

House of Modern Rituals

REFLECTION

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Case Study

St. Dominicus church
Oog in Al, Utrecht
The Netherlands

House of Modern Rituals: Rethinking the St. Dominicus church

My master's project, "House of Modern Rituals: Rethinking the St. Dominicus church" (Figure 1), was a long-term project that was engaging and inspiring to work on. While some aspects of the assignment were not new to me, I did find an interesting approach to work with. Researching the shift between religion and spirituality forced me to think about my perspective on the subject. While this was not an easy task and the project was not concluded without doubt, it did unfold some stimulating insights. What made the project complicated was integrating all of the appurtenant topics. The project included an understanding of conserving heritage, the value of building elements, sustainability, and zero-waste, and required research on a topic of choice. Due to the complexity of the project, the completion of it was especially rewarding.

I consider the project a successful research project on account of the incorporation of the researched contemporary spiritual values into the existing church structure. The redesign encapsulates the shift from religion to spirituality by illustrating the individual, impermanent, and imperfect nature of the spiritual in contrast to the collective, permanent, and perfect structure of religion. Implications of designing for spirituality are that everyone has their definition of what is spiritual and experiences the spiritual differently. The design is, therefore, difficult to validate because of its subjective nature. For that reason, the research focuses explicitly on the architectural qualities and modern rituals that can be associated with the spiritual and might therefore evoke spiritual experiences. Since the design is based on the incorporation of these qualities and rituals it can still function as a validation of the research.

During the project, it was essential to communicate and discuss with the tutors and my fellow students regularly. The information I gathered from our meetings was the most useful advice in the design process of the project. The received feedback made me consider the design choices I made more thoroughly and gave me further insight into the project. The feedback was assessed carefully before making a final decision. I also highly valued the discussions with my fellow students about our projects. Their observations helped form some interesting design solutions.



Figure 1. The St. Dominicus church in Utrecht, The Netherlands

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master's track (Ar, Ur, BT, LA, MBE), and your master's program (MSc AUBS)?

The Master Graduation Studio Revitalizing Heritage Zero Waste Church addresses the topical issue of the impact of the built environment on climate change. It challenges us to think about the tangible and intangible values of heritage buildings and explores how vacant churches can be transformed to stay relevant. The studio aims to determine when building elements are heritage or waste. The zero-waste approach for this research is to repurpose the church's social and spiritual values in the redesign of the case study: St. Dominicus church. As a result of secularisation and the shift from religion to spirituality, there is a noticeable increase in vacant church buildings that are being repurposed for different functions. This research demonstrates how a church can find a new purpose by revising the original function in a way it can better accommodate more modern spiritual needs.

2. How did your research influence your design/ recommendations and how did the design/ recommendations influence your research?

The paper is an integration of both the conducted research and the design proposal. The two are closely related and have influenced each other throughout the graduation process. In the first two quarters, extensive research has been done into the definition of spirituality and how it can be translated into architectural qualities to evoke spiritual experiences. This included literature and analytical studies and formed the theoretical framework for the design concept. The results were used as guidelines to design for more spiritual architecture and influenced numerous design decisions. The paper elaborates on the spiritual design strategies that were adopted for the redesign of the St. Dominicus church. It explains the most significant decisions step by step and forms a narrative for the design. On the other hand, the design and the decisions that were made also influenced the research paper. Together with the guidelines from the research, this design further

shows a personal perspective on spirituality which influenced how and where the different architectural qualities were utilized. The final design, therefore, functions as a validation of the conducted research and as a conclusion for the main research question.

