

Kristen Kelly

Profound & Profane Places: The Adaptive Reuse of Sacred Spaces in Philadelphia

AUTHOR BIO: Kristen Kelly is a recent graduate from the University of Pennsylvania's Urban Studies Program. Her work on the adaptive reuse of sacred spaces was part of her thesis, which earned her Honors in the major.

ABSTRACT

Purpose built churches from the late 19th and early 20th century are typical neighborhood landmarks and can be seen throughout Philadelphia. In addition to the massive architectural value that these buildings hold, they capture significant cultural and religious heritage for the city and its residents. Though many churches today are facing difficulties maintaining properties, new forms of use have emerged which bring new life into sacred spaces. This research examines the role of adaptive reuse in providing opportunities for the preservation of historic church buildings. It also investigates the successes and failures of two recent adaptive reuse projects in Philadelphia of sacred spaces originally designed by Frank Furness. This research seeks to illustrate the value purpose built churches hold for their communities, and demonstrate the renewed relevance they possess when provided with new uses.

INTRODUCTION

Philadelphia's sacred spaces are troubled by dwindling congregations and deferred maintenance, and some are turning to adaptive reuse as a method of preservation. For my research, I chose to examine adaptive reuse and preservation of church buildings. Though Philadelphia remains a city that is rich in cultural and religious histories, sacred spaces are often inadequately addressed under current preservation policies. This paper will examine existing scholarship concerning sacred space adaptation and Philadelphia policy and practice, and include two case studies of adaptive reuse sacred space projects that have recently occurred in the city.

In a 2011 inventory, 748 historic religious buildings were identified in Philadelphia. This inventory is not intended to be comprehensive, and though it is incomplete and now several years old, it can still be valuable for judging meaningful opportunities within the city for adaptive reuse. Here, the term "historic religious" refers to buildings that were constructed before 1960 with explicit religious purposes. Of these buildings, 51 properties were listed as closed, vacant, or for sale. Another 33 were listed as having been adapted for non-religious use (Lester, 12). The number of vacant and for sale properties, alongside the number of successful non-religious adaptive uses, indicates the possibility of future adaptive reuse projects in the city. Though only 2 properties were listed in this inventory as being slated for demolition, it is likely that more buildings fall under this category or are significantly at risk.

It must be acknowledged upfront that not every church can or even should be preserved. The number of at-risk historic sacred spaces far outnumbers the market demand for adaptively reused sites. When considering neighborhood context and the feasibility of intervention on different buildings, far fewer sites may pose as desirable locations for “rescue”. With that in mind, the conclusions drawn from these two sites may be used not only to assist in future developments, but to also help determine which properties are most realistic as beneficiaries of intervention, and which would be unlikely to escape demolition.

Of the 33 church buildings that had received some form of adaptive reuse treatment, there were several common building use types that emerged. These included hospital and health services, preschool/childhood centers, community centers, residential buildings (including condos and apartments), and senior living (Lester, 16). Other reports have highlighted the possibility for adaptively reusing church buildings for other arts and culture uses. Other forms of adaptive reuse, such as residential development for low-income families and senior living, may have additional financial incentives associated with them for developers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Adaptive reuse manifests itself in different forms for different churches – some are focused on serving residential, commercial, or community purposes, while other

projects may combine multiple uses into a single project. Stakeholders include the congregations themselves, historic preservation advocates who are interested in preserving the physical spaces these congregations occupy, and developers or community residents, who may or may not have been previously affiliated with the religious organization (Kiley, 33).

Shrinking congregations across the country have left many churches unable to maintain large scale buildings. Trends in suburbanization have also contributed to demographic differences between urban and suburban practitioners – frequently, city churches serve higher immigrant or minority population with lower socioeconomic status than their suburban counterparts (Cohen and Jaeger, 14; Kiley, 20). Some congregations consolidate several parishes in order to combat low attendance and high maintenance costs, while others attempt to maintain ownership and look into space sharing options (Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, 2). Many choose to sell their property and move into venues with less substantial required maintenance, leaving developers to think of new uses for the buildings.

What does this mean for adaptive reuse of churches? In some cases, church congregations choose to maintain ownership of their property, while finding other tenants with whom they can to share their space. For these multi-use spaces, we see many congregations gravitating towards partners that share in some kind of social or service mission (Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, 2). Churches that

convert to multiuse spaces may be more amenable to considering groups whose missions align with existing church programming. Other congregational resources, such as active church volunteers, staff, and financial contributions to programming, are all major benefits that can be considered when outside organizations consider approaching churches for space (Cohen and Jaeger, 17).

In other cases, churches may depart from the building and leave adaptive reuse to developers. This option may be more common, as some congregations lack the money necessary to maintain ownership. Congregants may still be able to shape eventual outcomes, through selecting between multiple buyers, and finding proposals that serve economic and social purposes. Other times, though a church no longer occupies the building, community residents may still associate the space with a community purpose, and be more likely to advocate that developers retain some part of this social mission in their repurposing (Kiley, 53).

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Historic preservation is commended for its ability to help reduce urban sprawl by utilizing existing structures in meaningful ways, and for informing the public about direct connections they have to the past through their urban experience (Jerome, 5).

Preservation also provides historic continuity by recognizing a diverse history of architectural trends and cultural monuments (Lyon, 80). Many preservationists view churches as community cornerstones, which contribute to the character of a

neighborhood and help improve quality of life for residents through the direct services that churches may provide. These buildings provide a link to city history by noting religious diversity and cultural history, and communicating the works of great local architects (Cohen and Jaeger, 21).

One critique of preservation is that conventional historic preservation has often neglected the voices of communities of color when considering the urban fabric. The marginalization of these groups occurs when sites representing historically white narratives are selected in favor of (or in a disproportionate representation to) sites that have historical importance to minority groups. Today, many are taking steps to include more diverse narratives in the conversation about historic preservation (Milligan, 106). An example of this broadening definition includes the movement towards a more inclusive definition held by the National Register through Ethnic Heritage criterion – which allows historic African American congregations to be eligible for recognition despite substantive material alterations to church buildings (Cooperman, 5).

There can be barriers to gaining the finances necessary to successfully rehabilitating a church. Observations of churches at varying stages of disrepair have also allowed preservation advocates to understand how pressing the need for immediate action can be. For historic churches with dwindling congregations, deferring maintenance for building upkeep can be a death sentence – many churches will deal with water damage and compromised roof integrity, if regular upkeep is not provided.

While these kinds of damages can entail expensive repairs, and will take up significant amounts of a congregation's annual budget, occupants and owners often fail to take preventative measures, and instead wait until a crisis occurs before conducting repairs (Kiley, 22; Cohen and Jaeger, 32).

There is a growing body of discourse relating to the economics of preservation. In addition to examining the possibilities of accessing tax credits for rehabilitation purposes, various scholars have posed that preservation initiatives may provide both substantial economic benefits and costs to the local economy. Donovan Rypkema, the principal of PlaceEconomics, a real estate and economic development consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., explored some of the factors associated with the economics of preservation and the limitations that exist in quantifying the economic impacts of historic preservation initiatives in a 2011 research report, supported by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. Rypkema argues for the acknowledgement of a greater number of dimensions of preservation and economic impact – while noting that many of the difficulties associated with the quantification of economic impact are rooted in the lack of cohesive definition for the overall field of historic preservation.

Scholars are at a point where they are concerned both by the tangible and non-tangible aspects of preservation. Non-tangible values, such as physical beauty and associations that a structure has to a historic figure or movement, can translate to tangible values: preservation work can energize tourism industries, and utilizing

heritage infrastructure can help spaces adapt to new environmental conditions.

