CHURCHES IN THE RE-CONSTRUCTION OF ROTTERDAM AFTER THE BOMBINGS IN 1940

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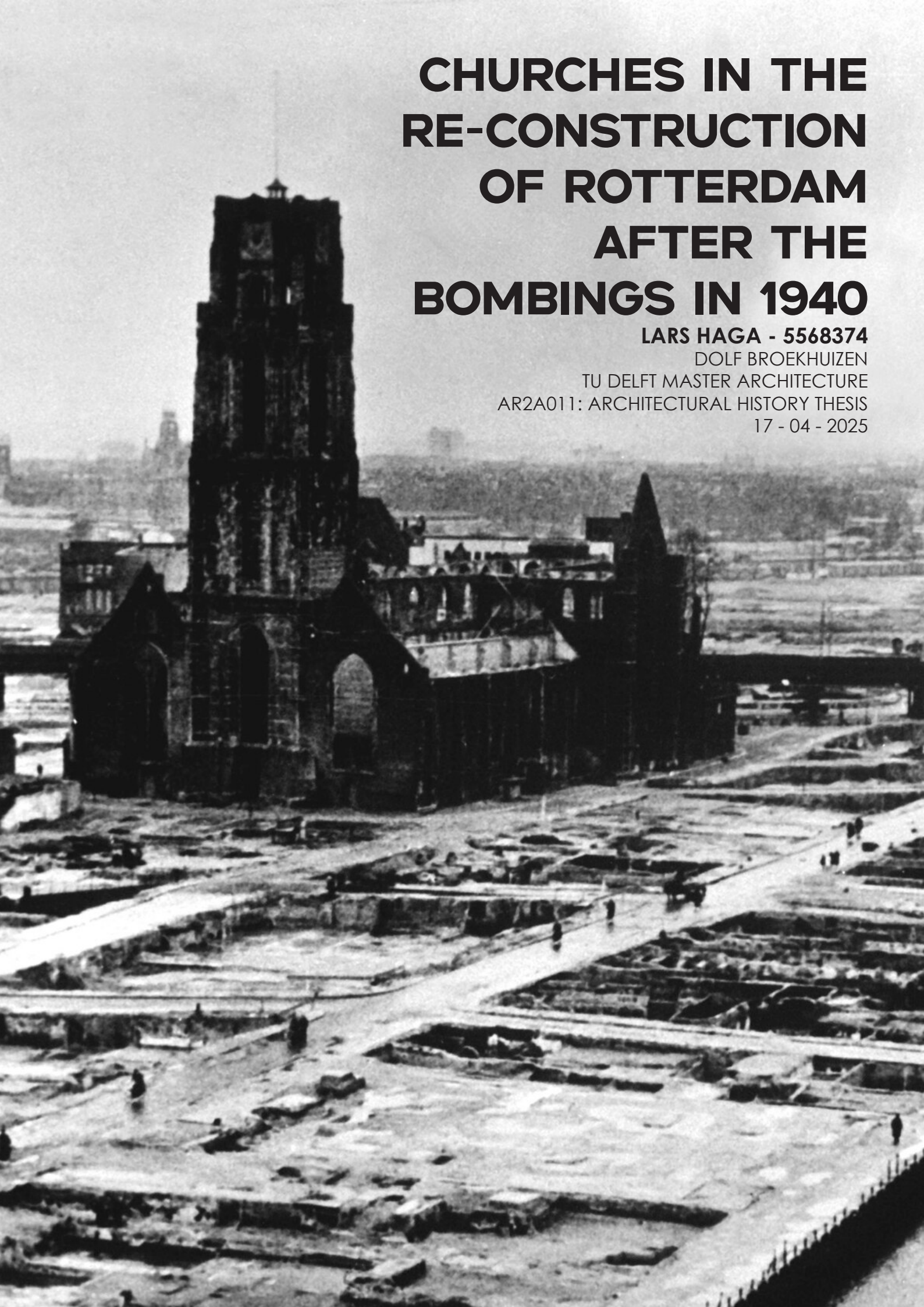

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the changing role of religion and churches in Rotterdam, from the seventeenth century to the present day. Central to this narrative is the Laurenskerk, which both symbolizes and reflects the broader transitions within Rotterdam.

Over the years, the city and its inhabitants have undergone significant transformation—socially, culturally, and architecturally—from pre-war urban development to the devastation of World War II. For centuries and decades prior to the war, the church was the central hub of social life. However, after the immense suffering Rotterdam endured, people no longer found their sense of belonging in the church, but rather in other forms of social infrastructure.

