

Designs for the Altar of St. Paul's Cathedral: The Comparative Visions of Sir Christopher Wren and Thomas Garner

Shanna M. Patton

Abstract: Thomas Garner's 1888 design for the altar and reredos at London's St. Paul's Cathedral is typically remembered as controversial and inconsistent with the vision of church's original architect, Sir Christopher Wren. However, this essay will provide a new context for appreciating Garner's work by juxtaposing evidence of Wren's unexecuted design with Garner's executed design. By comparing their situational contexts and recognizing the congruencies in their styles, this research will demonstrate how Garner's design reflected more of Wren's classic style than has previously been acknowledged.

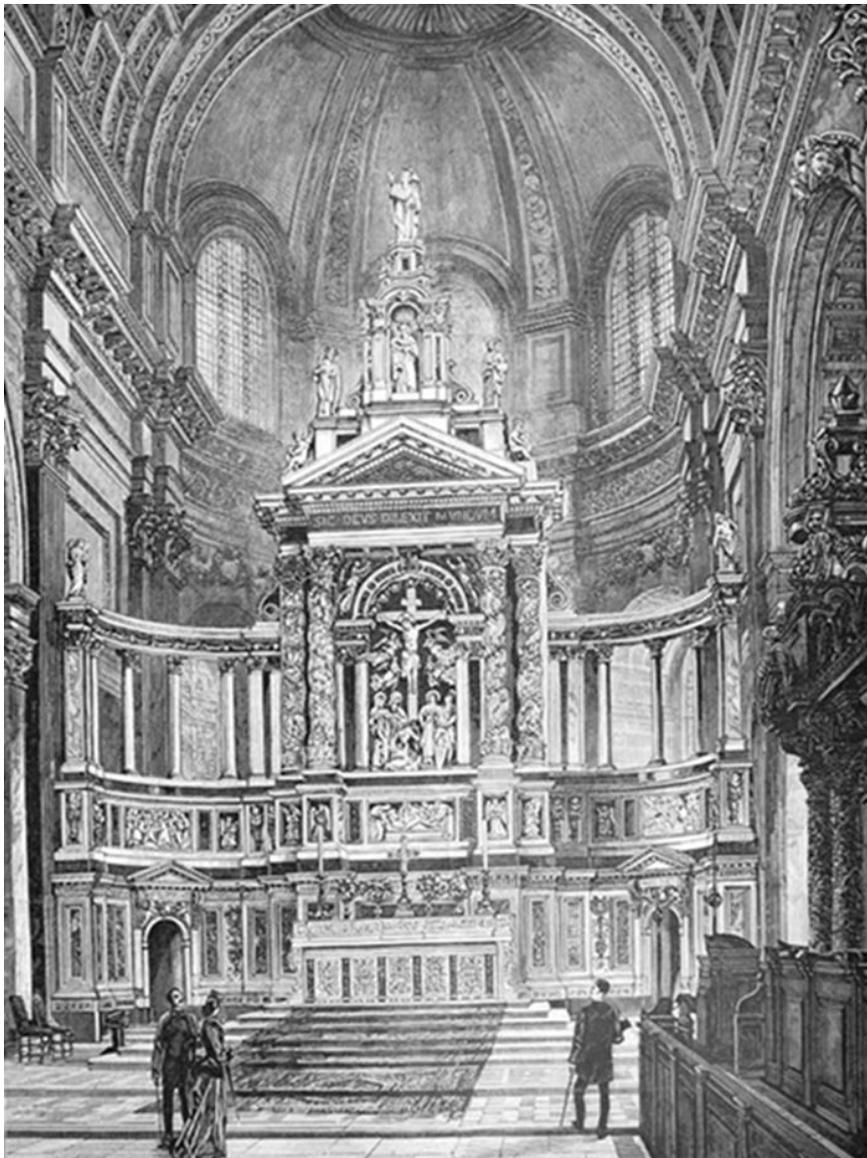


Figure 1: Thomas Garner's 1888 altar and reredos at St. Paul's Cathedral, London ('The New Reredos at St. Paul's Cathedral,' *Illustrated London News*, 31 Mar 1888, p. 312).

