Serendipitous conservation: faith-to-faith conversion of historic churches in Buffalo

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Serendipitous conservation: faith-to-faith conversion of historic churches in Buffalo

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ABSTRACT

US cities with shrinking populations have faced tremendous challenges in conserving their built heritage. Often, conservation work involves adaptively reusing existing buildings. Most reuse activity is fuelled by the developer and market-driven rehabilitation of historic properties through tax credits and other incentives. Places of worship, however, are difficult to rehabilitate, and cities lose this urban heritage after years of vacancy and neglect, and eventual demolition. In many shrinking cities, particularly those now welcoming new immigrants and refugees, serendipitous conservation of vacant churches through faith-to-faith conversion can be an asset to local planners and preservationists in their fight to save urban heritage from demolition. This paper examines two former Roman Catholic Churches in the City of Buffalo: one converted into an Islamic mosque, and another into a Buddhist temple, to argue that faith-to-faith conversions can be a viable tool for other US cities experiencing similar threats to their urban heritage.

KEYWORDS

Historic preservation; adaptive reuse; Buffalo; church; urban conservation; urban heritage

Introduction

Urban heritage within cities with shrinking populations is increasingly threatened and has been at risk for decades, particularly historic places of worship associated with communities that settled in US cities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Christian congregations suburbanize, as new generations do not identify with the same religion as their parents, as fewer people attend church\(^1\), and as operating costs rise, more and more inner-city churches across US are facing a crisis: stay open or close (Simons and Choi 2010; Hackworth and Gullikson 2013). It is estimated that nationally, between 5000 and 10,000 churches are today either underutilized, abandoned, or empty (Simons et al. 2016, 198). Many of Buffalo’s inner-city churches have faced the same dilemma for decades (for more see Albert and Ross-Sanders 1994). While preservation and rehabilitation of a plethora of building types, including churches, have been part of Buffalo’s recovery in sections of the city, the process has not been a priority in the neighbourhoods east of Main Street, where severe blight, poverty, and crime are still an issue. In some sections, however, there are signs of gradual neighbourhood revitalization spurred on by recent immigrants and refugees, and long-term African-
American residents. In recent years, local and state initiatives have also targeted the area for new development and investment, particularly through the Buffalo Billion’s second phase (Empire State Development 2017). Looking ahead, preserving historic urban resources through redevelopment, rehabilitation, and reuse will become even more important in the area.

It has been previously noted that “DIY preservationists,” particularly in post-industrial cities like Buffalo and Detroit are “quietly transforming the physical and social landscape of North American cities” (Campos 2014, 354). This paper adds a new kind of movement to these existing preservation processes. This movement is a community-driven, serendipitous one that is appropriating and transforming troubled areas like Buffalo’s eastern neighbourhoods, one abandoned church, building, and home at a time. These are not deliberate preservationists like the “DIY preservationists” or “citizen-preservationists” as seen elsewhere in the city, nor are they developers, or even activists. They are predominantly low-income African-American families, and recent immigrants and refugees, who are moving into severely blighted neighbourhoods in once-shrinking cities like Buffalo, and contributing to their slow recovery (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographic trends). In many cases, they have adapted vacant church buildings for their use in a process we have called serendipitous conservation. This paper draws on church reuse in neighbourhoods east of Main Street in Buffalo to argue that this serendipitous conservation process can be a viable tool for stemming the loss of urban heritage in other cities facing similar challenges.

