

Programme follows place

Adaptive reuse of the Sint-Annakerk in Ghent

The Sint-Annakerk in Ghent, a protected 19th-century monumental church in Rundbogenstil, ceased its liturgical function in 2016 after years of gradual decline and deferred maintenance. In 2023, the church was leased to a private investor, Delhaize, and is currently being transformed into a neighbourhood supermarket, restaurant, wine bar and pavilion/ kiosk. This decision was unprecedented and generated local controversy.

Yet the case argues the opposite of what critics feared. A financially strong function is not a concession but the flywheel that made a full restoration possible, and the means to return the Sint-Annakerk to the heart of its community.

The design, by Woonwerk Architecten and Bressers Architecten, departs from a single guiding principle: ‘programme follows place’. Each function emerges from the building’s own spatial logic in scale, light and position within the church. All interventions are reversible: a raised floor integrates technical systems without touching historic tiles, a glass wall separates supermarket from restaurant, and a suspended technical loop handles lighting and cooling.

This case demonstrates that commercial adaptive reuse, driven by heritage legibility and reversibility as non-negotiable design principles, can reconcile community controversy with genuine conservation ambition and offer a replicable model for religious heritage sites across Europe facing similar challenges.

Woonwerk
architecten
antw-rp-dam

Bressers
architecten

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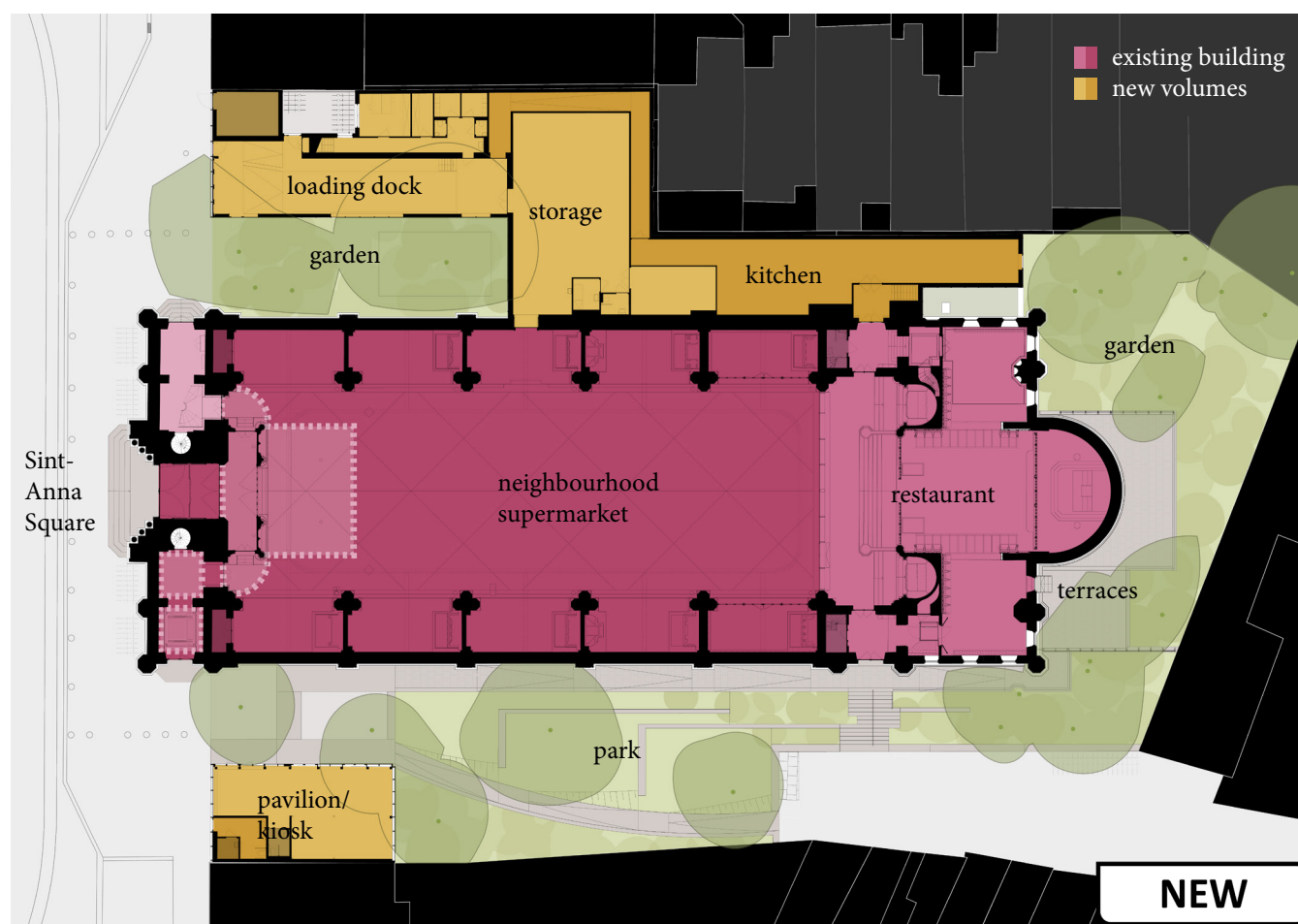
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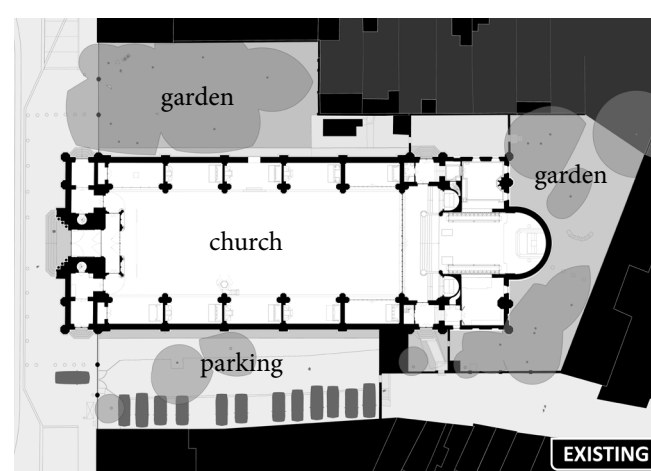