‘The sumptuous reredos, from the designs of Messrs. Bodley and Garner, was finished in January 1888, at a cost of £37,000. It was affirmed that it is in accordance with the intentions of Wren, as expressed in the ‘Parentalia,’ but it is not likely that Wren would have wished forty feet at the beautiful east end of his church to be permanently cut off by a barricade 60 feet high: neither is this mass of marbles, angels, Latin inscriptions, doors leading nowhere, &c., in accordance either with his pure Roman or Palladian designs, or with his intentions as to where the altar should be placed.’¹

Augustus John Cuthbert Hare’s critical reaction to Thomas Garner’s 1888 altar and reredos at St. Paul’s Cathedral (Figure 1) partially explains why, approximately 50 years later, the relatively new design was sacrificed to the Nazi war machine. Although throughout the course of World War II the survival of Sir Christopher Wren’s London cathedral had symbolized the enduring spirit of the English nation,² the damage sustained to the high altar during the German *Luftwaffe*’s October 9, 1940 nighttime air raid on London created an opportunity to ‘right’ a perceived architectural ‘wrong’ from St. Paul’s Victorian past. By 1958, the Dean and Chapter of the cathedral had replaced Garner’s Baroque altar with a Gothic ciborium considered more consistent with Wren’s original vision, but an objective comparison of Wren and Garner’s designs reveals that Garner’s work reflected more of Wren’s style than critics have been willing to concede.

In order to provide a new perspective from which to appreciate Garner’s work, this research will juxtapose Wren and Garner’s designs for the high altar at St. Paul’s Cathedral to compare their situational contexts and recognize the congruency of their styles. First, I will clarify Wren’s original vision by examining existing evidence and disassociating his design from the style of the existing ciborium, which is misleadingly described as ‘based on’ Wren’s design.³ Second, I will describe Garner’s vision and analyze how the common ground shared by Wren and Garner’s designs reveals how the 1888 altar and reredos reflected aspects of Wren’s classic style that have previously been ignored.

Although Wren was notorious for altering his plans for St. Paul’s during the course of its construction,⁴ a surviving model, description, and sketch of his design, as well as examples of his work in other London cathedrals, provides a reliable picture of what his original, yet unexecuted vision for the high altar actually was.

On October 2, 1693, Wren presented to the cathedral’s Building Committee a plan for a recessed altar in the semicircular apse at the far end of the East nave (Figure 2).⁵ Beginning flush with the end of the choir stalls, the design featured a two-rise platform with a semi-circular projection connecting the ambulatories on the North and South sides. Another platform with three rises and a more pronounced circular projection was positioned in line with the columns flanking the apse and was adorned with a decorative altar rail stretching the entire length of the platform. Just beyond the rail, the high altar table stood independently at

¹ Augustus John Cuthbert Hare, *Walks in London*, 6th Ed., Vol. 1 (London: George Allen Publishing, 1894) p. 115.

² ‘Oct. 9, 1940: St. Paul’s Cathedral Bombed,’ *This Day in History*, A&E Television Networks, LLC, retrieved from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/st-pauls-cathedral-bombed>.

³ Laura Arends. ‘What is a Cathedral? A resource book for teachers and students,’ St. Paul’s Cathedral Schools & Families Department, retrieved from <http://www.stpauls.co.uk/documents/education/what%20is%20a%20cathedral%20student%20booklet.pdf>. See also ‘Walk the Cathedral Floor,’ St. Paul’s Cathedral, accessible at <http://www.stpauls.co.uk/Cathedral-History/Explore-the-Cathedral/Walk-the-Cathedral-Floor>.

⁴ Compare the differences between the approved Warrant Design with Wren’s final product.

