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Challenges and Opportunities when Redeveloping School Buildings

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School buildings elicit strong associations for the public. Not only are they structures that housed you or your children for many years of learning, they serve as community anchors and create a strong sense of place within a community. However, many historic schools have been shuttered, making them targets for redevelopment. One of the most common building types rehabilitated using the historic tax credit (HTC), schools present an interesting set of challenges and opportunities for redevelopment.

Changing demographics might deem the neighborhood school unnecessary if there aren't many school-aged children living in that neighborhood anymore. The decline in the school-aged population in a particular area may render the historic neighborhood school unnecessary, posing an infrastructural problem to the school district. School districts, which already have limited budgets, then have to contend with maintaining a half-empty school. Educators and architects are constantly reevaluating best practices in scholastic architecture as a means to reinforce modern best practices in education. Therefore, the language of best practices for planning and designing 21st century schools is constantly changing. Many historic schools aren't viewed as conducive to present-day best practices or technological demands, but a renovation may

not be financially feasible. As a result, historic schools are shuttered in favor of new construction that is less expensive and more compatible with current needs. In addition, many school districts cannot afford to maintain their historic school properties. School districts' budgets have steadily decreased in the past decade, making it more and more difficult to pay for the upkeep of historic school buildings. As districts dwindle or consolidate, these schools are shuttered.

These demographics, changing educational best practices and budgetary constraints have resulted in an abundance of schools sitting shuttered, making them ripe for redevelopment, and often suitable for HTC projects. In the nearly 40-year history of the HTC, schools have been a prime target for rehabilitation. Their solid construction, open floor plans, and ample windows make them well-suited for adaptive reuse projects with easy marketability. However, rehabilitation of schools can be problematic. One of the major challenges in redeveloping schools is the treatment of features that have been identified as "character-defining," or distinctive. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (Standards), which serve as the guidelines for the HTC program, contain 10 general Standards that are applied to ensure that the character-defining features of a building, both interior and

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exterior, are retained. The Standards stipulate that while some alteration of a historic building may be necessary in order to provide for a suitable contemporary use, the rehabilitation may not destroy character-defining features or compromise their integrity. The National Park Service (NPS) uses these guidelines when determining whether proposed work is appropriate and approvable for HTC certification.

Open spaces such as auditoriums, cafeterias and gyms are often identified as character-defining elements of the structure and must be addressed carefully in order to secure credits. In many redevelopment projects, these large spaces might not be retained as open spaces, given budgetary constraints or the building's new use after rehabilitation. Often, open spaces get mothballed, but subdivision is also a possibility—albeit a challenging one. It may be possible to subdivide these spaces vertically, by the insertion of walls, or horizontally, by the insertion of a floor level. A less intrusive form of subdividing would be the creation of a mezzanine. While there are many examples of successful subdivision in HTC projects, the process of subdividing the space while retaining its integrity can be extremely problematic and difficult. The severity of the challenge depends on the design of the building. Additionally, the wide interior corridors commonly found in historic school buildings, which were designed for the insertion of lockers as well as a flow of hundreds of people, are often identified as character-defining features of the building and must be preserved in order to secure NPS approval. Because these corridors occupy a larger square footage than contemporary corridors and hallways, the design of the redevelopment must be efficient in order to maximize the limited leasable square footage. Other features that are generally classified as character-defining include built-in storage and seating, plaster ceilings, wood trim and flooring. Many buildings have remained surprisingly intact while functioning as schools and therefore retain many of these original features, which the developer may need to retain in order to secure NPS approval. Additional features such as blackboards and lockers, which are often identified as character-defining, can become unique assets to the rehabilitation project. These features can provide tangible links to the building's original function while serving as decorative and/or functional elements.

Dozens of school rehabilitations have been approved by the NPS for the HTC program. Most historic schools maintain their structural integrity due to thick masonry construction and/or steel supports. Because structural reinforcement or reconstruction is often unnecessary, the rehabilitation of these schools becomes more economically viable. However, this is dependent upon the building's location and whether or not seismic retrofitting is required. Another positive aspect is the size of the classrooms, which generally fit the size requirements for affordable housing units (and thus makes the project eligible for twinning low-income housing tax credit with the HTC). Additionally, large windows provide ample natural light, making the units more marketable, and the large, open floor plan of the classrooms allow for fairly flexible design interventions within the existing structure. Furthermore, existing playgrounds and athletic fields commonly found on school grounds provide sufficient land to accommodate adequate on-site parking, given the features are not character-defining.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Gorman & Company took a very similar tact for a very different use with the Jackie Robinson Elementary School. In a \$16 million renovation, Gorman & Company adapted the Gothic Revival building to 68 affordable housing units called Sherman Park Senior Living Community. Classrooms were adapted to loft-style living units with hardwood floors, high ceilings and dramatic windows. The gymnasium was converted into several apartment units but also includes a hair salon, nurse station and arts room. Other specific use rooms were repurposed as a library, community room and kitchen classroom. As part of the renovation, lockers, chalk boards, clocks and built-in display cases were kept. Retaining the broad hallways, Gorman installed artwork throughout focused on the history of the neighborhood and school. To further connect with the neighborhood, community gardens were installed.

The opportunity to reuse these buildings is significant with the help of tax credit incentives. Rebecca Shiffer, a tax credit reviewer for the NPS, said, "Hundreds of schools across the county have been rehabilitated using historic tax credits in the last two decades. Their primary new use has been residential, and apartments fit well in the former classrooms. There are challenges, such as a new use for one or more assembly spaces and code concerns with open staircases. But we have seen so many successful school

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rehabilitations that the Historic Preservation Office or the National Park Service can suggest solutions to those challenges, based on treatments seen in other projects.”

Schools contain a large amount of character-defining features, resulting in a level of inflexibility in design. A key to successful school rehabilitation is the ability to accept the building without significant alterations to corridors, assembly spaces and other character-defining components. In order to produce positive results, these features must be creatively integrated into the design and utilized as marketing assets. This not only adheres to the Standards, but appeals to the public by providing

tangible links to the building’s original function. When properly rehabilitated, historic schools can regain their importance in their neighborhoods as functional symbols of community pride. ❖

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