

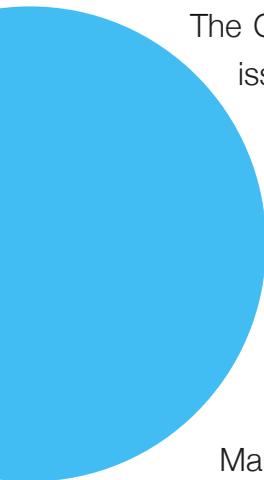
**retrofitting**

**postwar churches**

rdp >



# the postwar church | introduction



The Church of England is generally faced with a range of pressing issues. These include a largely Victorian or medieval building stock, changing demographics, cultural marginalisation and a chronic failure to invest in innovation and marketing.

Many of these issues are not new. However, an issue which is not widely recognised is the emerging crisis of the suburbs and by extension the suburban church.

Many of our churches built in the immediate postwar decades are also now reaching the 'natural' stage in a building's life where they require major attention and refit. Ignoring this need now will condemn many of these buildings to early demolition, blight their mission and be a greater drain on shrinking resources in the coming decades.

This short publication looks at some of the key socio-cultural issues and demand imperatives facing postwar churches. In particular, it focuses on the role that a retrofitting of these buildings can help play in prolonging their life, enhancing the relevancy and profile of a church's mission and offer, as well as increasing their positive impact in our local communities.

In order to make this happen we will need to return to, and reinvent the role of, churches as centres of collective life and identity.

**rdp** = rapid development programme. For further information see page 16.

# the postwar church | issues



Our postwar churches were built for a different era. That era was defined by:

- Widespread active, or deferential, recognition of the role of the church in community life.
- Larger congregations and a wider offer (e.g. youth groups, Sunday schools etc).
- More homogeneous communities, households and attitudes.
- Cheaper energy.

These features no longer form the key elements in the operational context of our churches. Rather we live in an unchurched society with rapid and radical economic, technological, cultural and social change, evident in all communities, households and personal lives. Many of our churches are not keeping up, engaging, or shaping/leading these changes in their local communities and it is likely that without a rethink and decisive action, many of them will close.

Many of the wider changes and challenges facing our communities and churches are most obvious in inner-city communities. As we have visited many different types of communities and parishes while delivering the rapid development programme (rdp – see page 16 for more details), we have

become more aware of the impending crisis in our postwar suburban and estate communities.

Crisis of course has become an overused term, but it is clear to us that our apparently successful or at least stable postwar churches, will certainly face major challenges over the coming decade.

These challenges include:

- A collapse in morale and failure to recognise or respond to changing communities and lifestyles.
- An aging and shrinking congregation as the ‘pioneer’ cohort die.
- The consequences of a failure to invest in the upkeep and upgrading of buildings.
- A widespread failure to update amenities and offer.

More widely, postwar suburbs, estates and new towns have gradually seen a loss of services, including their libraries, banks, post offices, pubs, and shops etc. There has also been a failure in many areas adequately to invest in community infrastructure and life and/or articulate a positive local identity, which has in turn contributed to a weakening of local, civic and community life.

Finally, all our lives over the coming decades (and beyond) will be shaped by climate change. The planners and pioneers in the postwar period built new communities, estates and towns with a building stock and transport infrastructure based on what is now an obsolete and energy intensive base, focused around and limited by the car. Indeed some of our postwar churches resemble (as one taxi driver put it) “that funny building surrounded by a car park”.

