

Regarding: Basic Elements of Ecclesiastical Design for use at St. John’s Church

1 Introduction

With church architecture in general and Anglican church architecture in specific, there are many and varying common usages, even more opinions, and very few “absolutes” or “universals”—if any.

This document proposes to give some basic theological and historical context for the discussion of church architecture and design. When the importance of having a properly designed sanctuary is discussed, common words often do not express common ideas. Is a steeple essential? An organ? What rug color? Central pulpit or to the side? Which side? Two reading desks for Epistle and Gospel readings, or one? ... and many other such questions.

While I do not claim scholarly expertise regarding church architecture, training and experience have exposed me to information pertaining to the arrangement of a church’s elements of design, the reasons for the arrangement of such elements, and how to relate to them in the conduct of worship. I am sharing what I know in order to promote a common framework for discussion.

I refer as often as possible to online resources which are easily accessible for the average reader, especially from Google Books and Wikipedia. I have especially used two books that are available from the Google Books archive (all links are clickable if you are reading this as a PDF file): a) *The Parson’s Handbook*,¹ and b) *Anglican Church Architecture*.² I also made use of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.³ Words in **bold** are defined in section 3, “Definitions”.

2 Discussion

Here are a few basic ideas that should be helpful in a discussion about worship space in a “classical church” structure.

2.1 Liturgical “compass”

By way of referencing locations and directions, I am using the liturgical directional “compass” of church design. Namely,

¹books.google.com/books?id=Sp4SAAAAYAAJ.

²books.google.com/books?id=wHZFAQAAMAAJ.

³www.newadvent.org/cathen.

