

Adaptation of redundant churches to alternative uses in the Italian context

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Abstract

In the last decades an international debate, still present and unsolved, started about the new religious architectures and the recovering of the existing ones. The new liturgical code coming from the 2nd Vatican Council (1958) deeply modifies the relationship between the human and the divine aspects during the religious ceremonies. The faithful, ones passive spectators of a ceremony celebrated by others for them, become now the main actors, and so both the space of the ceremony and the functions performed deeply change.

The new churches represent this renovated religious concept through a new shape and new inner spatial distributions, emotionally and physically more involving, while the rigid inner spaces of present churches, built following the old liturgical code, need to be modified to meet the new requirements.

At a scientific international level, a debate still misses regarding another subject both important and actual by a religious, historical, social and architectonic point of view: the restoration of redundant churches, no more used for religious ceremonies. It has never been codified how to restore these buildings, their possible destination of use, the sustainable structural, functional and spatial interventions for a particular and meaningful architecture as the religious one is.

This paper deals with a research carried on at the Laboratory of Building Design of the University of Trento called "Renaissance Opportunity for Redundant Churches" which objective is to formulate guidelines that can be useful both by architects and by the public administrators to understand how to properly use church buildings and to adapt them especially to housing uses achieving sustainable interventions, so that the historical, architectonic and formal values of the building are preserved and the religious meaning and representation are not distorted.

One meaningful example in the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy) is shown and discussed.

1 Introduction

Even if in Italy the Christian-catholic religion is prevailing (some studies, to whom the reader is requested to refer for closer examination, state that a percentage between the 97.2% and the 80% of the Italian population is catholic [1&2]), and every village, even the smallest one, has at least one and often two churches, the interest towards buildings for worship no more used for religious functions is missing. The Curia's neglect was, and it is still now, due to the fact that a deconsecrated building has no more religious value or interest when no more used for religious ceremonies; but even the public or private boards for the conservation of the built estate have never shown interest for redundant churches, unless for those buildings that have historic and artistic relevance or some valuable elements, considered as single objects independent from and out of an overall view of the building.

While there is an important national and international debate regarding the changing of religious buildings in order to adequate them to the new liturgical code coming from the 2nd Vatican Council (1958), a debate still misses regarding the restoration of redundant churches, no more used for religious ceremonies, so deconsecrated de facto. The question is if they can be considered as "simple boxes", disconnected from the activities they have been built for, and so reusable for other purposes changing their inner and outer shape and structure, or if they have historical, social, constructive and formal values to be preserved and proposed again with a new key to the reading, but always respecting the previous sacred function.

Some explication.

First of all, religious buildings are expression of the religious feeling of a population that, in a certain period, decided to built up a space to be a church, that is "a sacred building designated for divine worship to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship" (from the Code of Canon Law, as given on January the 2nd 1984, the sixth year of John Paul II pontificate, can 1214). Church is a word coming from the Latin "ecclesia", coming from the Greek "qahal" generally translated as "people assembly" [3], the moment when people meet together as a religious entity in a place that is God Home and people home at the same time. So, church firstly means the presence of a community. The building gains a double meaning: the religious one, obviously, but even the social one, as a place where people meet together, discuss, interact. The church becomes the centre and the symbol of the community, not only from a religious but even from a social point of view; it is the centre of a lot of activities, political and economical too, a reference point around which the social structure develops.

In this sense, the church is even an important and determinant element for the urban structure of a built-up area. In fact, the church, the square, the parvis, usually make a free and multipurpose space, usable for the different needs of the community. So, the church is both a "social element" being a catalyst of activities, and a "physical element" modifying the territory and influencing its shape.

Finally, the church is a building designed to satisfy religious purposes, and so it is not an ordinary object, but each part and each element conveys deep meanings (the shape, the inner spatial distribution, the finishing, the material, the colors for example) concerning another dimension compared to the earthly one, and that are symbols, iconography of a specific religious message.

The reuse of redundant churches or, as the Code of Canon Law states, "relegated to profane but not sordid use", puts down a number of complex problems. But it gives some interesting design idea too.

