

Reuse of Religious Heritage in the Catholic Context

A Comprehensive Strategy at the Territorial Level

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Abstract

If there is one architectural typology associated with reuse in our times, it is religious architecture. To verify this, one need only review the case studies presented at this first edition of the International Conference on Adaptive Reuse. The number of them related to religious use is very significant. This fact is linked, at least in the Western context, on the one hand to a history of accumulation of churches, chapels, and other religious centers in cities and their suburbs, and on the other hand to a change in the customs of today's societies. In fact, that accumulation can also be interpreted as a factor of imbalance insofar as there are too many religious centers in city centers, while those same centers lack other types of cultural facilities. And all this while the outskirts are built with hardly any facilities, religious or otherwise. The following text presents an approach to a possible territorial strategy, particularly relevant for settlements with a long history, in search of a rebalancing of religious and cultural facilities in the center and, at the same time, an adequate provision of religious facilities in the suburbs. To this end, we turn to the Catholic case study, probably the one that has shown the greatest sensitivity and attention to this reality of reuse.

Keywords: Religious Heritage, Periferias, Dotaciones Culturales

Introduction

In the West, history and previous generations have left us with a multitude of temples—cathedrals, parishes, oratories, chapels, even synagogues and mosques—in the centers of cities. This presence is all the more dense the older the fabric under consideration, with this typology also serving to sketch the history of art in each place.

This heritage requires a duty of care and conservation that, in general, exceeds the economic possibilities of the communities it serves, requiring recourse to municipal, regional, national, or international aid—public or private—whose management requires a mechanism that once again clashes with the operational possibilities of the communities.

On the other hand, modern societies have largely emancipated themselves from religious practices, replacing them with other cultural activities—museums, concert halls, exhibitions, etc.—commercial activities, or sports. Regardless of the social assessment of this transformation, the fact is that religious facilities have been significantly emptied and, in any case, are competing for an ever-decreasing attendance.

Finally, in the newly created neighborhoods of our cities, religious facilities are scarce, even for the average religious practices of their inhabitants, regardless of their religious affiliation. This is the result of geographically extensive, vocationally peripheral planning, dedicated



Fig. 1. Current parliament of Andalusia, former church of San Hermenegildo, Seville (Spain)

almost exclusively to residential use. This approach ends up marginalizing religious facilities, which are often seen as the most expendable, definitively separated from the historical programs that have been familiar to them for centuries: education and welfare or healthcare. Under these conditions, a strategic plan could be drawn up to address this twofold problem: on the one hand, the saturation of religious buildings in the center—or centers—of historic cities and, on the other, the scarcity of resources necessary for religious facilities in the peripheries. The idea would be to propose an intelligent exchange of buildings, land, and resources: in many cases, the churches located in the center of cities are ideally suited to be transformed—once desacralized—into cultural facilities or even educational and commercial centers, with due respect for the collective memory and the origin of the buildings.

The plan that we wish to outline would require a great deal of open-mindedness to imagine a new functional landscape superimposed on the familiar one. It would also require enormous generosity to understand the necessary transfers, fair compensation, and a deep sense of service to the community.

Scientific and Regulatory Context

As early as 1989, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had drawn attention to the vulnerability of religious heritage due to its redundancy in a given territory. In its Resolution No. 916, this body warned that it was desirable that:

When a religious building is no longer viable as such, efforts should be made to ensure its future use, whether religious or cultural, insofar as possible compatible with the original intention of its construction, and that local communities should be encouraged “to rediscover a shared interest and a future role for such buildings”.¹

In 2003, the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) promoted a meeting entitled Conservation of Living Religious Heritage, where, in view of the possible use of religious heritage as a hostage in armed conflicts or conflicts of any kind, its abuse or abandonment, the scientific community established criteria for shared responsibility between religious communities and

heritage conservation professionals:

The care of this heritage is primarily the responsibility of the religious community for which this heritage is important, locally and/or globally. Ideally, the religious community should initiate the conservation of living religious heritage and carry it out in collaboration with conservation professionals and all stakeholders.²

Since then, the leading role of communities in the conservation of religious heritage has been ratified in practically all scientific meetings and declarations dedicated to this topic. In this regard, it is worth noting the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society published by the Council of Europe (Faro, 2005), the Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas (Xi'an 2005) and the Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of the Place (Québec 2008), the latter two promoted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Finally, the Burra Charter (Australia 2013) focused on the cultural significance of heritage, emphasizing that its valuation involves a complex process in relation to compatible uses and participation.³ Finally, in this list of declarations and documents, it is worth noting the Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention (Kiev 2010).

