

# St Mary's Coptic Church

(COUNTRY) Wurundjeri  
(REVIEWER) Lucia Amies  
(PHOTOGRAPHER) Rory Gardiner

A new chapel and suite of community spaces re-establishes the contemporary relevance of church architecture in Australia's increasingly secularised suburban landscape.

(ARCHITECT)  
Studio Bright



If you ask me, society’s faith in architects seems to be dwindling. In the face of seemingly immeasurable challenges – rapid climate change, decreasing housing affordability and the increasing privatisation of our cities’ public spaces, to name a few – it seems architects are increasingly relegated to the sidelines to watch on as policymakers enact powerful changes in our cities and communities. Not only this, but the architecture of faith is itself in decline. Once widespread in our suburbs, local church buildings are diminishing in number: being closed, sold, abandoned or demolished altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Churches – much like architects – must adapt to their time and place in the twenty-first century. While serving ongoing (and evolving) religious traditions, today’s sacred spaces must also contend with changing demographics and complex, occasionally stigma-laden histories in order to maintain relevance as unique civic places. In the case of St Mary’s Coptic Church, located in Melbourne’s inner-west on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country, Studio Bright has found a contemporary foothold for the Christian church as an inclusive space for both parish and public, and reawakened the role of the architect as a powerhouse for community-first design.

Seven years ago, the parish of St Mary’s approached Studio Bright with the commission to design its new Arabic chapel, priest’s offices, Sunday school rooms and community hall and kitchen, for which a previous design had been rejected by council due to a lack of heritage response. The challenge for Studio Bright was not only to manage the project’s complex civic brief, but also to negotiate with Kensington’s proud population of vocal residents – of whom I am (more recently) one – and to honour the suburb’s famed village feel.

Studio Bright director Mel Bright’s impetus for the design response came from an idea to celebrate the parish’s rituals of sharing Egyptian food. “After the services, the families will cook, and everyone gathers and eats together,” she explains.



“I’m not personally religious, so for me, trying to understand this and to connect with this idea of community was really important.” The manifestation of this idea is clearly at the heart – both physical and symbolic – of the proposal, which weaves a network of communal spaces across the site. The most obvious of these is a multifunctional gathering space and kitchen for the congregation, wedged between the site’s old and new buildings. The space’s prime street-front position also means that it’s the first part of the project glimpsed after ascending Kensington’s high street.

The site’s hilltop location is also home to four other churches within a 100-metre radius. The existing church – designed by Gawler and Drummond and built in 1918 – was an Anglican church until it closed in the 1970s. By doing away with the church’s previous assortment of ancillary red-brick and weatherboard buildings (not to mention its uninviting metal picket fence enclosure), Studio Bright has made a public domain ripe for the insertion of the new C-shaped building, which wraps the site’s western and southern edges before folding parallel to the northern edge of the existing church. As a result, two secondary – and arguably more important – communal spaces emerge.

The first is a public street that has been carved diagonally through the site, which successfully fulfils its intent as a pedestrian thoroughfare and nexus for gathering. I’m one to talk, as I use it often to shortcut through to my own street. I also see it activated by kids after school and parishioners stopping for a chat. On the clear October afternoon when I meet Mel Bright, three elderly men sit comfortably on the sun-drenched timber bench seats that Studio Bright has sensitively sleeved into the facade of the existing church.

The second public gesture is unexpected of a church building, and was certainly absent in the Coptic churches that Studio Bright researched around Melbourne: the massing of the new building opens generously to the main road frontage to create a north-facing

( PREVIOUS )	Monolithic forms, red-brick paving, gold detailing and landscape design by Openwork creates a civic quality and unifies the precinct.
( LEFT )	Inside and out, Studio Bright has sought to balance the qualities and symbolism found in traditional Coptic architecture.
( OPPOSITE )	The pitched roof successfully modulates the suburban streetscape with the busy main road down to Kensington’s high street shops.

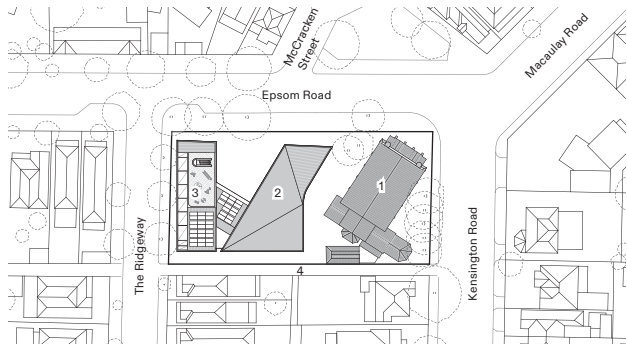


courtyard. Replete with a sandpit and mini stage, this space was envisioned as a place for kids to play, and for the parish to hold fetes and other events. It’s a vision that holds true on occasions when this courtyard is opened to congregation.

