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Divine Intervention

The controversy surrounding the change of use at Portland's Williston-West shines a light on a growing trend.



BY DAVID SVENSON

When the collection plates are empty, more and more churches find themselves transubstantiated into dress stores, posh restaurants, and arts venues. As we change form and function, are architects and entrepreneurs reconciling the reality of the past with today's *zeitgeist*?

"You're putting something new in the space that is, in a sense, a kind of theater," says University of Maine-Augusta professor Eric Stark. "Whatever you do, visitors still expect a sense of the beyond."

As a board member of the Portland Society of Architects, Stark is fascinated with the art it takes to bring these forms down to earth.

From top: The former Methodist Meetinghouse in Wiscasset was converted into The Church Art Gallery in 2004; Theater seating and a stage fill Bath's Chocolate Church Arts Center, previously the Central Congregational Church.



TALKING WALLS

From top: At the former Methodist Meetinghouse in Wiscasset, the balcony is now an extension of the art gallery at The Church; Instead of a pastor's welcome, visitors to the Wyeth Center at Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland are now greeted by an admissions desk.



The Church Art Gallery

IN A FORMER LIFE: Methodist Meetinghouse, 1818
25 Fort Hill Street, Wiscasset

“Turning a sacred space into one that’s art-focused makes sense,” Stark says of this 2004 restoration. “In this case, we are still *looking* at something.” Converging on the central space of the original Methodist Meetinghouse, “You have the small lobby space and then the left and right entries originally designed to separate men and women back then.”

Today’s gallery spaces still invite crowds to ‘Please don’t touch’ events. The central or singular focus gives way to multiple paintings or vases.

“A simple church like this resonates with the New England Puritan aesthetic. They don’t want a lot of ornament. That’s all about ego, building bigger or having more gold on the wall than the next church.

“At The Church, it’s like they’re still thinking about god. Everything here is pure white. It’s so naturally like a gallery or museum. But the green wall is jarring, as is the railing; even that can be white. I can imagine getting rid of the chandelier. It competes with what’s there.”

Wyeth Center

IN A FORMER LIFE: United Methodist Church, 1870
44 Union Streets, Rockland

“A church is all about God—something higher. The idea of turning it into a gallery aligns with that. I couldn’t paint those Wyeths [at the Farnsworth Museum]! There’s something I’m looking at that’s above and beyond what most of us can do as mere mortals.

“You can see how they’ve inserted more things into the building and reshaped energies” for the 1998 renovation. “You enter into this space and you’re moving up these steps. Once you get into that, you don’t have the same central space that once was there as a church.” There’s the multiplicity of options you’d expect from a gallery. “You still come up the stairs to the lobby spaces, but you then go into other, successfully evolved spaces.”

Grace Restaurant

IN A FORMER LIFE: Chestnut Street Methodist Church, 1856
15 Chestnut Street, Portland

“Grace is set up very much in line with how



The open sanctuary of the former United Methodist Church is now sectioned with walls for art at the Wyeth Center gallery at the Farnsworth Art Museum.

a church works. [In 2009], they created this culinary *event*, with the kitchen located where the altar was. The attempt is to make the food sacred. There’s beautiful ductwork above the kitchen. It rises in the manner that the interior of a Gothic church rises, and that’s brilliant engineering.

“It’s all about taking the eye, spirit, and soul toward heaven. Those Gothic arches are pointing toward heaven very consciously.

“But you don’t eat in the sacred space; that takes place on the side, in the aisle. Not eating there allows the diner—or the worshipper—to feel comfortable about not violat-

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ing that space. The tricky part here" is they reverse course "and put the bar smack in the middle" of things. Holy spirits? "Architecturally, it's done well. They've picked up on a lot of forms, in the leaf-like elements over the bar, the Gothic arches turned flat. It's beautiful detail.

"Grace has challenges as a restaurant. You have boisterous places like sports bars, which are very pedestrian. Then you have the more reserved places. Grace wants to be more reserved, partly because it's in a church, but the space is so large. The idea of dining is a very small-scale activity.

"We're eating food. Drinking alcohol. We're doing things we don't immediately consider sacred or are beyond us. Someone may cook better than me, but I can cook.

"I remember the renovation. It seemed like a huge risk to put a restaurant in that space. The risk is inspiring. It's a spectacular approach to sustainability."

Irish Heritage Center

IN A FORMER LIFE: St. Dominic's Church, 1833

34 Gray Street, Portland

"At St. Dominic's you see the rose window in the back, above the choir loft. Over the al-




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TALKING WALLS

tar is the tracery and the ribbing above. It's a gorgeous space. The blue in the ceiling looks like the sky, like looking up toward heaven. It's amazing.

"The hardest [part of this 2003 conversion] is that it's about community, because now it's about *us* and not about something beyond us. Before, that happened in rooms below or to the side of the church. The sacred space isn't about having a reception, or gathering for coffee or a slice of pound cake; they wouldn't do in the main sanctuary. That's for the lower rooms.

"So while different programs happen up here, this space still totally a church." Which puts it in a nutshell: "The focus has departed from some event or something beyond us—like God, a play, or art" and descended to our level without the architecture following us. "Now it's a space set up for events."

