

## Sacred Places in Europe : A Second Life for Churches? A Case Study of the Protestant “Kapel” Church in Heemstede in the Netherlands

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## **Sacred Places in Europe: A Second Life for Churches? A Case Study of the Protestant “Kapel” Church in Heemstede in the Netherlands**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the process of secularization, church attendance in Europe has declined. Churches in many western European have closed due to low turnout on Sundays and Christian highlights such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Often, members who could support a church rarely attend its regular services. Old churches are considered part of the West’s cultural heritage, however, and now have a chance to find a new purpose. More recently built churches are often not considered heritage sites and may be closed and even demolished, especially when they occupy large plots of valuable land in city centers. In the Netherlands, physical planning rules determine whether land is used for agricultural, industrial, residential, infrastructure, or other (social or cultural) purposes, and a church normally falls into the last category.

Is there a second life for churches? This depends on a number of factors, which we will analyze in a case study of the Protestant “Kapel” church in Heemstede in the Netherlands (Yin, 1994). The paper begins with a description of the European practice of turning famous churches into museums. Then it illustrates the realities of a small city whose authorities were forced to consider closing one, then two, and eventually three churches within about 30 years. What factors influenced their decisions, and what are the chances that a useful future exists for a building that has a history and may even be designated as a (national or municipal) monument? Methodologically we have taken a multi-stakeholder perspective, analyzing the role of various actors in an urban renewal process and the arguments they use in debates about its outcome (van Dijk 2006).

### **DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN CHURCHES: TURNING SOME FAMOUS CHURCHES INTO MUSEUMS**

There are several examples of cities where the religious authorities have turned famous churches into museums. Aachen in Germany has a Dom, which was largely spared during the bombardments in the Second World War. In 1979, money was collected to repair the church and make its treasures visible to the public—not just on Sunday but all week long. Visitors do not have to pay, but can admire the church of Charles the Great, whose construction

started in the year 800 with an octagonal building. In the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries a gothic choir was built and chapels constructed to the north and the south of the octagon. The museum displays age-old treasures and uses 600 square meters for that purpose. The Dom is centrally located in the city and a big tourist attraction. A European Foundation now runs the facility ([www.aachendom.de](http://www.aachendom.de)).

Amsterdam in the Netherlands has turned its very old “New Church” into a museum in the very center of the city. The city of Dordrecht in the same country created an Association of Friends of the Great Church in 1974. Over the past 700 years, this church has played an important role in the history of Protestantism in the Netherlands. Inside the building its history is shown to the public—this time for a fee if they are not Friends of the church: 15 Euros a year for individuals and more for companies. As with the Dom in Aachen, people can also donate money as part of their inheritance. In Europe such donations are usually tax deductible.

Most European countries are undergoing a process of secularization, and according to Putnam (2008), even in the United States the number of visitors to traditional churches is declining. The graying of populations, the rise of migrant cultures (Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa, Christians from Sub-Saharan Africa, each group using its own building), and the forces of secularization lead the financial councils of many churches in Europe to consider closing one or more of their facilities. The question is what then happens to these “sacred places”? It must be noted that Catholics and Protestants differ in their responses to the situation. The former often consider a church building as sacred and would rather tear it down (after de-sacri-fying the building) than use it for other purposes. Protestants, in contrast, tend to consider a church a pile of stones and do not care what happens to it if it is no longer needed.

The sacred has different meanings in different cultures. In the Netherlands it is be linked to religion, but Buruma (foreword Benedict 1946) notes that in Japan there may not be such a huge gulf between the human and the divine: “all kinds of things could be invested with a sacred aura: rocks, mountains and rivers, as well as human beings.” He brings the issue up to explain the reaction of the Japanese people at the end of the Second World War. They once felt “a sense of obligation to their emperors, the ultimate source of what it means to be Japanese.” The concept of the emperor’s “divinity” is often misunderstood, however: he was not considered a god per se but rather a symbol of a sacred institution. Similarly, church officials may say that a church is just a pile of bricks while their congregations consider it to be sacred! From a sociological perspective this behavior can be called “symbolic interactionism,” stressing the subjective meanings attached to things by human beings.

