

KLEIN WETSINGE : THE REDESIGN OF A VILLAGE CHURCH IN RURAL GRONINGEN .

Today I will be talking about Klein Wetsinge - a redesigned village church in rural Groningen - a project that earlier this year was nominated BNA building of the Year in the Netherlands. The jury valued the design solutions of the new program as an attempt to rejuvenate , regenerate a small settlement.

Like many villages across Europe, the redundancy of the local church is only one of several problems the community is facing. The Reitdiep area were this settlement of two streets and a windmill Klein Wetsinge is located , witnesses many problems. The depopulation of the Groningen countryside first became problematic in the 1960's .Unemployment in this province is the highest in the country. Several attempts to counter this trend have all failed. More threatening the preservation of religious heritage in this region are , somewhat unexpected , earthquakes . This year alone over 80 registered earthquakes in this region , though not on the scale of Armatrice , the heaviest of them was in 2012 which severely damaged the thirteenth century church of Huizinge - and several others in the region. One of the was at Klein Wetsinge. What to do with this abandoned building , this damaged church that was in need of costly restoration ? This countryside may look bucolic , the reason it attracts visitors , life in these villages is not .

In Klein Wetsinge it was decided a restoration ,which was much needed as the woodwork was in a poor condition , was an opportunity to redesign the building and give it a second life. The new program for the building was drafted by the new owner of the church - the charity SOGK (Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken) which now owns over 80 churches in the province of Groningen , in collaboration with the local community , some sixty people living in two settlements. This new program consists of three parts ;first and probably most important, this former house of worship was transformed into the local living room, a community centre on a parochial scale.Two other functions were added to this : a venue for hosting events , wedding or anniversary parties ,concerts , rented out through the foundation Special Locations Groningen which exploits a small group of former churches as centers hosting different kinds of events . The third and final layer that was put over the church was a site for rural tourism. As the community centre would provide over a kitchen serving coffee and cakes , the decision to open up this space to visitors and passers-by was an easy one. The location of the village on the crossroads of two bicycle routes of the Reitdiep Area , a small step. SOGK acknowledged the appeal of this church as ecclesiastical architecture to visitors was limited. The designed additions hope to attract visitors. Part of this new program is a repetition of what the SOGK had done at Leegkerk a few years earlier. Here the new program of the church concentrates on cultural events and hosting events and to a lesser extent rural tourism. Rural tourism was the main objective for the redesign of the Uitwierde Tower where a free standing church tower

dating back to the thirteenth century was turned into a tourist attraction in a project called Landmerken , connecting heritage sites to the landscape and the coast. The juxtaposition of the old and the contemporary has made these buildings more interesting , but as the interiors have been changed so has the meaning of these buildings.

Groningen is the most northern province of the Netherlands and takes its name from the eponymous capital and principal city. After the Reduction of Groningen in 1594 the protestant religion was forcefully imposed. This introduction of the calvinist liturgy involved a redesign of the churches , a form of adaptive reuse , the interiors were stripped of their altars and statues , the walls were white washed. Even the organ was treated with suspicion. Today the religious landscape in the northern provinces is typified by fragmentation. It is not unusual for even villages to have several churches ; there is not one calvinist church , there are many. The decrease of the congregation and church attendance has instigated the union of three denominations , the dutch reformed church , the reformed church and the lutherans in 2003. As a result of this unification more houses of worship became redundant. (Sauwerd - has a reformed and a reformed liberated church - Bedum is the home to no less than five houses of worship - dutch reformed - presbyterian - two reformed liberated and a roman catholic church.)

A possible solution to redundancy is demolition. In Groningen the Cathedral of Saint Martin in Groningen was pulled down in 1982. Today we look at the Netherlands as inspirational for the reuse of ecclesiastical architecture .The bookstore in Maastricht is probably one of the best known examples of reuse. Yet until as recent as the 1990's demolition was not unusual. (Cathedral of St Barbara , Breda 1970 - The Queen's Church in Rotterdam , 1972 - St Boniface , Amsterdam , 1984 - St Eusebius in Arnhem , 1990 - The Anabaptist church in Harlingen , in 1997 - St Nicolas & Barbara , Amsterdam in 1990.) Demolition was never an issue in Klein Wetsinge , it would destroy the settlement . What other options are there for this loved building ?

