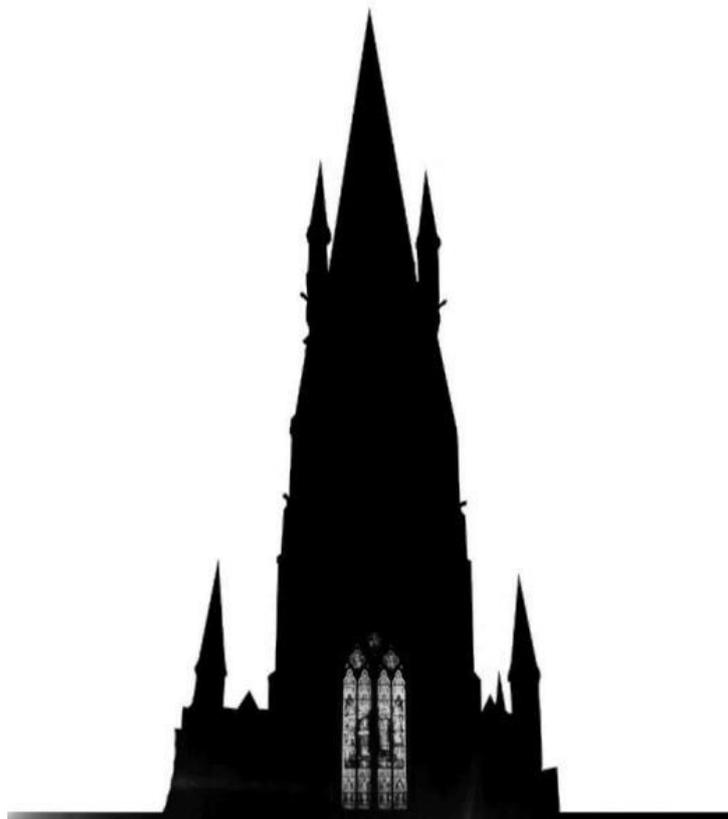

A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN

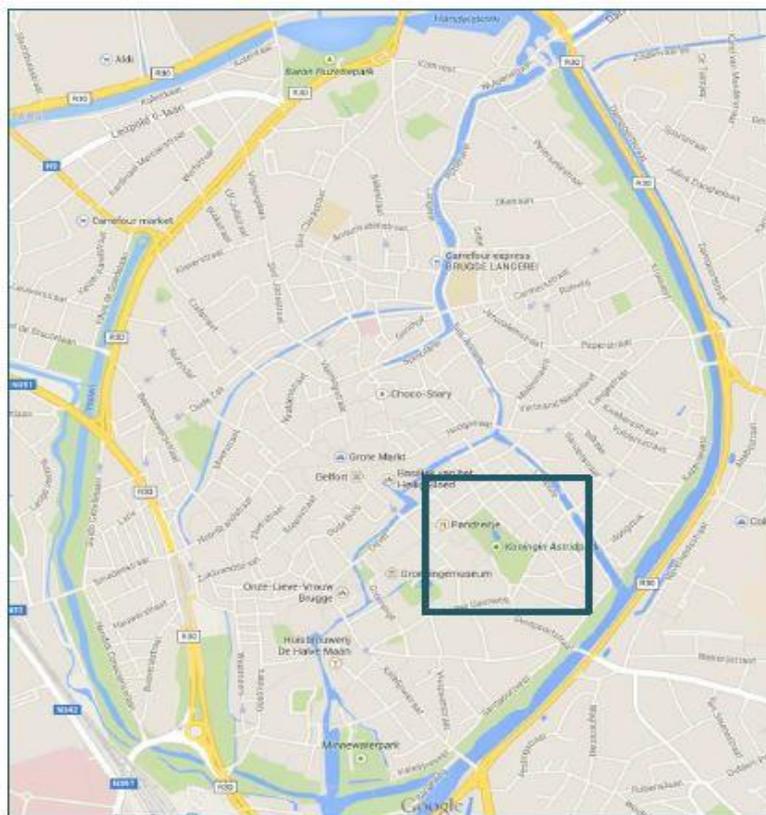


Saint Magdalene Site, Bruges
Nominee Flanders Heritage Venue

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The Saint Magdalena site is in the south-eastern part of Bruges city centre

*There is a little piece of heaven in the world today
I think I saw it comin' but I really couldn't say*

Codley & Crème – a little piece of heaven



The Magdalene Church in Bruges is on the list of protected religious heritage. Its interior has been refurbished in a unique way, which is challenging visitors. In this creative setting the site welcomes value-prompted organizations and concerns who feel “ready for a change”. And change always starts with a spark in the dark.

