

Reflection Paper

Detangling the layers

– the Palimpsest as a Tool for the Redesign of Heritage with Layered Narratives

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Project overview and its relation to the studio, the Architecture Master Track, and the Master Programme

The Heritage & Architecture section of the Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft concerns the preservation and renewal of existing buildings and built environments. We consider heritage to be a multidisciplinary and multifaceted field encompassing the study of technology, design, and values – an attitude reflected in the organisation of the three chairs of Heritage & Technology, Heritage & Design, and Heritage & Values.

Within this institutional framework, pressing questions in heritage discourse are explored, often in a collaborative fashion between the chairs. One of the ongoing themes within the H&A section and the focus of the Revitalising Heritage studio is the issue of vacant heritage buildings. The revitalising of vacant buildings for contemporary use represents not only a research interest but equally a growing concern in today's architectural and sustainability fields – particularly in the Dutch context of restricted building capacity and housing shortages. Through the examination of vacant heritage, successive editions of the studio have reflected on the capacity for change in heritage buildings, a central topic within heritage study encompassing design, technological, material, economic, and cultural concerns. (dos Santos Gonçalves *et al.*, 2022)

In past years, the Revitalising Heritage studio has drawn its subject from notable vacant sites or collaboration with external groups, such as local governments. Past themes have included the redesign of retired police stations and department stores. In 2023, the attention is directed towards the sacred realm, which has in recent years become a contentious arena between the differing interest seeking to preserve or redevelop heritage sites. In the Netherlands, the continued decline in general religiosity has led to a large and growing rank of churches being decommissioned, adapted, or demolished. A 2021 report estimated that of the 7110 recorded places of worship in the Netherlands, 1530 no longer have religious functions and a further 295 are in transition. (Hannema, 2021) This number is expected to rise

in the coming years, as the trend of secularisation continues and the rift between the older, statistically more religious generation and the younger, secular generation grows. (CBS, 2021, 2022) Recent global events including the post-Covid-19 recession and soaring energy prices brought by the Russo-Ukraine war will likely also increase the pressure on struggling religious institutions. Against this backdrop of vacant churches and a persistent hunger for new buildings, a recurring question of whether society should – and if so, how to – adapt former churches springs to the forefront of contemporary heritage discourse.

My graduation project centres around the former Maranathakerk of Castricum, Noord-Holland and the adopting the notion of *the Palimpsest* as a tool for the study and (re)design of heritage buildings. The focus derives from my interpretation of heritage as intermingling layers of narratives. The Maranathakerk in Castricum is exemplary of these entangled narratives. Having been decommissioned from religious use in 2018, Maranathakerk experienced a remarkable transformation in the following years, as an upstart school community established itself and flourished in the former church halls. Despite the successful adaptation, present economic and political interests threaten both the new school and the heritage building itself. The building's prominent location and lack of protected status positioned it as a prime candidate for local redevelopment. A municipal proposal, which would have led to the demolition of the former church, was halted only by petitions from heritage preservation groups and remains under debate. (Leo Dubbelaar, 2021)

The main research ambition of my graduation project and the studio is to explore how architectural interventions could provide an alternative future for vacant churches under threat. The crux of my graduation project is thus a petition against demolition, instead favouring the expansion of existing social and material building layers to meet future demands. The Palimpsest, encompassing an assortment of hitherto loosely linked theories that have emerged within various branches of social sciences including linguistics, archaeology, urban planning, postcolonial studies, and drawing theory was used as the theoretical framework.

In this sense, the project also parallels the MSc programme's goal of creating "innovative ways to create more sustainable development". (Delft University of Technology, 2023) The project addresses sustainability in both the material and social dimensions. Firstly, the project makes use of an existing building and proposes an extension as an alternative to demolition and rebuilding. Secondly, the building is studied and redesigned with consideration of its material components. The existing building is viewed as a source of both raw materials and a database for new design options. Removed materials are salvaged for circular use, and additions are made with decarbonisation, flexibility, and reversibility in mind. Thirdly, the project highlights the significance of social sustainability by orienting the design around the continuation of shared values and practices between the past and present communities.

