A Model Proposal for the Conservation of Rural Religious Heritage: Case of Former Bulgarian Exarchate Church in Seymen Village in Silivri Istanbul

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Abstract:
Rural heritage, including its religious core, is becoming a vulnerable area for historic conservation due to urbanization and abandonment. Bulgarian Orthodox Exarchate Church in Seymen Village, Istanbul, Turkey, is an example of this vulnerability. Built in 1858, it served as a church and meeting space for a small settlement founded by Bulgarian immigrants, was later transformed into a mosque and used until the mid-1970s. It was abandoned in 1974 or 1975 due to the construction of a new mosque next to it. In 2010, it burned down and has been in ruins ever since. Conservation is now essential to save this multicultural heritage site with diverse values. This research first explores related theories and concepts, then scrutinize the documentation, analyses, evaluations, and proposals about the case handled. Then, based on the findings of this case study, it develops a conservation project preparation process, as a conservation model, to generate guidance for future protection of this group of buildings.

Keywords: Rural religious heritage, adaptive reuse, conservation model, Bulgarian Orthodox Exarchate Church, Istanbul.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an early form of human habitation, rural settlements serve as proof of civilization and the community resilience in pre-modern societies. Over time, urbanization has largely replaced rural settlements, now the dominant type of human habitation. According to a 2018 UN report, 55% of the world's population resides in urban areas, which is expected to reach 68% by 2050[1]. Thus, as a concept that is actively regressing, many historic rural settlements are now wholly or partially abandoned, making rural built heritage a challenging topic of historic conservation. Mainly located at the centre of rural settlements, religious buildings are critically important and usually the most qualified architectural buildings, considering both their core physical contributions to the rural context and social significance for the community.

One such endangered building is the Exarchate Bulgarian Orthodox Church, later known as Seymen Mosque in Seymen Village, formerly known as Cüce (meaning dwarf or little) Sekban[2]. Located 13 km from Silivri and 78 km from Istanbul, it was constructed by Bulgarian immigrants in 1858, according to Silivri Municipality Archives. It represents an important and cultural legacy, serving as rare evidence of this community's existence and religious freedom during Ottoman era. Following the displacement of its original congregation, the church was repurposed as a mosque but was ultimately abandoned after a newer mosque was built. It later suffered extensive fire damage and has remained in ruins since according to Silivri Municipality Archives. Seymen Village shares a similar trajectory; with the departure of its Bulgarian inhabitants, it has struggled with neglect and limited resources, reflecting broader challenges faced by rural settlements.

This research examines this building to develop strategies for safeguarding similar group of buildings as a case study of physical and social trauma, both of which are common in today's world. There are very few studies on rural religious architecture and its conservation countrywide[3] (Ekimci 2021; Uzun et al. 2018; Uzun and Çiftçi 2016; Uzun 2016) and worldwide (cited herein); a gap also highlighted by scholars[4] (Karakuş 2022, 275). The present study addresses this deficiency by proposing a conservation framework, emphasizing adaptive reuse—a crucial approach given the increasing vulnerability of rural religious architecture. It also aims to make a contribution to the international state-of-the-art body of knowledge by

focusing on the case of damaged rural religious heritage, which has quite complex and challenging problems, especially for those who may seek to develop such sites but are unclear how to proceed.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONSERVATION OF RURAL RELIGIOUS HERITAGE, ADAPTATION, AND REUSE

Rural heritage buildings are integral to historic rural settlements, representing the relationship between humans and nature, representations of unique phases of history and society. As they constitute the best examples of manmade surroundings coexisting sustainably with the natural environment and serves as a link to our past and a part of our cultural identity, preserving it is crucial. Recognized as cultural heritage by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in *the International Cultural Tourism Charter* in 1999, due to characteristics such as being utilitarian and carrying the imprint of contemporary life as the work of humankind and the creation of time[5] (ICOMOS 1999), emphasizing concepts applicable to rural heritage. The interaction between community and time defines the historical and aesthetic significance of rural religious buildings[6] (Wang 2016, 323).

While there is currently a lack of conservation research on rural religious heritage, there is also an increasing interest in the topic by other fields, such as rural economics[7] (Sardaro et al. 2021), heritage and rural development[8] (Bourdin et al. 2019), architectural analyses of historic farmhouses [9] (Herrle and Wozniak 2019), the revitalization of rural historical landscapes[10] (Taylor 2019), financial sustainability of rural historical landscapes[11] (Rossitti et al. 2021), and rehabilitation methodology research for marginal environments, including rural areas[12] (Rossitti and Torrieri 2022). However, rural religious buildings remain largely overlooked, despite their architectural prominence and social importance. Often suffering structural problems due to age and the weathering of original materials, they can require costly and difficult-to-match supplies and workmanship. Moreover, unsuitable alterations and improper maintenance methods can completely destroy the architectural composition[13] (Lynch 1982, 5-9). Recognizable historic monuments have long defined urban and rural landscapes, as depicted in historic city views and cartographic documents[14] (Di Biase 2017, 57), while their interiors serve as spaces for quiet contemplation[15] (Crişan 2017, 33).

The factors involved in the abandonment or underutilization of churches, also often true for other types of historic religious buildings, are as follows:

(1) Sociological and demographic shifts: Reduction in religious community populations due to migration, forced displacement, or changes in religious practices.

(2) Loss of skill and expertise: Necessary to cope with property problems and collective exchange.

(3) Changing priorities: Regarding the use of resources and putting human needs before those of the building.

(4) Economics of design: High costs of maintenance, heating, and restoration.

(5) Tradition versus change: Communities' reluctance or restrictions in seeking external support for preservation[16] (National Trust for Historic Preservation 1978, 2-3).

However, there is a long tradition and many different examples of changed use of sacred places. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, once the Patriarchal Church of Constantinople, built by Emperor Justinian in 532 to 537 CE was converted into a mosque in 1453, later a museum in 1938, and back into a mosque in 2020. Confiscated churches were used as stores, barns, and stables after the French Revolution. In the early 19th century, a Carthusian church in Ghent was converted into a textile factory, while the Abbey of Fontenay in Burgundy (a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1981) was used as a paper factory from 1820 to 1903[17] (Coomans 2012; Crişan 2017, 32). In Turkey, the Barhal Church Mosque in Artvin, originally a 10th-century Georgian church, was transformed into a mosque in the 17th century and later abandoned. In 2016, it was reopened to serve both the local Muslim population and Georgian visitors seeking Christian worship[18] (Güryapı 2018). These examples demonstrate both controversial and pragmatic approaches to adaptive reuse, highlighting the complexities of repurposing sacred spaces while maintaining historical integrity.

Before the development of scientific theories on historic conservation, many churches were reused based primarily on economic considerations and their potential to serve as 'public utilities'. Even though some of these new uses would be considered inappropriate now, they ensured the conservation of such buildings, albeit with certain changes. As structures of historic and architectural interest deeply valued by the community, religious buildings are worthy of preservation[19] (Velthuis and Spennemann 2007; Johar et al.

2011; Johar et al. 2010; Mirza-Avakyan 2013; Tanaç-Zeren 2013). However, conservation without reuse can be sustainably and financially difficult to justify[20] (Crişan 2017, 32-33).

Methodology of the Study and Related Challenges:

This research follows established conservation methodologies as defined in contemporary restoration theory[21] (Ahunbay 1996, 70). These phases are:

(1) Research (including research-specific information about the building, context, users, and examples from comparative studies; see Section 3)

(2) Field Study

(3) Building Analysis (see Sections 4 and 5)

  (a) Measured Drawings

  (b) Materials Analysis

  (c) Materials and Structural Deterioration Analysis

(4) Restitution (see Section 6)

(5) Restoration and Reuse (see Sections 7 and 8)

While traditional in structure, the methodology was modified to address the specific characteristics of rural religious heritage, ensuring a comprehensive conservation approach applicable to similar cases.

While this study's emphasis is on recounting a technical procedure, it is also important to note the challenges encountered that were influential on the adaptation of this particular conservation methodology such as;

1. Limited Historical Documentation – Compared to urban heritage, rural sites lack detailed archival records. Research at Ottoman and Bulgarian Exarchate archives (at St. Stephen's Church, Istanbul) which until 1913 was the former centre of the Bulgarian Exarchate (Seyfeli 2011, 184), yielded no specific records. As a result, comparative studies played a critical role in supplementing missing information.
2. Primary Source Dependency – The building itself became the main historical source, with visible material deterioration revealing its construction techniques. Layers of peeled paint and plaster due to decay exposed underlying architectural features, aiding field analysis.

3. Community Involvement – Current inhabitants of Seymen Village, are not financially well-off and cannot support the conservation and are not linked with the original inhabitants to provide photographic records of the church period but gave information about the mosque period. However, they expressed their interest and moral support for conservation and reuse during the field study.
4. Local Authority Support – The Silivri Municipality played a crucial role as a funding and implementation partner, supporting the project from its inception.
5. Academic Contributions – With limited resources for rural religious heritage, academic institutions—such as this graduate program—played an essential role in developing an idealistic yet feasible conservation strategy, later donated to the municipality for execution.

