

Spence, Basil 1907 - 1976



Basil Urwin Spence [commonly known as Basil Spence; also known as Sir Basil Spence] was born the son of British parents in Bombay [now Mumbai], India on 13 August 1907. He studied at Heriot-Watt University Architectural School in Edinburgh (1925-29), and at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London (1929-30). He then worked as an assistant in the office of [Sir Edwin Lutyens](#) in London (1929-30). In October 1931 he went into partnership with [William Hardie Kininmonth](#) (1904-1988) as [Kininmonth & Spence](#) in Edinburgh.

In 1934 the practice merged with the Edinburgh firm [Rowand Anderson & Balfour Paul](#) to form Rowand Anderson, Paul & Partners. Following the death of Paul in 1938, Kininmonth and Paul were sole partners in the practice.

After serving in the British Army (1939-45), Spence returned to Edinburgh and opened his own architecture and design office, Basil Spence & Partners, with Bruce Robertson in 1946. John Hardie Glover became a partner in 1949 and Peter Ferguson was made a partner in 1951. The practice became Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson in 1964. In 1963 Spence formed another partnership, Spence Bonnington & Collins, in London, with John Bonnington and Gordon Collins.

In 1964 Spence also set up additional partnership, Sir Basil Spence, with Anthony Blee with his son, John Unwin Spence as a consultant. In 1974 this became Sir Basil Spence International, later to be renamed Sir Basil Spence Partnership.

Spence was adviser to the Board of Trade for the British Industries Fair in London, 1947, 1948, 1949; and served as Planning Consultant to Nottingham, Southampton and Edinburgh universities, and Basildon New Town. He taught widely and was Professor of Architecture at the University of Leeds (1955-56). and the Royal Academy in London (1961-68). He was an active member of the Royal

Institute of British Architects (RIBA) of which he was made a Fellow (1947), and President (1958-60). He was also made an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (1963) and an Honorary Member of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome (1973). In 1960 Spence was also elected a Royal Designer for Industry (RDI) by the Royal Society of Arts and a Royal Academician (RA) the same year.

Among the many awards he received were the Festival of Britain Award (1951), a knighthood (1960), the Académie d'Architecture Gold Medal, Paris (1974), and Honorary Doctorates from the University of Leicester (1963), University of Manitoba (1963), and the University of Southampton (1965). He died at Yaxley Hall, near Eye in Suffolk, England, on 19 November 1976.

Worked in

UK

Works

By Kininmonth & Spence: a housing estate for Berwickshire County Council (1932); a house on Easter Belmont Road, Edinburgh for Dr. King (1932-33); Southern Motors Garage in Edinburgh (c.1933); Kininmonth House, 46A Dick Place, Edinburgh (1934-35); and housing, 12-30, Victoria Street, Dunbar (1935).

By Basil Spence: I.C.I. Pavilion for the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow (1938); the layouts for the 'Britain Can Make It' exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (1946); the design of the 'Enterprise Scotland' exhibition in Edinburgh (1947); the design of the 'Scottish Industries' exhibition in Glasgow (1949); the 'Allegro' chair for the Glasgow-based furniture manufacturer H. Morris & Co. Ltd. (1949); housing in Dunbar, East Lothian, Scotland, and in Selkirk, Scotland (1950); housing in Shepperton, Middlesex (1951); the design of the 'Heavy Industries' exhibition and the 'Sea and Ships' pavilion at the Festival of Britain in London (1951); Duncanrig Secondary School in East Kilbride, Scotland (1952-53); St. Nininian and St. Martin's Church in Whilthorn, Scotland (1954); Trinity College Chapel in Glenmorgan, Scotland (1956); St. Chad's Church at Bell Green, Coventry, England (1957); St. Oswald's Church at Tile Hill, Coventry, England (1957), the Church of St. John the Divine at Willenhall, Coventry, England (1957); St. Paul's Church in Ecclesfield, Yorkshire, England (1958); the Institute of Virology Department building, Glasgow University (1958); housing in Basildon New Town, Essex, England (1958, 1962); St. Aidan's Church in Leicester, England (1959); St. Catherine's Church in Sheffield, England (1959); the Natural Philosophy Buildings, Glasgow University (1959); Twasfynydd Nuclear Power Station in Wales (1959-62); the Research and Teaching Building, University of Liverpool (1959);

