



# Conference Proceedings



Kőszeg 2018

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Interpret Europe's Conference 2018 was held in Kőszeg, Hungary, from 23-26 March 2018. It was organised by KÖME, the Hungarian Association of Cultural Heritage Managers.



The conference included 85 presentations and workshops from participants, in addition to a selection of study visits. The following participants submitted full papers to be published in the proceedings:

Esra Aytar  
Ilyas Aytar  
Shraddha Bhatawadekar  
Vera Boneva  
Britta Burkhardt  
György Csepeli  
Luiz Antônio Bolcato Custódio  
Jasna Fakin Bajec  
Stuart Frost  
Aniko Illes

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Katalin Nagy  
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Angela Pfenniger  
Filip Skowron  
Ottó Sosztarits  
Mária Szilágyi  
Saša Tkalec  
Nikolaas Vande Keere

The abstracts of the other presentations are included after the full papers.

All opinions expressed are the authors' own and are not necessarily endorsed by Interpret Europe.

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## Heritage without heirs? Reconnecting church and community through adaptive reuse

Nikolaas Vande Keere and Bie Plevoets (Belgium)

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### Abstract

Churches have historically been part of the collective identity of local communities in Europe. Current developments, like secularisation and immigration, can be seen as eroding processes, leading to depopulation of churches and undermining this sense of identity. Adaptive reuse in this context often disregards the complex spiritual and social potential of religious heritage. Churches risk becoming heritage without heirs.

In our (design) research we show how adaptive reuse of churches can be based on intangible heritage values. To appeal to a broader group, including future generations and migrant communities, we want to transform the use and meaning of the church from within. Rather than replacing a sense of spirituality or community, we seek to reactivate and strengthen it by adding new layers.

We focus on two urban cases in Belgium and show how they can reclaim a collective identity: Transformation of the protected church of St-Jozef into a community centre in the socially charged neighbourhood of Rabot in Ghent. Adaptation of the modernist church of St-Alena to a migrant church and other functions for the neighbourhood of St-Gillis in Brussels.

We aim to prove that adaptive reuse of church architecture can seize the opportunity to gather and (re)integrate diverse communities in the spirit of its former use. We want to interpret adaptive reuse beyond a spatial or functional transformation as a renewal of (religious) identity. We aim to open up historic sites and buildings initially intended for a local community by inviting new inhabitants. This work implies a changing understanding of heritage not only as a witness of history but also as a source for the future, able to adapt to a changing society and incorporate new social values.

### Keywords

religious heritage, adaptive reuse, design research, immigration, community, social values

### Introduction

#### Context

In Flanders, there are more than 1,800 Roman Catholic parish churches, about the same number of presbyteries and a range of chapels. In 2012, 8% of the churches were no longer in service, only 60% hosted religious ceremonies once or twice every week (Aerts ea. 2014), and these



numbers have been rapidly increasing since. Nearly half of the churches only open during hours of service. The situation in Flanders illustrates the process of secularisation in Europe and North-America (Halman & Draulans 2006; Voas 2009), where many regions face the question of what to do with underused and obsolete religious buildings (Deathridge 2012; De Bleeckere & De Ridder 2014; Morisset et al. 2005).

The reasons for the decline in church visits and attendance at mass is due to a process of secularisation of the indigenous community on the one hand, and society is becoming increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious on the other hand due to immigration. In many cities, villages and neighbourhoods, parish churches nonetheless give shape to the physical centre and are part of the local collective identity. Besides having a historical and architectural value, they form an essential part of the landscape and represent emotional value. As such, churches are an important aspect of our tangible and intangible cultural heritage: the building and interior as immovable heritage, its art relicts and religious objects as movable heritage, and the rituals and (local) traditions as intangible heritage (Plevoets & Prina 2017). However, as the local community – its younger generations and migrant communities – often has no relationship with the church building and its religious use, churches risk becoming heritage without heirs.

The substantial decline in participants in the Catholic service means that the use, management and maintenance of these built relicts are ever more difficult. The integration of a new, secular use is often proposed as a solution to the problem of obsolete church buildings. This integration can be through shared use, which means that the church is still used for religious services with a secular function available through a spatial division in the church interior, or by planning activities at different times. There can also be an adaptive reuse of the church for an entirely new programme. In this case, 'deconsecration' (official removal of its religious function) and a change of ownership is considered as a logical consequence. However, radical transformations often disregard the complex spiritual and social role that church buildings play in local communities and city centres. Although their historical and architectural values may be safeguarded, drastic reorientation of the programme may cause their cultural meaning and broader relevance within contemporary society to disappear.

