

Mediating Religious Elements

Collective memory of religious objects for Transformation of decommissioned churches

Research Plan

AR3AH115 Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste Church

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Research Preface

As a part of the Revitalising Heritage studio, this research plan is written with respect to the multitude of vacant churches in the Netherlands and their secularisation. Most churches act as landmarks in the cityscape of the Netherlands. They are anchors to a time and a set of beliefs. Noël Carroll called the church a threshold for the community and the community was a set of people moulded by the beliefs of the church.¹ Churches, thus, for the longest time, were an integral part of the community. With rapid secularisation, many churches have lost their place in everyday society.

While the church becomes less important, so do the objects within them. Much like the church itself, these objects carry with them the stories of the people who have come across it over the years, who have imbued it with value. I define the religious objects in this case as elements in the church that have a religious and social meaning that links them to the community.² When churches are decommissioned or have to close, these objects may risk losing their value. Depending on this value of the object, it may end up in a museum or in the hands of an individual who does not know the story behind it. The rapid decommissioning in the Netherlands has not only forced people to handle churches but with these objects within the church.³ These objects, like the benches and other furniture, the stained glass windows, or statues and altarpieces, may lose meaning during the churches reuse. I aim this research at understanding how narratives associated with religious objects in decommissioned churches can provide new incentives for the church's transformation and conservation.

To narrow the study down to a more achievable output, the focus of the research will be the Saint Augustinus church in Amsterdam Noord and the multitude of objects, both immovable and movable, within it. Wilhelm Victor Alfred Tepe, an architect of the Saint Bernulfus guild, built the church as a part of the Utrecht diocese of village churches in the 1880s in the Neo-Gothic style of architecture. Over the years it served as a landmark for the village, as Amsterdam Noord grew but has lost its standing in society as the significance of religion in everyday life reduced.

With its decommissioning in 2014, the church has become an anchor point in the neighbourhood, with the community taking an active part in trying to revitalise it. The church has also been sold multiple times, but many have failed to repurpose it because of social and financial difficulties. Squatters took over the church in 2019 and they drew a petition up for its transformation into a social space, but they have not done much since the petition in terms of the actual transformation of the building. In 2022, the church was sold, and they have drawn plans up for the reuse, but financial strains have halted the process. They gave underage refugees temporary housing in the church in October 2022 to prevent it from going into disuse. Several parts of the church have been moved or left to ruin and the community has tried to take an active part through the signing of petitions and meetings to save the church and the objects within the church. Understanding the relationship between the community and the objects would thus be an essential part of the research. This links to the multiple visits conducted to the church as I could perceive the strong relationship the community has to the church, from the bar in the basement where people met, the altar where they got married, from the sound of the bell and its now absent humdrum in the background of everyone's lives, to the concerts and weekly dinners held in the church. Making the church an active part of everyone's daily life would be a way to revitalise it and bring forward the stories which would otherwise be lost.

¹ Noël Carroll, "Churches as Memory Machines," *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*, 2019, pp. 57-66, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315146133-6>, 57.

² Jerrold Cuperus (2019), 3.

³ Jerrold Cuperus (2019), 3.

Understanding the theme and its Relevance:

For clarity, a few of the major terms will be defined and how they apply to the main theoretical framework of the research to be conducted.

Secularisation is the decreasing relevance of religious institutions in everyday life. A 1996 study showed that 60 percent of the Dutch population did not belong to a church.⁴ “An exile of religion from civil society.”⁵

Community can be defined as the people of a common interest or social group living in a particular area,⁶ in this case, the region of Nieuwendam, who have a vested interest in the church’s revitalisation, as seen through the petitions submitted to save the church from disuse.

Intangible cultural heritage⁷ lies in the community and the immaterial actions and ephemeral processes that make a non-solid, unquantifiable characteristic of an object.

Narrative has been defined as the storyline embedded in the object, and the understanding of the narrative has three aspects. First, it is time-based and sequential. It is a series of stories that occur over a period of time. It also has a narrator who is giving meaning to the object and last, it is subjective to the narrator and their point of view.⁸ These give the object its intangible value.

Collective memory is defined as a memory that transmits collective identity, one that would disappear if not accumulated and transcribed into a physical form.⁹

Spatial transformation is defined as the physical change, a reconfiguration of a group of object,¹⁰ changing placement, orientation, use and other such physical bounds for the objects.

