

# House of Modern Rituals

RESEARCH PAPER

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## **Case Study**

St. Dominicus church

Oog in Al, Utrecht

The Netherlands

# House of Modern Rituals: Rethinking the St. Dominicus church

This research explores how the St. Dominicus church in Utrecht can be revitalised with the help of contemporary spiritual values. As a result of secularisation and the shift from religion to spirituality, there is a noticeable increase in vacant church buildings. In this research a design strategy is proposed that revises the original function in a way it can better accommodate the modern spiritual needs. Incorporating the results of different literature and analytic studies in spiritual architecture, this study demonstrates a way to create a design that accommodates more spiritual experiences through architecture. It argues that these experiences can be evoked through architectural qualities that adhere to the bigger spiritual concepts of sensuality, humanity and sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

Churches in The Netherlands currently face a decline in members and struggle to stay in service. The cause for this secularisation is partly because institutionalized religious traditions are not received well in modern times. Most Dutch people no longer define themselves as religious but instead, identify as atheist or spiritual. They renounced the traditional procedures and rules of their church community [1-3, 7]. A consequence of this decline in churchgoers means an increase in vacant church buildings. Does this automatically mean that the function of the church becomes redundant? In the Netherlands, most of these vacant churches are repurposed into museums, housing, libraries, and even supermarkets. Instead of trying to fit in a different function altogether, this research explores the possibility to revitalize a church by revising the original function in a way it can better accommodate more modern spiritual needs.

Research shows that by renouncing the traditional precepts of the church, meaning is no longer provided by religion (meaning OF life). Instead, individuals have to search for it themselves (meaning IN life) [4]. Sociologist Linda Woodhead and anthropologist Peter Versteeg describe that this shift from collectively worshipping an external divine being to personally experiencing the divine is what separates spirituality from religion [2, 4, 5]. Therefore, the purpose of this redesign project is to revitalize the St. Dominicus church in Utrecht by evoking spiritual experiences through architecture.

As a result of previous research into spiritual experience, the list "10 Design Principles for Spiritual Architecture" was defined. It consists of a brief description of what qualities are most prevalent in spiritual architecture:

1. Use prominent geometric forms
2. Create at least one large and open space (inside or outside)
3. Frame views of the surroundings with care
4. Use homogeneous and solid materials that are long-lasting (unity, coherence)
5. Use natural and weathered materials (or materials that weather over time) to show impermanence as a contrast to the solid structure
6. Use reflective materials, such as water, to evoke meditation and contemplation
7. Create a route that allows for different flows through the building (intuitive wayfinding)
8. Consider the connection with nature/the environment when designing
9. Design with the history of the place and/or the building in mind
10. Vary light and shadow to experience the rhythm, scale, and spaces of a building

These ten principles are derived from the analysis of case studies and a literature review on contemporary spirituality. The studies conclude that spiritual experiences can be evoked through architecture by designing with these principles, which characterize the spiritual.

In one of the researched studies, Architecture professor Julio Bermudez explains that in architecture, the experience of spirituality is mostly understood in the sense of aesthetics, but to create more intense experiences it should also be in service of the ethical. If considered carefully in a design, the layout, functionality, and context of a building can raise morale, social justice, cohesion, and environmental conservation. In other words: doing good through architecture can help

others and the environment [9]. It can prove valuable to integrate spirituality into the design process and inspire more reflective, effective, and insightful design approaches. Another study by Architecture professor Brian R. Sinclair mentions that to facilitate more spiritual experiences an individual must be connected to the self (sensuality), the social/cultural (humanity), and the environment (sustainability) [6]. These main concepts of sensuality, humanity, and sustainability are used to describe and explain how spiritual experiences can be evoked through the proposed design interventions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The graduation studio Heritage & Architecture: Revitalizing Heritage - Zero Waste Church focuses on the values of heritage buildings to determine if building elements are heritage or waste. It is specifically about disassembling and repurposing tangible materials, but this research argues that the intangible aspects of a church building, such as its spiritual value, should also be thought of when repurposing. For this graduation project, a redesign will be made for the following case study: St. Dominicus church in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The main research question states: How can contemporary spiritual values help repurpose the St. Dominicus church? This research explores how the St. Dominicus church in Utrecht can find a new purpose with the help of spirituality by exploring how spiritual experiences can be evoked through architecture. The redesign is an attempt to include contemporary spiritual values and focuses on the experience of the spiritual instead of the religious aspects of the church. This approach intends to adapt the current church building in a way that will make it more open, inclusive, and subjective and therefore evolve with the changing need for spirituality.

