

“CONVERTING” SPACE IN TORONTO

The Adaptive Reuse of the Former Centennial Japanese United Church to the “Church Lofts”¹

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On January 8, 2006, the Centennial Japanese United Church (CJUC), in West-Central Toronto, held its final service.² After almost one hundred and fifty years of ministry, the church was forced to amalgamate with another nearby congregation and sell its aging and expensive property. Notes from the church’s newsletters suggest that this fate was of no surprise.³ In the years leading up to the closure, the congregation closely monitored a significant decline in numbers. Indeed, as many of its older members began to leave the area for Toronto’s suburbs, a number of its younger generation began to choose new life paths. Larger demographic and economic shifts in the neighbourhood began to play a part in the process as well. Over the years, the increasing presence of Italian and Portuguese migrants and, more recently, a surge of property reinvestment and redevelopment have significantly altered the sociocultural and physical characteristics of the community. Unable to continue supporting its building amidst the changes, the CJUC chose to sell the church and move on. However, a heritage designation established in 2004 by the City of Toronto limited resale options. In a short time the building was sold to Dovenco Corporation, a real estate development company headed by local architect Bernard Watt, for conversion to upscale residential lofts. The nature of this turnover was not out of the ordinary. For some time now, many redundant churches in Toronto have been bought by niche developers seeking to convert historic properties into lucrative condominiums and lofts (table 1). In several older residential neighbourhoods

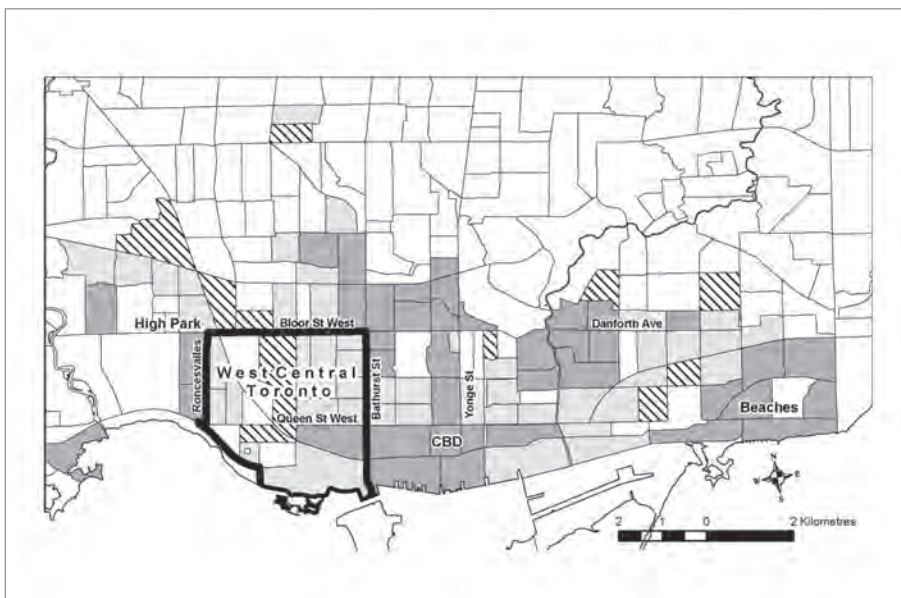


FIG. 1. MAP OF WEST-CENTRAL TORONTO. | ADAPTED FROM MURDIE, ROBERT AND CARLOS TEIXEIRA, 2010 “THE IMPACT OF GENTRIFICATION ON ETHNIC NEIGHBOURHOODS IN TORONTO: A CASE STUDY OF LITTLE PORTUGAL.” *URBAN STUDIES*, JUNE 8; DOI:10.1177/0042098009360227.

TABLE 1. REDEVELOPING TORONTO'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE — SELECT CHURCH CONVERSIONS ACROSS THE INNER CITY

Former Church	Loft Project	Address	Project Status
Summerhill Baptist	Macpherson Church Lofts	12 Macpherson Ave.	Completed, 1990
Dovercourt-St. Paul's Presbyterian Church	Hepbourne Hall	110 Hepbourne St.	Completed, 1992
Eglinton United Church	St. Georges on Sheldrake	65 Sheldrake Blvd.	Completed, 2001
Riverdale Presbyterian Church	The Glebe Lofts	660 Pape Rd.	Completed, 2004
Howard Park United Church/Howard Park Pentecostal Church	The Abbey	384 Sunnyside Ave.	Completed, 2007
Victoria Presbyterian Church	Victoria Lofts	152 Annette St.	Completed, 2010
The Centennial Japanese United Church	The Church Lofts	701 Dovercourt Rd.	Completed, 2010
St. Mary the Virgin/St. Cyprian Anglican Church	The Westmoreland Lofts	40 Westmoreland Ave.	In process
Seventh-Day Adventist Portuguese Church	Private Development	512 College St.	In process
Swanwick United Church	The Swanwick	21 Swanwick Ave.	In process

that skirt Toronto's inner city, churches like the CJUC have been similarly repurposed: in Greektown the former Riverdale Presbyterian Church is now the "Glebe Lofts"; in High Park the former Howard Park Methodist Church is now the "Abbey Lofts"; in the Junction the former Victoria Presbyterian Church is now the "Victoria Lofts"; and so on. No longer sustainable as spaces of worship, these and other redundant church structures have found a new value in the private real estate market, creating a relatively new terrain for what some urbanists have called "loft-living."⁴ In a slight divergence from its original manifestation as the reuse of abandoned industrial buildings, church-style "loft-living" connects deeply with the lifestyles, urban aesthetic, and progressive politics of the nation's growing urban elite. Instead of warehouses and factories, the renovated church offers a unique alternative for many of Toronto's inner-city sophisticates. Local heritage, historic architecture, and an "old story" are all functional aspects of the revalorization of these converted places.