These basic concepts set the stage for understanding the research question and its subtopics. I will explain the relation between them in the chapter, ‘Research Methods’. The historical context of the construction of Neo-Gothic churches would also help understand how and why the religious objects were introduced. In the second half of the 19th century, at a time when political, social and economic development was rapid in Western Europe, the people were shocked and needed something to hold on to from the past. Neo-Gothic architecture was derived from this idea, where P.J.H. Cuypers alongside Tepe took the iconographic decorations from the Gothic church and superimposed them on the churches they built. They copied medieval art objects to give the people something to connect to, for

⁴ Hans Knippenberg, *GeoJournal* 45, no. 3 (1998): pp. 209-220, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1006973011455>, 209.

⁵ Kieran Flanagan, Peter C. Jupp, and André Droogers, “Beyond Secularisation versus Sacralisation: Lessons from a Study of the Dutch Case,” in *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 81-99, 81.

⁶ “Community,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/community>.

⁷ According to the UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, 1972

⁸ Elinor Ochs, “Narrative,” *Discourse as Structure and Process: Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, 1997, pp. 185-207, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221884.n7>.

⁹ Jan Assmann, Rodney Livingstone, and Jan Assmann, “Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies,” in *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (California, United States, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-30, 9.

¹⁰ Angela Million et al., “The Reconfiguration of Space, Circulation and Mobility,” in *Spatial Transformations: Kaleidoscopic Perspectives on the Refiguration of Spaces* (New York, New York: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group, 2022), pp. 17-27, 21.

¹¹ Macha van Damme, “Modern Versus Traditioneel: Het Materiaalgebruik Van De Bouwmeesters Cuypers En Tepe,” 2004, pp. 158-182, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7480/knob.103.2004.5.243>, 161.

support in changing times, and to anchor the community together.¹¹ In a time where everything is tumultuous and growth again is rapid, this viewpoint towards the past could provide a bolster for today's community.

The Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, a Christian art and culture museum, has a series of value assessment protocols for religious paraphernalia developed in collaboration with religious institutions, defined as the religious value of the object, its rarity and its historical significance. But assigning value without taking into consideration their intangible value is an 'abstract and arbitrary' venture.¹² This understanding of the stories that people can imbue into an object can create a function within unused churches that is more linked to the community, and the community would want to be a part of. The Actor-Network theory, the concept of the continuously shifting network of relationships between people,¹³ also relates to the relationship between people and these objects. These intangible relationships people create with these objects being a continuously evolving network.

The case for the relevance of these religious objects that would otherwise go into disuse or lose their significance also reflects directly on the theme of the studio, the zero waste aspect, starting from the thoughts of the community and linking it to the optimum use of every element in the church, not fixing it in a time or space, but allowing its innate qualities and the emotional quotient of the people involved, to determine their most appropriate alteration or transformation. Connecting to the idea of "People, Places and Stories" of the Faro Convention, towards the safeguarding of the aspects of cultural heritage, this conversation between the people and the objects and this emotional quotient would create a collective identity, taking a more community oriented approach to its reuse.¹⁴ This also brings to the forefront an aspect of the religious body, the religious objects, that would otherwise be overlooked. The revitalisation of the church through the use of Stewart Brand's innermost layer, the "stuff" are also a way of treating not only the church with respect during its adaptation into a new purpose but relying on the objects and its storyline to create a socially sustainable building which would hopefully never go into disuse again.

This helps frame the question of how intangible narratives associated with religious artefacts in decommissioned churches can provide incentives for their transformation and conservation.

The focus of the research lies in:

- What are the aspects in a church that led to religious objects being used as a determining factor for transformation?
- What is the link between the religious objects and the architecture of the church? How does this relate to the narrative?
- Would the narrative change if the object is spatially transformed, and how would this transformation be defined?
- Can the narratives of these objects aid in the creating a space that the community can relate to so that there is a continuation of the narratives of the past into a seamless transition towards the future?

To comprehend the concept, the theoretical framework also needs to be understood regarding the choice of religious objects in a church, the community, their narratives, and the concept of collective memory.

¹² Jerrold Cuperus (2019), 3.

