

Adaptive Reuse of Roman Catholic Churches

Good Practice and Viable Solutions
for Converting Sacred Spaces

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Research context and aims

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1 Research context and aims

1.1 Introduction

For centuries, the architectural history of European cities has been deeply influenced by significant religious events. Even today, religious heritage remains a vital and lasting part of the urban landscape, reflecting the cultural identity, historical continuity, and social values that have shaped these cities over time. Historic churches – symbols of identity, culture, and heritage – represent an important part of collective memory and serve as enduring signs of spiritual continuity within society. All architecture, as Deyan Sudjic (2005) states, “has its origins in sacred building. Its techniques, intellectual as well as material, have shaped architecture’s contemporary role and given us our understanding of an architectural language, with temporal as well as a spiritual content”. Church buildings have long carried deep symbolic meaning through their form, spatial layout, location, and interior design, often evoking a sense of the transcendent. For this reason – especially in Europe – they hold not only historical, architectural, and religious significance but also profound cultural and social value, reflecting the identity, memory, and shared experience of communities over time. Peter Zumthor (2006, 23) observes that architecture, while “rooted in the present, reflects the spirit of its creator and responds to contemporary questions – through its form, appearance, relationship with other works of architecture, and its connection to the place in which it stands”.

Architecture reflects the changing dynamics of a community, acting as a lens that reveals its history and core values. Religious heritage, both tangible and intangible, plays a key role in identifying and authenticating the identity of national groups. Thomas Barrie (2010, 212), in his book *The Sacred in-between: The mediating roles of architecture*, states that it is “through symbolism and ritual use that sacred architecture creates the intermediary zone required by the religions it was built to serve”. Architecture has a crucial position in the cultural landscape, not only shaping the physical environments we inhabit but also reflecting the values, histories, and identities of the societies that create it. It serves as a tangible record of human experience – marking shifts in belief, power, and tradition – while continuing to influence how we interact with space, community, and one another. Deyan Sudjic (2005), in the book *The edifice complex: How the rich and powerful shape the world*, describes architecture as “the most visible expression of cultural

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and civic values, emphasizing that architecture consistently revolves around the same themes: power, glory, spectacle, memory, and identity”.

The church primarily serves as a place of worship and a strong symbol of Christian faith that is “embedded in culture and society, and if we want to understand and serve it, we must see it in context and study that contexts as well” (Halík 2024, 21). Faith, as noted by Thomas Coomans (2012, 222),

is a decisive factor of the identity of nations, people, social groups, and communities, more than any other building type religious buildings crystallize a complex range of symbolic, psychological, and ideological values, including power and authority, tradition and modernity, emotion and devotion, ethics and aesthetics, theology and liturgy. The balance between all these values evolve over time as a result of changing historical contexts, successive generations and new perceptions.

What distinguishes sacred buildings from secular ones is their liturgical function, hosting rites such as marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation, and funeral services – all of which are deeply rooted in religious worship. These ceremonies mark significant moments in the lives of individuals and communities, reinforcing the spiritual role of these spaces and their connection to tradition, belief, and collective memory. The church as a building is a place where a religious community comes together to celebrate the Eucharist. There is also a place for silence and personal prayer. These roles and rites of passage give churches a deep emotional resonance within the community, making their transformation a matter of both cultural and spiritual sensitivity.¹ As a result, they should be approached differently from secular structures and not regarded purely in terms of utility or function. Cornelius Gurlitt (1921), in *Die Pflege der kirchlichen Kunstdenkmäler: Ein Handbuch für Geistliche, Gemeinden und Kunstfreunde* [The care of ecclesiastical art monuments: A handbook for clergy, congregations and art lovers], writes that “the builder in the church is the liturgy”. What defines Catholic churches is the sacramental presence of Christ, signified by the sanctuary lamp burning before the Blessed Sacrament. Moreover, churches are often constructed in places of profound spiritual significance. Many are built on the graves of martyrs or saints, on sites that have been revered as holy since ancient times, or in locations where miracles have been reported. These choices imbue the church with a deep, historical sanctity, linking the physical space to the divine through centuries of faith and devotion.

Halík (2024, 13) describes tradition as a “living stream of creative transition and witness”. Religious heritage can act as a transmitter of the age-old values linked to the identity of a territory, while reflecting on the relationship between the religious value and the monumental value of a place. Christian traditions and religious architecture have had an irreversible effect on the shaping of time and space in Europe. Even today, years are measured according to whether they were Before Christ or Anno Domini – in the year of the Lord. Both week and year follow the Christian cycle; major festivals and days off refer to Christian holidays. In Europe, the

physical presence of Christian churches has huge symbolic value; their silhouettes have for many centuries formed a defining characteristic of the skyline of our built heritage. Today, that religious skyline is changing with the addition of mosques and other places of worship – a visual indicator of growing religious diversity. Europe is evolving, but the Christian tradition and its architecture remain deeply embedded in both the physical and the cultural environment.

Françoise Choay (2001) describes churches as “one of the most significant elements of cultural heritage for groups or nations who claim a Christian historical legacy, because of their role in the history of art or in the history of the city or the



Figure 1.1 The Calvary in Antwerp, Belgium. Photograph by the author, 2024.

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country”. Examples such as the Calvary in Antwerp² (Figure 1.1) and the panoramic view of Warsaw’s Old Town³ (Figure 1.2) highlight the lasting presence of religious signs in the urban fabric. Their domes and spires continue to shape the city skyline, standing alongside historic architecture and modern skyscrapers – symbols of continuity amid transformation. The sacred landscape is rich with diverse meanings, symbols, rituals, and traditions of devotion. Churches and other sacred structures stand as highly visible markers of religious identity. Their prominence in the landscape reflects not only their institutional significance but also their role in reinforcing and expressing symbolic power within society (Wierzbicka, 2013).

In an era of a capitalist economy and consumer culture, in an era of secularization and “dechurching”, the boundaries between the sacred and the secular – between *sacrum* and *profanum* – are becoming increasingly blurred. The religious experiences of older generations may hold little significance for the generations that follow. Despite transculturalism and the diffusion of cultures,⁴ as Sharon Macdonald (2013, 242–243) emphasizes, the church as “a building – a sacred space – continues to play a significant role in shaping the European city”. For centuries, Western Europe was characterized by a largely homogeneous Christian culture, and its religious heritage is deeply embedded in both the physical and cultural fabric of society. However, due to migration and cultural diffusion, this is changing. It is worth noting that in contemporary Western European cities, the urban landscape is increasingly becoming a reflection of growing religious diversity. This shift should not be seen as something negative, but rather as a reflection of the times, prompting us to find solutions.

