

WORKS: HUDSON ARCHITECTS

Something to beli

Hudson Architects had the tough task of translating the Salvation Army's changing vision of itself into an architectural form, writes Ellis Woodman

Pictures by Keith Collie



The Baddow Road elevation extends to enclose an internal courtyard.

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SPECIFICATIONS Architect: Hudson Architects, Client The Salvation Army, Structural engineer Curtins Consulting Engineers, KLH engineer Techniker, Services engineer EP Consulting, Acoustics engineer Cole Jarman, Project manager Arcadis AYH

George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, his memoir of years spent as a tramp in the late 1920s, offers a memorably grim description of a Salvation Army hostel in London's east end. While cheap, such lodgings obliged residents to attend compulsory services and were pervaded by a culture of militaristic order.

"At 10 o'clock an officer marched round the hall blowing a whistle. Immediately everyone stood up.

'What's this for?' I said to Paddy, astonished.

'Dat means you has to go off to bed. An' you has to look sharp about it, too.'

Obediently as sheep, the whole two hundred men trooped off to bed, under the command of the officers."

The world in which Orwell found himself had been conceived by the Reverend William Booth half a century previously. In 1865 Booth had established The Christian Revival Society, a Methodist-inspired denomination that was committed to the relief of the poor community around its base in London's Whitechapel.

It was from this church that, in the 1870s, the Salvation Army emerged, newly rebranded along military lines. Each congregation was known as a corps, its members as soldiers, preachers as officers, and Booth himself as general. Abstaining from the full pack of detestable evils, each corps met weekly under a flag bearing the bracing war cry, Blood and Fire, and committed itself to a life of evangelism and humanitarian aid.

Booth's army duly conquered the world. Today it can claim a membership of 1.6 million, bases in 118 countries and, most staggeringly, an annual aid budget of over \$2 billion. That ongoing success is a tribute to the fact that the organisation has adapted its mission to the needs and expectations of the modern world.

Visiting the handsome new citadel of the Chelmsford Corps last week, I found much of it in use as an elderly person's day centre. At other times, it supports a parent and toddler group; beaver, cub and scout evenings; choir rehearsals and after-school playgroups. Some of these activities have a religious dimension but many do not and we can safely assume that none involves the dispossessed being frogmarched around to the blare of whistles.

What remains perplexing — at least to an outsider — is that, while the church has evidently undergone a major cultural transformation in recent decades, its core iconography remains absolutely that of the late 19th century. For an architect tasked with designing a new building for the church, this mismatch is not easily reconciled.

In 2005, Sheppard Robson completed the Salvation Army's international headquarters in a



The building is highly visible from the dual carriageway.

prominent location in the City of London. It presents a highly peculiar melange of imagery drawn from the corporate world and from that of the church. One imagines that the words screen-printed on the facade of full-height glazing might be trying to sell you an Isa. Yet they turn out to be biblical quotations. The office layout, in a nod to the church's quasi-military structure, is modelled on that of a Roman camp. What looks like a board room, suspended, pod-like over the entrance is, in fact, a chapel. All this feels a long way

Approaching the citadel from the town is to be momentarily hoodwinked to its true dimensions

from the militancy of Booth's original vision and yet markedly fails to offer a contemporary identity of equal conviction.

Anthony Hudson, the architect of the Chelmsford Citadel, has had a similar set of iconographic quandaries to contend with. Significantly, however, his is a much cheaper building than Sheppard Robson's, and its site is considerably less well to do — conditions that more securely anchor the scheme in the social context from which the Salvation Army was born.

It replaces a single-storey, 1970s building — a standard design the church rolled out across the country, and which was beset by major technical failings.

Securing the funding for the new structure — the build cost of which was £1.2 million — has taken over a decade. When Hudson Architects was first approached, the plan was to incorporate 40 apartments as a means of subsidising the required facilities, but the financial benefits of that solution proved marginal. Given the recent collapse of the housing market, the church must be extremely thankful that it abandoned that plan.