Various studies preceded this paper to determine the compatibility of the St. Dominicus church building with the concept of contemporary spirituality. The first study of the spiritual values and architectural elements of the St. Dominicus church included questioning the church's caretakers, observing the community, conducting research on the current church and its activities, and an overall architectural analysis of the building. The results of this study can be found in the "ABC Analysis Booklet". The second study on contemporary

spirituality was conducted to understand the value and definition of spirituality for the redesign. The findings of this study are the framework for this paper and clarify and substantiate the redesign process. In addition to this, various works of the architects Tadao Ando, Louis Khan, and Peter Zumthor have been analyzed for their spiritual architectural qualities. The list "10 Design Principles for Spiritual Architecture", as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, is based on the acquired information from this theoretical and analytical research. The architectural qualities on the list are used as principles for the different design interventions.

To tie in with a more modern view of spirituality, the topic of zero waste was considered and the focus of the research was mainly on materiality, sustainability, and the overall connection with nature and the environment.

This research paper discusses and explains the design process for the redevelopment of the St. Dominicus church. The spiritual values and architectural elements of the St. Dominicus church are compared to the theoretical framework and an appropriate redesign strategy is proposed. The purpose of the design is to represent the shift from religion to spirituality and this paper elaborates on the most significant design interventions that illustrate that shift. The final redesign functions as a validation of the conducted research and as a conclusion for the main research question.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Revising the church structure

##### 3.1.1. Modern rituals

According to Peter Versteeg, the shift from religion to spirituality also resulted in more modern rituals that emphasized subjectiveness and intense personal experiences. These modern rituals are reinterpreted to be more inclusive of various beliefs and separate spirituality from religion. They are not attached to religious beliefs but can still provide spiritual experiences and a sense of community or belonging [5]. So, including modern rituals in a program can help develop individual spirituality and offer a sense of belonging. A few examples of these ritual forms include meditation, yoga, and retreats or courses and meetings that are related for example to art, religion, and dance [8, 10].

Church functions	Modern rituals
- Sunday mass (weekly)	- mindfulness
- visitation	- walking (nature)
- celebrations/holidays	- celebrations (holidays, birthdays)
- funeral ceremonies	- funeral ceremonies
- wedding ceremonies	- wedding ceremonies
- art expositions	- art expositions
- small concerts	- music and dance
- charity events	- festivals
- Christian meditation (monthly)	- meditation classes
- reading group (monthly)	- wellness
- bible teachings (monthly)	- yoga classes
- retreat days (4x a year)	- retreats
- evening vigils	- coaching classes
- language lessons for asylum seekers (weekly)	
- organization of meals	

**Table 1.** Functions in the St. Dominicus church compared to modern rituals

From Table 1, we can conclude that most church functions already concur with modern rituals. The main difference, however, is that the current functions are based on the use of explicit religious sacredness such as specific places, rituals, and objects that have been designated sacred in anticipation. Whereas modern rituals focus more on the personal experience of the spiritual which arises unintentionally from the nature of the individual experience rather than its designated intentions [9]. The challenge is then to convert those existing functions to accommodate more subjective experiences. The spaces in the church were organized to enable strict adherence to the sequence of movements

necessary for the rituals [11]. So, considering that within sacred space form follows function, to achieve this, a change in the structure of the church building is required.

##### 3.1.2. Ritual space

The church is a place that serves Christian rituals and embodies the divine. These sacred rituals engender an understanding or reminder of God. The spaces in a church are merely devices for ritual display. The layout of the church consists of a sequence of spaces in which rituals take place. Entering the sacred space initiates a series of rituals in which the presence of God can be felt. Here the divine is expressed in the experience of size, lighting, acoustics, incense, and materiality of the space, but also in the symbols and decorations, such as a cross, candles, water, or special furniture, that indicate an encounter with the sacred. These various symbols and objects are an instantly recognizable part of the ritual space. This is especially true for the more formal and official rituals that occur in the Mass [12]. The Eucharist (last supper), takes place in the most sacred space of the church, the apse, and is the central moment of the Mass. It is therefore self-evident that the layout of the church is oriented toward this place. The Eucharist derives from a domestic ritual of breaking bread and drinking wine where the apse represents the triclinium: a formal dining room in early Roman houses. The arches, vaults, and domes in the church emphasize the idea of 'interior' and define the sacred ritual space.

