Re awakening
Langlands & Bell

In Garden Grove, California, there is a cathedral made out of silver glass. To step inside is to travel from the uncontained landscape of the everyday into a space framed by belief systems and building systems, by hierarchies and traditions. Religion's architecture tends to make this transition apparent, conferring on its buildings the geometry and dimensions of divine order and magnitude. In Garden Grove, the transparency of the structure renders the framework practically invisible – edifice transfigured by artifice – so that it also projects the possibility of a never-ending space, an eternity. As Lewis Carroll's Alice observed as she stared into the looking glass, one side is nothing like the other side, although nothing can be seen to separate them; and while the everyday world can be mapped and measured, the mirrored space is potentially infinite, and 'may be quite different on beyond'.

Langlands & Bell's 1995 relief sculpture which models the floor plan of the Crystal Cathedral is part of a series of works interrogating the architecture of Jewish, Christian and Muslim places of worship. Occasionally arranged in diptychs – juxtaposing, for example, the Abbey Church of St Benedictus in Vaals, Holland, and the Ka'ba in Mecca – these immaculate constructions point up correspondences between apparently polarised faiths, at least in terms of the organizing principles of their buildings and the sense of people's place within them. Floating against black or white painted ground, as though cast adrift in the unfathomable space that human religions both embrace and resist, each rendering of a mosque is connected to the next within the global structure of Islam, and by the sense of a centre or final destination in Mecca. In the church pieces, blocks of identical empty pews figure the absorption of the individual into the single body of the congregation. Viewed through glass, as though from above, and stripped of enclosing walls, domes or vaulted ceilings, these buildings are ultimately exposed as social environments, constructed for shared experience and subject to irresistible laws.

In this sense, Langlands & Bell's investigations of 1995 and 1996 into what might be called constructions of religion reflect concerns central to their practice, and are a logical extension of their work on the architecture of other social and political systems. Like prisons, museums, parliaments and offices, synagogues, churches and mosques stage unresolved conflicts between powerful impersonal forces and the identity of the individual, an opposition that finds expression in the artists' interest in dualism and bi-polarity. When an individual constructs his own church, however, these conflicts must shift or dissolve, providing Langlands & Bell with new opportunities to interrogate issues of privacy and participation.

The third Marquess of Bute commissioned William Burges to build a private chapel for his family seat at Mount Stuart in 1873, but he conceived many aspects of the design himself, and its inspiration – the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – was encountered on his travels to the Holy Land in 1865. The third Marquess was the head of an ancient and noble family, and one of the country's richest men, but he was also a convert to Catholicism only 40 years after Roman Catholics were granted full civil and political liberties in Britain; he could in every sense afford to create a private religious universe, and simultaneously enable a total architectural context for art. Family chapels were, of course, the privilege of the aristocracy, a symbol not only of their superiority to their tenants but also of their significantly closer relationship to God; as such, they were both their inner sanctum and the heart of their power. (In Evelyn Waugh's elegy for the aristocracy, the 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*, the chapel – which in Waugh's description

bears a striking resemblance to the private chapel at Mount Stuart – is the only part of the eponymous family home not to fall into disrepair. The fact that the Burges Chapel was miraculously preserved from the fire of 1877 would surely not have been lost on a devout Catholic.)

Every feature of the third Marquess's private chapel – from the stones he collected in Palestine, set as relics into the altar, to its dedication to St John the Baptist, the Marquess's patron saint and namesake – stakes an aristocratic claim to ownership or appropriation of the Holy Land. The intimate family services performed here, such as the christening of his first child, proposed a link between the longevity of a noble lineage and the eternal life of the spirit. Moreover, the rich topography of Christian narrative had ensured that far-off places – Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth – were enshrined at the centre of the faith as resonant conceptual sites rather than as real places. For the third Marquess, then, the Holy Land was reached by a certain act of imagination or leap of faith. The Burges Chapel was a portal between earthly estate and spiritual home; both were sacred, and as such were accessible to very few.

