

CHICAGO ARCHITECT

ALL TOGETHER NOW

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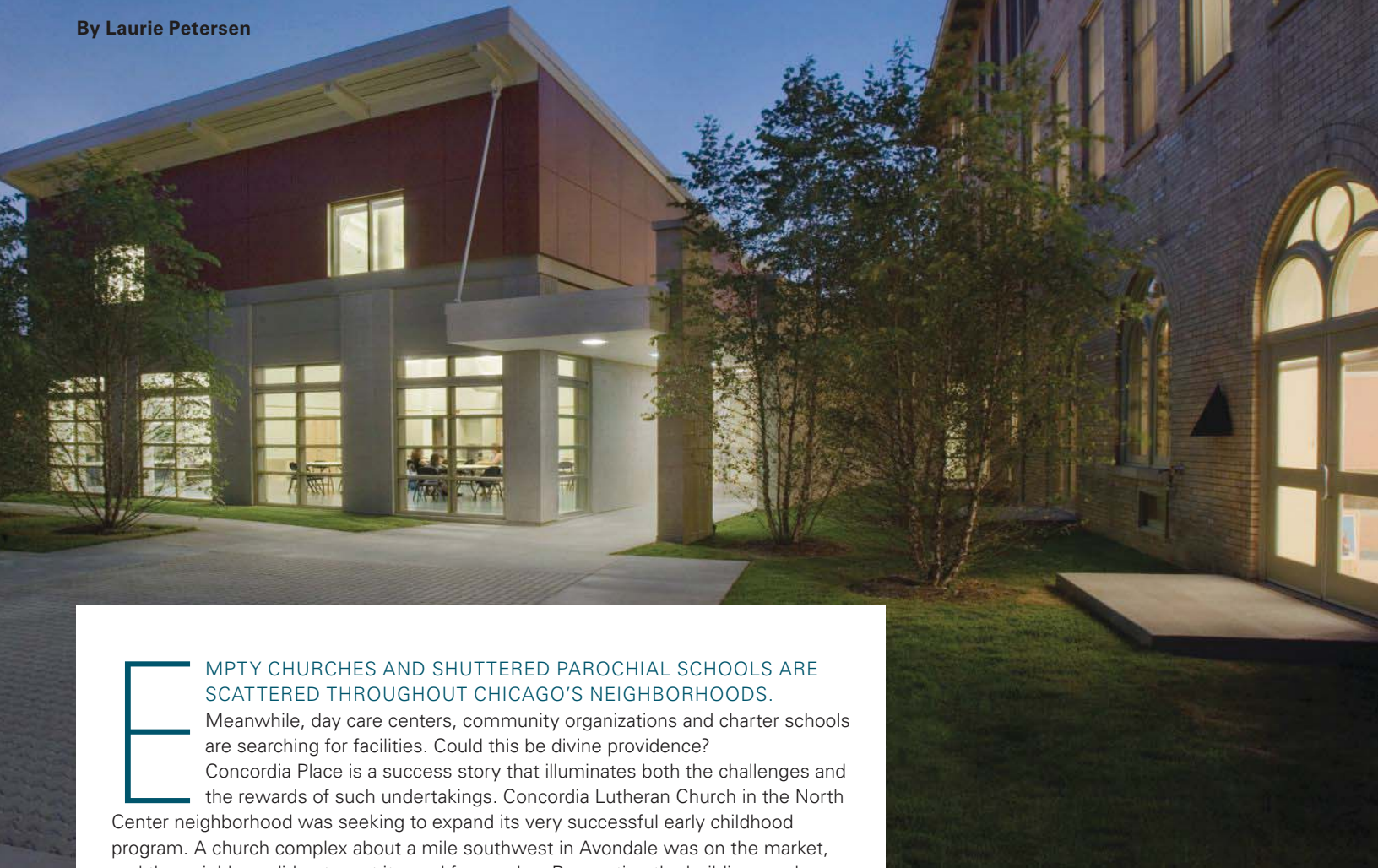
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ANSWERED PRAYERS

GROWING COMMUNITY CENTER'S CHURCH REHAB
SERVES MANY PURPOSES

By Laurie Petersen



EMPT Y CHURCHES AND SHUTTERED PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS ARE SCATTERED THROUGHOUT CHICAGO'S NEIGHBORHOODS.

Meanwhile, day care centers, community organizations and charter schools are searching for facilities. Could this be divine providence?

Concordia Place is a success story that illuminates both the challenges and the rewards of such undertakings. Concordia Lutheran Church in the North Center neighborhood was seeking to expand its very successful early childhood program. A church complex about a mile southwest in Avondale was on the market, and the neighbors did not want it razed for condos. Renovating the buildings and constructing an annex resulted in an expansion of mission and program: Concordia Place now serves a multi-age population from babies to senior citizens.