In this way, this research generates a road map for those working on similar cases to prevent the further decay and complete loss of such historic sites. Table 1 schematizes a structured framework for approaching the conservation of a rural religious heritage site, divided into phases and key objectives, emphasizing methodical planning, interdisciplinary integration, and social impact, reflecting an advanced understanding of heritage conservation's complexities and aligning with the principles.

Table 1. Conservation Project Preparation Process (by the authors)

PHASE 1 - INTRODUCTION			
Introducing of the research topic			
Defining the scopes and aim of the research			
Determining the main and sub research questions			
PHASE 2 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK			
Rural Heritage	Significance of Rural Religous Heritage	Factors in the Abandonment and Underutilization of Religious Heritage	Conservation of Rural Religous Heritage
PHASE 3 - METHODOLOGY FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE CASE STUDY			
Data Collection			
Historic Research		Site Survey	
• Maps		• Site Sketches and Measuring	
• Photographs		• Photographic Documentation	
• Archival Documents		• Environmental Data Collection	
• Published Documents		• Inquiry for Values	
• Verbal Sources			
Data Assesment and Analysis			
Materials Analysis	Materials and Sturctural Deteriorations Analysis	Chronological Analysis	Value Assesment
PHASE 4 - OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES			
Accomplishing Physical Intactness	**Assigning an Appropriate Function**	**Reestablishing the Values**	**Contribution to Society**
• Providing resistance to weathering conditions and disasters	• Assigning a function in line with the building's potentials for reuse, considering its values and physical conditions	• Reestablishing the authenticity, aesthetics and architectural values through physical implementations	• Defining a function in line with the needs of the owner/community
• Recovering physical values	• Assigning a function in line with the building's limitations, considering its values and physical conditions	• Reestablishing the social, cultural and spiritual values through assigning a decent function	• Improving the social and physical conditions in the context by providing new public/recreational facilities
• Implementing necessary changes for the proposed reuse	• Assigning a function in line with the contextual potentials and limitations	• Reestablishing the economic value through revitalization of the declined context and accomplishing the physical intactness	• Reestablishing the historical value of the building through raising awareness
• Improving energy performance of the building considering **environmental sustainability**	• Assigning a function for safeguarding cultural knowledge, cultural diversity and cultural practices for **cultural sustainability**	• Reestablishing the economic value through approaches paying attention to **economic sustainability**	• Planning the reuse of the building in details for post-conservation period considering **social sustainability**
PHASE 5 - PROPOSALS			
Conservation Model >> Synthesis >> Conservation Plan			

3. RESEARCH ON HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The historical background was addressed on two scales: the settlement and the building.

3.1 About the Settlement

Silivri, a harbour town known as Selymbria (also Selybria, Selybrie, or Salymbria), has a history dating back to prehistoric periods and has been home to many civilizations. Archaeological excavations in the area carried out by the British Archaeological Institute have shown that its history goes back to the Late Chalcolithic Age. The Silivri Region was home to the Thracians since 1200 BCE, but historical evidence goes back to 750 BCE.

A district in Istanbul Province near the Marmara Sea and just outside metropolitan Istanbul, Silivri consists of eight towns and 18 villages, one of which is Seymen Village. After the Yörüks migrated elsewhere, during the Ottoman-Russian War of 1828 to 1829, Bulgarians came to settle in the village. Once an important Bulgarian outpost, Seymen Village depended upon the Bulgarian Exarchate (an independent Orthodox Church). After the Bulgarians left the Ottoman lands in 1858, the settlement became a Turkish village, but Bulgarian immigrants living in the surrounding Turkish farmlands remained in the region until 1912 and continued to use the building as a church. After the end of the Balkan War, Bulgarian workers began to leave Seymen due to the population exchange of Turks and Bulgarians in the Balkans (Akkaya 2011, 18-31).

3.2 About the Building

Immigrant Bulgarians who came to Seymen Village after 1828 set up neighbourhoods and built the church in 1858, which functioned as such until 1912. After a period of vacancy and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the church was converted into a mosque and used until the mid-1970s. The building was abandoned around 1974 or 1975, after the construction of the new Seymen Mosque next door. In January 2010, a fire broke out in the old structure that nearly ruined the monument, according to Silivri Municipality archives (see **Figure 1**).

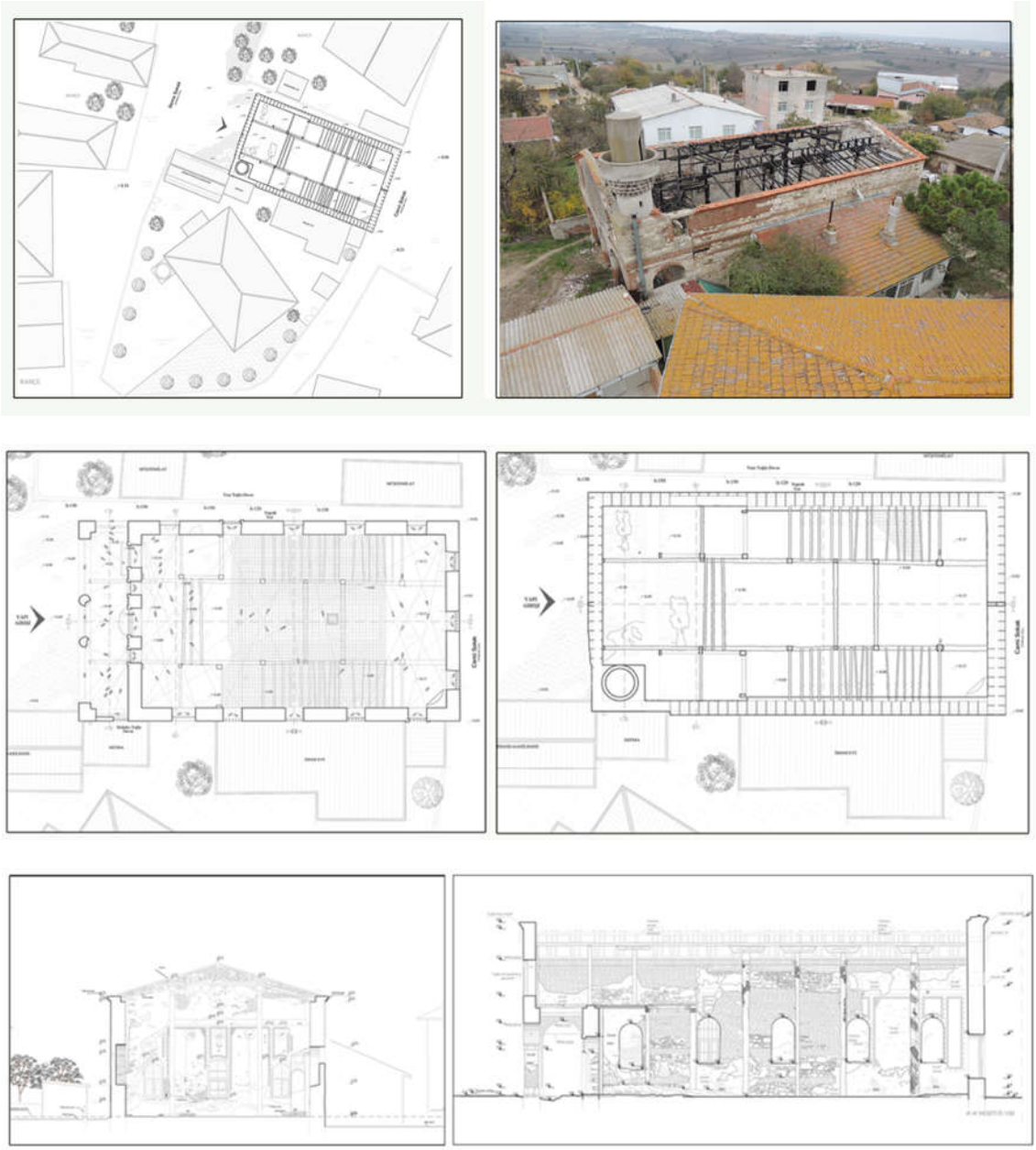


Figure 1. Measured drawings of the current situation of the building: (top left) site plan (drawing scale: 1/200), (top right) general view of the building and environs, (middle left) ground floor plan, (middle right) Mahfil floor plan, (bottom left) lateral section, (bottom right) longitudinal section (drawing scale: 1/50) (authors' archive).

4. ANALYSIS OF THE ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BUILDING

The architectural characteristics of the building are examined in four aspects: plan features, façade features, features of the materials, and structural elements.

4.1 Plan Features

Originally designed as a church, the building consists of three main parts: the narthex, main space of three aisles, and apse. During the mosque period, the main spatial features of the building did not significantly change, except for the addition of a few architectural elements specific to mosques, such as a minaret and

mihrab. Currently, there are two entrances: the main access point on the western (frontal) façade and a secondary entrance on the southern façade of the building (see **Figure 1**).