As a result, churches gradually emptied, losing their religious function, with attention shifting toward their aesthetic and historical value. To preserve them, many were repurposed into multifunctional spaces. The Laurenskerk stands as a prime example: a ruin that, after the bombings, became a symbol of resilience and historical continuity, and was later adapted to serve various purposes in order to support its upkeep.

This thesis argues that the evolution of Rotterdam's churches parallels the broader social shift from religious collectivity to cultural individualism, marking a fundamental change in how urban space and identity are constructed.

CONTENT LIST

1. INTRODUCTION

The social function of public buildings in Rotterdam drastically changed after the war and bombardments in the inner city (after 1939). In the years before the war Rotterdam had a historic inner city with buildings that served as meeting places, commercial centers and cultural hubs (Bos, A. 1946). After the war however, the destroyed city gave way to a more modern vision upon urban planning with buildings with another social function (Van de Laar, p., 2000). This became especially evident within churches in Rotterdam. The Laurenskerk will be centrally discussed as it is the most important church in Rotterdam having had a great influence during the reconstruction (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959). The Laurenskerk can be viewed as a metaphor and representation of the broader social and religious transformation that the city of Rotterdam and its inhabitants have undergone. Additionally, the Laurenskerk is the oldest surviving monument in Rotterdam and is symbolically intertwined with the shifting identity of the city. (Dijk, H. van, 1980).

The evolution that the Laurenskerk has experienced is compared to the social setting of Rotterdam with its people and buildings. This introduces the main question for this thesis: How did the social function of churches in Rotterdam change from before the bombings and war (1939) to the decades after the bombings? Before this question can be answered however, the (social) setting in Rotterdam in the years before, during and after the war needs to be researched after which the churches in Rotterdam can be examined to see how they adapted to the changing social and urban context. This research aims to deconstruct and dive deeper into this transition of religious function within the churches to find out how important this was to the population and how it influenced the following decades.

Research has already shown that a transition took place from purely religious centers to broader, often multifunctional spaces that responded to the needs of post-war society. New church buildings are increasingly designed for multifunctional use, combining them with homes and offices. Furthermore, the church buildings themselves are increasingly being used less by different religious communities. (De Jonge, S., 2002). Concludingly, Looking at the Laurenskerk, its primary source of income now comes from commercial rentals. As a result, the church is not accessible to the public after these events take place (Eisses, K., 2011).

In my research, I aim to take a critical stance on the total research, without necessarily addressing a gap in the existing literature. Instead, the focus will be on how the city and its inhabitants changed during a critical period (World War) and how these new needs of the residents are reflected in churches as significant gathering places, specifically the Laurenskerk. This study serves as an important learning moment for an uncertain future, given

the ongoing threat of global conflict.
The research will first examine the setting of Rotterdam and its churches before and during the war. Key events will be noted and their impact on the society of Rotterdam examined. Subsequently, the same setting will be analyzed after the war, during the period of reconstruction. The changing society and its effect on religion and churches will be analyzed and compared to the decades before the war. The Laurenskerk and the social well-being of Rotterdam's residents will be central to this analysis. Finally, the contemporary status of religion and churches will be examined after which all periods will be compared to highlight the changes and formulate a critical conclusion.

2. ROTTERDAM IN THE YEARS BEFORE THE WAR: A CITY IN TRANSFORMATION

2.1 Urban Renewal in the Port City

In the decades leading up to World War II, Rotterdam was the most important port city in the Netherlands. It was not merely a city with a harbor, but rather a city that was built around and in service of its port. However, the prosperity of the residents of Rotterdam began to decline, partly due to the absence of cultural entertainment (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

After World War I, the first calls for urban renewal emerged. The modernization of the city was inevitable, yet the manner in which this transformation would take place remained uncertain. Initially, little attention seemed to be given to the city's historical identity by the modernists who drove the call for transformation. However, a group of traditionalists rose to prominence, advocating for renewal while striving to preserve valuable elements of the old merchant city (Laar, P. van de, 2000). Wattjes and Ten Bosch (1940, before the bombings) furthermore stated and argued that drastic traffic breakthroughs in urban planning were no longer considered progressive and that Rotterdam's historic harbors, the old stock exchange, and the Schielandshuis should be spared from demolition.

