Adaptation of Ecclesiastic Heritage: Do Non-Offensive New Uses Exist?

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Abstract. The current trends, affecting religions worldwide, have led to the wide-spread “emptiness” of ecclesiastic architecture that forms a part of the backdrop and fabric of our lives, cities, and countryside. These changes have forced scholars and practitioners from many walks of life to seek adaptation solutions for these endangered structures, which influence the public image of their respective religions and nations. Through the analysis of the Church’s public image in different countries, a study of the increasing numbers of obsolete and abandoned religious buildings across the globe, and by examining different adaptation strategies worldwide, this paper seeks to illustrate the variety of adaptation solutions, and answer which of them can be defined non-offensive.

1. Introduction

According to a study by the Pew Research Centre [1], the percentage of the population who claim to be “unaffiliated” with any religion is steadily increasing throughout Europe. In the Netherlands, atheism holds a percentage of about 42.1%, 28% in France, with Germany, the UK, and Italy at 24.7%, 21.3%, and 12.4% respectively. In the US this percentage is at 16.4%, while in China almost half the population does not affiliate themselves with a religion [1]. Along with a disassociation with any kind of established religion, a pattern of declining congregations is prevalent in most countries. In France, less than 5% of Catholics regularly attend church on Sunday, while in the Czech Republic it is less than 3% [2].

While in Russia, thousands of Orthodox churches left empty or abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and to this day they continue to rot away, due to the fact that conservation efforts have yet to be planned or implemented.

In summation, shrinking congregations in many countries have left many churches unable to maintain large scale properties. To counteract this, some congregations have consolidated their parishes in order to avoid skyrocketing maintenance costs and adapt to a new normal of consistent low attendance, while others attempt to maintain ownership and investigate various space sharing options [3]. The adaptation of national heritage sites for contemporary uses is one of the key issues in the ever-evolving sustainable development movement, and it has long been recognized that the continuation of appropriate usage of historic buildings is one of the best ways of ensuring their survival [4]. As such, the author argues that adaptation of obsolete and abandoned ecclesiastic heritage, through Non-
**Offensive New Uses**, contributes greatly to sustainable development of such heritage and ensures the continuation of their life cycle.

2. Literature review – Adaptation and adaptive reuse

Adaptation has been well-studied and examined by many researchers all around the world. The definition itself is associated with the change of use, the renewal of basic structure and fabric that aims to extend the life of a property [4; 5; 6; 7]. Wilkinson, Remoy and Langston [8], wrote that frequently such terms as renovation, adaptive reuse, refurbishment, remodelling, retrofitting, conservation, transformation, rehabilitation, and restoration of buildings are used to define adaptation activities. “Adaptive reuse” involves converting a building to undertake a change of use required by new or existing owners [9]. Adaptive reuse, though a specific technical term today, in principle has long been interwoven with the history of ancient monuments and the development of policies for the preservation of heritage [10].

The definition of cultural heritage “Adaptation” adopted for this research will be as follows: any work to a building over and above maintenance to change its spaces, tasks, capacity, function, or performance, in other words, any interventions to adjust, reuse, or upgrade a building to suit new conditions or requirements [6; 8].

Changing the use of historic buildings has not always been favoured in the history of architectural conservation. Morris’s [11] manifesto of “The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings” contains a plea “to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, raise another building rather than alter or enlarge the old one”. Today, the principles for such conversions are firmly established in a policy: the Council of Europe’s Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe adopted in Granada in 1985 [12] specifically commits member states to foster “the adaptation where appropriate of old buildings for new uses” – subject to “due regard being had to the architectural and historical character of the heritage” [13]. Good adaptation practice allows a structure of a church evolve and adapt to meet changing needs while retaining its particular significance.

In summation, this paper aims to study a range of possible new uses which can potentially applied to obsolete and abandoned ecclesiastic heritage. Further, on the basis of which, the author will define what new uses can be defined as Non-Offensive New Uses.

2.1. Adaptation through adaptive reuse of ecclesiastic heritage: Case studies

The author analysed 65 case studies in religious heritage adaptation from all around the world. The Use Interventions which were applied to these case studies were divided into were divided into two general types: Extended Religious Use and Functional Conversion that includes five sub-types: Arts and Cultural Activities, Community and Institutional Uses, Commercial Post-Religious Use, Residential Post-Religious Use, and Office Post-Religious Use.

2.1.1. Extended Religious Use. According to many researchers, where it is possible to preserve a former church’s original religious use, it is recommended as the best adaptation solution, or as Harron puts it, “the best use for a church is a church” [13]. With that being said, in most instances where a church had been abandoned in its religious use, it would not be out of the question to presume that it cannot sustain a full congregation in the future without any additional uses. A solution in this case might be the Cohabitational Religious Use, which is seen as the most secure type of adaptation from an expert’s perspective after, of course, preservation as a monument. The Cohabitational Religious Use of a historical church means that the Archdiocese still owns the property and performs religious services inside, however, the religious building can be, periodically in time or partially in space [9], rented by other organizations for non-religious purposes, such as classical music concerts, temporary museum exhibitions, cultural venues or events, etc, or by another religious denomination [22].
2.1.2. Art and Cultural Activities. Functional Conversions for Art and Cultural Activities can suit and take full advantage of former churches with their large open spaces and high ceilings [14], which can host centres of arts, concert halls, multipurpose cultural open spaces, etc. These functions may fit properly to a parish. On top of that, cathedral churches, which were initially built to accommodate a large number of people, have well-suited void spaces with good quality acoustics for concerts and cultural performances. Usually, this type of adaptation is accepted by Archdioceses [14].

