

Modern architecture in twentieth century protestant church design in The Netherlands

The design of protestant churches in a modern style

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“Is the modern architecture from the end of the twentieth century capable of translating the needs that come with a design for the Dutch protestant church?”

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Amongst Christians there is a strong feeling for tradition. Christianity itself is traditional, being handed from one generation to the other. There is this sense and belief of unity with all generations and places. In this sense anything that suggests novelty seems out of place(Wright, 1962). This traditional religion resulted in traditional church architecture. Protestants base their traditional way of building on the great periods of the Roman Catholic Church architecture(Christ-Janer & Foley, 1962). These buildings were clearly expressing the faith that they manifest in all its mystery, majesty and hierarchal power(Christ-Janer & Foley, 1962).

Martin Luther, a German teacher and a monk, was the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation when he challenged the Catholic Church's teachings starting in 1517(Guyer, 2018). With the emerge of Protestantism, the unity of spirit between believers was severed(Christ-Janer & Foley, 1962). In their beginnings the protestant church took hostage in the empty buildings of the Catholic Church. This caused tension between the principles and needs of the protestants and the embodied symbolism of the genuine Catholic church. Where in Roman Catholic churches the importance of the eye was emphasized, in Protestant churches the ear became most important. This means that for the protestant it was not about appearance but about content. Opposed to the Roman Catholic church, the protestants had predominance for the Word over the sacrament and predominance of the congregation over the leaders of the church(Christ-Janer & Foley, 1962). This changed focus implied the first changes that had to be made in church architecture to become protestant and defined certain principles for new church buildings.

Nowadays we still see people being stuck with the image of the church as being a gothic church with a tower(Blanckesteijn & Overbosch, n.d.). For this respect some claimed to hold on to the traditional church image. But since the beginning of the twentieth century modernistic movements gained influence in architecture and also in church architecture(Curtis, 1996). Therefore there appeared many churches with modernistic influences in the twentieth century. This made for this century to be known by its great diversity of protestant church architecture(Van der Harst, 2008).

Beside the architectural switch, there were also societal and industrial changes in the twentieth century that influenced church architecture. They changed the hierarchy of the church. This change became visible in the city, because development in technology caused the church towers to no longer be able to compete with the high-rise in the city(Blanckesteijn & Overbosch, n.d.). Where a church building used to be the center and highest point of the city, they now disappeared between the rest of the buildings. Besides that, new building materials became available due to the industrial revolution (Curtis, 1996). But also societal changes impacted the hierarchy of the church. Due to secularization, lesser people visited the churches and people didn't take religion as serious as before(Melchers, 2015). Internally the protestant church changed as well. With the pillarization of the protestant church in the twentieth century, their distinction and specific needs became more complicated and diverse. This led to a great variety in floorplan design specifically(Melchers, 2015).

A lot has been written about churches and their architecture and all the changes it has been through in the past. This paper specifically focuses on the design of protestant churches in modern style in the Netherlands after the second world war. A church is not just a building, it holds something important and has something to say to the world. The question is if these modernistic changes and influences are capable of taking and keeping that great responsibility. If a church building in modern style still reaches its purpose. Therefore the question in this paper is:

“Is the modern architecture from the end of the twentieth century capable of translating the needs that come with a design for the Dutch protestant church?”

To get to the answer, this paper starts with an explanation of modern architecture, its characteristics and the opportunities for and contradictions with the protestant church. The second chapter focuses on what a church building should be, for the congregation and towards society. In the final chapter these two elements come together. The paper will talk about how the translation of this values in modernistic church buildings went in real life. There first will be some overall comments and then two

case studies to see if these modernistic church buildings have successfully been implemented to design a 'good' protestant church.

Chapter 1: Characteristics of modern architecture

Modern architecture evolved in the beginning of the twentieth century. It made drastic breaks with the past to create opportunities for the basic principles of architecture to be rethought. Modern architecture was conceived in reaction to the chaos and eclecticism of the various earlier revivals of historical form (Curtis, 1996). The claim of modernism was that each age had possessed its own authentic style before and therefore there was a new style needed for this period. This modern architecture had to be based on new means of construction with functionality as leading factor in design.