Social and cultural changes within a society inevitably affect sacred architecture as well. In many European cities, declining church attendance and the high cost of upkeep have led to churches being purchased by private individuals and repurposed as cultural venues, residences, or commercial spaces. The phenomenon of church reuse has a multifaceted nature. It requires “understanding and respect for cultural and religious values, and the engagement of local communities in the choice of projects for future transformation, so that they can be sustainable from a technical,



Figure 1.2 Panoramic view of Warsaw’s historic old town with modern skyscrapers in the background. Photograph by the author, 2025.

economic, social, and cultural point of view” (Arno, 2025). These changes reflect the broader processes of secularization and desacralization across Europe. Churches have experienced a decline in attendance for worship, yet been increasingly visited for their historical and artistic value. When left unused, these structures gradually deteriorate, contributing to the decline of their urban surroundings. Addressing this issue requires the collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders – including religious institutions and church authorities, property owners, architects and conservators, and public bodies responsible for cultural heritage, as well as local communities and future generations, who are both the users and heirs of these historic spaces. The issue of church reuse has become increasingly important as an urban, architectural, and conservational task in Europe, the USA, and Canada. The complex and evolving phenomenon of church reuse cannot be fully understood through architectural, technical, or heritage perspectives alone. Insights from theology and the sociology of Christianity are essential, as they broaden our understanding and offer valuable perspectives from the often unseen spiritual dimension.

Religious heritage, like all forms of heritage, is constantly being reinterpreted and reshaped to meet the demands of an evolving present. Even when they lose their liturgical function, churches’ evangelizing presence remains. As stated in the document *Guidelines on the decommissioning and ecclesial use of churches* (2019), “we need to take into account the concepts of resilience, sustainability, co-responsibility and planning”. Every religious building has an inherent character shaped by its historical evolution. Therefore, it is essential to strike a balance between honoring its memory and embracing innovation. When repurposing important heritage sites, it is vital not only to preserve their physical structure but also to protect and communicate their historical and cultural meaning, thereby enhancing their value. This balance, which respects the building’s cultural and historical significance, forms the foundation of the book. As Andrea Longhi (2022) points out, “adaptive reuse is not an emerging theme or a trend, but the constitutive nature of religious heritage, just as resilience is not a recent challenge, but the way of life of Christian communities and their heritage”.

1.2 Aims and scope

Sacred architecture offers a unique reflection of the spiritual life of its time. Repurposing former churches for new uses is a delicate and often contentious matter, particularly in societies like Poland, where Christian values remain deeply respected. The preservation and transformation of religious heritage require thoughtful, well-informed approaches that are rooted in both respect and expertise. This challenge is a shared responsibility, requiring open dialogue among various stakeholders. The question of church reuse is a highly controversial and difficult one. While it would be unrealistic to expect any book to resolve all the debates, offering a fresh perspective on the fundamental questions surrounding churches, their meanings, and their secular uses could be valuable to all parties involved. Kieckhefer (2004, 19) highlights this effectively, noting that “churches have theological significance, but in fluid and complex rather than fixed and simple ways”.

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The primary goal of this study is to explore how sacred buildings can be repurposed for secular functions, using selected examples from Western Europe to show that there are many viable redevelopment examples that respect the building's sacred character and prevent desecration. A secondary aim of this book is to provide best practices, comparing and presenting a wide range of reuse approaches – highlighting both those that honor and preserve the sacred, historical, and cultural values of these spaces, and those that, intentionally or not, result in their profanation. By examining these different functions and outcomes side by side, the book seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions involved in church reuse. How can the adaptive reuse of Roman Catholic churches preserve and revitalize their heritage, narratives, traditions, and values, while maintaining their connection to the original liturgical function and shaping their future?

The third key issue explored in this book is the conflicts of interest that arise between heritage conservation bodies and church law, and between tangible and intangible heritage and values. These tensions are formally recognized in a document *Conservation of living religious heritage* (Stovel et al., 2005), which states that “the goals of religious communities often appear to be in conflict with the goals of conservation authorities for conserving heritage”. It also emphasizes that the evolution and adaptation of religious practices, rituals, and festivals to modern circumstances should be seen as a natural part of the ongoing continuity of living religious heritage and should be considered in conservation decision-making. The aim of this research is to explore how conservation and preservation can be reconciled with religious law.

It is essential to clearly define the scope and limitations of the study and research methods. This work focuses exclusively on the adaptation of Roman Catholic church buildings. Other sacred buildings – such as chapels, church ruins, monasteries, synagogues, mosques, or Orthodox churches – are not included, as they represent a separate topic with distinct conditions and effects. Kilde (2008) explains that Roman Catholics believe in and experience the divine presence within their churches and other sacred spaces, as well as in consecrated bread and wine (which are seen as the body and blood of Jesus). In contrast, Protestants tend to view the sacredness of churches more metaphorically, with the people themselves bringing the sacredness as a community of worshippers. Another reason for focusing on Roman Catholic church buildings is their large number and their significant role in fostering community life in neighborhoods, villages, and cities. Additionally, as mentioned in the preface, my academic background and research have primarily centered on the Roman Catholic tradition, which has provided me with a deeper understanding of its theological, architectural, and cultural significance.

The case studies presented in this book come from Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. All the discussed buildings are under heritage protection and have been repurposed over the past two decades – a period during which adaptive reuse has significantly expanded. Case studies from Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium were selected as this phenomenon has been especially widespread in these countries, offering a wide range of transformation examples. Together, these

cases provide valuable insights for architects, conservators, historians, and church authorities in other regions and countries to analyze and potentially apply suitable solutions. Case studies from Poland are also included, as the author lives and works there. These examples may be especially valuable to international readers, providing insight into a phenomenon that has been the subject of relatively few publications. The questions raised are of urgent relevance on both sides of the Atlantic.

Through an exploratory study, twenty-five case studies were gathered and thoroughly analyzed to highlight the various aspects and practices in this field. This book is intentionally multi-layered and multi-dimensional, though it does not claim to be comprehensive. This publication is aimed at architects, historians, art theorists, architecture researchers, conservators, priests, and the managers of these buildings, as well as enthusiasts of sacred architecture who care deeply about its future.

1.3 Methodology

Architecture, as a discipline within the arts, is inherently complex to analyze – especially when it comes to sacred architecture, which goes far beyond aesthetics or function. Sacred spaces are imbued with symbolism, ritual significance, and spiritual intent, making them not just physical structures but expressions of belief, memory, and identity. Sacred architecture demands a multidimensional approach to analysis, one that considers theological context, cultural background, liturgical function, and emotional impact. Unlike secular buildings, the church is “uniquely imbued with an architecture of rituals, in which holy rites performed over millennia are imprinted on its elements, from the floor plan to the detail” (Wong, 2023, 147).

