Literature and Architecture in Early Modern England

Myers, Anne M.

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On April 10, 1992, the church of St. Helen’s Bishopsgate in the City of London was severely damaged by an Irish Republican Army bomb. The incident seemed to end an extraordinary run of luck: the medieval church, which had its roots in a thirteenth-century nunnery, had “miraculously” survived both the Great Fire of 1666 and the bombing raids of the Second World War, in which many of its neighbors had suffered significant damage. Choosing to see this misfortune as an opportunity, the parochial council commissioned architect Quinlan Terry not only to restore the church to a safe and serviceable state but to redesign its interior in a way that better suited the needs and style of worship of its current congregation. Terry’s plans were decried by conservationists, including the Victorian Society, English Heritage, and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, for introducing changes that were too radical; and the designs did call for major modifications to the floor and roof, as well as the creation of a new gallery and the repositioning of many important funeral monuments and much interior woodwork and furniture. A vitriolic controversy followed, culminating in a Consistory Court hearing of nine days’ length during June 1993. With one or two minor alterations, however, Terry’s plans were accepted, and the present church reflects a fairly complete realization of his vision. “If you knew the ‘pre-bomb’ St Helen’s,” the introduction to the current guidebook reads, “you will see a great difference.” The result of this controversial renovation is a surviving and very explicit body of evidence—in the written records of the court hearing and in the material fabric of the church itself—about the varying ways in which architecture might continue to be perceived and understood. It is with both the
controversy surrounding these alterations and the design of the finished church that I am concerned here.

This Coda traces the persistence of an approach to interpreting architecture that we might call antiquarian or historical alongside methods that emphasize aesthetic concerns. As a group, the authors explored in this book raise questions about how a literary or historical text might be informed by its architectural setting and how architecture ought to be understood, evaluated, and designed. The story of St. Helen’s demonstrates the continued relevance and urgency of these questions; the church is an example of their influence on modern perceptions and discussions of English architecture and, in this case, I argue, on its material fabric and design. As we have seen, these questions themselves have a long history. The debates over the new St. Helen’s are embedded in the needs and priorities of a late-twentieth-century church and its congregation, but they might be positioned lineally, as much as laterally, and be read as a recent manifestation of a long historiographic and literary tradition. Contextualized in both contemporary and historical terms, the story of St. Helen’s can provide a hinge between early modern subjects and ongoing scholarly conversations about architectural interpretation and historiography.

In 1993, Quinlan Terry was an established architect with strong convictions. Associated with the approach called New Classicism, he had publicly expressed his disdain for both Victorian and modernist architecture, vehemently preferring Georgian architecture instead.3 His commitment to the style is not merely aesthetic; famously, he professes to believe that the proportions of the classical orders were communicated by God to Moses for use in the Tabernacle before being opportunistically hijacked by the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome: “the visual form of the building in which the one true God was to be worshipped, could not be left to the vain imagination of man; so a detailed description was given to Moses.” The “appearance of Classical buildings,” he writes, “does something to people.” He continues, “I can only explain the phenomenon of the Classical orders as a direct consequence of the fact that first and foremost they were ordained to contain the visible manifestation of human worship of the only true God.”4 For these beliefs, architectural critic Ian Martin has written, “Quinlan Terry is widely held to be barking mad.”5 It is not surprising, then, that the renovated St. Helen’s Bishopsgate reflects elements of classical design. The interior is “wide open, light and airy,” writes Claire Melhuish.6 Funeral tablets accent white, lime-washed walls, and insofar as is possible, they are symmetrically and evenly arranged. White Doric pillars support the west gallery, and dark wooden beams accent a white plaster ceiling. Clear glass windows have replaced most
of the medieval and Victorian stained glass that had been in the church, most of which had been damaged by the bomb. While such elements as clear glass windows, white ceilings, Doric pillars, and lime-washed walls are not confined to classical or Georgian styles, it is plausible to suggest, in Terry’s case, that a conscious reference to these models played some role in their selection.

