

Conversioni interne: Ridisegnare la chiesa parrocchiale per un riuso adattivo

Interior conversions: Redesigning the Village Church for Adaptive Reuse

Così come sempre più chiese parrocchiali perdono la loro funzione originaria di luogo di culto, il riuso adattivo è una strategia sempre più popolare per la conservazione del patrimonio religioso. Trasformare il locale luogo di culto per mettere in scena una nuova scenografia implica una riprogettazione degli interni. Tre tipi di architettura ecclesiastica sono riscontrabili nelle aree rurali di Groningen, i Paesi Bassi, sono stati ridisegnati negli ultimi anni per ospitare una nuova funzionalità, con interventi architettonici, attraverso la definizione di un contesto in cambiamento, accettabile come strategia di conservazione valida. L'aggiunta di nuovi strati al patrimonio esistente ha determinato interessanti spazi che rivelano le qualità di questi edifici ecclesiastici.

As more and more village churches lose their original function as a house of worship adaptive reuse is an increasingly popular strategy for preservation of religious heritage. Transforming the local house of worship to stage a new scenography implies a redesign of the interior. Three types of ecclesiastical architecture in rural Groningen, the Netherlands, have been redesigned in recent years to house a new functionality. Architectural interventions by definition change context. However it can be accepted as a valid preservation strategy. The addition of new layers to the existing heritage has resulted in interesting spaces which reveal the qualities of these ecclesiastical buildings.



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Schonen is etwas im wesen lassen

Martin Heidegger; Bauen, Denken, Wohnen

The death of Gregor was a relief to the Samsa Family. His transformation into a vermin had alienated him from family and society. The relation between Gregor Samsa and the world surrounding him had changed. Adaptation to this new reality became a struggle for survival finding an end in death. A death the Samsa family experienced the loss of a burden. In his novel *Die Verwandlung* Franz Kafka explores the transformation of men in modern society¹. Modernity has brought many changes to society. Rural areas were not left untouched. Depopulation and secularization are a reality changing local communities beyond compare. The adaptation to this new reality has become a constant struggle for survival for these smaller communities. For centuries the heart of the village, of social and cultural life, was centered around the church². The village church connected past and present, locals to a community, creating place (Fig.1). Decreasing population and church attendance forces congregations to give up their house of worship. Abandoned buildings are in risk of becoming alien bodies (Fig.2), after redundancy the age old ties between church and community gradually evaporate³.

The world is urbanizing at high speed and the province of Groningen in the Netherlands is not an exception. As the population of the eponymous capital increases the depopulation of rural Groningen continues. Figures of 2014 show a decrease in rural municipalities like Delfzijl or De Marne of 20 % since 1990⁴. Unemployment in this province is the highest in the country affecting mostly the rural areas⁵. Several villages have seen the closing of the last shops in a region that has the highest number of vacant retail space in the Netherlands. Associated with modernity is secularization⁶. Church attendance and membership has been falling for decades. In the Netherlands, a country typified by a fragmented religious landscape, this has instigated the unification of three denominations embodied in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands⁷. Diminishing and merging congregations give up their churches as costs to maintain these houses of worship can no longer be supported. Ecclesiastical buildings become redundant at a break-neck speed never seen before.

Another threat for the preservation of religious heritage in the province of Groningen comes unexpected. The 2012 earthquake of Huizinge damaging several churches came as a shock⁸. Over eighty quakes have been reported in the

region this year, however nothing on the scale of central Italy, not surpassing 2.0 on the scale of Richter. These dutch earthquakes are man inflicted and a result of the extraction of natural gas in the area. In recent years the repairs due to quake damages has become a new worry. The redundant church of Krewerd, Delfzijl municipality was restored⁹. Preserving a building without a function however can be regarded the creation of a defunct monument. For decades the poor state of a structure in need of a costly restoration has been regarded a valid reason for demolition in the Netherlands. Ecclesiastical architecture was not an exception. In Groningen the cathedral of Saint Martin was pulled down in 1982 after plans for adaptive reuse as a library were abandoned¹⁰. Throughout the country ecclesiastical architecture regardless of denomination was and is being destroyed, in recent years targeting modernist and post war edifices. The Cross church in Geleen was demolished in 1994, the Resurrection church in Apeldoorn in 2006. Only a very limited number of these modernist buildings has some form of protection. The possibility of destroying post war history, this important period in the twentieth century, is a reality. A few years ago in the Netherlands a contest was held electing



