Mediating Religious Elements

Collective memory of religious Elements for transformation of decommissioned churches

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AR3AH115 Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste Church

Abstract

This paper explores the utilisation of the collective memory of vacant churches and the architectural elements within them as incentives for their transformation and reuse. The number of decommissioned churches in the Netherlands is increasing with rapid secularisation, and many churches remain empty. The purpose of this paper is to find a method to connect the collective memory within elements in a church and utilise them for the church's redesign. This study will focus on one such church for theoretical application of the methodology, the Saint Augustinus church in Amsterdam Noord, which has been empty since 2014. Finding a way to reconnect the church to its neighbourhood using the collective memory of the neighbourhood around this church, could be a way to socially sustain the church and prevent it from going into disuse. The individual memory of the churchgoers is rather subjective, but as churches have been a part of the landscape of the cities of the Netherlands for long periods, they also have shared memories. The way to investigate the collective memory of the church is to collect individual stories and find common strings among them. A phenomenological study of these architectural elements provides the way they are experienced and how this can be enhanced for the community to feel connected to them again. This paper thus answers the question of how the collective memory of the church can set in motion the transformation and conservation of vacant churches.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, there are a rising number of vacant churches. Most churches in Europe act as landmarks in the cityscape, with their tower, a prominent element in the skyline. They are also historically anchors for the congregation, a community. Community, here, is defined as a set of people who have been influenced by the presence of the church.[1] The sacred spaces in churches act as meeting points between the intimate personal lives of the individuals of the congregation and their religious experiences. The church and the people thus were a crucial part of each other's lives. An average of 27 Catholic churches and 33 traditional protestant churches are forced to close every year.[2] When the church lost its place in everyday society, the church building became redundant.

As the church became less important, so did everything related to the church such as the altar, pews, benches, chandeliers, and so on. These are termed as 'movable objects' by the Catherijnconvent, Utrecht set out in the 'Guidelines on ways of dealing with Religious Objects.'[3] These elements are separated from the church structure as they are inextricably connected to the building but are not a part of its structural definition and thus may be separated and relocated elsewhere.

Jennifer Clark, when describing church architecture, described the structure as a shell that carries the stories and communal knowledge of the day to day histories of the congregation.[4] These elements within the church also hold stories of the people who have used and experienced them. These elements give the church its essence, from stained glass windows to the organ to the altar and the church bells that chime throughout the day. Decommissioning of the church not only pushes towards the transformation of the church itself but these elements, too, may risk losing their value. This paper focuses on a methodological approach towards dealing with these elements and how the community linked to vacant church and the elements can incentivise their adaptive reuse.

Juhani Pallasmaa in 'Space, Place, Memory and Imagination: The Temporal Dimension of Existential Space' stated that architecture is mediating art form that settles a person between the past and the future. The church is one such architectural space, a "projection of epic narratives."[5] Further description by Pallasma stated that built structures materialise and preserve the course of time and concretise its memory. The study of this memory is also a study of the community linked to it. Thus involving them in the research process through a participatory approach and studying these memories allows for them to be brought forth from the past and imbued into the re-design for the future. Participation in design is defined as the involvement of non-expert points of view within the stages of design.[6] Moreover, Participatory design is a

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[1] "Community," in *The Cambridge Dictionary*, 2020, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/ english/community.

[2] Marieke van Schijndel, and Marc de Beyer, *Guidelines for Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects* (Utrecht: Catherijnconvent, 2010), 10.

[3] Schijndel and Beyer, *Guidelines for Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects*, 19.

[4] Jennifer Clark, "'This Special Shell': The Church Building and the Embodiment of Memory," *Journal of Religious History* 31, no. 1 (March 2007): pp. 59-77, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9809.2007.00545.x, 59.

[5] Marc Treib and Juhani Pallasma, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination:The Temporal Dimension of Existential Space," in *Spatial Recall: Memory in Architecture and Landscape* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 17.

[6] Peter Blundell-Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, "Architecture and Participation," in *Architecture and Participation* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012), p. xiii-xvii, xii.

process of mutual learning according to the *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design* where users and designers are able to draw on each other for the process of data collection and creating new points of view.[7] Rachel Luck defined participatory design, not as a design or research method but rather as a multitude of techniques that are situation specific and hence, a standard approach is not possible.[8] The goal of these methods can be summarised under the need to investigate connections between users and their space, wherein the research implies a collection of their situations and of the users' problems and the vocalisation of their aims.

However, understanding the preservation of buildings based on sentiments and emotional associations alone, as stated by Philip Johnson, is misguided, as non-architects do not see everything.[9] Thus, a clear understanding of the cultural, economic, political and historic aspects of the built space is also required before the social study is undertaken. The supposition here is that with a more detailed look at the church and its collective memory, it could be converted into a more socially sustainable space, entwined with the lives of its community.

