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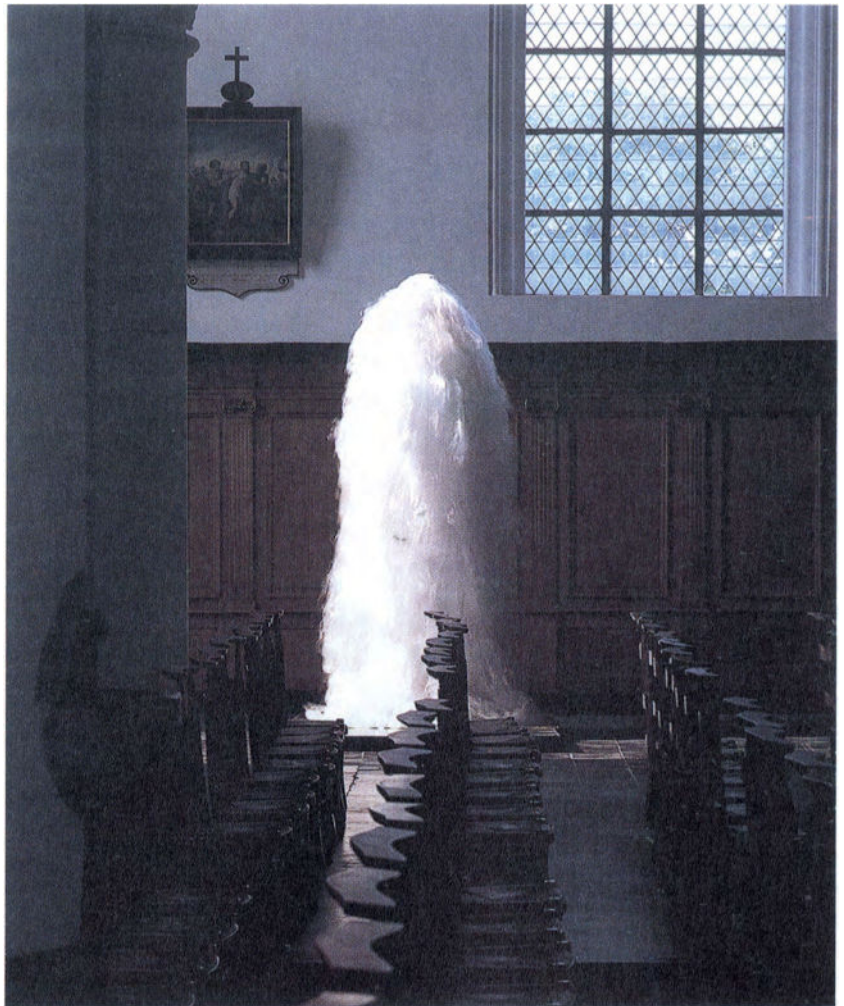
the House of God

Adaptive Reuse of Religious Buildings in Flanders

Building remains one of the most fascinating of human activities. A structure is always meant to satisfy a particular need. For all sorts of reasons though, the original function of a building ceases to exist, leaving it redundant. The Italian architect Aldo Rossi emphasised the fact that old buildings often outlive their original purpose. We do not demolish every redundant structure, but often find ingenious new roles for our architectural heritage. This continuous process is an essential part of the life of a town or city, and is precisely what gives it its fascinating complexity. Some buildings have been given a succession of new uses, reflecting the constantly evolving nature of society. Factories are transformed into homes or spaces for exhibiting art, offices become shops, and so on. For religious buildings, especially churches, however, the situation is less straightforward. Monastery complexes are usually located within urban conglomerations and therefore have many possible uses. Decisions about the reuse of a building are often based on fortuitous circumstances. Since 1975 there has been general agreement that finding a constructive new use should be a priority in conservation policy. Reuse is an essential aspect in the preservation of our architectural heritage because disused buildings represent self-destruction.

Can a church be given a new purpose?

