From far East to Dutch streets
The arrival of the Dhammakaya in Afferden

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the visibility and impact of Buddhist temples in The Netherlands, focusing on the integration of Buddhist practices in the Dutch society. The research will analyze the transformation of the former Victor & Gezellenkerk to the Dhammakaya temple in Afferden. It delves into how this architectural and cultural shift reflects broader themes of pluralism, secularism and social integration within the Dutch society.

The research traces the evolution of Buddhism in the Netherlands, from the first written scripture about Buddhism, migration to the establishment of Buddhist temples. It highlights how the now Dhammakaya Temple preserved the church's Christian architectural elements, reliefs, repurposing spaces, but blending them in with Buddhist elements. The transformation honors the building's history while accommodating Buddhist (Thai) practices. The paper further investigates community responses, from resistance to acceptance, showing how consideration can foster cultural coexistence. This case study of the Dhammakaya Temple shows how religious spaces can serve as a dynamic dialogue, embodying both continuity and adaptation in the now pluralistic Dutch society.

Introduction

As societies around the world become more religiously diverse, the Netherlands is no stranger to this phenomenon. The growing plurality has brought significant changes in the country's cultural and architectural landscapes, like the influence by the decline of the traditional, pillarized social structure, also known as 'ontzuiling' in Dutch. The depillarization in the 20th century, which led to

decline of religious believers, and eventually church attendance was due to 'loss of function' according to CBS.[1] This process was further influenced by the uprising of socialism and the democratic and emancipation developments at that time. This modernization contributed to the creation of a society with greater institutional differences and increased religious pluralism. [2] As a result, many religious buildings were left vacant. In response to this shift and the changing socio-cultural environment, municipalities, developers and private parties took action to repurpose these buildings, transforming them into museums, restaurants and apartments. This practice of adaptive reuse not only preserves architectural and historic value, but it also contributes to revitalizing spaces and promotes economic growth.[3]

As more and more buildings are becoming vacant, the practice of adaptive reuse has drawn more attention over the years, this is also the case for religious and cultural buildings. Scholars have analyzed adaptive reuse grom multiple perspectives, exploring both challenges and opportunities of preserving architectural and historical value, the intersection of faith, space and economic growth.

A central theme in the literature is the preservation of cultural heritage. According to Tessa Persoon and Hilde Remøy who analyzed the economic impacts of adaptive reuse in industrial heritage sites, these projects not only preserve the architectural heritage but it also regenerates the local economies.[4] Knippenberg, discussed trends of secularization in the Netherlands. He highlighted how adaptive reuse had become essential for maintaining the social and historical aspect of communities.[5] The transformation of religious spaces, however, goes beyond economics and architecture. It has a spiritual and emotional embodiment. In Crompton's analysis of multifaith spaces, it highlights how such transformation can symbolically mark a shift in a community.[6] Reyhan Sabri further deepens this analysis, addressing the tension involving faith to faith conversion. She distinguishes emotional dissonance and sensitivity as a recurring challenge in these projects.[7] Furthermore, Hayden and Walker framed this transformation through the concept of intersecting religioscapes. Their concept of layered religion highlights the ways in which religious spaces are not neutral. Rather, these spaces are shaped by evolving narratives and historical events.[8]

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[1] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), "1889-1971: Ontkerkelijking vanuit het noorden," *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, March 29, 2024. https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/tijdlijn-125-jaar-kerkelijke-gezindte/1889-1971-ontkerkelijkheid-vanuit-het-noorden.

[2] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), 'Ontkerkelijking vanuit het noorden,' *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*.

[3] Tessa Persoon, Hilde Remøy, ''De toegevoegde waarde van herbestemming van industrieel erfgoed: Het prijseffect op omliggende woningen'', *VOGON*, May 26, 2020, https://www.vogon.nl/toegevoegde-waarde-herbestemming-industrieel-erfgoed/.

