

Detangling Layered Heritage: The Palimpsest as a Tool for Examining Multiple Narratives – Case of the Former Maranathakerk in Castricum

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of the palimpsest as an early-stage investigatory tool in developing redevelopment strategies for vacant heritage. It focuses on the former Maranathakerk in Castricum, The Netherlands. Due to its transition from religious to secular educational use, Maranathakerk serves as a case study for heritage buildings which has accumulated multiple cultural narratives over their lifetime. The paper explores a novel approach to defining and documenting the transition in cultural narratives, an important and unresolved issue in heritage studies stressed by successive declarations by UNESCO and ICOMOS. The palimpsest, a notion frequently used to describe complex spatial conditions, is combined with existing architectural methodologies to catalogue narrative transformations in Maranathakerk. The proposed methodology is used to identify how the pre- and post-secularisation configuration of the building and its usage by different user groups influenced the present characteristics of the building. The key findings are how narrative changes resulted from both physical changes and performative adaptations and how individual building elements made contributions towards the overarching narrative of a site.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen increased awareness and a growing impetus towards recognizing heritage as non-static and culturally diverse. As pointed out in the 1997 Nara Declaration on Authenticity: *"All cultures and societies are rooted in the particular forms and means of tangible and intangible expression which constitute their heritage, and these should be respected."* (World Heritage Convention *et al.*, 1993)

A key arena in contemporary heritage management is thus the conciliation of multiple cultural narratives. Successive doctrinal expressions since Nara, such as the 2005 Xi'an Declaration on the conservation of heritage sites and settings stressed the importance of an inclusive understanding of heritage settings. (ICOMOS, 2005) The 2008 Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of the Place similarly reiterated the need for stakeholders to assemble multidisciplinary views in heritage assessment. (ICOMOS, 2008)

Nevertheless, as the Nara and its subsequent documents acknowledged, the act of mediating multicultural narratives – and even diverging narratives within the same culture – remain a challenging task. An expression of this issue is the growing ranks of vacant churches in the Netherlands. 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 churchgoing segment of Dutch society continues to shrink. The issue of secularisation also reflects a growing generational rift in the nation. Older populations, particularly the post-war 'baby-boom' era are statistically more likely to be religious compared to the increasingly more secular younger generations. (CBS, 2021, 2022) Recent global events including Covid-19 and soaring energy prices are also expected to intensify the pressure on struggling religious institutions. (Walsum, 2020)

1.1. Vacant Churches

Vacant churches represent a form of 'heritage obsolescence', as many of the churches remain nominally functional buildings and hold cultural significance within their community. The persistence of 'cultural value' separates them from other forms of building dereliction. This makes vacant churches both a potentially more 'valuable' target for conservation but also presents additional challenges in adapting them for other uses. Congregations, particularly those of Roman Catholic affiliation, are often reluctant to allow non-religious functions even after a church ceases operation since Catholic doctrine holds that consecrated ground may not be used for profane purposes. (Schulte, 1908) Whilst Protestant doctrine attaches less significance to church ground itself, churches often come to represent an important spiritual pillar for local communities. Beyond regular masses, churches also host key life events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Local churches thus frequently serve as significant sites of personal or familial heritage for their users, even former ones, adding to the challenge of transforming such spaces for other functions. How to combat heritage obsolescence and how to conciliate diverse cultural narratives thus form intertwined problems in managing and adapting vacant churches.

1.2. The Palimpsest

Palimpsest originally referred to a method of intentional erasure and superposition of texts on a piece of parchment script. It became a regular practice in medieval monastic scriptoria as parchment was a costly resource. Much to the delight of modern researchers, these acts of economisation sometimes resulted in superimposed layers of texts discernible under careful observation and helped preserve otherwise lost knowledge. (Toth, 2016) After its adoption by the 19th Century literati Thomas De Quincey, the palimpsest has gained growing traction as a substantive notion representing acts of overlaying which creates a new or greater totality. (Dillon, 2005) André Corboz, in particular, popularised the palimpsest within spatial studies as a metaphor for understanding the successive human transformation of the physical environment through his essay '*Le territoire comme palimpseste*' [French: The land as a palimpsest] (1983) A wealth of studies have followed this tradition of palimpsestic urban reading, covering cities from Berlin to Maputo. A brief selection of these includes Noppen and Morisset, 1999; Khirfan, 2010; Giacomo Bottà, 2012; Vâlceanu, Kosa and Tămârjan, 2014; Kroessler, 2015; Ramirez-Hinojosa, 2015; Avramidis, 2020; Declève, 2020; Maskineh, 2021; Noormahomed, 2021; Sağlam, 2021; Turgut, 2021; Evans, 2022. The palimpsest has thus had a legacy of employment in academia to understand heritage settings and built heritage on the macro-scale as the result of successive layers. This interpretation of the built environment as successive layering also reflects the consensus laid forth in the Venice, Nara, and Quebec ICOMOS charters. (ICOMOS, 1965, 2008; World Heritage Convention *et al.*, 1993)