2.2 Emergence of Art and Culture

By the late 1930s, Rotterdam was beginning to emerge as a more culturally vibrant city. With the establishment of Museum Boijmans and the rise of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, local artists and performers found greater opportunities for creative expression. A city culture developed in which Rotterdam's residents—accustomed to a life of shipping, trade, and pragmatism—could escape their daily burdens of life through music, dance, and theater (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

In the years leading up to World War II, Rotterdam had retained its historic beauty while cultivating a newfound sense of cultural and social well-being among its inhabitants. Confidence was restored where the people of Rotterdam no longer had to fear that their spiritual and cultural values would be sacrificed for economic gain (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The message was clear: Rotterdam had learned its lessons…

3. ROTTERDAM DURING THE WAR YEARS

3.1 Reconstruction Amidst War

On May 18, 1940, shortly after the bombings of Rotterdam's city center on May 14, the municipal executive council commissioned Witteveen to draft the main outlines of a reconstruction plan (Laar, P. van de, 2000). Overseeing this process was J.A. Ringers, "the general commissioner for reconstruction". His first action was to expropriate the devastated city center, ensuring that Witteveen would not have to take into account the historical urban layout when designing his new plan. Additionally, Ringers ensured that Witteveen would not have to consider potential claims from residents and property owners of the destroyed buildings, including homes, businesses, and cafés. Compensation was tied to a mandatory rebuilding obligation (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

In a matter of days, years of debate and disagreement over Rotterdam's renewal—particularly regarding the preservation of its historic charm—were rendered irrelevant. The German-appointed administration proceeded with its own plans, with little regard for the city's residents. The Nazi leadership viewed Rotterdam as an essential "Hafenstadt" (port city) and took a keen interest in Witteveen's new plan, particularly in his efforts to restore the major port infrastructure that Rotterdam had spent years trying to move away from (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Despite the imposed restrictions, Witteveen still paid significant attention to preserving the historical inner city. His vision presented a romanticized urban landscape aimed at maintaining a sense of continuity (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

3.2 Destruction and Resistance

In the final year of the war, the pressure from the Allies increased as they advanced into Belgium. In response, the Germans initiated the dismantling of Rotterdam's still-functional port and shipyard facilities, transporting them back to Germany (Laar, P. van de, 2000). Additionally, they systematically destroyed strategic infrastructure, including quay walls. In total, the Germans demolished 4.7 kilometers of general cargo quay, damaging 1,500 homes and buildings in the process (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

As resistance among Rotterdam's population grew—with increasing acts of looting, sabotage, and defiance—the Germans retaliated by implementing the razzia in Rotterdam, also known as the "manhunt." During this operation, able-bodied men between the ages of 17 and 40 were forcibly conscripted for German labor, in part to prevent them from joining the underground resistance. Ultimately, 50,000 men were taken, making Rotterdam the site of the largest razzia operation carried out by the Nazis (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

3.3 The Hunger Winter

However, this was only the beginning of Rotterdam's suffering, as the harsh winter loomed. As the war progressed, food supplies became increasingly scarce. Open spaces in the city were repurposed for growing vegetables and rye, while a wave of private citizens took up urban farming, just barely providing enough food for survival (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Things took a drastic turn for the worse after "Dolle Dinsdag" ("Mad Tuesday"), when false radio reports of an imminent liberation spread throughout the city. This marked the beginning of the Hunger Winter. With many men gone due to the razzia, Rotterdam fell into neglect—waste collection ceased, the windmills stopped working, and the city's waterways began to reek. It was not long before people were literally fighting over food and firewood. Trees and wooden structures vanished from the city, and even the tram rails were dismantled for their hardwood blocks. Children became severely malnourished, and exhausted mothers went on "voedselstrooptochten" (food raids/roaming's) with their children in desperate search of food, even outside the city (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Thousands of residents of Rotterdam perished from starvation during this brutal winter. With no wood left for coffins, the dead were buried naked, without a proper funeral (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Laar (2000) states that by the end of the war, almost all 'Rotterdammers' had lost their last remnants of courage and hope, having had no time to even process the trauma of the bombings, the destruction of the harbor, or the razzia. Following a series of public executions meant to intimidate the population, May 5, 1945, finally marked the day of liberation.

"The Rotterdammers waiting at the city's exit roads for the arriving liberators savored the chocolate, cigarettes, and other treats handed out by the Allied troops" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 449).

