

Reflection

# Art Complex Het Steiger

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Graduation studio  
Heritage & Architecture  
Revitalising Heritage – Zero Waste Church  
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Student:  
Chiem Hollander  
4485505

Tutors:  
Design tutor: Alexander de Ridder  
Research tutor: Ivan Nevzgodin  
Building Technology tutor: Koen Mulder

## Introduction

My graduation project, *Art Complex Het Steiger*, involves the adaptive reuse of religious heritage. The new programme transforms the existing St. Dominic church complex in Rotterdam, also known as Het Steiger, into a multifunctional art complex. This complex includes various residential and working spaces for artists, diverse exhibition areas, and a grand café for visitors. Designed by Kraaijvanger and completed in 1960, Het Steiger is situated in the city centre of Rotterdam and is one of the iconic representatives of the post-war reconstruction era. In 2016, it was designated as a national monument.

## 1 Graduation project, Architecture master track and master programme

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track Architecture and your master programme?

The focus of my graduation project concerns the transformation of the Catholic church complex Het Steiger in Rotterdam. The building was designed for the Dominican monastic community in Rotterdam, making Het Steiger reflect Dominican architectural principles. My design aims to draw from this Dominican tradition with the new programme and design.

This objective aligns with the theme of the master's programme 'Revitalizing Heritage: Zero Waste Church.' One of the central challenging questions posed in this studio is: What is heritage, and what is waste?

My approach is as follows: I consider the Dominican narrative as heritage, not as waste. This approach is reflected in the program. The new programme is closely tailored to the existing building and can be seen as a reflection of the previous Dominican monastic program:

- The building remains (essentially) publicly accessible, preserving it for the inhabitants of Rotterdam.

- A new artistic, residential community moves into the complex.
- Through art, a dialogue unfolds between the artists and visitors, similar to the past interactions between the brothers and churchgoers. Consequently, Het Steiger continues to be a place of inspiration, where, through art, contemplation and discussion about spiritual values persist. As composer Arvo Pärt asserted, "Art is about the question of how much the artist has come to know life."

As the master's program is part of the Heritage & Architecture section, the handling of values takes centre stage, ranging from cultural-historical to architectural-art historical values, encompassing tangible and intangible aspects. Literature research (including experiences of parishioners, art-historical commentary, and monumental value assessments) and multiple visits to Het Steiger enabled me to discover, prioritise, and incorporate the various values into my design. For instance, the rarity value of the open space plan and the transition of interior spaces is crucial in my design.

## 2 Research design and design research

How did your research influence your design and/or recommendations, and how did the design and/or recommendations influence your research?

How immaterial values are translated into architectural principles fascinates me. The Dominican ideology provided the opportunity to explore the architectural considerations that symbolise the concept of divine transcendence. In addition to Het Steiger by Kraaijvanger in Rotterdam, I have investigated other Dominican buildings. These include Sainte Marie de La Tourette by Le Corbusier and the Dominican Motherhouse by Louis Kahn. The approach of

these architects to architectural themes has deepened and strengthened my design for a multifunctional art complex. I will provide a few examples:

1. Amidst the bustling city centre, Kraaijvanger introduced an atmosphere of 'peaceful tranquillity' in Het Steiger. The open inner courtyard and the enclosed walls of the church contribute to this. This mystical atmosphere aligns well with the exhibition spaces of the new art complex.
2. Kraaijvanger's incorporation of composition and axes, exemplified by the central axis leading to the altar and the baptistery next to the inner courtyard, highlights specific architectural design interventions. Consequently, introducing a new exhibition space in the centre of the former church hall establishes a new 'heart' in Het Steiger.
3. In Het Steiger, religious art and architecture are interwoven. The principle that the building itself can be considered a work of art has led me to consider my interventions in the same light.
4. Le Corbusier's manipulation of light in La Tourette inspired me to treat light as an architectural theme in Het Steiger. This includes introducing indirect light in studios, skylights in the former church hall to accentuate the central exhibition space, and mosaic-clad confessional lighting for a mystical atmosphere.
5. Kahn's attempt in the Motherhouse to bring together monastic ritual life and modern informal religious life has also prompted me to think about circulation and facilitate informal transitions and encounters between the visitor and artist by locating the ateliers in various corners of the building.

The design and the choice of a multifunctional art complex have led me to narrow the scope of the literature research and specifically explore which architectural principles may be crucial for the program.

### 3 Methodology and approach assessment

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

The aim of the literature study on Het Steiger, La Tourette, and The Dominican Motherhouse was primarily to comprehend the architectural considerations and principles connected with Dominican life. It took a relatively long time during the research process before narrowing the focus to the specific program of realising an art complex. This narrowing could have occurred earlier, making the literature study more focused and directed.

Thanks to the ample availability of archive drawings of Het Steiger, a thorough understanding of the building was achieved, serving as the foundation for a digital model. This, in turn, facilitated the creation of precise drawings of the existing building and my design interventions.

