

lifespan perspective

A different way of looking at design

Your new (used) facility: Why some senior centers are moving into old buildings

A church nestled among homes in a bustling Philadelphia neighborhood is being readied for its new role—as a senior center. On the New Jersey coast, a former (national chain) pharmacy will soon be renovated for this unexpected purpose as well.

It's not unusual for senior centers to exist in made-over versions of buildings originally constructed for other purposes—seventy percent of the directors we've polled at state and national conferences of senior center professionals reported that their facility started out as something different. At a time when unprecedented numbers of centers are exploring their options for a new facility, used buildings continue to come under consideration, and with good reason:

- They are often found in highly desirable, central locations.

- The cost to acquire and renovate an existing building to meet your needs is sometimes less than the cost to purchase an unimproved site and construct a new facility.
- Renovating another building (rather than the one you're in) may eliminate the need to relocate your operations during construction.
- In some cases, renovations can be accomplished more quickly than constructing a new building.
- Re-use is "green." When you reuse an empty building (and thus avoid having to construct a new one from scratch), you reduce blight in the urban landscape and conserve natural resources. Low-interest loans, tax breaks, and other incentives may be available in some communities.

A pre-commitment evaluation of an existing building's merits as a potential home for your senior center is critical. This period of due diligence prior to purchase may uncover issues that could seriously compromise the building's appropriateness to accommodate your goals effectively—or drive up the cost to make it work. The following issues all warrant careful consideration.

Parking

- Does the site include an adequate number of parking spaces (or the space to create them) to accommodate your participants and staff at projected levels?



The Crawford County Commission on Aging in Grayling, MI studied the pro's and con's of renovating this historic fish hatchery for use as a senior center. A treasured community asset, the hatchery building and its central, scenic location have tremendous popular appeal with the target population. Limited parking, a sloped site, and structural limitations pose formidable challenges to meeting the organization's goals. The study also reviewed another existing building, and projected the cost of constructing a new facility on a vacant site.

- Is the existing parking lot well located and laid out for safe, easy access to the main entrance by people of various abilities?

Identity

- Does the building have a strong identity (sometimes including distinctive architectural features),



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associated with its previous owner/use? How much of a makeover will it take to make the public see the building in a new light?

What's beneath the surface?

- Gross square footage may be a misleading indicator of a building's ability to accommodate your needs. Options for carving up the overall square footage may be limited. In some cases, existing "bearing" walls, columns, and even some windows and doors cannot be moved or removed without substantial re-engineering and expense.
- The cost to repair, expand, or upgrade building systems to support the proposed reallocated spaces and uses may consume a substantial chunk of your renovations budget. The capacity and state of repair of the building's electrical, plumbing, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems—and the capacity of its structural components to support the projected uses—should be evaluated prior to purchase.



- Older buildings and sites sometimes contain hazardous materials, such as asbestos or lead, that must be contained and removed.

Other hidden costs

- The fact that a building is currently in use is no guarantee that it meets current building code requirements (pertaining to accessibility and safety). Even if you only intend to make minor changes, you may be required to bring

everything up to code in order to pass mandatory inspections. Approved uses (zoning) must be explored as well.

- If you are not planning to update or replace existing systems, equipment, fixtures, etc., right away, how soon may you have to? At what cost? If you don't improve them, what will it cost to operate and maintain them?

The future

- Are you looking at the proposed location as a long-term solution? How adaptable is the structure to respond to changes in the types of programs, services, and amenities you may need to accommodate in 10 or 20 years? Is there room on the site for an addition, and parking to support increased attendance?

This partial list of potential challenges to a building's appropriateness to support your goals can be daunting, yet adaptive reuse is certainly an option worthy of consideration. Just as you wouldn't purchase an expensive used car without a mechanic's approval, it's important to seek qualified professional input before committing to the purchase and/or renovation of an existing building. You may choose to contract separately with one or more consultants: building inspectors, structural engineers, mechanical/electrical/plumbing engineers, architects, cost estimators, etc., to review essential issues—or hire a single consultant to coordinate an appropriate study.

Ultimately, the goal is to determine the practical and financial feasibility of accommodating your needs at the proposed location. These needs should be clearly spelled out in a list of parameters for the new facility: **the architectural program**. For best results, enlist a design professional with directly relevant experience to help you develop this essential resource.

Know what you need: A look inside one room in your architectural program

As with any recipe or shopping list, the more detailed the list, the more reliable it is. A thoughtfully detailed architectural program could be the key to a successful design or renovation experience.

Let's assume, for example, that you want to create a lifelong learning classroom for groups of 20-30 students. Since your current classroom seats 15 students comfortably, you assume that the new room should be about twice as big. But is this true?

Will you seat students at the same kind of tables/desks you currently use, or would something different be more effective? How big will the new tables be, how will they be arranged, and how much space should be allowed around them for seating and walking? How much space will the instructors/speakers require to stage their presentations? For that matter, what is the ideal configuration of the space itself: square or rectangular?

What kinds of equipment would you like to be able to make use of in the new room? Will secure storage be needed for that equipment and other supplies? If the room will sometimes be emptied for other uses, where will the tables and chairs go?

Where should this room be located in relation to other rooms and activities? Are noise and other distractions a concern? Would you like the space to have windows for natural light and views of the outdoors, or prefer that it didn't, so that it's easily darkened for audio-visual presentations?

If you haven't thought through issues like these, how sure can you be that the structure you are considering renovating can be modified (within your budget) to meet your needs? Are you dreaming of a new facility? Start "programming" today!