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Turning White Elephants Into White Knights

Very often, abandoned large historic buildings are seen as a blight in the community. Vacant, boarded-up, or otherwise presenting a derelict presence in a neighborhood, they often become prime candidates for demolition. This self-defeating action is sometimes viewed as the catalyst to bring revitalization. Such thinking belies the fact that such resources, adaptively reused and sensitively treated through the federal historic Preservation Tax Incentives program, can have the opposite effect on a neighborhood.

Developers, owners, financial institutions, and neighborhood groups are sometimes unaware of the existence of the Preservation Tax Incentives program, how it works, and the procedures for applying for the credits. Demolition, then, may appear to be the only solution to them. The tax credits can often be the “sweetener” in the deal that makes the project pencil-out and become economically feasible.

The most difficult problem is finding a new use for these buildings. The first of the *Secretary's Standards* states that a new use should require minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building. Identifying those features is the first step in determining what kind of activity can cause the least amount of change. Adapting a large house to small offices, such as for lawyers or designers, can provide agreeable results because there is a strong compatibility in the activities. However, larger buildings such as schools, lodges, train stations, or factories can present considerable challenges.

The former Spokane Main Public Library, Spokane, Washington, was rehabilitated into the Integrus Architectural offices. Photo courtesy NPS.



A brief consideration of recent tax projects in some western states demonstrates clearly that larger buildings can often return to life and in the process, allow the community to enjoy a historic resource as a continuing presence in a neighborhood.

The former Main Public Library occupies a unique site at the edge of downtown Spokane, Washington in the Riverside Avenue Historic District. Because of the confluence of several streets, it is the single occupant of an unusually shaped lot, giving it a marked visual presence in the community. In 1962, the building changed use from a library and became the Intercollegiate School of Nursing through the late 1970s, when the school closed. Despite its prominent location, it remained a tarnished presence until 1992, when a local architectural firm saw the building's potential and submitted plans for the adaptive re-use as its offices.

The library building is part of a thematic district of Carnegie libraries in the State of Washington. It was built in 1904 from the designs of the local firm of Preusse and Zittel. The building is a good example of the Classic Revival Style, popularized by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago. The grey brick building is most notable for its imposing two-story pedimented porch with terra cotta Corinthian columns, large windows, and central two-story skylit atrium. Large reading rooms with decorative brick fireplaces and wide-arched openings flank the atrium space on the first floor. There were other notable details on the interior including a patterned tile floor, finely detailed metal stair railings, and two tiers of free-standing Tuscan columns supporting the second floor walkway and skylight.

There were obstacles to the change which needed to be solved to accommodate the new use. The large open spaces of the reading rooms with wide arched openings, combined with smaller back-office administrative spaces offered a chal-

lenge for any adaptive re-use.

Some changes had occurred when the building was used as a nursing school, but most of the interior was intact, if a bit deteriorated. And lastly, the building was not accessible.

A local architectural firm selected the building because of its prominent central location and the support from the community for its preservation. The large reading rooms were ideal for the large open spaces needed for drafting and designing. Clear glazing was added in the arched

The former Lipman Wolfe and Company building, Portland, Oregon, is now the Kimco Company's 5th Avenue Suites Hotel. Photo courtesy Heritage Investment Company.



Wolfe and Company and its original owner, Adolphe Wolfe. Wolfe was important in the development of retailing in Portland's commercial history. It is also significant for its architecture as an example of the work of the Portland firm of Doyle and Patterson.

Constructed in 1910, the exterior was relatively intact, although the original decorative marquees had been lost in previous alterations. Some of the large showcase windows had been reduced in size and others, on the second floor, completely infilled. Some of the terra cotta lion head

openings to provide open office areas shielded from the atrium entrance noises. There was still a need for smaller offices for the principals in the firm. These were inserted at one end of the reading room opposite the fireplace. Less than full height partitions allowed the sense of space to be retained while providing the sound privacy needed. The smaller back-office areas, with minor alterations, were able to be adapted for additional private offices. The architects also took great care to minimize the impact of installing new HVAC by concealing it, particularly in the former reading rooms and other public spaces.

