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CHURCH AS A CONNECTOR

A reflection on the Transformation of the Grote- of Mariakerk
towards a public interior, whilst maintaining its heritage values



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REFLECTION PAPER

Within the studio 'Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste Church', the problem of empty churches is being addressed. My graduation project 'Church as a connector' looks at the possibilities of transforming the Grote- of Mariakerk in Meppel into a public interior. The project aims to make the building function as a public living room, being easily accessible to the inhabitants of Meppel. This is reflected in the programme, which is multifunctional and in which culture and connection are paramount. The desire is to create a building with overlap between the users of the different programme components. By making the activities in and around the building visible, the people of Meppel are being encouraged to enter, participate and to be part of the community of Meppel. The community of Meppel is also reflected in parts of the interior, by means of a wall consisting of locally harvested window frames and an exhibition wall for the objects which are made at the workshops in the church. The flexible program components create opportunities to invite even more users into the church by transforming the building into a indoor market one day in the week.

This document reflects on the entire graduation studio in both a broad and personal context. It forms the overview of the entire research and design process, taking a critical look at the aim, result, academic relevance and transferability of the graduation project.

What is the relation between the master track, the graduation studio and the student's graduation project topic?

Within the graduation studio 'Revitalising Heritage: Zero Waste Church', new functions for endangered vacant churches are being sought. In addition to this main theme, the graduation studio also looks at how students position themselves on zero-waste: "Is it heritage or is it waste?" (Quist, W & Dos Santos Gonçalves, J, 2022). Therefore the goal is to transform an endangered vacant church of choice in the Netherlands, whilst producing zero-waste.

The subject of the studio is related to the field of architecture and the architecture track because within the studio it looks at the heritage values that architectural heritage objects such as churches possess. These heritage values translate into historical, cultural, emotional and functional elements that the building contains in addition to its physical characteristics. In addition, the studio is expected to take into account the zero-waste challenge. As a result, the student is expected to take a position on these two topics, which are often in conflict. On the one hand, it is important to preserve the historical architecture and the components it contains as much as possible and, on the other hand, there is the goal of repurposing a building in such a way that it respects the planet's future. Every choice within the project constitutes a constant balancing act between these two factors.

Within my own project, the possibilities for a transformation into a public interior are being explored. This topic is related to both the studio and the master track. Indeed, this is where the conflict arises between preserving the existing spatial functioning of the church, and the ambition to make a building accessible to all. By analysing the existing church and, in particular, its transition zones, it became clear what architectural elements the church possesses, what the spatial functioning of the church is and what this triggers in the user. By mapping this, a position could be taken to see which elements of the church are important for its spatial functioning, so that they could be taken into account in the transformation towards a public interior. The graduation project also constantly considered how existing elements could be reused to meet the zero-waste requirement. In the project, the zero-waste challenge also translates into the use of as many bio-based and recycled materials as possible and demountability if steel is used. Finally, a very active programme with overlapping and flexible elements was deliberately chosen, so that optimum use is made of the church, which is also in line with sustainability.

How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

My graduation project 'Church as a connector' examines the possibilities of transforming the Grote- of Mariakerk in Meppel into a public interior. The choice to investigate the topic 'public interior' has to do with the location of the Grote- of Mariakerk. The church is located in the heart of Meppel and from researching newspaper reports it became clear that the whole of Meppel feels connected to the church. Discussions with the employees of the church and Stichting Meppel also revealed their preference for a public function. This gave rise to the ambition to make this church a public interior and explore this for the paper. I attempted to make the building function as a public living room, which is easily accessible for the people of Meppel. This will be reflected in the programme, which is a multifunctional programme in which culture and interconnection are at the forefront. This programme was created by researching the functions of Meppel and 3 trends emerged:

- The city theatre Ogterop in Meppel wanted to expand with a pop stage, but this was not financially feasible;
- Arts centre Scala in Meppel also went bankrupt during this period, but there was a demand to retain the arts centre;
- Meppel library wanted to expand and take on more of the role of a public living room for Meppel.

By combining these three cultural functions and making the spaces multi-functional so that there is constant occupancy, these functions could potentially be profitable together in the Grote or Maria Church. Thus, the choices of functions for

the design of the Grote- of Mariakerk was guided by the research into the local demand of functions. Subsequently, the paper also shows that the case studies chose to investigate similar functions. This has been a direct consequence of the choice of functions.

During the above process, an ABC analysis was also carried out, which forms the historical, contextual, situational, architectural and structural basis of the study. Conducting this research on the church and its surroundings has improved the knowledge of the church as a whole.

The literary study of the three concepts, public space, public building and transition zone provided criteria against which the case studies of different public interiors could be assessed. The case study research of the public interiors was very focused on functional requirements and yielded fewer results than desired. Consequently, in the P2 presentation, there was too little relationship between the research and my design choices made. This is due to the fact that the link with the existing church architecturally, situational and in terms of heritage was still too much lacking. I improved this link by adding a field study on the functioning of the existing transition zones of the Grote- or Mariakerk, the surroundings of the church and history of the surroundings of the church. This research clarified the opportunities and challenges for the transformation to a public interior.

