

ADAPTATION OF HISTORIC SACRED BUILDINGS FOR SECULAR PURPOSES KEEPING THE SACRED FUNCTION AS A LINK BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

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Theme of the dissertation: Narrative research of semantic architecture as a tool of adaptation of sacred buildings for secular functions

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ABSTRACT: Sacred objects are an important part of Europe's religious heritage. Due to the current laicisation of Europe, the adaptation of sacred buildings for secular functions has become a necessity for economic reasons. Their owners, architects, conservators and historians are faced with a dilemma: how to preserve an object or transform it for another function? Places of worship cannot be treated in solely economic terms due to the identity of the place, its current function and symbolism. Narrative research on semantic architecture, as one of the measures of researching sacred architecture, may be one of the directions of analysis and the designing process to decorously allocate them for secular functions. The adaptation of historic sacred buildings for secular purposes, keeping the sacred function, with its strong symbolic value, can be a possible answer to the troubled future of religious heritage.

KEY WORDS: church reuse, semantic architecture, religious heritage

Introduction

Sacred architecture reflects changes taking place in the social and cultural life of a particular society. It plays a major role in the life of an individual because it "satisfies religious, spiritual

and social needs as well as the need for affiliation”.(1) Hence, in addition to their historical, architectural and ethical value, these objects also have a cultural and social quality.

Europe is currently experiencing both the desecration of faith-related objects and the secularisation of societies. This process is also evident in the urban setting; it reverberates into the conduct of the sacred space itself, including the interiors of churches. In many European cities, due to the lack of believers and the high maintenance costs, churches are sold to private individuals and converted into cultural, residential or service facilities.

The phenomenon of desacralisation has occurred in all cultures and is not a specific feature of our times. Historical examples demonstrate that sacred objects have been constantly transformed over the centuries. Today, it requires attention because “of our greater awareness of the symbolic, artistic and historical value of sacred buildings and the items conserved in them”.(2)

The current state of research

The problem of adaptation of sacred buildings is not widespread in Poland, which is a country with deep Christian traditions, where almost 58% of the population attend church. However, it has become the subject of public attention in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. Therefore, a wide range of scientific publications on this subject have been written there. These include the publications by Coomans et al. (2012). Latham (2013) Klanten & Feireiss (2009) Morisset, et al. (2006), and Verkaaik, et al. (2017) that report numerous examples of the adaptation of historic buildings for new functions. In addition, the author discusses the extent of transformations that should be accepted, both in terms of their size and usefulness for a given function. The researchers Stückelberger (2019), De Wildt et al. (2019), De Wildt (2020), and Plevoets & Van Cleempoel (2019) analyse architecture and space as religion, the phenomenon of adaptation as a process, and the transformation of temples for other secular purposes.

The abovementioned publications concern the architectural, technical and historical aspects of the adaptation of sacred buildings for secular purposes, as well as the religious and liturgical aspects. However, they do not address this phenomenon in the semantic-narrative approach, in which sacred architecture is treated as the site of a story through semantic elements combined into a cohesive whole.

The aim of the research

The subject of the Phd, which is partially mentioned in this paper, is the analysis of the adaptation of historic sacred objects in Western Europe with the use of the narrative me-

thod. The conducted research is qualitative, not quantitative, and serves to explore the research problem and the directions of transformation of given sacred objects, and to disseminate the possibility of further research. The territorial scope covers Western Europe, as an area where the phenomenon of adaptation is widespread and where numerous controversial examples of adaptation of former places of worship can be indicated.

The aim of this research is to draw attention to the important and often forgotten semantic aspect of sacred objects during adaptation for secular functions. The aim of narrative research is an attempt to enter the real, multi-layered, often hidden content of an object. Narrative research (described in the next section) can be used to analyse selected adaptation implementations, and to present a certain model of conduct during the adaptation of sacred objects. It should be underlined that the aim of the research is to find acceptable new secular functions for former churches, where sacred, historical and conservation values are taken into consideration; new purposes and solutions that can be implemented in a society with strong Christian values without causing a cognitive dissonance.

