

# Sacred and Civic Synergy

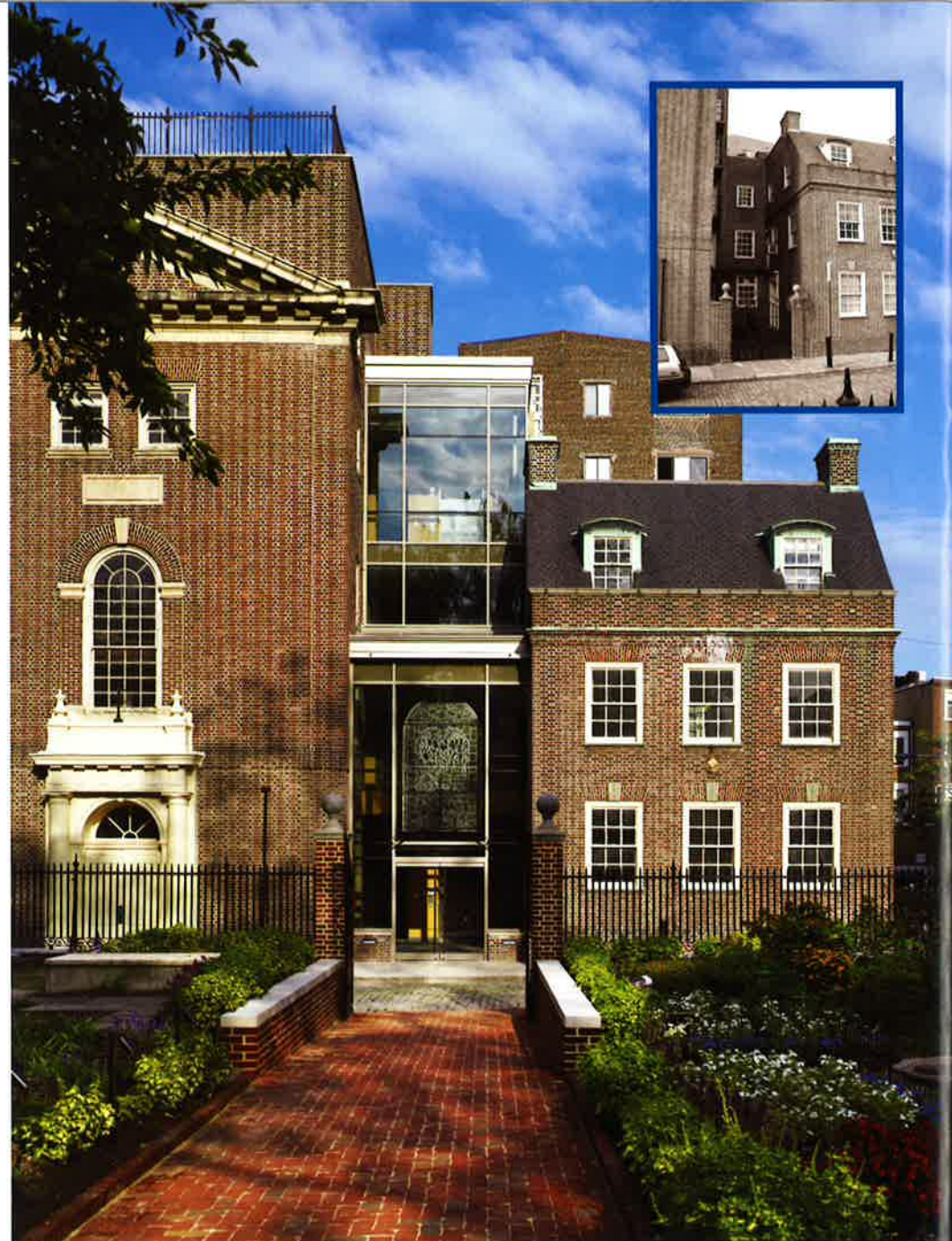
*Christ Church's dramatic transformation of its Neighborhood House into a community asset*

By Chad Martin  
Images courtesy of Voith & Mactavish Architects

The transformation of Christ Church's Neighborhood House in the Old City neighborhood of Philadelphia powerfully exemplifies the aims of the *Sacred Places/Civic Spaces* project. The central premise of the project, "That underutilized space in historic sacred properties throughout Philadelphia can be activated in ways that expand the civic commons, serve a larger secular purpose, and strengthen communities," is clearly exemplified in design sensibilities, program practices, and values of the parish.

