

# Identification of dominant stakeholder perspectives on the future of church buildings in the Netherlands using Q methodology

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**Abstract:** All across the Netherlands more and more church buildings are abandoned as a consequence of secularisation, declining church attendance and ageing of the population of churchgoers. However, finding a new future for a church building is not as easy as it sounds, as it mostly result in protracted and complex processes in which involved stakeholders can hardly come to an agreement. In order to increase clarity, this article identifies different stakeholder perspectives on determining a future for church buildings in The Netherlands. By using Q methodology three shared perspectives could be identified, as well as areas of agreement, in dealing with vacant church buildings. The perspectives named: A) “church building as house for the public”, B) “making well considered choices” and C) “church councils in control”. The perspectives share awareness of the importance of church buildings for society and are all willing to retain those buildings for the future. However, they disagree on what possible future is preferred and how the process of defining a future should be shaped. Where perspective A mainly focuses on culture-historical values, perspective B has more eye for financial feasibility of reuse and perspective C stresses the importance of the religious meaning of the church building. The differences between those perspectives together with the secrecy of stakeholders is therefore seen as one of the most deciding bottlenecks in reuse processes of church buildings.

**Keywords:** reuse; adaptive reuse; church buildings; heritage; wicked problem; decision-making; perspectives; Q methodology.

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## 1 Introduction

Our biggest museum is for sale. All across Europe, religious heritage buildings are under threat (Future for religious heritage, 2014) because of secularization and deinstitutionalization of religion which translates to a lack of social and financial support. In the Netherlands this trend manifests itself as well, as 51% of the Dutch population declared to be not affiliate with any religion, and 78% of worshippers acknowledged they never or hardly ever go to church (CBS, 2018). As the popularity of the established Christian denominations continues to drop, the number of Christian church buildings becoming redundant is increasing (Velthuis & Spennemann, 2007) As a result, many church buildings cannot be kept by the local congregations (Bisseling et al., 2011). Church buildings are forced to close,

resulting in a major surplus of vacant places of worship. Based on expectations of the CIO-K, a Dutch organisation of collaboration churches, coming 10 years 30-80% of all churches in the Netherlands are becoming redundant (Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, 2018), equalling 3 to 8 churches every week.

The effect of this massive close down of church buildings has a considerable effect on the living environment, especially because church buildings are not just ordinary buildings (Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, 2012). For many people, closure of a church building implies they will lose their inner home, a welcoming place for worship and forgiveness (Stassen, 2017). For others, the outer appearance of church buildings is a reason to pursuit new use of these buildings. This latter reason is especially present in a densely populated country such as the

Netherlands, where there is a deep need of space (Steenhuis & Meurs, 2017), the housing shortage is pressing and where land is generally too valuable to be left unused (Velthuis & Spennemann, 2007). As a consequence, the moment a church buildings loses its religious function does not have to lead to a demolition of the building (Bisseling et al., 2011).

Despite that importance of religious heritage in society is recognized by many, when church buildings become vacant, deterioration lies in wait. If new use is not found quickly once a church building becomes redundant, Roche (2011) argues that its viability reduces rapidly as the fabric deteriorates and repair and renovation costs soar. On top, Velthuis & Spennemann (2007) warns that unused church buildings are easy targets of vandalism and environmental decay and Latham (2000) points out the potential negative impact on a communities emotional well-being. As a result, there is an importance of quick action. Especially since enumerative real estate usually cannot afford to stand vacant for a longer period of time, as underlined by Pasterkamp (2014).

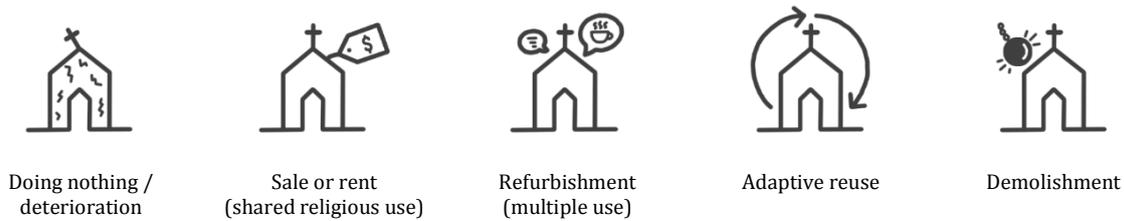
As a consequence, the challenge of finding suitable new uses for redundant churches is pressing (Roche, 2011). However, defining a future for a church building often leads to vigorous debates that might cause considerable delays, disappointed parties or non-decisions (Bisseling et al., 2011). Many, highly committed stakeholders are involved who all favour a different future. This makes that finding a future for church buildings can be seen as a wicked problem: *“complex, open-ended and intractable problems, where both the nature of the problem as the preferred solution are strongly contested”* (Head, 2008: 101). Where one argues that much may be allowed in order to avoid demolition of church buildings, others fear for disrespectful, disgraceful and unworthy handling of religious legacies. Dealing with abandoned churches therefore raises important questions about identity and ethics (della Dora, 2018). In other words: stakeholders can make or break possible futures. This has been very well captured by Latham (2000, 12) stating:

*“The real limitations are not archaeological, aesthetic, economical or functional, but psychological: the limits created by preconceptions, and by lack of imagination. Once the will is there, the skill and ingenuity will follow.”*

Practice also shows it is very difficult to reach consensus when binding agreements on the future of a church building have to be made (Baarveld et al., 2014). Emotions run very high, and non-decisions lie in wait. In the meantime, the former prestigious church buildings are left unused, devoted to the test of time and subjected to the risk of decay. In order to overcome this impasse, the biggest challenge lies in uniting underlying (joint) interests of all actors (Baarveld et al., 2014). According to Koren et al (2016), the joint interests within redevelopment collaborations of church buildings should be based on all different, individual interests. An argument that is also underlined by de Vries (2017), stating that general interest should take precedence over personal interest of stakeholders in order to move in the right direction.

However, where the importance of stakeholders and their perspectives is recognized in defining a future for church buildings, considerably less information is documented. This might be explained by the assumption that every reuse process of a church building is considered as an individual case, depending on location, scale, financial situation, etc. (Baarveld et al., 2014). However, in order to grasp the nettle on this subject, common grounds could be very useful as starting point. The main purpose of this article is to reveal shared stakeholders' perspectives on the future of church buildings, in order to contribute to a better understanding of stakeholder behaviour and to optimize the process of defining a future for church buildings. By applying Q methodology, motivation perspectives on dealing with vacant churches in The Netherlands are elicited and categorised.

This article first zooms in on characteristics of the Dutch context on reusing church buildings. Next, it describes Q methodology and how this was applied. The focus of this article can be found in section 3 and 4, which presents and



**Figure 1** | Alternatives for church buildings when becoming vacant

analyses the identified shared perspectives. Section 5 describes how these perspectives can be used in dealing with vacant church building. To wrap up, section 6 will present the main conclusions of this study.

## 2 Reusing church buildings in the Netherlands

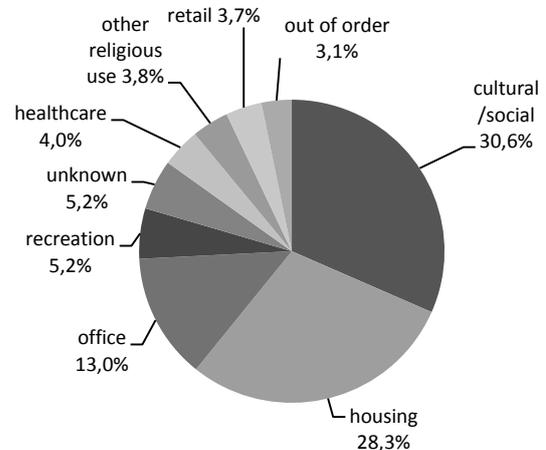
In order to define a future for church buildings there are roughly five options: 1) doing nothing, which leaves the building as it is, but also increases the risk of deterioration; 2) sale or rent in which a shared religious use is possible that provides extra income for the maintenance of the building; 3) refurbishment in which minimal interventions enables multiple use, including religious use; 4) adaptive reuse that changes the use of the church building; 5) demolition that (partly) destroys the building to make space for new developments (see **Fout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.**).

Nevertheless, how the Dutch deal with church buildings is also highly influenced by the historical context and (former) position of the church in society. From origin, the Netherlands always had a Christian orientation in which two main movements of Christianity could be distinguished: Catholicism and Protestantism (Nelissen, 2008). The constant conflict between those religious denomination, resulted in an extensive and versatile collection of church buildings as symbols of local pride (Wesselink, 2018).

However, not all church buildings survived the test of time. Especially the first effects of secularisation after World War II resulted in a massive wipe out of church buildings in the 70's and 80's. As a consequence, a debate in society was launched on how those buildings could be preserved for future generations (Kroesen, 2008). Many church buildings, especially the

ones built before 1800, are nowadays listed as monuments (van der Breggen & de Fijter, 2019). In this light, when it comes to demolition of a church building much resistance might be expected.

As a consequence, reuse and adaptive reuse are seen as an appropriate alternative and a sustainable future for religious heritage. Practice has already shown that religious use is just one of the many functions to preserve a church building (Koren et al., 2016). In fact, 1 out of 5 church buildings, almost 1400 in total to be more precise, already received a new use in the Netherlands (van der Breggen & de Fijter, 2019), varying for social purposes to housing and commercial use, see Figure 2.