[4] Persoon and Hilde, "De Toegevoegde Waarde van Herbestemming van Industrieel Erfgoed: Het Prijseffect op Omliggende Woningen," .

[5] Hans Knippenberg, 'The Changing Religious Landscape of the Netherlands', 1971-2016. *Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers*, 2018.

[6] A. Crompton,The architecture of multifaith spaces: God leaves the building, *The Journal of Architecture*, 18(4), (2013): 474–496. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2013.821149.

[7] Reyhan Sabri, ''The uncomfortable truths of adaptive reuse: faith-tofaith conversion of religious heritage buildings in conflict environments'', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, (2025): 31:2, 160-177, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2024.2406000.

[8] Robert M. Hayden and Timothy D. Walker, 'Intersecting Religioscapes A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces,'' *Oxford University Press*, 2013.

Within the context of adaptive reuse, the increasing presence of depillarization has transformed the religious scapes in the Netherlands. While many Christian buildings have been repurposed for secular uses, the establishment of Buddhist temples represent a different form of religious architecture and practice. Although Buddhist communities in the Netherlands remain relatively small, they have founded temples that reflect not only their spiritual and cultural needs but also the need to integrate within a secular and pluralistic society. These spaces are by multiple layers of adaptations, both architecturally and in the broader social context. This research focuses on the Dhammakaya temple in Affereden as a case study. It seeks to understand this space reflects broader developments in the Dutch religious landscape. Central to this exploration is the question ''How have the practices of religious pluralism and secularism in the Netherlands influenced the prominence/visibility and social integration of Buddhist temples?'' In answering this question, the research touches three related themes though a set of subquestions.

First, its exploration begins with by tracing visibility of Buddhist spaces in the Netherlands. It asks, how have Buddhist temples evolved since the arrival of the first Buddhist migrants and to what extent has their presence been 'hidden' of visible within the Dutch society? This question highlights the paths through which Buddhist communities have integrated into the Dutch religious landscape. Diving deeper, the second theme are the material and symbolic attributes of the space. How did the Dhammakaya temple adapt traditional Buddhist architectural styles to align with the Dutch environmental context. The focus shifts to the ways in how religious identity is expressed. How visibility is not only about the tangible presence, but also spiritually and emotionally. The final theme explores what the role of institution framework in shaping religious spaces. What role had political and legal factors, such as building regulations played in the establishment of the Dhammakaya temple? This last question brings a regulatory perspective into the research, where the construction of a temple is as much about navigating through bureaucratic procedures as it is about architecture and integration in the local community. All these questions together offer a framework for understanding how Buddhist spaces are established and perceived in a society shaped by both secularism and pluralism.

To investigate the layered complexity of a Buddhist temple visibility and adaptation in the Netherlands, this research uses a mixed approach combining archival research, interviews and visual analysis. The archival research consists from architectural drawings, providing a understanding of the churches transformation. Complementing this, interviews with key figured were held, such as the monk of the temple. This offers an insight into the lived experiences, negotiations and perceptions from the community. This is crucial for discovering the nuances of social integration and visibility. Lastly, visual analysis on both historical and contemporary architectural elements allows how the Buddhist identity is materially and spatially expressed.

The paper is structured to reflect the layered aspects of the research questions. The first section explores the development of Buddhist spaces in the Netherlands, starting from the first written encounter with Buddhism in the Netherlands. The second section focuses on the regulations and negotiations shaping the establishment of the temple. The third section investigates on the architectural transformation, analyzing how Buddhist elements are integrated within the old church. Together, these sections work towards a understanding of how Buddhist spaces are adapted and received in a secular and pluralistic society.