Ultimately, these values are not separated or in opposition to one another. Social values, heritage values, ecological values, and economic values are deeply tied to one another and their successes are dependent on the involvement of many stakeholders. The dependence on the public and participation on all levels for the long-term success of preservation projects is perhaps best described by Jones and Mean, whose study broadly focused on the resiliency of different places using various examples of adaptation of heritage infrastructure (Jones and Mean, 42). Their findings concluded with the assertions that preservation work can have multiple layers of benefits to communities, and that successful heritage projects required diverse communities to come together in the acknowledgement of heritage values.

Philadelphia:

Philadelphia is a city with a history of religious diversity. Started as William Penn's Holy Experiment, it is steeped in cultural and religious markers of its faith based origins. An estimated 700 older meeting houses, churches, and synagogues remain open in the city, and provide services and programs to their communities. This contribution was estimated to be close to \$100 million annually (Cohen and Jaeger, 18).

In Philadelphia, there are two methods of gaining official historic recognition: through listing on the Philadelphia Register, and the National Register. The National Register and local Philadelphia Register differ in several ways in their approaches to

historic recognition. The National Register acknowledges aspects such as the integrity of a location, design, setting, materials used, workmanship, and the feeling and association of a building to determine the “ability of a property to convey its significance” (Cooperman, 4). Other criteria determining the significance of a building include the relationship that the building may have to broad patterns of national history, specific historic individuals, or the ability of a building to represent distinctive characteristics of an architectural period (Cooperman, 3). These requirements form an “integrity test”, which can be used to determine the value of the property by the National Park Service. The City of Philadelphia requirements for historic designation do not require that all buildings meet the same standard for the “integrity test” (Cooperman, 5). This can lead to differences in the types and numbers of buildings that are listed on the Philadelphia Register and the National Register.

DATA

In Philadelphia, value is ascribed to sacred spaces in three distinct ways: the historical, social, and physical components of the church or church complex. The historic significance can be examined by linking the building to the architect or architectural firm that played a role in its design and construction, considering the history of the religious denomination that owned the property, or by measuring the impact of the congregation to the community it was situated in.

Peter Woodall, the Co-Editor of the Hidden City Daily through Hidden City Philadelphia, lamented the differing standards between the public perception of historic value and the technical definitions (Woodall Interview). Because churches are not unique resources, they tend to convey a similar historic narrative to the public about their origins and the transitions they have experienced. Because they are not unique in this way, Woodall argues that it may actually be more difficult to get official recognition from the city for these buildings.

Another measurement of value comes from the social services that a church can provide to its neighborhood. Community residents learn to associate the physical spaces with the social goods that they provide. Several interviewees noted that churches had successfully maintained their physical spaces by opening up their facilities to other groups. Many congregations also saw this form of work as a means of furthering their religious mission of supporting their communities and fostering local programming. In some cases, rent in these spaces were kept intentionally low to assist fledgling organizations.

Aside from the church from the social or historical functions that it serves, church buildings are remarkably durable. The construction of these buildings involved high quality materials, which have allowed these churches to remain standing for over a century. Sam Kuntz works with PennPraxis, which aims to extend collaboration between Penn's School of Design and the City of Philadelphia. When speaking about

churches, she mentioned how these buildings continue to function as community cornerstones because of their value as structurally sturdy resources. Others cited the ability of these church buildings to act as local landmarks and visual indicators of their neighborhoods (Kuntz Interview). Even without understanding a church structure in an academic context, pedestrians can appreciate how churches contribute to a sense of place unique to Philadelphia (Wunsch Interview). Though it may not be a particular rigorous method of attributing value, the perception exists that a church on the streetscape makes for a more complete urban experience.

For these three reasons, even churches falling into disrepair, can through minor interventions and regular upkeep last for decades, or centuries. Finding ways to maximize their lifespan will allow these places to continue to function with historic, social, and physical relevancy to their communities and city long into the future.

Space Sharing and Adaptive Reuse Options

One option for the rescue of church buildings comes in the form of space sharing. This may involve altering the space to better accommodate these groups, or simply sharing the same space between involved organizations – allowing the congregation to continue to use worship space during the weekend, and hosting other uses throughout the week. This requires few physical changes to the buildings, but requires congregations to find groups willing to work within the existing church space. Calvary

Center for Culture and Community located at the corner of 48th Street and Baltimore Avenue is often highlighted as a prime example of this form of space sharing.

Adaptive reuse is another tactic to give church buildings new life. For churches in Philadelphia, adaptive reuse tends to gravitate towards two main uses: educational services, and residential units. There are several reasons why these trends in adaptive reuse exist: Sunday school spaces lend themselves to classrooms for new educational use, church offices can be repurposed as administrative office spaces, and multipurpose event halls can be easily be converted to secular spaces. Churches may require more substantial physical alterations in order to accommodate apartments or condominiums. For this reason, immediate plans after acquisition of a church building may involve non-residential development in order to stabilize the property, and shift towards residential purposes when the market allows. In most cases, the greatest danger for the long-term safety of these buildings is vacancy, as regular usage of the building insures a certain amount of required regular maintenance will take place and allow for further development to take place later on.

Many adaptive reuse projects today attempt to respect a building's original character, though this has not always the case. Earlier reuse projects had fewer restrictions placed on them, and were therefore able to make more structural changes to the exterior of the buildings, while more modern reuse projects continue to read directly as a former church (Lester Interview). While modern projects may not pursue historic

preservation incentives, developers may be more inclined to preserve elements of the building such as the façade. This kind of partial preservation continues to contribute a historic element to the streetscape, even while serving an entirely different purpose.

Historic Recognition

Acknowledgement of historic status through the National or Local Registers of Historic Places can make a building eligible for historic tax credits from the city, state, or federal government. At the same time, local listing can limit what developers are able to do with their properties. The nomination process itself also entails additional work, and often requires a specialized background in architecture or preservation in order to complete. Pursuing recognition can also prolong different aspects of the development process.

Some developers see the process of historic recognition as something which creates more work in the short term, and prevents long term flexibility without providing tangible benefits or adequate compensation. Ken Weinstein, a local developer who owns four adapted church properties, weighed the value of going onto the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, stating that pursuing acknowledgement on the register is only advantageous when a project requires historic tax credits. Pursuing this option is only worthwhile if asking for 3-4 million dollars or more (Weinstein Interview). Guy Laren, another developer in Philadelphia who has worked on two

historic church properties, tends to avoid official designation because of the added difficulties it brings to the development process. Because of the limitations and added surveillance that official designation and historic tax credits entail, Laren prefers to save the time and money by avoiding the historic register (Laren Interview).

While many developers choose to ignore the designation process, Aaron Wunsch argues that the widespread perception of the Historical Commission as Machiavellian enforcers of preservation guidelines can be rooted in misinformation. He believes that there are fewer negative consequences to preservation than most developers seem to believe (Wunsch Interview).

Case Studies:

The adaptive reuse of churches can take many forms but I chose to look at two examples of church to school conversion, as I believe educational uses hold unique possibilities for community engagement.

I found two developers that recently acquired church properties and paired with community programs to provide educational services. These projects had a number of similarities: both churches were designed by Frank Furness's firm (albeit in different iterations of his practice), and had begun to deteriorate after prolonged neglect. The two buildings were both at risk of collapse or total demolition, and had started to become a source of blight in their respective neighborhoods. There were also similarities in the

intended future uses. Each was an independent educational service with community-oriented foci and pedagogical approaches emphasizing holistic development. The first of these two centers offers preschool education, while the second offers K-8 education. Each program sought new spaces that would allow for continued expansion, and had left sites at other churches before seeking out new partnerships. There were also some significant differences in how the projects were addressed: one was recognized on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, the other was not. One chose to work on a standard project timeline, while the other pursued historic preservation tax credits and doubled that timeline. One had a collaborative and positive relationship with its community partner, while the other has suffered from general opacity between the developer and school.