**Figure 2** | Nature of reuse of former church buildings (© van der Breggen & de Fijter, 2019: 1)

However, before a new function could be taken in use, a long trajectory will be preceded. Along the line, some aspects within the Dutch context are rather unique compared to other countries. First of all, unlike most European countries, church buildings in the Netherlands are not owned by the state. Instead, local religious denominations are invested with juridical ownership (Kroesen, 2008). As a consequence, they are the ones with final decision-making

power and are able to set limitations to a transfer of a church building. Therefore, if a reuse plan is not supported by church authorities, there is no chance that it will be realised. In case a church building is listed as a monument, the government gains some decision-making power, but also commits itself to financial contributions of the preservation (Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency, 2012). Secondly, church and state are separated in the Netherlands. In this, the state does not interfere with the content of the faith and the church does not appoint officials or influences the choice of councillors or ministers (de Jong, 2016). However, over time, the misunderstanding has arisen that the separation of church and state means that the influence of religion must be pushed back from the public domain (Snel, 2004) or that there is a separation between religion and society (de Hart & van Houwelingen, 2018). This concept, including its misinterpretations, is so deeply rooted in Dutch society, that municipalities and church authorities are not inclined to seek help from each other (Dijk, 2016). Thirdly, the Netherlands are faced with one of the most rapid increases of secularisation in Europe (de Hart & van Houwelingen, 2018). Therefore, struggles in which the Dutch have attempted to order their religious pluralism is worthy of international attention (Kennedy & Zwemer, 2010) and made them a forerunner in dealing with church vacancy and adaptive reuse (Mørk, 2015). The knowledge on perspectives presented in this article might therefore also be of value for the international context.

### 3 Q methodology

To elicit and categorize stakeholder perspectives, Q-methodology is applied. This methodology, which originates from social sciences and psychology, is designed to “assist in the orderly examination of human subjectivity” (Brown, 1980: 5). This makes the application especially well suitable to the context of vacant church buildings, since discussions related to

the future of church buildings might be dominated by highly emotional behaviour.

The basic idea behind the Q-method, is that respondents of a Q study will be confronted with a group of statements and asked to rank these by the degree to which they agree or disagree with the propositions. The collected data will be analysed using factor analysis in order to find patterns in the way statements are ranked by respondents. In doing so, the methodology combines principles from qualitative research with quantitative research methods (Brown, 1993).

This Q methodological research on futures of church buildings consisted of six stages summarized in **Fout! Verwijzingsbron niet gevonden.** and elaborated below.

In order to grasp the “concourse” and to get a good understanding of the dilemma’s that might occur during the search of a future for a church building, various sources were consulted, such as academic articles, newspapers, books and guidelines, discussion groups and expert meetings. The collected statements concerned values related to church buildings, issues that occurred during reuse processes of church buildings, suggestions to optimize those processes, limitations by stakeholders and all different kind of complexities that might be faced during a reuse process. To guarantee the most realistic possible overview, formulated statements were kept close to their original wording.

Only the most relevant statements could be included in the “Q-set”. By categorising the statements from the concourse, duplicated statements could be eliminated and propositions with approximately the same connotation were combined. Next, the set of unique statements were compared, discussed, tested and edited iteratively until forty-seven statements remained. The statements in the final Q-set can be found in Table 2.

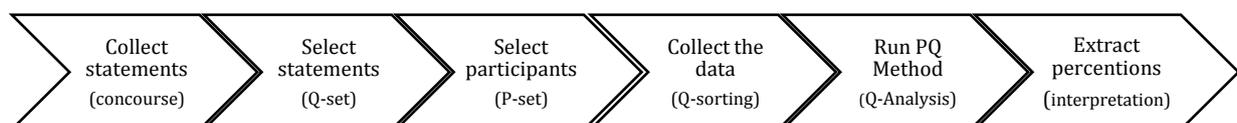


Figure 3 | Flowchart of the steps of the Q methodological research approach

**Table 1** | Fixed distribution of the Q-sort grid

← most disagree												most agree →		
		-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5		
(2)														(2)
	(3)												(3)	
		(4)											(4)	
			(5)										(5)	
				(6)									(6)	
					(7)									

In order to make sure a wide range of perspectives, including less dominant perspectives, are included in this research, a stakeholder selection procedure was started. By means of an actor analysis it was ensured that stakeholders in the “P-set” represented as many organisations as possible, but at least the stakeholders with high power and interest. Respondents were contacted personally as much as possible, for example by attending discussion groups or events and meetings for knowledge sharing. Furthermore, during the interviews snowball sampling was used as well. In this, participants were asked to recommend people with an interesting different or similar viewpoint on the future of church buildings. If a respondent was expected to reveal new information, this person was contacted to contribute to the research as a participant. The final P-set contained 24 respondents, varying from governmental agencies, NGO’s, private organisations and religious institutions.

During in-person interviews participants were first asked to classify the statements of the Q-set into three categories: ‘disagree’, ‘neutral’ and ‘agree’. This helped participants to structure their minds and gave a first impression of the range of statements at the same time. Next, the participants were asked to place each statement in one of the forty-seven boxes on the scoreboard of the “Q sorting” grid, see Table 1, ranging from “very strongly disagree” (score -5) to “very strongly agree (score +5). Due to the fixed distribution, the participants were obliged to weigh each statement against the others, forcing them to make trade-offs on what is

considered more important. After the sorting, participants were asked to explain the statements that were placed on the extremities (+5 and -5) of the scoreboard. Furthermore, they were asked to report on any technical problems, problems with understanding the statements, missed statements or other contributions they would like to make.

