

Contemporary Art in the Church: Re-use of Churches in the Netherlands

1. Introduction and statement

As a result of a decline in religious practitioners in combination with reducing church visiting numbers, churches are finding themselves on the edge bankruptcy with often demolition as result. The destruction of a church may hurt a local community’s well-being. An inevitable conflict arises on how to rightly re-use the church, as multiple groups attach different meanings and values to it.

The implementation of (contemporary) art presentations and performances in churches, could be a sustainable and meaningful re-use strategy

2. (Christian) religion in the Neterlands and the redundancy of the church

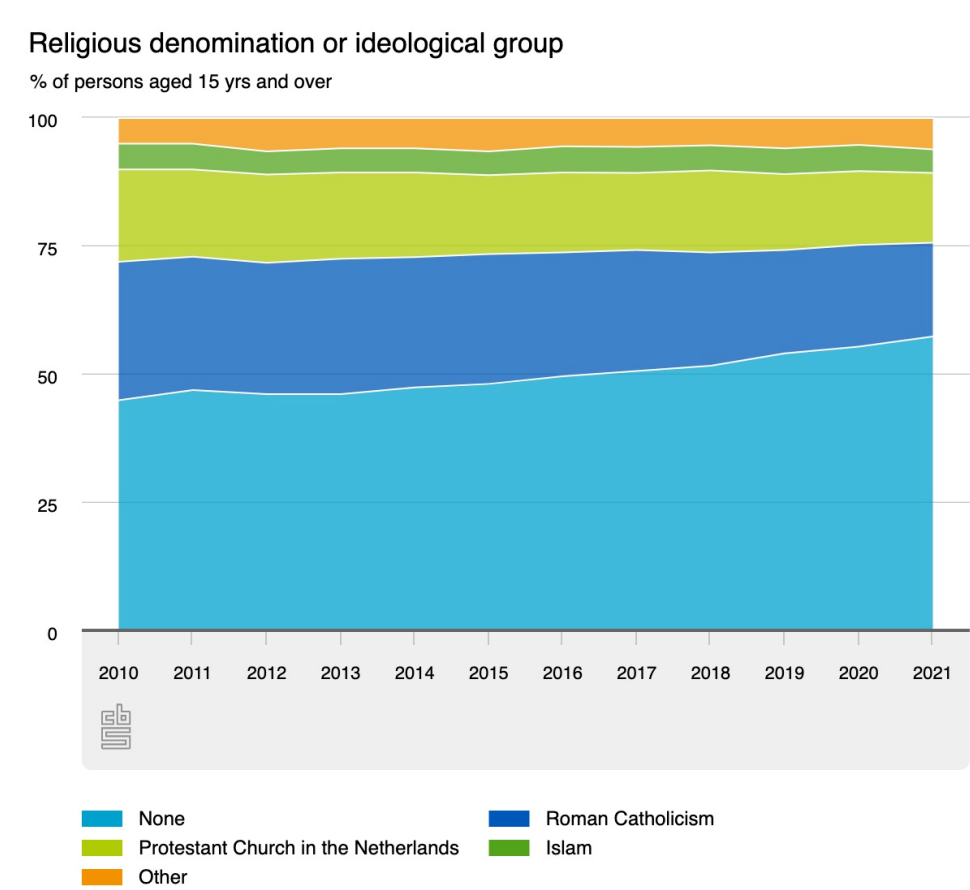


Fig.1 Religious denomination or ideological group (CBS)