1.1 Contradiction with the protestant church

This new style and representation of its own time was successful but these new ideas provoked resistance among protestants since it implied the rejection of superficial imitations of past forms and a more direct and honest portrayal of the contemporary world (Curtis, 1996). The rejection of imitations of the past clashes with the traditional way of thinking in Protestantism. Even though some modern characteristics can be rhymed with church design, it is contrary to the traditional church image there is and the sense of unity with all generations and places, as mentioned in the introduction (Wright, 1962).

Important in the afterwar period was the industrialization. This gave way to new inventions and new materials for building where reinforced concrete had a leading role (Sutton, 1999). The modern movement used, beside concrete and steel, also mainly curtain walls and ribbon windows for materialization (*Modernism in architecture*, n.d.). Where they still used bricks it was recti-linear and streamlined (Sutton, 1999). These new materials were real one-sided and therefore raised questions for church architecture. As Blankesteyn and Overbosch (n.d.) mention, it is hard to use a material that is used in so many human activities for a church. In that way the building loses its specialty and it is at the expense of recognisability. Besides that, not only in materialization, but also in its whole way of thinking, modernism is known for its efficiency, luxury and convenience. This is far from the Biblical message, that asks for humbleness and devotion (Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.).

1.2 Opportunities for the protestant church

But modernistic architecture also had qualities that rhymed with protestant thinking and could support it. Modern architecture became known for its minimal ornamentation (*Modernism in architecture*, n.d.). Architects of that time confirm this by having famous quotes like 'ornament is crime' (Adolf Loos) and 'Less is more' (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe). The limitation of ornamentation in modern architecture is in line with the protestant church that sees no need for decoration (Melchers, 2015).

Another quality is the fact that modern architecture focuses rather on functional design than aesthetics (*Modernism in architecture*, n.d.). Therefore the dogma of functionalism was at its starkest in this movement (Sutton, 1999). The focus on program and functionality rhymes with the thought of the church that should focus on liturgy. With the emphasis on program, the church can focus on the service and what happens within. Where Catholic church used to be all about making a visual impression, the focus on the ear, preaching and singing could have the first place in protestant design.

Modern architecture has the aim for an open floor plan with a feeling of spaciousness. The feeling of spaciousness can be used in church building to reach the sacred emptiness that is mentioned by Christ-Janer & Foley (1962), that symbolizes the distance between God and the world that is bridged by the Word.

In exterior, modern buildings are characterized by its emphasis on volume, asymmetrical composition and horizontal lines.

Chapter 2: What a church building should be

Putting the style apart, the church building has in itself a lot of aspects that need to be respected and ideally implemented in the design as well. A church is not just a building. It has a sacred meaning with a special audience and an important task. It is not only important what happens inside the building but a church also has the responsibility to say something to the world. This makes designing a church a great responsibility for an architect and it should not be taken lightly. Therefore it is important to understand the purpose of the building to know what is needed to serve the congregation and to know its purpose towards the world.

2.1 For the congregation

The word 'church' has its origin in the Greek word 'Kurios', meaning 'lord' or 'master'. So the church literally means 'what is from the Lord'(Van den Brink, 1946). With this knowledge we understand that the church is not the building itself, it is the people and what they do(Davis, 1962). They are 'what is from the Lord', His children. The church exists in the believing people(Van den Brink, 1946). Therefore the importance does not lie on the building but on the congregation, and how they are served, to serve their God. This makes the church a functional building to learn that has nothing sacred in itself(Melchers, 2015). The building does not make what happens holy, what happens makes the building holy. If the building falls apart the church stays(Van den Brink, 1946), and when destroyed, nothing essential is lost(Davis, 1962). The building is just to facilitate the worship of God, but for doing this the congregation is not bound to this place(Van den Brink, 1946).

