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Life for Old Churches

Reusing Religious Buildings in the Netherlands

Nowadays it is rare for an architect to be asked to build a church in the Netherlands. Over the past few decades, what used to be one of the main areas of activity in architecture has largely evaporated as a result of secularisation. This first became apparent in the second half of the twentieth century, when the construction programme for religious buildings came to a halt and churches ceased to be built as a matter of course in new residential areas, as they had been until the end of the 1960s. Until this time Dutch society was still strongly 'pillarised', which meant that every newly built residential area had at least three churches: Catholic, Reformed and Orthodox Calvinist. In the built environment, the first sign of the progressive decline in church-going became apparent from about 1970 onwards, when planners no longer regarded the church as an essential local amenity. Since then, new churches have been the exception rather than the rule.

Disuse and demolition

As the construction of new buildings for religious worship gradually ended, a further consequence of secularisation became apparent: more and more churches fell into disuse because they were no longer required for their original purpose. This also applied to monasteries but, since the Netherlands is a predominantly Protestant country with few monasteries, the phenomenon was only noticeable in the Catholic southern provinces of North Brabant and Limburg.

The church of the Vrije Gemeente on Weteringschans in Amsterdam symbolises the onset of this second phase of secularisation. Built by G.B. Salm in 1880, the church was granted a new lease of life in 1967 when it became a centre for the burgeoning hippie culture. The new centre was initially called the 'Kosmies Ontspannings Centrum Provadya?' (Cosmic Relaxation Centre Provadya?) and its name was even spelled according to the new hippie convention. The name supposedly referred to a Tibetan monastery, but happened also to strongly resemble that of the Provo protest movement. The story was that the Tibetan monks themselves were unsure whether the



Daf-architecten: the empty interior of the Roman Catholic St Isidorus church, redesigned to house a permanent exhibition of the history of Nagele (1998).

monastery actually existed; hence the question mark after the name. At the beginning of 1968 the centre was renamed Paradiso, and today it is still one of the main platforms for pop music in the Netherlands.

Converting the church of the Vrije Gemeente into a venue for pop concerts was a clever move because few modifications were required – little more than removing the pews and replacing the altar with a stage. The extent of the modifications needed to give a church a new lease of life is usually the main reason for demolishing it and replacing it with a new building. It is often difficult to find a new use for a church; the interior is likely to be too high and doors and windows inconveniently positioned. Heating and maintenance costs can also be prohibitive. This has led to the demolition of many churches, even today, despite a growing willingness to find a new use for them. That willingness comes from the growing awareness that religious buildings have architectural and historical value and, furthermore, that their central location and vertical silhouette make them an important feature of the urban landscape.

The most logical form of reuse – conversion into a mosque – is not even considered; it is simply out of the question. Religious communities are not prepared to hand over their empty churches to the only religion in the Netherlands whose adherents are increasing in number: Islam. Apparently the Crusades have not yet faded sufficiently from the collective memory to allow a Christian church to become a mosque. That is why Muslims initially worshipped in all manner of buildings, ranging from schools to garages, that were never intended for religious meetings. New mosques have only been built since the 1980s, their minarets and characteristic roofs lending an exotic flavour to the Dutch urban landscape.

The reluctance of Catholic and Protestant clergymen to hand over their buildings to the imams often makes it difficult to find a new use for a church. This is especially the case with 'everyday' church buildings; the most important Dutch churches, even if they are only occasionally used for religious services, are able to justify their existence by functioning as museums and sometimes exhibition centres. Examples of this are Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk and Jewish Historical Museum, housed in a former synagogue, and the Bergkerk in Deventer.



Forms of adaptive reuse

The Roman Catholic church in the centre of Nagele, a modern 1950s polder village, has also become an exhibition centre. On a large village green in the centre of Nagele, three churches and their three denominational schools are grouped together as symbols of pillarisation. The empty interior of the Roman Catholic church, with minimal alterations by the architectural firm Daf, now houses a permanent exhibition of the history of this unusual village.

The Daf approach represents one end of the spectrum, where as far as possible buildings are left intact. The Amsterdam offices of the firm Soeters Van Eldonk Ponc represent the other extreme. A photograph hanging on the wall in Sjoerd Soeters' studio is the only reminder that this building, now converted into sophisticated office accommodation, was once the Martin

Luther King chapel. Nothing about the building betrays that fact, except perhaps for the pontifical empty space at its centre. The 1960s brick and concrete facade has disappeared behind a cladding of corrugated steel. Next to the former church, an extension with apartments above it has further erased any trace of the original structure. The church is seen as a shell that can be adapted to any purpose.