This essay traces the adaptive reuse of the former CJUC to the Church Lofts—a transformation that has taken this building from a religious place of worship to a set of upscale residential lofts. My aim is to illuminate some of the specific architectural processes and socialcultural conditions that have made the Church Lofts possible. Following a description of the history and original construction of the building, I explore its contemporary renovation into upscale loft properties. As this case study shows, I argue that along with the material transformation of the built structure the adaptive reuse of redundant churches often requires a concomitant adaptation of symbolic elements. That is, the creation of the Church Lofts partly involves the reproduction and promotion of "authenticity" through a recognizable yet unique loft-living brand, a marketable identity which is constructed in the commodification of the building's preestablished material heritage and by the adaptation of a diffused religious heritage.

A LIFE BEFORE LOFTS: THE ORIGINS AND DESIGNS OF THE FORMER CENTENNIAL JAPANESE UNITED CHURCH

The origins of the former CJUC are found in Toronto's late-nineteenth-century economic and immigrant boom. By the 1880s, much of the vacant lands on the western periphery of the city were under development to make way for the exploding populations of industrial workers and their families.⁵ In what is now considered West-Central Toronto (fig. 1), new housing subdivisions helped to create the region's emerging suburbs, areas that were further consolidated by the continuous expansion of commuter railway and streetcar lines radiating from the downtown core. A large number of the new residents in the area were principally immigrants from England, Scotland, and Ireland, many of whom were also members of various Protestant denominations.⁶ By 1891, responding to increasing demand, a small but flourishing congregation of like-minded Methodists built



FIG. 2. CMC, EXTERIOR, C1906. | UNITED CHURCH ARCHIVES.

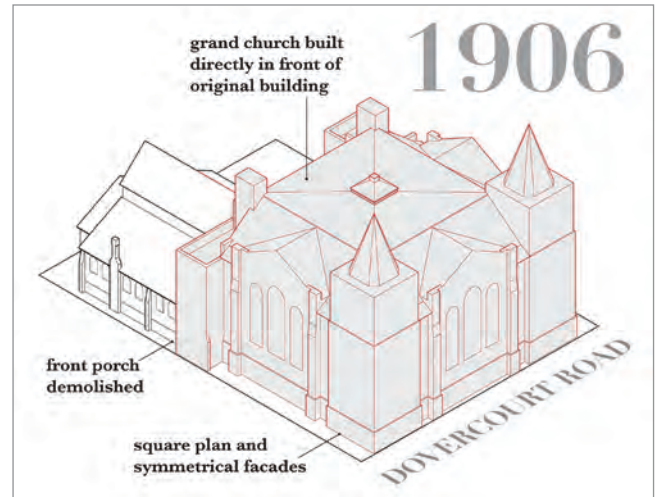


FIG. 3. CJUC, SCHEMATIC, 1906. | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.

a permanent worship space on the east side of Dovercourt Road, naming it the Centennial Methodist Church (CMC) to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Reverend John Wesley. At a cost of about ten thousand dollars, this modest church sat some four hundred congregants and was a solid brick structure with a stone base, a pitched wooden roof, and two chimneys (fig. 2).⁷ In a short time, the church became a central landmark in the rapidly developing neighbourhood, attracting new congregants from outlying areas and new ministers to its pulpit—by 1904 the church was led by its seventh minister, the Reverend Edwin A. Pearson (1904-1906), father of the late Honourable Lester B. Pearson, former prime minister of Canada.⁸

Although the rising popularity of the CMC after the turn of the century was certainly embraced by the ministry, the expanding membership (over double its intended capacity) placed considerable pressure on available space for both worship and Sunday school activities. As a result, by the beginning of Reverend Pearson's tenure a new structure was commissioned to

meet the future needs. Designed by local architect William Briggs, the new church was placed directly in front of the original structure, making use of the old sanctuary space as a Sunday school. At that time, the original church was almost entirely conserved and the front porch was the only feature removed in an effort to maximize the footprint of the new building. Restricted by the reuse of the original church, however, the new design was a relatively unique wide square plan that, by necessity, utilized almost three city lots.⁹

Briggs's design celebrated CMC's success with a neo-Gothic exterior complete with front double towers, pointed arch entrances, extended stone courses, and elaborate Tudor-arched stained-glass windows (fig. 3). Likewise, the interior spaces continued the motif. With seating up to one thousand two hundred persons, a Tiffany stained-glass skylight, full choir seating with organ, the main sanctuary space was a central focus for the new development. It is important to note here that the heritage designation by the City of Toronto only classified the main components of the exterior structure and includes the northern, southern, and

western walls (the western wall fronting on Dovercourt Road), and the roof of the 1906 building.¹⁰

With the merger of Canada's main-line Protestant denominations in 1925 and the creation of the United Church of Canada, many landmark Protestant churches in Toronto, including the CMC, received a large number of congregants in response to amalgamation efforts.¹¹ Once again, in an attempt to keep up with expanding demands and a record-high membership (over 1700 congregants by 1930), the church, then dubbed the Centennial United Church (CUC), redeveloped the original rear worship space in its entirety.¹² In 1927, a large two-storey rear annex was built to accommodate multiple uses, including providing larger Sunday school space and new capacity for both administrative and community functions (offices, change rooms, and even a basement basketball court) (fig. 4).¹³ Remarkably, the original front wall of the 1891 church survived the rear annex development. Squashed between the front annex wall and the rear 1906 church wall, remnants of the 1891 church, including brick elements such as original

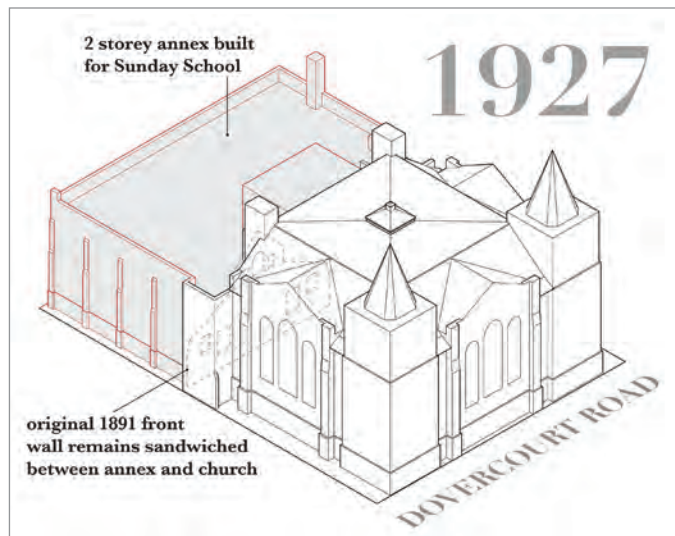


FIG. 4. CJUC, SCHEMATIC, 1927. | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.