In this church building services are held. The church service is a meeting between God and the congregation through Christ(Van den Brink, 1946). What happens during the service is decided in the liturgy. Liturgy is a certain order of events that take place during the service (*What is liturgy...*, 2020). The elements in the liturgy are the program of requirements considering the church hall. Central in liturgy is the preaching(Whyte, 1962). John Calvin was of great importance in defining this liturgy(Melchers, 2015). Against all complicated and formal rituals of the Roman Catholic church he stated that it should be Sola Scriptura(=only Scripture)(Melchers, 2015). Martin Luther added to this: "Nothing else should take place therein rather than that our dear Lord Himself should speak with us through his Holy Word, and we again speak with Him through prayer and praise"(*Luther and his significance*, 2017). So the meeting of God with His people is central in protestant liturgy. This contains one hand listening to the preaching and respond with worship and prayer(Van den Brink, 1946).

Adding to this, the sacraments have an important part in the service as well. The sacraments were given by Jesus Himself to strengthen the faith and insure the promises of those who celebrated them(Van den Brink, 1946). The two sacraments in protestant church are the Holy Baptism and the Holy Supper. Baptism takes place when a new baby is born or a new member is integrated into the congregation, to ensure and symbolize the removal of sin and the covenant that God makes. The Holy Supper has to take place at least once every eight weeks in protestant church. This is a meal with wine and bread for everyone who believes, in remembrance of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. John Calvin even claimed for it to be celebrated every week(Melchers, 2015).

Besides liturgy and the services on Sunday, the church building can have supportive spaces for other activities as well. This asks in design for more rooms in the church building than just the church hall. These other functions can be for meetings of the deacons and elderly, for teaching the youth, for prayer, for associations, etc. Some see these ancillary functions as a limitation of what the building is really about, as if Word and sacraments are not enough(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.). But the Bible also speaks of the communion of saints, it refers to the members of the church and the task there is to be there for each other. This is also part of being a Christian and church member. The extra functions to the building can be an option that support what is taught by Word and sacraments on this aspect(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.).

2.2 For the world

We have seen that the church building is to facilitate the congregation in their service to listen to God and answer in worship, the place where God meets with the believers. But that is mainly about interior, while exterior has a whole different but also very important role. It testifies of the way that the church stands in the world, or wants to be in the world(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.).

Unfortunately, due to secularization, most people only see the church from the outside. Therefore it becomes even more important to show what is going on to the outside world (Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.). For this reason is the exterior also an important aspect of the protestant church, and not just the interior. Architects have the responsibility to fulfill the purpose of the church as a building that shows in all honesty what God wants with the people(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.). This makes for the art of the architect of a church to be completely different from other arts or other forms of architecture. This work can't be a individual expressing of the architect but has a higher goal(Van den Brink, 1946).

Because the purpose of the church is sacred, it must have a sacred character. And can never be equated with secular architecture(Davis, 1962). It should stand out and be recognizable as something completely different from the rest. All else is secular but within the walls of the church only eternity matters. If this is so it makes sense if the church is the odd one out in architecture, it is wholly proper that it should be so(Wright 1962).

The theological position of the church towards the world also consequences its architecture. The church has a position towards society and the world as being evil(Wright, 1962). Biblically spoken is the church 'in this world, but not from this world.' The building has a mission to inspire, mold and inform the people who see it(Wright, 1962). Wright(1962) even states that the ultimate object of a Christian community is not to build themselves a place, but to transform environment. The building is not there to control society, but to represent the calmness God gives(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.). The building should speak of the judgment but also the promises God gives over this earth. The congregation has a big responsibility in this as well, for they are the bearer of God's name(Wright, 1962). Their joy and singing should be heard, and therefore the church building should be centrally located in the city(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.).

Chapter 3: Protestant church buildings in modern style

Since the Second World War over a 1000 churches have been built(Blankesteyn & Overbosch, n.d.). These churches have different forms and focusses than the traditional church building. In a modern style architects tried to design a 'good' church. Some successful, others with just one focus like just exterior, or just interior and others struggled on.

