

Fitting the Sacred: Evaluating Adaptive Reuse Potential of Churches

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Keywords

Adaptive reuse; Churches; MCDM; Secularisation; Rural border regions

Across Europe, ongoing secularisation has led to a growing number of underused or abandoned church buildings. In the Czech Republic, this condition is particularly pronounced in rural and border regions affected by depopulation and declining religious practice. While numerous examples from countries such as the Netherlands demonstrate the potential of adaptive reuse as a strategy for preserving these structures and reactivating them as community assets, such approaches cannot be universally applied. In many cases, a fundamental mismatch emerges between the spatial capacity of church buildings and the socio-demographic reality of their surroundings. This paper argues that adaptive reuse must be understood as a problem of “fitting” – requiring a careful alignment between architectural scale, community needs, and local conditions. To address this, it develops a multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) model as a tool for identifying churches with realistic potential for adaptive reuse, based on spatial, demographic, and functional indicators. The results indicate that a significant number of churches within the Czech Republic show high potential for adaptive reuse. To further investigate this potential, the research is complemented by a research-by-design approach conducted within an architectural design studio. Students select churches identified by the model and develop adaptive reuse proposals, exploring possible programmatic scenarios and spatial transformations. The designs are informed by the concept of churches as “third places,” as defined by Ray Oldenburg, rather than strictly sacred spaces, thereby opening possibilities for new social and community functions. The paper ultimately argues that adaptive reuse of churches should not be approached as a universal strategy, but as a selective and context-sensitive process, in which identifying the “right scale” of intervention becomes a critical architectural task.