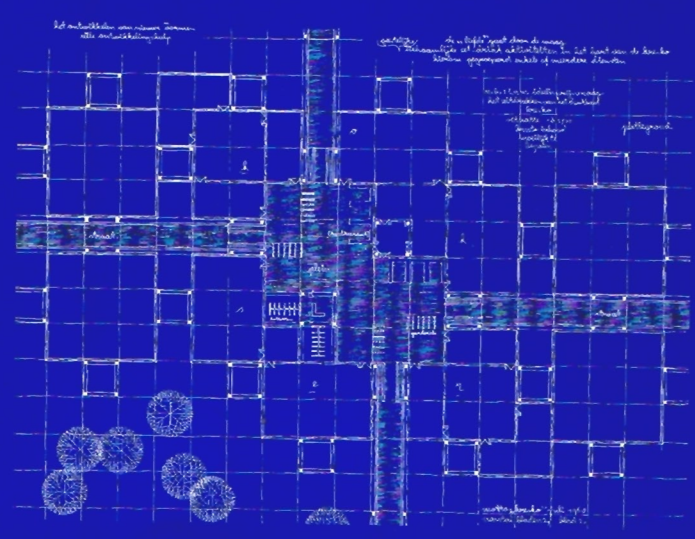


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THE LIGHT FROM ABOVE

Modern Religious Heritage in the Netherlands



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20TH CENTURY CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN FLANDERS

Like the neighbouring countries, Flanders has a problem with its religious heritage: the increasing secularisation gives rise to the question of what should be done with the church buildings. A traditionally strongly Catholic region, Flanders has an extensive ecclesiastical patrimony. This is often perceived as a problem, in view of the heavy cost of maintenance and restoration. Still we must not forget that church buildings also represent a valuable resource: they form an inseparable part of the identity of the region, since the historical organisation of villages and urban neighbourhoods took place literally 'around the church tower'. Despite the increasing volume of high-rise buildings, churches and their towers remain as beacons in the landscape.

Leen Meganck, Yves Schoonjans & Sven Sterken

From the point of view of ecclesiastical history, the 20th century was an eventful period that brought many changes to the liturgy. This was clearly reflected in the ecclesiastical architecture. Under the influence of the Liturgical Movement, which started during the pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914), the liturgy and its structure were thoroughly reappraised. Architecture too was made to serve the new liturgical concept. The church building must be sober and structurally straightforward, modern and yet timeless, and above all must contribute to the maximum participation of the faithful in the liturgy. The role of individual devotion was reduced in favour of celebration by the community. Architecturally this was

translated into the reduced importance of the side chapels and the widening of the nave. The choir became shorter and the side aisles were reduced to circulation zones. These innovations, especially in the area of the plan concept, took place during the first half of the 20th century in churches that were built in both progressive and traditional styles. Up to the 1920s, church architecture illustrates the declining days of the neo-styles. Thus in 1930 the Sint-Pauluskerk (Fig. 01) in Ghent was still constructed in a robust neo-romanesque style according to a design of Henri Valcke. From the later 1920s onwards the search was directed towards a contemporary design language which maintained the link with the traditional. The Saint-Luke's school played an important role in this. It promoted church building using an austere architecture in traditional brick. In particular the designs and theories of the architect A.J. Kropholler were promoted as rational and modern. A number of churches in Flanders showed a clear relationship with the architecture of Kropholler and other Dutch architects such as B.T. Boeyinga, Jan and Theo Stuivinga, J. Uyterlinden, and C.M. Van Moorsel. However, literal references to, or copies of historic style elements are nowhere to be found. Yet these churches radiate a degree of familiarity. Very characteristic of this building style is Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van de Oude Bareel, in Sint-Amandsberg (Fig. 02), designed by Valentin Vaerwyck in 1930. For a young generation of Catholic intellectuals such modernisation did not go far enough. In his writings Huib Hoste, in particular, polemically defended the choice of modern design. The concrete rafters that remained visible in the church of Zonnebeke (Fig. 03) (1922) broke with the traditional design that still dominated church building at that time. The churches that were most progressive in design in the interwar period were those of Flor Van Reeth. His Sint-Walburgiskerk in Antwerp, designed in 1937 (Fig. 04) bears witness to the persistent sobriety, typical for the functionalist movement. For the inter-war churches built in Flanders such a style was the exception rather than the rule.