Relationship between research and design

Over the year, the research and design components of my project have continuously progressed in parallel with each other, at times intersecting and at others diverging. This fluctuating nature has presented both challenges and unexpected influences on my thesis.

I have been aware of the term 'palimpsest' for a long time. Nevertheless, the term represented to me, as with I believe most others in the architectural profession, only a vague metaphor. An initial literary review on the subject I conduct confirmed this thought. Since its popularisation as a substantive term by Thomas De Quincey in the late 19th century, *palimpsest* has become an almost catch-all phrase for layered-ness. (Dillon, 2005) The palimpsest nevertheless entered my thoughts when I first visited the site in Castricum. In the former Maranathakerk, I observed how the various time layers had become mixed and superimposed. Successive heritage theorists such as Meurs, de Jonge, and Kuipers have reflected on this sort of cultural deposit – 'layers of time' as they called it. (Meurs, 2016, p. 36; Kuipers and Jonge, 2017, p. 53) In Maranathakerk, the complex mingling between the various time layers also took on political dimensions, as ongoing disputes on whose narrative to prioritize, and how to deal with them, have caused much debate within the local community.

Hence, already from the conception of this graduation project, research and design had become entangled. Since a key research interest in my project is to examine the transition from religious use to school use and how certain social characteristics have been continued, the natural programmatic choice for the design project was the continuation of school activities – thus my proposal of an extension to the former church building to make it a permanent home for the school.

Research into the palimpsest to understand the different layers and how present and past users interact with them became the main research line of my project, with the intention of the result would eventually inform my design options. Simultaneously, my (re)design phase would be used to test the value of the research methodology. As shown in the diagram of my initial research, (fig. 1) the research-design process was envisioned as a three-phased overlapping process where discoveries would provide feedback to earlier phases.

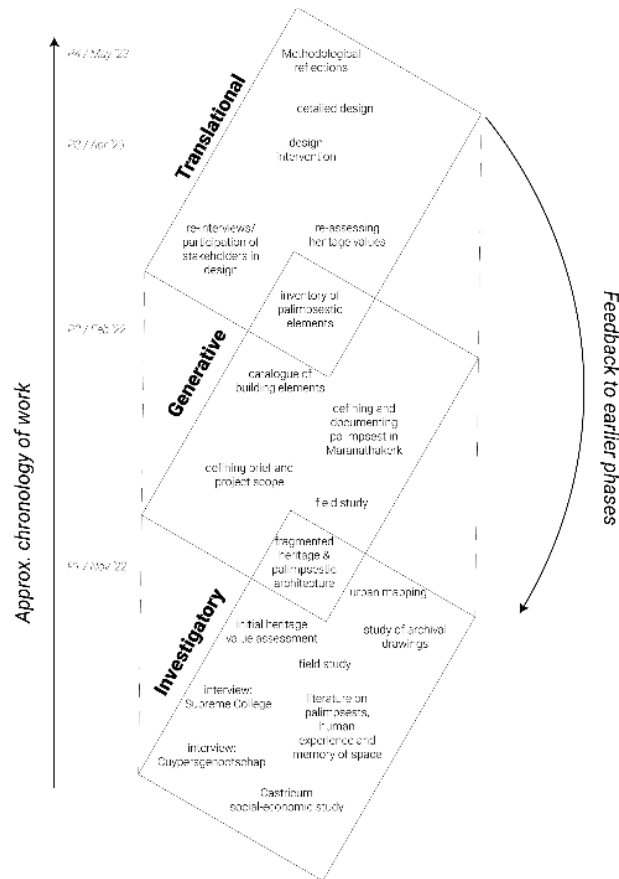


Figure 1 – research chronology diagram, the originally envisioned three-phase planning proved too static, but the general principle of new research/design discoveries providing feedback remained a central part of the project.

Cataloguing Palimpsests

The primary findings from the research phase were the cataloguing of palimpsestuous elements in the present-day Maranathakerk. To achieve this, a methodology was devised from earlier work by Geoff Bailey and Ceren Kaya. Bailey, an archaeologist, had introduced the idea of sub-dividing *the palimpsest* into typologies by referencing archaeological finds. His work likely represented the first attempt to bring order to the concept. Kaya's work followed Bailey's footsteps by relating the palimpsestuous process to that of drawing, linking the palimpsest to the existing methodology employed in architectural design and representation.