Hampstead Civic Centre, Library and Swimming Baths in London (1959-64); halls-of-residence at Queen's College, University of Cambridge (1960); the Aeronautics and Mechanical Engineering building and the Economics building, University of Southampton (1960); the Physics building, University of Liverpool (1960); St. Francis Church at Newall Green in Wythershawe, Lancashire, England (1961); the Cathedral of Saint Michael in Coventry, England (1962); the Senior Common Room, University of Southampton (1962); Scottish Widows Life Assurance Building in Edinburgh (1962); Falmer House, University of Sussex (1962); the Chemistry building and the Arts building University of Southampton (1963); the Music Rooms at Trinity College, Glenmorgan, Scotland (1963); the Civil and Electrical Engineering building and the Nuffield Theatre, University of Southampton (1964); the Library, phase I, University of Sussex (1964); the Animal Research building, University of Edinburgh (1965); the Chemistry building, University of Sussex (1965); the Chemistry Building, University of Exeter (1965); St. Aidan's College University of Durham (1965); the Meeting House, University of Sussex (1966); the Physics building, Students Union building, and Lecture Theatre, University of Exeter (1966); crematorium at Mortonhall, Edinburgh (1966); the Physics building, University of Sussex (1967); the Physics building, University of Exeter (1967); the Library, Staff Club and Canteen, University of Edinburgh (1967); the Geology and Botany building, University of Southampton (1967); the British pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal, Quebec (1967); an extension to the Tizard building, University of Southampton (1969); the Recreation building and Biology building, University of Sussex (1969); the Municipal Library in Newcastle upon Tyne, England (1969); the Town Hall and Civic Centre in Sunderland, England (1970); the Household Cavalry Barracks at Knightsbridge, London (1970); the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (1970); the British Embassy Chancery Building in Rome (1971); the Library, phase II, University of Sussex (1971); the Administration building, University of Sussex (1972); the Zoology building, University of Southampton (1973); the Bank of Piraeus in Athens, Greece (1975); the Arts building, university of Sussex (1975), and the Geology and Mining building, University of Newcastle (1975).

Bibliography

Banham, Rayner. 'Coventry Cathedral - strictly trad, dad'. Architectural Forum vol. 117, August 1962 pp. 118-119 [Critical article on the design of Coventry Cathedral by Basil Spence which the author asserts "is the worst setback to English church architecture for a very long time"]

Beaumont, J. Duncan and Woods, Ian R. J. 'Duncanrig, Secondary School at East Kilbride'. Prospect vol. 3, Autumn 1956 p. 8 [A brief description of Duncanrig Secondary School in Westwood, East Kirkbride, Lanarkshire, Scotland designed by Basil Spence in 1952-53]

Burford, James. 'St. Michael's, Coventry: the evolution of the new cathedral church'. The Builder vol. 192, 11 January 1957 pp. 56-57, 83 [A description of the new Cathedral Church of Saint Michael in Coventry designed by Basil Spence]

Campbell, Louise. Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects. London: RIBA Publishing, 2012

Collins, Peter. 'The lessons of Coventry Cathedral'. Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Journal vol. 39, September 1962 pp. 61-68 [The Canadian architect and architectural historian Peter Collins criticises in detail the design of Coventry Cathedral by Basil Spence]

Ebara, Sumiko. Coventry Cathedral reconstruction the preservation of ruins and the style of new cathedral'. Journal of Architecture and Planning (Transactions of AIJ) vol. 69, no. 580, 2004 pp. 235-241 ["In a conservation project, architects, craftsmen, and clients need to consider various aspects such as what should be preserved, how it should be protected, and what should be its use after conservation. Regarding Coventry Cathedral, bombed in 1940 and reconstructed in 1962, there were primarily two issues concerned, namely the treatment of the ruined old cathedral and the architectural style applied on the newly constructed cathedral. Eventually, the ruin was preserved as a war memorial, and Sir Basil Spence built the new Coventry Cathedral in a 'contemporary' style". *Abstract*]