**Defining serendipitous conservation**

Serendipitous conservation is defined as the act of adapting a vacant historic (older than 50 years) building for reuse, and in the process saving it from continued vacancy, neglect, or worse, demolition. We draw on the definition of ‘conservation’ as outlined by Ashworth (1997) as an extension of the preservation movement; however, he expands the scope to include not just buildings, but also ensembles that should be

### Table 1. Recent demographic changes in Buffalo, NY, 2000 vs. 2015.

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>292,648</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>259,517</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>−33,131</td>
<td>−11.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Born</td>
<td>279,792</td>
<td>95.6%</td>
<td>236,655</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>−43,137</td>
<td>−15.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Born</td>
<td>12,856</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>22,862</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>10,006</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2. Top countries of birth for Foreign-born population in Buffalo, NY, 2000 vs. 2015.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2000 Total</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>2015 Total</th>
<th>% Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>1,096</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>991</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>639</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

preserved as part of the larger landscape. Ashworth clarifies that the criteria for selecting these ensembles should be beyond intrinsic, and he calls conservation “a series of compromises about the goals, methods, and focus of attention resulting from the experience of integrating preservation policies into local land-use management” (Ashworth 1997, 94).

Thus, conservation takes on an important role in the messy urbanism of contemporary cities battling a whole host of issues from overcrowding to population loss. In Buffalo, NY, the act of faith-to-faith conversion of vacant churches is, therefore, a serendipitous conservation process – as shown in the case studies, the conversion process negotiates various compromises both spatial and functional to accommodate the new users of the space. We call it ‘serendipitous’ because while the community stakeholders bought a vacant church and adapted, repaired, and maintained it for their use while retaining the property’s overall form, they did so without explicitly having a conservation agenda. In the act of finding a readily available space for their functional needs, they serendipitously contributed to the conservation of vacant historic churches.

The adaptive reuse processes involving former places of worship are unlike those typically discussed in prevalent literature. While adaptive reuse of religious spaces, particularly churches, is increasingly seen across American cities, the process is most often market or developer-driven. Most literature on adaptive reuse deals with conversion of religious spaces into residential, commercial, cultural, or office-related uses (for more see Simons and Choi 2010; Mine 2013; Lueg 2011; Kiley 2004; Hackworth and Gullikson 2013; Choi 2010; Mian 2008). Studies have shown that redevelopment of underutilized spaces in cities is directly related to neighbourhood conditions and demographic changes (Simons and Choi 2010; Burchell and Listokin 1981; Mian 2008). Those kinds of adaptations, however, are typically market-driven. Even the Buffalo Central Terminal’s incremental preservation, called ‘marketless’, eventually seeks to have “income generating uses and private development partners that will be commensurate with the building’s majesty and traditional notions of adaptive reuse…” (Campo 2014, 363). There is little information, however, on what Candace Iron has called “religion-to-religion adaptive reuse” (Iron 2014, 97). This paper fills that gap in the context of urban transformations that are contributing to the conservation (even if serendipitous) of urban heritage, particularly historic churches.

Methodology

The authors conducted a survey of churches in the City of Buffalo to understand the context, and to gather data on the total number of churches, and a distribution of their current use. Information was collected via windshield surveys, Google Maps, Sanborn Maps, and city directories. Primary information for this paper was collected by conducting structured interviews with stakeholders of the case study sites to understand the process of adapting churches for worship by a different faith, and the challenges faced before, during, and after conversion. This emerging practice of faith-to-faith conversion of vacant churches is an important one, and interviews with stakeholders gave a better insight into the process, its meaning, their motivation, and how they perceive the
historic church. Demographic data, both historical and contemporary, were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau and archival resources to understand the demographic changes taking place in Buffalo. Instead of using planning neighbourhoods, we have

**Figure 1.** The planning map of the City of Buffalo illustrates the various census tracts comprising the city’s neighbourhoods. Map courtesy Office of Strategic Planning, City of Buffalo.

