

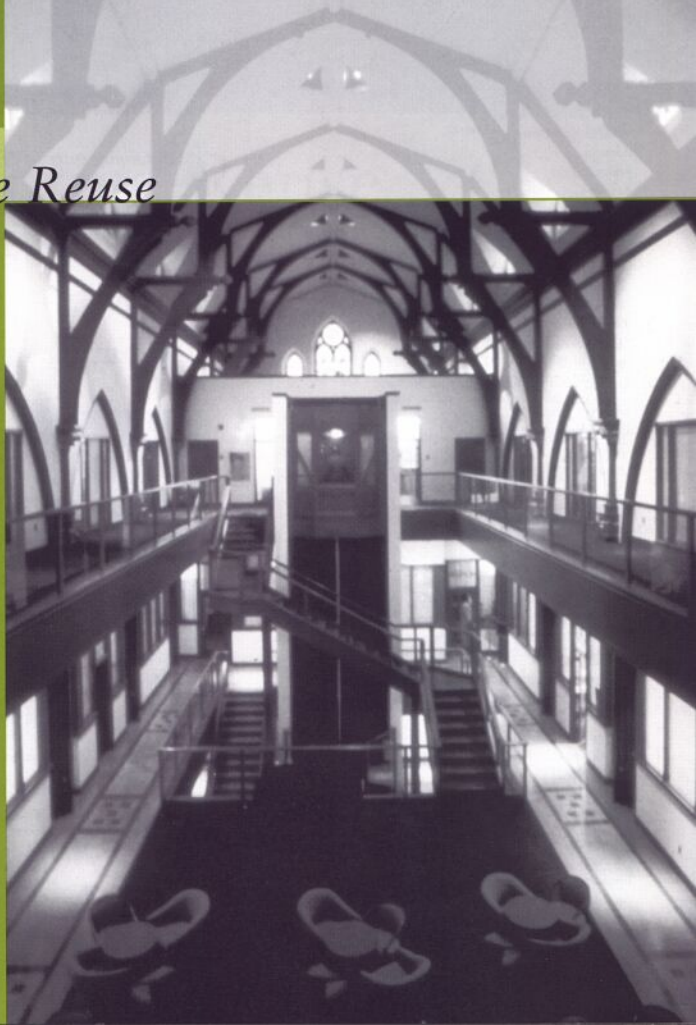
Landmarks Conservancy

COMMON BOND

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Adaptive Reuse

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From pews to classrooms:
before and after
adaptive reuse
at St. Mary of
Sorrows Roman
Catholic
Church in
Buffalo, NY.



Preservation League of New York State

Adaptive Reuse

When Jane Sherman first spotted the nearly abandoned Presbyterian church in downtown Nyack over a decade ago, it was like love at first sight. The Greek Revival style building had been faithfully serving the town since 1839, its congregants long woven into the fabric of Nyack's history. But by the early 1990s there were clear signs that the dwindling congregation—down to a dozen or so elderly parishioners for several years—would soon need to close down the church.

by Paul Zakrzewski

"It was this wonderful old building, which I fell for the first time I saw it," says Sherman. "The problem was that hardly anybody was using it." Sherman and a friend wanted to create a community center for one of Nyack's overlooked populations, and both knew they had found the perfect place. Even the church building's location proved auspicious, for it stood both literally and figuratively on an important crossroads of town. While its front faced a major thoroughfare and a pleasant downtown full of antique shops and restored Victorian homes, the back of the church looked over a 1960s-era low-income housing complex. Its residents lacked public space and could really use a community center.

When it became clear that the church was about to close, and it was more than likely that the Hudson Valley Presbytery would sell the building, Sherman and her friend decided to act. At first they approached Presbyterian churches from surrounding communities to gauge their interest in helping to maintain the Nyack church as a community space. But they soon realized that those churches didn't have the resources to participate, and Sherman contacted the Hudson Valley Presbytery. "The Presbytery was very supportive of the project, and really understood its value," says Sherman.

The Presbytery sold the church building to center's nonprofit board for \$50, maintaining the title to the land should it decide in the future to convert the building back to a functioning church. Within several months, the center's co-founders had filled the sanctuary space with popular programming, including a children's breakfast hour, a women and infant's feeding class, a literacy program, even live theater. "What's interesting is that people in the community now treat the center as if it had always been there," says Sherman.

Clockwise: 1. A convent at 64 Havemeyer in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was turned into apartments. 2. A former chapel, now part of a home, in the convent. (Li/Saltzman Architects, PC) 3. Another former chapel, this one from a rectory in Queens, converted to a classroom space at the Theresa Cervini Daycare Center (Trix Rosen).



The Nyack Community Center isn't simply a powerful case of grassroots community organizing. It's also a particularly good example of "adaptive reuse"—the substantial alteration of a building to serve a new purpose or function. As changing social patterns and rising costs of the past 30 years have forced several aging congregations to shut down, especially in urban centers, the question of what to do with the congregation's building arises more frequently.