4.2 Façade Features

The masonry building has alternating walls made of rubble stones with three rows of brick, with cut-stone corners.

Western (Frontal) Façade:

On the ground floor of this façade there is an arcaded area that was the narthex of the church building. The façade is composed of brick walls and cut-stone corners. The bottom part of a subsequently added minaret was altered by inserting reinforced concrete beams, causing the loss of architectural/aesthetic unity of the façade. The top-floor right window was altered into a rectangular form and the middle window was covered with bricks. The floor tiles of the narthex have mostly been lost and cement-based plaster—chemically incompatible and destructive to the original materials—covers the surface of the façade. The posts supporting the arches on this façade are made of wooden studs similar to the interior posts of the building, with fire brick walls wrapping them (see **Figure 2**).

Eastern Façade:

Masonry wall of the eastern façade is made of alternating rubble stones and three rows of brick, with cut-stone corners. The original apse projection on this façade was removed and rebuilt, leaving traces of the original arch. It has three lower windows and an upper central window filled in with stone. The right and left windows were constructed with the same brickwork technique, but the middle one features a top-arched system. The eastern façade is the most altered of the facades with cement-based plastered parts (see **Figure 2**).

Northern Façade:

Now completely covered with cement-based plaster, this façade has five window openings, though only one remains open, four are filled with brick. Even though the façade is covered with cement plaster on the external surface, it is possible to see a similar wall technique of rubble stones and three rows of brick masonry from traces in certain areas (see **Figure 2**).

Southern Façade:

Facing the new mosque, this façade features rubble stone and three rows of brick masonry with cut-stone corners. There are two additional buildings leaning on this façade, used as the imam's (prayer leader's) house, lavatories, and heating centre of the new mosque. There are deformations and changes on this façade

(see **Figure 1**), due to the later-added minaret and concrete beams supporting it, similar to those on the frontal façade (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Current photos and measured drawings of the façades: western (frontal) façade photo (top left) and measured drawing (top right); eastern façade photo (2nd row left); measured drawing (2nd row right), northern façade photo (3rd row left); measured drawing (3rd row right); southern façade photo (bottom left); and measured drawing (bottom right) (drawing scale: 1/50) (authors' archive).

4.3 Features of the Materials

Stone and brick are the main construction materials. Additionally, a post-lintel structural system of wooden posts and beams supports the wooden roof of the narthex and main space, along with the masonry walls. Other authentic materials include:

- Wooden doors and joineries,
- Mosaic floor tiles in the interior,
- Marble steps at the entrance,
- Iron tension bars and lintels on doors and windows,
- Lime-based plaster with organic fibers (*kıtıklı sıva* in Turkish),
- A few remaining original roof tiles

The materials added during later interventions include cement-based plaster on the masonry walls and reinforced concrete beams that support the minaret (see **Figure 3**).

4.4 Structural Elements

The structure combines masonry walls, iron tension bars, and a wooden post-lintel system. The solid monolithic wooden posts are clad with wooden laths nailed to the wooden studs and plastered (known as the Baghdadi technique) to create the appearance of stone masonry pillars. Notably, the two posts nearest the eastern façade differ, featuring inner loadbearing wooden studs with wooden spiral slats, wrapped around the wooden laths nailed to the studs and plastered with a cellulosic fibre reinforced plaster. The main structural elements of the two columns on the frontal façade are also wooden studs wrapped with brickwork. The preference for wrapping the exterior wooden posts with brickwork rather than wooden laths provide better resistance to weather and fire (see **Figure 3**).

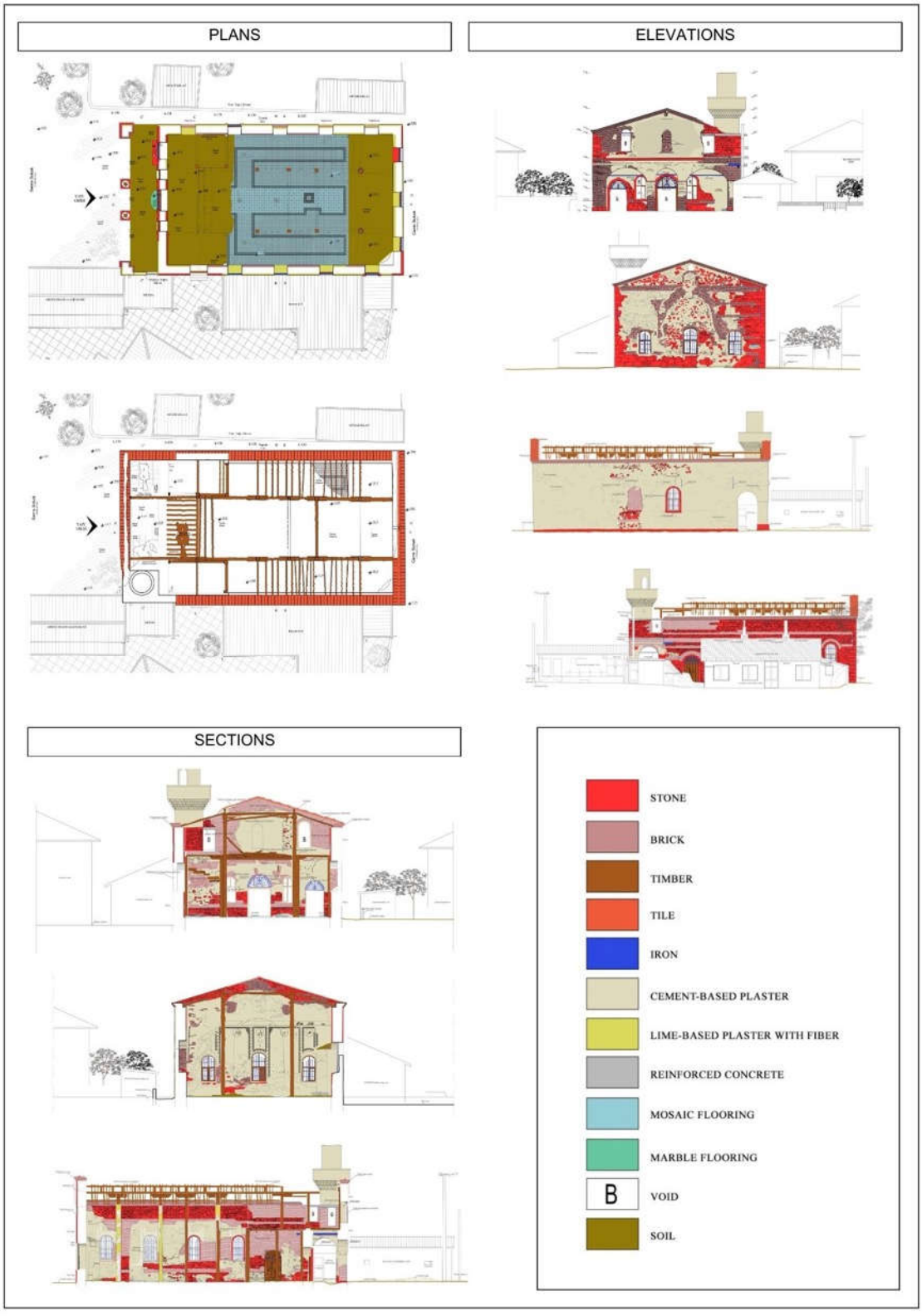


Figure 3. Materials analysis of the current state of the building (authors' archive).

5. ANALYSIS OF THE PHYSICAL CONDITION OF THE BUILDING

Abandoned historic religious buildings, especially in small settlements, often suffer from deferred maintenance and lack of inspections, allowing minor issues to escalate into major structural problems (National Trust for Historic Preservation 1978: 3).

This building experienced sudden and severe deterioration and the loss of many building elements and materials, primarily due to a fire in 2010. This building experienced sudden and severe deterioration, primarily due to a fire in 2010, which destroyed most wooden elements, including the timber roof structure, *mahfil*[1] floor, entrance doors, and window casings. The stairs on the southern side of the entrance were also burned. Two pillars near the eastern façade survived, but the others were destroyed. Today, 90% of the original floor covering of the main space remains, but the apse and narthex floorings are completely lost. The internal walls, built during the latter mosque period, were also destroyed during the fire, leading to accumulated debris inside the building. Additionally, the loss of the roof has left the interior exposed to external weather conditions (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4. Materials and structural deterioration of the building (authors' archive).

The building is also exposed to vegetation due to moisture from rain, as well as cracks, detachment, and chipping of the stones and emptied mortar joints, caused by repeated freeze and thaw cycle temperature fluctuations. Inside the building, the deterioration of the masonry materials mainly takes the form of blistering, cracking, erosion, exfoliation (either peeling, scaling, or flaking off), and detachment, as well as the spalling and crumbling of both the stone and brick. Such deterioration is the result of a lack of maintenance, presence of water, and weather conditions affecting the building materials (see **Figure 4**). Discoloration of the stones is due to surface crust or efflorescence resulting from fire smoke, soiling, and salts. The replaced cement-based plaster is incompatible with the original construction materials and causes efflorescence due to the crystallization of salts. Mortar loss is also visible in the lower parts of the frontal columns.