As mentioned before, these spaces, rituals, and objects have been designated sacred in anticipation and are a manifestation of an external divine being. Spirituality on the other hand looks inward to oneself and manifests itself in the individual experience of the divine. It is considered to be subjective and therefore more inclusive and open than the traditional Christian religion. The new design should represent these notions of spirituality as opposed to the notions of religion. This starts with the structure of the building that has been constructed to serve the Christian rituals. The St. Dominicus church is an example of the Christian Basilica, which is the main archetype for a Christian place of worship and originally derived from the Roman basilica. However, the early Roman basilica was not meant to be sacred, it was intended for formal and informal public gatherings. Unlike the Christian church, the Roman basilica was accessible from all sides and had a more open structure, without a specific direction (Figure 1)

[11]. The proposed design intervention encapsulates the shift from religion to spirituality by intercepting the designated sacred space. This results in a divided space that no longer serves one direction with specific places for designated collective rituals but provides an open structure that allows space for individual experiences.

Within this structure, space is made for modern rituals that help evoke individual spiritual experiences. These rituals will take place in a secure and neutral environment organized as a retreat. The retreat will function as a space within the city, a sanctuary enclosed by walls, a sacred space that is a temporal interruption of the everyday. The extension that is needed to facilitate the retreat residences will therefore, together with the previous extension of the church, function as the wall that encloses the innermost spiritual space (Figure 2). In pursuance of maintaining parts of the historic and spiritual values of the existing church building, the current functions and spaces are modified to adhere to modern rituals.

### 3.2. Designing spiritual experiences

#### 3.2.1. Spiritual concepts

The redesign encapsulates the shift from religion to spirituality. It illustrates the individual, impermanent, and imperfect nature of the spiritual in contrast to the collective, permanent, and perfect structure of religion. Contrary to praying and worshipping an external god, this design emphasizes the main concepts of spirituality as described by Architecture professor Brian R. Sinclair:

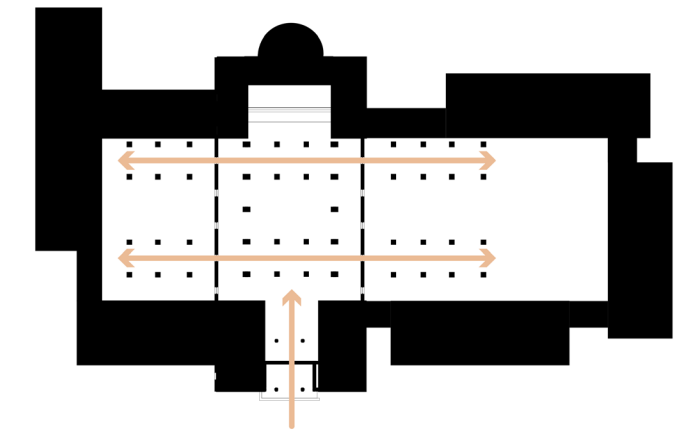


Figure 2. A sanctuary enclosed by walls

sensuality, humanity, and sustainability. The concepts relate to the modern rituals and functions that can be found in the three different areas formed by the building structure (Figure 3).

The Monastery retreat is characteristic of the concept of sustainability. Here visitors can learn about and explore their spiritual side and interact with nature. This place, where originally monks devoted their lives to God through prayer and work, can now be used similarly by visitors in search of the spiritual. It will provide space for coaching and mindfulness classes, short stay rooms, a lunchroom, a congress space, a courtyard garden, and a kitchen garden where nature takes center stage. When describing the numinous as something bigger and beyond ourselves, the connection to nature is easily made. Landscape architect and artist Rebecca Krinke

