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A Different Kind of Education Reform: Reuse of Historic School Buildings

By John M. Tess, Heritage Consulting Group

For better or worse, we all have strong memories of the school buildings where we spent much of our youth. Similar to municipal, ecclesiastical and institutional buildings, schools have traditionally been viewed as centerpieces of communities and neighborhoods. They are where kids gather for learning, adults gather to vote and everyone has a story. The response to “Where did you go to school?” can define a person and evoke a sense of pride and nostalgia. Schools, from tiny one-room schoolhouses to large high schools with thousands of students, create a sense of place, define a neighborhood and provide an identity for those who have attended over the years.

Although education is given an important place in our society, school buildings are representative of the current state of affairs in our communities and are not immune to the changes taking place on the block, in the city or throughout the country. School buildings, after all, are real estate. Like other pieces of real estate, they have a specific function, they have maintenance and operational costs, and they are subject to the law of supply and demand.

Throughout the country, our classic school buildings face three challenges that threaten their survival: demographics, educational best practices and economics. Historically, schools were constructed to serve local populations; children went to the elementary school around the corner, walked to the middle school and took the subway or the bus to the high school. As neighborhoods age, their demographics change. Neighborhoods once teeming with children become bastions of retirees and heavily populated



Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
Kennedy Elementary School, a 183,000-square-foot 1915 school in Portland, Ore.

areas lose residents resulting in a decline in the number of children enrolled in the local schools. With fewer students, the demand for space is reduced and school districts are forced to reassess their infrastructure requirements. Where two elementary schools were once required, one may now be sufficient to serve the population.

Like place demographics, educational theories have changed since many older school buildings were constructed. Educational best practices with regard to space have been revised and many schools don't meet modern education's spatial requirements. These older buildings appear outdated and unable to meet modern education standards. While this may not be the reality, it is hard for an older building

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Photo: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting Group
The redeveloped mixed-use Kennedy School property includes restaurants and bars.

to compete with a new environmentally friendly, technologically enabled building down the road. The iconic school buildings face the same problems as the vintage office buildings discussed in previous articles. Just as 1920s office buildings do not meet the spatial demands of modern office tenants, historic schools often do not meet modern spatial requirements.

Perhaps the most significant challenge facing school buildings are the economic realities facing school districts. Throughout many of our cities, school buildings are aging, many having been constructed in the early 20th century to meet the demand of exploding populations. These school buildings define the classic American school, with multiple floors, large windows, strong masonry exteriors, wide interior corridors, fixed classrooms and aged systems. Although well-built, these older school buildings have added maintenance costs when compared to newer buildings. The costs to retrofit these buildings can be significant. Additionally, cities throughout the country face fiscal uncertainty and school district budget shortfalls.

The solution that has become common for alleviating these issues is to shutter older school buildings. School closings are contentious but are often deemed necessary. These closings create a stock of vacant school buildings that are generally in good condition. In Philadelphia, school district officials approved a plan to close 23 public schools in 2013. Chicago plans to shutter 50 public school buildings. Religious school closures have also contributed to the number of vacant school buildings. While not all schools are historic, a significant portion of these buildings are classic neighborhood schools.

Throughout the country, schools of all shapes and sizes have been closed and await reuse, or the wrecking ball (which may be the

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preferred choice for some of their former students). Although schools can be difficult to repurpose, the abundance of vacant schools, and their often-low price tags, has made it worthwhile to find a way to reuse these buildings.

When school buildings are historic, federal and state historic tax credits (HTCs) are a key financing tool for their adaptive reuse. Twinning the HTC with the low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) has proven a winning combination for rehabilitating schools and as more school buildings have become available, there has been significant growth in their adaptive reuse as housing, often for seniors. The intangible connection to schools, as well as the abundance of natural air and light that the buildings' large windows provide, has made this type of conversion popular.

One particularly interesting school adaptive reuse project was the conversion of the Kennedy Elementary School in Portland, Ore. Like many closed schools, Kennedy was vacant and deteriorating. Demolition was an unpopular, but realistic, possibility until the McMenamain Brothers purchased the school building and saved it from the wrecking ball. Reuse of the aging school building took vision and required a creative multi-use program that allowed the building to be rehabilitated for modern use while maintaining its prominent historic features. The developer successfully adapted the 183,000-square-foot, 1915 elementary school into a mixed-use facility that included hotel rooms, restaurants, a movie theater, bars, gardens and more. The corridors were used to display historic photographs, the auditorium was converted into a movie theater and the former cafeteria was repurposed as restaurants and bars. The developer also used the school's history to draw patrons to the businesses within the building.

Although school-to-residential conversions are popular and effective, they entail many challenges. Most commonly, school buildings are largely intact and unchanged from when they were originally constructed. Schools often retain significant amounts of historic fabric including plaster ceilings, wood trim and built-in cabinets, which the developer may need to retain to secure National Park Service (NPS) approval. Although nostalgia-inducing, the floor plans can also make it difficult to convert a school to another use while still meeting the Secretary's Standards for Rehabilitation. Historically, schools had very wide corridors to allow for lockers and efficient flow of students through the building. No matter what the conversion, it's safe to say that the new occupants will not require anywhere near that amount of circulation space, though often the width of corridors must be preserved in order to meet the standards. This loss of square footage can significantly affect the project as the corridor is not leasable and usable space beyond the corridor walls is limited. Additionally, the spatial arrangement of classrooms and intact features can make reuse difficult. Creative solutions, such

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as retaining original walls and inserting new partitions can overcome the spatial realities of the building.

Another common issue when reusing historic school buildings is how to repurpose large public assembly spaces. Often, NPS considers the volume of space to be character-defining, meaning subdividing such spaces can be challenging. Most historic schools feature large assembly areas including gymnasiums, cafeterias, libraries and auditoriums. The former North Scranton Junior High School in Scranton, Pa., built circa 1920, faced significant hurdles in reuse because the large portions of the building dedicated to gathering spaces weren't easily adapted for other uses. The developer chose to utilize the auditorium as a community gathering space and the two gyms as storage space for tenants.

Although challenges can arise when redeveloping historic schools, the opportunity to repurpose these buildings is significant with the help of tax credit

programs as well as local economic incentives and municipal support. Community sentiment is often strongly in favor of the reuse of these buildings. And, as seen in both the Kennedy School and North Scranton Junior High, school buildings can retain their importance in their neighborhoods and remain institutions for community gathering and pride. ❖



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