The realisation that a design project can be a struggle, as Kahn (Merill, 2010, p. 25) stated: "A building is a struggle, not a miracle, and the architect should acknowledge this," is an experience I have also encountered. Switching between different scales and restarting again has been instrumental in this process.

The exploration of design, perhaps, has been the most compelling aspect. How to relate to the existing building? This graduation project undeniably contributed to developing a design approach that suits me. I aimed to create a design complementary to the existing building, a new layer with its own construction practices, thus recognisable as distinct. In the rhythm and composition of the existing building, a certain

naturalness should become visible, directing attention not so much to the interventions themselves but to the building as a whole.

#### 4 The academic and societal value, scope and implication of the graduation project

This graduation project is a contemporary reflection of former monastery life, inhabited by a new residential community united by the shared desire to create art and thereby move others, encourage contemplation, and let others marvel at the beauty of art. Choosing a programme that 'echoes' the former also provides sustainable adaptive reuse for the building. Aside from some adjustments, the existing structure suits the new owner well. Thus, this project offers a sustainable strategy for dealing with vacant religious heritage.

Furthermore, this graduation project exists in a dynamic playing field. A playing field marked by increasing vacancy of religious heritage and, consequently, the communal living aspect disappears. The persistent housing shortage remains a pressing issue. Simultaneously, there is an urgent need for atelier spaces for artists in Rotterdam (Habiballah, 2020). The project also addresses the preservation of monuments as part of the public domain. The academic and societal value lies precisely in the project's need to engage with all these domains and thus contribute to solving multiple urgent issues and challenges. Nevertheless, the project is hopefully more than solving problems or facing societal challenges. This graduation project also represents a standpoint on dealing with religious heritage, addressing social order and how we want to live together.

#### 5 Transferability of the project results

The aspects of this graduation project that could be transferred to other contexts or settings are:

- The broader strategy of taking the narrative of existing heritage as a guiding thread for the new design.
- The design attitude incorporates a subtly recognisable new layer primarily consisting of renewable materials.
- The challenge of addressing multiple issues — housing shortage, lack of workspace, and the ongoing need for places in the city to slow down, meet, and reflect —simultaneously.
- Densification through ground-bound and rooftop additions.

The aspects of the graduation project that could hardly be transferred to other contexts or settings are:

- The specific design interventions of the new exhibition space and the new atelier spaces closely relate to the genius loci and the building's spatial gestural composition and hierarchy.
- An architecturally rich and multifunctional building like Het Steiger is unique, making accommodating similar multifunctional programs such as an art complex in other religious heritage objects challenging.

#### 6 The beauty of working with religious heritage

What do you consider the value of working with religious heritage?

Working with religious heritage can be considered unique on multiple levels. Firstly, you engage with a building that has an existing story. Religious heritage often holds an immense wealth of craftsmanship – increasingly scarce in today's architectural practice – artworks, ornamentation, etc. All these elements carry religious and traditional references. Together,

they contribute to the spiritual essence of a place. Bringing the sacred and secular with a new design is a challenge. Thus, the design becomes a statement that tangibly reflects the ongoing process of secularisation.

Secondly, it is generally acknowledged that existing buildings possess an atmosphere not found in new construction. The patina of time is a richness given to you as a designer. Simultaneously, there is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the ideas of the original architect of the existing building. It becomes a quest to choose how to relate, understand those ideas, and seek symbiotic design solutions – a beautiful challenge and an honourable task.

Thirdly, working with religious heritage contributes to the broader tapestry of urban landscapes, where the architectural diversity of existing and new buildings shapes the cultural identity of a street, neighbourhood, or city. The central question in this context is: What do you want to express, and who do you want to be?

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‘It says the language of man is art. It stems from something which grows out of the need, of the desire to be, to express and the evidence of the promise of the material to do it’ (Kahn & Twombly, 2003, p. 229).

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## 7 The architect’s role and position in projects like Het Steiger

What is the architect’s role in a project like Het Steiger in Rotterdam?

The architect has the role of recognising, emphasising, and bringing the qualities and values of Het Steiger to the forefront.

The architect should acknowledge the freedom and responsibility to create a new narrative. Restraint and courage are closely

intertwined here. On one hand, it involves a respectful approach to the existing complex, requiring restraint. On the other hand, courage is necessary to make interventions that enhance the overall plan. In my design project, the central exhibition space may be an example of that, as shown in Figure 1.

In the tensions between achieving a particular spatial quality on the one hand and careful consideration of material usage on the other, the architect should make wise decisions. The challenge for the architect is not to view these two aspects as opposing forces. Recognising that the same spatial quality can be achieved using indigenous materials should be a guiding principle for the architect.

The architect needs to exercise restraint when it comes to demolition work. If materials are removed, the question arises whether they can find application elsewhere.

Finally, the architect must work with foresight: consider the impact of time, where materials age and change colour, and anticipate that future users may make modifications willingly. Ultimately, the architect has a facilitating role.



Figure 1. The exhibition space seen from the first floor. Own work.

## References

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