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

As mentioned in question 2, the research included literature and analytical studies on the topic of spirituality. The literature study focused mainly on the spiritual combined with architecture and sustainability which resulted in a limited amount of references. Although a broader context might have been interesting for the research, the focus on these topics helped form boundaries for the project and developed a more specific approach to the design. The results of the research were used as guidelines and have been a helpful design tool. The analytical study was focused on reference projects that are manifestations of the spiritual. The projects were chosen for their relationship with the environment, their materiality, and their functions and were all designed by architects that consider themselves to be spiritual. After conducting the two studies, a list of the most prevalent architectural qualities of both studies was composed. During the design process, this list could be used as verification for the design decisions. The preconceived restrictions in subject choice and the concluding list provided a good foundation for designing because the main subject of spirituality tends to be ambiguous and difficult to define. This way of working provided a clear structure that could be pursued in the overall design process and helped form a personal perspective on the subject.

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope, and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The issues dealt with in this graduation project are important contemporary topics that need to be addressed. When repurposing a church one must

consider all sorts of factors such as the tangible value of the building, the intangible value of the building for the neighborhood and its users, the implications concerning sustainability and zero-waste, and finally what it means to incorporate contemporary spiritual values in the existing religious building structure. The project addresses all of these matters. The project mostly interacts with the surrounding neighborhood but can also be of value for larger research questions in the same area. The proposed design focuses on the individual and offers a temporal interruption of everyday life (Figure 2). It functions as a neutral space in the neighborhood that is open to all. It offers space for social events and individual exploring. The project included some ethical complications concerning the use of a sacred religious space for contemporary spiritual purposes. This may seem offensive to the current church community and the sacred spaces and rituals of their religion. In my opinion, the design tries to deal with the existing building respectfully and weaves the new design together with the original structure. The design is a new layer that takes a great deal of inspiration from current spiritual values, rituals, and functions. This makes the design a suitable solution for the imminent vacancy problem without losing the social and spiritual values of the church.

5. *How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?*

Churches in The Netherlands are in decline and are being repurposed for different functions. This research demonstrates how a church can find a new purpose by revising the original function in a way it can better accommodate more modern spiritual needs. It is not hard to believe that there is a growing need for more spirituality in this fast-changing world. For example, different forms of spirituality can give meaning to life, help process difficulties, improve health and well-being, and give a sense of community. For this reason, it is important to facilitate more spaces in our built environment that evoke spiritual experiences and can include both the people that are and are not involved in traditional religion. I think it is therefore important to continue to research the implications of spiritual values in our built environment.

Furthermore, the increase in vacant church buildings is a pressing issue when it comes to conserving heritage. The challenge of conserving heritage is to implement sustainable strategies while at the same time considering the cultural values of the building. Although this research is specific to the case study of the Sint-Dominicus church, it can further contribute to the general research in adaptive reuse. More specifically, it focuses on churches and how to treat sacred architecture when repurposing. Although the result is specific to this graduation project and the case study, it can still serve as a precedent for future research projects in contemporary spirituality and adaptive reuse.

6. *In what ways did your project challenge your preconceptions or assumptions about the topic, and how did you address these challenges?*

When we talk about spirituality, people often think of the magical and mythical associated with astronomy, minerals, tarot cards, spirits, and becoming one with nature. Others consider spirituality to be a deeper connection with God or it can also be described as