2. Church and the Community

Collective groups of people hold memories that would constitute their collective identities which could contribute a sense of togetherness. The experience of place is, within the realm of architecture, in a sense made of memories of previous visits and expectations of what it could be.[10] For a church, such a process of building of emotions already happened and has been brought to a standstill as the church shuts down. While they act as collective memory devices, these built spaces also stimulate and amplify emotion, and evoke mental states and memories.[11]

Many buildings awaken a sense of memory, but buildings and their remains suggest stories of reminiscence and emotional power.[12] Church buildings that have been left vacant for extended periods have a similar effect wherein, once an individual enters the space, the feelings of what it was like when previously used are brought to the forefront.[13]

This link to memory can particularly be seen in Neo-Gothic churches where religious elements were introduced as a way to link the Gothic style of the past to changing context of the 19th century. At a time when political, social and economic development was rapid in Western Europe, the people were shocked and needed something to hold on to from the past.[14] Neo-Gothic architecture was derived from this idea, where architects like P.J.H. Cuypers

7 Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, eds., "Participatory Design: An Introduction," *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*, 2012, 1–17, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108543-7, 2.

8 Rachael Luck, "What Is It That Makes Participation in Design Participatory Design?," *Design Studies* 59 (2018): pp. 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2018.10.002, 3.

9 Daniel M. Bluestone, "Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation," in Buildings, Landscapes, and Memory: Case Studies in Historic Preservation (New York, New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 14-17, 14.

10 Treib and Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination," 26.

11 Treib and Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination," 30.

12 Treib and Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination," 19.

13 Clark, "This Special Shell,", 68.

14 Macha van Damme, "Modern Versus Traditioneel: Het Materiaalgebruik Van De Bouwmeesters Cuypers En Tepe,'" 2004, pp. 158-182, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.7480/ knob.103.2004.5.243, 160.

and Alfred Tepe took iconographic decorations from the Gothic church and superimposed them on the churches they built.[15] They copied medieval art objects that carried religious messaging and symbolism to give the people something to connect with and anchor the community together.

Within the composition of the church-community structure, generations of families have been involved. From the construction of most Neo-Gothic churches in the Netherlands which used community-derived funds for their construction, to congregational events held within them, the absence is experienced in the church's atmosphere that register its previous use[16] and people's memories.[17]

The focus of this study is one such vacant decommissioned church, the Saint Augustinus church in Nieuwendammerdijk, Amsterdam Noord, built in 1987. With its decommissioning in 2014, the church became an anchor point for the community. With multiple visits conducted to the church, a strong relationship between the church and the neighbourhood is seen.[18] From the sound of the bell and its now absent humdrum in the background of everyone's lives to the concerts and weekly dinners held in the church and the pub in the basement. Making the church an active part of everyone's everyday life would be a way to revitalise it and bring the collective memory of the church to the forefront, something that would otherwise be lost through years of disuse and neglect.
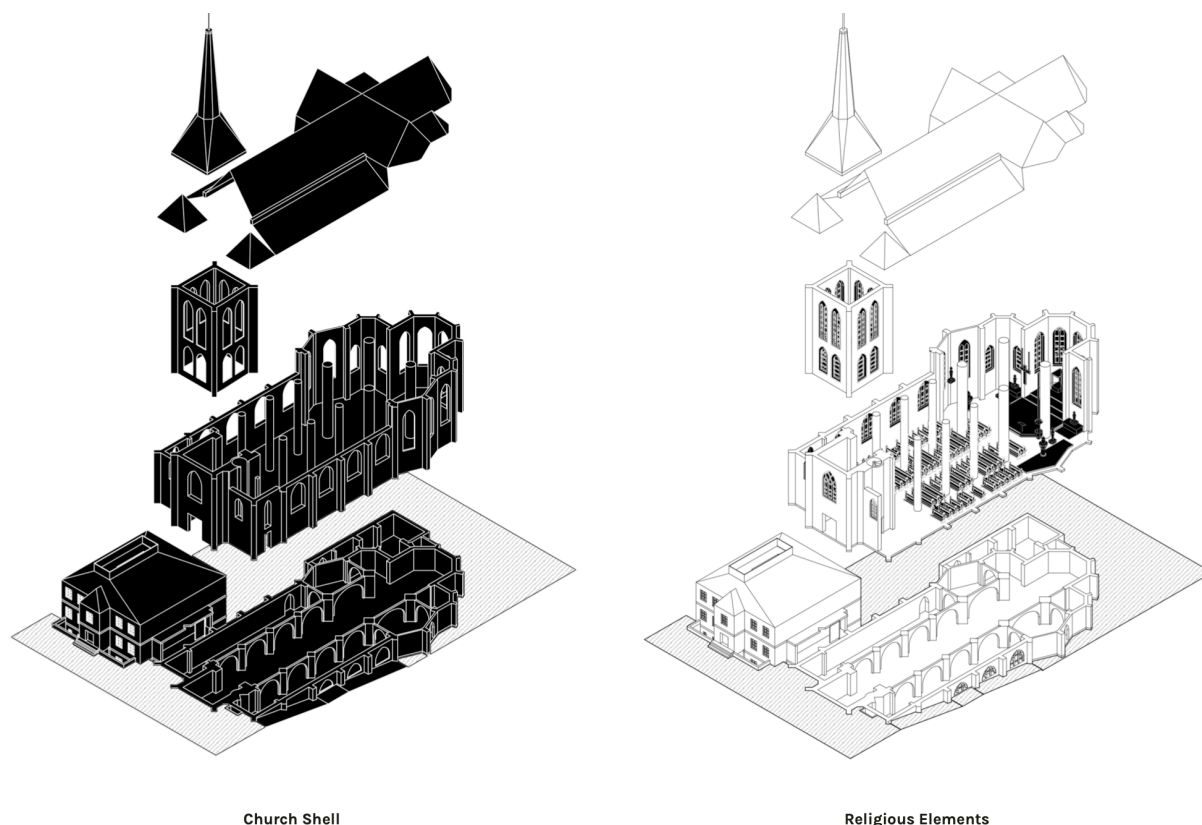

