

The Coventry chair

Past, present and future



Luke Hughes

Furniture in Architecture

The Coventry chair, an iconic post-war design by Dick Russell RDI, is being revived and re-engineered by Luke Hughes®.

The first major project, comprising 1545 chairs, for the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University, Indiana, was delivered on 27 October 2015.

The chapel is reputedly the largest college chapel in the United States (and probably the world) and has a long association with Coventry and the Community of the Cross of Nails.

We hope that this short introduction will help describe some of the background to the chair, its revival and its association with Coventry Cathedral.

The original and new Coventry chair



Photograph of the original cathedral, taken circa 1880



A sketch of the original cathedral interior, circa 1890

'It is questionable whether the entire kingdom supplies a finer architectural specimen, as a parish church, than that of St. Michael, Coventry'

'History of Coventry', Benjamin Poole, 1847

Formally the Parish church of St Michael, the Old Cathedral as it has now become known, originated in the 1300s with chapels added some 200 years later. At one point St Michael's was the largest parish church in England and after some 400 years the church was raised to cathedral status in 1918.

A pair of brothers, and half a century later, a pair of sisters are particularly remembered for their contribution to the building costs. A small brass plaque at the spire's base reads:

'William and Adam built the tower,
Ann and Mary built the spire,
William and Adam built the church,
Ann and Mary built the quire.'

In 1931 the permanent pews were replaced with chairs, a recognition even then of the increasing need for flexibility within cathedrals.

1918

St Michael's becomes Coventry Cathedral

The photo on the opposite page shows Coventry Cathedral in 1880. Its stonework and facade were in a state of decay and later in that decade it underwent a large restoration to the exterior.





Opposite page: US soldiers attend a Mother's Day service in the bombed out nave of Coventry Cathedral. This page: Prime Minister Winston Churchill visits the cathedral ruins

The city of Coventry was attacked numerous times during the war. The most devastating air raid was on 14th November 1940. The city was one of Britain's most important centres for steel and munitions production, accounting for 25% of all British aircraft produced during the war.

The Luftwaffe's codename for this attack was Operation Mondscheinsonate (Moonlight Sonata). 515 aircraft dropped over 500 tonnes of high-explosives and killed 568 people. Joseph Goebbels later used the term *coventriert* ('coventried') when describing similar levels of destruction.

4,330 homes were destroyed and more than three quarters of the city's factories were damaged. During the 10 hour air assault, the 14th century cathedral was almost totally destroyed.

'The cathedral will rise again, will be rebuilt, and it will be as great a pride to future generations as it has been to generations of the past.'

Very Reverend Dick Howard, Cathedral Provost, speaking the morning after the raid

1940

Coventry Cathedral bombed

On 14th November 1940, Coventry sustained intensive bombing in what has now become known as the Coventry Blitz.





Exterior of Coventry Cathedral with ruins on the left. Photo: Steve Cadman



Interior of Coventry Cathedral with original Coventry chairs. Photo: David Iliff. License: CC-BY-SA 3.0

Although other cathedrals, including Exeter and St Paul's, were damaged by aerial bombardment during WWII, Coventry was the only one to be destroyed.

The very next day after the attack, while the ashes were still smouldering, the decision was made to rebuild, a commitment that became a beacon of reconciliation, changing liturgy, and shifting fashions in post-war architecture.

Today's cathedral consists of both the old ruins - a potent reminder of the cost of conflict - and the new building which is intended as a space for all denominations and walks of life to gather.

The chosen architect, Basil Spence, had been a former assistant to Edwin Lutyens and well understood the importance of integrating the decorative arts into architecture. The rebuilding project offered one of the greatest opportunities in the twentieth century to commission artists, craftsmen and women in many disciplines. Commissions included ceramics by Hans Coper, lettering by Ralph Beyer, glass by Margaret Traherne, John Piper, Patrick Reyntiens, John Hutton and Keith New, together with sculpture by Geoffrey Clarke and what is probably the largest tapestry in the world, by Graham Sutherland.

Dick Russell RDI was recruited by Spence to work on the seating and he came up with a classic design. Two thousand chairs were made for Coventry which to this day blend seamlessly with the architecture. The chair was later used to furnish cathedrals across the UK and the USA. Tens of thousands are still in use around the world, more than fifty years after they were made.

