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Adaptive Reuses for White Elephants

Repurposing former neighborhood gems

A Division of New York Department of State

2

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.



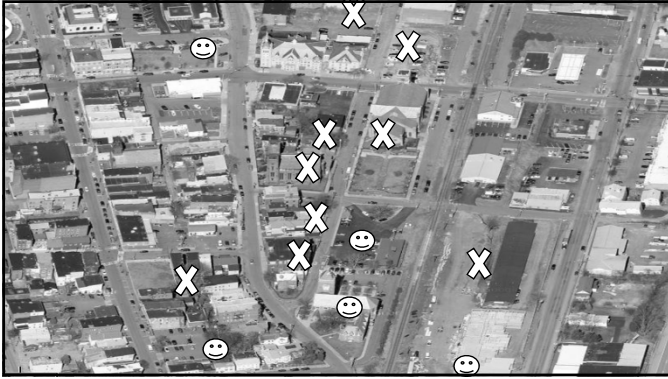
3

Are you herding white elephants?

Chances are your community has at least one white elephant!

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





5

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

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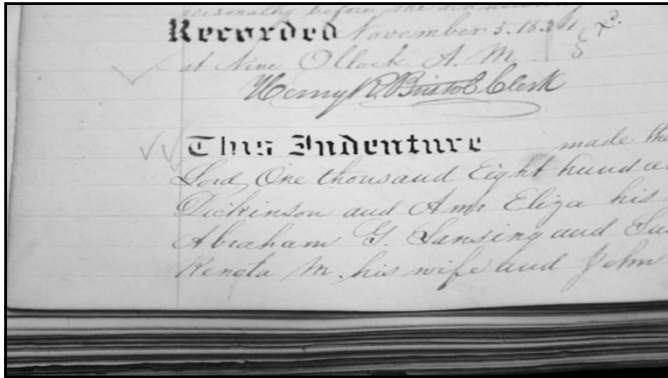
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Churches are special cases

- 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

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8

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






9

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



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



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, 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



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



34

Tax credits



35

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







36

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

37



- 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

38

- 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
 - 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: munis 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	http://nysparks.com/shpo/
Preservation League of New York State	www.preservenys.org
National Trust for Historic Preservation	www.preservationnation.org
Advisory Council on Historic Preservation	www.achp.gov/
National Alliance of Preservation Commissions	http://napc.uga.edu/index.htm
Association for Preservation Technology	http://www.aptnet.org/



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