



The former Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church on Park Street in Syracuse is undergoing renovations to become Masjit Isa Ibn Maryam (Mosque of Jesus the Son of Mary).

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE GREENLAR

Second life for sacred spaces

| BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

Members of Dennis Earle's environmental interior design class spent part of their spring semester creating proposals for transforming Syracuse's former Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, 501 Park St., into Masjit Isa Ibn Maryam (Mosque of Jesus the Son of Mary). In early May, the Syracuse University students set their projects on display boards fashioned from the wood of former church pews. They wandered from poster to poster, examining each other's color schemes and suggested layouts.

Options included shutters and gauzy

curtains with Arabic lettering to close out the stained glass windows. The Muslim community is looking for a way to accommodate their religion — which does not allow images of humans or animals in their prayer space — while allowing others to enjoy the colorful windows at other times.

Students also suggested a curtain or screen to separate men and women during worship. A crucial part of the re-design is creating the mihrab niche, a semicircle that indicates the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca, which is the ►

DWINDLING
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CNY WORSHIP
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PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN D. CANNERELLI

The final Mass at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church was held in February 2010.

direction that Muslims face while praying. In the Holy Trinity building, the mihrab is at the back of the church sanctuary, on the opposite end of the church's altar.

The building dates to 1891, when Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church was constructed to serve the neighborhood's growing German Catholic population. The Syracuse Diocese closed the church in 2010. North Side Learning Center bought the church campus in December 2013. It will rent the building that a group of volunteers hopes to open this summer as a wor-

ship site for the neighborhood's growing Muslim community.

With renovations started in the spring, the former church, with its tall arches, already felt like a mosque. That's because Islamic architecture borrowed from medieval architecture, says Earle, an instructor in SU's Department of Design.

"If you can find a way to make the unique connections, these spaces can be reused," he says. "You'll never be able to find some of these unique windows and elements. There are great possibilities."

The class project provided a real-life lesson in creative re-use and rehabilitation of a building. The students also got a taste of a growing trend: the search for innovative ways to repurpose worship sites vacated by shrinking or relocating religious congregations.

The recent makeover of the former Holy Trinity Church highlights a quiet, but urgent, campaign by preservation-minded citizens, experts and public officials to find ways to save abandoned houses of worship.

The community needs an intentional plan that honors the buildings' rich history while being open to creative re-use, Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner said at a November 2013 Sacred Spaces



PHOTOGRAPH BY DENNIS NETT

Anne Angiolillo, a longtime parishioner of Holy Trinity, successfully fought the proposed sale of the church's windows in 2012.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DICK BLUME

The twin steeples of the former Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church tower over Syracuse's North Side.

Symposium sponsored by the Preservation Association of Central New York.

She urged participants not to fall into thinking, "We just have to tear that down or we just have to say it won't be like it once was." Such planning, she told the crowd at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in downtown Syracuse, "is an important building block to the future of the city of Syracuse."

Local history enthusiasts and preservationists still mourn the loss of the mansions along the once-majestic James Street. And many still feel cheated by the out-of-staters who bought the 1907 South Presbyterian Church on South Salina and West Colvin streets in 2008 and removed its Tiffany stained glass windows and other precious fixtures.

Other landmark churches have closed recently, including the stately First Presbyterian Church United at 620 W. Genesee St., Syracuse. The church, which dates to 1904, was sold in January to another Christian congregation.

The former West Genesee United Methodist Church, 1700 W. Genesee

St., Syracuse, was auctioned off in December. The new owner said in March that the property would be too expensive to refurbish, and he plans to sell it.

Those transactions have not gone unnoticed by Syracuse officials. The city expects to begin, by September, a survey of Syracuse's approximately 200 religious properties to see which are vacant. Officials plan to prioritize properties that could be eligible for inclusion on the National Historic Register. Properties that transform to commercial uses could be eligible for tax credits; others that continue religious or nonprofit uses might be eligible for state preservation grants.

