

# Abandoned and Re-Used Churches in Germany

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## 1 ABSTRACT

Abandoned and reused churches are a current societal issue that has achieved considerable public attention in Germany. A growing number of churches, other buildings in the parishes or land owned by the church have been on offer for sale more frequently in the past years. Caused by a decline of church members in the last decades the result is a continuous shortage in the available budgets, which are necessary to maintain the property. The general treatment of abandoned churches is discussed among professionals in a broad way with different perspectives. One of the main problems is to find appropriate solutions which suit the different participants who are involved in the process of reuse. To keep the church building maintained a form of mixed use is a necessary solution. Within this process new forms of cooperation between the different participants are developed to create a mix of different usages.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

In Germany churches are vacated or not used to their whole extent. Main reason for this trend is the declining number of church-goers. An excess amount of sacred buildings ensues, all of them in need of new uses in accordance with the building substance. The Protestant and the Catholic Church have to find functional solutions which are structurally and economically sustainable.

In the near future both of them will not be able to maintain their property economically. The scope of follow-up uses is broad and ranges from changes or extension of use to demolition as a last solution.

There are diverse types of churches and parishes. Two main differences are for example the position of the church building in town is variable or the financial framework of a parish. This leads to an inability of finding standardised solutions, making spacial context and involved player's vital components in the process.

## 3 SITUATION OF THE CHURCHES IN GERMANY

Both churches have abundant spaces at their disposal: The Protestant Church owns approximately 75'000 buildings of which about 21'000 are churches and chapels. Out of this number over 16'600 are listed buildings.<sup>1</sup> The remaining buildings serve profane uses: as rectories, trust homes, nurseries etc. The Catholic Church owns approximately 60'000 building of which about 24'500 are churches and chapels. Out of this number over 23'000 are listed buildings.<sup>2</sup> The preservation, the restoration and the maintenance, especially of the listed buildings, effect major costs<sup>3</sup>.

The high percentage of listed buildings put into focus the immense cultural value of parish buildings while causing high maintenance costs. Plus, these buildings need to answer to new standards like accessibility as well as user demands like heated service rooms and state of the art utilities management.

The number of church-goers is declining. In between 2007 and 2010 both congregations have lost nearly a million members each.<sup>4</sup> The chief factor of influence is the demographic change, whereat other factors like lost faith and deficient identification with the church also present important figures. In the long run this decline will cause lower church tax gains and as a result severely affect the financial situation of the churches. We can today assume that in 30 years time the Protestant Church will have lost a third of her

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<sup>1</sup> EKD 2012: 35

<sup>2</sup> EKD 2012: 35

<sup>3</sup> Around 12,3 % of the annual budget by the Protestant Church in Germany is invested in the maintenance and renovation of church building.

The total amount is 1,23 billion euros. (Dagmar Reiß-Fechter (Hrsg.) Kirchliches Immobilienmanagement - Der Leitfaden (2009), p.40)

<sup>4</sup> Statistisches Bundesamt, Statistisches Jahrbuch 2012, p.65, The churches have 23,9 million (protestant) and 24,6 million (catholic) members.

members and half of her current tax income<sup>5</sup>. A similar development is to be expected from the Catholic Church.

Already only a small part of members takes part in church activities. Only 4% of Protestants in Germany regularly attend Sunday service and 14.8% of Catholics attend the Holy Communion.<sup>6</sup>

This trend is expected to carry on in the future. The impacts of this development are still small at this stage. Only 202 protestant churches have been sold and 75 have been demolished between 1990 and 2010.<sup>7 8</sup> In the past 242 catholic churches been taken out of use. Only 30 of them have been demolished. The expectation is that around 3% of have all catholic churches will be losing their function as a sacred place.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4 CONSTRUCTIONAL SOLUTIONS FOR CHANGES OF USES

The existing excess amount of vacant buildings in both congregations makes them unable to put their whole property to good use and forces them to develop solutions and concepts for their extended use. Apart from constructional operations which require financial investments, organisational concepts for more dense or extended uses are being researched. Well known are the following:

- Organisational solutions: By merging multiple rectorates single church buildings can be used more efficiently and to a heightened capacity. To extend this way of usage, communal functions can be added and combined in church buildings.
- Densification of uses: various parochial functions previously accomodated in profane buildings are transferred into church buildings. This way of integrating and densifying church-related uses reduces the number of local church buildings in the long term.<sup>10</sup>
- Extension of use: New functions are added inside the church buildings. This can be achieved temporarily, for example with a profane usage during the week and a sacral usage on the weekends (example Kulturkirche Hamburg Altona<sup>11</sup>), as well as spacially by dividing the sacral room (example Müncheberg). For many churches this can be the first step to a thorough reuse.<sup>12</sup>
- Reuse of churches<sup>13</sup>: The complete change of a sacred to a profane use of the church building marks the last step. Hereby conflicts ensue mainly out of the kind of use and the resulting constructional transformations.
- Closure: If no further use can be found, a sensible temporary solution can be the preservation and closure of the building.
- Demolition as a last solution: To prevent a damage of the church image by alien uses, the parish can also choose to demolish the church building.<sup>14 15</sup>

In practice of reuse of a church there are little differences between the two congregations<sup>16</sup>. The main difference between the catholic and the protestant church is that the Catholic Church is a sacred place, which can only be used by a profane user after a process of desecration has taken place.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> H. Adolphsen 2006:30

<sup>6</sup> Fisch 2008:20

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Schulz 2013: p.108-110

<sup>8</sup> Evangelische Kirche: Gebäude und Predigtstätten <http://www.ekd.de/statistik/kirchen.html> (03/11/2013)

