



A Sacred Mission

The uphill battle to save our old houses of worship.

By Cathleen McGuigan

Newsweek

Nov. 6, 2006 issue - This week, the 200-year-old neoclassical Baltimore Basilica will reopen its weighty oak doors after a two-year, \$32 million face-lift. The restoration of America's first Roman Catholic cathedral is a triumph for preservationists, both for its history and design: it's considered the masterpiece of architect Benjamin Latrobe, best known for his work on the U.S. Capitol. After a dingy decline, the Basilica's lofty interior has been refashioned according to Latrobe's elegantly simple intentions, especially the restoration of skylights set high in the spectacular dome, which admit a heavenly light into the sanctuary below. But this successful makeover—paid for by private donations—highlights a real crisis: the hundreds of crumbling historic churches and synagogues across the country, whose shrinking congregations can't keep up—let alone restore—their decaying buildings.

Saving them raises thorny church-and-state issues. A few years back, the National Park Service denied a grant for repairs to Boston's Old North Church because it is still an active parish. But for heaven's sake—this is the church where Paul Revere had those lanterns raised to warn that the British were coming! Ultimately, the Park Service reversed the decision, but some local governments don't want to touch religious buildings, either with funding or special designations. And churches often resist landmark status: they want to be free to develop or demolish or sell historic properties in today's real-estate market.

So most saviors of old houses of worship are private nonprofits—the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Partners for Sacred Places, scores of local landmarks groups—working to save New England steeples or the prairie churches of North Dakota. In Berkeley, Calif., a nondenominational consortium of design aficionados is raising money to restore the First Church of Christ, Scientist, the magnificent 1911 arts-and-crafts building by the ingenious and eclectic Bernard Maybeck. (They're known as "Maybeck nuts.") In Oak Park, Ill., the Unitarian congregation of Unity Temple, with help from Landmarks Illinois, is working to save their deteriorating 1905 church designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, his first building made of poured concrete.

But such high-profile structures are far more likely to be rescued than the many old churches and synagogues that dot our inner cities, once-grand landmarks that still anchor their tattered neighborhoods. Chicago's Pilgrim Baptist Church, designed as a synagogue in 1890 by Wright's great mentor Louis Sullivan and his partner Dankmar Adler, became a Baptist church—and a crucible of gospel music—in the 1920s as the neighborhood became mostly African-American. Last January the church burned to its monumental stone walls—and how its small, struggling congregation will rebuild isn't clear.

Many old urban churches shelter soup kitchens, day-care centers, AA meetings—even living quarters. Preservation advocates say it's far better to "repurpose" beautiful old buildings no longer in use than to tear them down. After the quake-damaged old St. Vibiana's Cathedral in Los Angeles faced demolition, an enlightened developer refurbished it as an arts center. "Municipal governments shouldn't look on this as a religion issue," says Peg Breen, president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. "Neighborhoods are changing all over the country, with buildings going up that aren't of the same quality and scale." But all too often, saving these fine old places of worship seems to call for a miracle.

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