1 The evolutions of Buddhist temple since the first migrants

Buddhism in the Netherland can be found dated back as far as 1843,[9] when preacher, linguist and culture scholar dr. J.H Halbertsma wrote a book titled '*Het Buddhisme en zijn Stichter*'[10] aimed at introducing Buddhism to a Western audience. Halbertsma examined Buddhism through a Christian lens, often comparing its teaching to those of Christianity and writing it in a more missionary tone as it 'implied' that Christianity offered a more complete truth. The real migration only started after World War two, before that it was primarily only individuals who were interested in the Buddhist philosophy.

The first wave of Buddhist were primarily migrants from Indonesia and Hong Kong. Later waves of included refugees and migrants from Vietnam, Tibet, Thailand and Sri Lanka. They brought their religion with them, establishing temples within homes, and for that reason their presence remained relatively hidden for the outside world. This was primarily due to lack of fundings and numbers of Buddhist at that time.[11] Later, as the numbers of migrants grew over the years[12] and awareness was spread about Buddhism to the Dutch society. Buddhists were able to afford to build more prominent temples or move to larger spaces to practice their religion. This evolution from discrete location to more prominent building reflects the growing visibility and integration of the Buddhist community that is residing in The Netherlands today.[13]

2 Buddhist architecture meets Dutch architecture

Figure 2.1.1 St. Victor & Gezellenkerk

Once a Catholic church in a small Dutch town named Affereden, is now transformed into a Buddhist temple. This part of the research focuses on the transformation of the former Victor & Gezellenkerk, a 19th century church into a Buddhist temple. By delving into the history of the building and tracing back the context surrounding its reason of repurposing, this section aims to show how material heritage, legal regulation and local sentiment are negotiated in the transformation.

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[9] Jacque den Boer, ''hoe het boeddhisme in Nederland wortel schoot'', *Boeddistisch dagblad*, May 12 2018, https://boeddhistischdagblad.nl/achtergronden/109615-109615/.

[10] Henk Blezer, 'Het pompeblêd en de lotus,' (Asoka, 2020).

[11] Luang Phi Sander, interview by P.T. Aung, December 26, 2024.

[12] Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), ''Religie in Nederland'', *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek,* effective December 18, 2020.

[13] Luang Phi Sander, Interview.

2.1.1 History of the building

The Victor & Gezellenkerk in Afferden was a Catholic church build between 1890-1891 designed by the German architect Carl Weber, [14] who was primarily active in the Netherlands. The building was built in a neogothic style, a style that is seen back in a lot of Weber's work in many churches that he designed. The Church was part of a the Afferden parish and which later fused into the Drutense fusionparish 'Heilige Franciscus' and 'Heilige Clara'. Afferden is a small town in the province of Gelderland with approximately 1700 residents. Buildings cannot live forever, like all buildings, churches require regular maintenance and repairs to remain functional.[15] Due to financial difficulties and decline in church attendees from weekly 300 to 34-40 and change in subsidy policy of the municipality of Druten, the church was put on sale in 2016 and bought by de Stichting Dhammakaya Nederland for 600.000€ to establish a Buddhist temple and lending its original function as Catholic church.
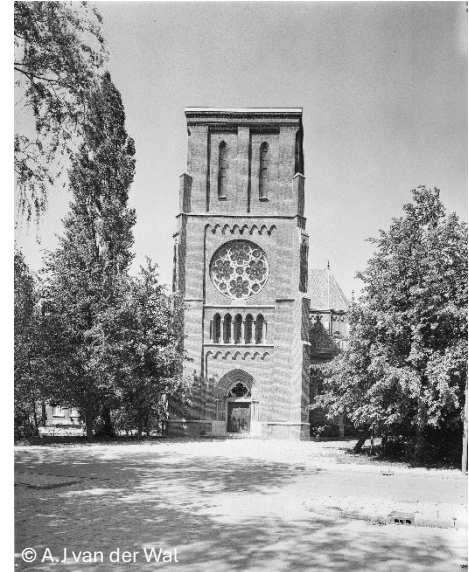

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Figure 2.1.1 South facade, 1977