Church Shell   Religious Elements

Figure 1.1 Exploded isometric of the Saint Augustinus church, Amsterdam Noord depicted the church shell (left) and the religious elements (right)

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[15] van Damme, "Modern Versus Traditioneel", 161.

[16] Daan Beekers, and Susanne Lanwerd. "Sakrale Residuen/Sacred Residue." in *The Urban Sacred: How Religion Makes and Takes Place in Amsterdam, Berlin and London*. Berlin: Metropol, 2016, 37.

[17] Beekers, and Lanwerd. "Sacred Residue." 37.

[18] Jacqueline and Pam. "Nieuwendammerdijk - Straten van Amsterdam." interview by Anneloes Mullink. *AT5 Straten van Amsterdam*, May 19, 2017, video, 1:16. http://youtu.be/OHd7rgDnj7E

Of all the elements identified in the church such as the altar, pews, fonts, sculptures and paintings (Fig 1.1), for this study, the information will be focused on stained glass windows. The purpose of this case study is to provide insight into the way the methodology was tested and provides an instance of how this method can be further used.

3. Methodology:

This paper focuses on combining various methods of participatory design to build a research design scenario where the community linked to the vacant church are involved in various stages of the design process. This stages are instructed by the steps detailed in 'The Methodology of Participatory Design' which begins with ways in which people can come together, the voicing of their goals and prototyping ways to achieve it.[19]

'Ladder of Citizen Control' (Figure 3.1) stratifies Citizen Participation into 8 levels, from superficial methods of participation to increased decision-making power given into individuals.[20] For the purpose of this research design study, the focus was *Consultation* (Method 1) which considers the vocalisation of the citizens' point of view and the *Partnership* (Method 2) which enables negotiation with power holders and makes their opinions heard.
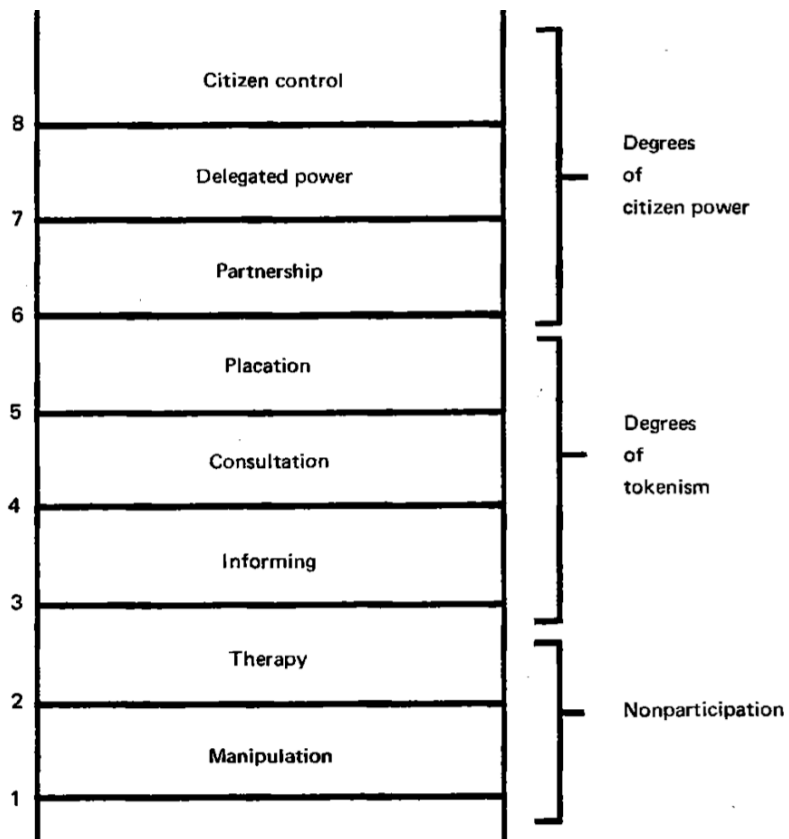

