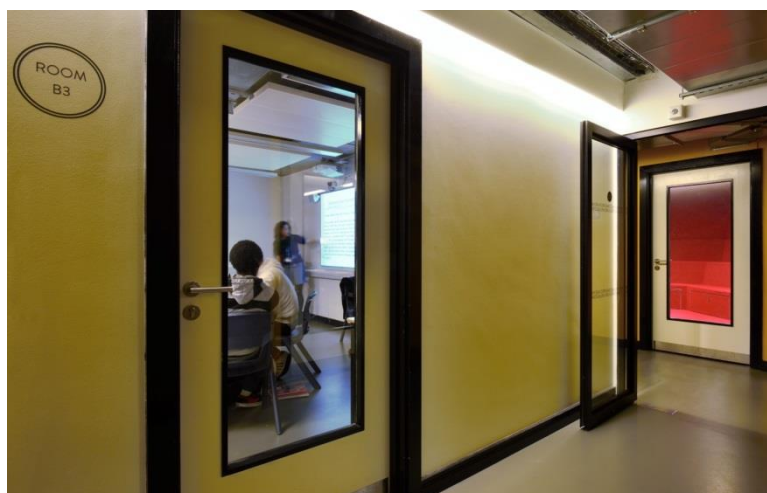
and attractional space: The opportunity for community engagement continues to grow as word spreads.



Entrance hall



Cinema room in the converted Crypt



Classrooms/meeting rooms in the converted Crypt

5 – The ongoing management and use of church spaces

Since the church building re-opened in 2013, the congregation of St David's now has the benefit of a bright, new worship space in which it can meet and worship and into which it can grow. The church has also retained use of the basement rooms and most other spaces on Sundays and in the evenings for running children's church and other church activities. Some additional rooms are also available for church use all day. There are plenty of attractive and flexible spaces for the church to use throughout the week for its mission of growth and serving the local community.

Most of the newly created spaces, in the basement and upstairs, are currently rented out by the adjacent Church School, who are obviously a key partner for the church. With the exception of the spaces on the first floor, all of the other spaces are available for use by the church in evenings and on Sundays. Sometimes these spaces (and the main church itself) are let out to other users on a regular or an ad-hoc basis; for example a Czech language school uses a number of spaces each Saturday at the moment.



The Bishop of Stepney and Revd Jonathan Rust at the opening service

The church currently earns over £160,000 per year in income from renting out its various spaces at St David's; this includes income from all of the church spaces, the two parish flats and £12,000 p.a. ground rent from the adjacent housing development (which the church still owns the freehold of). After the costs of managing and maintaining these spaces, it is estimated that perhaps £130,000 net per year is available for the church to spend on what it chooses. Needless to say this is a very helpful boost to the parish in its mission as a whole.

The Parish employs a part-time (3 days per week) Premises Manager to manage all of its buildings, manage lettings, liaise with tenants and oversee any repairs. She is also assisted by a couple of part-time vergers who undertake a range of practical tasks.

6 – Lessons

Planning and redevelopment

- Any significant church redevelopment is likely to be difficult, time-consuming and expensive. They are not to be undertaken lightly and a definite resilience is needed to cope with (perhaps inevitable) set-backs or disappointments along the way; but experiencing problems does not mean that it is a bad scheme, it just underlines the nature of the challenge. Nevertheless, when they conclude successfully, they can deliver a great enabling resource for the church which may benefit several generations. The advice from St David's is *"dream big...then pare back if you need to"*.
- The story of this scheme includes the appointment of architects who were not appropriate, several failed planning applications, a major global financial crash and a firm of builders going bust. Yet, the scheme was still successfully built and the church now has a great resource. The lesson here is perhaps *"don't give up"*.
- The aims of the project and the church's vision and purposes will need to be clearly explained to any external partners, funders and the local planning authority. It should not just be assumed that people will understand what the project is for or why the church is doing this – it will need to be clearly communicated.
- Many planning applications succeed but nearly always benefit from prior discussion and, where necessary, negotiation on the key points. Some compromises may be necessary to secure permission. Engaging with local councillors and politicians is important on a large project – and not just the technical officers.

Construction

- When a contractor sub-contracts out work, be clear about who is doing what and ensure that an appropriate quality of work is maintained.

Management of spaces

- In choosing how best to manage its spaces there is a 'triangle of tension' between the church retaining use of its spaces for church activities, the renting out of spaces for income generation and using spaces to serve the local community (which may cost money). Finding an appropriate balance may take time and may also change over time as circumstances require. *"A redevelopment should enable more mission... not just make our lives more comfortable."*
- Church spaces require pro-active management if they are to be well maintained, repaired and used effectively. It does not just happen accidentally.
- Hosting non-church activities on church premises does not automatically lead to 'mission' if those building users do not engage with the congregation themselves



or have the time or opportunity to enjoy the building as a church. Any such engagement of users requires thought and intentional planning. Mission needs to be intentional.

Further information

For further information please contact St David's. Contact details are on their website at www.hopechurchislington.org

Acknowledgements

All photographs were kindly provided by St David's church. The case study draws on desk research and discussions with Revd Jonathan Rust and was written by the Centre for Theology & Community.

