

Adaptive Reuse of Urban Religious Heritage

A Historical Perspective from the Centre of Turin

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Abstract

The adaptive reuse of underused or abandoned historical buildings is an emerging topic in both academic research and architectural practice, particularly in relation to religious heritage, the cultural significance of which is often threatened by inappropriate reuse strategies. Given the high concentration of churches in the European—and especially Italian—historic urban landscape, effective reuse and mixed-use strategies for urban religious heritage can play a crucial role in social and cultural dynamics by integrating historical and cultural values with the transforming needs of contemporary urban communities. Research in this field, however, tends to focus on case studies of singular adaptive reuse projects, which limits a systemic understanding of the issues and the interplay between reuse strategies and broader urban dynamics. This paper, therefore, offers a systemic reflection on the practices of reuse of religious heritage on an urban scale, examining their potential social, cultural and economic impacts on the urban context. The historic urban landscape of Turin (Italy)—capital city from 1563 to 1864—serves as the case study, owing to its urban religious system characterized by a high density of churches (over thirty) and by increasing phenomena of underuse. These conditions have led to the implementation of various mixed-use strategies, with differing degrees of effectiveness in terms of the conservation and enhancement of the architectural, religious and cultural values of the buildings. A critical analysis of this phenomenon from a systemic perspective, carried out within the scope of the *ChiesTo* research project at the Politecnico di Torino and grounded in the interpretation of historical and documentary sources on architectural interventions undertaken on churches over the past quarter century, makes it possible to reflect on the effectiveness and adaptability of the reuse and mixed-use interventions implemented. This reflection, which opens up a range of questions, also offers insights for the systemic planning of strategies for the reuse of religious heritage, aimed at promoting environmental sustainability, social inclusion and the resilience of urban communities undergoing transformation.

Keywords: Urban Religious Heritage; Turin's Historic Urban Landscape; *ChiesTo* Project

Introduction

The analysis of adaptive strategies for the reuse of decommissioned or underused religious architectural heritage has become an increasingly prominent topic in Italian and international contexts, within academic discourse and the fields of architectural design and restoration (Morisset et al. 2006; Bartolomei 2017; Jaspers et al. 2018; Chavardès, Dufieux 2018; Capanni 2019). Secularization, economic crises and widespread cultural transformations

across the western world have profoundly altered the relationship between religious life and its physical spaces (Diotallevi 2020, 15–24), leaving many such spaces redundant. The result is an overabundance of religious heritage in relation to contemporary worship needs, with many buildings becoming increasingly subject to neglect, lack of maintenance, closure, abandonment or conversion to secular use. The social, economic and cultural dynamics generated by the abandonment and reuse of churches have far-reaching implications not only for Christian communities but also for society in general, as these buildings are tangible expressions of the cultural and memorial values at the very foundation of western identity (Longhi 2022, 9–25).

In Italy, where religious heritage (churches, chapels, convents, monasteries, sanctuaries, etc.) is both abundant and often of exceptional artistic quality, underuse affects rural areas threatened by depopulation as well as urban areas challenged by demographic decline, suburbanization, polarization and overtourism (De Lucia 2023). Consequently, in recent decades, growing attention to the reuse and transformation of these buildings has emerged. To curb interventions that are inappropriate, or even desecrating, as well as being ineffective and costly, the Pontifical Council for Culture approved the *Guidelines for the decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches* (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2018). These guidelines highlight the need to see ecclesiastical heritage as part of a broader urban, territorial and landscape system in which the relational system of religious values forms a key visual and cultural framework (Longhi 2023, 340–354). From this perspective, churches involved in well-conceived transformation processes may regain a social or religious function that, while not identical to the original, preserves foundational elements. Based on these premises, adaptive reuse entails dual adaptation: first, reuse must respond to the religious, cultural, memorial and identity-related values embodied by the church without undermining its principles; second, it must adapt to context, aligning with current needs and enabling renewed functions for renewed communities.

Adaptive reuse strategies are often examined case by case, limiting a broader understanding of the phenomenon and the rationale behind interventions within a comprehensive analytical framework that considers the surrounding social, cultural and urban context. Research has frequently focused on specific examples, analysing the adaptive relationship between the architectural container and the type of reuse through disciplinary lenses such as design, restoration and technology. By contrast, this contribution offers a systemic reflection on the reuse of urban religious heritage, employing a historical-critical approach to assess the adaptive capacity of interventions in response to a rapidly evolving urban society. This methodological value is twofold. Operationally, a systemic analysis of religious building reuse supports the definition of decision-making criteria and data in the planning of comprehensive reuse, as recommended by the Guidelines and applied in various international contexts (Contarin 2023, 179–183). From a critical-reflective standpoint, analysing multiple, ostensibly comparable reuse episodes reveals the diversity of the underlying assumptions and developmental paths, raising questions that suggest broader research agendas: who are these churches being adapted for? Which communities are being addressed and using which tools? Under which principles of inclusion, heritage valorisation or sustainability can reuse be considered truly adaptive and therefore appropriate?

