

Expo '67 and the Mersey Funnel

by Patrick Nuttgens

The coincidence of the opening of a gargantuan international exposition at Montreal and of a new cathedral at Liverpool is provocative of questions about the relationship of architecture to society and of the sacred to the secular. In some ways an international exhibition like Expo '67 is to our century what the building of a cathedral was to an earlier one—lots of people and fun and a tempting opportunity for architectural gymnastics on a universal scale.

That, in terms of cost at least, is what such an exhibition is; and ever since Paxton's Crystal Palace patrons and designers have seized their chance. But Expo '67 has another dimension. By the man-made islands, near the tense and justified hilarity of rival national displays, is the building of *Habitat*, permanent housing of an aggressively experimental kind. The units are piled up with a cubist exploitation of spaces between and through and over them. They are homes. They are extravagant; they cost per home about ten times what we would spend on local authority housing. Yet it all seems reasonable.

It seems reasonable because an exhibition is a chance to make innovations and experiments unhindered by a realistic budget. And that is one of the few ways in which experiments on a big scale can be made. (Otherwise the costs escalate, as in aircraft development.) In this case the designer can try out a social experiment: exploring ways of additively building up a group of homes individually expressed, the reverse of the tall slabs of storage for people with which we have become familiar.

But the combination in Montreal of display pavilions and experimental housing has a further message. The pavilions may become historically influential because of their innovations in structural techniques and materials; the housing because of its study of human requirements. Architecture has an outside which is the part that provokes most aesthetic reactions; it also has an inside and ultimately it is the inside that matters.

The inside is the organization of spaces for individual human needs; we have to live in and use buildings; and that simple principle lies at the heart of all serious architecture. It lies especially at the heart of modern architecture, with its emphasis on the solution of social problems. In Le Corbusier language, the plan is the generator,

and arrangement is the gradation of aims, the classification of intentions. Parts of Expo '67 may justify themselves subsequently in what is developed from them for realistic budgets, and become socially meaningful.

But already the exhibition is meaningful as a gathering place for some of the community on a short-term basis. On a longer-term basis that is partly what a cathedral used to do. The exhibition is really a multi-purpose, complex cathedral for the twentieth century; and perhaps the Mersey Funnel ought to have been moved there and included as part of the cheerful heterogeneous scene.

There are some interesting comparisons. The cathedral at Liverpool, excluding Lutyens' expensive pre-war crypt, seems to have cost about £2½ million. It seats, according to some sources, 2,000 people; but it may be 2,500 (it is not the 3,000 originally asked for). That means that it has cost at least £1,000 per place. An ordinary modern parish church can cost about £100 per place. There is thus a similarity in terms of cost per unit between *Habitat* at Montreal costing about ten times that of low-cost housing and Liverpool Cathedral costing about ten times that of a low-cost church. In both cases a seminal and social value would account for the difference. It seems to be there in *Habitat*; is it there in Liverpool?

The answer must be positive if at Liverpool there is clearly an exploration of functional needs and a contribution to history in the form of a statement about the place of a modern cathedral in the modern city and the realization of liturgical needs inside it.

In the absence of a detailed and scholarly study by the archdiocese it must be assumed that the building is a realistic interpretation of the requirements by the architect. He understood from the competition conditions that the cathedral was to enshrine the altar and that three thousand people should be closely associated with it; he therefore put an altar in the middle and the people round it. The solution is disarmingly simple. Nobody at Liverpool seems to have had any other liturgical ideas, and the architect has said that he did not learn as much about the liturgy as he thought he would and that the Church did not seem to know herself; so the archdiocese has got the cathedral it asked for.

And that is a very large parish church. It could not be a seminal modern cathedral because nobody has discovered what a modern cathedral should be. It is not—what the name 'cathedral' implies—the seat of the bishop, for there is no definite seat for the bishop. He gets a moveable throne which can be brought out of hiding and put somewhere, presumably in the sanctuary, where it will not get in the way of too many people. There is no *architectural* place for it, expressed as a built-in function and symbol of the cathedral, which would have happened had it been a generator of the plan. It may be just as well, because if there were it would be empty most of the time thus, symbolizing the absence of the shepherd from his flock. The move-

able throne symbolizes the true situation—the bishop as occasional visitor. The modern diocese is an administrative machine and the spiritual significance of the bishop as pastor of his flock is marginal: largely a matter of occasional formal visitations and confirmations.

This flat realism shows in another aspect. Traditionally the cathedral had a combined social-religious significance based on the practical fact that it was run by a chapter; the canons not only had and presumably still have administrative and parochial functions but also took part in the liturgical action. At Liverpool the canons' stalls, near the sanctuary but not obstructing the view, were initially part of the brief. In the event they have been left out. It is a sensible decision because, given the circular plan, there is really no place for them. The architecture has excluded the canons. Symbolically it is no doubt apt; either the plan of the cathedral is inappropriate or the canons are; and the usual sight of empty stalls suggests the latter.

In a sense therefore Liverpool Cathedral summarizes the obsolescence of the Church's organization in the modern world. And more; it establishes the fact that that administrative organization has ceased to be liturgically relevant; the divorce between the spiritual and administrative function is absolute. In terms of the community it may be no more than an unforgettable and ingenious structure on a hill, which thus looks like a cathedral.

Except, of course, for the central thing—the performance of the sacred liturgy centred upon the Mass. For this it is adequate, while making no discoveries. The release of thought by Vatican II came too late, it has been said; the Liturgical Movement on the other hand has been gathering strength for over fifty years. Liverpool has not furthered it as did the German churches after the war, especially in the diocese of Cologne. The basic plan, with the altar surrounded by people, the placing of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel with the reserved Sacrament behind the choir and the seclusion of the Baptistry in one of the chapels, can hardly have been inspired by a profound analysis of the meaning of Baptism, the Mass and the Eucharist and the dynamic relationships between them. Nor, at a time of liturgical change, could there be a more finite and fixed geometrical concept than a circle with a lantern on top; at a time of emphasis on the communication between priest and people, it is doubtful if the shape is generated by acoustical demands.

It may be that the modern cathedral, converting the community, should really be an urban centre, with social facilities, meeting rooms, shops, all informed by a meeting place for worship; perhaps it should be a precinct, as multi-purpose as the cathedral used to be. For a Church awakened by Vatican II, Liverpool seems more an end than a beginning. But it is unavoidably provocative; and perhaps its spiky memorable shape will serve, beside the sleek one of the Anglican Cathedral, as a daily reminder to the Church that it has hardly begun its own conversion and rejuvenation.