

St Matthews Church

Derek Wilson



Fig.1 St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)

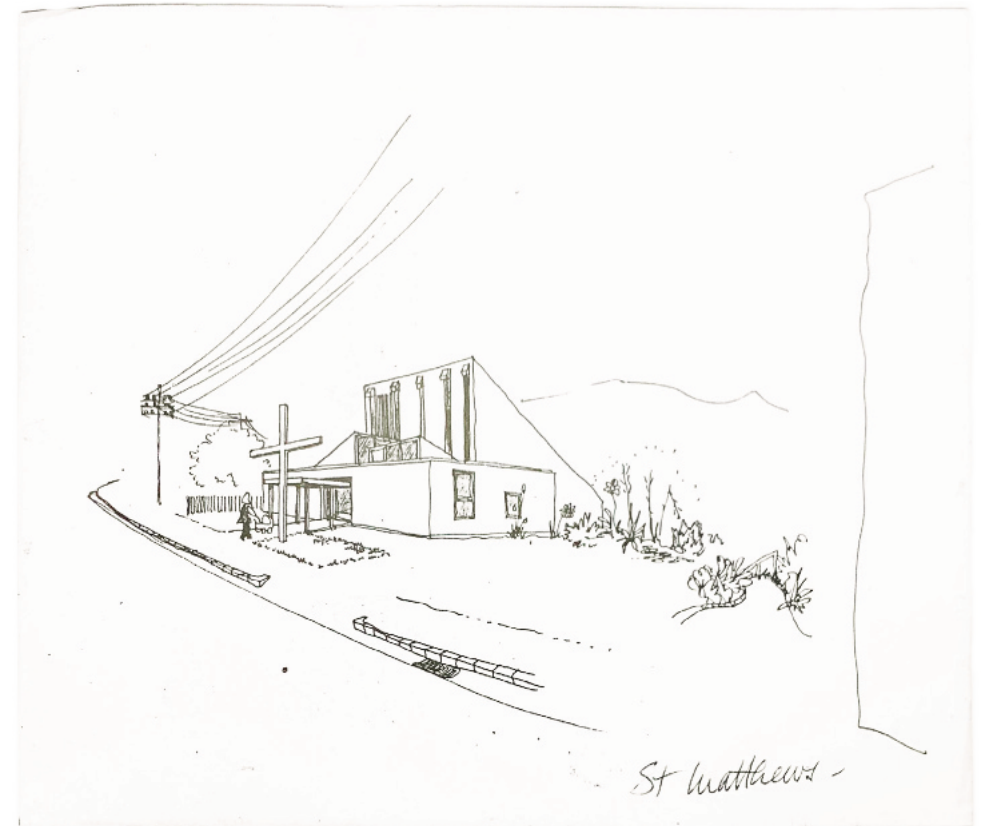


Fig.2. Sketch of St Matthews Church. (Sketch by Derek Wilson. "Sketch of St Matthews," in Stratford, Architects 1950-1980, 176.)

Published by Daniel Clendon
Clendon Architects Limited
First published 2021
Wellington, New Zealand
ISBN: 978 0 473 605971

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Fig.3. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Charles Fearnley, "Photo of St Matthews," in Fearnley, Wellington City Libraries.)



Fig.4. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.5. St Matthews Church. (Photo by DIAKRIT)



Fig.6. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.7. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.8. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.9. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.10. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.11. St Matthews Church. (Photo by Simon Devitt)



Fig.12. St Matthews Church.(Photo by Simon Devitt)

