

CONSTRUCTING A *GENIUS LOCI*: THE ST PIUS X'S CHURCH IN WILRIJK, 1957-1967.

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Resumo: Os locais sagrados são geralmente descritos como sítios notáveis, cujas dimensões poéticas são acentuadas pela arquitectura. O presente trabalho inverte esta concepção convencional ao inquirir de que forma podem locais vulgares adquirir significados sagrados. Centrando a atenção na construção de espaços suburbanos de culto na Bélgica do pós-guerra, o trabalho examina as influências do Concílio Vaticano Segundo nestas propostas arquitectónicas. Em particular, a alteração do significado de sagrado introduzida por este Concílio será escrutinada através do estudo do caso da paróquia de São Pio X em Wilrijk. A análise desta igreja paroquial (1967) com recurso ao modelo teórico de D. Chidester e E. Linenthal sustentará a hipótese de que diferentes interpretações de sacralidade podem existir num mesmo local.

Palavras-chave: Arquitectura religiosa moderna; Espacos sagrados; Suburbanização.

Abstract: Sacred places are mostly described as remarkable sites where architecture is used to accentuate their poetic dimensions. This paper reverses this conventional conception by inquiring how sacredness can be *created* on 'ordinary' locations. It focuses on the construction of suburban spaces for worship in post-war Belgium and examines the influence of the Second Vatican Council. To this effect, it analyses the case of the St Pius X's parish church (1967) in Wilrijk by means of a theoretical model by D. Chidester and E. Linenthal. It furthermore scrutinizes the considerable revision of the concept of sacredness brought about by the Council. This paper argues that sacredness is something that can be *constructed* and demonstrates that different interpretations of sacredness can coexist at a single site.

Keywords: Modern religious architecture; Sacred space; Suburbanization.

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CONSTRUCTING SACREDNESS

Sacred places are generally known as extraordinary sites that are set apart from daily reality and normal time. The sacred dimensions of such special places often derive from symbols, such as exceptional architecture¹. In his seminal work *Genius Loci*, Christian Norberg-Schulz also attached great importance to architecture in concretizing meanings of a place: «The existential purpose of building (architecture) is [...] to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment»². In other words, architecture has the potential to revive the poetic dimensions already present in a place³. This paper, however, reverses this conventional conception. Rather than analysing exceptional locations, we examine whether sacredness can be *created* and if so, how architecture can contribute to the sacralization of an ‘ordinary’ site.

This issue becomes all the more relevant in the context of the suburbanized spaces of the post-war world, where, at least at first sight, there are no astonishing or existential meanings to be uncovered in the sense of Norberg-Schulz. This paper, therefore, investigates how, in such a context, sacredness can become *constructed*. As a case in point, we analyse the establishment of the St Pius X’s parish in Wilrijk (Oosterveld), a nondescript residential development amidst the urban sprawl around Antwerp. The parish church, designed by the architects Lode Wouters and Paul Meekels between 1960 and 1967, was built during the transitional period of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)⁴. During this period, the idea of sacredness in the Roman Catholic faith was subject to considerable revision. Instead of attaching great importance to the sacredness of the church building on its own, the gathering of the church community in the building took priority⁵. This case study thus allows to chart how this changing concept of sacredness found its way into the architectural practise. Moreover, it demonstrates how, in transforming this trivial site into sacred ground, different sacralization ‘mechanisms’ were at work.

To this effect, it is necessary to understand how a place obtains sacred meanings. The forms and processes that distinguish religious sacred places from everyday locations have been theorized by David Chidester and Edward Linenthal⁶. They propose a model which interprets a sacred site as a combination of three types of space: contested, ritual and significant space. As they explain, sacred space is first

¹ HEYNICKX *et al.*, 2012: 7.

² NORBERG-SCHULZ, 1980: 18.

³ HADDAD, 2010: 92–3.

⁴ On the architects Wouters and Meekels see: BRAEKEN, 2004; SPITAEELS, 2004.

⁵ LAMBERIGTS & GELDHOF, 2013.