On the one hand, in fact, redundant churches have a particular arrangement and structure of the inner spaces, of the finishing, of the furniture that strongly reduce the changing in use, unless deep alteration of the structure sometimes not respectful of the original architectonic framework. On the other hand, redundant churches could be reused with different functions from the original ones, and they could continue playing a central role in the community life, as social catalysts for void urban areas, for cities that are often full of objectives and activities but void of common occasions and spaces, so becoming an engine for social aggregation and personal interchange. The churches could take again the function of "assembly", even if no more from a religious point of view, for which they have been designed.

2 The research program

In order to analyze these aspects, in 2003 a national research program called “Renaissance opportunities for redundant churches” started under the coordination of the University of Trento, together with other three Italian Universities (Università Politecnica delle Marche, University of Naples “Federico II”, University of Salerno),.

The idea arose from the fact that both in Italy and in Europe there are religious buildings no more used for religious purposes, that have been changed in a way not very respectful of the previous sacredness of the site. For example, in Dublin (Ireland) one of the most representative churches, St. Andrews church, is now used as tourist office; in Dundee (Scotland) a redundant church is now an Indian restaurant at the ground floor, and a billiard room upstairs; in Edinburgh (Scotland) the church near the Castle is a tourist office and a bar at the ground floor, and a great banquet room at the first floor.

The research concerns only the catholic churches, that is those buildings that the Code of Canon Law defines as “sacred buildings designated for divine worship to which the faithful have the right of entry for the exercise, especially the public exercise, of divine worship” as previously written. In Italy, churches still used for worship cannot be removed from their use; the Italian civil law states that “the buildings designed for the public exercise of the catholic worship, even if private property, cannot be removed from their use even through alienation, till then the designation is stopped in compliance with the laws concerning it”. These laws refer to the Code of Canon Law where it is precisely stated when the religious role is ceased: “If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane but not sordid use” (Can. 1222 §1.).

The research final result is to formulate guidelines that can be useful both to architects and most of all to the public administrators to understand how to use properly the churches relegated to profane but not sordid use that, to be brief but with great respect, has been often called “deconsecrated” or “redundant” churches.

The research objective is to preserve the historical, architectonic and formal value of the building, together with the former religious one in order to give the building, once a sacred one, a well-suited and proper new destination. At the same time, the guidelines can contribute not to pervert the nature of the building from a constructive point of view, proposing most of all reversible interventions.

3 The church as a home

We said that a redundant church can perform again by a profane point of view those social functions that once it performed as “Assembly of God”, as a building where other assemblies and meetings can take place.

But simpler, the church has even the meaning of “Home of Christ”, “Home as a place where people live and where the most personal, intimate and deep relations that marks a man’s life take place; home where to take refuge and to shelter not only from the inclemency of weather conditions and the outer dangers, but even where to look for the privacy we need in order to find our self again and our genuineness; where to give an appointment for work or for friendship, for fun or for love. Home as icon of our self, to which we give the duty to tell people frequenting, or seeing by chance or noticing it about us: its beauty, its richness, its order, its greatness, the brightness of the materials, everything is made so to give specific messages about the rank and the cultural and moral qualities of the person who wanted or lives in it” [4].

At a lower scale, more “human” so to speak, a redundant church can be reused as a house.

In this case, the restoration plan is very difficult for several reasons, briefly analysed hereafter.

- a. Generally speaking, churches are buildings used to hold an assembly, that is a certain number of people meeting together for a specific purpose. The inner space has a certain size, because it must guarantee the access, the stay and the use by a lot of people according to the liturgy. In a way, it is easier to reuse a place of worship as theatre, auditorium, multifunctional space than as a house, because the former functions need large spaces as a place for worship has. Instead, a house is a closer space, more intimate, cosier in a way, where rooms have usually a small scale.
- b. The rooms in a house are connected according to functional rules different from the ones related to the liturgy. The living room, the kitchen, the sleeping rooms, the bathroom, the closet, the access rooms have little sizes and are designed taking into account the daily use, the orientation, the brightness, for example.
- c. The need for light inside the rooms can lay to new openings in the churches walls, and so the facades need to be changed.
- d. As said before, the space in a place of worship is usually high and large, while a room should not be higher then 2.70 metres. New floor must be built then, and this causes:
 - a deep changing of the visual perception of the inner space as a whole;
 - the changing of the structure in order to allow the connection of the new elements.
- e. Furthermore, we must take into consideration that a house needs systems as the water and sewage installation, the heating system, the electric system, usually absent in churches. Their integration inside the building must be carefully evaluated so that both the main system elements and the secondary ones well integrate in the building and do not interfere with the original valuable elements of the building itself.
- f. If new floors are planned, they must be connected one to the other by means of stairs that must be properly inserted inside the old structure.