While the new structure is not significantly larger than the one it replaced, its massing is very dif-

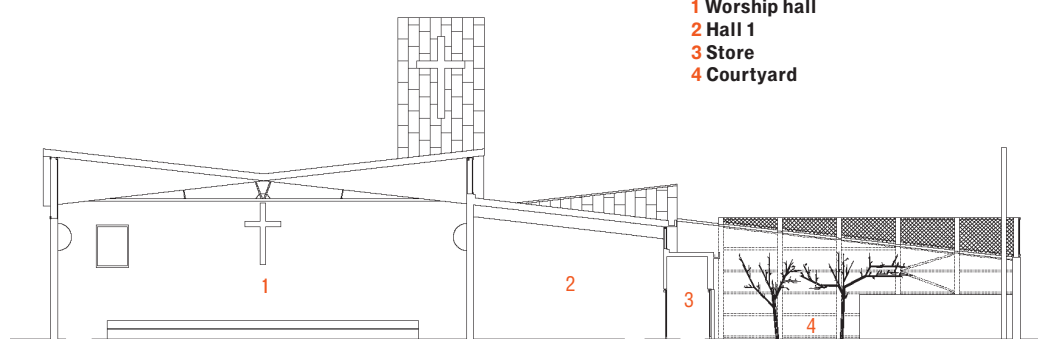
ferent. The earlier building stood as a solitaire, framed by surface car parking, whereas the new citadel reasserts the pavement line on each of its open boundaries. The principal elevation is to Baddow Road, which extends out of the historic town centre, but was bisected by a ring road in the post-war years. The outer-lying stretch, on which the citadel stands, has suffered a considerable downturn since it was cut off, although the local authority is working on reviving it. The new building represents a major contribution to that effort.

Approaching the citadel from the town, at least for the first time, is to be momentarily hoodwinked to its true dimensions. Although the zinc shingle-faced facade extends along the full length of the plot, we soon discover that, for the first third of that length, it is in fact no more than a fence, enclosing an external courtyard. This gives the building a sense of being larger than it is but has also allowed the architect to cultivate a much livelier elevation than might otherwise have been achieved.

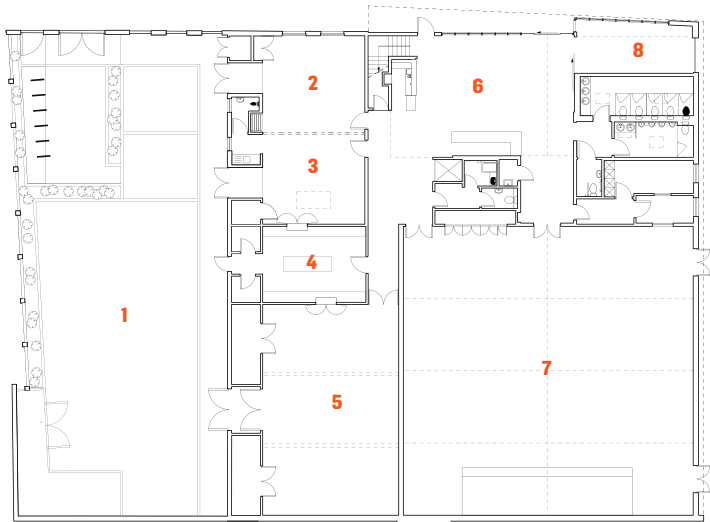
The key objective has been to establish a scale commensurate with that of the neighbouring houses — no small task given that the brief was dominated by the need for rooms for large gatherings. What smaller rooms there are — an office and a day care lounge — have been duly loaded against the Baddow Street facade, establishing a two-storey arrangement within a section that is otherwise occupied by full-height spaces. Both rooms present a couple of picture windows, which we read in conjunction with a trio of equivalently sized openings that have been punched into the adjacent fence. Each is positioned incrementally higher than the last, giving the impression that they have been configured in response to a non-existent staircase, whose destination is the equally imaginary terrace, suggested by the open mesh balustrade that extends along the top of the fence.