An example of a more spontaneous and informal reuse, which stays close to the meanings and values represented by the initial religious function of the church, is the Heilige Familie Church, or Tafelkirche as it was re-named in 2008, in the a more impoverished part of Oberhausen. The church, designed by Rudolf Schwarz, is not used for religious service anymore but has not been deconsecrated. Instead, the church is used as a social restaurant and a place for distribution of food packages for people in need and refugees. The church has not been redesigned or actively adapted. Instead, the necessary furniture and equipment, such as a kitchen and cold storage, have been added pragmatically. Notably, the social reuse falls in line with the religious function of the church – 'gathering people around the table of life' (Diepmans & Eisenmenger 2018) – and is considered by the local (Catholic) clergy as an acceptable alternative for the celebration of mass.

### Methodology

In this paper, we will present a specific approach to adaptive reuse of churches, inspired by the transformation of the Tafelkirche and based on a social interpretation of the different heritage aspects of the building. To appeal to a broader group, including future generations and migrant communities, we want to transform the use and meaning of the church from within, regardless of the need for deconsecration. Rather than replacing a sense of spirituality or community, we seek to reactivate and strengthen it by adding new layers. We focus on two urban cases in Belgium and show how they can reclaim a collective identity. The first is the transformation of the protected church of St-Jozef into a community centre in the socially charged neighbourhood of Rabot in Ghent. The second is the adaptation of the modernist church of St. -Alena to a migrant parish church and other functions for the neighbourhood of St. Gillis in Brussels.

The methodology for the case study analysis is ‘research by design’ (Van de Weijer, Van Cleempoel & Heynen 2014), in which the potential for adaptive reuse is studied by designing and visualising different spatial and programmatic scenarios. As stated in the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE) Charter on Architectural Research: *‘In research by design, the architectural design process forms the pathway through which new insights, knowledge, practices or products come into being. It generates critical inquiry through design work. Therefore, research results are obtained by, and consistent with experience in practice’* (EAAE 2012:1). The research by design conducted for the St. Jozef church is part of a research programme launched by various organisations in Flanders to encourage the adaptive reuse of these buildings. The programme is supervised by the Flemish government architect and supports feasibility studies for the transformation of parish churches into a new use.<sup>88</sup> The study was executed by tv TRACE, a collaboration between different architectural offices<sup>89</sup> and the research group with the same name at the Faculty of Architecture & Arts of Hasselt University, Belgium, during 2016-2017 (Vande Keere et al. 2017). The research for the St. Alena church took place in the context of a design studio of the International Master of Interior Architecture on Adaptive Reuse at the same university.

### **St. Jozef: from church to community centre**

#### History

The church of St. Jozef was constructed in 1880 as part of a newly developed neighbourhood called Rabot in the city of Ghent, Belgium, for the workers of the textile industry and their families. The urbanist plan for Rabot was very ambitious as a new extension to the north of the city with axial lines and rows of small private houses with individual gardens located just outside the historic centre. In this plan, the church is clearly conceived as the heart of the new neighbourhood, both in spatial and social terms. The placement of the church fits within the context of the Ultramontanism, a clerical political movement within the Catholic Church that places a strong emphasis on the prerogatives and powers of the pope and attributes a central role to religion in society. As such, the church of St. Jozef formed the centre of the plan for the Rabot and was, therefore, instrumental in establishing a pious and stable society among the textile workers and their families.<sup>90</sup>



**Figure 1 – St. Jozef – Aerial view of the church in the neighbourhood of Rabot, Ghent**

<sup>88</sup> More information on this programme is available on [www.herbestedemmingkerken.be](http://www.herbestedemmingkerken.be), accessed 14 February 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Three offices, Broekx-Schippers Architecten, Saidja Heynickx Architect, and UR Architects, have collaborated with the research group TRACE of Hasselt University. For each of the offices, one of the directors is also professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University.

