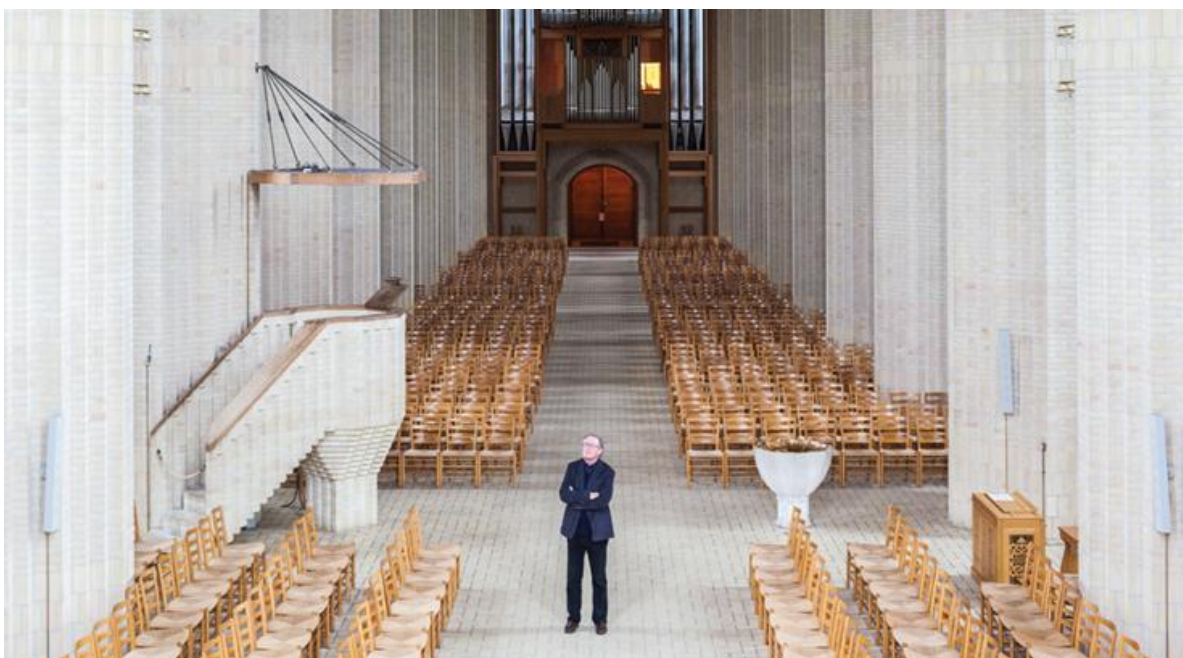




Michael Squire's inspiration: Grundtvig's Church, Copenhagen

1 November 2012 | By [Pamela Buxton](#)

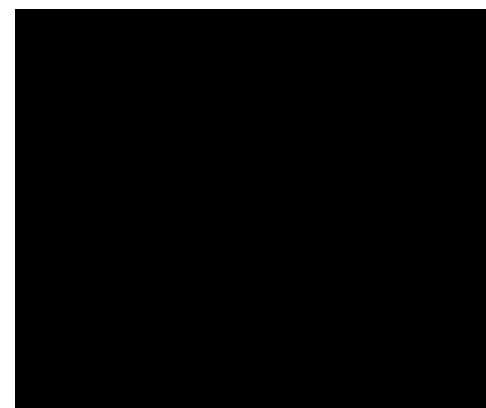


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Michael Squire admires Grundtvig's Church in Copenhagen for its poetic use of brick and the way the architect interpreted local traditions in a contemporary way

In Denmark, brick is an ordinary material. But at Grundtvig's Church, the architect Peder Vilhelm Jensen-Klint makes it extraordinary. I first visited two years ago on an office trip to Copenhagen, and as I engaged with the building I found it increasingly compelling. It demonstrates how a building can be a contemporary image of its time while remaining grounded in its culture.

The exterior is powerful and expressive — with roots in gothic, classical and local Danish architecture. Its shapes are drawn from organic crystalline forms and contemporary futurist images, but they



are organised within the framework of a traditional Zealand village church.