⁶ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL, 1995.

of all «contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols»⁷. This means that the production of sacred space is an act of asserting power. However, this control is often resisted and can become the source of conflicts. Secondly, they identify sacred space as «ritual space, a location for formalized, repeatable symbolic performances»⁸. With the performance of rituals, such as praying or meditating, places become charged with sacredness since these acts are not performed elsewhere. This interaction takes place in the other direction as well; rituals take on a greater significance when performed in an extraordinary setting. Thirdly, they define sacred space as «significant space, a site, orientation, or set of relations subject to interpretation because it focuses on crucial questions about what it means to be a human being»⁹. This entails that sacred environments, like churches or temples, symbolise a specific view on the existential questions of life. This comprehensive model provides a clear framework to analyse the processes that set sacred space apart. In the following, we will rely on the three dimensions of Chidester and Linenthal's model to structure our case study.

THE PARISH AS A COLLECTIVE PROJECT

Regarding the first dimension of Chidester and Linenthal's model, the condition of sacred space as contested space is applicable to the formation of new parishes during the post-war period in Belgium. After the Second World War, rapid urbanization provoked a 'competition' for land around urban centres, especially because this process generally occurred with minimal formal urban planning and was mostly driven by private initiative. This was also the case in the municipality of Wilrijk, located in the southern periphery of Antwerp¹⁰. During the rapid urbanization of this area in the 1950s, the hamlet of Oosterveld, in the north-eastern part of Wilrijk, changed from a rural to a residential area. Except for the St Augustine's Hospital (1938), the Oosterveld neighbourhood comprises single family houses and apartment buildings only principally for a middle class population.

⁷ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL, 1995: 15.

⁸ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL, 1995: 9.

⁹ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL, 1995: 12.

¹⁰ The following account of the realization of the St Pius X's parish infrastructure is based on: ADA – *Records of the St Pius X's parish in Wilrijk*, 581A; APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*; APA – *Archive of architect Lode Wouters, records of the St Pius X Wilrijk*, LW 3.1; FA – *Archive of the municipalities before the attachment or merger with Antwerp, Wilrijk*, 1584#182 and 222#1237; and CORENS & SMETS, 2010.

During the post-war period, new neighbourhoods were generally developed without initially allocating a site for a place for worship. The Catholic Church was therefore confronted with finding available land for the construction of new churches much like private investors. Typically, this resulted in a negotiation process to acquire a suitable building plot for a new church. The case of Oosterveld provides a good overview of the actors that were involved in these negotiations. In this young residential neighbourhood, the need for a community meeting place and a church arose at the end of the 1950s, setting off the negotiations in 1957¹¹. First of all, it is interesting to note that vicar general Schoenmaeckers of the Mechlin-Brussels archdiocese had an important influence in the process. Subsequently, the following three actors were involved: the municipality of Wilrijk where the Christian Democratic major Louis Kiebooms was almost continuously in power between 1947 and 1976¹², architect De Koninckx who was appointed as urban planner by the municipality of Wilrijk, and the private firm *Société d'Entreprises et de Placements Immobiliers* that owned most of the available land in Oosterveld. After the civil approval of the establishment of an annex parish in Oosterveld in 1958, priest Raymond Meyer additionally concerned himself with the construction of the necessary parish infrastructure¹³. Meyer was furthermore assisted by the Association of Catholic Works of the South Antwerp deanery and the church council.

Among the available parcels in Oosterveld, Schoenmaeckers first considered a plot along a planned square for the future church. Nevertheless, he eventually decided on a less expensive plot in the inner area of a building block situated along the ring-road. To officialise the agreement, De Koninckx agreed to add the parish infrastructure to the special zoning plan of Wilrijk, and to alter the building regulations of the adjacent buildings to better integrate the planned church in the urban fabric (Fig. 1)¹⁴. It can thus be assumed that financial considerations were a determining factor in the selection of the parish infrastructure's location. Furthermore, it is remarkable to note that the selected building plot was divided among three actors for the realization of the intended parish facilities. Firstly, the lateral parts of the building plot were purchased by the association of the deanery in 1959, for the construction of a primary school for girls (1960) on one side, and for a parish hall (1961) on the other side. The parish hall was initially used as provisional church and once the new church was completed, it would become a

¹¹ ADA – *Records of the St Pius X's parish in Wilrijk*, 581A, Onderhoud, 14/02/1957.