## **A CASE STUDY IN HEEMSTEDDE IN THE NETHERLANDS**

A case study in Heemstede in the Netherlands will be presented. This city of about 25,000 inhabitants used to have four Protestant churches belonging to the two main denominations, the Reformed and the Christian reformed churches, which merged into the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN) in 2004. In the 1990s one of the three remaining churches had to be closed, and currently only two are still operational. Heemstede is a relatively small

city close to Haarlem and Amsterdam in the western part of the country. In the 1990s the church council announced that the Kapel would eventually have to be closed due to declining membership; the year 2011 was mentioned. This did not result in a strong reaction, since 2011 was far away. The Kapel was a remarkable institution after the closing of the first church. In fact the mixing of the Christian reformed members (from the closed church) and the Reformed members of the Kapel went very well. This became an example of what was expected of different Protestant groups after the official merger. A sequence of events took place determining the future use of the Kapel. These events are summarized in the next section.

The role of physical planning is important in the sense that it can give protection to a building, creating barriers to the destruction or repurposing of a building—for example, preventing it from being turned into apartments like the first church dropped by the authorities in Heemstede. In the Netherlands this is possible in three ways:

- a. A church could attain the status of municipal monument through a decision of the local municipal council, which means its building would have to be preserved.
- b. Its land could, through zoning policies, be reserved for “societal” or “general services,” disallowing its use for residential, agricultural, or industrial purposes.
- c. Finally, the church can be protected at the national level if it is found to be essential to a city’s skyline (*beschermd stadsgezicht*). In this case a building could not be destroyed or blocked by other buildings. In the following case study the national authorities had suggested such protection but not yet completed the procedures necessary to achieve it.

If none of the above methods work, public collective action may help, as it has in Haarlem a number of times. However, not every church may be worth preserving. Some are quite ugly, old, poorly maintained, or located in unattractive environments. In the case of Protestant churches these may be sold or used for other purposes. In Haarlem wine and even carpets have been sold in old churches. In other cities social services are housed in former churches, or even a bookshop or mosque!

## **EVENTS CRUCIAL FOR THE FUTURE OF THE KAPEL**

After the announcement that another church would have to close, a lot of discussion took place in the Church council and in the congregation. Many members were against closing another church, especially those who had attended services at the Kapel or experienced baptisms, weddings, or funerals there. At the end of 2002, the Church council, pushed by one of the preachers, insisted on closing the Kapel in 2011. It cited financial problems and encouraged the church community to bring all its members, including youth, together in one church building, explaining that another church building was better suited to that purpose. Subsequently:

1. In March 2003 it was suddenly announced that the Church council intended to close the Kapel in 2004—rather than in 2011—for financial reasons. In June 2003 the official decision was made, triggering a “Save the Kapel” movement among active church members.
2. The movement managed to collect in a relatively short period 238,047 Euros in commitments

to support the building. Payment began in December 2003, and only 200,000 Euros were required to keep the Kapel running. Authorities promised that the church would now stay open until 2007, and finances in fact allowed it to remain open until 2009.

3. Formal closure took place in September 2009, and the Kapel was put up for sale.
4. Meanwhile, the neighboring municipality of Haarlem, in which the Kapel is physically located, had decided that the Kapel should become a municipal monument. Haarlem also asked national authorities to designate this part of the city “protected skyline.” It also invited other interested parties to voice their positions on the issue.
5. Church authorities and activists, with support from neighbors, contributed their points of view (zienswijze), with the latter presenting more than 200 signatures in favor of making the church a municipal monument.
6. The municipality of Haarlem decided on June 30, 2009, to designate the Kapel an official monument.
7. The church decided to go to an administrative court with a professional lawyer: being an interested party, it was entitled to start legal procedures in an administrative court to fight Haarlem’s decision. The Financial committee of the church also initiated a parallel procedure with the Council of State (the highest legal body in the Netherlands) to force the municipality to change the destination of the land where the church is located, to allow the open space that would be created by its destruction to be used for housing purposes.
8. The administrative court ruled in December 2009 that the municipality had not considered the arguments of interested parties sufficiently when designating the Kapel as a municipal monument and reversed the decision (effective 4-1-2010)
9. The municipality of Haarlem once again began the process of making the church a municipal monument, while NGOs sent urgent letters to the City Council asking to preserve the church as a cultural heritage site and other interested parties voiced their points of view as well.
10. The Council of State should issue a decision in 2010, and decisions by the national Ministry of Culture (OC&W) and Ministry of Physical Planning (VROM) regarding the “protected sky line of Heemstede” (beschermd stadsgezicht) are also expected in 2010. These decisions would imply that the church cannot be destroyed. The church authorities have not taken action against this intention yet.

