

REFLECTION GRADUATION

Participatory Churches

A case of St. Dominicus in Utrecht

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Revitalizing Heritage - Zero Waste Churches

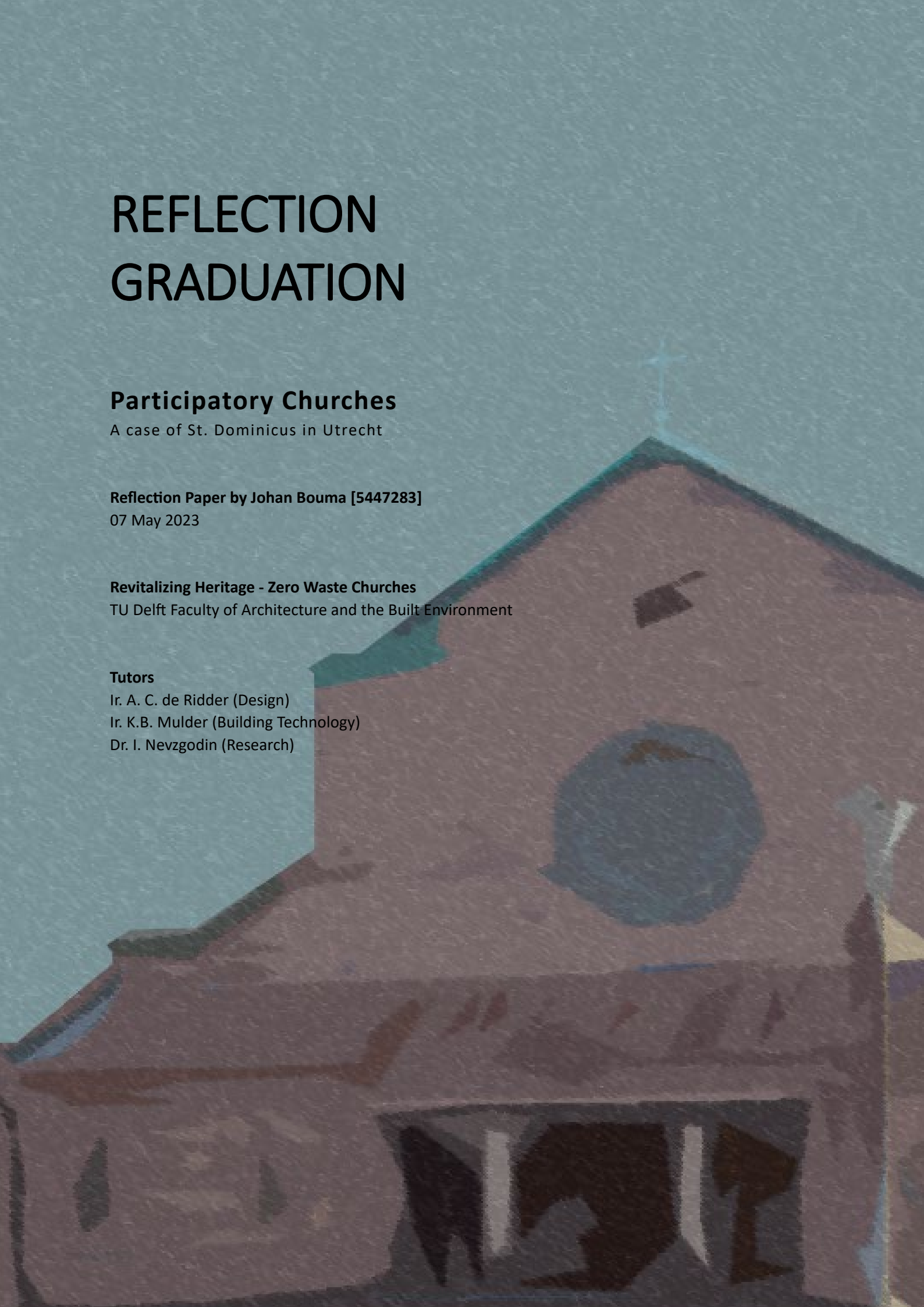
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01. Relation between graduation topic, architecture, and religious heritage

We live in a world where the population density is increasing whilst the available resources are declining. Besides this troubling occurrence, the production processes for the products we daily require emit a considerable amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. Because of these unsettling developments, the building industry is among many that are tasked to reduce material waste and reduce the amount of emitted carbon dioxide. This task does not only concern newly released structures but also relates to already existing structures, of which several are deemed monumental heritage.

Church buildings are excellent examples of structures that often are deemed monumental due to their ecclesiastical, aesthetical, cultural and historical values. Despite this, church affiliation in the Netherlands has been in decline since the early 1970s and is expected to continue in the coming decades. Consequently, churches are decommissioned; the urban structures outlive their original ecclesiastical function. Because of their monumental status (and cultural significance), these structures deserve to be USED and PRESERVED rather than let deterioration set in with demolition as a natural consequence.

