

01 CONCEPT |  
New Bulgarian Orthodox Church  
St. John of Rila in London.



Prepared by Archetypes Design on behalf of Pro Construction London Ltd

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## 1. Context & Constraints

The church of St. John of Rila is located at 26 Jay Mews that is at the back of the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria in London at 186-188, Queen's Gate SW7 5HL.

Currently the church is located at the ground floor of the building at the southern corner between Bremner Road and Jay Mews. The footprint is L shaped measuring 12.8 x 8.8 meters and 3.29 m high.

The project aims at maximising the space of the church, adding a garage aside the entrance (measuring around 4.5 x 7.2 m) and the flat upstairs (8.8 x 7.2 m).

The building it-self is not listed. However, it is within the Knightsbridge Conservation Area, and it is surrounded by Listed buildings such as the Embassy's Building (Listed Grade II), the Holy Trinity Church (Listed Grade I) and the Queen Alexandra's House (Listed Grade II), without mentioning the Royal Albert Hall (Listed Grade I). For that reason, any proposal will be subject to the greatest scrutiny from the Council, Conservation Officers, Heritage Associations, etc.



The Royal Albert Hall



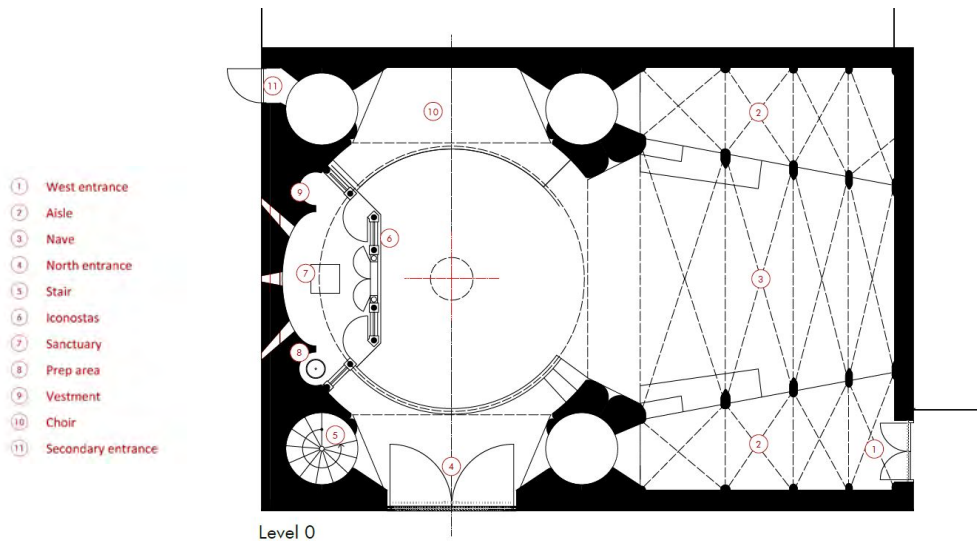
The Holy Trinity Church



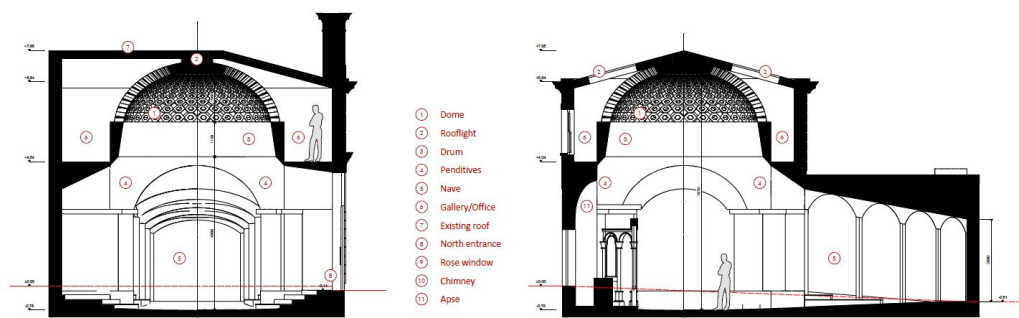
The Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria

## 2. Layout and architecture

The plan follows the traditional footprint with the Sanctuary to the East and the entrance to the West and the choir to the steps on the right-hand side looking at the altar. An additional entrance has been added to the North side, along Bremner Road giving direct access to the centre of the church and its dome. A secondary access connects the church with the parking area in Jay Mews.



