

REINCARNATION

THE ADAPTIVE REUSE OF CHURCHES IN POST-INDUSTRIAL AMERICA

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This piece discusses the interface between the functional, temporal, and social dimension of physical space as it relates to the post-industrial adaptive reuse of churches. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania there have been several attempts to convert cathedrals into concert halls, creative spaces, bars, and living space. These former places of worship speak for themselves through their fine building materials and carefully designed detail. Moreover, these spaces herald the overall marketing strategy for the city, and the rise of Richard Florida's "Creative Class" in hopes of a post-industrial revival. The interplay between the new and old uses of these spaces offers a glimpse into the role that planners and designers will play in the field to define this burgeoning modern practice.

In the mid-to-late 20th century, industrial U.S. cities such as Cleveland, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Buffalo, New York; and Detroit, Michigan spiraled into rapid decline. Massive out-migration due to the automation of manufacturing, offshoring of what little manufacturing was left, and ease of access to the suburbs strained local tax bases. In 2014 the *New York Times* examined this large planning issue writ small on the scale of the preservation and adaptive reuse of a single building type: the church. What should be done with the leftovers of magnanimous churchgoers in Rust Belt cities? The phenomenon regarding Pittsburgh churches can be observed at three scales: individual buildings, the city, and society in general. When observing the context of the phenomenon, we discover the essence of design as a permeating language in our human consciousness, melding to our present needs while retaining a certain historical milieu.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE REMNANTS OF STEEL CITY

It is important to recognize the many contributing factors from the past that led to the modern reuse of churches. Pittsburgh is located at the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers, which positioned the city for rapid industrial growth in the 19th century. By 1877, the regional steel factories produced three-quarters of the total U.S. output. The glass and iron industries also contributed to a robust middle-class local population, which peaked at 677,000 people in 1950 (Explore PA, n.d.).

However, the city, once teeming with soot-emitting stacks and a strong blue-collar

work force, encountered the same economic difficulties as other Rust Belt cities. After 1950 the U.S. landscape suffered a series of eviscerating changes due to factors such as urban renewal, federal highways, Title II mortgage insurance programs, and mass layoffs from deindustrialization. Thus the population of Pittsburgh began to shrink rapidly. Decreasing by more than half since 1950, the total population of Pittsburgh today is only 306,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

As a result, many churches were left scraping for money to stay afloat as their congregations shrank, leading them to follow the people to the urban fringes. This mass exodus from the city required the Diocese of Pittsburgh to invest in churches in the suburbs. The Diocese built ten Catholic churches after 1950 in North Hills, a large outer-ring suburb of the city (North Hills, n.d.). The investment was “a result of the migration of population from the city of Pittsburgh to the North Hills following World War II” (North Hills, n.d.).

Other factors led to the vacancies as well. One of the repurposed churches, the former St. Mary's Church and Priory, was slated for demolition to make way for Interstate 279 in the early 1970s. For the next 10 years, attendance waned. In 1982, the congregants of another planned demolition, St. Boniface, were able to change the route of the highway and save both church structures. St. John the Baptist's congregation dwindled, as did the revenue streams that weekly tithing provided.

In both the cases of St. Mary's and St. John the Baptist, the diocesan bishop in Pittsburgh issued a Decree of Suppression. This clause in the doctrine of the Catholic Church made the

reuse of these churches possible. According to Roman Catholic Canon Law, suppression of a parish causes the parish to cease to exist, after

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which the responsibilities to the congregation will be redistributed, and real property will be donated or given back to the original owners (Gray, 1983). The building, stripped of its sacred decor, can then be sold to new owners or developers. In recent years, creativity on the behalf of envelope-pushing developers has led to a radical adaptation to convert these churches for other uses. Thus far, Pittsburgh churches have been repurposed into concert halls, a creative commons, studio spaces, a hotel, and lofts.

OPULENCE

DESIGN AT THE INDIVIDUAL BUILDING SCALE

In most cases, churches presuppose mastery in architectural design. The typical large naves and soaring ceilings make for wonderful bones for adaptive reuse. The fine detailing of column capitals and gold-plated altars is timeless and ornate, and contrasts with modern design components. For these reasons the church sets a ripe stage for development, sometimes literally. Altar Bar, the former St. Elizabeth's

Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, is now a multi-level concert venue that hosts private events and live performances.

Developers and designers have capitalized on this residual beauty in different ways. The Priory Boutique Hotel and Grand Hall reside in what was St. Mary's Church, which resisted the encroachment of the highway system. Edward Graf, who bought the church, used a style of preservation for the elements of the former church so as to preserve the history of his family members who were baptized and married in the church ("The Priory Hotel," n.d.). Relics of the old church, such as the stained glass windows that pour in light, ensheathe the Grand Hall. A preserved organ is a sleeping giant on one end, while columns with golden capitals rise toward a blue dome that encircles guests.