Source: City of Buffalo, Office of Strategic Planning. [https://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/MapDesc/dd_panels_community.pdf](https://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/MapDesc/dd_panels_community.pdf)
focused on the larger geographic distribution of planning communities as defined by the City of Buffalo and shown in Figure 1.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the tabulation of all churches (Chart 1 and Chart 2) within the City of Buffalo was done by combining various resources. Therefore, the authors estimate a margin of error of 0.9% in the calculations of both the absolute number of church properties and their conversions over time. Second, many stakeholders, particularly from several Islamic mosques and the African-American congregations were either reluctant to do interviews, or refused requests for interviews. Therefore, the study has been limited to the two case studies that responded to requests for interviews. Third, while the tabulation of churches in Chart 2 includes denominational change, the study itself focuses on conversion from one faith to another, because denominational changes often do not involve major physical or liturgical changes. Therefore, we have concentrated this study on two cases where churches were converted into an Islamic mosque and a Buddhist temple, respectively.

The challenge of preserving churches in Buffalo

Buffalo has struggled with population loss and high vacancy rates for decades, particularly in the neighbourhoods east of Main Street (see Figure 2 for a comparison of population density by census tract). According to the US Census, vacancy rates in the City of Buffalo increased from 4.9% to 15.7% between 1970 and 2010. Since 2001, the city’s demolition program has removed over 5,900 residential structures and over 700 commercial buildings.
Recently, there have been some real estate trends that have begun to change the tide. Additionally, recognition of the city’s older building stock and the benefit of preserving, restoring, or rehabilitating it has been a big part of recent revitalization trends in projects like Hotel Lafayette, Statler City, Richardson Olmsted Campus, and Martin House Complex (Stebbins 2014; Ward 2011; Fink 2011; Campo 2014; Office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo 2014).

The future of church buildings, on the other hand, has been nationally grim in recent years. At the end of 2008, for example, over 1300 churches were for sale across the US (Simons et al. 2016, 2). As of 2018, it is estimated that the City of Buffalo has 311 church or church-like properties, out of which only one was a National Historic Landmark (St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral at 139 Pearl Street), and 17 were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as of 2018. For decades, Buffalo’s churches (predominantly Catholic) have struggled with changing demographics, dwindling congregations, out-migration to the Bible belt, flight to the suburbs, dwindling finances, and shortage of
priests. The Buffalo Diocese began its downsizing efforts in 2005, eventually selling 38 out of 77 church properties by 2010 (O’Malley 2010). Chart 1 shows the change in the number of churches across the city’s planning communities between 1925 and 2018. Many areas of the city have lost historically, architecturally, and culturally important churches, synagogues, and other places of worship to either demolition (24%) or neglect and vacancy (5%) as shown in Chart 2.

Surveys conducted show that while approximately 32% of the churches have retained their use since 1925, about 31% have undergone a denominational change, 2% have undergone faith-to-faith conversion, and 6% have undergone a sacred to secular conversion. In response to several instances of church reuse and conversion in the city, the bishop established a “Church Property Re-use Committee”, and included developers, real estate brokers, architects, and preservationists in order to market the properties efficiently (O’Malley 2010). These properties, however, had some reuse restrictions: deeds of the churches forbade any potential buyers from converting the churches into spaces for abortion clinics, strip clubs, fortune-telling establishments, saloons, or casinos (O’Malley 2010). Catholic charities and human service agencies have therefore been able to buy and reuse some of these vacant churches like the former St. Mary of Sorrows Church.
(Tokasz 2012), which houses the King Urban Life Center (945 Genesee St), and was formerly a charter school. The rectory building houses Catholic Charities. Similarly, since 2000 the parish school of St. Gerard’s Roman Catholic Church (1190 Delavan Ave) has housed Gerard Place, a non-profit transitional housing facility.

Several churches in the in-demand neighbourhoods west of Main Street have undergone sacred to secular conversions. They have been converted to market-rate apartments, and some, like the award-winning Lafayette Lofts project, have taken advantage of the rehabilitation tax credits typically not applicable to churches. Similarly, the former St. Francis Xavier Church (157 East Street) is now the Buffalo Religious Arts Center (BRAC), a non-profit organization with a mission to preserve Buffalo’s religious history and its artefacts. BRAC has been able to leverage funding from the NYS Environmental Protection Fund for roof repair and brick repointing. The long-vacant Richmond Avenue Methodist-Episcopal Church (345 West Ferry Street) is now in the process of being converted into a 500-seat visual and performance arts centre. Denominational changes have also taken place throughout the city, although as shown in Chart 2, these changes have been higher in many areas east of Main Street. This has been primarily due to the two-thirds African-American population in the area, which has reused many vacant Catholic churches for other Christian denominations like Church of God in Christ, Anglican, Baptist, and Evangelical.