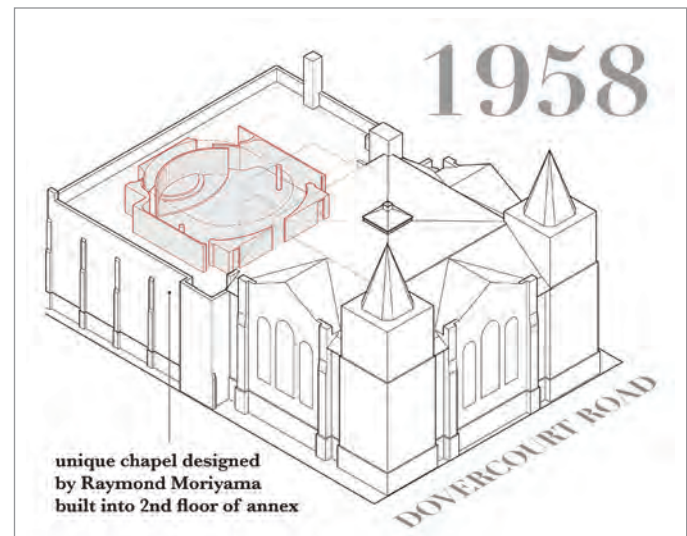


FIG. 5. CJUC, SCHEMATIC, 1958. | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.

window openings, remained intact and are currently restored features in the present loft conversion.¹⁴

The postwar period marked a turning point for the CUC. By the 1950s, a considerable drop in membership and support placed new pressures on the ministry and on the viability of the congregation. As was common in this period of decline, the CUC decided to share their worship space with the nearby Toronto Japanese United Church.¹⁵ In 1958, a new chapel space was constructed for the Japanese Nisei congregation in the rear annex. Designed by Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama, the chapel provided the primarily English-speaking congregation a formal worship space of their own. Moreover, the chapel was a unique architectural feature and, being one of Moriyama’s early projects, it was an important piece which reflected the fusion of modern aesthetic with traditional ecclesiastical designs. In particular, while the chapel was adorned with curved ceilings and doorways, an elaborate stained-glass skylight, and sat one hundred and eighty people on premium

ash pews, it was further contextualized, according to designer Benjamin Watt-Meyer, with catacomb-like spaces that were inspired by the 1950s “spacecraft” aesthetic¹⁶ (fig. 5).

From the 1960s onward, the sustainability of the CUC was increasingly difficult to manage. Replacing the aging congregations and financing the church property was a losing battle. With its “golden years” behind, the CUC made what was to become a last amalgamation effort. In 1986, an official merger was made between the CUC and the Toronto Japanese United Church—Nisei congregation. The newly amalgamated Centennial Japanese United Church (CJUC) then spent the next twenty years managing the slowly shrinking but still dedicated parish. Significant changes in the character of the local communities, specifically the villages known officially as “Little Italy” and “Little Portugal,” continually challenged the church’s future. By the late 1960s, prominent Italian and Portuguese diasporas had been firmly established in West-Central Toronto and the diversifying social,

cultural, and material needs of the community were increasingly reflected in the urban landscape.¹⁷

Over time, the CJUC became dependent on farther-flung congregants, often as far as the Mississauga suburbs, and by necessity transformed into a commuter church—an often precarious position for relatively smaller worship places. By the turn of the millennium, the physical distance between the church and its congregants and the cultural distance between the church and the local community were increasingly difficult conditions to manage. As geographers Robert Murdie and Carlos Teixeira explain, a set of countervailing trends accelerated the sociocultural nature of much of West-Central Toronto.¹⁸ In particular, a marked out-migration of established Portuguese residents for the northwestern suburbs has been partly replaced by a relatively large group of immigrants and refugees from eastern and southern Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Furthermore, they also point out that in the last decade an increasing number of middle-class professionals, the classic gentrifiers, have also



FIG. 6. SOUTHERN ELEVATION OF THE FORMER DOVERCOURT-ST. PAUL'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (C1884), NOW THE "HEPBOURNE HALL LOFTS." | NICHOLAS LYNCH, 2009.



FIG. 7. THE CHURCH LOFTS UNDER CONSTRUCTION. | NICHOLAS LYNCH, 2009.

targeted the area in search of relatively low-cost housing with renovation potential in close proximity to the downtown core. Although originally attracted to the older Victorian houses in the eastern half of the region, over the years a steady progression of renovation, revitalization, and, ultimately, gentrification has slowly migrated westward. Partly responding to that trend, a variety of reuse projects have converted differing building types for upscale residential purposes, including the adaptive reuse of former Dovercourt-St. Paul's Presbyterian Church (*circa* 1884), a project not one block from the CJUC (fig. 6). Additionally, patterns of commercial change have also been noted as a significant part of the transformations in the area.¹⁹ In particular, the process of retail gentrification has expanded in recent years as numerous restaurants and boutiques catering to more affluent consumers have been slowly displacing older establishments that traditionally provided more affordable products and services to low-income residents. In Little Italy and Little Portugal, for instance, an upscaling of ethnic restaurants and boutiques, which were partly influenced by the

activities of local business improvement associations (BIAs), has dramatically transformed both the commercial and social culture of the area, enticing higher-order consumption and patterns of gentrification now common in other ethnic strips in the city.²⁰

In face of these difficult transitions, the church held its last service at 701 Dovercourt Road in early 2006. Instead of continuing on, the congregation finally opted to sell the building to architect and developer Bernard Watt of Dovenco Corporation and amalgamate with the Lansing United Church in North Toronto.