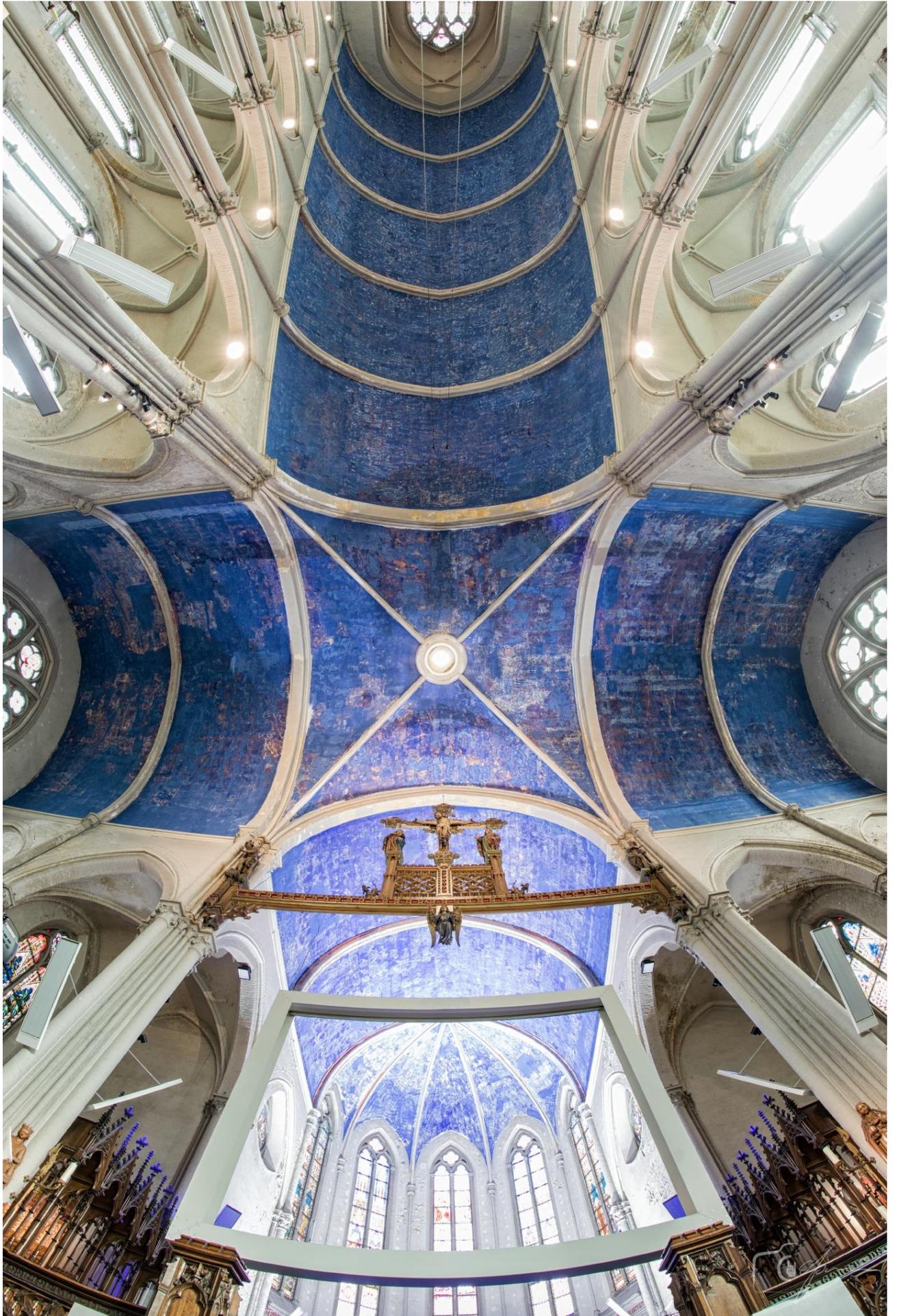
A little piece of heaven

The Magdalene church in the heart of historic Bruges is a special place. On the outside the building seems to be a normal parish church, but the moment you go inside the monument surprises: with its remarkable furnishing, playful quotes and novel views the church defies congress delegates and makes it a paradisiacal place for creative pioneers. It is innovative through unexpected, challenging activities.