The great activity with regard to church building in the 1950s can be explained by the destruction which took place during the Second World War and the increasing suburbanisation. This was initially dominated by a traditionalist trend. For example Jos Ritzen, an early

Gent, Sint-Pauluskerk, 1930, Henri Valcke
(photo Vincent Debonne)



follower of the Bossche School, built basilica's in early Christian style with freestanding bell towers such as those of the renowned Sint-Margarethakerk in Nokke (1952-1959). A modernizing impulse arrived only with the 1958 world fair in Brussels and during the run-up to Vatican II, when religious clients commissioned modern designs to support their progressive fervour. The 'Zonnelied' convent (Fig. 05) by Paul Felix (1959) is illustrative of the sobriety and the anti-monumental character of this new religious paradigm. With its restricted palette of materials (visible concrete, wood and glass) and its clear spatial and structural articulation, it forms an architectural expression of the vow of poverty and detachment. This also explains why the church can hardly be distinguished from the surrounding buildings of the convent. Another important renovating impulse arose from the work of Marc Dessauvage. In close cooperation with Geert Bekaert, the most important Belgian architecture critic in the postwar era, he developed the concept of the 'house church'. It formed the architectural translation of a new vision on liturgy: a return to the example of the first Christians, for whom the Eucharist was primarily a social event that took place in 'one or other house'. The Sint-Pauluskerk in Westmalle (Fig. 06) illustrates the small scale and deliberate 'invisibility' of these house-churches that inconspicuously integrate themselves with their surroundings. Here the typical axial orientation of the church building is replaced by a subtle spatial configuration, structured by a careful positioning of the liturgical furniture. The desired simplicity in the aesthetic and the use of materials (in which concrete, wood and brick remain visible) forms the architectural expression of an ethical imperative for integrity. This reticence contrasts with the expressive, often monumental church buildings of other prominent Flemish architects, such as the conical Sint-Ritakerk of Léon Stynen in Harelbeke (1966), the monolithic concrete chapel of Juliaan Lampens (1961) in Edelare or the expressive silhouette of the OLV Ter Duinenkerk (Fig. 07) of Jozef Lantsoght (1965) in Koksijde. In addition to these emblematic figures, an entire generation of architects of more regional importance has left its mark on the Flemish landscape because they were responsible for a large number of churches in a particular town or province: René Van Steenberghe and Paul Meekels in the province of Antwerp, Arthur Degeyter and Chris Vastesaeger in West-Flanders, and Adolf Nivelles in Limburg. So far the corresponding patrimony has not yet been systematically surveyed and in consequence is only fragmentally documented.

MENACES TO THE 20TH-CENTURY ECCLESIASTICAL PATRIMONY IN FLANDERS

Although still young, for several reasons this ecclesiastical patrimony is threatened. Numerically well represented, 20th-century church architecture is not yet perceived as a subject for discussions on heritage. As a result restoration or transformation is often carried out negligently and is not always carefully managed. Moreover, this patrimony is not sufficiently well known and is surrounded by negative connotations relating to its rational and stern architectural expression. Often built by using new experimental construction methods and materials, the long term behaviour of which was unknown, these churches age badly and are extra vulnerable. Finally Flemish statistics reveal a growing tendency towards secularisation. In the modern churches built during the



top
Koksijde, Jozef Lantsoght, Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk,
(photo Anneleen Cassiman)

bottom
Oostende, Clarissenklooster 'Zonnelied', Paul Felix.



post war Catholic revival in particular, it is not uncommon to find a large church welcoming only a handful of faithful each week. Empty churches or church buildings in limited use and with heavy costs for maintenance, heating and restoration, give rise to the need for the development of a consistent methodological framework which will permit a critical evaluation of this patrimony, with regard to its cultural-historical importance and its conservation, reconversion or reuse.