1.3. Heritage Narrative

In this paper, '*heritage narrative*' is defined as the assortment of cultural values, practices, memories, and usage patterns belonging to a particular user group of a heritage site. Over time, as different groups occupy and depart a site, differing sets of narratives are deposited within the site. This resembles the concept of 'layering (of time)' frequently used by heritage theorists. Paul Meurs conjectured that "each intervention (renovation, restoration or transformation) adds a new layer of history to the building" (2016, p. 36) Wessel de Jonge and Marieke Kuipers similarly used 'layers of time' to rationalise deviations between the present and the past – while linking deviations to "usage cycles". (2017, p. 53) These precedents offer valuable perspectives. Nonetheless, I propose narrative as an alternative and will employ it as the central axiom in this paper. Although the heritage process itself is one of layering, it should not be detached from the larger cultural-political activities responsible for its propagation. *Narrative* was chosen as it encapsulates part of this interaction between stakeholders and heritage meaning.

In the case of Maranathakerk, I suggest two predominant narratives: the church and the school. In addition, non-resident stakeholders – what I will term external interest groups – also play a role in projecting or maintaining certain narratives. Examples of such interest groups include the local municipality of Castricum, which represents contemporary development interests in the region.

Meanwhile, heritage advocates such as Cuypergenootschap or Bond Heemschut represent lobbyist parties seeking to maintain a relative status quo for the narrative. An application for Maranathakerk to be granted municipal monument status was lodged by the two heritage associations in 2021 and remains under consideration. (Leo Dubbelaar, 2021)

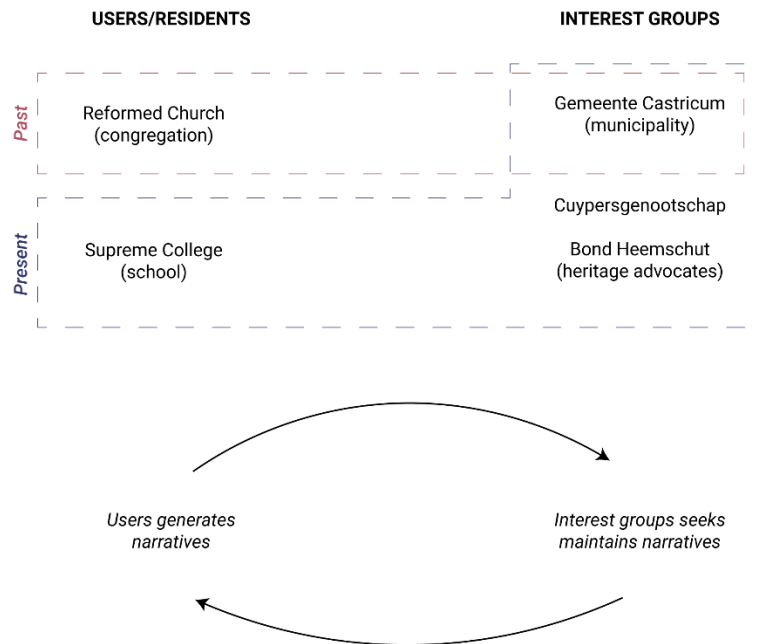


Fig. 1 – The stakeholder of Maranathakerk and their role in shaping or maintaining its narratives.

