

# Comment

## Sing the praises of Brutalist churches



**Mary Keating**

**B**IRMINGHAM is blessed with a stunning collection of post-war churches.

They tell the story of the city's post-war regeneration, of the move from overcrowded housing in the city centre to suburban estates and the growth and prosperity of the city of that period.

They provide insight into the styles adopted by the architects of the time and most have been maintained in their original condition.

Two churches offering a dramatic and intriguing contrast are St Matthew's in Perry Beeches and St Vincent's in Nechells, one an uncompromising Brutalist building, the other a blaze of colour and light.

A first impression of St Matthew's is of an austere, grey building.

Externally, its lofty, brick-faced walls are topped with a thin line of pennant shaped windows in a shallow fringe. A single bell hangs in a concrete frame.

It was built in 1962-64 and designed by rising architects Robert Maguire and Keith Murray.

Inside, the space is cavernous, challenging in its sculptural unfamiliarity.

Time spent in this building reveals its architectural quality. It is not easy; you have to work at understanding its sophistication.

What is revealed when you look up is a stunning design. What a joy to recognise the rising spiral of five ceiling heights arranged around a hexagonal core and see its complexity.

The ceilings are detailed with exposed timber beams, red wood boarding and emphatic concrete beams. Daylight pouring through the high-level, plain glass windows traces striking patterns across the grey brick walls and the terracotta floor.

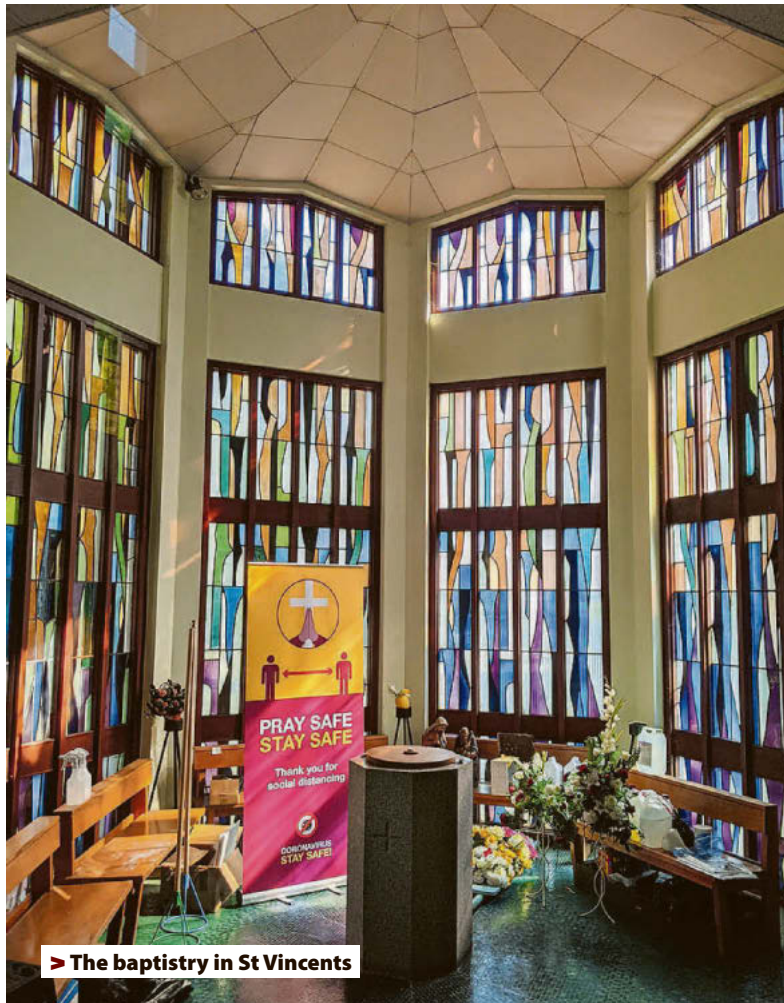
The stations of the cross by Nicholas Mynheer were a bold commission. They are stark and dramatic in their stylised representation, adding to the epic quality of the building.

The original English Ash furnishings include chunky, carved pews, a modern interpretation of medieval choir stalls.

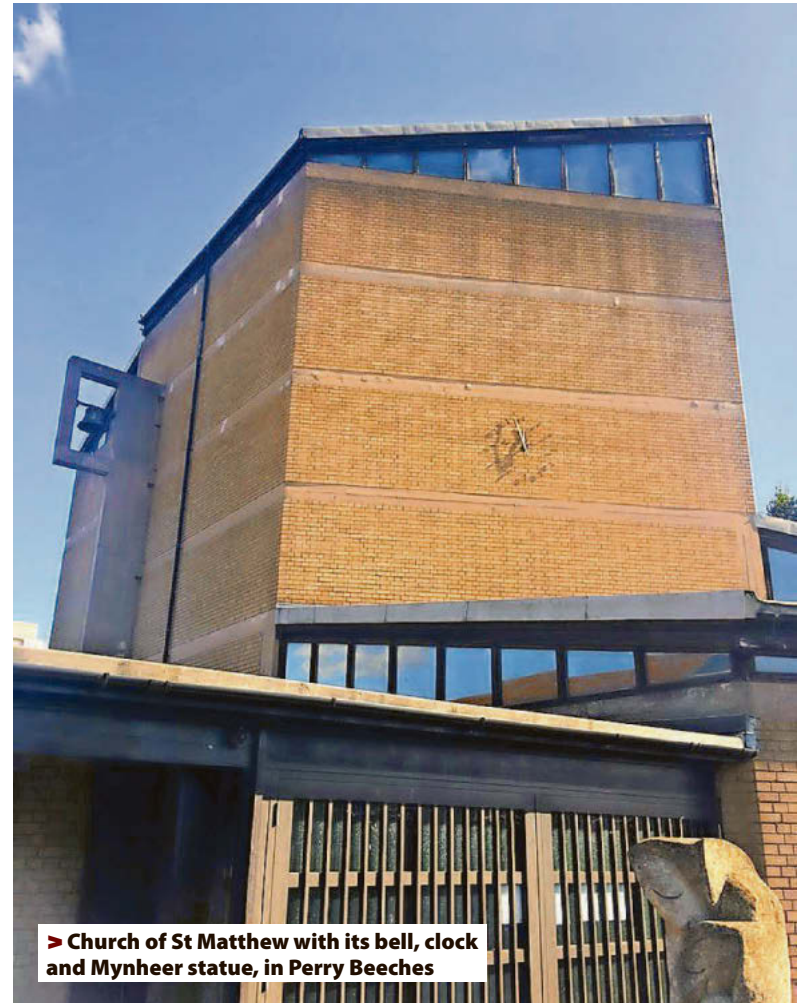
Low-level rows of small delicate lamps with arched reflectors, almost Conran in design, hang from the ceiling and bring the scale of the building down to a more human level. How different this space might feel on a dark night with the lights on.

