

Pastoral Properties as a Resource for Revitalizing Town Centers

Karina Brünner

Institute of Urbanism, TU Graz, Austria, karina.bruenner@tugraz.at;

Abstract

In Styria, Austria, numerous pastoral properties, such as parish houses, rectories, and associated buildings, are increasingly falling into disuse due to demographic shifts and institutional restructuring within the church. Located centrally in town and village centers, these properties hold significant potential for sustainable revitalization through adaptive reuse. Within the Styrian research program “*Starke Zentren*” (*Strong Centers*)—an initiative to promote multifunctional and vibrant town centers—initial synergies have emerged between regional planning institutions and the Diocese of Graz-Seckau. These collaborations include studies on conversion strategies aimed at unlocking the potential of pastoral properties to balance heritage preservation with contemporary urban development.

As part of a university workshop at Graz University of Technology’s Institute of Urbanism, in cooperation with the Province of Styria, six Styrian municipalities with pastoral properties were studied. Through interviews, spatial analysis, and mapping, students examined strategies for reusing former pastoral properties – documenting transformation processes, spatial integration, new uses, and participant networks. These case studies form the empirical basis of the paper.

Findings reveal that transformations succeed particularly when municipalities are engaged early and actively in the planning and design process. A sensitive approach to historic fabric combined with multifunctional programming enhances acceptance and sustainable use. Accessibility and a clear financial framework are key success factors. When these elements align, the attractiveness of town centers is increased, creating vibrant, diverse communal spaces. Conversely, projects lacking long-term vision and community participation tend to remain superficial and ineffective. The article highlights the transformative potential of such reuse strategies for sustainable urban and local development and identifies pastoral properties as important resources in the discussion about resilient, vibrant, and inclusive centers.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Pastoral Properties, Urbanism, Town Center Revitalization

Introduction

In many European regions—including Austria—small and medium-sized communities are increasingly faced with the challenge of keeping their town and city centers lively and functional. Demographic change, migration to larger urban areas, and changing consumer habits are leading to vacancy rates and a loss of function in once-vibrant town centers in many places. According to the 2021 census, over 47.5 million homes in Europe were vacant,

accounting for almost 20% of the total housing stock (FEANTSA 2023). In Austria, too, the proportion of homes without registered residents has risen steadily, with rural regions experiencing population loss being particularly affected (Statistik Austria 2023).

In direct response to this development, the province of Styria launched the “Strong Centers” research and funding program. The initiative supports municipalities in developing sustainable spatial and economic strategies, with a focus on revitalizing city centers by reactivating vacant spaces, improving local services, and strengthening regional cooperation. The overarching goal is to promote multifunctional, attractive, and resilient city centers in the long term (Province of Styria n.d.). In this context, pastoral properties—such as parish houses, rectories, and associated buildings—are increasingly coming into focus. Due to demographic changes and institutional restructuring within the Catholic Church (Diocese of Graz-Seckau, n.d.; Halmer & Posch 2025), they are increasingly affected by underuse or non-use (Rettich 2021). Helmut Widtmann (1966) already emphasized in his dissertation the close functional and spatial relationship between church buildings and their urban or communal surroundings—especially with regard to the location of the church complex as an element of community and urban planning (Widtmann 1966, Chapters IV B 1 and IV C, 1–109). At the same time, these buildings are often centrally located in town centers and, due to their building quality and deep roots in local identity, offer significant potential for sustainable revitalization through adaptive reuse (Widtmann 1966). In order to tap into this potential, initial forms of cooperation have emerged in Styria between regional planning institutions and the Diocese of Graz-Seckau. This collaboration aims to collectively develop strategies for the future use of pastoral properties while balancing heritage conservation with contemporary urban development (Rettich 2021). Such collaborative strategies reflect broader discussions about “territorial transitions,” in which designers and planners are called upon not only to shape space but also to anticipate and guide ecological, social, and spatial transformations at multiple scales (*Towards Territorial Transition* 2023). The topic of pastoral properties was addressed in the workshop “Umnutzung im Zentrum” (adaptive reuse in the town center)—a course for fourth-semester bachelor’s students – at the Institute of Urbanism at Graz University of Technology. The workshop was held in collaboration with Department 17—State and Regional Development of the Province of Styria and the Diocese of Graz-Seckau. In this course, students analyzed already completed transformations of pastoral properties in six selected Styrian communities as examples of good practice. The focus was on a detailed examination of how these repurposed pastoral buildings could be used as a resource for vibrant, inclusive, and resilient town centers, with an emphasis on preserving the historical building fabric and cultural values. These projects were analyzed according to categories such as their urban and social context, their function and transformation, the process of conversion, and the budget structure (Graz University of Technology, Institute of Urbanism 2025). This paper presents the results of these six case studies and places them in the institutional and cultural context of the Austrian church structure, particularly the Diocese of Graz-Seckau. It highlights the spatial and social dimensions of the conversion of pastoral properties and identifies those processes, collaborations, and design strategies that have proven particularly effective in practice. Furthermore, it reflects on the relevance of these findings beyond the Styrian context and their potential contribution to discussions on adaptive reuse and town-center revitalization in other European regions.

