

MARIA ELENA CIUCCI

REFLECTION

**CULT
TO
CULTURE**

A SEMANTIC SHIFT OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES

REFLECTION

Summary

The thesis addresses the theme of the management and transformation of Christian architectural heritage, with particular focus on Catholic churches. It explores the dynamics of friction and propulsion that influence this process, their significance in contemporary society, and potential future developments.

Rooted in the specificity of a case study – the former Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli, in the Rione Sant’Angelo, Rome – the research aims to offer reflections that are not universal but capable of stimulating debate on the fate of disused churches across Europe.

The thesis is structured into three main parts, guided by the three research questions.

The first part analyses the role and value of Catholic churches over time, examining their urban and cultural functions and highlighting how these buildings historically acted as symbols of collective identity. Through a historical and sociological approach, this section underscores the importance of churches not only as places of worship but also as community spaces.

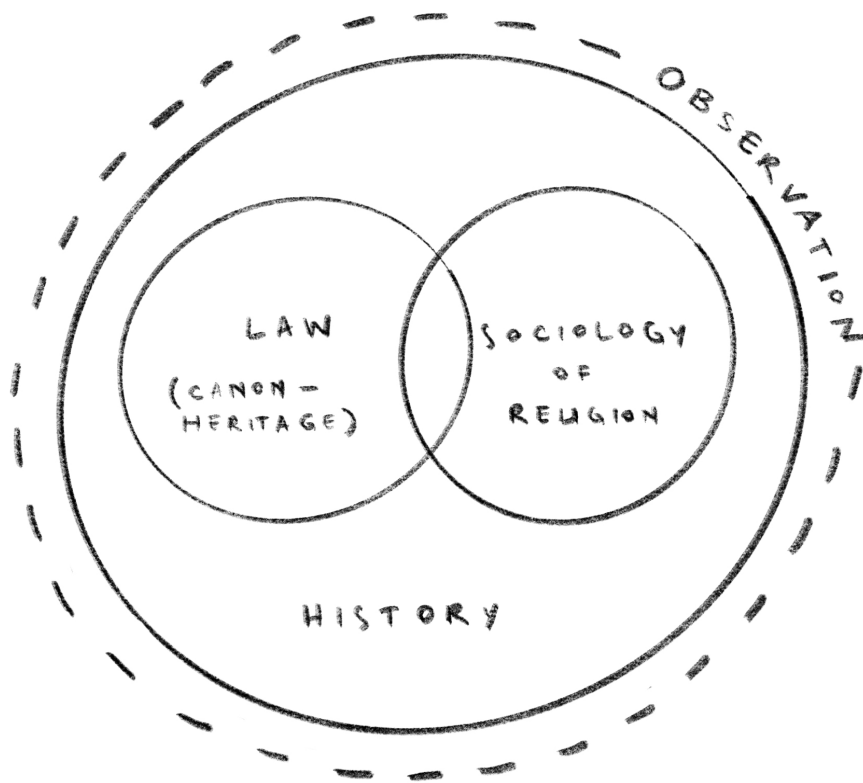
The second part focuses on the Italian regulatory framework, reflecting the physical and cultural proximity to the Vatican. Through an analysis of Italian laws and their restrictions on the reuse of places of worship, the thesis compares this context with the Dutch approach, renowned for its greater pragmatism in the management and repurposing of churches. This comparison reveals the tension between respecting the symbolic value of religious buildings and the necessity of adapting them to new uses.

Finally, the last part synthesises the insights gathered to propose scenarios and strategies for transforming Catholic churches, focusing on their ability to preserve historical memory and architectural identity while opening them to new functions that are relevant and beneficial to contemporary society. In this sense, the former Church of Santa Rita da Cascia becomes a concrete example for reflecting on how such buildings can be reimagined and reinterpreted in today’s context.

The aim of the thesis is therefore twofold: to critically analyse the past and present of Catholic churches and to propose solutions for their future, transforming them into spaces that respond to the needs of today’s society without losing their historical and cultural value.