The Church Brew Works, formerly St. John the Baptist Church, engaged a different strategy by repurposing infrastructure for alternate uses to create a Bavarian beer hall atmosphere. Its pews became benches for the long tables, and lanterns were repainted and hung along the center of the hall to illuminate the ceiling detail. Bricks from the former confessionals became a pedestal for an entry sign to welcome brewpub visitors. The church's blue walls, which formerly highlighted the altar, now draw attention to gleaming tanks of beer.

As Carmona, Tiesdell, Heath, and Oc explain in *Public Places - Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design*, the phenomenon of this adaptive reuse pattern is representative of the robust character of the church with respect to the temporal dimension of space (2010, p. 253). Robustness is the "ability to accommodate

change without significant change in the physical form." Once seen as a space that held static values for religious and spiritual purposes, the church adapts an identity that embodies this accommodated change without significant change in its physical form.

A MARKETING STRATEGY

THE RISE OF THE CREATIVE CLASS

The breathtaking beauty of adapted churches speaks to a larger movement in Pittsburgh in the 1990s. Pittsburgh, determined to make a new name for itself, invested in the industry of creativity. This emerged from the rise of bottom-up neighborhood

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organizations and community development initiatives that, drawing from coffers of local foundations, mobilized people around unique collective interests and identities. Richard Florida, researcher and scholar at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) from 1987 to 2005, documented this yearning for change. He coined the term "Creative Class" as an engine for revitalizing former industrial cities like Pittsburgh. He asserts that the Creative Class, comprised of "high bohemians," is young, vibrant, diverse, highly skilled, and educated.

The resulting culture then becomes a magnet for others of the like and, in turn, generates capital investment for economic development (Florida, 2002).

Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* outlines his theory that cities should focus on investment in attracting and retaining talent rather than other models of development, such as building arenas or conference centers to stimulate a local economy. Six years after he left CMU, in a blog piece from 2013 for his firm The Creative Group, Florida wrote that Pittsburgh was his "base case" for post-industrial regeneration through the Creative Class. He described his observations of the city that had once experienced unaligned investment goals from top-down elites and grassroots community groups:

"As the two began to accommodate one another and hew more closely together, sometimes in cooperation, other times in tension, a new synthesis emerged which combined the strength of the region's large institutions—its universities, hospitals, and research centers, its foundations and its arts and cultural groups—with the incredible energy of its neighborhoods and people. Ten years later, the synthesis and transformation is palpable" (Florida, 2013).

This new alignment of public, private, and community interests is evidenced in over 400 strategic documents between 1984 and 1994 alone, according to Piiparinen, Russell, and Post in "From Metal to Minds: Economic Restructuring in the Rust Belt" (2015, p. 9). The collective effort became focused on investment in the education and knowledge creation cluster, including

people employed at universities and colleges, research organizations, training programs, education support services, and professional organizations. The number employed in this sector grew by 24,000 jobs, or 61 percent, between 1998 and 2012, according to the U.S. Cluster Mapping Project (Piiparinen, 2015, p. 11). Also, its location quotient, a measure of the proportion of jobs in a local industry within the local economy compared to the proportion of jobs in that industry nationwide, ranks third in the country for metropolitan areas specializing in the sector (Piiparinen, 2015, p. 10).

The citywide investment in knowledge-based assets, and the dwindling congregations in Pittsburgh churches were overlapping phenomena in the 1980s and 90s. As Carmona et al. also state, obsolescence of space is rarely absolute, and is more likely economically or relatively obsolete (2010, p. 248). The churches in Pittsburgh were obsolete "with regard to the cost of alternative opportunities, which include competition from other buildings and areas, the cost of alternative development on the site, and the cost of development on an alternative site" (Carmona, 2010, p. 248). The reuse of churches is a visible representation of the shift in Pittsburgh's economic development strategies in the post-industrial age. As an entire industry shifted into obsolescence, so did the use of urban churches as evidenced by the low numbers of parishioners. However, the closing doors of churches provided a window of opportunity for the "high bohemian" population.

Florida's burgeoning Creative Class saw opportunity where others saw obsolescence. Not only were the churches located in desirable urban locations, they also had desirable features that the new market valued. For the Creative Class, these churches were ideal skeletons for

creative development options that diverged from the "level site" ideal popularized by Le Corbusier in his seminal work *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning* (1929). Thus adaptive reuse of Pittsburgh churches falls under the "morphological-conservationist paradigm," in which the extent of preservation is high along with an also high acceptance of change (Carmona et al., 2010, p. 248). The adaptation and preservation of the churches was artistically delivered, such that it softens the initial visceral reaction to using a church for any other use than worship. Preserving the historic aspects of the church as much as possible retained a memory infrastructure, or the tangible record of history that space can provide.

