WHITE ELEPHANTS

Repurposing former neighborhood gems

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

The 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

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

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

- 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, NY
Former D & H Railroad depot
Off Track Betting

Cohoes, NY
Former D & H Railroad depot

Nanotech hub

Albany, NY
Former Albany Union Station
Former Norstar Bankcorp

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

Live/work art studios
Art Space
Former Buffalo Vehicle Company

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
New York Department of State

(518) 473-3355  Training Unit
(800) 367-8488  Toll Free
Email: localgov@dos.ny.gov
Website: www.dos.ny.gov
www.dos.ny.gov/lg/

Bookstore

- Selexyz Dominicanen, Netherlands

Brewery

The Church Brew Works
former St. John the Baptist, Pittsburgh
Bakery

Blue Bonnet Bakery, Fort Worth, TX

Boutique winery

South River Vineyard, Shalersville, OH
Former Methodist Episcopal Church

Recreation

Treasure Castle Playland
Former South Williamsport Methodist Church, PA
# 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

## Church Location New Use

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<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>New Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis de Sales</td>
<td>Troy, NY</td>
<td>Phi Kappa Sigma Fraternity House</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Paul's</td>
<td>Troy, NY</td>
<td>Unity House Daycare Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macedon Presbyterian Church</td>
<td>Troy, NY</td>
<td>The Contemporary Artist Center</td>
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<td>St. Teresa of Avila</td>
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<td>St. John the Baptist</td>
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<td>Apostolic Pentecostal</td>
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<td>South Williamsport Methodist Church</td>
<td>South Williamsport</td>
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<td>Temple Adath Yehudah</td>
<td>Syracuse, NY</td>
<td>Entrepreneur Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion</td>
<td>New York City, NY</td>
<td>Light Hotel</td>
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WHEREAS, Wicked Smart, LLC, prospective owner of 700 5th Avenue, Watervliet, New York, has filed an application with the Zoning Board of Appeals of the City of Watervliet, New York requesting zoning board approval for a use variance to convert St. Brigid’s Church and Old School into a sportswear customization business; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to notice duly published in the official newspaper of the City of Watervliet, New York, a public hearing was conducted by this Board on April 13, 2011 at 7:00 PM in the Court Room, City Hall, Watervliet, New York, and

WHEREAS, at said public hearing, all those who desired to be heard were heard and their testimony recorded, and

WHEREAS, all testimony has been carefully reviewed and considered and the following pertinent facts considered:

1. The applicant is under contract to purchase the property pending all City of Watervliet Zoning Board and Planning Board approvals.

2. The subject premise is in an R-3 Residential District.

3. The neighborhood is primarily residential.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, by the Watervliet Zoning Board of Appeals that the SEQRA form was approved for said application stating there were no significant adverse environmental effects associated with proposed application.

Introduced by: Czarnecki
Moved by: Czarnecki
Seconded by: Such

Adopted by the following vote:
All in Favor - 6
Not In Favor – 0
Abstentions - 0

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the application as presented for the aforesaid variance from certain provisions of said Ordinance which are pertinent to the requested variances is hereby APPROVED with the following stipulations:

1. The existing roadway through the premises shall remain open at all times as a public accessway.

2. There will be no signage and the exterior will remain as it presently exists, subject to maintenance.

3. The storage of all materials on the premises shall comply with the NYS Fire Prevention and Building Code.
RESOLVED, that this Resolution is effective immediately and is herewith filed with the Secretary of the Board, and that a copy of the same is served with the notice of filing thereof upon the applicant and a copy filed with the Building Inspector.

Introduced by: Dugan
Moved by: Dugan
Seconded by: Gilchrist
All in Favor - 6
Not In Favor – 0
Abstentions 0