

The Local Landmarker

Issue 5, September 2007



On the Cover: Universal Preservation Hall in Saratoga Springs. Built in 1871 for a Methodist-Episcopal congregation, it is among the earliest and finest examples of High Victorian Gothic architecture in New York State. The building was condemned in 1999 due to structural issues and threatened with demolition. A creative arrangement that preserves and repairs the building for larger community use while also providing a home for the congregation has been developed and is in full swing. You can read more about this project inside and see it in person at the Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation 360 Conference on October 19-21, 2007. This year's conference features many training sessions dedicated to the work of local historic preservation commissions.

From the Coordinator

This issue

This issue of *The Local Landmarker* addresses an issue I've heard about as well as seen all too much during my travels across the state, the growing number of abandoned or greatly underutilized religious buildings. These buildings, be they simple meeting-house types at rural crossroads or large cathedral-inspired structures that mark a skyline with their steeples and towers, are community landmarks, sometimes the largest and most ornate buildings in their communities or neighborhoods. Declining populations in rural areas and urban neighborhoods can leave these monuments to faith and community empty and in disrepair and many times targets for vandalism, theft, and demolition. Some sit at major intersections where rising land values have given declining congregations the choice of staying and managing a too-large building in need of work, or selling and moving to a smaller, newer building. Whatever the cause, the loss of these structures can damage a community's historic character, sense of place, and sense of itself.

However, there is hope. Creative thinking and creative partnerships can help these buildings either find a new life in the community or continue in their original function. Kimberly Kloch, an architect in the Albany-based firm of Mesick-Cohen-Wilson-Baker, has been studying the issue and writing and lecturing on this matter nationwide. She is the first "guest columnist" for the *Landmarker*, and her article is the main focus of this issue. I will be looking for outside expertise on other topics as well, as I want the information presented to be the best we can provide. I'm not an expert on everything in the field, but I usually know who to ask or where to look. Kimberly was recommended to me through a local presentation that she made on abandoned religious buildings, and she graciously agreed to write the article.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the *Landmarker*. Please feel free to give me feedback on this issue and ideas for other issues. As always, please let me know what I can do to help as you work to preserve your community's sense of place.

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Sacred Places, Empty Spaces

By Kimberly A. Kloch

Neglect, deterioration, and abandonment are not terms that a community wants to use to describe its neighborhoods, and they are not terms often associated with religious properties. However, a problem that is growing throughout New York State, the United States, and the world, is houses of worship left vacant and deteriorating. Many communities that once relied on their places of worship as gathering spaces are now left with dark, hulking, and empty giants casting shadows over the streetscape or lonely buildings sitting dark at a rural crossroads.

You need look no farther than western New York for an example of how empty houses of worship affect a community. On July 1, 2007 Bishop Edward U. Kmiec announced that as part of the Roman Catholic Diocese's ongoing "Journey in Faith and Grace," a parish-based strategic initiative launched in June 2005, fifteen churches within the Buffalo city limits were earmarked for consolidation and closure by the end of the year. The promise that another round of closure announcements is due in September only adds to the anxiety. Neighborhoods once identified by their church buildings are left with the reality that in a very short time these buildings might not exist at all. This is indicative of the plight of historic religious structures throughout New York. Most hard hit are the rural upstate communities, where declining populations decrease already dwindling religious communities and make it difficult to determine a viable reuse.

How many memories are connected with these places? What if you were faced with the reality that the space that your great-grandfather helped to build, where your parents were married and your children were baptized would be closing its doors and possibly torn down? It's an unsettling prospect. From an architectural perspective, in many cases these buildings were built by master craftsmen using methods and techniques that are no longer used in modern construction. Some were designed by prominent architects. Others are decorated with frescos, stained glass, and ornament that are priceless and irreplaceable. Some represent the largest building in the immediate area, while others are small, simple, and elegant.

But there is hope for the future of these sacred but empty places. Throughout the world and here in the United States new uses have been found for these structures that can maintain their architecture and their splendor. Here are some success stories and suggestions about how you too might find a new purpose for an abandoned house of worship.

First, Be Realistic of the Challenge Ahead

There are a myriad of reasons why a house of worship may have closed its doors. As seen in Buffalo, declining religious service attendance is a big reason, but another major factor can be the structural and functional condition of the building itself. They are designed for a single purpose and often come with a large price tag on upkeep. Often the cost of daily operation over many years didn't leave much room in the budget for maintenance. After

years of deferred upkeep, items that were once simple maintenance issues can snowball into big headaches.

Whether the doors were closed last week or twenty years ago, the list of repairs might look the same; however, the buildings may differ in their various stages of decay and urgency.