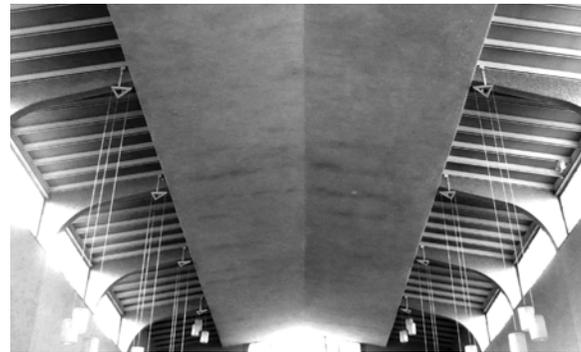
Within a transformed, economic, social and cultural landscape, suburban, estate and new town churches are, or appear to be, increasingly obsolete. They are often poorly maintained and energy intensive buildings hosting a backward looking offer. Inside the buildings themselves, a demographic ‘bubble’ exists, with a disproportionate number of older retired people afflicted by, in many cases, a collapse in confidence and

morale. This can lead to a cultural detachment, with congregations not pro-actively responding and adapting to the changes in their community.

Churches are faced with many issues including greater expectations in all areas of life with increasing levels of consumerism, a decline in ‘fixed’ identities and commitments, an increased focus on personal and household life and “happiness” and greater socialising as families.

There is also a greater differentiation in household structure and family form – more single parents, same-sex couples, reconstituted and more complex family arrangements and particularly a growth in single person households.

*We now live in a largely unchurched society. A growing church, and fully utilised churches, will have to feel and look very different in the future.*

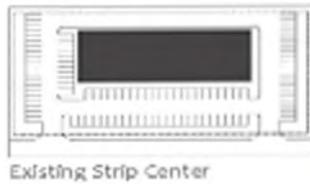


# postwar churches



# example | the american shopping mall

BEFORE



THE PROBLEM - no active frontage, no engagement, unsustainable

AFTER



THE SOLUTION - barriers removed, inviting spaces, more sustainable

An example of the issues facing post-war churches can be found in the late twentieth century shopping malls of North America. Many of these have now closed due to a failure to invest, not updating their facilities and environment or upgrading what they offer their customers.

These facilities were designed for a car-based culture founded on cheap energy. However, consumers now look for far more from their “shopping experience”. As a result some shopping precincts have been successfully retrofitted to reflect changing and growing expectations and environmental imperatives.

Many postwar churches have obvious similarities with these failing shopping malls in that they are car based, physically turning their back on the street and relating instead to the car park. As a result there is a poor street frontage or presence and instead what should be the centre of a community is often, quite simply, a tired/passive building “in the car park” with a dated offer.

There is often little real consideration of how to be more people or environmentally friendly. For instance how many churches incorporate a play/sports area or provide bike racks? Most are not ‘green’ and have very poor, passive landscaping that instead of inviting and enveloping, contributes to invisibility and discourages engagement.





# the postwar church | opportunities



Change also creates opportunity and while many of the issues can appear insurmountable, there are good foundations on which to build a proactive response, so that we become a growing and more successful church. Indeed, others in both secular and faith sectors have thrived in the difficult climate outlined above. In short, churches will need to identify the opportunities for reconnection and growth available to them in their local community. They urgently need to raise their profile, go green, retrofit their buildings, provide and sell services and act as an animating anchor of local informal and formal networks and civic life. In short, rethink their offer.

In order to make this happen we need to return to and reinvent the timeless role of churches as active centres of a more diverse personal and communal life and identity.

There are several key factors and trends that we can build on:

The decade from 2011 will see several million people retiring and many of these “baby boomers” will be looking for something meaningful to do locally. The Church, with spaces in central locations and a neighbour loving vocation, is able to offer so much more.

What will be a decade of recession is already seeing a growth in participation and engagement in a range of ‘real’ activities once again. This includes

gardening and cooking, coming together through community cinemas, book clubs as well as walking and cycling groups. All of these activities naturally involve making new friends through an interest, which can be accommodated and animated through a central flexible amenity: the spaces offered by the Church.

With the recession and perhaps since the millennium there is a widespread cultural desire for something bigger than oneself, in both the secular and spiritual sense, hence the growth in visits to contemporary art galleries and Cathedrals for example. We are a believing, questioning and spiritual culture looking for inspiration. Environmental stress, economic pressure, social isolation, greater diversity and new technologies are all driving a search for new ways of living. The disruption of the recent consumerist, individualistic and ethical free consensus opens up opportunities for remodelling and bringing good news to the poor.