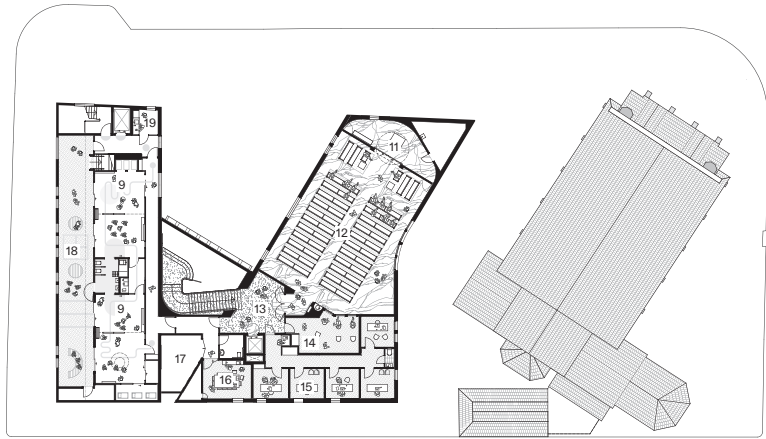
The site’s red-brick-paved ground plane, striped with gold bands and punctured with landscape design by Openwork, ties the entire precinct together, reinforcing its civic quality. During formal ceremonies such as the frequent Sunday weddings, the act of procession is reinforced through the axial alignment of the site’s entry with a grand internal stair that winds up to the new chapel and priest’s offices on the first floor. In contrast to the repurposed Anglican church, which is oriented west, this new Arabic chapel is located so that parishioners face east in prayer, per Coptic tradition. Carefully placed windows visually connect the two buildings in a way that strengthens the church and chapel services, typically held simultaneously.

Inside and out, Studio Bright has sought to balance the qualities and symbolism found in traditional Coptic architecture (which Bright describes as “singular monolithic materiality, arched openings, and highly ornate gold interiors”) with the project’s context of Australian ecclesiastical architecture.

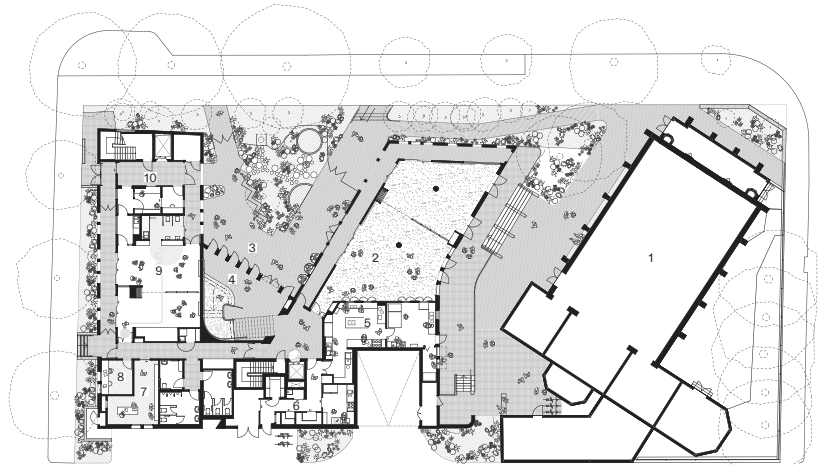
Viewed from the corner of Kensington’s central three-way intersection, the new building’s angled form very clearly speaks to the gabled roof of the existing church, and yet its raw,



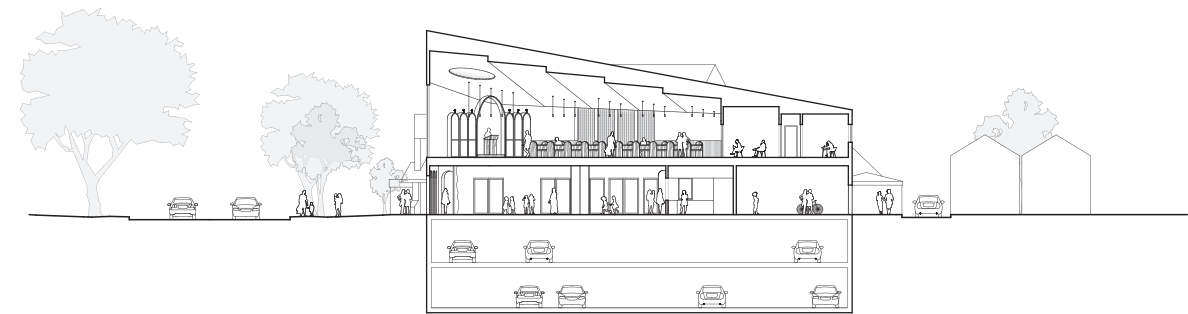
Site plan  
1:2000



Level one floor plan  
1:750



Ground floor plan  
1:750



Section  
1:500

#### (SITE PLAN)

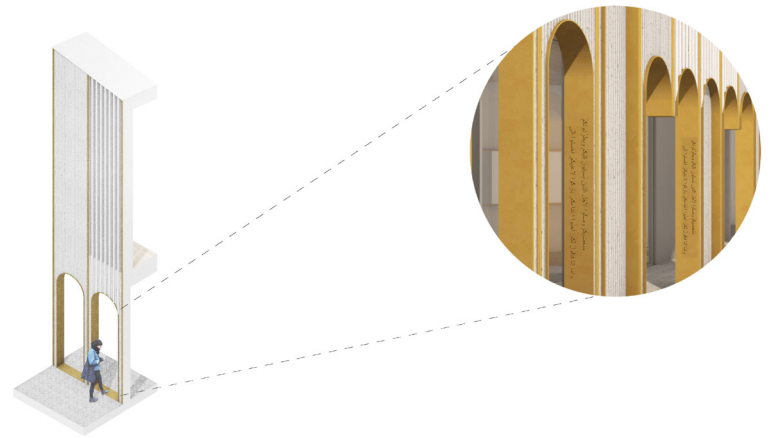
- 1 Existing church
- 2 New chapel
- 3 New community building
- 4 Laneway