The Church and Parish Structure in Styria

In order to understand the potential of pastoral buildings in Styria, it is essential to have an overview of the organizational and legal structures of the Catholic Church in Austria. The Catholic Church in Austria is divided into nine dioceses as inter-regional administrative units. The Diocese of Graz-Seckau, which covers the entire province of Styria, is one of these dioceses. With around 1.250 religious bodies under public law and approximately 2.100 buildings, it is one of the largest institutional owners in the region (Halmer & Posch 2025). Its building stock includes 531 churches, 170 chapels, 458 parsonages and parish halls, and 245 commercial buildings. A significant proportion of these buildings are listed as heritage sites and thus represent not only religious but also cultural and architectural heritage (Halmer & Posch 2025). Since the diocesan structural reform, the formerly numerous parishes have been merged into larger pastoral areas—currently 47 pastoral areas in eight regions. These new units combine pastoral and organizational tasks, while the individual parishes continue to exist as legally independent public-law corporations (Diocese of Graz-Seckau n.d.). They have their own assets and are responsible for the maintenance and use of their properties. Legally, this is based on the Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC, can. 515), which attributes legal personality and asset management to the parishes. For major measures—such as renovations, long-term changes of use, or sales—the approval of diocesan authorities is required, particularly from the Diocesan Building Authority and the Real Estate Department (Diocese of Graz-Seckau n.d.). The diocese operates largely autonomously in financial terms. Around €20 million is invested in construction projects each year, with a third of the costs usually covered by donations or the parishes' own funds (Halmer & Posch 2025). Church buildings are not commercially oriented; instead, they primarily serve pastoral, social, and cultural purposes. At the same time, declining church membership and a shortage of priests have led to increasing underuse and vacancy, particularly in parish halls (Rettich 2021). On average, only one to two parsonages per pastoral area are still inhabited or actively used (Halmer & Posch 2025). Based on 47 pastoral areas and a total of 458 parsonages, it can be calculated that approximately 364 to 411 parsonages—around 80–90 percent—are currently unused or only partially used. At the same time, these vacant properties represent a spatial resource with high development potential – both for church-related and public-interest-oriented reuse (Frerk & Baumgarten 2012). A typical parish in Styria consists of several functionally and spatially significant components: The church forms the liturgical and identity-forming center, usually in close proximity to the parish house, which traditionally served as the residence of the pastor. This ensemble – often supplemented by a parish hall, farm buildings, and garden – is usually located in the historic center of the village and thus has a significant impact on the townscape (Widtmann 1966). This makes pastoral buildings one of the central spatial anchors of many Styrian communities—both historically and potentially for future developments. Pastoral properties typically need to be thoroughly renovated approximately every 40 years. As a result, they require continuous investment and long-term strategic decisions regarding use, cooperation, and repurposing (Halmer & Posch 2025). Cooperation with municipalities, associations, and civil society initiatives opens up new opportunities for the sustainable and community-oriented redevelopment of pastoral buildings and, consequently, for the revitalization of town centers in Styria.