Fig.1 - A bucolic landscape can deceive. Decreasing population and increasing unemployment, even earthquakes shake up the peaceful countryside. Photo by the author.

the best demolished house of worship¹¹. Unfortunate winner of this contest was the protestant Queen's Church in Rotterdam, its demolition still regarded a loss. As a process of place destruction is a form of transformation. For communities however the church functions as a connection to collective memory¹². For rural areas demolishing the church would destroy the village. Monuments are protected from demolition by law. Yet its designated status as a monument could not prevent the demolition in 1990 of the 'Kleine Sint Eusebius' in Arnhem¹³. The building had been abandoned for five years. A similar fate has struck the church of Saint Dominicus in Alkmaar¹⁴ an early masterpiece by Gothic Revival architect Pierre Cuypers. After a decade of redundancy and neglect it was ultimately destroyed in 1985. The biggest threat therefore to religious heritage in is not a decreasing population, or even earthquakes, but alienation; a community that has lost the connection and has lost interest to support the edifice.

Reuse can preserve

In Warfhuizen, municipality De Marne, the local house of worship became redundant in the 1970's. This Waterstaatskerk (note 1) was built for the protestant congregation in the middle of the nineteenth century.

After years of desolation and redundancy it was bought by some Catholics in 2001. A redesign converted the former Calvinist interior to a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of the Enclosed Garden¹⁵. A statue of the Sorrowful Virgin was placed in this redesigned space and has become the attraction of many visitors. Today the sanctuary is a popular destination for pilgrims in the Low Countries¹⁶. Warfhuizen is an interesting example of a contemporary conversion and stands in a long tradition of religious architecture reused as a house of worship for another religion or denomination¹⁷. After the Reduction of Groningen in 1594 (note 2) the Calvinist liturgy was forcefully imposed in this northern province and catholic churches turned into protestant temples. This conversion involved a redesign of the interior with the whitewashing of walls, stripping of altars and statues¹⁸. Even the organ was treated with mistrust, several instruments were destroyed and others removed¹⁹. Paradoxically the adaptive reuse has safeguarded elements of the medieval church interior otherwise lost through changes in liturgy and taste. Mural paintings were whitewashed which has preserved them for later generations, examples can be found in Noordbroek, Middelstum or Loppersum²⁰. Choir screens, repeatedly demolished in



Fig.2 - Deceased ladybugs in the author's house. Modernity can alienate and disconnect, leaving the preservation of religious heritage an enduring concern.

Catholic churches in later centuries, retained their function as a space divider as the choir was regularly given a new function. The wooden screen in Holwierde is a fine example²¹. And in Krewerd, mentioned above, a stone screen supports a sixteenth century organ in a situation unchanged since the Reformation²². Today the province of Groningen can boast some of the most interesting medieval church interiors in the Netherlands. Unintended the adaptive reuse for the Calvinist liturgy has resulted in the preservation of the pre-Reformation interior.

Not only the conversion into another religious house also the adaptation to a new functionality can safeguard ecclesiastical architecture. In Ghent the Baudeloo Abbey was abolished by French Revolutionaries in 1794. The Nachgotik chapel was transformed into the city library²³ in 1800 a function it held for nearly two centuries²⁴. After some decades of neglect and desertedness the building is currently being redesigned as a food hall due to open late 2016²⁵. In the same city the monastery of the Carmelites was again closed in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Founded in the thirteenth century this monastic institution was finally abandoned in the late eighteenth century and most of the interior sold in