New volumes accentuate the symmetry of the Sint-Anna Square



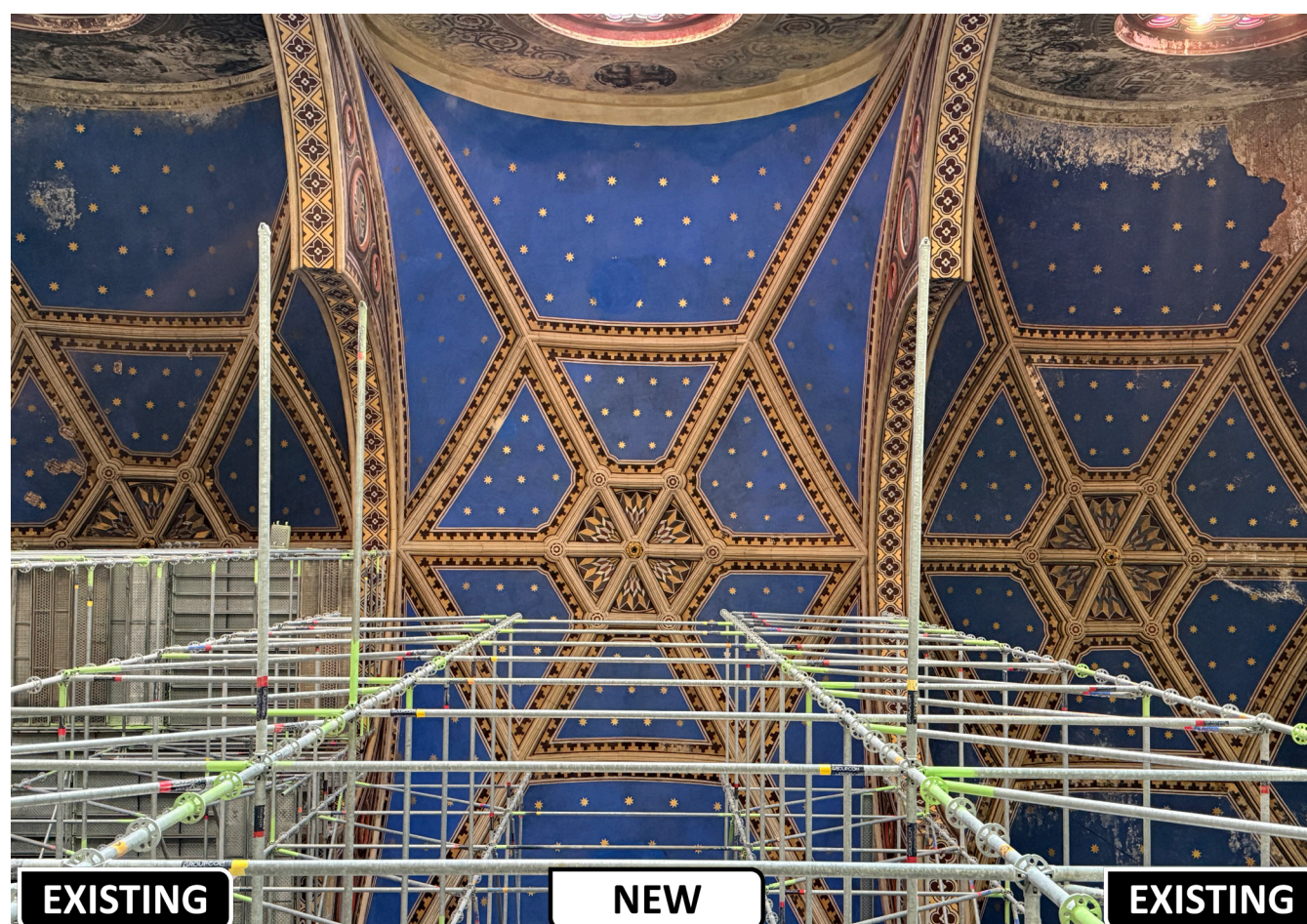
Public programme and new interventions

New functions are distributed across the church following its spatial logic. Where uses are incompatible with the historic fabric but essential for public accessibility and experience, they are accommodated in new supporting volumes or as fully reversible interventions within the church.