Aware of the issues outlined above and the different approaches of the scientific community and international chapters linked to heritage, the Catholic Church, through the Pontifical Council for Culture, promoted an international scientific meeting to study this phenomenon. The conference took place at the Gregorian University in Rome in November 2018.⁴ Almost immediately, in December, Cardinal Gianfranco Rabasi presented the first Vatican guidelines for the reuse of temples, even before the publication of the conference proceedings.⁵

In any case, before analyzing its contents, it is important to understand its approach. The fundamental objective of the document is to shed light on the process of converting real estate that at some point ceases to be sacred and returns to its profane status. It is reasonable to propose prudent measures to ensure that no abuses or inconsiderate actions occur during this transition.

But naturally, these guidelines do not consider scenarios of possible convenience or social,



Fig. 2. School of Architecture of the University of Granada, former Hospital Mayor de la Encarnación

urban, or strategic interests. In fact, although attentive to the evolution of the societies where it is established, the Church ordinarily refrains from intervening directly as such in matters of a strictly secular nature, such as urban policy or planning.

In this sense, the Vatican guidelines evoke previous documents—those already mentioned—and others at the local level, such as the Charter on the Use of Former Sacred Edifices (1987) published by the Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, which offered a first approach to the phenomenon of the desacralization of temples in Italy. The guidelines also mention other guidelines on the same subject published by the episcopal conferences of Germany (2000), Switzerland (2006), Belgium (2012), and England and Wales (2018), helping to establish a chronology of the progress of this phenomenon and the sensitivity of their hierarchies.

The document goes on to point out some fairly reasonable general considerations related to the process of reducing a church to secular use. Specifically, it highlights the following points, which serve to outline the Church's main concerns in relation to this issue:

1. The need to protect old churches that have already been converted to secular use from improper (“sordid”) uses as they pass from one owner to another;
2. The need to avoid situations that may offend the religious feelings of the Christian people;
3. The need to consider the fate of altars, which can never lose their dedication or blessing even after a church has been reduced to secular use. With regard to altars, the canonical practice of destroying the table in some cases may be in clear opposition to civil regulations concerning the preservation of cultural heritage.⁶

In any case, for the purposes of our plan, the most interesting points are contained in the final recommendations that were approved by the Pontifical Council for Culture itself and by the delegates of the episcopal conferences of Europe, Canada, the United States, and Australia. The recommendations range from reminding communities—particularly religious communities—of their responsibility to care for heritage, to the necessary training of those responsible,⁷ to the importance of keeping inventories of religious property, whether movable or immovable, to the declaration of who is responsible for deciding on possible disposals, caution regarding the future use of deconsecrated churches, and prudence in transformations with a view to their reversibility. But for our project, the most interesting statement is number 4:

Any decision on cultural heritage must be part of a coordinated territorial vision that includes social dynamics (demographic changes, cultural policies, labor markets, attention to environmental and rural sustainability, etc.), pastoral strategies, and conservation needs in accordance with international and national standards on cultural heritage, with planning for the use of church buildings at least in the medium term. In this context, it will be essential for the ecclesial community to engage with the civil community in the region, which must be willing to make broader use of the heritage. The process of discerning the future use of a closed church should involve heritage conservation specialists, architects, and surveyors, together with the parish and the wider community with an interest in the building.

This statement reflects the Church's intelligence and openness in recognizing values that go beyond mere heritage in the management of its properties. It could be said that our entire plan is based on this recommendation.

Background and Current Status of the Issue

Returning to religious buildings, although there are many examples of the transformation of churches and other buildings of heritage value for reuse, comprehensive policies in this regard are less common. In order to propose them, it is necessary to reconsider the primary objectives of any religion, which are closer to caring for its faithful and their needs and only secondarily to its common inherited heritage. We would like to think that this consideration is commonplace among the hierarchies, but its ultimate consequences, which this project aims to achieve, are more diffuse and difficult to address. There are many difficulties of all kinds that arise. In fact, a policy of “renunciation” of some of the heritage treasures inherited by the various denominations, as civil institutions, could be interpreted as a surrender to the pressure of the new times.