LOFT-LIVING: BUILDING AND BRANDING THE "CHURCH LOFTS"

The remaking of the former CJUC to the "Church Lofts" is firmly rooted in the phenomena now commonly known as "loft-living." Although the building's new name certainly points to that fact, the successful transformation of this redundant church to an upscale residential product actually belies a careful connection to an urban form more than forty years in the making.

In particular, loft-living was first attributed to the revitalization of New York's SoHo (South of Houston) district in the 1970s, and later used to describe similar transformations in other former industrial zones in many North-American, Western European, and Australian cities.²¹ In New York, London, Toronto, and other urban centres, the steady loss of manufacturing and production sectors, and the substantial growth of service-based industries, a process referred to as "post-industrialization," caused dramatic shifts in the function of economies, societies, and their various land-use formations. Although certainly not an even process across all urban contexts, commentators like Hank Savitch explain that post-industrialization has some widespread consequences:

[P]ost-industrialism [...] entail[s] social upheaval: factories are dismantled, wharves and warehouses are abandoned, and working-class neighbourhoods disappear. Sometimes there is replacement of one physical form by another—the growth of office towers and luxury high rises or the refurbishing of old waterfronts. Cafes and boutiques arise to feed and clothe the new

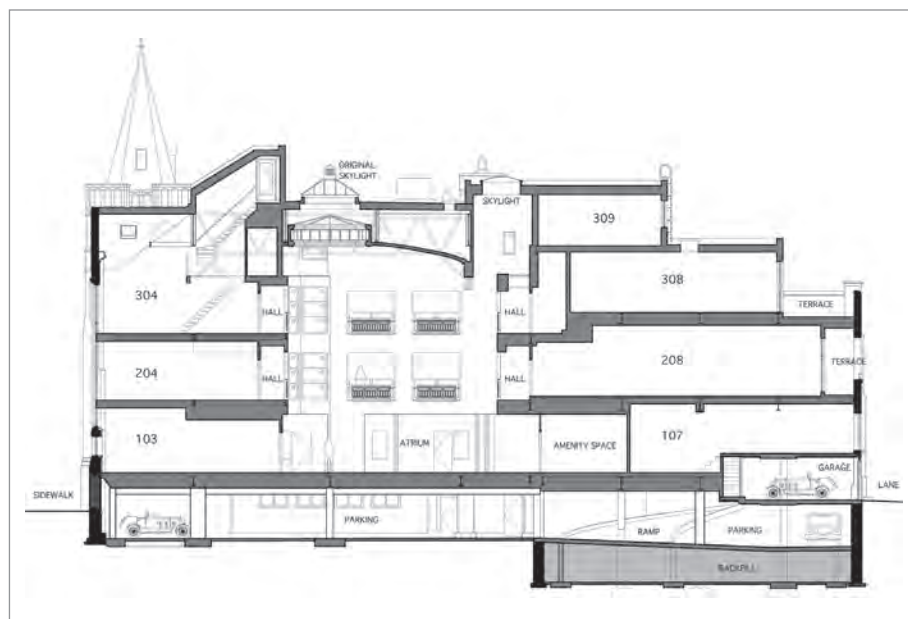


FIG. 8. THE CHURCH LOFTS, CROSS SECTION WEST/EAST LOOKING NORTH. | BERNARD WATT, ARCHITECT, 2009.

classes. At other times the transformation is truncated and nothing but an empty shell is left behind.²²

In many cases, these empty shells were eventually re-colonized as demand and property prices rose in the core areas of central cities. Replacing the industrial workers in the abandoned factories and warehouses was a sizable group of artists seeking large and cheap spaces that would accommodate not only work but also housing. In a short time, savvy urbanites looking for unique places to live in the city followed the artists' path, displacing many of them in their wake.²³ By appropriating the gritty industrial aesthetic and renovating the spaces to suit more middle-class comforts, a popularized loft-living lifestyle was quick to take off. Indeed, it became increasingly clear that the economic opportunities of reusing abandoned factory sites as residential spaces dovetailed with a cultural revalorization of urbanity in general: an emergent pre-occupation by elite groups with an industrial architecture and heritage aesthetic;

a new focus on renewing central urban spaces for accessible consumption, leisure, and sociability; and a search for new and unique platforms for producing and displaying contemporary lifestyles. In Montreal and Toronto, for instance, the construction of loft landscapes and markets has been instrumental in creating distinct cultural enclaves and tourist-historic precincts that attract tourist dollars, add a "sense of place" to the urban fabric, and entice a growing class of creative professionals to urban centres.²⁴ These landscapes have not only helped to shape the postindustrial city, but they have also made possible an emergent and expeditionary culture of adaptive reuse that now includes buildings of a post-*institutional* nature. Redundant schools, churches, municipal buildings, and movie theatres top the list as "hot-spots" for new loft development. As municipalities, civil corporations, and religious groups, to name a few, are forced to off-load costly post-institutional buildings and recuperate financial losses in the face of economic restructuring and

sociocultural changes like the decline of participation in mainline religions, the private real estate market has become an increasingly viable option for resale. Moreover, as many inner-city industrial zones are exhausted through popular redevelopment initiatives and as waning interest in what some call the ubiquitous "cookie-cutter condos" continues, the "loft-living" aesthetic increasingly shifts to this new terrain.