At the same time, through architecture and programming it radiates its heritage value, namely being a place of inspiration and a meeting point for people from all walks of life. That's the power of the Magdalene site, a power to keep the future open by connecting with the basic intuitions of our religious heritage.



“A little piece of heaven” stands for the conviction that change always starts with dreaming, discovering a spark in the dark and then seeing light, perspective, through which change can be brought about.



Setting and present function

Setting

The Saint Magdalene site is situated in the inner city of Bruges, Mediaeval trade centre of Northern Europe and now Unesco World Heritage.

It consists of:

- **The Magdalene church** in the south-west corner of the Queen Astrid park.
- **The vicarage**, a mansion with city garden, that breathes a domestic atmosphere.
- **The Queen Astrid park**, next to the church and open to Magdalene visitor.
- A small **city square** at the front of the buildings, connecting church and vicarage.



The monumental radiation of the church and the domestic atmosphere of the vicarage are complementary. Together they are an agreeable tandem for receiving guests and developing activities.

The site is at a strategic location in the city centre: on one hand not far from motorway and railway station, on the other at walking distance from the heart of the city and all its historic treasures.



Developing the site

Originally the Magdalene Church was one of the parish churches in the centre of the city. In 2002, YOT vzw started activities in the Magdalene church as a pilot project in the field of revaluation of churches. The YOT team is convinced that, more and more, the 21st-century visitor develops an appetite for value-driven experiences when they are inviting, not compelling. In this way the Magdalene team builds on the heritage values of the Friars Minor.

That's why, in the past twenty years, this project group has transformed the Magdalene site to a centre where social, cultural and spiritual activities challenge visitors and inspire people to open mindedness and creativity.

Present function

Through her value-driven approach the Magdalene site has become an innovative and original product in the cultural spectrum of Flanders. It is attracting more and more attention both nationally and internationally. Because of this self-conscious dynamic the Magdalena church, together with the Cathedral and the Church of our Lady, belongs to the best-visited churches in the city centre.

At present the Magdalene site plays a connecting role in the city quarter around the church. People can drop in for a casual cup of coffee, ask a question, visit an art exhibition, or attend one of the many activities that are organized.

Artists are sometimes welcomed to exhibit their work in the church. People with a vulnerable social background often find shelter in the Magdalene project as volunteer.



In this way the site contributes to the consolidation of the social fabric of the city. More and more Magdalene's presence is tangible in the wider surroundings within and beyond the city, brings people together from all over Bruges and co-operates with businesses or institutions in the field of catering, culture and education.

Through all this, the site tries to present a nowadays translation of the values on which, during the past few millenniums, our culture and civilization have been built through art, writing, bringing together, stimulating coherence and being a place of inspiration. In this way the Magdalene organization contributes to building up new generations, that can help shape society with new ideas and new perspectives.



The Magdalene site underlines and contributes to the Bruges policy of a well-balanced, connecting, attractive and enterprising city. The Magdalene church is a point of appeal to both individual visitors (many of them inhabitants of the city) and organized groups such as congress members, which creates a well-balanced diversity.

The inhabitants of the city quarter around the Magdalene site consider church, park and square their public property. They just drop in for a quiet moment or a cup of coffee. Congress delegates are welcomed in the same area to experience a surplus value in the modern approach, inviting interior or inspirational activities, which are unique in the city.