Langlands & Bell's 2004 installation in the chapel reactivates – or, in the artists' words, 'reawakens' – this dormant portal for a different kind of traveller and, in several respects, opens up a new dimension to the Mount Stuart visitor. Previously closed to the public and invisible from the outside of the building, the chapel reclaims its place within the structure of the ancestral home, reasserting its historical and artistic significance; while the profuse detail of the interior – amplified by Langlands & Bell's mirrored floor – demands both the contemplation of its formal aesthetic qualities and an interpretation of its hidden meanings and religious symbolism. Most importantly, the project makes the space available to viewers uninitiated into the faith and family that are its very fabric. The private realm of the third Marquess and the highly personal spiritual journey that it afforded him are democratized in what appears to be an expansion – a doubling – of both the physical and religious dimensions of the chapel. What was once enclosed within the parameters of architecture and ancestry, claimed as the material and spiritual legacy of an elite, now escapes into another time and space.

Although Langlands & Bell's chapel installation intrudes – and then permits further intrusion – into the sealed-off sphere of the individual, it does not depersonalize it, but rather throws its particular qualities into relief. Tracing the vestiges of identity or evidence of human participation in architecture and in structures in general is a central preoccupation of their work, and here the comparative unobtrusiveness of the installation reflects their concern to provide a reading of both the space and its builder. Their *Reflection Portrait* (2002) a diptych of framed architectural models of banks by Norman Foster and Richard Rogers on a mirrored ground, providing a metaphorical rendering of these architects' faces (or façades) and making viewers complicit in the interpretation by incorporating their reflection. In the Burges Chapel, the visitors must themselves step into the 'reflection portrait', interacting with the work and the space in the construction of residual identity.

The artists' interest in the active engagement of the spectator / participant with both actual and virtual space – in this case, the chapel and its reflection, or the chapel and the conceptualized Holy Land that it projects as its correlative – has been particularly prevalent in their recent work, such as *The Artist's Studio* (2002), an interactive digital model based on computer game technology created for their Turner Studio Residency exhibition at Petworth House, West Sussex. Once 'entered' by the viewer, the installation unfolded as a series of doors linking the

occasional studio of JMW Turner at Petworth – a space once closed to all but the artist and his host, Lord Egremont – to Langlands & Bell's own working environment in Whitechapel, east London. The same strategy and technology were deployed for *The House of Osama bin Laden* (2003) at London's Imperial War Museum, in which viewers used a joystick to navigate a construct of the Al Qaeda leader's spartan former home on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In both works, evasive 'personalities' lost in time and space are reconstructed by the viewer's interpretation of an architectural model devoid of actual human presence.

If Langlands & Bell's intervention in the Burges Chapel furnishes a portrait of the third Marquess of Bute, their work for the Mount Stuart Visitor Centre – a space at a remove both physically and aesthetically from the chapel – extends biographical trajectory into global trajectory. In 1896, more than 30 years after his first visit to the Holy Land, the third Marquess commissioned a landscaped walk through the grounds of Mount Stuart that would recreate the Way of the Cross, or Via Dolorosa, in Jerusalem, enabling him symbolically to tread the path of Christ's suffering. Langlands & Bell's wall painting *Rothesay–Jerusalem* (2004) aligns the Marquess's real and symbolic journeys to Jerusalem with the virtual transportation of the viewer by the four airport designator codes – RAY (Rothesay) / JRS (Jerusalem), GLA (Glasgow) / TLV (Tel Aviv) – from which the painting's imagery is derived.

Past works such as the *Frozen Sky* (1999) and *Language of Places* (2002) series have tended to focus on the visual and aural properties of these codes rather than employ them as referents. Here, however, the artists have revived a somewhat austere motif in a context rich in historical and contemporary resonance's, from the Marquess's19th-century pilgrimages, to today's interrogations between the West and the Middle East.

Mount Stuart 2004