

On buildings and sacred places. Where is religious life situated?

1. The generous Space, an interwoven Concept for a World in Motion

a. From problem to opportunity

This text is a summary report of the research that has started as a search for the revitalization of Flanders' religious heritage, and has evolved towards the design of new sacred spaces based on the concept of "the generous space". This concept can be applied both within the religious heritage in order to open it, or within everyday space, in order to enrich it. Secularization as a social theme was not the only point of departure, but the impact of the full transition and globalization too were included in the research. Those themes were not considered to be a problem, but more an opportunity.

b. From action to interaction

The concept of "the generous space" is based on research by design. Imagination was the key to increase the range of future perspectives, to deepen content and to strengthen the dynamics between human-form-content. Research by design interweaves the concrete with the conceptual and allows to develop not only linear but also spiral processes. So the start or ending point is not that important here, but the interaction between the different steps are. The most important output of this research by design consists of three finished projects to be experienced : a pilot project, a turning project and a summary project. The three projects have each grown up in a different period of time, have a different scale and offer answers to a different question. They are not separate from each other, but are an evolution. All three are embedded locally, have social impact in the Flemish region but have international appearance too. The three projects have become three processes that continue to evolve.

c. From polarization to differentiation

The concept of "the generous space" is based on the idea that every moment and every place carry spiritual potential. That is why "the generous space" breaks open the binary thinking between sacred and profane to give oxygen to all levels of life. It interweaves meaning and function in time and space. The generous space is a space that both moves people and makes them stand still.

2. Meaning of Change – Change in Meaning

a. Looking for new forms of meaning

During recent decades, many Flemish people have tried to free themselves from an imposed religious context. This has caused confusion and awkwardness. But the release of the religious tradition has also brought opportunities: it has set many people back in motion to find and shape new communities, words, rituals, time and space. Free from obligations and typical to this time.

b. Secularization as an opportunity to expose the essence

Secularization offers spirituality the chance to re-grow bottom-up, as a sincere and personal search, stripped of frills or obligations. In complete freedom, back to the essence and in

interaction with current events. The search for meaning now occurs in many branches of society. Spirituality is not just a concern for the religious or deep believers. The research field is expanding, affects more people and has different angles. The search for essence and redesigning that search is an important spiritual exercise in itself. Perhaps searching has become even more important than finding the right answer?

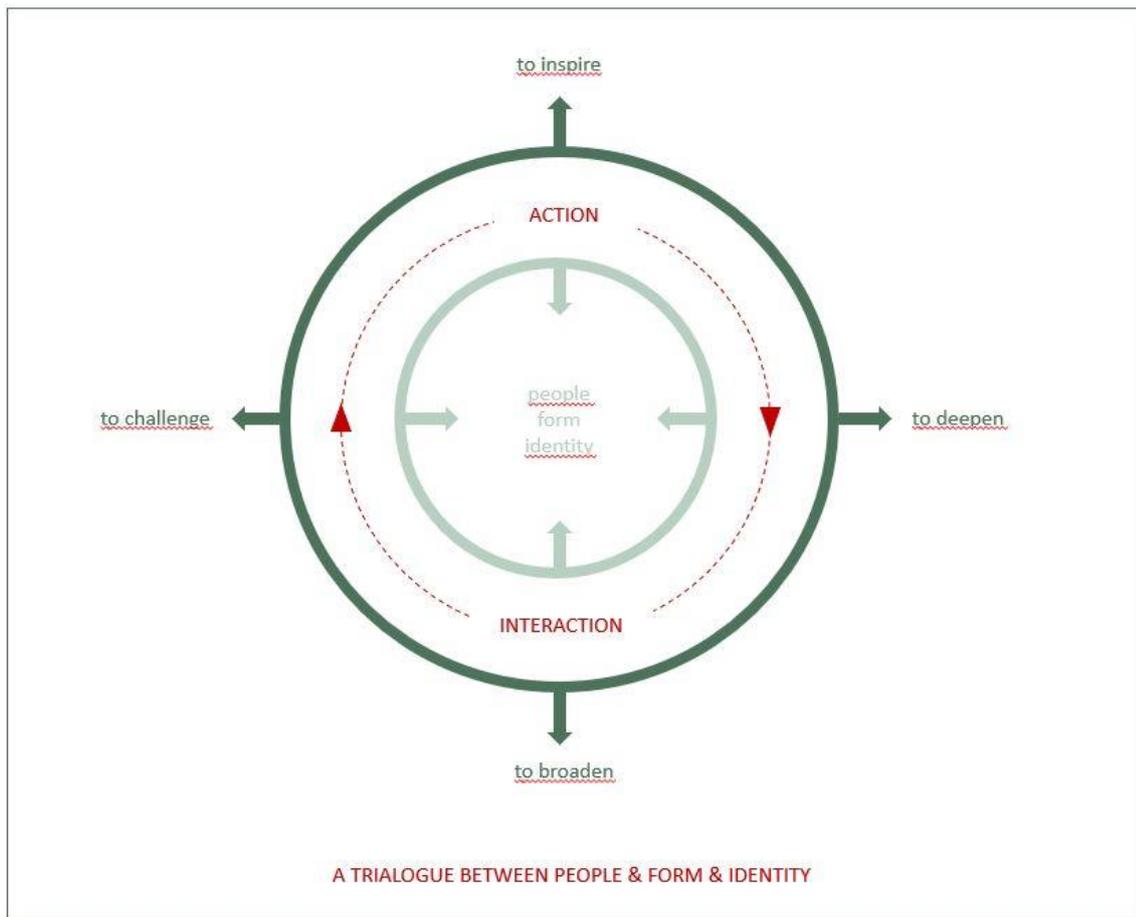
c. Full transition as an opportunity to connect energetically with the context