Any reuse will come at a cost for the repair of the structure and its deficiencies but also for bringing the building up to code. Our constitution clearly defines a separation of church and state. Because of this, religious structures are not held to the codes as strictly as homes and businesses. Often municipalities only enforce the most important of life safety concerns. Therefore, any reuse taking the building out of religious use will need to address issues such as accessibility and fire protection.

Also, religious properties are not zoned. Once a religious property is transferred to a non-religious organization, the city, village, or town must then zone the building in a way that is best for the surrounding community. Many a project has been thwarted because viable uses don't match the designated zoning for the location. Rezoning may need to be explored, or requests made through the local zoning appeal board. This is an important factor to consider before undertaking any reuse project.

Finally, you've heard the saying "it takes a village"? This aphorism aptly describes the process of reusing a religious structure for another purpose. It will take hard work, community involvement, and dedication. Any intended purpose will be only as successful as the community's need for the service provided and its willingness to support it. It is also important to consider, especially in rural areas, how much visitor traffic comes to your area. In choosing a reuse, the function should be able not only to serve the community but also to attract the attention of visitors. In rural areas, a mixed-use function may be better suited to using the structure fully and giving it the best chance for financial success. Most people agree that these religious structures were built to serve the community and any new use that continues that purpose is preferred.

If your community is up for the challenge, some hard work and effort could pay off in a big way. Here are some options to consider.

Old Building, New Use

You might be amazed to learn the numerous ways that former religious structures are being reused throughout the world. You also might not agree with some of these reuses, but keep an open mind. If you are resolute in your determination to keep these structures in use, you have to be open to all possibilities. Some of the most common reuses may not be right for your community, or the local zoning laws might not allow them.

The most desirable reuse is obviously for a similar function by another religious organization. Almost as appropriate is development as a community center and multi-use facility. But if you don't have a demand or need for these, some of your other options include performance spaces, libraries, museums, residences, offices, restaurants, and even retail space. Residential is by far the most common reuse of churches. The most interesting reuse I've seen so far is a former church in Bristol, England that was reused as a climbing center. The height of the interior space was conducive to building tall climbing walls for recreational use.

To give you examples of some of the other possibilities, I've compiled a list of twelve projects, mostly in New York or the surrounding states, that I have found in doing my research that show a wide range of possibilities.

Asbury United Methodist Church – Buffalo, New York

Built in 1874 and closed in 1995 because it was no longer safe for habitation. Reused in 2006 as a community arts space, flexible public performance and entertaining space, and corporate headquarters for a record production company.

<http://www.thechurchbuffalo.com/>

Graduate Health Systems Corporate Headquarters – Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Built in 1881 and closed in the early 1980s. The building was nearly destroyed by fire in 1985. A private company made the investment to restore the church for use as its offices in 1989. It did so by building floors within the mass of the church, while leaving the nave untouched for use as the lobby and reception area.

http://www.nationaltrust.org/issues/downloads/worship_graduate_health.pdf

International Institute of Culinary Arts – Fall River, Massachusetts

The former First Congregational Church is located in a state historic district. In 1997 it was purchased by a man with a dream to establish a culinary school. The church and its surrounding buildings have become the culinary school, a restaurant, and banquet facilities.

<http://www.iicaculinary.com/>

The Church Brew Works – Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania

Built in 1902 and closed in 1993, the former Catholic church was purchased by a private investor who turned it into a microbrewery and restaurant. This project was highly controversial because after the fact the local Catholic diocese felt that the reuse was inappropriate. The diocese has since set strict guidelines for future sale of any religious property to ensure that the intended reuse meets its approval.

<http://www.churchbrew.com/>

Kirkland Art Center – Clinton, New York

The Kirkland Art Center occupies a former church and barn on the village green. The center offers adult and child continuing education classes, traveling art exhibits, concerts, lectures, a coffee house, and a thrift shop. Support comes directly from the community, volunteers, the New York State Council for the Arts, and other funding sources.

<http://www.kirklandartcenter.org/>

Sand Lakes Art Center – Averill Park, New York

Built in 1835, the First Presbyterian Church of Greenbush served also as the town hall until it was purchased by the SLAC in 2002. Its function is similar to the Kirkland Art Center in Clinton, but this building is also home to the Circle Theatre Players troop. The community and performance space is also available for rent.

<http://www.slca-ctp.org/index.htm>

The Sanctuary for Independent Media – Troy, New York

This space offers media makers a place to meet, screen, produce, and perform all types of independent media, an unusual but creative use for a historic religious structure

<http://www.thesanctuaryforindependentmedia.org/>

Packer Collegiate Institute – Brooklyn, New York

Built in 1869 by Renwick and Sands, the closed church was purchased by the institute in 1969. It remained underutilized until 2004, when renovations were completed to accommodate the institute's middle school. A five-story independent structure was built inside the church shell to provide classroom space while preserving the original architecture.