In delivering on these opportunities, briefly outlined above, there is a vital role for our postwar church buildings. While they have some good spaces, that are adaptable for new purposes, they are generally looking tired, encumbered with a high level of energy use, not utilising the opportunities in new technologies and/or responding to new demands. Additionally they suffer from a low profile, often surrounded by passive landscaping and generally have no active connection with the street.

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The good news is that many of these issues are amenable to affordable change and with creative thinking we can revitalise our existing building stock. However, the required changes, of an essentially rethought and retrofitted building, will have to go beyond a new boiler and more/better toilets.

Many postwar houses or other public buildings have also been retrofitted with better insulation, lofts etc.

The basic opportunities for rethinking and retrofit are:

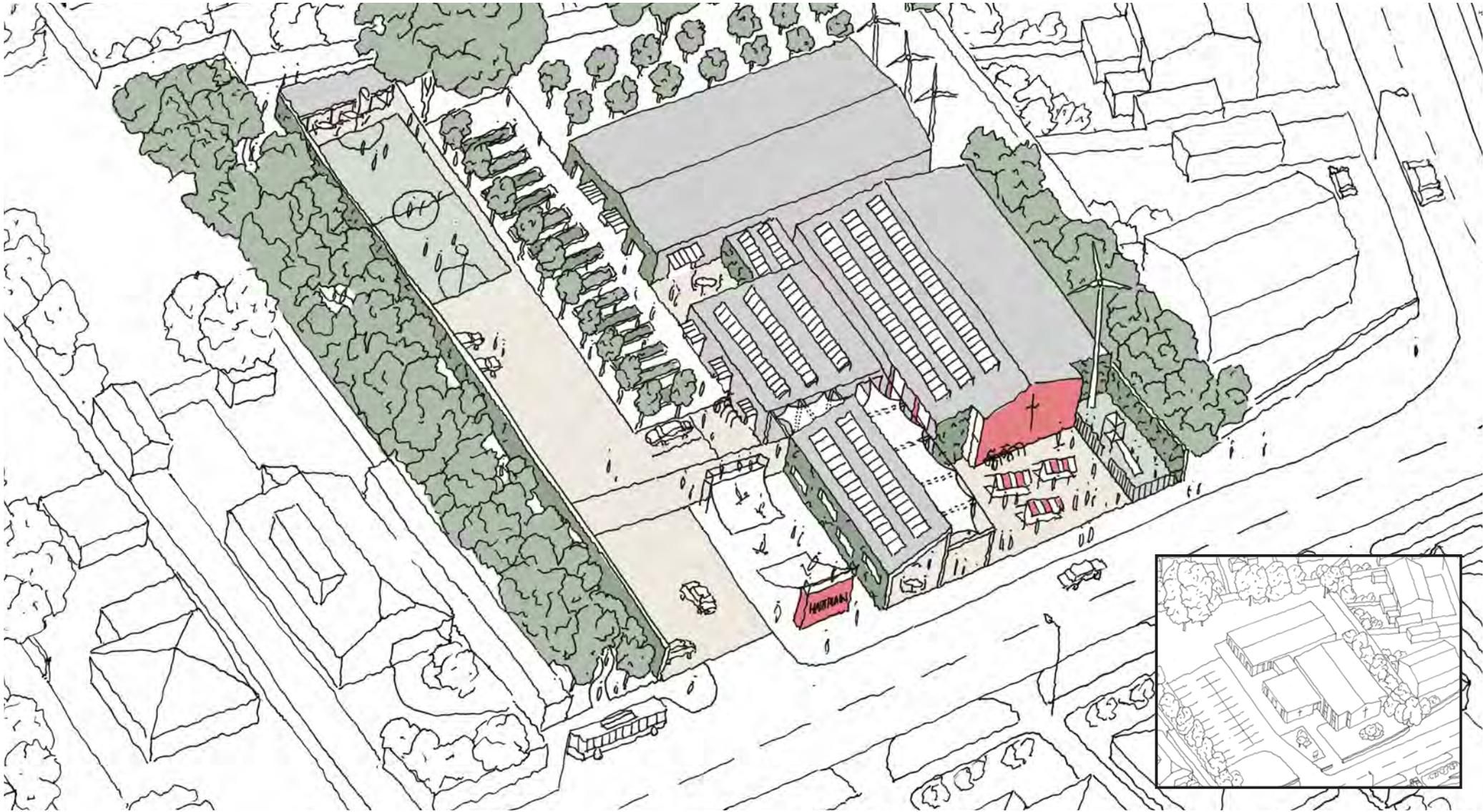
- a. Connecting with the street; canopies, pavilions or temporary structures can reconnect a building with its immediate surroundings and provide local spaces for gathering.
- b. Landscaping; removing hedge and wall boundaries, community gardening, reducing and relocating car parking, developing play and sports areas are ways of bring spaces alive. A bike rack signals you are open for younger people!
- c. Going green is a responsibility for us all and churches should be local exemplars. Green walls, insulation, renewable energy, roof

