



The former Good Shepherd Catholic Church is being transformed into an arts center with a Tony Hawk-designed skatepark and an interactive sculpture park featuring works by renowned Detroit artist Charles McGee. | Renderings courtesy PRO.

REVERENTIAL REVIVAL

4 empty churches find an afterlife of service in the Motor City

BY MICHAEL H. HODGES

Shuttered buildings are by definition forlorn, but some closures are sadder than others. Churches surely rank high on that list. When a house of worship is deconsecrated—after the spiritual matter has been boxed up and carted away and the doors locked—what was once a neighborhood anchor that helped enliven the street, pulling

people in on a regular basis, overnight becomes a brooding, empty presence.

So, repurposing long-empty churches, of which Detroit has its fair share, is a cause for civic celebration. And happily, four long-empty sanctuaries have been or are being revived for commercial and nonprofit use, a trend echoed in other cities.

In the Motor City, one church was reinvented in 2020 as a coffee shop and restaurant. Another will become a neighborhood cultural center. A third is being expanded into an apartment complex, while a fourth will morph into a rentable social hall whose profits will fund adjacent housing for the homeless.



A SHEPHERD THEY'LL FLOCK TO

Take the art center first.

For over a century until its closure in 2016, the Good Shepherd Catholic Church and rectory anchored the neighborhood east of Indian Village along Parkview Street between Agnes and East Jefferson.

Come spring 2023, however, both the Romanesque Revival church, now rechristened The Shepherd, and all 3.75 acres of the block it sits on will be transformed into Detroit's newest cultural center. The 16,000-square-foot church will house two galleries, a performance space and a Black-arts library, while the rectory will become a six-room bed-and-breakfast. In the works as well are a coffee shop, a skatepark designed by skateboarding legend Tony Hawk, and an interactive sculpture garden starring three large works by Kresge Eminent Artist Charles McGee, the much-beloved African-American painter, sculptor and teacher who died last year.

The engines behind all this urban resurrection are Anthony and JJ Curis, co-founders of downtown's Library Street Collective gallery, in partnership with DAC members Dan and Jennifer Gilbert. Helping them on the massive project is Jefferson East Inc., a nonprofit neighborhood organization that fosters economic development on the east side.

Anthony Curis said they've reached

out all across the East Village neighborhood where The Shepherd is located.

"The minute we started looking at the church," he said, "we opened conversations with local stakeholders—residents in the immediate area, the East Village Association,



Renderings show the gallery and performance space envisioned for The Shepherd arts center.

Jefferson East Inc. and Pewabic Pottery. It's been an inclusive process.

"We're building toward something that will be used as an amenity by the neighborhood."

The exterior of the church, built in 1912 by Detroit's Donaldson & Meier, looks to be in good shape and will stay the same except for new nighttime lighting. Indoors, the Brooklyn-based architects doing the renovation, Peterson Rich Office, will keep the stained-glass windows as well as—traditionalists might be happy to



JJ Curis, Charles McGee, Lyndsay McGee and Anthony Curis. | Photo Sal Rodriguez, courtesy Library Street Collective

hear—the confessionals. Those will become private multimedia booths for audio and visual materials.

Resurrecting an entire city block is exciting, no matter how you slice it. But Curis is particularly pleased with the Charles McGee Legacy Park, which will take up much of the open space around The Shepherd.

"The park is actually the last project Charles ever worked on," Curis said. "We started the conversation with him on that about a year and a half ago."

The park, he said, is not going to be "precious and untouchable. It's going to be a public structure that's actually meant to be engaged with. There'll be little kids climbing on it."

It's a prospect that tickled McGee, who was particularly interested in the next generation of young Detroiters.

A CONGREGATION SENSATION

Across town on the southwest side of the Boston-Edison neighborhood, you'll find The Congregation, a lively coffee shop, bar and restaurant that has taken up residence in what had been the New St. James AME Church, which had been empty for a number of years.

Boston-Edison resident Betsy Murdoch and her friends Amy Peterson and Antonio Luck had talked for years about how great it'd be if there were someplace, anyplace, within walking distance where you could get a cup of coffee and read a book. Boston-Edison is gorgeous but short on commerce.

"We kept eyeing this church," Murdoch said. "We were afraid it'd become dilapidated. Then one day my business partner drove by, and the doors were open. She stopped and there was a Realtor inside. It was like all the stars aligned."

The threesome bought the 1924 structure designed by Spier and Gehrke Architects, originally the



Owners of The Congregation kept all the stained glass they could and resurrected a bricked-in window at one end (above right) with a new design by the Nordin Brothers. | Amanda Kay Wyse Photo and Design

Unity English Lutheran Church, in 2016 for under \$100,000, Murdoch said. The sanctuary was in good shape and didn't require big renovations apart from repairing stained windows. But a ton of expensive updating was required, ranging from a new roof to new heating, ventilating and air conditioning equipment and upgraded plumbing and electrical work.

In terms of interior aesthetics, one of the bigger projects was restoring a large window that faces Rosa Parks Boulevard.

"Originally it was stained glass," Murdoch said, "but the window had been removed and cinder-blocked." She knew they wanted something striking, but stained glass is expensive. So they collaborated with artists Erik and Israel Nordin, who have works all over town, to create a handsome new window that's mostly clear glass, but with dark-blue accents.

Murdoch and her partners also took steps to ensure residents didn't regard them as invading gentrifiers.

