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THE REVITALIZATION OF CHURCH BUILDINGS: HOW NEW LIFE & PURPOSE CAN BE BROUGHT TO THESE HISTORICAL RESOURCES



There are an estimated 27,000 religious buildings in Canada. By the time we arrive at 2025, it is expected that 9,000 places of worship will close across Canada (National Trust for Canada). An interest in organized religion has been on the decline for a number of years, with 25% of citizens now identifying themselves as religiously unaffiliated (StatsCan). Many Canadians have the opportunity and the desire to find alternative means of spiritual comfort, and other ways to build relationships with their neighbours. But what happens to those buildings? And, particularly in smaller, rural towns, what about the people who relied on their local church as the only provider of social services and peer support?

Jasmine Frolick is a Registered Professional Planner (RPP) working at ERA Architects, an architecture firm that specializes in heritage conservation. As a planner with ERA, Frolick's primary interest is in the adaptive reuse of churches in the Toronto area due to its high development pressure. Toronto's neighbourhoods are forever growing, their needs forever evolving, and so finding a unique use for a church building to meet the desires and requirements of a varied population is a creative project. In some cases, a once-Protestant church may simply become a different religious denomination's renovated place of worship, as one group leaves a neighbourhood and another with different needs moves in. Says Frolick, "there are plenty of examples of churches that are now synagogues or temples." But in towns with less development pressure, where fewer able parties exist to take on the big purchase and painstaking revitalization of these churches and other heritage buildings, a creative project becomes a Herculean challenge.

In response to this, ERA Architects also houses [Culture of Small](#), known familiarly simply as 'Small'. It's a not-for-profit that specializes in aiding smaller, more rural communities across Canada transition "from resource-based settlements to diversified, creative economies" and evolving the resources that they have to meet the current needs of their communities. Frolick's involvement in Small has meant stepping outside the Toronto revitalization scene into towns like Picton, or Cochrane, or Chapleau. She works in a very hands-on way with all of the stakeholders involved in the emotionally taxing, sometimes awkward (talking money), but ultimately rewarding task of taking a beloved church building from a declining place of worship and returning it to its former status of community resource, community pulse.

The historic composition of many communities across Canada is grounded in three core settlement institutions: the post office, the school, and the church. While the church's primary function is to provide religious services to its local congregants, it also traditionally offers other social support, or 'common good services' as that support is sometimes known. Think free or subsidized child care, the food banks for those in need, perhaps the English learning classes for new immigrants, or Narcotics Anonymous. They're not services that every single community member in a small town requires. But as Frolick summarizes it, "I'm not a member of AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] but I do feel strongly that that service should be available to whoever needs it." Without the church, who hosts the weekly meetings? Even if organized religion is also waning in smaller Ontario towns at the same rate as Ontario's larger cities, the church buildings themselves need to be maintained to host these services or other, newer initiatives that aid the community. The evolution of the local church in Chapleau, Ontario is the perfect example of a small town meeting its community's needs.



St. John's Anglican Church in Chapleau, Ontario

In 2015, Jason Rioux, born and raised in Chapleau, approached the congregants of St. John's Anglican Church - he wanted to buy it. Rioux had moved to Toronto to build his career and his fortune, but he'd never left his hometown in spirit, and wanted to give back in some way. He heard that St. John's was struggling to keep its doors open. So his idea here was to purchase the church, rent the top floor or chapel space back to the congregants for a nominal fee, and then turn the unused basement into something that all members of Chapleau's community could enjoy, regardless of their religious affiliation. Working with Small, Rioux was able to realize his dream - not just in terms of making over the dark, dingy basement into an eventual blend of café, store and event venue, but in terms of communicating thoroughly with the people of Chapleau to really determine what they would want and need out of this now-available public space, and therefore truly 'give back' to his beloved hometown.



St. John's Anglican church basement before revitalization



St. John's Anglican church basement is now a thriving mixed-purpose space

To kick things off, the basement was cleared of its many forgotten boxes and church belongings, and a series of workshops were hosted in it, whereby locals of Chapleau could stop by and brainstorm adaptive reuse ideas for the basement - together - while physically being inside it. Frolick and her colleagues' role was to listen; hear what the community expressed as its needs and desires of the space, report back to them and the church stakeholders, and effectively facilitate a revitalization that ticked as many boxes as possible for all involved.



Community members brainstorming ideas for repurposing St. John's basement

That active listening is a skill she can't emphasize enough when talking about planning. "[As planners involved in the project] we did not have the solution. We just had the space. We heard what everyone wanted to say, pulled different themes and presented that back saying, 'This is what we heard. Is this also what you heard and how do you feel about this, especially if the idea...' and so on. Definitely, active listening was important." You can watch a little more of the Chapleau project and process in the video below.



From an architectural standpoint alone, revitalizing a church building is no mean feat. Refurbishing a building erected in the late nineteenth century by replicating the original workmanship as closely as possible is a long, expensive process. "We have stone masons today like we did back then," says Frolick, "but they're not as plentiful." The work is hugely specialized and not every town comes with a resident mason at their disposal. But preserving the façade of a marked heritage building is a requirement, and Frolick further credits her skills as a heritage planner in the Chapleau project, specifically, "to help my peers, as architects and inspectors and so on, to kind of figure out how you physically treat the building in its adaptive reuse." Juggling the building's needs, the stakeholders' budget, the overall vision, and following the guidance set out by the Ontario Heritage Toolkit: Conserving Historic Places of Worship is a niche skill. But Frolick finds that her RPP designation is particularly helpful in her role as facilitator or mediator between all the different groups involved in these projects, particularly when working with peer professionals, like architects. "At heritage committees, the places where I do public presentations...I do think they sit up a little straighter and maybe take me a little more seriously having an RPP designation."



Noah McGilvery, one of the architects who worked on the project, is seen here assessing the rear of the church. The window is where a new opening door was made in order to provide a universally accessible entrance into the café

The theme at the recent [OPPI Symposium](#) was 'Community Readiness'. Frolick led a dynamic, fifteen-minute presentation and subsequent Q&A on this topic of church revitalization. She explored the social support offered by these historic buildings and pointed to Chapleau as a strong example of how churches can continue to meet community needs beyond religious services, well into the future. Because, as she eloquently and passionately asserted in an aside during her presentation, 'community readiness' is not just about preparing for climate change or economic down turns (although those are very big issues), it's also about preparing for and meeting social change. If all church buildings are turned into private condos in large cities or are being demolished altogether in smaller ones due to financial impossibilities, the neighbourly connections built by the locals over many years are destroyed, the common good services disappear, and the future of the community becomes fragile. There has to be an alternative, or many different alternatives, to suit many different adaptive reuse projects and the interest groups involved. In that vein, Frolick gives some parting advice to student planners on the brink of graduating and contemplating a similar role to her own: "When you're first out of school, attend as many meetings and conference calls as you can, and just listen. Because so much of the job is learning about how to negotiate and knowing how to speak about a difficult subject. You might not even have a starting position of where you want to go with complicated community projects like the evolution of churches, and every stakeholder group has their own interests...But there is a way to [help] achieve a balance of all those interests and part of it is education - really, just listen."

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