Disabled access was provided at a near-grade entrance immediately adjacent to the parking lot. Because of its proximity to the parking lot, this entrance is the preferred entrance. With grading, removal of a few steps, retention and repair of a stone retaining wall, the entrance could accommodate wheelchair access. This entrance also provided access to an existing elevator which was upgraded and now provides access to all floors.

The library building has been returned to service. Two other buildings across the street have also been rehabilitated since this project was completed. One of the buildings is an apartment building, the other a commercial building. Both were rehabilitated using the tax credits. This "spillover" effect of one rehabilitation project is often the result of such projects so that this modest Spokane neighborhood is coming back to life.

In Portland, Oregon, the Lipman Wolfe and Company Department Store building had been a white elephant in the downtown since 1980 when the company ceased operations. Its 10-story classically-detailed white terra cotta exterior is most notable but its re-use was uncertain. The building is individually listed in the National Register for the significance of its association with the Lipman

bosses had been lost from the cornice and other areas had damage. The Chicago-style windows, edged with spiral moldings and paneled spandrels, were in fairly good shape. Wreaths, egg and dart moldings, water leaf moldings, and meander frets enriched the monochromatic color scheme. Insensitive first floor canopies hid other details.

On the interior, the building had been repeatedly remodeled so that little historic fabric remained. First floor columns with very simple plaster capitals and a staircase with decorative metal railings and marble wainscot were the only remaining features of any significance. The upper floors were devoid of character-defining features often associated with department stores, such as restaurants, meeting rooms, and offices.

For these reasons, the adaptive re-use for hotel, restaurant, and commercial use did not present such formidable problems to the new owner, a San Francisco-based hotel chain, which acquired the building in 1995. First floor commercial uses could be easily established with new entries and reopening of the partially blocked windows. Other exterior work included the restoration of the missing terra cotta decorative details such as the lions heads. Two new canopies to mark the new hotel and restaurant uses were added along with signage to mark the commercial shops.

Because of the large, relatively unobstructed floor plate configuration, the insertion of hotel room suites could be accomplished without impacting historic features. Room suites were placed along the three sides of the building with windows. The large windows were ideal in creating the rooms because of the commanding views of downtown Portland. Meeting and conference rooms were placed in the center core of the plate. Emergency exit stairs, elevators, and other services not requiring natural light and ventilation were

The former Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church, Portland, Oregon, was transformed into the Mission Theater and Pub. Photo courtesy Heritage Investment Company.



located along the blank wall abutting an adjacent building. The hotel entrance and lobby were also placed along this wall on the first floor and tie into the original underground parking access.

One of the constraints was aligning the new walls of the rooms with the window configuration. All walls were able to be placed against vertical dividers or recessed away from the vertical muntins to minimize any visual impact. The project, which was just recently completed, has returned a major building in the heart of a thriving downtown to a viable new use.

In another section of Portland, a former church, the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church, presented another kind of preservation problem for the community. The con-

gregation had departed the church in 1953. The building was then used by the Longshoremen's Union beginning in 1954. The building sat vacant for some time until 1987 when the new owner found that the community could support a live entertainment venue.

The building is individually listed in the National Register for its association and importance to the large Swedish community in Portland, which was 2% of the total population in 1920. This rise in the immigrant Swedish population had prompted the move of the congregation from two previous sites until 1912 when the church was built. Its proximity to the Nob Hill residential district was attributed to the

need to be supportive of the numerous single women who attended the church. They walked or took public transport to the church from their jobs as maids and governesses in the nearby residential neighborhood.

Although the designer is unknown, the two-and-a-half-story red brick building has minimal architectural features suggesting an ecclesiastical use. It has a very solid appearance, possibly due to the congregation's thinking that it could eventually be sold as a warehouse should such a need arise in the future. The main entrance is marked by a raked machicolated pediment. On the west elevation, simple pilaster strips separate three segmental brick wall arches which enframe two tiers of windows. The other elevations are minimally detailed. The Union had removed the crosses from the parapets when it used the building.