Redundant churches, perhaps more than any other property type, represent a built form loaded with commodifiable historic and symbolic values. Together, ornate architectural designs, historic connections with the local community, and wider cultural connections to a religious past offer discerning consumers a housing commodity entirely different from others. The Church Lofts, like similar projects of its kind, are made marketable not only by connecting these unique elements with the recognizable postindustrial loft aesthetic, but also through the construction of a novel identity or brand linked to a repackaged narrative of heritage, iconography, and neighbourhood. Thus developers, in concert with architects, public relations firms, and marketing and real estate agents, repolish churches with a contemporary patina to restore and emphasize not merely the economic capital of the building but also its new *cultural capital*.

Material Transformations

A significant number of physical alterations were necessary to properly convert the CJUC into an upscale residential property (fig. 7). As with most similar projects, the conversion process involved a considerable amount of demolition, restoration, and creative reconfiguration. From the outset, the design of the project necessarily took its lead from the

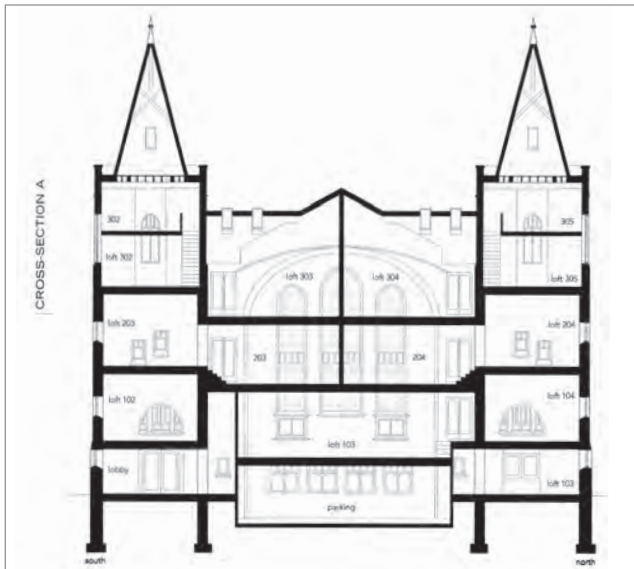


FIG. 9. THE CHURCH LOFTS, CROSS SECTION NORTH/SOUTH LOOKING WEST. | BERNARD WATT, ARCHITECT, 2009.

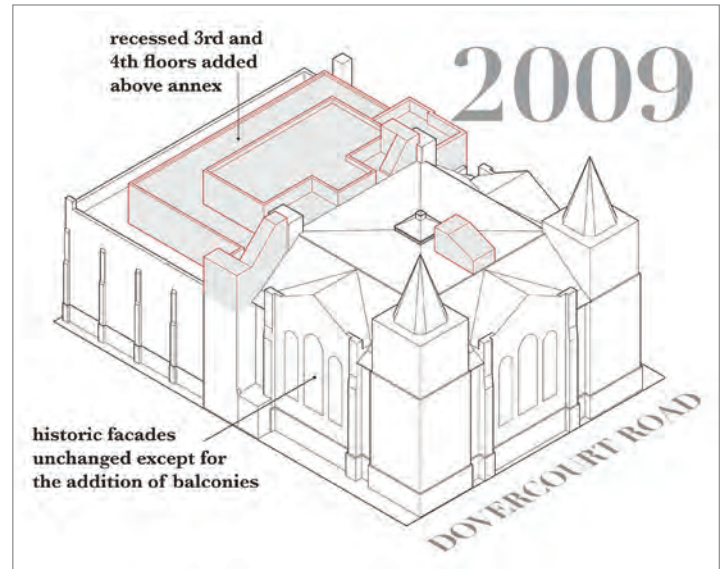


FIG. 10. THE CHURCH LOFTS, SCHEMATIC, 2009. | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.

existing heritage designated envelope. As opposed to other conversions that need to consider more complex architectural styles (e.g. cruciform), the square form of William Briggs's 1906 structure offered some design simplicity. The general layout of the twenty-eight individual and unique loft units follows the original square plan, cutting the building into three main floors with the basement as an underground parking facility (including three interior parking spaces with direct private access to individual units) and a multi-level atrium in the centre (fig. 8).

Well before construction, however, a large amount of the church interior that was left behind was necessarily disassembled and removed. Pews both from the main sanctuary and the Moriyama Chapel, numerous stained-glass windows, hanging lamps, and organ pipes, among other items, were either sent to storage, sold to collectors, or incorporated into the conversion process.²⁵ Many of the remaining elements in the main sanctuary and rear annex, however, were

destroyed to make way for new interior structures. Large interior features such as the main sanctuary floor, balcony and stage, and the rear annex roof were eventually demolished, leaving the building's heritage designated "shell"—main walls, front towers, and steel truss roof—intact.

A lengthy and delicate process of restoring many of the building's original heritage features followed the building's demolition. As with most church conversions, the costly off-site repair of numerous original stained-glass windows was required. The large Tudor-arched windows, in particular, represented an important part of this restoration process as these features not only help to reestablish the building's imposing presence on the streetscape, but are also integral to the interior design of several of the loft units (fig. 9). Furthermore, several windows along the front double towers were repositioned and on the primary walls the restoration of various brickwork elements was needed. Aged and damaged brick tuck pointing was replaced while exposed

brickwork was sandblasted. And, across the entire structure, the roof membrane and shingles were replaced.²⁶

As would be expected, the renovation of the interior structure was substantial in order to create a functional residential building. In the main sanctuary, large steel columns, many of which were salvaged and repurposed from the demolition process, were used for constructing new floors and walls. On the front of the building, several smaller balconies were tied into the front facing suites and third floor units were also given roof access. Renovations to the rear annex were also significant. In particular, two setback floors above the annex roof were constructed to elevate the third floor and create an additional fourth level for several two-storey features (fig. 10).