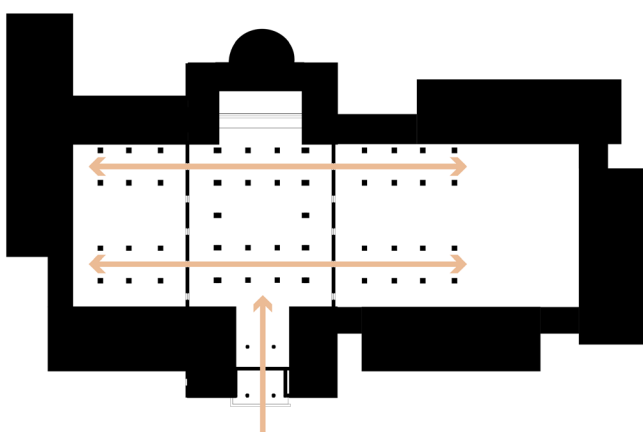


Figure 2. A sanctuary enclosed by walls
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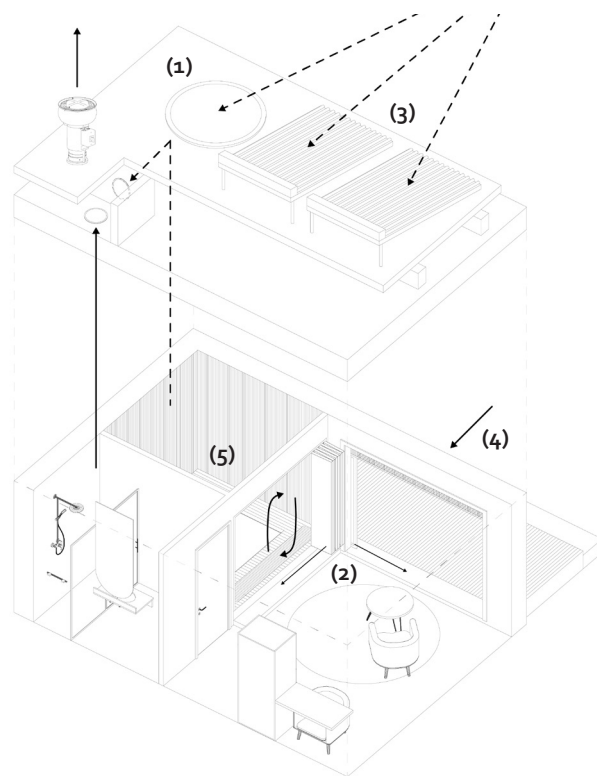
everything that has to do with the mind or soul. For that reason, it was necessary to first define spirituality before further research could be conducted. In this project, spirituality is described as a connection to the divine by searching for your meaning in life. It focuses on the connection of an individual with the self, the social, and the environment. In this way, it differs from the religious meaning of spirituality which conveys the meaning of life to its followers and focuses on collectively worshipping an external being. When the difference between the definition of religion and spirituality became clear, the conditions for the project were easier to develop.

7. How did you ensure that your project was both innovative and feasible within the given constraints (such as time, resources, or data availability)?

What makes this project innovative is the challenge of implementing contemporary spiritual values in the existing church structure. It suggests a transformation in the current religious practice to include people that want to connect to the spiritual but do not consider themselves religious. The project proposes a change in the way churches can contribute to spiritual practice and stay relevant. This is especially visible in the proposed extension of the church in which all spiritual aspects of the research come together. The Circular Retreat allows visitors to live with the rhythm of nature and is a personal concept for spiritual architecture (Figure 3). The overall design revitalizes the original function of the St. Dominicus church by using contemporary spiritual values.

During the start of the project, we had the chance to interview the current caretakers of the church about the inner workings of the church and how they value the building. Although we were not able to also question the churchgoers due to the sensitivity around the issue of closing the church, the acquired information was adequate to continue our projects. Because it concerns a theoretical project, the majority of information was not difficult to gather and implement into the research. A complication I did encounter during the design process was

associated with the zero-waste topic. Since there is not yet a clear approach to dealing with second-hand materials, most of the design interventions are assumptions of how the materials can be reused. Another complication is the shortage of information on what materials are available to be used in the design and what the quality of those materials is. When dealing with used materials, the design process should be reversed, since the available materials should first be proofed and gathered before implementing in a design. This made the design of a zero-waste building more difficult.



1. The use of natural light to wake up, instead of using curtains
2. Façades that can be opened up to integrate the inside space with the outside space
3. Water that is heated by solar water heaters
4. Natural ventilation through vents in the façades
5. Small closeable sleeping area that can be heated through a floor convector
6. Growing and eating seasonal vegetables (kitchen garden)
7. Bio-waste is transformed into energy for heating (kitchen garden)

Figure 3. Technical aspects of the guest rooms