A small, but growing movement also involves the faith-to-faith conversion of vacant churches, particularly in areas east of Main Street. All cases of faith-to-faith conversion of churches have been in planning communities of East Delavan and East Side (see Figure 1), where there has been continuous loss of population density between 1990 and 2010 (see Figure 2). Therefore, the conversion of four churches to Islamic mosques, and one church to Buddhist temple (see Figure 3 for the location of the case studies) have all been locally important in helping to save and conserve a formerly vacant church property from almost certain demolition.

Serendipitous conservation in eastern neighbourhoods of Buffalo

Formal processes of historic preservation seen in other parts of the city have not had the same presence in the neighbourhoods east of Main Street, particularly in relation to a significant part of its urban heritage: historic places of worship. Demographics and real estate demands (or lack thereof) have played a significant role in this difference. Even historically significant structures like the Jefferson Ave Shul (the oldest synagogue in Buffalo) have been demolished in the past few years (Radlich 2014; JTA 2014). There is also a lack of connection between the preservation community and minority groups in the area that are two-thirds African American (U.S. Census Bureau 2015), with an increasing community of refugees and secondary migrants from Asian and African countries (see Tables 1 and 2). Meanwhile, Buffalo’s activist preservation community comprises predominantly white professional and working-class men and women (Campo 2014, 356). While local preservationists have been involved with iconic structures like Central Terminal in the area (Campo 2014), they have not been able to save every at-risk iconic place of worship in the area. As a result of sustained population loss and economic decline, as well as entrenched racial segregation and concentrated
poverty, many neighbourhoods east of Main Street face challenges of increased crime, poverty, and unemployment, and housing vacancy rates that exceed the average for the city overall. Despite these challenges, there are some signs of hope. While many single-family homes and commercial properties are now being reused as places of worship,
community-driven serendipitous conservation of at-risk iconic churches has saved some of the city’s urban heritage.

The Muslim Society of Buffalo (Jami Masjid)
The Muslim Society of Buffalo, popularly known as Jami Masjid, located at 1955 Genesee St, was formerly the Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church as seen in Figure 4. The church was completed in 1928 and designed by Dietel and Wade in the Late Gothic Revival style with some Tudor influences. It served the increasing Polish community (first and second generation) in the area, who were moving from the Broadway-Fillmore neighbourhood. The parish was originally established in 1920, and initially constructed a small frame church and school building. Soon, however, their growing needs necessitated a bigger building. The architects commissioned for the new project suggested a complex comprising a combined church, school, and rectory building (see Figure 5). The building was designed in a cruciform layout, with the school and rectory forming the left and right arms, respectively. The 800-seat church and sanctuary formed the central arm of the cruciform. The church also featured murals by artist Josef Mazur (Napora 1995), as seen in Figure 6.

In 2007, members of a Muslim community in the Schiller Park neighbourhood were looking for a place to set up their worship space. They faced challenges of funding and struggled to find appropriate sites in the area. The Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church had already been closed to worship for 2 years by then, and seemed like an ideal solution to the community’s needs. It was already zoned for the kinds of uses the community had in mind: a religious space and a seminary school. The Diocese was

Figure 4. View of the Jami Masjid from Genesee street. The cruciform plan of the former church is visible in this image: the rectory building, church projecting in the centre, and part of the school building. No major alterations have been made to the exterior except for the removal of stained glass windows. Historical photographs show that the corner spire no longer features the original cross.
Source: Author.
also looking to sell the large edifice; in early 2007 the entire property was bought by Darul Hikmah for $300,000. Darul Hikmah is a sister organization to Darul-Uloom Al-Madania, an Institute for Islamic Higher Education that was set up in the 1980s, and that

Figure 5. Aerial view of the former church complex shows (a) the rectory, (b) the church, (c) the school, and (d) living quarters.
Source: Google Maps.