By comparison with the grandeur of St Matthew's, St Vincent's, in Nechells Parkway, is easier to feel comfortable with and understand in its more human scale.

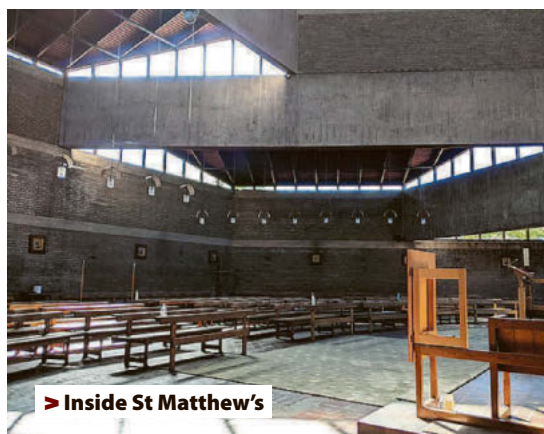
Visiting on a day of sunshine, we were greeted by glowing colour and



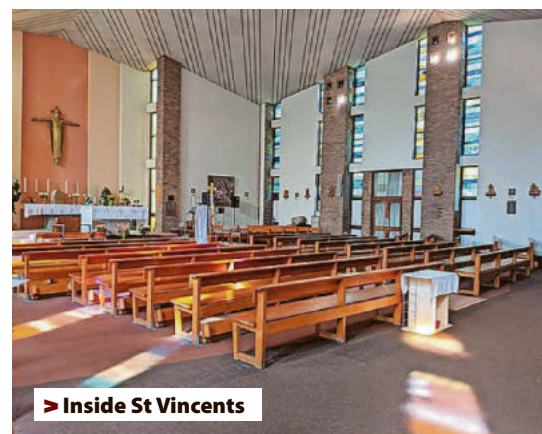
> The baptistry in St Vincents



> Church of St Matthew with its bell, clock and Mynheer statue, in Perry Beeches



> Inside St Matthew's



> Inside St Vincents



> Church of St Vincent de Paul, Nechells

the sound of sacred music.

Built in 1967-68 by SN Cooke and Partners, the architecture is less daunting and hence less intriguing.

Despite its size and open plan design, St Vincent's offers a comfortable familiarity because of its more conventional shape, layout and artefacts.

The main church space is square with the ceiling rising to the centre in a chevron design. The stained-glass windows are full height and abstract in design.

Unlike the strong blues of the windows alongside the entrance, the colours in the main church are relatively muted, and cast a gentle warmth over the interior.

The windows and other furnishings were provided by Birmingham-based stained-glass manufacturers, John Hardman Studios. You might know their work from the stained-

glass windows in St Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham, which were designed by the architect of the cathedral, Augustus Welby Pugin.

John Hardman's was well-known throughout the 19th and 20th centuries for their stained glass and it is great to see a modern version of their work.

The more complex abstract design of the stained glass which surrounds the small, octagonal baptistry fills it with coloured light.

The visitor is drawn into this intimate area by the sunken, glass mosaic floor, its different shades of blue and green symbolising the waters of baptism.

Ceiling panels like those of the main church are arranged in a star pattern. Imagine being baptised under a star in the waters of a vivid glass mosaic!

The exterior of the building is

impressive with its black wooden screen and the large mosaic panel depicting scenes from the life of St Vincent over the main door.

The octagonal baptistry is tucked into an L-shaped corner of the main building adjacent to the entrance.

It appears to stand independently of the brick-faced walls of the main church against which it provides a charming contrast with its walls of concrete-framed stained glass.

We were puzzled by the absence of any form of bell tower or spire until we discovered that the archbishop of the time declined to fund the addition of the bell tower that was included in the original plans.

With these churches, we have two examples of Modernist architecture which are radically different; we can say with absolute confidence that St Matthew's is Brutalist in design.

Congratulations to the Church for

having the courage to run with such an innovative design. We enjoyed our visit for the challenge it presented. We found its architecture exhilarating in the way it revealed itself over the time we spent there.

We enjoyed visiting St Vincent's for the comfortable embrace of its familiarity. Thank you to those who welcomed us and introduced us to the architecture and art of both churches.

Thanks to the protection of the church organisations to which they belong, we can appreciate the architecture and design of these churches as originally intended. St Matthew's is also protected by grade II statutory listing. St Vincent's is locally listed - but our experience of local listing unfortunately suggests it offers little in the way of protection.

**Mary Keating represents Brutiful Birmingham**