Also, however, the new church is clearly influenced by the very historical concerns that opponents accused Terry of disregarding. Ashley Barker, an architect and expert consultant in the preservation of historic buildings, testified that the new church design retained many features that would be of interest and “delight to the historians and amateurs of architecture in subsequent years.” While detractors called the new scheme a “return to a notional architectural plan . . . of the
early 18th century,” Terry’s designs place the historical features of the church on display.9 “His approach,” as Sheila Cameron, a lawyer specializing in ecclesiastical law, described it, was “to retain as many as possible of the internal features of the church, even though numerous items would be moved and repositioned elsewhere.”10 The result is that, like many old English churches, St. Helen’s continues to present its viewer with a series of odd chronological juxtapositions: a fifteenth-century arcade, a thirteenth-century doorway, an early-sixteenth-century sepulcher which doubled as a nuns’ squint (designed so that sick or occupied nuns could still see the elevation of the host, even when they could not attend the service), a seventeenth-century doorcase and pulpit, a modern immersion baptistery. The notable collection of funeral monuments—wall plaques, floor slabs, tomb chests, and a canopied sepulcher—represents the late fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries.11 Barker summed up his testimony to the Consistory Court with the remark, “Mr Terry has demonstrated how the ancient and modern elements of the existing building [will] be preserved in the new design.”12

In his own defense, Terry testified, “It is sometimes said that I specialise in Classical architecture to the exclusion of all other styles. This is not entirely true. . . . I have always felt that the enduring character of English architecture is neither classic nor Gothic, but the combination of the two.”13 Terry’s remark sug-
gests that the conflict over the new church design centered on incompatible aesthetic preferences, but this seems not entirely—or even mainly—to have been the case. In fact, it emerged from the incompatibility of two different modes of architectural literacy: one in which architecture was valued for its capacity to record history, and one in which it was perceived as a visual work of art designed and engineered through the skill of an architect. The historical approach to architecture, which Terry was accused of ignoring, is a direct descendent of post-Reformation antiquarian writing such as Camden’s *Britannia* and John Stow’s *Survey of London*. As we have seen, churches and funeral monuments were of special antiquarian interest, and George Herbert, in “The Church-porch,” recognized the role of the parish church as a site that recorded and witnessed the human stories of a local community. In addition, as it did in the architectural
works of Anne Clifford, antiquarianism seems to anticipate itself by becoming an actual principle for the design or modification of buildings. It was not simply that architectural evidence might sponsor and shape the historical narratives extracted by antiquarian writers or viewers; for Terry’s detractors, as for Anne Clifford, such narratives provided a blueprint that ought to shape the production of the architecture itself.

Moreover, as I have shown, questions about the way architecture should be interpreted and understood—historically or visually—date back to the country...
house poems of the seventeenth century, and, in its balance of these perceptions and of classical aesthetics with antiquarian sensibilities, the St. Helen’s project resembles that of John Evelyn, when he selected and translated the Parallèle of Roland Fréart. Visually, in fact, the church bears some loose resemblance to Fréart’s illustrations, as architectural fragments with their own histories are collected, realigned, and neatly put on display within the church. Stemming from these conflicting modes of literacy, there emerged in the controversy over St. Helen’s a similar anxiety or disagreement about the agency and obtrusion of the architect in the design of a building highly valued by some for the historical information it conveyed.

Terry’s assertion of his interest in Gothic architecture as an aesthetic style did not quite address the objections of his opponents; it was not really Gothic style in itself that they seem to have been anxious about preserving, and the word “Gothic” rarely comes up in their testimony or written objections. Instead, their descriptions of the old church building as “accretive” or “historical” reveal the antiquarian underpinnings of their perspective; these are words that might be used to describe the perspective of antiquarian chorographers.14 A church building, in this view, ought to be designed—or, more accurately, be allowed to develop—so that it can offer itself up to these methodologies, representing visually the interests and activities of an antiquarian viewer. These modern descriptions of the church remain rooted not in enthusiasm for a particular aesthetic style but in the history of the church’s fabric itself and the stories it tells. In Stow’s Survey, London architecture is seen to have disrupted and challenged a particular kind of antiquarian narrative that was threaded along continuous strands of ancestry, ownership, and occupation. By the late twentieth century, historians of London architecture registered such evidence of historical change as a distinctive virtue that enriched the value of this ancient City of London church. And it was this antiquarian approach, not Gothic style, against which Terry ultimately found himself arguing, complaining to the Consistory Court in his “Proof of Evidence,” “There has been much criticism of the proposals from the narrow perspective of history. It is significant that there has been no criticism or reservations expressed on aesthetics.”15 In summation, he asserted that the two concerns are not necessarily at odds with each other, a point which he believed was proved by his design: “The rich palimpsest of history will remain and take its place in this new work.”16