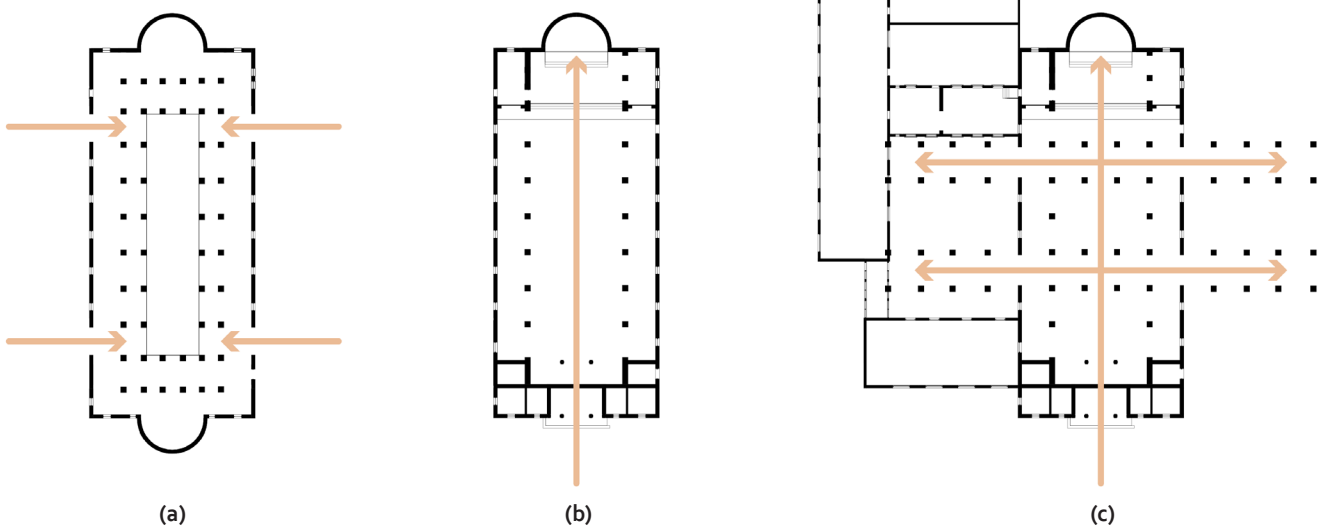


Figure 1. The adaptations of the basilica archetype. (a) Early Roman basilica concept, (b) Christian basilica concept, (c) Intervention St. Dominicus church

describes that when experiencing a natural landscape it is hard not to feel a sense of the numinous, nature is what gives us life [9]. Nature is central to the courtyard garden and the kitchen garden. Visitors can work in the kitchen garden to connect with and become more aware of the natural world.

The church space is characteristic of the concept of humanity. The social and cultural connection can arise from narrative and authenticity. A place's sense of narrative and authenticity derives from the significance attached to it through history. Using weathered materials or materials that weather over time can evoke a feeling of impermanence and can imply a certain narrative over time. A sense of impermanence can also arise from flexibility and adaptability in the program of space [6]. This social and cultural connection is made through the adaptation of the historic church building. This most sacred space of the building which was used for explicit collective rituals and worshipping will continue to be a place where social and cultural events are hosted. The multifunctional space will accommodate functions such as art expositions, small concerts, and gatherings, and will also serve other functions such as meditation and yoga classes.

The Circular Retreat is characteristic of the concept of sensuality. To connect an individual to the self, a person must engage in all of the senses. Through design, a richer experience can be created that generates an awareness of one's surroundings and encourages one

to focus on the present. This means using materials, textures, and light in a way that is authentic and gives meaning to a building [6]. The name Circular Retreat represents the connection with nature and the rhythm and continuity of its seasons. The retreat is designed to acclimate to the different seasons to reconnect with the natural world and its rhythm. Visitors are encouraged to use the available spaces and natural resources in different ways throughout the seasons to become more aware of their natural surroundings.

### 3.1.3. Architectural qualities of the retreat

The design of the Circular Retreat plays with transitions of inside and outside spaces where people can take shelter and protect themselves or expose themselves to the elements. The outer wall is independent of the rest of the structure and serves as protection against the chaotic outside world. The visitors enter their rooms through this long, circular, outside hallway, which guides them toward the residences that look inward to the courtyard. Inside these guest rooms, people can withdraw completely from the outside world. The whole structure is covered by a timber roof construction that hovers over and connects the different spaces (Figure 4).

