Adaptive Reuses for White Elephants
Repurposing former neighborhood gems

A Division of New York Department of State

What's a white elephant?
white elephant n.
1. Rare, expensive possession that's a financial burden to maintain;
2. Something of dubious or limited value;
3. Possession unwanted by its owner;
4. Endeavor or venture that proves to be a conspicuous failure.

Are you herding white elephants?
Chances are your community has at least one white elephant!

- Churches
- Schools
- Armories
- Depots
- Mills/factories

Rusting neighborhood anchors
How did we end up with so many white elephants?
- Natural cycle of neighborhood growth and decay
- Restrictive zoning
- Natural disasters (flood, fire, tornado, etc.)
- Decline of neighborhood parochial schools
- Change in transportation options
- Temporary architectural nature of big box stores
- Changes in retail trends; glut of space

Churches are special cases
- Shrinking urban congregations
  - Population shift from cities to suburbs
- Parish mergers and closings
- May not be handicapped accessible
- Financial troubles
  - Dwindling donations
  - Parochial school tuitions too high to sustain
  - Repairs, maintenance, utilities too high
- Reverter clauses
Legal bulwark: reverter clause

Deed clause requiring property to be used as house of worship or else returned to donor’s heirs

- Must demonstrate “diligent search” for heirs
- Typical arguments:
  - heirs can’t be found, or
  - there are too many heirs

Taking action against derelict properties

- Force church through code enforcement to either sell dilapidated property, fix, or demolish
  - selling requires blessing from diocese
  - city could deny demolition
- Consider if adjacent buildings/land still in use
  (rectory, convent, schools, gardens, parking lots)
- Non-owners want to dictate what happens next…
  - Should they have a say?
  - Do they have a say?

Zoning can hinder or help

- Pre-existing nonconforming use
- Or flexible enough to allow use
- Is a use variance spot zoning?
  - Not if the change is in best interest of neighborhood and supported by comprehensive plan
- Zoning should not be a hindrance

Real property taxes

Religious, charitable, educational, and government uses are generally off the tax rolls

- Partial exemptions possible for historic buildings; multiple dwellings; and “commercial, business or industrial property in an economic transformation area”
- Adaptive reuses for private or commercial purposes could generate new tax dollars
Adaptive reuse: church

- Church sharing
- Residential
- Commercial or municipal
- Food and drink
- Cultural
- Recreational and entertainment

Church sharing
Cooperative facilities use

- Multiple congregations share one building
  - Burden of additional expensive buildings avoided
  - Shared maintenance and utility expenses
- Room use, time, and priorities made jointly by committee or between church leaders
- For churches in decline, this is an opportunity to participate in a meaningful transition

Fraternity house
Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity house, RPI
former St. Francis de Sales, Troy

Marketplace
Limelight Marketplace, former Church of the Holy Communion, NYC

Web design/marketing
Overit Media, former St. Teresa of Avila, Albany

Screen printing
Wicked Smart Apparel, former St. Bridget’s, Watervliet
Brewery
The Church Brew Works former St. John the Baptist, Pittsburgh

Hotel
Hotel Skyler
Former Temple Adath Yeshurun; Salt City Theatre, Syracuse

Municipal offices
Green Island Power Authority and town offices
Former St. Mark’s Episcopal, Green Island

Bookstore
Selexyz Dominicanen, Netherlands

Curtain Call Theatre Inc.
Since 2000, Small former church in Latham, NY, is now producing great local talent performance & plays.

Recreation
Treasure Castle Playland, Former South Williamsport Methodist Church, PA
Boutique winery
South River Vineyard, Shakersville, OH, former Methodist Episcopal Church

Bakery
Blue Bonnet Bakery, Fort Worth, TX

Armories

Unity Center
Newburgh Armory Unity Center, Newburgh
- Formed by individuals and community organizations
- Programs aimed at inner city youth
- Focus on athletics, personal development, and business
- advancement to benefit residents

Brewery
Ravens Head Brewery, Cohoes, former Cohoes Armory
City welcomed them:
- Fits into existing zoning and neighborhood business plan
- Ample parking on site/on-street

Museum
NYS Military Museum, Saratoga, Former Saratoga Armory
- Capitalized on existing tourism traffic
- 10,000 artifacts from Revolutionary War to Desert Storm
- Largest collection of state battle flags
- Veterans Research Center
Arena
Albany Armory Sports & Convention Arena, Albany
Former Albany Armory

