

## Sædden Church

The ecclesiastical architecture of Inger and Johannes Exner offers timely lessons in design for collectivity, says Amanda Iglesias

As institutions predicated on collective gathering face uncharted territory today, the architecture of the sacred offers a unique case study, given the explicitly relational nature of liturgical space. Beyond its invocation of the ineffable, ecclesiastical architecture has always negotiated relationships between the individual and the collective through material and organisational means. Though often relegated to the sidelines of contemporary discourse, the sacred has historically served as a catalyst for emboldened architectural thought and experimentation, thus offering us already-trodden pathways for moving forward.

Inger Exner — born in 1926 — and her husband Johannes (1926-2015) are widely known and respected in their native Denmark but sit outside of the broader canon of twentieth-century architecture, though important efforts to counteract their relative obscurity include Thomas Bo Jensen's monumental monograph 'Exner' (2012) and a recent website, [ingerogjohannesexner.dk](http://ingerogjohannesexner.dk).

This online repository of the architects' extensive oeuvre includes 13 celebrated parish churches built across Denmark. These highly experimental churches wrestled with the sacred and its attendant forms in the civic sphere. Though built for Lutheran parishes of the Church of Denmark between the 1950s and the 1990s, these buildings operated in the spirit of Vatican II in their pursuit of a reformed individual-collective dialectic. In answer to the question "You feel, then, that a square church room is more democratic than a long one?", the Exners respond: "In a way, yes. We are talking of principles of equality and not graduated principles of order."

My academic work examines church-building, and during a 2019 research fellowship granted by ADAM Architecture, I was able to travel to the 13 Exner churches and reflect on three key themes that emerged. First, they fall under architect and theologian Edward Sövik's 'non-church' concept, as an implicit critique of copyist, dead-end architecture. They represent an authentically modern church architecture in a modern world.

Second, each interior is a unique site of 'communitas' — defined by anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner as an acute point of community predicated on values of equality. The Exners arranged their churches according to the 'circumstantes' principle: the physical encircling of a congregation around the altar in a dialogical relationship. Such layouts were designed to rectify the hierarchical format of the longitudinal plan, which was felt to make a spectator of the layperson.

The third theme is the highly experimental design of each church, revealing an intuitive understanding of the many minute social dynamics at work in a collective space.

The design of Sædden Church (1971-78) at Esbjerg in Jutland aptly illustrates these themes. Most striking, however, is its care for the smaller, more private spaces that exist as integral components of the larger assembly. While all Exner churches are dimensionally modest, often organised around the centralising and rigorous geometry of the square, Sædden Church embodies a dynamic understanding of collective gathering. The seemingly erratic positioning and design of the pews enables congregants to choose their desired proximity and viewpoint. Rather than lighting the room uniformly, a constellation of twinkle lights creates a sense of specificity and festivity.



### Above, right

The red brick Sædden Church has wave-shaped folds on the north and east walls, and galleries on the other two walls. It adjoins parish rooms and administrative offices, while a nearby free-standing tower has a round base and a square top.



This highly calibrated scale and dimension does not assume a homogenous laity, but rather a dynamic, changing assembly, one that holds the individual and the collective as co-dependent. The private spaces dignify the individual congregant in relation to, rather than in isolation from the congregation.

Further, the experimental approach to form and material is not free-handed or bombastic, but rather exults in rigour and restraint. Within Sædden, we find transition from the spartan, roughly-constructed interiors of the Exners' early churches to a more decorative and patterned approach to bricks and mortar.

Despite its relatively mute exterior, the interior is undeniably festive, dramatised by a circuitous and compressed entry sequence into the sanctuary. Nothing about the quiet, forgettable exterior is sufficient to prepare a visitor for what's inside: a decisive and total rupture from the ordinary world beyond. This project was "designed from the inside out", allowing for surprise and delight – two conditions rarely ascribed to ecclesiastical environments. This is a church that celebrates collective gathering, while simultaneously allowing for reflection and rest.

As space for collective contemplation is not only rare in our commercial and highly privatised world, but currently restricted, the architecture of collectivity will necessarily undergo serious consideration in the years ahead. The Exners' churches counteract the idea that sacred architecture is somehow predetermined by liturgy, instead offering an opportunity to seriously examine the ways in which a collective inhabits, postures, and engages built space. Given their rigorous yet deeply human calibration of the individual scale within the collective, the Exners offer a timely and hopeful precedent for us today. /t