The property featured an unusual set of structures. St. Veronica Parish was founded in 1904 and a year later dedicated a combination church-school building at 3300 N. Whipple. What looks like a three-story brick-and-limestone school actually contained a sanctuary on the ground floor, classrooms on the floor above, and a large community hall on the third floor. Gone was an old wood-frame convent in a wood-frame penthouse above it all; it was destroyed by fire years ago.

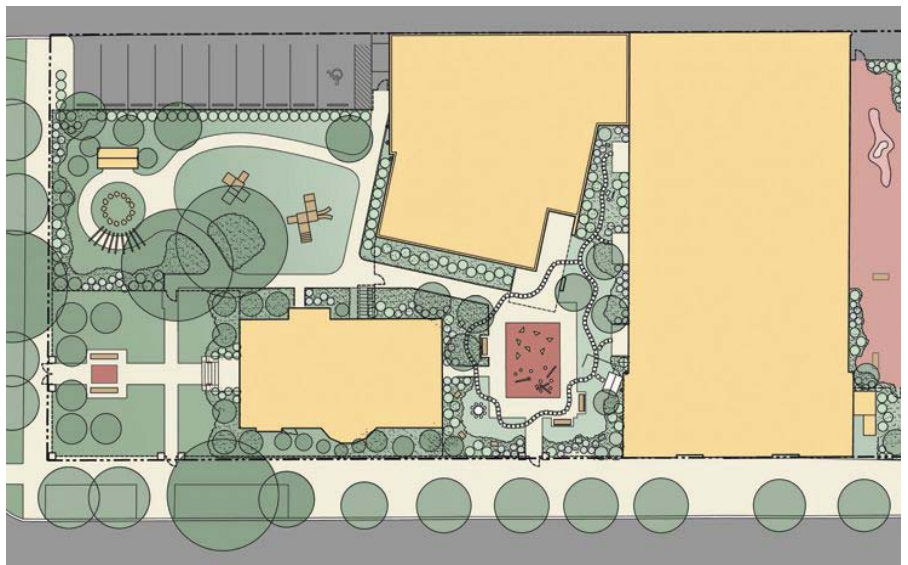
Chicago cultural historian Tim Samuelson says that this building type was not uncommon in the Chicago Archdiocese during the period. He notes that "it was a good,

Images courtesy of Holabird & Root

Lit up at night, the annex (left) is set up for a community event and glowing like the neighborhood beacon it has become. During the day, the interior space is used for children's large-motor activities.

Three buildings contribute to the complex (top right). At left is the red brick Schlacks-designed rectory, rehabbed in an earlier phase of work. The St. Veronica's church/school building is at right, and the annex is at back. Together, they enclose a courtyard that is used for both school and community events, including a farmers' market run by the after-school teens.

The site plan (bottom right) shows the three buildings (in yellow): rectory on left, church/school on right, annex pulled to the back of the site between the two older structures. A playground for preschool children is left of the annex, and a fenced play area for toddlers is tucked to the right of the school building.



Images courtesy of Holabird & Root

pragmatic Chicago-style solution.”

The combination church-school building may now be the most readily adaptable of church properties, as it has no bell towers, large rose windows or tall, voluminous naves. And the lack of the typical church basement means the main level is usually just a step or two up from the sidewalk, making ADA compliance easier to achieve. The principal design quirk of the St. Veronica's building was the slope of the first floor toward the back wall where the altar was located.

In contrast to the modest church-school structure, the rectory, built a decade later, is an imposing red-brick Tudor design by noted ecclesiastical architect Henry Schlacks. The archdiocese closed both church and school and sold the property to the city of Chicago in 1989. For a time, it was used as overflow space for nearby Carl Von Linne School, but by 2001 it was vacant and suffering from vandalism.

When Concordia Lutheran purchased the property that year, leaders of the group knew that the first two floors of the church-school building would be perfect for their early childhood and preschool program. But according to Reverend Nicholas Zook, they

wondered what to do with the third floor. With the help of consultant Laurel Lipkin, they surveyed the community and found that because of gang activity, teen programs would be welcomed. There was also a large population of seniors and non-English-speaking adults. So the “bonus space” of the third floor would house a more comprehensive program, a community center. In addition to licensed childcare and preschool programs, Concordia Place's offerings include after-school and summer camp programs for ages 6 to 12, leadership development for teens, English classes for adults and wellness programs for seniors.

Architects Holabird & Root were charged with meeting all the varied programmatic needs while preserving historic exteriors. Careful site planning made use of every square inch of the property. “We wanted to get as much space as possible for the kids to play but also make a welcoming gesture to the public,” says project designer Maria Segal. A single-story annex replaced a decrepit 1950s addition. Its colors and materials—soft red and light sage green composite cement panels—mediate between the red brick rectory and the yellow brick church-school building. Siting the annex at the back of



the lot created a courtyard that is now used for both school and community events, including a farmers' market run by the after-school teens.