a public sale²⁶. However, the building was not dismantled. For a short period it was used as a warehouse. From 1884 onwards it held a cultural function, first displaying antiquities, later as a museum to local folklore²⁷. Today the restored brick gothic church functions as the cultural centre for the Province of East Flanders hosting a broad variety of exhibitions. The whitewashed walls and wooden roofs created an interesting and suitable space for Berlinde de Bruyckere in 2002²⁸. These two monastic churches were reused and subsequently saved. Just outside the western walls of Ghent the Carthusian priory Vallis Regis, or Koningsdal in Flemish, was vandalized by Calvinists during the iconoclasm of 1566 and finally dismantled in 1578²⁹. Once the burial place of Poorters like Joos Vijdt³⁰, maecenas of The Adoration of the Lamb, the memory of this institution has been wiped out. Two years after the demolition of Koningsdal priory the Cistercian abbey at Aduard in Groningen was attacked. Founded in 1192 this abbey had become one of the largest in the Low Countries. Calvinists destroyed much of the buildings³¹. Only one edifice survived, possibly the refectory, as it was converted into a house of the Lord³². At Ter Apel, in the south east of Groningen, the Premonstratensian monastery did not witness iconoclams like the churches

in Ghent and after the conquest of this region it was peacefully converted to Protestantism. Today the village church of Ter Apel can boast a medieval interior, including stone sedilia and choir screen³³. The adaptive reuse of this monastic church into the Calvinist house of worship has safeguarded elements of the pre-Reformation interior. Adaptive reuse has changed the appearance of interiors, possibly even the meaning of the monument as a church, as could be argued at Baudeloo Abbey. However the changed functionality of these buildings has safeguarded what would otherwise have been lost. Important for the preservation of religious heritage, is its connection to society. The designation of a building as a monument does not protect it, as Alkmaar and Arnhem have illustrated. A status quo after redundancy can result in the ultimate demolition. Transforming Baudeloo Abbey into a the public library and the Carmelite cloister chapel into an exhibition space has safeguarded these edifices from likely destruction.

Redesigning for a new scenography

In recent years three buildings in the care of the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (note 3), from here abbreviated SOGK, have been redesigned. Three different types of ecclesiastical architecture

were given a new program, a Calvinist waterstaatskerk of the 1840's, a pre-Reformation church and a thirteenth century tower. In an attempt to reconnect these abandoned buildings to a local community and society new layers were added to the existing heritage. At Leegkerk the church was redesigned to stage a new program formulated by the SOGK. This abandoned house of worship dates largely from the sixteenth century and became a protestant temple after the Reduction of Groningen in 1594³⁴. To stage the Calvinist liturgy much of the original interior was altered, however the choir retained sacrament niche and piscina dating to the early sixteenth century³⁵. The last service in this house of worship was held in 1965 as the diminishing congregation had merged with another and this edifice was no longer needed. To safeguard this deteriorating monument the SOGK was founded in the late 1960's³⁶. The latest redesign can be regarded the last stage of a restoration process that started shortly after the SOGK had become new owner of the abandoned building. Preservation as found was not the path chosen. An entrance door in the choir was bricked up and bricked up windows dating to the sixteenth century were opened up again. After completion of the first restoration the church became a venue for cultural

events. The success was limited and revenues less than expected. Partly this was due to the lack of facilities such as a kitchen and toilets.

To stage the new scenography the Antwerp based architects Jan Verrelst and Maarten Verdonschot of AWG Architects³⁷ came with an intervention connecting tradition with contemporary design. To house the functions, kitchen and toilets, a box as placed in the nave. By placing this golden box in front of the two entrances the space is divided in a larger and smaller part retaining spatial unity visually. The box is divided kitchen and toilets by the placing of stairs which allow the top of the box to be used as a platform. This can be interpreted as a balcony, to look in the church or outside through the windows, or as a stage to seat musicians for a concert. Comparable is the mezzanine in a sixteenth century sanctuary in Brihuega, Spain, created by placing a contemporary corpus in a historical environment. Here an abandoned chapel was redesigned for hosting events ranging from weddings to yoga classes³⁸. The second intervention was the placing of a door with cabinet space in an existing wall opening. This wall is situated on the location of the sixteenth century screen that once divided nave from choir. Golden doors allow to

once again separate spaces and work as a visual counterweight to the golden box .