Figure 3.1, Sherry R. Arnstein. Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation. (*Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4, 1969), 217, fig 2

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[19] Clay Spinuzzi, "The Methodology of Participatory Design," *Technical Communication*, 2005, pp. 163-174, 167.

[20] Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): pp. 216-224, https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225, 217.

Moreover, when participation is brought into the process of design, usually in regeneration projects, the users, whose voices are meant to be heard, may be suppressed.[21] The use of more than a singular method of participation thus allows for these individuals to be embraced in various stages of design, from its conception to its realisation. Here, this involved approach of participation also inevitably brings to the forefront a sense of belonging, a group of people invested in the process. The users become the stakeholders.

Whether an object has cultural or historical value is usually not determined by the meaning of one individual, but by groups of people.[22] The ultimate value assessment is the result of a social process. This social analysis of value is dealt within the research question in two areas (Fig 3.2). First, a study of the understanding of collective memory of the church and its elements is conducted and second, prototyping spatial transformations to the elements are reviewed by the community. The focus is thus, on the material nature of the church, its elements, and its social backbone.
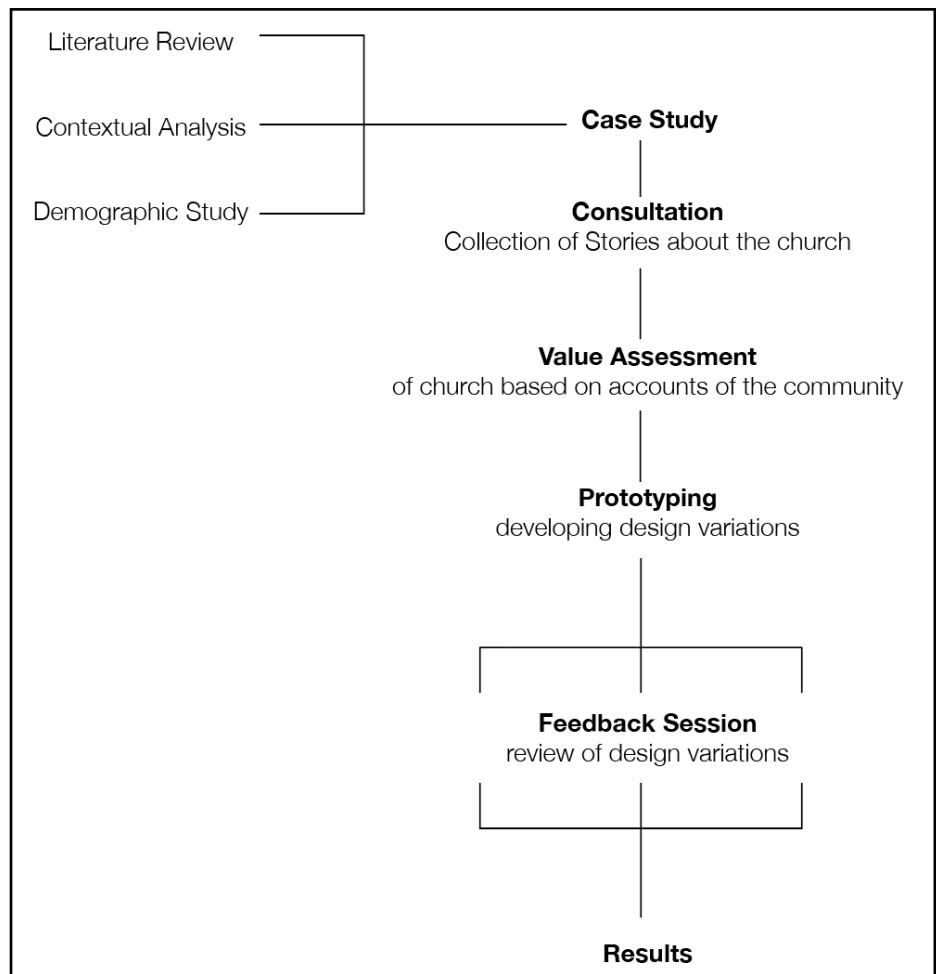

Figure 3.2, General Scheme of research methodology

[21] Blundell-Jones, Petrescu, and Till, "Architecture and Participation," xiv.