Edwards, Brian. Basil Spence 1907-1976. Edinburgh: Rutland Press, 1995

Edwards, Brian and Fahy, Susan. 'The British Pavilion at Expo '67: Art, Architecture and National Identity' British Journal of Canadian Studies vol. 20, no. 2, 2007, pp. 249-274 ["The British architect Sir Basil Spence designed the British pavilion at Expo '67 in a style which controversially combined elements of national identity with the innovative use of steel-framing and asbestos sheeting. The design departed from orthodoxy and was seen by reviewers more as sculpture than architecture. In realising the design Spence worked with a firm of architects based in Montreal and associated with McGill University, where they were also members of the architecture faculty. The first part of the article explores the ideological basis for the Spence design, its cultural and artistic references, the collaboration with artists, and finally the mechanisms (including

construction) employed to bring the design to fruition. The second part investigates the responses to the British pavilion comparing the opinions expressed in Canada to those in the UK, and contrasting popular reaction to comments in the architectural press. Finally, the article reflects upon Expo as a place of design experimentation and the role the Spence pavilion played in this. The paper speculates that one of the first expressions of postmodernism in architecture is to be found at Expo '67". *Abstract*]

Fair, Alistair. "'A new, image of the living theatre": the Genesis and Design of the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, 1948-58'. *Architectural History* vol. 54, 2011 pp. 347-382 [Designed by Basil Spence]

Fifoot, E. R. S. 'Edinburgh University Library: the consumer's view'. *Edinburgh Architectural Association Yearbook* vol. 13, 1969 pp. 112-113 [Assesses the design of Edinburgh University Library, designed by Basil Spence and built in the mid-1960s]

Girouard, Mark. 'Success and failure at Coventry'. *Country Life* vol. 131, 31 May 1962 pp. 1292-1293 [A critical assessment of the recently completed Cathedral Church of St. Michael in Coventry, designed by Basil Spence]

Glover, J. Hardie. 'Edinburgh University Library Edinburgh Architectural Association Yearbook vol. 13, 1969 pp. 103-111 [A detailed description of the new Edinburgh University Library designed by Basil Spence]

Harwood, Elain. 'Basil Spence buildings and projects'. *Journal of Architecture* vol. 18, no. 2, 2013 pp. 325-330 [A review of Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects by Louise Campbell (RIBA, 2012)]

Harwood, Elain. *Mid-Century Britain: Modern Architecture 1938-1963*. London: Batsford, 2021

Harwood, Elain. *Space Hope and Brutalism. English Architecture 1945-1975*. New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press in association with Historic England for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2015

Howard, Maurice. 'Chapter 7. Ancient spaces in modern dress: Basil Spence at the University of Sussex' in *British Design: Tradition and Modernity after 1948*, edited by Ghislaine Wood. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 pp. 101-112

Jordan, Robert Furneaux. 'Cathedral Church of St. Michael, Coventry'. *Architectural Review* vol. 132, July 1962 pp. 24-42 [A critical assessment of the new Cathedral in Coventry designed by Basil Spence]

Jordan, Robert Furneaux. 'Coventry Cathedral'. *The studio* vol. 164, August 1962 pp. 54-57 [The author discusses what he believes are some of the good and not so good features in the design of the new Cathedral in Coventry designed by Basil Spence]

Laird, Michael. 'Two Scottish churches'. *Architects' Journal* vol. 128, 18 September 1958 pp. 408-410 [St. Andrew's Church in Clermiston in Edinburgh designed by Basil Spence & Partners in the 1950s is described]

Lizondo-Sevilla, Laura and Domingo-Calabuig, Débora. 'The University of Sussex by Basil Spence: Graphical Insight of the First 'Plateglass University' in *Graphic Imprints: the influence of representation and ideation tools in architecture*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019 pp. 53-65

Long, Philip and Thomas, Jane. *Basil Spence, Architect*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2008 [Published to accompany the exhibition 'Back to the Future: Sir Basil Spence 1907-1976']

Mills, Edward D. 'Basil Urwin Spence' in *Contemporary Architects*, edited by Ann Lee Morgan and Colin Naylor. Chicago and Chicago: St. James Press, 1967 pp. 859-862

Morris, A. E. T. 'Trawsfynydd Power Station'. *Official Architect and Planner* vol. 32, May 1969 pp. 542-548 [A description of the Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station designed by Basil Spence. Construction began in 1959; it began operation in 1965; and was decommissioned in 1991]