Narrative research of semantic architecture

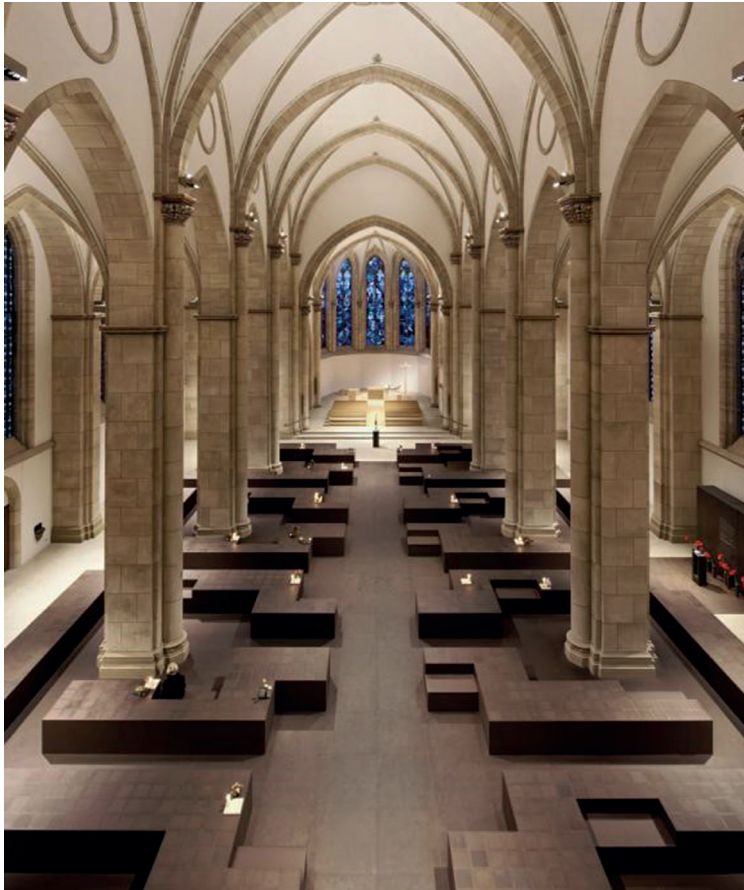
The narrative method, resulting from the narrative research on contemporary semantic architecture, was formulated by Anna Maria (Wierzbicka, 2013) on the basis of the book 'Architecture as meaningful narration', transferred to the field of research on the adaptation of historic places of worship. This method consists of the following points (aspects) according to which selected objects are analysed. The method assumes analysing selected projects in two stages: the creation and adaptation for a function other than the sacred one. They are: history (the story told by the object), place (the location of the object in the architectural, urban and social context), time (the aspect of time of origin and transformation for secular function), creator of the narrative (the idea of the architect, the artist, the builder, his creative intentions, beliefs and intentions), purpose of adaptation and reconsecration (whether the desecralisation process is reversible? Will interference with the internal structure of the building allow for fulfilling liturgical function inside the temple again, e.g., in 50 or 100 years?).

Case studies

In this paper several adaptation projects in the Netherlands and Germany will be presented.

One of the possibilities is adaptation to a columbarium. The function of a funeral is directly related to religion and sacred buildings. One such example is the transformation to a columbarium of the Catholic church of Our Lady in Dortmund, Germany in 2011 (Img. 1). The cemetery-like layout of the field of urns (4,000 cinerary urns) evokes an

analogy with traditional burials in the ground. At the same time, because the urns are installed only 80 cm above the church floor, reminiscent of the familiar pews or chairs otherwise found there, the existing church interior can still unfold its full spatial and atmospheric dimensions.⁽³⁾ The Church of St. Bartholomew's in Cologne was partially converted into a columbarium in 2014. The space has been divided into two parts. The Chapel (Img. 2) has been kept in the centre, surrounded by the actual burial vaults, which are arranged in a geometrical concentration of recesses offering a final resting place for 2400 urns.⁽⁴⁾ Both churches still serve their sacred function, Holy Masses are held there. The buildings are financially self-sufficient thanks to burial costs.



Img. 1. Conversion of the Church of Our Lady in Dortmund into a Columbarium (Source: <https://miesarch.com/work/1247>).



Img. 2. Conversion of the Church of St. Bartholomew's in Cologne into a Columbarium (Source: <https://polish-architects.com/pl/promesh-gmbh-muhlacker/project/columbarium>).

St. Lawrence Church in Rotterdam is used both for sacred and cultural functions (Img. 3). There are Holy Masses of the Protestant and Catholic communities on Sundays. In addition, organ concerts, permanent exhibitions, and other cultural events are held there. In the permanent exhibition, the side chapels present events from the history of the city and the church.

Churches in smaller towns and villages are often transformed into local community centres while keeping their sacred function. In most cases, they belong to foundations that protect abandoned churches or religious communities. There is a foundation in the province of Groningen, the Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken, which acquires disused churches (about 100 church buildings) and protects them. One of them is Garmerwolde Church.

The church is rented out for celebrations: weddings, funerals, various meetings, receptions, concerts and exhibitions (Img. 4). Nevertheless, its original function has been preserved - once a month the service of the reformed Protestant community of Garmerwolde Thesinge is held there. The Church of St. Gertrudis in Heerle was renovated and adapted to a local cultural centre (Img. 5), transforming the side aisle into a chapel for religious services (Img. 6).



Img. 3. Conversion of the Church of St. Lawrence in Rotterdam into a cultural centre
(Source: M.Arno).



Img. 4. Garmerwolde Church, 2018 (Source: <http://www.kerkgarmerwolde.nl>).



Img. 5. Conversion of the Church of St. Gertrudis in Heerle into a cultural centre. A view of the lobby. (Source: Reinstra A., Stolenberg F. 2020. *Kerkgebouwen – 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik*. Amsterdam: Blauwdruk, p. 94).



Img. 6. Conversion of the Church of St. Gertrudis in Heerle into a cultural centre. A view of the side aisle. (Source: Reinstra A., Stolenberg F. 2020. *Kerkgebouwen – 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik*. Amsterdam: Blauwdruk, p. 94).

Conclusions

Adaptation of sacred objects has become a common practice in Western Europe. Transformations of sacred objects must be carried out with respect to the existing historical tissue and sacred tissue (elements of sacred interior furnishings, altars, reliquaries, tabernacles or tombs). Aesthetic solutions do not always create ethical contents. Despite the good intentions of designers and the owners of buildings, former places of worship are often profaned. Revitalisation, modernisation - the desacralisation of sacred objects must

be designed in such a way as to enable restoration of their sacred function.

The pre-conceptual design analysis of sacred objects can be supplemented by the method of narrative research, which allows for the analysis of various aspects of sacred objects in a multidimensional manner. The purpose of a narrative in a cultural context is related to the site, the narrator, the recipient and the time of narrative. Narrative research of semantic architecture, as one of the measures of researching sacred architecture, may be one of the directions in which analysis and the designing process can be appropriately allocated to secular functions.

Footnotes

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