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## REUSE OF CHURCHES IN URBAN AND RURAL DUTCH LANDSCAPES

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European churches are confronted with the challenge of finding new uses for their church buildings. Due to a lack of members and income, the maintenance of their buildings cannot be ensured in the future; therefore, new applications and users are to be found. This task poses a considerable challenge, especially in a to a certain extent provincial and conservative country like the Netherlands, where people, even irreligious ones, perceive the church as a building that belongs to them. Besides having to deal with the building in an architectural way, there is a wide range of possibilities for reusing it; for example, community-based or mixed uses, commercial or residential ones. The eventual solution is mainly based on the church's building type, the influence of the neighborhood, the owner's financial possibilities, and the location. One of the present study's main results suggests that uses which serve the community are more likely to be found in rural areas, consequently reflecting the importance of those buildings there.

**Keywords:** reuse, adaption, ecclesiastical buildings, churches, the Netherlands, cultural landscapes

Churches in Central Europe are facing substantial challenges: worshipping and church activities are decreasing due to society having become increasingly secularized (Vries, 1990); thus, the role and position of the church within society is transforming and impacting on the decline of regular worshippers and the number of members in general – a problem that two of the major religious groups, Catholics and Protestants, are confronted with. Though the number of worshippers and members is constantly decreasing, that of churches remains the same. Since 1990, both churches have lost about 13 million members, dropping from 58 to 45 million individuals, while the number of churches with 44.000 has remained almost the same (Katholische Kirche in Deutschland, Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2018).

Owing to less baptisms and constantly dropping membership numbers, it is expected that the latter will continue to shrink throughout Europe. One consequence will be that the imbalance between potential users and available church buildings will increase; consequently, the risk that even more buildings that require comparatively intensive and costly maintenance will become underused will increase, too, – resulting in turn in a shrinking membership and church tax. Especially in rural areas, local communities are experiencing considerable difficulties with those changes: while churches play an important role in a cultural landscape's-built heritage and in local community life, they also cause those communities serious trouble (Fisch, 2008). The situation generates a discussion about adapting, changing or reusing church buildings. In Europe, countries like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

show a wide range of reused churches that are exemplary for other cases throughout Europe (Krämer and Kuhn, 2008). Academic discourse addresses the main concepts of reusing buildings based on their cultural and substantive building value, commonly referring to the conceptual work of Riegl (Riegl, 2010).

Reuse entails not only changes in use, but also structural changes of the building, ranging from adaptations to the facade to extensions by adding new parts to the main building. In academic discourse, the terms reuse and adaptation are often used interchangeably. Wong (2017) presents a systematic overview of both concepts; according to her definition, adaptation describes changes that structurally alter the building's capacity, function and performance, while extension addresses the enlargement of the building, including "[e]xpanding the capacity or volume of a building, whether vertically by increasing the height/depth or laterally by expanding the plan area" (Douglas, 2006).

A more nuanced, but at the same time vague discussion comes with the terms maintenance, refurbishment and renovation: all three focus on the structural and technical condition of a building (without changing e.g. its functions): maintenance and renovation aim at a suitable constructional condition of a building, while refurbishment concentrates more on modernizing it (Douglas, 2006). However, adaptation and extension are related concepts since both focus on the optimization and extension of usable space. Other recurrent terms in this field are transformation, conservation, remodeling, restoration, etc. – all concepts that refer to the structural design of buildings and

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therefore share a similar connotation, i.e. maintenance and preparation of an existing building to maintain its usability. Their conceptual nuances depend on the type and extent of the structural intervention in the building stock: while the aim of renovating a building is to establish a building's utility value, modernizing it includes upgrading the existing building stock. The location of a church building usually has a spatial impact and supports the orientation within a settlement pattern (Cramer and Breitling, 2007). Especially in rural areas, the church is a prominent landmark, which helps people distinguish places. By inhabitants, churches are perceived as a public area – one of the last places in rural sites where the community meets (Beste, 2014). In light of this prime purpose of a church building, the danger of having vacant structures in rural settlements is not higher than in urban ones; however, the societal impact is.