Research Context and Case Study Framework

With the aim of providing reflections on the questions outlined above, this contribution analyses the urban religious heritage of the historic centre of Turin, which was capital city from 1563 to 1864. The observations presented here are based on the results of the recently concluded research project ChiesToChurches of the historic center of Turin. From twenty years of monitoring interventions (2001-2021) to the analysis of strategies and intervention policies¹ conducted at Politecnico di Torino and supported by Fondazione 1563 per l'Arte e la Cultura of Compagnia di San Paolo. The primary aim of the project was to monitor the uses, cultural development and conservation and restoration interventions undertaken at thirty-two churches in the historic centre of the city over the past twenty years². By integrating documentary and historical sources, mainly consulted in the Archive of the Superintendence for Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Turin and the Archive of the Metropolitan Curia of Turin, with fieldwork, interviews, statistical data and participatory events, a critical periodization of interventions and regeneration initiatives, some conducted and some omitted, emerged. This provides the starting point for the reflections presented here (De Lucia 2024). Such critical periodization allows for the development of new reflections on the adaptive reuse and mixed reuse of these churches, which, as in many other historic urban landscapes in Italy and Europe, are subject to profound transformations and processes of reconsideration.

The historic centre of Turin is still commonly referred to as the “Baroque almond”, a nickname that stems from the shape of the perimeter of the military fortifications, which reached their definitive configuration in the eighteenth century (Comoli 1983; Comoli 2002, 431–461; Roggero 2002, 799–819;). This area exhibits a complex layering of urban religious heritage, resulting in a notably high density of churches (28 churches/km²), most of which were built during the period when Turin was a capital city. (Fig. 1)

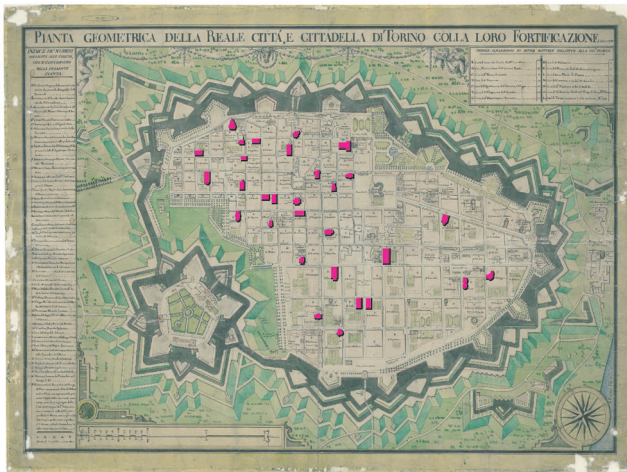


Fig. 1. Eighteenth-century layout of the churches analyzed in the fortified centre of Turin. *Pianta geometrica della reale città e cittadella di Torino colla loro fortificazione*, by Amedeo Galletti, 1790 (ASCT, Tipi e Disegni, 64.2.13)

Architecturally, these churches can often be grouped under the general label of Baroque art; however, they reflect a wide variety of social stakeholders and motivations that influenced their construction, maintenance and preservation over the centuries. A “polycentric” distribution of worship sites and a large “pluralism” of social stakeholders characterized the urban religious landscape of Turin during the *ancien régime* (Silvestrini 2002, 371–422; Cozzo 2006). This framework encompassed a territorial parish system, networks of confraternities and lay associations, churches commissioned by civic or dynastic authorities, private chapels, monastic institutions and mendicant convents, and complexes of new male orders and post-Tridentine female congregations. Over time, this intricate system produced a remarkable abundance of churches, which have now become disproportionate to the current population and active worshippers. The present-day configuration results from nineteenth- and twentieth-century processes, including suppression, nationalization, expropriation, urban and architectural redesign, demolition and decommissioning, which have shaped contemporary patterns of use, care and ongoing processes of patrimonialization, de-patrimonialization and reuse.

Mapping the Patterns of Use, Disuse and Mixed Reuse of Turin’s Religious Heritage

Based on the thirty-two churches examined in the *ChiesTo* research project, a widespread phenomenon of underuse can be observed. Liturgical activities are currently suspended in six churches (almost 18% of the total)³, fewer than two eucharistic celebrations per week take place in six churches (18%)⁴ and fewer than two masses per month are celebrated in two churches (6%)⁵.