2.1.2 Regulation and opinions

During the establishment of the Dhammakaya temple faced next to architectural differences, opinions from the town and legal factors. One reason why the church could be reused as a Buddhist temple was because, the diocese beliefs that Buddhism is more a philosophy than an actual religion as it has no god or creator. This highlights the different interpretations of religion in a secular society or Christian lens. The categorization of Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion, became a strategy that facilitated the interreligious transition and reuse of the building. Another reason why the church could be reused was because the building itself had cultural and religious use and for this reason it was easy to use the church for another religion as it is without needing to file for new permits. However, opinions from the Christian community differed, a few residents from the town were not too happy about the arrival of foreign Buddhists in their town. Paying a visit to the monks and giving them a warning to not to touch certain objects in the church. Overall opinions were positive, happy that the church can be kept alive and maintained even though it is now for another religion[16]. Furthermore, church guidelines do not easily allow people of other faiths to purchase a church[17]. After extensive discussion the parish managed to convince the diocese to make an exception. This was because the building remains a spiritual building and because the diocese sees Buddhism not as a religion[18].

2.1.2 Buddhist renovation

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[14] ''St. Victorkerk in Afferden'', *Rijksmonumenten*, https://rijksmonumenten.nl/monument/14154/st-victorkerk/afferden/.

[15] Luang Phi Sander, Interview.

[16] Luang Phi Sander, Interview and Michiel van de Kamp, ''Hoe de kerk in Afferden een temple werd: 'Liever boeddhisten dan appartementen','' *Katholiek Nieuwsblad*, November 27, 2019.

[17] van de Kamp, '' 'Hoe de kerk in Afferden een temple werd: 'Liever boeddhisten dan appartementen'.'.

[18] van de Kamp, '' 'Hoe de kerk in Afferden een temple werd: 'Liever boeddhisten dan appartementen'.'.

The building holds a monumental status, therefore the temple could not make a lot of chances to the façade of the building[19]. This left the temple no choice but to leave the church as it is if they had plans to renovate it to make it appear more Buddhist if they wanted to modify it to make it appear more Buddhist. One thing that they did change to the façade was the "piek" on top of the building. During a stormy night the cross of the building broke down and this had to be replaced. Replacing it with another cross felt out of place as it is now not used anymore as a Christian church, therefore the residing monks wanted it to replace it with a Buddhist parasol with a relic. The designer of the parasol for the Dhammakaya temple chose to represent this back into a more modern form of parasol for the 'piek'. Ideally the first choice was to make the parasol golden, but due to that the building is a monumental building where technically they could not make any changes, replacing the cross with the parasol was already very generous of the municipality and the idea of making it gold got denied as this would draw to much attention to the fact that the cross has been replaced. For this reason, they made the parasol dark blue so it does not stand out too much[20]. The parasol is an object that is found on top on every Buddhist pagoda. The parasol itself symbolizes protection. The parasol consists of multiple tiers, where each tier represents the steps to enlightenment[21]. It also shows functions as a visual marker of

[19] ''Rooms-katholieke Pastorie'', *Mijn Gelderland*, https://mijngelderland.nl/inhoud/routes/drutense-monumenten/rooms-katholieke-pastorie-koningstraat-47-afferden.
[20] Gerrit Korenberg, interview by P.T. Aung, February 10, 2025.
[21] Htun Aung, interview by P.T. Aung, March 14, 2025.

