



**Department  
of State**

# **Adaptive Reuses for White Elephants**

Repurposing former neighborhood gems

**A Division of New York Department of State**

# What's a white elephant?

## **white elephant** *n.*

1. Rare, expensive possession that's a financial burden to maintain;
2. Something of dubious or limited value;
3. Possession unwanted by its owner;
4. Endeavor or venture that proves to be a conspicuous failure.



## Are you herding white elephants?

Chances are your community has at least one white elephant!

- Churches
- Schools
- Armories
- Depots
- Mills/factories



## Rusting neighborhood anchors

### How did we end up with so many white elephants?

- Natural cycle of neighborhood growth and decay
- Restrictive zoning
- Natural disasters (flood, fire, tornado, etc.)
- Decline of neighborhood parochial schools
- Change in transportation options
- Temporary architectural nature of big box stores
- Changes in retail trends; glut of space

## Churches are special cases

- Shrinking urban congregations
  - Population shift from cities to suburbs
- Parish mergers and closings
- May not be handicapped accessible
- Financial troubles
  - Dwindling donations
  - Parochial school tuitions too high to sustain
  - Repairs, maintenance, utilities too high
- Reverter clauses

personally before me and my  
Recorded November 5. 1834 P.

✓ at nine O'clock A. M. 5  
Henry P. Bristol Clerk

✓ This Indenture made the  
5th day of October 1834 between  
said One thousand Eight hundred and  
Twenty five Dollars to the said  
Dickinson and Ann Eliza his  
Abraham G. Sensing and Susanna  
Bereta M. his wife and John

## Legal bulwark: reverter clause

Deed clause requiring property to be used as house of worship or else returned to donor's heirs

- Must demonstrate “diligent search” for heirs
- Typical arguments:
  - heirs can't be found, or
  - there are too many heirs



## Taking action against derelict properties

- Force church through code enforcement to either sell dilapidated property, fix, or demolish
  - selling requires blessing from diocese
  - city could deny demolition
- Consider if adjacent buildings/land still in use (rectory, convent, schools, gardens, parking lots)
- Non-owners want to dictate what happens next...
  - Should they have a say?
  - Do they have a say?

## Zoning can hinder or help

- Pre-existing nonconforming use
- Or flexible enough to allow use
- Is a use variance spot zoning?
  - Not if the change is in best interest of neighborhood and supported by comprehensive plan
- Zoning should not be a hindrance

# Real property taxes

Religious, charitable, educational, and government uses are generally off the tax rolls

- Partial exemptions possible for historic buildings; multiple dwellings; and “commercial, business or industrial property in an economic transformation area”
- Adaptive reuses for private or commercial purposes could generate new tax dollars



# ADAPTIVE REUSE

## Adaptive reuse: church

- Church sharing
- Residential
- Commercial or municipal
- Food and drink
- Cultural
- Recreational and entertainment

# Church sharing

## Cooperative facilities use

- Multiple congregations share one building
  - Burden of additional expensive buildings avoided
  - Shared maintenance and utility expenses
- Room use, time, and priorities made jointly by committee or between church leaders
- For churches in decline, this is an opportunity to participate in a meaningful transition

## Fraternity house

Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity house, RPI  
former St. Francis de Sales, Troy



# Marketplace

Limelight Marketplace, former Church of the Holy Communion, NYC



# Web design/marketing

Overit Media, former St. Teresa of Avila, Albany



# Screen printing

Wicked Smart Apparel, former St. Bridget's, Watervliet



# Hotel

## Hotel Skyler

Former Temple Adath Yeshurun; Salt City Theatre, Syracuse



# Municipal offices

Green Island Power Authority and town offices  
Former St. Mark's Episcopal, Green Island



# Armories

# Unity Center

## Newburgh Armory Unity Center, Newburgh



- Formed by individuals and community organizations
- Programs aimed at inner city youth
- Focus on athletics, personal development, and business
- advancement to benefit residents

# Brewery

## Ravens Head Brewery, Cohoes, former Cohoes Armory



City welcomed them:

- Fits into existing zoning and neighborhood business plan
- Ample parking on site/on-street

# Museum

## NYS Military Museum, Saratoga, Former Saratoga Armory



- Capitalized on existing tourism traffic
- 10,000 artifacts from Revolutionary War to Desert Storm
- Largest collection of state battle flags
- Veterans Research Center

