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Group links low-use religious sites with space-needy organizations

By [Sherri Welch](#)



Photo by JOHN SOBCZAK A space-sharing pact with St. John-St. Luke Evangelical United Church of Christ provides ArtLab J founder Joori Jung space for performances.

The sounds of children playing once filled the gymnasium at the historic **St. John-St. Luke Evangelical United Church of Christ** in the city's Eastern Market area.

But they faded as the size of the congregation there — over 1,300 strong in 1874 when the church was built — dwindled to just 50 today for the church now occupying the building.

Things are looking up for the church to find new use, and even new membership interest, however, thanks to a new space-sharing agreement between the church and two local performing arts groups.

Church spaces find new uses in Midtown

The concept of repurposing sacred spaces may not be common, but it isn't brand-new in Detroit. Here are two other local examples:

- In 2011, **First Unitarian-Universalist Church** in Midtown donated its complex of buildings, including the

ArtLab J and its fledgling contemporary modern dance company moved into St. John-St. Luke's auxiliary building last summer, joining United Church of Christ performing arts outreach program **Young Fenix Physical Theatre**.

With its lofty ceilings, wood floors and balcony, the former gym is perfect for dance performances, and the classroom-like space on the building's second floor is perfect for rehearsals and classes, said ArtLab J founder and artistic director Joori Jung.

Next year, she and ArtLab J plan to host performances inside the sanctuary — complete with its towering stained glass windows and candelabras as a backdrop.

Space at the church is affordable — ArtLab isn't charged rent but does make donations to the church — and parking is free, Jung said, unlike its previous locations in the downtown area.

For the church, the agreement is bringing new people and new donations through its doors, something it needs to keep the lights on and the building maintained.

It's exactly the type of space-sharing arrangement Philadelphia-based **Partners for Sacred Places** hopes to spur further in Detroit, Baltimore and Austin.

The organization is in town, talking with churches and religious sites about the potential value of opening their doors to artists, nonprofit cultural groups and even creative businesses. A \$100,000 grant from the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation** is funding its assessment of creative sector space needs and the availability of sacred space in Detroit, Baltimore and Austin, Texas.

The hope is that foundations might make grants to help facilitate space-sharing agreements between the two in the three cities, said Karen DiLossi, director of arts in sacred places at Partners for Sacred Places.

Such agreements give arts and cultural groups suitable and affordable space, while helping bring more people and more donations to religious organizations, DiLossi said.

It sounds like a partnership made in heaven, but one local creative sector leader cautioned about guarding against the potential conflict between religious views and artistic expression.

"It appears that Partners for Sacred Spaces have dealt with similar concerns in other cities, and have strong processes in place to help negotiate," said Matthew Clayson, director of the **Detroit Creative Corridor Center**.

Scarcity of space

ArtLab J and its contemporary modern dance company had a tough time finding suitable, affordable space after it launched in 2012.

The organization, which is operating on a budget of just over \$245,000 this year, was one of the **John S. and James L. Knight Foundation** Arts Challenge grantees last fall, with a \$100,000 matching grant.

Initially, ArtLab J operated from a loft space above **Nikki's Lounge** in Greektown, but being located in a nightlife district wasn't ideal, and parking was a challenge.

sanctuary and attached church house with social hall and second-story church, to the **East Michigan Environmental Action Council**.

Those buildings are now part of the council-managed Cass Corridor Commons, a multiuse, nonprofit and green space for tenants such as the **Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice**.

- **Midtown Detroit Inc.** is converting a former church on East Forest Avenue west of John R Street into an intimate music/performing arts venue in the main sanctuary and a 100-seat black box theater. It will also include an outdoor patio and stage area and a permanent restaurant/bar inside the sanctuary that will operate even when the performances spaces are dark, said Executive Director Sue Mosey in an email. Built in 1915, the two-story brick building built in the Late Gothic Revival style originally housed the Church of the New Jerusalem. Crossroads of Michigan subsequently operated a soup kitchen and food pantry from the church until 2008.

Art Place America awarded a \$900,000 grant to Midtown Detroit in 2011 to do due diligence and acquire the property. Mosey said Midtown is continuing to fundraise for the \$4.7 million project and plans to also seek federal and state historic tax credits, foundation grants, lenient-term loans and other funding, with a goal to begin the renovations next spring.

— Sherri Welch

Last spring, ArtLab J moved to space in the **Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center**. It was suitable but not dedicated space.

Through a performer, Jung met the Rev. Todd Farley, senior minister of **First Congregational Church United Church of Christ** in Saginaw and **Young Fenix Fellowship UCC** — an alternative church that does a Sunday service through performance rather than preaching — that he brought to St. John-St. Luke in Detroit. This was at the request of the **Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ**.

Farley was operating Young Fenix Physical Theatre from the 1515 Broadway Café in Detroit but moved to St. John-St. Luke Evangelical to create space sharing there as he had done at his Saginaw church.

"We also wanted a cultural outreach in the community, (so) I invited Art Lab J to be involved, too" Farley said. "I believed Art Lab J was also trying to work with the community, give voice to it, express its angst and life."

The fine print

As a condition of being nonprofit, St. John-St. Luke cannot rent space or engage in other profit-making activities, said board secretary Tracy Craig.

The church, built in 1874 by German immigrants, was looking for a way to signal to the surrounding community that it was not closed, as many believed, she said.

"If we could have people here during the week, the community would see there was something going on and the church was open."

It's slowly working.

So far, a few people who'd come to the church for a performance presented by ArtLab J or Young Fenix have shown up for Sunday morning services, Craig said.

And, coincidentally or not, there have been more donations in the donation box recently, she said. And that's a help: "It costs at least \$20,000 to operate the church annually ... and you certainly can't bring that in (from) donations from 20 people each Sunday."

Such space-sharing agreements help both the congregation and the nonprofit arts sector, said Sacred Places President Robert Jaeger, a Mt. Clemens native who became fascinated with historic Detroit churches while pursuing his MBA at the **University of Michigan** in the 1970s.

Most of the Detroit churches he fell in love with back then are still here. And space-sharing agreements help them "to hang on ... (and) continue to take care of their buildings," he said.

Partners for Sacred Places has been hosting training sessions to help artists and congregations understand the logistics of sharing space and facilitating agreements between arts groups and religious organizations over the past four years in Philadelphia and Chicago, DiLossi said.

Here in Detroit in early May it held a town hall-style meeting for local nonprofit arts and cultural groups and artists to brief them on the study and ask for their participation in focus groups and an online survey.

"We hear from our members all the time, 'I wish I had a place ... a presence downtown,'" said Lynn Friman, acting executive director of **CultureSource**.

Partners for Sacred Places came in almost a year and a half ago and looked at half a dozen locations up and down Woodward and now is expanding its reach, she said.

"The idea is they will work with CultureSource to (identify) funding and gauge opportunities."

The plan is to share the findings from Detroit and the other two cities in September during meetings at the Doris Duke offices in New York and at **Drexel University** in Philadelphia, which is assisting with research on the project, DiLossi said.

Partners for Sacred Spaces will bring best practices and "hopefully ... a framework that ensures long-term access and affordability for ... creative groups," the creative corridor's Clayson said.

Partners for Sacred Places is focusing initially on repurposing sacred spaces for the arts here in Detroit, but in a way, it's an extension of what many churches offer in the way of hosting emergency food and shelter and senior programs, Jaeger said.

"I think we're also delivering a broader message — these sacred spaces have an enormous value as places that shelter, support, host and incubate a wide range of nonprofit or community purposes."

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