Churches play a significant role in building and supporting communities both in their sense of belonging and social capital (Putnam, 2007). The distinctive location, appearance and historic role turn churches into focal points in neighbourhoods (Shopsin, 1986). The building serves as canvas for religious and social practices and is a physical manifestation of memories (Clark, 2007). Hence, closing or reusing churches might disrupt the established social and religious practices and consequently result in local conflicts. Clark (2007) stresses that the type and style of reuse impacts not only on the individual, but particularly on the religious memory associated with the building. Reuse and adaptation might preserve the building as built memory or heritage, but religious practices and memories will be substituted by other uses.

While practises of reuse and adaptation are still relatively modest in Germany, the Netherlands show a considerable amount of different types of reusing church buildings and have introduced an established practice of how to do it.

## Material and methods

The present research is based in the Netherlands due to its long-standing practise of reuse, which started after WWII. This rich experience enables reflection on different practises, challenges, enablers and barriers, which have been studied by focusing on four aspects:

- a) use-related,
- b) structural,
- c) urban,
- d) governance-/process-related characteristics.

The present work follows a mixed-methods approach, combining different mapping techniques to assess spatial and structural characteristics, a policy analysis and semi-structured interviews to further explore the governance and institutional dimension.

The policy analysis and interviews illustrate the importance of the legal and institutional situation of churches. Most sacred (consecrated) buildings are protected heritage, therefore making not only structural interventions but reuse projects in general ambitious enterprises. Consequently, financial instruments based on membership fees, taxes or funding play a crucial role when it comes to financing or supporting the development of reuse concepts,

implementation, operation and maintenance of church buildings.

The sample includes an initial exploratory mapping of 110 reused churches, sampling:

- a) types of reuse,
- b) denomination,
- c) building date and time period that the church converted into monument status,
- d) spatial embeddedness in the urban or rural landscape.

Based on this mapping, 35 cases were selected for an in-depth study. The selection of these cases was based on the recurring types of reuse (e.g. mixed uses, housing, healthcare facilities, etc.) or were outstanding examples, i.e. extreme cases.

In a second step, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dutch experts: three architects, three real estate agents, three church representatives, and four NGOs. The range of stakeholders ranges from heritage ministries, church institutions, architects and planners to specialized foundations. The interviews were taped, transcribed and a content analysis based on Mayring (2002) was performed. Field works were taking place between 2013 and 2015.

## Results and discussion

From the 1970s, transforming and converting church buildings became part of the Dutch planning practise (Rijksdienst, 2011). The exact number of reused or demolished churches is unknown. Nevertheless, the strategic plan (Bisdome van Haarlem-Rotterdam, 2008) reports 900 churches that have switched from ecclesiastical to civic use since 1975. In 2011, the Ministry of Heritage corrected the number to an estimated 1,340 churches that have been converted since 1975 (Rijksdienst, 2011).

Type I: Community-Based churches are characterized by the delivery of community services to the surrounding urban or rural communities (table 1). Different community services are bundled into and complemented with social and health services, offices etc. that are supplying the local community with goods and services. They are situated in central locations and therefore easily accessible and connected to public transport (PT) services. The building stock and the plots provide space for structural adaptations, e.g. extending the building by using outdoor spaces and by doing so creating (temporary) parking lots. Two main structural changes of the churches stand out: i) developing a flexible room layout and space options within the church; ii) extending the usable surface area. Structural changes range from freestanding structures to vertical partitions of the building. Those changes often require additional changes such as window openings, additional entrances or sanitary installations. The sacred character and former use of the church do not play a role anymore as far as the reuse design is concerned; instead, the focus is on providing community services and generating enough turnover in order to maintain the building stock and operate the building. The distribution of costs and the revenue from various users increase the risk. However, the focus is on maintaining the church and providing community services

and not on making commercial profit (fig. 1).

These examples share their spatial program: the flexible use focuses on the needs of the local community and permanent gastronomic use. Uses in the field of the hospitality industry generate the necessary financial basis for maintenance and operation. However, strong interventions and structural changes of the building are impacting the sacred character of the churches. For this type, the sacred character and its community value play only a modest role in reuse. In rural areas, where the church still plays an important role in local culture, this re-evaluation often conflicts with the community's perceptions and expectations. In such settings, the church is still considered a community place where people meet, and events and community festivities take place. Hence, they play key roles in building local community and identity. Reuse mixes that are restricting or revoking public access are lowering social and public acceptance to a different degree and raise the question if reuse types that are revoking public access are to be considered appropriate solutions in general.