religious identity. The parasol in this case is not merely an architectural element, it becomes a site of syncretism, where Buddhist and Catholic architectural elements come together.
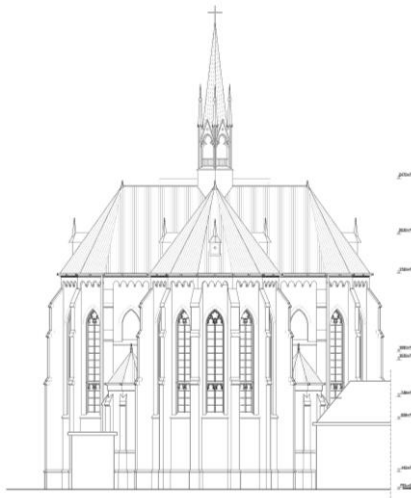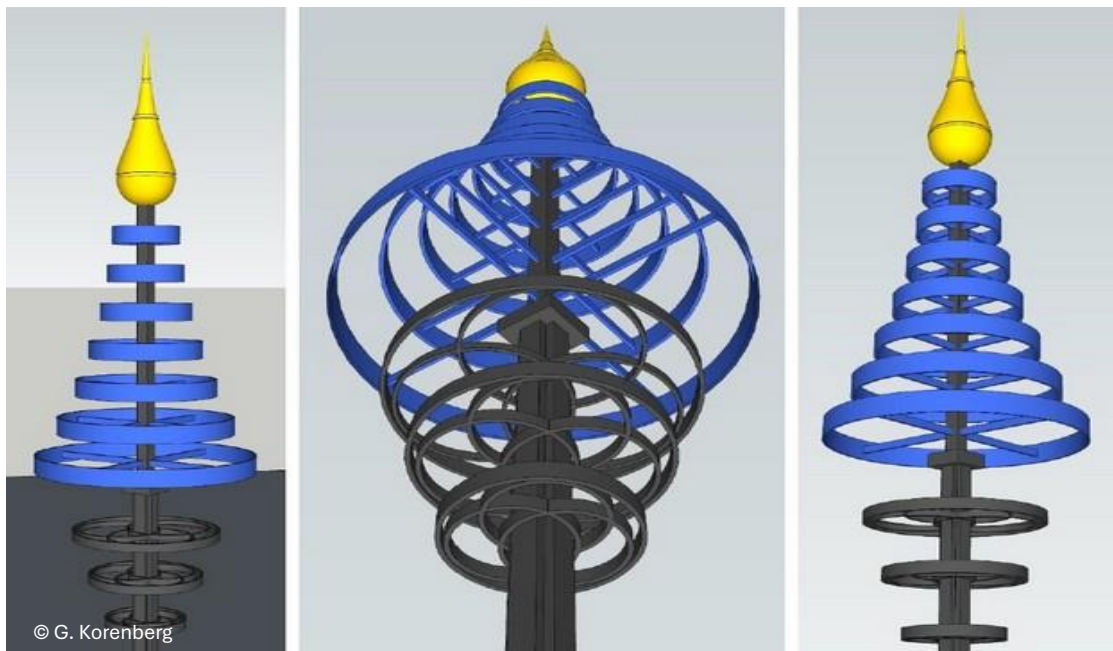

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Figure 2.1.2 North façade with the crucifix, 2010

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Figure 2.1.3 Parasol, 2024

© G. Korenberg

Figure 2.1.4 Parasol, 2024

Since the transformation into a Buddhist temple. The former church underwent renovation to accommodate the liturgical and spatial requirements of Thai Buddhist customs. Rather than removing or erasing the elements of the building's previous owner, the Dhammakaya monks and temple goers chose to architectural layer, deliberately preserving parts of its history[22] , while inserting new elements. This decision reflects adaptive reuse, where heritage value is maintained though functional and symbolic reinterpretation and to sustain intangible social value. In a small town where many locals were baptized, married and farewelled, the building

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[22] Luang Phi Sander, Interview.

hold emotional and communal significance that exceeds its religious function. The layering of the two religions results to an architectural and religious syncretism.[23] Where elements of two distinct coexist, shaping a sacred space.