The high-ceilinged annex is used for children's large-motor activities as well as banquets, community meetings and worship services. Extensive glazing provides a visual connection to the outdoors and makes it glow during evening events. A playground for the preschool children is just south of the annex, and a fenced play area for toddlers is tucked into the north part of the site, offering direct access from those classrooms.

The church complex is rated orange—meaning it possesses significance to the community—on the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. Receiving state funds for the project triggered the involvement of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. The original wood windows were restored and double-glazed. A compromise was reached between IHPA's directive to preserve all window openings and Concordia's desire to change them into glass-paned doors for the

first floor classrooms: alternating windows were changed into doors, and small square windows were punched into the walls below the sills of the remaining windows.

The interior of the church-school was gutted except for a stairway in the southeast corner. Folding wooden doors that divided a large room on the third floor were reused for the same purpose. Another compromise was reached with the second-floor hallways, which IHPA wanted to be as wide as they had been originally. To meet this directive, yet gain much-needed classroom space, Holabird & Root bumped out bays into the hallway and then took advantage of the configuration to incorporate hall benches.

The archdiocese had removed about half of the stained glass windows before selling the property. Those that remained were removed from the first-floor sanctuary and placed in back-lit frames in the historic stairwell and in the third-floor teen room, which can also serve as a chapel. Preservation of the glass was not required by the IHPA but was done at the insistence of Rev. Zook, who "wanted to

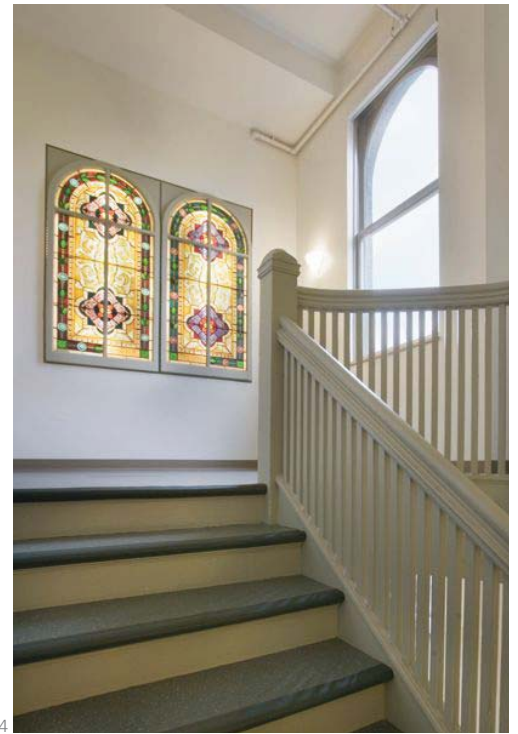


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1. To maximize daylight and views for the children, alternating windows of the first-floor classrooms were changed into glazed doors, and small square windows were created just above floor level. Activity areas are defined by low walls, lofts, and changes in ceiling and floor treatments. The neutral palette is a soothing backdrop for the children's toys and activities.
2. To gain classroom space while meeting the IHPA's requirement for wide second-floor hallways, Holabird & Root bumped out bays and then incorporated benches. Interior windows provide views into classrooms.
3. The skylit third floor café serves as a secondary lobby and multi-age meeting space.
4. The stairwell is the only historic element of the otherwise gutted interior. Back-lit stained glass windows were originally in the first-floor sanctuary.



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show continuity with this place as an anchor in the community."

The interior materials palette is in neutral, soothing colors with natural materials, such as birch plywood, used wherever possible. "That way the child brings the life and color to the spaces," Segal says. She and the client were able to visit several other childcare centers and found some common desires: maximization of natural light, a scale that is appropriate for children and an abundance of storage spaces. Zook praises Segal for creating storage from otherwise useless space, which helps maximize the flexibility of the rooms. He is also enthusiastic about the variety of lighting, including daylight, that is found throughout the building.

The child-appropriate scale was achieved despite high ceilings by breaking down the scale of the classrooms with alcoves, cubbies and lofts. Activity areas are defined by changes in ceiling and floor treatments. Low, square windows provide views into adjacent classrooms as well as to the outdoors.

The third floor has an array of spaces whose flexibility has been key

to the building's success as a community center. Zook had wanted a grand first floor lobby, but it was not practical because that valuable space was needed for classrooms, so instead, the project team created a great lobby upstairs. A pitched-roof skylight structure provides abundant north light, and a café serves as a multipurpose space used at different times of day by seniors, adults and teens. New doors can close off the corridor to separate the licensed preschool spaces from the community areas. Segal notes that this kind of mixed-use facility is a good model for the pooling of resources that is now often necessitated by tight budgets.

Challenges during the process included the discovery of cast-iron columns, requiring the addition of a secondary set of them in steel. Zook feels that the added costs of preservation were part of the organization's "good faith relationship to the community," which includes former St. Veronica parishioners. Instead of being lost to the wrecking ball, this former church serves a new organization's mission as a place "where all our neighbors can gather, learn and grow." **CA**