Type II illustrates Mixed Uses, consisting of two or more permanent

or temporary uses (e.g. case 22, 24; see also table 1). Churches of this type are entirely repurposed into non-religious uses: the sacred purpose is entirely replaced by a mix of different (also commercial) activities (fig. 2). Most mixed-use churches are located in urban and peri-urban landscapes and are well connected to PT; however, there is no direct link between spatial conditions and implemented uses. Implementing those uses is linked to structural changes: horizontal and/or vertical partition and additional entrances are the most common structural changes. One significant structural change is the implementation of additional entrances. Those entrances are crucial for the accessibility of the building and its new internal utilisation to ensure a conflict-free operation (fig. 2). Also, for this type the sacred character of the building only plays a minor role in repurposing, compared to spatial and operational requirements, which leads to rather pragmatic structural solutions. Some uses such as cafés, theatres or museums still allow public access and experiencing the church at least temporarily.

Churches of the type Commercially-Utilized Churches (Type III) are repurposed into permanent utilisations

such as retail, supermarkets, cafés, restaurants, hospitality, recreation and sports, or offices. Location-based factors (e.g. centrality or high population density) play an important role in decision-making regarding their reuse: while for some repurposes such as bookshops, cafés, retail or shops central locations endowed with high customer and pedestrian frequency are important, for destination activities such as sports or recreation they are less. The adaptation to commercial, sports and recreational activities leads to a full 'clearing' of the church's furnishings and embellishments, which are then replaced with gym or sports equipment (e.g. skateboard ramps, trampolines) (fig. 3), retail shelves, technical appliances such as refrigerating facilities, lightning, or labels and posters are put on the façade of the church.

Additionally, the spatial organisation and implementation of storage rooms, lavatories or the delivery of goods are posing organisational and structural challenges. Utilisation for hospitality industry demands technical interventions such as including kitchen facilities, lavatories and a compliance department with safety regulations. However, the cases show different types of facility management

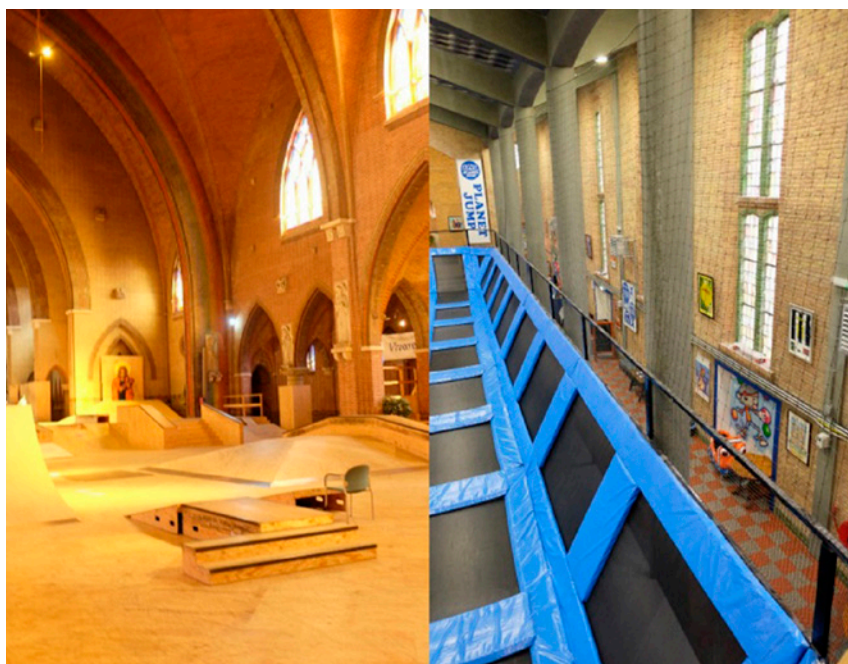


**Figure 1** Community focused uses of Mixed-Use churches in Den Horn (21) and Klein Wetsinge (23). The churches are also facilitated for community activities, flea markets, concerts, neighbourhood cafes, etc.  
Photo: authors



**Figure 2** Creating an additional entrance of the Remonstrantse Kerk (Groningen) was necessary to provide a functional access to the office wing, used by the 'Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken' (case 19)  
Photo: authors