¹² ODIS, 2016.

¹³ ADA – *Records of the St Pius X's parish in Wilrijk*, 581A, Ministerie van Justitie, Koninklijk Besluit, 15/09/1958.

¹⁴ The municipal council of Wilrijk approved this altered plan in 1959.

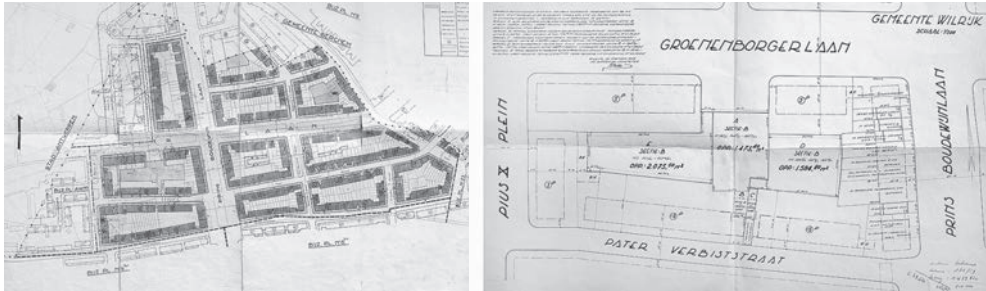


Fig. 1. Special zoning plan of Oosterveld, Wilrijk, with the plot for the parish infrastructure in blue, O. De Koninckx, 1959; and location plan of the St Pius X's parish infrastructure, with the plot for the primary school on the left (E), the plot for the church in the middle (A), the plot for the parish hall on the right (D), and the plot for the presbytery at the bottom (B), 1961 (FA – *Archive of the municipalities before the attachment or merger with Antwerp, Wilrijk, 1584#182*; and APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*).

valuable place for the Catholic social life¹⁵. Secondly, the municipality of Wilrijk purchased the forecourt of the site and provided a presbytery (1961) on the other side of the building block¹⁶. Finally, the church council purchased the central part of the building plot reserved for the church proper in 1960, since by that time, Oosterveld was officially established as an independent parish dedicated to St Pius X¹⁷.

In contrast to Chidester and Linenthal's theoretical model for sacred places, the negotiations in *this* case were not a 'contest', but rather a constructive collaboration. Interestingly, the various actors involved *all* collaborated in acquiring the building plot. We can thus argue that the legitimate ownership of the sacred centre for Oosterveld was not contested at the time of its construction. The constructive collaboration can be explained by the fact that the Catholic Church, at that moment, still enjoyed a quasi-monopoly in spiritual, cultural and social matters in Belgian society¹⁸. This ideological influence was especially clear in municipalities like Wilrijk with a strong majority of the Christian Democratic Party. The fast agreement on a building plot for the parish infrastructure can thus mainly be attributed to the political support of the municipal council, which showed its Catholic affiliation in the negotiations.

A similar collaboration was achieved for finding financial means for the construction of the church. Logically, priest Meyer and his church council made use

¹⁵ CORENS & SMETS, 2010: 61–121.

¹⁶ In Belgium, communes are obliged to provide presbyteries.

¹⁷ In Belgium, churches used for public worship constructed after 1802, are the property of church councils, which oversee their upkeep together with the financial support of local communes.

¹⁸ GEVERS, 2014.

of the legally available subsidies of the Belgian state¹⁹. Moreover, they successfully appealed to the province of Antwerp and the municipality of Wilrijk for additional funds. It was, however, not until 1966 that the church council could obtain all these subsidies and the necessary permits, resulting in the realization of the building in 1967. In the meantime, the outstanding amount was collected from the parish community by the local division of *Domus Dei*, the diocesan organization for church buildings²⁰. The most important methods used for stimulating financial contributions were house visits, the organization of a yearly fair and monthly collections during the Sunday Mass. In this way, the local population also became involved in the appropriation of the sacred space in their parish. Thus, civil and religious authorities, and parishioners alike all collaborated towards constructing this spiritual and social centre.