The study utilized qualitative research methods, emphasizing the collection and analysis of diverse empirical materials. A critical analysis approach was applied to relevant literature and sources, including academic literature (scientific publications, edited volumes, conference proceedings, doctoral dissertations, and journal articles); archival materials and historical photographs; legislation and legal documents; doctrinal texts, legal codes, international agreements, declarations, and conventions; and electronic sources. A literature analysis was carried out of current academic and practical discussions to present the state of research and practice on church repurposing in Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Additionally, statistical data were examined to analyze social changes in these countries, which constitute the territorial scope of the research. This use of statistics is called “descriptive” statistics because it simply presents or describes important relationships among variables (Wang & Groat, 2013, 271).

The next phase employed the historical–interpretative research method, which involved collecting, documenting, and assessing source materials pertaining to the selected twenty-five reused churches. This involved fieldwork, including on-site observation and analysis of artifacts, a review of documentation and the buildings themselves, and an assessment of their urban context. Interviews were conducted with the owners and managers of the properties as well as architects and designers of the projects. This stage of the study helped establish an understanding of each building’s history, assess its technical condition, and produce photographic documentation

and an inventory of its current state. The field research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of each building's history and technical condition, while also allowing for photographic documentation and a detailed inventory of its current state. This included on-site observation and analysis of the buildings themselves, their architectural features, the surrounding urban context, and their landscape settings.

The qualitative research focused on comparing the twenty-five selected case studies based on predefined quality criteria.⁵ Qualitative research tends to emphasize a holistic exploration of complex situations and environments where testing and deduction of sequenced or causal relations are unlikely (Wang & Groat, 2013, 222). This case study approach involved an in-depth analysis of twenty-five buildings, which served as the foundation for drawing key conclusions about the adaptive reuse of Roman Catholic churches. These findings directly address the aims and research questions outlined at the beginning of the book, offering valuable insights into patterns, challenges, and best practices in the transformation of sacred spaces.

1.4 The structure of this book

This book is structured in a logical and progressive manner to guide the reader through the complex and multifaceted topic of the reuse of Roman Catholic churches. It comprises five core chapters, each addressing a distinct layer of the subject, from theoretical foundations and theological perspectives to national frameworks and detailed case studies. The work is framed by a **Preface** and **Acknowledgments**, which offer insight into the motivations behind the research and recognize the contributions of individuals and institutions that made this study possible.

Chapter 1 – Research context and aims. This opening chapter lays the foundation for the study, situating the adaptive reuse of religious buildings within the broader context of contemporary Europe. It begins by outlining the growing relevance of this topic in light of secularization, shifting demographics, and the complex challenges of heritage conservation. The *Aims and Scope* section defines the study's objectives and boundaries, clarifying its specific focus and intended contribution to the field. The *Methodology* describes the qualitative and comparative research framework, integrating architectural and theological perspectives. It details the selection criteria for case studies, the process of site visits, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, providing transparency and rigor in the research design. The *Literature Review* synthesizes key academic contributions on sacred architecture, adaptive reuse theory, heritage values, and the sociology of religion, highlighting both foundational concepts and current debates. To ensure clarity and consistency, the chapter concludes with a list of *Key Terms and Definitions*, establishing the conceptual vocabulary used throughout the book.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework and historical context of church reuse. This chapter examines the reuse of churches through a broad historical, cultural, and philosophical lens. It opens with an overview of historical examples, tracing transformations from the conversion of pagan temples into early Christian churches to the contemporary adaptation of deconsecrated churches into libraries, museums, and community centers. The discussion then turns to the phenomenon of

secularization, outlining its origins, definitions, and diverse interpretations. It also examines the place of religion in a secular age, focusing on themes such as memory, space, and value. The chapter also addresses spirituality and values in both European and global contexts, highlighting the varied ways communities engage with religious heritage. Particular emphasis is placed on the ethical responsibilities of architects when intervening in historic sacred sites, with attention to authenticity, symbolism, and the preservation of community identity. The final section introduces a narrative approach to heritage preservation, demonstrating how storytelling, memory, and meaning can sustain the cultural relevance of sacred spaces in changing social landscapes.

Chapter 3 – Theological reflections and ecclesiastical principles on the interior and adaptation of Roman Catholic churches. This chapter delves into the theological principles and canonical guidelines that shape the Roman Catholic Church's approach to sacred architecture and its reuse. It begins with an exploration of the structure and symbolism of ecclesiastical space, detailing liturgical orientation, spatial hierarchy, and the spiritual significance of liturgical elements such as the altar, nave, and sanctuary. The next section outlines the theological foundations for church adaptation, referencing canon law, papal encyclicals, guidelines, and doctrinal statements. The phenomenon of profanation is also addressed, with a clear definition of what it entails and the circumstances under which it occurs. A comparative analysis follows, focusing on the positions of bishops' conferences in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium. By combining theological and canonical frameworks with regional perspectives, the chapter highlights the enduring significance of sacred space and identifies adaptive reuse approaches that may be acceptable to bishops' conferences in specific contexts. Finally, it examines the tension between heritage conservation authorities – who prioritize the preservation of material value and historic fabric – and the church, which seeks to protect the sanctity and liturgical integrity of its worship spaces.

Chapter 4 – Religious landscape and church property management in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Poland. This chapter offers an in-depth comparative overview of the religious landscape and church property management in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Poland, providing a distinctive perspective on the adaptive reuse of sacred buildings. Each national profile presents key data on religious affiliation, charting trends in church attendance, membership, and secularization. The analysis also surveys the architectural landscape, detailing the number of church buildings, along with their current uses. Particular attention is given to property management and stewardship, and the institutional responsibilities involved in the maintenance and reuse of these structures. By examining these four contexts side by side, the chapter reveals how differing policies, cultural attitudes, and patterns of religious life influence both the opportunities and the constraints surrounding adaptive reuse. This comparative approach highlights not only the shared challenges of preserving and reimagining sacred spaces in Europe but also the diverse strategies employed to ensure their continued relevance.