Bremner road is slightly sloping so there is around half a meter between the entrance in Jay Mews and the western entrance. The aisle on the northern side of the nave is a ramp connecting the northern entrance with the western one. Since the floor of the nave is also sloping down, the church is perfectly accessible to wheelchair users.



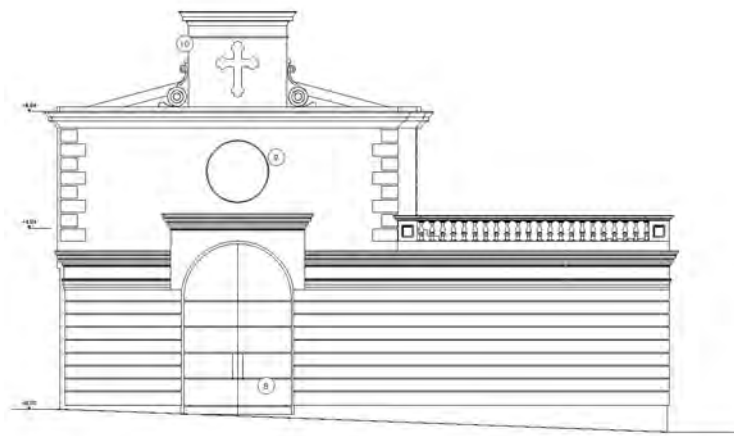
The spiral staircase leads to the gallery level where an office space can be located and possibly a tea point and a toilette.

Exploiting the difference of level of Bremner Road from East to West (half a meter), and the sloping floor required by the forced perspective (see next paragraph), the

lowest point of the church is around 80 centimeters lower than the current entrance from Jay Mews.

The dome is contained within the existing roof (ridge at around + 7.65) which covers the space between the dome and the existing external walls (the gallery) that is wider enough to accommodate an office space.

The peculiar shape of the existing chimney on the top of the northern façade along Bremner Road, suggested the opportunity of creating a more church-like façade on this side: by adding a simple cross on the top, a rose window just below, and a large entrance at street level, the façade is completed with all its traditional main elements.



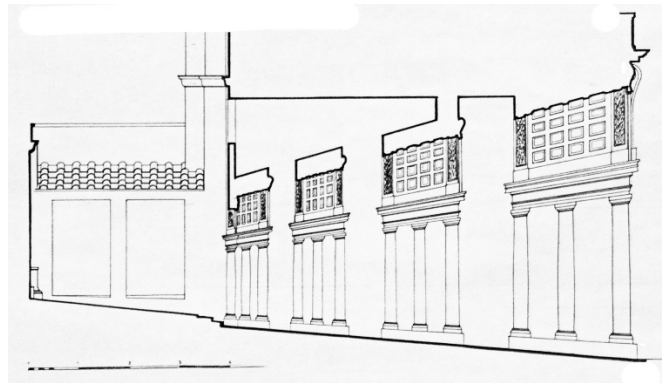
On Jay Mews, at the upper floor all the windows should be retained (just transforming the odd door into a window like the others), and at the ground floor the wall should be solid with niche aligned with the window above.

### 3. Magnifying the perception: the forced perspective

The big challenge of the project was exploiting as much as possible the available space, creating a church with all the traditional characteristics (the dome, the nave, etc) with specific requests about the location of the altar and the access.