The temple community tried not touch the Chirstian elements as much as they could to sustain the intangible value of the space. Although the temple community did not actively remove any elements, the parish itself removed prominent elements like the crucifix, statues and the churches altar table during the move. This decision was motivated by a desire to retain these sacred objects within the Christian community, as the parish expressed a discomfort leaving the objects to 'outsiders.'[24] While there is no Dutch law about the removal of religious object, as there is in Italy where deconsecration of sacred iconography is required.[25] There is a guideline created about how to deal with religious objects. [26] The guidelines address the difficult subjects of destruction and is created not only exclusively for Christian denominations but may also be useful for other denominations like Buddhism.[27] Architecturally, the removal of Christian icons, created space for the Dhammakaya community to make changes.

© de Gelderlander

Figure 2.1.5 Dismateling the cross

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[23] Robert M. Hayden, Timothy D. Walker, ''Intersecting Religioscapes A Comparative Approach to Trajectories of Change, Scale, and Competitive Sharing of Religious Spaces'' (Oxford University Press, 2013), 404-405.

[24] Luang Phi Sander, Interview.

[25] Elena Ciucci, interview by P.T. Aung, February 27, 2025.

[26] Museum Catharijneconvent, ' Handreiking Roerend Religieus Erfgoed' , *Museum Catharijneconvent and de stichting kerkelijk kunstbezit in Nederland*, March 15, 2011 , https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/documents/55/Handreiking_Roerend_Religieus_Erfgoed_3GnR1tW.pdf

[27] Museum Catharijneconvent, 'Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects', *Museum Catharijneconvent,* https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/documents/56/Guidelines_dealing_with_religious_objects__oyww2E0.pdf.
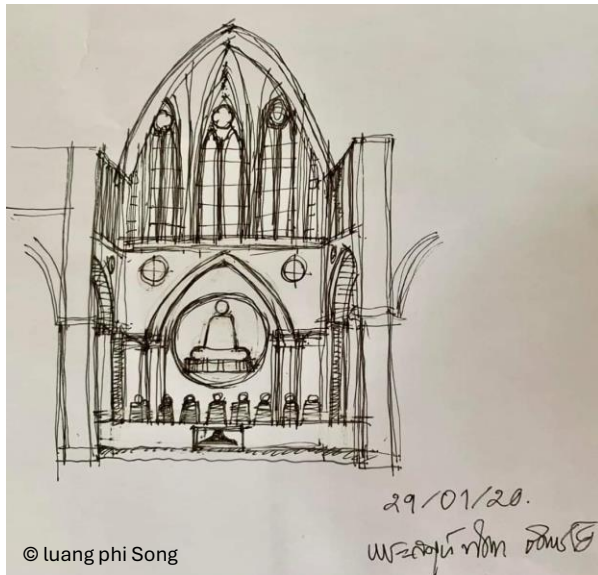
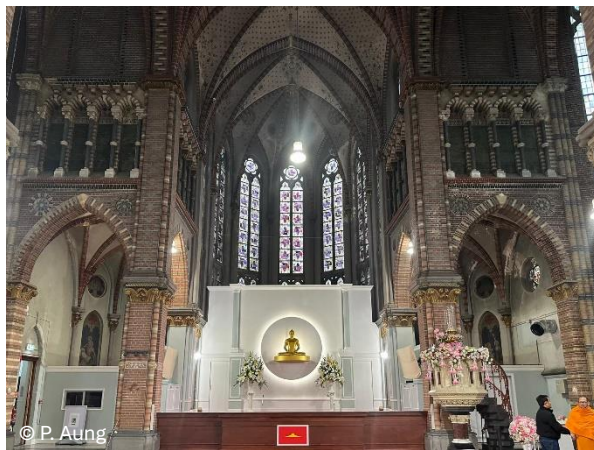© luang phi Song