[22] Ray Lucas, "Chapter 13: Ethnographic Research," in *Research Methods for Architecture* (Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2016), pp. 164-173, 165.

Stage 1: Collection of collective memory/narratives

For years of its existence, people have involuntarily collected memories of the church. This creates a framework for viewing the church through the lens of the neighbourhood, forming the collective memory of the church and its element.[23] This transmits its collective identity which in turn, defines the storyline embedded in the element.[24] These together form the basis for the first step of collecting data.

To gather all the stories from the neighbourhood, two initiatives were undertaken (Figure 3.3). First, digital archives were studied to find stories related to the church, from interviews conducted in newspapers and news channels to articles in local magazines. Also, stakeholders who were involved in the church, such as the owner, and through him, former residents of the rectory and the former pastor, provided instances and experiences within the church. Then a questionnaire was directed to the residents of Nieuwendammerdijk to gather their stories. The questionnaire involved two vague questions that allowed for they stories to shine through, "Tell me a story about the church" and "If you had to save one thing in the church, what would you save?"
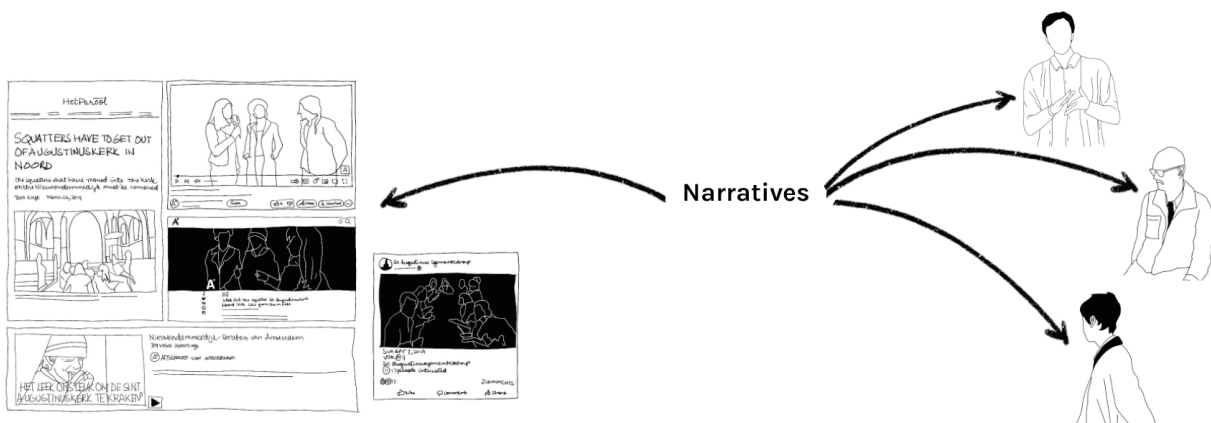
Digital archives, online interviews, newspaper articles, social media activity.

First person accounts, stories from the owner, squatters, residents of the neighbourhood of Nieuwendammerdijk.

Figure 3.3, Methods of Narrative collection Used

The various methods of data collection provided stories ranging in time period from the decommissioning of the church in 2014 to the present day. The responses also involved people who were avid churchgoers to individuals who had never been inside the church but heard the bells chime or walked past it everyday.

These stories were assessed in the next steps through the collection of the collective memory of the church and the cataloging of this information to form the basis of the social realm and emotional attributes of the church and its elements. These were catalogued as a set of stories and they were analysed with respect to two aspects:

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[23] Jan Assmann, Rodney Livingstone, and Jan Assmann, "Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies," in *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (California, United States, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-30, 9.

[24] Elinor Ochs, "Narrative," Discourse as Structure and Process: *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, 1997, pp. 185-207, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221884.n7.

1. which of the elements within the church were most prominently mentioned by the stakeholders and,
2. what is the experience that they are attributing to the aforementioned elements?