The similarities between the projects and the differences in their execution provide valuable insight into the successes and failures of adaptive reuse. Today, both education centers are fully operational within their respective buildings. While on a surface level, both of these projects may be considered successful, their radically different trajectories to reach their current states must be taken into consideration before weighing the relative accomplishments of both developers.

Case Study #1: Children's Community School & The Church of the Atonement

The Church of the Atonement building was designed in 1892 by Furness, Evans & Co., the architectural firm of Frank Furness. The building on 47th and Kingsessing housed the Episcopal Church of the Atonement, which was relocating from 17th and Summer Streets (See Figure 1). The cornerstone of the church lists both 1847 as the year of the congregation's formation, and 1900 as the year of project completion (See Figure 2). The congregation moved into the building officially in 1901, and held their first worship services on Easter Day. Church of the Atonement came at the tail end of Furness's architectural career, and some have speculated that the design of the building was taken on by others in his firm. While the exterior characteristics of the building lack some of the defining features of Furness's earlier works, elements of the interior layout are distinctly Furness in style.

Church of the Atonement was not immune to the changes taking place in the surrounding community – which suffered from population decline and white flight throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A new congregation moved in, and the building changed hands in 1979 and became St. Peter's Church of Christ, under the leadership of Pastor Clyde Brown, who preached to a predominantly African American congregation. Over the years, the congregation shrank significantly and began holding religious services in the nearby Parish House. By 2013, the congregation was comprised of Pastor Brown, his goddaughter, and a small number of infrequent visitors. Services attracted fewer than 5 people on a regular basis.

Around this time, Licensing and Inspections (L & I) began to take note of the building. Without the necessary stewardship of the congregation, reports began to pile up that remarked on various violations of city codes. In the first of these violation reports, dated December 17th, 2008, inspection officers noted roof deterioration throughout the church complex, missing bricks and other property maintenance issues, as well as a need for architectural and engineering services “through out [sic] the entire exterior” (Figure 5.1). In another violation report submitted on May 2nd, 2012, the property was in violation of seven city codes, with an increase in property maintenance violations in both the main church building and the parish house. These violations related to walls, windows, and roof repair, and noted compromised drainage systems that contributed to later water damage (Figure 5.2).

By June 2014, demolition was imminent. Demolition permits had been approved for the building, and various news sources had picked up on the story. Members of the preservation community lamented the impending loss of another Furness building, but it seemed inevitable that it would come to pass. Scott Mulderig, director of L&I's Emergency Services Unit, had also estimated that demolition costs would reach hundreds of thousands of dollars. While the costs of demolition would legally fall onto the building's owner, in this case, Pastor Brown and the rest of St Peter's Church of Christ, there was no way that the congregation would be able to pay, leaving all of the projected expenses to the city.

In an eleventh hour rescue, the demolition was delayed. Aaron Wunsch of Penn's Historic Preservation program collaborated with Reverend Dr. W. Wilson Goode, former Philadelphia Mayor and Chair of Partners for Sacred Places, and local developer Guy Laren to prevent the building's demolition. Together, they insured that the building would not be seen as an imminent threat to the surrounding community by performing engineering assessments and preventative maintenance. Once the building was officially removed from threat of demolition, Laren moved forward with the acquisition of the property and began developing the space. In an interview, Laren reflected on the acquisition:

“...it takes someone who has been around a little longer to have the staying power, and to even be able to start addressing these things. There's probably no business plan that I have that I could recommend to somebody else. I just go into these buildings and fall in love with them. And then I try my best to work backwards.

Laren's involvement in the Church of the Atonement was not the first time that he had acquired a sacred space. Although he owns one other church building in West Philadelphia on the corner of 43rd and Chestnut Streets, he primarily holds residential properties throughout the neighborhood.

While Laren did not have extensive background with the adaptive reuse of sacred spaces, his prior involvement with the community was a contributing factor in

why he ultimately chose to acquire the property. Laren spoke about the sentimentality of falling in love with sacred spaces, as well as the tangible financial benefits that such a project might provide to him through his other property holdings. Few developers in the neighborhood would have been so uniquely positioned to benefit from the property. The match between Laren, Wunsch, and Goode was an important step forward in the preservation of the building – without this partnership, the Church of the Atonement would have undoubtedly been demolished.

The Future of Church of the Atonement: Children’s Community School

Children’s Community School is a private preschool located in West Philadelphia. The school was founded in 2009, with the mission of utilizing progressive education to “build a better society by fostering creativity, problem solving skills, communication skills, a sense of initiative, and a capacity to listen.” Though the preschool is a private institution, 90% of families live within walking distance with the remaining 10% coming from elsewhere in the city – including Fairmount and South Philadelphia. Recently, Children’s Community School has begun applying for Head Start grants, in hopes of reaching more low income local students.

Children’s Community School had occupied a space in the Calvary Center for Culture and Community from its founding in 2009. CCS was taken in by Calvary Center for Culture and Community as a project of Calvary Church, which allowed

Calvary to loan their non-profit status to CCS in their early years. Prompted by a desire to grow their program, CSS began looking into other potential homes that would allow them to increase their number of classes and expand their student population.

The search for the right place took nearly five years – and CCS had awaited their move into the Church of the Atonement after facing countless setbacks. According to Merryll Gladstone, the process was anything but smooth. Gladstone had approached the previous owner of the Church of the Atonement Property to propose a collaboration between the preschool and church. Pastor Clyde Brown was unwilling to consider sharing the space, unless CCS was willing to agree to teach religion. Gladstone was unwilling to align the program with a religious mission, and stepped away from the property. It was not until Laren acquired the church that it returned onto CCS's radar as a potential site. Gladstone and Laren were connected to one another and began to envision the Church of the Atonement as a new home for CCS.

With the support of Children's Community School families, Laren was able to move forward with the development of the Church of the Atonement. While the development was not met with substantial resistance from the surrounding community, it was necessary to hold several community forums and zoning board meetings. There was a visible presence of community support for this project at this time – in preparation for a rezoning meeting on April 15th, 2015, an online petition pledging support was circulated online through the West Philly Local and attracted close to 300

signatures. Gladstone recalls that “[Laren] really needed us as a community group, he needed the leverage we could offer in terms of community support. Initially there was a zoning issue, and he had to get the building rezoned, and he really needed a community group, and a daycare in particular to power the jump through the hoops.” However, though this partnership between Laren and CCS did lead to the passage of the rezoning petition, the dynamic between developer and community organization changed significantly. Though Laren had initially been very accommodating towards CCS, once the building was approved for rezoning he became more recalcitrant in communications with Gladstone and other representatives of CCS.

At this point, concerns about the Church of the Atonement began to emerge from different parties involved in the project. Former collaborators were concerned with Laren’s long-term investment in the preservation of historic churches. Wunsch remains unconvinced that this participation in preservation advocacy comes from anything beyond financial motivations.

“My fear is that in a case like that, not only will the church continue to receive unsympathetic alterations, but when that property goes up in value as the neighborhood gentrifies, Guy Laren will tear it down and put whatever he wants there. In a lot of ways, it's developers that don't have huge amounts of capital at their beck and call who reuse these buildings. And for them, it may just be a

holding strategy. It may not be because they are particularly interested in preservation.”

These reservations, and others, have made many in the project skeptical of Laren’s objectives. This skepticism has been reinforced by his treatment of CCS in the Church of the Atonement, which led to delays in the project completion date and opaqueness throughout the process.