Fig. 3. Current parliament of La Rioja, former convent of La Merced, Logroño (Spain)

In any case, examples of this process of desacralization and transformation of uses should be studied. These cases are becoming increasingly frequent—as has been seen in this first edition of the International Conference on Adaptive Reuse—and the degree of success of the process must be determined in order to draw useful conclusions for the proposed process.

In this regard, a field study covering those territories where religions have had a significant history is key, as a result of which the density of temples and other necessary religious facilities can be observed in order to implement the project. In this regard, art history manuals can be consulted for each settlement, where the heritage buildings covered by this plan will undoubtedly be concentrated.

It is also desirable that the conditions for growth in the suburbs exist, which will justify the implementation of the policies described.

In terms of methodological principles, it is worth noting the work of the *Habitar* research group, led by Professor Xavier Montejos at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya⁸ (UPC), which, although focused on the city of Barcelona, offers a careful protocol for the reuse of architecture.

On the other hand, a publication edited by Professor Andrea Crudeli has recently appeared, whose title is a meaningful summary of its intentions: *Adaptive Reuse: Theoretical Glossary*

and Design Labs.⁹ The novelty of this publication lies in the invitation to a series of architects and academics to propose concepts that help to outline this reality of reuse.

Final Objectives and Expected Benefits: Conclusions

By way of conclusion, the final material objectives, i.e., the documents that would make up the complete plan, and the benefits that could be expected from its implementation are set out below.

1. Drafting of a catalog of examples of deconsecration and change of use of temples. This point is generic and could refer to models within and outside the geographical scope of the study, understood as case studies from which to learn both the positives and the negatives.
2. Precise cartographic maps of the location of places of worship in city centers and in any areas that meet the pre-established density conditions. The same should be done with the outskirts, in this area looking for sites that could be used for the location of future religious facilities, so it is estimated that a wise measure could be to draw up complete plans of the cities, indicating the areas with an overabundance of religious facilities and those with a deficit.
3. Cataloging and planimetric survey of properties that could be included in the plan. At this point, it would be necessary to assess not only their artistic and architectural value, but also their significance in the memory of the faithful and users, and of the city itself. It should be noted here that it would be rare to find a temple that does not have some kind of tradition. In other words, all properties will have their history—big or small—but it should be understood that sacrifices will have to be made in order to achieve greater gains.
4. Reasoned proposal for the continued use of some temples and the desacralization of others. Assessment of their conditions—spatial, artistic, visual, acoustic, etc.—with a view to changing the use of the latter. It is also advisable to study in detail the destination of movable pieces—liturgical elements, sculptural groups, paintings, etc.—linked to the buildings whose desacralization is proposed and which could be transferred to other temples.
5. Finally, although the details of reuse projects—especially those involving new buildings on the outskirts—are beyond the scope of this strategic work, some cases of both situations could be addressed to provide examples of what is intended.

In terms of expected benefits, this could be described as a historic moment for the cities involved in the plan. The primary consequence of this project would be to provide accurate documentation for the rationalization and rebalancing of their religious heritage, both in their centers and on the outskirts. Likewise, the documentation generated will make it possible to consider the transformation of certain buildings in city centers for cultural and social purposes, enriching this dimension in the cities under study and work.

Above all, however, we can expect results in the form of better service for the faithful who attend religious practices, as the concentration of centers offering these practices will result in denser and, therefore, more active communities. In addition, the concentration of resources will also lead to better attention to the material dimensions of celebrations, perhaps activating the practice and, in any case, improving it. This goal, which is not too easy to measure and which will pose logical difficulties in the face of changing customs, etc., is one of the primary objectives and must be assumed by the corresponding hierarchies as such an improvement.



Fig. 4. Current headquarters of the IE University Campus in Segovia, former convent of Santa Cruz la Real, Segovia (Spain)

The reuse of some religious buildings after their desacralization will also lead to more effective maintenance of these buildings, precisely because of their use. It is well known that buildings with little activity are the ones that fare worst over time. The aim is to maintain their heritage values linked to collective memory, even if this means giving them an alternative use. Many of the buildings we have been discussing have spatial, acoustic, visual, and other conditions that can be used for other purposes. However, it is above all their privileged location in the urban fabric, which varies in density depending on the city and its center, that will offer the opportunity to re-densify cultural and other facilities in these same areas.