1. What are the frictions or driving forces that either enable or hinder the transformation of catholic churches?
2. What can be defined as a “church” in contemporary society?
3. What is the next evolutionary stage for catholic churches?





Assessing my approach

Why?

From a professional perspective, this research stems from a desire to explore the role of Catholic churches in the contemporary context, viewing them as architectural and cultural spaces capable of adapting to a transforming society. The progressive secularisation and decline in religious practice raise urgent questions about the identity and function of these buildings.

From a personal perspective, this research represents a journey of reflection and understanding. Growing up in a city where churches are part of the landscape and collective memory, I questioned the meaning of these spaces in my experience and in the social context surrounding me.

This graduation project aims to be a response to both personal and universal questions: how can we keep history alive without becoming prisoners of it?

How?

This research originated from the intention to address a complex spatial issue: the apparent immobility surrounding the transformation of places of worship. The topic lies at the intersection of multiple domains – sociological, political, regulatory, and cultural – whose interactions generate intangible effects on built heritage, effects which are often difficult to substantiate due to their abstract nature.

The research therefore developed across multiple analytical levels, adopting an interdisciplinary methodology. It began with an analysis of the phenomenon of secularisation from sociological and anthropological perspectives. The contribution of anthropological sciences proved essential in deciphering the dynamics that link collective memory, symbols, and architecture.

This was followed by a thorough legal review, examining instruments such as the Code of Canon Law, the Code of Cultural Heritage, and relevant Italian legislation. These regulatory tools were indispensable for understanding the constraints governing the use of churches, while also revealing the opacity of certain criteria and the inherent difficulty of reconciling cultural and religious requirements with practical and urban planning needs.

Furthermore, the comparison with the Dutch case opened new perspectives. In the Netherlands, economical pragmatism has guided the reuse of places of worship, demonstrating that respect for historical value does not necessarily preclude functional adaptation. However, engaging with such a distinct model highlighted the impossibility of applying universal solutions to an issue that demands context-specific responses.

The case study of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia offered a unique vantage point from which to investigate these dynamics. Through on-site surveys, historical documentation, and interviews with local residents, the research revealed tangible moments of friction between cultural and religious dimensions, shedding light on how these tensions manifest in the physical space of the church itself.

Integrating feedbacks

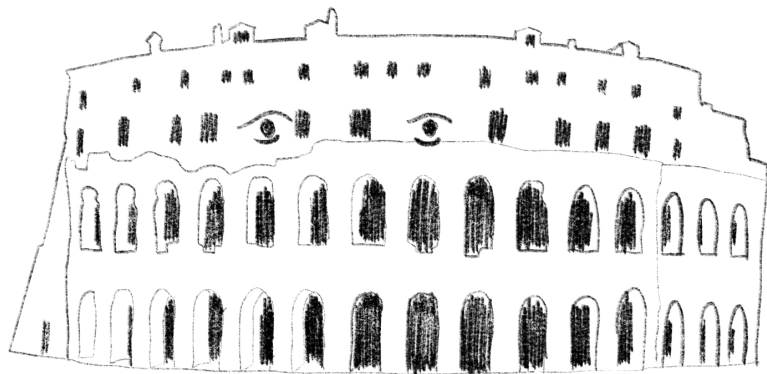
During the research phase, the feedback received from my mentors played a fundamental role in guiding the work towards greater depth and conceptual clarity. One of the primary suggestions concerned the need for more precise definitions, not only regarding the current state of affairs — both legislative and sociological — but above all in developing a clear and well-structured understanding of the concept of a “church” within a contemporary framework. This input led to the inclusion of a dedicated section aimed at defining “church,” which in turn facilitated a smooth and coherent transition into the final chapter exploring hypotheses for its “next evolutionary stage.” This focus effectively anchored the theoretical reflections within a cohesive conceptual framework.