"We wanted to make sure the community was aware what we were planning," she said. "We hand-flyered the streets to get people together, get feedback and see what they wished they had in the neighborhood."

The partners showed up at block clubs and neighborhood organizations. "We worked real closely with the [Historic] Boston-Edison Association,"

Murdoch said, "and were able to get in front of a lot of people that way."

But if the stars aligned for the church purchase, they went on strike once the excited new business partners threw open the doors in March 2020.

"It took four years," Murdoch said of the project, "and then we were lucky enough to open two weeks before the pandemic."

A resourceful woman, she realized that their large backyard was an underused resource of considerable value, particularly in a pandemic. So Murdoch marched right out and bought "every picnic table I could find," which bolstered their business during anxious times and lends the place—at least in warmer months—an outdoorsy, informal charm.

They've also got a large, handsome deck that can seat about 30.

All in all, The Congregation seems to have struck a chord. "When they opened, they had tons of community support," Melia Howard, the

city's district manager for the area, told the website Deadline Detroit. "The place was literally packed. People were spilling over on the outside."

With time, of course, some of that congestion has abated. But be forewarned—weekends are often mobbed.

HOUSING OF WORSHIP

The Congregation, of course, is now utterly restored and gorgeous. But if you want to see the down-and-dirty side of church renovation, stop by the former Christian Temple Baptist Church on Detroit's east side at Cadillac Boulevard and Sylvester, still in the earliest stages of renovation.

"Ever seen mold so bad it looks like cotton candy?"

asked Mike Willenborg, the retiree from Romeo who has made it his mission to resurrect both the church and its school to serve a small community of tiny homes for the homeless that he plans on empty land abutting church property. "We had to completely demo the basement," Willenborg said, "and bring in a



Christian Temple Baptist Church will become a rental event space with profits supporting adjacent tiny houses for the homeless. | Author photo

company to sanitize the whole thing.”

The whole point of restoring the church is to turn it into a moneymaking event space that can help support emergency housing for the homeless—a gated, residential project that Willenborg and his partners have dubbed New Path Villages. The 240-square-foot “houses” will be, in effect, freestanding bedrooms with electricity, heat, air conditioning and a microwave. However, to qualify for federal dollars, which only fund “emergency” shelter as opposed to “transitional,” they won’t have bathrooms or kitchens. Those will be in the renovated schoolhouse building. But Willenborg sees a social upside to this.

“The reality is most people who’ve been on the street for any amount of time have been in isolation,” he said, “with little sense of community. The concept is you want to build community, so you make daily tasks communal—eating, bathrooms, showers, kitchen, as well as a weekly meeting.”

Neighbors, who’ve mostly been supportive, nonetheless wondered whether New Path Villages might attract homeless folk with criminal pasts, but Willenborg said that won’t happen. A city agency will screen applicants and conduct background checks before sending them over, and there will be 24/7 security and supervision.

“There’ll be very strict rules for anyone living on-site,” he said. “No drugs; no sales of drugs; no guns; no violence, verbal or physical. All those will be grounds for dismissal.”

But before any of this can happen, the church has to get renovated. Willenborg guesstimates that is likely to run somewhere around \$200,000—though a lot of work already has been done, including a new roof and the



The old Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem will be expanded to accommodate 15 studio and one-bedroom rental apartments. | Author photo

decontaminated basement.

Still, on a recent Sunday, as members of the local chapter of Burners without Borders (an outgrowth of the Burning Man Festival) stuffed dozens of backpacks with warm socks, nonperishable food and other necessities to give to the homeless, you could easily spot water damage in the sanctuary and the gaping holes in the ceiling that need to be fixed.

Willenborg laughs when asked what he thinks about retrofitting a church for secular purposes.

“Because of my Catholic background,” he said, “there’s a little part of me that thinks I’m doing something sacrilegious. But I do my best to ignore that.”

And while he says he’s now a lapsed Catholic, he still hopes he is, one way or another, “doing God’s work. I don’t think,” he added, “I’m besmirching God’s house.”

A REVIVAL FOR RENTALS

Finally, the long-empty, somewhat dilapidated little church right across John R from the Detroit Medical Center is about to see new life.

Originally the 1915 Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem, the modest Gothic Revival brick building was passed in 1940 to Grace Missionary Baptist Church. Empty since 2008, the church was acquired by Midtown Detroit Inc. in 2001 with hopes of turning it into a small arts center and restaurant.

But Annmarie Borucki, Midtown Detroit’s director of arts and culture, said they just couldn’t make the numbers work, so the organization sold the church last summer for \$900,000 to developers Neal and Dawn Check. They plan to add onto the building and turn it into 15 studio and one-bedroom apartments, one-fifth of them priced for modest incomes.

Krieger Klatt Architects of Royal Oak will do the renovation and restore as much as it can of the interior details—in particular, the stained-glass windows, many of which are in rough shape. But while the exterior of the church will maintain its original appearance, the high-ceilinged sanctuary will be divided in half, with a new floor bisecting the space into upstairs and downstairs apartments. (Word to the wise: Second-floor units in the old sanctuary will have astonishing stained-glass windows and remarkable ceilings.)

“I’m all about trying to keep the church in all of its glory,” said Neal Check, who has already converted Albert Kahn’s old Packard showroom and service center north of Grand Boulevard into 38 loft apartments. “Restoring a historical church and maintaining its character is fun and challenging.”

Or as Anthony Curis put it at The Shepherd, in a city with unoccupied churches begging for renewal, “coming up with reuse strategies that are positive for the neighborhoods is vital.”