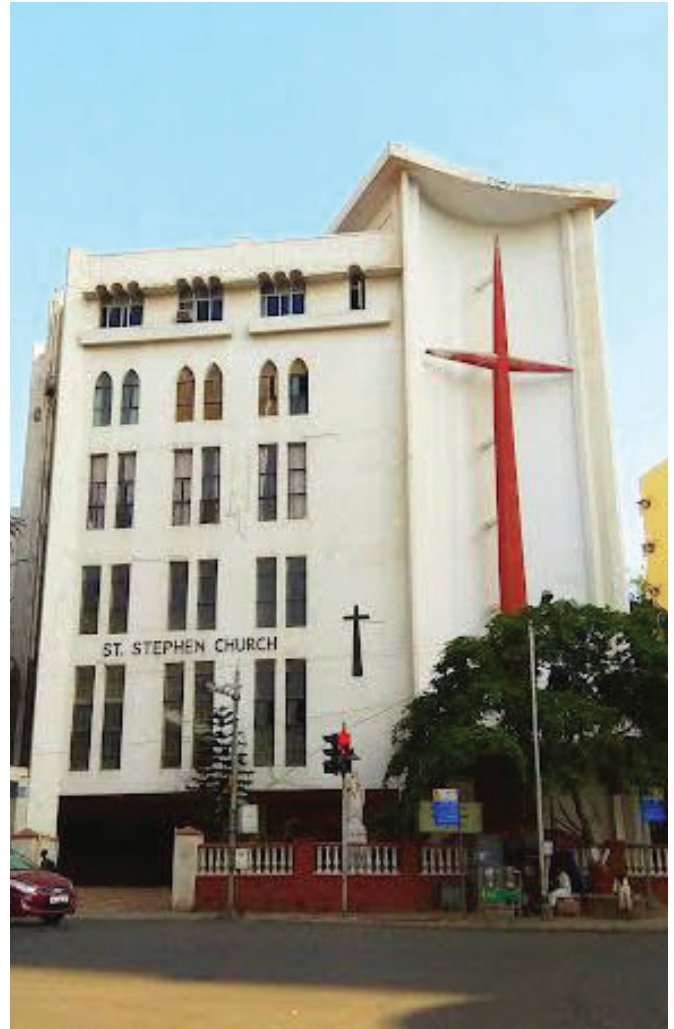




Informally referred to as the church between two hills, St. Stephen's Church is located between two prominent hills, Cumballa Hill and Malabar Hill, although more commonly associated with the former. The church lies on a wedge-shaped plot that descends towards the street. Its architecture is influenced heavily by the Art Deco and Le Corbusier styles. Perin J. Mistri, India's first qualified woman architect, designed the structure. With a white concave tower housing a crucifix within its recesses, Mistri transformed a residential house into a church with her designs (Compiled by D'Souza et al. 2022, 51; Gangadharan, 2021). Between the wings of the building, the tower ascended above a bustling intersection. The builders extended the construction to the 1970s due to a delay in obtaining approval for its height (Woods, 2017, 25).

The deep windows and thick-wall construction effectively maintained coolness in the interiors, providing relief even in the city's humid and hot climate. Under an elliptical canopy, a staircase at the tower's base leads to a door adorned with wooden coffers, each featuring a small crucifix. Elevated above the bustling streets, the sanctuary receives illumination through lancet windows and skylights. The coved ceiling over the sanctuary is divided by deep concrete beams. Instead of the initially envisioned skylight, a narrow stained-glass window now allows light to pass into the concave altar area, a modification made to prevent potential leaks during rainfall. A striking sculptural canopy extends above the pulpit (Woods, 2017, 25). Art Deco metal waves decorate the railing of staircases outside the sanctuary. At St. Stephen's Church, Mistri designed a variety of scales to bring India's diverse religious traditions and architectural influences together through various elements incorporated in her designs (Woods, 2017, 26). The church differs from traditional churches as its main hall of worship has some floors above it. One floor provides space for holding events and music performances (Desai 2016, 50).



On 12 March 1941, Archbishop Roberts issued a Decree that implemented territorial adjustments for several parishes. The restructuring resulted in a new parish, St. Stephen's Church, at Cumballa Hill. As a part of the decree, it was stated that "The area west of a line along Harvey Road, Grant Road, the B.B. and C.I. Railway, Falkland Tardeo Road, known as Malabar Hill and Cumballa Hill, is intended to become the new parish of St. Stephen as soon as the necessary can be made." Seven years later, on 26th December 1948, St. Stephen's Church was established due to the growing Catholic population and the required arrangements mentioned in the decree. The construction of the new church took place in 1967 under the vicarship of Fr. Frank E. Lobo (Archdiocese of Bombay, 1982, 194).



Like most other early churches, St. Stephen's Church began as a private residence where people came together to pray and celebrate the holy Eucharist. The current location of the Church was initially a bungalow acquired from Keshavdeo Ghanshamdas Poddar. The Archbishop took possession of the property on 23rd August 23 1941 (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 17). The plot of land was bought for a total of 1,75,000 rupees, and the acquisition was finalised on 21st January 1942, facilitated by a loan obtained from the Bhuleshwar Cathedral, the former Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Bombay. The church was consecrated and opened to the public on Friday, 5th September 1941. As reported in the Examiner (25th August 1941), 'Situated at the Junction of Warden Road and Nepean Sea Road, the church will serve the whole district which is to become the new parish of St. Stephen. As no structural alterations have yet been made in the house already existing on that site, the accommodation available is now small; but it is hoped to make such changes shortly as will enable the regular congregation to attend Mass comfortably' (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 18).

On 26th December 1948, on the occasion of the Feast of St Stephen, the church was officially blessed during the eucharistic celebration and announced as a parish with the then Vicar, Rev. J. A. Lobo (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 27). The formal Decree of Erection was subsequently read in Latin, with His Lordship briefly explaining its full implications. He congratulated the Vicar and his Assistants for their ongoing work and encouraged the laity, expressing appreciation for their cooperation and support.



In December 1948, prompted by a surge in population, the midnight solemn Christmas High Mass was arranged at the Gowalia Tank Maidan and the premises of Government House Employees Quarters. The Christmas morning Mass was held at St. Stephen's School, in the chapels or on the compounds of St. Teresa's on Pedder Road, St. Elizabeth's on Harkness Road, and the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Sophia College. The tradition of conducting High Masses on the eve of Christmas and Easter at the Gowalia Tank Maidan persisted until 2012 (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 28).

The number of parishioners and the Catholic community grew, surpassing the capacity of the existing space, even for daily mass attendees. The insufficient space necessitated the construction of a larger facility, and in November 1963, the long-awaited rebuilding project commenced (Compiled by D'souza et al. 2022, 43). The new church building opened its doors on 18th September 1966, marking 25 years since the church's establishment. Since then, it has consistently fostered faith and fellowship, uniting people from diverse backgrounds. This effort has strengthened the congregation's devotion and upheld the memory of its historic service to society.



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