1.4. Scope of the Paper

This paper deals with the former Maranathakerk in Castricum as a case study. Originally raised as a reformed protestant church in 1954, the former Maranathakerk was decommissioned from religious use in 2018. Following its acquisition by the local municipality, the building was temporarily leased out to an upstart bilingual school in 2020. In the years since, the former church was gradually transformed and adopted by the school community, introducing new layers of narratives onto the site. As part of a thesis project redesigning the former church site, the palimpsest was used to formulate an investigatory framework to study the multiple narratives present in Maranathakerk caused by the transition from sacred to secular use. The following research question will be addressed in this paper:

How can the palimpsest be used as an investigative tool for understanding heritage narratives? The case of the former Maranathakerk in Castricum.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Origins of Palimpsests

'Palimpsest' stemmed from the Greek word *palimpsēstos*, meaning 'scraped again', from *palin* + *psēn* to rub, scrape. (Merriam-Webster, 2023) Upon entering English in the 1820s, 'palimpsest' initially existed only as an obscure palaeographic term describing a medieval recycling method in which scribes would reuse parchments by scrapping the topmost layer off and writing over the rest. (Toth, 2016)



Fig. 2 – Archimedes' Palimpsest, dated ca. 1000 CE.

2.2. Substantive Use of the Palimpsest

Sarah Dillon attributed the first foray of 'Palimpsest' beyond palaeographical jargon to Thomas De Quincey's 1845 essay 'The Palimpsest'. Through the coupling of 'palimpsest' with the definitive article 'the', De Quincey "*inaugurated – that is, both introduced and initiated the subsequent use of – the substantive concept of the palimpsest.*" (2005, p. 243)

De Quincey noteworthy detached the palimpsest from its physicality, focusing primarily on the experience and symbolism the convolution of layers yielded, to which he likened to another self-coined

term 'involute'. *Suspiria de Profundis*, De Quincey's poetic and hallucinogenic-fuelled exploration of memory, described involution as how: "our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combinations of concrete objects...in compound experiences incapable of being disentangled." (1864, p. 173) Thus according to De Quincey, through successive acts of manipulation and layering, the palimpsest becomes more than its physical constituents. In other words, the palimpsest represented a recurring complex of ideas.

The tension between embedded meaning and physical being shares parallel with Jacques Derrida's conception of 'Deconstruction'. Across multiple works, including *'Of Grammatology'* (1976) and *'Letter to a Japanese Friend'* (1985), Derrida explored the interplay between language and meaning. Attempting to 'deconstruct' the centrality of meaning in Western philosophy – which Derrida ascribed to the Platonic legacy of logocentrism – he argued that meaning itself was less a result of absolute natural order than fluctuations in the negotiation of competing concepts. Derrida termed this phenomenon *Différance*¹. Whilst the primary purpose of language is to convey meaning, *Différance* argues that meaning itself derives from the use of language. Meaning is therefore a product of and is dependent on human perception and individual memories. (Turner, 2016)

Reading De Quincey's definition of the palimpsest with Derrida's Deconstruction theory opens the path of the palimpsest to take an analytical role and become a vehicle for deconstructing entangled narratives. As Dillon posited:

"The palimpsest – as both a literal agent of history that was appropriated by Western palaeographers from Eastern monasteries during the nineteenth century, and as a metaphor – represents 'history' not as natural evolution or progress but as the history of colonial expansion, the violent erasure and superimposition of cultures, and defiant and subversive persistence" (2005, p. 254)

A similar sentiment was mirrored by postcolonial theorists, who likewise looked to the palimpsest as a tool for confronting conflicted legacies. Sara Rosling, voicing as a representative of an art institution, proposed the palimpsest as a means to conduct nuanced examinations of the past. *"Pushing history to the background – whilst keeping it present as a link to the past – would make room for more urgent and pertinent statements in the foreground"*. (2022)

2.3. Meaning, Deconstruction & Post-colonialism

The detachment of meaning from physicality, and the potential of the whole to be greater than its constituent parts represent a core feature of the modern palimpsestic theory. Dillon prioritised reading the palimpsest as a 'totality' when she advocated for using 'palimpsestuous' over 'palimpsestic' as the associated adjective for the palimpsest. She pointed to the complex relationality embedded within the

¹ Derrida deliberately misspelled the French word 'différence' to illustrate the potential for language and meaning to be disjointed.

palimpsest as a much more significant aspect than the physical act behind its making, as suggested by 'palimpsestic'.

Having established the substantive role of the palimpsest, the next step in the process is to consider how it can be used to unravel the constituent elements. Presently, this represents a largely uncharted direction in both architecture and palimpsestic theory in general, however, two forays exist. The first is Geoff Bailey's work in archaeology, which positions the palimpsest as a framework for reading time perspectives. Crucially, Bailey's 2007 paper made the first attempt to dissect the palimpsest into five sub-categories through archaeological examples. (2007, pp. 203–208) Bailey proposed the following categories of palimpsests, for which I have provided abridged interpretations and illustrations (fig. 3):

I. True Palimpsest

The "true" or perhaps what should be called intentional palimpsest, described according to Bailey instances in which the topmost layer completely covers all preceding ones, leading to a complete unawareness of the existence of multiplicity. Only the surface layer is perceivable by the observer.