Chocolate Church

IN A FORMER LIFE: Central Congregational Church, 1847
804 Washington Street, Bath

"If you're looking for a theater in a church, it's already there, because it's already been designed for a theatrical event. It happens on a raised platform, an altar or stage; people are focused on that. There's a ceremony and expectation of what's going to happen. In that way, [the 1970 repurposing of] the architecture lends itself to that. More importantly, it makes sense that the programs are so similar. We're watching a single event at one end of the space. It's not jarring at all. The way you experience a vaudeville revue at The Chocolate Church is like how you experience it as a church.

"You have aisles on the left and right. Here, the second level is typically not inhabited by us. In the larger churches, it was like a passageway."

Franco American Heritage Center

Saint Mary's Church, 1927
46 Cedar Street, Lewiston

"The churches that act as theaters are like hybrids. At the Franco American Heritage Center, they've actually changed the seating [in 2000]. Now they're raked, at an angle. When you go way back in history, it was the stage that was raked at an angle. It had a false perspective. There were no seats; you stood. It was narrower at the front than it was at the back. The actors were standing on a sloped surface.

“Then that changed. What they did that dramatically changes the space is they’ve taken out the pews and inserted theatrical style seating. You can see how the Gothic arches get smaller and smaller as the seats move up.

“This succeeds both as a conversion and historically. It was an important building for the community. Now, there are people who’ve taken on this reuse of the church and it preserves that idea.”

Williston-West

Williston-West Church, 1897

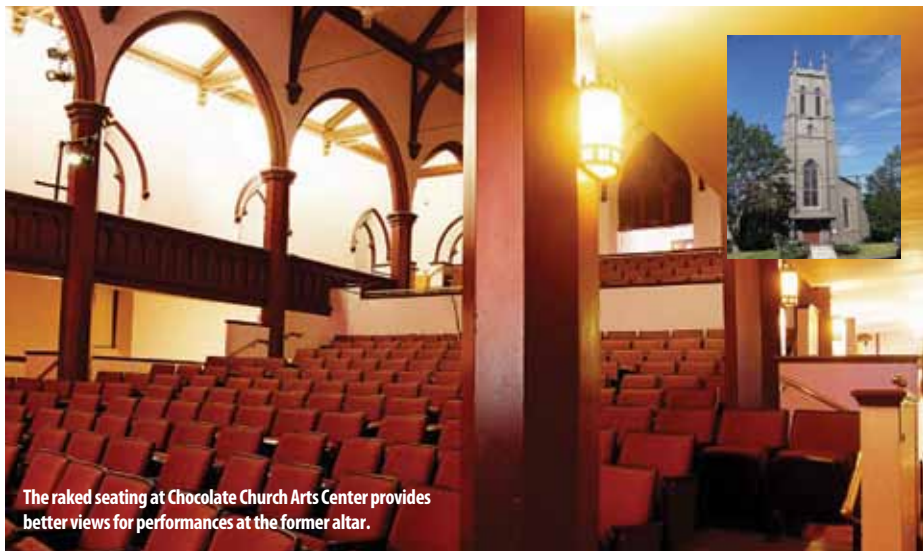
32 Thomas Street, Portland

“It’s a late-Victorian building with Queen Anne features to it,” says Paul Stevens, the great-grandson of architect John Calvin Stevens, of the Williston-West Church, very much in the news these days. “The church was de-

signed by Francis Fassett and built in the 1880s. The parish house was designed by John Calvin Stevens and finished in the early 1900s.

“Church sanctuaries, on the other hand, are large volume spaces that don’t have a lot of windows on the outside, and the windows they do have are stained glass. And unless you have a use for that volume, it could be extraordinary unrealistic to think of anything that could be done to the interior of the Williston-West sanctuary that could easily accommodate residential use.

“It would take an enormous amount of structural work within the sanctuary to make that happen. You’d probably have to put in one extra floor. And there are no windows to see out of. And because it’s in an historic district, trying to get anything permitted through the Historic Preservation Committee would have been extremely difficult. The cost would have been to the point it probably would not be practical, because the building is con-



The raked seating at Chocolate Church Arts Center provides better views for performances at the former altar.

signed by Francis Fassett and built in the 1880s. The parish house was designed by John Calvin Stevens and finished in the early 1900s.

“The issue with these church buildings is that they are each very specific. It’s really hard to find good usage of sanctuaries unless it’s someone like [the proprietors of] Grace, who can make use of the large space.

“What Williston-West owner Frank Monsour is proposing is to renovate the first floor of the parish house for office space for Majella Enterprises. The zoning allows him to have up to 14 people in the space, so it’s a pretty modest use. He’s also planning on renovating the upper two floors of the parish house for quarters for himself and his family when they’re visiting from Australia.

figured poorly.

“Monsour’s professed to be very interested in preservation, so I don’t think this is a money making project. His intent is to use the sanctuary as a community center and set up a not-for-profit to run the center. In many respects the space would be preserved on the interior and exterior as it is now. It would be for a similar use.

“It would have been a shame to try and do something like many of the neighbors were proposing, to converting it into condominiums. They’ve filed a lawsuit naming both Monsour and the city of Portland, and it’s delaying the project.” ■

▶ For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/09/church-extras.



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