Some ten kilometers north of Klein Wetsinge lies the village of Warfhuizen , also in the Reitdiep area. The original medieval church was in ill repair and in the 1850's replaced by a new building somewhat similar to Klein Wetsinge . This building became redundant in the 1970's. Several years passed and ultimately this abandoned Dutch Reformed Church was bought in 2001 by some catholics. Now it is reused as the *Chapel of Our Lady of the Enclosed Garden*. The redesign of this building included the placing of this statue of the Sorrowful Virgin .It has become a popular pilgrimage destination in the Low Countries , a phenomenon that has been referred to as the Miracle of Warfhuizen ! This fine example of reuse is often overlooked , certainly in the Netherlands , yet it remains a successful example. Reuse as a church for another denomination is the favoured solution for many. Closer to the Groningen city the calvinist village church of Engelbert is now in use by the Old Catholic Parish of Groningen. St Elisabeth , in Ghent , Belgium, was handed over to the Anglican Community earlier this year. A chapel in

Dateln , Germany , was re-dedicated to the russian saints Boris and Gleb. For most village churches however dedication to a foreign saint is not an option .

The village church of Leegkerk dates largely from sixteenth century. It became a protestant temple after the Reduction of Groningen in 1594. Much of the original sixteenth century interior was altered , one could say this catholic church was reused as a calvinist house of worship. The number of church attenders dropped significantly in the 1960's forcing the congregation to merge with the one next door. The last service in this house of worship was held in 1965 and subsequently the building was abandoned. The structure quickly deteriorated. In the late 1960's the Leegkerk church was in alarming condition .The pitty state of this building was one of the principal reasons the SOGK (Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken) was established. This newly founded charity bought the building for the symbolic amount of one guilder and it became the first church in SOGK care.

What started was a large scale restauration project. Instrumental in this project, in which the dutch state participated , was the work of the late professor Regnerus Steensma -co-founder of SOGK. This restoration of the early 1970's was a child of its time. Preserving as found was not the path chosen , instead it tried to reveal a building as it would have appeared in the sixteenth century and at the same time retaining the calvinist character of the interior. After restoration the building was used for cultural events like concerts , lectures and exhibitions , occasionally as a wedding venue . Revenues from these events however were not sufficient to keep up the costs of safeguarding a historic building of this type. It generated far less money than expected. This was partly due to the lack of facilities, a kitchen and toilets.

Some thirty years after the building had reopened as a venue .A new program was written and the space reshaped to stage this new scenography.The Antwerp based architects Jan Verrelst and Maarten Verdonschot of AWG Architects came with an intervention that connects tradition with the contemporary. To house the functions like the toilets and kitchen a box was placed in the nave. By placing this box in front of the two entrances and from the wall - the intervention becomes a space- divider. Although the nave remains one visually, the space is divided in a larger and a smaller space, the stairs divide the functions in the box ,kitchen and toilets, and allow the top of the box to be used as a platform ,a balcony , to look in the church or even outside through the windows, a stage ,to seat musicians for a concert.The second intervention was the placing of a door and cabinet space in the wall-opening. This wall is situated on the location of the sixteenth century screen that divided nave from choir , these doors would make it possible to separate again these spaces , allowing different kinds of venues to take place in the church or even a possibility to host smaller events like lectures. These magnificent doors also work as a visual counterweight for the golden box.

This phenomenological design is strongly rooted in tradition and references the sixteenth

century church interior on several occasions. The choice of material is not incidental nor is the colour purely inspired by fashion. By choosing a copper-alloy Verrelst and Verdonschot intentionally reconnect with pre-reformation tradition. Copper alloys as a material were used for many liturgical objects in the Low Countries, for baptismal fonts, as this illustration shows the early twelfth century fonts of Liège Cathedral, now in Saint-Barthélemy, for eagle lecterns or for shrines. The architects refer to the box as the shrine. The medieval shrine in the Low Countries often takes the shape of chapels becoming miniature architecture. Examples are the shrine of Our Lady of Flanders in Tournai Cathedral or the shrine of Saint Ursula in Bruges by Hans Memling. This box could however also refer to the pulpitum which in the medieval church was used to stage musicians. Then doors become a sixteenth century carved altarpiece from Antwerp.

Leegkerk is an intellectual design. It refers to the sixteenth century interior of this church before the redesign as a protestant house of worship, shaping spaces and housing functions and creating a scenography. But it is also a very modern addition in that it accepts contemporary architecture and interior design is only temporarily. This intervention can easily be reversed.