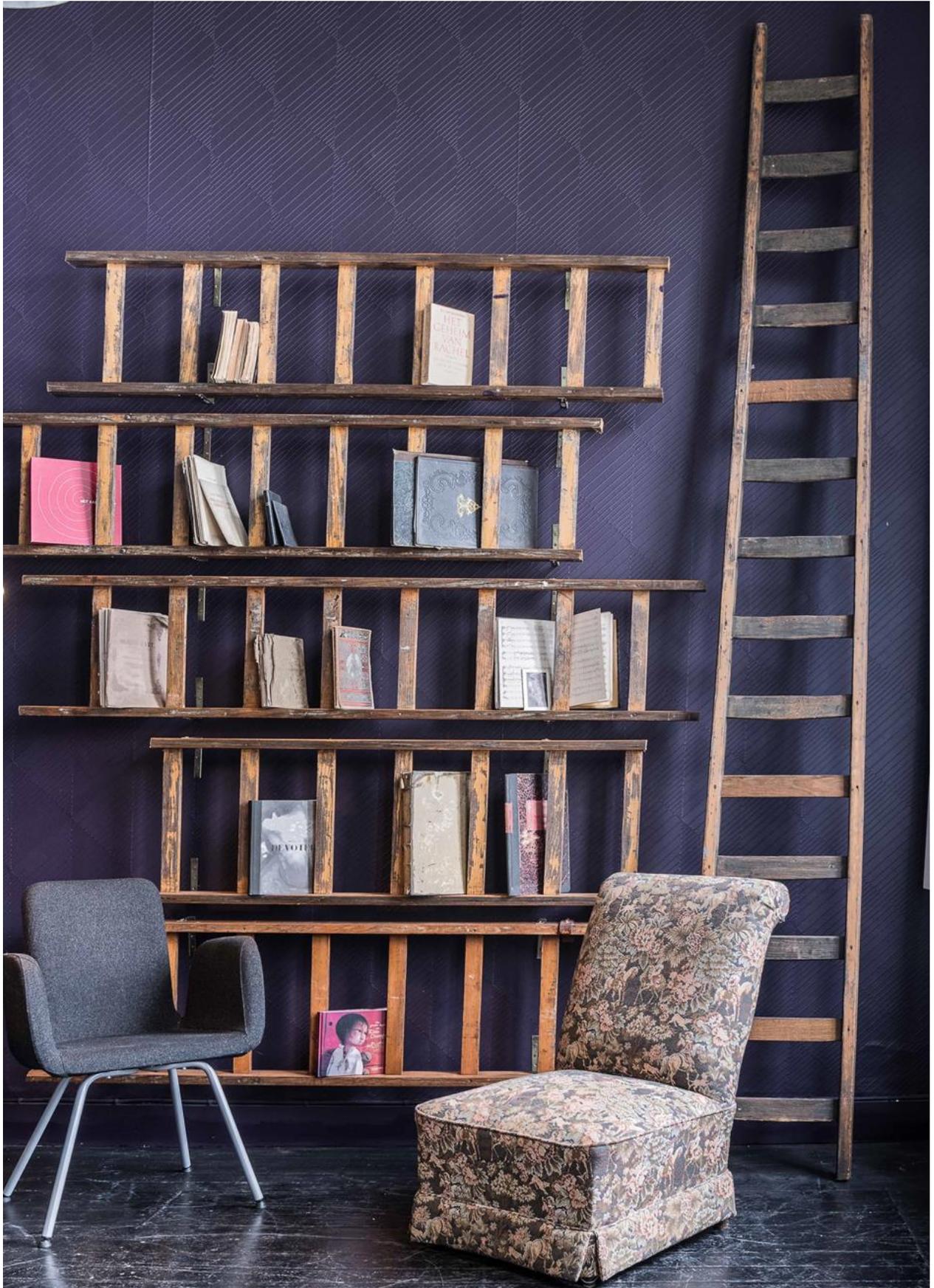
Beside this the site also makes good use of business services in the neighbourhood on a regular basis. This means there is regular contact with a range of suppliers, which partly also are neighbours of the site. Because of the mixture of different kinds of visitors vivacious encounters take place, conversations are held at the coffee corner and opinions are exchanged.



All this in a surprising interior amidst unexpected installations and pieces of art, which make the place an attractive hub and place of inspiration in the city centre.

Those who make use of the breakout rooms can also experience the link between heritage and modern thinking through the special features of these rooms.

In the coming years, through its value-prompted approach, attractiveness and unique features the Magdalene site will be a valuable asset in the range of touristic product of the city of Bruges. Moreover it can help spread the volume of visitors coming to the city by offering programmes in off-season periods.