1950

Basil Spence unveils new cathedral design

Whilst serving as a Captain on the beaches of Normandy, architect Basil Spence, in response to his friend's enquiry as to his ambitions, replied 'to build a cathedral'. In 1950, out of 600 applications, his unique and unorthodox design was chosen to become the new Coventry Cathedral. Construction began in 1954 and the final piece, the flèche, was installed by helicopter eight years later.

'When Coventry Cathedral was going up... he went through a lean period when he wasn't offered any jobs at all because people thought he wouldn't have time for anything else.'

Sir Arnold Joseph Philip Powell on Basil Spence

1962

New Coventry Cathedral opened by HM the Queen

Six years after laying the foundation stone for the new Coventry Cathedral, HM the Queen returned to the city to officiate at its opening. The occasion also included the premiere of Benjamin Britten's 'War Requiem', the unfurling of the world's largest tapestry and the unveiling of Dick Russell's Coventry chairs.



Dick Russell's original Coventry chair in Basil Spence's new cathedral





Opposite page: The Gordon Russell Museum. Above: Dean of Coventry Cathedral The Very Revd John Witcombe meets Valparaiso's Executive Director of Campus Ministries Rev. Brian Johnson in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral

The cathedral has, since its dedication in 1962, become a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation. Immediately after the destruction, Provost Dick Howard expressed the hope that, when the war was over 'we should work with those who had been enemies to build a kinder, more Christ-like world'. Two charred beams which had fallen in the shape of a cross were bound and placed on an altar of rubble. Three medieval nails were formed into a cross, the form of which became a potent sign of friendship, especially in new relationships with Germany through links between Coventry, Kiel, Dresden and Berlin. The result was the foundation of the 'Community of the Cross of Nails'.

One partner is Valparaiso University, Indiana, a Lutheran University not far from Chicago, which has maintained an annual exchange programme with the cathedral. The university has its own chapel, designed by Charles Stadel and dedicated in 1959, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Spence's original conception for Coventry. Representatives of the university realised that the chair design was particularly well suited to their own chapel and contacted the Gordon Russell Trust who passed them on to Luke Hughes® with whom there has been a close and long-standing relationship.

Thus began the process of reviving Dick Russell's design for a new generation.

2012

Valparaiso University reach out to the Gordon Russell Trust

After signing an exclusive world-wide licensing arrangement with the Worcestershire-based Gordon Russell Design Museum, Luke Hughes® began the process of reviving the design so as to benefit from modern construction techniques.





A model of the revived Coventry chair is constructed in the Luke Hughes® studio

The first step in reviving the Coventry chair was to examine the original drawings and archive material at the Gordon Russell Museum and then to upgrade the manufacturing processes to take into account modern production techniques that were simply not available fifty years ago.

For Luke Hughes®, a company that has been designing furniture for cathedrals and churches across the UK and USA for the last twenty five years, the chair fits perfectly within the company's central design philosophy that furniture should enhance architectural space, not embarrass it.

'The design epitomises all the best traditions of the Arts and Crafts movement with the practicalities of the machine age. Gordon used to say that we needed to teach the machine some manners – well, his brother Dick certainly did with this chair. It's marvellous to know this classic design will have new life.'

Trevor Chinn, Trustee of the Gordon Russell Trust
and former Chief In-House Designer of Gordon Russell Ltd

2013

Luke Hughes® works with Valparaíso on furnishing their chapel

For Valparaíso, the dimensions of the Coventry chair were adapted for a new audience. One of the versions of the linking mechanisms, in solid brass, was upgraded and made integral to the structure.





The revived Coventry chairs inside the Chapel of the Resurrection.



The Coventry chairs are unpacked. Photos: Valparaiso University.

On the morning of the 26th of October 2015 1,545 revived Coventry chairs arrived at their new home in Valparaiso just as the existing pews were removed and shipped to their new homes across the country.

‘As soon as we started unpacking the boxes, the favourable impact of the chairs on the architectural interior was immediately clear to everyone.’

Prof Gretchen Bugglen, Phyllis and Richard Duesenberg Chair in Christianity and the Arts

‘On time, on budget, without a blemish – they make the chapel look amazing.’

Gary Greiner, Director of Facilities, Valparaiso

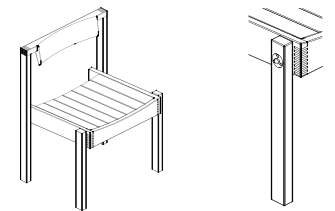
2015

The chairs arrive at Valparaiso University

The first batch of revived Coventry chairs is delivered to Valparaiso University.