Figure 6. Undated interior view of Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church prior to conversion, showing the altar, pulpit, murals, and stained glass windows. Image courtesy of the collection of The Buffalo History Museum. General photograph collection, buildings – religious – Roman Catholic.
also runs Masjid Zakariya, another mosque housed in a former cathedral in the Broadway-Fillmore neighbourhood. Darul Hikmah was primarily established to streamline all paperwork related to taxes and administration of the seminary school as well as the mosque (Dr. Hatim Hamad\textsuperscript{8}. President of Darul Hikmah, in discussion with the authors. 24 July 2018).

Between March and August of 2007, several Darul Hikmah volunteers worked tirelessly to convert the church into an appropriate space for Islamic worship. Before the sale was finalized, a private contractor, seeking the beautifully intact stained glass windows, replaced them with plain frosted glass. All religious iconography in the church was removed, including all the pews and the church organ. All the murals depicting any human form were painted over by the volunteers. All iconography in the altar was also removed. The floor is now covered with Turkish carpets for Islamic prayers, the windows feature frosted glass windows, and the walls and Gothic brackets are adorned with Arabic calligraphy as shown in Figures 7 and 8. The school building has been converted to the accredited Universal School, a non-profit Islamic seminary day school (Dr. Hatim Hamad. President of Darul Hikmah, in discussion with the authors. 24 July 2018).

Since the mosque opened in 2007, Darul Hikmah has spent over $300,000 in repairs and maintenance, raised primarily through donations. Over the years, the front steps leading up to the former church have had to be repaired, roof tiles replaced, and significant upgrades have been made inside, particularly to create separate restrooms for men and women, and to create locker rooms for the worshippers to wash their feet before entering the main prayer space (Dr. Hatim Hamad. President of Darul Hikmah, in discussion with the authors. 24 July 2018). The front entrance is used by men, and opens into the narthex, which leads into the nave. In the main prayer space, the orientation has changed, and the altar removed. While the men’s space comprises the former nave and aisles (see Figure 7), the women’s space comprises the former

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.jpg}
\caption{Interior views of the Jami Masjid show the replaced windows and Turkish carpeting for Islamic prayer. The murals have been painted sky blue and the walls are adorned with Arabic calligraphy.}
\label{fig:figure7}
\end{figure}

\textit{Source: Author.}
transept and crossing (see Figure 9). All the pews have been removed from this space and replaced with carpeting. A small altar along the western wall has been created for the imam to stand, and worshippers on both the men and women’s sections sit facing him (see Figure 8). A screen separates the men and women’s prayer spaces, and women have their own entrance from the north-west part of the former church.

Figure 8. The orientation of prayer has changed; the imam now stands along the eastern wall of the building.
Source: Author.

Figure 9. The apse has been screened off as the private prayer space for women.
Source: Author.
While the mosque was established corresponding to the needs of the Islamic community that was settling in the area, the resettlement continues. Habitat for Humanity has also helped several Muslim refugees and immigrants settle in the area by building or rehabilitating homes through a 30-year interest-free mortgage (Tan 2018). The mosque complex therefore also serves as a community centre for Muslims in the region. They have weekly programming, youth groups, counselling services, and Quran classes for both children and adults. All of the community-centred programming is run by NO-MADS (New Organization of Men Adhering to Deen and Sunna), a non-profit group of young men who are mentoring the local youth. Through the mosque, the school, and the programming, the mosque plays a positive role in the neighbourhood. Many non-Muslim families, predominantly African American, are now sending their teenagers to the mosque for counselling and positive experiences, and to ensure that they do not associate with problem groups (Dr. Hatim Hamad. President of Darul Hikmah, in discussion with the authors. 24 July 2018).