"The first step is to see what's out there," says Kate Auwaerter, Syracuse's preservation planner. "They might not even know they have these options."

The city can't save every historic or beautiful worship site, Auwaerter cautions. "It's a planning document for us," she says. "A lot of these churches can again be anchors in a neighborhood."

Their importance is clear: "When ►



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE GABEL

Kate Auwaerter, preservation planner for the city of Syracuse, will help with a survey of the city's approximately 200 religious properties.

you're riding in on the highway and see the overall landscape of the community, you see these spires," Auwaerter says. "They add to our historic landscape."

Despite some disappointments, Central New York holds several success stories as well. In Syracuse, a former downtown church is a popular restaurant, the Mission. A former synagogue near Syracuse University now houses a high-end hotel with unique suites. And the Samaritan Center recently announced plans to turn a former Catholic church into a soup kitchen.

Auwaerter is especially enthusiastic about plans to turn Syracuse's former People's AME Zion Church at 711 E. Fayette St. into a café with a job training program.

"They are absolutely on the right track," she says. "It's a few people doing a lot of work. The lessons are this takes time, an idea and money."

With the right plan, even South Presbyterian could still be saved, Auwaerter says. The owner of the former church is behind on his tax and water bills, and the property could be transferred to the city-county land bank, Auwaerter says.

"It's brimming with possibilities," she says. "If we can get the right combina-

tion of people in it, it could become a community center."

Auwaerter hopes the upcoming survey sends a message that officials want to work with congregations that face financial struggles and dwindling populations. "I'd like to have a heads up and have the community conversation so we're not blindsided," she says.

Local architects are on board, says Dean Biancavilla of Holmes-King-Kallquist & Associates. He cautions against using personal stories to drive plans for reuse.

"Those are emotional arguments and become disturbing and hurtful," he says.

He prefers focusing on objective criteria, such as the requirements for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. For religious properties, that includes architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance.

Biancavilla understands why cash-strapped congregations sell windows and other furnishings. But he wishes they wouldn't.

"I would like to see those elements remain in the building because you can come up with more unusual uses," he says. "They become focus points for the new room."

The growing interest in sustainability influences the trend for creative reuse, says Jeanie Gleisner, program manager for comprehensive planning for the CNY Regional Planning and Development Board. Gleisner is also on the board of the Preservation Association of Central New York.

"We have all this amazing existing infrastructure that is going unused and being destroyed," she says. "We have to get past the idea that if it's not a church it's not of value. There's a lot of value in its location and its structure and its cultural heritage." ❖

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Church with a legacy to become café

| BY RENÉE K. GADOUA

A few years ago, it looked as if People's AME Zion Church didn't have a prayer of saving its historic Syracuse church on East Fayette Street. But a determined effort to save the building led to a plan to create Benediction Café, a restaurant that will provide training for food service jobs.

"The benediction is the final prayer," said the Rev. Daren Jaime, pastor of People's. "We know this is the final purpose of the building."

The church, built in 1911, is the oldest black church still standing in Onondaga County, and it serves as testament to the community's links to the abolition and the civil rights movement. It's also one of the few remaining buildings of Syracuse's 15th Ward, a victim of urban renewal in the 1970s.

The building served the congregation once led by the Rev. Jermain Loguen, a former slave and a leader on the Underground Railroad. The congregation moved to its current location at 2306 S. Salina St. in 1975. Jaime has been pastor there since 2006.

After decades of inattention, the building was a mess. Rain, cold and bird waste had damaged the roof and walls, and parts of the building were unstable. A group of People's congregants, the Preservation Association of Central New York, local officials and others began discussing ways to save the building.

The project has received two \$250,000 state grants to renovate and refurbish the building. That's at least \$300,000 short of the estimated amount needed for the project, but Jaime is optimistic that donations and grants will make up the difference.

Benediction Café will help us "connect with the community in a positive way," he said. The project will bring economic development, create jobs and serve as a histor-

ic reminder of the church's legacy, he said. He hopes the café will open by late 2015.