II. Cumulative Palimpsest

The cumulation likely represents the most prevalent form of a palimpsest, in which successive developments deposit memories atop each other. While individual layers do not necessarily share the same "opacity", meaning some may appear more clearly than others, a multiplicity is nonetheless apparent to the observer.

III. Spatial Palimpsest

With a spatial palimpsest, fragments of an event or interrelated events are, through human or natural forces, dispersed over a large geographical area. Individually, each fragment may appear as standalone pieces, yet it is when read together that a complete picture is formed. In architecture, an analogy may be multiple geographically separate works by the same designer in which certain styles or architectural intentions are repeated. The original architect of Maranathakerk, Hinderik Eldering was an avid builder of churches and one of the favourites of the Reformed church of his era. Between 1949-1975, Eldering designed 17 reformed churches across the Netherlands, many of which shared his characteristic octagonal floorplans or 'glas-in-beton windows'. (Jurcka and Feekes, no date)

IV. Temporal Palimpsest

The temporal palimpsest represents an assemblage of materials that may be spatially adjacent but stem from different ages. The key difference between a temporal palimpsest and a cumulative is, according to Bailey, that temporal palimpsest is not the result of natural cumulations over time, but rather from an intentional concentration of materials in a spatial

context. A shipwreck, a museum collection, or a Roman monument adorned with spolia from earlier eras all represent examples of temporal palimpsests.

V. Palimpsest of Meanings

Bailey's final category describes instances in which objects that experience multiple uses through time garners shifting 'meanings'. Even without physical changes, an object could acquire new perceptions or values as the overarching cultural narrative shifts.

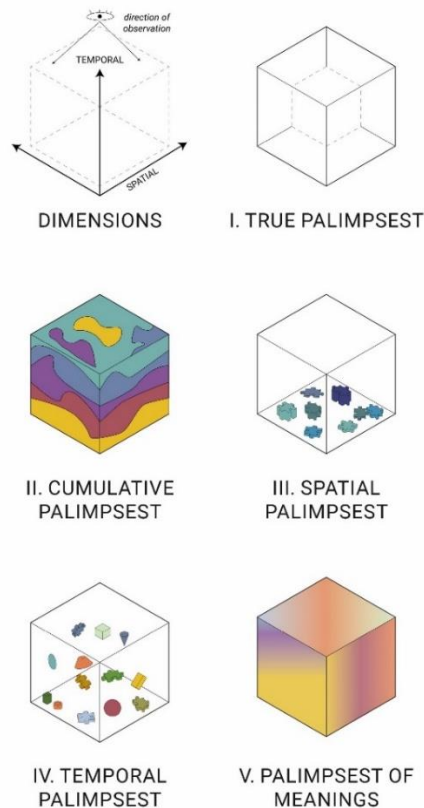


Fig. 3 – the five forms of palimpsest are illustrated as conceptual diagrams. The x-axis of the cubes represents spatial distance, e.g., objects spread over a vast field in different locations. The y-axis represents the distance in time – picture deposits buried in different geological layers, with the top layer being observable by the present viewer.

2.4. Palimpsestuous Drawings in Architecture

Another attempt to apply the palimpsest was made by Ceren Kaya, who adopted the notion of palimpsestuous in her research into architectural drawings. Kaya argued that the repetitive and layered nature of architectural designs makes them inherently palimpsestuous. The act of drawing, the primary generator of architectural designs, therefore, constitutes a palimpsestuous process and could be broken

down into four operations: drawing, re-drawing, erasing, and shifting. (2021, pp. 4–5) 'Drawing' serves as the generative phase, from which a concept is translated into an image. Yet, it is through the intertwined acts of 're-drawing' and 'erasing' that a design is developed and approaches maturity. Finally, 'shifting' enables the different layers to be made visible and differentiated, such as when a successive drawer rotates its added text to the original or draws over a layer of tracing paper. The totality formed by the repeated drawing and re-drawing processes corresponds with Bailey's definition of the cumulative palimpsest. Depending on the drawing method and intention of the drawer, a palimpsestuous drawing may reveal its constituent layers with varying opacities.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on the definition of the palimpsest established in critical literature and philosophy while drawing its primary methodology from the frameworks by Bailey and Kaya.