"Is that a church?" might be the question you have yourself when you see a modern church, or at least is a question Blankesteyn & Overbosch (n.d.) confirm hearing in their surroundings. Not just from random people but also from churchgoers. There seems to be a gap of what a church is supposed to look like, and the modern buildings that have appeared in the end of the twentieth century. Being stuck with the traditional image of a church is also applicable for many postwar church architects. Wright(1962) states that, despite the modern movement, designers still felt the need to bring certain associations in their church design, because a church should look like a church. They also labor under the distorting influence of the cathedral image(Davis, 1962). Imitation of the past is what his happening due to this thinking, but this fails to grip the fundamental purpose of the building(Davis, 1962). These certain overtones, contrary to the logic of modern architecture, makes for the designs to have a feeling of silliness and unseriousness(Wright, 1962).

On the other hand lead the forcing of modernism also to failure of grasping the purpose of the building. Using modern materials to produce new dramatic effects of religious expression is as bad as imitating the past styles. The real task is to put up a building suitable for the liturgical assembly(Wright,

1962).

Van der Leeuw, who studied the relationship between the sacred and the beautiful in protestant churches, concluded that protestant church architecture had a church building problem. People have no idea what they want since the cross shape from the past does not work with the protestant liturgy(Melchers, 2015). He pointed out that just focusing on the interior was also not a good thing. Churches just for preaching were not churches but more like classrooms and were no different from a meeting room(Melchers, 2015). According to Van der Leeuw church architecture, while starting with the interior, had to go back to a shape that expresses the sacred. In every church the pulpit, the baptismal font and the table should be visible.

Regarding the floorplan there has been many attention to what should have focus. Following the decisions made in the past and after the takeover of catholic buildings the main focus lay on the liturgical center of the church. This is the area around the pulpit(*Liturgisch centrum in de kerk*, 2016). But the different flows in the protestant church all have a slight different focus or opinion on what should be on the liturgical center and what not. Every design has its certain specifics concerning the liturgical center. But also towards the seating of the congregation, the placing of the organ, the spatial relation between the church hall and the ancillary functions, etc. So the struggle of how to deal with this new modern style and the specifics of a church became visible on many levels.

3.2 Case studies

To make this struggles, successes and failures visible, two Dutch modern protestant churches from the postwar period have been selected to show how modern architecture and church needs come together. They are chosen for multiple reasons. The first simply being the fact that they are both mentioned a lot in different literature concerning modern church architecture. In this way there are different viewpoints on the designs. Another reason is the fact that they both represent a different branch of the protestant church. One being The Dutch *Hervormde* Church, which is considered more liberal with freedom of interpretation of the liturgy. And the other is the Dutch *Gereformeerde* Church, which is considered more conservative. In this way only two studies show a broad range of the protestant field.

3.2.1 Adventskerk in Aardenhout

The first church this paper will study is the *hervormde* church in Aardenhout designed by K.L. Sijmons in 1985(figure 1). He was known for his innovative protestant church designs. He wrote a book called 'Protestantsche kerkbouw'(Protestant church building) in 1946 in which he wrote about what made a church protestant in coloring and design(*Adventkerk in Aardenhout*, n.d.).

Exterior: materialization and shape

The image of the church is dominated by the body of the church with three concrete vaults (Van der Harst, 2008). In the materialization of the exterior the modernistic influences are clearly visible in the use of massive concrete constructions. Sijmons was inspired by Le Corbusiers design of the Notre dame du haut in Ronchamps(Van der Harst, 2008). After the first design sketches, the design was organized according to Le Corbusiers modular system based on the golden ratio (*NH Adventkerk Aardenhout*, n.d.).



Figure 1. 530839 Exterior front side. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2007, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=20383903&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2006, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.



Figure 2. 512085 Exterior back side. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2005, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=530839&page=1&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2005, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.