I recently had the opportunity to talk about Christ Church with architect James Timberlake, FAIA (founding partner at KieranTimberlake and a congregant at Christ Church who headed the building committee), Rector Tim Safford, Barbara Hogue (executive director of the Christ Church Preservation Trust), and Daniela Holt Voith, FAIA (founding principal at Voith & Mactavish Architects, who designed the project). Design played a very important role in this transformation, making the entrance transparent and welcoming and providing easy access to the entire space for artists and community residents. We discussed the church's work to enliven the building via the arts and open it to the larger community.

Today Neighborhood House is utilized throughout the year for rehearsal and performance space by an eclectic mix of arts groups, and is typically bustling with community activities. For several years more than 150 performance events have taken place there. Philadelphia Fringe Festival, First Person Arts, Pig Iron Theater, and Tempesta di Mare have produced works in the gymnasium-turned-theater on the fourth floor. Meanwhile, the Great Hall on the third floor is often occupied by community groups, 12-step programs, and social service agencies. A few years ago Christ Church Preservation Trust also took over



*A welcoming, glassy entry invites visitors to explore the facilities at Christ Church's Neighborhood House. An addition to Neighborhood House was shoe-horned between two wings of an existing building (inset photo).*

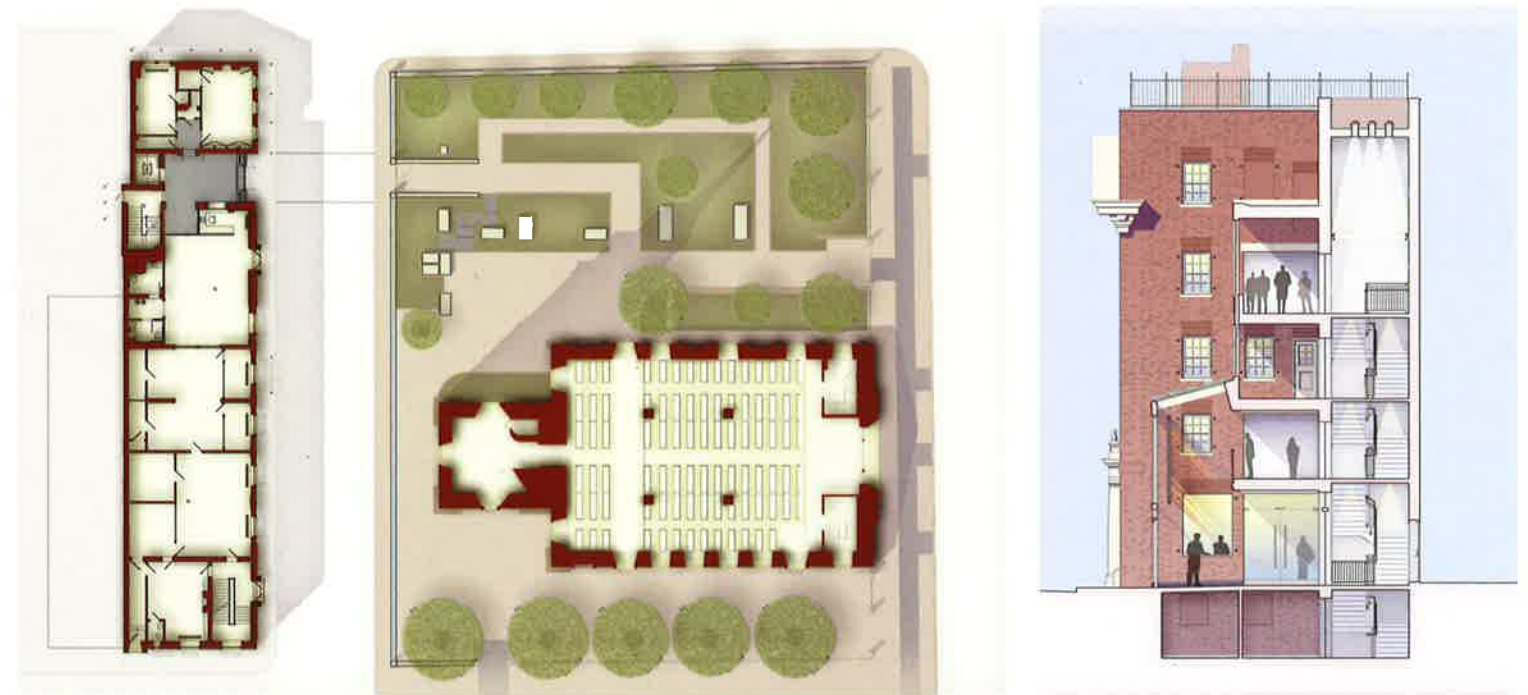
management of the weekly farmer's market on the nearby lawn. Add to this the hundreds of thousands of annual tourists visiting the church and burial grounds, and Christ Church is generally bustling everyday. But this was hardly the case a little more than a decade ago.