Chapter 5 – Case studies. This chapter presents twenty-five selected case studies of church reuse, drawn from the four countries examined in the previous chapter. Chosen according to the criteria outlined in the *Assumptions* section of the chapter, the examples represent a balanced mix of historical periods, architectural styles, geographic settings, and contemporary functions. Each case study follows a consistent analytical framework, addressing three key dimensions: first, the historical and urban context of the church, including its origins, location, and role within the community; second, the architectural transformation of the building, focusing on changes to its form and structure; and third, the adaptation to a new function, covering interior modifications, the nature of the reuse, and the ways in which the new purpose engages with or preserves the site’s sacred heritage. Each study concludes with a concise summary highlighting major insights, challenges, and outcomes. Together, these cases showcase a wide range of reuse strategies – from sensitive interventions that maintain liturgical elements to bold transformations that entirely redefine the space – while offering critical reflections on their successes, limitations, and public reception.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and final conclusions. This chapter brings together the key findings of the research and offers broader reflections on the future of church reuse. It not only summarizes the central themes explored throughout the book but also provides thoughtful insights and practical considerations for those engaged in the repurposing of sacred spaces. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying new uses that honor the building’s spiritual and architectural heritage while avoiding any perception of desecration. These considerations are crucial to ensuring that the transition from sacred to secular use is handled with dignity, sensitivity, and cultural awareness. The conclusions point toward the most suitable new functions – those that preserve historical and sacred values while allowing for the possibility of re-sacralization should it be required in the future. The chapter closes with reflections on the delicate balance between respecting tradition and embracing change, outlining adaptive strategies that are both thoughtful and respectful. Ultimately, it frames church adaptation as a defining phenomenon of our time – one that the present generation must address responsibly and pass on, with care, to those who will inherit these spaces in the years to come.

1.5 Literature review

This study recognizes the complexity and multifaceted nature of adapting sacred buildings for secular use, which is why the literature has been organized into several thematic areas. These include the architectural dimension, which examines potential design interventions, appropriate practices, and examples of poor or insensitive adaptations; the conservation, legal, and theological aspects, which explore the constraints imposed by preservation laws and religious doctrines; and the ethical and philosophical perspective, which addresses how to interpret the adaptation process and considers the architect’s ethical responsibilities in repurposing former places of worship. The research draws on more than two hundred sources, including books, legal documents, and online materials. This section highlights the most

relevant literature directly related to the transformation of sacred spaces into secular ones, while also exploring how sacred architecture continues to shape – and be shaped by – the modern world. In addition, it includes key texts on the development of narrative theory, narrative research, and narrative methodology.

In the field of adaptation of sacred building, some important books have been published. Bie Plevoets and Koenraad van Cleempoel, in *Adaptive reuse of the built heritage: Concepts and cases of an emerging discipline* (2019), present adaptive reuse as a growing academic and professional field. Their work introduces innovative methods and tools, historical examples, and contemporary conservation practices. In the Netherlands, *Kerkgebouwen: 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik: van appartement tot zorgcomplex* (2020), edited by Albert Reinstra and Frank Strolenberg, presents 88 examples of churches that have been converted to secular uses, along with up-to-date statistics on deconsecrated churches compared to other Western European countries. In *Loci Sacri: Understanding sacred places* (2012), Professor Thomas Coomans offers a thorough, multidimensional analysis of church adaptation, exploring the broader context of Western secularization. Similarly, Sally Stone's *UnDoing buildings: Adaptive reuse and cultural memory* (2019) delves into the challenges of preserving sacred architectural heritage in an increasingly secular society and considers how to responsibly repurpose church buildings that are no longer serving their original religious role. The book, *Conservation–Adaptation: Keeping alive the spirit of the place. Adaptive reuse of heritage with symbolic value* (2017), edited by Stefano Musso, Loughlin Kealy, and Donatella Fiorani, presents the work of 39 participants from the 5th Workshop on Conservation, organized by the Conservation Network of the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE) in Hasselt and Liège in 2015. The book explores adaptive reuse in heritage sites that hold symbolic meaning, emphasizing the importance of maintaining their spirit while ensuring functional transformation. A noteworthy pair of books by Liliane Wong offer valuable insights into the practice and theory of adaptive reuse in architecture: *Adaptive Reuse: Extending the lives of buildings* (2017) and *Adaptive reuse in architecture: A typological index* (2023). Together, these two books form a comprehensive and thought-provoking exploration of adaptive reuse as both a design strategy and a cultural practice, making them essential reading for anyone interested in sustainable architecture, heritage conservation, or the future of the built environment. The book *Doesn't God dwell here anymore? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage* (2019), edited by Fabrizio Capanni, contains papers from an international conference held by the Holy See and the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 2018, including papal guidelines for adapting churches to secular functions.

When it comes to the development, history, and significance of sacred architecture in the contemporary world, several key publications stand out for their depth and insight. One such work is Thomas Barrie's *The Sacred in-between: The mediating roles of architecture* (2010), which explores how architecture acts as a bridge between the material and the spiritual, emphasizing the unique role sacred spaces play in shaping human experience and religious identity. Philip Johnson's *History*

of Christianity (1979) provides a comprehensive overview of the Christian faith from its origins to modern times. While not exclusively about architecture, the book is crucial for understanding the broader historical and theological context within which Christian sacred architecture evolved. Richard Kieckhefer's *Theology in stone: Church architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (2004) offers a theological and historical analysis of church architecture, tracing its evolution from the Byzantine era to contemporary expressions in places like California. Kieckhefer not only discusses the stylistic changes in architecture but also how buildings embody theological ideas and influence religious practice. His work bridges art history, theology, and cultural studies, making it a foundational text for understanding how architecture expresses belief. Jeanne Halgren Kilde's *Sacred power, sacred space: An introduction to Christian architecture and worship* (2008) delves into the dynamic relationship between church architecture and Christian worship practices. Her interdisciplinary approach highlights how architecture, theology, politics, and social norms intersect in the design and use of worship spaces. The *Bloomsbury handbook of religion and heritage in contemporary Europe*, edited by Lilian Wijnia and Todd H. Weir, brings together a range of scholars to examine the intersection of religion, heritage, and identity in modern European contexts. This volume is particularly valuable for understanding how sacred architecture is being preserved, reinterpreted, or contested in increasingly secular societies. It addresses contemporary debates about heritage, religious pluralism, and the reuse of sacred sites, providing a critical lens on how the past continues to shape the built environment today. Finally, Harold W. Turner's *From temple to meeting house: The phenomenology and theology of places of worship* (1979) investigates the theological and experiential aspects of worship spaces across religious traditions, with a special focus on the Christian shift from temple-like buildings to more community-oriented meeting houses. Turner's phenomenological approach underscores how architecture reflects and shapes religious worldview, making his book essential for understanding the spiritual and social dimensions of sacred architecture across time.