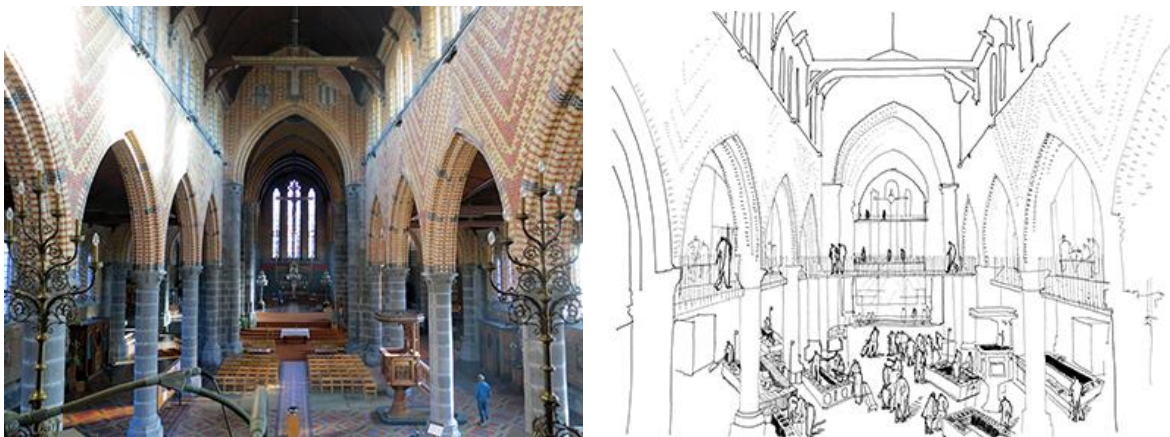
<sup>90</sup> An earlier study by students at the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation (KULeuven) made a thorough historical analysis of the case (Bouwen et al 2016).

The church, designed by the architect, Auguste Van Assche (1826-1907), is a classic example of the Gothic Revival style. It features a succession of vestibule, nave and choir representing the layered spiritual structure of the suffering, struggling and triumphing church. The choir and main altar have an easterly orientation reflecting the sunrise and resurrection of Christ. The (unfinished) tower is positioned precisely in the centre of the church and refers to heaven and the plan is the form of a cross and references the body of Christ and the crucifixion. The plan was changed several times before construction began – mainly to enlarge the interior to make room for a larger community, but the concept remained the same throughout the design process. The exterior of the church is based on *Scheldegotiek*, an early Gothic style used in Flanders in the 13th and 14th centuries and reused by the artistic St. Lucas arts and crafts school in the 19th century. The interior is strongly influenced by the English Victorian style and is heavily decorated with polychromatic ornamentation. The church has been protected as a monument since 2003 for its socio-cultural, artistic, historical and folkloristic value; the protection order also stresses the extraordinary quality of preservation of the Gothic Revival interior.

#### Current Context

Ever since its emergence, Rabot has been a socially charged neighbourhood, with the church fabric as an important mediator between communities. The district today has a high density, many migrant communities, large families, a considerable number of young people with a low-level of education and a quick succession of tenants for shops and dwellings. The urban redevelopment project, 'Bridges to Rabot', aims to improve the living conditions in the area through a better connection with the centre of Ghent, improvement of public functions, (green) public spaces, and (family) housing and through different social projects involving the inhabitants.

The church is still owned by the church fabric of St. Jozef but is no longer used for religious services since the popular and socially active priest, Koen Blieck, passed away in 2015. The city of Ghent stepped in to gain insight into the possibilities for reuse of the church for a social programme that would serve the needs of the local community, in consideration of buying the church. It ordered a feasibility study to set up and compare various scenarios for adaptation and reuse taking into account its architectural, historical, social and cultural values and its protection as a monument.

