

*Reflection.*  
*repurposing*  
*sublime church*  
*architecture.*

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# Preface.

This reflection provides a structured review of the project and the research I conducted within the studio Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste church. The academic, societal and architectural value will be discussed as well as the relation between the project's topic, the architectural field as a whole and heritage preservation. A careful personal analysis will be conducted on the graduation process, as well as the preliminary result and the response to given feedback.

The project entails the repurposing of a case study, which is the Sint Augustinuskerk in Amsterdam-north in this case. The neo-gothic church was build in 1889 by famous dutch architect Alfred Tepe. Although adored by the local community, the church has served no purpose since 2014. Transformation of the structure has proven to be challenging for developers.

The research is highly integrated in the design and focuses on the spatial and emotional experience of the visitor. Specifically, the sublime and its architectural elements. The project aims to leverage the opportunities provided by religious heritage to promote mental well-being within a communal and societal context.

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## I A fascination and a purpose.

It started with a fascination: how come I feel some type of spiritual or inspirational energy whenever I set foot in a church, even though I have no religious upbringing or any link to religion whatsoever? How did the architecture or the space make me feel this way? What tools did architects use to make the visitor of the church believe in an all powerful God, a heaven and a hell? What is this experience?

I remembered reading about the sublime in Edmund Burke's 'A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful (1757)' for Agential Materialism, an architecture theory course given during Msc2 at TU Delft university. At the time I was very intrigued, which is why I remembered the concept quite well. I was now wondering if this natural sublime is what I was experiencing in a lesser extent in the church. Here began my graduation project. The Sint Augustinuskerk was, once again, able to generate a feeling of transcendence and awe. Very important to myself and the project was that this was not only an experience I liked to preserve. Its preservation needed to have a purpose, a clear why. This was found in its abilities to positively influence mental health and in its uniqueness in the urban tissue of today's cities. At the same time, I saw opportunities in the connection that can be made between preserving the sublime experience and circularity. A summarizing overview of the approach towards this graduation project can be seen in the page to the right (fig.1).

## II Unveiling sublimity.

Combining literature, books, papers, articles and dissertations let me to a list of characteristics that seem to make sublime architecture, well, sublime. The literature review revealed recurring architectural features such as succession, obscurity, contrast, uniformity, height, depth and scale. All characteristics identified are accounted for in their more extreme form: such as a scale that leads to a sense of vastness, grandeur and power. Height that makes the visitor feel lofty, elevated, inspired. Proportions that make one feel small or insignificant but at the same time in awe and overwhelmed. Succession, rhythm and repetition in such a rate that a sense of infinity or boundlessness is suggested. Identifying and

understanding these characteristics and how they interact with the spatial experience of religious heritage has been an intriguing and demanding journey. The philosophical theories espoused by renowned thinkers including Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Archibald Alison, and Lord Kames have served as a solid theoretical foundation for this research. However, due to the complexities inherent in their writings and the concept of the sublime, a contemporary perspective (Brady, 2013; Costelloe, 2012) has been employed to elucidate more tangible aspects. The different existing views on the subject forced the research to present a clear stance on the sublime and what it entails. Which theory is followed? Which aspects are at the base of the research and which aspects are not and why?

Although delving into theoretical frameworks has been a challenging yet intellectually stimulating endeavor, navigating the vast expanse of literature proved to be a potential pitfall. Initially, I found myself becoming engrossed in an endless cycle of reading, searching, and summarizing newly discovered sources. While it was crucial for me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept, I should have focused on concretizing the information earlier in the process.

The subjective nature of the transposition of the philosophical concept of the sublime into the domains of experience, design, and perception is evident. By accepting the very nature of the subject, I could start my attempt on materializing an abstract theory and using the information I learned about sublime architecture in my analyses of the church and start of the design.

By applying the knowledge gained from the literature in an analysis of the church, the most apparent architectural characteristics, able to aid in the experience of the sublime, were identified. Combined with the actual emotional experience that is present in the church, which was assessed through a questionnaire, it was established that sublimity was present in the church to a certain degree. However, it is important to acknowledge that the degree of sublimity is subjective by nature and intentionally left open-ended. While a definitive answer cannot be obtained in research endeavors focusing on this particular subject matter, the pursuit of potential new insights, knowledge, and design strategies remains very fruitful.