The speed and fullness of the spiritual transition continuously challenges us to reconnect with the context and to keep on changing or to start all over again. It is a sustainable principle making it possible to explore wider boundaries and adjust faster, alert, flexible and agile. It gives the chance to make every action an interaction, to make every attempt a learning moment. It gives the opportunity to consider spirituality not as an acquired knowledge but rather as a source of power from which new energy flows every day and from which new interpretations can grow.

d. Globalization as an opportunity to develop identity

If searching becomes more important than finding, then the diversity in that search will be very instructive and enriching and will also be an interweaving event. Because we will have the searching in common and not the finding. Searching together from this great diversity, creates a double opportunity. On the one hand, confrontation with other cultures helps the individual to make one's own identity more clear and give more nuances. On the other hand, the exchange with other cultures helps the larger community to understand each other more and to live together in a better way.

3. Research by Design: the Power of Imagination



a. Increase the range of perspectives

Starting from imagination there are many more scenarios to investigate: feasible and not feasible, meaningful and meaningless, serious and playful. Something can be investigated from the moment it can be conceived and imagined. Within the world of imagination there are no unsolvable problems, the only limits are our own limits. This not only provides many more options, but also a completely different energy during the search. Not only our mind is addressed, but also our heart and belly. Research can be done with great enthusiasm.

b. Deepen the content and make the core explicit

Starting from imagination there are not only more possibilities but the exercises can also be tested much deeper and more pronounced. In reality, "the extreme" can become dangerous, but as an imaginary exercise it is instructive and expansive and challenges to choose more clearly.

c. Strengthen the dynamics between human-form-content

Imagination also brings more people together. There is room for more diversity in thoughts, actions and characters. Working together is nothing definitive or threatening, but only serves to interweave new insights. Working together in imagination gives the chance to strengthen the dynamics between human-form-content. It turns a project into a sustainable process. It ensures that change does not need to be seen as a threat but as an opportunity.

4. YOT Magdalena Church in Bruges (2002)



design tc-plus & Stefaan Onraet , photography Wim Van Nueten

a. Tradition as an engine for innovation

When Bruges became the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2002, the "Christians in Bruges" association took the initiative to offer a positive answer to the problem of vacant religious heritage. To the association it was important that there was cooperation from many more perspectives (such as heritage, tourism, diocese, urban development,...) to come to a future-oriented policy vision on the religious heritage. In addition, the association wanted to change the church again into a meaningful place for the city .

In what way can a church be reoriented, to update the religious tradition for believers, and to open it up to a wider group of seekers?

b. An experiment with people, space and religion

The most important spatial interventions in the Magdalena church are a core plane (a welcoming place for many encounters), the art rooms (a means to deepen and connect with tradition) and the projection surface (an open framework to develop new perspectives). The wooden core plane is the largest intervention in the protected Neo-Gothic church. It lies in the church space like a monumental dish and invites to come together. In the middle of that core plane, a symbolic plane has been created, the size of a living room, often filled with water. Water as a universal symbol of tranquility and reflection. There are smaller rooms around the symbolic surface: the former baptistery, the side entrance, the storage room, the prayer chapels, the sacristy and the choir and the entrance. Contemporary art has been added to these rooms in dialogue with the tradition. In the Magdalena Church, art is the means to deepen and connect with tradition.