# Arena

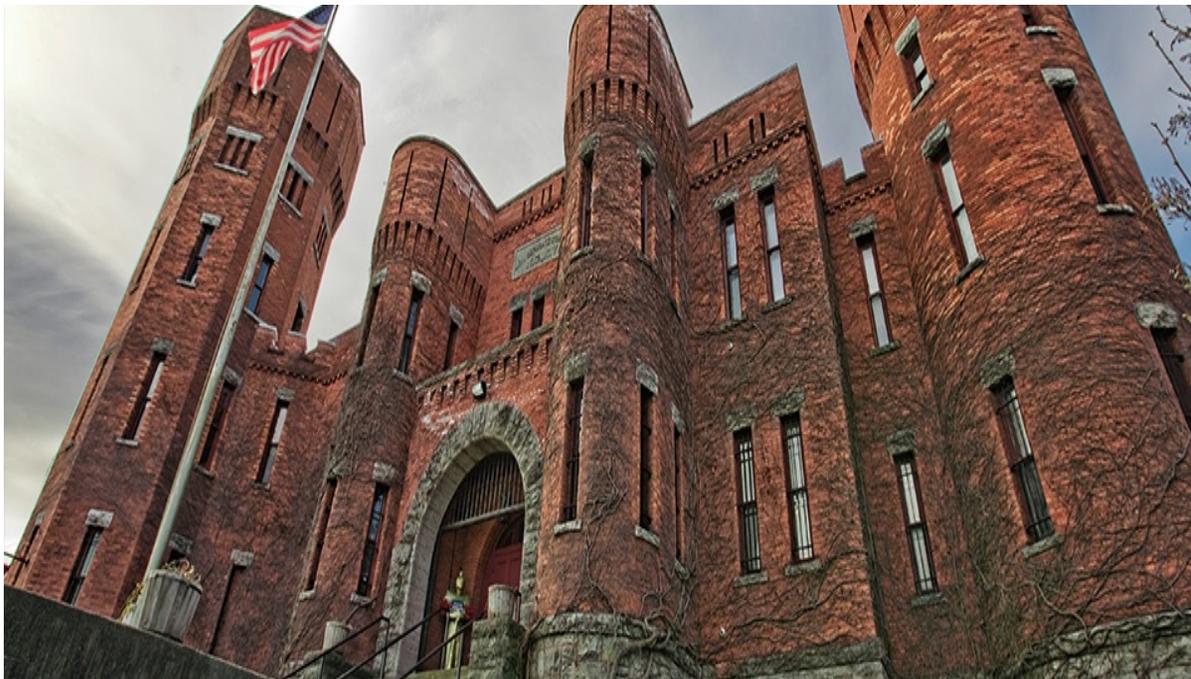
## Albany Armory Sports & Convention Arena, Albany Former Albany Armory



- Sports arena (roller derby, basketball, tennis tournaments)
- Concerts
- Conventions

# Bed and breakfast

## Amsterdam Castle B&B, Amsterdam, Former Amsterdam Armory



- Decommissioned in 1995, converted to 36,000 sq ft private home
- National Register of Historic Places
- Featured on HGTV “Re-zoned”