The redesigned church of Leegkerk reopened in 2013 and was widely regarded a success. Although the architectural scene in the Netherlands gave it little attention a regional award by the general public showed the SOGK had done great job. When the redundant church of Klein Wetsinge was in need of a restoration the SOGK took the opportunity to redesign this building. The local community, two settlements of in total sixty inhabitants, requested a sort of community centre, a parish hall, as a way to rejuvenate village life. This idea was welcomed by the SOGK. But the church would also become a space for cultural events like concerts or exhibitions and would be rented out for gatherings like wedding or anniversary parties, as was done earlier at Leegkerk. A third layer was added to this: rural tourism. A look at the local tourist map showed this village was located at the crossroad of two bicycle routes - this is the Netherlands - this type of recreation could generate funds and possible future clients for renting this converted building. Shaping the space for this scenography was done by Jelle de Jong Architects. Not only the new program was inspired by Leegkerk, also the design can be regarded a citation of this precedent. The typology of this church however is different from the example; it replaced a medieval building in the 1840's. Facilities like the bathroom could be easily housed in the existing entrance space. A kitchen and a meeting area were placed in boxes. These two alien objects were called the *eggs*, the rounded shape in plan could be regarded a reference to the ceiling.

This would have been enough to house the local living room. Also for most events like concerts or weddings. But part of the new program was the attraction of the bicycle-tourists and other passers-by. The appeal of this type of ecclesiastical architecture is very limited. With some of the finest in religious heritage in the country only a bikeride away some would consider Klein Wetsinge church a decorated shed. It was decided this church needed something more to

trigger interest. Inspiration was found in the Uitwierde Project of 2012. Adjacent an early nineteenth century church stands a tower dating back to the thirteenth century. As part of the Landmerken project - connecting heritage sites to the landscape and the coastline - SOGK wanted to open up the structure ; climbing a tower and enjoying the view speaks to many. Berit Ann Roos of Onix Architects designed a stairway connecting the three spaces that make up this structure , creating movement and a spiral going upwards. Visitors are taken to a small balcony passing thirteenth century bricks , the old woodwork , the clock showing , almost confronting them with the heritage. This is a confident design that makes the interior space more interesting. What could be regarded as plain has become recognisable old and venerable by the juxtaposition . This design has completely changed the building and intentionally changed the meaning of it. What was a church tower, a testimony of a medieval past , was turned into a viewing spot . This might attract visitors but what they come for has no relation to religious heritage.

The designer said she was inspired by Piranesi , probably referring to the Carceri , an example of the phantastical paper architecture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Indeed the wooden stairs that move through these towerrooms provide an interesting interior. But the connection between a thirteenth century church tower and these eighteenth century etchings remains unclear. How beautiful this interior may be , it is also a worrying image . And perhaps this is what Berit Ann Roos refers to with the Piranesi inspiration. Has the church tower become a container for a cheap thrill , nothing more than a novelty.

The addition of a viewing space was forced into the church of Klein Wetsinge . The turret soon proved to be too small thus the viewing space was moved to the back of the roof . This intervention tries to be an ' *Promenade Architecturale*' with a ladder-like stairs , a passway through the roofs and a polyester cabin as the apotheosis. But other than Uitwierde the view is not the sudden surprise view of the Dollard , the coastline and the river . The grass is still green , the countryside flat , the skies grey. To complete the anti-clymax of this experience the polyester cabin is far from welcoming. But maybe this *dutch directness* is simply not my taste . It is not the design that feels problematic , it is the program, this new program that has been forced in this village church. This intervention , the cabin , has no function for the community centre , it is purely an instrument to attract visitors. Arguably this cabin reduces religious heritage to a superficial novelty. If it does enhance the appeal of this church as an attraction as is the intention of this redesign it can be excepted as a valid intervention. This transformation has revealed the building as it was ; it has opened up the wooden roof and opened up the view.

I started this talk by mentioning this redesigned church was nominated BNA Building of the Year, one of the most prestigious architecture awards in the Netherlands. The jury rapport

hailed its impact and importance as a regeneration project ; a living room for the local community , some sixty inhabitants in two settlements. This is an interesting idea and can act as a stimulus for village life. The addition of two more layers to this central idea was done to generate the funds to keep up the building. Rural tourism was one, the other hosting events. The program formulated for the new scenography is complex and contradictory, an expression of our time. Every intervention changes a building , every architect understands this. Klein Wetsinge is an interesting redesign that has transformed the church altering the ecclesiastical architecture and adding the new layers to its functionality. The legitimacy of this new functionality remains questionable.

I want to end with the words of Heidegger from ' *Bauen Denken Wohnen* ' and I quote :
" Das eigentliche Schonen ist etwas *Positives* und geschieht dann, wenn wir etwas zum voraus in seinem Wesen belassen, wenn wir etwas eigens in sein Wesen zurückbergen, es entsprechend dem Wort freien: einfrieden. " " Schonen ist etwas in Wesen lassen "

Safeguarding is allowing something to keep its nature , its being. This could be inspirational for preserving our religious heritage.

THNK YOU

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