Terry’s opponents implied that, as a “wholesale dispersal, reassembly and reordering of parts,” the new church design disrupted a certain kind of integrity or wholeness; but the whole that was compromised was clearly historical, not
visual or aesthetic. Even before it was bombed, St. Helen’s was a fragmented building. Not surprisingly for an ancient London structure, the pre-bomb church appears to have been its own strange anthology. Much like a page from Stow’s Survey—and it does have a page there—the church preserved fragmented narratives from multiple periods, patrons, and occupants. Because it had remained a church after the Reformation, St. Helen’s recorded some degree of institutional continuity, but it also spoke of the changes within that institution. The church’s distinctive double nave and chancel for instance—which remain today—are remnants of the nuns’ quire, which was originally separated from the main sanctuary of the church, while the Jacobean pulpit reflected a new emphasis on preaching following the Reformation. Wooden chancel screens designed by the celebrated Victorian church restorer J. L. Pearson, along with a lowered and gradated floor creating a series of steps to the chancel and altar, were the visible byproducts of a nineteenth-century Tractarian style of worship that Terry and the church’s rector, the Reverend Richard Lucas, found incompatible with the church’s current emphasis on a “preaching ministry.”

At least one of Terry’s supporters found this concatenation of periods and styles displeasing, but it was precisely this historical inclusiveness that preservationists would cite as the building’s greatest virtue. “From the architectural point of view,” correspondent John Norman wrote to Gordon Watkins, secretary of the Diocesan Advisory Council, “the present layout is lopsided and ugly and makes little visual sense. [Terry’s] proposals . . . would restore a feeling of spatial unity which is currently missing.” It was not spatial unity, though, with which detractors were concerned. During the Consistory Court hearings, architect John Russell Sell, a member of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, argued, “The possible need for change has to be balanced against the undoubted importance of St Helen’s as an historic building.” At the same time, he asserted, “St Helen’s is an example of a building whose character derives to a very large extent from change.” Sell seems to have been urging that the process of change itself be visibly preserved, and in Terry’s design, he argued, “the history of the building [was] denied and its accretive character destroyed by the damage scale and thorough-going nature of the proposed new interior.” Similarly, Terry opponent Sophie Andreae protested in a letter to Watkins that the church’s “development over many centuries” had been “incremental.” “Its unique qualities,” she wrote, “derive to a very large extent precisely from its ‘palimpsest’ nature. . . . What is proposed now is not the addition of another layer but a stripping back of historic layers.” Andreae’s implication that an ideal repair would constitute “the addition of another layer” suggests that for her, an-
tiquarianism becomes not only a mode of interpretation but the basis of architectural practice. The architect’s goal, in such a case, would be to preserve items of antiquarian interest and to anticipate this interest through “addition.” Put differently, the architect should respect the accretion of historical narrative and add a new page to the story. In another letter to Watkins, Hermione Hobhouse expressed the opinion that the new design should not violate “the antiquarian demands of the opposition. . . . St Helen’s is a major medieval monument with a number of important accretive changes of all periods. These record the history of both the City in which the church is set, and of the varying changes in worship of the Church of England.”

Hobhouse thus reads the architecture of St. Helen’s in a way that is now familiar: it is a historical document or record, not only of its own development as a building, or even solely as a religious institution, but of a wide range of human stories that might be associated with it. Like the monasteries and churches of Camden’s Britannia, or Herbert’s church porch, St. Helen’s was a religious artifact that recorded much more than religious history. Newspaper columnist A. N. Wilson, for example, lamented in the Evening Standard the bomb’s destruction of a Victorian stained-glass window “depicting Shakespeare, who must have known the church.” Calling Lucas a “vandal in a dog collar,” Wilson saw the proposed renovations as little more than a continuation of the damage. Like some of the correspondents of Gordon Watkins quoted above, Wilson values church architecture for its commemorative, in addition to its religious, qualities, for its possible (and in this case very tenuous) associations with both topography and human identity. In the summation to his testimony, Lucas charged preservationists with attempting to use “history . . . as a straight jacket, an original text (if that could be found),” and even as he advanced an alternative view, his analogy between architectural fabric and “text” reveals his familiarity with an antiquarian mode of architectural literacy, in which buildings and texts might function in parallel and interdependent ways.

