

Religion and Communities: Materiality, Spatiality and the Adaptability of Parish Churches in The Diocese of Sheffield



WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the School of Architecture and Landscape, University of Sheffield and The Diocese of Sheffield, Church of England



Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors

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Project summary

This PhD project explores social aspects of the adaptive reuse of parish churches of the Church of England in The Diocese of Sheffield to define conditions for revitalising under-resourced Church-owned buildings and spaces as vital community assets. The research will use case studies to examine how churches can bridge religious and non-religious communities. The student will facilitate research-by-design workshops to empower parishes to articulate their needs, strengths, and aspirations. The project aims to define conditions to reimagine churches as community-oriented social hubs that align with the Church's core values.

PhD Project description

According to the 2021 census, 46.2% of people in England and Wales identified as "Christian," down from 59.3% in 2011. Church of England data reveals that regular worshipers decreased from 1,113,000 in 2019 to 984,000 in 2022, with suburban and rural parishes facing the sharpest declines. This shift presents significant challenges for the Church of England, which must reimagine parish churches as inclusive community hubs while maintaining their spiritual

identity and growing their local mission. This research investigates the dynamic relationships between parish churches as physical spaces, religious institutions, and their surrounding local communities. It seeks to examine the evolving role of parish churches amidst broader questions about the role of religion in contemporary British society.

The project addresses the following research questions:

- **Materiality:** How do the physical attributes of parish churches (construction, style, upkeep) shape their function as community assets beyond religious use?
- **Spatiality:** How do urban, suburban, and rural settings influence the interaction of parish churches with their communities?
- **Adaptability:** How can parish churches be transformed to serve both religious and non-religious communities while preserving their spiritual essence?

The research will adopt a predominantly qualitative and participatory approach, combining ethnographic insights with research-by-design techniques. A key aspect of the project will be reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of redefining parish churches as inclusive community hubs within diverse contexts. The study will explore how adaptive reuse strategies, grounded in both spatial and material analyses, can align with the spiritual and community-focused values of the Church of England. It will also consider the broader implications of these strategies for contemporary British society, offering innovative perspectives on how religious spaces can foster connections between non-religious and faith-based communities. By engaging parishioners and stakeholders in envisioning the future of these spaces, the project will generate practical recommendations for adaptive reuse and sustainable design while contributing to broader academic debates on religion, space, and community dynamics. This work aims to inspire refreshed interpretations of parish churches, helping communities see these spaces as physical structures and vibrant expressions of shared values, histories, and aspirations.

About The Church of England, The Diocese of Sheffield

The Diocese of Sheffield is the project's partner organisation, offering invaluable expertise and resources to support this research. The Diocese oversees a diverse range of parishes, from thriving urban centres to struggling rural communities, providing a rich and varied context for exploring the adaptive reuse of parish churches.

The Diocese of Sheffield is committed to all aspects of sustainability and its own mission is to grow a sustainable network of Christ-like, lively and diverse Christian communities in every place which are effective in making disciples and in seeking to transform our society and God's world. As part of this mission

The Diocese is supporting work to reimagining its church buildings and Parishes, many of which seek to be vibrant, inclusive community hubs while maintaining their spiritual and historical identities. The partner organisation will provide access to case studies, archival materials, key stakeholders, and mentorship and training in areas such as community engagement and adaptive reuse strategies. The student will also benefit from a secondment within The Diocese, gaining practical experience in managing religious spaces and contributing to their sustainable transformation.

Through close collaboration with The Diocese, the research will address real-world challenges faced by under-resourced parishes, helping to redefine their roles as vital community assets and contributing to the Church of England's mission to foster sustainable, community-centred parish models. More information about the Project's partner is available [here](#).

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The studentship will support targeted engagement and outreach activities designed to enhance the project's impact. The student will help coordinate a series of public workshops and talks within selected parishes, creating spaces for community input and fostering discussions on the evolving roles of parish churches. They will also assist with digital content for The Diocese of Sheffield website, sharing findings highlighting innovative parish space uses.

The student will contribute to a modest exhibition or display, onsite or in a local gallery, showcasing parish churches as vibrant community hubs. Additionally, they will assist with preparing brief articles or blog posts, documenting key insights from the project and providing guidance for other parishes interested in similar transformations. These focused initiatives will extend the project's reach, directly supporting the Church's mission to strengthen community-centred engagement.

Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2025; no deferrals are possible as this is the final round of recruitment to WRoCAH Studentships. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a tax- and national insurance-free maintenance grant (£20,780 in 2025/26). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship. It is possible that the difference between the Home/UK and International fee may be met by the University of Sheffield for a successful international applicant. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time under the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one), usually at Distinction level, or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project. The ideal candidate will have a background in architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, or product design. At least a basic understanding of research-by-design methods is essential.

Requirements of the Studentship

This opportunity is being offered as a full-time studentship but part time study may be an option subject to agreement with the supervision team.

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month and a Knowledge Exchange Project.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination within the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

How to apply

By 12 noon GMT on Wednesday 5 March 2025, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that LP University and Project Partner.
 - How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
 - How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.
- 17 March 2025: decision on short-listing
The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Monday 17 March 2025.
 - *Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.* If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Sheffield. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
 - 7-30 April 2025: interviews

Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

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