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HISTORIC TAX CREDIT TOOL BOX

Lessons Learned from Adaptive Reuse of Building to Become a School



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Adapting historic buildings for new uses in a historic tax credit (HTC) development often hinges on the ability to find a compatible use, so what happens when a school needs to undertake an adaptive reuse project on a historic building that was not previously used as a school?

Schools have specific needs which may not fit with the existing historic fabric. On top of preserving the character-defining spaces of the historic building, a successful school development must meet various code requirements and adapt to the program of the school. When pairing the rehabilitation of a historic hotel for use as a school, another set of challenges arise. This article addresses the opportunities and challenges of the adaptive reuse of historic buildings for schools in HTC developments, using the Lane Hotel in Rogers, Ark., as a case study.

Considerations for Schools in HTC Developments

Adapting historic buildings for school use presents a number of challenges and opportunities. While these

factors are not necessarily unique to adaptive reuse for schools, there are specific challenges in designing a school within a historic building—including the subdivision of significant spaces, circulation and additions, building codes, and safety and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

It is common in an HTC development for a historic building to have large public or assembly spaces for which there is no feasible reuse without subdividing the space. In assessing the significance of interior spaces, the National Park Service (NPS) examines the floor plan, arrangement of spaces and the inherent hierarchy of interior spaces. Public and circulation spaces are typically recognized as more

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important than spaces that were not historically seen by the public.

Schools may need to adapt these spaces to fit their programmatic needs, particularly the circulation spaces. By nature, schools have a high volume of students in spaces at the same times, which may or may not fit with the historic circulation pattern in the building. Architecturally distinguished public spaces are typically assigned a higher level of significance than more utilitarian spaces. The NPS will generally require that these spaces be retained or altered with a sensitive approach. The team must decide which character-defining spaces within a historic building will best house various educational uses. For instance, a large ballroom in a hotel may serve well as a dining

hall while former offices in a commercial building may be easily repurposed for classrooms.

Image: Courtesy of Heritage Consulting
The conversion of the Lane Hotel in Rogers, Ark., provided an illustration of handling large public spaces while doing a historic renovation into a school.

Schools may also need to construct additions for a development to be feasible. As schools generally contain spaces that are unique to educational use, new additions may be required for gymnasiums, cafeterias, libraries and circulation, including stair and elevator towers. In assessing the impact of a new addition, the NPS will evaluate the location, massing, size and scale of the addition. NPS guidance states that an addition should be subordinate to the historic building; that it should not complete in scale with the historic building. Additions on secondary side or rear elevations, particularly on elevations that are less architecturally distinguished, are more likely to be approved. A proposed addition that dominates the site or requires the removal of important site features is not likely to be approved. By contrast, a smaller addition on a secondary elevation that respects the proportions and massing of the historic building is more likely to be determined appropriate. The team must take these

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factors into consideration when weighing the decision to build an addition.

Perhaps the biggest challenge schools face in HTC developments is adhering to various building codes, school requirements, ADA requirements and life safety requirements while maintaining the building's character-defining features. In general, the NPS is responsive to safety as well as ADA issues. However, it is necessary to work with the state historic preservation office (SHPO) and NPS on any upgrades to safety and ADA access and take an approach that is sensitive to the historic fabric. The NPS provides guidance on these issues in "Preservation Brief 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible." As is the case with new additions, accessibility modifications

Image: Courtesy of Brian Stark, What My Eyes Have Seen
Lane Hotel LLC recently converted a historic landmark in Rogers, Ark., into a public charter school.

should be in scale with the historic property, visually com-

patible, and, whenever possible, in secondary spaces. On top of safety and ADA access, schools, especially public schools, must adhere to district programmatic and design requirements, including classroom size, security, energy efficiency and the inclusion of specific spaces such as gymnasiums, cafeterias and libraries. If a school is private or a charter school, the school's individual standards may be less stringent. A successful HTC development will consider all of these requirements up front and devise a design that is safe, accessible and functional.

Case Study: Lane Hotel, Rogers, Ark.

One recent development that successfully adapted a building for school use was the Lane Hotel in Rogers, Ark. The 1929 Spanish Colonial Revival style Lane Hotel was a local historic landmark before being vacated in 2005. The rehabilitation by Lane Hotel LLC

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involved the conversion of the building for a public charter school.

The property faced several challenges, which generally centered on building code and school programming requirements. Because the construction was privately funded, the design of the new charter school did not fall under the Arkansas school code, which on top of the local building codes, applies specific design standards to school buildings. These standards include minimum requirements for classroom size and the types of spaces which the school must provide. Charter schools have a certain degree of flexibility in design when construction is privately funded, as was the case with the Lane Hotel. However, while the standards were certainly more flexible, the building still needed to meet building code, ADA and the public charter school's specific programmatic requirements. The school planned for a student body of 350-450, which could be comfortably housed in the former Lane Hotel without any significant exterior additions. While the building size was appropriate for the charter school, there were a number of challenges that arose in adapting the building for school use.

One of the primary challenges was meeting egress requirements, as the existing egress was insufficient for school use. At the start of the development, the elevators that existed were inoperable and narrow. In order to maintain the historic elevator locations, as is generally required in HTC review, new elevator cabs were installed in the existing shafts. Ordinarily, the small size of the elevators would not meet egress requirements, but a variance was granted by the state to enable the historic elevator shafts to remain. The stairs that existed at the start of the development were also insufficient to meet egress requirements and thus it was necessary to add two new stair towers to the rear of the building to supplement the existing. Since the new stair towers were on the rear elevation, and thus

not readily visible, the new construction was approved in the HTC review.

Additional challenges arose in the building interior, which retained significant public and circulation spaces. At the start, the hotel lobby, main dining room and a secondary dining room remained. These spaces were monumental in design, featuring extensive character-defining features including ornamental millwork, tile floors and high-beamed ceilings. Retention of these spaces with the ornamental features was required under HTC review. The challenge in reusing these spaces was finding a use compatible with the school's program requirements that did not require subdivision of the spaces or alteration or removal of the character-defining features. It was determined that the most appropriate reuses adhered to the historic uses: the main lobby now serves as the main entrance lobby for the school and the two dining rooms remain in use as the school dining hall.

On the upper floors, the historic hotel corridors remained intact and retention was required in the HTC review. However, the corridors were 18 inches narrower than a standard modern school corridor. Since this charter school's programming permits students to stay on their own floor throughout the day, minimizing transitions from floor-to-floor, the narrow corridor size was ultimately determined acceptable. This was particularly fortunate as widening of the corridors was not likely to be approved under HTC review and would have adversely impacted the size of the classrooms.

A final challenge revolved around the incorporation of mechanical systems. HTC guidelines require that ductwork be concealed in buildings that historically had finished interiors and finished ceilings must be above the windows. Due to a minimum floor-to-ceiling height requirement, designing the mechanical systems in a historically compatible fashion proved to

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be a challenge. The ceiling heights within the former hotel rooms did not leave much space for the addition of mechanicals while maintaining the required ceiling height. As a solution, the team was able to install the new mechanicals within existing chases throughout the building, which allowed for the maintenance of the historic ceiling heights within the classrooms.

As seen in the case of the Lane Hotel redevelopment, when rehabilitating a historic building for use as a school, a school that has flexible programming will present fewer challenges than one with a prescribed formula. The Lane Hotel development demonstrates that a creative design team that understands the parameters of the HTC program as well as local

building codes and school programming will enable the success of a development. The school was able to adapt its programming to meet the constraints of the building and the team was able to design an historically compatible rehabilitation without compromising historic integrity. ❖

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