<http://www.packer.edu/>

Universal Preservation Hall – Saratoga Springs, New York

In what was truly a community effort, concerned local citizens banded together after this former Methodist-Episcopal church was condemned in 1999. They refused to see the structure torn down to become another paved lot. It is envisioned as a community space offering concerts, films, poetry readings, and lectures, as well providing space for corporate meetings and retreats and wedding receptions. A portion of the building remains a house of worship for the congregation, allowing it to remain an active part of the life of the community.

<http://www.universalpreservationhall.org/>

King Urban Life Center – Buffalo, New York

A broad-based group of concerned citizens organized to save the historic St. Mary of Sorrows Roman Catholic Church from the wrecking ball in 1985. After discussing such possibilities as a theatre, television station, and condominiums, it was decided to find a reuse that served to support and boost the economically depressed neighborhood surrounding it. The center draws from the educational resources of local colleges and universities to offer exceptional learning opportunities to K-2 students. The center's program includes technology based education as well as after-school programs.

<http://www.kingurbanlifecenter.org/>

The Hotel Pharmacy, Inc. – Brattleboro, Vermont

A former Methodist church built in 1880, the building has seen various reuses over the years. Formerly a theatre with a tavern in the basement, the structure has since been divided longitudinally down the nave to form two commercial spaces. It is now home to Wildwater Outfitters, which left its interior space unchanged, and the Hotel Pharmacy, which has completely renovated its half of the building.

<http://www.hotelrx.com/history.html>

Cohoes Public Library – Cohoes, New York

The City of Cohoes Public Library has resided in the former St. John's Episcopal Church since the 1970s. Space not used by the library has been leased to different businesses over the years to aid in covering the cost of upkeep and maintenance on the building.

What's Next?

You may already have a religious building in mind and a reuse that fits the needs of the community. The next step is to secure funding. When you are talking about deferred maintenance and costs for renovation and code upgrades, totals can rise into the millions and tens of millions. Believe it or not, there are quite a few options available to get you started.

Federal Funding Sources

- Save America's Treasures – A federal grant program available for “nationally significant” properties whose owners are not-for-profits, municipalities, or recognized tribes.
<http://www.saveameericastreasures.org/index.html>
- Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits – A 20% tax credit that can be taken for a rehabilitated income-producing historic property listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The work must be a “substantial rehabilitation” as defined by the program and must follow the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Not-for-profits can utilize the credits through syndication, selling them on the market for direct capital.
<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/implement/index.htm>
- New Market Tax Credits – The New Market Tax Credit (NMTC) program is a federal tax incentive program authorized by Congress in 2000 to help spur the investment of \$15 billion of capital into businesses that are located in low-income communities.
- Community Development Block Grants - This is a federal program earmarking 70% of its yearly funding directly to low and moderate income communities.
<http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/communitydevelopment/programs/>
- Community Reinvestment Act – Passed by Congress in 1977 and revised in 1995, this requires banks and lending institutions to help meet the credit needs of moderate to low income projects in their communities.
<http://www.ffiec.gov/cra/>

Please note that some of the federal sources require a property to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places in order to qualify for the funding. National Register listing is an honorific program that recognizes historic properties and opens the door for various funding sources not available without that designation. Save America's Treasures and the Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits are two programs directly linked to National Register listing. Some religious organizations have shied away from these designations due to the mistaken perception that such designation comes with limits on what kind of renovations can be done to the building. This is not true: National Register listing puts no controls on privately funded work on a listed building. However, public funding of National Register listed or eligible properties does require review by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) under the appropriate regulations. Contact the New York State Historic Preservation Office for more information.

New York State Funding Sources

- State Tax Credits – New York State has recently enacted state historic rehabilitation tax credits. The most useful for historic religious buildings would be the credit for income-producing properties, which is directly linked and calculated on the federal rehabilitation tax credit. Commercial properties that qualify for the federal credit are eligible for an additional state income tax credit, equal to 30% of the federal credit. This program is still in the development stage; check with the SHPO for more information and updates.
- State legislative member items – Legislators may have access to sources of funding through their ability to direct funds through line items. Be sure to check with your local representative to see what might be possible.
- State Grants – Currently there are several grant programs available.
- Environmental Protection Fund – A portion of these funds are set aside for historic preservation projects. The property has to be listed on the National or State Register of Historic Places and owned by a not-for-profit or a municipality in order to qualify. These grants are announced annually. You should check with the grants officer in your regional office of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation for more information about schedules and applications.
<http://www.nysparks.state.ny.us/>
- RESTORE - Restore NY is a program through the Empire State Development Corporation designed to encourage economic development and neighborhood growth by providing municipalities with financial assistance for revitalization of commercial and residential properties. <http://www.empire.state.ny.us/restoreNY/>

