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## These Holy Sites Double as Dapper Digs

Soaking tubs, chef's kitchens and private patios: It's safe to say nobody had those hallmarks of luxe New York living in mind back in 1859, when the congregants of the Sullivan Street Methodist Episcopal Church built their sacred space.

Devout worshippers frequented the church at 135 W. Fourth St. in Greenwich Village for a century and a half before the building was sold in 2004.



*This \$12.49 million church-turned-Greenwich Village penthouse, where Jude Law once lived, found a buyer this week.*

While a landmark designation protects the white marble facade, the interiors were transformed into eight luxury condos, one of which celeb Jude Law briefly called home.

Despite the change in use, there's no escaping that you live in a church. "This building isn't cookie cutter in any way, shape or form," says CORE broker Jim St. Andre, who was marketing the now in-contract \$12.49 million penthouse, where Law lived in 2009.

That apartment boasts 20-foot cathedral ceilings and panels of stained glass, as well as a wall of glass leading to a terrace and a floating chrome staircase; other units on the market right now are asking \$3.59 and \$3.69 million.

“It’s that blend of old and new, modern and historic,” adds St. Andre, who showed the apartment to a Formula 1 racecar driver, actors and a celebrity chef before locking down a buyer earlier this week. “Buyers want compelling residential spaces ... It’s rare to find something like this.”

As religious institutions struggle with dwindling congregations and New York land prices soar, more of these historic buildings are being sold either for conversion or demolition.

In converting these houses of worship to houses for people, developers and architects have to domesticate spaces notorious for soaring ceilings, few windows and religious imagery — not the stuff of an easy religious-to-condo makeover.

Costs are greater compared to a traditional conversion, according to Jordan Rogove, an architect with DXA Studio.

He speaks from experience: the firm is currently converting an Upper West Side church at 142 West 81st St. into six apartments.

Newly built rooms need to be structurally reinforced; special attention must be paid to exterior details like stained glass. The list of challenges can add between 10 and 20 percent to the bill for construction, he said.

But the payoff can be big in an over-saturated market with buyers looking for one-of-a-kind homes.

“There are quite a few opportunities to redevelop religious buildings as the US becomes more secular,” says Jody Kriss, co-founder of development company East River Partners. The firm gutted the interiors of an East Village synagogue at 415 E. Sixth St. and plans to launch its three units, starting at \$3 million, this summer.

Kriss is spot on: according to the Christian Post, a record \$1 billion worth of religious properties were sold in the US in 2014 due to high maintenance costs and declining membership — nearly twice the sales made in 2010. Last year, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, citing shrinking attendance and rising costs, finalized plans to merge about 40 city parishes and sell off properties. Most churches, in fact, cite similar pressures and the desire to help fund their congregations.

With that kind of ready availability, one man’s prayer hall can quickly become another man’s living room. Martin Davis purchased an East Village synagogue in 2002 after it had fallen into disrepair. The building required a complete gut renovation, but vestiges of its past life remain. “I wanted to keep as many old details as I could,” he says.

Separate floors for men and women were taken down and a rooftop addition was added, but Davis retained and restored the stained glass and the building’s original Star of David. He couldn’t save murals of zodiac signs painted on the wall, so he photographed them to project onto his curtains in the living room.

Davis’ apartment ties him back to when the East Village was home to a flourishing Jewish community. After moving in, he discovered his grandfather grew up in the tenement behind his building (although he

didn't attend the same synagogue). One of Davis' plumbers, it turns out, even celebrated his bar mitzvah in the house.

Many conversions, though, pose significant challenges to developers, architects and designers. "These are spaces with lots of volume and not a lot of windows," explains Corcoran broker Deborah Rieders. As for interior design, "religious iconography and too much dark wood can create more of a somber situation," she says.

Rieders is handling sales at 541 Leonard St., a freestanding former church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, that has the marketable perk of windows on all four sides. Despite the constraints associated with a house of worship, the project still results in drool-worthy living spaces.

"A developer would never choose to build 22-foot ceilings ... but buyers get to take advantage of that," Rieders says. Two of the three units at 541 Leonard are in contract with prices starting at \$2.6 million; the remaining pad, a three-bedroom, three-bathroom with original wooden beams, is asking \$2.97 million.

To create The Residences at Prince Street in Soho, Time Equities and Hamlin Ventures renovated the old St. Patrick's Cathedral School into seven condos starting at \$7.74 million. The placement of the windows on the landmarked facade "had certain implications for the layouts," says Time Equities director Roberta Axelrod.



*Roberta Axelrod (inset) is turning a Soho church building into posh pads.*

The firm added walls of windows on one side of the building, which faces a courtyard, to bring extra light into the apartments, which retain the building's peaked ceilings.

DXA Studio, meanwhile, got creative on 81st Street, designing a glassy enlargement for the landmarked church. Although the addition is contemporary, Rogove says, “we designed it as a gabled roof that refers back to the Romanesque church design.” CMC Development made an agreement with the church to provide sanctuary space for the congregation alongside six condo apartments. “By buying in this building, you can help support this institution that’s been in the Upper West Side for 40 years,” Rogove says.

Renters can also find salvation in former churches — for a price: within the Spire Lofts, at 167 N. Sixth St. in Williamsburg, two rentals with exposed beams and cathedral ceilings are on the market starting at \$5,500 a month. The last unit remaining at the 12-unit Fort Greene church conversion 232 Adelphi St., a two-bedroom duplex, asks \$8,600 a month.

Julia Lichtblau bought one-half of a Cobble Hill church with her husband and two children in 2001. (Their first to-do was to enclose a waist-high parapet inside the space, making it safe for children.) Lichtblau occasionally offers her home as a vacation rental from \$530/night through luxe website Onefinestay. “It’s more interesting and memorable than a brownstone,” she says. “It’s a perfect space ... for a New York visitor because you get to experience the city’s traditional architecture adapted in a creative way.”

Right next door is 58 Strong Pl., a church redeveloped into 24 condos in 2010. Units don’t often come to market here; the last apartment sold in 2013 for \$2.85 million. A close-knit community has blossomed among residents.

“There’s a communal feel — it’s kind of churchy,” says Gregory Copeland, who runs the condo board. “There are potlucks, yoga, a book club.”

The common hallways are decorated with stained glass and old pews, but Copeland selected his apartment because “inside... you wouldn’t realize you were in a church.” He said that owners have added different flourishes alongside the arched doorways and windows that remain from the church. “People have left their own imprints on the units,” he says. “But we were given a pretty good template to begin with.”