THE CHURCH AS A RITUAL SPACE

Having discussed the choice of the St Pius X's church's location, it is now necessary to address the ways in which this location was set apart from the surroundings, a necessary step in creating a suitable place for the performance of rituals. We have identified two processes that are consistent with the description of a sacred place as a ritual site in Chidester and Linenthal's model. First of all, a Catholic church explicitly acquires its sacred meaning through a formal consecration ritual²¹. In the case of Wilrijk, the consecration ceremony started with a procession from the parish hall to the church, after which the bishop performed the consecration of the exterior walls, the anointing of the interior walls (a ritual act of pouring aromatic oil) and the consecration of the altar by inserting relics. The celebration of a first Mass in the finalized church completed the ceremony. Through the parish newsletter, the parishioners were informed about this programme and urged to participate actively²². In the Catholic faith, the consecration ritual is a milestone in the sacralization process of the site.

Besides the formal consecration ritual, it can be noted that the sacredness of the site was reinforced by the architectural design of the church. To decide who could complete the important assignment of designing the church, a competition was organized in 1960 for which the regulations were drawn up by priest Meyer and three local architects

¹⁹ In Belgium, the church council could appeal to the commune, the province and the state for subsidies for the construction of a new church, supplementary to their own funds and the donations of parishioners. Only the state was legally obliged to provide 30% subsidies. However, these subsidies were only granted after the approval of the church design by the Ministries of Justice and Public Works.

²⁰ On *Domus Dei* see: STERKEN, 2013.

²¹ Formal rituals are also performed for the laying of the foundation stone and the consecration of the bells.

²² APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*, Parochieblad, 10/12/1967.

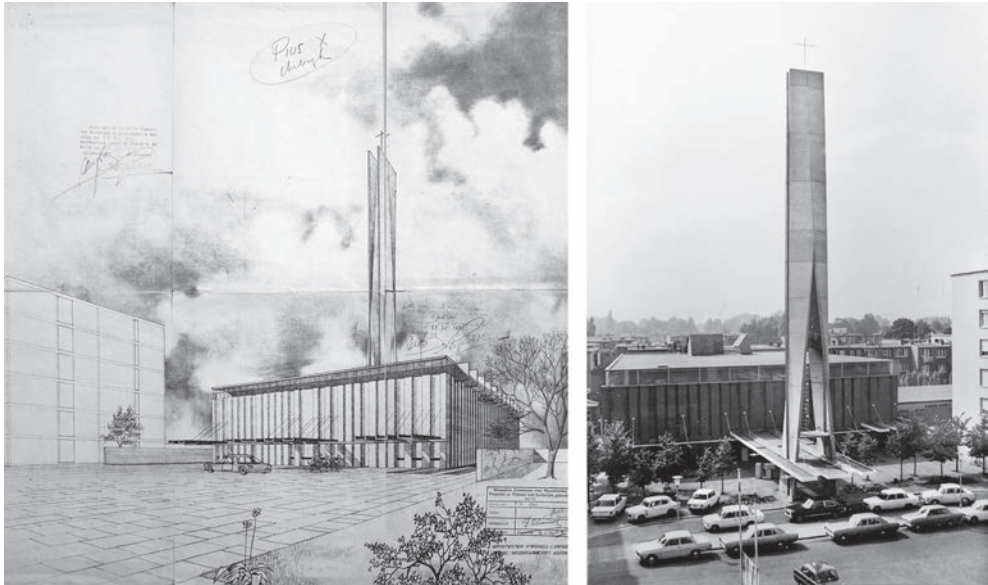


Fig. 2. Design drawing (1961) and historic photograph (ca. 1967) of the St Pius X's church in Wilrijk, architects Paul Meekels en Lode Wouters (APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*).