In order to compare the data of twenty-four Q sorts, Q-methodology identifies shared viewpoints by subjecting the Q-sorts to a (by-person) factor analysis (Brown, 1993). Whereas normal factor analysis (also known as R-methodology) searches for correlations between variables across a sample of subjects, Q-methodology looks for correlations between subjects across a sample of variables (van Duin et al, 2018). As a consequence, new variables can be invented mathematically in order to explain variation in any variables (Webler et al., 2009) Next, by analysing the shared and divergent perspectives, dominant factors will appear by clustering (van Duin et al., 2018). The term ‘factor’ can therefore be seen as a more technical term of ‘shared perspective’ (Raadgever et al., 2008)

The collected quantitative data of the Q-sorts was subsequently analysed using the purpose-built PQMethod software (Schmolck, 2014) version 2.35. This straightforward application guides one through the process of factor analysis and produces several useful outputs for the interpretation of the perspectives.

The twenty-four Q-sort responses were analysed using centroid factor analysis, after which Varimax rotation was applied. Solutions with various numbers of extracted factors (1-7) were tested. The three-factor solution was considered optimal, since 1) their eigenvalue > 1.0 (Webler et al., 2009); 2) each factor had at least two loadings higher than the significant loading factor Watts & Stenner (2012) of 0.376 in this study; 3) the slope of the scree plot of a principal component analysis changed (Cattell, 1966) after principal component four; and 4) the three-factor solution explains 42%, which exceeds the minimum of 35-40% to be considered a comprehensive solution (Kline, 1994).

**Table 2 |** Factor scores of the three extracted factors, starting with the statement on which there is most agreement between factors (-5: strongly disagree with statement, +5: strongly agree with statement)

Nr.	Statements	Factor scores		
		A	B	C
19	Political influence is required to draw attention to the urgency of vacant church buildings	2	2	2
6	Even after adaptive reuse, church buildings will represent more than ordinary buildings. Sacral stones always leave a "holy residue"	3	3	3
11	Local residents need to be more involved in finding a future for the church building	2	2	1
31	Dividing a church building into a religious and non-religious part is preferred	0	-1	0
44	Adaptive reuse is not the solution for a long-term future of church buildings	-1	-3	-2
40	Secrecy of stakeholders complicates the process of finding (new) uses for a church building	5	3	4
30	Adaptive reuse of church buildings makes a positive contribution to creating a pleasant living environment	3	2	5
25	The church belongs to everyone; the future of the church building should therefore be determined by joint agreement	1	1	-1
5	Selling a church building to another religious community is a short-term solution	-2	-3	-1
22	Once a church building has been adaptive reused, it can no longer fulfil a religious function in the future	-4	-5	-5
24	A church building is essential for the silhouette of a village / city	5	4	4
46	The Dutch government should make more subsidies available to be able to reuse church buildings	1	-1	1
3	The preservation of a church building as religious heritage is only possible if the government makes financial contributions	-1	0	-2
47	A vacant church building must be reused for cultural or social purposes	0	-1	-3
26	Multiple use is only a temporary solution: in the end, adaptive reuse is insurmountable	-3	-4	-5
38	In case of a good adaptive reuse plan, action must be taken, "poldering" leads to delays and motivates parties to invest	-1	1	-1
9	Maintaining the religious function is preferred, regardless of the religious belief	-1	0	1
42	The future of a church building can be found in a joint search for new revenue models	4	1	1
35	Adaptive reuse detracts from the image of church buildings as a religious expression	-2	-2	-4
39	Even after adaptive reuse, church buildings must continue to witness the Christian tradition	-3	0	0
34	A church building should be opened to local initiatives, even if they are not of a religious nature	2	0	0
7	The religious background of a church building is less important in finding a future	1	-2	-3
36	Municipalities must take more responsibility to preserve church buildings for the future	2	3	0
33	Adaptive reuse of church buildings is only desirable if this contributes to the socio-economic development of the local community	-2	-4	-4
43	Adaptive reuse is not the solution for a long-term future of church buildings	-5	-4	-2
12	Without developers who want to re-invigorate church buildings, nothing will happen	1	-2	-1
28	In dealing with church buildings, too much attention is paid to limitations instead of possibilities	1	5	3
2	The adaptive reuse of a church building must be reversible	0	0	2
13	Demolition of a church building will leave a deep scar in society	4	1	1
14	A new use of a church building must supportive to the local community, just like the church used to be	0	0	3
16	If denominations will look for alternative incomes, their church buildings can remain intact	0	1	4
29	Society should contribute financially to the maintenance of church buildings in their region	-1	2	2
20	By allowing architects and designers to think along earlier in the process, a new use for church buildings can be found sooner	3	-1	-1
1	(For now) doing nothing is undesirable and does not benefit the church building	1	2	-2
21	The Dutch government only has eye for cultural-historical values	-3	-2	1
15	In the absence of a suitable reuse, preference is given to demolition of the church building	-4	1	-2
37	Denominations are responsible themselves for the maintenance and preservation of their church building	0	0	5
18	When the time is right, a suitable function for a church building will presents itself.	-2	-3	2
17	The demolition of a church building no longer suits today's society of sustainability and reuse	4	-1	0
8	Church councils must have their own plan first, before contacting the government / third parties	-2	4	-1
45	Demolition of a former church buildings is a matter of impatience	0	-3	3
41	Public resistance hinders finding a new future for a church building	-1	3	-3
27	In case of vacancy, the church building should be sold to the local government for a symbolic amount	-3	-5	0
4	If project developers can book a return on church buildings, so can church councils	-4	-1	2
10	A church with monumental status is more valuable to me than a church without monumental status	2	-2	-4
32	Also a monumental church might be demolished if no suitable use is being found	-5	4	0
23	It is impossible to retain all existing church buildings in the Netherlands	3	5	-3