Source: [Gareth Gardner](#)

View towards the main entrance of Grundtvig's Church, which was designed in 1913 but not completed until 1940.

a basic material. In this way, there is a link to Grundtvig himself, because he, too, celebrated the simplicity and ordinariness of traditional Danish culture, and believed education based on this simplicity would enrich rather than debase Danish cultural life.

The appeal of this building is how it is rooted in the history and culture of the place in which it is built — its genius loci. I love how Jensen-Klint referred to the church as built culture. Yet it remains a completely contemporary work. My own architectural aspirations stem from the notion that a building should be culturally connected to where it is.

Jensen-Klint loved the vernacular of village churches and his design for Grundtvig's Church comes from this very simple pastoral Protestant tradition rather than a smells-and-bells Catholicism. As a result, it is very much part of where it is in Denmark — you really couldn't drop it down anywhere else.

Having viewed the exterior of the building, I didn't really know what to expect of the inside — it could have been an over-scaled timber barn. Instead there was this poetic array of soaring vaults made from the same buttery brick used on the outside, but here they were polished and their colour preserved. The effect is calm and restrained, yet enormously powerful.

So many things are at play in this church but Jensen-Klint expresses them economically through the use of a single element manipulated in numerous different ways. In doing so, he turns everything that is gothic — except the structure — on its head and creates something poetic out of such

Jensen-Klint was an engineer before he became an architect, and thought architects should be trained to build rather than design. He was extraordinarily hands-on, visiting the site every day for 12 years and drawing every detail necessary for the construction. I admire how he pursued his dream relentlessly from winning the competition in 1913 to finding a site, fundraising, and then drawing every aspect of the design for over a decade. Although he died 10 years before the building was finished, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his design was complete. He'd left nothing to chance.

The site found for Jensen-Klint's competition-winning design was to be at the heart of a new housing development. Although classical plans were proposed for the housing layout by



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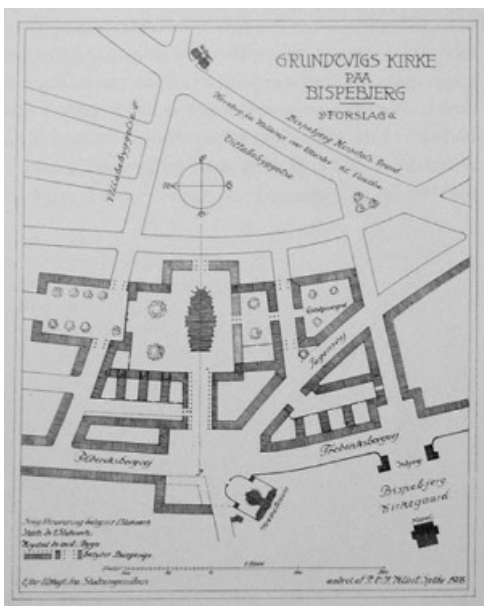
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Plan of Copenhagen showing Grundtvig's Church, 1918

Copenhagen city planners, Jensen-Klint adapted these to a freer, more medieval layout.

The original plans proposed positioning the tallest residential buildings closer to the church, stepping up in scale towards it, but Jensen-Klint typically wanted the opposite. The result is that the church rises dramatically with far greater contrast to the surrounding housing.



Source: [Gareth Gardner](#)

Grundtvig's Church was built as the centrepiece of a new housing quarter on the outskirts of Copenhagen.

The housing was eventually almost entirely taken over and detailed by Jensen-Klint. The architectural language drew upon the arts & crafts movement, but understanding the cost and consequent elitism that led to its demise, Jensen-Klint kept the housing extremely simple and affordable with the exception of the articulated doorways that brought a uniqueness to each group of dwellings.

The interior has been criticised for being a pastiche and the vaults are certainly rooted in the gothic tradition, but there isn't a single piece of decoration — no stained glass, art or even crosses — and no sense of the church trying to control the congregation through such things.

There is no storytelling here, and no tricks. Instead, there is a single palette of infinite brick that just expresses structure. There is a tremendous variety in the shades of the brick — some pink, some orange, some yellow — but, like tweed, they all read as one.