'Obituary'. *RIBA Journal* vol. 84, January 1877 pp. 40-41

Richards, J. M. 'Coventry'. *architectural Review* vol. 111, January 1952 pp. 3-7 [Discusses Basil Spence's competition-winning design for a new cathedral in Coventry. The previous cathedral had been destroyed by enemy bombing during World War Two]

Spence, Basil. *Phoenix at Coventry*. London: Bles, 1962

Swift, Nigel F. and Palsey, David. 'Dominikus Böhm, Sir Basil Spence and the Dream in the Dentist's Chair: A German Source for Coventry Cathedral'. *German Life & Letters* vol. 64, no. 2, 2011 pp. 235-253 ["This article identifies for the

first time the influence of the German architect Dominikus Böhm's Church of St. Johann, Neu-Ulm (1921–7) on Sir Basil Spence's designs for the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral after the Second World War (1951). Coventry's zigzag walls, external chapels and net vault were probably derived by Spence from a ground plan of the German church with superimposed vaulting published in an American textbook of reinforced concrete, Francis S. Onderdonk's *The ferro-concrete style* (New York 1928). This influence may help to explain a charge of plagiarism levelled against Spence in private in 1962. Dieser Artikel identifiziert zum ersten Mal den Einfluss einer deutschen Kirche, St. Johann, Neu Ulm (1921–7), Architekt Dominikus Böhm, auf die Pläne von Sir Basil Spence zum Neubau des im Zweiten Weltkrieg zerstörten Doms in Coventry (1951). Die dortigen Zickzackwände, externe Kapellen und Zellengewölbe wurden Spence wahrscheinlich durch einen Grundplan der deutschen Kirche mit aufgezeichnetem Gewölbe bekannt, der in einem amerikanischen Textbuch des Betonbaus erschienen war: Francis S. Onderdonk, *The ferro-concrete style* (New York 1928). Dieser Einfluss erklärt vielleicht, warum Spence im Jahre 1962 privat eines Plagiats beschuldigt wurde".
Abstract]

Williams, H. C. N. *Coventry Cathedral a Guide to Coventry Cathedral and its Ministry*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1966 [An extensively illustrated guide to the new Coventry Cathedral designed by Basil Spence]

Walford, Sarah. 'Building for Education: The School Designs of Sir Basil Spence'. *Architectural Heritage* vol. 22, no. 1, November 2001 pp. 137-156

Wright, Lance. 'Coventry Cathedral six years later: an analysis that concludes with success'. *American Institute of Architects' Journal* vol. 50, August 1968 pp. 50-55 [On balance, the author concludes that Basil Spence's design for the new Cathedral in Coventry is a success]

Wright, Michael. 'RIBA Architectural Awards 1968'. *RIBA Journal* vol. 75, September 1968 pp. 407-413 [A report on the RIBA Architecture Award 1968. The winner was Basil Spence for his design of Edinburgh University Library]

Links

- Twentieth Century Society <https://c20society.org.uk/?s=Basil%20Spence>

- Dictionary of Scottish Architects 1660-1980

http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=203352

- Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_Spence

- The University of Warwick

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/arthistory/research/projects/basil_spence

- The Sir Basil Spence Archive Project

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20170903010359/http://www.basilspence.org.uk/>

- Brian W. Edwards, 'Spence, Sir Basil Urwin (1907–1976)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2012

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31707>

YouTube. 'Conserving the 1960s: Basil Spence at the University of Sussex' by Maurice Howard, FSA [49 minutes. Poor quality sound]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-P2id1uD0Ys>

- National Records of Scotland - Celebration of a Modern Architect

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20170903010359/http://www.basilspence.org.uk/>

- Undiscovered Scotland

<https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/usbiography/s/basilspence.html>

- English Heritage <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/blue-plaques/basil-spence/>

- University of Brighton Design Archives

<https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/royaldesigners/2016/06/06/basil-spence/>

- The Modern House <https://www.themodernhouse.com/directory-of-architects-and-designers/basil-spence/>

- National Art Library Catalogue <https://nal->

[vam.on.worldcat.org/search?databaseList=&queryString=Basil%20Spence](http://www.worldcat.org/search?databaseList=&queryString=Basil%20Spence)

- Twentieth Century Society <https://c20society.org.uk/?s=Basil%20Spence>

- National Records of Scotland - University of Edinburgh Library

<https://webarchive.nrscotland.gov.uk/20170903012952/http://www.basilspence.org.uk/learn/university-library>