

New Life through Adaptive Use: Saving Our Historic Schools

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NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



*Interlake Public School/Wallingford Center,
Seattle, WA*

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was hearing from so many communities about threats to historic schools that we decided to take on the issue in January 2000 by putting historic schools on our list of “America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.”

The continued use of historic schools has been the primary message of the National Trust in response to the alarming loss of small, walkable historic neighborhood schools across the country. If it is decided that an historic school cannot be renovated and maintained to support a first class 21st Century educational program, however, at the very least it can be reused to serve another purpose. If all efforts to continue using an historic school as a school have failed, finding an appropriate adaptive use for the building is preferred to demolition.

The Significance of Historic Schools

- Few public institutions are more important to community life.
- In communities all across the country, historic schools command respect and portray the importance of what takes place inside.
- They are distinctive places and landmarks in a community with impressive architecture, in contrast to the many look-alike, non-descript schools being built today.
- Historic schools tend to be smaller, more community centered and in walkable locations.

Why We Care

- Renovating an historic neighborhood school can save money and resources while helping maintain community character.
- Historic schools have both intrinsic value and contextual value to a community.
- Renovating historic schools promotes environmental sustainability by conserving resources and stemming unnecessary development.

Most Common Adaptive Uses of Historic Schools & Examples

1. Housing
 - a. Lovejoy School/Lovejoy Lofts, Washington, DC
 - b. Bowler-Mason School/Bowler Retirement Community, Richmond, VA
2. Office
 - a. Harvard Grammar School/Cambridge City Hall Annex, Cambridge, MA
 - b. Emerson School/Frank B. McGlone Center, Denver, CO
3. Community Center
 - a. Pine Bluffs High School/Community Center, Pine Bluffs, WY
 - b. Wiley Rock Schoolhouse/Community Center, Wiley, CO
4. Mixed-Use Commercial
 - a. Frank B. Cooper School/Youngstown Cultural Arts Center, Seattle, WA
 - b. Libby High School/Libby Lofts, Libby, MT

Definition of Adaptive Use

The process of adapting old structures for purposes other than those initially intended while retaining historic features.

Barriers to Identifying Adaptive Uses

- Lack of communication, creative thinking, planning and technical expertise.
- Costs associated with severely deteriorated buildings due to deferred maintenance/abandonment.
- Public policy regarding building surplus, land use planning, etc.

Best Practices

- Coordinate planning efforts
- Keep schools as center of community
- Identify and protect important historic schools
- Require feasibility studies
- Encourage public participation

Kennedy School/McMenamins Kennedy School, Portland, OR

- Constructed in 1915-16 and used by the Portland School District until 1979 when it was closed due to declining enrollment. Slated for demolition.
- In the early 1980s neighbors and community leaders came together to save the building, including the Portland Development Commission and Concordia Neighborhood Association.



- An RFP was issued in 1985 to identify a developer. No proposals were received and building again slated for demolition.
- Concordia Neighborhood Association worked with the city to get a demolition delay to provide time for a feasibility study and conditions assessment. Stalled demolition.
- Property ownership transferred to the city of Portland in 1993 with the condition that PILOT funds could be used for building maintenance.
- The Kennedy School Committee was formed and comprised of key decision makers. A master plan was created with considerable citizen involvement in 1995.
- Another RFP was released and McMenamins Pubs & Breweries was selected from 12 proposals. The locally-owned and operated corporation proposed a mixed use of overnight lodging, theater, restaurant, pub, meeting rooms and conference facilities. Office space was dedicated to the Concordia Neighborhood Association and Portland Police Bureau.
- McMenamins purchased the property from the city at the lower assessed value through a creative loan agreement that required the corporation to pay through community service equivalents over 15 years. Through the value of such things as room rentals made available to community groups, the creation and use of a community garden, and community soaking pool use, the loan was repaid in only five years.
- For more information contact:
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Brookings High School/1921 Building, Brookings, SD

- Constructed in 1921 and closed in 1998 so that a new high school could be built on the outskirts of town.
- Slated for demolition by school district.
- County commission expressed interest in redeveloping the school for office use so the district “gave” the building to the county.
- County received \$400,000 HUD grant to help with renovations and proposed a bond to cover the remaining expenses.
- Bond included money for other projects that the community did not support and failed. In 2002 the county commission voted to demolish the building.



- At the same time, a developer stepped forward with an interest in using the space for commercial use and the county rescinded its demolition decision.
- County unable to sell building directly to developer so gave it and the HUD grant to the Economic Development Corporation who then sold the building to the private developer for \$1 and loaned the HUD money to him at 1% with an expressed understanding of the intended use and public benefit of the project.
- The adaptive use of the Brookings High School into a mixed-use office and housing space was largely driven by the Brookings Historic Preservation Commission, who used their local powers to prevent the county from demolishing the building.
- With the HUD money, a Deadwood Fund grant, federal rehabilitation tax credit, and South Dakota property tax moratorium, the private developer redeveloped the two-story building into market rate office space on the first floor and housing on the second.
- The total project cost was \$2.4 million.
- The 1921 building has enjoyed a high occupancy rate since its completion in 2004.
- For more information contact:
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Tools & Resources to Help Local Efforts

- National Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic Neighborhood Schools, www.preservationnation.org/issues/historic-schools
- “A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools,” Kerri Rudman, National Trust Preservation Books, www.preservationbooks.org
- “Model Policies for Preserving Historic Schools,” Center for State and Local Policy, National Trust for Historic Preservation
- CEFPI publications: (1) “A Primer for the Renovation/Rehabilitation of Older and Historic Schools” and (2) “An Appraisal Guide for Older & Historic School Facilities.” www.cefpi.org

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