



POLITECNICO
DI TORINO

Honors thesis

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN ARCHITECTURE
FOR HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT

Abstract

Invisible churches

**A journey among the places of worship fallen into disuse
between 1999 and 2018 in the Diocese of Turin**

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February 2019

The number of churches fallen into disuse in Europe and in the secularised western countries has been constantly increasing in the last decades. The issue requires the communities to question themselves on several social and cultural matters, not least the heritage protection and the strategies for reuse.

While other countries have developed solutions to this delicate phenomenon, in Italy it is still hard to define the size of the problem, awaiting legislative clarity and in the absence of specific analysis and planning tools.

In Italy, religious buildings belonging to the Catholic Church amounts to over 65.000, but this is not the ultimate fact. Congregations, public bodies and private citizens also own churches and a final count is therefore hard to guess.

This is the complex situational frame in which to place “invisible churches”: buildings no longer used, never considered, never surveyed.

This research wishes to correct the lack of studies on this phenomenon, focusing on the Diocese of Turin’s local territory. Based on reserved documents, the study investigates how many churches fell into disuse in the last twenty years and evaluates the outcome of the dismissals.

The first input has come from the book *Architettura, arte e liturgia, Interventi nella diocesi di Torino 1998-2015*, authored by Mauro Sudano and Paolo Tomatis and published by the Liturgical Office of the Diocese of Turin, which illustrates some cases of Church dismissals that have been debated by the Liturgical Commission during those same years.

The list has been integrated by additional cases of churches dismissed up to 2018, documented and archived at the Liturgical Office: the sample counts 34 cases.

The complete story regarding each case has been reconstructed like a mosaic by putting together pieces of information found in texts, articles, interviews with clerks, mayors, planners, citizens and by exploring those very places of dismissal. Every single story has been portrayed in a profile sheet and implemented with the available administrative data.

Every hypothesis for reuse has been matched with the actual effective function of each building, with the cases being catalogued according to recurring features, including property, public availability, and eventual completion and success. Furthermore, a tool for analysis has been introduced to compare the cases between them and highlight recurring situations and behaviours.

The research indicates that most dismissed churches used to belong to parishes or confraternities, which are nowadays mainly extinguished and legally represented by the parish priest. This group represents 56% of the whole number, while 32% of it comes from religious institutes.

After the act of dismissal, the first group tended to maintain the property of the building or otherwise cede it to public bodies. The second group tended to sell the property to private citizens instead, allowing real estate investments which brought to the loss of the good.

Just 55% of the projects have been completed while 15% are still in progress and another 15% has stopped. Nevertheless, irrespectively of the kind of ownership, most of the churches that have undergone practices of reuse are now open to the public, allowing the communities to benefit from them.

The research displays the current situation in the Diocese of Torino concerning the phenomenon of the dismissed churches and proposes an unprecedented database which can be useful to develop further studies on a wider time range or focused on the specific matters met alongside the research, such as planning, joint responsibility and sustainability of the project of reuse.

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