

Mediating Religious Elements

Collective memory of religious Elements for transformation of decommissioned churches

Reflection Paper

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Introduction

This paper will focus on reflecting on the process of research and design conducted for my graduation project, which was done as a part of the Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste Church studio within the chair of Heritage and Architecture.

The position of the studio focused on the adaptive reuse of churches around the Netherlands with a focus on the material attributes of heritage church buildings ("Zero-Waste"). The subject of the study in my case, was the Saint Augustinus church in Amsterdam Noord, built in 1887, studied in the current climate of decommissioning and secularisation of religious buildings in the Netherlands. The church has been through periods of disuse and neglect since its decommissioning in 2014.

Relationship between the graduation project subject, studio topic and master architecture track

With an average of 27 Catholic churches and 33 traditional protestant churches forced to close every year,¹ the studio concentrated on the capacity for change of nine such decommissioned churches. The Saint Augustinus church was decided on in the first few weeks due to its unique context on the Niewendammerdijk dam, its close relationship to its neighbourhood and the challenges it has faced throughout its history.

Multiple visits to the church and the study of interviews and newspaper articles brought to the forefront, the attachment of the neighbourhood towards the church and their disappointment in its neglect. What made me curious was that the focus of this conversation was not just the church but the elements (defined here as movable detachable parts of its architecture²) within the church. The supposition made here was that the study of the collective memory of the church and its elements could lead to a more socially sustainable space entwined with the lives of the neighbourhood. My graduation project thus investigates how collective memory and community participation can create a sense of engagement and incentivise the adaptive reuse of heritage church buildings.

This subject relates to the topic of the studio in two areas. First, the elements in the church which would otherwise be gotten rid of in the general development of the church or deaccessioned, are reused, giving it new purpose. This relates to the larger theme of revitalisation of not just the church building but even smaller, otherwise neglected parts of the church. On a community level, it also delves into the forgotten memories of the church,

¹ Marieke van Schijndel, and Marc de Beyer, *Guidelines for Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects* (Utrecht: Catherijnconvent, 2010), 19.

² Schijndel and Beyer, *Guidelines for Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects*, 10.

which can now be stored in the church and where newer memories can be made. The project studies communal and social value through participatory design approaches and investigates community participation, not just at the design stage but also in the introduction of a self-build scheme to create an engagement to prevent future disuse. The purpose of involving a self-build scheme also links to the social sustainability aspect of circularity with links to themes of adaptive reuse and incremental growth, both of which will be addressed in the research paper and through the design. This connects the topic to not only the studio context but also to the state of architecture now. With an attitude where sustainability is not just about building anew, but involves a responsible approach towards dealing with the existing building stock and their material composition. The significance of this graduation project lies in the utilisation of the social value of vacant churches.

Relationship between research and design

My research was focused on coming up with a method for bringing together collective memory, religious elements and their contribution towards the transformation of the existing building. The backbone of this research involved literature reviews of the notions of spatial perception and memory, community participation in design and storytelling. The participatory approach was broken into: data collection, feedback on design prototypes, and community-led construction.