Sociological literature offers crucial insights into the broader cultural and societal shifts that have made church closures and their transformation into secular spaces an increasingly relevant and pressing issue. Zygmunt Bauman's influential works *Globalization: The human consequences* (1998) and *Liquid modernity* (2013) describe a world in constant flux – marked by uncertainty, fluid identities, and the erosion of traditional structures of belonging. Ronald Inglehart's more recent research *Religion's sudden decline: What's causing it, and what comes next?* (2021) documents a dramatic and, at times, unexpected decline in religious affiliation across Western societies, challenging long-held assumptions about the endurance of institutional religion. This trend is further explored in *The new Blackwell companion to the sociology of religion* (2016), edited by Bryan S. Turner, where scholars including Grace Davie and Steve Bruce debate whether these shifts signal a profound secularization or merely a transformation in how faith is lived and expressed. The continued relevance of religion in modern urban contexts is explored by Becci, Burchardt, and Casanova in *Topographies of faith: Religion in*

urban spaces (2013), which examines how religious practices persist – often subtly or symbolically – in the architecture and cultural rhythms of contemporary cities. This theme is echoed in *Managing sacralities: Competing and converging claims of religious heritage* (2022) by Hemel, Salemink, and Stengs, who analyze how religious heritage is negotiated and preserved amidst diverse and often conflicting social, political, and economic interests. Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s *Religion as a chain of memory* (2000) offers a compelling framework for understanding how religion endures not solely through belief but through the transmission of collective memory and ritual over generations. Similarly, *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity* (2020), edited by Isnart and Cerezales, investigates the tensions between preserving Christian heritage and adapting it to contemporary, often secular, societal needs. In *Democracy Needs Religion* (2024), Hartmut Rosa argues provocatively that democratic societies require the moral grounding and community-building functions that religion provides, even as formal religious participation declines. This argument resonates with Charles Taylor’s landmark work *A secular age* (2018), which charts the long-term evolution of Western societies from a time when belief in God was virtually unquestioned to a pluralistic, disenchanted modernity where faith is one choice among many. In a world reshaped by secularization and globalization, Christianity and faith are facing a crisis – one that Tomáš Halík explores in his book *The afternoon of Christianity* (2024). Drawing on the Bible, the history of Christianity, theology, philosophy, psychology, and classic literature, Halík weaves together a rich and thoughtful reflection on the challenges of belief in the modern era. Together, all these works illuminate the complex and often paradoxical ways in which religion, memory, heritage, and identity continue to interact in an era marked by rapid social change and growing secularization. They provide a crucial backdrop for understanding the challenges – and opportunities – involved in repurposing sacred spaces for contemporary use.

Theological literature grounds the conversation about sacred space in a profound exploration of religious meaning, offering essential insight into why certain buildings and rituals hold enduring spiritual significance. Fundamental works such as Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* (1987) and *Myths, dreams and mysteries: The encounter between contemporary faiths and archaic realities* (1979) as well as Rudolf Otto’s *The idea of the Holy* (1958) provide a conceptual framework for understanding how religious experience is intimately tied to specific places, rituals, and symbols. Eliade (1987) explores the human need to distinguish sacred space from the profane, arguing that sacredness is revealed through symbolic manifestations – what he calls “hierophanies”. Otto, on the other hand, delves into the emotional and existential dimensions of encountering the divine, famously describing the experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – an overwhelming mystery that both attracts and terrifies. Romano Guardini’s *Sacred Signs* (1956) builds on this by examining how liturgical gestures, spaces, and objects communicate spiritual truths. His reflections emphasize that the physical actions and settings of worship are not mere rituals but carriers of deep theological meaning. This perspective is complemented by more institutional teachings found in official

Catholic texts such as the *Code of Canon Law* (1983), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2019), and major documents of the Second Vatican Council, including *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (on the liturgy), *Unitatis Redintegratio* (on ecumenism), and *Gaudium et Spes* (on the church in the modern world). These texts collectively define the church's understanding of sacred space, its liturgical functions, and its role in the spiritual and communal life of believers. Jean Hani's *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple* (2007) offers a rich account of how architectural elements, spatial arrangements, and sacred symbols convey spiritual truths within Christian temples. He explains how the temple itself serves as a microcosm of divine order, structured to lead the faithful from the material to the spiritual. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (2018), contributes profound theological insight into the importance of sacred form, unity, and orientation in worship. Ratzinger argues that the design and use of sacred spaces must reflect the heavenly reality the liturgy reveals, reinforcing the church's ecclesial identity and its connection to the transcendent.

From a practical perspective, conservation literature offers crucial guidance for preserving both the tangible and intangible heritage of religious buildings. Works such as Kate Clark's *Informed conservation* (2003) and Bernard Feilden's *Conservation of historic buildings* (2005) lay the groundwork for heritage preservation practices. Clark's book emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural and historical significance of a site before undertaking any intervention, advocating for a values-based approach to conservation that balances historical integrity with contemporary use. Feilden, meanwhile, provides a more technical and methodological framework, offering practical strategies for the maintenance, repair, and adaptive reuse of historic structures, including churches and other sacred buildings. Miles Glendinning's *The Conservation movement: A history of architectural preservation from Antiquity to Modernity* (2013) traces the philosophical and political evolution of the conservation movement over centuries. His historical account situates current debates about heritage in a broader context, showing how shifting ideologies – from romantic nationalism to postmodern sustainability – have influenced how we treat sacred architecture. In addition to these foundational texts, a range of international charters – including the ICOMOS Charters, the *Faro Convention*, the *Venice Charter*, the *Burra Charter*, and the *Krakow Charter* – set out ethical principles and best practices for conservation. More recent contributions to the field reflect a shift toward participatory and community-centered approaches. *Open heritage* (Oevermann et al., 2023), for example, documents the outcomes of the Open Heritage project, a four-year European initiative funded by the Horizon 2020 program. The book presents case studies where local engagement has led to sustainable and innovative transformations – turning deconsecrated churches into cultural centers, housing, or social spaces without erasing their sacred past. Similarly, *The religious heritage complex: Legacy, conservation and Christianity* (2020), edited by Isnart and Cerezales, explores the complexities of conserving Christian heritage in a rapidly secularizing world. The volume examines the tensions between religious tradition, cultural identity, and the practical demands

of heritage management. It emphasizes that religious buildings are not just historical artifacts but living symbols that continue to evoke emotional and spiritual responses, even in secular societies.