A significant proportion of the churches analysed, particularly parish churches, are experiencing declining attendance. Excluding the Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista, the remaining parish churches show progressive underuse, driven by transformations taking place in the historic centre which have dispersed parish communities and limited generational renewal. These include a decline in population, overtourism, suburbanization and the concentration of commercial activities. While all churches report lower attendance of weekday and sunday mass, two categories are exceptions. First, churches of notable historical or artistic importance, such as San Lorenzo or the Santuario della Consolata, maintain relatively stable attendance, supported by festive celebrations and tourism. Second, churches entrusted to other denominations, such as Santa Croce, Santissima Annunziata and Santa Pelagia, show growing participation, reflecting strong community attachment shaped by demographic, cultural and institutional factors (Giorda 2023; Pignotti, Giorda 2025, 1–25).

In response to these trends, sixteen of the churches analysed (50% of the total) have adopted mixed reuses within the liturgical space to counteract a progressive lack of attendance. Three primary categories have been identified.

Mixed reuse for musical purposes: the most widespread reuse strategy focuses on concerts and musical events. Ten churches (30% of the total and 70% of those with mixed activities) host seasonal concerts or regular musical events. In some cases, musical activities take place within the liturgical hall, which is temporarily adapted to host musical events. In others, specific areas of the building, such as the choir, are used permanently for this type of activity with a dedicated layout of the furnishings. In both cases, this kind of

mixed reuse is facilitated by the intrinsic acoustic qualities of religious architecture and the permissive framework of Canon Law. Notable examples include Santa Pelagia church, where the historical choir is managed by Opera Munifica Istruzione, focusing on musical education, and the small Santissima Annunziata church, which hosts a Byzantine singing school. This type of reuse typically requires minimal alteration of religious space while meeting urban cultural requirements, particularly in a city like Turin, where music enjoys strong civic appreciation due to the presence of Teatro Regio and the Conservatorio di Musica Giuseppe Verdi. However, some churches report limited benefits in terms of community engagement and cultural valorization, primarily due to the lack of variation in the music performed, restricted mostly to sacred music or to specific, authorized pieces, and also to regulatory limitations, pandemic-related disruptions and a lack of organizational and human resources. Mixed reuse for social and welfare-related purposes: churches managed by those who are attentive to social issues often become focal points for community engagement and maintenance activities. Santi Martiri church, for instance, has been managed by the Community of Sant' Egidio since 2017, addressing social exclusion and housing emergencies. The church has become a centre of social rehabilitation and communal activities, such as the annual Christmas dinner. Similarly, the former convent of Santa Chiara, entrusted to Gruppo Abele in 2015, operates as a cohousing facility for young people in difficulty, with the liturgical space being used for meetings and cultural events. The historical choir has been converted into a common area to facilitate community integration and shared activities. Mixed cultural reuse: almost all of the sixteen churches that host additional activities also engage in cultural reuse, including conferences, seminars and public talks. The frequency and content of these activities are contingent on external initiatives by foundations and private bodies.

Findings and Thoughts Emerging from the Research

A critical reading of the use and reuse mapping developed within the *ChiesTo* project offers several significant opportunities for reflection. Firstly, data on the underuse of churches, together with information on buildings where reuse activities have been undertaken, highlight the need for a coordinated regeneration plan in which programming within religious spaces is diversified and strategically designed to engage the widest possible audience. Planning the use of ecclesiastical real estate is an indispensable tool for properly assessing the transformation of each individual church” (Pontifical Council for Culture 2018, 282-283), and such planning requires a complete understanding of several key factors. Although robust assessment procedures are well structured abroad and applied extensively in the management of underused religious heritage, in Italy and much of Europe such procedures continue to be largely absent, mainly due to the lack of comprehensive governance capable of coordinating the fragmented landscape of religious properties. One major factor that influences the planning of reuse concerns ownership and management arrangements. Of the thirty-two churches examined, 30% are owned by ecclesiastical entities, with only six of these serving as active parishes. Another 30% belong to public institutions (the Municipality of Turin, the FEC–Fund for Religious Buildings, and the State Property Agency) and the remainder are held mainly by confraternities and lay associations (seven churches) and, to a lesser extent, by minor owners. In 40% of cases, ownership and management responsibilities do not coincide (Fig. 2).

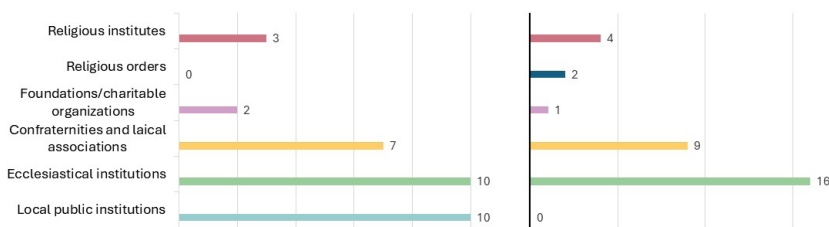


Fig. 2. Comparison between the ownership categories (left) and management categories (right) of the churches under investigation

Understanding ownership and management regimes is essential for assessing each building's potential for adaptive reuse. While such distinctions can benefit use and conservation, particularly in churches managed by religious congregations or lay associations, they may also delay decisions, especially those regarding maintenance and experimentation with regeneration, as seen in state-owned churches. Overall, greater administrative autonomy is associated with a greater capacity to implement conservation and regeneration strategies.

