

# Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer

*Paul Bulkeley tells the inspiring story of how it was in prayer that the idea of this monument came to him, and by prayer the project was supported all through its development. He sees the unusual shape as a powerful symbol of God's eternal nature, a surface without beginning or end. The project was not without its difficulties and delays, and being in the public eye has its pressures, but it has most certainly put Christian prayer on the map.*

In August 2020 planning permission was secured for the Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer, a national landmark of hope that will be the largest Christian monument ever to be built in the UK. As its designer, this was a significant and career-defining moment as well as the climax of a long journey.

The project is the vision of Richard Gamble, former chaplain of Leicester

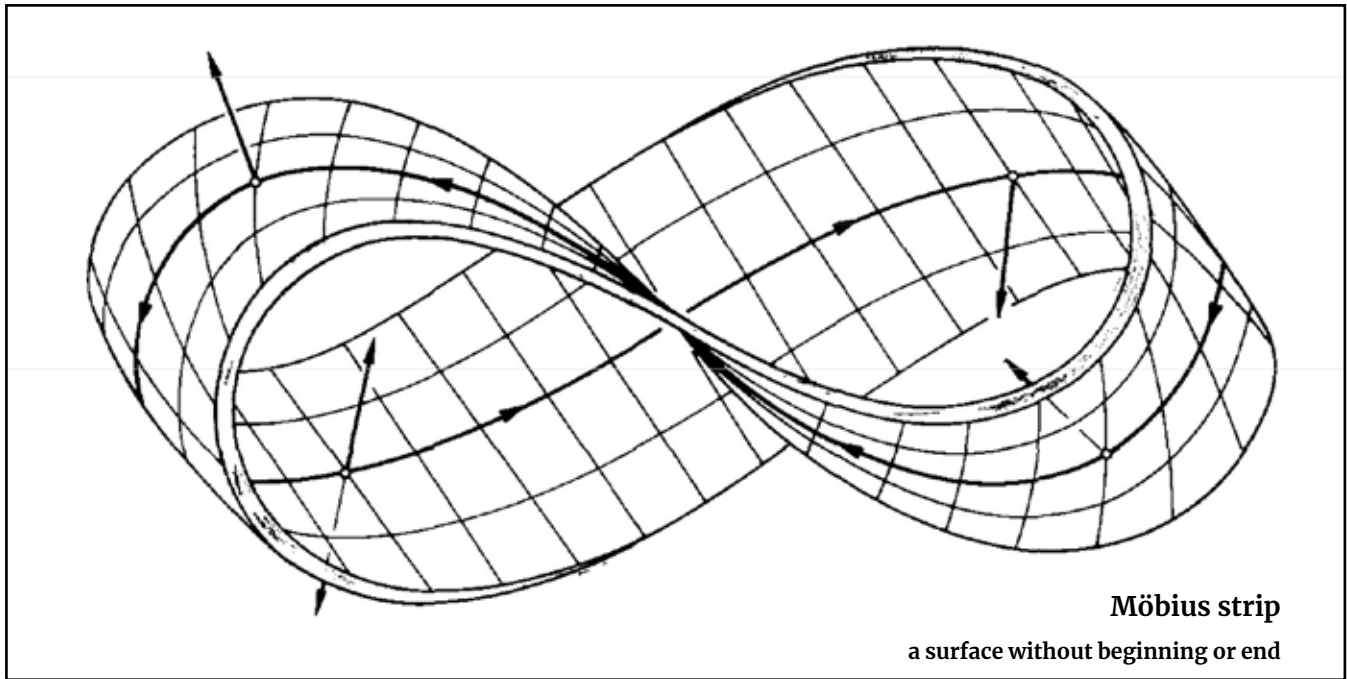
City Football Club, who 16 years ago had the vision to build a monument containing a million bricks, each one representing an answered prayer.

Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer will eclipse the Angel of the North, standing nearly three times higher at 169ft high. It is expected to attract 300,000 visitors each year with over 500,000 driving past it every week. This is an ambitious project and is expected to cost around

£10,000,000. It is also seeking to be the largest crowdfunded project in the UK; the goal is that it is quite literally built from the faithfulness of Christians getting involved from across the Church.

The concept behind our design is a gigantic, never-ending Möbius strip; a surface which seemingly has no beginning or end. The concept has proved to be inspirational. It was





**Möbius strip**

a surface without beginning or end

certainly inspired and came to me, quite fittingly, during a time of prayer. Prayer has always played a central place in my work and fundamentally underpins my ability to creatively fill the blank sheet of paper.