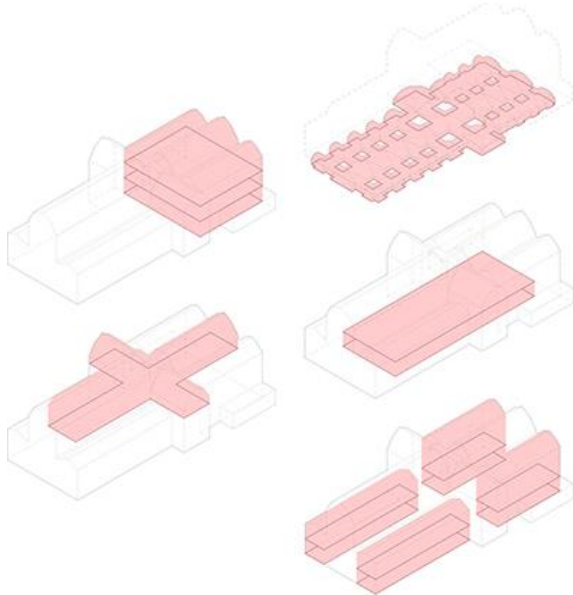


**Figure 2(a) & (b) – St. Jozef – Polychromatic interior and impression of an additional floor**

#### Research by design

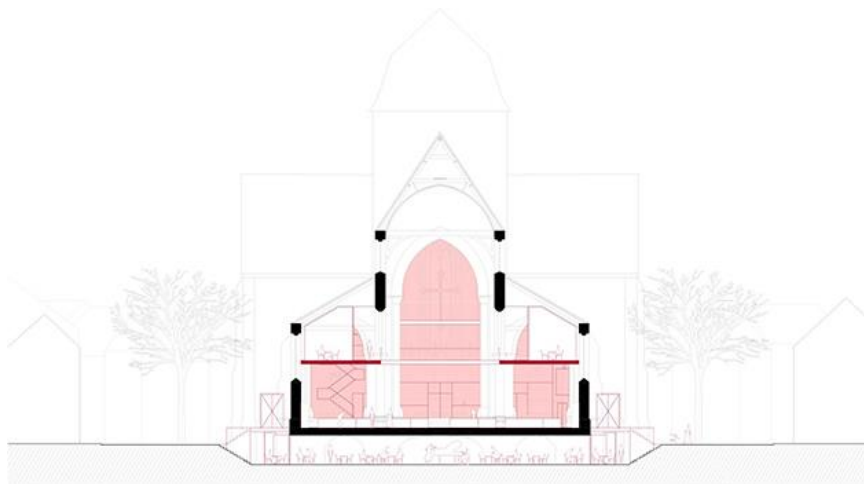
Although the designers started from an analysis of the listed possible functions for the church, the study was not limited to the design of the concrete needs for a set of specific users or functions. Instead, the research focused on spatial questions, such as how to increase the useful area, the accessibility and circulation, and the relationship between the interior and exterior of the church building and its surroundings. Though it was planned that the church would be officially

deconsecrated, the sanctuary or central choir of the church was designated as a ‘silent space’ for repose, contemplation or prayer.



**Figure 3** – St. Jozef – Typological analysis of different scenarios with additional floors

Based on the results of the typological analysis (to increase the capacity and increase floor area) and circulation analysis (to improve accessibility between the inside and outside and within the church space itself), a spatial strategy for adaptive reuse was defined. In this strategy, the vaulted basement becomes part of the functional space. Additional floors in the side aisles of the nave and choir provide extra floor space while preserving the spatial experience of the church by respecting the open central axes of the nave and transept. Given the unique condition of the Gothic Revival interior, the newly added floors are aligned with the decorative layers of the interior walls and pillars of the church. Two additional entrances are necessary to allow the increased capacity and will be integrated at the crossing of the nave and transept. The primary intervention involves the basement of the church. By partly excavating the direct surrounding of the church and opening up the façade, the closed character of the church can be countered. This intervention allows the access of daylight and may solve existing humidity problems, but above all improves the relationship between the building and its surrounding.



**Figure 4** - St. Jozef – Transverse section of the nave and the excavation around the basement



## **St. Alena: from parish to migrant church**

### History

The first plan for the St. Alena church dates back to 1913. It was designed in an eclectic style by the architect Louis Pepermans as the parish church for the neighbourhood of St. Gillis in the south of Brussels, Belgium. Of this, only the crypt and all adjacent buildings, like the presbytery, were built. The plans to build a church were taken up again in the 1930s with a design competition won by the young architect, Roger Bastin (1913-1986). For the interior of the church, the side chapel and the façade, he collaborated with Jacques Dupuis (1914-1984). The construction started in 1940 but suffered a delay because of World War II and a lack of funding. The main body of the church was finished in 1951, while the street façade was only finally completed in 1972.

Throughout the whole process, several adaptations were made to the design. This evolution reflects the transition the church made from pre- to post-Vatican II. The modern church was built on top of the older basement. The floor plan of the church remains somewhat traditional, although the architect formed a subtle asymmetric layout by shifting the central axis and creating a narrow and low side chapel to the east. The positions of the altar and ambo have been adapted to the liturgical reform requirements. The interior architecture has a modern finish as well as the geometrical decoration and iconography, referring to motifs fashionable in the context of the mentioned reform. Although the building is a very fine example of modern church architecture, including qualitative craftsmanship, including stained-glass windows and reliefs and sculptures commissioned from local artists, and is included in the official inventory of built heritage in Brussels, it is not officially protected as a monument (Lanotte 2001).



