



# Reflection Paper

Research and Design Reflection on  
the Case Study of “de Hoeksteen”



# 1. Master track and program

The Diocese of Amsterdam-Haarlem announced in 2021 that 99 of its 164 churches will be closed, when the dust settles and the diocese decides which churches will need to close their doors 28 will full fill a central role in the community, 37 will remain as stud for the community for at least the coming years.<sup>1</sup> This decline of the church seems devastating for the people in which lives it still plays an important role. However, the decline of the church also presents an opportunity for adaptive reuse and repurposing of these buildings. This can involve converting them into new uses such as housing, community centers, or cultural venues. In some cases, churches may also be reimagined as mixed-use developments, combining residential, commercial, and community spaces.

The challenges and opportunities presented by vacant church buildings require careful consideration and planning. Community engagement and collaboration between stakeholders, including religious organizations, preservationists, developers, and local government, are important for finding sustainable and socially responsible solutions. Ultimately, the fate of vacant church buildings will depend on the willingness of communities to embrace creative and adaptive approaches to their reuse and preservation.

This studio emphasizes the need for new societal models in the face of climate change, particularly in the building sector, which is responsible for up to half of global carbon emissions. While many think of sustainability in terms of energy and new high-tech buildings, the article argues that the construction industry generates a significant amount of waste, with one third of waste in Europe coming from the building sector. The broadening of the concept of heritage, from single historical monuments to entire urban ecosystems, introduces a significant change in the impact of heritage for the sustainable built environment. In this studio A ‘100% heritage’ approach that includes all the resources inherited from the past that form part of our human habitat and deserve a careful assessment to recognize their values for the future of society. The integration of sustainability as value to preserve in heritage buildings reflects the complexity of the built legacy and expands traditional cultural and historical values by including social, environmental, and economic values in the evaluation process. The studio ultimately challenges students to take a position and explore creative design thinking to transform vacant churches, learn from experts in religious heritage, climate action, and building deconstruction, and develop new methodologies for a zero-waste future.

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<sup>1</sup> Stijn Fens, “uitendelijk gaat de kerk aan taal ten onder” Trouw (2022). <https://www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/uiteindelijk-gaat-de-kerk-aan-taal-ten-onder~bbfbfc17/>

For my personal project I chose a church that hasn't been used as church since 1973.<sup>2</sup> The project relates to the is part of the studio in the sense that it concerns religious heritage, it relates on wider themes of the master track in matters of sustainability. By focusing my research on participatory design and making it an integral part of my design process it also finds a connection with the research done within the domain of the heritage and architecture chair.

## 2. Research and design

This research explores the potential of revitalizing vacant churches to reduce waste and promote sustainable development. By integrating participatory design methods and heritage assessment frameworks, this study seeks to develop innovative design solutions that respect the cultural, social, and environmental values of these historic buildings, as such the research tries to find the possibilities of participatory design that is advocated by both UNESCO and ICOMOS.<sup>3,4</sup>

2 Within the process the connection between research and design is undeniable and both have played a crucial role in all stages of the design process. The initial valuation of the building informed the design even though it was then unclear it was part of the formal research, while the program was determined through a participatory process. The design was then prototyped in a participatory workshop. Although the final iteration of the design was not directly informed by stakeholders, it was based on earlier input from surveys and workshops. Likewise, the research was also informed by the design, not only in terms of subject matter, but also due to the nature of the research itself. Various stages of the design process, such as workshops on abstract themes and design variations based on input, contributed to the research. Ultimately, the research was influenced by the design in every part of the process, as participation was included throughout the study.

The effectiveness of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates participatory design and heritage assessment frameworks to explore the potential of revitalizing vacant churches for sustainable development. By involving stakeholders and respecting the cultural, social, and environmental values of these historic buildings, innovative design solutions can be developed that are both practical and meaningful. The connection between research and design is essential to this approach, as both inform and shape each other throughout the process.

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2 Amsterdam op de Kaart, "het afrikahuis" [https://amsterdamopdekaart.nl/1966-1990/Van\\_Ostadestraat/Afrikahuis](https://amsterdamopdekaart.nl/1966-1990/Van_Ostadestraat/Afrikahuis)

3 UNESCO World Heritage Committee. "Operational guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention." UNESCO, 2013|2014—04—291. <http://whc.unesco.org/archiVe/opguide13.en.pdf> (2017).

4 ICOMOS (1987) Charter for the conservation of historic towns and urban areas. Washington, Dc.

### 3. Methodology

As a designer I do not find myself walking around with ideas seeking for the perfect client to bring them to life. Instead, I see my role as finding the best solution to a given problem, within the constraints of the program or brief provided by the client. In order to do this effectively, it's important to involve stakeholders and users in the design process. By listening to their needs, preferences, and ideas, I can gain a deeper understanding of the problem, reflect and develop a more thoughtful and tailored solution.

#### **program**

For my graduation project, this participatory approach was particularly important. Since the goal was to create a design for a specific building, obtaining a well-defined program was essential. Rather than simply relying on my own assumptions and research, I worked closely with multiple stakeholder groups to gather their input and ensure that the design was informed by their needs and desires, fostering more interest and knowledge about the building among the stakeholders in the process. Through workshops, surveys, and other participatory methods, I was able to develop a program that reflected a range of perspectives and priorities, and ultimately led to a more effective and meaningful design solution. This was also a solution to the posed problem after the P2, where the lack of clarity of the program was an obstacle to further develop my design.