### III Back to basics.

During my graduation process, I had a hard time starting on the actual design process. In my mind, my research on the sublime was never finished. There was so much more to be read, to be known, so how can I ever start a design without knowing everything about sublime architecture? Stuck in sublimity, I started drawing concepts, ambiances, possibilities to further elevate the church. The P2 presentation put both my feet back on earth. Because this was not designing with the existing heritage, the Sint Augustinuskerk, what I was doing was projecting my knowledge from the research straight onto the existing structure. I was not directly made aware by the teachers before the p2 presentation that the direction I was going in my process might be insufficient, which is why my confidence definitely took a hit when receiving the news of a retake. Very quickly afterwards, I could easily understand and appreciate the need for redirection in my process. I worked on those aspects in which my project was lacking: what does the design of a mental health centre entail? How does each space conform to the overall design concept? What are the requirements for each space? The result was a new extensive plan for spatial requirements. New floorplans, more logic, less imagination & more reality (see *fig.2*). In the following period the design process really started running more smoothly.

This offset the real start of my design process, in which I found a lot of doubt, excitement, curiosity and lack of knowledge to be most present. I had no prior experience with transforming a 19th-century church. This led me to heavily rely on the knowledge provided by the teachers but also to do a lot of research on the side. I did a lot of experimenting and weighing options. In hindsight, this was ofcourse good, but I think I was too careful and scared of making choices, because I did not want to make the wrong one. At some point I knew that externally insulating for my project was the right move, although very experimental and daring, it just made the most sense for this particular project. Because it has not been done before however, I waited 3 weeks to actually go through with it. Just needing that extra bit of encouragement from the tutors. My approach to this graduation project was not to stay within the safe box, but to use this project as an opportunity to add new ideas and new impulses to the existing heritage field. Really

carefully reconsider what is the best option for each individual case. No intervention means no transformation which means no financial means to uphold the heritage, which in turn means no future for the structure. The feedback helped me in making choices and daring to be bold with them, which I am thankful for.



*Fig 2. An interior concept sketch from P2 (top), which was based on a projection of knowledge onto the structure, to an integrated facade design at P3 where the church itself is the priority.*



## IV A learning curve.

I often tend to quite specifically focus on 1 subject at a time and then deep-diving into the relevant matter. In the end, all these puzzle pieces form one whole, which at the time of working at them separately, already starts happening in my head. However, this led me to feedback from the tutors who did not always see the whole image and who asked me to show more versatile drawings. Not only the details that week or not only the facades the next, but highlighting both and their connection. This is something I still have to learn, because it is also character driving. If I am working on details and technique, I am working on details and technique. Once I have gained knowledge and expertise in that area, I go back to my design and re-evaluate the implications and start designing. For me, the process is more a back and forth of all these different puzzle pieces, re-evaluating each piece as I go. This is why I believe I got stuck in the research in the first semester. I wanted to know exactly where this piece of the puzzle should go and what it entails before going to the next one. In the future, I ought to remind myself of the process, working on different halves at the same time which later on can be tweaked and joined to one whole. Although designing with heritage sparks the designer in me that wants to be careful, respectful and most considerate of the existing, I can be more assertive in the process. If a design choice makes sense from many different angles, then it makes sense. Thinking about it and re-considering it for many weeks will not help and stalls the progress. In the diagram (fig.3) we can see how my process had ups and downs, with more steady improvements as I learned along the way.

The learning curve.

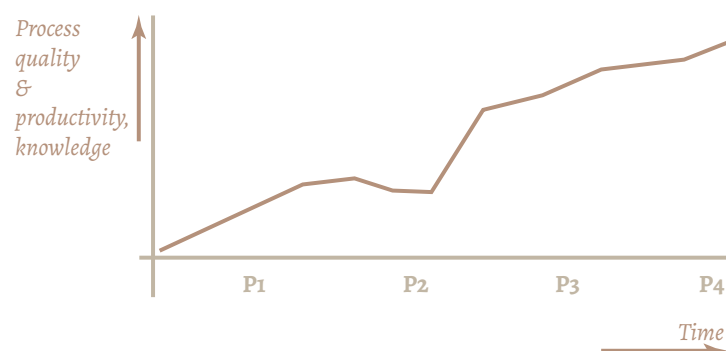


Fig 3. A schematic table showing the learning curve of the graduation project. With periods of getting stuck on one thing or not daring to take the next step. Learning throughout the year about myself, how I work and heritage design, gave cause to a more stable direction upwards.