Though the school was originally scheduled to move into the space in September 2015 for the 2015-2016 academic year, CCS was displaced and forced to find other accommodations until the start of the 2016 calendar year. Kathy Dowdell is the Principal at Farragut Street Architects, a West Philadelphia based consulting architectural practice focused on the rehabilitation and renovation, preservation, and adaptive use of built structures. She was brought into the project by Gladstone, following concern about the project completion. In thinking about the timeline of the project, she said: “When the CCS was first talking with Guy Laren a year ago, the idea that they would be able to occupy the space by September 2015 was pretty reasonable.” The lack of communication had led her to doubt if the school would be in place by January 2016, the newly negotiated move-in date. When asked about delays on the intended occupancy of the building, Laren said: “And we were trying to accommodate all of that. It’s just that every time you opened up another wall, there were other termites and water rot. Everything just took a lot longer than we thought. And L & I

was sort of looking over our shoulder on everything that we did.” In the conversation, he indicated that the schools would be in place by January. Despite these assurances, Dowdell and Gladstone expressed frustration with the changes that had occurred, and seemed uncertain about their future, and the future of the Church of the Atonement.

Case Study #2: The Waldorf School & St. Peter’s Church of Germantown

St. Peter’s Church of Germantown was designed by Furness & Hewitt, the architectural firm of Philadelphia architect Frank Furness. The building was placed on a large lot donated by Mr. Henry H. Houston, a businessman and philanthropist responsible for the extension of the Philadelphia Railroad’s expansion to Chestnut Hill. The cornerstone for the first building was laid on June 30th, 1873, and the church opened for its first service on December 21st of the same year. The church consisted of three separate buildings united on a large complex (see Figure 9). Growth in the residential properties in the neighborhood can be seen between the 1890s and 1940s (see Figures 10 and 11).

The building was placed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and the National Register of Historic Places in 1965 and 1985 respectively. The congregation at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church of Germantown left the property in 2005. Though the building remained in the hands of the Episcopal Church, it went onto the market and sat vacant. After remaining on the market for several years and dropping in price, local

developer Ken Weinstein purchased the lot in June 2011, for \$435,000, with the intent of transforming the property into the new home for the Waldorf School of Philadelphia. Weinstein remarked that the buildings on the church campus were facing varying degrees of vulnerability, and estimated that at least one building would have been within two years of irreversible damage.

The Future of St. Peter's Episcopal Church of Germantown: The Waldorf School

The Waldorf School of Philadelphia is one of over one thousand Waldorf Schools across the globe, and the only school of its kind in Philadelphia. As a K-8 school, their mission is to provide a “vibrant learning community where education, based on a deep understanding of the developing child, integrates the intellectual with the artistic, the practical with the beautiful — fostering the ability to engage fully in the world.” The school formerly occupied space in the New Covenant Church Campus, located on 7500 Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia's Mt. Airy neighborhood. The move to the St. Peter's Episcopal Church campus was prompted the desire to expand their enrollment which currently sits at 210 students, with 32 faculty members and 6 administrative staff members.

Waldorf had been actively seeking new homes for their school for some time before entering into the partnership with Weinstein. In 2011 interview with the Chestnut Hill Local, Kerry Hoffman remarked that “We started looking at St. Peter's

two years ago, but after discussing it among ourselves we realized we wouldn't be able to do it on our own." At the same time, Weinstein had been contemplating the St. Peter's property for several years, but said that "I wasn't about to do it without a tenant." When the two were introduced to one another, it quickly became obvious that they were able to help one another out.

Though the building had been used as a church, the underlying zoning for the property was as a residential usage. In order to proceed with the project, it was necessary to approach a zoning board to approve the site for educational use. At this time, there was limited pushback from the surrounding community. Concerns that were voiced early on by community residents were worries about increased traffic flow. To address these concerns, Waldorf members created plans with parents to prevent congestion during drop-off and pick-up times, and have encouraged their staff and administrators to use public transportation options.

With this project, Weinstein pursued historic tax credits to complete the necessary rehabilitation work on the campus. For other sacred space adaptive reuse projects Weinstein had worked on, he remarked that it was difficult to find tenants who were interested in the aesthetic and historic qualities church buildings had to offer. While many tenants appreciated the beauty those spaces provided, it was difficult to find someone willing to accept higher renovation costs per foot. Though in general, Weinstein believes that: "A tenant is not going to pay more for square foot because they

appreciate what you put into it”, he admitted that he was lucky to find the Waldorf School because they were seeking out unique buildings (Weinstein Interview). Because Waldorf was on board to maintain the historic character of St. Peter’s Church, Weinstein began the process of investigating historic tax credit options. Though he pursued historic tax credits in past projects, this was the first time he pursued tax credits for a sacred space.

“... From day one, we knew that we would pursue federal historic tax credits.

We later found out that the state historic tax credits, the first round ever, became available at the perfect time and we were included in the first round. They gave away 3 million dollars state wide, and we got 250 thousand of that. So that was fortunate.”

These tax credits were split evenly between the developer and the Waldorf School.

Weinstein felt that he needed to provide the Waldorf School with some form of compensation for extending the original construction timeline. While this new timeline was nearly twice as long, drawing out this process was necessary to comply with historic preservation codes.

“From day one, we knew - even before lease signing - we knew that we were going to pursue these. In order to get their buy in, we actually agreed to split the proceeds from the historic tax credits 50/50 with the tenant. We needed to get their buy in, we couldn't just say "you guys don't mind waiting another year and

a half, right?" They would have just laughed at us. We had to get their buy in some way. "

When considering the timeline for the project, had historic tax credits not been on the table, Weinstein estimated that the architectural drawings and planning would have taken six months, and construction would have lasted another year. Instead, the project required a full year of architecture and planning, and two years on construction.

The process was one that was well documented by several local sources who were interested in the historic preservation and educational implications of the adaptive reuse project. Waldorf created their own regular feature on their school's blog, covering the adaptation of the building in a series titled "Our New Home". Other posts remarked that the school "couldn't be happier with the renovations", and that "the renovations of 6000 Wayne Avenue are progressing quickly". A level of satisfaction for the quality and schedule of development was indicated throughout each of their published posts. Other interviews with local newspapers reflected this same positivity about the nature of the collaboration between Waldorf and Weinstein, and the Historic Preservation work that was being conducted (see figures 15.1 and 15.2 for conceptual mockups of St. Peter's Church made for the Waldorf School).

The project was officially completed in 2015, and the Waldorf School began occupying the space in September of the same year. Waldorf has now been happily housed in the church for several months. While they are currently renting from

Weinstein, they are also conducting their own fundraising efforts to purchase the building from Weinstein in the next 10 years to secure St. Peter's Church as a permanent home.

CONCLUSION:

Churches hold value for their communities – but when left unattended, these buildings can deteriorate and pose a threat to the physical safety of surrounding structures. Structural concerns should not automatically discredit buildings from consideration for adaptive reuse – as both case studies examined churches that were nearing collapse or total demolition. The work that has been done thus far to revive these buildings and bring new life into their neighborhoods is a testament to the capacity of sacred spaces for urban revitalization. Though this paper looks closely at only two adapted sacred space properties in Philadelphia, there are many more which are likely to confront similar problems in the near future. The successes and failures of these two projects can help inform future developments to maximize the success of implementing adaptive reuse efforts in historic sacred spaces.