⁵ St. Paul’s Cathedral Architectural Archive, ‘The Choir and Morning Chapel; 1693-97,’ retrieved from <http://www.stpauls.co.uk/Cathedral-History/The-Collections/Architectural-Archive/4-The-Choir-and-Morning-Prayer-Chapel-169397>.

the centre of the apse, several feet in front of a spiral-columned reredos-canopy that was pushed against the easternmost wall.

A physical model of Wren's design for the reredos-canopy (Figure 3) was constructed by joiner Charles Hopson in 1693, and we know from the description provided by Wren's son in *Parentalia* that the design prescribed 'four Pillars wreathed, of the richest Greek Marbles, supporting a Canopy hemispherical, with proper Decorations of Architecture and Sculpture.'⁶ The anterior surface of the reredos-canopy, which was inspired by the twisted columns of Giovanni Battista Flora's ciborium in St. Peter's Basilica (Figure 4),⁷ featured a 'shallow segmental canopy above an arched opening'⁸ framed on each side by two pairs of spiral columns, each capped with ornate Corinthian capitals and sharing a rectangular plinth. A similar scheme was mirrored on the posterior side of the design, although square fluted columns were substituted in place of the spiral ones.

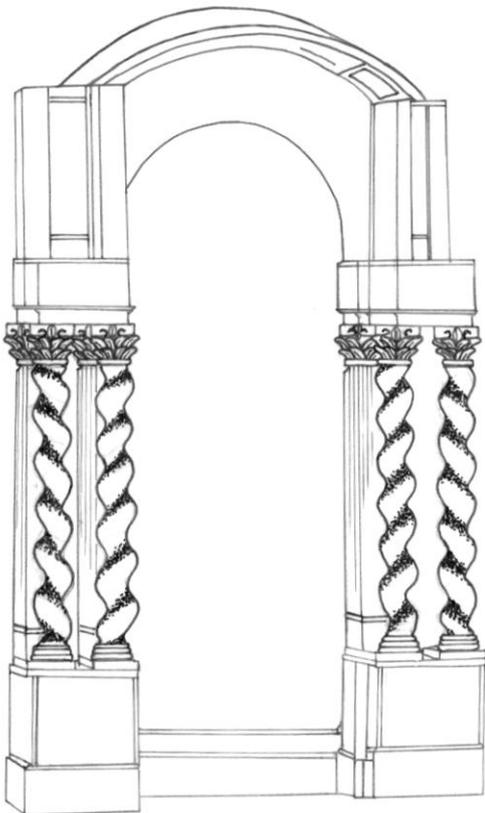


Figure 3: Wren's wooden model (Illustration: S. Patton).

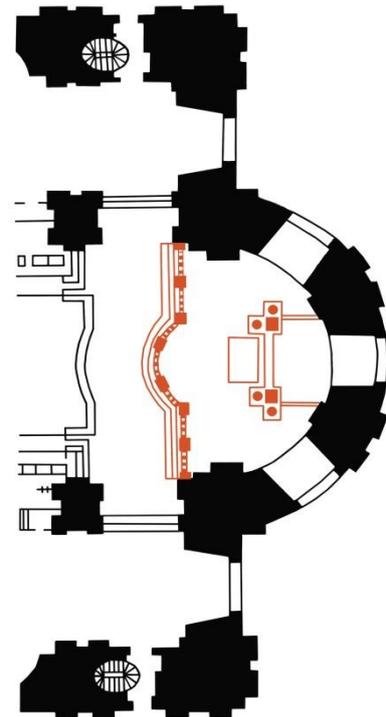


Figure 2: Wren's plan for the choir and altar enclosures (Diagram: S. Patton).



Figure 4: Giovanni Battista Flora's ciborium in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome (Engraving: Artstor).

⁶ Christopher Wren. *Life and Works of Sir Christopher Wren from the Parentalia or Memoirs by His Son Christopher*. (London: E. Arnold, 1750) pp. 152-153.