**Figure 3** Removable installation for sport activities: skate park in the St. Josephskerk in Arnhem (left image, case 10) and trampolines for recreational activities in the Martelaren van Gorkumkerk (Den Haag, case 29)  
Photo: authors

in sacred heritage and built stock: one interesting case (24) illustrates the reuse as a bookstore, which preserved the building stock and included the sacred character and ambience in the re-design by maintaining structural characteristics and the original structural composition (e.g. building height, zoning, internal organisation) – thus preserving the *genius loci* in the

adaptive reuse concept and design. The present research illustrates that especially organisational and structural adaption for retail or recreational activities shows a very pragmatic and straightforward approach when it comes to repurposing and structural interventions, where the building's cubage is considered valuable and is the main factor for decisions on

repurposing. Since adaptations are rather costly, repurposing is considered a permanent conversion.

Type IV illustrates repurposed churches for Residential Use. In contrast to the previous types, the ownership structure plays an important role here, because most churches belong to private owners or in some cases to housing. What both have in common is that due to the residential use, public access is mostly restricted or impossible.

The type Residential Use is found evenly in rural and sub-urban landscapes. A common characteristic is the need for enough space for possible expansions of the building and parking lots (on the property or street parking). For repurposing the building, significant structural changes are necessary: vertical partition, implementation of new or additional storeys, provision of technical infrastructure and significant alterations of the building envelope are necessary to ensure appropriate lightning and ventilation in the apartments. As a rule, the appropriation of churches for residential use leads to the utilisation of the entire building volume. This utilisation also includes static and structural changes since the building was designed for representation and church services and changes and structural inserts of such extent were not part of the initial design plan. The comprehensive utilisation of the building volume is due to high expenses and necessary investments that project developers try to compensate by significant floor space development. The major investments and significant structural changes of the building might query if conversions for residential purposes are reversed. The privatisation of the building also alters its public accessibility which in most cases is revoked. From a cultural perspective, structural alterations of the building composition, building envelope and façade are obliterating the sacred character and therefore considered significant (fig. 4).

#### Public accessibility and community value of reused churches

Churches are part of the traditional urban and rural landscape and used as publicly accessible community



**Figure 4** The re-utilisation of the St. Josephskerk (Hilversum) with apartments required structural changes of the façade necessary to provide sufficient lightning and ventilation of the apartments and open spaces (case 35)  
Photo: authors

Table 1 Mapped characteristics of re-used church buildings and adjoining plots

	Type 1: Community-Based Churches										Type 2: Mixed Use Churches										Type 3: Commercially-Utilized Churches										Type 4: Residential Use					
Religious Denomination	Type 1: Community-Based Churches										Type 2: Mixed Use Churches										Type 3: Commercially-Utilized Churches										Type 4: Residential Use					
	1 - O. L. v. van Albidderende Blijstand, Breda	2 - St. Gertrudis van Nijvelkerk, Heerte	3 - Pastoor van Arsker, Eindhoven	4 - Haaseltse Kerk, Tilburg	5 - Dorpskerk, Amstelveen	6 - Noorderkerk, Haarlem	7 - Maarten Lutherkerk, Weesp	8 - Sacramentse Kerk, Gouda	9 - Leonarduskerk, Helmond	10 - St. Jozephskerk, Arnhem	11 - Kampwegkerk, Doorn	12 - Hart van Jezuskerk, Hengelo	13 - Danieliskerk, Nijmegen	14 - Hentiuskerk, Amersfoort	15 - Oranjerkerk, Amsterdam	16 - Prielerkerk, Amsterdam	17 - Fatih Moskee / De Zaal, Amsterdam	18 - Posthoornkerk, Amsterdam	19 - Remonstrantse Kerk, Groningen	20 - Janskerk, Haarlem	21 - Kerk van Den Horn, Den Horn	22 - A-Kerk, Groningen	23 - Kerk Klein Westing, Westing	24 - Broerkerk, Zwolle	25 - St. Bernadettekerk, Helmond	26 - Maria Minor, Utrecht	27 - Jopenkerk, Haarlem	28 - St. Jozephskerk, Amsterdam	29 - Martelaren van Gorkumkerk, Den Haag	30 - St. Anna, Breda	31 - Vredekerk, Bussum	32 - Elbakkerk, Haarlem	33 - St. Vituskerk, Bussum	34 - Zuiderkerk, Groningen	35 - St. Jozephskerk, Hilversum	
Monument Status	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	1954	1862	1929	1898	1867	1923	1819	1932	1939	1928	1910	1955	1961	1908	1903	1954	1929	1860	1883	1318	1862	1492	1840	1466	1955	1863	1910	1952	1905	1914	1907	1884	1901	1936	1997	
Location	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Plot	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Structural Intervention	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Organisation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Owner	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Longer Vacancy Rate	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Service Life	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Spatial-Functional Significance	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Public Access	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	