Some congregations simply abandon their space, letting time and the elements destroy a building's historic fabric. But increasingly congregations elect to sell the building to a business or nonprofit organization for an adaptive reuse. In the best examples of adaptive reuse, these houses of worship can be adapted so that their historic fabric remains intact while their reuse makes a new contribution to the social fabric or continuity of the surrounding community.

Nevertheless, both congregations and developers face obstacles unique to the rehabilitation of former sacred sites. One common obstacle which usually comes up soon after the decision to sell a sacred site is the feeling among the congregation that the building may be desecrated or misused by its new owners.

While the Hudson Valley Presbytery backed the idea of a community center, for example, the elderly parishioners were more hesitant about the new use. "The local members weren't sure what it meant," says Sherman. "But I stayed in touch with two sisters, both elderly congregants. After a time they finally embraced the whole project. They would come by to give me items from the original church to use in the center. That was a great affirmation."

Then there are the challenges of actually rehabilitating former sacred spaces. The cost of bringing a former sacred space up to code can be very steep. And older religious buildings may have inadequate plumbing or lack air conditioning. For nonprofits, the cost of rehabilitating a building on a shoestring budget can prove to be challenging as well. In the case of the Nyack



Center, the former church building needed a lot of work to be stabilized. Initial studies revealed that both the roof and the basement floor needed to be replaced, while the bell tower could not be used because of insect damage. There were even environmental hazards, as lead-based paint was flaking off the building's exterior. "The building was in a lot of trouble," says Sherman.

Despite two sizable federally-sponsored community development block grants of \$200,000 and \$270,000 (plus a \$3,000 grant from the New York Landmarks Conservancy), the center was careful to pick an architect whose plan for adaptive reuse was both sensitive to the building's historic fabric—and to the center's budget. When removal estimates for the lead paint proved astronomically high, for instance, the architect had the exterior covered with a thick elastic paint-like substance that virtually encased the lead paint, protecting both the building and the environment.

The former Sacred Heart Academy Chapel, Rochester, NY
Then there are times when a successful adaptive reuse can be done without much cost or fuss. One such example is a grand 1890s Gothic Revival-style chapel, patterned after the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, and located in a complex that once housed one of Rochester's finest Catholic girls schools. Started in the 1840s by the French Order of the Sacred Heart, the Sacred Heart Academy had run its course by the late 1960s, when dropping enrollments, rising costs, and sweeping changes within convent life took their toll.

A local dentist purchased the massive complex of interconnected buildings and adapted space for three uses: as part of the campus of a local college, an apartment building, and a private, non-denominational school. Because the complex happens to be located in the center of Rochester's famous East Avenue historic district, he was not permitted to make any significant changes to its exterior. Meanwhile, he removed the pews in the chapel but otherwise left the space—along with its soaring Gothic ceiling, the decorative paneling, the stained glass, even the platform for the altar—virtually intact.

"If I could give you an example of all the conversions that has had the least intrusive changes, it would be this chapel," says Cynthia Howk, Architectural Research Coordinator at the Landmarks Society of Western New York. Soon after, the former academy was sold to a local dance instructor, who has operated a dance studio ever since.

Howk recommends this particular example of an adaptive reuse for nonprofits and other small businesses that operate on a shoestring budget and can make the most of a church's inherent open-space design. "It's an exquisite space that would probably require a six-figure budget for a major rehabilitation," she says. "Instead, it hasn't even been painted. This is much better for the building than having someone spending lots of money in the interior and destroying the historic design."

The former Spencer Memorial Church, Brooklyn, NY
If a successful adaptive reuse can be as simple as removing pews, then Brooklyn's former Spencer Memorial Church, refashioned into a co-op apartment building, probably stands at the opposite end of the scale. Built in the Gothic Revival style, the former Presbyterian church dates from 1851, when a group of abolitionists broke away from an existing congregation. For a time the church's attic was even a stop on the Underground Railroad, aiding escaped slaves who were fleeing the South. By the 1970s the congregation had dwindled and the building, originally slated for demolition, was declared a landmark. It was sold to two brothers who sent the pews to Columbia University and converted the sanctuary into ten apartments, including duplexes and triplexes.

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Issues to Consider



The Nyack Center

The decision of whether to sell and adaptively reuse a formerly sacred space can be a difficult, even controversial, one. And there are plenty of issues to be considered, not only for the congregation, but for the businesses, nonprofits, lawyers, architects, and preservationists involved.

Many for-profit businesses have purchased and adaptively reused formerly sacred spaces. The federal government created an additional incentive for such adaptation when it introduced the Investment Tax Credit in 1976. The 20% tax credit may be taken by the owner of a certified historic building as long as two conditions are met. One is that the building must require extensive rehabilitation (i.e., not just a paint job) and second, that the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

If developers receive federal grant money or the tax credit, then certain restrictions will apply to their adaptive use. The State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation will review such projects for compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Still, the state focuses purely on matters of preservation and doesn't get in the business of endorsing or criticizing specific reuses. "We stress to applicants that you should pick a use that requires the least change and is the most compatible with the significant spaces, character, details and design of the historic site," says Rick Lord, an architect with the New York State Historic Preservation Office.