⁷ Although the terms 'baldacchino' and 'ciborium' are often used interchangeably, '[s]trictly speaking, a baldacchino would be a non-permanent structure, presumably fabric, whereas a ciborium refers to a permanent structure of wood, metal, or stone.' Steve Semes, 'Introibo Ad Altare Dei: The Baldacchino as an Element of Catholic Liturgical Architecture,' *The Institute for Sacred Architecture*, Vol. 2, retrieved from http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/introibo_ad_altare_dei/.

⁸ St. Paul's Cathedral Architectural Archive. See also Robert Trevitt's view of the choir on 31 Dec. 1706, Wren Society 14, pl. 18; and the description of sketch WRE/4/1/5 in the St. Paul's Cathedral Architectural Archive.

The Building Committee's October 1693 meeting minutes indicated 'nothing was resolved upon' regarding Wren's plan, but the altar was ultimately excluded from the Commission's May 1, 1694 authorization to begin construction on the nearby organ and choir.⁹ Wren's son justified the delay, explaining 'Information, & particular Descriptions of certain Blocks of Marble were once sent to the Right Reverend Dr. Compton, Bishop of London, from a Levantine Merchant in Holland, and communicated to the Surveyor, but unluckily the Colours and Scantlings did not answer his Purpose; so it rested in Expectance of a fitter Opportunity, else probably this curious and stately Design had been finished at the same Time with the main Fabrick.'¹⁰

Even so, rampant speculation that the clergy rejected the reredos-canopy as 'too catholic' for their post-reformation Anglican cathedral fueled assumptions that Wren intended to construct a full, free-standing ciborium like the one in St. Peter's.¹¹ However, this conclusion is unsubstantiated by the surviving model, description, and sketch of Wren's design, as well as his overwhelmingly consistent use of a reredos screen in each of the altars he designed for other London Cathedrals.¹² The only similarity between Wren's design and Flora's Roman ciborium was the spiral marble columns. In other key respects, Wren's design was appreciably different: it featured pairs of spiral and square columns instead of four symmetrical corner columns; its canopy was a two-dimensional hemispherical arch, not a three-dimensional conical dome; its foundational layout was rectangular, not square; and its placement was against the wall several feet behind the altar table, not centered in the aisle directly over the altar.

From a stylistic standpoint, Wren was concerned with balancing the proportions of the cathedral's classical architecture with the details of its interior fittings,¹³ and the ornate embellishments of Flora's ciborium would have created a distraction from the clean Palladian details of the cathedral's larger fabric. Furthermore, from a political standpoint it is unlikely Wren desired to challenge church politics by proposing overtly catholic design in the aftermath of the English Reformation,¹⁴ especially when his salary was subject to the control of the Church Commissioners.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the 1958 replacement of Garner's altar and reredos with a Modern Gothic ciborium designed by Stephen Dykes Bower (Figure 5) shows the extent to which history has accepted an erroneous interpretation of Wren's original vision for the altar. Claiming Bower's Gothic design is 'based on'¹⁶ Wren's Classical design, people incorrectly view the ciborium as a fulfillment of Wren's vision. Although both designs took inspiration from the spiral columns of Flora's work in St. Peter's, Wren's design did not, in fact, propose a full-fledged ciborium. The surviving model, description, and sketch of his design, as well as examples of his work in other London cathedrals, all prove Wren's original vision for the altar involved a Classically-styled marble reredos canopy positioned against the wall of the

⁹ St. Paul's Cathedral Architectural Archive.

¹⁰ Wren, p. 153.

¹¹ See 19th century Surveyor Francis Penrose's interpretive sketches of Wren's design held in St. Paul's Cathedral Architectural Archive. See also William MacDonald Sinclair, *Memorials of St. Paul's Cathedral* (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1909) p. 253; and Keene, p. 229.

¹² Compare to the altars in St. Benet Paul's Wharf, St. Clement Eastcheap, St. James Garlickhythe, St. Margaret Lothbury, St. Margaret Pattens, St. Stephen Walbrook, St. Andrew by the Wardrobe, St. Andrew, Holborn, St. Anne and St. Agnes, St. Bride's Church, St. Lawrence Jewry, St. Mary-le-Bow, St. Michael Paternoster Royal, St. Nicholas Cole Abbey, St. Vedast Foster Lane, etc.