## V Contradiction & solution.

During the evaluation of the project, I noticed a lot of contradicting factors within the project that had to be mitigated by the designer. For example, contradiction within the project is found in the needs of the community function and the mental health centre function. The mental health centre needs more privacy, soundproofing, calm & tranquility. Although sedateness might be a beneficial effect of sublime architecture, it can also cause a slight terror, anxiety or a feeling of insignificance. Ornate design can be overwhelming. I as a designer, attempted to juggle these differing needs in a way that I saw fit and that would benefit all aspects simultaneously. Using perforated brick with translucent satin panels in between, will for example, create a certain openness and sense of a bigger space, but does not compromise quality and positively influence the acoustics of the space. Private consultations were placed on the lower ground floor, providing less overwhelming, more intimate spaces for the patients. Ultimately, the key to ensuring the continuation of sublime architecture in the transformation of religious heritage is to strike a balance between preserving the original sublime qualities of the building while adapting it to new functions and needs. This requires a thorough understanding of the building's history, the community's needs, and the architectural principles that contribute to sublimity.

To test if my approach really worked, which implicates that the sublime experience is indeed continued within the church after repurposing it, would mean that I would have to provide a second but identical questionnaire to the same people to see if after my interventions, their experience





In figure 4, we see an overview of the most significant factors that played a key role in the design process of the Sint Augustinuskerk. The goal and challenge lies in creating a result that is a balance of all significant factors. This gives insight into the relation between the graduation subject, the architectural field and heritage.

### **Academic and societal value**

Studying the identification and continuation of sublime architecture in the repurposing of religious heritage is significant for the architectural field. It contributes to a better understanding of the emotional and psychological effects that architecture can have on individuals and how this can be used as a strength during the design process. The project's focus on preserving sublime architectural characteristics emphasizes the importance of sensory experience and emotional responses to the built environment. This approach can help to create more meaningful and memorable spaces that foster a sense of connection and belonging within the community. Repurposing Sint Augustinuskerk can serve as a case study for other architects and researchers interested in designing for and with mental health & heritage.

Furthermore, the research can aid in the creation of guidelines and principles for architects and designers to follow when working on religious heritage sites. These guidelines give insight into the intangible heritage that is experienced within the building. The acquired knowledge can be used to ensure that the elements that contribute to sublimity are not lost during the transformation process. This then aids in the preservation of the identity and character of the building after transformation and its cultural, historical and emotional significance for future generations. Addressing a more philosophical aspect of architecture, the project and research can contribute to the broader field of architectural theory, which in turn can have implications for other areas of architecture and design.

The project can benefit the community and society as a whole by providing spaces that promote mental and spiritual well-being. Combined with a program that focuses on mental well-being, the existing qualities of the structure in its entirety are an integral part of a healthier mental-state. The project demonstrates the potential

of historic structures to serve contemporary needs. By repurposing the church as a mental health and community center, a valuable service to the community is provided while also preserving a well-loved historic landmark of the neighbourhood. This approach to preservation can help to revitalize historic neighborhoods and promote sustainable development. Accessibility of the building and experience as a whole contributes to the inclusivity of the project, ensuring that it can serve the needs of all members of the community.

## **VII Transferability**

Provided that the project does not lack clear articulation and communication of the found and used principles, methods and strategies, as well as outcomes and lessons learned, it can be applicable and useful to other similar projects. The transferability of the project results is valuable in terms of sharing knowledge and best practices in heritage preservation and adaptive reuse. The research in particular is set up to be broadly applicable, because the found design techniques able to evoke sublimity, can be analysed in almost any building. It must always be combined with an assessment of the experience the visitors of the structure have however. For example, height, succession and obscurity can be analysed in skyscrapers as well as temples and public libraries. The design project however is quite specific to its context. Meaning, design choices were based on the layout of the existing urban environment, the specific historical elements of this church and needs of the surrounding community. So in this case, the design as a whole is not very transferable, but individual elements are. If someone is considering externally insulating a church for different reasons, the project can serve as one of the only examples out there. It can help other designers observe the implications of their design choices.