International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association
Saint Agnes Roman Catholic Church, at 194 Ludington Ave, was designed by the local architectural firm of Eisenwein and Johnson, and constructed between 1904 and 1905 to cater to the growing German and Irish families that had to travel afar for their church services. The Romanesque style church, shown in Figure 10, had an 840 seating capacity (Napora 1995). It was preceded by a wood frame church in 1883 to accommodate the growing congregation (Ederer 2003). By 1893, five structures had been added to the site: the wood-framed St. Agnes Church, parochial school, Sisters’ dwelling, priest’s house, and a shed. By 1917, the site was merged with another lot, the parochial school was combined with the original church building and converted into an auditorium, and a new St. Agnes Parochial School was constructed in the southwest corner of the lot (Lachiusa and Witul 2009). In 1921, stained glass windows by Otto F Andrle were added to the building, and John D’Angelo created several murals in 1926 as shown in Figure 11 (Napora 1995). Post-Second World War, the German community began to be replaced by Italians, who influenced St. Agnes both liturgically and physically (Lachiusa and Witul 2009). Sanborn maps from 1939 show a car garage next to the priest’s house; this garage is still standing. Most of the murals and paintings from the church’s interior were lost during renovations carried out in 1985 that aimed to simplify the church as shown in Figure 11 (Napora 1995; Lachiusa and Witul 2009). It is not clear when the convent, the janitor’s dwelling, and half of the auditorium were demolished. Today, the site comprises the German-influenced Romanesque Revival church, the school building, the nuns’ dwelling, and the rectory (priest’s house) with the attached garage as shown in Figure 12.

By the turn of the millennium, the dwindling parish at the church had to be reorganized by the Buffalo Diocese. In 2007, three parishes from the neighbourhood, St. Agnes, St. Francis of Assisi, and Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary were combined, and formed into the new St. Katharine of Drexel Parish (St. Katharine Drexel Parish Community n.d.; Tokasz 2009b). The last service at St. Agnes was held on 21 October 2007 (Lachiusa and Witul 2009). While the Buffalo Diocese was struggling to sell the property, a Vietnamese monk, Thich Minh Tuyen from California (originally from Vietnam), was looking for a place to establish an international centre for Buddhism and meditation, a place that would welcome Buddhists from around the world and be the focus of cultural and educational
exchanges (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018). The property was bought in 2009 from the Diocese, and over the next 3 years converted into a Buddhist temple called Tu Vien Dai Bao Trang Nghiem Temple. The temple is now known as International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association (henceforth Buddhist Temple). The Buddhist Temple bought St. Agnes for $250,000 and the former Visitation Church for $100,000 from the diocese after considering some other churches in the area as well (Tokasz 2009a). All the funds for the purchase were raised through donations by the international Buddhist community (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018).

While the conversion was taking place, the temple began offering space for worship in the former church. Through the conversion, the church has predominantly remained intact, although some iconography has been removed: the crucifix, and several images of the Stations of the Cross. Instead, the new owners have added three large sitting Buddha.

Figure 10. The exterior of the former Roman Catholic Church remains unchanged, including the cross atop the corner spires and the front gable.
Source: Author.
Figure 11. (Left) Interior view of the former St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church from 1934, taken from the church’s Golden Jubilee program. The image shows the decorative murals in the altar and the domed ceiling of the apse (Right) Interior view of the former St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church in 1986, showing significant simplifications in interior ornamentation. Images courtesy of the Chancery Archives of the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo.