So, when reusing a church as a house, the building usually undergo heavy functional, formal and structural interventions that modify both the inner and outer look. The designer must take these aspects into consideration, planning a sustainable intervention respectful of the original lay out so that, even if the new use is different from the old one, the perception of the original shape and function is clearly preserved.

4 A case study: S. Elena church in Cadine

During the research project briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, a new method has been proposed in order to identify the redundant churches in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Trento (northern Italy). In fact, an updated list of desecrated churches does not exist, and their identification is often difficult because of the deep modification occurred during the time. The deconsecration “de facto”, that occurs after years of non utilization, negligence or after some delinquent events occurred inside the building, it is not usually stated in any official document, and so no traces can be found even in the Archiepiscopal Curia’s archive (as it should be, being the diocesan bishop the authority that can relegate a church to profane but not sordid use).

313 churches no more used for religious purposes have been identified in Trentino [5].

Hereafter the S. Elena church is presented, a building placed in Cadine (in the suburb of Trento, the provincial capital), changed from place of worship into house.

The building has a central core surely old; in fact it has been already mentioned in 1365 (in a testament) and in 1469. In the Atti Visitali of 1835 (the Atti Visitali of the Diocese of Trento are a



Fig. 1: S. Elena redundant church in Cadine

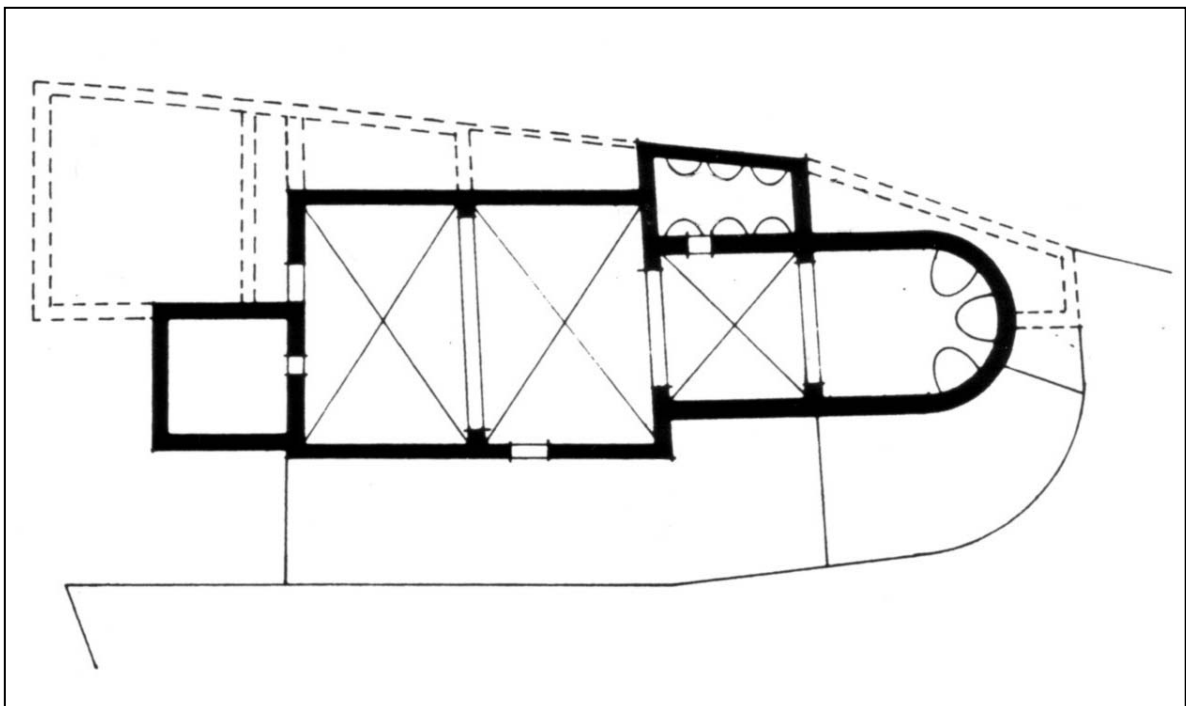


Fig. 2: The probable plan of the original church structure (the added building parts in dotted line)

collection of the official visits made by the bishops in the diocese starting from 1537-38 till 1983-85) the church is already described as “small and narrow (...) mostly destroyed and propped”. In 1860 it has been partly demolished and changed into house.

“The building had a gothic structure, with a unique nave of two spans, divided by a pointed cross-arch and with cross vaults now demolished. A pointed stone arch, laying on posts - the saint arch - and with smaller size than the nave, brought into a squared presbytery, covered with a ribbed vault converging on a circular keystone with Christ nomogram” [6]

As shown in the pictures (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), the original core of the church can be recognized from the bell tower and the semicircular apse on the southern side. Some original openings have been kept, now used as windows for the rooms, while two terraces have been added at the first floor. The old walls on the northern side have been demolished, and new building parts have been added on the original building. The roof has been clearly recently rebuilt, but works have been already proved around 1760. Chimneys and roof windows have been added in order to enlighten the rooms at the last floor.

Inside, the building has been completely transformed. Looking at the apse, for example (Fig. 3 and 4, from drawings kindly given by arch. Franco Caprini in Trento), the space has been divided into two floors connected by an inner stair, while on the eastern façade a new door has been realized in order to connect the original structure with the new added building part. The only request made by the cultural heritage provincial board to the designer has been to realize a “self loading” floor, that is completely free from the original walls and lays on four little pillars connected to the ground floor. In this way the new structure do not modify the original one, and the vision of the inner space as a whole is preserved. The intervention, even if it is invasive because it has deeply changed both the inner space and partially the outer one (most of all due to the new building parts added), has nevertheless three good points:

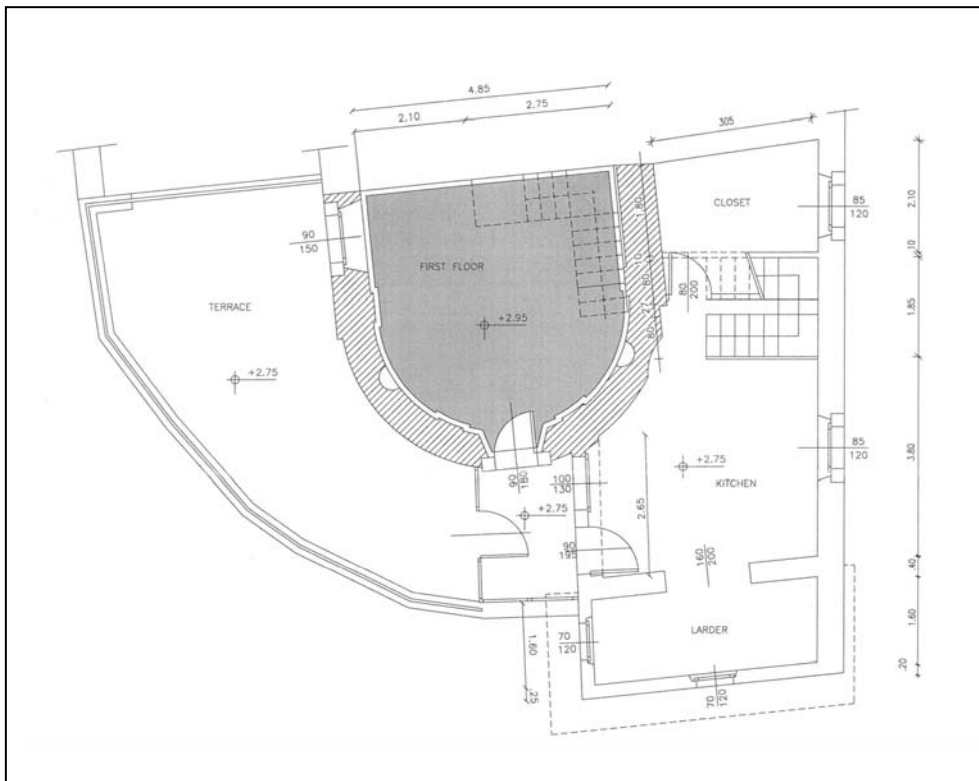


Fig. 3: S. Elena church: plan of the first floor in the apse (original parts in dotted line)

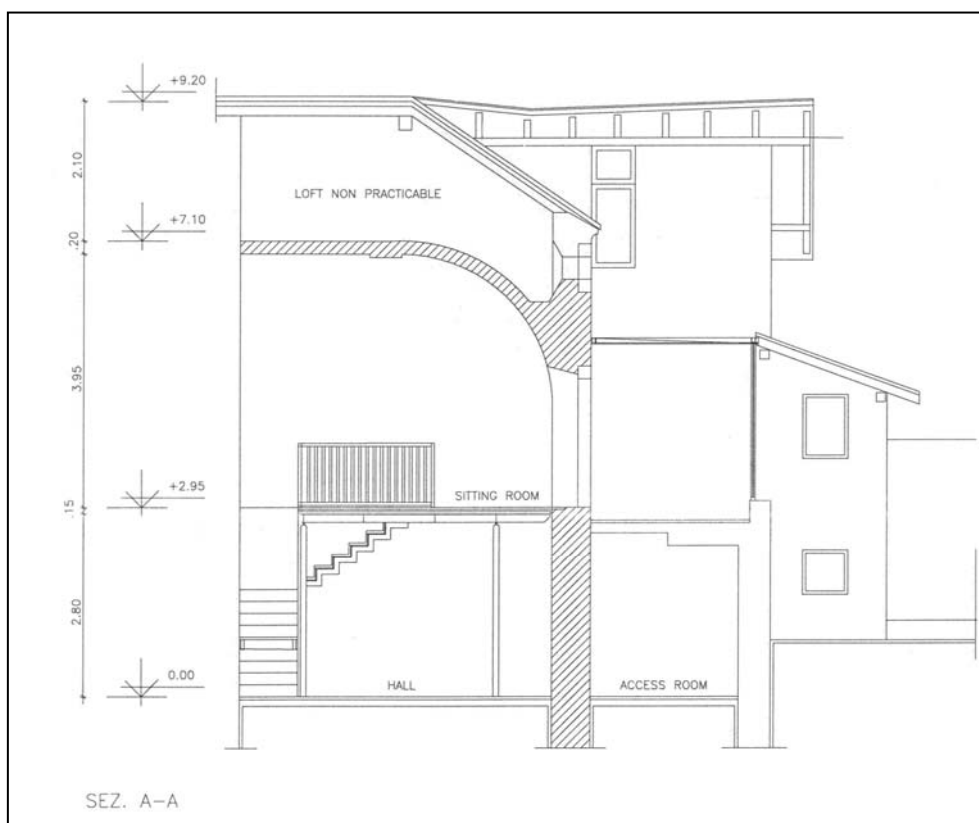


Fig. 4: S. Elena church: section of the apse (original parts in dotted line)

- a. first of all, a building with a great social value has been reused and not demolished, leaving to the community the possibility to have and to live again an object belonging to its history and so a symbol of its culture;
- b. a new function has been given to the building, to be a “home”, appropriate to the original one;
- c. the conservation plan has leaved the clear perception of the original core, most of all from outside, and so of the original building function.

5 Conclusion

S. Elena in Cadine shows us how it is possible to modify the built environment, even when it has a strong historic and religious (sacred, if we want) and so social importance, giving old buildings a new function that is respectful of the original use from different point of view: formal, constructive, material, distributive and so on. The design plan is the central moment where to settle the appropriate activities and changing for a building, considering with great attention the original features not only of the building itself, but even of the building as object with an high social and historical importance.

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