**Table 3 |** Values that are most important in defining perspective

	Perspective A	Perspective B	Perspective C
Extreme values	<p>Agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A church building is essential for the silhouette of a village / city</li> <li>▪ Secrecy of stakeholders complicates the process of finding (new) uses for a church building</li> </ul>	<p>Agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It is impossible to retain all existing church buildings in the Netherlands</li> <li>▪ In dealing with church buildings, too much attention is paid to limitations instead of possibilities</li> </ul>	<p>Agree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adaptive reuse of church buildings makes a positive contribution to creating a pleasant living environment</li> <li>▪ Denominations are responsible themselves for the maintenance and preservation of their church building</li> </ul>
	<p>Disagree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Also a monumental church might be demolished if no suitable use is being found</li> <li>▪ Adaptive reuse is not the solution for a long-term future of church buildings</li> </ul>	<p>Disagree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Once a church building has been adaptive reused, it can no longer fulfil a religious function in the future</li> <li>▪ In case of vacancy, the church building should be sold to the local government for a symbolic amount</li> </ul>	<p>Disagree:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Once a church building has been adaptive reused, it can no longer fulfil a religious function in the future</li> <li>▪ Multiple use is only a temporary solution: in the end, adaptive reuse is insurmountable</li> </ul>

Next, Varimax rotation was applied to maximise the total variance between the factors. By doing so, factors will be optimized, aiming to have as many people as possible load on a single factor rather than loading on two factors simultaneously (Minkman et al., 2016). After Varimax rotation, in which the explained variance of a three-factor solution was maximized, out of the 24 respondents, 21 respondents were loaded solely on one factor, 2 loaded on multiple factors and 1 respondent did not load on any of the factors. Hence, the Q-sorts of 21 respondents were included in further analysis, in which 11 clustered on factor A, 7 on factor B, and 3 on factor C. Table 2 shows the factor scores, in which the consensus statements are placed on top and the statements which encountered most disagreement are placed on the bottom of the overview.

#### 4 Results

In this section, the three main perspectives that are elicited are discussed. The three perspectives represent 21 out of the 24 respondents (87.5%) and therefore cover the interviewees' responses well. Each factor is interpreted by the most extreme values and supported by comments made by participants during the Q-sorting interviews (see lines between quotation marks). Based on the characteristics, each perspective was named: A) "church buildings as house for the public", B) "making well considered choices, and C) "church councils in control". Table 3 provides an

overview of the most important statements that define each perspective.

#### 4.1 Agreement between perspectives

Between the identified perspectives, there is a lot of agreement between respondents. The lowest correlation that could be found between individual Q sorts was -0.18 (minimum is -1), and the highest correlation was 0.63 (maximum is 1). This effect is also visible in the correlation scores for the different factors (see Table 4), since all pairs of factors are positively correlated. The correlation between Factor A and B is significantly correlated as well, since the significant loading factor of this research equals 0.376. According to Raadgever et al (2008) a significant correlation indicates that the shared perspectives agree on most of the statements. Watts & Stenner (2012) underline that this could also be taken as evidence that those perspectives could be understood as alternative manifestations of the same factor.

**Table 4 |** Correlations between factor scores

Factor	A	B	C
A	1.00	0.4938	0.3469
B	0.4938	1.00	0.3644
C	0.3469	0.3644	1.00

Besides overall agreement, there are also statements which were rated at roughly the same level - either high, low, or neutral - by every respondent, so called 'consensus items'. The most strongly agreed and disagreed consensus items will be discussed.

Respondents collectively agreed that church buildings are essential for the silhouette of a village or city, which underlines the importance of the physical appearance of church buildings. Furthermore, the biggest fall back of defining a future for a church building is attributed to secrecy of stakeholders. A better understanding of actors and their motives to interact is therefore very important in dealing with church vacancy. At the same time, the relevance of this research is underlined by this signal from the field.

Collective disagreement appears on the statement of 'once a church building has been adaptive reused, it can no longer fulfil a religious function in the future'. All parties agree that a church building can function as a place for worship, even if it has had a (temporary) other purpose. This consensus might open doors for temporary fill-ins of church buildings before a more sustained solution can be found.

#### **4.2 Perspective A: "Church building as house for the public"**

This perspective values church buildings especially because of their outer appearance. Since these buildings define the silhouette of a city or village, demolition of a church building should be prevented. Their disappearance is expected to leave a deep scar in society, even if the majority of society is not religious. As a consequence, in many cases demolition will lead to regret afterwards. Demolishment of church buildings is seen as an "easy way out" and should be prevented, especially in case of monumental church buildings, since they "represents an above-average value for society". In the absence of a suitable reuse, preference is definitely not given to demolition of the church building as this is "only a possibility if no other options are left". Furthermore, demolition of a church building does not suit today's society of sustainability.