The two-story interior is also simply detailed and had been modified when used by the Union. At that time, the first floor pews were removed and the wood floor was surfaced with linoleum tile. However, the balcony with its decorative fascia apron remained as did some of the theater style seats.

The rehabilitation work entailed the repainting and repair of the windows and doors, adding an entrance canopy, and signage. The single panel metal entry doors were replaced with paneled wood doors similar to those on

The interior of the former Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church, Portland, Oregon, now the Mission Theater and Pub, illustrates the adaptation of the building to a new use. Photo courtesy Heritage Investment Company.





The former Twin Falls Milling and Elevator Company Warehouse, now the Old Mill Building Brew Pub in Twin Falls, Idaho, was rehabilitated while providing a new disabled access ramp. The silos to the right of the picture are separate structures and were not part of the tax credit project. Photo courtesy NPS.

the interior. The primary change on the interior was the addition of a railing along the balcony to raise the height to meet code. The linoleum was covered with carpeting and service bars were added to the rear of both the first floor and balcony.

As a result of these adaptive re-uses through the tax credit program, Portland has seen the return of two very different resources. Although differing in scale and original uses, the buildings are once again giving the citizens an opportunity to experience the history of their community in a different way.

In Twin Falls, Idaho, there was an even more challenging resource, the Twin Falls Milling and Elevator Company Warehouse. It was constructed in 1914 and is the last remaining structure associated with the period when irrigation first made farming possible in this part of Idaho and caused the town to be established. The building was part of a larger complex of structures and silos constructed to process wheat and store flour. The company produced a variety of types of flours marketed throughout world, notably Duncan Hines cake flour. By 1968, most of the milling operations had ceased and by 1992, all but the warehouse and six silos had been razed. This building then remained as one of the last vestiges of the original settlement history of the community and was individually listed in the National Register for this significance.

Although constructed for an agricultural/ industrial purpose, the building is not without architectural interest. Apart from its sheer size, the buff colored brick building's main elevation features a stepped cornice with corbeled banding and narrow pilaster strips. The three five-paneled double doors with transoms and segmentally arched single and double-hung windows are arranged in a symmetrical pattern. The other elevations are simi-

larly detailed in a very simple manner. The brick had been painted in some areas and showed signs of weathering.

On the interior, the walls were exposed brick with substantial unpainted wood columns and joists. The wood floors were damaged in some areas and showed the former locations of milling equipment, some of which remained, including an open elevator. The building was structurally sound and in 1995 the new owner saw the potential for adapting it to a new commercial use as a brew pub and art gallery.

The exterior brick was gently cleaned and repointed. The former concrete loading dock was repaired and a new industrial type railing was added. An extension of the loading dock along a side elevation immediately adjacent to the parking area easily accommodated disabled access. Landscaping was kept to a minimum to enhance the industrial character.

The large open interior spaces were ideal for installing the brewing equipment and allowed for the industrial look to become a part of the interior decoration. Two new doors added to the rear wall allowed for access to new outdoor seating. A simply-detailed stone fireplace was added but clearly reads as new construction. The rafters were left exposed, the floors were sanded and sealed and the brick walls were cleaned. An exposed ventilation system and track lighting were added along with a new bar area. Simple wall-mounted glass light fixtures enhance the industrial look of the interior finishes. The art gallery space received the same treatment as the brew pub areas.

The project was strongly supported by the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. The Twin Falls location had been heavily impacted by the demolitions and the new use now adds a spark of life to an area of the city that appeared to have a very bleak future. The success of this adaptive re-use holds every possibility of spawning further beneficial changes at that location.

These tax credit projects show that changes in use for large historic buildings are possible and providing adaptive new uses can be part of successful economic development. This development can often extend beyond the historic building and provide the impetus for other projects so that a city can see an increase in economic activity that assists in the revitalization of entire neighborhoods. The Rehabilitation Tax Credit program can be a vital tool in making these kinds of projects happen.

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