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Source: [Gareth Gardner](#)

There is a tremendous variety in the shades of the brick — some pink, some orange, some yellow — but, like tweed, they all read as one

This one brick module is used in an amazing array of ways — in a herringbone pattern on the floor; slightly canted for the arches; turned on its side as a sailor course to give the suggestion of a capital at the springing of the arches; and pushed inwards into the entrance lobby to give depth to the three doorways on the outside, which makes reference to cathedrals such as Notre Dame or Chartres.

Just as Louis Kahn talked about respecting brick, here it is celebrated, and is absolutely true to the building. There is nothing artificial about how it is used — it just does what it is supposed to do and you see every piece of the construction. The church was criticised when first completed on the grounds that it was inappropriate as a monument to Grundtvig and for its remodelling of the humble Protestant church hall tradition, but I think this use of brick brings it right back down to earth.

Architects were seduced in the 20th century by the notion of manufactured buildings, but this church is the result of crafted engineering rather than a factory product. It is reported that only nine bricklayers were used throughout the entire construction period to lay five million bricks, working at a rate of 150 bricks per day, rather than the usual rate of 1,500 or so.

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Source: [Gareth Gardner](#)

Bricks are slightly canted for the arches

You can see the skill everywhere, particularly in the way the courses of brick are stitched together in the vaults of the crypt. Nothing is wilful. It's all beautifully logical. Every brick that went into the interior was polished before it was put into place. This was madness, but a beautiful madness and demonstrates a truly monumental rigour.

Grundtvig's Church has had the problem of being an ecclesiastical building in a materialist age, but buildings such as the Pantheon in Rome have a spirituality that transcends any particular faith, and would work as a temple, a church or a mosque because they are intrinsically poetic. This building possesses such spirituality and timelessness, and I'm sure it will be cherished for centuries to come.

Monument to danish consciousness



Grundtvig: celebrated ordinariness.

Grundtvig's Church is a memorial to N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), a priest, hymn writer and educator credited with a pivotal role in forming modern Danish national consciousness.

A competition for a memorial to him was won in 1913 by the architect Peder Vilhelm Jensen-Klint (1853–1930), who proposed building a church.

At first the project — estimated as costing 20 times the original budget — did not have a site. Eventually it was decided to make it part of a development in the proposed new Bispebjerg district, also designed by Jensen-Klint, to the north of Copenhagen.

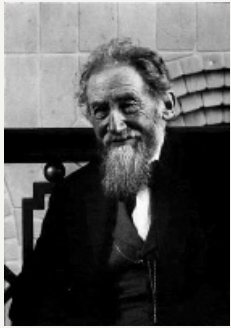
Situated on a hill, the church was to be the focal point of a housing development that was carefully planned to give the church maximum impact among the low-scale dwellings.

Gothic influences

Jensen-Klint's vision was for a dramatically scaled-up version of a Danish village church based on those in medieval rural Zealand, but with decidedly gothic influences.

He was also strongly influenced by the architects Peter Behrens and Fritz Höger from Germany, who were also using brick-work imaginatively at the time.

Using bricks delivered in straw from Zealand, the building programme began in 1921 and the tower was inaugurated in 1927.



Jensen-Klint: relentless commitment.

Family tradition

After Jensen-Klint died in 1930, his son, Kaare Klint, took over, completing the housing development in 1936 and building the rest of the church to his father's designs, with the exception of some interior

alterations, including his decision to change the metal balustrade above the side aisles to brick.

One of the few non-brick elements is the font, shaped by Jensen-Klint in the form of mussel shells. Kaare Klint also designed the simple wooden furniture, the pulpit and the altar. The church was finally completed by Jensen-Klint's grandson, Esben Klint, in 1940.

Grundtvig's Church seats 1,440 and is comparable in size to Copenhagen Cathedral. Its proportions are gothic, with a long, tall and narrow nave and ribbed groin vaults above the nave and aisles. The solid brick columns in the nave are more than 2m thick, comprising an average of more than 30,000 bricks. In total, almost five million bricks were used throughout the church.

Jensen-Klint's funeral was held at the church and his ashes bricked up in the wall of the porch.

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Words by Pamela Buxton

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