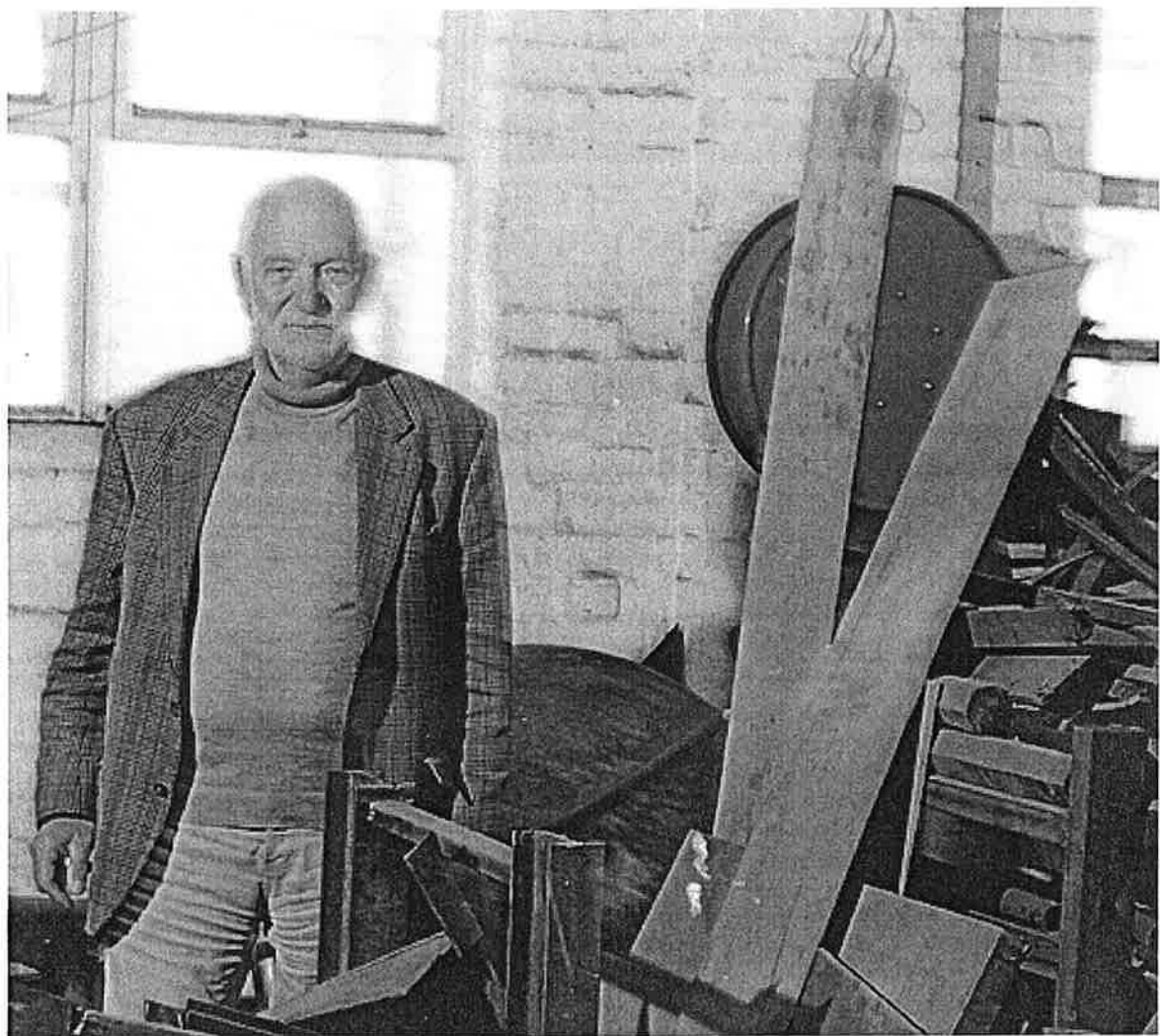
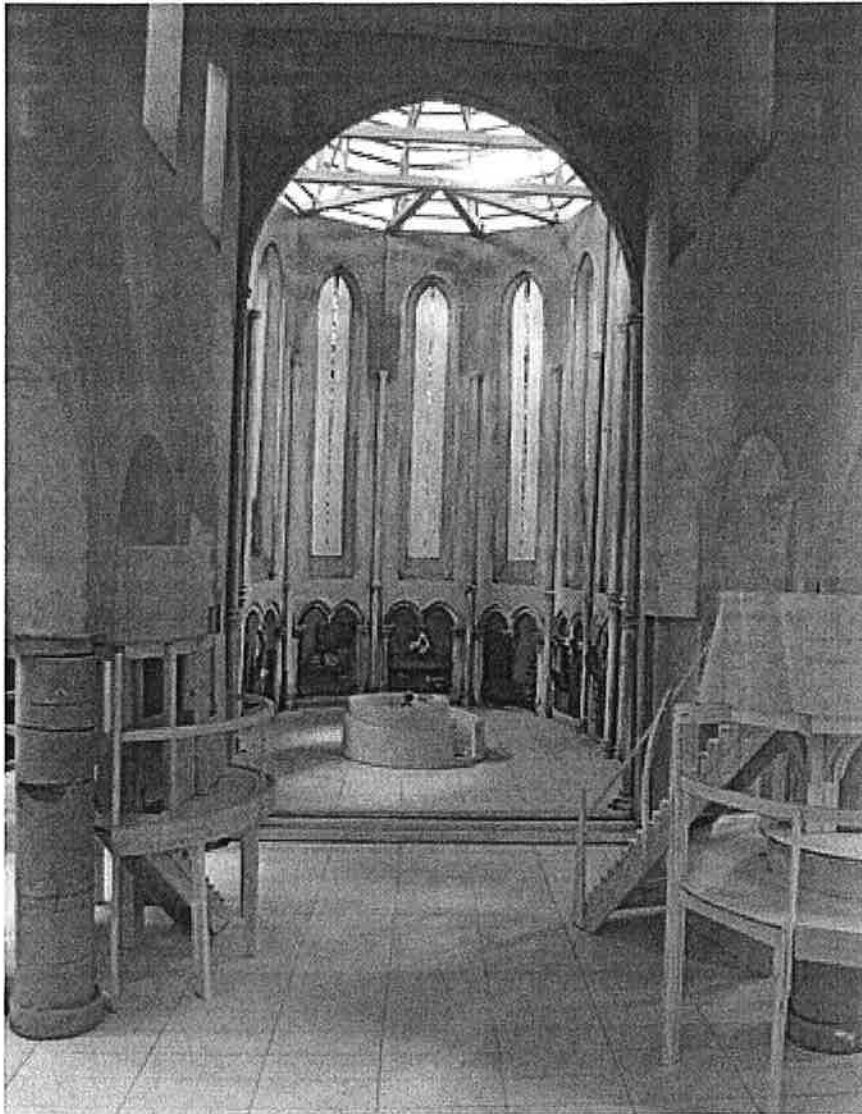