First, the collection of archival drawings and planning documents, sourced from the regional archive in Alkmaar, provided a basis for determining what past alterations have been undertaken at Maranathakerk. Historical photography from the local historical association Stichting Oud-Castricum and former congregation members supplement the archival documents in creating an understanding of the church's former (protestant) narrative. These records serve as the historical layers in constructing the Maranathakerk palimpsest. As is frequently the case in a historical building, and proven in my study of Maranathakerk, archival information does not always align with the constructed result on site. To borrow Bailey's terminology, these documents comprise the low opacity layers. For while they are indicative of the sublayers in the palimpsest, they are not necessarily reflective of the true present state of the building. Field observation was, therefore, essential to not only verify but also complement the recorded information and formulate a holistic picture.

Secondly, the acts of drawing and re-drawing were used to reveal the layers making up the present building. A drawing is first made of the building as is presently observable before a re-drawing is made based on the archival information. The resulting set, when viewed in conjunction, corresponds to the process of 'shifting' as suggested by Kaya. Critically, a cross-examination is enabled by comparing the physical transformation with behavioural information gathered from field observation. As noted earlier, the palimpsestuous only truly take form when substantive transformation in the meaning of space occurs. Field observation of the building in use, preferably over an extended period is, therefore, necessary to gauge the site's narratives from the local culture or community. For Maranathakerk, the field observation took place over a full school day during November 2022, in which the usage of the building by the students and staff was observed. The method can be compared to what Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre described as 'shadowing', in their book *How to study public life?*. (2013, p. 22) Furthermore, informal interviews were conducted with several users on their perception of the building.

Each set of drawings was limited to a fragment of the building. By collating the sets of drawings, a catalogic overview of the church was formed. Individually, the sets of drawings were each limited to a

specific part or element of the building, and thus examine the palimpsestuous on the building element level. However, read as a whole, the drawings indicated the building's overarching narrative.

4. Results

To identify palimpsestuous instances in the church, past and present floor plans of the building were re-drawn and cross-examined. In Maranathakerk, three notable periods could be delineated [fig. 4]:

- 1954-1976, consisting of the original octagonal hall and East wing as designed by Hindrik Eldering.
- 1977-2019, following a significant extension by Architect H. Blansjaar to accommodate the growing membership of the congregation.
- 2020-Present, after secularisation and interior renovation for school conversion