One of the main design elements of the Church Lofts is the large atrium fashioned from the former sanctuary space. Spanning the three main floors and topped by the restored Tiffany skylight,



FIG. 11. THE CHURCH LOFTS, CENTRAL ATRIUM (UNFINISHED). | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.



FIG. 12. THE CHURCH LOFTS, FINISHED INTERIORS. | BENJAMIN WATT-MEYER, 2009.

the atrium offers a functional and aesthetic backbone to the building's interior (fig. 11). This open plan connects the various public spaces and corridors, projects visual access to the multiple layers of the building, and offers cascading natural light into the centre space. In general, the atrium elicits a link with the historic envelope by connecting the heritage details visible on the exterior with a sense of communal space in the interior, a public space apart from the private spaces of the loft units.

The lofts themselves radiate outward from the central atria. All of the twenty-eight units are of a unique design. Ranging both in one and two storeys and in size from approximately six hundred to one thousand five hundred square feet, each unit accommodates and incorporates the built envelope and the public spaces of the structure.²⁷ Their interior elements include a combination of heritage or antique-style finishes with contemporary features (fig. 12). Exposed textures

like wood beams, original steel trusses, and brickwork, as well as reused pews (as windowsill caps, stairs, and treads) and period light fixtures make up part of the historic aesthetic. For the modern finish the units offer, for instance, top-of-the-line stainless steel products, *Italianate* kitchens, and contemporary custom-designed bathroom fixtures.

Symbolic Transformations

Integral to the transformation of the CJUC to the Church Lofts is an adaptive reuse of the symbolic economy of the building and its religious heritage. Accompanying the material renovations of the building, therefore, is a set of complex aesthetic discourses that are necessarily reworked not only to sell the building as a upscale residential property in a competitive real estate market, but also, interlinked, as a means to build a wider social acceptance for its new function—from a space of worship to a space of modern domesticity.

This process is most conspicuously developed in the branding strategies designed by the developer in concert with a media and public relations consultant (The Walsh Group) and real estate broker (Brad J. Lamb Realty Inc.). Branding is a pervasive marketing practice that involves not just advertising in the classic sense, but also includes the production of a new, often coherent, "identity" of a product or place—a complex process that uses slogans, icons, architecture, and design as a means to both promote and legitimize a new or "renewed" commodity. In this way, the adaptive reuse of the Church Lofts involves several strategic branding processes, three of which are important here: the repackaging of an architectural iconography; the "renaming" of both the building and the individual loft units; and the "re-narrativization" of the building in the contemporary urban landscape.

A large part of the popularity of urban lofts, whether of a postindustrial or post-institutional nature, concerns the quality

of their unique heritage aesthetic, the representation of a merged *space* and *time*. Along these lines, central to the restoration of the exterior and the design of the twenty-eight “premium” units in the Church Lofts, is an attempt to reconstruct a sense of “authenticity” and to create domestic spaces that are accented with hints of a “meaningful” historic past. This is made possible primarily through the production of a material antinomy, a strategic juxtaposition of the old (or the seemingly old) with the new, throughout the building. The raw and exposed elements associated with the church’s past, the interior stone walls and stained-glass windows, and the reused interior features, like period lighting and repurposed pews, are all unique architectural iconography that the developer has integrated in order to weave an historic narrative in which owners can participate, a “stage” that displays a level of authentic sophistication that is simply not possible in many new residential spaces. Indeed, the repackaging of the church’s iconography distances the conversion both from the ubiquity of the “box in the sky” constructions in the adjacent downtown core and the “new” (read: homogenous) communities in the city’s suburbs. This aesthetic differentiation highlights an architectural individuality that creates a “sense of place” instead of space, making possible a transfer of cultural capital from the building to the owner.²⁸ In addition, in much the same way that exposed industrial piping and preformed concrete walls and floors are restaged in renovated industrial lofts, the Church Lofts strip back and repackage “original” features to act as an aesthetic frame for the global menu of modern domestic products on offer in the interior spaces. That is, importantly, an attempt to satisfy consumers’ multiple, simultaneous, and rather paradoxical desires for the old and the new, the traditional

and the technological, the primitive and the progressive.

The symbolic and iconographic adaptation of the Church Lofts is also made possible by the practice of renaming. To be sure, the renaming of this building is not new. As illustrated above, the building was given several different names during its time as a space of worship, names that were intended to communicate and identify its specific position within the religious and local urban communities. Rather than a trivial detail, therefore, naming is riddled with meaning and is pivotal in constructing identity—not only to signify the expected *use* of a building but also to act as a marker for the building’s expected *users*.²⁹ The adaptive reuse of a church represents a specific need for renaming since the restoration of the exterior architectural envelope conserves the building’s original iconography—suggesting that this is, still, a church. In this case, renaming becomes part and parcel of efforts to broadcast its new use for new users. Originally, the developer and marketing team named the project simply “The Church”—a direct effort at creating a sense of cache by clearly linking to its historic use.³⁰ However, such an explicit linkage did not differentiate the project as a residential building and perhaps, obviously, early feedback from consumers was decidedly negative as many were confused about its supposed use. The “loft” prefix was added sometime later to more clearly identify the project as a loft-type residential space and to help it fit within the context of the housing market. The naming process, however, does not end there. Indeed, intended as a coherent discourse, all of the loft units are given specific distinguishing names based upon the townships of prominent churches found throughout areas of England—from the Scottish border to the English Channel. Thus, unit 109 is

named “The Dover” in reference to the Church of St. Mary-in-Castro; unit 206 is named “The Ovingham” in reference to the St. Mary the Virgin’s Church; unit 301 is named “The Clapham” in reference to the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury; and so on. These place names link a diffused religious affiliation to the project as they commodify a distant religious past and connect to a religious architectural history, a heritage of seemingly quality craftsmanship. Moreover, the choice to reference the building’s older Anglo-Saxon heritage, as opposed to a more recent Japanese Canadian heritage, is telling: an authorized and romanticized image of England—its countryside, its heritage, its built form—is marketable. That is, this repackaged heritage reflects more closely the aesthetic sensibilities of the common upscale housing buyers—those of the predominantly affluent upper- and-middle class Anglo groups.

