

# NEW LIFE FOR OLD BUILDINGS

## TRANSFORMING SPACES TO IMPROVE PLACES

★ *By Shannon Easter White*

Adaptive reuse is the process of reusing an old site or building for a purpose other than that which it was built or designed for.

Many times, adaptive reuse is viewed by architects and urban planners as a key factor in land conservation and the reduction of urban sprawl. Adaptive reuse transforms old, unoccupied buildings into suitable sites for many different uses.

Flint and Genesee County have great examples of adaptive reuse. Putting historic or buildings of societal importance back in use has been the backbone of much of the revitalization happening locally, especially in downtown Flint.

### **FIVE THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN CONSIDERING REUSING A BUILDING FOR A NEW USE:**

Q. When was the building last occupied and what was it used for?

A: This is important because a change of building use or renovation of more than 50 percent of a structure triggers a requirement that the most recent building codes be followed during the renovation. That means buildings that don't have an elevator, handicap accessible toilet rooms and entryways may

be required to have them. Those requirements can be costly to a project but worth it in the long run. If a building has plenty of core and shell space in good condition, then interior walls can be demolished and redesigned quickly and easily for a new tenant.

Q. What existing prominent or important architectural features of the building can be fixed up or reused?

A: Buildings that previously have been deemed to have societal importance or historic architectural character often are first choices when considering an adaptive reuse project. Ask yourself: Does it have a neat window pattern? Unique woodwork or plasterwork? Interesting light fixtures that could be gutted, cleaned, relamped and reused? If the answer is yes, consider salvaging and restoring these key building features.

Q. What kind of economic savings can be reaped from adaptively reusing a building versus the cost and energy (both machine and manpower) of building new?

A: Many times less building material is required to adaptively reuse an existing building, even if decay, neglect and other damage has occurred but the "bones and structure" of the building are still in good shape. If a building can



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be renovated in a quicker time frame because new foundations and exterior walls do not have to be constructed, sometimes a tenant can save money by being open for business on a faster time schedule. Site savings can be huge if a parking lot already exists and drainage is already in place. Legal, zoning, financing, environmental, design and construction fees can be less as well. On the flip side, adaptive reuse can be *more* expensive if lead or asbestos needs to be abated, significant code improvements need to be made, etc., which is why it's important to make sure the building is suited for its reuse.

Q. Location, location, location. Is the building or site in question in a great location?

A: Central locations on easily accessible prime traffic arteries are hard to come by and are valuable real estate commodities. Genesee County has several big box retail stores that are sitting empty but these type of sites, along with buildings in a downtown proper, are in high traffic areas. They provide excellent visibility and curb appeal for a new business and often have parking already adjacent, available and many times free!

Q. Is the building or site part of a larger revitalization strategy that can catalyze redevelopment of other key buildings in an area that needs it?

A: Downtown Flint is the perfect example of how starting with one project in a key urban area can create a renaissance. One of the first redevelopments, the First Street Lofts by Uptown Reinvestment Corp. and Uptown Developments, transformed a historically significant building (previously First National Bank) into desperately desired loft living in the downtown area and spurred multiple projects totaling over a million square feet in real estate redevelopment in Flint. It also proved that downtown living was a hot commodity and in high demand as more and more businesses, restaurants, higher ed and other investments were made in the area. 

# 5 GREAT LOCAL EXAMPLES OF ADAPTIVE REUSE

★ *By Shannon Easter White*

## THE 500 BLOCK DEVELOPMENT / ROWE BUILDING, DOWNTOWN FLINT

The 500 Block Development transformed three historic South Saginaw Street buildings built between 1880 and 1920 into one mixed-use building. The front façades of the three adjacent buildings were removed. One floor was added to the middle building and two floors were added to the northernmost building. The interior space was combined into one four-story building.

The Rowe building has retail on the ground floor, which houses the offices of Mlive-The Flint Journal. The headquarters for Rowe Engineering—a professional service surveying and civil engineering firm—occupy the second and third floors, and there are eight luxury lofts on the fourth floor.

The new front façade is reminiscent of historic traditional downtown façades with stone arched windows and red brick, and incorporates a contemporary tilted glass atrium which defines the building's entry. The interior exposes the brick and steel structure, which gives the development a sleek, industrial feeling.