# Depots

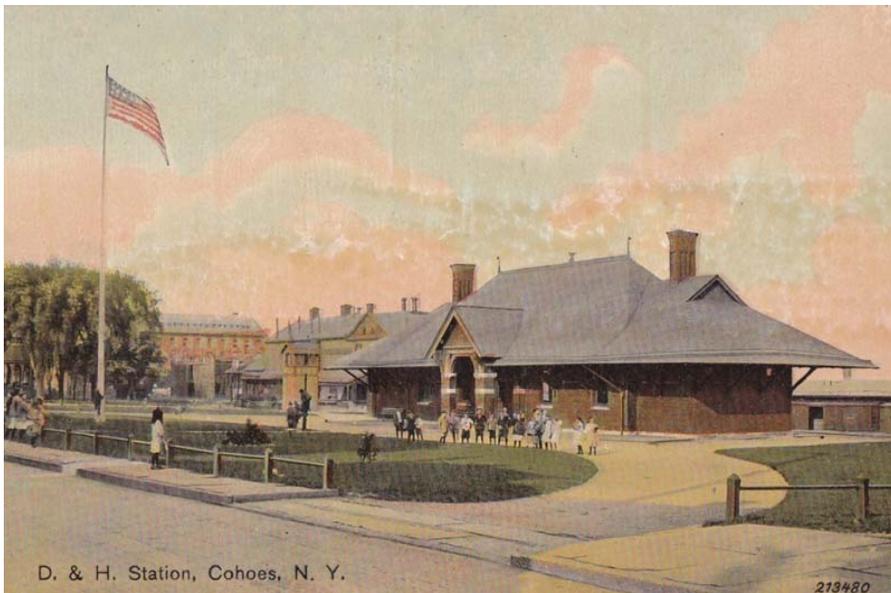
# Library

Waterford Public Library, Waterford, former D & H Railroad depot



# Off Track Betting

Cohoes, NY, former D & H Railroad depot



# Nanotech hub

Former Albany Union Station, former Norstar Bankcorp, Albany



# Restaurant

Former Potsdam Train Station now Mama Lucia's Restaurant, Potsdam



# Mills and factories

# Luxury loft apartments

The Lofts at Harmony Mills, Former Harmony Mills, Cohoes



## Live/work art studios

### Art Space, former Buffalo Electric Vehicle Company



# Restaurant

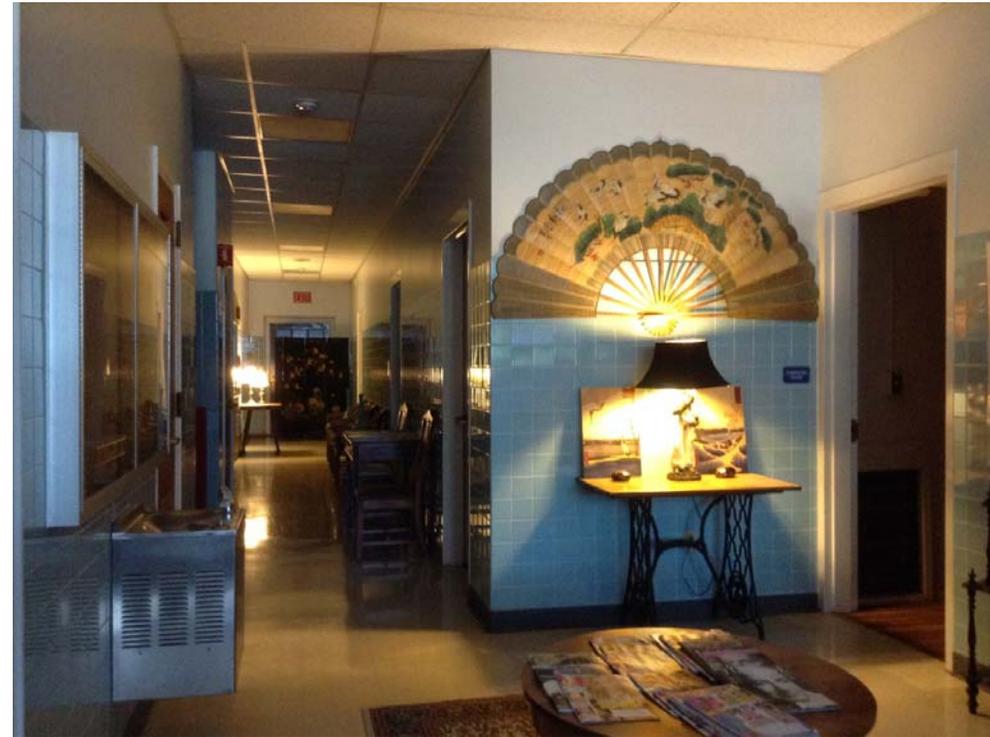
## Cactus Grill Restaurant, Former Water Plant, Potsdam