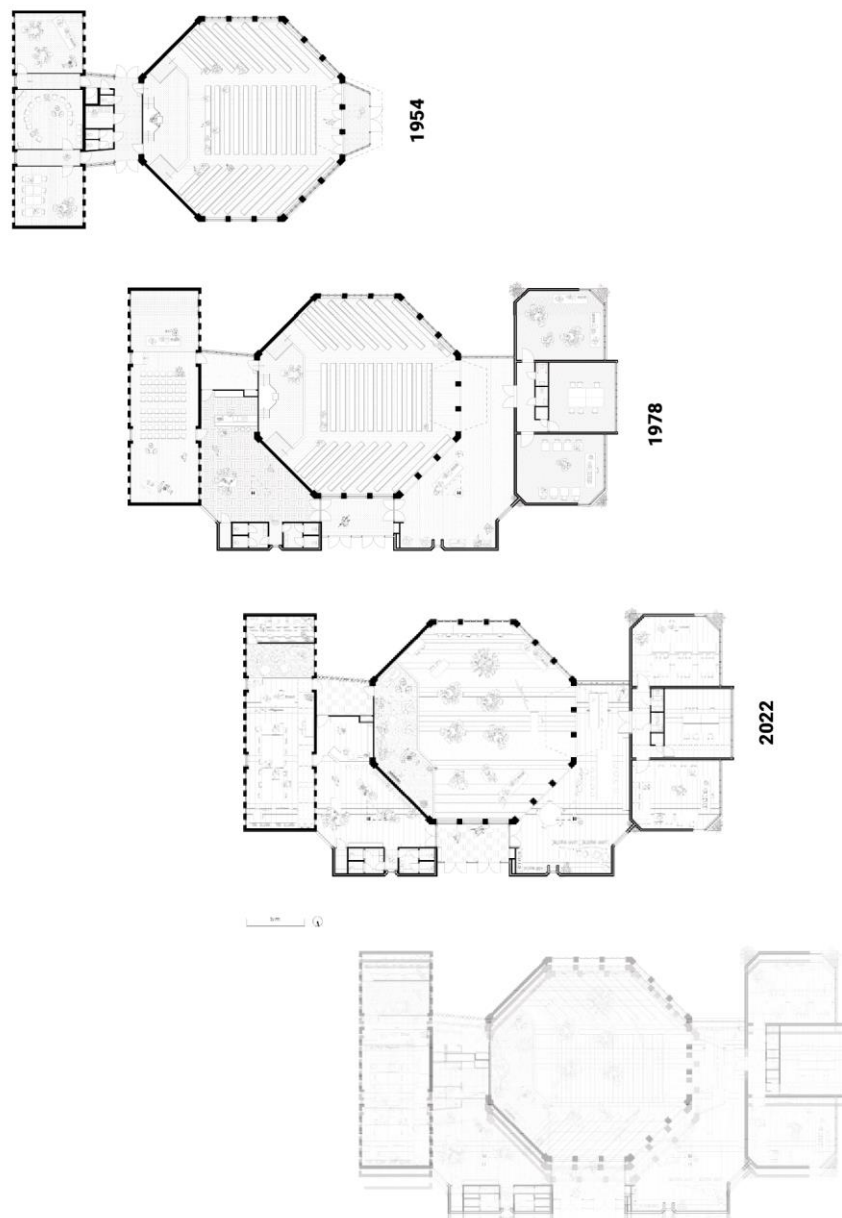


Fig. 4 – evolving plans of Maranathakerk.

Areas where both physical transformations and changes in usage were identified and used as the basis for further drawing analysis. The identified instances are outlined in Figure 5 and Figures 6-9 show the specific results.

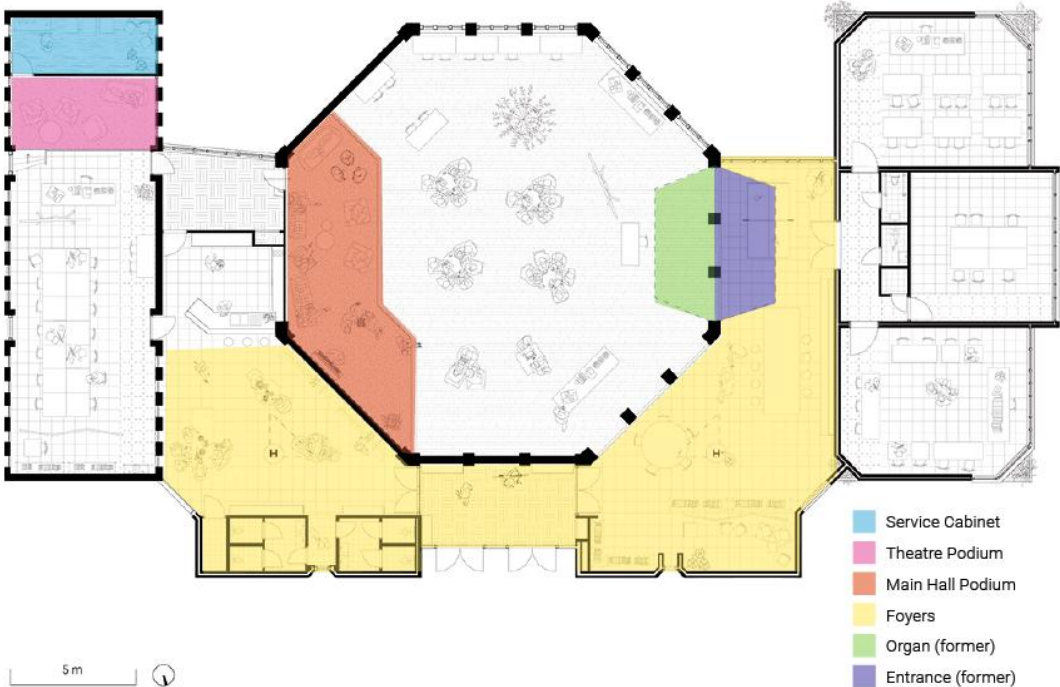


Fig. 5 – overview of the palimpsests identified in Maranathakerk.



Fig. 6 – the main altar/podium adopted as a social space.