On October 5, 2010, after having weighed various points of view, the Mayor and aldermen of Haarlem decided again to declare the chapel Nieuw Vredenhof (“new garden of peace”) a municipal monument, doing their best to respect proper procedure this time. This means they took into account the points made by the judge and argued their case better. They had a report prepared to counter the one submitted by Church authorities arguing that the Kapel did not deserve monument status since it had been rebuilt several times, the architect was not very famous, and it had been built at low cost. The bureau hired by municipality argued the opposite. The church will probably go again to the administrative court, which will take another year to make a decision, but may find it more difficult to argue with the municipal council this time.

## THE MAJOR ACTORS

The major actors in this drama are the church authorities— in particular the Church council and its Financial council—the municipality, church members, neighbors, and NGOs fighting for the preservation of cultural heritage and in particular objects with architectural value. The NGOs would not mind if apartments were built in the current building.

Some of the actors have shown some flexibility. For example, the municipality of Haarlem changed the destination “religious use” into “social/cultural use,” which includes a wide range of medical and other services (for children or other age groups, for example). However, without a clear request to the city council for permission to build, it is not likely that the municipal council will allow the use of this land for housing purposes, since that will require a complicated procedure to adjust the current land use plan. If the building remains a municipal monument, alternative uses (by stretching the physical planning destination, for example to include housing) may be allowed, but only within the current building and while respecting the character of the old building. There are precedents for this in the Netherlands.

After not being used for at least six months, the church building was in 2010 rented out to a ballet school. This not only provides some income for the church but also protects the building from vandalism, which is quite common for deserted buildings. However, this development also undermines the argument used in court by the church: namely, that the building is not suitable for any use but a religious one. In fact an article in the local press reported that a funeral society had wanted to use the building, but that its request had not been taken seriously by Church authorities.

A final actor is the local press. A number of articles have criticized the church for being concerned more about money than about cultural heritage. However, the press also informed the public that other parties were interested in buying the Kapel. The administrative judge may conclude from this information that, contrary to what the church claims, it is possible to find an alternative purpose for its building.

## THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF HAARLEM

The neighboring city of Haarlem is involved because the Kapel happens to be located at the edge of Heemstede in the physical area of Haarlem. The municipal council of Haarlem had drawn up a list of about one hundred “municipal monuments” at the end of the 1990s, and the Kapel figured on that list. In the Netherlands, municipal monuments cannot be destroyed and must be maintained by their owners. Unfortunately, most municipalities have no budget to support the maintenance or restoration of monuments. If a building is declared a national monument, it does qualify for such subsidies. The remaining two PKN church buildings in Heemstede are both national monuments: one dates from 1634 and the other, though it was built after the Second World War, has very special windows. Haarlem seemed in no hurry to discuss this list of monuments in its municipal council in 2008, but at the end of that year someone started pushing (elections were coming up in 2009) and the procedure was revived. The procedure for becoming a municipal monument boils down to:

1. Asking for an independent assessment by an architectural firm to determine whether a building qualifies for the status of municipal monument
2. Discussing the assessments with an independent advisory committee of the municipality
3. Discussing the assessment in a committee of council members
4. Announcing the decision in principle to turn the building into a monument
5. Allowing concerned parties to respond and voice their opinions (a *Zienswijze*)
6. Taking these responses into account and advising the municipal council, which normally follows this advice in making its official decision
7. Announcing the decision and allowing concerned parties to go to court again within a certain period if desired

In the first round, only church members living nearby and the church's financial committee had had a voice. These two parties had been in complete opposition. The former argued that the Kapel:

1. Was a monument from an architectural point of view
2. Was part of their religious and cultural heritage
3. Should be protected as part of the protected sky line of Heemstede (*beschermd stadsgezicht*)
4. Could take on a social function in the neighborhood

Meanwhile, the financial committee argued that the church:

1. Had been enlarged and expanded several times and was therefore no longer an architectural treasure
2. Could not be used for any other purpose
3. Would lose a lot of money if it were not sold to a project developer who would tear it down and build apartments on the valuable land it occupied

The municipality did not take these points of view explicitly into consideration when it declared the building a municipal monument, and hence the Church authorities had cause to go to court. Interestingly, the administrative court agreed with the Church at the end of 2009, stating that the procedure had not been sufficiently careful and that the municipality had not given due considerations to the concerns of the church. I consider this an example of good governance in the Netherlands. The administrative court sees to it that municipalities make decisions based on the right arguments and make these arguments public.

Then Haarlem started a second procedure (steps 1 to 7), this time with better preparation and more thorough argumentation. Again, however, the church authorities can file a protest—but the city council will turn it down, the issue could return to administrative court, and the whole appeal procedure may start anew.

## **AN OPPORTUNITY**

In 2008, the building was put up for sale, and a desired price of 1.2 million Euros was announced. When financial crisis hit later that year, the price was lowered to 1.1 million. Halfway into the next year, a potential buyer expressed interest in using the church to record

organ music and organize concerts. This provided an opportunity for the church to sell its building to him for at least 800,000 Euros, since the first price offered was about three quarters of the original asking price. The advantages of selling would have been:

1. No more risk of the building's degradation
2. Immediate cash for the church, allowing it to fund new activities
3. No more costly legal procedures against the municipality concerning its decision to make the Kapel a monument and in the Council of State to argue that the purpose of the land should be changed from "service" to "society" to allow a project developer to build apartments
4. No more loss of interest on money invested
5. No more unrest within the congregation

Using the building for music recording and public performances would not conflict with the physical planning and municipal regulations in force:

1. It would be seen as a cultural rather than a commercial use
2. It would not require destruction of the building
3. It would comply with the national government's mandate to protect the city's skyline (beschermd stadsgezicht)

## CONSIDERATIONS OF DIFFERENT PARTIES

The following considerations have been advanced by the parties involved. First, the *church authorities*, and in particular the Church council and financial council, assert that the church must take good care of its assets because these are the savings of previous generations meant to allow the church to serve future generations. Second, declining membership means declining revenues and hence threatens the continuation of services for the church's members. If no money is available for operation and maintenance of the buildings or for the salaries of preachers and their assistants, a vicious circle of decline could eventually bring all functioning to a halt, leaving the buildings as national or municipal monuments that cannot be sold.

The *municipality of Haarlem* wants to create a high-quality living environment for its inhabitants. It argues that cultural heritage contributes to the quality of that environment and should hence be preserved. It has a policy of mixing residential functions with others, such as the social services of a church. It took the initiative to declare the Kapel a municipal monument, following the advice of citizens.

*Concerned church members and neighbors* argue that this is a religious building and that its cultural heritage should be preserved for future generations. They explain that the strength of the church organization is its network of volunteers, who are always willing to contribute money or labor. In particular, the Christian reformed part of the church has a tradition of saving and donating. This is how they have built up and maintained their "Free" University in Amsterdam and how they have continued to serve their members in poor neighborhoods and remote villages. The "Save the Kapel" movement showed that churchgoing people are still willing to donate money for a common purpose.



However, the power relations in the church may in the end have decided its future. The distinction between the Reformed and Christian reformed members of the now unified Protestant church plays a crucial role. In sociological terms this is a distinction between the Reformed bourgeoisie and Christian reformed common people (*Kleine luyden*)—the elite versus the middle and lower classes. The Reformed in general are older, have fewer children, and are less active in the church (in terms of number of visits and taking on official functions) as the Christian reformed; they are also more laid-back and willing to donate if necessary. Consequently they were numerically a minority in the Church council meetings that decided to close the Kapel. The reformed would have been more inclined to sell the church at a lower price, and the Kapel was originally their church. However, if you have no power you are easily overruled. At the same time, the Christian reformed argued that their church had been the first to be closed, so now it was the turn of the Reformed, and given that their second church was already a national monument, closing the Kapel was the only option in their eyes.