*Architect: THA Architect Engineers  
Client: Rowe Engineering, INC  
Contractor: Sorensen Gross Construction Services*



BEFORE (ABOVE)





BEFORE (BELOW)



**GENESEEE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICT TRANSITION CENTER,**  
FLINT TOWNSHIP

The Genesee Intermediate School District sought to create a facility that would house a Transition Center for mentally and physically challenged young people between the ages of 18 and 26. The program provides vocational training and internship opportunities for more than 150 clients.

The need to get the program moving quickly made the adaptive

reuse of an abandoned big box store, formerly an Office Max, an excellent choice. Its high roof allowed for higher ceilings, leaving more space for HVAC and lighting systems. The large open space was conducive to flexible space planning, and also substantially reduced the time needed for demolition. The large parking areas typical of the big box store provided plenty of parking space and traffic lanes without high site costs.

The GISD’s building choice eliminated the costs of searching for a suitable site and associated

costs in providing new site utilities, infrastructure and paving, allowing the district to reduce the buildout cost of a new facility. Re-use of the building’s shell and maximizing natural daylight through the commercial style “showroom” windows reduced artificial lighting and energy use. Power and site utilities remained in their existing format, reducing tap-in fees, construction labor, fuel and material usage.

*Architect: THA Architects Engineers  
Client: Genesee Intermediate School District  
Contractor: Wolgast Corp.*



**ANDERSON HAMO CHIROPRACTIC CLINIC,**  
GRAND BLANC TOWNSHIP

Doctors Dana Anderson and Tera Hamo were looking to move their chiropractic practice from leased office space to a new building they had recently purchased. The project was the perfect example of adaptive reuse – taking an old Republic Bank building that needed a small addition and the creativity and vision to repurpose it for another business.

The original bank safes and teller counters were removed, as were the

old lay-in ceiling tiles, fluorescent lighting and dated carpet. New blown insulation in both the ceiling and wall construction, coupled with new mechanical and electrical upgrades, reduced the building’s heating and cooling bills by 50 percent.

New carpet, lighting, crown moldings, and general sensitivity to the interior design of the patient spaces resulted in their new, comfortable and inviting chiropractic office.

*Architect: FUNchitecture, LLC  
Client: Anderson Hamo Chiropractic Clinic  
Contractor: Hessling Construction*



BEFORE (RIGHT)



## FLINT FARMERS MARKET, DOWNTOWN FLINT

The Flint Journal sold its Press and Distribution Facility when printing operations moved out of town to the Uptown Reinvestment Corp. to become the home of the new Flint Farmers' Market.

To transform it into the market, 30,000 square feet of the warehouse portion of the building were demolished and a 6,000-square-foot addition was constructed to accommodate a portion of the market vending floor and an upper roof terrace to host parties, outdoor dining at lunch and private events overlooking Flint's skyline.

The four-story atrium that previously housed the newspaper's printing presses is now home to the market's "town square"—a multi-purpose flexible space that

has been used for weddings, a musical production, parties, and a community selling area and dining commons.

High structural bays and open floor space previously used for conveyor systems allowed flexibility for market programs such as a community room, two commercial kitchens, and more 70 vendors selling a variety of wares.

The exterior of the building was modified by the addition and by creating new window openings but was mostly left intact. The existing parking lot, with more than 300 spaces, surrounds a new outdoor market pavilion for seasonal vendors and holiday events.

*Architect: FUNchitecture, LLC  
Client: Uptown Reinvestment Corporation and the Flint Farmers' Market  
Contractor: DWLurvey Construction*

## URBAN ALTERNATIVES HOUSE, CENTRAL PARK NEIGHBORHOOD, FLINT

The Urban Alternatives House is a great example of sustainable design and adaptive reuse and an educational tool for the community in the future. The Genesee County Land Bank and the University of Michigan-Flint teamed up to turn this once-abandoned house into a UM-Flint classroom and meeting space on the ground floor and two residential apartments on the upper floor.

Multiple sustainable strategies were used to make the house, which was on the Land Bank's demolition list for blight elimination, more than 50 percent more energy efficient than it was before renovation. As new technologies become available, coupled with energy monitoring



BEFORE (LEFT)



systems, UM-Flint will continue to improve the project's energy efficiency.