Figure 2.1.6 Sketch of the altar

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Figure 2.1.7 The altar

After the move the Dhammakaya community made small changes to the former church building to accustom the Buddhist customs. The shrine for Buddhist is an important element in temples, it is the part where a statue of buddha is seated. Traditionally Buddhist pray to the east, and Buddha statues should too. The reasoning behind why it should be facing east is, because Buddha's enlightenment occurred while he was sitting facing east under the Bodhi tree. However, this is not strictly practiced nowadays as modern society now places the shrine where there is place as it is not always as practical in buildings and spaces to orientate it to the east.[28] As the original layout of the Victor & Gezellenkerk is aligned to the north. Rather than rearranging the entire spatial orientation, the existing chancel was retained and repurposed a monk named Luang phi Song designed an altar where now the statue of Buddha can be seated and where monks could preach/chant. Buddhists have their own way of practicing their religion, where Christians pray on benches as what could be seen by the prayer benches in the former church hall, Buddhist pray on the ground. Therefore, the temple decided to remove all the wooden benches in the main hall, except the benches on the sides as it was attached to the ground. The Dhammakaya community and carpenters elevated the floor with a few centimetres and covered the cold tiled floor with carpet for more comfortability.

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[28] Luang Phi Sander, Interview and Htun Aung, interview.
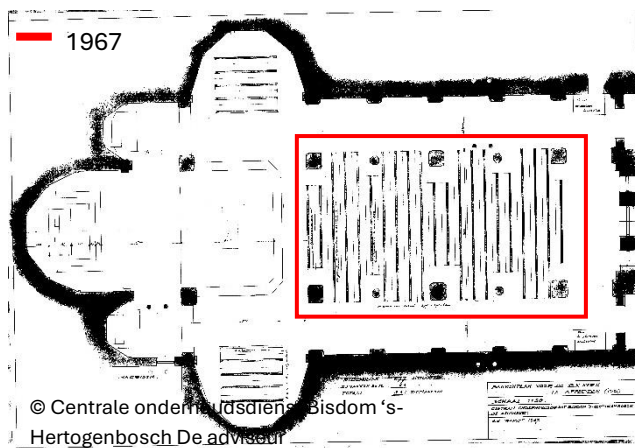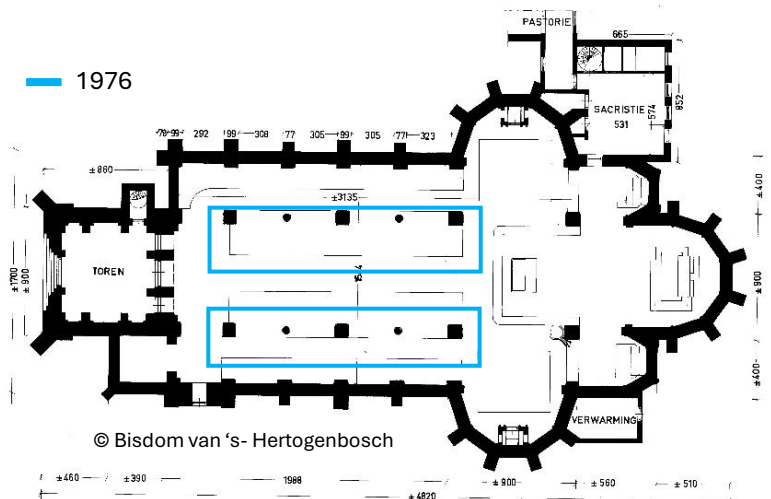
1967

1976

Figure 2.1.8 Ground floor, 1967

Figure 2.1.9 Ground floor, 1976

From the floor plans of 1967 and 1976 indicate that the church itself underwent renovation over time. Originally, the main hall was filled with benches, but as church attendance gradually declined, more and more benches were removed. Eventually during the Buddhist renovation, the remaining benches in the middle were removed entirely.