Ethical considerations form the backbone of many debates surrounding the adaptation of sacred architecture, particularly when it comes to questions of ownership, responsibility, and transformation. These issues are explored in depth in Tom Spector's *Ethics for architects* (2010), which examines the moral dilemmas architects face in professional practice, from client relationships to the societal impact of their designs. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) further addresses these concerns through its ethical guides (2019, 2021, 2023), which collectively outline principles for responsible architectural practice, including the stewardship of heritage and the respectful transformation of historically and spiritually significant buildings. Konrad Kucza-Kuczyński (2015) takes this conversation further by reflecting specifically on the moral obligations architects bear when working with sacred spaces. Legal and philosophical perspectives add further depth to the discussion.

The adaptation, desacralization, and decommissioning of religious heritage sites have become increasingly urgent issues, demanding careful attention from church authorities, academic institutions, and organizations committed to the preservation of religious and cultural heritage across Western Europe. As religious practice continues to decline in many regions, the future of these historically and spiritually significant buildings is being reimagined through both scholarly inquiry and community-driven initiatives. Each year, a growing body of research, publications, and annual reports is produced by NGOs and heritage organizations working in this field. Notable contributors include PARCUM (Belgium), Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), the Churches Conservation Trust (UK), the Historic Churches Foundation of Groningen, Sacred Places/Civic Spaces (USA), Reliwiki.nl, and Stichting Oude Groninger Kerken (SOGK). These organizations not only document and protect religious sites but also propose sustainable models for their reuse. For example, FRH actively advocates for the protection of Europe's religious heritage at both national and EU levels, while the TRANSARA project (Transformation of sacred space: Function and use of religious places in Germany) explores how religious buildings in Germany are being repurposed in light of changing societal needs. Collectively, these efforts reflect a growing awareness of the importance of preserving the cultural, historical, and emotional value of sacred spaces, even as their original religious functions evolve or disappear.

1.6 Key terms and definitions

This book explores topics spanning architecture, conservation, philosophy, and theology. Since many of the terms used in these fields can be open to interpretation, the most frequently referenced concepts are clearly defined. It is important for me to clarify what I mean by the following terms. These definitions are based mainly on the literature and sources cited in each relevant discipline within the book.

Adaptation – (from Latin *adaptatio*, meaning “adjustment”) refers to the process of restoring and modifying existing buildings to accommodate a new function or

to continue their use. The goal of adaptation is to ensure the ongoing usability and relevance of the place while retaining its cultural heritage value. This process often includes physical alterations or additions that respect the character and integrity of the original structure or setting. While adaptation allows for functional updates and compliance with modern needs – such as accessibility, safety, or energy efficiency – it must avoid compromising the heritage significance of the place (*ICOMOS New Zealand Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value*, 2010).

Adaptive reuse – the process of repairing and restoring existing buildings for new or continued use has become an emerging field that intersects with the more established disciplines of architecture, interior architecture, conservation, engineering, and planning (Plevoets & Cleempoel, 2019, 23). Adaptive reuse is nowadays widely considered to play a key role in strategic intervention in urban settings to address the increasingly urgent questions, as well as cultural and economic challenges, of how to deal with redundant building stock that is growing and heterogeneous (Lanz & Pendlebury, 2022).

Aesthetics – a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of beauty, art, and taste, as well as the creation and appreciation of beauty. It examines how people perceive and respond to aesthetic experiences and what constitutes artistic value and meaning. As a general theory of art, aesthetics addresses questions about artistic expression, interpretation, and the emotional or intellectual impact of art (Beardsley, 1998).

Consecration (from the Latin *consecratio*, meaning “sanctification”) and **dedication** (*dedicatio*, meaning “devotion”) are solemn acts by which objects – either movable or immovable – are formally set apart for exclusive religious use. Movable items may include sacred images, relics of saints or the blessed, and liturgical objects such as patens, chalices, portable altars, and monstrances. Immovable objects include churches, chapels, oratories, cemeteries, and fixed altars permanently attached to the floor. Blessing refers to the ritual sanctification of items used in liturgy – such as holy water, oils, vestments, and vessels – as well as everyday objects such as homes and food. According to the *Code of Canon Law* (1983), consecration is the solemn dedication to God of a person, place, or object through a sacred rite, marking it as permanently set apart for divine service.

Conservation (from the Latin *conservare*, meaning “to preserve” or “to safeguard”) refers to a fundamental set of practices within the heritage protection system aimed at preserving the material components of cultural heritage – both movable and immovable – as well as natural specimens of scientific importance. These efforts focus on maintaining heritage assets in good condition through actions such as removing harmful factors and, when necessary, reinforcing structural integrity. As defined in the *Venice Charter* (1964), conservation is intended to ensure the ongoing care and maintenance of a heritage site, supporting its continued use in a way that does not fundamentally alter its structure or design. Conservation is based on respect for the existing fabric, associations, meanings, and use of the place. It requires a cautious approach of doing as much work as necessary but as little as possible, and retaining authenticity and integrity, to ensure that the place and its values are passed on to future generations (*ICOMOS New Zealand Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value*, 2010). The *Burra Charter*⁶

(2013) defines conservation as all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance.

Conversion (from the Latin *convertere*, meaning “to change”) refers to the process of reassigning a sacred building – such as a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple – from its original religious tradition to a different one, allowing it to be used for worship by a different religious tradition. In the context of religious heritage, it involves not only the physical reuse of a sacred space but also the reinterpretation or removal of its symbolic, liturgical, and artistic elements. The architectural adaptation may require careful modification of altars, iconography, spatial orientation, and ritual furnishings to align with the practices of the new faith while preserving the historical integrity of the building.

Church (from the Greek *kyriakon* (*dōma*) – “the house of the Lord”, and from the Latin *ecclesia* – used more broadly to mean “church” or “assembly”) – defined, in the narrowest sense, as a sacred building designated for divine worship (most commonly Christian) to which the faithful have the right of access, particularly for the public celebration of liturgical rites, including Mass and other sacraments, and must be dedicated or blessed according to canonical norms (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983, Can, 1214). The Christian church building acquired the name *domus ecclesiae* (the house of the church, or the assembly of the people of God), and then came to be used not just for the living community but also of the building that housed it (Ratzinger, 2018, 62). More broadly, it refers to an organized religious community that brings together followers of Christ, such as the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Churches. From a theological point of view, the church is more than just one social institution or interest group; it is “a sacrament – a symbol and effective sign of the unity of all humanity in Christ” (Halík, 2024, 22).

Cultural heritage – defined as the totality of resources inherited from the past that people identify, regardless of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their continuously evolving values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions. Cultural heritage encompasses all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places over time. Signatories to the *Faro Convention: Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (2005), for example, commit to promoting the concept of a “shared European heritage”, consisting of all forms of cultural heritage in Europe, which collectively constitute a common source of memory, understanding, identity, cohesion, and creativity. They also commit to the ideals, principles, and values derived from past experiences – both progress and conflict – that support the development of a peaceful and stable society founded on respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Cultural heritage is understood as an ongoing process of transforming the human living environment, in which the values and meanings inherited from the past become an active and meaningful part of contemporary space.