Preservationists have some advice for congregations who are choosing between potential buyers and adaptive reuses. Tania Werbizky of the Preservation League of New York says that while limiting particular reuses is an understandable goal, sometimes these limitations can make it more difficult to encourage a good use. She recalls one example in the Finger Lakes region in which a vacated church did not want any link to alcohol, a decision that ultimately excluded several local wineries that had originally been interested in the space. "It showed that no one had really thought through the restriction," says Werbizky.

Meanwhile, Cynthia Howk of the Landmarks Society of Western New York has special sympathy for the heads of congregations. "Clergy study theology, not historic preservation or architecture," says Howk. She encourages clergy to get outside help as they consider adaptive reuses. This is especially critical for congregations that are remaining in the building. Professional advice can often save literally thousands of dollars—not to mention that it can reduce the impact on the historic fabric of the building. "Whether you are in central Manhattan or the wilds of the Adirondacks, there is a very strong network of professional advice across the state, all for the cost of a telephone call," says Howk.



Closeups of the completed tile restoration at Central Synagogue.

By Peter Aaron/ESTO

Pfeiffer Associates began the synagogue restoration, project architect Nina Freedman was faced with the daunting task of finding a company to produce new tiles that would match the salvaged 19th century Maw & Company ones. At first, Freedman and her colleagues turned to several American firms, but none were able to match the colors closely enough.

The team turned to English tile manufacturer H & R Johnson, which owns the original patterns and technology of Maw & Company. Unfortunately, the process of creating encaustic tiles has changed a great deal in the intervening century, and the original pattern had been lost. H & R Johnson set about to recreate the tile pattern using drawings, existing tiles, and computer modeling techniques.

Freedman says the process went through several iterations to get the color match right. "To be quite honest, we were afraid we wouldn't be able to do it," she admits. "The colors that were sent to us were quite close, but they weren't spot on."

Another issue conservators encountered was that the synagogue had replaced some tiles over the past century, and the tiles overall had varying degrees of thickness. If the tiles had been reset using a traditional thin-set method there would be inconsistency in the level. (A thin-set mortar is a cement compound used to bond ceramic tile). Instead, conservators came up with a "mud set" or thick-set method; they used a much thicker cement-based mortar and could adjust the amount used for individual tiles as necessary.

In the end, the team decided to install old tiles with old tiles, and new with new. The old tiles were kept in the more important areas of the floor, such as the central aisle and in front of the rabbi's pulpit.

The effect? Flawless, according to Freedman. "What happened is that you can't tell the difference between old and new. So, it was incredible when it was finished."

David Malkin of Tile Source Inc., who supplied the photos for this article, can be reached at 770-993-6602, djmalk@aol.com, or 203 Mill Pond Road, Roswell, GA 30076.

Adaptive Reuse

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As in the case of the former Spencer Memorial Church, when substantial changes must be made to the existing structure, significant architectural and preservation questions can arise. For example, the former Presbyterian church was located in the Brooklyn Heights historic district, and preservation guidelines prohibited the removal of the windows, limiting the view of several apartments. Although the apartments still sold, standard glass windows, with their size, opacity and religious iconography, can often prove an obstacle to the successful adaptive reuse of former religious spaces into homes.

Then there is the more central challenge of how to adapt the soaring, open nature of a sanctuary space into multiple units. Judith Saltzman of Li/Saltzman Architects, PC, who has adaptively reused several sacred sites and whose firm consulted on the Spencer Memorial project, says that a good balance between the form of the building and its new function lies at the heart of a successful reuse. "The question to ask is how are you going to maintain the character of the original building, and yet provide a new use that's both functional and economically viable."

Equally crucial, says Saltzman's partner Roz Li, is the issue of "reversibility"—the ability to reverse the adaptive reuse, should the building revert to its sacred purpose. Li points to the adaptive reuse of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church in Newark, NJ, as a good example. In that adaptive reuse, Li helped convert the church into a community center which includes offices, a health spa, atrium, health care center—and even one of the city's most popular Cajun/Creole restaurants. The owner of the complex, a major nonprofit housing corporation, was anxious to increase the building's floor size.

Nonetheless, Li insisted that any reuse should be reversible, and worked hard to bury or cover many of the building's interior ornaments and details, in order to retain the integrity of the building's historic fabric. "It was crucial that these details were not destroyed, only buried," says Li. "In case the building should ever revert to a church, I made sure our additions could be unbolted and the original fabric uncovered."

As a preservation architect, says Li, she has a guiding philosophy when deciding on adaptive reuse. "I have to ask whether a building can be effectively converted. Does it make sense to convert a sanctuary—in which the main feature is soaring, open space—into tiny offices? Are you going to destroy the character of the building with your reuse?"

Sometimes in adaptive reuse, the best changes are the ones that don't get made.