Some churches, especially in the USA, share their void spaces with theatres and other cultural performances, due to the fact that artists need space and churches have an abundance of free space. This creates a symbiotic relationship, in which historic religious spaces, such as churches, help alleviate performing artists’ need for space, thus benefitting both groups and better integrating them into the community. In other cases, former churches in a state of ruin are simply left in their ruined condition. These post-religious buildings can serve as museums under a roof, open-air museums or memorial centres open for believers, along with other visitors.

2.1.3. Community and Institutional Activities. Former churches can be reused for Community and Institutional Activities, another type of Functional Conversion, accepted by Archdioceses. These activities require the transferring of a church to a governmental institution, which would allow the use of the whole building for public or social purposes. Community centres, as a type of Community Use, are popular solutions for churches located in thriving communities with a lack of social facilities [9].

2.1.4. Residential Post-Religious Use. In her Master’s thesis at the University of Massachusetts, Duckworth [15] pointed out that “recent trends of using former church buildings as shell and facade residential space (commonly luxury condominiums), has garnered mixed reactions” and is not always appreciated by the community, while an archdiocese might “accept, but not prefer this type of functional conversion” [16]. Duckworth performed several informal interviews with people, primarily representatives of the creative class, and discovered that according to them, the idea of living in a place where baptisms and funerals took place does not seem quite right while living in an adapted industrial property is “cool” [15].

2.1.5. Commercial Post-Religious Use. This adaptation is represented by a wide variety of food services, retail, hotels, entertainment facilities, and multifunctional centres. On the one hand, this type of adaptation can be desirable for churches that have urban landmark locations, where a well-advertised new use of a church is very attractive for customers along with tourists. On the other hand, Commercial Post-Religious Use is the type of adaptation most opposite to church activities [16], and could possibly damage the public image of the church and provoke outspoken displeasure in society. Certain examples of Commercial Post-Religious Uses, such as Gattopardo bar-disco in Milan, Italy, with a bar counter and a DJ post in place of the former altar, or Nottingham Church Bar in Nottingham, the United Kingdom, raised heated discussions among believers and scholars. Nevertheless, Commercial Post-Religious Use can be religious-oriented, for example, a religious bookstore, which could help get buy-in from society.

2.1.6. Office Post-Religious Use. Former churches can be equipped, through adaptive reuse, to Office Post-Religious Use for a single company, a complex that is constituted by offices for several companies, and/or a mix of office and multi-purpose spaces depending on companies’ needs, which could even host public events. Velthuis and Spennemann [17] wrote that “in the Netherlands according to the Centre for Architecture and Town Planning Tilburg [18], some users, such as lawyers, architects, and graphic designers, seek out the unique experience of being in a church and, having the space, exclusivity and perhaps the prestige […] they are quite willing to put up with all the inconveniences and discomforts that come with such a venue”, thus, all the above professionals can be seen as potential users of adapted church buildings.
3. Proposal – Description of Non-Offensive New Uses in ecclesiastic heritage adaptation

In a time where society is moving ever forward, and at a quickening pace, churches will potentially be confronted with adaptation alternatives that match the time in which efforts are undertaken, and occasionally this could lead to proposed uses that might be difficult for some to come to terms with. Skate parks, bars, restaurants, disco bars are some uses which could be widely criticized and deemed “offensive” in the eyes of many, yet tourists are attracted to such unusual utilization of historical churches. For example, the former St. Mary’s Church in Dublin, which had been converted to a restaurant, “The Church” (Commercial Post-Religious Use), is one of the first tourists’ destinations in the city, even though it is located away from downtown, and highlights why such alterations should be pragmatically considered. The study has come to understand that while the above uses could be seen as offensive to the church, at the same time, it does not mean that those uses will not be accepted by society.

Usually, adaptation to Commercial Post-Religious Uses are deemed offensive more often than other types of ecclesiastic heritage adaptation. A whiskey distillery is another doubtful new use, which was applied to the former Church of St. James in Dublin, Ireland (see figure 1), that stands on a historic site at the edge of the Liberties, one of Dublin’s oldest parishes founded in the 12th Century. The church suffered over the years from a dwindling local Church of Ireland population, and gradually the church fell into disuse and was finally closed and deconsecrated in 1954. In later years, the church went into several uses, most recently a lighting showroom, until finally it was sold to Pearse Lyons’ family and was renovated to Pearse Lyons Whiskey Distillery [22]. The church works now as a boutique, working distillery, which shows the process of whiskey distilling. Again, on the one hand, an idea to put a distillery in an old church might be considered the most offensive use for a former church.