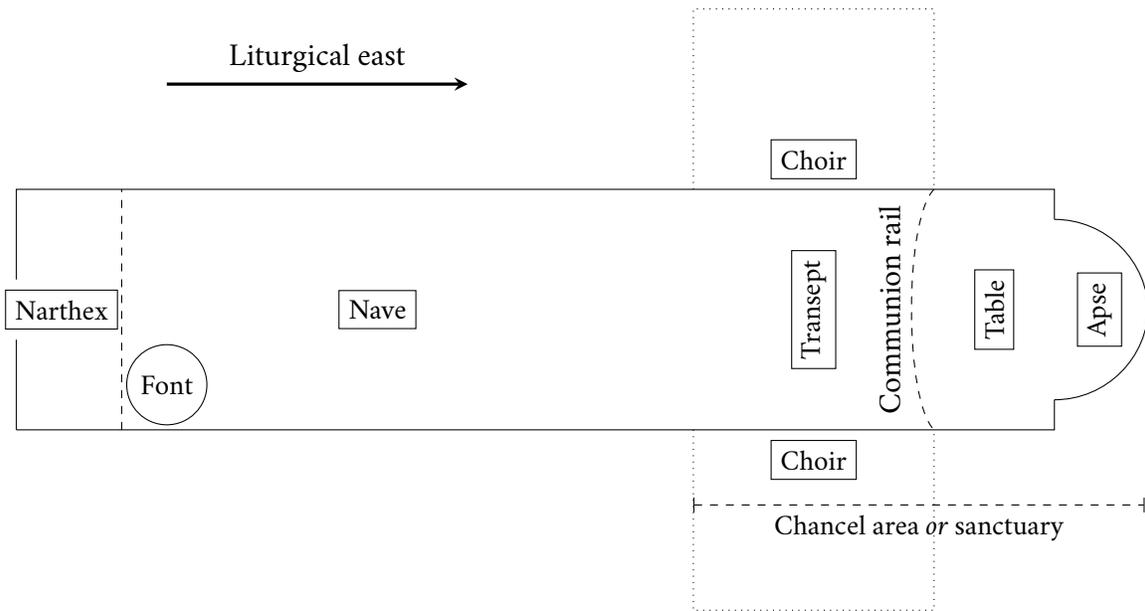


Figure 1: Historic layout

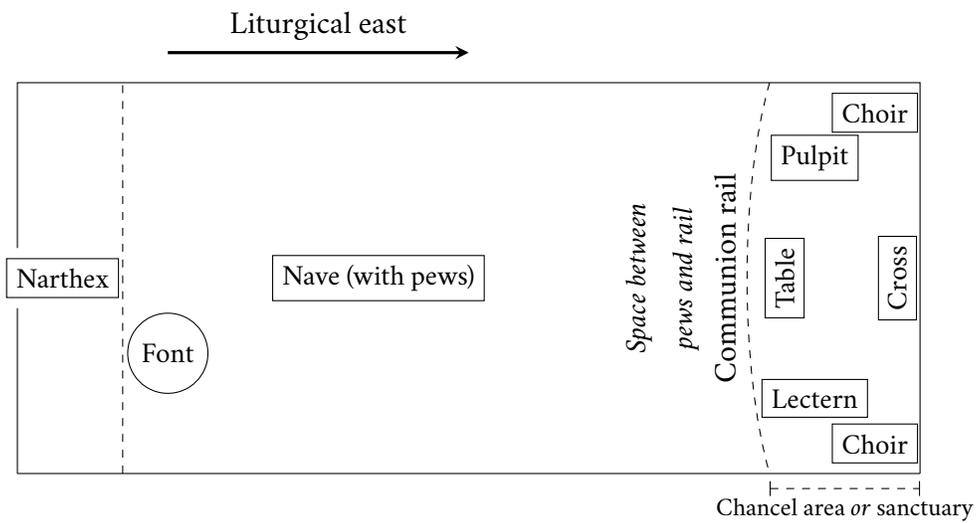


Figure 2: Split chancel layout

- the entrance way (**narthex**) is at the *west* end of the church liturgically speaking, and,
- the Lord's **Table** is at the *east* end liturgically speaking.⁴

2.2 Basic design elements

A quick comparison of figures 1 and 2 shows that there are some differences between what one might call an historical or classical layout (in the first figure), versus what is practical and useable in a Protestant church and especially at 1150 Bristol Road (as in the second figure). Nevertheless, a quick comparison will show that there is a cruciform feel” in both cases, with the use of the **transept** and **choir** spaces in figure 1 and with the use of a **split chancel** arrangement (**table** and **cross** from **west** to **east**, **pulpit** and **lectern** from **north** to **south**) in the Protestant layout of figure 2.

The most remarkable difference in design in many European churches would be that the pulpit would be quite elevated over the congregation—as much as 10–15 feet—and placed roughly at the center of the nave, usually on the wall on the north side. It is said by some that this symbolized the Word (Jesus) that came into the midst of our world.

2.3 ‘A’ list items

By ‘A’ list is meant those items that would be considered basic in the layout of the church.

1. Lord's **Table**
2. **Pulpit**
3. **Lectern**
4. **Credence Table**
5. Stand for the baptismal **Font**
6. **Cross**⁵
7. Kneelers: rearrange the pews in such a way that kneelers may fit comfortably between them.
8. Arrangement of the various items.
 - a) in a **split chancel** arrangement,

⁴“The Christians of the earliest ages ... placed the altar at the east end of the sacred edifice ...” (p. 19, [1]). Reasons may vary. I was taught that it was because of such texts as, “behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east”, as in anticipation of the Messiah (see Ezekiel 43:2, Isaiah 41:2).

⁵Should items 1–6 be of similar or the same wood and design?

- b) with a delineation of the **chancel area** from the **nave**, perhaps by means of space between the front pews and the communion rail.⁶
- c) In a **split chancel** arrangement, the **pulpit** will be on the liturgical **north** side of the **chancel area**. The **lectern** will be on the liturgical **south** side of the **chancel area**.⁷

2.4 ‘B’ list items

‘B’ list items are my suggestions or thoughts about things to which St. John’s is accustomed, or about which I have given some thought.

1. Noting that the 1150 worship space is more nearly square (as in figure 2), than a long parallelogram (as it would classically be, figure 1), perhaps arrange the pews in a slightly curvilinear fashion on a radius that best accommodates the width of the **chancel area**?
2. A pipe organ?
3. Need to provide a **piscina** for cleansing the communion ware.
4. Feature the symbol for the Apostle John—the eagle—more prominently in our “branding”?

3 Definitions

Consult figures 1 and 2 for the locations of various design elements.

Altar (preferably “Table”): An altar is any structure upon which offerings are made for religious purposes. This word was never used in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and is only used in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer in a service called the “Institutions of Ministers into Parishes or Churches”. The preferred term is “table”, because of the sacrificial connotations of “altar” and the relationship of a Roman view of the Eucharist thereunto.