¹³ Jerrold Cuperus (2019), 5.

¹⁴ Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper, "The Social and Spatial Frameworks of Heritage - What Is New in the Faro Convention?," in *Le Patrimoine Et Au-delà* (Strasbourg, France: Conseil de l'Europe Editions, 2009), pp. 69-75, 70.

Research Methods

The study, in the first quarter, began with outlining the theoretical framework of the choice of the church, the need for collective memory and narratives to save the now decommissioned Sint Augustinuskerk. This also helped understand its relevance in its surroundings. Then, the collection of religious elements as attributes in the church was collated from articles written about the church and the architect's work, expert reviews, and recollections of the community in interviews and social media. The starting point for the research thus, entails the determination of what these religious objects are. This being the first step, an objective viewpoint of the religious object. While numerous documents would draw out historically significant parts of the church, they will not take into consideration the emotional aspect of the people who are associated with it. This will be brought in through a questionnaire directed towards the community who live in the area now and other people associated with the church, such as the priest and the owners.

This study will be gathered as a catalogue of objects with which the community would have a close relationship. The purpose of the catalogue will be twofold (Fig1.1), which will be seen in the way it is ordered and read. It will first be investigated through a series of visual story-telling mediums that emphasise the elements and create a patchwork of different storylines that bring together the viewpoints of the community, a more subjective approach. This subjective approach also focuses primarily on the collective memory aspect of the religious objects, how are they remembered and how can they be used to find a solution for the church for the future directed towards the community. The second part of the catalogue would look at the relationship between the religious objects and the architecture, and the phenomenological impact of the object on people. That is the sensory output of the object, whether it is visual, olfactory, auditory or tactile, which will determine how it is perceived.

It would be important to state here that the research cannot take into consideration the narratives of everyone, as they may not join the conversation. So it will take the voices heard and generalise the data for optimum use. The choice of memories is important, as it will govern what happens to the building in the future. Thus, the choice of one narrative over the other would be biased and collective memory would be a larger determining factor than that of the individual.

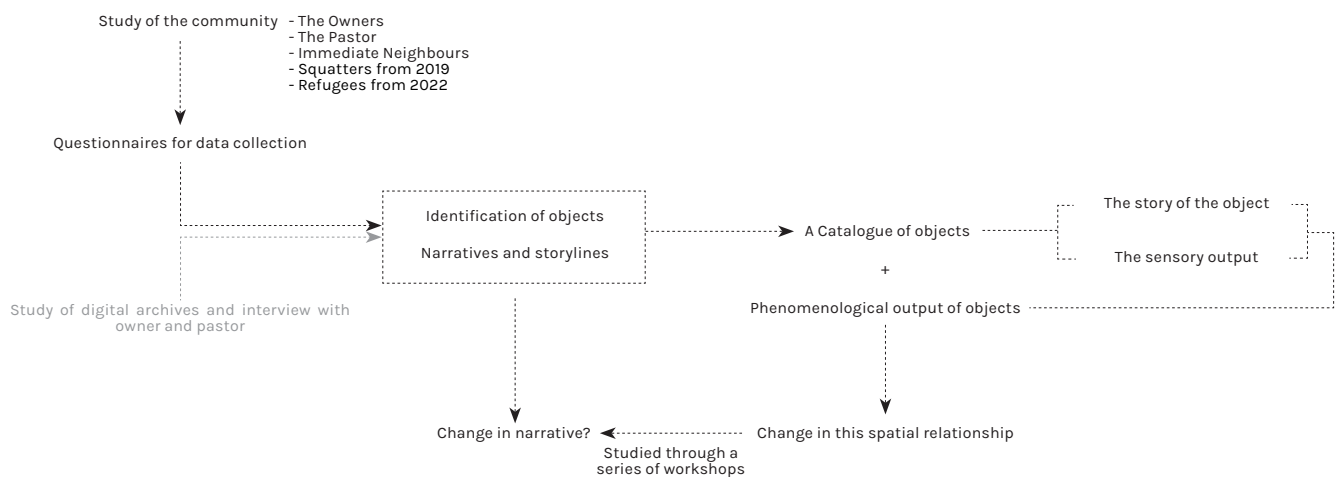


Fig 1.1:

Isolated Research Methods Diagram with Alternative Approach

..... Primary Approach
 Alternative approach

Alternatively, if there is not enough participation from the community, generalised data from stories collected from the owner, the pastor and interviews and social media data. This already available information will be taken into consideration, and a catalogue of these objects will form the base for the spatial quality analysis.