In this design, Sijmons made the choice for the simplest materials to emphasize focus on liturgy and what happens inside, instead of being really representative to the world (*Adventkerk in Aerdenhout*, n.d.). This focus is admirable, since the meeting with God is placed central and most important. But in this decision he really missed an opportunity and did not take his responsibility to show to the outside world, as discussed in chapter two. This can be seen in the facades. First impression of the building gives a closed and rough identity to the building. The entrance is clearly marked by the tower, which is the only element giving away it is a church building. But all other facades are not inviting or showing anything at all, they are closed and of one material (figure 2). The building certainly has a look of monumentality, like a church should. But further than that, one might understand the argument heard by H.R. Blanckesteijn and W.G. Overbosch (n.d.) that modern churches can look like factories.

Interior: floorplan, materialization and experience

In the floorplan (figure 3) it is visible that the building consists of three main parts; the church hall, a service building and the traffic area that connects both (*NH Adventkerk Aerdenhout*, n.d.).

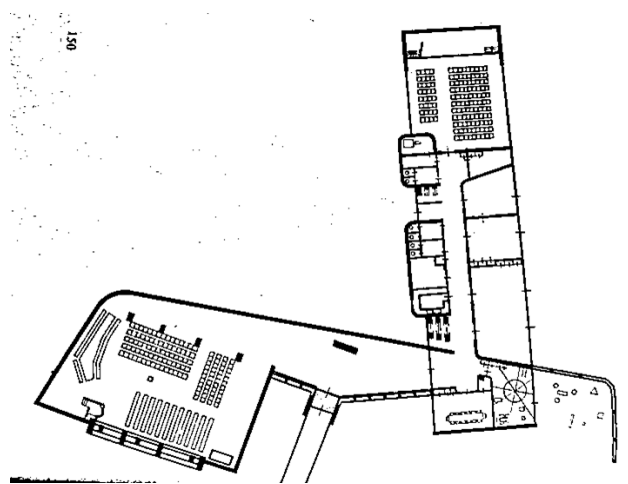


Figure 3. Floorplan church. Retrieved from *Een hut om in te schuilen* (p. 150) by H. R. Blanckesteijn and W. G. Overbosch, n.d., Baarn: Bosch & Keuning

When you enter the building you face the foot of the tower. The church hall is the main space in the building. This is emphasized on the outside and on the inside. From the entrance the curved shape of the hall on the left side leads you into the church hall (figure 4). The entrance hall is not separated from the church hall by a wall, it is an open connection and one space flows into the other (H.R. Blankesteyn and W.G. Overbosch, n.d.). When you turn right from the entrance you go towards the ancillary functions. They are separated from the church in the opposite direction and have a completely different character, less decorated and more formal (figure 5). The spatial division is aimed at creating a smooth transition between the sacred and the non-sacred part (*Gebouw*, n.d.).



Figure 4. 517159 Hall. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2006, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=20383903&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2006, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.



Figure 5. 517161 Ancillary functions. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2006, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=20383903&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2006, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.

Focusing on the church hall we find the room has two lower parts on each side and the hall itself is relatively high. In this way, when you enter the space, you find yourself coming from a low ceiling into this big spacious room. The lower part on the front contains a permanent place for the communion table as can be seen in figure 6. The baptismal font is placed central in the front of the church hall (*Adventkerk in Aerdenhout*, n.d.). Some churches only put this sacramental elements, especially the relatively large communion table, in the church when it is used. It is well thought of in design that there is enough space for a permanent presence of this elements in the building. In this way both sacraments are always present and visible during the service. Despite the attendance of these objects there is no clear liturgical center, or higher, distinguished part of the hall that is central.

The organ is placed in the other lowered part of the hall in the back. This is an unfortunate location, because the organist has limited connection with the pastor, and for acoustics it is best if the organ is placed diagonally in front of the church (H.R. Blankesteyn and W.G. Overbosch, n.d.). The seats are in different directions as much as possible towards the chancel, but they are not pointing optimal towards one point. The placing of the chancel seems a bit out of place as if there was not enough space. It is in the corner of the hall, but no lines in the design point towards this spot as being the central point.