Deconsecration (execration) (from the Latin *exsecratio*, meaning “removal of sanctity”) – the formal process by which a religious building, object, or space (such as an altar or liturgical vessel) previously dedicated to sacred use is officially declared no longer consecrated or set apart for worship. This act, typically carried

out by a religious authority, permits the repurposing of the space or object for secular or non-religious functions. Deconsecration is often required before the adaptive reuse of a church building and may also occur when a site has been irreparably damaged, destroyed, or is no longer suitable for liturgical purposes.

Dedication – see Consecration

Desacralization (from the Latin *de*, “away from”, and *sacer*, “sacred”) is the formal act by which a religious building, space, or object is officially declared no longer sacred and is released from its liturgical function. Typically performed by a recognized religious authority, this process allows the former place of worship – such as a church – to be repurposed for secular use. It is often required before adapting a religious structure for new, non-religious purposes, and may also be enacted when the space is significantly damaged, abandoned, or no longer serves a religious community. More broadly, it refers to the gradual removal of sacred meaning from belief systems, social norms, institutional frameworks, and religious practices.

Ecumenism (from the Greek *oikumene*, meaning “the inhabited world”) refers to efforts aimed at promoting unity among Christian denominations. The Second Vatican Council issued the *Decree on Ecumenism “Unitatis Redintegratio”* (1964), which defines the ecumenical movement as the range of initiatives and activities undertaken to foster Christian unity, shaped by the church’s needs and the context of the times. The decree emphasizes that the first step toward unity involves removing any words, attitudes, or actions that, when judged by the standards of truth and justice, misrepresent the reality of other Christian communities and hinder mutual understanding. Once this foundation has been established, dialogue begins – led by qualified representatives from various churches and Christian communities. These dialogues, conducted in a spirit of mutual respect and faith, provide an opportunity for each participant to explain the teachings and key characteristics of their tradition. Such exchanges lead to a deeper, more accurate understanding of each community’s doctrine and life, encourage fairer assessments, and promote greater cooperation on shared Christian responsibilities. Wherever possible, they also include united prayer, reflecting a spirit of solidarity and common purpose.

Ethics – a branch of philosophy that studies moral principles governing human behavior. It explores concepts of right and wrong, duty, virtue, justice, and the good life. Ethics is typically divided into several subfields, including normative ethics – concerned with establishing moral standards and determining what actions are right or wrong; descriptive ethics – used to analyze moral beliefs and practices as they exist in societies, without judging them; and applied ethics – used to examine moral issues in specific contexts, such as medicine, law, or business.

Monument – a structure, object, or site created or preserved to commemorate a person, group, event, cultural achievement, or historical period. Monuments are described in the *Athens Charter* (1931) as structures which stand as “a testament to civilization”. Monuments are often designed to evoke memory, respect, or reflection, serving as physical embodiments of collective identity, heritage, or values. The term “architectural monument” refers not only to individual structures but also to urban or rural areas that contain physical evidence of a particular culture,

historically significant spatial development, or important events (*Venice Charter*, 1964). Beyond their commemorative function, monuments may also possess artistic, architectural, or symbolic significance, contributing to the cultural and historical landscape of a community or nation. This concept includes not only grand masterpieces of art and architecture, but also more modest works from the past that, over time, have gained cultural significance.

Profanation (from the Latin *profanatio*, meaning “desecration” or “violation”) refers to the act of showing grave disrespect toward something considered sacred. It includes the desecration, sacrilege, or insult of holy objects, spaces, or symbols, whether movable or immovable. In both legal and religious contexts, profanation implies the misuse, defilement, or intentional dishonoring of things held in religious or cultural reverence. Profanation refers to the disrespectful or defiling treatment of something considered sacred – whether a physical object, place of worship, or religious symbol – by handling it in a way that disregards its sanctity. It also includes the violation of values and beliefs that are widely revered within a religious or cultural context. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2019), profanation (as a form of sacrilege) involves the misuse or disrespect of what has been consecrated to God – especially in worship.

Sacrilege consists in profaning or treating unworthily the sacraments and other liturgical actions, as well as persons, things, or places consecrated to God. Sacrilege is a grave sin when committed against the Eucharist, for in this sacrament the true Body of Christ is made substantially present.

Relics (from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning “remains” or “fragments”) are the physical remains of saints or objects closely associated with them during their lives, and they are regarded as sacred items of veneration in many religious traditions. These may include, for example, fragments of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The veneration of relics is particularly widespread in Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, where they play a significant role in devotional practice. In contrast, most Protestant traditions reject the veneration of relics, viewing it as incompatible with their theological emphasis on scripture and personal faith.

Renovation (from Latin *re* meaning “again” and *novare* meaning “to renew”) is the process of upgrading or improving a building to meet modern standards of comfort, safety, aesthetics, and environmental performance. Feilden (2005) distinguishes renovation from conservation and restoration, noting that it generally involves upgrades to improve usability, often with modern materials or systems.

Resacralization (reconsecration) refers to the process of formal reinstatement of a religious building – such as a church, chapel – that has not been used for worship or liturgical purposes for some time. In the Catholic tradition, resacralization typically includes a rite of reconciliation or reconsecration to reaffirm the sanctity of the space.

Restoration (from Latin *restaurare*, meaning “to renew”) refers to the process of accurately recovering the original form, appearance, and function of a historic building, structure, or object by removing later additions, repairing damage, or reconstructing missing elements based on reliable documentation. The aim is

to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument, and it must stop at the point where conjecture begins (*Venice Charter*, 1964). It differs from renovation, which focuses on modernization, and from conservation, which focuses on minimal intervention for ongoing preservation.

Sacred architecture refers to the design and construction of buildings intended for religious worship, ritual, or spiritual significance. These structures – such as churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, and shrines – are created not only to serve functional liturgical purposes but also to embody the beliefs, values, and symbolic expressions of a particular faith or religious tradition. Sacred architecture often incorporates symbolic forms, orientation, materials, and artistic elements that reflect theological concepts and facilitate a sense of transcendence, reverence, and community.

Sacred building – a structure specifically designed, designated, or used for religious worship, ritual, or spiritual activities. “Sacred buildings are constructed to embody religious meaning and serve as a locus for ritual practice. They are culturally encoded and serve both symbolic and functional purposes in religious life” (Jones, 2005). A sacred building serves as a physical space where individuals or communities engage in practices that connect them with the divine, the transcendent, or deeply held beliefs.