This phenomenological design is strongly rooted in tradition and references the pre-Reformation church interior on several occasions. The choice of material is not incidental. By choosing a copper alloy Verrelst and Verdonschot reconnect to a medieval tradition. Copper alloys like bronze and brass were used as a material for many liturgical objects in the Low Countries. From the tenth century onwards the Meuse Valley with towns like Dinant and Huy as the principle centres was an important region for the production of copper alloy objects³⁹. Liturgical brass objects like candelabras were exported as far as Genoa⁴⁰. The early twelfth century baptismal font made by Renier of Huy for Liège Cathedral (Fig.3), demolished in the early nineteenth century and now in Saint Barthelémy in the same city, is regarded as a masterpiece of Mosan Art⁴¹. Other centres like Tournai and Mechelen gained importance from the twelfth century onwards⁴². Mechelen is the place of production of the early sixteenth century baptismal font of St Walburga church in the dutch town of Zutphen⁴³. The brass choir screens in Saint Jacobi, Utrecht and Saint Bavo, Haarlem, were both made in Mechelen⁴⁴. Many eagle lecterns of

the fifteenth and sixteenth century were made in present day Belgium (Fig.4) and exported to places like Florence and Urbino, Dortmund and Corboda⁴⁵. The pelican lectern in Saint Bavo in Haarlem was made in Mechelen by Jan Fierens⁴⁶. Often taking the shape of a chapel becoming miniature architecture, the shrine in the Low Countries is frequently decorated with copper alloys. The shrine of Our Lady of Flanders by Nicolas of Verdun in Tournai Cathedral is a fine example⁴⁷. In Bruges the shrine of Saint Ursula by Hans Memling is a miniature chapel of gilded wood⁴⁸. At Leegkerk the architects refer to the golden box as a shrine⁴⁹. However, it could also refer to the pulpitum which in the medieval church was used to stage musicians⁵⁰, a function similar to the this addition. The golden doors connecting nave from choir become a representation of the sixteenth century carved altar piece from Antwerp, located near the original piscina and sacrament niche, completing this contemporary image of the pre-Reformation church interior. As an intervention this is an addition of a new layer instead of altering the existing edifice.

At Uitwierde the free standing church tower was redesigned as part of a project called Landmerken⁵¹ connecting heritage



Fig.3 - Baptismal font of Liège Cathedral, early twelfth century. After the demolition of the Saint Lambert Cathedral complex the monumental font was reused in the collegiate of Saint Barthélemy, Liège. Photo by Vincent van der Meulen



Fig.4- Brass eagle lectern made in Tournai, 1440-1450 , Halle. Copper alloy objects are a recurring feature in the early modern ecclesiastical interiors of the Low Countries. Photo by the author.

sites to the coast. Here the interior spaces are opened up and connected by stairways, creating movement going upwards. Destination a small balcony providing views of the landscape and the coastline. Passing thirteenth century bricks, the old woodwork, the clock, the white wooden stairways almost confront visitors with heritage. This confident design has made the interiors more interesting. What could be regarded as plain has become recognizable old and venerable by the juxtaposition. Once just a church tower and testimony to a medieval past, it was turned into a contemporary viewing spot. This intervention has transformed the building into a tourist attraction where the religious heritage is a conveyor. Has the ecclesiastical heritage become a container for a cheap thrill? The current spaces can be considered Gothic. Gothic in the sense these spaces are sublime and frightening⁵² recalling the Carceri by Piranesi. The designer, Berit Ann Roos, said inspiration came from this eighteenth century paper architect⁵³. Her intervention does not assault the rooms, attacking spatial qualities as a parasite. These stairways reveal and enhance the idea of a tower as a tool to reach the skies, the ladder connecting heaven and earth. An architectural addition that could easily be undone, the tower could be brought back

to its situation before this intervention.

The latest in the transformations of ecclesiastical architecture in rural Groningen is the village church of Klein Wetsinge (Fig.5). Like Warfhuizen this abandoned house of worship is a Waterstaatskerk (see note 1) built in the middle of the nineteenth century. A much needed restoration was the incentive for the owner of the building, Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (see note 3) to write a new scenario. The local community of this small settlement requested a community hall as a way to rejuvenate village life⁵⁴. Importantly this would re-establish ties between building and local society, preventing possible alienation of the redundant monument. Two more layers were added. A venue for cultural events, like concerts and the hosting of wedding or anniversary parties, similar to what was done earlier at Leegkerk, and rural tourism as the third layer⁵⁵. Located on the crossing of two bicycle routes exploring the Groningen countryside, SOGK saw an opportunity for attracting tourists in an attempt to generate funds. Sharing with the locals these visitors could use the facilities in the redesigned church. The 'local living room' (Fig.6) serves coffee and cakes as well as lunches, visitors could become future clients for renting



Fig.5 - The redesigned church interior at Klein Wetsinge with kitchen on the right. Photo by the author.

this converted building.