4. THE SOCIAL ROLE OF CHURCHES IN ROTTERDAM BEFORE AND DURING THE WAR

4.1 Restoration and Reconstruction of Churches from the 17th to the 19th Century

Already in the 17th century, a shift began in the approach to church renovation and reconstruction. In earlier centuries, destroyed churches were typically rebuilt according to traditional methods, with great care to preserve the original style and architectural character (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959). However, from the 17th century onwards, renovations increasingly reflected the contemporary design sensibilities of the time. Replacements were often made in the fashion of the current era, resulting in churches that deviated stylistically from their original form.

This period also marked a shift in the underlying motivations for reconstruction. The restoration of churches became less about preserving sacred spaces for religious expression and more about maintaining the aesthetic and symbolic presence of the church within the urban landscape (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959).

By the 18th century, this trend continued and intensified. The societal and financial strength required for full restorations had diminished. Churches were often reconstructed with a mix of old and new elements, designed in the stylistic language of the time, reflecting a more rational, practical mindset (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959).

In the 19th century, public attitudes toward church restoration became even more distant. This was partly due to the construction techniques of the era—such as detailed stone carving, vaulted stone and wooden ceilings—which no longer aligned with medieval building traditions, making authentic reconstructions far more difficult. Moreover, the spiritual attachment to churches waned, especially after the stop of burials within church buildings (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959).

As a result, many older churches were demolished to make room for modern structures, abandoning the earlier practice of combining historical elements with new interpretations, as had been common in the 18th century.
Toward the end of the 19th century, however, another significant shift took place. In an era of improving economic conditions and the emergence of modern architecture, a new wave of churches began to appear which were rebuilt in their original forms. “Restoration in the original form of important monuments appears, perhaps contrary to expectation, to occur only during vital, prosperous periods” (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959, p. 511).

4.2 Religious Tensions and Social Cohesion in Rotterdam

After the French Revolution of 1848, political unrest grew in the Netherlands in the years following 1850. In the wake of the revolution, key national issues such as education, colonial policy, and poverty relief became dominant factors in shaping local political dynamics (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The situation escalated in 1853 when Rome attempted to restore the Catholic episcopal hierarchy in the Netherlands, sparking nationwide unrest. For many Dutch citizens, this felt "as if a foreign church prince, from beyond the mountains, was imposing his power on small Holland" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 17). This unrest culminated in the April Movement, a surge of strong anti-Catholic sentiment across the country.

At the time, Rotterdam's population was composed of 57% Reformed Protestants, while Catholics made up a minority of 30%. Since 1795, Catholics had been permitted to emerge from their hidden churches, and the city government had granted them permission to build parish churches. In 1833, construction began on the Laurenskerk to serve the Catholic community of Rotterdam, followed by more Catholic churches in the years leading up to 1850. However, the April Movement seemed to reverse these gains; in a significant display of opposition, the people of Rotterdam signed a petition inside the Laurenskerk against the reintroduction of the episcopal hierarchy (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Laar (2000) raises an important question: why did Rotterdam, which had shown little evidence of anti-Catholic sentiment, react so strongly? He argues that the answer lies within the Dutch Reformed Church itself and its hierarchical structure, particularly in how governance and gender roles were arranged within the church.

4.3 Religion as a Foundation for Social Cohesion

In Rotterdam, religion played a crucial role in fostering a sense of unity. As Bos (1946) put it, "the city becomes the cradle of faith" (p. 265). In his study on the social and cultural urban community of the city, Bos argues that urban planning should take into account the development of community spirit. While this could be achieved in various ways—such as through medical and social services—Bos emphasizes that religious education was, at the time, an essential pillar of community cohesion. He highlights the importance of cultivating a sense of mutual solidarity (Bos, A. 1946).

In this context, the Catholic Church played a significant role. "The Catholic Church possesses a first-rate social center in the form of the church building itself" (Bos, A. 1946, p. 292). Through its parish system, the Catholic Church united its followers into a close-knit community. According to Laar (2000), this sense of belonging and shared identity was what ultimately helped the people of Rotterdam endure the darkest days of the war.

In contrast, Bos (1946) argues that Protestantism adopted a different approach. He claims that Protestant church communities formed weak bonds, and "offered little perspective for fostering social behavior" (Bos, A. 1946). However, Protestantism experienced a revival in the decades following 1900, as the church sought to redefine its role as a social educator. As a result, Protestant churches became increasingly important within Rotterdam's neighborhoods (Bos, A. 1946).