The experience of the element was also analysed and attributed to a certain sensorial dimension. Using the base provided by *The Sacred Senses of Sacred Space: A Journey into a Church*, these elements are then categorised into a sensory matrix between visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory elements (Figure 3.4). This helps to classify the experience.
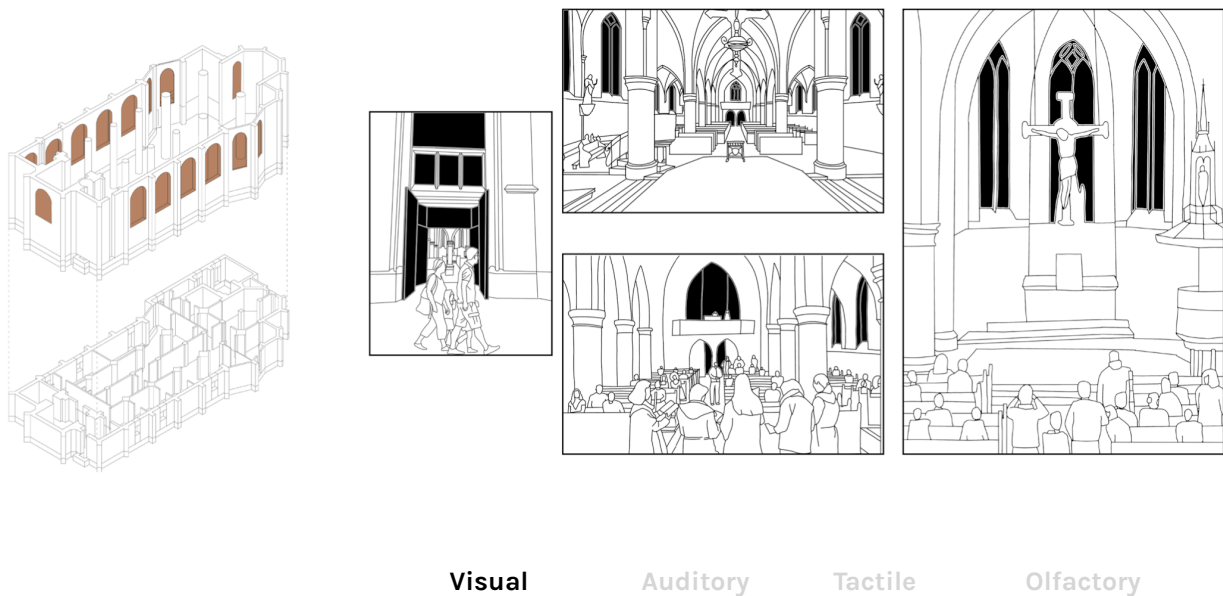

Visual   Auditory   Tactile   Olfactory

Figure 3.4, Stories used to highlight the important elements and how they are experienced by the community

It is important to note here that the research undertaken to find the collective memory of the church and its elements is not and cannot be an entirely objective study, as the individual memories of the church are subjective and not every person's opinion can be taken into account. Here, the term collective memory, defined as these cultural practices within the social group (of the neighbourhood) which influences their socio-cultural identities,[25] helps because it is generalised and without bias. Many architects have worked with these emotional aspects of built space. Alvar Aalto's work can be viewed as an episodic collage of events, images and fragments triggered by the remains of buildings.[26]

Stage 2: Prototyping of design variations

The significance of elements in these processes of memory-making is also similar wherein, one of the main reasons why people collect familiar and peculiar elements is to reinforce and expand on this realm of memories.[27] The phenomenology oriented study of architectural experiences is aimed at re-memorising primary architectural experiences.

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[25] Ivars Ijabs, "Collective Memory," *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, 2014, pp. 991-993, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_436.

[26] Treib and Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination," 21.

[27] Treib and Pallasmaa, "Space, Place, Memory and Imagination," 37.

As a way to reuse the elements, enhance the experience of each element and facilitate the creation of a truly public communal space, the new intervention would look at two aspects (Figure 3.5):
1) the elements would be opened up for increased accessibility to the general public, and,
2) to increase the methods by which people can experience the element and attribute more sensory categories to the element