All iron elements in the building have rusted due to direct exposure to weather. Apart from these, the effects of vandalism damaging the masonry structure can also be seen, where walls have been carved or hollowed out at specific points (see **Figures 4 and 5**).

Figure 5. Physical condition of different parts of the building (authors' archive).

6. RESTITUTION PHASES AND CHANGES

According to the building itself, information found in the Silivri Municipality archives and literature survey, the building had two main restitution periods. Initially built as a church (1858–1912), it is believed to have remained unused until until the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, after which it was converted into a mosque and functioned as such until the mid-1970s. It was abandoned in 1974 or 1975and later burned down in January of 2010 (see **Figure 6**).

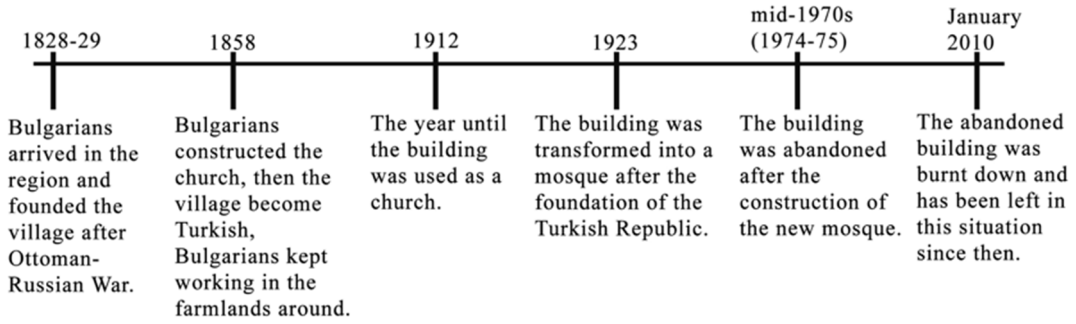


Figure 6. Timeline of the building and its context (by the authors).

6.1 Church Period (1858-1912)

As no primary documentation exists from the church period, restitution is based on comparative studies of Bulgarian churches (including ways of worship, spatial reflections, the general situation of minorities in the Ottoman Period[2]) and the traces remaining on the building (see **Figure 7**).

The basilica layout consisted of a narthex, three-aisled main space, and apse. The existence of an apse and its depth were determined according to traces remaining in the building. The apse's existence and depth were determined through visible remains and comparative studies, informing restitutional plans, sections, and façade (see **Figures 7, 8 and 9**). Moreover, due to traces in the building and literature survey, the second floor used as mahfil and gallery floor overlooking the main space in the mosque period, also identified as an emporia[3] in the Bulgarian churches. Floor coverings and level differences were also considered for restitution.

Sv. Konstantin and Helena Church, a Bulgarian Orthodox Church built in 1869 in the Uzunkaldırım (Kirişhane) Quarter of Edirne; served as a key reference for the restitution of this building (see **Figure 10**).

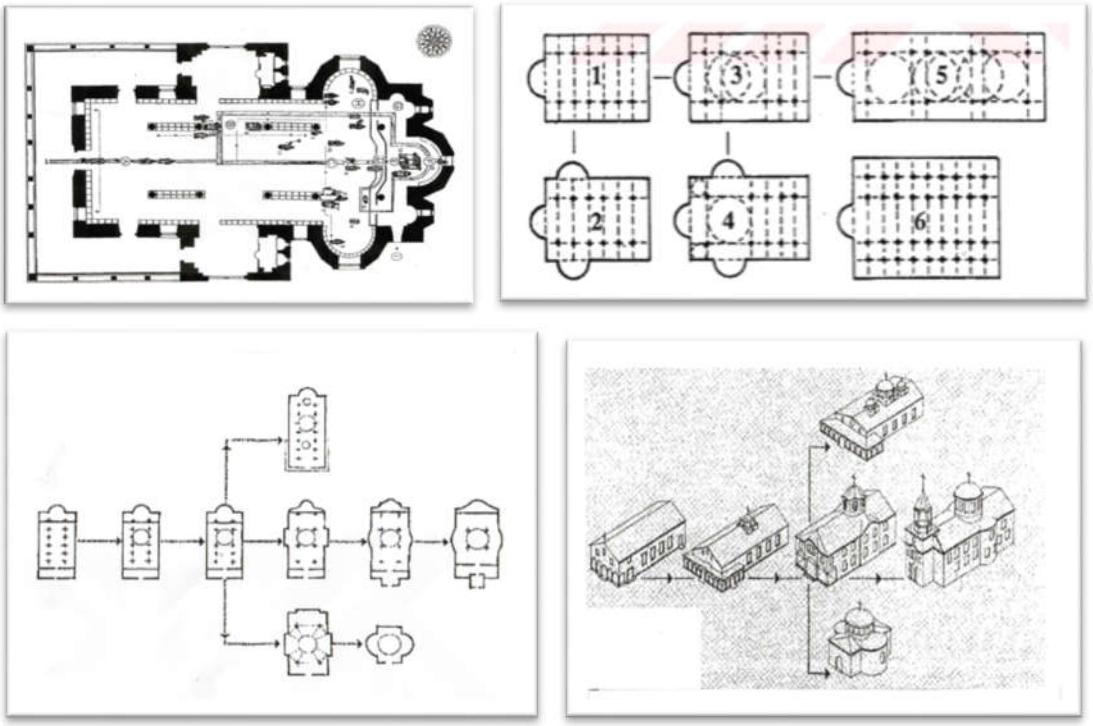


Figure 7. (top left) Rituals and ritual locations realized in the central church of Rila Monastery, serving as a comparative example (Koleva 2002a, 46, from Benian 2004, 31); (top right) Church plan typology with three aisles or more; (1) three-aisled basilica, (2) three-aisled basilica with chorus space, (3) three-aisled domed basilica, (4) three-aisled triconched and domed church, (5) three-aisled and three-domed church (two versions), (6) multi-aisled basilica (Benian 2004, 60); (bottom two figures) diagram showing the development of three-aisled churches built on Bulgarian lands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in plan and 3D form (Koleva 2002b, 30, from Benian 2004, 101).

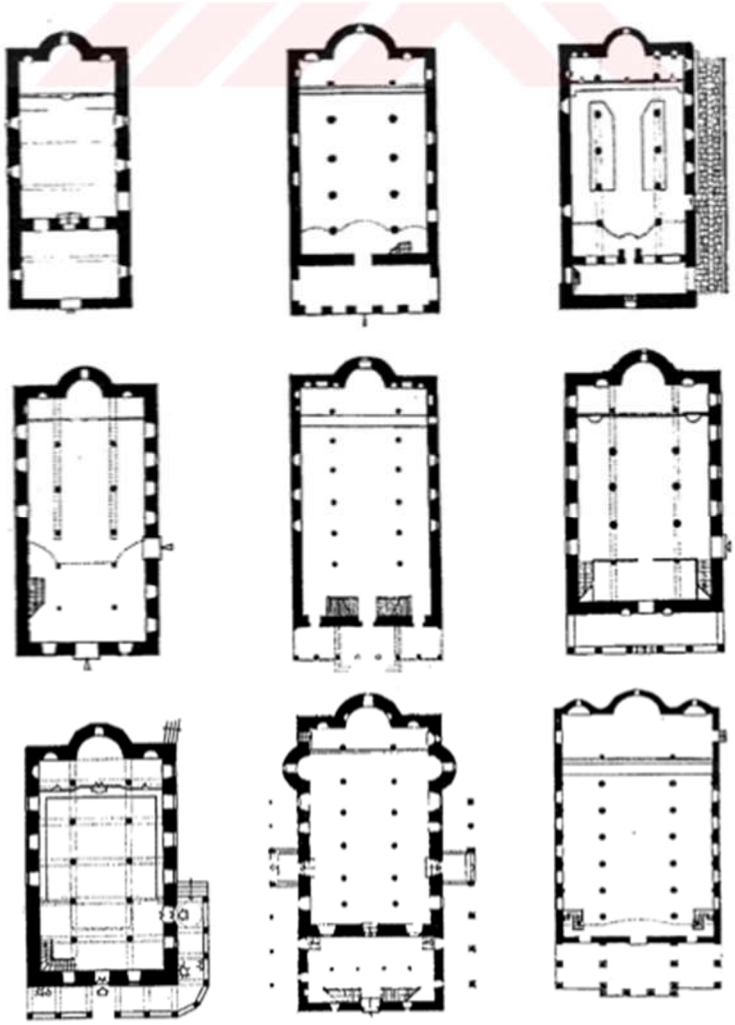


Figure 8. Examples of similar types of Bulgarian churches used in comparative studies: (top left) Preobrajenie Church in Maryan Village in Veliko Tırnovo City; (top middle) Sv. Petka Church in Koziçino Village of Burgaz City; (top right) Nedelya Church in the Raykovo Quarter of Smolyan City (Benian 2004, 56); (middle left) Sv. Prorok Church in Gradez Village in Kotel City, (center) Sviştov Sv. Preobrajenie Gospodne Church; (middle right) Sv. Dimitri Church in Vurbiza Village in Kotel city (Benian 2004, 69); (bottom left) Smolyan Sv. Uspenia Church in Tryavna; (bottom middle) Sv. Arhangeli Mikhael and Gabriel Church in Kotel; (bottom right) Sv. Peter and Paul Church (Benian 2004, 70).