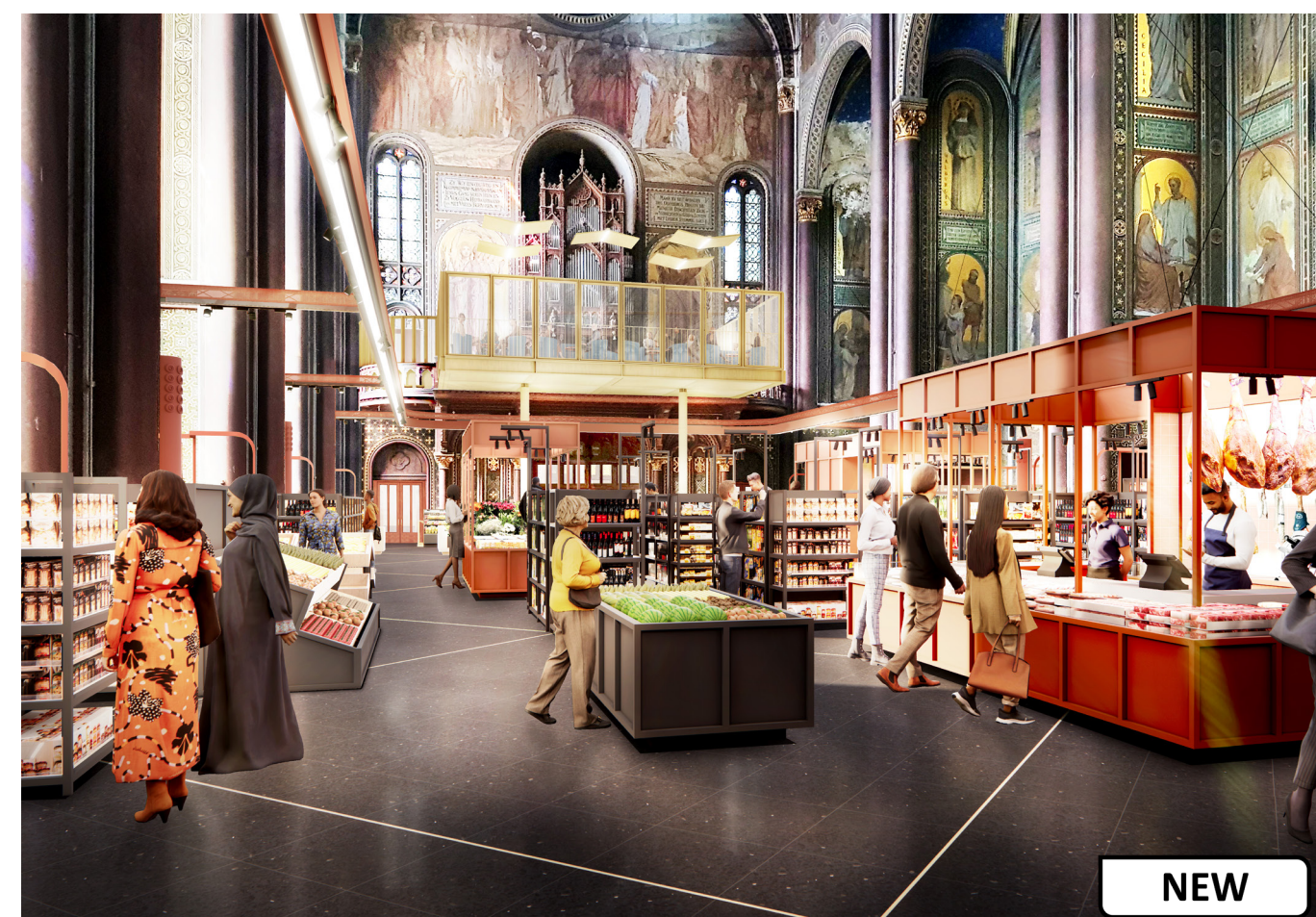
From car park to public garden

The former car park becomes a green neighbourhood park, activated by a new public pavilion. The church, previously turned inward, now stands in an open public landscape and addresses the street once more.