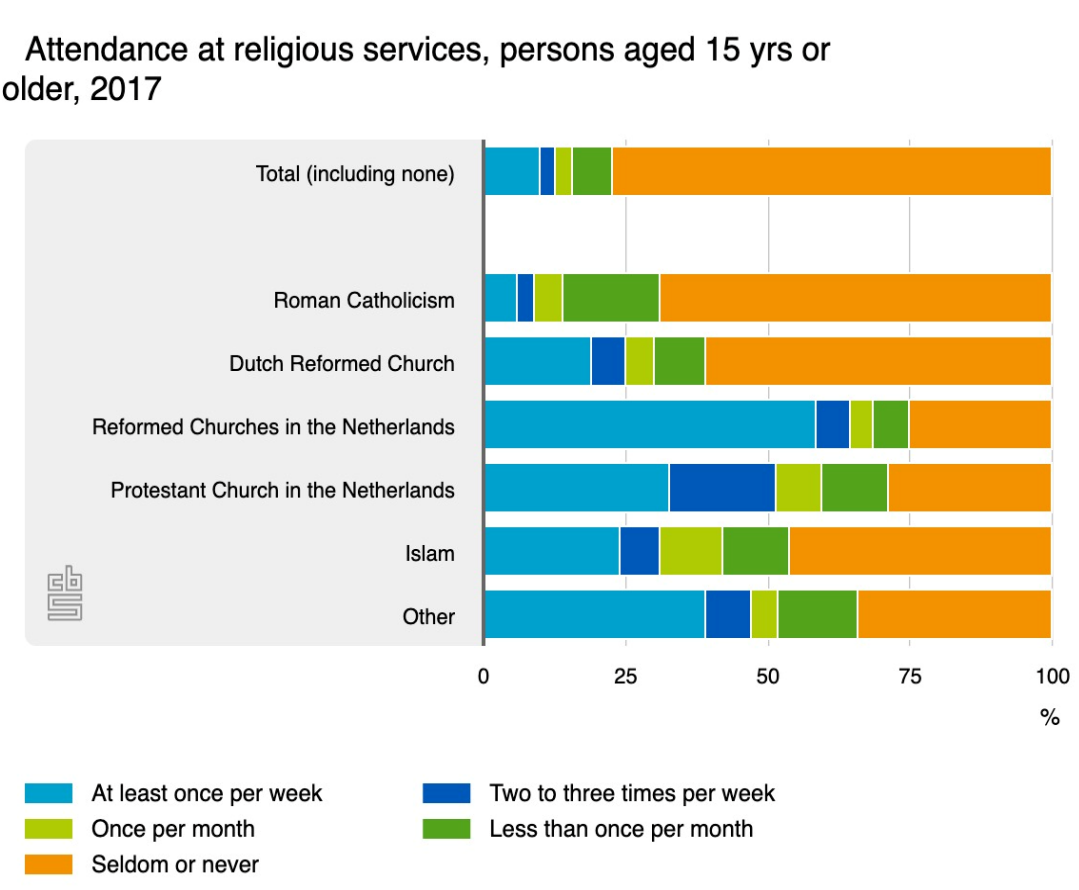


Fig.2 Attendance at religious services, persons aged 15 years or older, 2017 (CBS)

2. Re-use for continuity and (local) community well-being

“For historic preservation the three-dimensional, tangible sites that are imbued by the public with significance, it is these sites that can be used as tangible evidence to present and interpret the past for present and future generations” (Harrison, 2012, p.45).

In addition, “the identity of [church] buildings becomes very closely associated with the identity of the local population, not only in the minds of long-established residents but also in those of newcomers” (Latham, 2000, p. 6).

3. Contemporary art as meaningful completion

Similarities in art and religious practices; both express a vision of life and both have to potential to evoke similar existential questions.

Given the church's social function as a token of a community's identity and art's emancipatory role, a combination of the two make up for an institution that can become firmly rooted as a public space for everyone. In this way, the Christian heritage also remains relevant; both as a beacon of local and national history, and a place where new meanings can be created.

4.1 Examples from the field: Gothic Gestures & Church Inside Out



Fig.3 Gert Jan van Rooij. (n.d.). [Marinus Boezem, *Gothic Gestures*, 2016-2017] Oude Kerk Amsterdam



Fig.4 Edwin Wiekens (n.d.) *Church Inside Out*

In the collaborative project *Gothic Gestures*, residents and local churchgoers were invited to embroid the church’s floorplan on cloth. They worked on the cloth for four months, a few hours a day, as such, the project reflected the collective, yet slow construction process of the church. In addition, the project established relationships between the church, the artist’s conceptual practice, traditional handcraft, and the local churchgoers.

In 2020, the Grote Kerk Breda started with the project *The Church Inside Out*, for which artists and illustrators were asked to create a wall painting inspired by a small interior detail of the church. Subsequently, these paintings are hung on the construction fence in front of the church. In this way, an attempt is made to make a connection between ecclesiastical heritage and contemporary creative makers.

5. Conclusive remarks

To sum up, applying a museum function to the church might be fruitful adaptive re-use as art can question the same existential issues as religion does. In addition, given the church's social function as a symbol of a community’s or city’s identity and art's emancipatory role, a combination of the two make up for an institution that can become firmly rooted as a public space for everyone. However, the local context should always be taken into account when formulating a re-use policy strategy.

Bibliography

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