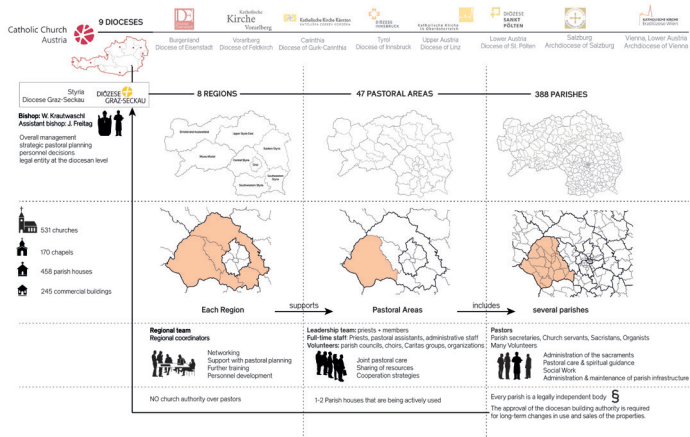


Fig. 1 Church and Parish Structure in Styria

Methodology

The empirical foundation of this paper is a student research and analysis workshop that was held in the summer semester of 2025 at the Institute of Urbanism at Graz University of Technology in cooperation with Department 17—State and Regional Development of the Province of Styria and the Diocese of Graz-Seckau. The aim of the course was to examine and document existing transformation processes of pastoral properties in Styrian municipalities using examples of good practice. The analysis covered spatial, social, historical, and organizational aspects of reuse (Graz University of Technology, Institute of Urbanism 2025). The six projects analyzed in Ligist, Paldau, Wundschuh, Gamlitz, St. Bartholomä, and Graz were selected in close coordination with the project partners (Fig. 2). Selection criteria included geographical distribution, different types of communities—from rural villages to small towns—and current challenges in dealing with vacant properties. Each case study focused on a pastoral building (e.g., former parsonages, parish halls, or outbuildings) that had high revitalization potential due to its central location in the town center and had already been successfully transformed.

The methodological approach was qualitative and interdisciplinary. It reflects the triangulation approach described in the literature (Flick, Chapter 4.6), which combines various qualitative

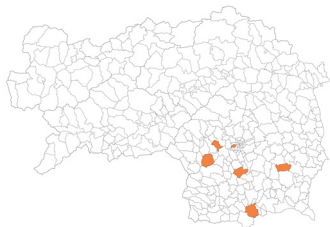


Fig. 2 Map of Styria marking the six selected municipalities

methods to investigate a phenomenon. The students conducted qualitative interviews with representatives of parishes, municipalities, planners, and other relevant actors (Hopf, Chapter 5.2). These interviews were exploratory rather than standardized, allowing for open insights into the individual projects. The interviews were supplemented by qualitative observations during site visits (Lüders, Chapter 5.5), visual qualitative methods such as photo documentation (Harper, Chapter 5.6), and the analysis of documents and files relating to existing planning principles (Wolff, Chapter 5.15). The aim was not only to record spatial and structural aspects, but also to visualize social networks, usage preferences, and emotional attachments to the buildings. Particular attention was paid to the link between building fabric and social potential: How can a vacant parsonage be revitalized as a place of social interaction? Which functions can be combined in a meaningful way? And which constellations of actors are needed for a successful implementation? The case studies were documented according to the criteria of context, function & transformation, and process & budget. The workshop results not only served as a starting point for this scientific analysis, but were also shared directly with municipalities and church authorities as inspiration for possible implementation processes at the local area (Graz University of Technology, Institute of Urbanism 2025).

Findings: Potentials and Success Factors of Pastoral Transformation

The six analysed communities illustrate that pastoral buildings constitute a valuable asset for the long-term revitalization of town centers, combining heritage preservation with contemporary development needs. The case studies were analyzed according to three central themes that emerged as particularly relevant during the workshop: (1) spatial and social context, (2) function and structural transformation, and (3) process design and budget structure.