<sup>9</sup> Deutsche Bischofskonferenz(2012):34

<sup>10</sup> H. Adolphsen, A. Nohr (Hg.)(2006):5

<sup>11</sup> KulturKirche Altona GmbH <http://www.kulturkirche.de/> (03/20/2013)

<sup>12</sup> Fisch(2008):132

<sup>13</sup> There are several published guidelines, which intend to support parochies to develop methods how to use their church building, e.g. Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen (Hrsg.), R. Miermeister, U. Moggert-Seils, K.H. Schanzmann, H. Schröter: Kirchen umbauen – neu nutzen – umwidmen, Bielefeld 2004. <http://www.ekvw.de/service/dokumente>

<sup>14</sup> Zusammenfassung der Regeln der EKD von Wolfgang Huber 2004 . W. Huber, p. 42 f

<sup>15</sup> Beste (2010):61

<sup>16</sup> The most important difference is that in the Catholic church is not allowed to share the sacred room with a profan user.

<sup>17</sup> Deutsche Bischofskonferenz (2003):26ff.

## 5 POSSIBLE RE-USES OF CHURCHES

New uses of churches are judged differentially in society, depending on their adequacy. In case of sacred buildings most people perceive almost any kind of reuse as degradation.<sup>18</sup> The bad popularity of reuses originates from the high value of church buildings as icons of identification in the general opinion. The question of compliance cannot be answered unambiguously. Futural usage by other congregations or congregational institutions<sup>19 20</sup> is possible, although many parishes (both congregations) rather (tend to criticise and) disapprove of a transformation into a mosque.<sup>21</sup>

Thinkable solutions are for example cultural uses (exhibitions, concert venues, lecture rooms, libraries), offices and other work spaces (studios, workshops). Also examples for accommodation, sports venues (e.g. climbing walls, gymnasia, wellness or baths) as well as gastronomy or hotels can be found. Parishes and citizens tend to rather accept the various forms of cultural uses and most of them are spatially compatible with the sacral spatial structure. Alas, not all abandoned church buildings can be reused this way.

Churches are not only a predominant component of a village or township as a building; they first and foremost take on an important role as a communal institution. In line with national urban development politics the recently concluded cooperational project „Kirche findet Stadt“<sup>22</sup> made it clear that by bringing together multiple stakeholders more sustainable solutions can be found. Churches with all their structural and social potentials present important partners in the development of use concepts on village or district level.

The communal perception and judgement of the reuse with focus on the symbolical value of the building presents a central element of the discussion. The more unique and larger the iconicity, the harder an adequate follow-up use will be found.<sup>23</sup> It will be easier to accept a new use for a post-war church in an urban quarter than for a listed central city church. Aside from the sort of use public accessibility takes on an important role as well. A reuse as a concert hall or museum will be well-received because public accessibility remains possible. A major difference is made between church-related and unrelated uses. Church-related reuses on behalf of the congregation or superior congregational institutions are much better tolerated, also mixed usages or sacral custom solutions such as “city churches”<sup>24</sup> or youth churches. In summary, commercial solutions are looked upon with great reserve, for example has the transformation into a gymnasium for a congregational school as St. Maxim in Trier been much better received than a non-congregational reuse such as a climbing wall venue.

The discussion about adequate forms of use can not be ended concordantly. It is expected that the rising number of vacant sacral buildings will heighten the acceptance for profane solutions.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The broad range of church building types in a specific local context refuses standardised solutions. Albeit, there are various subjects that need to be investigated more closely to yield possible solutions:

- The impeding demolition could be avoided in most cases if the pressure was taken down on the process of transformation. An interesting aspect was brought forth by the new eastern states of Germany to temporarily shut the buildings down and thus take them from the real estate market. This way their impression in the urban space can prevail.

<sup>18</sup> Fisch (2008):67

<sup>19</sup> Aus Grundsätze für gottesdienstlich genutzte Gebäude <http://www.ekir.de/bauberatung/umnutzungen/beschluss-der-kirchenleitung.php> (03/20/2013)

<sup>20</sup> They have to be a member of the „Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland“. <http://www.oekumene-ack.de/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> Hasse (2013) Kirche“ Abriss manchmal besser als Moschee“ im Hamburger Abendblatt vom 09.02.2013, <http://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article113501393/Kirche-Abriss-manchmal-besser-als-Moschee.html> (03/10/2013)

<sup>22</sup> Diakonie Deutschland (2013): Kirche als zivilgesellschaftlicher Akteur in Netzwerken der Stadtentwicklung, <http://www.kirche-findet-stadt.de/> (03/12/2013)

<sup>23</sup> EKIR(2013): Arbeitshilfe für Umnutzung und Entwidmung von Gebäuden „Weniger ist mehr“: Neues Leben unter dem alten Kirchturm <http://www.ekir.de/www/service/7CD9B17FCB65496884693852C8172210.php> (03/10./2013)

<sup>24</sup> Citykirche is an oecumenical project of churches, which are usually located in the inner city. The aim of the project is to motivate passersby to visit the church or to have a short rest.

- The significance of church buildings in an urban context is also a visual one. They make great impact on the townscape and are often found in central locations where they vitally add to local identification and genius loci.
- Strategies of reuse differ and depend on their application in cities or in rural areas. The significance of a church building is usually higher in villages which complicates profane reuses.
- A church building inventory should be established on a communal level.<sup>25</sup> The goal should be the portrayal of all disposable spaces for the community and their individual use intensity and capacity. New concepts and strategies for reuse can subsequently be found in cooperation with all congregations.

Not only do both churches have to think about spatial and architectural concepts, they also have to be open to new concepts in their church work. Only then they will stand a chance to preserve the church as buildings and as an institution and fill them with life anew.

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<sup>25</sup> Beste (2010):65