

# Valuation of medieval churches; towards an integration of experts' and laypersons' views

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***Abstract** - In this paper we explore the dynamics and strategies that spring from the tension between energy retrofit and conservation by investigating the differences and similarities between experts' and laypersons' valuation of historic buildings, as well as their views on their energy efficiency. This paper presents four case studies of medieval churches in Groningen, Netherlands. Valuation studies is used to investigate the values that are attached to historic buildings by various stakeholders. We introduce the 'heritage as a spatial vector' approach, to position heritage in relation to developments in society. Our theoretical contribution lies in the combination of heritage approaches and valuation studies. We conclude that for a more balanced assessment of historic buildings, laypersons' valuations should be further integrated in heritage studies.*

**Keywords – Medieval churches; retrofit; laypersons' valuation; heritage as spatial vector; Netherlands**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Preserving historic buildings does not always align with the ambition to promote sustainability in the built environment. In this paper we investigate the differences and similarities between experts' and laypersons' valuations of historic buildings, as well as their views on their energy efficiency. Our cases are set in the Dutch province of Groningen, a rural area renowned for its medieval churches. The Organisation of Historic Churches in Groningen (SOGK) is the owner of 86 historic churches, and takes care of building maintenance and repair. Local voluntary committees are responsible for day-to-day management.

Valuation studies investigate the different values that are ascribed to historic buildings by various actors. Architecture is a cultural product and as such all buildings are influenced by the culture and time when they were created. According to Walter [1], conservation focuses on the identification, description and prioritisation of values. Furthermore, the role of conservation is to “preserve and enhance values”. De la Torre [2] recognizes the mutability of values and the complex process to identify them: “The values of heritage are not simply ‘found’ and fixed and unchanging, as was traditionally theorized in the conservation field (i.e., the notion of heritage values being intrinsic).”

Valuation and assessment is usually performed by experts. More recently other stakeholders are being included in the value definition process. Fouseki and Cassar [3] argue that it is important to

understand how people feel and behave towards their built environment and how they value their buildings and the impact of energy efficiency improvements. Vatin [4] argues that valorising, or improving value, is an integral part of the practice of valuation. Heuts and Mol [5] suggest that stakeholders use specific sets of valuation criteria, which they call ‘registers’, related to professional background or interest. In this paper, we investigate valuation of historic buildings by laypersons, i.e. those without a background in architectural history.

To broaden our perspective, we draw on the ‘heritage as a spatial vector’ approach, which positions heritage in relation to its physical and social context [6, 7]. It is recognized that actors may attach different meanings, values and interests to heritage, therefore the ways in which heritage is preserved and enhanced can vary [8, 9, 10, 11]. However, these different views can also lead to tensions in conservation. We argue that sustaining historic churches should be positioned in a wider geographical and social context, thereby allowing developments such as demographic change, secularisation and earthquakes (caused by gas extraction) to be taken into account. Furthermore, utility values such as user experience, usability, thermal comfort and energy efficiency play a role in people’s valuations.

To demonstrate this, we carried out four case studies on medieval churches owned by SOGK. In the following, we briefly outline our methods first, then describe the case studies and discuss identified valuation processes and strategies. Finally, we draw conclusions finding that for a more balanced approach, laypersons’ valuations of historic buildings should be further integrated in heritage studies.

## **2. METHODS AND MATERIALS**

Empirical data considered for the four case studies consists of site visits, archival material [14], technical information and interviews. We held a group interview with each local church committee; in total 10 interviewees took part in the study. The age range of interviewees is between 47 and 74, professions include teachers (4), painter, (physio)therapist (2), psychologist, supermarket employee and nurse. Five interviewees are pensioners.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed according to usual procedures in qualitative research [13, 14]. Before the interview, each attendee filled out a questionnaire about the building regarding its thermal comfort, interventions to improve its energy performance and how he or she valued it personally. Photo-elicitation was used for the evaluation of the energy performance improvement. The starting point for our assessment was a list of sociocultural values, based on the literature [2, 11]. However, we kept an open mind as to user values that came up during the interviews and site visits.