The advantage of both these radical approaches is that they do not require the architect to consider the relationship between the old and the new, always a crucial consideration in every form of adaptive reuse. Where the building's new use derives directly or indirectly from its former use, a logical relationship can usually be found. The greater the gulf between the new and original purposes, however, the harder this becomes. The conversion of a traditional church into a women's refuge is an example of such a logical relationship. The church was built in the 1950s by H.P.J. de Vries and the conversion was carried out by the architects Duinker van der Torre at the beginning of the 1990s. The logic of the relationship exists at a conceptual level rather than in terms of use; never has a church so literally served as a sanctuary.

Trendy monastic cells

In 2001, a monastery in Vught belonging to the Friars of Tilburg underwent a similar conversion into a centre for contemplation and work. There is not a great deal of difference between a monastery and a spiritual haven intended for the working population of the Netherlands. The conversion has tempted the friars back to their old home and project architects Annette Marx and Ady Steketee have built a new house for them in the monastery grounds. The house provides accommodation for up to eight monks. The set-up is similar to a student house, and each occupant has his own room with a shower and balcony. There is a communal sitting room and kitchen and – the only feature not commonly found in a student house – a small chapel.

In the monastery itself Marx and Steketee made radical alterations to fit it for use as a venue for courses, lectures and retreats. Three main elements, in wood, cane and glass, have been added to the unspectacular building, which dates from 1905 and can at best be described as a textbook example of architectural frugality. One notable feature of this monastery for contemplation and work is the design of the guest rooms – a trendy variation on the monk's cell. With a single bed in the corner, a desk against the wall and a small bathroom, guests who come here seeking a meaning to their lives will not be bathed in luxury. Yet the decor is very contemporary: the desk – in yellow, orange, blue or green – is by Antonie Kleinepiet and the continuous pipe, which functions as shower-curtain rail and toilet-roll holder, was designed by Kapkar.

Designers are a powerful presence elsewhere in the building too. Richard Hutten designed the dining room with its spartan wooden furniture and rudimentary chandeliers. The adjacent recreation room looks like a lounge with its colourful collection of second-hand chairs that have been stripped of their upholstery by Wendi Bakker. There is also an enormous wooden cocktail bar full of cupboards and drawers, designed by the Nigerian architect Ola Dele Kuku.



Sjoerd Soeters: his own offices (1989) in Amsterdam, once the Martin Luther King chapel.

Marx & Steketee: assembly hall in the Vught monastery (2000).

The Opstandingskerk in Amsterdam West, built by M. Duintjer in 1958 and recently renovated.

The St Josef church (1952) in Amsterdam West, designed by the architects G.H.M. Holt and K.P. Tholens. It has been turned into an indoor climbing centre called 'Tussen hemel en aarde' ('Between Heaven and Earth').



Respect or demolition

Examples such as these, where a building's new use is a logical extension of its old use, are few and far between. Churches have been given a wide range of new functions, from library to supermarket. In most cases, however, they are converted into homes or offices.

Two large neo-gothic churches in Amsterdam, the Posthoorn (1860) and the Vondelkerk (1870), both by P.J.H. Cuypers, have been converted into offices. Both buildings accommodate several businesses. The aisles have been brought into use and the nave – left largely intact – is used for receptions, conferences and exhibitions. What typifies both of these cases is that despite the churches' radical transformation, in architectural terms the conversion is very restrained, as the subdued grey of the doors and windows clearly demonstrates.

A completely different philosophy informs the work of FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste), a British architectural practice that transformed a nineteenth-century neo-gothic church in the centre of Amsterdam for the advertising agency KesselsKramer. The result: a decorative, customised interior comprising many different architectural elements, which, in the words of the designers, *'explicitly refer to the sort of commonly understood activities which advertising agents might use – football, holiday or landmarks. These are slotted between the original iron columns'*. However loud FAT's 'lad art' design may be, it nevertheless shows respect for the building's nineteenth-century architectural style.

The respect automatically shown to buildings of a certain age is not accorded to more recent church buildings. The newest churches in the Netherlands, built in the decades after the Second World War, are much less respected; moreover, being located in what were then new developments, they seldom enjoy the prominent position traditionally occupied by churches in the urban landscape. The fact that these newer churches were built in a style that was generally unpopular and very controversial in the post-war years does little to help them find a new role. And, of course, the churches most recently built are always the most likely to be pulled down. Only a few exceptions have been deemed worthy of preservation, one example being the Opstandingskerk (1958) in Amsterdam West, built by M. Duintjer. This church, also known as 'the coal-scuttle' because of its unusual spire, is a protected building and recently underwent complete renovation. A stone's throw away stands another church, St Josef (1952), designed by the architects G.H.M. Holt and K.P. Tholens. It is one of the first Catholic churches in the Netherlands to be built entirely from concrete, but even this is unlikely to save it from demolition within the next few years to make way for homes and offices. While it still stands, the church is being used for a very unusual but remarkably fitting purpose: it has been turned into an indoor climbing centre called 'Tussen hemel en aarde' ('Between Heaven and Earth').

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Translated by Yvette Mead.