# Schools

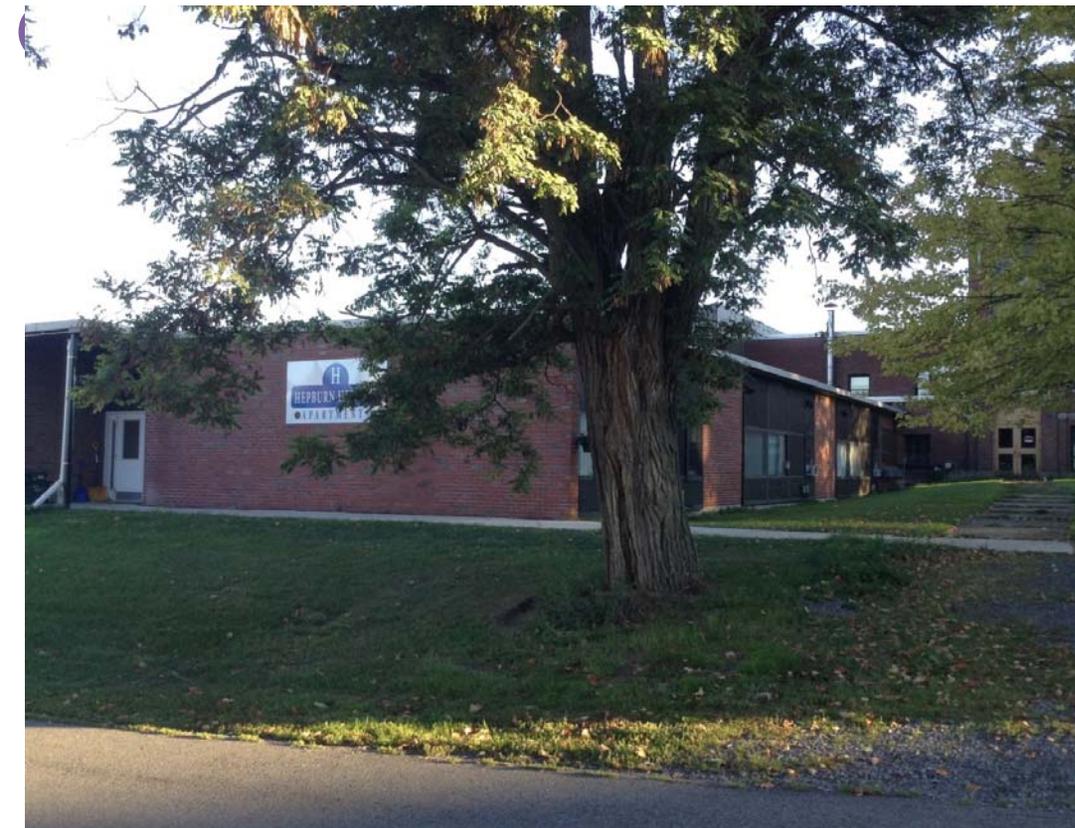
# Inn

## Sherman Inn, Former Sherman School, Ogdensburg



# Apartments

## Hepburn Heights Apartments, Former Norfolk School, Norfolk



# Tax credits

# National Register of Historic Places

- Honor, NOT restriction
- Associated with important events or persons
- Places embodying characteristics of period, method, or “master”
- Likely to reveal history about a place



# Federal Investment Tax Credit



- 20% of rehab of NR-listed income-producing buildings
- Subtracted from owners' income taxes
- 5-year restriction for sale, alteration
- <http://www.nysparks.com/shpo/tax-credit-programs/>



## NYS Credit, Commercial Buildings



- 20% credit on State taxes
- Eligible census tract (at or below state median income)
- Qualifying work
- Approved Federal Tax Credit Application

## NYS Historic Barn Tax Credit

- Barns built or in agricultural service before 1936
- Income-producing
- Rehab can't alter historic appearance
- Not for former barns converted to residences



# Local Historic Preservation Regulations



- Individual buildings or districts
- Often also listed on National Register
- Protection of structure and historic detail



## Certified Local Government Program

- Local legislation, separate historic district review commission with qualified members
- Muni/SHPO partnership, muni reports its activities to SHPO
- Technical services
- Reimbursement grants
  - Training for commission members, public education
  - Public education
  - Surveys, NR nomination, historic structure reports, guidelines



## Real Property Tax Law §444-a



- Muni can delay increased tax assessment on rehabbed historic properties
- Exempt increased value 100% first five years; decreasing 20% over second five
- For work approved by local historic district review boards



## Easements, Transfer of Development



- Article 5-K, General Municipal Law: munis may purchase or receive façade easements
- Transfer of development rights for historic properties

## Conclusion

### Why is it important to care about old buildings?

### What can adaptive reuse do for your community?

- Incite community revitalization and job creation
- Preserve community character
- Use existing infrastructure
- Use existing materials and craftsmanship that otherwise are difficult or cost prohibitive to reproduce

# Resources

- New York State Office for Historic Preservation 518-237-8643 <http://nysparks.com/shpo/>
- Preservation League of New York State [www.preservenys.org](http://www.preservenys.org)
- National Trust for Historic Preservation [www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation [www.achp.gov/](http://www.achp.gov/)
- National Alliance of Preservation Commissions <http://napc.uga.edu/index.htm>
- Association for Preservation Technology <http://www.aptnet.org/>

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