(Georges Lust, Herman Huygh and Francis Van de Velde)²³. The jury, composed by vicar general Schoenmaeckers, preferred the submission of architects Lode Wouters and Paul Meekels (Fig. 2) to those of Hugh and Van de Velde themselves. The selection of this design may have been influenced by the fact that Meekels was at that time already known at the diocese from earlier church design competitions. The episcopal interference in the selection of the church design is notable and indicates that the diocese attached great importance to production of modern architecture on its territory.

In the design by Meekels and Wouters, we have detected three interventions that the architects used to distinguish the church from its 'ordinary' surroundings. In the first place, the church stands out in its urban environment, located outside the building alignment and marked with an elegant concrete tower. The forecourt along the ring-road emphasizes the importance of the church and the prominent tower is an unmistakable endeavour to highlight the sacred nature of the site. Such vertical structures are known to work as symbolic connections between the surface of the earth and a transcendent God in heaven²⁴. Secondly, visitors enter the church

²³ Information about the design competition was found in: ADA – *Records of the St Pius X's parish in Wilrijk*, 581A; APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*; APA – *Archive of architect Herman Huygh, records of the St Pius X Wilrijk*, HH 2.111-2.114; and APA – *Archive of architect Francis Van De Velde, records of the St Pius X Wilrijk*.

²⁴ TORGERSON, 2007: 4.