However, when developing strategies it is important to realize that there is a difference between Flanders and the neighbouring countries. The separation between the Church and the State, although registered in the constitution, is not as sharp as in many other European countries. In 1801 a 'concordat' was signed in which it was stated that places of worship for the recognized faiths should be built and maintained with public money. This means that at the basis of every construction of a new church or transformation of an existing one, there is always a negotiation between the Church (the religious authority) and the State (the financial authority). Because of this special financial arrangement one could conclude that 20th-century church buildings in Flanders are well protected. Paradoxically this is not automatically the case, because the urge of the Church Institution to redefine those underused buildings is almost nonexistent. However, it is precisely this underuse that causes poor maintenance and a rapid decline of this heritage. At the same time this is the reason why there is very little methodological design expertise in the area of church reuse in Flanders, and that one can hardly find an example of reallocation. At this time, given the financial burden represented by this decaying and underused patrimony, policymakers have begun to question its social relevance, patrimonial value and its potential in future cultural, social and urban developments.

TOWARDS AN INVENTORY OF THE 20TH-CENTURY CHURCH BUILDINGS IN FLANDERS

The re-designation of the function of church buildings is more sensitive than that of any other type of building. The Flemish Government wishes to play the role of a catalyst in this, as evinced by the recent workshop 'Kerken in een ander licht. Neven- and herbestemming van religieus erfgoed' ('Churches in a Different Light. Reconversion and Reuse of Religious Heritage'), held in March 2008.¹ To delineate a policy for this young heritage, an overview of the number, distribution and quality

of the buildings is necessary. Since 2004 the Flemish government has directed its policy towards creating a thematic-typological inventory. This type of inventory will enable to work on a survey of a specific architectural typology throughout Flanders. This will yield an assessment framework within which a well-supported selection of buildings for the protection as monuments is possible. In the Flemish context the responsibility for the listing of heritage lies with the Flemish Heritage Institute (Vlaams Instituut voor Onroerend Erfgoed, www.vioe.be), a scientific research institute founded in 2004. Therefore in 2008 the VIOE was given the assignment to prepare an inventory and evaluate the 20th century churches. To some extent this project is a follow-up to a previous campaign which considered the neo-style churches in Flanders in 2003. Linked to this first campaign was a proposal for the development and implementation of a methodology for the protection and care of the nineteenth century ecclesiastical architectural patrimony in Flanders. [Currently, the VIOE is undertaking a thematic inventory of 20th-Century church architecture in Flanders. This externally contracted study will be carried out by a consortium consisting of KADOC (Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society of the Catholic University of Leuven), the Department of Architecture Sint-Lucas of the university college WENK, and the Department of Architecture, Urban Development and Spatial Planning of the Catholic University of Leuven. The inventory reviews the church architecture in Flanders between 1914 and 2000. This involves some 500 churches, convents and chapels. The basic data relating to all these buildings will be collected, including the interiors and the valuable art collections in so far as they are inextricably linked to the architecture. The inventory will be completed by the end of 2008. By making clear the status of this extensive patrimony from an architectural and historical perspective, it will create a frame of reference for possible restoration, renovation and re-use. In this way the inventory will contribute to the development of a strategy for the future of the ecclesiastical heritage of the 20th century.]

NOTES

- 1 The working document can be downloaded on: http://tijlv.studentenweb.org/mt/archives/2008/03/kerken_in_een_a.html

Marc Dessauvage, Sint-Pauluskerk, Westmalle
(foto: Stephanie Van de Voorde,



top
Zonnebeke, Onze-Lieve-Vrouw, 1922, Huib Hoste
(photo en copyright VIOE, O. Pauwels)

bottom
Antwerpen, Sint-Walburgis, 1937, Flor Van Reeth