

Belarusian Memorial Chapel

‘Our language, is the language of suffering.’

Svetlana Alexievich

Belarusian author, 2015 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature

Belarusian Diaspora Community in London

Following WWII, Belarusian soldiers in the Polish divisions were reluctant to return to their homeland due to the onset of the Cold War and the creation of the Iron Curtain. The number of Belarusians swelled and they established a community and a makeshift house-turned-church in North London. It had always been their collective desire to one day build a church.



WWII atrocities in Belarus

The Belarusians were predominantly Greek Catholics and were subsequently persecuted and banned by the Tsarist Regime in the 19th Century. Belarus lost 1/3 of her population – the largest percentage of any country during the Second World War. Countless wooden churches and synagogues in occupied Belarus were torched by Nazi troops, after locking all the villagers inside. The first generation of Belarusians in Britain were still haunted by this memory when they first arrived.



The 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster

On 26 April 1986, Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened, and 70% of the radioactive fallout fell on Belarus, contaminating and liquidating many villages. The new wooden church will therefore serve as a reminder of the loss of the many rural settlements in Belarus and a lasting memorial for all Belarusian victims of WWII and Chernobyl.



A Wooden Church

In 1839, when the Greek Catholic church was banned across the whole of Belarus, the baroque cupolas of the Greek Catholic churches had been replaced by Russian onion domes. These baroque cupolas therefore, serve as reminders of the Belarusian Greek Catholic identity and their history of being persecuted under the Tsarist and Soviet Regimes. The domed spire and timber shingle roof will offer familiarity, comfort and memories to London's Belarusian community, many of whom moved to the UK following the Chernobyl disaster. The architect, Tszwai So, conducted an extensive Research fieldtrip to Belarus to study her wooden church tradition, as wood was the predominant material in the largely forested country.



The Site

The new chapel is placed adjacent to the previously house-turned-church. The local authority did not welcome any design proposals put forward in the past, fearing that any new building activity would harm the protected trees.

The site is surrounded by thirteen mature lime trees and four birches, rising up to almost 20 metres, all of which are now statutorily protected. The white birches were originally planted in the 60's by the Belarusians to remind them of their beloved motherland.



Construction and Design

Traditional Belarusian Greek Catholic Churches were not east facing, therefore the new chapel can be oriented along the north-south axis to protect the existing trees, by avoid the tree root protection line. Besides protecting the trees, the light-weight timber structure is entirely prefabricated and made from sustainably sourced British Douglas fir, a nod to the historical connection of community and place. The CLT panels, were manufactured off-site using CNC technology to allow separately manufactured parts to fit perfectly when assembled on site to minimise waste and disruption.

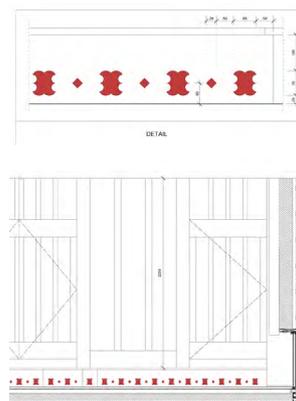


The design aims to transcend architectural ideologies, therefore, traditional forms and motifs that embody the collective memories of the community are complimented by contemporary detailing, exemplified by the exterior fins that form an unobtrusive yet dynamic façade. The chapel enhances natural lighting inside, while giving the appearance that the structure is floating. This illusion echoes the spiritual presence of the building yet contrasts its structural solidity.



Sustainability

The building goes beyond minimum energy requirements with high level of thermal insulation, provided by the use of certified timber which also ensure low embodied carbon. It is ventilated and heated by two heat recovery units located within the floor void beneath the altar. The building form makes use of the bell tower to create a stacking effect allowing circulation of fresh air and enabling efficient rapid warming of the space. The result was a significant 100% reduction of gas consumption and 58% of electricity consumption compared to the previous makeshift place of worship.



Community

The chapel has since become an important site for Belarusians in the UK and worldwide. Many have made a pilgrimage to the chapel from abroad, including the victims of Chernobyl.

It has also sparked intrigue and curiosity in the wider community – voted by Londoners during the London festival of Architecture 2017 as their People’s choice. The wooden chapel has, since then, simultaneously become the main place of worship for the Slovakian diaspora community. With this, the project’s historical and cultural significance has become a tool for sharing; building relationships across the communities in London.



Critical Reception

‘Belarusian Memorial Chapel is a reminder that churches still have the presence to become landmarks.’

Edwin Heathcote, The Financial Times

‘There is a kind of sensibility about this project (Belarusian Memorial Chapel) that’s quite hard to name but very easy to feel.’

Lesley Lokko,

World Architecture Festival Super Jury

‘...we are so overwhelmed by so much trash in the architectural world in the last decades, I think there’s a kind of purity in this (Belarusian Memorial Chapel), there’s a kind of naivety, there’s a kind of sincerity which makes it really achieve its point... It’s very emotional.’

Frederick Cooper Llosa,

World Architecture Festival Super Jury

‘A building potent with bitter-sweet memory and emotional charge.’

RIBA Journal

Footage from the film ‘Come and See’



Shot of the Chapel at Night



At night, as the Chapel glows softly, in prayer, the Belarusians are reminded of the traumatic torching of their ancestors during WWII.