

REUSE OF RELIGIOUS HERITAGE IN THE NETHERLANDS

by

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Ladies and gentlemen,

An advertisement with the words *Church for sale*, is not very uncommon in Dutch newspapers anymore. Fact is that churches and monasteries in the Netherlands are running empty fast. Loss of function, disuse and redevelopment of religious heritage is one of the biggest themes in monument care of the coming decenniums in the Netherlands. But it is also a rather complex issue.

The last twenty years the Dutch society has changed dramatically. The population has grown and shows a variety of cultural background; more people live in the cities; the average level of education has risen; prosperity is increasing; more people want to live on their own and the believe in the traditional values of the church is vanishing. Nevertheless, one out of two Dutchmen feels connected to some kind of religion, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or the Jewish religion. And also more individualistic orientated spiritual beliefs get attention and support. But on the average, because of the ongoing secularisation, less people feel that religion is the central issue in their lives.

Of course this has repercussions for the religious built heritage. Less people visit the church; the group of faithful believers is shrinking. As a result less money comes in the collecting-boxes, and consequently the burden for maintaining those enormous buildings is getting heavier every day. Instead of proper careful management and conservation they are neglected, and sold, and not seldom demolished. The price of the ground on which they are built, is always very expensive and thus sold for high price. While the catholic and protestant churches loose their front seat position, other religions, especially the Islam, need more praying houses.

This is one side of the process we are witnessing these days.

The other is that the several different protestant religious currents merged into one big national protestant church. As a result fewer churches are needed and a lot of churches have been pushed down.

These two developments make the reuse of churches and monasteries an urgent necessity. If a premises stands empty and unused for a long time, it will generally deteriorate, which sometimes results in demolition or greatly increased costs, jeopardizing the redevelopment process, and eventually damaging the cultural values of the monument. Thus, redevelopment should be done in a proper and sustainable way. New purposes should fit well into the original function.

If we look at the Dutch history, we see a large building activity of mostly gothic churches. Since 1200 at least 19.000 churches were constructed and served as the focal point of each community. They formed a well located and vital landmark. But at the end of 2007 only 4240 churches still had their religious function, of which 1740 catholic and 2320 protestant.

The Dutch monument list consists of about 61.000 buildings and has registered among them 2607 churches and 266 monasteries. This is only 5%. Most of the churches are located in the western and southern, mostly catholic, provinces like Noord-Brabant and Limburg.

Recently a report was published, written as an assignment of the bishop of Haarlem and the bishop of Rotterdam. It contained some dramatic facts and figures. For example, since 1970 in total 927 churches were closed. That means 25 churches every year. One third of them were demolished and two-third had been given a new function. Prognoses indicate that the next ten years between 1000 and 1200 churches will close their doors. This is a quarter of the total churches countrywide.

To make it even more urgent: of the total amount of 170 monasteries still in use, 150 will lose their religious function within ten years. Because no young novices enter these secluded monasteries, the average age of monks and nuns is over 75. Finally, about 150.000 religious objects and relicts will be relocated to different places, without knowing whether they will be lost forever or offered for sale the internet the very next morning.

In order to cope with these actual trends in the long term, the solution is to reuse or demolish the church. Is it that simple? No. In 2008 the catholic and protestant church communities in the Netherlands delivered a statement in which they formulated several binding conditions for new use of empty churches. One of the conclusions is that they prefer demolition to 'unworthy' new functions. Also mosques are excluded from the new purposes; and they did not give an explicit reason for this. Unfortunately, the discussion about redevelopment is very emotional most of the time. That is a pity, because the use of a former church as a mosque, can smoothly fit in the existing building, without mayor changing's. Above all, in the near future twenty or more mosques are needed. From the opinion of our Cultural Heritage Agency, mosques and other so-called 'unworthy' functions, like a discotheque or a supermarket, are indeed appropriate, because they need lesser spacious and physical interventions than for example the implementation of luxurious lofts. The issue is, we have to accept and respect these restrictions from the church, because they are the owner of the building and we, as the national government, act only as advisors.

More accurate: the Catholic Church thinks and acts differently as the Protestant Church. The Catholics think in a two-way concept: the church stays open as a house of God or it will be demolished. Generally they are not in favour of reuse. As a result 53% of the catholic churches have been demolished already. But as the Protestants think less reluctant about giving a second life to religious heritage, only 10% of the protestant churches are demolished.