Community members and community based organizations did play important roles in key aspects of the development. Without agreements of partnership with each schools at the very start, neither developer would have been willing to take on a

property of this scale. Secondly, school support remained critical in gaining rezoning approval, as each property had been zoned using a residential classification. In the early stages of the Church of the Atonement rescue, Laren was well supported by Children's Community School – and the students and families affiliated with the Pre-K overwhelmingly lived within walking distance of the site. Weinstein's positive presence as a local businessman and developer in Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy, and Germantown meant that community members (even beyond those that were directly impacted by the Waldorf School project at St. Peter's) supported his decisions. Both examples show the influences that positive and negative community group attention can have.

One of the differences between Weinstein and Laren's approaches was their relationship with community organizations. While Laren's relationship to Children's Community School deteriorated after rezoning approval was granted, Weinstein maintained regular communication and transparency with the Waldorf School. The relationship between Weinstein and Waldorf was also cemented in financial obligation, as Weinstein agreed to split half of the historic tax credits received with Waldorf to compensate for the extensions to the development timeline. Overall, the St. Peter's project had a more concrete deadline, and greater obligations to fulfill by the projected date, whereas the Church of the Atonement suffered from repeated delays and limited communication. However, community involvement is not necessarily a source of constant power – in the case of the Children's Community School, Gladstone noted that

the group became disenfranchised immediately after certain ends were met, and that there were limited options for recourse as a non-profit organization. Because the group lacked a substantial budget to rent elsewhere after their relationship with Laren deteriorated, they have been forced to accept delays and uncertainty in their project that they would have otherwise resisted.

From a preservation standpoint, both developers took vastly different approaches. Because Weinstein's property was already listed on the historic register, it was easier to justify pursuit of historic preservation tax credits. The financial incentive provided by splitting tax credits helped to cement the Waldorf School's involvement. Because of the stricter regulation of historic spaces receiving tax credits, the project was observed more closely and monitored for quality control purposes to ensure that adaptation took place in a responsible fashion. Because the Church of the Atonement did not pursue historic designation, fewer limitations were placed on the project, which granted them increased flexibility throughout the development. This flexibility proved to be a double edged sword. On one hand, community partners had negative experiences as tenants because of the delays. However, had the project been tied up in the red tape associated with the preservation tax credit process, it likely would have deterred Laren from purchasing the building early on and ensured the church's demolition.

In looking at these two examples, Weinstein's approach represents a gold standard. However, this may only be replicable for developers with access to capital with wealthier institutional partners who can invest in the long-term viability of their buildings. Individual developers and community partners with less money may find that pursuing tax credit would not be sustainable in the short term because of the longer delays associated with the construction and development process. For a number of churches in Philadelphia, following Laren's lead to forgo the additional work that preservation entails may be the only course of action that leads to the rescue and rehabilitation of these buildings. It is worth mentioning the speculation that Laren's acquisition of the church and its conversion to use as a community center may be a short-term strategy to stabilize the building until there is a more significant market for higher end residential real estate in the community. Other developers considering at-risk sacred spaces are likely to be driven by similar financial motivations and interested in acquiring church property for apartment or condominium use. In these cases, pursuing reuse without historic tax credits may be the most viable option to save at-risk buildings.

Recommendations:

If possible, developers engaging in the adaptive reuse of sacred spaces should follow Weinstein's model in maintaining transparency with partnering organizations

and conducting an organized development timeline. These benefits were made possible in part because of the use of historic tax credits and the formal recognition by the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and the National Register of Historic Places. Though conversion for educational uses may be more sympathetic to the original structures, and preserve more of the historic qualities of these churches, maintaining the building through any means – such as residential repurposing – is still a valuable pursuit if it prevents their demolition. A potential opportunity to increase the historic qualities of adaptively reused churches would be to make the process of pursuing official recognition status and tax credits clearer and less burdensome. While some of the perception of burden in this process comes from misunderstanding and popular misrepresentation, relaxing some of the standards for recognition may also allow developers to engage with more meaningful preservation projects on a larger or more frequent scale.

Another sentiment echoed throughout various interviews was the desire for more information about the churches in the city. Many believe that having access to a more comprehensive survey of purpose-built sacred spaces would give researchers the capacity to chart vulnerable churches and target buildings that are at risk of demolition. Such information could result in several actionable outcomes.

Pete Woodall, of Hidden City Philadelphia, proposed that formal programs could be established to target at-risk churches with early intervention strategies, which

would prevent massive damage from occurring and help building owners and city agencies save money (Woodall Interview). Targeting damage early on would be part of preventative maintenance that would have long term implications for the economic success of adapted sacred spaces. In cases of abandonment, where congregations have moved out of their churches and left the structures to become a public eyesore or safety hazard, demolition has been handled primarily through tax-payer money. If preventative measures such as those outlined by Woodall were to take place through non-profit preservation initiatives, or through a branch of the city government, massive savings of tax-payer money could be achieved. Additionally, by conducting preventative maintenance and extending the lifespan of these buildings, projects may have more flexibility in extending timelines to accommodate the formal historic preservation process.

A second result would be that potential developers could gauge the viability of investing in different properties. Having access to information about the community context and potential market demand for adaptively reused sites can help create a more structured rubric for determining when to get involved in a project, and what kinds of uses may be best suited for the spaces developers are adapting. Having more information about these kinds of adaptations may encourage more people to become involved in this work that would otherwise be discouraged from investing in these properties.

In providing these two examples of similar projects with different methods of execution, I have illustrated the diversity of approaches that can be taken when handling historic church buildings. Though I don't think that there is a single right way to adaptively reuse a church, I think that much can be learned from the successes and failures that each of these two projects confronted. Methods of engaging entire communities, claiming space, and providing social services to the surrounding neighborhood are all areas that should be considered thoroughly by future developers. This research may extend beyond just church buildings. Other religious buildings, and secular spaces that serve as historic resources for the city, confront a similar set of problems and can likely learn from these examples. When we consider the richness of the city and all that its architectural diversity has to offer, we must think about the ways that we may preserve and honor the many legacies that we interact with on a daily basis.

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Appendix:



NEW CHURCH OF THE ATONEMENT.

The new Church of the Atonement, Forty-seventh Street and Kingsessing Avenue, was erected in 1900 as a memorial of the late Rev. Dr. Benjamin Watson, long the beloved rector of the old Church of the Atonement, Seventeenth and Summer Streets, which was built in 1846

Figure 1: An image of Church of the Atonement, taken from “West Philadelphia Illustrated: Early History of West Philadelphia and Its Environs; Its People and Its Historical Points”. A short description of the Church of the Atonement can be found in Section V: West Philadelphia’ Historic Churches and Burial Grounds. Though this picture is undated, it would have been taken sometime between 1900 (the year of

building completion) and 1903 (the year of publication). This image is indicative of the original state of the Church and associated buildings.



Figure 2: Cornerstone at Church of the Atonement. The cornerstone lists 1847, as the year of the formation of the congregation, and 1900, as the year of project completion. This image comes from photographer Bradley Maule, in his April 4th, 2013 article “A Moment For Atonement” in the Hidden City Daily. Images are used with permission.