¹³ See Cedric D. Reverand II, 'Wren's Stylistic Development,' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 2001, pp. 81-115.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Implying Wren delayed completion of the Cathedral for his own financial benefit, sometime after 1707 an Act of Parliament successfully withheld half of Wren's salary to encourage the completion of construction. William MacDonald Sinclair, *Memorials of St. Paul's Cathedral* (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1909) p. 259-260.

¹⁶ Arends.

apse behind an open altar table, not a freestanding Gothic-styled ciborium hovering over a restricted altar table.

Upon Wren's death there were no revised plans to construct a permanent altar, and concern about the design of the altar lay dormant until 1870's when, in hopes of accommodating St. Paul's swelling congregation, a controversial decision was made to remove the choir screen, reposition the organ, and shift the choir stalls 30 feet westward.¹⁷ The open vista that now spanned the length of the cathedral emphasized the striking absence of an altar suitable to the grand proportions of the larger structure.¹⁸ A variety of designs were considered, including plans for a ciborium similar to Bower's, but it was only after the 1882 installation of the 'Great Paul' bell in the southwest tower that the partnership of George Bodley and Thomas Garner were invited to design a permanent altar reredos.¹⁹

Thomas Garner was ultimately responsible for the design of the altar and reredos revealed to the public on January 25, 1888 (Figure 1).²⁰ Instead of positioning the altar in the apse, he brought it forward with a semi-circular reredos backdrop, connecting the great eastern piers of the nave and isolating the apse into a separate chapel that became known as the Jesus Chapel.²¹ The altar table was elevated on a six-rise platform of white marble centered toward the rear of an expansive two-rise pavement of Rosso Antico, Brescia, and Verdi di Prato.²² The wall-high foundation or 'basement' of the reredos framed the altar with marble relief panels and two pierced-brass doors on each side providing access to the apse. A second level of vertically compact panels contained additional marble reliefs, the largest of which depicted from left to right the nativity, entombment, and resurrection, and it was upon this level the reredos was finally capped with a tall, open colonnade framing pairs of ornate spiral columns supporting a pedimented entablature. The focal arch of the central structure depicted Christ crucified with sculptures of St. John, the Virgin Mary, and a Roman soldier below, and a gilt bronze inscription of *Sic Deus Dilexit Mundum*, Latin for 'God so loved the world' (John 3:16), adorning the frieze above. The niche topping the pediment was then crowned with statues of



Figure 5: Stephen Dykes Bower's 1958 ciborium at St. Paul's Cathedral (Photo: S. Patton).

¹⁷ George Clinch, *St. Paul's Cathedral London*, London: Melhuen & Co., 1906, p. 151-153. Notes from 'The Choir and Morning Prayer Chapel, 1693-97,' St. Paul's Cathedral Architectural Archive.

¹⁸ Clinch, p. 151-155.

¹⁹ Sue Eastwood, 'Dean Gregory: "man of iron", radical reformer,' University of Chichester: Otter Memorial Papers, c. 2010, retrieved from

<http://www.stpauls.co.uk/documents/cathedral%20and%20history/dean%20gregory%20by%20sue%20eastwood.pdf>.

²⁰ Charles Force Deems, 'The New Altar and Reredos in St. Paul's Cathedral, London,' *Frank Leslie's Sunday Magazine*, Vol 23, Jan-Jun 1888 (New York: Frank Leslie's Publishing House, 1888) pp. 308-309.

²¹ Arthur Dimock, *Bell's Cathedrals: The Cathedral Church of St. Paul's, An Account of the Old and New Buildings with a Short Historical Sketch*, London: George Bell & Sons, 1900, retrieved from The Project Gutenberg eBook Archive, <http://archive.org/details/bellscathedralst25266gut>.