## NEIGHBORHOOD 'JEWELRY BOX'

Timberlake remembers this transformation better than most. It's not just that he is a member of the parish or that he provided vital leadership to the project. He has been hanging out at Neighborhood House since he first came to Philadelphia for graduate school in the 1970s, including playing basketball in the old gym. "Neighborhood House was one of

those sort of jewelry boxes where you lost the key in a way," observes Timberlake. "You lost the key a hundred years ago or more. It looked beautiful on the outside and everybody knew it was kind of useful. But it was one of those jewelry boxes you can't really use."

Neighborhood House was built to function as a civic gathering space beginning nearly a century ago. According to Safford, the moniker "Neighborhood House" was intentional. In contrast with the more typical "parish house," this name conveyed clearly that it was built to serve the needs of families nearby who worked in the factories and had little space for recreation--a place for the neighborhood. Years later as Old City became home to a growing



*Plans of the Christ Church physical plant, with Neighborhood House west of the historic church building, its new entrance on axis with church garden to the north. Section of the two-story entry volume reveals a tight yet potent space.*

arts community, Christ Church began opening its doors for performances. But without an elevator, air conditioning, or sufficient restrooms, the building remained underutilized.

So Christ Church set out to update the space, asking Voith & Mactavish Architects to provide the key to unlock this gem. Voith's team designed a connector between Neighborhood House and a historic residence next door, filling in what had been a small courtyard. The connector houses an elevator to all floors of both buildings (vital to the fourth-floor performance venue), provides space for restrooms and gathering, and creates a more transparent and welcoming main entrance. The street-facing entrance is all glass from ground level to roofline, introducing a modern touch and a flood of natural light into all levels of the building, literally opening up the building to the green spaces and courtyards on the north and south sides of the main church building.

The ease with which Neighborhood House and residential buildings have been physically knit together belies how complicated the project was. As Voith explains, "We were trying to unify two buildings with different scales and finishes. We wanted to draw attention to the entrance without competing with the two historical structures." Then there was the functional challenge of a top floor that was a 1930s addition to Neighborhood House, a second floor with exceptionally high ceilings, and interstitial floors all needing to be connected to the residential scale of the secondary building. Add to that building in a small space between to historic structures--the foundation had to be dug by hand--and it made for what

Voith describes as, "One of the tiniest, most complicated projects we've done."