Apse (not applicable at 1150): The apse is the semicircular or polygonal termination to the **choir** or aisles of a church at the eastern most part of the church. The apse is separated from the main part of the church by the **transept**.

Chancel (area): In church architecture, the chancel is the space around the **table** and includes the **choir** and the **sanctuary**, located at the liturgical **east** end of a traditional Christian church building. It is generally the area used by the clergy and choir during worship, while the congregation is in the **nave**.

⁶Some would hold this separation to echo the distinction between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament temple.

⁷There seems to be little or no agreement regarding **pulpit** placement. *The Parson’s Handbook*, tending toward a **high church** orientation, observes that the pulpit “may be in almost any part of the church, the usual place being at the side of the **nave**” [2], p. 56, also [1], p. 59.

Choir: Sometimes spelled “quire”, the area of a church that provides seating for the clergy and church choir. As an architectural term, it is not always the location from which the music is sung by a choir; one might say, that the music isn’t always sung from the “architectural choir” by the choir.

Credence table: A small side table in the **sanctuary** of a Christian church which is used in the celebration of the Eucharist. The credence table is usually placed near the wall on the **south** side of the sanctuary. It holds the implements that are used in the Eucharistic celebration. The chalice and paten (cup and plate), covered with their cloths and veil, may be placed on the credence either from the beginning of the service until the Offertory, at which time they are moved to the **table**. If the elements are put upon the table together with the offering, then the credence table is used to hold extra linens or other (secondary) items.

Cross: (Usually) two⁸ (usually) perpendicular⁹ beams, the longer of which is vertical and the short of which is horizontal. There are many variations on this design, of which the following could be applicable in our context: “Celtic” (cross or wheel), “Canterbury”, or *Christus Rex*,¹⁰. For an more detail, start with Wikipedia’s en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_cross_variants.

East/south/west/north: The compass directions by which the church was oriented in classical designs, now used as a liturgical compass orientation, without regard for the actual compass direction, i.e., “liturgical east”, “liturgical south”, and so on. For our purposes we are assuming that the entrance way (**narthex**) is at the *west* end of the church and the Lord’s **Table** is at the *east end* liturgically speaking, actual compass orientation notwithstanding.

Epistle side: Epistle side is the term used to designate the side of a church on which the Epistle is read during the Mass or Eucharist; it is on the liturgical **south** side of the church. This tradition appears to stem from the Middle Ages in Roman Catholic usage and is only used by those who still practice the Tridentine (Latin) Mass, or have been affected by that tradition. See **gospel side**. I am assuming that this will not be an essential distinction at 1150.¹¹

Font (baptismal): The container in which the water for baptism is contained. In reformational churches (including Anglican), it is a basin, sometimes on a pedestal. Traditionally, the baptismal font has been placed near the entrance of the church (after the **narthex**, at the beginning of the **nave**), since it is by baptism that one enters the visible body of Christ.

⁸The “patriarchal cross” is an exception.

⁹The Russian Orthodox cross is an exception.

¹⁰A cross with a triumphant Jesus—arms outstretched in invitation, rather than nailed to the horizontal beam—superimposed.

¹¹See the Catholic encyclopedia [5] (www.newadvent.org/cathen/01356e.htm). It appears that this usage is discouraged by the Episcopal Church (archive.episcopalchurch.org/109399_14437_ENG_HTML.htm). According to *The Parson’s Handbook* [2], older Anglican usage did not recognize such distinction of sides, see pp. 62–63. Rather, the differences in reading desks—if any—was a distinction between a reading desk for the communion service Epistle and Gospel, as distinct from a smaller and less elevated desk for the lessons for other services (Morning and Evening Prayer, for instance). Barr [1] makes no reference at all to such a distinction.

Gospel side: The Gospel side is the liturgical north side of the church. This tradition appears to stem from the Middle Ages in Roman Catholic usage and is only used by those who still practice the Tridentine (Latin) Mass, or have been affected by that tradition. See **epistle side** and footnote. I am assuming that this will not be an essential distinction at 1150.