Shaping the space for this scenography was done by Jelle de Jong Architects⁵⁶. Largely the design can be regarded a citation of the precedent at Leegkerk. Differences are explained by differences in typology. Some facilities like the toilet could be easily housed in the existing entrance space. Position of door and pulpit force the box to be deduplicated. A kitchen and a meeting space are placed in these new wooden eggs⁵⁷, a rounded shape plan which could be regarded a reference to the wooden ceiling. A contemporary addition is the lighting in this space. The circular shape of these devices is again a reference to the ceiling. Choosing white connects these three circles to the small organ case contrasting to the petrol blue of the wooden ceiling. Simple tables and black chairs allowing different arrangements complete this communal living room. Dominant in the space is still the pulpit, retaining the atmosphere of this former Calvinist prayerhouse. Adding the third layer, attracting tourists to visit a plain Waterstaatskerk proved to be challenging. The appeal of this type of ecclesiastical architecture is very limited. With some of the finest in religious heritage in the vicinity, this structure could be considered a decorated shed⁵⁸. Inspiration was

found at the Uitwierde project of 2012 as described above. The idea of a viewing platform was translated to this building eventually resulting in a polyester cabin placed at the rear end of the roof. This addition allows uninterrupted views of the countryside (Fig.7). Arguably the cabin has reduced religious heritage to a superficial novelty. However, this third layer can be interpreted as a *promenade architecturale*. Starting in the entrance hall, taking the slightly hidden stairs up to the organ level, going further up to the clock room (Fig.8) where a ladder (Fig.9) provides access to a passway through the wooden constructions of the roof, ending with these views of the countryside⁵⁹. A sequence of spaces through the different functions and layers of this monument ending with a connection to place (Fig.10). The opening up of the roof and the view have revealed qualities of this edifice that were present yet hidden. Where the tower balcony at Uitwierde surprises with an unexpected view of the coastline, the river Ems and the Dollard, Klein Wetsinge offers more of the same. As an apotheosis this is a disappointment, yet not the view but the promenade architecturale is the attraction. Polyester was the material chosen for this intervention which gives it a cheap and alienating appearance. The choice is surprising regarding wood is the



Fig.6 - Locals in their communal "living room". An assembly of layers, the pulpit predates the building, the light fittings are a recent addition. Photo by the author.



Fig.7 - Passing time: the clock room in Klein Wetsinge. Lack of space changed the original idea of creating a viewing spot here, instead a cabin was placed at the rear end of the roof. Photo by the author.

dominant material inside this monument, both of the original interior as the additions. Klein Wetsinge redesign was nominated for the prestigious architecture award BNA Building of the Year⁶⁰.

Layer and place

Architectural interventions change context as the three examples illustrate. Only rarely can the ecclesiastical interior be regarded a Gesamtkunstwerk. The church at Klein Wetsinge was built in the 1840's replacing two medieval precursors. Presumably the pulpit, which predates the edifice, originates from one of these. The present organ was added only in 1914⁶¹. Both preeminent objects in this interior do not date from the period this church was built instead reference different layers of local history. This accumulation of layers has resulted in the interesting architecture of many historic monuments, simultaneously anchoring edifice to community and expressing local memory. At Uitwierde and Leegkerk this history dates back to the thirteenth century as some bricks testify. The tower at Uitwierde has become a campanile, a free standing tower after the original church was replaced by a simpler structure in the early nineteenth century. Leegkerk reveals a medieval Catholic past adjacent Calvinist elements. Rather



Fig.8 - Stairway to heaven: promenade architecturale towards viewing cabin. Photo by the author.