There is a large empty frame between the nave and the choir. A new church window that gives the choir, the place of the local parish community, and the nave, the hospitable place for all seekers, some distance but also connects. They are each other's perspective. In the large frame, a projection surface can come down on which videos and photos can be projected just like new scenes on a stained glass window.

c. On the way: from project to process

At first, the association "Christians in Bruges" commissioned to design the four arms of the church separately according to the four different target groups: the parishioners, the seekers, the casual passers-by and the Flemish church community. This question arose from the concern that the four target groups would have a different need and approach. But the question also arose from the fear of being pushed into a scary box as a spiritual project. Ultimately, the association chose to install a powerful universal and connecting symbol in the middle of the church, radiating enough hospitality to welcome everyone.

A second topic, demanding a long maturing process, was the interpretation of the symbol surface. The dark gray symbolic surface is explicitly kept neutral and empty in order to challenge the YOT- community to repeatedly and consciously add another layer of symbolism and meaning to the church, adjusted to the moment or period of the year. So the dust that swirls through the church can never stay and accumulate into a dull, meaningless layer.

With the renewal of the church, the choir was converted into a weekly chapel for the parishioners out of respect for the original parish community. Working on a new building equals working on new dynamics within the community. The parishioners have thus evolved from outcasts to new hosts of the space. Proud of the renewal and hospitable to others.

5. The Chapel of Efflorescence (Groot-Bijgaarden, 2011)



design tc-plus , photography Luc Roymans

a. Free space for spiritual development

The Chapel of Efflorescence did not arise from the need to solve a vacancy problem. With the extinction of its religious function, the old chapel was gradually "re-allocated" into storage space. So the chapel was no longer vacant. But some of the brothers had a dream and, by way of inheritance, they wanted to re-fulfill the essence of their mission in the chapel, if necessary in a completely different way than they used to. They wanted to leave behind a space that helps young people with their "awakening", a fragile process in which you become yourself among the others.

The Chapel of Efflorescence (2011) was established ten years after Yot Magdalena Church (2002). After Yot, the assignments of tc-plus always departed from the extinction of church use. The client asked to design small weekly chapels in large churches, to guide mergers of parishes or to integrate additional functions in the church. There still was too much focus on the vacancy problem of the churches, so that "filling up" seemed to be the answer. With the Chapel of Efflorescence, the brothers wanted a space featuring as a search engine for many rather than an answering space for a few.

How to re-think a church that provides free space to people in their spiritual development?

b. A search for authenticity

The most important spatial interventions in the Chapel of Efflorescence are : the white space (an empty place to liberate), the shutters (a means of imagination) and the sand (the carpet of fragility).

The first step in the chapel is a step into a white, empty room with a white sand floor, surrounded by white felt shutters and covered with a white stretch ceiling.

The shutters function as a new, soft rug for the bare foot visitor. The silence and the emptiness are overwhelming, sometimes soothing, sometimes challenging, sometimes oppressive.

Comfortable or not, it wants to free people from what's redundant or disturbing to be themselves.

Although the chapel enables a completely new concept of searching for meaning, the old chapel was first completely renovated with respect to the past. In the old chapel a new chapel was built, in which shutters can be opened like a book. Possibly. Because, basically, it is about the new chapel and the zero moment.

Behind the top row of shutters are the old stained glass windows and murals, the stories from the tradition of the brothers. The old chapel as a whole no longer exists, but fragments of it can be re-opened and given a new meaning within that new context. Behind the bottom row of shutters there is free space to add new stories, images and symbols to shape a new future.

Between the white panels horizontal and vertical red seams are visible, abstractly bringing rhythm into the void, adding a human touch and encouraging imagination.

Entering the white sand with bare feet means looking for a new balance with every step. A step into the void looking for a place to be, in the middle or against the edge, in the light or just in the shadow. The sand carpet can also function as a kind of slate in which text, drawings or symbols can be written with your finger.

c. On the way: from answer space to search space

Clients and designers initially thought that a new chapel also had to provide all new means of communication. They were afraid that young people would get bored in an empty space. But

the projection screen and the projector have hardly been used because they only scatter the experience of here and now.

The shutters were often misunderstood. Some people interpreted the closed shutters as hiding the tradition, as if there was shame or as if they wanted to erase it. This is not the case. Covering the restored stained glass windows with shutters has been done out of respect for the the chapel's past. Some people look at the shutters as a kind of gadget, a heritage trick of opening and closing. As if the white chapel is just an introduction moment of the full experience when shutters are open. Neither is this the intention.

Nothing needs to be programmed in the chapel. It is based on the confidence that every human being possesses enough dignity to let it come to the surface. It is based on the confidence that if people visit the chapel in a true way, they can come to interesting encounters. And that the intertwining of these encounters result in a wonderful program.