Another reflection concerns the fact that the reuse interventions implemented to date have not entailed substantial architectural alterations to liturgical spaces. This points, on one hand, to the inherent adaptability of religious architecture to alternative functions, such as musical events, and, on the other, to a possible lack of creativity and innovation in exploring new forms of church reuse. The analysis of adaptive reuse strategies in Turin's churches shows that current activities mainly target culturally oriented, older communities, effectively excluding younger generations. Meanwhile, religious communities in Turin are shrinking due to social, economic and cultural factors, while urban populations are evolving. The number of residents in historic centres is falling, and the number of commuters is rising, weakening the attachment to buildings and their upkeep. In an ever-changing metropolitan context, identifying and engaging new communities is challenging and this poses the questions of how to define their boundaries, responsibilities and potential roles and how to adapt regeneration strategies to current community needs. This situation highlights the need to involve disciplines such as urban history, anthropology and sociology in recognising emerging heritage communities and shaping more inclusive, dynamic reuse strategies that reflect the complexity of contemporary urban life.

Moreover, if the reuse strategies analysed can be deemed adaptive insofar as they are non-invasive, in the name of which values (social inclusion, heritage development and sustainability for example), can reuse be considered fully adaptive? Some churches in Turin's historic centre, temporarily repurposed for other faiths, raise critical questions. At Santa Croce, while the interventions undertaken to make it suitable for orthodox practices can be reversed, they have altered the building's recognizability. At Santissima Annunziata, restored artworks have been obscured or replaced with different iconography, undermining recent conservation efforts. While such reuses encourage social inclusion and urban regeneration, they also reveal unresolved cultural and heritage tensions. These tensions, which are often overlooked due to their racial and cultural complexity, highlight the need for further dedicated academic investigation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has analysed strategies for the adaptive reuse and development of churches in Turin's historic centre via a systemic approach, with the integration of documentary data and participatory research. The critical analysis, framed within the city's social and cultural dynamics, highlights how planned and collaborative interventions can regenerate religious heritage and foster social cohesion in contemporary urban contexts. Nevertheless, there are still challenges relating to the adoption of systemic approaches that balance conservation, sustainability and community needs. Current reuse strategies often lack a programmatic vision and overlook urban sociology and community relations. Still, many cases respect architectural integrity and conservation regulations while requiring limited structural interventions. The central question remains: are these strategies truly "adaptive"? Adaptive reuse should preserve original values while renewing function in line with community needs, reactivating the bond between architecture and society, and ensuring continuous use and long-term preservation. Recent experiences show that participatory decision-making and stakeholder collaboration can achieve this goal. Though still limited in Italy, these approaches reveal promising potential, stressing the need for more integrated and informed strategies to sustainably develop urban religious heritage.

Notes

1. The project was launched in 2022 by the Fondazione 1563 per l'Arte e la Cultura of Compagnia di San Paolo, carried out in collaboration with DIST Department of the Politecnico di Torino and the CCR-Centro Conservazione e Restauro "La Venaria Reale" Foundation. The project was promoted in partnership with the University of Turin, the Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio of Turin, the Curia Metropolitana, the Regional Council for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage of Piedmont and Valle d'Aosta. I would like to thank Laura Fornara, Secretary General of Fondazione 1563, and Professor Andrea Longhi of Politecnico di Torino, scientific coordinator of the research. My thanks also go to the scientific committee and the scholars who contributed to the project. For further information: <https://programmabarocco.fondazione1563.it/studi-sul-barocco/chiese-del-centro-di-torino/> (last accessed: November 2025).

2. The temporal framework was established on a coherent body of knowledge represented by *Chiese del Centro Storico di Torino – Indagine Preliminare* (Cattaneo, De Leonardis 2001).

3. It refers to the Immacolata Concezione, Santissima Trinità, San Francesco d'Assisi, San Dalmazzo, Santa Chiara and Santi Maurizio e Lazzaro churches. Some of these churches have suspended their religious services due to long and extensive restoration works. The interviewees state that activities will resume once the works are completed. Data update in June 2025.

4. It refers to the Banchieri e Mercanti chapel, and the Misericordia, San Rocco, Santa Pelagia, Santi Martiri, and Santissima Annunziata churches. Data update in June 2025.

5. It refers to the Santissimo Sudario and Spirito Santo churches. Data update in June 2025

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