Striking enough, this perspective is least willing to assign financial contributions for the maintenance of church buildings to society. In order to retain as much church buildings as possible, reuse is considered necessary. Therefore, adaptive reuse is seen as a solution

for a long-term future of church buildings. In addition, this perspective suggests that a church building for religious purposes and as a house for the public go very well together. Although, when it comes to reusing former church buildings, the religious background of a church building is valued less important in finding a new future. After adaptive reuse it is also less important that the building should continue to witness the Christian tradition. Or, as stated by a respondent: "if necessary, a building can always be redeveloped to a place of worship again." Therefore, the church building should be opened to local initiatives, even if they are not of a religious nature.

This perspective primarily perceives the abandonment of a church building as an opportunity. Since its initial use has a social nature, merely commercial intentions are not supported. As a consequence, church buildings are considered very suitable to "make connections to other societal challenges" or as an "opportunity of boosting the living environment".

According to this perspective, the main bottleneck in the reuse process of church buildings is related to the willingness and ability of involved stakeholders to cooperate. Problems related to financial feasibility are to overcome, since there are "plenty ideas to make a financially viable business case". On top, this perspective endeavours a joint search for new revenue models in order to find a new use for a church building. However, in order to accomplish this "a change of mind-sets is required, including more flexibility of all involved parties".

In this light, it is no surprise that secrecy of stakeholders is awaited to complicate the process of finding (new) uses for a church building. Multiple respondents in this perspective experience "a lack of cooperation between involved parties" or "a gap between words and action". Also "off the record limitations or perpetual clauses" might hamper the reuse process. On top, if a potential reuse plan fails, stakeholders are likely to "blame others", as declared by multiple respondents. There seems to be a "fear for unacceptable risks

of loss". The process will therefore be optimized if stakeholders become more transparent.

Therefore, a "more professional approach would be very helpful in the process reusing a church building". After all, "new uses might develop over time, but nothing happens as a matter of fact". According to this perspective this professionalization can be found by project developers, since they "have special competences and expertise". This implies that if they can book a return on a church building, it is no guarantee for church councils to do the same. The same applies for architects and designers, as their role is expected to be more important in comparison to other perspectives. Especially their ability to "open up old, ingrained opinions by means of creative ideas and examples" is seen as very important.

#### **4.3 Perspective B: "Making well considered choices"**

In this perspective there is a strong conviction that it is not possible to retain all existing church buildings in the Netherlands. As a consequence, demolition is a viable option in this viewpoint. Whether a church building is listed as a monument or not, does not make any difference in this. According to this viewpoint, demolition is thus not seen as a matter of impatience. Various reasons might cause that demolition is inevitable.

To be able to make certain decisions, church councils should compose their own plans first. In order to do so, church councils are stimulated to actively pursue the future of their church buildings. After that, they could bring in third parties, such as governmental organisations or local residents. If they do, they will be able to compose plans that are "made by religious organisation instead of with religious organisations".

On the other hand, this perspective is well aware that the "process is mostly too complicated and extensive for church councils to deal with." As a consequence, church council might become overruled – while they assume to make the right decision. After all, denominations are managed by "benevolent, but unprofessional volunteers",

faced by "ignorance and uncertainties" of the future of their church building.

Still, choices have to be made, which might be very decisive. As a consequence, adaptive reuse does not have to be reversible. However, relating to the context of the church building, every future should be determined with "a bigger picture" in mind. Moreover, the "typology, location and appearance" strongly determine the possibilities for future use, since "supply and demand of church buildings rarely match." This requires some creativity. However, according to this viewpoint, too much focus is on limitations instead of possibilities in dealing with vacant church buildings. Or as stated by a respondent: "nothing should be excluded". Also, the "lack of courage to do different" or "fear to show different layers of time" is mentioned as one of the fall backs of the process. Furthermore, public resistance might hinder in finding a new future for a church building as well. However, if the public wants to be involved, they should also face the consequences. Or as stated by a respondent: "he who pays the piper calls the tune". When considered as a joint effort, there should be a joint responsibility as well.

As a consequence, when a good reuse plan arises, this viewpoint underlines the importance of moving forward. If this momentum is not taken advantage of investors might become demotivated. And once an opportunity is lost, it is questionable if a better opportunity will arise. As a result, investors and project developers are seen as an important link in the reuse process. After all, "a reuse plan that is only based on innovative ideas, will not necessarily be realistic in a financial sense". This perspective therefore mentions the importance of financial feasibility, which is considered "highly underexposed". In this, it should be about "optimal revenue, instead of maximal revenue".

When opting for adaptive reuse, this viewpoint recommends to start with a financier, "before ideas and detailed plans will be created". As a consequence, architects should be kept out as long as possible, since they might mislead church councils in the possibilities of their church building. After all, "proposals by architects, including expressive renders, could

be very convincing and decisive". At the same time, initiatives by neighbouring residents are greeted sceptically.