Another important aspect highlighted through feedback was the need to integrate additional media — including artistic, filmic, and philosophical references — in order to deconstruct the complexity of the subject and make it more accessible. In response, the research was enriched with references to the theories of Bourdieu (1977) and Baudrillard (1994), alongside reinterpretations of the work of Matilde Cassani (2010, 2011, 2024), the documentary by Fiona Hallinan (2024), and Ken Loach’s film (2023). These diverse contributions enabled the development of a dialogue with the language of the Catholic community, particularly through references to catechesis and official ecclesiastical guidelines. This interdisciplinary approach allowed the analysis to engage with broader cultural and symbolic imaginaries.

Once the research phase transitioned into the design phase, feedback prompted continuous reflection on how to translate the theoretical principles into concrete design strategies. In this sense, research, design, and technical development evolved simultaneously and in parallel.

Particular attention was consistently given to symbolic reflection: the expressiveness of interruption or continuity, considerations of scale and proximity, and the interplay between verticality and horizontality all became tangible conclusions of the process. Reinterpreting architectural elements as layered carriers of meaning guided much of the dialogue with my supervisors, resulting in a project that was carefully reasoned.

AM I THEN A CHURCH?



Learning From My Own Work

I have learned from my work, particularly in the process of connecting concrete data – such as historical archives, laws, statutes, and journalistic reports – with a more abstract and conceptual dimension. Translating tangible information into metaphors and narratives represented both a stimulating challenge and one of the most enriching aspects of the project.

The interplay between different levels of research – the tangible and the symbolic, the theoretical and the practical – taught me the importance of maintaining a critical and multidisciplinary perspective. Integrating concrete documentation with abstract reflections helped me develop a more comprehensive analytical approach that seeks not only to describe but also to interrogate and reinterpret the data.

This process allowed me to refine not only my research skills but also my capacity for cultural and disciplinary translation, demonstrating the value of dialogue between the concreteness of sources and the interpretative freedom of ideas. In this balance, I found new perspectives and greater analytical depth.

Relevance

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track, and your master programme?

My thesis project, which examines the shifting semantic significance of Catholic churches, stems from the intersection of my architectural background and a reflection on the Italian cultural context. The choice of this topic is profoundly influenced by a sensitivity towards the built heritage, developed during the master's programme, and an awareness of the sociological and symbolic complexities that characterise the reconversion of religious buildings in Italy. Here, the transformation of a church sparks an especially intense cultural and emotional debate, unless the structures are already destroyed or abandoned due to natural causes.

In this context, the Heritage Laboratory "Zero Waste Church," which I encountered during my academic journey, served as a significant source of inspiration. Although focused on a different cultural setting, the laboratory addresses the complex theme of church conversion, demonstrating how a sensitive approach can revitalise these buildings without betraying their historical identity. My project differs in its emphasis on the Italian context, where such interventions face greater cultural and institutional resistance, providing an opportunity to explore solutions that respect local sensitivities.

The connection with the master track in architecture is rooted in a focus on sustainability and the reuse of existing heritage, a central pillar of the programme. The project aligns with the principles of "Repair, Reuse, Reduce, Recycle," applying them to a specific and culturally significant context such as Catholic churches. This approach not only enhances the value of the built environment but also explores how buildings can be reimagined to meet new functional and social needs while preserving historical memory.

Additionally, the project expands the architectural focus to include urban and anthropological analyses. Churches are not just buildings but also pivotal points in the urban fabric, capable of defining the character of a neighbourhood and influencing its social dynamics. Through a dialogue between the architectural and urban scales, the research explores the possibility of integrating past and present, proposing solutions that honour history without abandoning contemporaneity.

In summary, the thesis project combines the architectural training acquired during the master's programme with a broader cultural perspective, addressing themes of sustainability, historical memory, and urban transformation in a highly symbolic and complex context, with constant reference to reflections drawn from the Heritage Laboratory.