The nervous rhythm of these openings offers an effective foil to the more straightforward, shed-like expanse of zinc, which extends down the remainder of the facade. It is broken only by a long strip of glazing at ground level, ►

SECTION



WORKS: HUDSON ARCHITECTS



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Courtyard
- 2 Lounge
- 3 Hall 2
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Hall 1
- 6 Foyer
- 7 Worship hall
- 8 Multi-purpose room



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- 9 Commanding officer
- 10 Admin office
- 11 Instrument store
- 12 Plant room
- 13 Plant roof
- 14 Void

within which the entrance is set.

Through the glass we can make out the brightly coloured chairs of a foyer café. It all looks rather like the entrance to an arts cinema — an impression strengthened by the marquee-style lettering that spells out THE SALVATION ARMY along the length of the entrance canopy.

The public spaces — a meeting room used for Sunday School classes; a multi-functional hall which is used for sports; the lounge; and finally the largest volume, the Worship Hall — are all accessible directly from the foyer. The doors to the last of these spaces have been lent a subtle prominence through their siting on an axis with the main entrance.

Immediately above the doors is the Salvation Army's crest, an elaborate knot of a crucifix, crossed swords and a serpentine S, superimposed on a crowned sun. It is almost the only religious emblem in a space that is essentially secular in tone. I say almost:



The worship hall seats a congregation of up to 300.



The public spaces are all directly accessible from the foyer.

to the immediate left of the main entrance a cross has been cut out of the wall high up, borrowing light from the meeting room beyond. The gesture offers not only an indication of the building's religious function but also draws attention to the means of its construction.

The main structure was assembled entirely from KLH cross-laminated timber panels prefabricated in Austria—a strategy that offered a £90,000 saving, compared with more established methods and also reduced the construction

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period by three months.

However, given the subsequent collapse in the value of the pound, the church was lucky—or blessed—in agreeing the contract when it did. Hudson Architects has a couple of other projects awaiting the go-ahead that employ the same system, but which are now proving more expensive to realise because of the strength of the euro.

A language of low-level linings conceals pipes and cabling and controls the visual impact of doors and built-in furniture, but a great deal of the timber has been left exposed. The roof has been designed as a series of alternating ridges and valleys that have been engineered with admirable economy by propping panels against each other and bracing them with minimal steel trusses.

The system is most legible in the Worship Hall, where its geometry serves to establish a series of clerestory windows around the perimeter. Particularly in this room, one cannot help wondering



The two principal facades extend to enclose a courtyard.

at the contrast between the powerful iconography that informs the church's organisational structure and the plainness of the architectural setting.

While the eschewal of religious imagery is very much part of the Salvation Army's culture, even the Mercy Seat and Reading Desk—the focal points of any citadel

meeting—have been bought as off-the-shelf pieces of furniture, denying the architect the opportunity to integrate them into the building's aesthetic.

However, if we head outside again, we discover the architecture is not entirely devoid of evangelical intent. While the south and west-facing elevations do not fea-

ture at all in the experience of a pedestrian approaching the citadel from the town centre, they are ultimately of greater urban significance than the principal facade. This is because both are highly visible from the dual carriageway that forms the site's western boundary.

The south elevation is, in effect, a gigantic billboard. It is faced in an expanse of red fibrous cement boards into which quotes from the scriptures and the abstracted image of a tree have been routed out. While the results are far from unattractive they do invite similar doubts to the supergraphics of Sheppard Robson's International Headquarters building. In Chelmsford, the impression is not so much corporate as akin to the kind of treatment you might find behind the reception of a hip metropolitan hotel.

The challenge of inventing decoration for a church that has no decorative tradition is clearly a significant one—a problem that the Salvation Army may do well

to address before it proceeds with future building projects.

The west elevation is more persuasive. Here, the presence of the busy road has precluded the introduction of openings, save for a single, high-level fixed window that lights the worship hall.

Their absence heightens the visual prominence of the roofline's rise and fall and of the facade's central motif, a 13m-high tower. This has been assembled from a single sheet of cross-laminated timber—indeed its height was determined by the longest sheet that could be transported by lorry. It is faced in glazing backed by a 3M radiant light film.

As one drives past, its colour appears to flash from lime green to a feverish blend of red and gold. A large crucifix, which has been cut into the timber, is picked out by artificial lighting at night. It is a startling vision and one that at last evokes the blood and fire that is otherwise absent from this fine but curiously worldly building.