The NGOs are fighting for the preservation of cultural heritage. They are similar to environmental or human rights NGOs, but in this case they focus on the cultural or architectural value of buildings. Some *active church members use strong ethical arguments*: a church should not try to make money; it should be happy to serve society. Hence the church should accept a sub-optimal solution, one that saves the building by giving it a societal function like a clinic, a rehearsal space, or an educational center. Some went as far as advising the church to become a commercial property to ensure a continual cash flow. There are precedents for this in neighboring municipalities (like Overveen), where the Roman Catholic Church has turned its peripheral buildings into office space, a children's day care, and so on.

## **FACTORS THAT PLAY A ROLE IN THE PROCESS OF FINDING A SECOND LIFE**

The following factors played a role in this conflict about a sacred place in the Netherlands:

1. In the Protestant tradition a building is not important. The religion is important, but the building is just a collection of bricks and nails.
2. The fact that the church was not centrally located is used by the Christian reformed as an argument to close it.
3. Different approaches/ideas about sound financing: the financial committee stresses having cash in the bank, while activists want to strengthen the Church's earning capacity by renting out the building
4. An aging population, implying declining revenues for the church
5. The organization of the church, namely a council that can decide what it wants and authorize its financial committee to sell at the highest possible price
6. A strong NGO movement in the region wanting to preserve cultural heritage
7. The possible alternative uses and the prices various parties can afford
8. The age and architectural value of a building, older and more beautiful ones usually being easier to save

9. The existence of a group of concerned citizens who insist on conserving cultural heritage
10. The physical planning rules and the extent to which they limit the repurposing of a building
11. The availability of institutional entrepreneurs who can help find a new purpose and launch a sustainable venture
12. The possibility of using the building for other purposes without major investment
13. The beauty of the building and its place in an urban landscape
14. Whether a champion can be found or created—for example, a foundation or association of concerned church members who push for the survival of the church building, but in a different role
15. The quality of the building, which determines the cost of preservation

### **CONCLUSIONS: THE FACTORS THAT REALLY PLAY A ROLE CONCERNING THE FUTURE USE OF CHURCHES IN EUROPE**

The future of the Kapel looks brighter because municipal authorities decided on October 4, 2010 to designate the Kapel as a municipal monument. However, the future of the Kapel is not yet decided, since the church could appeal again and the other legal institutions (the Council of State and the Ministries at the national level) have not yet issued their decisions.

It can be concluded that the Church council or the financial committee does not care much about a second life for the building. Only if sufficient countervailing power is organized can the Kapel survive as a monument with a second life. The Church council and its financial committee are not interested in exploring alternative uses of the building. A short-term benefit is preferred over long-term cash flow by renting out the kapel to other users and the satisfaction of preserving cultural and religious heritage. Redevelopment is considered too expensive, too much work, and too complicated.

However, the following factors seem to play determining roles in whether this church is turned into a cultural heritage site, used for another purpose, or even torn down to make way for other urban projects. First is thorough preparation for legal and administrative processes, allowing various parties to exert influence. Strangely enough, activists from inside the church were silenced by the church. In the end the legal decisions made by the Council of State and the national ministries are more important than any local activities. At that level, NGOs are quite important, because they put pressure on the press and the municipal council. Ultimately legal factors (zoning, being a monument, enjoying protected skyline status) and legal procedures (going to an administrative court and the State council) are more important than moral appeals by church activists and NGOs and moral persuasion through actions and newspaper articles in efforts to preserve sacred places for future generations in Europe. Church authorities just see it as business: sell the church as expensively as possible, preferably to some private party that can make a maximum profit in the deal. Church members see it as something “sacred” and want it to retain this function for future generations. Due to legal barriers, however, the Kapel now has a chance at a second life—one perhaps less sacred but not as secular as that intended by the project developers who wanted to turn it into apartments.

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