The house has new blown insulation to improve the R-value significantly. All windows were replaced with new double pane insulated glazing, again increasing the R-value in the building's walls

Existing wood flooring was left in place and refinished to save money and materials during the renovation.

The adjacent vacant lot is home to the new geothermal wells used to heat and cool the house and doubles as a community garden in the summer months.

The gut rehab was designed from the inside out where all asbestos was removed and lead paint either removed or encapsulated. The architect designed floor plans that left the majority of the interior walls in place.

The house passed a five star energy rating test and is one of the few LEED Platinum certified projects in Michigan. It has played a vital role in neighborhood stabilization and revitalization and promotes community learning with a unique classroom experience within walking or biking distance to campus. 

*Architect: FUNchitecture, LLC  
Client: University of Michigan-Flint  
Contractor: Swank Builders.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon Easter White, AIA, NCARB, has seen firsthand how giving a second life to a dilapidated abandoned building has the power to transform not just the structure, but the area around it and the people who live there.

White is the founder and owner of FUNchitecture, an award-winning Flint-based architectural firm that has conceived and brought to reality many of the current adaptive use projects in the Flint area in recent years.

One of FUNchitecture's highest-profile recent projects was the transformation last year of the former Flint Journal Press and Distribution Center into the new Flint Farmers Market.

White has bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture from the University of Michigan and worked at architectural firms in the Detroit area and at THA Architects Engineers in Flint, another major player in the downtown Flint renaissance. She was the lead architect or project manager in each of the five examples of adaptive reuse in the accompanying article.

"My background with downtown projects started with my work on the Community Foundation of Greater Flint's Downtown Façade Improvement Program. The program was funded by a one-to-one matching grant from the Ruth Mott Foundation to catalyze downtown

AUTHOR, CONTINUED ON PG. 50 

# FUN ARCHITECTURE

AUTHOR, CONTINUED FROM PG. 49

building and business owners to renovate their buildings and essentially double their money by participating in the program,” White said.

“The building owner needed to work with an architect to present a viable vision for what their façade would look like, or how they intended to transform their façade for the better and were eligible for up to \$250,000 in matching grants.”

It was through her work on downtown Flint projects that she met her now husband, Ridgway White, the new president of the C.S. Mott Foundation. White has been a long-time key player in downtown revitalization through his work at the foundation and as a loaned executive to Uptown Reinvestment Corp. and Uptown Developments.

“I met my future husband, then a loaned employee at Uptown Developments, at a design charrette that I threw monthly for young architects in the community to get together, drink beer, eat pizza and redesign the faces of buildings in downtown Flint for the better,” White recalled.

Their shared interests led to a successful collaboration—both professional and personal.

“We have worked together on many of the projects critical to the redevelopment of downtown Flint, he as the developer and me as the architect, including the Rowe Building, the Community Foundation Building, including the interior design for CFGF and 501 Bar and Grill, the original design concept for the Wade Trim Building, and most recently the Flint Farmers’ Market.” White said.

They married in 2007 and have two children, ages 5 and 3. White founded FUNchitecture after the birth of her first child.

“Ridgway and I are very proud of our professional and personal partnership and think we’ve made some good strides working together to better Genesee County where we are choosing to raise our young family,” White said. “We both have long roots in this community and intend to keep being part of creative solutions instead of complaining about Flint’s many problems. ☺

FUNchitecture has won numerous awards from the local American Institute of Architects chapter. Those include:

“**Best Sustainable Design**” for a collaborative project called the Urban Alternatives House with the University of Michigan-Flint and the Genesee County Land Bank.

“**Best Residential Design**” for a Northern Michigan lake home which had multiple custom features, creative siting and impressive interior and exterior design features.

Notable mention for “**Best Interior Design**” and “**Best Urban Planning and Site Development**” as well for the interior rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of a historic downtown building into the headquarters for a private foundation and the master plan of Smith Village (a \$14-million-dollar 88-unit housing and mixed use development in downtown Flint with HUD and MSHDA as key funding partners).

**Recognition from Projects for Public Spaces** at the upcoming 9th International Public Markets Conference in Barcelona, Spain for the firm’s work in facilitating connections between markets and community development, civic engagement, job creation, and public health.