²² Thomas Garner, 'The New Altar Screen in St. Paul's Cathedral,' *Transactions of the St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, Vol. 2 (London: Alabaster, Passmore and Sons, 1890) pp. 167-168.

St. Paul and St. Peter on either side of Mary holding the infant Jesus, and occupying the summit above her stood the crowning figure of the risen Savior.²³

Contemporary responses to Garner's design were divided. Supporters claimed it 'added incalculably to the dignity and impressiveness of the general architectural effect of the church,'²⁴ while detractors argued the scale and 'Popery' of the embellishments ruined Wren's original vision for the cathedral.²⁵ In reality, Garner's design reflected aspects of Wren's vision that have gone unnoticed. Specifically, the circumstances influencing the design, as well as Garner's stylistic choices, demonstrate their common ground.

Both Wren and Garner were influenced by contemporary church politics. Wren worked for post-reformation evangelists eager to symbolize a new theology in the architecture of the church. Disenchanted with, but still accustomed to, the Gothic style of Catholic cathedrals, the Anglican Church began to infuse Classically-inspired architecture into a tradition of Gothic design. To emphasize the priesthood of all believers, the 'high altar' became known as the 'communion table,' and 'Popish' idols of the Virgin Mother and the Crucifixion were replaced with more modest symbols of faith.

In a similar way, Garner worked for an Anglican church that recognized how church architecture symbolized High-Church and Low-Church theology. Specifically, the Oxford Movement had embraced the ritualism of the old church, and with it saw Gothic architecture as a representation of an idealized past. Victorian England re-embraced Gothic style as a symbol of national pride, and the Anglican Church fought to find an architectural balance between past and present ideologies.

Seeking to reconcile Classical principles with the picturesque quality of traditional Gothic architecture, both Wren and Garner's designs represent what *Parentalia* described as 'Gothic rectified to a better manner of architecture.'²⁶ Arguments that Garner's design violated Wren's 'pure' Roman or Palladian design are deceptive, because Wren's design was not itself 'pure'.²⁷ Wren's work was dictated by the King and Commissioner's desire for a design that would (1) glorify God and promote worship, (2) exceed the splendor of the previous church, and (3) create a principle ornament for the city that symbolized the honor of the government and realm.²⁸ Subject to conflicting opinions about style, his 'purer' first and second designs were rejected because they were so dissimilar to the Gothic cathedral style,²⁹ and his third design was only approved because it conformed to a so-called 'cathedral form' and attempted to reconcile a Classic style with traditional Gothic elements.³⁰

In a similar way, Garner's work was dictated by the Chapter and Dean's desire for a design that would (1) enhance the splendor of the cathedral without disrupting the solemnity and simplicity of the edifice, (2) integrate colorful marble durable enough to withstand London weather, and (3) employ rich gilding and decoration harmonious to 'our simpler form of worship.'³¹ The Decorative Committee rejected Garner's initial design for a less elaborate canopy altar as impractical and requested from him a large, semi-circular marble reredos to connect the existing architecture of the church.³² Concerned with creating a design visible from the far end of the West nave whilst preserving the overall scale of the cathedral,³³ Garner

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Clinch, p. 154. See also Deems.

²⁵ Eastwood, p. 6; Dimock, p. 52; and Hare, pp. 115-116.

²⁶ Wren, p. 139; See also Garner, p. 167.

²⁷ Hare.

²⁸ Wren, p. 135.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 139.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dean Milman, Letter to the Bishop of London, quoted by Hare, p. 167.

³² Garner, p. 168.

³³ Ibid.

conformed to the contemporary demand for an elaborate altar and created the grandeur desired by applying an ornate vision to a Classical form.