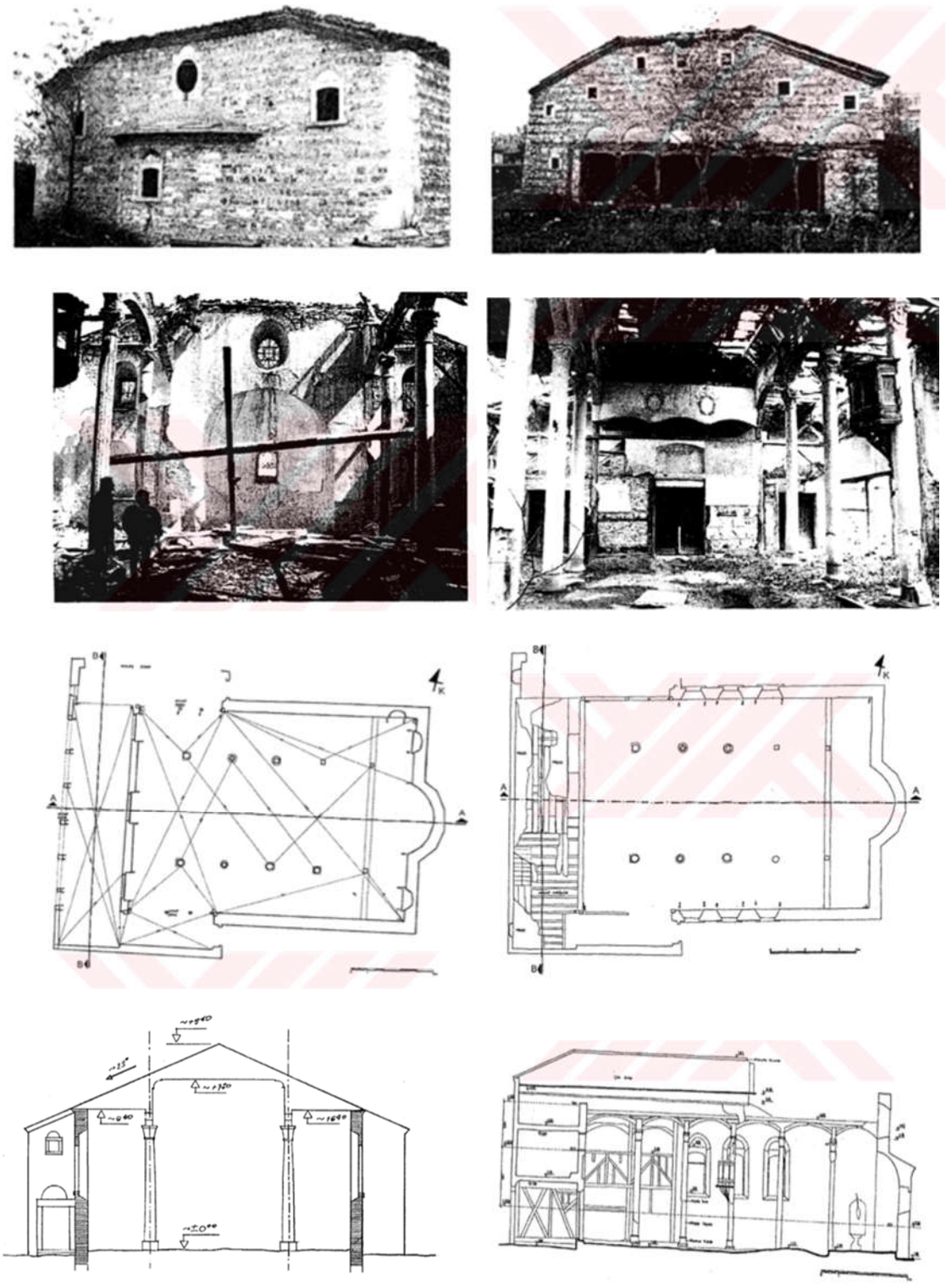


Figure 9. Sv. Konstantin and Helena Church in the Uzunkaldırım Quarter in Edirne: (top left) eastern façade with apse in 1999, (top right) western entrance façade with nartex in 1999; (second row left) apse from the interior in 2003, (second row right) main hall in 1999; (third row left) ground floor plan in 2003; (third row right) emporia floor plan; (bottom left) lateral section of the church in 2003; (bottom right) longitudinal section of the church in 2003 (Benian 2004).

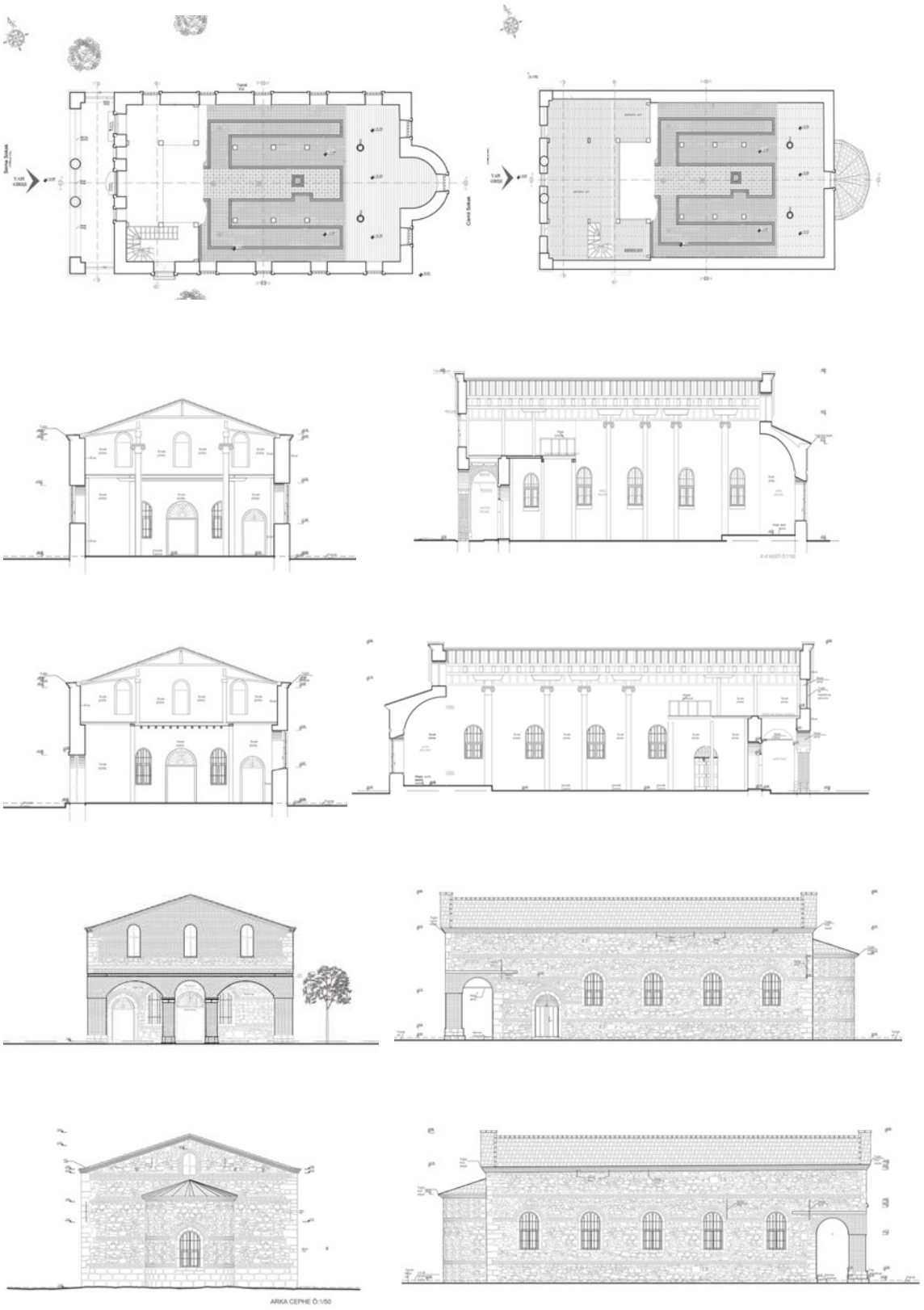


Figure 10. Restitution drawings of the church period: plans, sections, and elevations with drawing scale of 1/100 (authors' archive).

Although the roof system was mostly demolished by the fire, it was restituted based on the remaining parts and the traces. The drawing of the staircase leaning on the western wall was based on oral history and traces of the stairs on the wall next to the stairs (see **Figure 10**).