Inspired by Bailey and Kaya's works, I made a series of fragment drawings of Maranathakerk to identify instances which could be considered palimpsestuous. The determination of palimpsestuousness was done by considering both physical and narrative changes over time. Analytical drawings of the building's current state were cross-referenced with archival documents from the Alkmaar Regional Archive. Particular attention was paid to how previous architects' drawings envisioned spatial functions. Historical photographs, written accounts of past use by former congregation members, and interviews of present stakeholders supplemented this narrative comparison. The findings revealed several

noteworthy deviations in functions and user behaviours, even in cases where no physical changes occurred, and indicated larger transitions in the building's narrative after secularisation. These perspectives formed the starting point for my design strategy. The mutual focus by both the past and present user groups on communal gathering became a central goal in the redesign, while the new school community's adaptation of previously 'formal' elements for 'informal uses' informed my proposal's focus on emphasising programmatically flexible social spaces in the new school extension.

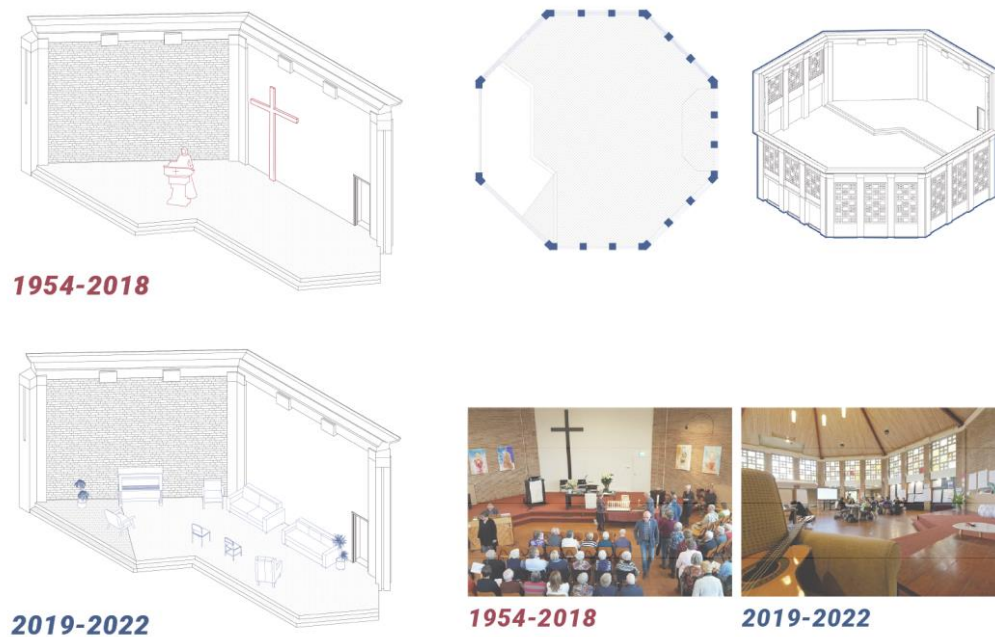


Figure 2 – selection from the research findings: the fragment drawings show the changes in spatial functions and characteristics over time.

Divergent research

The cataloguing efforts also inspired divergent research. During the study of the octagon, I observed that a significant heritage value was attached to the octagonal plan by heritage professionals and laypeople alike, without either being able to list precise reasons for their attachment. The present school community largely expressed their fondness of their adaptation of the generously sized hall for their activities and the fact that the space conveyed a 'communal feeling'. Meanwhile, Cuypersgenootschap explicitly identified the octagonal plan as a fundamental element of the site's 'character' due to its long legacy in Dutch Protestant churches yet offered no further insight into how this process of 'character' formation worked. Since palimpsestuous formation, as proposed by Bailey's typology *palimpsest of meaning*, relates to cultural understandings, an attempt was made to define what constituted the meaning of the octagon in (Protestant) architecture. The findings will not be discussed in detail here but reveal a history of religious narrative linking specific geometries to the Christian ethos. (fig. 3) This brief interlude reflected not only the non-linear nature of the research-design process but also the limits – or

perhaps potential – of the palimpsest as a method to understand heritage. In this case, the palimpsest offered no answer to my question, yet it was through the cataloguing process that the question came to light. The insight gained from the geometric studies would ultimately inform the layout design of the extension proposal.