places, despite their legal status as private property of the Catholic Church or the local protestant community. Either the church authority or the local community can decide on access rights and access times. Sharing access rights with the local community and the wider public in order to enable them to utilize the building outside church service hours as community home, for festivities or cultural services has become a common characteristic and practise of type I. Maintaining public access is an important factor for social and public acceptance as far as reuse designs are concerned. Access rights can take different forms or depend on different circumstances: permanent or temporary; for different audiences or related to the type of implemented use, such as cafés or hospitality services. Though hospitality services provide access to the building, their relatedness to consumption and commercial imperatives is restricting public availability. Termination of public access, as with type IV Residential Use, is the most contested option not only from a societal but also from a religious point of view. In the end, experiencing the church is limited to the exterior parts of the building, such as the building envelope, the façade and the open spaces surrounding the building (e.g. the cemetery). This experience might be additionally affected by structural alterations or adaptations

of the plot, such as replacing the surrounding Kerkhof with a parking lot (fig. 5).

Reuse concepts that are neglecting the community and cultural dimension of the building were questioned in the expert interviews: "For many residents in the surrounding neighbourhood, a church is still part of their direct urban surrounding, even if they are not using the church building in any way" (Peter Breukink). Especially in rural areas, the church still plays a significant role in traditional community life, since it is often the last operating 'public' community building. Developing reuse concepts for such buildings is difficult and evokes collective feelings and reactions, since the building is loaded with individual and shared memories (Bisseling et al., 2011). Consequently, reuse type I, Community-Based Churches, focuses on providing various services that are deemed suitable solutions retaining accessibility and availability for the local community and the wider public. The challenge is to develop suitable and financially viable mixes of public and commercial activities in order to fund necessary adaptations (structural, technical facilities, infrastructure such as lavatories, kitchens etc.), operation, management and maintenance in a long-term perspective.

#### Building volume vs. historic-cultural characteristics

The artistic and structural design of churches is based on its permanent, sacred use for worshipping, church services and representation. It created:

- a) a massive building (in relation to its surrounding),
- b) cultural and artistic value.

Based on this fact, we extracted two main narratives as far as the reuse of the analysed cases is concerned: i) the church's value is based on its building volume, and ii) the emblematic use; the representative and sacred character of the building.

Narrative i) highlights the importance of the building volume, since it seems to optimise or even maximise the potential floor space. This narrative is especially relevant to the residential (type IV) and commercial (type III) (supermarkets, sports) reuse types. Maximum utilisation of the floor space is mainly resulting from a strong real estate approach with straightforward cost accounting, targeting the highest possible revenue to finance the conversion of the building, operation and maintenance. Private developing also includes suitable revenue for business owners in the cost, which puts even more pressure on the utilisation of the building volume. In such repurposing narratives, motives such as sacred character, embellishments, historic-cultural or community values play a subordinate role and are not valorised in the re-design and conversion of the church.

The second narrative plays an important role in type II, Mixed Used Churches: the narrative revolves around the *genius loci* and the sacred and historic value of the church; those values are focal points for the decision-making process regarding the selection and combination of types of reuse and their translation into the building and structural design. The building's identity (e.g. artistic and historic characteristics) and sacred atmosphere (e.g. silence, contemplation) play a guiding role in staging and valorising the sacred building. Consequently, structural interventions (e.g. in the building envelope) remain rather minimal, are thoughtfully implemented, and are often achieved



**Figure 5** Providing a sufficient number of parking lots is an important question in the re-utilisation of churches (case 14)  
Photo: authors

as freestanding 'building-blocks' that are completely removable in case a re-adaptation for traditional church utilisation would take place. Another important motive is the perception of sacred buildings as Gesamtkunstwerk ('all-encompassing work of art'), demanding a respectful handling and integration of different religious and artistic components, such as pulpits, embellishments, church pews, or other furniture and décor. Developing reuse concepts following that narrative is putting the church and its historic, artistic and sacred value in the centre of attention when it comes to developing potential reuse concepts. In such cases, targeted 'match-making' by linking different parties, institutions (e.g. heritage) with a fitting church building and its community appears especially important.