Unlike renaming, the branding strategy of “re-narrativizing” focuses less on highlighting the aesthetic and iconic qualities of the building and more on promoting its accessibility to central “consumptionscapes” in the area. As mentioned above, the pace of commercial change in West-Central Toronto has been relatively rapid in the last decade as it has followed closely with the trends in gentrification. The gentrifying villages of Little Italy and Little Portugal, but also Roncesvalles, Queen West, and Bloordale, all contain expanding retail districts, many of which are now implicated in the process referred to as “boutiquification” that has been characteristic of postindustrial inner-cities.³¹ As part of the brochure promotions for the Church Lofts, for instance, the marketing narratives make explicit linkages to the new retail and food landscapes that have been increasingly established in these changing neighbourhoods:

The Church [*sic*] is surrounded by a rich tapestry of culture, fashion, style and design [...] College Street and Little Italy offer a great selection of diverse restaurants, bistros, and trendy spots to enjoy [...] Stroll down Bloor West and experience a diverse collection of places sprinkled onto an urban landscape of modern ideas and creative energy—the downtown core is just minutes away.³²

Across many of Toronto’s new and renewed communities, this similar “lifestyle” pitch circulates around the notions of accessibility and centrality. The calculated deployment of “the centre” as a key theme pervades marketing materials and development slogans and is perennially portrayed as a “hub” of quality urban life; shopping, viewing, playing, and living is all attainable, for some, by being in or close to the centre. Thus at the same time as the Church Lofts sell a reserved religious heritage in the making of a residential space, they also connect to an accessible vibrancy and diversity that many consumers seek in a modern city.

But access to the “centre” is not all that is offered here. The promotional website, for example, used highlighted

neighbourhood maps and illustrated descriptions of cosmopolitan boutiques and restaurants to not only help new owners navigate the neighbourhood, but also to renarrate the area as a space of legitimate cultural and economic revitalization (fig. 13).³³ Importantly, connecting to this milieu of upscale shopping and cuisine, essential to maintaining a modern urban lifestyle, adds an additional layer of distinction and value to the Church Lofts as it represents a stylized and convivial public space close to the “authentic” and “private” spaces of the lofts units. Moreover, the Church Loft brand is constructed with a specific local identity that incorporates and sells an urban liveability—a lifestyle imprinted with affluence, cosmopolitanism, and most importantly a history of a bygone culture.

The transformation of the former CJUC to the Church Lofts is now complete. By the winter of 2009-2010, the doors to 701 Dovercourt Road were reopened—not to a crowd of returning parishioners but to a group of new homeowners. Selling rather quickly, even amidst a remarkably difficult recession, the Church Lofts have been

hailed by many as a resounding success. Their popularity is likely attributable, in part, to the seemingly unstoppable real estate demands in Toronto—a city often proclaimed as among North-America’s largest condo markets.³⁴ This loft conversion, however, also speaks to a consistent appetite in the consumer housing market for something altogether new or, we should say, “old but new.” Indeed, similar to postindustrial factories that have been recycled to meet the demands of affluent urbanites in search of cool and unique places to live, repurposed churches like the former CJUC forward architectural and cultural heritage as intrinsic and unique amenities in the loft product. But post-institutional projects like these diverge from the common factory-loft landscapes that dot countless urban centres; instead of reusing the built legacies of past economies and industries, church-lofts reflect specific ecclesial architectural styles and commodified elements of religious heritage. In this way, converting the former CJUC to lofts presented enormous challenges ranging from the structural to the symbolic. Indeed, along with the careful renovation and preservation of the building’s physical envelope, the conversion has involved the repackaging of religious history as a suitable and marketable storyline for new discerning users.

Importantly, this case study demonstrates that material renovations to historic post-institutional properties like churches are but one element in the reuse process. As more redundant churches are becoming loft spaces in the city of Toronto, developers and architects are increasingly involved in reconstructing urban heritage not only through repolishing the character-defining elements of the built form, but also through producing specific *narratives* of place and space that help to legitimize and sell a unique and interesting domesticity.

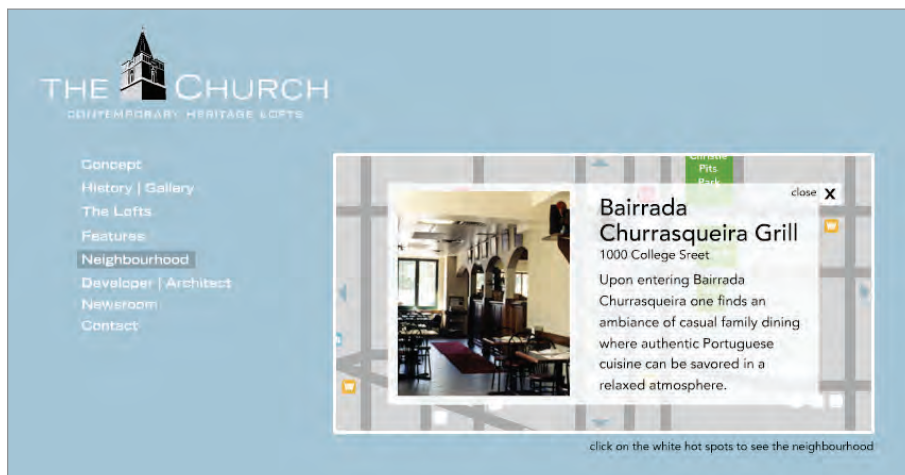


FIG. 13. THE CHURCH LOFTS, INTERNET MARKETING. | DOVENCO INC.