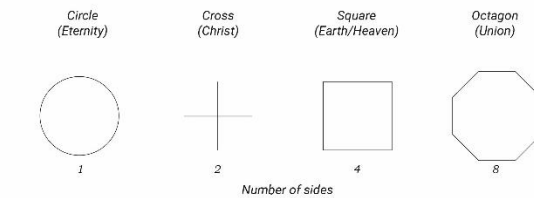


Fig. 27 - Geometrical Evolution

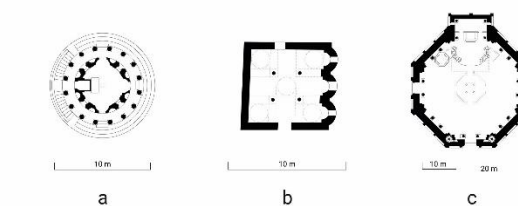


Fig. 28 - Adoption of Geometrical Progression in Church Architecture

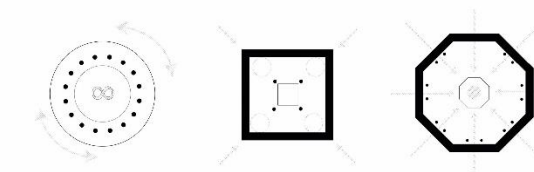


Fig. 29 - Spatial Characteristics of Each Form

a. Tempietto of San Pietro in Montorio, Rome (1502)
b. Cattolica di Stilo, Calabria (9th C.)
c. Battistero di San Giovanni, Florence (1128)

Figure 3 – research into the history and symbolism of geometric plans in Christianity revealed a genealogy stretching back to Pre-Christin architecture and a developed system of coupling geometry with religious narratives.

Dilemmas and Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations

A notable challenge that arose early on during the research phase was the collection of data from the current users. Given the nature of the building as a functioning school, ethical issues regarding data collection and privacy emerged. I made attempts to mitigate some of these concerns by preparing a detailed briefing document per the TU Delft guidelines and formulating interview questions in ways to not include personal information. Nevertheless, I ultimately decided to refrain from collecting photographic and audio recordings during the visit/interviews, as it proved logistically unfeasible to seek permission from all the parents. Furthermore, as the visit could only occur during a school day, a conventional interview also proved to be difficult since both the student and staff were engaged in teaching activities and did not have time for extended conversations. Ultimately, these field conditions

shifted my methodology towards mainly based on observation, like what Jan Gehl described as ‘shadowing’. (Gehl and Svarre, 2013, p. 24) This reliance on making observations introduced a higher degree of subjectivity to the research.

On Subjectivity

The matter of subjectivity proved to be a recurring dilemma in my research. As noted earlier, the palimpsest has long represented a loosely defined term – a concern also raised by my tutors. My original expectation of formulating a comprehensive methodology for building analysis based on the palimpsest proved to be difficult. While my findings became a valuable baseline for my design process and helped establish a design goal – they remained largely an early-phase tool. This experience made me reflect on the role of the architect in the heritage process, and how, even with additional tools like the palimpsest or value assessment, heritage (re)design ultimately remains a matter of individual discretion. As architects dealing with heritage, we must, as successive UNESCO and ICOMOS declarations have urged: strive to understand and include diverse cultural narratives. Yet, ultimately, the role of the architect, as I have come to understand, is also to act as a mediator between these differing narratives and take a clear position on the spectrum between preservation and transformation.

On the valuation of narratives

One of the primary dilemmas in the project was how to value the different sets of narratives or memories belonging to the stakeholders. In the case of the Maranathakerk, there were both local and external stakeholders involved in the narrative process. I consider the *local* to include the former congregation (past), and the school (present). External, or non-user stakeholders included the local municipality and heritage advocate groups.