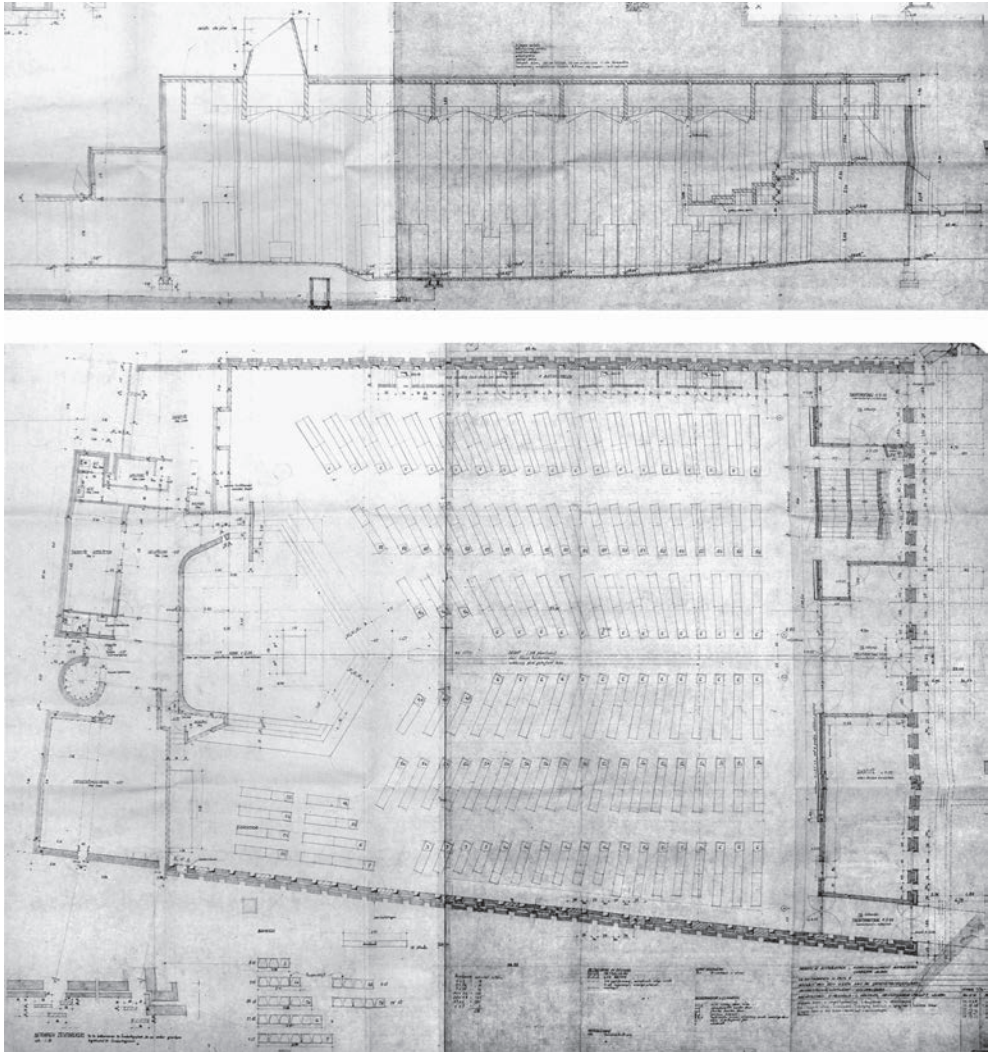


Fig. 3. Longitudinal section and floor plan of the ground floor of the St Pius X's church in Wilrijk, architects Paul Meekels en Lode Wouters, 1966 (APA – *Archive of architect Lode Wouters, records of the St Pius X Wilrijk, LW 3.1.*).

through a vestibule with a low ceiling before arriving in the spacious liturgical space, in which they might feel small and humble (Fig. 3). This contrast in scale is an efficient way to mark the transition from the everyday exterior to the sacred interior. Concerning the interior, a large volume in a church is often interpreted as emphasizing the significance of God²⁵. Thirdly, the design of the liturgical space

²⁵ TORGERSON, 2007: 4.

itself ensures its sacred spirit: the space is dimly lit with horizontal windows below the ceiling, shutting out the stressful urban life. Moreover, the bluestone altar, accentuated by three skylights, is the significant focal point in the space. This kind of spatial organization has been associated with a spiritual "journey"²⁶. It is clear by now that the architecture qualities of the St Pius X's church enhance its sacred character, making it a proper setting for the performance of religious rituals.

THE CHURCH AS A SACRED SYMBOL AND A COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE

Relying on the third dimension of the Chidester and Linenthal model, we can now discuss how the St Pius X's church becomes a 'significant' site in the sense that it reveals something about the existential questions of life. The monumental dimensions of the building and the control of the light in its interior do more than making the site an appropriate setting for rituals alone. These design features also work towards reminding worshippers of the importance of a transcendent God. A more profound analysis of the architectural design can disclose quite a different intention however. From the initial design of 1961 onwards, the architects proposed a completely open liturgical space with a slightly sloping floor in which all attendees were offered a clear view on the altar. Awaiting the subsidies, the initial design was changed at the request of the architectural commission of the diocese, taking into account the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council. In the final design, the altar was moved closer to the sitting area to encourage the active involvement of the faithful in the liturgy, according to post-conciliar practices (Fig. 4). Not



Fig. 4. Interior of the St Pius X's church in Wilrijk, after its construction (ca. 1967) and during a First Communion Mass (1977), architects Paul Meekels en Lode Wouters (APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*).

²⁶ TORGERSON, 2007: 3.

only the openness of this main space, but also the austerity of the materials used and the simplification of the décor emphasise the importance of the space as a gathering place for the Christian community²⁷. In this serene interior, the parish community itself can be the focal point. Consequently, the significance of the site for the parishioners not only originated from the church's overwhelming dimensions, but also from their appropriation of the space.

The significance of this site thus appears to be grounded in two seemingly opposing conceptions of a church: a monumental religious symbol devoted to God and a sober meeting place for the parish community. The architects used both these conceptions to contribute to the significance of the site and consequently to construct its sacredness. Following Chidester and Linenthal's line of thought, this sacred site seems to cast a glance on two different ways to lead a meaningful life, viz. a personal connection with God *or* an attachment to the neighbourhood and the other community members. This observation then raises intriguing questions regarding the origin of this paradox.

The double character of the church can primarily be related to the specific context in which it was established. Namely, during the twentieth century, the concept of sacredness was subject to important revisions, in which the Second Vatican Council was a turning point²⁸. The Council ratified the idea that faith would be better expressed by collective worshipping rather than individual devotion²⁹. This resulted in a typological transformation from a 'monumental church' towards a 'liturgical church'³⁰. While the 'monumental church' conveys the sacredness of the buildings as a temple for God, the 'liturgical church' expresses the sacredness of the assembly of the church community³¹. This important revision explains the origins of the St Pius X design. As we have seen, in this church these two prevailing interpretations of sacredness were superimposed by combining features from a 'monumental' and a 'liturgical' church typology.

