

An Applied Cultural Analysis of the Use of Sacred Space

Fieldwork Summary

In collaboration with the Church of Sweden, in response to an ongoing issue of unused or rarely used church-owned space in Sweden, we produced an ethnographic analysis of one particular site; Odarslöv Church, Torn Parish, Southern Sweden, which is a deconsecrated church currently housing contemporary art works.

Our aim was to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social heritage value of the site, and to make suggestions for its future use.

An ethnographic approach draws out the cultural meaning of particular places or practises through methods such as focus groups, observations, netnography, photographs, videos and interviews. We used these methods to analyse individual and collective motivations, priorities, and emotions related to Odarslöv Church and the wider area. We established current and potential users, and asked whether the meaning of the space changes when the building is no longer used for worship.



Findings

Continuity of Meaning

Although the use of the space had changed, we found that meaning remained. Many community members (religious or not) still experienced an intangible meaning of the space linked to memory and history, evoking the image of the everyday lives of ancestors and their traditions relating to marriage, birth and death. This was a valued part of the experience of the space, regardless of whether it was used for worship.

Continuity of Values

By understanding the current values of the local church community, we could extrapolate possible future use. Values of inclusivity and intersectionality, and a strong desire to build connections to those of different faiths and increase engagement with the local community, led to suggested future use of the space as an interfaith site, and potential opportunities for collaboration with the highly diverse local science development.

Continuity of use

The space was in use containing interactive works of art, which worked well experientially, and was in keeping with the values of the community. However a lack of resources was preventing promotion and management of the space. By identifying potential users, we were able to involve a local art community who could possibly manage the space.

Local Social Heritage

The geographical area had a strong agricultural history with a newly emerging focus on the local university town of Lund. Local people identified both challenges and benefits of living on the 'edge' of the city and the countryside. Our findings suggested that the church site was viewed as a 'boundary' meeting point of art/science, town/country, and the church itself was seen as a 'lighthouse' on the edge of the shore. This metaphor opened up new creative ideas for the identity of the church.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research is flexible, and adapts its methods to the context. It observes peoples' lived, sensory experiences, and draws out patterns and trends, which can be invaluable in understanding the place of heritage sites in a local community, even when no longer used for worship. It can suggest potential uses for the site in keeping with past use and local users' values. Finally, an ethnographic approach can help illuminate new and creative ideas, while still rooting the site firmly in its local context.