**Figure 5** - St. Alena – Roger Bastin, interior view towards nave and side chapel (Photo: Christine Bastin)

### Current context

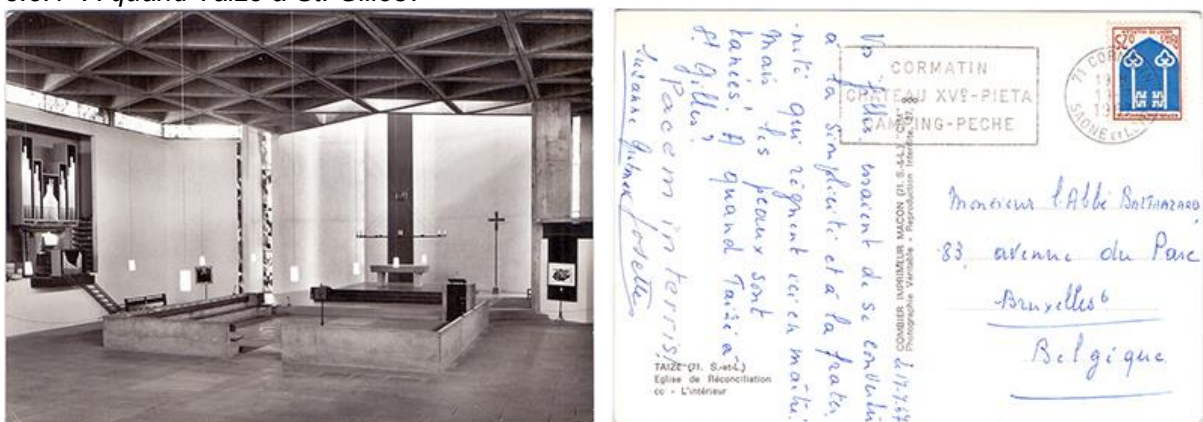
St. Alena's church has not been used as a traditional parish church for local inhabitants for some time. It was used until recently by the (older) Italian migrant population, but, since September 2017, the Brazilian community of the Brussels region have taken it up for their weekly mass and

social gatherings afterwards. The church itself is rather well preserved, although some restoration works might be necessary in the near future. The plot which is owned by the church also includes a large garden to the west, a presbytery to the east and the adjacent buildings to the back of the church (a large part of the latter formerly used by the Scouts Association). The crypt is currently employed as a community space but has poor spatial conditions with limited daylight. The presbytery and adjacent buildings, being older, could benefit from renovation. Although there are no plans for the adaptive reuse or additional shared use of the church, the Brazilian community has interest in upgrading some of the spaces surrounding the church and using them more extensively. The available space, however, exceeds their requirements. At the same time, they lack the funds to invest in a larger plan without involvement from other parties.

### Research by design

The assignment for the design studio<sup>91</sup> for the St. Alena church was to respect the current use of the building by the Brazilian community. The focus of the studio was intended to reflect on possible additional functions for the surrounding spaces to give a spatial upgrade and to link the church and its new community to the larger environment and the local inhabitants of St. Gillis. These links would include transforming the programmatic conditions with the introduction of social or cultural activities, rather than strictly commercial or private functions. Spatial conditions, such as a better link with the street, the inner gardens and also the church space itself, were also included. The project has the potential to embed the building and its activities in the surroundings and, at the same time, become a new home for the migrant community. In what follows, we elaborate on the results of two student projects.

#### 3.3.1 “A quand Taizé à St. Gilles?”

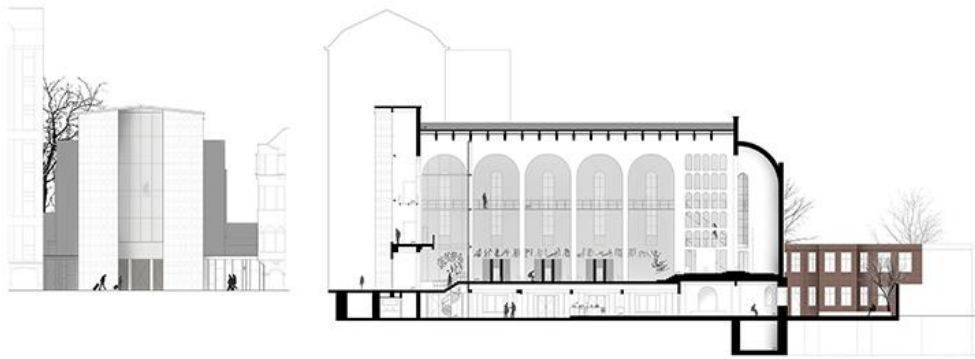


**Figure 6(a) & (b) - Postcard Taizé, 1967**

Tijl Beelen’s project was inspired by a particular postcard found in the archives of the parish. The card was sent in 1967 from a youth retreat in Taizé by some Catholic Sisters to the priest of the St. Alena church. It describes the particular atmosphere the Sisters had experienced during their pilgrimage to Taizé and is clearly coloured by the exciting and genuine spirit of reform felt at the time. They conclude with the above sentence translated as “When Taizé at St. Gillis?” This inspired Tijl to propose the transformation of the church and adjacent buildings into a youth hostel and retreat centre for pilgrims. This idea was strengthened by the fact that the church is located

<sup>91</sup> The design studio was part of a joint master class that took place in the autumn of 2017 as a collaboration between two schools: the International Master in Interiors on Adaptive Reuse of Hasselt University, Belgium, and the Master in Architecture of the University of Wuppertal, Germany. The students from Wuppertal worked on the adaptive reuse of two cases in Germany – the mentioned Heilige Familie church in Oberhausen and St. Mariä Himmelfahrt in Wesel, both designed by Rudolf Schwarz (1905-1994), while the students from Hasselt worked on the St. Alena church. During two short intensive workshops organised in both faculties the students exchanged insights and ideas on how to deal with modern churches.

on one of the extended pilgrim routes to Santiago De Compostela. Moreover, this function could co-exist with the current use by the Brazilian community.