Using narrative storytelling process would also aid in providing a line of progression¹⁵ and continuity, from when the structure was a building to what it might be in the future. A structure that is rooted in the stories of the past and can sustain itself in the future. An investigation was also be conducted in the first quarter of the functional changes in the church, its previous inhabitants, from the church's initial religious objective to when it was empty and from the squatters to the refugees. This could be an indicator to understand how the church can be used so that not only the narratives of the objects, but the story of the church is also transferred when designing the project in the second quarter.

The methods of data collection for this study stem from my fascination with community participation in architecture and their role in the fate of a soon to be demolished buildings. Thus, the study entails a deep analysis of the religious objects and the humans (the narrative) and the objects themselves (spatial quality). The spatial analysis would be studied through a workshop, asking community members if their storyline changes when the object is transformed, would the experience of the object change? And if so, would it have more or less significance for the surroundings? This would determine the objects that can be moved and the objects that cannot. A study of the objects transformed in the process and how this transformation is detailed in *Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects* from the Catherijnconvent would also show a baseline of what happens to the church now and how this category of religious objects can be potentially transformed in the future.

Stemming from the Geddesian theory of conservative surgery¹⁶ to consider the existing social and physical elements in the landscape for favourable future development. The object's transformation and the maintenance of the storyline would also leave the conversation open-ended for the final design solution's function, while it is a given that it would be something that is directed towards the community. The process of design would thus be a series of experimental studies that would focus on the change in the phenomenological output of the object as it is transformed, with an emphasis on the narrative and its change. Assessment by the community and self-reflection would be a way to test the design, making the community a part of the process and, eventually, more invested in the outcome.

¹⁵ Tuula Sakaranaho, "Religion and the Study of Social Memory," *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 47, no. 2 (January 2011), <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.5151>, 137.

¹⁶ David Lock, "Patrick Geddes: The Conservative Surgeon." *Built Environment Quarterly*, 1977, pp. 325-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42921164>, 326.