Concise history, heritage value and strategic concept

Saint Magdalene Church:

a quirky parish church with conference facilities

Since the first parish church of St. Catherine and St. Magdalene from 1220 was demolished during the religious turmoil of 1578, it took almost 300 years before a new church was built. Today's Magdalene Church became an example of Neo-Gothic Gesamtkunstwerk of architecture, furniture, decoration and use of colour, with distinct English influences. In 2002, the idiosyncratic parish church and its rectory became home to YOT, a laboratory for contemplation of life.



Today, the Church is still part of the Catholic community, yet any passer-by, of whatever conviction, who is focused on meeting, giving meaning and communion, is welcome. The spirituality of the site has been translated into an interior that surprises with modern and playful elements. The redevelopment of church and rectory provide a full-fledged venue for conference visitors. In combination with the outdoor spaces – Queen Astrid Park, urban square in front of the church and city garden behind the rectory – the site radiates tranquillity and harmony. It is inviting to conference visitors and incites to open-mindedness, creative thinking and discovering new perspectives.



Saint Magdalene Church: from Neo-Gothic church to laboratory for contemplation of life

The current Magdalene Church was consecrated in the second half of the 19th century as a church of the Saint Catharina and Saint Magdalene parish. The parish already existed in the 13th century, with a first church founded around 1270-1272 as part of the then monastery of the Friars Minor. After the destruction of that church during the religious turmoil of 1578, the parish community found shelter in **emergency churches** in various places in the neighbourhood for almost three centuries.

It was not until 1853 that this community was finally able to move into the Magdalene Church. The church was built **on a piece of land belonging to the southern part of the garden of the disappeared monastery, the Recollettenhof.**

At that time, the neighbourhood was in full expansion. Simultaneously, to the north of the church, the Botanical Garden - now Queen Astrid Park - was constructed.



The preliminary design in Tudor style, created by provincial architect Pierre Buyck, was then reworked in a Neo-Gothic style by the English architect Thomas Harper King. Although at that time this provoked considerable discussion and even fierce controversy, today it is considered to be **one of the earliest Neo-Gothic examples on the mainland in which English influences may be discerned**. The design was finalized by the Bruges architect Antoine Verbeke, under whose supervision the construction commenced. By 1853 the church was mostly completed, and three years later the tower too was finished. At that time the parish for the greater part consisted of deprived residents. As a result, the design of the church and its interior was deliberately sober and modest, with pastoral care predominating over historical references. Nevertheless, it was conceived as a Neo-Gothic '**Gesamtkunstwerk**' of architecture, furniture, decoration and use of colour.



From the middle of the 20th century onwards, successive modifications were made to the church which, unfortunately, compromised the original Gesamtkunstwerk. Only at the end of that century - minimal - repairs and restorations were carried out. Nevertheless, today it still is a precious site, not only because of its historical value, i.e. the Neo-Gothic style with its "English" inspiration, but also because of its folkloric and socio-cultural value. In this way, the church forms **an original and creative ensemble**, adapted to the functional and liturgical requirements of its time, and possesses an **iconic design** that demonstrates its engagement to its urban environment, in particular the entrance to the Queen Astrid Park.



The quirky nature of the church was an important source of inspiration for its revaluation at the beginning of the 21st century. The YOT organization, a philosophical laboratory that challenges classical divisions such as those between believers and non-believers and translates the heritage values of the site into innovative thinking and experiences, moved into the church and its rectory. From that time on, more and more, the site has developed itself into a place of inspiration with influences of art, literature, design, and creative expression, based on the heritage values it stems from.

Up till now the church has remained dedicated to Catholic service, but people from all walks of life, both individually and as a group, find their way to the monument with its original and challenging interior.

The layout of the church premises is inspired by the heritage value of the site and yet has a crisp feel to it. Temporary art installations, permanent interventions such as a large swing at the centre of the church, a framework between choir and transept as a window to the world, etc. all **invite visitors to pause and reflect upon the larger questions of life**. In combination with the Queen Astrid Park, the urban square in front of the church and the nearby rectory and garden the ensemble provide a special setting for smaller conference groups.