For this transformation work, it is essential to have experts in art and architecture—in their historical, heritage, social, and, where appropriate, religious values—to propose the best strategies for transforming the buildings. The necessary desacralization has already been mentioned, but it is also necessary to decide whether or not to maintain certain elements that speak of their past use and form part of their heritage value. If it is deemed appropriate to remove a heritage element—such as an altar, furniture, or an image—it must be properly treated by relocating it for worship in another temple or storing it in another facility, either preserving its functional meaning—which is most desirable—or in diocesan museums or others deemed appropriate. This work is essential to ensure the maintenance, in their liturgical and in any case heritage capacity, of the removed pieces.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the ultimate goal of this project is to rebalance religious facilities in cities and towns. Therefore, in parallel with the policies already described, the planning of new temples in the suburbs or neighborhoods that are worst endowed in this regard should be considered. In other words, the ultimate goal should be a certain urban rebalancing, considering both areas with a surplus of religious buildings and those with a deficit, linking the transfer of centers in the former with the construction of new ones in the latter through the appropriate provision of land and resources. It is important to take a holistic view and even generate a surplus of resources for the future, given that cities are likely to continue growing.

As has already been pointed out, the great benefits that this project will bring in all these areas are clearly evident, and we can speak of a major urban transformation, affecting many of its layers—social, cultural, religious, educational, commercial, and others—pointing to a new awakening of cities.

Notes

1. Council of Europe Treaty Series, n° 199 <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>; accessed 15 November 2024.

2. Conservation of Living Religious Heritage. Papers from ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: conserving the sacred, H. Stevel – N. Stanley-Price – R. Killick (Eds.), ICROMM, Rome 2005:

https://www.icromm.org/sites/default/files/ICROMMICS03ReligiousHeritage_en.pdf; accessed 15 June 2024.

3. The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 2013:

<https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf>, where the following can be highlighted: “Change may be necessary to retain cultural significance, but is undesirable where it reduces cultural significance of the place and its appropriate interpretation”.

4. Specifically, cases were presented from Spain, Portugal, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, England and Wales, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Turkey, Hungary, France, Slovakia, Germany, the United States, and, of course, Italy. Some of the interventions are similar to the plan outlined in this article and could be considered precedents, with different approaches and nuances: Flavia Radice, *AURA: an analytical method for the assessment of the possible transformation of decommissioned churches on an urban scale* (pp. 291-310); Mélanie Meynier Philip. *Between emotional values and functional values, what future for French parish churches? The Lyon-Saint Étienne urban region questioned by the Quebec's “Plan Churches”* (pp. 311-322); Elisabetta Pozzobon, Ewa Karwacka, Luisa Santini. *Knowing, reviving and enhancing church buildings. MultiCriteria Decision Analysis applied to underused ecclesiastical properties* (pp. 335-348); Robert Erdélyi. *Endangered churches in the Slovak Republic. Passportization, conditions for rescue and recommendations for praxis* (pp. 349-364).

5. Fabrizio Capanni (Ed.) *Dio non abita più qui? Dimissioni di luoghi di culto e gestione integrata del beni culturali ecclesiastici / Doesn't God Dwell Here Anymore? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage*. Editoriale Artemide. Roma, 2019.

6. The issue of altars—and certain other elements—which, due to their critical condition, cannot be desacralized and may appear destined for destruction, could be addressed by the plan we are presenting here. Specifically, given that the driving force behind this initiative is a rebalancing, i.e., the decongestion of the centers and the provision of resources to the peripheries, the transfer of these critical pieces to the new facilities could be considered. This would not only protect these elements but also lay a foundation stone of tremendous symbolism for the new parishes, given its connection to previous generations of believers.

7. It is noteworthy that this concern for the formation of pastors and the faithful in matters of liturgy, art, and heritage is repeatedly emphasized in numerous documents, such as the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (nos. 14-20).

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium-en.html; accessed 15 November 2024.

8. <https://upcommons.upc.edu/hadle/2117/3461>; accessed 4 December 2024.

9. Andrea Crudeli. *Adaptative Reuse. Theoretical Glossary and Design Labs*. STH Press. Florence, 2024.

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