The renovation includes plans to maintain the church's original exterior and stained glass windows. Signage will explain its history. The group also hopes to restore a mural by Syracuse artist Falstaff Harris.

People's Church belongs to the historically African-American denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The AME Zion Church was formed in the 1820s in response to racial discrimination in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The AME Zion Church is known as the Freedom Church. Among its members were Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass.

Loguen was born into slavery in 1813 in Tennessee and escaped in 1834. He moved to Syracuse in 1841 and is said to have helped 1,500 slaves seeking freedom. He assisted with the 1851 Jerry Rescue in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law.

"We've got to keep telling his story," Jaime said. "He's left us a rich legacy." ❖



PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLEN M. BLALOCK

Pastor Daren Jaime stands before the former People's AME Zion Church on East Fayette Street, the oldest black church in Onondaga County.

Old churches, new uses

Here are some ways Central New York houses of worship were reborn after their congregations left.

SAMARITAN CENTER, 215 N. State St., Syracuse. The Syracuse soup kitchen long housed in the basement of St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral announced in May it was buying the former St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church. The Gothic Revival building served as Syracuse's first Roman Catholic Cathedral from 1886 to 1904. The diocese closed the church in 2010. A few months after its closure, Scott Brennan, owner of Brennan Stained Glass Studio, rented the building for his studio. Brennan left last fall.

HOTEL SKYLER, 601 S. Crouse Ave., Syracuse. The hotel opened in 2011, after developer Norm Swanson bought the building from the city in 2007. It dates to 1922 and served Temple Adath Yeshurun, until the congregation moved to DeWitt in 1968. It later housed Salt City Center for the Performing Arts.

MISSION RESTAURANT, 304 E. Onondaga St., Syracuse. The popular Pan-American restaurant resides in the former Wesleyan Methodist Church, a congregation active in the Underground Railroad. Three faces carved in dirt found



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN BERRY

Samaritan Center will be housed in the former St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church.

in the church's basement are thought to have been drawn by fugitive slaves. The 1848 building became the Mission in 1999. Before that, it briefly was the Windows on Columbus Circle restaurant.

WILD BIRD CENTER AND SPIRITUAL VISIONS, 315 E. Seneca St., Manlius. The former Baptist Church, built in Greek Revival style, dates to 1827. It has had various commercial uses since at least the 1970s. It now houses Wild Bird Center and Spiritual Visions.

SLAVIC FULL GOSPEL CHURCH, 3528 E. Genesee St., Syracuse. The church, which serves mostly immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, moved to the former Temple Beth El in 2007. Earlier that year, the Jewish congregation merged with Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas as its membership and finances declined. Beth El's



PHOTOGRAPH BY JUSTIN FOGERTY

Hotel Skyler occupies the former Temple Adath Yeshurun.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY WALTS

Willard Memorial Chapel in Auburn was once part of the Auburn Theological Seminary.

congregation dates to 1854; its former building dates to 1965.

GREYSTONE CASTLE, 201 N. Main St., Canastota. The former Methodist Episcopal Church dates to 1909. It ceased use as church in the late 1960s. The building was bought and renovated in the early 1990s, and opened in 1995 as a banquet hall.

CENTER FOR THE ARTS OF HOMER, 72 S. Main St., Homer. The center opened in 2005 in a former First Baptist Church after the congregation relocated and a community group bought the building.

WILLARD MEMORIAL CHAPEL, 17 Nelson St. Auburn. The building was once part of the Auburn Theological Seminary and is now a historic site and host to events and weddings. It is believed to be the only complete, unaltered Tiffany chapel in existence. The former seminary began in 1818, and the chapel dates to 1892. ♦



PROVIDED IMAGE

The Center for the Arts of Homer is in a former First Baptist Church.



PROVIDED IMAGE

Greystone Castle in Canastota is the former Methodist Episcopal Church.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY WALTS

Mission Restaurant in Syracuse is in the former Wesleyan Methodist Church.