In addition, a possible explanation for the apparent conflicting characteristics of the church can be found in the regulations for the ideas competition from 1960, mentioned above. These regulations begin with explaining the general principles for the design as follows:

²⁷ TORGERSON, 2007: 4.

²⁸ LAMBERIGTS & GELDHOF, 2013.

²⁹ On the implications of the Second Vatican Council for church architecture see: MOREL & VAN DE VOORDE, 2012.

³⁰ FANNES, 1969.

³¹ FANNES, 1969.

The church building has to fulfil a double function:

- a) *It has to bear a sacramental character = visible sign of God's existing love with the people [...] the interior architecture has to draw attention to the place where the Lord approaches us in his sacraments: the altar [...]*
- b) *The church building has as second function: gather the Christian community. The nave has to be arranged in a way that the worshippers truly feel like a connected family community [...]*³²

Interestingly, these regulations explicitly indicate that the church had to serve a twofold function, which further supports the ambiguous interpretations of its purpose. The design regulations thus not only challenged the architect to connect these two seemingly opposed concepts of a church building, but also show how already well before the Second Vatican Council churches were increasingly being seen as gathering places for the community rather than monuments for the Divine. We therefore argue that the social dimension of the project, although more difficult to detect, is inextricably bound up with the sacralization of the site.

CONCLUSIONS

By means of the St Pius X's church, this paper has analysed how trivial places can become infused with sacredness, and how this occurred in the context of suburban post-war churches. This analysis has confirmed that the three dimensions of a sacred site identified by Chidester and Linenthal – a contested, a ritual, and a significant place – played a part in the sacralization of this site, essentially demonstrating that sacredness is something that can be *constructed*. The analysis furthermore has shown that this church design encompasses two diverging interpretations of sacredness which had general currency in the period around the Second Vatican Council. Balancing impressive dimensions with a restrained atmosphere, this modern church aimed not only at making this site 'stand out' in the suburban landscape, but also at creating an accessible gathering place for the Christian community.

Although this analysis has revealed that the sacralization of this site has a theoretical underpinning, the question remains whether the parishioners truly experienced this site as sacred. Did they understand the sacred meanings that the architectural design brought to the site, or did they still miss the poetic dimensions to which Norberg-Schulz refers? It remains difficult to provide a complete answer

³² Author's translation. ADA – *Records of the St Pius X's parish in Wilrijk*, 581A, Ideeënwedstrijd voor een ontwerp van een nieuwe kerk toegewijd aan de de H. Pius X te Wilrijk, 28/06/1960.

to this question. A few newspaper articles written after the consecration of the church, however, can provide us with some first insights into the reception of the building. For example, one article describes the church as sober, but impressive and especially reports on the delighted reactions of the parishioners whose “eyes were popping out of their head from admiring the building”³³. Another article even goes as far as calling the church an “architectonic functional work of art”³⁴. Despite the fact that many other modern churches received bad criticism, it seems that this church was experienced as an exceptional place from the start. This shows how sacredness (in the sense of exceptional, outstanding, memorable and so on) is not a static given, but can be the result of a dynamic process. Thus, this case study reveals the powerful role that architecture plays in this sacralization process: it can be that something *extra* that elevates the ordinary to the *extra*-ordinary.

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³³ Author's translation. APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*, Kerk van Pius X plechtig gewijd, Gazet van Antwerpen, 18/12/1967.

³⁴ Author's translation. APX – *Records about the construction of the parish infrastructure*, Mgr. Daem wijdt nieuwe Pius X-kerk te Wilrijk, De Standaard, 18/12/1967.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ADA: Archive of the diocese of Antwerp, in Antwerp
- APA: Architecture archive of the province of Antwerp, in Antwerp
- APX: Archive of the St Pius X's parish, in Antwerp
- FA: Felix Archive of the city of Antwerp, in Antwerp