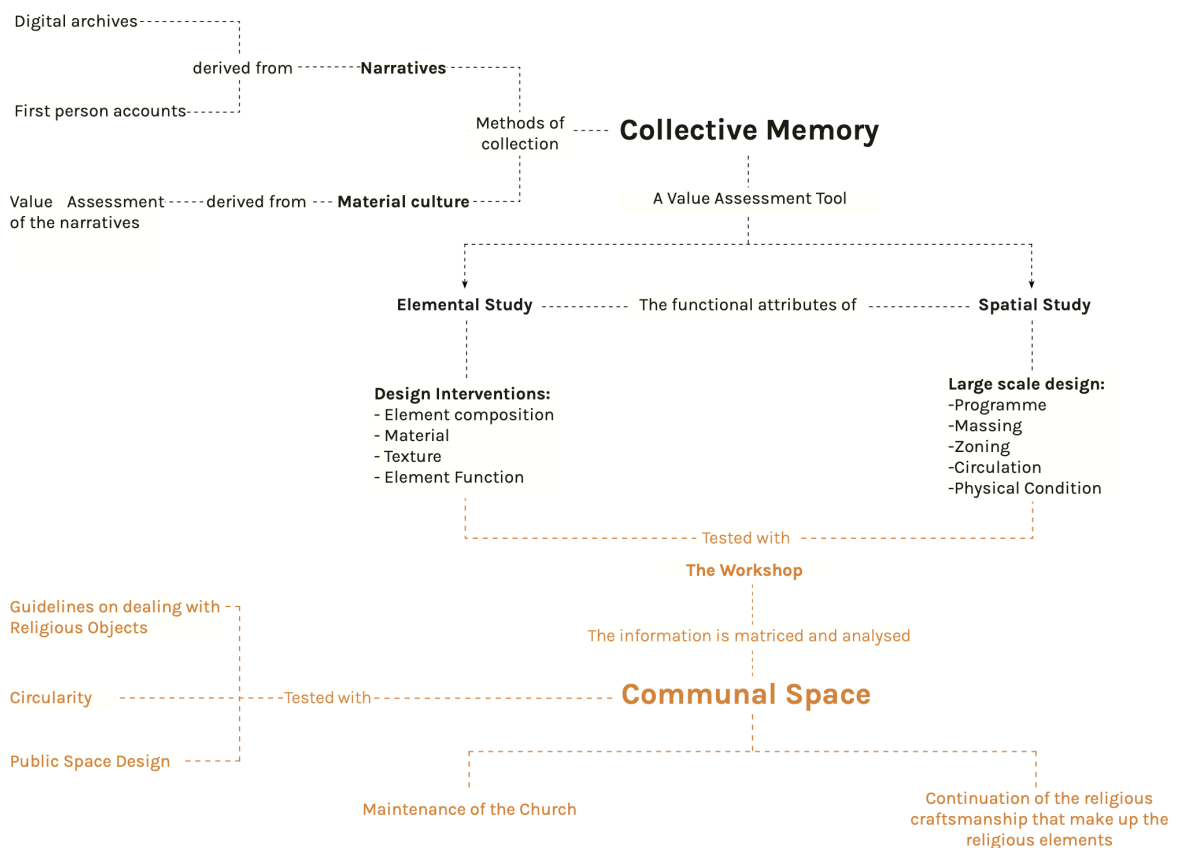


Figure 1: Research to Design Diagram (Own Image)

The data collection step involved the use of surveys of the community. This information was made into a visual guide of stories collected and each was analysed to extract the elements that people related to and how they were experienced alongside both negative and positive connotations attached to the church. It provided an array of different people who brought forward a spectrum of experiences, from people who were avid churchgoers to ones

who had never entered it before. This formed the basis of the design steps taken to reuse the elements and determine how design prototypes were derived.

In the feedback stage (Workshop), the way the information was given to the community is crucial. Complementary studies were conducted on various interactive workshop strategies, such as physical models, sketching, interviews, 2.5D models and spatial mapping. The feedback session also focused on the church's ground floor, as other parts of the church were not accessible to the general public. This restricted design prototypes of the elements to this level and the exterior of the church. The participants could stand within the church, look at the collages in front of them, envision the changes and make their choice. This process of approval and choice from the participants gave the basic form of results which was then assessed through the lens of materiality, perception and use, and the common choices were the design interventions chosen for this particular transformation.

Keeping with the craftsmanship aspect of these religious elements, such as the stained glass windows, sculptures and paintings, the proposal for the church is to convert it into a maker's space for arts and crafts. This functional change implies a safeguarding of the artisanal aspects and techniques in the creation of the church, thus safeguarding not just the tangible heritage but its intangible cultural heritage. The rest of the church redesign was done through the lens of functional changes and the viewpoint of achieving a communal space.

A study into the participatory design approaches showed how the types of participation do not need to restrain themselves to the data collection and research phase but can extend into the design process, construction and management of the design. This research into participatory design and the design study was brought together into a phased design project that focused on construction process, management and buildability. My role as an architect is important to clarify here. The architect becomes the facilitator of the process from start to finish and the creator of the design interventions, and also outlines the steps required to achieve the said design.

Assessment of research methods and approach

Q1

The first phase of the study began with the choice of a decommissioned church and its analysis, done as a group, focused on the architecture, technical characteristics and cultural values of the church to document it thoroughly. The approach towards this analysis required going through archival material, doing community research, neighbours, owners, churchgoers, literature reviews and a value assessment of the building, which also trickled into my particular research subject. Alongside this, for my own research, I undertook a theoretical study of the concepts of narratives, collective memory, and the existing guidelines for religious elements in the Netherland. The data collection survey was sent out, collected and assessed and a catalogue of all the stories collected was collated and elements to be studied were derived.

Q2

The second quarter began with the creation of a timeline for the process to reach the final stage of design which involved coming up with the design steps and prototypes, finalising a method for the feedback session, and conducting the feedback session which would happen at the beginning of Q3.

With further study of the community and the elements, I defined a programme at the beginning with a focus on the users being able to contribute to the building, its maintenance and daily function. Then I focused on the broad

strokes design that came from the positive and negative ways the people viewed the church and its spatiality (derived from the value assessment of the stories). An elemental study was also done to understand their situation within the spatiality and evaluation to understand how to increase this sensory experience. This sensory experience was derived from the book *The Sacred Senses of Sacred Space: A Journey into a Church* which provided an overview of experiences within the church. These were then tested in Q3. In the P2 presentation, a set of these was presented, and the comments given encompassed the complex nature of the design strategies presented and how they can be put across to the participants. Ease of understanding and directness of information presented was asked to be given utmost importance.