Churches are undoubtedly the most problematic religious buildings when it comes to reuse. The decision to transform the Jesuit Church in Bruges into a venue for medieval-style banquets was heavily criticised. The decision was seen as scandalous, almost pagan. A church is set apart from other buildings by its typology, basic architectonic form, and iconography (among other things). Also important is the fact that a building does not become a church until it has been consecrated, that is: dedicated to God and worship. The church interior thus becomes a place of quiet contemplation, but at the same time it is an extension of the public space; it is a place that anyone may enter. A church building therefore belongs to the community, and not exclusively to a limited group of churchgoers; the deconsecration of



The church as exhibition space: Jan Fabre's *He'll Stand Forever with Feet Put Together* (1997) in Watou's St Bavo church. © SABAM Belgium 2002.

a church is far more than an administrative decision.

Churches are characterised by their spacious interiors. It is no coincidence that after the French Revolution confiscated churches were bought for use as stores, barns and stables. In the nineteenth century a church in Ghent was even converted into a textile factory. The structure of a church, with its large span, makes it suitable for such a purpose. Converting a church into offices involves dividing up that interior space with walls and flooring. The essence of the architecture is eliminated, leaving only the outer shell. From that moment, the church is reduced to nothing more than a large shelter, a shell that has been retained for economic reasons or in order to preserve the townscape. Churches are, after all, a focal point in the urban landscape.

When it is forbidden to partition a church interior, the possibilities for reuse are extremely limited. In such cases it is possible to use it as a museum, one example being the Beguinage church of Sint-Truiden which houses a permanent exhibition. A church may also be used for temporary exhibitions. The small village church of Alveringem, near Veurne, is used for art exhibitions during the summer months and so contributes to the tourist industry in Flanders' Westhoek.



The Catholic Documentation and Research Centre in Leuven, KADOC: the chapel, which is a protected building, is used for small concerts or academic meetings. Photos courtesy of KADOC, Leuven.

The Caermers monastery in Ghent: its restoration was completed in 2000 and the building is now the Centre for Art and Culture of the province of East Flanders. This is the exhibition room, as it was set up for the Joseph Plateau exhibition in 2001. Photo by Dirk Pauwels.



The most obvious function for a building that is still used for religious worship is as a concert venue. The many organ concerts held every year in Flanders form an important part of cultural life. The well-known international Flanders Festival owes its size to the many churches and cathedrals in which concerts are held. Church interiors provide an ideal setting for the St Matthew Passion, but many people find them inappropriate for the profane music of Strauss. A church is still a church, and a concert hall is a concert hall.

Few redundant buildings

Finding new uses for parish churches is not yet a problem in Flanders since very few of them are redundant. The situation differs in several ways from that in the Netherlands, where in addition to a large number of Roman Catholic places of worship there are many that belong to the various Protestant denominations. The buildings are the property of the Dutch church and can



A former Dominican monastery became a school of architecture in Ghent. The restoration was carried out in several stages under the direction of architect Herman de Witte and finished in 2001. Photo by Marc Dubois.

therefore be put up for sale. In Belgium – and therefore also in Flanders – the relationship between the Catholic Church and the authorities is completely different. This means that the law regarding the ownership for church buildings is also fundamentally different. Civic responsibility for church property in Belgium dates from Napoleonic times. After the French Revolution, all church property was ‘nationalised’ and became the property of the Nation. From 1792 onwards a number of churches were sold. In 1801 Napoleon concluded a Concordat with the Vatican, and a decree of 1802 returned use of the churches to the bishops. The government is also responsible for the maintenance of this substantial ecclesiastical patrimony. Today, the churches are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, which funds church restoration. The churches are managed by church councils (called *kerkfabrieken*). Municipalities and cities are bound by law to provide financial support when a church runs into financial difficulties. It is simply a fact that the Church today has fewer resources available for conserving its patrimony. It is therefore understandable that, in the context of increasing laicisation, questions are being asked about this use of government funds. Indeed, there are people who would like a thorough review of the system. The church community itself is becoming aware that, in this age of secularisation, buildings preserved with public funds must play a wider role in the community. The concept of ‘unlocking’ means more than simply providing access.