4.4 The Laurenskerk: A Symbol of Old Rotterdam

During the German occupation, when Witteveen was drafting his reconstruction plan, he divided the city center into three sections. The Laurenskerk was designated as the heart of Old Rotterdam—a choice that held deep significance. Even in ruins after the bombings, the remnants of the Laurenskerk carried immense historical value and maintained a special connection with the people of Rotterdam (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The importance of the Laurenskerk was firmly established in the new plan and thus created a great need for the reconstruction of the church…

4.5 The Future of Religion in Rotterdam

Bos concludes his analysis with a striking statement: "All that still exists will, for the time being, continue to exist" (Bos, A. 1946, p. 295). He suggests that Rotterdam's old neighborhoods will preserve their traditional religious and social structures, with insular faith communities continuing to follow their own methods and ideologies.

However, Bos (1946) also sees promise for the future of Rotterdam. He characterizes the city as a place of dramatic tensions and tragic conflicts—a battleground between the old and the new, the static and the dynamic. In his view, the old order will eventually break, allowing faith to open itself to transformation, becoming not only a religious force but also a symbol of the Dutch people's resilience and progress.

5. ROTTERDAM AFTER THE WAR—THE RECONSTRUCTION

5.1 Post-War Governance

In the aftermath of the war, Rotterdam slowly began its recovery. The city's population longed for a new, democratically elected municipal government to guide them forward (Donker, D., 1955). Life in the city gradually resumed, marked by a strong sense of urgency and movement. Tens of thousands of displaced 'Rotterdammers' returned, many of whom had been victims of forced labor raids and other wartime atrocities. In the first months after liberation, both the temporary administration and the citizens focused primarily on providing shelter, restoring food supply chains, reviving employment, and addressing the various social and logistical challenges left in the wake of German occupation (Donker, D., 1955).

Initially, a provisional council worked alongside military authorities to maintain order in the city. However, by August 1946, this temporary governance structure was replaced by a democratically elected municipal council, signaling a return to normal civic administration (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

5.2 Basisplan Van Traa

By the winter of 1945, preliminary plans for Rotterdam's reconstruction had already been drafted. These would later be formalized as the Basisplan Van Traa (Laar, P. van de, 2000). Willem Gerrit Witteveen had initially overseen reconstruction efforts, but his successor, Cornelis van Traa, took over management of the project. Unlike Witteveen, Van Traa sought to expand the city's spatial framework, allowing for larger commercial and business districts. However, he did not have the luxury of starting from scratch—his plans had to accommodate both the surviving buildings left after the bombings and the modifications already implemented by Witteveen (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Despite being viewed as part of the past, Witteveen's vision closely aligned with Van Traa's so-called 'new' Basisplan. The main differences were found in urban design and spatial planning. "The Basisplan Van Traa, in its essence, was nothing more than a zoning plan, limited to four primary urban functions: traffic, industry, residential areas, and recreation" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 457).

The early stages of reconstruction, particularly re-establishing employment and infrastructure, were met with considerable difficulty. The city had suffered extensive sabotage following the bombings and port demolitions. Although many were eager to work, the overall situation was bleak: housing shortages were severe, churches had been lost, and no fewer than 6,970 business premises had been destroyed (Donker, D., 1955). The economic engine that had once defined pre-war Rotterdam was unrecognizable. Many essential industries, including construction and metallurgy—both vital

for rebuilding—had either disappeared or relocated outside the city.

5.3 Cultural Resurgence

Before the war, Rotterdam had also been emerging as a cultural hub. However, in 1945, the municipal government was unable to prioritize cultural policy, as urgent practical matters such as rebuilding the port, restoring traffic systems, and clearing the ruins of the city center took precedence. Only after these foundational concerns were addressed could attention shift back to cultural development. By the 1960s, Rotterdam had surpassed Amsterdam and The Hague in nearly every cultural sector, cementing its status as a thriving cultural metropolis (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

5.4 Reconstruction of the Laurenskerk

In 1950, a historic decision was made to renovate and reconstruct the Laurenskerk, which at the time still stood only barely upright. For the people of Rotterdam, the Grote Kerk (Laurenskerk) in the city center was more than just a church—it was a symbol, a landmark, and a point of recognition that resonated throughout the city (Donker, D., 1955). Driven by strong public sentiment and grassroots support, the city decided in favor of its restoration. As Donker eloquently noted, "Both the old and the new are founded upon the same principle of faith and confidence in the growth and greatness of Rotterdam" (Donker, D., 1955, p. 123).

