

Experiencing
the
Atmosphere



A l m a z P a a l v a s t

P 4 r e f l e c t i o n

Graduation studio and fascination

Throughout my study I have developed a personal fascination for older buildings and the architectural challenge in redesigning them. The fine balance between treating these buildings with the utmost respect, but also being able to leave your own mark for the coming generation, which, one day, might also become the old elements of the building that we are fascinated with today. For me it is about the way to make a design in which the strong existing atmospheric elements of the location will be used to accommodate the experience of the newly added architectural structure. But it is also about combining the old and the new as a harmonious ensemble, while at the same time the distinction between the two remains clear.

With the studio of Explorelab, I found the opportunity to explore more about one of the branches within the field of redesign, namely that of the redesign of churches. There is something about these types of religious buildings that give me a special feeling when visiting them, even though I am not a Christian. It is something about the atmosphere that makes them special to me. An atmosphere that can still be present when the church gets a new purpose. In my opinion, it should be the task of the architect to make sure it does.

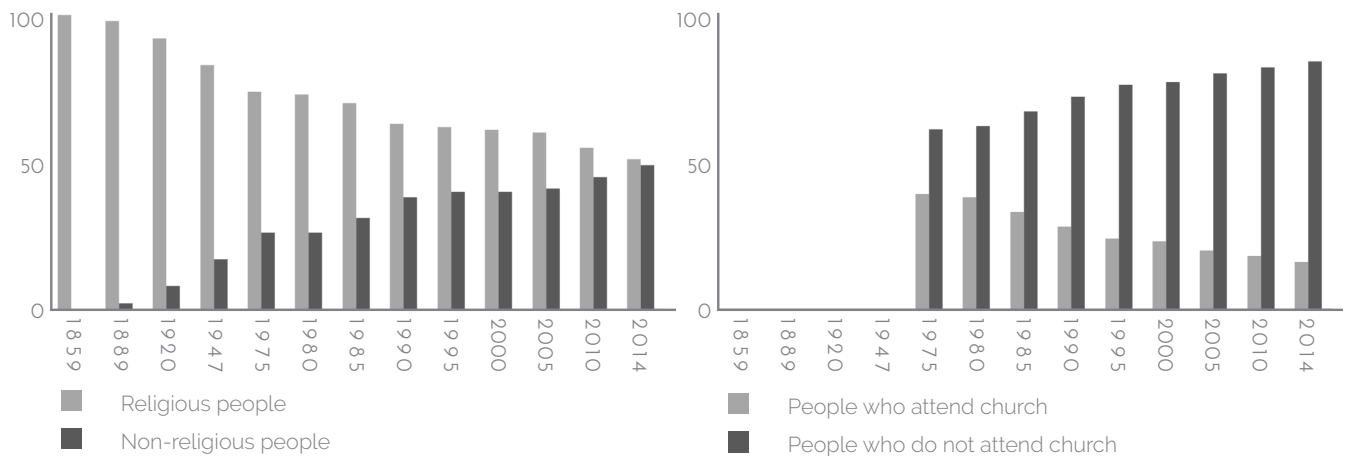
In the end, because of the freedom within this studio, I felt that not only was I able to research the topic of my personal fascination, but also to learn a lot about the research and design process in general.

Wider social context

The past few years, the number of churches and monasteries across Western Europe that are being forced to close their doors is increasing rapidly. The Church of England has to close around 20 churches per year. About 200 churches in Denmark have discontinued their services in the past few years. In Germany, in the past decade, the Catholic Church has had to close down roughly 500 churches. In The Netherlands this trend is even stronger; it is estimated that 1,000 Catholic and 700 Protestant churches will close within the next ten and four years, respectively.

The large number of closing churches reflects the rapid decline of faith in Europe. Figures show that the percentage of the Dutch population feeling affiliated with any religion has dropped from almost one hundred percent in the first half of the nineteenth century to almost fifty percent today (fig. 1). This trend has consequences for the whole society. Neighborhoods will be confronted with these empty churches, which for many centuries have been the centerpiece of the community.