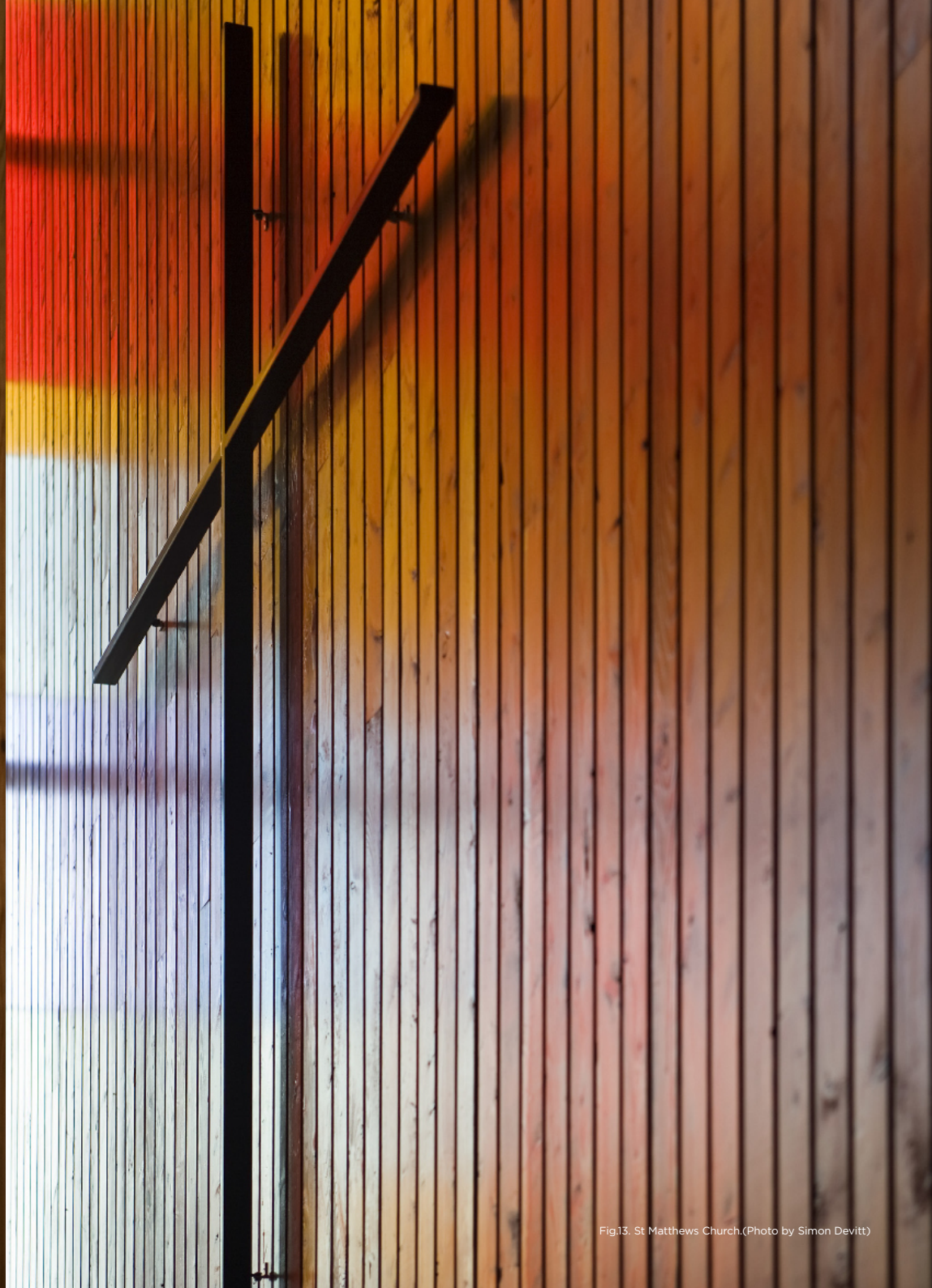


Fig.13. St Matthews Church.(Photo by Simon Devitt)

Ode to St Matthews Church

Designed by Derek Wilson, 1969
Brooklyn, Wellington NZ

St Matthews sat near the top of Washington Avenue – a too busy, too narrow, quintessentially Wellington road along the ridge of the hill in Brooklyn, an inner-city suburb of Wellington.