6. G-LAB (Bruges, 2018)



design tc-plus , photography Jason Slabbynck

a. An antidote for polarization

Where the point in time of Yot Magdalena Church (2002) was one of resistance to everything that had to do with spirituality and where the point in time of the Chapel of Efflorescence (2011) was one of a growing curiosity in meaning, the G-LAB originated in a point in time where meaning had become a theme that could be found in all newspaper articles on daily basis. Many people have made the theme their own again and it has been breaking through in all levels of our society.

From the day-to-day perspective, the G-LAB also wants to offer space for what transcends us. It starts from the point of view that a private home can mean more to us than a refuge, but that it can also be meaningful to our surroundings. The home of the G-LAB has been opened up to offer space for more people than the family. It is an exercise in living together and a grateful tribute to the generosity of life.

The G-LAB is also an antidote to polarized thinking based on the conviction that we can meet each other in the nuances of life and that diversity is a good opportunity to better develop our own identity.

How can space be designed in which people can search for a meaningful life, based their individuality and diversity?

b. A laboratory for hospitality

Two important spatial interventions have taken place in the G-LAB: on the one hand, the spaces have become much more diverse and on the other, the boundaries have been broken open and have become fluid. Due to the diversity of spaces in the G-LAB, there is always a place where people can find themselves or each other. The wide range is created by thinking rather in intentions than in functions. A different use of colour, scale, tactility, visibility and light always provides a different experience and a different meaning. The G-LAB has fluid limits. Fluid boundaries are changeable over time and do not form a hard fault line.

Sometimes the house belongs only to the family, sometimes it is open to many other people. It is just as much a place for the daily as for what transcends us.

c. On the way: the difficult release from polarized thinking

The design process of the G-LAB took almost seven years. In this process it was very confronting to notice how conceptual and theoretical points of view could not be easily translated into a building and into daily life where heart and stomach feature.

In the beginning, the fixed and strict boundary seemed necessary in order to merge private and public on one site and the design was created with fear and focus on the boundary. When designing started with the desire to intertwine, boundaries became more fluid and the power of the experience of the place was taken into account. Fluid boundaries generate a special gap: the wrinkle space. Just like on the beach where there is a gap between ebb and flood.

Sometimes the space is like the sea, sometimes like the beach, but it is never quite the same. The indefinability of the wrinkle space has become a freedom within the world of imagination and enterprise.

7. The Manifesto of the generous Space

Never in human history have we had so much knowledge, experience and resources to make our planet a beautiful place for everyone. We only lack trust and imagination to actually do so.

The concept of the generous space wants to give people the opportunity to develop trust and to activate imagination. Trust in oneself, the others and the other give the power to make the most of the opportunities in life. Imagination gives the space to grasp all the opportunities in life in all candour.

a. Trust

The generous space is a training place in hospitality. It is a diverse designed house offering space for a large range of people, emotions or objectives. The generous space is designed rather from intentions and not so much from functions. Each space reflects a specific atmosphere, allowing many functions, but ensures that the same function in a different space becomes a different experience and generates a different meaning.

Recognizing the diversity of the generous space creates confidence to be yourself in relation to the others and the other.

The power of the generous space is that it starts from the concrete possibilities and wishes of every initiator, making it achievable for everyone.

b. Imagination

The generous space is a laboratory for generosity. It is a place with fluid boundaries, breaking open polarized thinking and giving oxygen to a wealth of nuances. The space between the two extremes is just like the vacant space between ebb and flood and is called the wrinkle space in this context. The wrinkle space lies between architecture and nature, profane and sacred, private and public. It touches both worlds but also gets detached.

The freedom of the indefinable aspect of the generous space challenges to build interesting relationships with others or the other.

The power of the generous space is that even a small gesture can have a striking impact on an individual or its immediate environment.

c. An interwoven relationship

A strong trust and open imagination create more room to interweave a diversity of people from their knowledge, experience and resources. An interwoven relationship is a dynamic relationship in which a permanent search for distance and proximity yield an enriching encounter. Such a meeting joins everyone's possibilities to make this globe a beautiful place for everyone. The concept of the generous space encourages not only the design of a place, but more in particular the process.

The power of the generous space is that it can be interwoven in many ways into a global network with a considerable impact.

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Tom Callebaut (1971) is an interior architect. He is affiliated with the faculty of architecture, KU Leuven, and has his own interior design office, 'tc plus'. Tc plus has wide experience in designing sacred spaces, both within the existing traditional religious heritage and in new contexts, and connecting spaces, in both public and private contexts. Callebaut is convinced

that we have sufficient knowledge, experience and resources to make this planet a fantastic place for everyone.