These methods were studied with respect to the stained glass windows and can be viewed here as a case study. These different interventions would allow the elements to be experienced in different ways. These various methods were tested in the next step.
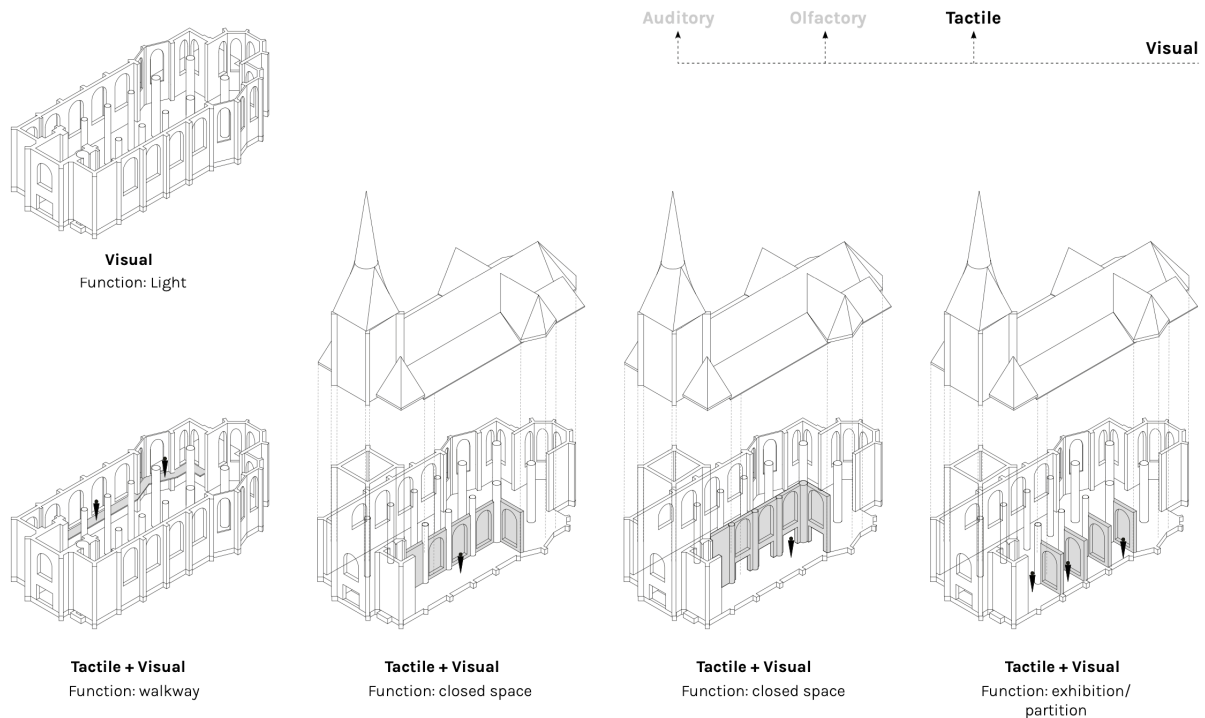

Figure 3.5, Change in the function and the experience of the religious elements

Stage 3: Feedback Session

The design interventions created in isolation in the previous steps are untested and can be interpreted by the users in various ways. Here, the use of the step *Partnership* in the 'community participation ladder' comes in. Through a feedback session that brought together a community whose stories were gathered in the first step to evaluate their interpretation of the design variations and their points of view. The experience of these interventions would also then be under the microscope, bringing together the users' right to choose from the different design ideas and voice their concerns.

This method of informed decision-making is called a dialogical method of participation, a conversation that builds up to synthesis and may involves a contradiction from the idea presented. A set of overlapping drawings of each design variation was printed on a base of the church. The feedback session focused on reflecting on the interventions for the church in the form of an open conversation with local residents, in this case, the neighbourhood of Nieuwendammerdijk.The participants came from different types of people, the current owner of the building, two former resident of the rectory, six former churchgoers and four people who had never entered the church but walked

past it frequently. The first question was, "Which of the design interventions do you prefer" and the second question was, "What could the functional attributes of these spaces be?" This session was conducted on-site so that participants could visualise the new design variation while standing within the old church. Every choice was noted, assessed and the functional attribute given was noted.
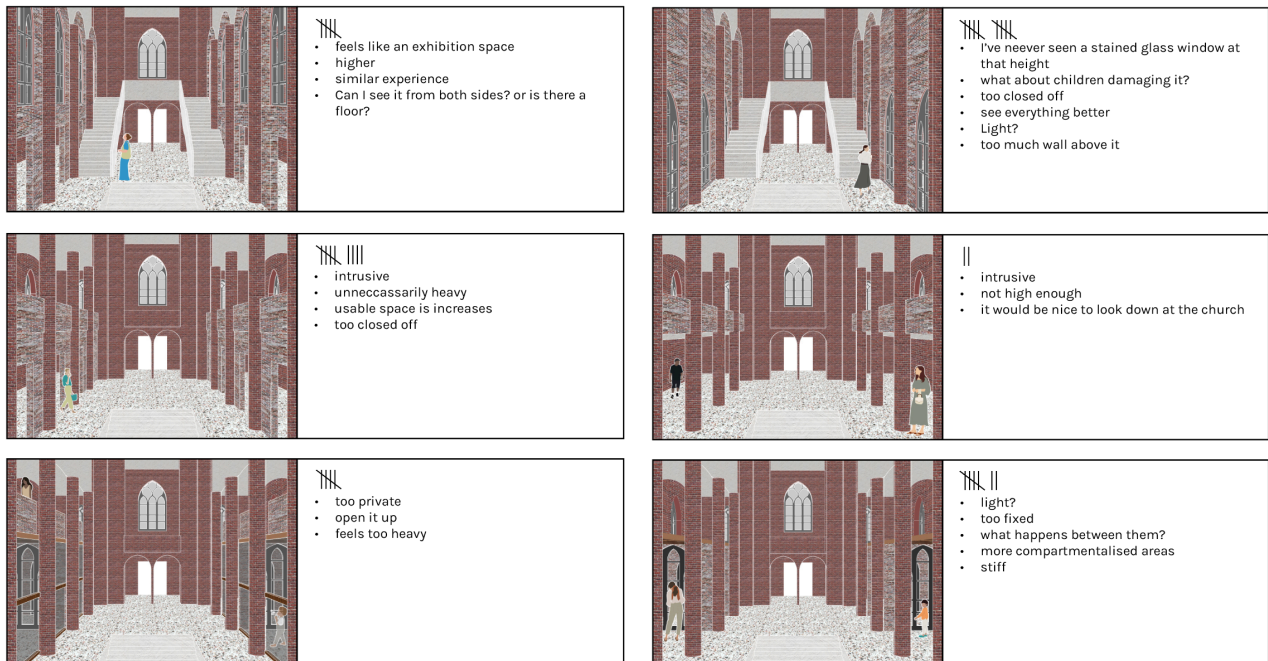