High church: This phrase can have two meanings: “high church” in style, or “high church” in theology. The first sense has quite a breadth of uses and is impossible to define with precision. The theological sense refers to Roman views of the sacraments and the priesthood. Churches (like St. John’s) can have elements of high church style, without being theologically high church. For example, St. John’s has a tradition of using the chasuble¹² and distinguishing between the **Epistle** and **Gospel sides**: historically Roman Catholic usages. See **low church**.

Lectern: A reading desk, not to be confused with a podium, the platform on which one stands.

Low church: This phrase typically refers to the ornamentation and theological leanings of what many call “evangelical” Anglican churches. See **high church**.

Narthex: The entrance, lobby, or vestibule at the west end of the church, from Greek, *narthēkas*, a porch.

Nave: The main body of the church from the entrance at the west end and providing the central approach to the **table** up to the **chancel** area. The term nave is from medieval Latin *navis* (ship). The ship is an important Christian symbol dating from earliest Christianity, alluding to 1 Peter 3:18–22.

Piscina: The shallow basin placed near the **Lord’s Table** of a church, or else in the **vestry** or **sacristy**, used for washing the communion vessels. The purpose of the piscina is to dispose of water used sacramentally by returning these particles directly to the earth, rather than dumping them into sewage. For this reason, it is connected by a pipe directly to the ground.

Pulpit: A raised podium and/or **lectern** for preachers.

Sacristy: A room for keeping vestments and other worship service paraphernalia. The sacristy is usually located inside the church and usually behind or on a side of the sanctuary area.

Sanctuary: Generally used to denote the area inside the church used for worship. More properly, it refers to the area from the communion rail to the **apse**, the eastern half of the chancel area.

Split (or divided) chancel: Interestingly, the idea of a split or divided chancel has several meanings, depending upon who is commenting on the arrangement. For our purposes, it shall be defined as follows, “the split **chancel** balanced the four primary symbolic representations of God’s revelation held by Protestants: the Bible, the **table**, the **pulpit**, and the **cross**. Balance among these symbols was achieved by placing the cross on the far wall

¹²en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chasuble.

at the back of the chancel, centering the table in the chancel on the longitudinal axis, but several feet out from the wall, placing the lectern holding the Bible on one side of the axis, and positioning on pulpit on the other.”¹³

Table: The (Lord’s) Table is the table on which the elements of bread and wine are placed at the appropriate time in the communion service.

Transept: For our use, the transverse section of the church which stands between the **nave** to the west and the **chancel** area to the **east**. It was formed by two sections added to the north and south of the church, creating a cross-appearing (cruciform) floor plan. This word can also be used to allude to the space between the first row of pews and the communion rail.

Vestry: A vestry refers to a robing and storage room in or attached to a place of worship. It also referred to the committee for secular and church government for a parish which met in the vestry of the parish church, and consequently became known colloquially as the “vestry”.

¹³Kilde [3], p. 209. She asserts that the split chancel design was an early to mid-twentieth century reaction against “auditorium churches” (her words) in which all liturgical elements were removed except for the prominently central location of the pulpit and the pews were arranged in an auditorium fashion, curvilinearly rather than rectilinearly, and focused on the pulpit. Such design changes between auditorium and split chancels and *vice versa* also involved the placement of the choir, design of the pulpit area, and other aspects of building design. She also asserts that it was liberal main-stream churches who popularized the movement toward the divided chancel arrangement as a formalism in the place of rigorous content ([4], pp. 172–173).

Bibliography

- [1] James Barr. *Anglican Church Architecture with some remarks upon ecclesiastical furniture*. John Henry Parker; Tilt and Bogue, London, second edition, 1843.
- [2] Percy Dearmer. *The Parson's Handbook*. Henry Frowde, London, sixth edition, 1907.
- [3] Jeanne Halgren Kilde. *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [4] Jeanne Halgren Kilde. *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [5] Augustin Joseph Schulte. *Altar side*, 1907.

See also these interesting volumes, available in the Google Books archive.

- Mant, Richard. *Church Architecture Considered*, in which the author commends “the study of Ecclesiastical Architecture” as “one of the most pleasurable and profitable intellectual features of the present day” (George Phillips, Belfast, publisher, 1843).
- Close, F. *Church Architecture, Scripturally Considered*, stands in stark contrast to Mant’s volume, though written but a year later, in which the author develops his concerns about superstition being promoted by overly ornate churches (Hatchard and Son, London, publisher, 1844).