For more than a decade, the ruined shell of the Laurenskerk dominated the devastated cityscape and became a powerful visual symbol of prewar Rotterdam. Although it had likely suffered more damage than any other building in the city, there was a clear will to rebuild. After removing the timber roofing and the rows of columns in the nave, and the overlying masonry, only the damaged exterior walls remained (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959). Despite the lack of reliable architectural drawings, historians and architects were able to reconstruct a faithful image of the church's original form through photographs and meticulous research.

The restoration of the Laurenskerk also posed an urgent question: how to reintegrate the church into the modern urban fabric of postwar Rotterdam, especially as outlined in the new Basisplan. This proved challenging, since the church had stood for years as a freestanding ruin in a wide, empty plain, resembling more a solitary monument than a functioning part of the city (Donker, D., 1955).

Although the people of Rotterdam had grown accustomed to this open context, it had never been the original architectural intention, as with most Gothic churches, the Laurenskerk was designed to be partially obscured, with its form unfolding gradually through glimpses and sightlines. Its surroundings were meant to frame its presence, granting it a sense of scale and dignity (Donker, D., 1955).

Ultimately, the modern redesign of the surrounding area incorporated this historic insight. The church was once again anchored in the city's layout, now with streets that guide the eye and the visitor toward it, reestablishing its presence and prominence within the built environment (Donker, D., 1955).

6. THE SOCIAL ROLE OF CHURCHES AFTER THE WAR

6.1 The Social and Cultural Shifts of the 1960s

During the reconstruction period between 1945 and 1965, the church was kept both literally and symbolically at the center of society (Dettingmeijer, R., 2002). In those years, there was a strong emphasis on consensus-building, with a so-called "civilizing offensive" in which the church was given a central, guiding role in shaping the moral and social order of the new city (Dettingmeijer, R., 2002). The Dutch government also played a specific role in shaping the postwar urban religious landscape, as it subsidized the construction of new churches. This support stemmed from the belief that churches fulfilled an important social and societal function in the emerging residential neighborhoods (Wesselink, H., E., 2018). However, this vision for the role of the church during the reconstruction quickly proved to be out of step with the rapidly modernizing Rotterdam.

The 1960s witnessed significant shifts in Rotterdam's social and cultural landscape. The dynamic changes that Bos (1946) had predicted immediately after the war had now fully materialized. The Rotterdam resistance was primarily directed against the material city and, by extension, the culture of reconstruction that accompanied it. Many 'Rotterdammers' opposed the idea that economic prosperity and growth were being prioritized above all else. This resistance movement ultimately led to a "reassessment of cultural policy as a counterbalance to the city's industrial development" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 578). With this growing presence and influence of the cultural sector in Rotterdam, churches gradually faded into the background as centers of social gatherings and entertainment grew more and more popular. A large-scale process of de-pillarization and secularization was underway (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

While churches had once served as the most important urban anchor points prior to the war, they gradually came to be seen as functionless relics—what Dettingmeijer calls "obstructive monuments" in a city increasingly defined by progress, efficiency, and economic growth (Dettingmeijer, R., 2002). According to Laar (2000), these trends had already begun before the war, particularly affecting the generation born between 1910 and 1929. By the 1960s, this generation was experiencing prosperity for the first time in their lives. The previously restrictive economic policies of post-war austerity gave way to increased income and leisure time. More people owned cars, and for the first time, some even took vacations.

At the same time, this generation had lost faith in the pacification democracy that had shaped the Netherlands' post-war political structure. Instead, they expressed their discontent by supporting anti-establishment parties, such as the Boerenpartij (Farmers' Party) and D66 (Democrats 66) (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The shifting mindset of Dutch society in this period

was aptly summarized by historian Hans Righart: "Less church, more school, less work, and more sex" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 577).

6.2 Secularization—the Disappearance of Church Life

By the late 1950s, pastors and priests began observing a loosening of moral standards in Dutch society. Around the same time, the first alarming reports of secularization emerged. The Dutch Reformed Church was the first to express serious concerns, as the traditional balance between Protestants and Catholics had begun to shift. Whereas in the 19th century, the Dutch population was 57% Reformed and 30% Catholic, by 1938, this had reversed to 30% Reformed and 40% Catholic (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Adding to the Dutch Reformed Church being in the minority, the overall church community faced a 17% decline in membership. However, it wasn't until the 1960s that the Catholic Church began to experience the full impact of secularization. This shift started with criticism of orthodox teachings, particularly regarding sexuality, which led to a steady decline in church attendance (Laar, P. van de, 2000). By the late 1970s, religious sociologists classified Catholics as the "least orthodox religious group" (Laar, P. van de, 2000, p. 578). In contrast, the Reformed population remained more stable for a longer period, as their birth rates declined at a slower pace (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