You would have been forgiven for missing the unassuming St Matthews Church at first glance, set back from the road near the high point of the hill. The cedar clad, 1960s church had a utilitarian feel, sitting behind a small carpark and patch of grass, and was devoid of the usual features of a church. There was no transept, chapel or steeple.

But upon closer inspection, the tell-tale signs of Christian architecture revealed themselves. A weathered, wooden cross standing in the foreground. Soaring cedar and glass wall fronted by a rectangular form punctuated with triangular clerestories. The true impact of the building – its unique, thoughtful design, was not able to be missed once inside.

St Matthews was commissioned to house three local Christian denominations – the Anglicans, Methodists, and Calvin Presbyterians – who joined forces in Brooklyn in 1960. It was designed by the prominent Wellington architect Derek Wilson (1922 – 2016) in 1965, and construction was complete by 1969. The brief was clear – multipurpose spaces with maximum flexibility – able to accommodate different sized groups for different purposes¹.

The exterior began at a human scale; a rectangular form with an entry centred on the façade. It was clad in vertical reversed board and battens of unstained cedar. Upon entering there was a large welcoming central space joining all areas of the building. To the north, a huge window with vertical mullions framed a dense cluster of native bush and let in the light. This space was low roofed and unassuming, surrounded by utilities, with a large multipurpose room opening off it – perfect for meetings and music groups of all sizes. Throughout the building was lined with functional, tidy and timeless rimu ply, providing a sense of warmth.

Continuing straight ahead, heavy, velvet curtains separated this space from the main worship place of the church. Walking from the low ceiling

central area into the nave of the church was an uplifting experience. The nave's soaring height and east facing leadlight stained windows, caught the full glory of the morning sun, providing a truly religious experience, whether you were a believer or not.

With exposed steel portals and Douglas Fir planks, the walls drew your eyes up to the east, and the light. Narrow windows spaced along the west wall provided glimpses over the Brooklyn valley, towards the wind turbine. The chancel and sanctuary area were all part of the larger space, with a single step separating it from the nave. On the rear wall was a simple steel cross, elegant in its minimal form.

The lower floor, underneath the church, was closed in at a later date to house children's play areas and games rooms, and in 1985 it became a parent run, community creche known as Brooklyn Early Childhood Centre. This space has its own charms, with concrete formwork and posts with timber windows between, creating a grounded, light filled structure, nestled into a beautiful bush clad setting.

Derek Wilson, along with William (Bill) Toomath, were arguably two of the most prominent and influential Wellington architects of their time, producing a significant

and influential body of work. Toomath and Wilson designed, among other works, the Wellington Teachers College in Karori, the DSIR and Fisheries Marine Research Laboratories (now NIWA), Calvert House in Stokes Valley, Maunsell beach house in Riversdale and the Wilson House in Khandallah.

Wilson's work was distinctive and modernist, and left lasting impression on the urban fabric of Wellington. A number of Toomath and Wilson works have since been lost, including the Wellington Teachers College, which was controversially demolished this year to make way for a retirement village.

Among civic works, the St Matthews Church was a unique work of modernist architecture in Wellington. It was of its time but timeless, and for more than half a century functioned as an exceptionally successful space for a multitude of user groups. In 2020 it was finally added to the Wellington City Council's Heritage list, effective 2022 and shortlisted for an NZIA Enduring Architecture award.

Generations of parishioners were served by priests living in the adjoining Vicarage (at 13 Garfield Street, which was built as the vicarage in the early 1900s and still retains many of its original features). The last priest to live in the vicarage retired in 2013. After his

¹Stratford, 4 Architects 1950-1980, 176.

retirement, the congregation welcomed various temporary or visiting priests. But with a dwindling congregation and no permanent priest, the writing was on the wall – Sunday services were ceased in 2016, and the church went fallow.

Despite this the church buildings remained in constant use by church and community groups and other regular users until early 2021. The nave welcomed candidates and the community for the local electorate debates, and provided an inspired place to vote at the recent election. Finally, in late May 2021, having survived the many policy and funding changes facing early childhood education and

serving the community for more than 30 years, the Brooklyn Early Childhood Centre closed its doors for good.