Sacred space – a physical or symbolic location that is set apart for religious, spiritual, or transcendent experiences. It is a place where the divine or the sacred is believed to be present, accessed, or honored. Sacred spaces may include temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, shrines, or natural sites like mountains, rivers, or groves, depending on cultural or religious traditions. Space is sacralized by human action and behavior, and certain spaces become sacred because people treat them differently from ordinary spaces. What distinguishes a sacred space is not necessarily its physical form but its meaning, ritual function, and the beliefs associated with it (Wierzbicka, 2013). It should be noted that a church is a holy place not because of what is in it, but because of what happens within it. In this light, *sacrum* can be seen as a sacred space where symbolic elements come together to form a narrative (Wierzbicka, 2013, 173). These spaces often serve as focal points for worship, pilgrimage, meditation, rites of passage, and communal identity. Mircea Eliade (1987, 10–11) asserted that “a sacred space is qualitatively different from all other spaces. It is the fixed point where the divine reveals itself and breaks into the profane world”.

Sacred object – any movable or immovable object that has been designated for divine worship through an act of consecration, dedication, or blessing, in accordance with the norms of canon law. Sacred objects should be treated reverently and not be employed for profane or inappropriate use, even if they are owned by private persons (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983, Can. 1171 1205, 1210, and 1237). This includes both immovable property – such as churches, chapels, oratories, cemeteries, and altars that are permanently affixed to the ground – and movable property, such as holy images, relics, and liturgical items such as patens, chalices, monstrances, or portable altars. It also extends to signs and symbols that are widely venerated, particularly those with religious significance.

Sacrum (from Latin *sacer*, meaning “holy” or “that which is sacred”) refers to everything associated with the religious realm, standing in contrast to the secular, or *profanum*. The meaning of *sacrum* has evolved over time. Traditionally understood as synonymous with the religious, it serves as the opposite of *profanum*, a term prominently used by Mircea Eliade (1987). German philosopher and Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto (1958) argued that even places not directly tied to religious worship – such as homes or museums – can be experienced as sacred, as they may evoke a sense of awe or transcendence. Eliade (1979, 1987) emphasized that the defining quality of *sacrum* is its opposition to the mundane; it exists outside the everyday world, time, and space – fundamentally separate from the secular.

Secularization⁷ – a socio-cultural process by which religious beliefs, institutions, and practices lose their social, cultural, or moral authority in public and private life. Secularization involves a gradual shift in which sacred or spiritual meanings are diminished or replaced by secular (non-religious) values and worldviews (Taylor, 2018).

Sign – a key concept in semantics, a sign is a visual representation of information designed for human communication, and it serves as a fundamental component of both verbal and spatial language (Wierzbicka, 2013, 172). A sign conveys a clear, intentional message that reflects the purpose of its creator. A good example of how a sign’s meaning can shift depending on context is the cross. When placed on a building, visible in a city skyline, a cross conveys a certain message or significance but it may not function symbolically in a deeper sense. It may be interpreted by some simply as an indicator that the structure is used for Christian worship. Unlike a symbol, which often carries layered or abstract meanings, a sign typically has a more direct, functional, and universally recognizable intent-guiding interpretation or action.

Symbol – a complex, multilayered notion (idea, category). In the context of churches, symbols often have a sacred dimension and play a key role in the narrative structure of a building. In meaning-driven architecture, symbols help convey a story by invoking the sacred significance of past events. In the sacred architecture of monotheistic religions, symbols form the backbone of the narrative; in a thoughtfully designed space, they are intended to tell the story of salvation (Wierzbicka, 2013, 171). Symbols act as a kind of visual language. As Wierzbicka (2013) noted, “a space becomes sacred only through symbols woven into a coherent narrative, which serves as the key to understanding the story being told”. While every symbol is a sign, not every sign qualifies as a symbol.

Notes

- 1 In *A Pattern language*, Christopher Alexander (2017) highlights the vital role sacred spaces play in human life, especially in marking major life transitions. He points out that rites of passage – birth, coming of age, marriage, and death – are universal experiences that deserve to be honored with meaningful rituals in equally meaningful places. According to Alexander, these moments should unfold in spaces that act as symbolic gateways. He argues that hospitals are ill-suited for baptisms, and funeral homes can strip funerals of their emotional and spiritual depth. Instead, he advocates for these ceremonies to be held in sacred settings that reflect and respect their significance.

- 2 The Antwerp Calvary has been designated a protected monument known as Calvary Hill since 1940 and was officially recognized as architectural heritage in 2019. Originally erected in 1710, the Calvary was dismantled during the French occupation, but the group of statues was reinstalled in 1814. The structure features a three-part pedestal with a grey and white painted base. At its center is a curved, tapered plinth that supports a wooden cross bearing a painted polyester statue of Christ. The central section of the pedestal includes three chronograms referencing both the original foundation in 1710 and the restoration in 1814.
- 3 The Old Town of Warsaw, founded in the thirteenth century, was almost completely destroyed during World War II. It was meticulously rebuilt after the war, earning recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its faithful restoration is the city's oldest historic district. Today, the Old Town is a lively place of cobbled streets, colorful townhouses, and historic landmarks such as the Royal Castle and St. John's Arch cathedral. It stands as a symbol of resilience and cultural pride. Warsaw's Old Town is home to six churches, while the New Town, built about a century later, has five. In the distance, beyond the red rooftops and church spires, Warsaw's modern skyline rises with glass skyscrapers and contemporary architecture. This striking panorama contrasts past and present, showing how the city has grown into a modern European capital while preserving its historic heart.
- 4 Sharon Macdonald, a British social anthropologist and museologist, explores the dynamics of cultural interaction within Europe, particularly in the context of migration. She examines how the blending and fusion of cultures within nation-states lead to the creation of new cultural forms that retain identifiable elements. Macdonald contrasts this with multiculturalism, which assumes the existence of distinct, separate cultures and does not necessarily imply cultural intersections. She likens multiculturalism to zoology, as it reinforces the understanding of cultures as separate "species".
- 5 Detailed information about the selection and rationale behind the 25 case studies is provided in Chapter 5: Case Studies, subtitle: Assumptions.
- 6 The *Burra Charter* was first adopted in 1979 at the historic South Australian mining town of Burra. Minor revisions were made in 1981 and 1988, with more substantial changes in 1999. Following a review this version was adopted by Australia ICOMOS in October 2013.
- 7 The definition and origins of secularization, along with the process itself, are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, specifically in Section 2.2, *Secularization*.

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