Figure 6. 526237 Holy Supper. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2007, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=20383903&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2007, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.



Figure 7. 526232 Colored glass. Derived from *Adventkerk* from Beeldbank Cultureel erfgoed, 2007, from (https://beeldbank.cultureelerfgoed.nl/rce-mediabank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=20383903&sort=order_s_objectnummer%20asc). Copyright 2007, Rijksdienst voor het cultureel erfgoed.

The church hall is on one side characterized by its colored glass in concrete (figure 7). The use of colored glass blocks the direct view to the outside, and therefore does not distract the congregation during the service. Beside that it is an effective way to create a numinous atmosphere and a mystical illumination upon the interior (Christ-Janer & Foley, 1962). One might wonder if the colored glass has the wanted effect as it has in the reference of Le Corbusier. The use of colored glass itself is a powerful tool to create a divine, unique atmosphere.

The interior is a combination of rough materials, concrete, marble and wood, and finishes of untreated concrete, plastered brick walls and a rough concrete floor (NH *Adventkerk Aerdenhout*, n.d.). The chancel, baptismal font and table are also from concrete, where the table has a marble top (Van der Harst, 2008). As can be seen in figure 6, the hall is in good proportions and dimensions and the use of colors and materials create a calm and nice space.

3.2.2 Gereformeerde kerk in Nagele

The second church this paper will study is the *Gereformeerde* church in Nagele designed by Broek and Bakema in 1960 (figure 8). The building is dominant in its surrounding (Van der Harst, 2008). In the neighborhood of Nagele, this modernistic shaping of buildings is typical, and is far from the traditional church architecture of the surrounding areas (*Gereformeerde kerk Nagele*, n.d.). The church and corresponding bell tower are placed on a centrally located square, together with other churches. Despite the pillarization, these three churches got a central place together.



Figure 8. Nagele gereformeerde kerk. Derived from Flickr, 2009, from (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/klaasfotocollectie/4046529677>). Copyright 2009, Klaas Vermaas

Exterior: materialization and shape

The church, being modernistic, is built in concrete. Therefore they used gray concrete brick, which are very decisive for the appearance. The openings in the façade are accentuated with white painted concrete (Gereformeerde kerk Nagele, n.d.). This predominant use of concrete materials and structural elements gives the church an industrial look (Van der Harst, 2008). This design also refers to Le Corbusiers modernistic Ronchamp Chapel for it also has an outside chancel.

Beside the clearly visible modernistic features of the building in materialization and organization of the building, the plastically used supporting elements in façade still make a reference to a traditional church building (Gereformeerde kerk, 2010-2023).

There are many symbolic aspects to the design, already visible on the outside of the building. The way to the church hall is an upgoing spiral movement. Starting with the low wall, as mentioned before, the building rises layer by layer, with the church hall as the highest space. And specifically the part above the liturgical center, which is the highest point of the church hall (Gereformeerde kerk Nagele, n.d.). In image 10 you can see how the overall composition and exterior is beautiful in shape and proportions (H.R. Blankesteijn and W.G. Overbosch, n.d.).



Figure 9. Top view composition. Derived from *Gereformeerde kerk Nagele* from Destination Art, 2017, from (https://destinationart.nl/projects/almere-mensen-maken-de-stad/attachment/nagele_bij_schokland2/). Copyright 2023, Destination Art



Figure 10. Passage under tower. Derived from *PKN Nagele* from Facebook, 2017, from (<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1381091741967093&set=g.494580820683415>). Copyright 2017, Annie Reitsma-Hogendorp

This low wall, that goes up and then becomes part of the façade of the space with the entrance, is one aspect showing the important theme of transition between inside and outside in this design (Van der Harst, 2008). The glass façade on the ground floor supports this, by giving sight inside the church (Gereformeerde kerk, 2010-2023). This transition is also visible in the corresponding bell tower that is placed separate from the church. The tower has a bell that is visible. The white concrete elements are placed on four corner columns, which creates openings in all directions on the bottom. The openings form a passage, as can be seen in figure 11. The path that runs under it leads to the church (Van der Harst, 2008). In this way the entrance of the church is clearly marked.