Q3

In the end, I chose a collage format (a set of overlapping drawings of each design variation was printed on a base of the church) for the feedback sessions as it helped put across the material studies conducted. This would be an interactive session where the participants would be interviewed while they play with the collages. The feedback session was conducted, and each choice was noted and assessed and it gave me a broad idea of what my design would turn out to be. All the design interventions were put together and the atmospheric impact was studied.

The community participation aspect was brought back in, now through the perspective of construction. A self-build approach was emphasised and techniques to promote demountability, structural independence and phased incremental growth. This provided a complexity to the design process as it was not just about coming up with a design but about phasing it from a managerial and organisational perspective. Viewing the community as client, stakeholder, constructor and user was another challenge to be dealt with.

The reuse and harvesting of all elements from the existing church structure (not just the ones mentioned in the survey) allowed for the optimal use of everything within the site. Moreover, the programme, a fabrication space, allowed for any material that is not used in the construction phase to be stored on use for future use. This fit into the topics of circularity and fed into the building technology aspects of the design, tying together architecture and building technology seamlessly. The problem, though, lay in the simplification the intervention made for not just ease of construction from the communities point of view, but also from a presentation standpoint. The assessment in the presentation of P3 also resonated with the same. In hindsight, the organisation of information collected from the beginning into a logbook would have been helpful as some of the key themes and ideas which were there at the beginning of adaptable and flexible spaces were lost in the humdrum of the design study.

Q4

A revision of the design starting points for simplification and combining architectural details with this self-build strategy was the focus of the first half of this quarter. I also concluded that some of the design standpoints that I envisioned, such as a completely self-standing site with no materials brought from outside, were not possible, as there was just not enough. Energetically, too, the self-sufficiency strategy was unfulfilled, and the site had to be connected to the power grid. This led me to review the essence of the project which lay in the incremental idea which would facilitate all the other design ideas to come to fruition. This helped crystallise my design decisions, from taking a simplified stacked timber-frame construction approach to the adaptability of certain design fragments which could change as the building was utilised. Certain functional and pragmatic aspects also came to the forefront, the level of noise within these equipment-heavy spaces, zoning of

heated and semi-heated spaces, and the insulation of the existing structure were also answered throughout the phases of the incremental design approach.

Graduation project and the social and academic relevance

Existing Framework of guidelines:

The relevance of the research conducted and the use of this method is rooted in the fact that it creates a structure that is established in the stories of the past and can sustain itself in the future. In the beginning stages of research, I found myself confronted by a plethora of documents and forums that talked about the cultural and intangible value of heritage conservation of churches but none of these seemed to transfer to the smaller scale of elements which are just removed and replaced when the church is adapted. This method provides a way to deal with these elements on-site without displacing them from the community that has an emotional attachment to them. Safeguarding intangible heritage, as stated by the Faro convention in its 'People Places Stories' initiative, with a focus on these aspects, could lead to more socially sustainable transformations of vacant church buildings. As more countries secularise, the use of the emotional aspect of the buildings may act as a way to find a binding factor.

Ethical dilemmas:

Generally speaking, the idea of memory is not singular. This does not take into account the stories of everyone and only those voices which are heard and generalised and taken forward for data collection for optimum use. This is also a problem faced in the workshops where common ground had to be found within the participants' opinions on the design.

Transferability of the project

The broader notions of the design and research study focus on the community-oriented study of a vacant church, which, in its initial intention, is a building designed to convey a certain haven for its congregation. With this overarching idea of creating a community space, the superimposition of these design and research methods is repeatable, given that the church already has a strong community backbone and people invested in it. Most neo-Gothic church elements are designed for longevity and sustained use, unlike Stewart Brand's layers, which have the shortest lifespan. This project focuses on giving these a second life through an incremental reuse method development. The reapplication of this process maybe in the transformation schemes of other Neo-Gothic churches where the community spirit can act as a guiding force in the adaptive reuse. The research approach is, moreover, broad enough that it allows itself to apply not just to this particular church but to various churches which have a strong community backbone, which can be found out through the first step, the survey.

Feasibility and Use:

The entire research and design approach is based on the supposition that the introduction of the community at various stages of data collection design would have them involved in the church and as such would make them a stakeholder. From the point of view of feasibility, a major principle involved is the ease of achievability by the community and the utilisation of a few principles to construct and manage the project to fulfilment.

References:

Schijndel, Marieke van, and Marc de Beyer. *Guidelines for Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects*. Utrecht: Catherijnconvent, 2010.