## DESIGN IN SERVICE OF MISSION

But the hard work and nimble design has paid off. Reflecting on how the project has enhanced the use of the space over the last decade, Timberlake notes that it is light-filled most of the day. At night when there are services or programs going on, "that space is a kind of lit beacon to those who are arriving." The new entry hall and elevator made the whole parish inclusive of every youngster, aging senior, and disabled visitor. "I could make an argument that if we'd done that strategy any other way than to make that entrance there, that it wouldn't have made the same difference that it has over the last 12 years," Timberlake believes.

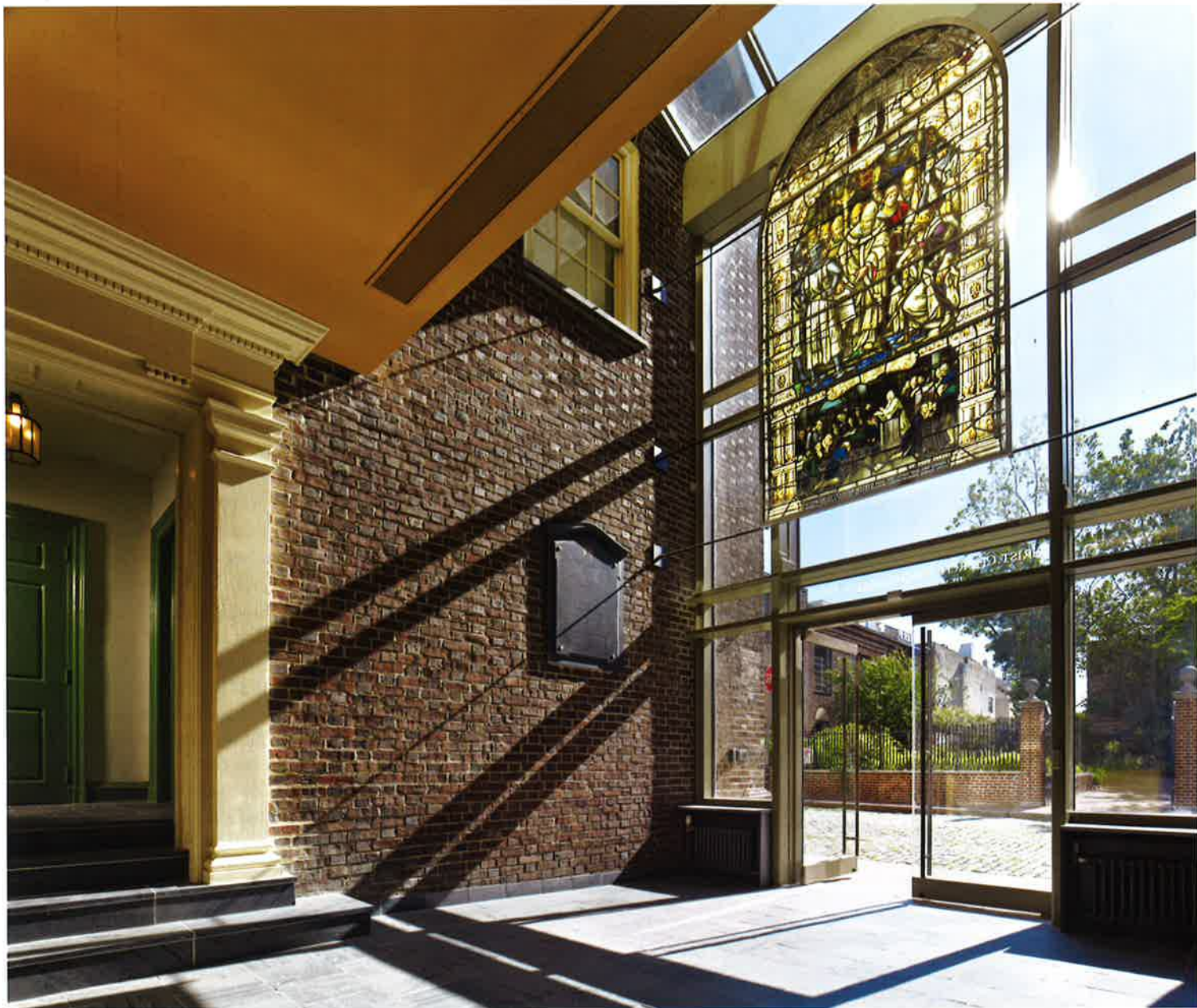
Safford expands upon how the design has enhanced the mission of the parish. He explains that reimagining Neighborhood House to make it accessible "...changed the way we see everything. Prior to this it was almost like Neighborhood House was not part of Christ Church." Reorienting it made it much more accessible to the church building entrance. Stafford adds that enhancing the building's service to the community "...made us much more aware that *all of this* is meant to serve the community."

