

# CONTEXT

SUMMER 2018

## SACRED SPACES/CIVIC PLACES

Congregations in Transition

Design Challenge

Christ Church Transformation



PHILADELPHIA PA 19145-3613  
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JEFFREY PETERS  
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# CHRIST CHURCH'S NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE:

SYNERGY BETWEEN SACRED AND CIVIC SPACE

BY CHAD MARTIN

**The transformation of Christ Church's Neighborhood House in Old City 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, founding partner at KieranTimberlake, Rector Tim Safford, Barbara Hogue, Executive Director of the Christ Church Preservation Trust, and Daniela Holt Voith, founding principal at Voith and Mactavish. We discussed the church's work to enliven the building via the arts and open it to the larger community. 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.

Today the 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. Some 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 couple years ago Christ

Church Preservation Trust also took over 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.

Given this, one could forget what a different place the Neighborhood House was little more than a decade ago.

But 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.

As Timberlake recalls:

"[Neighborhood House] was one of those sort of jewelry boxes where you lost the key in a way. 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 name Neighborhood House was intentional. In contrast with the more typical "parish house" moniker, 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 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 unlocking this gem. Ms. Voith's team designed a connector between the 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 4th-floor performance venue), provides space for restrooms and gathering, and created a new, more transparent and welcoming main entrance. And 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 the 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 the 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 the challenges of building in a small space between two historic structures—the foundation had to be dug by hand—and it made for what Voith calls, "One of the tiniest, most complicated projects we've done."



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 observes:

It's light-filled most of the day... At night when there are services going on and when there are programs going on at the Neighborhood House, that space is a kind of lit beacon to those who are arriving...

[When] crossing the street to this... new entry hall and the elevator—transforming the whole parish from youngster to aging senior, and the disabled for that matter... 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 twelve years.

Safford elaborates on how the design has enhanced the mission of the parish.

When we reimagined the Neighborhood House, to make it accessible, it changed the way we see everything... Prior to this it was almost like Neighborhood House was not part of Christ Church... By reorienting it... it became much more accessible to the entrance (of the historic church building).

In remaking [Neighborhood House] so it can serve the community better, it made us much more aware that all of this is meant to serve the community.

Whereas previously one could arguably divide the complex into two distinct spaces for two distinct purposes—Christ Church for the sacred, and Neighborhood House for the civic—now the relationship 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 a 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 quieter approach could have been taken to incorporate an elevator near the original entrance at the corner of the building.





The artful design of the space 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.

As Barbara Hogue says, "One of the main things artists will say about why they come back [to Neighborhood House] is because it really is a community space. 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.

The most recent 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 the 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 Philadelphia now and into the future. ■

*Chad Martin is the Director of the National Fund at Partners for Sacred Places.*

Instead the bold entrance guests have enjoyed for the last decade invites people inside with a glass and steel modern facade distinct but thoughtfully connected to the historic buildings. And the glow of interior light that pours out when evening programs are underway upstairs illumines the way to enter.

"That sense of light and air are really important," Voith underscores. "Pulling in the views [from inside the upper floors of the new space] 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 the Neighborhood House for church activities. And 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 and aligned with parish and organizational mission and core values has been critical to this expansion.

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."