**Figure 7** - St. Alena – Tijl Beelen's design for the new front façade and longitudinal section

The most significant architectural intervention was the transformation of the façade and entrance to the building. Currently, the entrance gives access to the level of the church which is several steps higher than street level, while the crypt is only accessible through a side entrance. Together with the closed character of the front façade, the difference in level between inside and outside creates a barrier between the street and the interior of the church. Therefore, the design proposes an in-between space inside the church but at the level of the street to be visible from the outside by making a part of the front façade transparent. This entrance portal has a more inviting character and refers to a narthex, a preparatory or transitional space allowing for assembly and silence before entering the sacred space of the church. Tijl referred to the courtyard of the Basilica di San Clemente in Rome, but adapted the concept to the St. Alena church. The new narthex was created by extending the level of the street to the first two bays of the interior. New stairs and elevators in the narthex provide maximum accessibility to the levels of the church and the crypt, hence creating a more suitable access to the lower level housing a reception area and the multifunctional and communal space of the youth hostel. On the same level below the sanctuary, a chapel or silent space has been created, accessible from and extendible towards the shared space.

### 3.3.2 *Modernist gesamtkunstwerk*

Emilie Raquet started her project with a thorough analysis of the architectural qualities of the St. Alena church through careful observation, the study of archival documents and comparison of this church with other modernist (religious) buildings. In her presentation, she described the experience of moving through or accessing the buildings, referring to the so-called 'corridor of silence' which used to be the main entrance to the crypt space before the modern part of St. Alena was built. Inspired by the contrast of modern materials, like concrete versus figure glass and precious metal elements, she investigated the other work of the architects and their contemporaries and went back to their main source of inspiration at the time: the convent of Sainte Marie de la Tourette by Le Corbusier. To define a programme for the building, she built further on the characteristics of St. Gillis as a creative and cultural neighbourhood in Brussels. She proposed to insert an art centre with gallery, atelier space and accommodation for artists in residence.



**Figure 8** – Sainte Marie de la Tourette – Le Corbusier, façade detail, 1960 (Photo: Fernando Schapochnik)

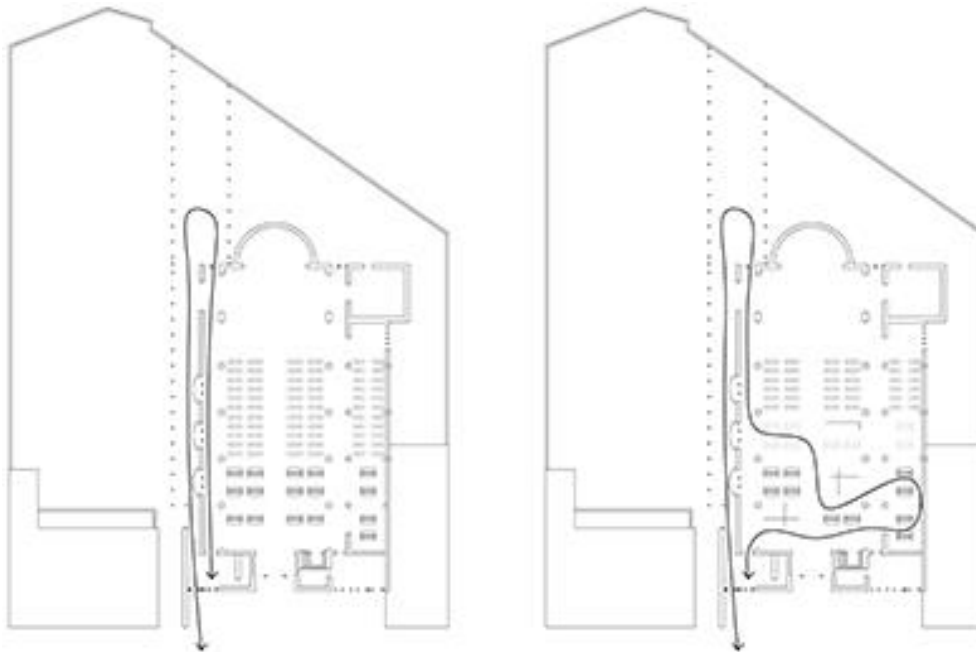
Emilie removed the adjacent buildings behind the church and added a new volume, of which the larger spaces in the back function as apartments for artists. The design of this new building is inspired by monastic architecture in the way a new corridor of silence or '*claustrum*' connects all the different spaces, including the church, from front to back. Besides its role as direct circulation from the street to the spaces in the back, it is also defined as the main exhibition space. Its structure of concrete ribs filled in with figure glass, as in la Tourette, allows for a direct and continuous relationship with the garden and receives evening sunlight.