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

My methodological approach is based on integrating diverse disciplines, ranging from historical and legislative research to sociological and anthropological analysis, to provide a comprehensive and nuanced view of the transformation of Catholic churches. This multidisciplinary approach allowed for tackling a complex issue by considering both the tangible and symbolic dimensions of religious buildings. The choice to incorporate varied sources

– archival documents, sociological data, and artistic and filmographic representations – was crucial in constructing a dialogue between material and immaterial dimensions.

A key aspect of my method was the continuous comparison between case studies and cultural contexts, such as the Italian and Dutch settings. This comparison highlighted the cultural and legislative differences that influence the reuse of religious buildings, offering a broader and more applicable framework. Additionally, the interviews with residents of the Rione Sant’Angelo in Rome, enriched the work with local perspectives, revealing the unique perception of sacred spaces and their symbolic value in the specificity of the neighbourhood.

I assess my methodology positively for its ability to synthesise theoretical and practical elements. However, the complexity of the topic required a constant balance between analytical depth and clarity, a skill I refined progressively. The use of theoretical tools enabled the translation of complex concepts into comprehensible and applicable terms. This approach, though demanding, rendered the work not only academically rigorous but also accessible and useful for a wider audience, including professionals beyond the architectural or urbanistic fields, such as sociologists and anthropologists in religious studies (**Brenneman & Miller, 2016; Hayden & Walker, 2013**).

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope, and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

The research broadens the academic discourse on religious architecture by raising new questions about how places of worship can be reinterpreted to meet contemporary societal needs within a resistant cultural framework.

At a societal level, the project holds significant implications. Catholic churches, in addition to being places of worship, have historically served as points of reference for local communities, and their abandonment or conversion can profoundly affect both the urban and social fabric. Through the analysis of the case study of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia, the project establishes a precedent for the critical reinterpretation of legal texts, while also demonstrating the potential societal impact of reuse if applied more broadly. In the Lazio region alone, there are more than 1,255 churches, while across Italy there are 2,854 architecturally significant religious buildings, according to the ongoing census launched in 2018 (**Beni Ecclesiastici in Web, 2024**). If even a fraction of this extensive architectural heritage could be reinterpreted through adaptive reuse—shifting their symbolic significance while enhancing their cultural and historical value—the impact would be considerable.

From an ethical perspective, the research carefully addresses the delicate balance between respecting the sacredness of these buildings and acknowledging the need for transformation in response to evolving social and cultural conditions. The study’s examination of the legislative frameworks governing all relevant stakeholders ensures that diverse perspectives are taken into account.

However, for meaningful change to occur, certain ruptures have proven necessary: in particular, the rupture of the exclusivity and the immutable symbolic significance traditionally attached to churches as buildings. The project’s findings demonstrate that such ruptures can open the way to new forms of appropriation—scenarios which, although controversial, are ultimately necessary to allow these buildings to engage with contemporary society.

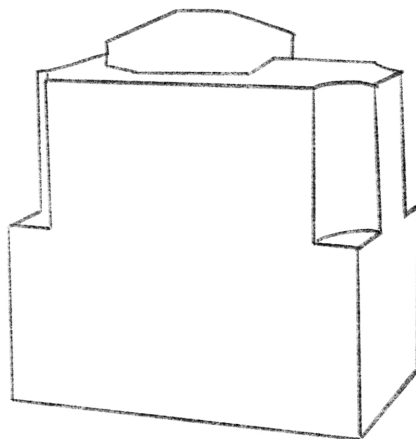
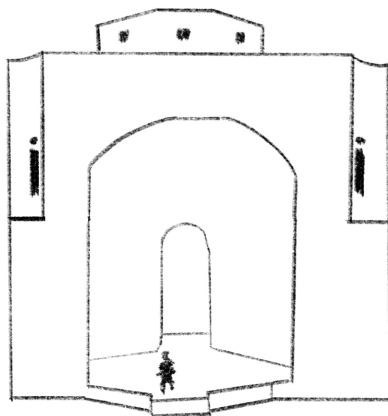
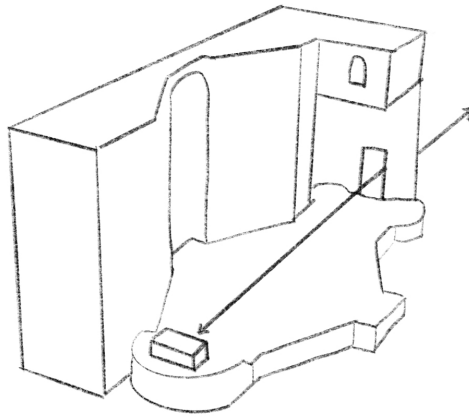
How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