## **3. RESULTS**

The churches in our sample are located in Nieuw Scheemda (figure 1), Leegkerk (figure 2), Lettelbert (figure 3) and Obergum (figure 4). Frequency of use ranges from five times a year to several times a week. Regarding their thermal comfort, the churches in Nieuw Scheemda, Lettelbert and

Leegkerk were considered acceptable, although in Lettelbert the interviewees differed in their assessment. Nevertheless, in Nieuw Scheemda and Lettelbert it was deemed necessary to wear heavy clothing in winter; while in Leegkerk warm clothing was needed all year round. In Obergum, the thermal comfort level was considered insufficient. Judgment was adapted in some cases by taking the age of the building into account. Pre-heating time before an event ranged from 1 up to 12 hours in advance. In this last case, the church was used only five times a year so this was not felt as a problem.

### 3.1 Stakeholders' valuation

In this section, we give an overview of the values that our interviewees ascribed to their buildings, and contrast these values with the values from the literature [2, 11]. We scaled the responses on a five-point scale: absolutely unimportant (--), unimportant (-), somewhat important (+/-), important (+), very important (++). Architectural and artistic/aesthetical value is split in two separate values. If the value did not come up in the interview this is indicated with 'x'.

*Table 1. Values*

Values	Nieuw Scheemda	Leegkerk	Lettelbert	Obergum
Age value	+/-	+	++	+/-
Architectural value	+	+/-	--	++
Artistic/ Aesthetical value	-	+	+	+
Emotional value	--	--	++	--
Historic value	--	+	+	+/-
Religious value	++	--	++	--
Political value	--	x	x	x
Educational value	--	x	x	x
Community value	+/-	+/-	++	++
Economic value	--	--	++	--

The historical values of the church were important to all respondents, which could both relate to the building itself as to certain elements that were deemed especially important. The majority of the respondents are interested in history and consider themselves to be knowledgeable about the history of the church. In some cases, the building was mentioned as a site of important historical events, such as Leegkerk, which had a role in the Eighty Year's War (1568-1648), fought by the Netherlands against the Spanish Empire. The architectural value of the church was considered not important by the respondents in Lettelbert, whereas the age value was considered very important. In Leegkerk the simplicity of design was mentioned as a special quality. On the other hand, in Nieuw Scheemda the respondents were unaware of the history of the church and considered the aesthetical value of the church as not very important. The value of authenticity was added as an important value in Obergum.

The interior of the church is often experienced as peaceful; in one case the atmosphere was considered one of the main qualities. In Nieuw Scheemda respondents stated that the (Christian) religious value of the church was ‘very important’, (general) spiritual value was put forward quite strongly in the case of Lettelbert. In the other two cases this original value of churches was considered ‘not important’. Furthermore, personal memories of the respondents themselves or others in the community were considered important.

Apart from the values in themselves, it is interesting to analyse who these values are for. Some respondents argue that the church fulfils an important role for the community by providing a place for local events. This includes cultural events, such as concerts, but also more commercial activities, such as weddings or funerals. Moreover, the organisation of events is the mainstay of the survival of these churches. Other values are considered important for the general public, including tourists, visitors of events, or ‘heritage visitors’.

Regarding the economic benefits of the church reactions were mixed. In three cases the general feeling was that the profits should only provide for the (daily) upkeep of the church. In Lettelbert the respondents envisaged a greater economic contribution of the church, by attracting tourists to the village.

An important characteristic of Nieuw Scheemda is its excellent acoustics, which makes the church attractive for concerts. The organ, by the famous organ builder Hinsz, is probably as valuable as the church itself. The interviewees even state that the church should be demolished, were it not for the good acoustics. On the other hand, in Obergum the church lacks good acoustics, which makes it less attractive for musical events.

The churches house several elements which are deemed important. Integral to the building are *niches* in the apse in Leegkerk. The *piscina* in Leegkerk and the *altar stone* in Lettelbert are remembrances of the period before the reformation. In Obergum the *cave* under the church was especially valued, maybe because of its authenticity. *Gravestones* in the floor provide memories of people who have lived and died in the community. The *pulpit* in Lettelbert is valued as a decorated wooden interior item. Other elements include an old *bible* in Nieuw Scheemda. Some of these elements contribute to other values, such as the peaceful atmosphere, memories of earlier periods or people.