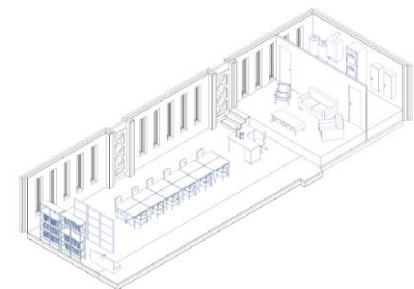
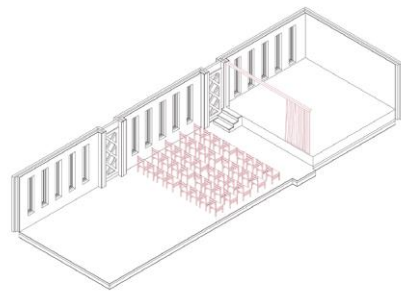


Fig. 7 – former theatre stage turned into a classroom.



Fig. 8 – students used the remnant organ platform to display their figurines.

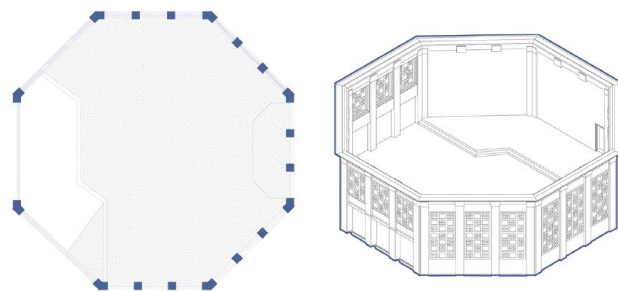


Fig. 9 – the adaptation of the former church hall as an open classroom.

Building upon the catalogued palimpsests from Maranathakerk and Bailey's model of the five palimpsestic forms, we see that certain trends emerge when considering a building's historical layers with the palimpsest in mind. Figure 10 outlines the three themes, which include therein a spectrum of 'processes'.

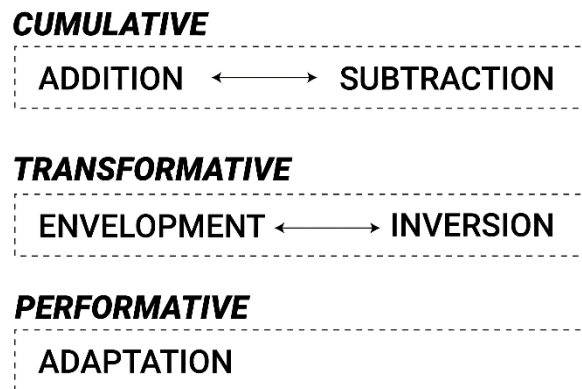


Fig. 10 – the three palimpsestuous themes identified.

Cumulative

Bailey's idea of the cumulative palimpsest proved most applicable for architecture. The notion of historical layers cumulating into their modern form parallels the common view in heritage theory. Behind cumulation, one finds a spectrum between addition and subtraction. While ostensibly oppositional terms, the study of Maranathakerk has revealed that past alterations to the building fabric could rarely be attributed as only subtractive or additive. As with the medieval practice of palimpsest-making, the addition and subtraction of layers in a building frequently occurred in tandem or succession. Hence the cumulative process should not be taken as a linear act of sedimentation atop previous layers, but rather as a circular interplay between erasure and addition. An example of a cumulative palimpsest in Maranathakerk is the removal of the organ during the departure of the former congregation, which left behind a notable void beneath the ceiling. [fig. 7] After the establishment of the school, students decided to make use of this void by using the deck to display their figurines, adding a new layer of meaning atop the previous subtraction.

Transformative

By transformative processes, I refer to changes in the building fabric or space plan which create a substantial difference in the experiential or programmatic quality. The terms Envelopment and Inversion relate to the acts of enclosing and opening, two of the primary means of space-making. It might be objected that transformative palimpsest simply becomes a catch-all term for all alterations across a building's history. Here, I believe, is where 'meaning' as relayed by Derrida's 'Différance' and Bailey's 'Palimpsest of Meaning' play a foundational role in differentiating nominal alterations from substantive transformations. For a spatial change to be palimpsestuous— i.e., to create meaningful layering — it

should have noteworthy meaning attached to it before the alteration and this meaning should be substantially transformed after the alterations. An example of this is the 1970s extension to Maranathakerk. To accommodate the new enveloping foyer, the original 1950s entrée was demolished, yet a fragment was maintained and became embedded in the new roofing. The reason for this odd remnant is unknown, but a possible explanation could be to serve as a counterweight to the organ platform on the opposite side or simply because the contractor wanted to avoid the time-consuming task of trimming off the reinforced concrete slab. Nevertheless, through this act of enclosing, parts of the formerly public front court were transformed into an interior space and made private to the church- and later school community.