Saint Magdalene Church as Flanders Heritage Venue: “A little piece of heaven”

The positioning of the Magdalene Church as a Flanders Heritage Venue "A little piece of heaven" responds to the relevant features of the site: being a place where visitors can get inspired, find room to reflect, and immerse in the atmosphere and tranquillity of the site. It is an oasis right in the middle of the city that inspires and connects, both associations that are relevant to congress delegates.

Whoever enters the church gets impressed by its spaciousness. Every nook evokes new associations, is a new context that incites the search for answers to questions everybody is confronted with. Encounter, connection, and experiencing inspiration through creative installations are important features. Dwelling on important personal or social questions preferably happens from a passive, receptive attitude, rather than from an active search for answers. The purposeful emotional and spiritual spaciousness is striking and creates the feeling of a “little piece of heaven”.

Combined with the Gesamtkunstwerk interior the 21st century furnishing radiates a feeling of sensibility and harmony.

Tangible examples are:

- The square in the centre of the church which is an oasis within an oasis
- The blue vaults which invite to dream. At their departure visitors can take “a little piece of heaven” home
- The angels, as part of the Gesamtkunstwerk, which of course help to evoke the heavenly feeling
- The swing, on which you seem to swing in a 21st century paradise



Likewise the vicarage with its characteristic office, breakout rooms and secluded “Garden of Eden” , the pleasant square as a resting point in the city, and the romantic park as an idyllic spot in the shadow of the church contribute to the uniqueness and paradise-like atmosphere of the site.

Beside the “heavenly” spaciousness that stimulates exploration, being drawn into feelings of inspiration and open mindedness, **the positioning of the site also refers to history.**

Despite all its misfortunes, the parochial community kept searching for a spot where it could celebrate its religious belief. The spirit and motivation of the local community have persisted throughout the centuries, and the opening of the present church in 1865 marked the - quite delayed - rebirth of the medieval parish church.

At that time architects and religious communities searched for ways to express spirituality in a contemporary style. They translated spirituality into spatiality.



In 2002 YOT became an inspiring laboratory in the field of transforming historic values to modern ideas and ways of thinking. Through never failing persistence this team built up a renewed Magdalene site. Values such as courage and endurance, reinventing oneself and the community, and commitment to others and the world, were of utmost importance both then and now. This innovative craftsmanship now contributes to the development of a value-driven touristic segment in which the cultural and historic values of the city of Bruges are promoted and respected.

The positioning of the site also has to do with the role the Magdalene church plays **in modern society**. The YOT team has transformed the Magdalene site into a place where every person may feel welcome, regardless of their philosophical or religious beliefs.

YOT and its partners experiment on social themes such as entrepreneurship, durable ways of co-habitation, dialogue, management, eco-projects such as e.g. the Magdalene church itself, which is the first eco church in Belgium. The Magdalene site stands for growth and engagement towards individuals and the world at large. This ambition is also included in its name. The Holy Maria Magdalene among other things stands for creativity, courage and endurance.



The Magdalene site pioneers in the search of translating spirituality into a contemporary, 21st century style, and hereby ranges itself in the group of organizations with innovative craftsmanship.

Craftsmanship often consists not only of a process of creation but also of an unorganized, meandering quest in which ideas can bubble up in an open, receptive way. It is this craftsmanship which is the spirit of the Magdalene site and an important element in the creativity that ties in with the **economic growth industries** of the city of Bruges.

Creativity through the ages! As the Magdalene community of the past created yesterday's historic values, so the present Magdalene team and community are creating tomorrow's heritage.



In summary, the positioning of “A little piece of heaven”

- refers to the heritage story of the site, especially to the permanent search for a place to experience spirituality and the role of spatiality and / or churches.
- links to the current operation of the site as an experimental site for spirituality, contemplation of life, meaning and connectedness, offering a unique setting that combines the Neo-Gothic character and Gesamtkunstwerk with exceptional interventions in an unprecedented way;
- relates with the Flemish concept of “Create Tomorrow’s Heritage” and the economic growth industries of Bruges;
- will market the Magdalene Church as a conference venue where participants will be challenged to innovative and creative thinking, exploration, open mindedness, research, engagement, and reflecting on what is 'sacred' (what touches, animates and inspires) for them and their organization.

All this to discover new perspectives and feel new energy towards the challenges of life.





Opus