SOCIETAL CHANGE

THE TEMPORAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE PHENOMENON

The observer must look to how the temporal dimension of space has led to this phenomenon. The temporal dimension of space refers to the evidence of time made manifest in the physical form of the city, according to urban planning and design theorist Kevin Lynch (1972, p. 65). The reuse of these churches does not reflect an egregious act, but rather an effective reuse for spaces that would otherwise be economically obsolete. Historical benevolence and almsgiving were reasons that massive churches survived so long in otherwise prime lots for real estate development. The social needs and interactions of the people have changed to necessitate other forms of interaction in these creative spaces, especially in cities like Pittsburgh where the economic lifeblood (steel) was essentially siphoned from the city. Now, in a post-industrial age, commerce depends on creativity.

However, in other cases the temporal dimension of space could be exploited to represent a shift in societal views of religious practice. For instance, a Catholic church-turned-bar, Altar Bar, in Pittsburgh, is adorned with cocktail waitresses wearing exceedingly short Catholic schoolgirl skirts. This creates a play on the past functional dimension of this space in which the developer can generate new economic value by shocking deviation from social norms. In this business model, the developer imbibes from a secularist chalice.

Repurposing churches is vaguely representative of the organicist perspective of the temporal dimension of space. The organicist perspective refers to the “dynamic and adaptive process in that systems acquire and maintain structure and that no external agency controls” (Carmona et al., 2010, p. 258). Jane Jacobs and other contemporary planning greats described the natural growth and complex systems within cities that defy certainty of outcomes based on a set of inputs. A pillar of the organicist perspective is incremental change, which resembles the small-scale minutia of evolutionary phenomena. Incremental change occurs when various authors or agents impact the cumulative outcome but do not have control over it (Carmona et al., 2010, p. 259). The city is not the result of a single actor or designer, but is a living organism that responds incrementally to the environment.

An article from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* emphasized the organic process of transitioning churches between the clergy and developers that ensures that the hollow church is not ignobly or immorally used. After the Decree of Suppression, former congregation members were conditioned to use the space

after the church was decommissioned and all sacred objects were removed from the space. In fact, the St. Ann Catholic Church in Millvale transitioned from church to live recording studio to concert venue. The owner, Mike Speranzo, said, “It was an organic transition to live music, a matter of survival” (Jones, 2015). Such is the case for St. John the Baptist, now Church Brew Works. This clever transition hails to the tradition of Trappist monks from Bavaria, known for initiating brewing beer in mass consumption.

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However, this organic change can only occur following decisions to develop churches for other uses that are relevant to the mechanist perspective of urban development. According to Carmona et al., the mechanist approach to city planning and design assumes that the city is knowable and, therefore, controllable by the human hand. From this perspective, the market is a static mechanism for resource allocation. This city-as-machine perspective draws from the 20th-century influences of modernism and modernization (Carmona et al., 2010, p. 258). In Pittsburgh one could argue that the developers took a mechanist outlook when diverging from the accepted use of the church as a space for worship. For example, the spatial use shifts

from the past traditional one-way sermon to a use that promulgates dialogue. Thus, many of these uses are diametrically opposed to the structure and form of religiously moderated behavior. They favor creative expression and liberation, which are instigated by the avant-garde visions of the redevelopers themselves.

The adaptive reuse of individual churches in Pittsburgh speaks to the incremental change that contributes overall to the large-scale outcome of a city brimming with creativity. While the divergent decisions to repurpose churches at a singular building scale are clearly more in line with the mechanist perspective, the ways in which these spaces evolved into their future uses and the urban fabric overall mirror the organicist perspective. Through incremental change in both the buildings themselves and throughout Pittsburgh, these churches have contributed to the growth of the city as a nucleus of knowledge and creativity.

CHURCH STRUCTURES

DESIGNING A TEMPLATE FOR ADAPTIVE REUSE

The church structures described did not reach the end of their natural life as in a prototypical adaptive reuse project. However, the spaces had reached the end of their natural social life, and sought reincarnation that would bring new

life to the hallowed (and hollow) halls. While some seek to continue their use by adapting them into residential space, other spaces are adapted for creative expression, and still others are for pure entertainment purposes, such as concerts or socializing. What social sensitivities should planners have in small-scale projects such as adaptive reuse of churches, as well as larger-scale adaptive reuse of entire districts and neighborhoods? All adaptive reuse involves some sort of historical attachments within the social dimension of space that must be considered before embarking on these endeavors.

This essay does not suggest that repurposing churches is an unwanted or immoral practice, but rather explores the manner in which their temporal dimension is used to give reverence to the past and re-envisioned future. Regardless, creativity in redevelopment strategies has aimed to overcome the economic obsolescence of churches and attempted, in some instances, to transition in a more organic manner than others. Planners, developers, and architects are in the business of determining the social bounds that can or should be pushed in the wake of innovative practices. In the case of post-steel Pittsburgh, a social outing is graced by the angelic cacophony of "Prost!" and spirits flow, while the holy spirits of the past float amongst the rafters. ■

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