Context: Location, Identity, and Accessibility

Pastoral buildings are often located in prominent places in the community—frequently in close proximity to public institutions, local supplies, or educational facilities. This central location is not only functionally valuable, but also creates a sense of identity. Historically, churches had a “central, cityscape-defining function in the overall urban layout” (Kanitz, Moos, Zarnow 2023, 279). In many interviews, it became clear that the buildings have an emotional significance for the population beyond their original religious use (interviews with students and local stakeholders, verbal communication, May 6 2025). The familiar architecture, symbolic weight, and history of these places create a sense of connection and trust—an important foundation for future repurposing (Eckardt 2012). At the same time, it became clear that accessibility, for example by public transport, safe footpaths, or bicycle infrastructure, contributes significantly to the frequency of use. Places that are well connected were not only considered more suited in terms of planning, but were also perceived by those involved as more accessible and “open.” This relationship between centrality, accessibility, and social identity is clearly illustrated in the contextual plan of Ligist (Fig. 3), which highlights the immediate proximity of the former parsonage to schools, shops, social meeting places, and bus stops. The short distances make the location both symbolically central and physically accessible, which are important factors for its successful conversion.

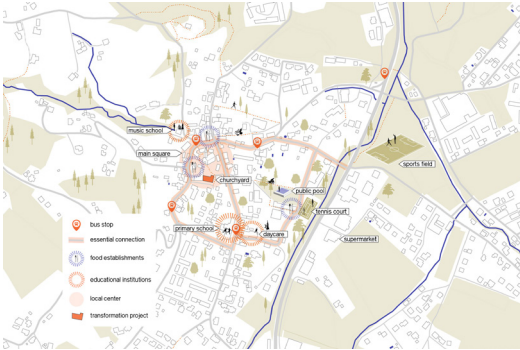


Fig. 3 Context plan of Lígist

Function & Transformation: Mixed Use and Sensitivity to Heritage

A key finding was that successful projects do not focus on a single use, but combine different functions. This involved combining religious, social, cultural, community, or economic uses—for example, as an event location with an integrated village store or as a youth center with spiritual offerings. This multifunctionality not only creates synergies but also increases long-term viability by leading to sustainable, economically viable locations. In literature, rural areas are increasingly understood as “multifunctional spaces” that contribute to the resilience of rural communities (Wilson 2010) and where the integration of multiple functions maximizes limited space. The sensitive handling of existing buildings proved to be crucial. Buildings that were respected in their architectural quality while being adapted to new requirements were more readily accepted by the general public. One participant described this as “old and new in dialogue”: existing buildings should not only be preserved but also carefully developed (interviews with students and local stakeholders, verbal communication, May 6, 2025). This principle is illustrated in the renovation section of the parish house in Gamlitz (Fig. 4), which compares the building before and after the transformation. Subtle structural interventions and new spatial connections created a multifunctional community space while preserving the historical identity of the former parish house.

Design clarity, transparency, and resilience were described as qualities that accommodate intensive and diverse use. Spaces that are not designed to be too specific or exclusive can be adapted more flexibly and encourage participation.

Process & Budget: Participation, Collaboration, and Funding Structures

All of the examples analyzed showed that sustainable solutions arise from multi-layered processes. Often, the starting point was a specific local need—such as vacant space, new space requirements, or changing demographic conditions. Projects in which local stakeholders—from the parish, community, architecture, and population—were involved at an early stage proved to be particularly successful. Participatory processes (e.g., workshops, public presentations) have been shown to lead to greater identification and solutions that are more suitable for everyday use (Flick 2010). In addition to architectural functionality,



Fig. 4 Parish house in Gamlitz: section before and after transformation

cultural compatibility and the commitment of all stakeholders are key to the successful conversion of religious buildings (De Castro et al. 2025).

This dynamic is illustrated in the process diagram of St. Bartholomä (Fig. 5), which maps the interaction between parish representatives, the municipality, the Diocese of Graz-Seckau, and regional development authorities over different project phases. The diagram also reflects the involvement of local citizens, whose participation contributed to greater acceptance and identification with the project. The graphic shows how early cooperation, transparent communication, and clearly defined responsibilities contributed to the successful implementation of the project.

Another key factor was the clear distribution of roles within the project team, combined with the ability to draw on funding from various sources. In almost all cases, funding came from several sources, such as LEADER, the diocese, the state, or the municipality. Good funding advice and practical, sustainable planning proved to be particularly effective, not least in terms of involving regional businesses and strengthening the local economy. Conclusion of the results section: When context, function, and process interact—i.e., buildings are developed with attitude, locally anchored, and professionally supported—there is great potential for sustainable, community-supported transformations.