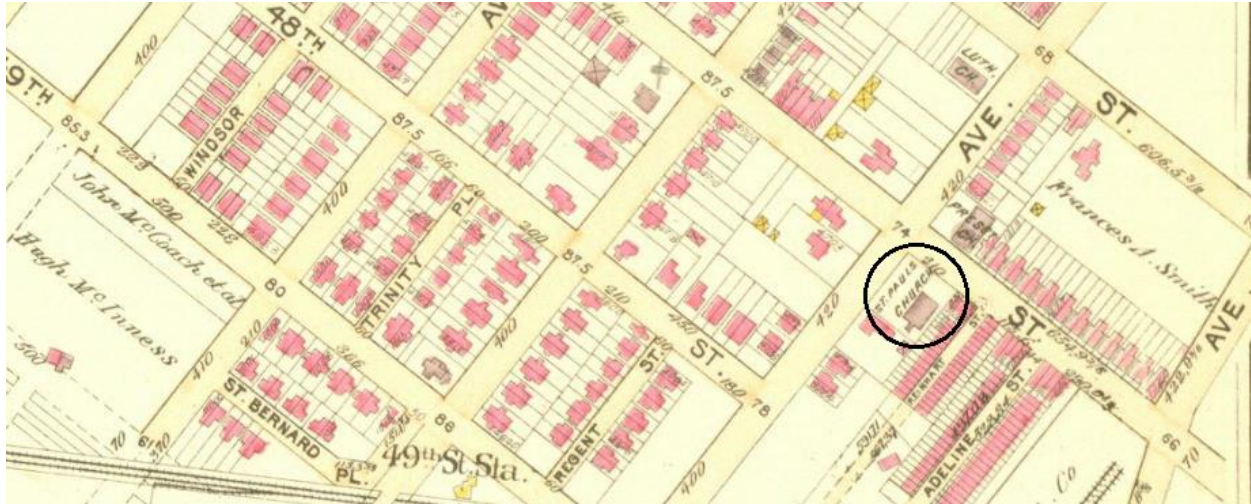


Figure 3: Segment of 1895 Philadelphia Atlas. This atlas predates the construction of the main church building on what would become the Church of the Atonement lot, here listed as “St. Paul’s Church. The lot has been circled in black for clarity. Throughout the neighborhood, one can see examples of split family homes on spacious lots. Next to the church, one can see a concentrated cluster of rowhomes. Across 47th street, there is a large mostly undeveloped lot belonging to “Frances A. Smith”.

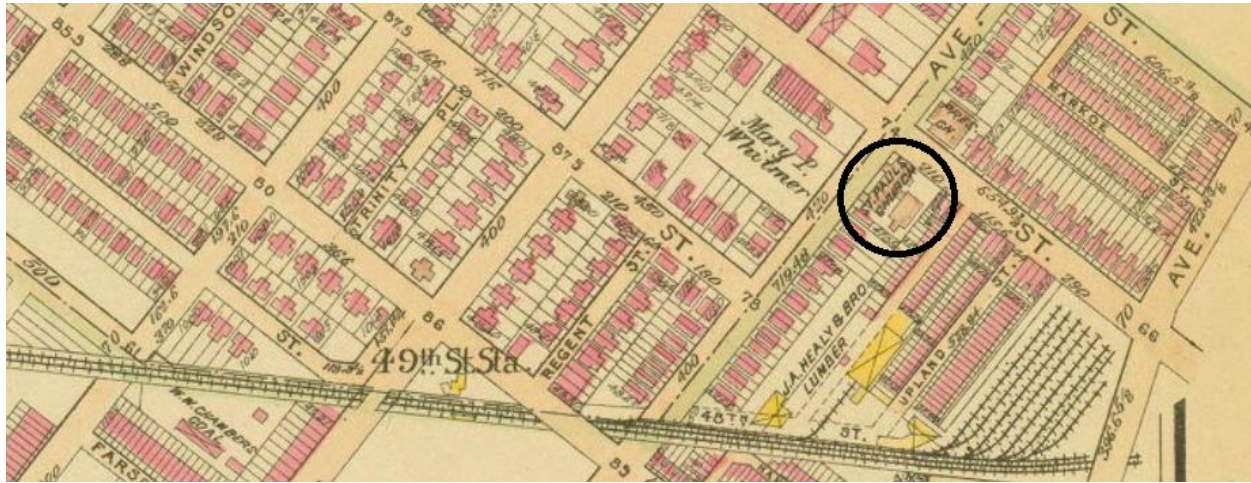


Figure 4: Segment of 1910 Philadelphia Atlas. This atlas was published 10 years after construction was completed on the Church of the Atonement, here listed as “St. Paul’s Church”. The lot has been circled in black for clarity. Significant neighborhood development can be seen between this atlas and the 1895 atlas. Most notably, there is an expansion of the rail lot, terminating at 47th Street. Additionally, double family homes and rowhomes adjacent to the church property have increased. In the lot previously belonging to Frances A. Smith, there has been the development of a new street and construction of many rowhomes.

VIOLATIONS

VIOLATION CODE	VIOLATION TYPE	VIOLATION DATE	STATUS	LOCATION
A-304.1/1	ARCHITECT/ENGINEER SERVICES	December 17, 2008	Complied	through out the entire exterior
PM-307.1/10	WALL LOOSE/MISS BRICKS	December 17, 2008	Complied	weed tree growing through wall

PM-307.1/2	ROOF DETERIORATED	December 17, 2008	Complied	all roofs
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Figure 5.1: Licensing and Inspections Violations filed on December 17, 2008 for Church of the Atonement, Located on 4700 Kingsessing Avenue. Other details about report can be found at

<http://www.phila.gov/data/Pages/default.aspx?entity=violationdetails&eid=188140>

VIOLATIONS

VIOLATION CODE	VIOLATION TYPE	VIOLATION DATE	STATUS	LOCATION
A-000.0/10	VIOL C&I MESSAGE	May 2, 2012	Complied	THROUGHOUT EXTERIOR OF BUILDING
PM-302.4/6	DRAINAGE-	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING

DOWNSPOUT

CONNECT

PM-302.4/7	DRAINAGE- DOWNSPOUT REPR/REPLC	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING
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PM-304.3/1	EXT S-WALLS REPAIR/MAINTAIN	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING
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PM-304.4/1	EXT S-ROOF REPAIR	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING AND PARISH HOUSE
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PM-304.5/3	EXT S-CORNICE BARGEBOARD DEFEC	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING
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PM-304.8/1	EXT S-WINDOW REPAIR/MAINTAIN	May 2, 2012	Complied	MAIN BUILDING AND PARISH HOUSE
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Figure 5.2: Licensing and Inspections Violations filed on May 2, 2012 for Church of the Atonement, Located on 4700 Kingsessing Avenue. Other details about this report can be found here:

<http://www.phila.gov/data/Pages/default.aspx?entity=violationdetails&eid=326476>



Figure 6: Church of the Atonement in 2013. This image shows that relatively few exterior modifications have been made to the church building in the century since its completion. This image does not reveal interior structural damage caused by deferred maintenance. This image comes from photographer Bradley Maule, in his April 4th, 2013 article “A Moment For Atonement” in the Hidden City Daily. Images are used with permission.

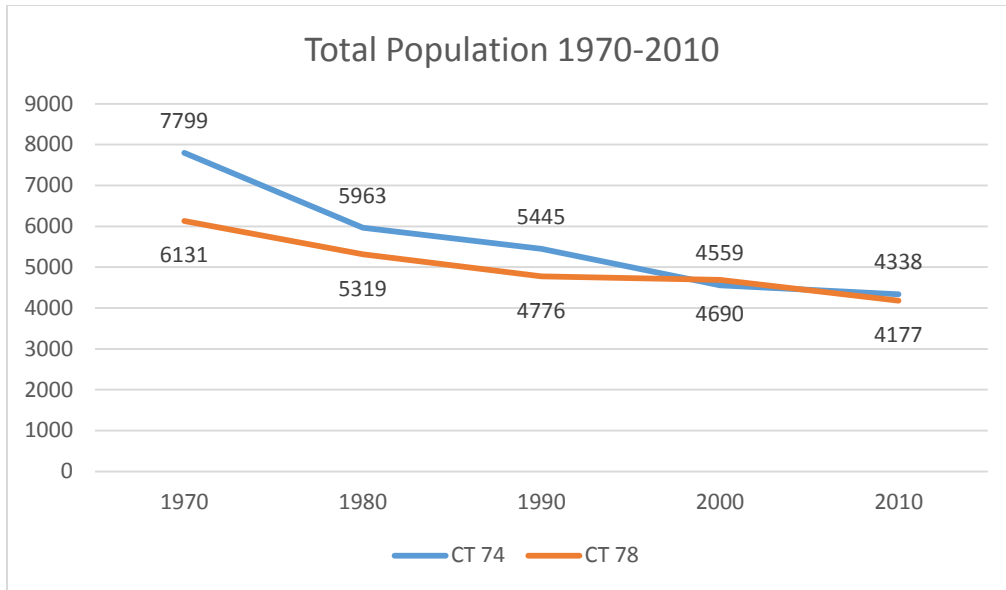


Figure 7: Total Population in Census Tracts 74 and 78 between the years 1970-2010. This chart reflects an overall decrease in population in both census tracts bordering the Church of the Atonement.