Figure 3.6, The feedback session and reasoning provided behind each choice made by the community and tabulation.

Interpretation of results and limitations

The participants commented on materiality, the addition of stained glass windows as partition walls and composing different elevated walkways to view the stained glass. Comments ranged from the granularity of the brick to the solidity of staircase or the walkway. As the session was interactive, they were able to play with every layer and ask questions. The scenarios imagined also develop as such that the community feels like they contribute towards the redesign, creating a sense of belonging. This process, though, comes with a few limitations. First, the design scenarios are limited to the church floor and the church exterior as other parts of the church, in the past have been closed off to the general public. Thus, these design scenarios are concentrated in these spaces.

Another limitation lies in the translation of the choices made into final design decisions. The goal of this process is to find common ground where their collective identity can be stored. The role of the researcher as a facilitator and mediator enters here. It is under the purview of the researcher and architect to analyse these results and choose which ones are best suited. This would be to find middle ground between,
-which choices the participants made, and
-the reason why the participants made their specific choices.

This study focuses on a certain number of scenarios or design interventions. It is possible to come up with more alternatives (such as indoor balconies, removal of windows, creation of walkways, and so on) which would result in a diverse set of reactions. While the study already takes into an account a

spectrum of people from the neighbourhood (fourteen in total), a wider range of participants may translate in a similar way as the cross-section of people taken into consideration in the study is now, quite non-specific. As long as they have been a part of the neighbourhood before, they can be a participant.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The research investigates methods of community participation, story collection through surveys and interviewing for the redesign of a vacant church as a way to bridge the gap between the communities feelings towards the church and its final redesign. The use of an interactive drawing set used when standing within the church helped reduce abstraction while working with real people who are well-versed in their needs towards the church. The feedback approach, which here involved the opinions of fourteen individuals encouraged newer ideas to be generated and equalising all potential voices, 'a true sense of democracy'[28] without the bias of the designer, through free conversation to air their grievances.

The need for the transformation of vacant churches is inevitable. The transformation of churches , unlike other heritage buildings also becomes very controversial as religious sentiments are hurt and varying opinions on their change to function other than that of a religious nature provides an unstable environment for the transformation of these churches. The use of storytelling also toe the line between the temporal understanding of the objects and how they were used in the past and how they can be used in the future without hurting these religious sentiments.

This subject on the building level also related to the larger scale understanding of the guidelines such *Guidelines of ways of dealing with Religious Objects* which provides a pathway to the repurposing of religious elements, while the LAMO Guidelines provide a framework for their deaccession. Both methods negate the social impact of these elements and having a method that involves people at all stages allows for this social aspect to be brought back into the decision making process.

This method also removes the dilemma between the previous users of the church, current users and future users as the thread between the past and the future is continued throughout with the use of the narratives. Involving the community and creating an environment where the design is informed by a three-sided conversation, the designer's input, the previous users (and their stories of the past) and the future users (and their goals of the future). The conflicting demand for change between the new and the old users is also met through this dialogical method that can find common ground for the use of the church and the elements.

Through its research methodology, this paper situates itself in the field of community-oriented conversion of vacant churches and programmatically too these community ties can be extended with these church converted into community centres and public spaces where these elements can be highlighted. While this paper ends at the data collection and processing phase of the design, there are more steps towards which the community participation process can be extended. A managerial approach, wherein citizen control over the redesign becomes a point of focus for the creation of this adaptively reused structure or a 'self-Built' or 'self-constructed' projects undertaken by various architecture practices over the last few years are some ways to provide create a sense of belonging within the realm of community participation.

[28] R Luck, "Design Studies ," *Design Studies* , 2018, 10.1016/j.destud.2018.10.002, 2.

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Word count: 3462 words