6.2 Mosque Period (1923 to the mid-1970s)

Since the mosque burned down after being abandoned, there exists a number of traces from the mosque period. In addition, the mosque period was restituted based on a photo of the building taken before the fire. The demolished inner wall, roof system, mahfil floor, and floor tiles have all been drawn (see **Figure 11**) based on this photo[4]. Major changes in this period are the removal of the apse, addition of the minbar, minaret, a new window, and removal of the earlier staircase; the exact dates of these interventions remain unknown.

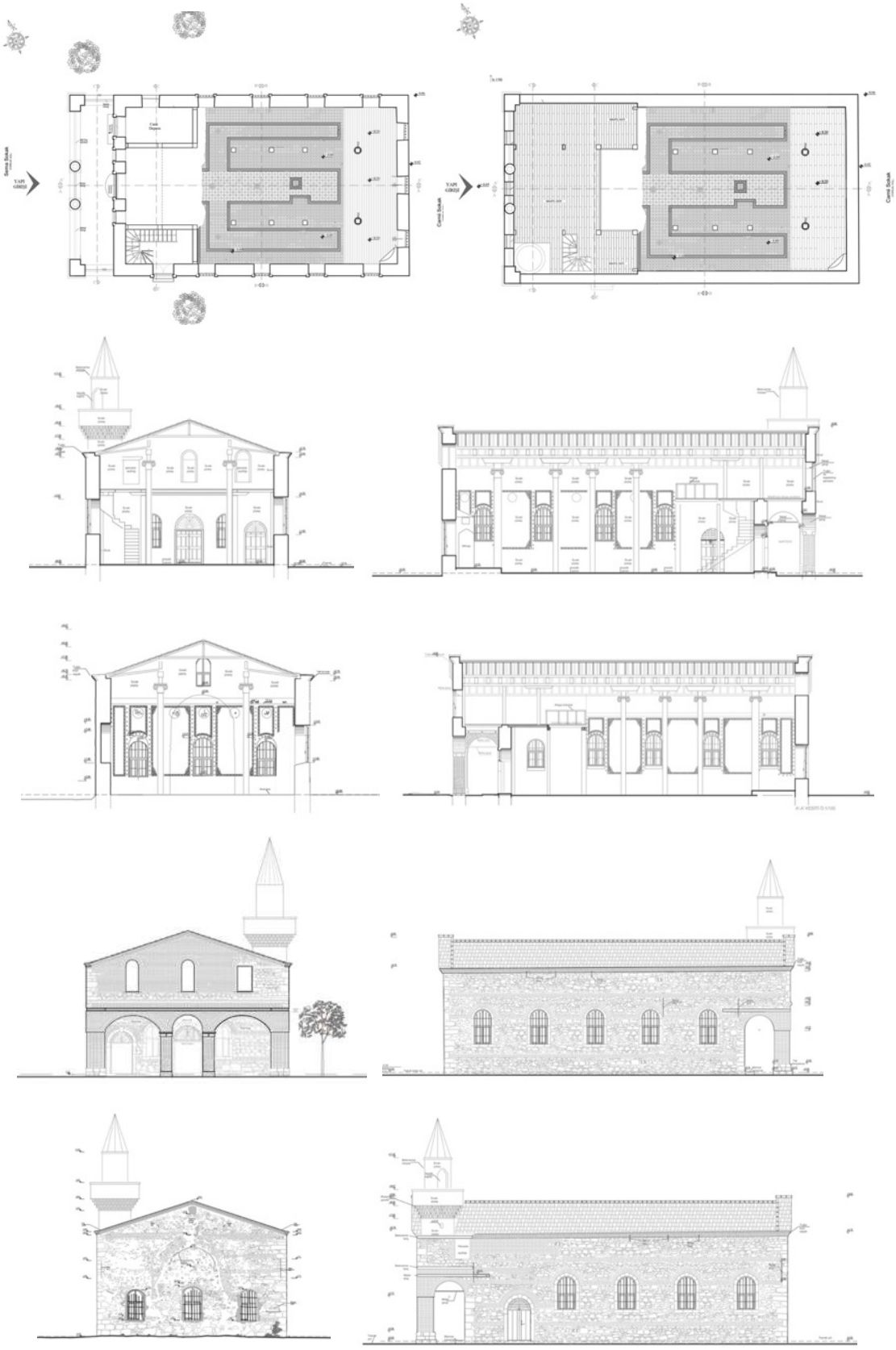


Figure 11. Restitution drawings for the mosque period: plans, sections, and elevations (drawing scale: 1/100) (authors' archive).

7. DISCUSSION OF THE CONSERVATION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON VALUE ASSESSMENT

Conservation decisions rely on heritage values, known as 'cultural significance', as a reference point for understanding, planning and decision-making. These values overlap, evolve and sometimes compete and conflict, requiring diverse assessment methodologies (Mason 2002).

Depending on the analyses and evaluation put forward in the related sections, the building holds multiple values:

- Aesthetic – A fine example of architecture.
- Spiritual/Religious – A historic place of worship.
- Social – A gathering space for the village community.
- Historical – Due to its age and its past.
- Economic – As a real estate asset.
- Sociocultural – A symbol of different ethnic and cultural groups.

This paper systematically analyses these values and develops a deliberate, systematic and transparent proposal phase for conservation.

Conservation Through Freezing:

One option is to freeze the building in its current state, a method used in archaeological sites and fortifications where completion would be speculative or misleading. However, small, recent heritage buildings face greater risks from weathering and vandalism, making freezing impractical unless the site has a valid function. Without surveillance and maintenance, the building would eventually deteriorate further. Additionally, from the perspective of sustainability and resilience, the responsible use of resources and recycled materials, and provision of a valid purpose rather than abandonment, reusing existing heritage buildings that cannot continue their existence as academic and educational resources is a must.

Challenges in Conservation:

As a comparatively late-period rural religious heritage site, the Exarchate Church presents conservation challenges, particularly in terms of funding and resources. However, the villagers and local municipality are interested in its conservation and reuse, as it is the most qualified piece of architecture in the village (based on the interviews conducted during the field study). In addition to the intent of the stakeholders, it

is believed that the qualities of the Exarchate Church justifies this study and the included conservation proposal. Given these factors, the issue is not whether to conserve, but how. This clarifies the scope of this research and motivates our introduction of this building as an example to guide similar cases in other rural areas.

The Venice Charter and Contextual Integrity:

Since the 1950s, and particularly after the 1964 Venice Charter, conservation theory has emphasized preserving entire historic areas, including modest structures like residential, production and storage buildings, not just monuments. The Venice Charter advocates for maintaining historical authenticity by reflecting original construction qualities and valid modifications from all periods.

Conservation is not just about architecture but also about historical layers, representing past communities and their role in shaping the cultural and physical environment. The Exarchate Church embodies this contextual integrity, justifying its protection as a historical document[5].

Conservation Approach:

According to contemporary restoration theory[6], a restoration must not be misleading or illusory. Only necessary interventions should be made to sustain a historic building with previous alterations respected and preserved as part of its evolution. New interventions must be coherent yet distinguishable, and reversible, ensuring changes can be undone without harming the original structure. Based on collected data, the following conservation and reuse proposals have been developed and are ready for a participatory decision-making process.

8. PROPOSALS FOR RESTORATION AND REUSE

Multiple restitution phases are common in historic buildings, complicating conservation efforts. The former Bulgarian Exarchate Church in Seymen Village holds unique value due to its multicultural history encompassing different periods, a rare example of this type of religious building for this ethnic group in Turkey. However, the loss of its original Bulgarian community has resulted in limited documentation and a partially demolished condition, making restoration challenging. Although public monumental buildings are likely to have more documentation as rare communal, valuable, and durable structures, this building has very little, probably due to being located in a rural area. While public monumental buildings often have extensive records, this rural monument lacks primary sources, requiring reliance on comparative studies and the building itself as primary evidence. According to these data, facts, and conditions, as well as the basic

principles of contemporary restoration theory, the following interventions are proposed for the restoration and reuse of the building (see **Table 2**):

(1) Cement plaster removal.

(2) Repointing.

(3) Changing bricks and stones where more than 80% of the surface is eroded.

(4) Replastering interior surfaces and restoring wall paintings.

(5) Cleaning contaminated, colour-changed stone and dirty brick surfaces, as well as rusty iron surfaces, solid unburned wood surfaces, soil piles, and soiled floor surfaces.

(6) Repairing damaged stones and brick, repairing interior plastered walls with hand-drawn patterns, and fixing damaged columns and pillars and joints suffering a loss of material.

(7) The mihrab and minaret additions are important evidence of the mosque period of the building. These should be kept as layers representing the time and culture. However, while the mihrab is a compatible addition to the building, the minaret has created both structural and architectural problems. On the western and southern façades, many interventions with reinforced concrete beams have been implemented to solve structural problems, but these did not stop the collapse of the minaret. Thus, certain questions must be answered before making decisions about the future of the minaret.