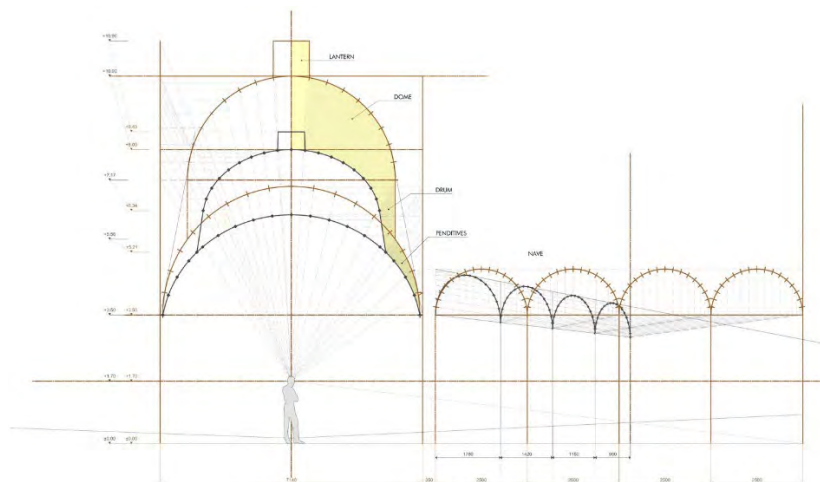
However, the limited footprint (12.8 x 8.8 m at ground floor and 7.14 x 8.89 m at first floor) with a façade less than 6.5 meters, suggested that, besides trying to expand the available space (for instance, lowering the ground level to gain a bit of ceiling space for the dome), maximising the “perception” of the space was an option worth to be explored.

The technique is well-known, and it has been used in architecture for centuries: it is the so called "forced perspective". The 16th century Palazzo Spada in Rome (see images below) is home to a spectacular example of forced perspective, the creation of that genius of Baroque architecture, Francesco Borromini (1599-1667). The false perspective is created on the illusion that the tunnel is at least 35 meters long, while it is only 8.82 meters long.



In architecture, a structure can be made to seem larger, taller, farther away or otherwise by adjusting the scale of objects in relation to the spectator, increasing or decreasing perceived depth. When forced perspective is supposed to make an object appear farther away, the following method can be used: by constantly decreasing the scale of objects from expectancy and convention toward the farthest point from the spectator, an illusion is created that the scale of said objects is decreasing due to their distant location.

The forced perspective technique has been used in two ways in the project for the new St. Ivan Rilski church at the Bulgarian Embassy: to make the nave appear longer and to make the dome appear taller.



In both cases the point of view has been chosen at the very centre of the dome in plan, conventionally at 1.70 meters from the floor and the vanishing point, that is the point in the position at which all receding parallel lines meet, at around 20 meters from the point of view.

Using the forced perspective technique, with the spans decreasing as much as the eight of the arches, the nave appears to be 10 meters deep while it is just 5.31 meters deep. The effect is helped by the rising floor.

For the dome the technique has been the same but with a vanishing point situated at around 20 meters vertically above the point of view. All the elements forming the dome (the four pendentives, the drum, the dome, the lantern) have been “forced” in the perspective so the top of the lantern appears to be at around 11 meters from the floor although it is just at 8 meters.

#### 4. Planning Feasibility: the external appearance

Since the building is not listed, hopefully any transformation of its internal space should be permitted. However, the greatest attention must be given to the external appearance which must be maintained as much as possible as the existing.

Given the above, the approach of demolishing all internal walls and slabs to exploit the existing volume is certainly valuable as long as the external fabric of the building (walls and roof) is preserved.

In the proposal, the only suggested alterations to the external fabric are the new entrance to the west side, the new entrance to the north side, along Bremner Road, and, above that, the rose window and the cross.

The alterations to the east façade along Jay Mews are not concerning as the ground floor is not visible from the street (because of the gate) and that façade has been already manipulated in the past.

The most controversial alterations would be those on the North side.

An argument could arise that the proposal would alter the perfect symmetry with the mirroring buildings on the other side of the street.



If removing those elements would be requested by the Council, this would not cause any significant harm to the functionality of the internal space of the church. However, the rose window and the cross are features to mark the presence of a church, which is symbolically important. The double door to Bremner Road, besides completing the façade, would help to manage the flux of people entering and exiting the church in the busiest days or during special celebrations.

Therefore, since those features are important but not necessary, it is worth to explore the possibility of keeping them at the early stage of the conversation with the Council.

The entrance to the west side should possibly not be a big problem as it would be recessed from the main façade.

The roof would be kept unaltered except for the rounded rooflight on the top of the dome.