Allowing stakeholders to determine the program can be effective because it ensures that the resulting design is tailored to the specific needs and desires of the community. By involving stakeholders in the process, their perspectives and experiences are considered, which can lead to a more inclusive and responsive design. Additionally, involving stakeholders can help to build trust and buy-in from the community, as they feel that their voices are being heard and their needs are being addressed.

However, there are also potential drawbacks to this approach. For example, stakeholders may have conflicting views or interests, which can make it challenging to arrive at a consensus on the program. Additionally, involving stakeholders can be time-consuming. Finally, it is possible that some stakeholders may not have the expertise or knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about the program, which can lead to suboptimal outcomes.

#### **Prototypes**

Once the program was established, the design progressed into a more visual phase where the different programmatic elements were organized into “blocks” on various levels of the building. These blocks could be digitally configured by the stakeholders, providing an efficient way to keep track of the decisions made during the participatory workshops. The use of digital tools also enabled the workshops to take place in both formal settings as well as informal ones like the sidewalk, where residents of the neighborhood often gathered to participate.

Allowing stakeholders to digitally configure the program in a visual way is effective because it provides a clear and accessible way to keep track of design choices and progress. It also allows for more flexibility in conducting workshops, as they can be done in both formal and informal settings. These advantages are on top of those that were identified when composing the program: to put it simply it generates support for the project by creating a sense of ownership.

As stated earlier, a potential drawback of this approach is that it can be time-consuming to involve stakeholders in the design process in such a detailed way. Additionally, there may be differing opinions and competing interests among stakeholders, which can lead to challenges in reaching a consensus and making decisions. Additionally, the use of digital tools may not be accessible or preferred by all stakeholders, which could create disparities in participation and input. This medium was chosen because in the course “architectural ethnography” stakeholders were hesitant to use analogue methods to visualize their wishes, this is why I chose a more generic approach. In total I believe that my way of working was effective in achieving the goals of my graduation project. I employed a mixed-methods approach that included a literature review, surveys and design proposals.

### **Considerations**

When stakeholders are involved in the design process and are given the opportunity to determine the program, they may lack expertise or knowledge in certain building elements or configurations of space. This is where the architect can come in to explain and showcase the qualities of these elements or spaces. By doing so, the architect can further involve the stakeholders in the design process and help them make more informed decisions. In the case of conflicting wishes and desires, the architect can help mediate discussions and find a solution that meets the needs of all stakeholders while still achieving the project goals. The most important lesson I think is to feel comfortable to take the position of expert stakeholder as an architect. Not only trying to explain the existing qualities of the building but also the qualities of suggested interventions.

## 4. Value

The value of this project lies in its contribution to the field of architecture and sustainability. The research explores a new approach to sustainable development by examining the potential of revitalizing vacant churches. By integrating participatory design methods and heritage assessment frameworks, this study seeks to develop innovative zero waste design solutions that respect the cultural, social, and environmental values of these historic buildings. This research offers a unique perspective on sustainable development that could be applied to other types of historic buildings, providing architects and researchers with a new set of tools to promote sustainable practices in the field that can help preserve and transform heritage with support of the local community.

The societal value of this project offers a potential solution to the problem of vacant churches that can contribute to sustainable development. Vacant churches are a common sight in many cities around the world, and they often become a burden on the community as they deteriorate over time. By revitalizing these buildings, this project can help to reduce waste and promote sustainable development while preserving the cultural and social value of these historic structures. The participatory design methods used in this study also involve the community in the revitalization process, promoting a sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhood.

In terms of scope and implication, this project has the potential to be applied to other types of historic buildings, not just churches. By developing a framework for sustainable development that considers the cultural, social, and environmental value of historic buildings, this project can help to promote sustainable practices in the field of architecture making use of participation.

Finally, in terms of ethical aspects, this project takes into account the social and cultural value of historic buildings and involves the community in the revitalization process. By promoting sustainable development in a way that respects the heritage of the building and the needs of the community, this project aligns with ethical principles of social responsibility and sustainability.

## 5. Design

Design can be a powerful tool for creating a sense of community in a neighborhood. By creating a space that is welcoming and accessible, a design can transform a previously overlooked or misunderstood area into a gathering place for the community. When a design is well-executed, it can become a focal point for the neighborhood, attracting people from all walks of life to come together, share their thoughts, and form a sense of community. This process of bringing people together can help break down barriers and misunderstandings, allowing people to connect with one another in a meaningful way. Through thoughtful design, a space can become more than just a physical structure - it can become a hub for social interaction, a place where people feel a sense of belonging, and a symbol of the community's identity.

The design process is never easy, especially when it involves transforming an existing building, especially one with cultural and historical significance. Every intervention is in dialogue with the existing building. The challenge of coming up with a language that effectively communicates the changes being made can be daunting. This challenge is further compounded by the need to balance the preservation of heritage values with the need to adapt to new uses and contemporary societal needs.

6 However, despite these difficulties, the strategy used to ensure that the design process results in a successful transformation. Was designing from a set of main themes: One such theme is to prioritize sustainability in the design process, aiming for environmentally responsible solutions that reduce waste and promote sustainable development. Another key theme is the need to make the building more public and accessible to the community. This was achieved by relocating the main entrance to facilitate a more open and welcoming atmosphere, and by incorporating participatory design methods to ensure that the needs of the community are incorporated into the design. Finally, the conservation of quality is also a crucial consideration in the design process. By preserving and enhancing the architectural quality of the building, the transformation can maintain its cultural and historical significance while adapting to contemporary needs.

In summary, the design process for transforming an existing building can be challenging, but by prioritizing sustainability, making the building more public, and conserving its quality, it is possible to successfully create a space that meets the needs of the community while preserving its heritage value.



# Bibliography

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