For most Christians the closing of a church is an emotional event. For generations they have practiced their beliefs in these buildings and have felt both grief and joy there. However, even many non-religious residents feel upset when these churches fall into disuse and



1. *Left:* People in the Netherlands who affiliate themselves with religion.
Right: Church attendance in the Netherlands

are threatened with demolition, as they represent important landmarks and have both great historic and cultural value in Western society. This issue establishes a question for communities, and governments: what to do with these holy, but now vacant buildings?

As society struggles to repurpose its vacant churches, some solutions are less reputable than others. People often want to restore the social function of bringing people together the church once had. The problem, however, is the high maintenance costs of these buildings. This often results in commercial projects occupying the space, whose interests lie with inexpensive and quick solutions, rather than making the most out of a building from an architectural point of view.

Research

Although many churches have already been redesigned in the past couple of years, a clear overview of the influence of interventions and modifications on the atmosphere has not been made yet. The goal of my research is therefore, to not only create a collection of types of interventions and their effects for architects to use when redesigning a church, but also to show a range of different successfully executed projects for stakeholders who are interested in converting churches. This overview can act as a frame of reference for future design assignments and help with the modern day question what to do with the growing number of vacant churches.

Because of the challenge for future projects to redesign these vacant churches and repurpose them, without forgetting the great architectural values that are often present in these buildings, a couple of questions have been answered in the research thesis.

- *What architectural elements constitute the sacred atmosphere inherent to church design?*
- *What type of interventions and modifications can be made in the redesign of a church?*
- *What are the influences of these interventions and modifications for the atmospheric aspects?*

Planning, method and process

The research mainly consists of two parts. First a theoretical framework is given, in which the problem statement and the history of church architecture is addressed, to form the background of the research. The second part covers a selection of case studies of both churches that are still in use and those that haven't been redesigned. The former to analyze what architectural elements help constitute the atmosphere of the place, the latter to identify the different types of interventions and modifications and their influences on the atmosphere.

Despite having answered all three questions mentioned above, the main question I started the research with: *How can vacant churches be redesigned in such a way that the atmospheric aspects inherent to church design are maintained or enhanced?* Can still not be easily answered.

During the analyses of the repurposed case studies, it has been found that each church redesign project is unique in its own way. There is no such thing as a standard church, as each church has its own distinctive qualities. Each example creates the atmosphere differently; therefore there is no such thing as a standard solution for redesigning churches.

The sacred atmosphere is, as it seems, still an abstract definition that cannot be easily rationalized. Like music or poetry, the experience of atmosphere is just that: an experience. My advice therefore would be to use the research as a form of guideline when redesigning a church and to take example of the case studies and to look for similarities.

During the process of the research, the most difficult aspect for me was the fact that I had a hard time finding the essence. This may also have to do with the fact that describing an experience could almost not be done objectively, something I found out along the way. An experience of a sacred space, the silence and the atmosphere is very personal and is not something that can be easily read on the internet or literature. Therefore I decided to physically visit the case studies. As a result, I tended to take a bit longer to complete the research than first was intended.

Design

The choice to make a redesign for the ruin church of Ammerzoden (fig. 2), also turned out to be quite a challenge. Not only did I have to take into account the results of my research thesis about atmosphere in church design, but also the factor of the redesign of a ruin played an important role. As it turns out, designing with a ruin and decay could be a whole graduation subject of its own.

During the design process I tended to make up for the lost time caused by the research delay, by making decisions and jumping to conclusions too quickly. Sometimes I had to be reminded to go back to the basics and to really look at what the desired qualities were, that I wanted to achieve instead of just come up with a solution I liked. Finishing my research helped me a lot in this process as it helped me to get a grasp on the atmospheric aspects of the church and therefore to define what these qualities were I wanted to maintain and/or achieve.

Nevertheless I still think the design aspect of my graduation project was a really interesting and educational process. The fact that I also encountered redesigned ruin churches during my research, helped me to get a head start on the design. And though the question *How can vacant churches be redesigned in such a way that the atmospheric aspects inherent to church design are maintained or enhanced?* couldn't be easily answered, the case studies within the research formed a comprehensive database of what kind of design interventions are possible and what their influences are on the atmosphere.



2. *The design location: the Ruin Church of Ammerzoden.*