The spiritual meaning of living within the rhythm of the seasons is about listening to our natural rhythm. Autumn and Winter are times to turn inward and offer time for reflection and rest when nature goes into hibernation. In the Spring and Summer nature wakes again and we can turn outward to nature, start working

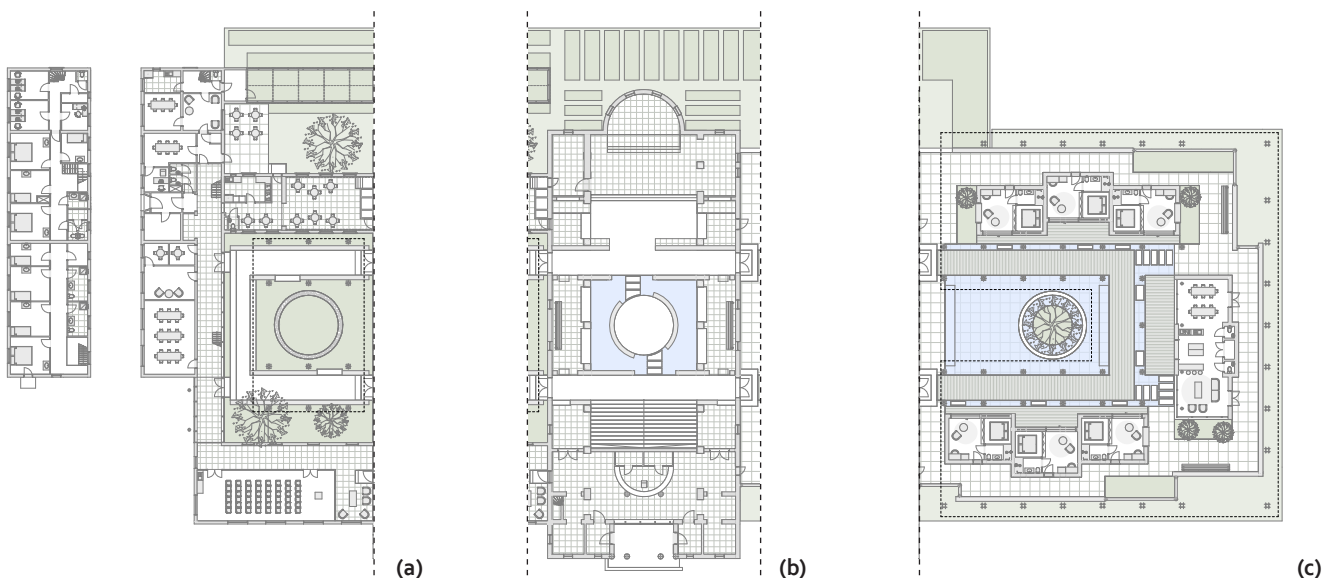


Figure 3. The three areas of (a) sustainability, (b) humanity, (c) and sensuality

in the kitchen garden and be more active.

The use of the guest rooms depends on the current season and the availability of natural resources. The entire room is well-insulated but only the bedroom and bathroom are heated. Each room has a smaller, lockable, wooden cabin where the sleeping area is located (Figure 5). This modern take on a box bed allows the small space to warm up faster when it is cold. In autumn and winter, it will be logical for visitors to withdraw more to this room, because the other rooms are less comfortable. In the spring and summer, they will turn more to the outside, when it is warmer and more comfortable. In this period the modern box bed can also be transformed into a meditation space. Other features that can be found in the retreat (Figure 5) to strengthen the connection to nature are:

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)

In contrast to the sober-looking solid church structure, rammed earth is used to form the thick walls,