Figure 12. Aerial views of the property show (a) the school, (b) the rectory, (c) the church, and (d) the nuns’ quarters.
Source: Google Maps.

statues (see Figure 13) each weighing about 2000 pounds (Tokasz 2012). These are now at the altar and were shipped from Canada (Bhksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018). Three
standing Buddhas have been placed at a shrine in the narthex (see Figure 14). The monks have retained the church layout, and most of the physical changes made are reversible. Four to six rows of pews immediately next to the altar were removed and replaced with carpets for the worshippers to sit on, as shown in Figure 15. The remaining pews were left in place
for anyone unable to sit on the floor. All the stained glass windows in the church were left intact, and colourful curtains and valances have been added over the windows along the aisles. The stained glass windows in the transept and the rose window over the altar have been left as-is as shown in Figure 16.
The minimal physical intervention at the former church was a deliberate decision by the founding monk Bhiksu Tuyen. He recognized the historical significance of the former church, and also wanted to show respect to other faiths by combining the Buddhist iconography with the existing Catholic one, instead of completely erasing the latter (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018). Therefore, much of the physical fabric of the former church and its environs has been retained by the new occupants, even though for them it was not an active act of conservation. Thus, the new users of the site participated in what we have called serendipitous conservation by saving the historic fabric of the church from almost certain neglect or worse, demolition, and added to the social fabric of the neighbourhood.

The residents of the neighbourhood surrounding the temple have also been welcoming of the conversion. While many were upset at losing their church as a place of worship, they were glad to see the church building being actively used for worship by another faith instead of slowly decaying, and have welcomed the activity at the site (Linda Hastrieter. President, The Iron Island Preservation Society of Lovejoy, Inc, in discussion with the authors. 3 August 2018). Many local residents have also ventured inside the temple to partake in prayer services and cultural events, or to meditate (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018). Today, the temple serves hundreds of predominantly Vietnamese Buddhists from Buffalo and surrounding communities of Amherst, Depew, Cheektowaga, and Lockport. They also get worshippers from Utica, Syracuse, and other parts of upstate New York. Sometimes, they also host international travellers. Increasingly, Buddhists of Burmese, Thai, Indian, and Sri Lankan origins are also visiting the temple for worship (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018).

While the temple has been successful in drawing people from the region and beyond for worship and meditation, they have struggled to come up with alternative uses for the rest of the buildings in the complex, because the Buddhist faith does not allow them to generate revenue for themselves (Tokasz 2012). The sisters’ residence towards the north-east part of the property currently houses four nuns who taught at the former St. Agnes School for decades. Once the parish moved and the church was closed, the diocese requested the new owners to accommodate the nuns. They currently live in their quarters onsite and do not pay rent. Instead, they donate money to cover the costs of any updates or repairs that need to be done to their residences. The temple attendees donate money wherever possible, and fundraising through donations is how the temple is primarily run. Initially, the monks had hoped to draw Vietnamese and Buddhist residents to the neighbourhood to try and build a community centred on the temple. This, however, has not yet been realized, although their congregation draws people from afar. Bhiksu Chanh also struggles with paying for the large utility bills incurred in heating a large space like a church. They are averaging total utility bills of around $2500 per month. Additionally, they continue to fundraise for maintenance projects like roof repair, landscaping, and repairing water damage to walls (Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh. Monk, International Sangha Bhiksu Buddhist Association, in discussion with the authors. 12 August 2018).
In summary

The efforts to reuse vacant historic churches described in this paper have come from local residents, often recent immigrants and refugees. Denominational changes have been undertaken by African-American congregations, making the process distinctly community-driven, and not developer or market-driven as seen elsewhere in the city. The process has been serendipitous in the neighbourhoods east of Main Street because local communities did not have an explicit agenda to preserve the properties – rather, their intent was to find an affordable way to house their places of worship. This reuse process has also been physically different from typical church reuse. The various kinds of architectural considerations laid out by Simons et al. (2016, 56–57) for religious adaptive reuse projects have not applied to the properties discussed in this paper. Most church redevelopment projects, particularly in strong markets, look to preserve the architectural character and character-defining features to “brand the product” (Simons et al. 2016, 61). This, of course, can raise the real value of the project, and attract potential renters and/or buyers at market-rate prices.