Besides the aesthetical, cultural and historical values which make the building monumental, I vouch for the preservation of the social value of the church building. Churches are, besides their main function places of worship, social gathering spaces for a specific religious community. With the decline of this community, this social ancillary of the church also vanishes. This disappearance of social ancillary is unfortunate, considering the increase in experienced loneliness throughout every layer of society and the observed "neo-pillarization" (the growing segregation of large groups within a society, e.g. urban versus rural, far right versus far left) that weighs down on social coherency. These monumental religious buildings, which ironically stood as a symbol of pillarization, could play a vital role against the increasing loneliness and neo-pillarization by functioning as social gathering spaces for the whole neighbourhood, rather than a specific religious community. For this reason, I have chosen to preserve the social ancillary of my selected case church building by transforming the structure into a community centre.

Despite my ambitious plans, churches are tricky structures to redevelop because of the variety of values that make them monumental, and because they remain a symbol of pillarization. These different values can result in conflict before, during and after the redeveloping process. By

involving stakeholders through participation, these values could be identified and conflict could be prevented. Besides this obvious benefit of stakeholder participation, it also gives residents agency in developing their own neighbourhood, further increasing the integration of user needs and prolonging the longevity of the design. The only question that remains is "*How?*"

02. Relations between research and design and vice versa

A participatory workshop was conducted to define a suitable program for a community centre. During the research in which various participation methods were applied, ranging from individual brainstorming and cognitive mapping. Each method resulted in research data in the form of 'method effectiveness' and design data in the form of 'community centre program'. The research data was utilized to reflect on the methodologies applied whilst the design data was employed as starting point for the design. Thus, the program of the community centre is directly derived from the participatory workshop conducted during the research.

To conclude the research with the workshop alone without evaluating the final design with the participants, not only sounds dubious but also bypasses an essential goal of participant involvement – that is, enhancing the sense of ownership. For this reason, the preliminary design was evaluated with the participants two months after the participation workshop was conducted. Not only did this result in more research data but also further established participants' contributions.

03. Assessment working method

Instead of a top-down approach in which the architect hovers over their design, as some sort of omnipotent being creating its ideal world, a bottom-up approach is required where this world is created together. To achieve this, a certain degree of flexibility and vulnerability is required. This approach is reflected in my work process.

This process was not without flaws. For instance, the research paper and design are intended to start roughly simultaneously. Because my design heavily relied on the research workshop, this was not the case for me. It is, after all, difficult to design a program that has to be

derived from a workshop that has not been conducted yet. Consequently, my graduation process could be divided into a pre-workshop and a post-workshop period.

During the pre-workshop period, concrete progress remained dormant in the design process. Generic ideas were considered and experimented with but lacked solid argumentation backed up by my research. Because the participation workshop was required to make concrete progress in the design, a sense of urgency to 'just conducted that workshop' became eminent. However, this process should not be rushed, because my research paper depended on it. Frustration ensued. The unfortunate fact is that I had to alter my participation group from locals to actors did not assist me in this endeavour. Besides this, personal barriers resulted in a period I now can only reflect on as stagnating.

Only after the participatory workshop was conducted, concrete progress in the design process occurred. Because of the relatively late date on which the workshop was conducted, haste was required to make up for the accumulated backlog. Besides this, the workshop resulted in a program for the community centre but failed to determine specific spatial requirements. Again, frustration ensued.

In brief, because of the relation between my research and design, concrete design progress occurred late in the graduation process. This resulted in an accumulated backlog, with frustration and stress as the ultimate consequence. This could have been prevented by not making the participation workshop essential for the design, by, for instance, focusing on aesthetical aspects of the church rather than programmatic aspects. This solution, however, reduces the relevance of participation to a mere aesthetical role rather than acknowledging the participants' agency.

04. Academic and social implications

Participation is a soft science and is influenced by different social variables. What case study is applied? Who are the participants and what are the existing relations between the participants? What are the competencies of the conductor? Etc. This makes the participation workshop difficult to replicate. Similar methods could be applied, which might result in similar method reflections, but the design data will always be different. Besides the workshop, there is a great amount of interpretation required between the end of the workshop and the integration of the design data into the design, which makes comparing design results impossible.

What does matter most is the social aspect that is implied by this research. Participation questions the role of the architect as a top-down agent and suggests a more bottom-up approach. Especially if the case regards an existing structure to which many emotions are attached. Should the architect determine what the design is, or is this more relevant for the users? Of course, the answer is not as binary as the question suggests. The designer retains a degree of responsibility, considering their experience and knowledge which cannot be expected from laymen. But the collective knowledge and experience of the locals should not be underestimated and could be a valuable resource to further increase the potential of the design.