Interior: floorplan, materialization and experience

Inside the church the symbolism continues. The architect designed a church without thresholds, with the idea that with a physical barrier free church, the figurative barriers to go there would also disappear and make everyone feel welcome (Gereformeerde kerk Nagele, n.d.).

When you enter the building you directly need to make a turn in the opposite direction to go to the church hall (figure 12). You have to go through a narrow hall, and then you enter the wide

church hall. The floor in the church is different from the industrial character the rest of the building has (Van der Harst, 2008). It is made of different stone pieces. This is seen in more protestant churches of that time.

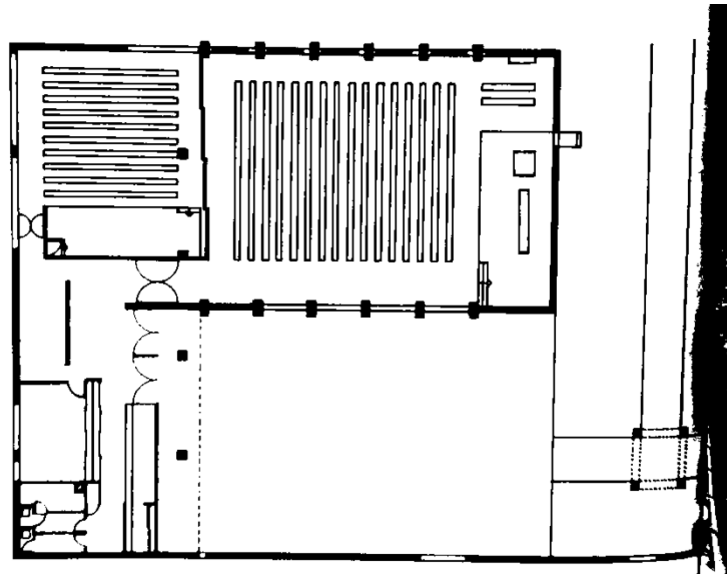


Figure 11. Floorplan church. Retrieved from *Een hut om in te schuilen* (p. 72) by H. R. Blanckesteijn and W. G. Overbosch, n.d., Baarn: Bosch & Keuning

Focusing on the church hall, we find a singular seating plan all pointed to the front of the hall. The elderly and deacons are placed left of the center. Blanckesteijn(n.d) mocks this positioning as if they are some kind of supervising guardians.

In this design the organ is placed exactly wrong, for it is not possible for the organist to have any contact with the pastor (H.R. Blanckesteijn and W.G. Overbosch, n.d.). They use mirrors now to fix this, but it is a design mistake. Besides that are the acoustics in the church hall really bad (*Gereformeerde kerk*, 2010-2023). This is unfortunate and a shame in a building where praise through singing is a key element.



Figure 12. 01428 Liturgical center. Derived from *Gereformeerde kerk* from Reliwiki 2011, from (https://www.reliwiki.nl/index.php/Nagele,_Ring_15_-_Gereformeerde_Kerk). Copyright 2011, André van Dijk



Figure 13. 01428 Light on liturgical center. Derived from *Gereformeerde kerk* from Reliwiki 2011, from (https://www.reliwiki.nl/index.php/Nagele,_Ring_15_-_Gereformeerde_Kerk). Copyright 2011, André van Dijk

On the west side of the building, in the right corner of the hall, the floor is lifted and forms the liturgical center. On the liturgical center are the concrete baptismal font, and a concrete chancel. Unfortunately there is no place for the communal table. Instead they placed a wooden table with the tools that are used for the Holy Supper, to still have this sacrament visible in every service (figure 13). The roof above the liturgical center is raised even more than the rest of the hall. The windows placed in this extension give light on the liturgical center (*Gereformeerde kerk Nagele*, n.d.). This is a really successful effect, pointing out where the focus of the service is (image 14). Furthermore has the church a closed character because of the blind walls to the outside (*Gereformeerde kerk Nagele*, n.d.). The openings are placed on the side of the interior courtyard.

