

## Architecture

The *Selexyz* bookshop in Maastricht.



### Religious Heritage and More

At this point in time it is still unthinkable that cathedrals such as the Notre Dame de Paris, the *Kölner Dom* or the *Duomo di Milano* will become redundant. However, many less spectacular church buildings will, all over Western Europe. This article explores the challenges associated with the current and increasing redundancy of Christian church buildings in the Low Countries. Two thousand years of Christianity have left a deep imprint on our culture and, although membership of established religious communities is decreasing, Christian conventions and cultural values are still present in our society. Nonetheless, fewer churchgoers need fewer church buildings, leaving us with countless church buildings that are out of use. In the Netherlands, for example, the expectations are that about 1200 church buildings will become redundant in the next ten years. Yet religious redundancy does not necessarily equal physical, social or spatial redundancy. This gives rise to a debate on the (im)possibility of using and re-using these (soon to be) surplus church buildings.

Almost every 'old' - from medieval to gothic revival - church building in a city centre nowadays seems pre-eminently to be an example of cultural heritage rather than a religious artefact. The religious function of many

inner-city church buildings is slowly diminishing; however their historical and cultural significance, as well as their architectural shape and their position in and relation to the urban tissue, continue to be of value. City councils and developers are starting to recognise the commercial, cultural and social power of such buildings. The church gets 'culturalized'; it becomes a tourist attraction or is turned into a museum, bookstore or boutique to start a whole new life that isn't religious at all. Some famous examples are *De Nieuwe Kerk* in Amsterdam, which is now a centre of cultural life with large exhibitions, the *Selexyz* bookshop in the *Dominicanen Kerk* in Maastricht or the *Wolweverskapel* in Ghent, which is currently a clothes store.

The re-use of church buildings is not a new phenomenon; *De Nieuwe Kerk*, for example, became a cultural centre back in the nineteen eighties. Ever since the *Nieuwe Kerk* foundation was set up it has been used for cultural events, lectures and exhibitions. The monumental church building is situated at Dam Square, next to the Royal Palace. It will still be used for the coronation of future Heads of State and was the location for the wedding of the Prince of Orange and Princess Máxima. This is an interesting example of non-religious re-use, not only because it's a successful cultural centre, but also because this type of conversion is reasonably acceptable to the religious



Tapestry exhibition in the *Kunsthof Sint-Pietersabdij* in Ghent.

communities. Since its new programme is cultural the re-use is considered 'neutral'. It could only be considered 'fitting' if the new function were at least partly religious. This 'cultural centre recipe' has often been used, for example the concert hall of AMUZ in the former convent church of St Augustine (Antwerp), the *Kunsthof Sint-Pietersabdij* and the Provincial Cultural Centre *Caermersklooster* (both in Ghent). Other forms of profane re-use, such as the *Sint-Josephkerk* ('s-Hertogenbosch), which was transformed into a party centre, or the *Bernadettekerk* (Helmond, in North Brabant), which has become a supermarket, are much less acceptable and have actually led to a reduction in the willingness of religious communities to consider re-use unless they have control over the new program.

A commercial programme is often considered 'unworthy' or inappropriate. This is an issue with the *Wolweverskapel*, too. Having had all sorts of functions, this listed building is now a clothing shop. The question is how long a religious building keeps its religious connotations, as this one has not been used for religious purposes since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In heritage terms the new program has been designed to be reversible, meaning that it can be removed without damaging the building. At the same time it leaves the space intact. The same thing has been done in the *Selexyz* bookshop in Maastricht, in

the by now famous former Dominican church. A three-story high-rise full of books, designed by *Merkx + Girod* architects, provides us with a new perspective on the church building and is fully reversible.

These are all listed buildings that are, by their age and location, very much embedded in the surrounding urban tissue. Most of the churches that will become redundant, however, are probably the less famous, smaller and more locally oriented church buildings. The ones you'll find next door, the neighbourhood church, the house church, the place to go for the local community. The size of the problem is greatest here and since the buildings are often not listed their existence in the future is not ensured, the solutions need more subtlety. Can they become apartments, or should they retain their public function in some way? Should we support 'co-housing', multifunctional and religious re-use, or is that a hopeless task? Should we demolish them or will there be a revival of religion in time? Is it better to demolish than to re-use a church building in an inappropriate manner? And if we only want to re-use them in a way we deem suitable, how many cultural centres, libraries, health centres, neighbourhood centres etc. do we need? Many questions, which only time will answer.

Whatever the answer is, we should keep in mind that the church building is a special type of heritage. Not only because we are confronted with a high level of church redundancy and will subsequently have to deal with these churches, whether we want to or not, but also because of the fact that a church building represents much more than just its own history. It is an expression of religion, but it is also an architectural and urban element with tangible and intangible cultural and socio-historical values. All these aspects should be considered in the discussion on the (im)possibility of re-use; it is not only a question of how to respect religious, theological or liturgical values, but also of how to deal with their significance as a cultural and urban element, an essential part of a city or neighbourhood.

Through the ages, above-average attention, vigour and care have been devoted to the designing, building and rebuilding of churches. From the Middle Ages until quite recently the erection of a church building played a significant and often leading part in the development and growth of a city. In addition, a church building in itself is also a centuries-old and very powerful building typology, and in this case the label 'church' reaches far beyond its function. Formal symbolism, such as a church tower or a cross, and other spatial and ornamental elements determine the religious connotations of a church building. A church building that has been turned into apartments for example, does not simply become an apartment building. No, it is a church in which people live; the converted church continues to refer to its religious past.

This, however, is all rather theoretical. Closing down a church is first and foremost an emotional process and a difficult decision for the (local) religious community. Next, there are many different interests and points of view when it comes to the question of 're-using or removing' once a church has been closed down. The differences nearly all relate to how one perceives a church building. Is it nothing more than another pile of stones or is it saleable property? Does it have a vital connection to the contemporary socio-cultural status quo or is it an historical artefact? Is it a symbolic representation of a specific religious community or of a Christian world view in general? It all depends

on the position of the people involved in the process of redevelopment. Are they active church members or more 'cultural' Christians, neighbours or architecture lovers, policy makers or developers? They all have different points of view.

Religious communities tend to place the emphasis on minimising emotional confrontation in combination with maximising financial gain in order to maintain the buildings they do still own and use, leading to a preference for removal. Cultural and governmental players, on the other hand, often emphasise cultural and historical relevance and therefore plead for re-use instead. This frequently leads to a delicate situation. It is a contested space, where religious beliefs, commercial interests, cultural consciousness and emotions set the agenda.

It is rather difficult to come to a conclusion. Religious heritage is and will remain a tense subject as long as the church has both a cultural and religious presence in society. It is, however, possible to reconsider our views when it comes to the preservation and re-use of heritage. By taking into account that a building can be valuable for very different reasons and by letting go of the idea that it can only be preserved in the form of the stones it was built from and can only be re-used by giving it a new function we widen all perspectives.

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