All in all, a reuse should be financially feasible in itself, therefore the Dutch governments does not necessarily have to contribute financially to reuse a church building. Striking enough, many praised adaptive reuses of church buildings are "highly subsidised by the government". It is therefore questionable whether these projects are successful. Hence, selling a church building to a local government for a symbolic amount is definitely not the way to go. In fact, financial shortcomings are not seen as the biggest problem in reuse. After all, "in case of a decent reuse plan, money will follow".

#### **4.4 Perspective C: "Church councils in control"**

Within every future of a church building, the objectives of the religious community should be put first according to this perspective. The main aim is to "continue to remain church as far as possible". After all, denominations are responsible for the maintenance and preservation of their church buildings. "If church congestions are able to observe their influence towards society with an outward gaze, one would be able to strengthen this position."

Hence, denominations should look for alternative incomes to keep their church buildings intact - for example by "serving as transmission masts" or by "leasing (parts of) the building to others". This perspective has the most faith in the abilities of the church councils and argues that church councils are also able to book a return on church buildings, as well as project developers. However, specialist knowledge is not always available in church councils. More overarching institutions, as the dioceses or Dutch cultural heritage agency, might be able to link both worlds.

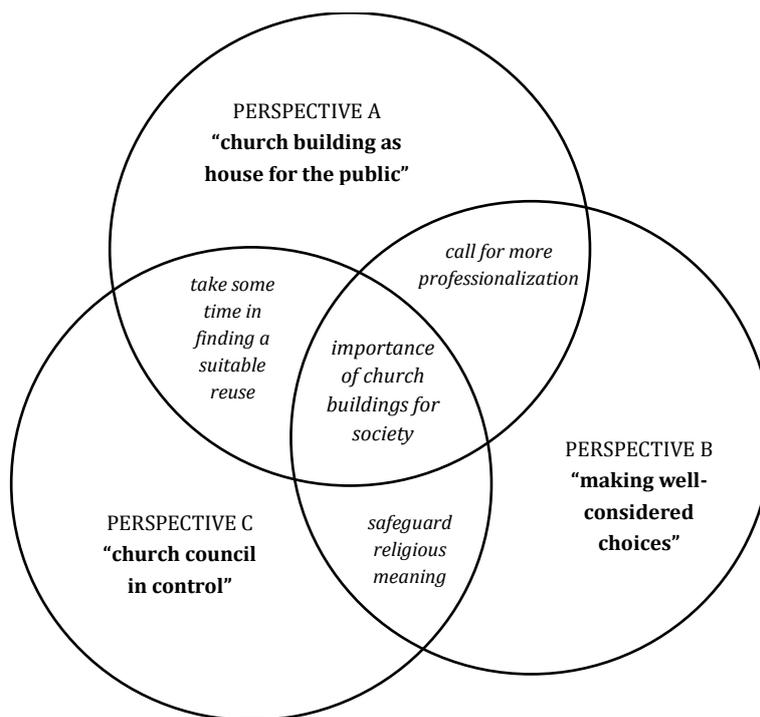
Opting for a project developer is considered as "an easy way out". It is also questioned whether this project developer has specialist knowledge, especially on religious interpretations. Furthermore, "project developers are mostly interested in making profitable transactions and

are therefore not acting primarily in favour of denominations"

Within this viewpoint it is possible to retain all of the church buildings in the Netherlands. In doing so, this perspective is also inclined to take some time in the process of determining a new function. Doing nothing (for now) is not directly stigmatised as something negative. Waiting for a while, might sometimes settle down emotions that are involved in the process of church abandonment. Or as stated by a respondent: "take some time to decide what solution is convenient and sensible at the same time." After all, when the time is right, a suitable function will appear. Public resistance is therefore not expected to cause major issues. If so, the new function is simply not preferred. On the other hand, demolition of a church building is seen as a matter of impatience. However, if demolition is a consequence of the preferences by the religious community, this should be respected.

In order to preserve vacant church buildings, this perspective is convinced that adaptive reuse of church buildings makes a positive contribution to creating a pleasant living environment. Furthermore, adaptive reuse does not by definition distract from the image of church buildings as a religious expression. However, the religious background of a church building is important in finding a new future and should be handled with respect and care. After all, even after adaptive reuse, church buildings will represent more than ordinary buildings: a quality that "may very well be taken advantage of". Conversely, the focus on protecting the cultural-historical values of church buildings are overrated from this point of view. Resulting in too much involvement by the government at the moment: "their role is mainly to offer a helping hand, rather than an outspoken opinion."

In defining a new future, the preference is consequently given to new uses that are supportive to the local community. Therefore, multiple use is seen as a very convenient solution, also for the long run. Besides, "more layers of use results in more future value, since a wide-range of uses can be fulfilled when the church building accommodates multiple uses."



**Figure 4** | Graphical representation of differences and similarities between stakeholder perspectives on the future of church buildings

However, where the possibilities for multiple use are considered widespread, “the will to look for those possibilities is limited”.