The existing legal provisions mean that no parish churches are sold, but this does not apply to churches and chapels belonging to monastic orders and papal congregations. A monastery is considered to be the private property of the order or congregation in question. It is these churches that often become redundant, with no listed status to protect them from demolition.

In Flanders, unlike the Netherlands, there are very few examples of churches that have undergone a radical transformation and so acquired a new lease of life.

New uses for monasteries

This is not the first time in history that a decline in the number of persons entering monasteries and convents has resulted in disused buildings. In some cases, they continued to be used by small groups of clerics. The design of these buildings, usually based on a central cloister, makes them suitable for a range of other uses. In many cases, the architectonic quality of a conversion is not very high. This is because conversions are often seen as ‘doing up’, while the wrong approach can have disastrous consequences for the future use of a historic building. Nevertheless, Flanders has some interesting examples that show that with a little imagination a country’s rich heritage can become part of its future too.

The chapel of devotion in Leuven’s Vlamingenstraat is an inspiring example. The baroque octagonal central structure with its dome was designed by Joris Nempe and consecrated in 1705. In 1873 the chapel became the property of the Franciscans, who added a monastery complex. After the Second World War, however, the number of monks declined sharply. In 1987 the Catholic University of Leuven acquired the complex to house its Catholic Documentation and Research Centre, *KADOC*. The cloisters are used for exhibitions, the cells have become offices and workrooms, and the refectory and kitchen have been converted into a reading room. The chapel, which is a protected building, is used for small concerts or academic meetings.

The city of Ghent has a rich patrimony of monasteries. The former Dominican monastery near St Michael’s Church had become a run-down residential building. In 1963 the complex was acquired by the University of Ghent and, after thorough restoration, became the venue for official university functions. The Abbey of St Peter, also in Ghent, was given a new lease of life as a cultural centre, and has functioned as a *kunsthalle* for temporary exhibitions since the 1960s. The Abbey even provided a suitable venue for the European Summit in October 2001.

The Caermers monastery is part of the compact medieval street pattern of Ghent’s Patershol quarter. The monastery consisted of two quadrangles and was virtually derelict. The imposing two-aisle church had been used for some time to store theatrical scenery. The restoration was completed in 2000 and the building is now the Centre for Art and Culture of the province of East Flanders. One of the quadrangles is intended for private residential use, and this part of the monastery has yet to be restored.

The Poortackere monastery at Oude Houtlei in Ghent is a large neo-Gothic complex. The religious use of this site dates back to 1278. In 1999 the architect Romain Berteloot converted the complex into a hotel and restaurant and venue for seminars. The monastery, tucked away behind other buildings in the heart of the city, is a quiet, peaceful place. The diversity of its many rooms allows it to accommodate a wide range of activities. The neo-Gothic chapel, for example, provides an ideal setting for small concerts.

From monastery to school of architecture

The finest example of reuse can be found in another Dominican monastery in Ghent. This imposing complex from the early eighteenth century is again hidden away in the very centre of Ghent, almost invisible from the public thoroughfare. A listed building since 1981, it is a haven of peace at the heart of the historic city. Restoration work began at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s the St Luke Higher Institute for Architecture acquired the site on a long lease. The former monastery thus became a school of architecture. More than five hundred students choose to study at this historic location. The restoration was carried out in several stages under the direction of architect Herman de Witte. The final phase, in 2001, was the restoration of the Abdissenhuis (Abbesses' house). A number of small modifications have adapted the complex to its new educational purpose. The fine cloisters are used as an exhibition venue and meeting place, and allow people to circulate freely between the different areas. Thanks to the vision of former director Walter Steenhoudt, this listed building, an important part of the city's architectural heritage, has been given a constructive new purpose that has saved it from further decline. In every case of adaptive reuse it is vital that the potential of the historic building should be properly assessed and incorporated into a vision for the future.

MARC DUBOIS

Translated by Yvette Mead.



- Dutch language-area
- French language-area in Belgium
- Brussels bilingual area : Dutch and French
- German language area : in Belgium
- Bilingual area : Dutch and Frisian
- Capital city
- Provincial capital
- National frontier
- Provincial Boundary

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United Kingdom	£	30
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