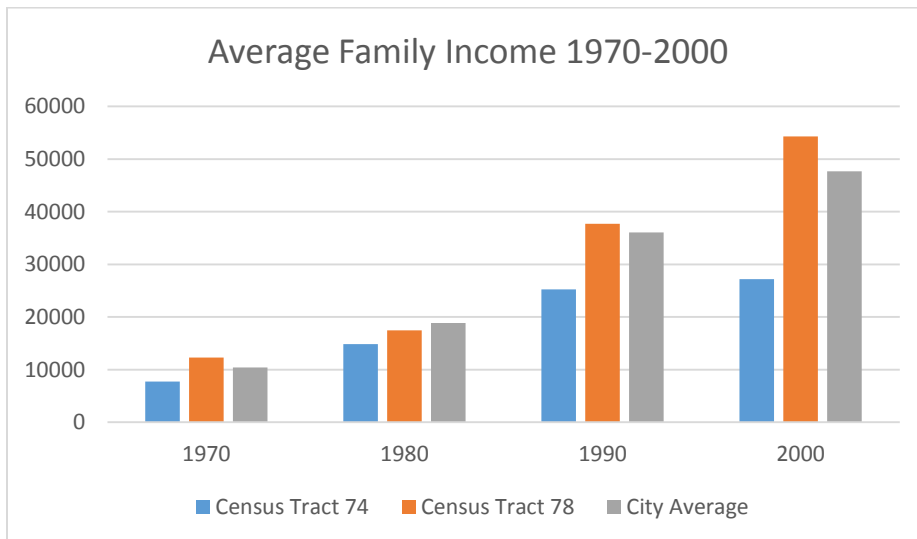


Figure 8: This chart illustrates the average family income between the years 1970-2000 in Census Tracts 74 and 78, with the citywide average for each of these years to provide

a broader context. As it can be seen here, Census Tract 78 was regularly near to or above the city average, while Census Tract 74 was consistently and increasingly below the average.



Figure 9: Rectory, Sunday-School Building, and Church of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

Image taken from 1915

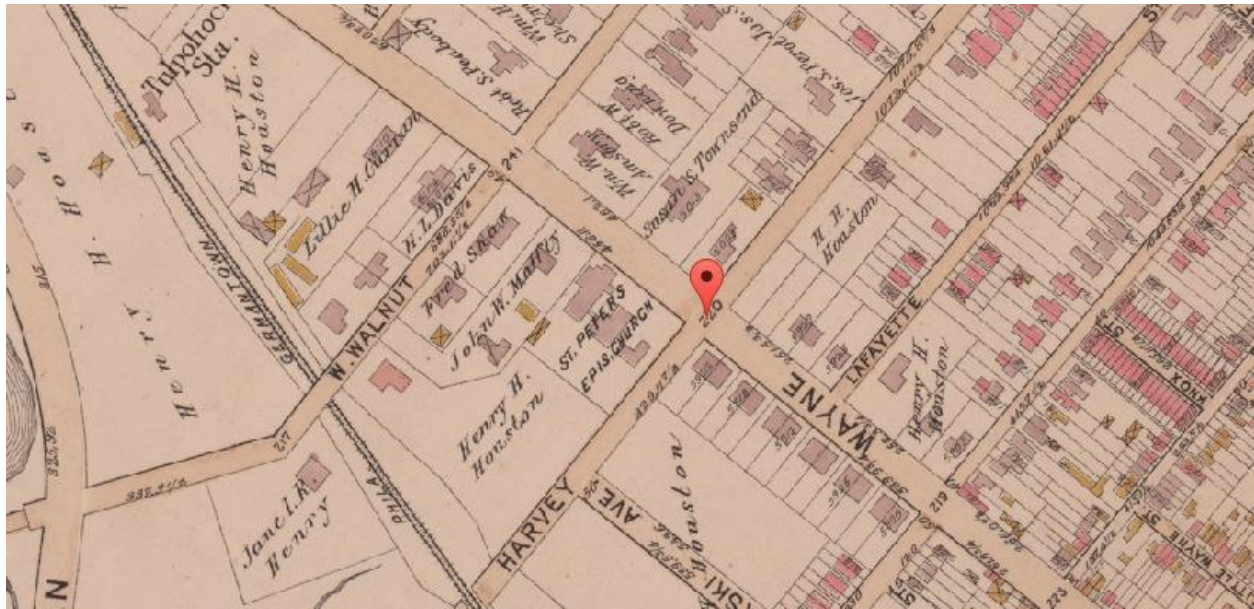


Figure 10: Segment of the 1895 Philadelphia Atlas by G. W. Bromley. The pin marks the intersection at 6000 Wayne Avenue. “St. Peter’s Epis. Church” is labeled. Several undeveloped plots of land nearby to the church are labeled as belonging to Mr. Henry H. Houston, the same philanthropist that gifted the land to the Episcopal Church for the erection of St. Peter’s. Though there is development throughout the neighborhood, most houses are detached structures constructed on large lots. Some large twin houses can be seen, and in the lower right corner of the map segment one can also observe rowhomes on narrow plots of land.

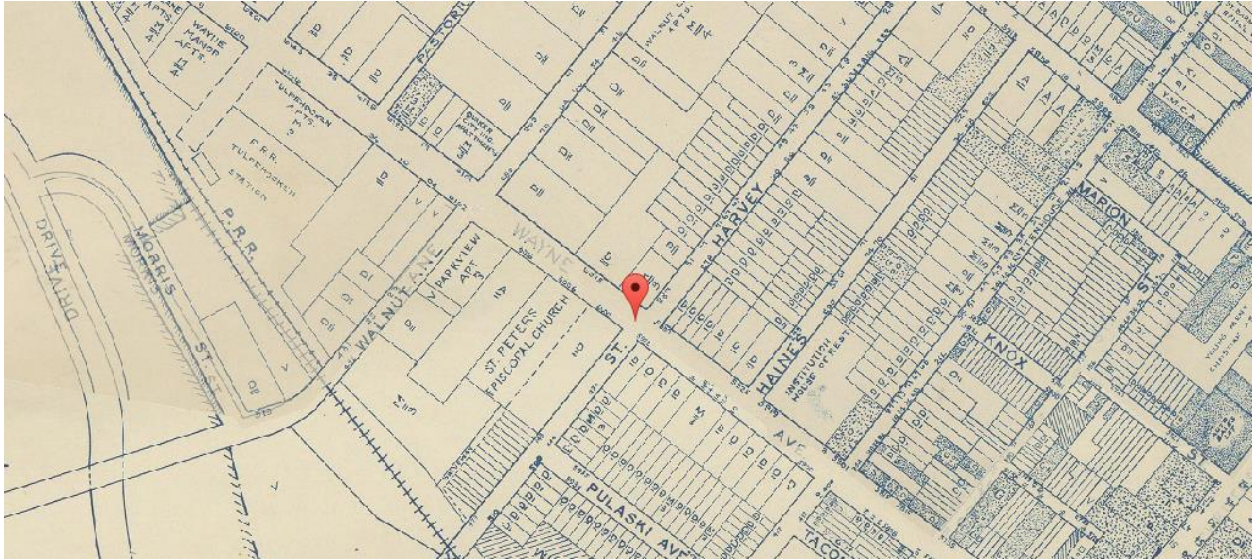


Figure 11: A segment of the 1942 Land Use Map from the Works Progress Administration. Substantial development has occurred in the neighborhood in comparison to the 1895 map – though this map does not mark building type, the significant subdivision of larger lots indicates that new construction favors row-homes above freestanding single family structures.