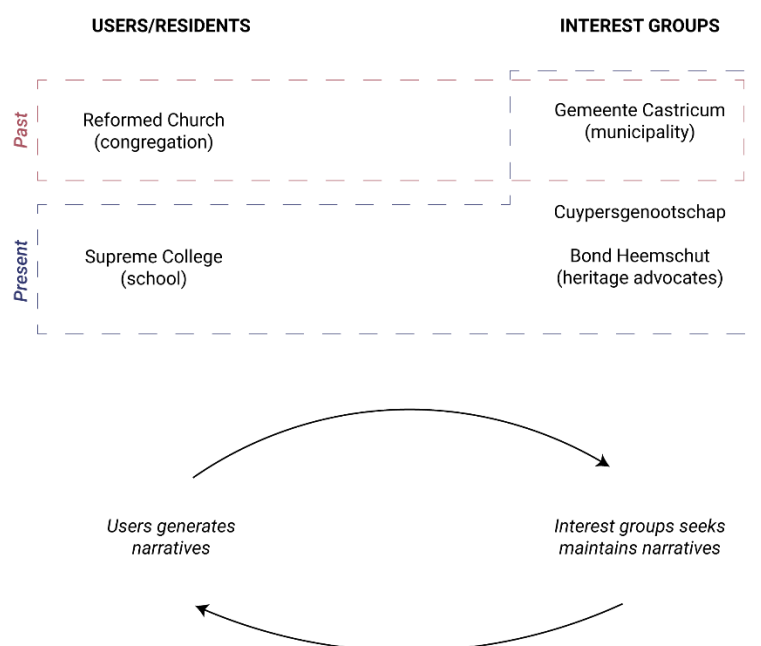


Figure 4 –the various stakeholders of Maranathakerk and their role in shaping or maintaining its narrative(s).

Related to the dilemma of valuation was how to balance the technical requirements of a contemporary school with heritage preservation. One example of this clash was found in the main octagonal hall, which features original 1950s stained glass windows. These were made up of prefabricated 'glas-in-beton' window systems – essentially stained-glass panels encased in a solid concrete framework. While these elements represent a central architectural feature of the hall and a legacy of the original architect, Hendrik Eldering, they also represented significant climatic shortfalls. Due to their monolithic nature and large size, they acted as vast cold bridges in a key inhabited space. The few available options to insulate these windows would inevitably introduce a level of architectural change. My methodology did not offer a clear solution in this regard. Ultimately, a subjective position had to be taken following deliberations and consultations with climate consultants, in which I conceded that the future comfort and environmental cost of non-intervention outweighed the heritage concerns. Nonetheless, the perspectives gained from the palimpsest studies, as well as the value assessment conducted based on the work developed by the TU Delft Heritage & Values group informed this decision. (Rodgers and dos Santos Gonçalves, 2022)

As noted by Wessel de Jonge during my P2 review, architects must ultimately take a well-grounded, albeit subjective position in the heritage process. UNESCO and ICOMOS too acknowledged this thought in the Xi'an Declaration: *"Understanding, documenting, and interpreting the setting is essential to defining and appreciating the heritage significance of any structure, site or area. [...] Understanding the setting in an inclusive way requires a multi-disciplinary approach and the use of diverse information sources."* (ICOMOS, 2005)

Relationship to the wider social, professional, and scientific context

My graduation project explored a novel way to understand multiple narratives in a heritage setting, intending to provide added perspective for a redesign. The palimpsest was used to formulate a methodology. My research and graduation project, therefore, contributed to a topical heritage issue on how designers and heritage professionals could approach complex sites with multiple embedded narratives. Additionally, the orientation of my project towards extension as an alternative for demolition builds upon the call to recognise reuse and retrofit as the primary directive for future architectural developments. My project, therefore, adds to this growing body of research into sustainable redevelopment.

Furthermore, the research contributes to a further understanding of the layering process in heritage. The palimpsest, a previously loosely defined and utilised term, is brought into the architectural realm and used to demonstrate how physical changes over time could affect the narrative of a place, also on a building element level. While more research is required to refine this methodology, given the limitations discussed earlier, I believe the palimpsest represents a promising avenue which could one day provide another perspective in the study of heritage narratives and another tool for designers dealing with complex heritage.

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