'It's an iconic 1960s design, beautiful in itself, practical, hard-wearing and passing that key test, really important for churches, of minimizing visual impact on the interior; so many beautiful church interiors are ruined by inappropriate furniture.'

Luke Hughes





History and philosophy

Luke Hughes was educated at Cambridge University before setting up a small craft workshop in the backyard of a house in Bloomsbury in 1978 and then moving to Covent Garden in 1981. The business was incorporated in 1986 and was at that time producing design work and prototypes for Liberty & Co., Heals and John Lewis Partnership.

Hughes's design philosophy is heavily influenced by the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement, not least about the nature of craftsmanship. Another central principle is that, in any quality building, the connection between architecture and furniture should be seamless: most buildings cannot function without furniture, yet inappropriate pieces grossly undermine great architecture.

Since 1990, he has focused on design for public spaces, particularly in the ecclesiastical, corporate, leisure and institutional sectors – principally for buildings with significant architectural interiors.

Past projects

Cathedrals

Arundel Cathedral
Bristol Cathedral
Canterbury Cathedral
Chichester Cathedral
Derby Cathedral
Ely Cathedral
Exeter Cathedral
Hereford Cathedral
Leicester Cathedral
Newcastle Cathedral
Portsmouth Cathedral
Rochester Cathedral
Sheffield Cathedral
St Albans Cathedral
St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh
St Paul's Cathedral
Southwark Cathedral
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Columbia, USA
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Miami, USA
Westminster Abbey
Westminster Cathedral
Winchester Cathedral

Chapels

Benenden School Chapel
Charterhouse School Chapel
Clare College Chapel
Epsom College Chapel
Hurstpierpoint College Chapel
Keble College Chapel
Royal Military Chapel, London
Shrewsbury School Chapel
St Peter ad Vincula, Tower of London
Shrewsbury School Chapel
Valparaiso University chapel, USA

Churches

All Saints' Church, Woodford
All Saints' Church, Carshalton
Boxgrove Priory
Church of the Holy Spirit, Southsea
Dorchester Abbey
Holy Trinity, Cuckfield
Jesuit Care Centre, Christchurch
Mucknell Abbey
Newark Song School
St Alban's Church, Romford
St Andrew Church, Holborn
St Andrew's Church, Alderton
St Andrew's Church, Feniton
St Andrew's Church, Southwark
St Andrew's Church, Stapleford
St Andrew's Church, Surbiton
St Barnabas Church, Dulwich
St Bart's Church, Wilmslow

St Catherine's Church, Burbage
St Clement Dane's Church, The Strand
St Dunstan's Church, Mayfield
St George and St Martin Church, Wye
St George's Chapel, Windsor
St George's Church, Bloomsbury
St George's Church, Bristol
St George's Church, Oakdale
St Joan of Arc Church, Highbury
St John the Baptist Church, Tisbury
St John's Church, Berwick St John
St John's Church, Blackheath
St John's Church, Notting Hill
St John's Church, Preston
St John's Church, San Francisco, USA
St John's Church, Shirley
St Joseph's Church, Hackney
St Lawrence Jewry
St Luke's Church, Chelsea
St Margaret's Church, Bethersden
St Mark's Church, Swindon
St Mary's Church, March
St Mary-le-Bow Church, Cheapside
St Mary the Less Church, Durham
St Mary the Virgin Church, Ideford
St Mary the Virgin Church, Oxford
St Mary-at-Hill Church, Billingsgate
St Mary and St Giles Church, Stony Stratford
St Mary's House, Brighton
St Mary's Church, Ealing
St Mary's Church, Easton
St Mary's Church, Fairford
St Mary's Church, Houghton-on-the-Hill
St Mary's Church, Ilfley
St Mary's Church, Kempston
St Mary's Church, Shroton
St Mary's Church, Somers Town
St Mary's Church, Twickenham
St Mary's Church, Woodbridge
St Matthew's Church, Wilton, USA
St Michael and All Angels Kingsnorth
St Michael's Church, Stourport
St Paul's Church, Croxton
St Paul's Church, Mill Hill
St Peter & St Paul Church, Uppingham
St Peter Port Parish Church
The Temple Church
Valparaiso University, USA
Westbourne Grove Church

Synagogues

CBST Synagogue, New York, USA
New North London Synagogue
Park Avenue Synagogue, New York, USA
Westminster Synagogue



Rows of new Coventry chairs in Valparaiso University's chapel

T +44(0) 20 7404 5995
info@lukehughes.co.uk
lukehughes.co.uk
@lukehughesco