The realisation that my abilities as a designer relied on the power of the Holy Spirit began in my second year at university. I was floundering under the pressure of the course and having become increasingly aware that my own efforts were inadequate, I eventually reached the place where I called out to God for his help. It was a defining moment in my career and the resulting inspiration led to me securing the highest mark in my year for that particular project. I have never forgotten where my help comes from and prayer remains central both to my ability to design and to carry the burden lightly.

Both for me and my firm, Snug Architects, this particular chapter in our journey began in the autumn of 2016 when the Royal Institute of British Architects launched an international design competition to design what was at that time known as The Wall of Answered Prayer. What struck us was the explicitly Christian nature of the project brief. This was something very different and although it is our normal policy to avoid entering architectural

competitions like the plague, the odds of success being universally terrible, we felt that this was different and that we needed to get involved.

I decided that we would initially run an in-house design competition. This was in part because I wanted to bring the collective wisdom of the team to bear on the project but also because I wanted my largely non-believing team to engage in the issue at hand: prayer. There were a host of animated discussions about prayer and many asking whether prayer could really be said to have been answered. Some four years and a great many answered prayers later it is much easier to explain what I believe!

I allowed the rest of the office to present their ideas and it was encouraging to have the whole office agree that my own idea perfectly captured the essence of our many ideas in a single concept. Successful design is rarely the result of blending multiple ideas as that tends to lead to a 'dog's dinner' and I was glad there was universal recognition that we should proceed with the idea I believed God had given me. We adopted the Möbius strip as our concept. It has proved to be a remarkably flexible and poetic form that keeps revealing new depths of symbolic relevance. We love the fact that people keep seeing new meaning within it. For us it is firstly

a powerful symbol of God's eternal nature, a surface without beginning or end. The way it rises into the air to form a gentle bow across the sky also reminds passers-by of God's oldest symbol of love, the rainbow. We have even discovered in our modelling that the inherent geometry of a Möbius strip is not the circle but the triangle: a single unending surface made of a trinity of flowing turns.

At the heart of the competition was the challenge of creating a totally unique and iconic structure. That is no small feat, most iconic shapes having already been taken as symbols by previous movements, religions or political ideologies – except for the Möbius strip. It seems it really is a form fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: a genuinely unique and iconic shape that has never been constructed in this way before. There is no doubt that this was divine inspiration, not least because I spent no time thinking about its creation. It was a true gift from God. We therefore take no credit for it.

The competition process was a long one. Initially, what turned out to be an international field of 133 entries from 28 countries was reduced down to a longlist of 25 designs. Each day leading up to Christmas 2016 one scheme was announced on social media. This was great viewing for the public but made

for a very tense few weeks as ours was one of the last to be announced. We were delighted to make the longlist.

In February 2017 we were invited to a Parliamentary Reception and informed that we were down to the shortlist of five. It was wonderful to have got this far but there was still a long way to go and we knew that the real challenges lay ahead. The second stage of the competition would require us to develop our design and this could only progress once a site had been found. In late 2018 we were up and running again and began developing our ideas on an incredible site located close to the geographical centre of the nation on the edge of Birmingham, adjacent to both the M6 and M42 motorways. It was a great site, but we knew it would require significant changes to the initial design. At this stage our team was strengthened by the addition of leading engineering firm Ramboll, landscape architects UBU Design and quantity surveyor Ridge. Things now became serious. We needed to develop our design to fit the site and a now more refined project brief, whilst also elegantly resolving what is a highly complex form. The most common comment on social media regarding our

concept was 'that won't stand up.' We now had to prove the doubters wrong. The structural approach uses a range of innovative technologies and remains a closely guarded secret but – suffice to say – it will stand up!

In May 2019 we were announced as the winners of the competition at another Parliamentary Reception. It was a huge moment, both for the practice and for me personally. The process had stretched our faith and our finances and it was hugely satisfying to have been entrusted with the opportunity to design such an important and prominent Christian monument.

At the reception a journalist asked whether we prayed that our design would win. My answer was simple. No, we prayed that the best idea would win. I pointed out that this would be rather like praying for your football team to win. It is rather presumptuous to assume that the other teams weren't also Christians or for that matter just better than us. That said, I was privately confident that we had something very special. I believed in the source of the idea and knew we had put everything into the process. It was lovely to see the panel of judges independently

agree. It is never easy submitting your work into the hands of others. Architectural competitions leave you feeling particularly vulnerable. The six week wait for the judges' decision was in many ways the longest and loneliest part of the journey.