On the other hand, if one asks why Pearse Lyon bought a historic church and transformed it to an unprofitable doubtful use, many interesting facts will be discovered that help in understanding national thinking. First, the family of Pearse Lyon hails from the Liberties, Pearse’s uncles and grandfather were coopers in the nearby St. James Gate Brewery and as many as 9 family members are thought to be buried in the graveyard adjoining the church. Moreover, during the restoration, architects designed a few new Irish artisan stained glass windows that illuminate the distillery interior. The illustrations depicted on the windows include the pilgrimage to the Camino de Santiago, also known as “St. James’ Way”; how Irish Whiskey is made; the art of coopering; and the natural ingredients grown for Irish “uisce beatha” (Irish for “water of life”). Thus, the story becomes clearer; whiskey for Irish society is a source of national pride, a “water of life”, just as worshiping in a church had been associated with all
the important dates of every family. And since many Irish people do not worship anymore, Pearse Lyons revived the important historic building, which has strong connection with the history of his family, through another important national sacred tradition – a tradition of distillation. The Liberties Dublin wrote about the reuse of the Church of St. James, taking an interview from Deirdre Lyons, a wife of Pearse Lyons: “The nature of the layout of Pearse Lyons Distillery means we will always be a boutique visitor attraction. The tour guides will be called storytellers because the difference between our distillery and others is the fabulous history of the location and of the church itself. It all becomes a story — a story of whiskey, a story of the Liberties and the history of the graveyard” [19].

To summarize, the story of Pearse Lyons Distillery shows that, though doubtful, every proposed use should be seen, and considered in its context. Depending on the history of a place, a use considered very offensive and/or unacceptable in one country/city/community might be trusted, respected, and even appreciated by another society. Every use, if it can be proven with facts, history, and knowledge of context, is feasible.

Smock Alley Theatre (see figure 2) in Dublin, Ireland, is located in the former St. Michael and St. John’s Church, which was recreated from an old theatre. In the 19th Century two nearby churches were closed and amalgamated into one. Old Smock Alley Theatre became known as the Church of St. Michael and St. John. Opened during the Penal Times, the church faced persecution and restrictions daily. Most notably on the use of the bell that had been illegally installed on the roof. It was the first time a Catholic bell had been rung in Ireland for 300 years, and this happened 18 years before Catholic Emancipation. It went on until 1989 as one of the most popular Catholic churches in the city center. It was small but bright and cheerful. Wisely the parish priests catered to its congregation. It had very early Mass times for the workers, either going to or returning from work on the docks. And in the 1950’s and 1960’s, these early Masses were popular with young men and women heading home from dances the night before. The church was one of the most well attended as the suburbs grew because of its last parish priest [20]. In 1989, due to falling numbers of parishioners, St. Michael and St. John’s Church was deconsecrated. It was then redeveloped into the “Viking Adventure” which was closed down in 2002. Finally, in 2012, Smock Alley Theatre returned to its roots.

The story of Smock Alley Theatre (Art and Cultural Activities) in the former St. Michael and St. John’s Church is a good example of different interpretations of functions through time. Since ancient times a church had been the main place for socialization, the main meeting place, the main place to share moments of joy and tears. Today, the theatre aims to socialize people who attend shows, the same meeting place as it used to be in the church during masses, and now remains an important place for socialization. Moreover, considering that, initially, every church had an educational function, and the function of helping care, it’s interesting that the partial transformation of St. Michael and St. John’s Church was into a theatre school (Community and Institutional Uses), seen by the author as reversal to the initial understanding of what a church building is, partly a place for education. Helping care is embodied in the possibility to organize workshops and masterclasses for different social groups in the theatre’s main space which is adaptable for various events. Thus, some of the functions which had been carried by the church were transformed into the theatre.

4. Concluding remarks
It is important to remember, a church is not only about socialization and education, but is also about unconditional faith in God and adoration of God. It’s a reminder that no theatre, concert hall or library can fill the place of a church in full because “the best use for a church is a church” [13], even if a new use is respectful of the former use of a church. Thus, this paper does not suggest simple replacement of the original use with new uses, but explains how to fit them and make them Non-Offensive New Uses defined by the author as the ones helping carry on the initial mission of a religious building. Once built, every building and its function start to change together with society, and its changing way of life. If the community is not able to preserve the tradition of having a church in its life, then the church should change with the community, but only one aspect has to remain the same – unifying people while responding to their needs.
The definition of a Non-Offensive New Use cannot be introduced globally, due to the fact that one nation can easily accept an adaptation that would be rejected by another nation. Thus, the range of offensive uses should be identified at the national, regional and local levels.

Note
This research paper presents a part of doctoral thesis “Spaces ‘Out of Religious Use’ and Ecclesiastic Architecture as Marketable Real Estate Assets: A Potential Solution for Russia’s Abandoned Religious Heritage Artifacts” written and defended by Anastasiia Sedova in Politecnico di Milano [21].

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