Conclusion

The study has shown that pastoral buildings represent significant spatial, social, and cultural resources for the development of small and medium-sized town centers. In Styria in particular, where many of these buildings stand empty or are underused, their revitalization offers double added value: on the one hand, the preservation of historically grown places, and on the other, the possibility of new communal usage concepts. Key success factors

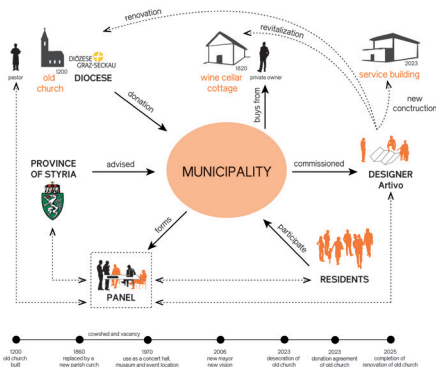


Fig. 5 Process diagram of St. Bartholomä

for sustainable transformations include the early involvement of all relevant actors—from parishes and communities to future users and dioceses—a clearly defined process framework, and a willingness to treat the existing buildings not only as functional structures but also as carriers of meaning. Rather than proposing a universal model, the findings underline the importance of context-specific solutions, openness to hybrid programs, and a shared learning process on site. From a broader European perspective, the conversion of pastoral buildings is highly relevant, as many countries face comparable challenges related to vacancy, demographic change, and institutional restructuring. The experiences from Styria suggest that sustainable conversion should not only be considered from an architectural or economic perspective, but understood as a social and spatial process that creates identity, enables participation, and strengthens town centers in the long term.

This text was written in collaboration with Aglaée Degros and Eva Schwab.

Bibliography

- Armengaud, Matthias, Aglaée Degros, and Radostina Radulova-Stahmer, eds. *Towards Territorial Transition*. Zürich: Park Books, 2023.
- Codex Iuris Canonici. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983. https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/cic_index_ge.html
- De Castro, M. E., S. Azasu, and D. Echeverry. “Adaptive Reuse of Religious Heritage Buildings: A Case Study from Miranda de Ebro.” *REDC* 82, 155–172, 2025.
- Diocese of Graz-Seckau. “Seelsorgeräume und Regionen in der Diözese Graz-Seckau.” Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://www.katholische-kirche-steiermark.at/portal/pfarren/seelsorgeraumeregionen>
- Eckardt, Frank. “Die Emotionalisierung der Stadt.” In *Die subjektive Seite der Stadt*, edited by Katrin Harm and Jens Aderhold, 37–57. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2013.
- FEANTSA. *Reclaiming Vacant Spaces to Tackle Housing and Homelessness Crises in Europe*. Brussels, 2023.
- Flick, Uwe, Ernst von Kardorff, and Ines Steinke, eds. *Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch*. 8th ed. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2010.
- Frerk, Carsten, and Christoph, Baumgarten. *Gottes Werk und unser Beitrag. Kirchenfinanzierung in Österreich*. Vienna: Czernin Verlag, 2012.
- Halmer, Martin, and Lena Posch. “Die Transformation pastoraler Räume zu lebendigen Orten der Gemeinschaft in der Diözese Graz-Seckau.” Ortskern-Akademie, Trofaiach, October 7, 2025.
- Kanitz, Jan, Tobias, Moos, and Claudia, Zarnow. “Religion im urbanen Raum.” *Urban Studies*, 2023.
- Land of Styria, Department 17. “Starke Zentren.” Accessed August 6, 2025. <https://www.landesentwicklung.steiermark.at/cms/ziel/172099493/DE/>
- Rettich, Stefan. Urban Obsolescences. In *Post-Pandemic Urbanism*, hrsg. D., Kleilein, F. Meyer, et al., 49–63. Berlin: JOVIS, 2021.
- Technische Universität Graz, Institut für Städtebau. *Workshop 2. Umnutzung im Zentrum. Good Practice Sammlung*. Graz: unpublished document, 2025.
- Widtmann, Helmut. *Funktionen und Beziehungen einer katholischen Kirchenanlage*. Diss., TU Graz, 1966.
- Wilson, Geoff. “Multifunctional ‘Quality’ and Rural Community Resilience.” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (3), 364–381, 2010.