gardens and community gardening etc are beneficial to churches – but they are also relatively cheap ways of signalling relevance within what needs to become a mainstream environmental agenda.

- d. Celebrate the post-war/funky – good post-war design should be celebrated when instead many churches are trying to pretend that they are a Victorian pastiche. Good, bright design, furniture and repainting can get them noticed.
- e. Like all of our churches, postwar churches have specific spaces, such as crypts or lofts, that can be re-purposed as youth space, cafés etc.
- f. Others who are using our buildings are often better at promotion and signage. Good branding, bright and professional temporary signage that changes frequently and punter focused websites that actually talk to others (not just ourselves) can work.

In the coming pages are several examples of how a retrofit of our buildings can contribute to a change in our image and offer.

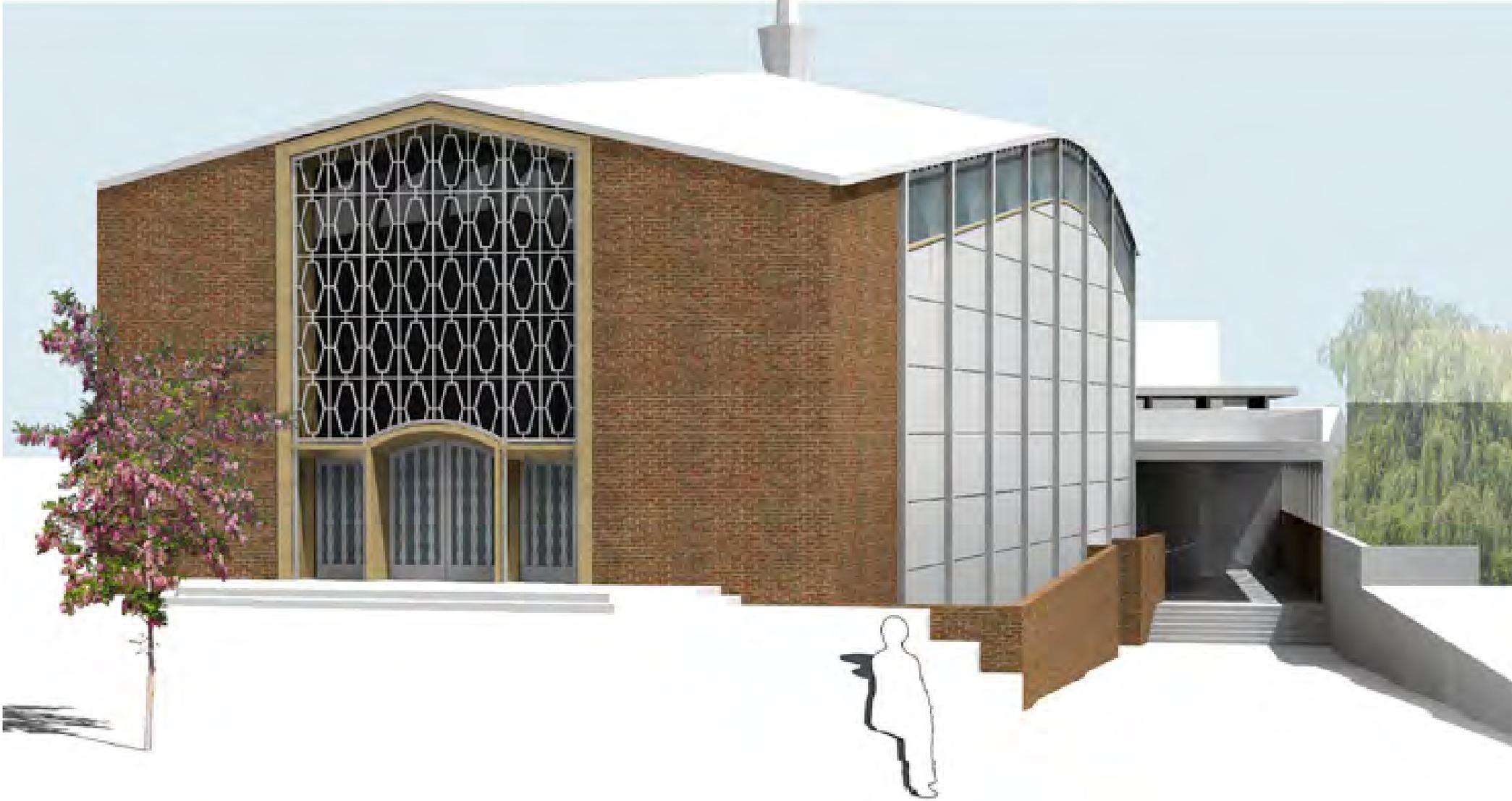
# possibilities | green retrofit



# possibilities | community life



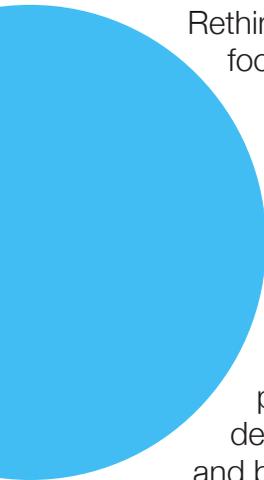
**possibilities** | crypt



**possibilities** | canopy



# the postwar church | conclusion



Rethinking our role, offer and facilities will be the basis of re-engaging with our communities. Identifying local dynamics and opportunities as a focus for mission and how our buildings can serve this mission are the key to our success.

Creative and 'free' thinking about all our buildings is necessary but is sometimes easier in our postwar buildings.

We need to move out of the decline or survival mode of thinking, as this approach will guarantee that many of our vital parishes will close. We are driven by the urgent need to move beyond denial, helplessness or complacency to reposition and re-energise our amazing offer. Our postwar churches have a vital role to play in this.

We have developed the rapid development programme (rdp) to facilitate this. rdp is a unique tailored workshop programme for local parishes that are considering new ways to engage with their community and/or a building project. It uses adapted social/business development techniques to help participants think in a focussed and creative way about the potential role of their Church in bringing light, hope and belief to their community through new ways of engagement and a greater ambition and focus.

rdp was envisaged and developed by the Council for Social Responsibility at the Diocese of Portsmouth and we are now working with the Church Urban Fund to share our approach nationally.

To find out more about what we are doing, visit our websites: [www.csrnet.org.uk](http://www.csrnet.org.uk) and [www.rapiddevelopment.org.uk](http://www.rapiddevelopment.org.uk)

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[www.csrnet.org.uk](http://www.csrnet.org.uk)

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