### **3.2 Energy retrofit proposals**

In the interviews photos were presented of energy retrofit interventions, interviewees were asked to give their opinion on the implementation of these interventions for their own church. Many reactions of the respondents were highly negative regarding most interventions. In Nieuw Scheemda there was powerful opposition against almost all the possibilities presented, although internal double glazing and floor heating had some agreement. In Leegkerk none of the interventions could count on unanimous agreement. In Lettelbert respondents agreed to double glazing and floor heating. Insulation attracted mixed reactions. In Obergum the respondent agreed with floor heating, internal double glazing,

screening and shutters. He was interested in the glass double lobby. He was the only respondent to agree with PV panels on the roof.

Both internal and external insulation was strongly opposed by almost all respondents. Double glazing was strongly opposed by the majority of respondents. The reactions to the internal double door and lobby varied considerably, from strong opposition to strong agreement. This could be related to the authenticity of the interior and the impact this intervention would have. Partition heating was primarily opposed, while floor heating was the least controversial intervention. The reaction to solar panels varied from strong opposition to agreement, with respondents in Lettelbert suggesting the removal of gravestones to allow for the placing of PV panels in the graveyard.

### 3.3 Case comparison

The interviewees in Nieuw Scheemda defend the building under two principles: acoustics and religious nostalgia. The informants coincided that investments were not merited, because the building is not used for religious purposes anymore. They expressed no interest in energy efficiency, considering that the actual systems work well.



*Figure 1. Church Nieuw Scheemda*

The informants at Leegkerk are pensioners with a higher educational level; they showed much more environmental consciousness in their reaction to the energy-efficiency proposals. They would accept minor improvements in the thermal bridges and the heating system.



*Figure 2. Church Leegkerk*

Lettelbert church presents a grave problem of outdated technology, it has been renovated in 1995 without any improvements in energy-efficiency. The church is valued as a spiritual place, well suited to the icon-painting classes. During winter interviewees have to struggle with the two heating devices inside the classroom, while trying to avoid the cold coming in from the church.

For Obergum, the intervention for energy-efficiency is already programmed and it is also highly needed. Present conditions are uncomfortable and the heating system can hardly cope with the heat demand.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Traditional architectural-historical values did play a role in the valuations of the church, especially specific elements and historic value were mentioned. The valuation of the architecture ranged from valuing simplicity to considering the building as unimportant safe for its acoustics. In Obergum, the informant defended the authenticity of the church and rejected interventions which might compromise the walls. Considering registers of valuing we acknowledge several clusters of valuation, which can be related to actors' interests. For the 'history buff' the historical qualities of the church are its main attraction, including valuable elements. The 'community organizer' is primarily interested in what the church can do, as a meeting point, a place for cultural events, concerts. The 'spiritualist' is looking for religious or spiritual inspiration and values the atmosphere of peace and quiet. On a personal level this is related to personal memories or religious nostalgia. Economic benefit was not a very prominent motivator, only as far as the benefits are necessary for the upkeep of the building.



*Figure 3. Church Lettelbert*

In keeping with the 'heritage as a spatial vector' approach, the position of the interviewees seemed of importance. In Nieuw Scheemda and Obergum we have the impression that they were following a group agenda, instead of expressing personal values. Environmental consciousness was related to the level of education, with higher education leading to a greater interest in saving energy. Specific values can be related to a community perspective and the role the church plays in this community. The church in Lettelbert as painting school has become an important element in community identity and emotions. Also in the other cases the church is integrated in local activities and is a highly valued part of the local network.



*Figure 4. Church Obergum*

The present state of the building and the frequency of use obviously influence the need for energy retrofit. Therefore, Lettelbert and Obergum require the most attention for thermal upgrading. In the case of Nieuw Scheemda interviewees were very perceptive of the economic costs of the proposed interventions, even though the committee itself does not have to pay for restoration work. This probably also relates to the very low use frequency of five times a year.

We conclude that for a more balanced approach, laypersons' valuations of historical buildings should be further integrated in heritage studies. In particular, community values need to be more fully addressed in value assessments.

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