Although the proposal has been developed considering all the constraints to be feasible, in any case, it is subject to the Council's approval.

The proposal should be submitted to the Council to seek Pre-Application advice and to discuss with the Council the best course of action to develop the project further and to be successfully approved.

## 5. Construction Feasibility: the interior space

The proposal would require the complete demolition of the first floor (internal partition and internal slab), the construction of steel frame (columns and beam) to support the

first-floor western wall, redoing the roof and the roof terrace at first floor, lowering the level of the ground floor.

In regard to the internal space and its traditional features such as the dome and its components (pendentives, drum, dome, lantern), the nave and its components (colonnade, arcade, cross-vault ceiling), in theory they could be built with traditional methods as they have been used for centuries.

However, since the available space is limited, it is suggested to have a steel frame (to ensure having slim components) clad with shaped elements made of a different material.



The cladding elements should be made off-site, in a workshop, and then assembled on-site over the steel frame. To form those complex surfaces, it would be possible to use 3D CNC machine (suitable to shape wood or stone).

There are a couple of upsides coming with the technique suggested above. First, the church, although traditional in its appearance, would be a 21st century building requiring the most advanced design and construction system. Second, all the elements could be manufactured directly in Bulgaria, by Bulgarian companies, using Bulgarian resources and workers, and then shipped to London creating a very significant connection between the homeland and the community in London.



## 6. Iconography and decoration

The internal spaces have been purposely kept as simple as possible at this stage.

The icons have been selected by Rev Dr Dobromir Dimitrov who, besides being the priest of the church, is also phonographer and theologian and he painted icons in the tradition of the Byzantine icon for more than 23 years.

The pendentives would be decorated with painted icons of the four evangelists and the Christ Pantocrator will be at the top of the dome.

The apse will have the representation of the Virgin Mary.

All the mosaics and paintings have been selected from existing churches by Rev Dr Dimitrov at this stage just for representing the concept. However, the new church will require the intervention of an artist for the creation of original icons.

## 7. Conclusion

The proposal has been developed on the basis of the brief provided by Pro Construction London as follows:

- a. The project should exploit the space of the current church + the garage on the left-hand side + the flat at first floor.
- b. The project should maximise the space, its use, and its perception by means of materials, lights, colours, and decorations. All these to complying with the Orthodox church tradition.
- c. The interior of the church should reflect those of traditional orthodox churches in Bulgaria, possibly having a dome.
- d. The interior of the church should include decorations inspired by the traditional Iconography of the Eastern Orthodox Church.
- e. Besides the traditional space for the cult (vestibule, the nave, the sanctuary) and possibly a space for the choir (possibly on a mezzanine floor), it has been required to accommodate a small toilet and a small kitchenette (like a tea-point) at first floor.
- f. Besides the confirmation regarding the style, it is in the architect' prerogative to select the materials to be used (bricks, stone, plaster, wood, etc) besides those likely to be used for structural reason as long as these comply with the tradition and approved by the client.
- g. Externally it is expected the façade to be reorganised appropriately (but with as less as possible structural alterations). However, because of potential restrictions due to Conservation requirement (Listed Building, Conservation Area), it will be the architect advising for a solution more likely to be successfully accepted by the Authority.
- h. It has been required to explore the possibility of having the entrance from the back. However, it has been clarified that this is not a strictly necessary from a ritual point of view (like the case, for example, of the Sanctuary on the East side).

All the above has been achieved with the current proposal which has been developed considering the feasibility in terms of planning and construction and integrating further suggestions and requirements expressed by the client.

The level of information provided is consistent with the Concept stage.

If the project is accepted in principle by the client, more details (materials, decoration, finishes, etc) can be introduced at the next stage, where adjustments to the layout can be made. At the next stage, beside the input from the client, the involvement of structural engineers it will be necessary and, at some point, involving artists for enriching the inside with icons and decoration would be recommended.

However, before moving the project forward, assuming that the current proposal is accepted by the client, the information provided are more than enough to start engaging with the Local Authority (by submitting a PRE-APPLICATION) to seek advice about the best way of proceeding from a planning perspective.