Local Funding Sources

- Tax Exemptions
- Budget Line Items
- Business Improvement Districts

Not-for-Profit Organizations

- National Trust for Historic Preservation: <http://www.nationaltrust.org/>
- Partners for Sacred Places: This national, non-profit organization is dedicated to the stewardship and active community use of America's older religious properties. <http://www.sacredplaces.org/>
- Denominational Administrative Bodies

Grants and Charitable Foundations

- The Chronicle of Philanthropy
<http://www.philanthropy.com/>
- The New York Landmarks Conservancy, Sacred Sites Program: This program provides financial and technical assistance for the maintenance, repair, and restoration of religious properties throughout New York State.
<http://www.nylandmarks.org/>, click on "houses of worship"

- The Getty Foundation: The Getty Foundation awards architectural conservation grants to preserve buildings and sites of outstanding architectural, historical, and cultural significance. Planning grants assist in the initial development of an overall conservation plan. Implementation grants assist in the actual conservation of a building's historic structure and fabric.
<http://www.getty.edu/grants/conservation/>
- Local Foundations: Many communities have local foundations that can assist in planning or implementation of work at historic religious buildings.

A more complete list of grants and other funding sources, along with links to their websites, can be found at: <http://www.preservenet.cornell.edu/links.html>

Reusing a house of worship can be a challenging venture. These projects are already competing against other preservation projects for limited funding resources. It is not advisable to count on outside sources alone to fund the adaptive reuse project. Careful consideration should be taken to determine the costs associated with the renovations before asking for funding. Many grant programs require you to be very specific about how their money will be spent. Also, look to your local officials for help. They might be aware of funding available based on other projects undertaken in the area. They can also be very helpful in aiding you in understanding the processes involved in a reuse project.

A Vision for the Future

Historic religious structures are a part of our country's heritage, built and paid for by people who came to America to find a better life. It would be a shame to lose structures that were once the anchors of their communities, some of which exemplify types of construction rarely duplicated in modern high paced and cost driven construction industry. However, it is hard to imagine that every vacant religious structure will find a reuse. It is the harsh reality that some will be left to decay or fall victim to the wrecking ball. Nevertheless, these structures warrant the time and effort required to look into whether or not there are viable and applicable reuses available.

The need to find new uses for sacred places is gaining urgency with the acceleration of closings and consolidations. State and local governments are only now beginning to set up agencies to monitor the growing number of vacant religious structures in their areas and to set up plans for their care and reuse. There are so many unknowns in this type of project that it is important to look at what others have done and ask questions of those who might assist you in making your goal a reality. However, know that while it is daunting, the effort you might be undertaking has been successful in cases where buildings had been left for dead, the community had lost hope, and no one thought it possible. Sometimes it took just one person to catch the vision and lead the way for others so that these landmarks could have active lives for the next century.

"The preservation of these structures is a responsibility we all share, to ensure that we pass on to future generations an understanding of our country's great religious, architectural, and historical heritage." - Rev. Thomas F. Pike from Common Bond, Volume 1, Number 1, Summer 1985.

Featured Website

Several communities have asked me about design guidelines for rural landscapes, open spaces, and other historic areas that are not the traditional historic commercial and residential districts. I did some research and found Clarke County, Virginia, which adopted an excellent set of guidelines developed for an “historic access corridor overlay district.” In this mainly rural county, there was concern with commercial development along its traditionally scenic rural roads and in its hamlets and how that could radically change both the county’s historic character and quality of life. I think the list provides excellent rationales for design guidelines in historic districts regardless of the location, rural or urban. If you are interested in reading the entire zoning code for the overlay district, including the actual design guidelines you can go to:

http://www.co.clarke.va.us/documents/ZoningOrd/zone_ord.pdf

Scroll down to section 3-E-4-d. The purposes and intents of the guidelines (in section 3-E-4-d) are to:

- Accommodate economic growth that will both maximize direct municipal revenues and minimize the indirect costs of eroding the distinctive character of the district/village/city/town/county
- Protect private property values and related public investment from the detrimental impacts of indiscriminate and insensitive new construction
- Anticipate and guard against commonplace and uniform corporate architecture that if built might create anonymous developments indistinguishable from those in other parts of the country (“Generica”)
- Maintain the image of the district/village/city/town/county to benefit residents, attract tourists, and interest potential homebuyers, investors, and employers
- Encourage new construction projects to produce contemporary architecture compatible with traditional forms and materials unique to the area.
- Provide for an appropriate and attractive yet diverse mix of new buildings that relate to one another in a coherent way by guiding them towards shared design principles without imposing any specific architectural style.

The Back Page



The King Urban Life Center in Buffalo. This view from above the main level shows the sensitive construction inserted so the building could serve the community in its new incarnation as a community educational resource. You can read more about this project at its website, www.kingurbanlifecenter.org