Whereas previously one could arguably divide the complex into distinct spaces for distinct purposes--Christ Church for the sacred, and Neighborhood House for the civic--the relationship now is much more synergistic and interconnected. With a decade of hindsight,

after years of expanded programming taking place in the building, one can see how vital the commitment to thoughtful design was to this community-building purpose. Here the desire for a more inviting entrance was at least as important to the success of the design as the functional need for a more accessible space. Had the latter been the overriding consideration, a less engaging approach could have been taken to incorporate an elevator near the original entrance at the corner of the building. Instead, the bold entrance invites people inside with a glass and steel facade distinct but thoughtfully connected to the historic buildings. The glow of interior light that pours out in the evening illuminates the way to enter. "That sense of light and air are really important," Voith underscores. "Pulling in the views and connecting to the city was important."

This inviting space has facilitated ease of movement functionally as well as metaphorically. Now parish members more frequently use Neighborhood House for church activities. Increasingly the historic sanctuary building is used for arts programming. The whole campus more fluidly shifts between sacred and civic functions, contributing to how Christ Church has been activated to expand the civic commons in recent years. Thoughtful design of built spaces informed by and aligned with parish and organizational mission and core values has been critical to this expansion.

Rector Safford points out that performance events have taken place in the church's archive, the burial ground, and the sanctuary itself--not just in the dedicated performance space. "From the church's perspective it's all just



Christ Church,” yet he is quick to add, “One of the things we’ve done smartly is not put church people in charge”—meaning the arts and community programming. “In a sense [these activities speak] back to the church about what it needs to become.”

**OPENNES, CURIOSITY, DEDICATION TO COMMUNITY**

The artful design of the space has opened new possibilities in recent years. But the success of programming at Christ Church has also come from an ethos of openness, curiosity, and dedication to community benefit on the part of staff, artists and patrons alike. “One of the main things artists will say about why they come back here is because it really is a community space,” says Barbara Hogue. “There is no gate-keeper.” This spirit of community partnership and openness underscores the fact that even highly utilized sacred spaces can—with a mix of innovative design and savvy leadership—be more fully activated to expand the civic commons and serve community benefit.



*Left, top: Eastern light streams into the new Neighborhood House entry/connector, through an historic stained-glass window.*

*Left, below: Revived Neighborhood House reception space, adjacent to new entry/connector beyond.*

*Above: New entry to Neighborhood House aligns on axis with the historic church’s garden at the corner of North American and Filbert streets.*

A new project by Christ Church is a fitting example. Recently, the church installed a new pipe organ in conjunction with a project to stabilize the iconic steeple. Based in part on lessons learned at Neighborhood House, from the onset the parish asked, in Safford’s words, “How do we make it not just an organ for the church, but also for the arts community?” This led to a grant from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage to commission a new work from the New York-based International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). The piece, inspired by the nearly three centuries of life at Christ Church, will employ a variety of place-based instruments and technologies, and will have the audience traversing the entire grounds—including part of Independence National Historic Park. “We’ve built a public organ,” Safford concludes. “We could have built a church organ, but we built a public organ.”

Guided by this vision and sentiment, the civic realm stretches across both sides of this little stretch of North American Street, serving the civic good of the city now and into the future. 