Adaptive reuse, on the other hand, is not per definition seen as the solution for a long-term future of church buildings. It is also not expected that adaptive reuse should necessary contribute to the social-economic development of a local community or should be reused for a cultural of social purpose. It is, however, favoured most by this perspective that adaptive reuse of church buildings is reversible.

#### 4.5 Differences between perspectives

Despite common ground between perspectives, differences between perspectives can also be indicated. Those contention items include statements that were highly agreeable to some participants and disagreeable to others.

The main difference between perspective A and B, is that demolition, especially for monumental church buildings, should be avoided at any time according to perspective A, whereas perspective B argues that in some cases it is more preferred to demolish church buildings, even if they are listed as a monument.

Perspective A and C especially differ on responsibilities and capabilities of involved stakeholders. Where perspective A worries that not all Dutch church buildings can be retained, even though demolition does not suit current society and especially monumental church buildings are too valuable to disappear from street level, perspective C states that the role of church councils should not be underestimated: they are able to book a return on church buildings and should be held responsible for their church buildings themselves. Depending on how the church congregation will develop over time, they should have their own vision before any other stakeholders should be requested to cooperate. In doing so, it might be possible to retain all existing church buildings in the Netherlands.

Perspective B and C are especially divided between the question if all church buildings can be retained for the future. Where perspective B sees a less bright future for church buildings in the Netherlands, it also notifies that church councils should first have their own vision on the future of their church building(s) before starting cooperation, and that public resistance might constitute substantial barriers in the process of defining a future. Perspective C is

more optimistic as it favours to believe that a suitable function for a church building will present itself when the time is right. They seem to perceive less problems if a church building becomes vacant as demolition is a matter of impatience. A better solution in this case is to sell the former church building to the local government for a symbolic amount.

## 5 Use of shared perspectives

Knowing the areas of consensus and conflict between dominant perspectives is very useful in understanding stakeholder interactions and to eliminate potential conflicts. Especially within the context of defining a future for church buildings, the process might be intensified by underlying emotions of stakeholders. The three identified perspectives both reveal differences and similarities, see Figure 4. The differences between perspectives might hinder the decision-making process of finding a future for church buildings and should be taken care of. On the other hand, when discussions between perspectives run high, it might be very useful to focus on similarities between perspectives (Donner, 2001), which are shown in the overlapping areas of the circles in Figure 4.

Based on the identification of perspectives, it can be concluded that in finding a future for church buildings, it is important to achieve balance between cultural-historical, economic and religious values. Thereby, the search for this balance will be different for each church building – resulting in a different outcome (i.e. future) for each church building. Despite, all respondents underlined the importance of church buildings for society. Regardless of church buildings are still in use for religious purposes, their appearance is too remarkable to destroy without any effort. This makes that in essence all respondents are willing to find a proper new use for a church building.

## 6 Conclusions

Eventhough todays society is highly secularised, church buildings still fulfill an important role in our living environment. However, because of decreasing church attendance and increasing maintenance cost, church councils struggle to keep their church building in active use. As a

consequence an increasing amount of church buildings becomes vacant. Nevertheless, defining a future for this ennumerative real estate is proven to be extremely complex.

One of the bottlenecks within defining a future for church buildings can be found within the existence of many stakeholders, all with conflicting values and interest. The main purpose of this article was to reveal shared stakeholders' perspectives on the future of church buildings, in order to contribute to a better understanding of stakeholder interaction and to optimize the process of defining a future for church buildings.

By performing a Q-methodological study, it can be concluded that respondents largely agreed on the significance of church buildings for the silhouette of a village or city, the importance of protecting these buildings from demolishment and the complexity of the assignment to preserve church buildings for the future. At the same time, shared stakeholder perspectives on a future for church buildings were identified to pinpoint the most important values of church buildings to secure. The identified perspectives were labelled: A) "church building as house for the public"; B) "making well considered choices"; C) "church councils in control". In perspective A the focus is mainly on social and culture-historical values of church buildings, in which vacancy is seen as an opportunity to reinvent the meaning of the church as meeting point. Perspective B on the other hand is more aware of the economic value of a church building. When a church building becomes vacant, this has a bad influence on the region. In this matter, adaptive reuse might be a solution, on condition that a financially feasible business case will be realised. However, if church buildings become vacant for too long, demolition has to be considered. The last perspective, perspective C adheres religious values of a church building. The disposal of a church building is seen as an extremely painful decision, in which the vacant building reveals bygone glory. Therefore the religious connotation of the building should at least be remembered respectfully - in mind or by new use.

As the identified stakeholder perspectives each represent values (i.e. culture-historic, economic or religious values) it becomes also possible to pinpoint areas of conflict and consensus which might structure stakeholder interaction. Areas of consensus can lead to the formulation of coalitions or agreements and areas of conflict might cause contested discussions. Consensus can be found on the importance of church buildings for the living environment and the intention to preserve these buildings for the future. Conflict can be expected on the trade-off between costs and benefits, worthy and unworthy functions and public of private use. In order to optimize the process of defining a future for church buildings one must therefore pay attention to both culture-historical, economic and religious values, minimizing the areas of conflict and maximizing the areas of consensus.

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