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Anthony Caro champions architectural collaboration

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As his new show opens in London, sculptor Anthony Caro talks to Pamela Buxton about his architectural collaboration with French architect Pierre Bernard

“To be retired would be terrible,” shudders Anthony Caro as he prepares for his first London exhibition in three years. “I don’t really have any hobbies — only the grandchildren and the wife .”

And at 83, the distinguished sculptor who was once assistant to Henry Moore is certainly showing no signs of slowing down. As well as unveiling a new series of galvanised steel pieces, he’s nearing the final stages of his latest architectural collaboration — an eight- year project with French architect Pierre Bernard.

It's an extraordinary endeavour of a quite different nature to his best known architectural adventure, the Millennium Bridge across the Thames with Foster & Partners. Installed within a war-damaged church at Bourbourg near Dunkirk, the Chapel of Light project includes towers, niche pieces, an immersive font, and seating on the theme of the creation.

Caro has long held an interest in architecture. As an art student he mixed with those studying architecture and got to know Peter Smithson well. Later, when teaching sculpture at St Martin's, he invited AA students in one day a week, and bemoans the more usual separation of the disciplines.

"We need a greater understanding of each other. Sculptors have always been close to painters. But architects are separate and do their own thing." Such close proximity, he feels, would make for far more successful art-architecture collaborations.

His interest in the subject led in 1987 to a workshop to create an architectural-sculptural "village" with Frank Gehry, where the two used fork-lift trucks to move around their work, and Caro was amazed at Gehry's need to make constant drawings of the process. He is in awe of Tadao Ando who, says Caro, improved his sculptures greatly with his inventive changes to the gallery environment when he installed his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. Similarly, he enjoyed the healthy difference of viewpoints he and Foster had when they worked on the Millennium Bridge.

"The architectural way of thinking was more conceptual than the sculptural way. I began to understand some of the problems architects have to deal with, which are quite ghastly."

On the church project, Caro is thrilled to have the chance to create such extensive interventions, enjoying the parallel with Henri Matisse's Dominican chapel at Vence in France, which Matisse also carried out late in his career. Just as Matisse was greatly assisted by the nun Sister Jacques-Marie, Caro says Pierre Bernard wryly calls himself "Caro's little nun", on hand to oversee the restoration and art installation, and to see that the sculptor's vision materialises.

Bricked up

The choir of the Eglise Saint-Jean-Baptiste was damaged when a plane crashed into it during the second world war. That part of the church was subsequently bricked up and left virtually untouched for 60 years. The regional arts authority gave Caro pretty much free rein to make sculptural interventions and provide an immersion font in the apse, a new door and bench seating. He has designed two internal singing towers of French oak, an external tower, nine niche pieces, a door, a circular concrete immersion and anointing font, as well as seating. The steel and terracotta pieces for the niches have the theme of water running through them, and will tell the story of creation.

"It's the chance of a lifetime," says an enthused Caro. "Architecture is very tough, it's so complex. We sculptors have such a simple problem of a lifetime," says an enthused Caro. "It's wonderful — so free".

Caro knows he's fortunate to be cocooned from many of the usual hassles of architecture: there was no competition, and Bernard helped obtain the various permissions needed.

Installation is set to be completed in October 2008. He is clearly happier working in this context than in more public arenas.

"I don't really like to do public things," he says. "There are too many of other people's dreams. My work is more intimate," he says, worried by the poor standard of public art. This tends, he says, to be both "big and bad", and instead he advocates that the genre should be taught at art school.

He is far more generous in his appreciation of architecture. Caro is particularly in awe of architects' ability to negotiate "variables" such as planning and logistical issues.

Planning and plumbing

"Architecture is very tough, it's so complex," he says. "We [sculptors] have such a simple problem — to get it right aesthetically, and to get in what we want to get in. Architects have to do that as well as the planning and plumbing and everything else.

"I'm amazed at the strength of mind of architects in holding onto the concept in the face of all those things."

Perhaps the project's architectural context is rubbing off on his other work such as the six pieces in the new show at Annely Juda, which opened this week. Lately he has become more interested in sculpture that you can walk through, and is keen to further explore the idea of "throughness".

"The idea of penetrating through and into, even if it's only with your eyes, is an extension of sculpture in the architectural direction," he says.

Enthusiastic and affable, he is approaching both his art and his architectural collaborations with as much zest as ever.

"I just love it. It's one of the best things in life. A real pleasure."