6.3 The Decline of Attendance to the Social Church

As modern mass society evolved, both Protestants and Catholics felt a diminishing need for church attendance. According to Reverend Van Veldhuizen, this shift led to the loss of the church's social function (Laar, P. van de, 2000). No longer did people attend church to meet others or engage in social interactions as these activities were now found elsewhere, in public spaces and entertainment venues. Additionally, the language and atmosphere of society changed; the way people spoke in sports events (such as boxing and football) or cafés became increasingly distant from the formal expressions used in church. However, Laar (2000) argues that these changes were not the primary reason for declining church attendance. Instead, it was the growing reluctance of churchgoers to submit to spiritual authority, combined with broader resistance to authoritarian structures and the increasing availability of leisure activities and television, that contributed to the decline.

At the neighborhood level, the process of secularization was largely driven by demographic shifts. Families that remained committed to their faith often moved to "better neighborhoods", where they could surround themselves with like-minded communities (Laar, P. van de, 2000). As a result, churches in older neighborhoods struggled to maintain engagement with newcomers and those left behind. The students and working-class youth moving into these areas were far less oriented toward religion and largely unaffected by

the church's message (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

6.4 Teenager Culture as a Result of Secularization on Society

The process of secularization extended beyond the religious sphere, influencing other aspects of social life as well. People no longer automatically voted in alignment with the religious or ideological pillar they were raised in, instead adopting a more critical perspective on society.

Before 1960, there was little to no societal criticism among students. However, after 1960, a student movement emerged—not primarily to change society, but to advocate for their own material conditions. These movements largely recruited students from working-class or middle-class backgrounds. At the same time, a distinct "teenage culture" developed, characterized by the blurring of class distinctions and a shared identity through clothing and music (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

6.5 Secularization and its impact on Rotterdam's urban landscape—Depillarization

With fewer people attending church, the demand for church buildings declined drastically. In an effort to preserve these emptying structures, Rotterdam sought ways to repurpose churches for social, cultural, or commercial functions. However, when this proved unsuccessful, many churches were demolished (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The sharp drop in attendance left churches unable to sustain their growing operational costs, and necessary renovations had been postponed for too long, leaving many buildings in a state of disrepair (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The Catholic community lost Ignatius and Laurentius Church (1967), the Reformed Church the Nieuwe Zuiderkerk (1967), and the Protestant community lost the Wilhelminakerk and the Koninginnekerk (1972). The destruction of the Koninginnekerk was the final straw after its temporary social-cultural function ended with the opening of De Doelen, the building was left without purpose and was ultimately torn down. As a result, the skyline of Rotterdam was directly reshaped by the process of secularization (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Many Inhabitants of Rotterdam were outraged by this drastic transformation of their city's architectural landscape. For some, it was incomprehensible that, after the destruction of World War II, Rotterdam continued to erase its own historical buildings without remorse (Laar, P. van de, 2000).

Contemporary heritage conservation still struggles with the growing number of vacant church buildings. Solutions must be found to address this issue, often requiring difficult and sensitive decisions (Wesselink, H. E., 2018). While the "demolition wave" of recent decades appears to have largely come to a halt, it has been replaced by a new wave of transformations (Wesselink, 2018). In these cases, although the exterior of the church may be preserved, the unique and often monumental interior is typically lost in the process.

Wesselink (2018) notes that society must come to terms with the fact that the intrinsic, sacred meaning of many church buildings is disappearing. However, he also argues that these buildings can still play a valuable societal role. As long as there is local support and sound financial management, these iconic structures can be preserved by giving them new, community-oriented functions.

Such transitions, however, often imply a complete metamorphosis of the church building—internally and, in some cases, externally as well.

6.6 The Laurenskerk in the Present

In 1989, the Laurenskerk was officially transferred to the Grote- or Sint Laurenskerk Foundation. This decision was prompted by the municipality of Rotterdam's inability to continue bearing the financial burden of the church's maintenance and operational costs (Eisses, K., 2011). The creation of the foundation opened up new opportunities and strategies to preserve the building.

As noted above, the Laurenskerk has also undergone a significant transformation like many others. Today, it serves as a nationally renowned venue for organ concerts and choral performances. However, these cultural events are not the foundation's primary source of revenue. The church's financial sustainability now largely depends on commercial rentals. Over the years, this practice has faced criticism, especially when the church is used for business dinners and even house parties, which many consider inappropriate for a historical and religious monument. Additionally, the church is often closed to the public before, during, and after such events, further fueling public concern (Eisses, K., 2011).