Figure 2.1.10 Church Hall, 1976

Figure 2.1.11 Church Hall, 2024

Christian reliefs depicting the life of Jesus remain visible on the walls. Rather than demolish them, the monks chose to overlay them by hanging paintings illustrating Buddha's life in front of the reliefs. Allowing the space to continue telling a sacred narrative, now reflecting the temple's Buddhist identity. Across temples and pagodas in Southeast Asia paintings and reliefs can be found illustrating Buddha's life. It can be seen architecturally in the hall towards the main hall or shrine. While visitors make their way to the main hall or shrine, they can read or see the story of

Buddha, it has a spiritual and meditative purpose, it mirroring you own inner journey.[29]This spatial adjustment creates a form of visual and symbolic layering. These transformations keep the Christians architectural identity alive while embodying the new Buddhist function in the building. The approach practices palimpsestic layering,[30] it reflects the coexistence of the past and present. The space provides a multisensory dialogue across time. The syncretic transformation extends beyond physical alterations. Many residents of Afferden continue to visit the former church building, driven by nostalgic connection to their personal events within the space[31]. Simultaneously, they participate in the temple's meditation sessions and educational lectures, showing an evolving relationship with the building. It illustrated that the building now has a dual function, it operates as a heritage site tied to the former Christian communal identity and as living religious space for the Buddhist community. The building serves as space that preserves architectural legacy while accommodating its new Buddhist purpose, it created a space for both continuity and transformation in the religious and cultural landscape.

Figure 2.1.12 Left side of the hall with the life of Buddha paintings

Figure 2.1.13 Right side of the hall with the original relief of the life of Jesus

[29] Htun Aung, Interview.
[30] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, 3rd ed (Wiley, 2012).
[31] Luang Phi Sander, Interview.

3 Conclusion

The transformation of the former Christian church Victor & Gezellenkerk into the Buddhist Dhammakaya temple in Afferden serves as a case study for to analyse the intersection of pluralism, secularism and cultural integration.

The Netherlands commitment to religious pluralism and secularism has provided a legal and cultural framework that support the repurposing religious buildings. However, transformation always comes with its difficulties. Despite church guidelines generally restricting the sale to non-Christian groups, the succession by the Buddhist showed how exception can be made when the building's spiritual function is persevered. The diocese's decision to allow the sale, influenced by the belief that Buddhism is more a philosophy than an actual religion, highlights the different interpretations of religion in a secular society.

Architecturally and culturally, the temple embodies syncretism by blending Buddhist practices with the preserved Christian heritage of the building. The Dhammakaya communities decision to keep Christian elements, the use of adaptable design, such as covering the Christian reliefs with Buddhist paintings rather demolishing them, reflects a recognition of the building's significance to the residents of Afferden. This approach encouraged continuity rather than erasure. Beyond the tangible elements, the syncretism is found in the social and cultural aspects. Residents continue visiting the former church, not only for nostalgic reasons tied to personal events, but also to participate in the temple's meditation and educational activities. This engagement shows that the building functioned as a sacred space, where both religions share a space for spiritual and reflective purposes.

The transition has not been without anyresistance. The opposition from some residents, warning monks about handling specific objects from the church, shows a discomfort with the presence of a 'foreign' religion. Overall, the temple's arrival was accepted, particularly after the recognition that the temple's role in preserving the building and maintaining its function as a place for spirituality. This shows that practical consideration can override religious exclusivity. The temple's compromise on the design of the Buddhist parasol, to meet heritage regulations, shows again a balance between cultural preservation and integration.

In conclusion, the visibility and social integration of Buddhist temples in the Netherlands are shaped by a combination of religious pluralism, secular values, and pragmatic culturaladaptation. The Dhammakaya Temple's transformation of the Victor & Gezellenkerk shows how Buddhist temples can integrate into Dutch society, not by erasing the past, but by layering new meanings onto existing structure. Integration is not a linear process of assimilation but a dynamic negotiation between preservation, adaptation, and evolving the community. Ultimately, the former Victor & Gezellenkerk and now the Dhammakaya reveals that religious spaces are more than physical structures, they are living embodiments of cultural dialogue, where the past and present coexist in tangible and intangible and meaningful ways.

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