05. Transferability project results

As briefly stated in the response to the previous question, replicating this research might be difficult due to the specific case study, and the application of actors through which the workshop was conducted. Method-effectiveness partially depend on the personality and relations between the participants. This factor could be eliminated if the workshop was conducted with a larger number of participants. This was however not the case in the workshop conducted in this research, making these factors highly influential. For this reason, I highly suggest conducting more workshops or larger workshops to acquire more research data for future research.

Despite this, I would like to believe that, if the participatory methods from the workshop were applied again, it would have resulted in similar outputs as in usability. Participants do not suddenly gain more knowledge regarding spatial qualities when they find themselves in larger settings. Larger groups require different methods to utilise the collective knowledge.

06. Self-interpersonal reflection

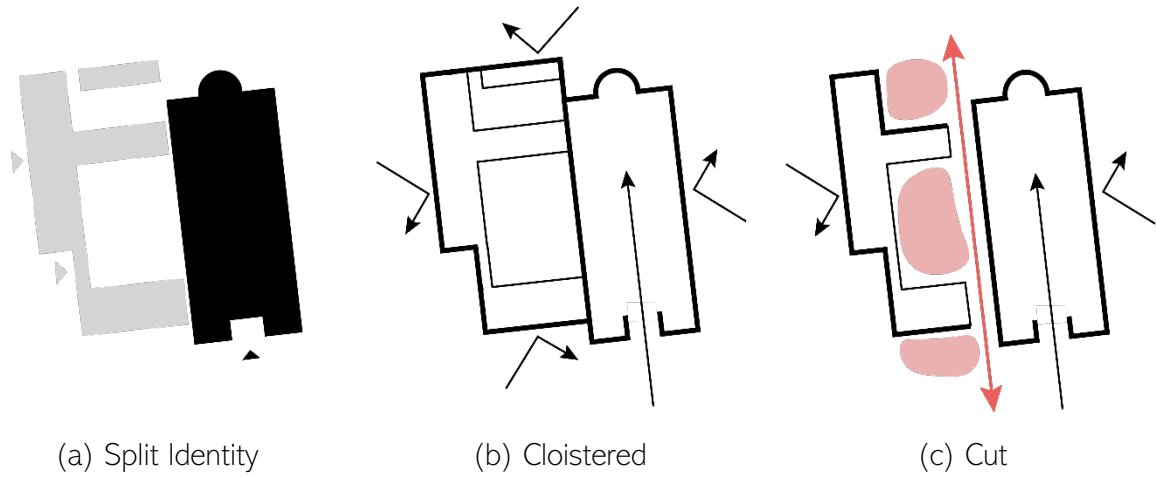
As a student that spent more than a decade studying architecture and architectural engineering through different educational levels, multiple challenges arose during the research and design process. A considerable part of my previous education was focused on the technical aspects of architecture and building technology. Relatively little was spent on architectural visions. I noticed that this gap in abstract thinking and finding the correct words to correlate to my thinking patterns remain a challenge for me. The desire to find purity through simplicity and elegance only takes

shape in tangible aspects of the design. Object reality is, after all, easier to make sense of than abstract reality. Occasionally, I caught myself auto-piloting depending on my existing knowledge. This is not a bad thing on its own, but it does not contribute to the furtherment of new knowledge.

On another note, the involvement of other agents in my design requires a degree of vulnerability and flexibility. This set of requirements seems to misalign with my personality. I suppose a more outgoing person that creates connections more easily would have an easier time conducting this research than lack these skills. I would not attribute this set of skills to myself, and thus I struggled in the process. Consequently, the process stagnated, especially during the run-up towards the workshop.

07. Approach between existing and new design

The existing church building is a beautiful example of an early Bossche School church. Bossche School is a Dutch architectural style developed after the second world war in an attempt to rebuild religious buildings. In the early development of the Bossche School style, considerable inspiration was drawn from classical Romanesque architecture. As a result, the case church appeared massive, hierarchical and cloistered off from the neighbourhood. Besides this, two clear atmospheres could be derived from the church building (a) – the hierarchical nave, and the domestic monastery. The nave, built seemingly from one piece of rock stands monolithically in the neighbourhood. The monastery, on the contrary, is more polythetic, existing from more masses with more windows. Between the nave and monastery, there is a courtyard seemingly unused. All these characteristics contribute to the overall 'personality' of the church, which is deemed valuable and monumental (b). However, some of these characteristics conflict with the principles of a community centre, which is open to the neighbourhood. The design approach already contradicts the existing church building, which is seemingly designed by one man whereas the new design was developed with participants.



One possible design approach is to 'tear the skin off of the church' or 'poke holes from all sides' to expose the inside. However, by doing so, the cloistered character of the church disappears. Instead, one single cut is made between the monolithic nave and the polylythic monastery (c). By doing so, the church building is essentially divided into a formal setting and an informal setting, whilst also creating a passage through the internal courtyard. From this point, architectural interventions only take place internally.