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## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Getting Schooled: Creative Reuse of Historic School Buildings

By CED Program Interns & Students

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Copyright Justin Cook | September 4, 2013 – The ribbon cutting at Maureen Joy Charter School in Driver Street in Durham.

In the last 15 years, enrollment in urban schools in 12 cities across the United States (primarily located in the northern states and in rustbelt cities) has dropped an average of 32%, forcing a number of schools to be closed down and students transported to other areas of the city to consolidate resources. Many of these schools were built early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are outdated by modern academic standards – they may be difficult to wire for internet or modern learning aids such as projectors and portable charging stations. These schools may also need considerable upgrades to vital utilities like plumbing and HVAC to be comfortable and conducive to the learning environment. However, these urban schools are often also integral parts of the neighborhood, and leaving them vacant can prove detrimental to the health and vitality of the neighborhood. While the challenges for these large, aging structures are great, their possibilities for adaptive reuse are extensive and can help provide stability in rapidly changing parts of the urban environment.

Dropping enrollment in these cities is a direct result of migration from these cities to cities in the sunbelt and mountain west, oftentimes leaving behind deteriorating housing stock and a decreased tax base for providing upkeep and job opportunities for those remaining. Because of the high cost of maintaining these aging school buildings, school districts are often forced to put them on the market. Of the 12 cities studied by the Pew Charitable Trust in their report *Shuttered Public Schools: The Struggle to Bring Old Buildings New Life*, schools have put a median of 26 empty schools up for sale – Detroit had an outstanding 124 properties available for sale.

In addition to being tremendously expensive to maintain and keep these buildings from falling into disrepair, leaving these buildings empty for too long can result in their use for illegal activity. Since many of the buildings are located in high crime areas, they can end up being susceptible to fires, vandalism, or other criminal acts – which could further encourage migration from neighborhoods by families wanting a safer environment for their children, further perpetuating the loss of population and capital that would help to revitalize these structures.

However, these structures do not have to be eyesores and with the help of a visionary developer and the support of the community, they can be transformed once again into a vibrant part of the neighborhood. The most common reuse of these old school buildings is to renovate and use them once again for educational purposes. Between 2005 and 2012, 42% of closed schools in the 12 city study area were repurposed by charter schools.

A North Carolina example of this was the 2012 renovation of the Historic Y.E. Smith school in East Durham to be the home of the Maureen Joy Charter School. The Y.E. Smith school had been vacant from 1998 until Self Help Ventures Fund acquired the property in 2011. By utilizing New Markets Tax Credits as well as state and federal Historic Tax Credits,



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Self-Help was able to renovate the property to be not only a high quality, highly modern learning environment, but also a source of pride for the surrounding community which had had to deal with the deteriorating eyesore for more than a decade.

Because these older school buildings were constructed at a time when space – especially in urban areas – was very limited, and costs for heating and electricity were proportionally much higher than they are today, many old schools are actually prime candidates for eco-friendly renovations. Large windows provide ample natural light, and a more compact, multi story design makes it easier to heat and cool the school building. Reinforced concrete and brick walls give buildings a high fire rating as well as help to maintain a comfortable internal temperature. Maureen Joy is an excellent example of this sort of green renovation. Because most all of the existing infrastructure needed to be replaced, Self-Help was able to install high quality, low impact lighting, and utilize eco friendly construction materials. Architects and engineers were able to take advantage of the large windows when designing classrooms, and the lower cost of energy bills helps to keep the school functioning and able to relegate funds to providing high quality instruction.

Because these schools are typically located in dense urban areas with existing transportation and utilities connections, the renovation can be done with far less material than a greenfield school development. If the renovation serves the immediate community, the market (whether that be for a charter school, low income apartments, or even retail) already to an extent exists. This also helps conserve land and resources located farther out of the inner city.

But depending on the needs of the community and the feasibility of the different options, the school can also be reimagined for a completely different use. Oakwood Elementary in North Knoxville, TN was the subject of a 2 year, 6.8 million dollar renovation to turn the 100 year old school building into a senior living facility. Family Pride, a Knoxville based developer saw the need for high quality senior care in the community, and purchased and renovated the 53,000 SF building to include efficiency apartments, three dining halls, a salon and barbershop, as well as community and visitor spaces for residents to congregate and entertain guests.

The choice of what the school building should become of depends heavily on the needs of the larger community as well as available funds from state, federal, or private entities. Because of the hefty price of removing and replacing the internal framework of the buildings (things like electric wiring, plumbing, and HVAC systems), as well as performing environmental abatement (as many of these older school buildings have asbestos and lead paint that will need to be removed) financially, it can be very difficult to do a school renovation without the help of outside funding sources. Location in struggling neighborhoods as well becomes a factor in the ability of the community residents to rally in support of these structures.

Though the challenges are many when it comes to renovating these old school buildings, the opportunities are also extensive. With the help of visionary communities and developers, these intriguing parts of history can be preserved and reimagined for a modern purpose.

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