As it had in seventeenth-century country house poems and in Wotton’s Elements of Architecture, this historical understanding of architecture resulted in the marginalization of the architect as visual artist and controlling figure in a building’s design. In these modern debates as well, the architect becomes an encroaching figure whose influence is perceived as “foreign” (to use Marvell’s term) and even inimical to the histories a building might preserve. Frequently, Terry and his supporters found themselves defending not only Terry’s particular designs but his right to design at all. Terry contended that the elements of his proposal could not be adopted piecemeal because they constituted an inte-
grated whole: “An architect must be given some freedom to use his skill; if this is denied he ceases to produce a consistent work of architecture, because he is forced to design against his better judgment.” Lucas declared, “I must . . . pay tribute to the knowledge and skill of our distinguished architect,” and Cameron argued that “it is clearly right that an architect should be given scope for originality.” Andreae, however, disagreed with this deference to an architect’s “skill,” which she perceived as being opposed to the integrity of the building’s historiographic meanings. Andreae denied that the church restoration represented “the creation of a work of art” that “should thus be allowed in its totality,” feeling that this premise was not “an appropriate way to approach a historic interior of the intricacy and complexity of St Helen’s.” In addition, Andreae’s (above quoted) objection to Terry’s design as “notional” echoes Marvell’s critique in “Upon Appleton House” of theoretical or intellectual approaches to building, of the sort inspired by classical and Renaissance treatises. The detractors, agreeing with Marvell, thought that St. Helen’s did not need an architect who “of his great design in pain” would “for a model vault his brain.”

Terry’s supporters countered such objections by arguing that Terry had used his architectural skill not to erase the historical associations of the building but to integrate aesthetic and antiquarian concerns, thereby making the building legible on two registers at once. At the same time, their arguments implicitly acknowledge the tension between antiquarian and aesthetic interests, presenting one as a counterpoint to, rather than a reinforcement of, the other. Describing the pre-renovation church, Barker testified, “The interior of the church presents itself today more as an historic ‘arena for worship’ than as a highly integrated work of art or architecture. This observation is not intended to diminish its importance as an historic building, so much as to indicate that the interest is ‘accretive’ and to be seen in the layers of its history, rather than as a single work of architectural creation.” Barker’s remarks indicate an essential incompatibility or tension between historical and aesthetic priorities. Despite his ostensible respect for the church’s historical interest, his characterization of it as a “historic ‘arena for worship’” seems intended as a critique that might potentially “diminish” preservationists’ views. History is here imagined as undermining the achievement of “a highly integrated work of art or architecture.” Further, Barker places “creation” in opposition to “accret[ion]” suggesting that the difference between historic and aesthetic values consists partly of the architect’s intervention, the influence of a mind whose “creation” the building represents. Barker’s analysis thus remains equivocal; while he does not “deny” the church’s “importance as an historic building,” he suggests that by overemphasizing this impor-
tance, detractors deny both the prerogative of the architect and the building’s aesthetic potential.

Although Barker would finally argue that aesthetic “creation” and “historic” importance were reconciled in Terry’s designs, in his view this reconciliation comprised the balancing of opposites. The design’s integrity and symmetry would be constructed in part by the equal consideration of history and aesthetics and would be held in place by a kind of isometric tension between the two. “It is the intention of the parish and its architect that no items of architectural, artistic or historic value should be lost or taken from the church,” he said, “rather that they should all play their part in a new architectural unity.” Architectural, artistic, and historic values are differentiated from one another, even as they are placed in parallel. “Unity” is here perceived as an architectural effect, to be imposed upon the miscellany of “items” with which preservationists were concerned. In summation, Barker testified, “In my opinion the proposals before the Court do make the ‘best use’ of the inheritance both as a church and as architecture.” His syntax (“both . . . and”) again suggests both a symmetry and a tension between St. Helen’s “as a church” and St. Helen’s “as architecture.” In context, the phrase “as a church” seems to refer most directly to the building’s functional utility, but Barker’s reference to the church’s “inheritance” makes clear that history constitutes part of this ecclesiological value.

