
Germany: Gothe (architect), “the number of empty or underused churches in Europe is greater than we know”

The three-day online symposium “Herrenhausen”, on the recovery, reuse and conversion of empty and abandoned, ancient and contemporary churches, comes to an end today. 350 experts from Germany, Belgium, Finland, France, the UK, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland and the US participated in the online conference, originally planned in Hanover, coordinated and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation. Urban planner and professor of architecture Kerstin Gothe stressed the need to find new ways to appropriately reuse disused churches. “The number of empty or underused churches is greater than we publicly know”, he said. Churches are “a significant testimony to the cultural heritage” that shapes the image of our towns and villages. As a result of current social changes, many church buildings in Europe “can no longer be operated and maintained by church institutions”. Gothe argued that the community should be the focus to help direct the search for new uses. “Church buildings have always served the community where they were built”. The new uses of churches could open up opportunities: for municipalities, for the society, and also for religious communities. Many church buildings across Europe have been sold and divested in recent years. According to the experts participating in the symposium, specific local differences in terms of legislation and finance have led to churches in Europe being converted in different ways, “often with no consideration of their public role in the community”.

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