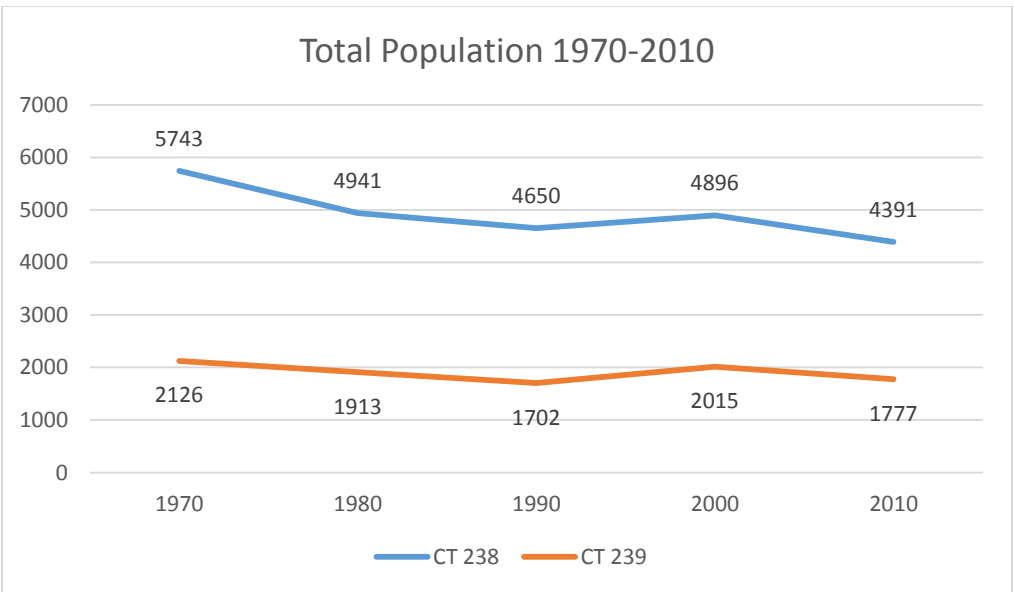


Figure 12: Total Population in Census Tracts 238 and 239 between the years 1970-2010.

This chart reflects an overall decrease in population in both census tracts bordering St. Peter’s Episcopal Church.

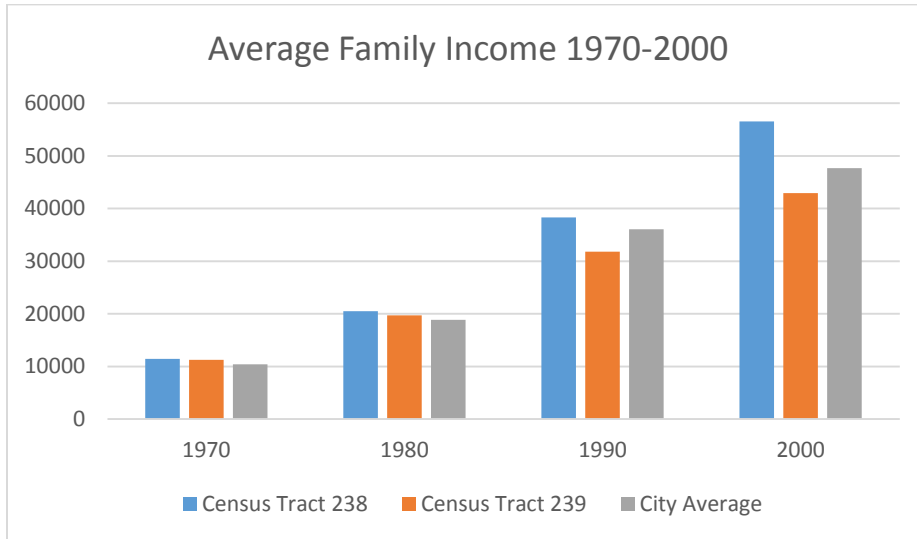


Figure 13: Average Family Income in Census Tracts 238 and 239 between the years 1970-2000. This chart reflects and overall increase in Average Family Income in both Census Tracts bordering St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Census Tract 239 fell beneath the citywide Average Family Income in years 1990 and 2000.



Figure 14: St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 2014. This image shows the physical condition of the main church building on the St. Peter's Episcopal Church property, after some stabilization and preventative maintenance has occurred. The exterior is similar to the how it would have appeared in 2011, when Weinstein first acquired the property. The image comes from the Waldorf School of Philadelphia's blog, "Loving Learning".

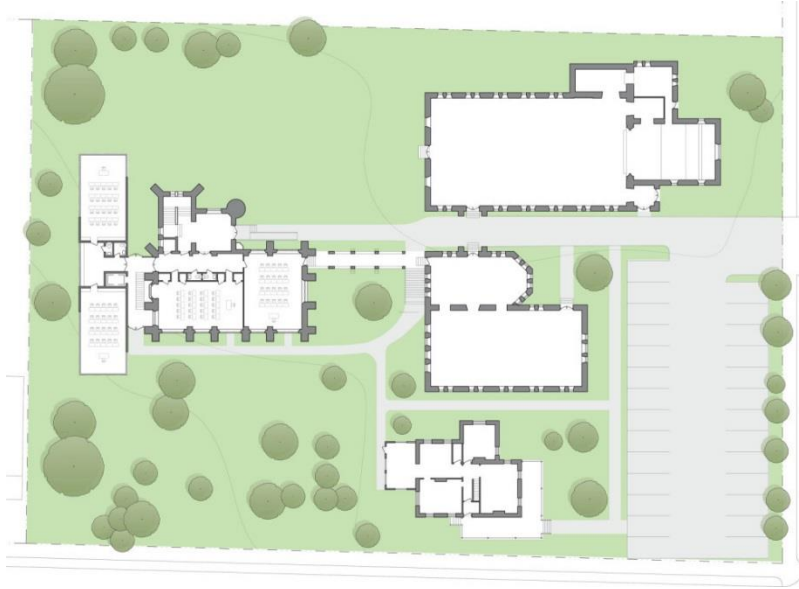


Figure 15.1: Figures 15.1 and 15.2 are mock-ups of the St. Peter's Church Campus, conducted by C2 Architecture Firm. The firm surveyed the buildings and created conceptual drawings to illustrate different layouts and additions for the Waldorf School. The firm has extensive experience in large scale historic adaptive reuse projects, and is based in Germantown, Philadelphia.



Figure 15.2: Figures 15.1 and 15.2 are mock-ups of the St. Peter’s Church Campus, conducted by C2 Architecture Firm. The firm surveyed the buildings and created conceptual drawings to illustrate different layouts and additions for the Waldorf School. The firm has extensive experience in large scale historic adaptive reuse projects, and is based in Germantown, Philadelphia.