This resulted in design strategies that are directly reflected in the design. Below are some examples of design choices made that directly result from the research:

- *The wooden volume is placed behind the columns to maintain the verticality accentuated by the columns;*
- *The wooden volume is relatively low, so the church hall still feels like one large space;*
- *The horizontal beams and ceiling are painted to emphasise the horizontality of the church hall;*
- *Minimal openings in the façade have been used, in line with the existing openings to minimise the impact on the existing church hall and to accentuate contract compression;*
- *South extension uses glass to show activities of the building to bystanders of the church square;*
- *South extension uses compression, by making the roof extra low, in line with the original transition zones which use compression as well;*
- *South extension uses a skylight so the user experiences the transition of the originally closed facade more consciously;*
- *On the outside of the extension, benches are added to activate the 'edge' of the public space.*

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

The ABC analysis was carried out in groups and forms the historical, contextual, situational, architectural and structural basis of the study. Conducting this study of the church and its surroundings enhanced our knowledge of the church as a whole and was accompanied by a value assessment. On the whole, I think we made a complete analysis of the church and every aspect was highlighted. However, at the later stage, we noticed some minor differences in the roof structure, which we should have seen earlier. Apart from that, I would not change much about our execution of the ABC analysis because it was a very streamlined collaboration with Levi Steevensz.

The choice of functions for the Grote- of Mariakerk responds to three trends that were visible in Meppel. By combining three cultural functions and making the spaces multifunctional so that there is constant occupancy, these functions in the Grote- of Mariakerk can be profitable together. I am satisfied with this approach, but I would have contacted the three organisations to get a clearer programme of requirements next time.

In my overall design process, I would involve the population more in future projects. Whilst describing the project as a 'house of the people', I spoke relatively little to the residents of Meppel. I could have done this, for instance, in the form of interviews or a workshop. However, my design does feature a form of participation, through the wall made from locally harvested window frames from Meppelers.

We also had to make a wooden model of a significant part of the church, to experiment design options. Looking back at this, we made the model but I could have used it more enough to explore options whilst designing. I use 3D model software a lot in my designs to explore options, but this can sometimes limit my imagination in the design process.

In my case study research on public interior projects, in retrospect, I could have realised earlier that I was not getting as many results as I hoped. If I had realised this earlier, I could have shifted the main focus of the paper to the transition zones of the existing church and the experience of the user quicker to gain more depth on this topic. This only happened now after the P2 presentation. Had I brought the research more at the forefront in the overall graduation, I feel my research could have been even stronger. For instance, for my field research on the existing transition zones of the Grote or Mariakerk, in retrospect, I would have liked to use the experience of local people. By adding the experiences of more professionals as well as non-professionals, similarities and differences in the way they experience the transition zones can be studied. Finally, due to feasibility, only one design approach was put forward, but in reality, several design approaches might be possible which could have been tested.

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

The design of the Grote- of Mariakerk and the research that preceded it provides unique results. The results of the ABC research into the existing de Grote- of Mariakerk can provide more clarity on churches from this period for future research, though. The transferability of the project lies mainly in the methods applied during the process. The method of research in the ABC study, which used Steward Brand's shearing layers, is a methodology that could be applied to any church. In addition, the research into values and attributes was conducted by using different types of sources: national monument listing, books & researches and news articles & local publications. Based on these combined with interviews with people from the church, a value assessment of the church was then drawn up. This method can easily be applied to other projects as well.

The criteria of the case studies of a public interior in the graduation paper and the results derived from them are quantitative. In this way, any project can be tested against this set of criteria, so it is transferable. Having said that, the results of the case studies turned out to be of less value for my paper than hoped for, as they contained mainly functional requirements. The field research into the functioning of the existing transition zones of the Grote- of Mariakerk was conducted qualitatively, based on the experience of one professional and therefore unique. However, as mentioned earlier, it is possible to conduct this research with several people, making it quantitative. In addition, the research remains focused only on the transition zones of the Grote or Mariakerk, but this does

not take away from the fact that the method of research can be reused. One could research the transition zones of other churches in the same way; through a site visit using a serial vision such as George Cullen's to map the user's experience. In this way, these unique results in a bigger picture can become quantifiable though. For example, if one were to compare similar churches, the results that initially appear unique might be represented by multiple churches.

As mentioned earlier, the design choices made for the transformation of the Grote or Mariakerk are unique to the project, but the challenges & opportunities mentioned in the study stem from properties that the existing church possesses. These properties are not unique and the previous case studies also show that different churches possess similarities. So there is a chance that a qualitative study of similar churches, would yield similar results in the form of challenges & opportunities in a transformation towards a public interior. But as the study was now conducted qualitatively, this cannot be said with certainty.

*How do you assess the academic and societal value
of your graduation project in a broader context?*

Of the 7,000 churches still owned by the Netherlands, an average of two churches per week will close in the Netherlands at the current rate. These churches are often in prominent locations in the city and their vacancy detracts from the social and physical quality of these areas. Churches are considered important by both religious and non-religious residents and therefore it is inevitable that the number of transformed churches will increase in the future. During the graduation project, it became clear to me that research on transformed churches is still in its early stages. There are already a fair number of examples of transformed churches in the Netherlands, but these largely contain commercial functions. My graduation project includes a transformation into a public interior, combining the local demand for multiple functions in one building. By combining this with intensive use and flexible components, an attempt was made to make a program with cultural functions more financially viable.

The graduation project represents a contemporary twist on the old church idea of gathering and this can be an inspiration for future transformation projects of churches on many levels. For instance, my research and design offer an example of drafted design strategies that show it is possible to give a church a more public character whilst respecting the heritage values of the existing church as well.

The design graduation project also offers several examples for future transformations to involve local people in designing a public building. In the design phase, this is done through the wall consisting of hardened frames and doors from the local community. This allows the residents of Meppel to contribute in order to enhance the sense of community. Exhibiting elements made from the workshops, together with the aforementioned wall, ensures that the people of Meppel are represented in the interior. Finally, Meppel's market is considered very important. Through a flexible design in which the market can also take place in the church, this important historical function has been revived and even more people will enter the church who might not normally have done so.