(a) Is it a unique, rare, and valuable example of a minaret?

(b) Is the minaret built with qualities of religious architecture and a qualified example of its time? Does it need to be saved to share with future generations?

(c) Is the structural system of the minaret a developed example of its period and is it firm?

(d) Will there be a need to utilize it again for future uses?

The answers indicate that the minaret lacks architectural or structural value, and since a functioning mosque exists nearby, retaining the unstable minaret would diminish the building's integrity. However, keeping the mihrab is essential for representing the mosque period.

Additional proposals include:

- Rebuilding missing masonry on the frontal façade and vandalized stone walls.
- Renewing and replacing the wooden floor beams, doors, and windows to be replaced with new ones with the same details as the original.
- Renewing the lost roof structure based on remaining evidence.
- Renewing the bent iron struts on the façade.

Removing incompatible interventions such as cement-based plaster damaging the original materials, and adjacent unqualified new building additions.

Table 2. Conservation and Restoration Proposals (by the authors)

Building Component	Materials	Structural System/ Construction Technique	Deterioration Type	Earlier Interventions	Proposed Interventions
Roof	Wood Roof tiles	Carried by interior wooden pillars and beams and exterior masonry walls	Completely burned	------	Reconstruction of original roof following the authentic details
Walls					
Eastern Façade	Alternating rubble stone and bricks	Stone and brick masonry, cut-stone corners	Emptied joints, burned doors and windows on upper floor, eroded brick and stone surfaces	Apse projection removed, central top window filled, cement plaster	Cement plaster to be removed, central top window reopened, replacement of very eroded bricks and stones (more than 80% surface loss) with compatible materials, repointing
Southern Façade	Alternating rubble stone and bricks	Stone and brick masonry, cut-stone corners	Emptied joints, eroded brick and stone surfaces	Minaret and the RC beams supporting it are additions, two illegal building additions	Minaret, beams, and illegal additions to be removed, replacement of very eroded* bricks and stone with compatible materials, repointing
Western (front) Façade (pillars on first story walls)	Brick and cut-stone walls, brick-faced pillars with wooden studs, lime and crumb-based interior plaster	Brick masonry, cut-stone corners	Emptied joints, burned doors and windows, eroded brick and stone surfaces	Minaret and the RC beams supporting it are additions, top floor window on the right is altered and surrounding walls replaced with stone, filled central window on top, filled right door on the back wall on the ground, cement plaster	Demolished minaret, RC beams and cement plaster to be removed, right window to be reshaped, top central window and bottom right door reopened, stone wall replaced with brick, very eroded* brick and stone replaced with compatible materials, repointing
Northern Façade	Alternating rubble stone and bricks	Stone and brick masonry, cut-stone corners	Burned doors and windows, eroded brick and stone surfaces	Four windows filled, illegal building addition, cement plaster	Illegal addition removed, cement removed, four windows reopened, very eroded* bricks and stones replaced with compatible materials, repointing
Interior Pillars and Beams	Wood	Post and lintel, wooden spiral slats wrapped around wooden studs of two eastern pillars, Baghdadi plaster on other pillars	Except for the two eastern pillars, all pillars have been seriously damaged by fire	------	Except for the two Eastern pillars, all pillars need to be reintegrated using the same technique of Baghdadi plastering
Interior Wall Surfaces	Brick	Masonry	Detachment of plaster, wall paintings faded	Mihrab addition	Replastering, wall painting repair on internal surfaces
Foundation	Stone	Masonry	Humidity	------	Water insulation and drainage of foundation improved
Flooring	Mosaic tiles Marble steps	------	10% of aisle flooring and flooring in the apse and narthex sections are lost	------	Missing flooring in the apse and narthex sections completed using mosaic tiles
Doors, Windows, Mahfil, Stairs, and Joineries	Wood	------	Destroyed by fire, stairs are seriously damaged	------	All missing and burned windows and doors reproduced as original, stairs, mahfil, and joineries reintegrated

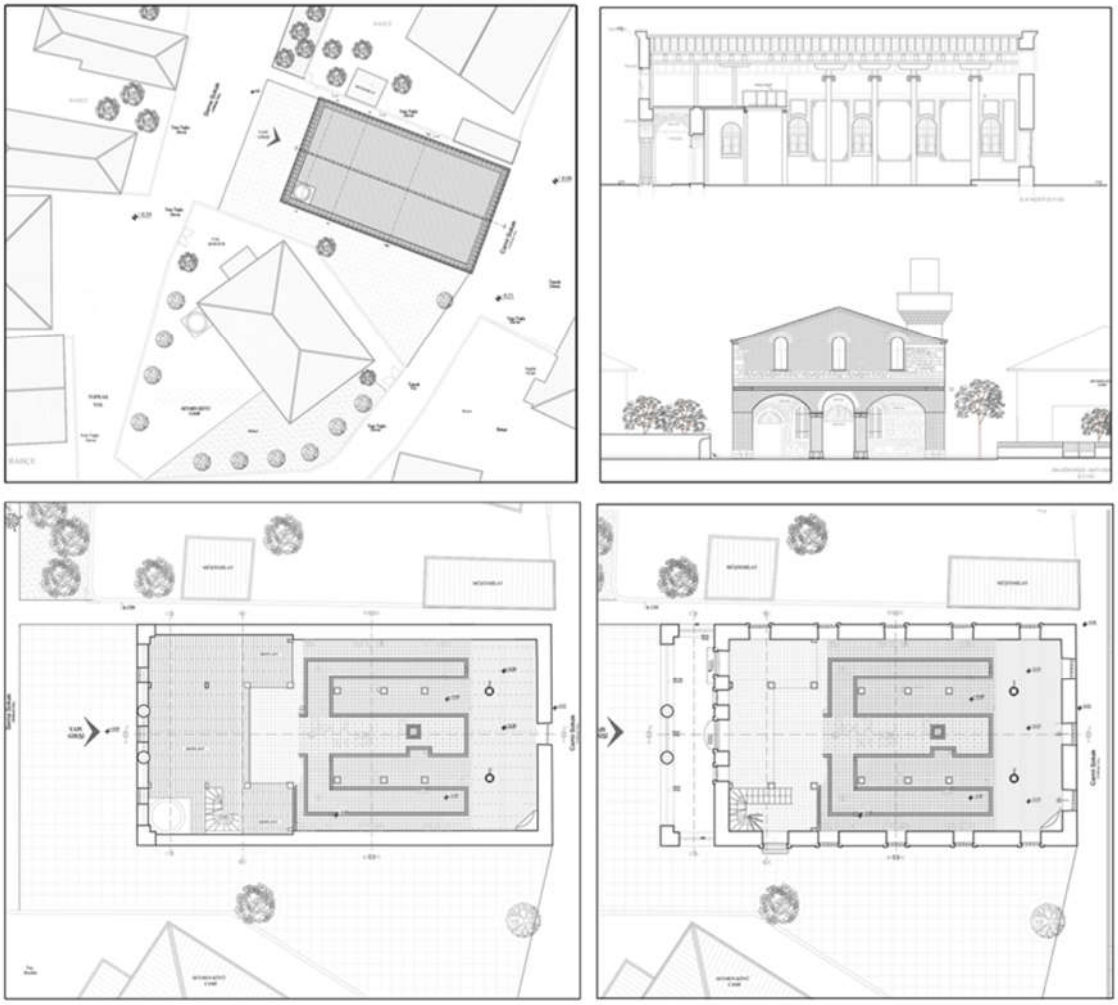


Figure 12. (top) Conservation proposals for the site plan, silhouette, ground floor, and mahfil floor plans; (bottom) Reuse proposals for ground floor and mahfil floor plans (drawing scale: 1/100) (authors' archive).

Suggestions for Reuse of the Building:

Historic buildings that are religious in nature (such as churches) cannot be given just any use, as the new use must be appropriate and satisfy the following two aspects:

(1) It must be compatible with the spatial and environmental qualities and conserve the architectural value.

(2) It must earn the broad consent of the residents, provide social acceptance, and be economically sustainable.