**Figure 9** - St. Alena – Emilie Raquet, a model of new volume and 'corridor of silence' (Photo: Liesbeth Driessen)



Emilie made limited changes to the interior of the church but proposed a suggestive dual use of the church without creating a fixed or physical separation between the different functions. The religious purpose of the church remains in the choir and the front part of the nave, while the rear of the nave could be used as an informal art gallery. The crypt has been designed for artists' studios and shared kitchen and dining spaces below the choir for artists as well as the Brazilian community.



**Figure 10** – St. Alena – Emilie Raquet, routing exhibition versus church space

### Re-activating history – re-defining identity

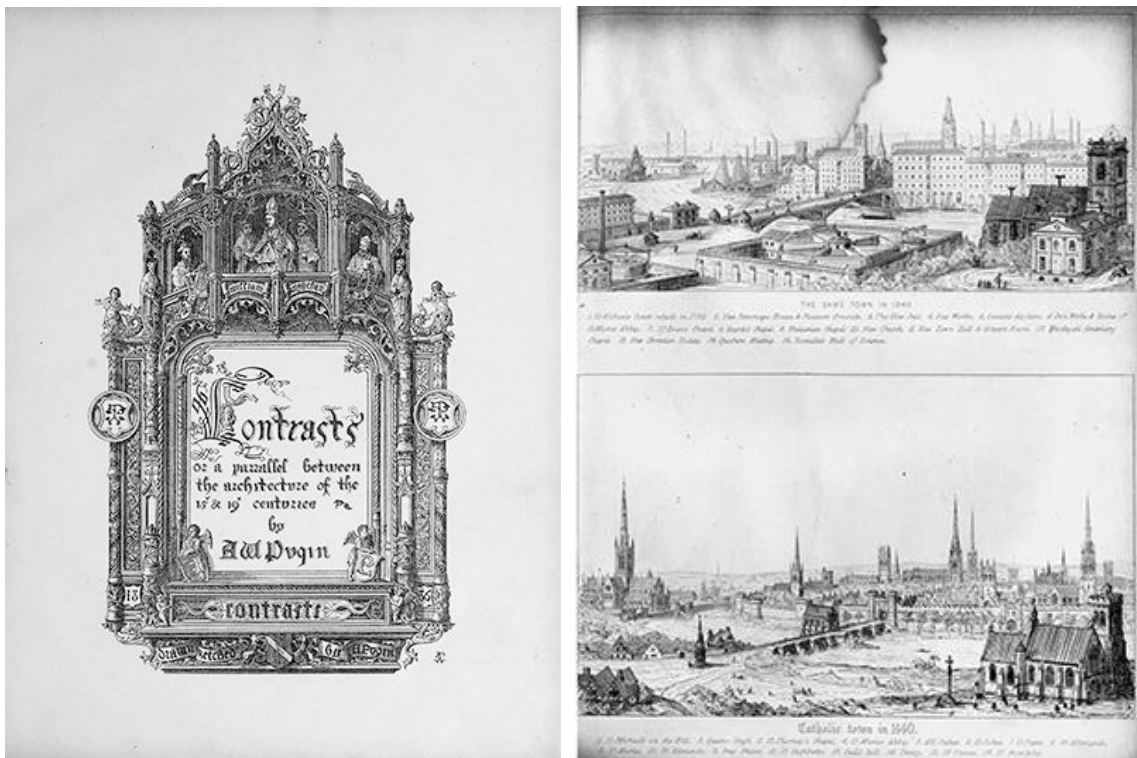
The new programme for the Tafelkirche in Oberhausen is not perceived by the Catholic faith as a break with its former use or the tradition of celebration of mass. Instead, it can be considered as a reinterpretation of the communal activity to adapt to contemporary and local needs. In the same way, the two case studies with a (seemingly) very different background reveal a rich potential for adaptive reuse if, beyond their material appearance, we reinterpret the historical narratives and intangible values of their heritage. By thoroughly studying the layered context of the buildings or sites, we can identify and select specific traces – defined as bridges between past and present – as anchors for the design process.