Fig.9 - View of the countryside from the polyester cabin. The way is the goal as the apotheosis a dissapointment. Photo by the author.



Fig.10 - View of Klein Wetsinge. The abandoned house of worship was redesigned in an attempt to rejuvenate and reconnect the local community. Photo by the author.

than a Gesamtkunstwerk the historic interior can be regarded as an ensemble or even *assemblage*, an accumulation of layers of meaning and history creating place⁶². In this the accumulation the contemporary additions described above are representations of our time. These contemporary interventions have become not only new layers but also revealing hidden qualities already present in the building⁶³. A pre-Reformation interior in Leegkerk, in a contemporary translation, finishes a restoration of a sixteenth century village church. The brick tower at Uitwierde expresses the desire to ascend to heaven. And the plain Calvinist church of Klein Wetsinge shows its hidden spaces and connection to the countryside. Interior design becomes not only an instrument to house functions, it is also a tool to express place and emphasize qualities of a historic building. An expression linked to the site⁶⁴. The additions and edifice have an experiential connection resulting in poetic architecture. However, these alterations accept being temporary interventions rather than permanent transformations.

Conclusion

As churches become redundant new programs are written to rejuvenate monument and community. Alienation can be regarded the most dangerous threat for the preservation of ecclesiastical architecture. Adapting to the new reality means adopting a new script. A scenography that reconnects the abandoned monument to society is a preferred solution. To adapt the existing building to the new scenography a redesign of the interior is needed. In the past this has safeguarded ecclesiastical architecture including interiors. The adaptive reuse of religious architecture is not a new phenomenon in the Low Countries. In the province of Groningen parish churches were reshaped to the stage the Calvinist liturgy after the Reduction of Groningen in 1594. Unintended the whitewashing of walls has preserved medieval murals and choir screens could retain their function as space dividers. The redesign for adaptive reuse of two monastic churches in Ghent after redundancy has altered the spatial arrangements of these buildings. The recent cultural functions housed in these interiors has established new ties between edifice and society which has safeguarded what otherwise would have been lost. In the province of Groningen three typologies of ecclesiastical architecture have been reshaped in recent years. The church

functions as the connection to communal memory. A defunct monument can become an alien body losing connectivity to the community. New scenarios for these three abandoned buildings were written by the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken preventing alienation in an attempt to reconnect religious heritage to society. At Leegkerk the pre-Reformation interior has re-appeared to stage the functions as a cultural centre and venue for events. The concept of a tower as a stairway was expressed at Uitwierde. Views of the countryside and the coastline hope to attract visitors. At Klein Wetsinge the connection between community and historical edifice is reestablished as the former house of worship was transformed into the local living room. Two more layers were added, a venue for hosting events and a viewing cabin to attract visitors. The interventions have revealed the hidden structure of the edifice and its connection to the countryside. Interventions change context. These architectural additions have changed appearance and meaning. In the accumulation of historical meaning these layers can be interpreted as expressions of modern society. Contemporary interventions are not intended to last for ages, these layers can be removed remaining temporary and reversible transformations.

Notes:

1. A Waterstaatskerk is a church in the Netherlands built between 1824 and 1875. The name derives from the ministry of water management and public works , Waterstaat in dutch . After the royal decree of 1824 a new house of prayer had to be built under supervision of the state. This supervision was done by engineers of the ministry of Waterstaat, who occasionally provided the designs. Initially this type of architecture was thought for catholic parishes, it was also used for replacing dilapidated churches , as was the case in Klein Wetsinge. These simple brick structures are often aisleless halls , crowned by a turret and can be decorated in a Neoclassical, Neorenaissance or occasionally Neogothic style.
2. The Reduction of Groningen is an event in the Eighty Years War resulting in the capitulation of Groningen. As a result Catholic goods in this region were confiscated and the Calvinist religion imposed. The countryside and city were formally unified to create Groningen Province in the Dutch Republic.
3. Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (SOGK) is a charity which owns and maintains churches in the dutch province of Groningen. Founded in the late 1960's the charity currently has over eighty churches in their care. Some of these are rented by congregations and consequently still in use as a house of worship, many however are redundant. <https://www.groningerkerken.nl/>

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