In the first years after 1970 as many churches were demolished as reused. But since 2000 reuse is threefold compared to demolition. That is good news.

I like to elaborate on two more conclusions from this earlier mentioned report. First, starting from 1970 lots of churches built in neo gothic style were demolished. But in the eighties especially these churches were rewarded and

saved. After 1990 many postwar churches built between 1940-1965 were demolished. But now these so-called 'ugly' churches are reevaluated and receive special attention and architectural rewarding.

The second conclusion is that churches once built on a vital spot within the village or city, were replaced by newly constructed buildings that did not fit into the neighborhood, and often made of boring, grey concrete blocks. The appreciation of once strategic locations of churches, is lost somehow. That is why the protest against demolition is getting a louder voice.

The Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, as part of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, is designing a framework and is guiding a growing number of transformations that are assigned today. The transformations should be done with respect for the unusual experience of the spaces of the former church. Also the application of extra walls in order to keep the units open and alive, or unnecessary breakthroughs that destroy the interior space of the building, should be avoided as much as possible. And a last criterion: the built-in construction should be reversible, so it could be broken off when new, maybe more proper functions are available or necessary.

Anyway, redeveloping churches is an arduous process. Its success depends on the type of building, its position, the region and of course the willingness of the owner. Reuse can serve as an opportunity to revitalise the neighbourhood or the total district. It is a big **change** for the people living in the surrounding, but it is also a big **chance** to strengthen the local identity!

Now, let's have a look at some fine examples: like cultural functions: a theatre, museum or music performances; an apartment, a supermarket, a bookshop; or an office.

Most empty churches are maintained by local initiatives, as churches have an important function within the identity of the neighbourhood or districts. Social and cultural activities are an excellent answer to empty churches. However the exploitation of such new functions often causes a financial problem. A combination of public and private functions like office's can offer a good opportunity. By doing so, conservation on the long run is guaranteed and the spatial characteristic of the building is respected. An example of this public-private function is the Majella church in Amsterdam: it is a public archive in combination with the rental of office spaces for smaller entrepreneurs. Another good example is the Posthoorn church, also in Amsterdam: it is a multifunctional space for theatre and cultural manifestations, and also combined with office rental. Normally, churches can be reused more easily into an office than in for example apartments, for which a lot of smaller rooms are needed with extra walls and a greater negative impact on the exterior. An excellent example of a complete commercial redevelopment is the library in the Dominican church in Maastricht. It offers a sustainable function with a beautiful stand alone built-in construction.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We should take into account that redevelopment of churches is often ambivalent and controversial. Most of the time sustainable functions have negative implications on the characteristics of the protected monument. On the other hand, a church changed into a twenty lofts has no financial exploitation problems at all. But the 'space' is gone. In other words, when a new function is assigned to a church which according to our Agency is well done and respectful for the historical building, the necessity for government grants or mortgages is higher. Functions with a total cover of space do not leave much of the monumental values, but won't need any subsidy from the government. So, it is very important that (local) governments adjust their policies to the development of non-profitable or partial profitable transformed churches, together with the church communities. Some more actions in favour of the re-use of religious buildings were executed recently. In 2008 the Year of Religious Heritage was introduced in order to show and share the urgency of the problem of empty churches and to develop a coherent policy on this matter.

Secondly, the government offered help by raising the budgets for heritage management and conservation of churches, including redeveloped churches, for the period of 2010-2016 with 40 million euro. These budgets are applied for grants spread over 6 years.

Two years ago the ministry of Culture and the ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment have managed to invest in total 9 million euro for the years 2009-2012 for redevelopment of cultural heritage especially in 40 so-called problematic districts. A very important financial injection of more than two million euro each year. Till now we don't know precisely if the investment is worthwhile; we are waiting for the first conclusions.

Thirdly, and I am reaching the end of my paper, the National Restoration Fund, the 'house bank' of our Agency, stimulates new church owners with low-rented mortgages of 5% under the market price, which is less than 1,5 %. This application is especially marked for the adjustments of churches to new functions.

As we have seen, the heritage is constantly changing, it helps to shape group identities and create a feeling of continuity down the generations.

Therefore, religious heritage has to belief in the future!

Thank you very much.