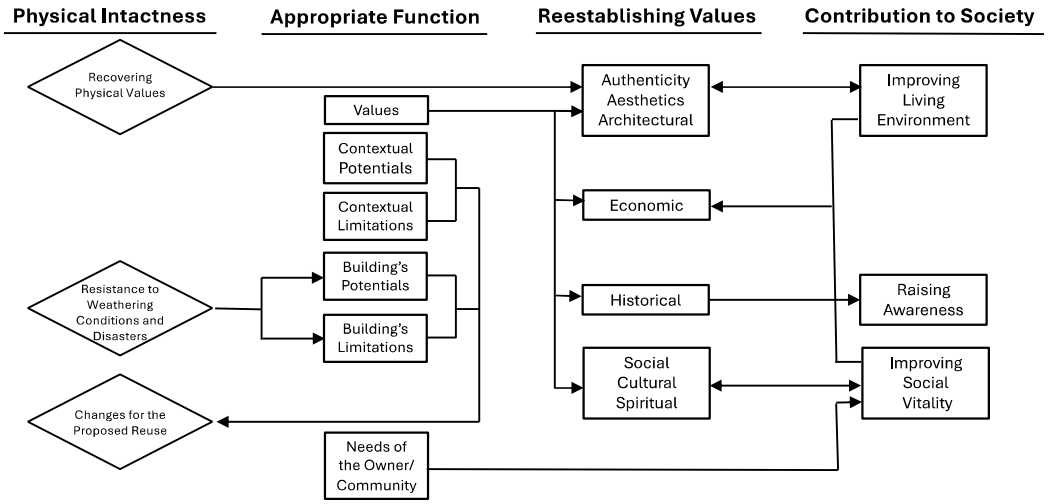
Based on the general interviews with the villagers and Silivri Municipality during the site study, specific cultural uses emerged as the most appropriate for religious buildings like churches, allowing the building to remain open to the public and a part of community life. Reuse of prominent historic buildings enriches the community both socially and historically, providing another chance for such buildings to continue their life and the community to learn from them and enjoy quality architectural spaces.

Based on this notion and the outcomes of the interviews, it was determined that the best use of the building would be a library and information centre, which will be useful for all ages of residents. In addition, an outdoor seating area is proposed as a community gathering place to increase the functionality of the southern entrance. Two unqualified and incompatible small buildings leaning on the historic structure are to be removed. A small new building with a plain and simple character, containing a small food service area, two single units for male and female restrooms, and a small storage room is proposed to the south, in between the main building and new mosque. Through this new reuse, the historic building will connect the villagers (as the main users) to the village (see **Figure 12**).

9. CONCLUSION

Conservation decisions depend on diverse data, and unique case-specific conditions of the historic buildings, requiring adaptable methodologies. While there is no single recipe for all, a traditional conservation framework can serve as a foundation for addressing challenges, as demonstrated in this rural religious heritage case. The adaptation of this traditional conservation approach can serve as a key tool to be adopted in other similar cases worldwide through the developed conservation model below (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. Rural Religious Heritage Conservation Model (by the authors)



Developed Rural Religious Heritage Conservation Model:

This model is divided into four key components, each linked, creating a holistic approach, and integrating physical, functional, cultural, and societal perspectives.

1) Physical Intactness

- Recovering Physical Values: Focuses on restoring architectural and structural integrity.
- Resistance to Weathering Conditions and Disasters: Ensures resilience against environmental and disaster-related risks, crucial for long-term preservation.
- Changes for Proposed Reuse: Indicates that physical changes may be required to align the building with its new functional purpose, balancing conservation with modern usability.

2) Appropriate Function

- Values and Contextual Factors: Recognizes that the potential for reuse depends on both contextual potentials and limitations, reflecting the socio-cultural and environmental aspects of the site.
- Building's Potentials and Limitations: Focuses on assessing the architectural and structural capacities of the building to support a new function.
- Needs of the Community/Owner: Aligns the reuse purpose with the expectations and requirements of the stakeholders, emphasizing participatory conservation.

3) Reestablishing Values

- Authenticity, Aesthetics, and Architecture: Reflects the importance of maintaining authenticity and architectural significance.
- Economic: Recognizes that conservation should ideally support local economic development or sustainability.
- Historical: Ensures the conservation of the heritage's historical narrative and integrity.
- Social, Cultural, and Spiritual: Acknowledges the intangible aspects of heritage and their relevance to communities.

4) Contribution to Society

- Improving the Living Environment: Highlights that conservation should enhance the quality of the environment for residents.
- Raising Awareness: Aims to educate and engage the community about the importance of heritage preservation.
- Improving Social Vitality: Positions the heritage site as a hub for fostering community interactions and enriching local cultural life.

Strengths of the Proposed Conservation Model:

The model has an interconnected approach, emphasizing that no single component stands alone, such as:

- Changes for proposed reuse (Physical Intactness) are guided by the needs of the community (Appropriate Function).
- Reestablishing values feeds directly into societal contributions, ensuring that heritage conservation delivers tangible and intangible benefits.
- Economic considerations and community needs are central to balancing reuse and restoration.
- The model considers a broad spectrum of factors: physical, functional, cultural, economic, and social.
- It integrates technical conservation techniques with community-oriented outcomes, reflecting global best practices.
- The model is flexible and can be applied to various heritage contexts, including rural and urban sites, sacred and secular buildings.
- By addressing weather resilience, community needs, and economic considerations, the model ensures long-term sustainability.
- The focus on community needs ensures that conservation efforts are relevant, accepted, and impactful for the local population.

This framework aims to balance technical conservation strategies with social and cultural sustainability. Its interconnected design is to ensure all aspects of heritage preservation and make it a robust model for similar rural religious heritage conservation projects by incorporating stakeholder input and emphasizing societal contributions, aligning with global conservation standards.

This research explored diverse data and the unique conditions of this case in depth technical detail. During the field study, it was seen that the village did not have an enclosed public space for social and/or cultural events. The local authorities were clearly interested in reusing this abandoned historic monumental building. To develop the adaptive reuse options, interpret different periods, and obtain the most sustainable results, the contribution of experts from related fields and stakeholders in the decision-making process was both crucial and critical.

Like many other religious buildings (especially those located in rural contexts) that are vulnerable due to a lack of awareness and attention, inappropriate or unqualified transformations, and even demolition, the Bulgarian Exarchate Church, later transformed into Seymen Mosque, serves as an example of the importance of the conservation and reuse of rural religious heritage, which can be challenging compared to urban examples. However, preserving and reusing religious buildings for socially acceptable purposes enriches and evolves society in multiple ways.

Based on the data and the outcomes of the study, a building in ruins can be restored and reused. This is made possible by providing an appropriate function and the comfort conditions necessary for its use in that context. Reuse of the building is essential not only for a successful restoration, but also to make a physical contribution to the village and community as a social core. With this goal in mind, the 'minimum intervention for maximum use' principle was adopted. In this respect, conservation decisions based on the original structure and characteristics of the building were made and followed as much as possible. Due to the scope of a successful restoration, it is essential to understand and define the building clearly and elaborately, as much as the building and available data make possible. In that sense, the current case study building was examined in detail, despite being nearly destroyed and lacking historical documentation. The contribution of a systematized restoration process as defined herein and a social and public reuse of the Exarchate Church are invaluable for the advancement of the cultural and social lives not only of the inhabitants of Seymen Village, but also other rural settlements nearby. Additionally, the historical information and building technology represented by this special building can now be sustained for future generations.

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[9] Herrle and Wozniak 2019

[10] Taylor 2019

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[20] Crişan 2017, 32-33

[21] Ahunbay 1996, 70

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[1] Mahfil is the Turkish word for a raised platform in a mosque, opposite the minber, where the müezzin carries out his duties regarding the call to prayer and chants in response to the imam's prayers.
[2] 'However, after this domination, in which the Patriarchate tries to establish the entire Orthodox world living in the Balkans, reaches a level that cannot be tolerated, the Orthodox tribes separate themselves from the Patriarchate and begin to build their own churches and national states around these churches'.

'Based on *Tanzimat Fermanı* (the Imperial Edict of Reorganization) declared on 3 November 1839, it was accepted that Muslim and non-Muslim Ottoman citizens were equal under the law, without any discrimination. This edict laid the groundwork for the Bulgarians who had begun to regain consciousness from 1825 onwards and were relieved of the authority of the Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul and wanted to establish their own church'.
'The Babıali issued a decree on 11 March 1870 permitting the establishment of an independent Bulgarian Church, and according to this 11-article decree, the newly established church would be known as the Bulgarian Exarchate and lead by an exponential'.
'Since the Orthodox Bulgarians left the Patriarchate, the Bulgarian Church was also established in the places where the Greek Church in Rumelia was gathered around the Eksarhane'.
'In 1910, Hakkı Pasha issued the Law on Churches. In accordance with this law, if two churches belong to the congregation in a region, the congregation with a larger population will keep whichever it wants and give the other to the one with less population' (Benian 2004, 36-40).

[3] An emporia is the gallery section of the upper floor that extends in the form of a balcony toward the naos of the church. While in earlier churches it was the section used by women, it is now the section where the church choir is located and can also be used as a reserve section for large ceremonies (Benian 2004).
[4] A photo of the mosque showing the building before the 2010 fire was found in the Silivri Municipality Archives. However, it cannot be shared herein, as the necessary permission could not be taken.
[5] In some parts of the world, due to war and certain societies' historical stages of settlement, areas are intentionally destroyed, damaged, and pillaged, in the former case to demoralize the enemy and the latter to erase a certain historic period for political, financial, or social reasons, doing so has only been accepted as a crime since the nineteenth century (Vrdoljak, 2015).
[6] Contemporary Restoration Theory was defined initially by Italian Camillo Boito at the end of the nineteenth century, reconciling previous approaches. It was then developed further by Giovannoni and announced at Carta del Restauro in the early twentieth century and has consistently been in progress ever since.