### Appropriate types of reuse?

Repurposing narratives are linked to debates on appropriate (re)uses of sacred buildings. The common understanding of 'appropriateness' is subject to change over time: the present research shows that public and community acceptance has shifted over the last decade, moreover, it illustrates that not only communities but also church representatives have become more reserved and cautious when it comes to reuse and re-develop churches: "In the last decades, the acceptance of reuse solutions has changed. Society and church representatives are less open to new solutions, which could be reasoned by unsatisfying examples." (Mickey Bosschert) Those shifts are linked to social and planning practises with the re-development and implementation of reuse concepts and its subsequent community and public acceptance. Experimenting with new combinations of potential uses and openness towards possible project developers has diminished due to contested practises (e.g. major structural interventions) and the concern about the potential loss of 'their' community building; paired with concerns about 'inappropriate' uses neglecting the contemplative, sacred character, the general attitude towards repurposing churches appears to be rather negative. Reuses such as case 25 which implement commercial uses (e.g. supermarkets) were considered inappropriate, owing to insensitive handling of the community's memories that are linked to the building (e.g. weddings, funerals, community festivities, etc.); these were recurrent arguments in the interviews. Despite an increasing number of projects being considered successful by the experts (e.g. case 24 bookshop), a change in the public and community perception could not be achieved yet.

Thus, civic involvement and participatory processes including the church community in an early stage of the re-development process might be a way to overcome that challenge. Nevertheless, the data show the urge for a public debate, exploring the future societal valuation of churches and their future role in community and public life. Declining numbers of church members and attendees of church services will result in an oversupply of churches compared to the demand of regular attendees of church services and actual members. This oversupply will put church leadership (Catholic) and church communities (Protestant) under significant financial and decision-making pressure regarding the operation and long-term maintenance of their buildings. Therefore, it is to be expected that conversion to residential

(type 4) and commercial (type 3) reuse will be increasing in the future, despite concerns and hesitations on the part of local communities.

### Embeddedness in the landscape

Due to their size, building volume, artistic expression, location and embeddedness in the surrounding rural or urban landscape, churches are prominent landmarks. Being either integrated in the urban fabric or freestanding solitaire buildings, churches are spatial units that are unique and recognisable (Marcos, 2008). Embeddedness also refers to embeddedness in the local community landscape: churches are often focal points of community life and have created memory that goes beyond the traditional uses of churches. They carry individual and collective memories and stories and are closely related to local narratives. Consequently, conversions and reuse concepts that are advocating and implementing community services (Type I) and new mixes of use (e.g. mixed use that still provides the opportunity to enter the building) that still allow community members to access, enjoy and experience the sacred building in its local community context, seem to be the most successful and accepted ones.

### Conclusions

Reuse and repurposing of churches pose a planning challenge for urban and rural communities. In the rural context, the debate seems more significant due to lower population and customer density, turning reuse types emphasizing commercial utilizations into contested re-development approaches:

1. An economically viable operation of rural churches through commercial re-use options is more challenging than in urban settings: this challenge is related to a smaller population and necessary catchment areas to secure the necessary utilisation and financial turnover providing the financial funds for the maintenance of the building.
2. Urban churches are more prone to demolition: urban church buildings and/or the plots they are built on are more in the focus of property development and real estate interests. Hence, in urban settings, higher rates of economic utilisation and economic interest are driving re-use approaches stronger than in rural ones.
3. Churches in rural landscapes play an important role for the local community: often, churches are the last remaining community buildings providing a focal point for community life; thus, rural communities have a stronger interest to preserve its community character and public accessibility.

Hence, the research illustrates that there are no standard solutions for reusing sacred buildings in urban or rural contexts are existing, since every repurposing type is strongly related to the quality of the church building, its location and the needs and aspirations of the local parish and civic community. However, our work confirms that all types of reuse are either adding or replacing religious narratives and memories with secular ones. Those changes of narratives indeed result from the preservation of the building structure, although isolated from its initial religious meaning and practice. Though converted to secular

uses, there is a potential role to serve and support local communities in building their social capital.

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