In late 2020, the three churches sold St Matthews church to a developer, and in July 2021 it was demolished to be replaced by townhouses.

At times intimate, at times breath-taking, this beautiful modernist building and community treasure will be sorely missed, and Brooklyn is all the poorer for its loss.

Written by Dan Clendon,
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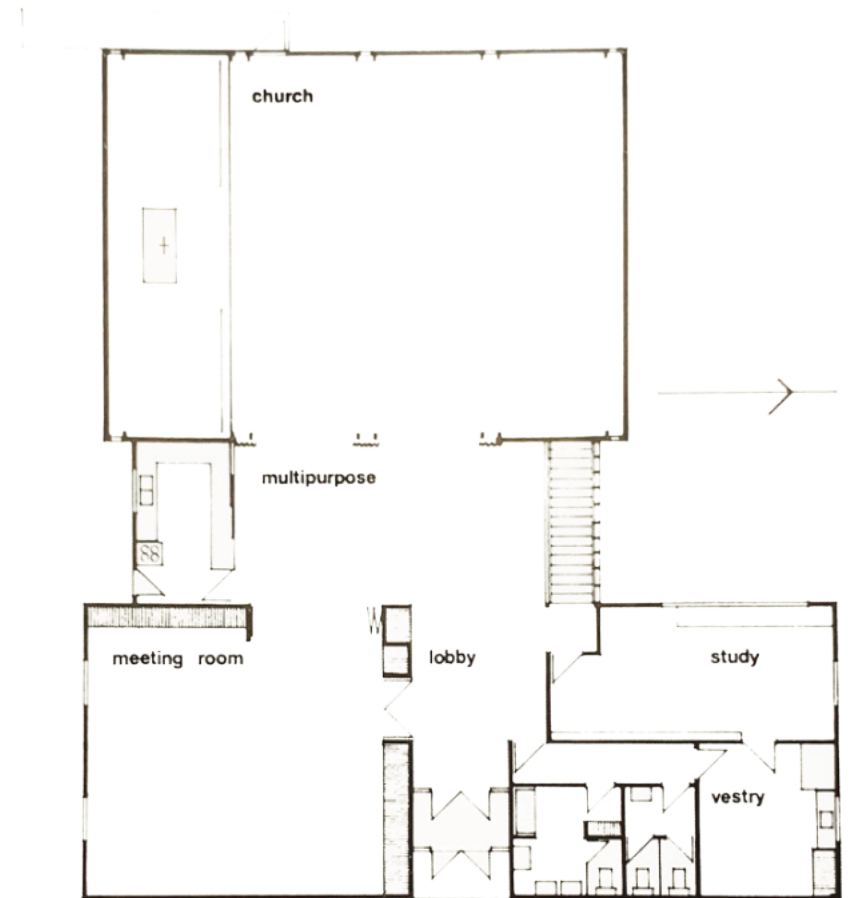


Fig.14. Plan of St Matthews Church. (Plan by Derek Wilson, "Plan of St Matthews," in Stratford, Architects 1950-1980, 180.)

References

Fearnley, Charles. St Mathew's Church, 96 Washington Avenue. Wellington City Libraries, 1976.

Stratford, Stephen. 4 Architects 1950-1980. New Zealand: New Zealand Architectural Publications Trust, 2010.

With special thanks to Simon Devitt

For further information on the history of St Matthews Church Brooklyn, refer to "A Church Amongst Presidents, the Story of St Matthew's Church Brooklyn 1909 - 2009", compiled by Chris Rabey.

This book showcases a unique and beautiful Church in Wellington, New Zealand which has since been demolished. The photos explore the unassuming nature of the first glance, to the soaring cedar and glass walls, before bringing you inside the church to the breath-taking leadlight stained windows.

These photographs are an ode to the church in hope that its memory will live on in the hearts of the community.

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