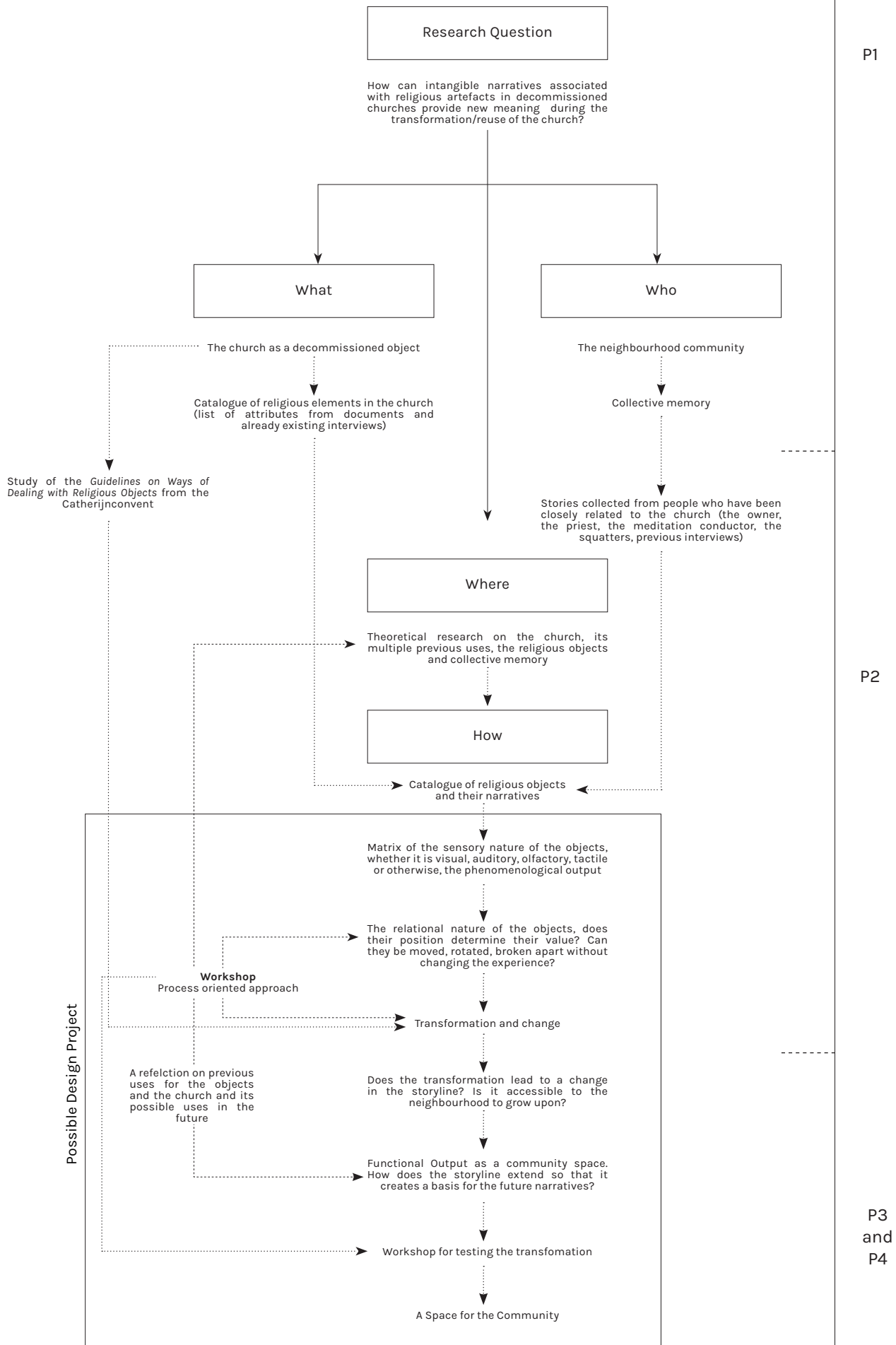


Fig 1.2:

Research Methods and preliminary schedule Diagram

Design Agenda and Relevance for the Future

The design proposal would intend to create a space that pulls the neighbourhood together. With continuous efforts made by the squatters who took over the church in 2019 to the seminars the community holds to keep the church alive, the church has always been a point of collection for the quaint neighbourhood of Nieuwedammerdijk. An exercise would thus be to understand how the religious objects and their narratives could give new meaning to the church and the people who associate themselves with it. A community centre that accommodates the needs of people from different walks of life in the community, accommodating a myriad of purposes. An art centre for the appreciation of the objects that are already there, or a community kitchen as an extension of an idea the squatters had to revitalise the church, a bar reminiscent of the one created in the 1990s in the basement by the community. This would allow for change such that in the coming years, the church does not have been left empty, an attempt at preventing the church from futility. The output is a version of a lived space, something that lends a sense of belonging to the people in the neighbourhood and employs the stories of the community towards a more socially resilient structure that would hopefully not go into disuse again.

As churches continue to secularise, the use of the stories behind objects in a church can help build a backbone for the decommissioned church that it can be adapted for the needs of today and the future, making a resilient community space that would otherwise go into desolation or be demolished. When change is absolute and growth is rapid, reminiscent of when the Neo-Gothic churches were built, a focus on the objects of the past as anchor for comfort in turbulent times would also aid in creating a space that is resilient and will not go into disuse.

This also relates to the Zero Waste aspect of the church again with a focus on not just the material nature of the object but the emotional aspect of these objects that would otherwise be discarded as the church changes roles. This relationship between the last of Stewart Brand's layers, that of the 'stuff' and the 'spirit,' that seems to have the shortest lifespan, would be focused on supporting each other. Long-term sustainability of these objects and their ethos, also seen through Brand's layers, establishes the optimum use of every aspect of the church. The aspect of social sustainability and introducing the community into the process creates a bottom up approach. This imparts the quality of maintaining cohesion so as not to create a space that would be rejected by the community in the future, a reflection on the 'People, Places, Stories' of the Faro convention. Loss of value is reduced at all levels. With financial concerns being explicitly high and the need for productive and efficient space even more pertinent, the use of existing church buildings with a focus on the objects within the church without wasting the objects or shifting them within this case study may provide a framework to do so for other churches that have been decommissioned.

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