- Sports arena (roller derby, basketball, tennis tournaments)
- Concerts
- Conventions

Bed and breakfast
Amsterdam Castle B&B, Amsterdam, Former Amsterdam Armory

- Decommissioned in 1995, converted to 36,000 sq ft private home
- National Register of Historic Places
- Featured on HGTV "Re-zoned"

Depots

Library
Waterford Public Library, Waterford, former D & H Railroad depot

Off Track Betting
Cohoes, NY, former D & H Railroad depot

Nanotech hub
Former Albany Union Station, former Norstar Bankcorp, Albany
Not for profit foundation

Arcus Landmark Depot, MI
- Home to Arcus Foundation (human, civil and animal rights)
- Multi-function gathering space wintergarden
- Café and office space
- Revitalized long forgotten part of the city

Mills and factories

Luxury loft apartments
The Lofts at Harmony Mills, Former Harmony Mills, Cohoes

Live/work art studios
Art Space, former Buffalo Electric Vehicle Company

Former Water Supply City of Albany

The Albany Pump Station was completed in 1874, the entire structure being completed and put into service in 1895. It drew water from the Hudson River and pumped it under Clinton Avenue to Bleecker Reservoir.

The old Charles Street jail, Boston:

The building, which was built as a jail between 1849 and 1851, was converted into a luxury hotel through a five year $150 million renovation project.

Rooms at the LIBERTY HOTEL can be had for anywhere from $319 a night for the lowest-priced room to $5,500 for the presidential suite.

The property was bought by Massachusetts General Hospital, next door, which invited proposals for preserving the building's historical character. The old jail is intact. The hotel bar, Alibi, is built in the jail's former drunk tank.
The Linda, Albany, NY
Performing Arts Studio.
Former Fleet Bank, an Albany landmark
that had been abandoned and unused for
years. Once it had been determined that the
building was sound, a grant was obtained to
fund the venture.

Steamer No.10 Theatre, Inc,
Albany, NY
Former Fire House built in 1891 and used until 1988.
Theatre Group took ownership in 1989 and opened to
the public in 1991.

https://www.google.com/#q=the+linda+in+albany+ny

Tax credits

National Register of Historic Places
• Honor, NOT restriction
• Associated with important events or persons
• Places embodying characteristics of period, method, or “master”
• Likely to reveal history about a place

Federal Investment Tax Credit
• 20% of rehab of NR-listed income-producing buildings
• Subtracted from owners’ income taxes
• 5-year restriction for sale, alteration
• http://www.nysparks.com/shpo/tax-credit-programs/

NYS Credit, Commercial Buildings
• 20% credit on State taxes
• Eligible census tract (at or below state median income)
• Qualifying work
• Approved Federal Tax Credit Application

NYS Historic Barn Tax Credit
• Barns built or in agricultural service before 1936
• Income-producing
• Rehab can’t alter historic appearance
• Not for former barns converted to residences
Local Historic Preservation Regulations

- Individual buildings or districts
- Often also listed on National Register
- Protection of structure and historic detail

Certified Local Government Program

- Local legislation, separate historic district review commission with qualified members
- Muni/SHPO partnership, muni reports its activities to SHPO
- Technical services
- Reimbursement grants:
  - Training for commission members, public education
  - Public education
  - Surveys, NR nomination, historic structure reports, guidelines

Real Property Tax Law §444-a

- Muni can delay increased tax assessment on rehabbed historic properties
- Exempt increased value 100% first five years; decreasing 20% over second five
- For work approved by local historic district review boards

Easements, Transfer of Development

- Article 5-K, General Municipal Law: municipalities may purchase or receive façade easements
- Transfer of development rights for historic properties

Conclusion

Why is it important to care about old buildings?

What can adaptive reuse do for your community?

- Incite community revitalization and job creation
- Preserve community character
- Use existing infrastructure
- Use existing materials and craftsmanship that otherwise are difficult or cost prohibitive to reproduce

Resources

- New York State Office for Historic Preservation
  518-237-8643
- Preservation League of New York State
  www.preservenys.org
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
  www.preservationnation.org
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
  www.archp.gov/
- National Alliance of Preservation Commissions
  http://napc.uga.edu/index.htm
- Association for Preservation Technology
  http://www.aptne.org/
New York Department of State

(518) 473-3355  Training Unit
(518) 474-6740  Counsel's Office

Email:  localgov@dos.ny.gov
Website:  www.dos.ny.gov
          www.dos.ny.gov/lg/