Terry’s own testimony, as much as his design, is an exercise in balance. “My primary interest is not history,” he said, “but architecture; the elements of which are (to quote Sir Henry Wotton) ‘Firmness, Commodity and Delight’.” Superficially, Terry seems to use Wotton as a way of dismissing or demoting history, but the quotation is also a way of bolstering his own view with its historical ancestry. Moreover, the sentiment is not original to Wotton; it is a fairly direct translation of Vitruvius. By choosing the English source, instead of the Roman one, Terry deemphasized both the foreignness of his view and its association with classical aesthetics, defending his work as being grounded in English history: the design is not only the product of individual aesthetic tastes but a sign of his connection to ancestry and part of his own “inheritance” as an English architect. Significantly, Terry returns to Wotton as he registers the tension between the agency of the architect’s skill and a regard for architecture’s historical meanings. As we saw in Chapter 2, Wotton’s *Elements of Architecture* was also shaped by awareness of this problem. Although Wotton dealt with country houses rather than churches, he, like Terry, attempted to lay out elements derived from classical building design for an audience more invested in understanding architecture in historical terms.

Other supporters of the new church design also authorized their position by
invoking history, pointing out that both some material aspects of the proposed
design and the principles on which it was based were in fact older than the fea-
tures that detractors were fighting to preserve. Proponents frequently argued,
alongside Terry, that utility and function were more important than history, or,
as he would say, that “history is not the first ingredient of architecture.”
In this case, functionality involved the accommodation of the church’s current style of
worship, described by supporters as a “preaching ministry” and by opponents as
“their . . . horrible happy-clappy love-ins . . . out of tune with the religion of their
ancestors.” Yet supporters countered the charges of disregarding history with
their own historical evidence. For instance, Terry grounded the parish’s commit-
ment to a “preaching ministry” in Reformation developments that predated the
Tractarian style of worship reflected by the nineteenth-century arrangement of
the church. The chancel screens and raised altar which preservationists wanted
to protect were, in Terry’s view, infelicitous innovations of a relatively recent
historical moment when the “mind liberated by an understanding of the Bible at
the Reformation, now turned back to the bondage of visual forms and spectacu-
lar ritual.” Dodging comparisons to Reformation iconoclasts, though, Lucas
argued that this emphasis on preaching “was certainly a major concern before
the Reformation, in late medieval times. For example, the City benefitted enor-
mously from . . . the work of a preaching order like the Dominicans (the Black
Friars),” who “had in mind, as Wren later . . . the needs of worshippers.” The
re-ordering of the church, then, would not ignore or erase history but use “his-
tory as a pointer to the times when faith was rediscovered and the churches built
to meet the demands of a multitude of seekers after God.” Thus, while Terry
criticized his opponents for the view that “anything that is old, whether good or
bad, must not be disturbed because it is old,” he and his supporters simultane-
ously exploited history to their own ends, balancing, once again, a notion of the
church “as architecture” with an evident regard for its historical “inheritance.”

“The result,” wrote the current rector, William Taylor, in his introduction to
the church’s present-day guidebook, “is that, today, St Helen’s is coherent, com-
fortable and in a good state of repair. Its rich tapestry of history remains.” In
this assessment, Terry’s design succeeds in balancing aesthetics and utility, co-
herence and comfort, and opens up both synchronic and diachronic experiences
of architecture. The church is poised at the intersection of visual and historical
modes of architectural expression. Terry, like John Evelyn and Roland Fréart
before him, worked as a collector of architectural fragments, and, more broadly
speaking, his design collects multiple modes of architectural literacy. The first is
based loosely in the principles of classical aesthetics and engages the viewer in a
synchronic analysis of space, arrangement, and materials, expressing Terry’s belief that the “appearance” of buildings is capable of “do[ing] something to people.” The second is based in an antiquarian perspective and queries the particular histories of artifacts or items, moving backward and forward in time.