Garner's attempt to preserve Wren's stylistic vision and sense of proportion despite the demands of church leaders was initially praised, with one magazine writing,

‘The architectural detail has been very carefully studied so as to assimilate, as far as possible, the general style of the Cathedral, and the leading lines of the composition continue those of the choir wall; so that the various cornices, architraves, plinths, etc., all range with similar features of the main fabric of the church, by which means the reredos is made to assume the character of a structural part of the building rather than that of a mere piece of furniture, and thus the marked classical treatment which Sir Christopher Wren had imparted to his design for the Cathedral is in no way impaired or broken through.’³⁴

But this praise was soon forgotten when a drawn-out legal battle over the purportedly Catholic symbolism of several of the reredos sculptures inspired viewers to distance Garner's design from Wren's vision.³⁵ The aesthetic similarities between Garner and Wren's designs were substantially ignored while differences in their scale, placement, use of colour and use of text were used to suggest that Garner's design was overtly High-Church and completely antithetical to the Low-Church character of Wren's design.³⁶

However, a comparison of the circumstances influencing Wren and Garner's stylistic choices prove otherwise. According to Edward Rimbault, Wren had always ‘wished the organ to be placed on one side of the Choir, as it was in the old Cathedral, that the whole extent and beauty of the building might be seen at one view; the Dean, on the contrary, wished to have it at the west-end of the choir; and Sir Christopher, after using every effort and argument to gain his point, was at last obliged to yield.’³⁷ The minimized scale of Wren's design for the reredos canopy was tailored to the confined vista created by the organ and choir screen, just as the maximized scale of Garner's reredos was tailored to the expansive vista created by the removal of the organ and choir screen. Both Wren and Garner were concerned with balancing the scale of the altar with the proportions of the surrounding architecture, and the difference in the size of their designs demonstrates less about how their styles clashed than how their styles coordinated.

Wren positioned his altar and reredos canopy within the apse to accommodate the restrained dimensions of the choir and emphasize the beauty of the stained glass windows. In like manner, Garner positioned his reredos canopy away from the apse to accommodate the new dimensions of the relocated choir stalls, and on the top of his reredos he created an open colonnade of Corinthian columns to allow spectators a full view of the windows beyond. Although Wren and Garner's designs for St. Paul's altar were influenced by different circumstances, both sought to blend their creative visions with the existing architecture of the cathedral and maintain a balance of proportions that enhanced the beauty of the larger structure.

Moreover, Wren and Garner's design choices were stylistically consistent. Like Wren's unexecuted design, Garner's executed plan included pairs of spiral marble columns; a compressed reredos-canopy with a central arch; a solid, semi-circular backdrop to frame a

³⁴ Deems, pp. 308-309.

³⁵ See Hare, 115; Eastman, p. 6; ‘St. Paul's Reredos,’ *The Press, Canterbury*, Vol. XLVI, Issue 7326, 3 Jun. 1889, p. 5; ‘St. Paul's Reredos Case,’ *The Brisbane Courier*, 22 July 1891, p. 5; ‘The Reredos in St. Paul's Cathedral,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 July 1891, p. 7; ‘Allcroft v. Bishop of London; Lighton v. Bishop of London,’ *The Law Times*, Vol LXV., N.S., 26 Sept. 1891, pp. 92-97; ‘R. v. Bishop of London,’ *The Justice of the Peace*, Vol. LV, 5 Dec. 1891, pp. 773-775.

³⁶ See Hare, 168.

³⁷ Sinclair, p. 248, quoting Edward Rimbault, *New History of the Organ*, London: Robert Cocks & Co., 1870).

free-standing altar; ornamentation with angels, fruit, and floral festoons similar to that used on the choir stalls and wall reliefs; and Corinthian capitals mimicking those that adorned the columns throughout the interior and exterior of the cathedral.

In conclusion, although Thomas Garner's 1888 design for St. Paul's altar and reredos may have been controversial and differed from Wren's original vision in its scale, placement, use of colour, and use of text, an objective comparison of Wren and Garner's designs reveals they had more in common than critics have previously acknowledged. Both the historic situations influencing the designs, as well as the stylistic choices that resulted, represent a common ground that will forever link Wren and Garner's designs and provide a better context for appreciating the value of Garner's historic contribution to the architecture of St. Paul's Cathedral.

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