We have now achieved planning permission for the project and it is more ambitious now than even our competition-winning entry. This is a significant milestone for the project and very satisfying professionally. The project has received significant national and international media coverage and has most certainly put Christian prayer on the map. This is in itself a great achievement for Richard Gamble and his team. There is no doubt this project is a significant moment for my practice. It would be a real high for any architect.

Soon after the planning permission was announced a journalist asked me how it felt to be building a structure that might stand at the heart of the nation for hundreds of years. My honest answer was that I had not really thought about it. You don't, it would be a little overwhelming. The reality is we just get on with the task at hand and do our best to be faithful in it. This is how we have

## Paul in negotiations

photo: snug architects



always approached our work. We seek to be faithful in the small things and trust that when we operate in accordance with our principles and values we will, in faith, end up somewhere good. Again and again, we have found that God has done more than we can ask or imagine. Crucially the burden remains relatively light, certainly manageable! It is not that there have been no challenges along the way. Our willingness to press on has certainly been tested at times. We always knew however, that we had been given both the ability and most importantly the inspiration to design this project. Whether we were selected or whether we got planning permission was always in the hands of others.

What is becoming clear is that this project is both a privilege and a responsibility. This is not just the professional responsibilities that come from working on a complex project of national significance. We are under no illusions about the scrutiny this will bring. More significant is the scrutiny we now find ourselves under as an architect who is known to be a Christian working on a high-profile Christian project. The world has their eye on the project and therefore on us. In God's grace we pray we will do Him proud.

Our approach will be to continue as we have set out. I have always felt the verse in James 4 about not boasting about tomorrow is very significant in how we approach business. None of us knows what tomorrow holds and no amount of

business planning will give certainty. We can only do 'the good we know we ought to do.'

This kind of opportunity may be an extreme example but it is actually why I believe God calls Christians into business. He has given us the abilities needed to collectively deliver his purposes in our generation. I believe that Eternal Wall is something special and I don't believe it is a coincidence that he has ordained that my firm and I are involved.

Outside of my professional practice I have for over a decade been committed to exploring and promoting the notion that my business is my ministry. In 2017 I set up BizMin, an organisation that is now equipping Christian entrepreneurs to make their business a fruitful ministry around the world. For me, Eternal Wall is the perfect opportunity to practice what we preach. It is also providing me with both reputation and influence amongst my peers. Whether we like it or not, the world listens to

those who have achieved success in the things that matter to the world. Eternal Wall is certainly an impressive project that has grabbed the attention of the construction industry. I for one intend to use that for all the marketing it can generate, though not primarily for my own reputation or even that of my company. Our prayer is that it will give us the opportunity for the work of our hands to 'win the respect of outsiders' (1 Thess 4.12) so that both the way we work and the product of our work is a


**'None of us knows what tomorrow holds and no amount of business planning will give certainty'**

fragrant offering to the Lord. We have no doubt that our momentary success is the result of God's underserved favour. It is also an opportunity for His name to be upheld in both the nation and our industry. This is certainly the primary goal of the project. Please pray that we prove up to the task!

The announcement in September that the project has secured planning permission resulted in national exposure. Almost every national and many local newspapers as well as all the main media TV and Radio stations covered the story. Eternal Wall is already delivering on a part of its mission; the nation is talking about answered prayer.

Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer is ultimately a piece of public art. Its goal is not to provide all the answers. Instead it sets out to gather one million Christian testimonies and create a beautiful and inspiring place where anyone can come, be inspired and make their own judgement.

Our prayer is that we would now be able to see the project through to completion. There is a lot of work to be done to see the vision that God gave Richard and the design that God gave us actually built. That won't just be one answered prayer. It will be the result of many. We hope that you too will join us and add your answered prayers to the wall.

You can find out more about the project, how to support it financially, and importantly, how to upload your testimonies of answered prayer at [www.eternalwall.org.uk](http://www.eternalwall.org.uk). You can find out more about the design and Paul's practice at [www.snugarchitects.co.uk](http://www.snugarchitects.co.uk). 



*Paul Bulkeley is the founder of multi-award-winning Snug Architects and designer of Eternal Wall of Answered Prayer. In 2017 Snug was selected as only one of nine RIBA role model practices. The practice is based on the South Coast and is currently a team of 17 construction professionals. In addition to leading Snug, Paul is also the founder of BizMin, an organisation dedicated to 'calling and equipping a generation of Christian entrepreneurs to do business as ministry.' He is the author of the BizMin Course, a ten-part discipleship course for Christians wishing to explore how business can become a fruitful Christian ministry.*