Performative

In both aforementioned themes, 'meaning' plays a crucial role in differentiating substantive and nominal changes in the building fabric. Performative palimpsests cover the instances of change that are wholly non-physical. The adaptation of the former altar by the school exemplifies this form of performative change. While the stage's physical form was unaltered, its use by the school as an informal social space drastically inverted the conventional expectation for a stage or podium. (fig. 11) The placement of social activities physically and symbolically higher than the formal educational activities also served to express the school's narrative of a democratic and free-spirited community – delineating its transition from the hierarchical nature of the church.



Fig. 11 – shifting narrative/spatial character as a result of performative palimpsest.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

This paper explored the potential to use the palimpsest as a tool to examine and define multiple narratives present in a heritage site. The scope was limited to the case study of (former) Maranathakerk in Castricum. While the paper builds upon a wealth of precedents which utilize the palimpsest as a metaphor for complex layering in the built environment, the usage of the palimpsest beyond a descriptive sense represents a new direction. The paper drew from research in fields including critical literature, archaeology, deconstruction, postcolonialism and drawing theory to build its theoretical framework. The resulting catalogue of drawings showcased how existing tools in the architectural process, such as drawing and re-drawing, could be used to define and communicate both physical and narrative changes in a heritage site.

As the analysis of Maranathakerk demonstrated, by applying the palimpsestuous notion on specific building fragments or aspects of building usage, it is possible to establish an understanding of how heritage narratives operate on a building element level. In Maranathakerk, select parts of the building, such as the octagonal podium, showcased the clearest changes in narratives between the pre-and post-secularisation periods. Taken together, the individual elements also indicated larger trends, such as a shift towards a more informal character after secularisation. These conclusions aided in the subsequent design process by highlighting which narrative aspects made a greater contribution towards the overall narrative of the space. Further assessment methods, such as the heritage value matrix developed by Ana Pereira Roders were used in this process but will not be discussed here as it falls outside the scope of this paper.² Additionally, the adaptation of the podiums (fig. 7 & 9) showed that changes in spatial narratives could also result from purely performative transformations. The context of the case study – a church turned into a school – may have amplified such performative aspects. In Maranathakerk, the transition between the two user groups (congregation and school) occurred relatively quickly and involved a drastic demographic shift (predominantly elderly congregation to teenage high school students).³

Further research into the palimpsest, especially its application in heritage redesign would benefit from a greater selection of case studies. Furthermore, the present nature of the building as a working school and the logistical challenge of gaining parental consent for data collection of the students made it difficult to conduct in-depth interviews and documentation. Future studies could therefore be strengthened by more comprehensive primary data collection, ideally over an extended period, to better gauge the usage patterns of the building and reduce bias by the researcher.

Lastly, I would propose that an interesting avenue for future research is to adapt the methodology used in this study to analyse other presently prevalent, yet hard-to-grasp heritage concepts such as 'spirit of the place' or 'character'. Like the palimpsests, these terms represent contentious concepts in modern heritage discussion. By attempting to dissect them into applicable typologies and test their application

² For further reading on how to assess heritage values, consult: Silva and Roders, 2012

³ By December 2014 over 60% of congregation of Maranathakerk were aged 60+ and 40% were aged 70+. (Kok, 2017)

in real-life case studies, the field may gain valuable insight towards design practice. In some sense, this parallels attitudes conveyed by ongoing research within the participatory (heritage) design movement or the ongoing work at the Heritage & Values chair at TU Delft – which is similarly seeking to streamline the assessment process for heritage values. (Roders and dos Santos Gonçalves, 2022)

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is not to provide a definitive and objective methodology for heritage analysis, for which there likely could be none. Instead, it positions the palimpsest as a tool and an added perspective in the larger process of heritage redesign, and part of a continuous process to make heritage appreciation and evaluation more accessible to designers and the public alike.

6. Bibliography

6.1. Figures

Figure 1

Author's drawing

Figure 2

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Figure 3-7

Author's drawing, based on Bailey, G. 2007

Figure 8

Author's drawing, images (top/bottom) from:
Collecte Johan Streefland (2018) *Er kwam een nieuw orgel* [Photograph];
Author's image, *site photograph* (2022)

Figure 9

Author's drawing, images (left/right) from
Collecte Johan Streefland (2018) *Laatste zondag van het kerkelijk jaar* [Photograph];
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Figure 10-11

Author's drawing

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