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50 Years after the Second Vatican Council Taking the Modern Church into the 21st Century

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50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) came to a *close*. Although this gathering of the Church hierarchy essentially ratified ideas that had already found their way amongst progressive Catholics in many respects, it infused a spirit of innovation and liberation throughout the Christian world. The Council's central idea, namely that the Catholic faith would be better expressed by collective worshipping rather than individual devotion led to a fundamental rethinking of the church as a building type. It was no longer to constitute a monument to the glory of the Divine but a piece of social infrastructure fostering community building along Christian values. Its internal organization was to encourage the active involvement of the faithful in the celebration and bridge the traditional (hierarchical and spatial) gap between the clerics and the laity. As a consequence, in the 1960s, church architecture became a field of creative experimentation; many architects enthusiastically broke away from tradition and introduced new spatial concepts, expressive shapes and novel structural principles in their designs.

Given the very large amount of church buildings that were constructed in the decade after Vatican II, the new religious paradigm had a significant impact on the built environment of the welfare state of the 1960s - not in the least in the sprawling suburbs. Today, this enthusiasm and experimental vigour are long gone. Apart from the general secularizing tendency and the competition with other religions, Christianity is also affected by a severe institutional crisis. Moreover, attendance

at church services has dropped to a historically low. The resulting number of redundant church buildings is one of the most tangible results of this unpropitious climate. The future of this vast architectural patrimony constitutes a key challenge for today's Church leaders and civil society as well as for the design community. This session maintains that this phenomenon of redundancy particularly affects the more experimental churches of the post-conciliar period. Because of their young age and their location in peripheral and low-density suburban areas, these churches are not as firmly rooted in the collective memory as their older counterparts. As a consequence these buildings are not yet "heritagized": scholarship on their architectural significance is limited, their social and cultural values have not yet been made explicit and financial support to do so is often lacking. As a result, these "modern" churches suffer from a lack of appreciation by the general public while restorations and transformations are often carried out negligently. The fact that many of these buildings were realized with cheap materials and according to experimental construction methods causes them to age badly and to require onerous maintenance. The literature on the various aspects of adaptive reuse of religious buildings (social, cultural, economic and technical) is generally based on experiences with "historical" churches, i.e. the traditional typologies and the familiar (neo-)styles. This session therefore seeks to broaden the scope of this expertise by examining to what extent the existing know-how on adaptive reuse is applicable to the post-conciliar Christian churches from the 1960s and early 1970s.

The variety in perspectives adopted in this session's papers not only testifies to the impressive aesthetic and liturgical diversity of post-conciliar church production, it also allows us to uncover some of the mechanisms behind this plurality. All authors stress that, apart from architectural paradigms or particular theological ideas, the program (and thus the analysis) of a church building always transcends the purely religious. In their paper, Ariel Luis Lazzarin and Renato Luiz Sobral Anelli show, for example, how the *Espirito Santo do Cerrado* church by Lina Bo Bardi in Uberlândia, Brazil, was conceived (and functioned) as an instrument of local empowerment in the context of Liberation Theology and the bottom-up democratization movement it supported through the so-called "base groups". Also, in the paper by Elisabeth Urbán and Zoran Vukoszávlyev, the parish church appears as a site of conflict. The suppression of Catholicism behind the Iron Curtain created a context where clinging to tradition became an act of resistance since openly embracing liturgical and aesthetic renewal was simply impossible. The contrast with the *Senhora da Boavista* church, analyzed by João Luis Marques, could not be bigger. Part of the newly laid-out *Boa Vista* neighbourhood on the outskirts of Porto and entirely designed by famed modernist architect Agostino Ricca, it featured not only housing slabs and office buildings but also amenities that were meant to infuse the scheme with a sense of urbanity such as shops, a luxury hotel, a swimming pool, a cinema and – a church. The prominent presence of this religious equipment in the heart of such a private

real estate operation is telling for the (then) prominent position of the Catholic Church in Portuguese society. Quite surprisingly, the multi-purpose church is the only part of the public amenities that is still fully operational today. Its concept, namely that of a platform for communal activities based on a shared spirituality (rather than a place exclusively reserved for the cult), which was promoted by the Second Vatican Council, is also highlighted by Eva Weyns in her paper on the *Blijde Boodschap* church in the Parkwijk in Turnhout, Belgium. Although this church has nothing of the architectural bravura of Ricca's - the church forms part of a public housing scheme - it provided a modest but crucial infrastructure in the associative life of the local community. Finally, on the basis of a morpho-typological analysis of the interaction between urban planning and church building in modern Barcelona, Alba Arboix-Alió and Cristina Jover Fontanals illustrate the importance of churches in the structuring of the urban fabric and public space. As they rightly state, the debate on the future use of churches should not be limited to their architectural dimension but rather focus on new modes of appropriation and usage; indeed, considering the church space as an extension of the public realm opens up a whole new field of possibilities.

As the papers in this session show, the fact that Christian religious practices and their sites increasingly are becoming heritage confronts us with two challenges. On the one hand, it raises the question regarding the (advisability of) conservation of the original characteristics of these buildings in a context where their original religious significance is increasingly evaporating. On the other hand, the time has come to consider this heritage beyond the focus on its religious meaning and explore the modern church from a more prospective point of view. As the authors in this session show, typical characteristics of this heritage are its non-monumentality, the attempt to blend with the surrounding built environment and a more abstract approach to religious symbolism. Moreover, in the post-conciliar period, church buildings were often conceived to accommodate also other functions than only religious services; hence they are often firmly rooted in the social and cultural life of the neighbourhood. By contextualizing these features and discussing how they can be relevant in a context of adaptive reuse, these papers provide important keys for speculating about the potential of this patrimony as a social, cultural and spatial resource for the 21st century.