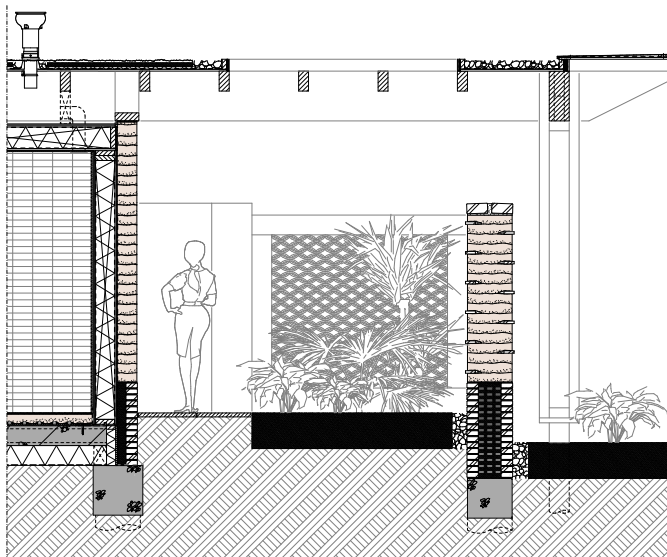


Figure 4. Section drawing of the Circular Retreat

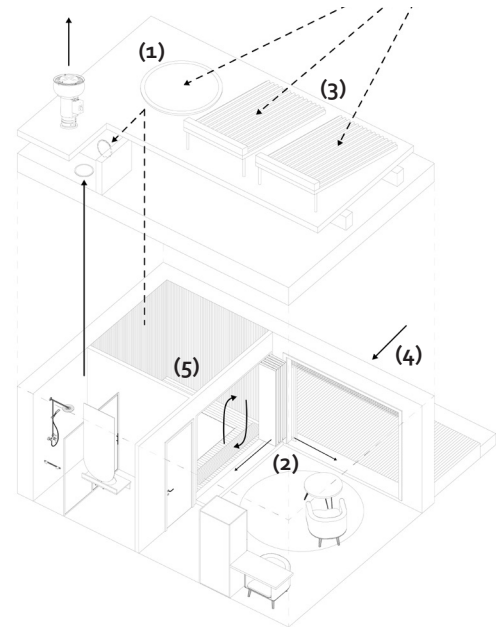


Figure 5. Technical aspects of the guest rooms

and wood is used to form the roof and other interior elements to give a sense of warmth and create a more inviting atmosphere (Figure 6). Both materials have the property to weather over time. This impermanence suggests that change is a natural part of our world and helps to provoke a sensuous experience [6]. The outer walls of the retreat are also made of a thick rammed earth construction that is enhanced by reclaimed bricks to slow down the erosion process. The excavated soil from the site will be used in the rammed-earth mixture. The use of these materials derives from the circular design approach of the project and their spiritual values.



Figure 6. Materiality of the façade

## 4. Discussion

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 [7, 8]. 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. What separates spirituality from religion is the shift from collectively worshipping an external divine being to personally experiencing the divine [2, 4, 5].

The redesign encapsulates this shift by illustrating the individual, impermanent, and imperfect nature of the spiritual in contrast to the collective, permanent, and perfect structure of religion. Among other things, an intervention is made in the main structure of the church to depict this. Furthermore, the redesign for the St. Dominicus church focuses on designing for individual spiritual experiences through architecture. Designing for spiritual experiences has its complications. Everyone has their definition of what is spiritual and experiences the spiritual differently. 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. The architectural qualities are concluded in the list "10 Design Principles for Spiritual Architecture" and include: using prominent geometric forms, creating large open spaces, using long-lasting solid materials, but also using weathered and reflective materials. The current rituals and spaces in the church are modified to adhere to modern rituals that are more inclusive and do not necessarily focus on worshipping an external being but rather focus on the individual. These rituals include, for example, mindfulness, art expositions, meditation, yoga, and coaching classes. These qualities and rituals can be linked to the bigger spiritual concepts of sensuality, humanity, and sustainability. With these concepts and the principles of spiritual architecture in mind, the proposed design was formed. The design also includes a personal perspective on spirituality. The Circular Retreat that allows visitors to live with the rhythm of nature is a personal concept for spiritual architecture. The overall design revitalizes the

original function of the St. Dominicus church by using contemporary spiritual values.

The increase in vacant church buildings in The Netherlands is a current issue when it comes to conserving heritage. The challenge is to implement sustainable strategies while at the same time considering the cultural values of the building [13]. 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, this research focuses on churches and how to treat sacred architecture when repurposing a church. This research aims to preserve the spiritual values of the church and embed them in a sustainable redesign. The final design for the case study will conclude and validate the research. Although the result is specific to this graduation project and the case study, it can still serve as an example for future research projects in contemporary spirituality and the conservation of heritage.



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