The so called 'attention wall' behind the chancel had to be completely empty according to the architect. In this way the preaching of the Word became central, which he considered the whole church building to be about. A big window in the attention wall shows the cross that is placed outside. The light falls down on the chancel, symbolizing the Word coming down on the congregation (*Gereformeerde kerk Nagele*, n.d.).

Figure 13 shows that the simplicity and minimalism that was aimed for in design, is different in reality. It is said that the architect had more attention for the eye than the ear (*Gereformeerde kerk*, 2010-2023). This might have been successful in exterior, but inside the church hall even the eye is not pleased. The materials give a dark and cold atmosphere. What one might consider rough and honest use of materials, comes out here as unfinished or messy.

Conclusion

Provided with knowledge about modernism, the specifics of a church building and two case studies this paper will answer the question it started with: "Is the modern architecture from the end of the twentieth century capable of translating the needs that come with a design for the Dutch protestant church?"

Modernism has its specific characteristics in design and materialization. The church on the other hand, also has real specific needs. Although there are some contradictions between the modern style and the ideas for church design, many architects have tried to combine them.

Unfortunately this has appeared to be difficult in real life. We can't speak for all modern churches, having studied only two cases, but they give a good idea of the difficulties of designing a protestant church in this style. The fact stays that in the protestant church the importance does not lie on the building but on the congregation, and how they are served, to serve their God. Focus is on functionality and more emphasis on the ear than on the eye. But this does not take away any design or aesthetic responsibilities.

Focusing on this two case studies we start with the exterior, and what the building says to the world. This modern buildings do not express the faith that they manifest in mystery and majesty as much as is said and can be seen in traditional churches. They are sometimes even not recognizable as church, except for a tower. Modernism implied the rejection of superficial imitations, which is a good thing to have a design of the time, this gives the building a certain honesty. Unfortunately this goes at the expense of the recognizability. This in combination with the one-sidedness of material, makes for these church buildings to not be as informing, inspirational, recognizable and inviting as they should be. A church must never be equated with secular architecture and show in all honesty what God wants with his people. It is a challenge to create something unique and outstanding in modern style that has this qualities.

In Nagele the struggle is visible in the attempt to bring certain elements of a traditional church building back into the design. This referring to previous styles is against the modernist way of thinking. The overall composition and exterior however are beautiful in shape and proportions, and because of the central location and space around, one can guess it is church. The use of rough modernistic materials inside failed. The choice for concrete bricks make it look cheap and messy, and the meant to be empty walls are full with art pieces. When you are here it does not feel like a church. The modern quote 'less is more' should be exaggerated in the church hall to have full focus on the preaching of the Word. Putting aesthetics aside, the biggest mistake is that the materialization and proportions make for bad acoustics. In this way the praise, being one of the central elements, cannot be done properly.

In Aerdenhout the struggle is more in exterior. The church hall in Aerdenhout uses the concrete, spaciousness and minimalism of modern architecture in a good way. It is nice to sit there. Also the flowing between spaces is working well. But exterior does not give this away. It is more like a factory, and only focused on one side of the building. The other sides are neglected and completely closed. The building over all functions well and has all aspects to have a good service.

To summarize, we must conclude that the characteristics of modern architecture and the ones of the protestant church seem to be too contradicting to have both fully come into their own. Combined either one of them has to do concessions and the result is not pleasing. Many designs failed to create a proper church building in modern style for there are too many contradictions or shortcomings. They focused just on certain aspects of interior and/or exterior or did not use the material or space properly. Even though the designs showed some good aspects as well, modern architecture is probably not the best style for a protestant church building. But combining the good things, with an architect that has knowledge of what a church should be, I still believe the modern style can create a 'good' protestant church in interior and exterior, it is just a real great challenge.

But where people fail or come short, it may comfort that it is not the building they have to depend on, for God promised: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." - *Matthew 18:20*

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