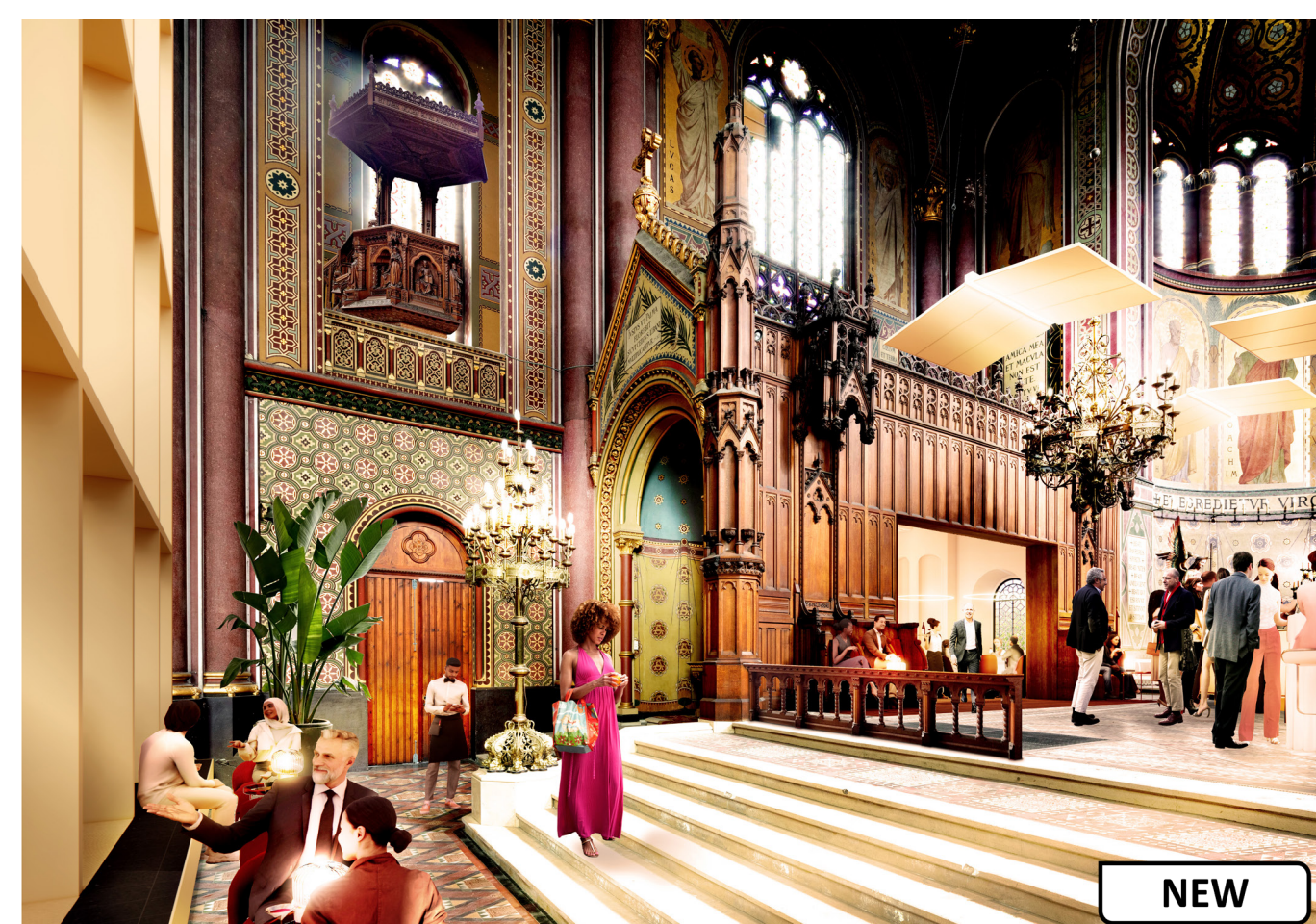
The scale of restoration

An intensive restoration programme — made possible by the financial strength of the new function — brings the interior back to its full splendour. The scale of the works is exceptional: murals, ceiling painting, stained glass, woodwork are all meticulously restored.



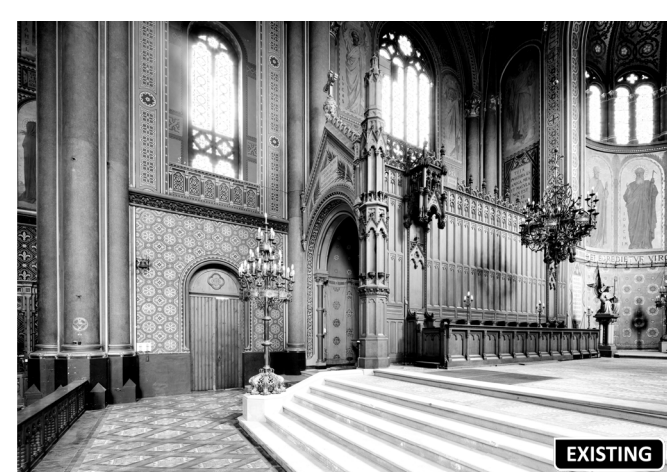
Reversible interventions in the nave

Three fully reversible interventions make the transformation possible: a raised floor integrates all technical systems without touching historic tiles, a suspended technical loop carries lighting and cooling through the nave, and the wine bar occupies the organ loft for the first time.



Choir and sacristies as restaurant

A 27-metre glass wall separates supermarket from restaurant while maintaining visual continuity through the full depth of the church. The sacristies are drawn into the restaurant, climatically separated but spatially connected to the choir.



Before and after

Where decades of deferred maintenance had caused irreversible damage, the new programme creates the economic conditions for structural, long-term conservation. Heritage and commercial reuse are not opposites — they are mutually enabling.