NOTES

1. This article presents work from my current doctoral research entitled: *Altered Places: The Reuse of Redundant Churches as "Loft-Living" in the Post-Industrial City*, at the University of British Columbia. This paper would not have been possible without the unwavering guidance of my thesis committee comprised of professors David Ley, Elvin Wyly, Thomas Hutton, and Deborah Leslie. I would like to especially thank architect Bernard Watt and Benjamin Watt-Meyer for sharing their expertise, experiences, and knowledge of the history of the CMC, the CJUC, and the production of the Church Lofts.
2. The former CJUC building, now Church Lofts, is located at 701 Dovercourt Road, south of Bloor Street in Toronto, Ontario.
3. Lively, Margaret, 1986, "The Centennial United Church History – 1891-1986," unpublished booklet prepared for the Centennial Japanese United Church, available online: [<http://www.cjuc.org/history/index.html>], last accessed August 31, 2010.
4. Zukin, Sharon, 1982, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change*, New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers University Press; Podmore, Julie, 1998, "(Re)Reading the Loft Living Habitus in Montreal's Inner City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 22, p. 283-302.
5. Hayes, Derek, 2008, *Historical Atlas of Toronto*, Toronto and Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre.
6. In the prewar period, Toronto was seen by some as a "mere extension of Great Britain." By 1911, 87% of the city's population was of British descent, a figure that remained buoyant until the Second World War. (Harney, Robert (ed.), 1985, *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighborhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*, Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario.)
7. Lively, *op. cit.*
8. *Id.*
9. Personal interview with Benjamin Watt-Meyer, August 2009.
10. *Id.*
11. In 1925, approximately 560 members of the former Dovercourt Presbyterian Church amalgamated with the CMC. (Lively, *op. cit.*)
12. Lively, *op. cit.*
13. The rear annex was never classified in the 2004 heritage designation by the City of Toronto.
14. Personal interview with Benjamin Watt-Meyer, August 2009.
15. The Toronto Japanese United Church was composed of two congregations: the Issei (first-generation immigrant-born) formed in 1946 and the Nisei (second-generation Canadian-born) formed in 1954.
16. Personal interview with Benjamin Watt-Meyer, August 2009.
17. Scardellato, Gabriele, 2009, "A Century and More of Italians in Toronto: An Overview of Settlement," *Quaderni D'Italianistica*, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 7-31; Murdie, Robert and Carlos Teixeira, 2010, "The Impact of Gentrification on Ethnic Neighbourhoods in Toronto: A Case Study of Little Portugal," *Urban Studies*, June 8; doi:10.1177/0042098009360227.
18. Murdie and Teixeira, *op. cit.*
19. Rankin, Katharine, 2008, "Commercial Change in Toronto's West-Central Neighbourhoods," *Research Paper 214, Cities Centre: University of Toronto*, vol. 214, p. 1-80.
20. Hackworth, Jason and Josephine Rekers, 2005, "Ethnic Packaging and Gentrification: The Case of Four Neighborhoods in Toronto," *Urban Affairs Review*, vol. 41, no. 2, p. 211-236.
21. Zukin, Sharon, 1982, *op. cit.*; Zukin, Sharon, 1991, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*, Berkeley and Los Angeles. University of California Press; Podmore : 283-302; Shaw, Wendy, 2006, "Sydney's SoHo Syndrome? Loft-Living in the Urbane City," *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 13, p. 182-206; Hamnett, Chris and Drew Whitelegg, 2007, "Loft Conversion and Gentrification in London: From Industrial to Postindustrial Land Use," *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 39, p. 106-124; Mian, Nadia, 2008, "Prophets-for-Profits: Redevelopment and the Altering Urban Religious Landscape," *Urban Studies*, vol. 45, no. 10, p. 2143-2161.
22. Savitch, Hank V., 1988, *The Post Industrial City: Politics and Planning in New York, Paris and London*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press.
23. Ley, David, 2003, "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification," *Urban Studies*, vol. 40, no. 12, p. 2527-2544; Zukin, Sharon, 2009, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, New York, Oxford University Press.
24. For more on this topic, see Lynch, Nicholas and David Ley, 2010, "The Changing Meaning of Urban Places," In Trudy Bunting, Pierre Filion, and Ryan Walker (eds.), *Canadian Cities in Transition: New Directions in the Twenty-first Century* (4th ed.), Toronto, Oxford University Press, p. 325-341.
25. Personal interview with Benjamin Watt-Meyer, August 2009.
26. *Id.*
27. This range includes interior space only. The vast majority of the units also include outdoor spaces ranging from 8 to almost 500 square feet. At the time of presale, prices ranged from approximately \$210,000 to \$700,000.
28. Zukin, 1982 : 60.
29. For more on this point see: Rofe, Matthew and Gertrude Szili, 2009, "Name Games 1: Place Names as Rhetorical Devices," *Landscape Research*, vol. 34, no. 3, p. 361-370; and Berg, Lawrence and Jani Vuolteenaho (eds.), 2009, *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, Burlington (VA) Ashgate.
30. Personal interview with Bernard Watt, July 2009.
31. Zukin, Sharon, Valerie Trujillo, Peter Frase, Danielle Jackson, Tim Recumber, and Abraham Walker, 2009, "New Retail Capital and Neighborhood Change: Boutiques and Gentrification in New York City," *City & Community*, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 47-64.
32. Dovenco Inc., *The Church: Sales Brochure*, 2009.
33. Website: [www.thechurchlofts.com], last accessed October 2010, but not available in March 2011.
34. Estimates for new condominium built by 2009 in the Greater Toronto Area were approximately 16,000 units. This estimate would place the GTA as the largest condo market in North America ahead of cities like Montreal, New York, Vancouver, Houston, and Los Angeles. (Thorpe, Jacqueline, 2008, "Toronto's Condo Kings: Is their Boom Sustainable?" *Financial Post*, June 2, [<http://www.financialpost.com/story.html?id=552055>].