#### (FLOOR PLANS)

- 1 Existing church
- 2 Multipurpose room
- 3 Courtyard
- 4 Entry foyer
- 5 Kitchen
- 6 Back of house
- 7 Bookshop/library
- 8 Staff office
- 9 Childcare playroom
- 10 Childcare reception / foyer
- 11 Altar
- 12 Chapel
- 13 Chapel foyer
- 14 Parents' room
- 15 Offices
- 16 Meeting room
- 17 Services
- 18 Outdoor play
- 19 Staff room

#### (RIGHT)

Arches, synonymous with Egyptian Coptic architecture, are trimmed with gold-hued metal and provide differing degrees of access and functionality.



Arch elevation and detail  
Not to scale



corrugated precast concrete construction distinguishes it from its context of historic red brick buildings. Thanks to its pitched roof, the building’s profile in elevation successfully modulates the suburban streetscape with the busy main road down to Kensington’s high street shops. The planning also responds to this shift in scale, with the smaller Sunday school rooms located along the site’s residential street. In contrast with Gawler and Drummond’s pointed arches, Studio Bright has been mindful to restore rounded arches, synonymous with Egyptian Coptic architecture, to the new building’s facade. Within the colonnade that wraps both the inner and outer edges of the envelope, iterations of these arches provide differing degrees of access, privacy and functionality. A nod to the ornate interiors of typical Coptic churches, the arches – like the joins of the precast panels – are detailed with gold-hued metal trims. In scrutinising these elements, I can’t help but wonder if the building’s referential semantic might also point to the fact that nearly 10 years have passed since it was designed – if, despite its newness, the building has already become a relic of a foregone contemporary design era.

For Bright, the realisation of the building was not without its hurdles. Four years into the planning process, the Sunday school was redesigned to also accommodate weekday childcare, but given earlier contention from local residents, the angled building form was kept largely intact and the internal programs squeezed within the approved envelope. While the decision is understandable from a timeline perspective, the outcome is noticed in the first floor of the building’s west wing, which feels a little labyrinthine. The northern courtyard, which would have ideally remained open, has had to be fenced for childcare security. Thankfully, the spirit of the site’s porosity remains.

Bright admits to embracing the tight programmatic constraints: “We loved that you might put overlapping programs together, because we want to see the building used more. They now program it all week, all weekend and into the evening.” St Mary’s is a building clearly adored not only by the parish but by the entire Kensington community – some even declaring it “future heritage.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the drawbacks of a lengthy process, the project has succeeded in reinvigorating this site, and with it the relevance of the church, as a contemporary public place. With a second Coptic church commission currently under construction, Studio Bright has cemented its role – and that of the architect more broadly – as a crucial advocate in the evolution of our cities.

— Lucia Amies is associate editor of ArchitectureAu, a registered architect and a writer based in Naarm/ Melbourne. Lucia studied at the University of Queensland and at the University of Melbourne, where she also tutored design studio and architectural history. She is a past co- curator of New Architects Melbourne and co-editor of Inflection Journal.

(FOOTNOTES)

- (1) Ursula de Jong, “Designing Australia’s sacred spaces and religious buildings: past, present and future,” *Architecture Australia* vol. 103, no. 3, May/June 2019, 13.
- (2) John Dickie (@jdflemington), “New contemporary chapel and community building, St Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church, Epsom Rd, Kensington,” Instagram image, 21 June 2024, [instagram.com/p/C8eJXFJPZAL](https://www.instagram.com/p/C8eJXFJPZAL).

- (OPPOSITE LEFT) On axis with the site’s entrance, a grand internal stair winds up to the new chapel and priest’s offices on the first floor.
- (OPPOSITE RIGHT) In the new Arabic chapel, northern light illuminates windows adorned with symbolism and parishioners face east in prayer as per Coptic tradition.
- (BELOW) The site has been reinvigorated through a multitude of religious and communal spaces, which are programmed throughout the week and weekend.

Architect Studio Bright; Project team Mel Bright, Rob McIntyre, Annie Suratt, Ryan de Winnaar, Emily Watson, Jaxon Webb, Rob Hillman, Pei She Lee, Amy Tung; Builder SJ Higgins Group; Project manager Gallagher Jeffs; Urban planner Urban Planning Collective; Quantity surveyor Rider Levett Bucknall; Structural and civil engineer Eng Plus Consulting; Services engineer ECM Group; Landscape architect Openwork; Building surveyor Checkpoint Building Surveyors; Heritage consultant Lovell Chen