Given the methodological similarities between Terry’s project and Evelyn’s, it is perhaps not surprising that the finished church, like the treatise Evelyn chose to import, embodies principles of collecting. In relation to Fréart’s treatise, I quoted Susan Stewart’s observation that “the collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection.” A similar statement might be applied to Terry’s design for St. Helen’s. Stewart’s point seems to express the logic underlying much of Barker’s argument that “items of architectural, artistic, or historic value should . . . all play their part in a new architectural unity.” Fréart’s plates neatly broke down, rationalized, reordered, and realigned their visual pieces of evidence in a way that created order from evident disarticulation; in St. Helen’s as well, the fragmentation and discontinuities of history are clearly visible. The bright white space of the lime-washed walls and white stone floor isolates monuments and items of church furniture from one another and creates an obvious visual contrast with earlier aesthetic preferences, as displayed in the heavy, dark wood of the elaborately carved Jacobean doorcase and pulpit, the tracery of the Victorian screens, the grey stone of the nuns’ squint, the painted and carved figures of the Elizabethan wall monuments, the pale and worn effigies of a late-fourteenth-century tomb chest. Like the architectural fragments depicted in Fréart’s treatise, each object arrives in a new context, visibly deracinated, while still trailing its history behind it. I have argued that John Evelyn seems to have seen in Fréart’s Parallèle an analogy for the history of the Restoration itself and a representation of the restored monarch to whom he dedicated his translation. The disruption and recuperation of a fragmented past described the history of the English monarchy as much as the history of classical and Renaissance architecture. In St. Helen’s as well, we might read this visually interrupted history as a reflection and partial consequence of the literal, material fragmentation caused by IRA bombs, a simultaneous recollection and reparation of the church’s own recent past.

It might be said that many old London buildings are collections of fragments that represent the discontinuities of history. At St. Helen’s, though, the ordering influence of classicism and the conscious arrangement of a collector are especially evident. In Fréart’s treatise, bases and capitals are carefully excised, aligned, judged, measured, and framed. In St. Helen’s, monuments and artifacts have obviously been rearranged rather than simply allowed to accrue. Wall mon-
uments are spaced at even distances, while accommodating older architectural features, and overall, the ordered display of woodwork and wall plaques complements the symmetrical effect created by the double nave and chancel, which are still divided by a row of columns and pointed arches.

In the introduction to this study, I cited the work of recent architectural historians who have noted that the particular lenses through which we interpret architecture—as examples of an aesthetic period, as plot points in an architect’s body of work, or as heritage from the past—are themselves historical acquisitions or cultural constructions, rather than inevitable outgrowths of buildings themselves. The design of the new St. Helen’s and the debate surrounding it give evidence that these questions are not merely theoretical or academic; they play a practical role in the way buildings are created and perceived. These discussions have a long history. It is not only modern critical inquiry that has produced the awareness that buildings might be interpreted in both historical and visual terms, as the works of an architect or as the products of history. The debate over St. Helen’s, and its current physical fabric, were shaped by antiquarian approaches to architecture that can be traced at least as far back as the mid-sixteenth century, while a sensitivity to the tension between antiquarian and visual modes is clearly evident in works of the early seventeenth. The recent history of St. Helen’s can thus be read not only in the context of modern theoretical discussions but as a late chapter in the longer story this book tells.

Modern day viewers of St. Helen’s might well find it comfortable and modern, and might also be impressed by its “distinguished, unaffected” design. But they might equally be following in the footsteps of John Leland, who, in the mid-sixteenth century, toured England’s landscape, spurred by the urgent desire of regathering its history. For Leland, buildings told stories that were not about architects or even architecture, presenting instead a much broader cast of characters and a wider range of subjects. Despite Terry’s division between “architecture” and “history,” his design demonstrates his awareness of the complicated interdependence that has been the main subject of this book. Architecture is understood not only through the spatial and visual effects it creates; it also continues to be read as a form of literature or history, indelibly inscribed with its human connections, and valued, still, for the stories it can tell.