Re-reading the Gothic Revival style of the St. Jozef church led us to investigate the movement and its ideological background beyond the stylistic features. The architect Auguste Van Assche (1826-1907) and his contemporaries were very much in touch with the leading advocate of the Gothic Revival in the United Kingdom during the Victorian era, Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-1852).<sup>92</sup> Pugin published various books on the matter, revealing himself as a strong opponent of the rapid industrialisation of Britain. The book, 'Contrasts', published in 1836, reads as a moralistic 'manifesto' for the Gothic Revival. It is developed as a comparison between the negative aspects of the 19th century modern society and the so-called positive and more humane

<sup>92</sup> Van Assche has been introduced to the Gothic Revival style of the Victorian era by his colleague and mentor architect, Jean-Baptiste de Béthune (1829-1894), who was a pioneer for the Gothic Revival in Belgium. De Béthune's approach to architecture was strongly shaped by an encounter with Welby Pugin in the United Kingdom. His approach to the Gothic Revival is characterised by a strong religious and social idealism (Van Cleven et al 1997).

model of medieval society. Pugin illustrates the contrast between factory work and manual labour, the institutionalisation of hospitals and prisons, the alienation of the sick and poor, the unhygienic and cramped circumstances of urban life, etc. It is not a coincidence that some images in the book are emblematic to the situation of Rabot as a new neighbourhood outside of the historic city boundaries.

Beyond their moralism, the illustrations reveal an idyllic and almost utopian aspect. Craftsmanship, family life and the Catholic faith were the basis of an idealised society, uncorrupted by modernisation. The church building was to play a social role in it as a catalyst for a more harmonious public life and, ultimately, to define a conscience for the new community back then. Translating these ideas to the situation today could inform and, to some extent, legitimise the reuse of the church as a neighbourhood centre. The original inhabitants of relatively poor descent lured to the city by employment could today be replaced by a young migrant community looking for good fortune but adrift in the globalised society. This legitimisation is confirmed by the continuous social role of the church fabric until recently. The position of the church building in the centre of the area could allow it once again to become a meaningful focal point of encounter and support between the various inhabitants of the neighbourhood.



**Figure 11(a) & (b) – Contrasts – Augustus Welby Pugin, comparison between a 19th century and a medieval town, 1836**

Similarly, the St. Alena church was built at a crucial time in the history of the Catholic church. As a result of experiments by the 'liturgical movement' before World War II and the urge for modernisation after, different reforms were established by Vaticanum II (1962-65). Besides a theological reinterpretation, these reforms defined the basis for a profound transformation of the liturgical space. The stronger involvement of the faithful as a consequence of the democratisation of the liturgy had a significant impact on the interior lay-out and typology of church buildings, both existing and new. Also, the renewed interest in the (layered) history of the liturgy and iconography lead to a form of re-sourcing, for example to early Christian tradition, that in its turn inspired a fundamental change of the spatial concept of church buildings in the post-war era. Called by

Pope John XXIII the *aggiornamento*, loosely translated as 'awakening' or 'actualisation', it reveals a thorough transformation of an institute often perceived as conservative.

It opened up the way for architects and artists to apply a new formal language and created the freedom to approach spirituality on a more experimental and contemporary level. In the case of St. Alena, the students were encouraged to respect and even develop further the spirit of the *aggiornamento*. The first project took the re-sourcing at heart by referring to the early Christian Basilica di San Clemente. The design improved the connection of the different functions with the street to allow pilgrims to enter and dwell in the buildings and gardens, without restricting their function to Christian worship. The second project built further on the modernistic architectural properties of the original design and deliberately looked for additional sources in monastic architecture of the same era.

The reuse proposals for both St. Jozef and St. Alena, although very different, both assimilate historical (re-)sources as the starting point for their adaptive reuse<sup>93</sup>. The selected traces for both cases reveal the potential of a personal and emphatic reading of the site and its cultural context. The designs apply these sources for a much-needed transformation in a careful and balanced way and emphasise continuity where at first radical change seemed inevitable. The goal is to reach a soft transformation from within, able to affirm and secure a place in the future while at the same time keeping in touch with history. This goal has a hope that new communities will adopt the church building and its new use in such a way for it to play, once again, a crucial role in society and aims eventually to lend these communities the identity they deserve.

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<sup>93</sup> The terms translatio, imitatio and aemulatio were frequently used in pre-modern times to characterise this assimilation as part of the design process. We consider this practice as relevant again in the context of adaptive reuse as it embeds a transformation in a historical context, while at the same time allowing it to improve or surpass the original value of the building to create innovative architecture (see, among others: Mayernick 2016; Plevvoets & Van Cleempoel 2014; Plevvoets & Heynickx 2016)

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