In response to these concerns and to make the building more publicly accessible, a permanent exhibition was launched in 2005. This exhibition narrates the dramatic and emotional history of the church, offering insight into its significance throughout the centuries. Today, the Laurenskerk stands as a symbol of Rotterdam's historical identity, both architecturally and culturally—inside and out (Eisses, K., 2011).

7. CONCLUSION

Looking back at the different historical periods of Rotterdam, a clear shift in both social and urban development becomes visible. Each of these transitions has left its mark on the city's religious landscape and its churches. This transition signifies a religious transformation, in which churches are increasingly recognized as cultural heritage, while social interaction has shifted towards the cultural sector. Altogether, this has influenced and shaped Rotterdam's urban transformation.

Even before the war, Rotterdam was already undergoing a transformation, playing with the balance between preservation and modernism. The city was flourishing in terms of art and culture and aimed to position itself as the cultural hub of the Netherlands (Laar, P. van de, 2000). This rise, alongside the preservation of historical aesthetics during times of urban renewal, gave citizens a renewed sense of confidence and identity (Laar, P. van de, 2000). It can be concluded that this cultural revival went hand in hand with Rotterdam's economic prosperity. It also influenced how people viewed church restoration. While previous centuries had seen diminishing attention to authentic reconstruction, often favouring contemporary interventions, this newfound wealth sparked a renewed appreciation for the aesthetic value of churches (Bouwkundig Weekblad, 1959). However, Laar (2000) suggests that religious affiliation was already declining by 1950, indicating that this renewed interest in church architecture was driven more by a fascination with style and heritage than by faith.

The outbreak of war abruptly ended this cultural rise. The dream of a vibrant, historic city—fought for by generations—was reduced to rubble. Only the Laurenskerk remained as a beacon on the devastated skyline. Despite the city's resistance against the Nazi regime, suffering intensified, reaching a climax during the Hunger Winter when citizens were pushed to their limits (Laar, P. van de, 2000). In the immediate post-war months, reconstruction plans were rapidly set into motion, partly because many had already been prepared. Bos (1946) emphasized that churches and religion were crucial for rebuilding social cohesion. This mindset was visible in postwar urban plans. However, Bos also sensed that a social shift was underway in Rotterdam.

During the reconstruction period, the government tried to place the church at the heart of civic life (Dettingmeijer, R., 2002), and the Laurenskerk was designated as the focal point of the old inner city. Yet it soon became apparent that the traumatic war years had reshaped public sentiment. People no longer found their sense of support or community in the church, but they were seeking something more modern (Laar, P. van de, 2000). The rising cultural sector, with theater, museums and public space, became the new sanctuary. A key observation is that it was primarily the younger generations—those who had not experienced the pre-war prosperity—who

were demanding change. The moral boundaries enforced by the church no longer aligned with their ideals—freedom of expression with a 'new language' and societal involvement. Over time, the Laurenskerk became more closely associated with the city's history than with faith itself. For many citizens, it became a monument to collective suffering and endurance.

Religious affiliation continued to decline, and churches grew increasingly empty (Laar, P. van de, 2000). This led to a decentralisation of religious communities, as believers regrouped in certain districts to remain among like-minded peers. These gaps were then filled by new, more secular and culturally expressive communities. As a result, many churches—burdened by operational costs—were listed for demolition. This brings us to the present, where many churches have been transformed into multifunctional venues to sustain themselves financially (Wesselink, H. E., 2018). The Laurenskerk is a prime example of this evolution, mirroring the city's social developments. The Laurenskerk, like other churches during the reconstruction, creates a paradox: conservation of a religious monument while the religious use of it declines. Even non-religious citizens have expressed regret about church demolitions, especially after the devastation of WWII, highlighting the importance of preserving the urban landscape and its atmosphere.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that the war and its impact on the population brought about a permanent transformation of religion in Rotterdam. After years of oppression, freedom and social expression became more attractive in the cultural domain than within the confines of the church. Older generations, whose social lives once revolved around religion, tend to return to it. But younger generations—those raised with the freedom to choose—often reject the constraints the church still represents. Over time, churches have come to be valued more for their aesthetic and historical quality than for their religious function. In this sense, they continue to reflect Rotterdam's layered and resilient history.

The Laurenskerk is therefore not just a remnant of a religious past, but a tangible witness to the social, cultural and urban transformation that has permanently shaped Rotterdam.

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