The results of the project exhibit a high degree of transferability due to their multidisciplinary nature and focus on universal issues related to the transformation of the built religious heritage. Although the case study of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia is specific, the methods and principles developed can be applied to a wide range of contexts, particularly in Europe, where many churches face similar challenges of abandonment or repurposing.

The project offers a methodological framework that integrates historical, sociological, legislative, and symbolic aspects, making it adaptable to cases with diverse characteristics. The comparison between the Italian and Dutch contexts, for instance, highlights how different strategies can be applied depending on cultural sensitivities and regulatory constraints, providing a useful guide for addressing the reconversion of religious buildings in varying settings.

Particularly, the reflection on symbols and their reinterpretation represents a significant contribution to other disciplines, such as art and urban planning, opening up possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration. The theoretical tools employed can also be applied not only to religious architecture but to other building types with strong symbolic connotations.

The transferability is strengthened by the proposal of concrete and cohesive solutions, including the involvement of local communities and the pursuit of a balance between conservation and innovation. In this sense, the project does not merely offer theoretical insights but serves as an operational model for tackling similar challenges in different cultural and geographical contexts.





Cattelan M. (1999), "La nona ora"

My own reflection

Why does art enjoy greater freedom in reinterpreting symbols compared to architecture?

Art, by its nature, operates on a personal and intimate scale, challenging individual and collective perceptions through free and often provocative languages.

Architecture, however, as a social tool, is deeply rooted in cultural and legal contexts, acting on shared spaces.

Churches, in particular, are loaded with symbolisms that make them challenging to “reinterpret” without infringing upon historical and religious sensitivities. Nevertheless, examples such as the Kolumba Museum demonstrate that architecture can renegotiate its symbols if approached with respect and creativity, initiating a dialogue between historical memory and contemporary innovation.

Is it possible to separate worship and culture in the transformation of religious buildings?

Separating worship and culture is virtually impossible in a cultural context such as the Italian one, where Catholicism continues to shape both political and national identity.

However, perhaps the most significant finding of this research lies in the physical association between the old and the new, and in the material expression of their inherent tension. By actively engaging with the historical complexity of the building and the symbolic layers that inhabit it, a perceptible “rupture” is generated at the architectural scale.

In this sense, the visible transformation of religious buildings could follow this very logic, recognising them as cultural assets open to new meanings and functions. Architecture that respects historical stratification while embracing diversity could offer a tangible example of how to transcend the rigid boundary between faith and heritage, thereby enhancing the relevance of these buildings in contemporary society.

What would change if disused religious buildings were defined as “dissonant heritage”?

The concept of ‘dissonant heritage’ advances the idea that changes to the architectural heritage are driven by a dominant class that effectively “owns the past” (Smith, 2006). In this light, the outdated and ambiguous nature of the current legal frameworks clearly reflects this entrenched ownership.

I firmly believe that the recognition of sociological and anthropological research as a fundamental basis for the adaptive reuse of built heritage should become an essential premise for all buildings, and even more so for churches — buildings originally conceived as places of assembly, from the Greek *ekklēsia*, meaning ‘gathering’.