In the neighbourhoods east of Main Street, those considerations were not of paramount importance – communities were seeking to establish places of worship in close proximity to their neighbourhoods, and found the answer in the scores of abandoned churches that dot the area’s landscape. Another reason that may have played a role in the reuse of church properties is the concern that religious spaces that “look” non-Western can be threatening, like the early mosques of Britain from the nineteenth century (Naylor and Ryan 2002, 44). Numerous contemporary US and European examples show that those sets of conflicts continue today (Naylor and Ryan 2002, 45). Consequently, an Islamic mosque or a Buddhist temple that ensures the safety of a beloved church from guaranteed demolition is often more palatable to traditional local (predominantly Christian) communities and former parishes and congregations than a place of worship that looks ‘foreign’ – the latter can be perceived as threatening.

The predominant physical changes at both sites were internal, not external, further assuring the community of the safety of their former church. In the Jami Masjid example, the former church was rescued from deterioration or demolition, but Islamic beliefs dictated the removal of another faith’s iconography, which led to the loss of traditional features like stained glass windows, statuary, pews, and the murals. The overall site, however, has remained relatively intact. In the Buddhist Temple example, stained glass windows and pews were retained, and only the iconography at the altar was removed. While each case necessitated some level of loss of traditional material culture, the advantages of saving the properties and putting them to active community-driven use far outweighed the material loss. Therefore, despite the removal of material culture, these serendipitous acts of conservation are slowly making their presence felt in the relatively bleak urban character of the neighbourhoods east of Main Street.

Recommendations for faith-to-faith conversion of churches

Planners, preservationists, and architects in cities across the country can look toward this serendipitous conservation process as a tool for saving, preserving, and reusing vacant or abandoned church properties in their communities. Particularly in cities like Cleveland where refugee and immigrant resettlement is comparable to Buffalo, this faith-to-faith conversion process can be a viable community rebuilding tool. Several recommendations have emerged
from analysing the case studies discussed in this paper that can help other communities incorporate these conversions into their planning agenda.

**Expanding the scope and definition of ‘integrity’**

As municipalities look at policies aimed at faith-to-faith conversion projects, there has to be a larger conversation about what we understand as integrity in conservation, and how that can be expanded to include projects like Jami Masjid and the Buddhist Temple. Recognition of essential changes that can be made in the conversion process, and expanding the scope of what would be considered physical or material integrity can incentivize similar conversions. In each case the severity of interior changes was dictated by the faith – flexibility in recognizing ‘integrity’ in these kinds of complex projects can, therefore, help municipalities ward off the rising number of demolitions done every year. Creation of municipal or state policies and guidelines that can help property owners identify appropriate ways to bring about the changes can make the conversion process more streamlined and can pave the way for possible future designations of the former church properties. Guidelines for sellers and buyers to properly document such historically significant properties prior to conversion can also help local, state, and federal agencies to place a property within its proper context. Currently, for example, the significant changes made to Jami Masjid will likely not pass existing standards for integrity, and therefore will make the property ineligible for a National Register designation, even though it was deemed eligible prior to conversion.

**Better municipal policies and oversight**

Currently, there is no cohesive policy related to these kinds of conversions in the city. Despite the presence of a preservation ordinance, the city lacks clarity on how to protect such properties, or how to guide the conversion process and avoid demolition. In 2014, for example, after the city allowed the demolition of the North Park Baptist Church, Buffalo Preservation Board sought greater oversight in preventing the demolition of properties that were not landmarks, or not located within historic districts. The Board also wanted to have better oversight in trying to get threatened buildings designated as landmarks – currently, they have to wait until a demolition permit is requested by an owner (Staff 2013). Consequently, many architecturally, historically, and culturally significant properties including churches have been lost to demolition.

Publicly available data pertaining to churches, their original use, current use, vacancy status, and designation status can help municipalities and advocacy groups to step in and assist as well. Members of a local Korean church, for example, are looking for a larger church space for their growing congregation – however, they do not know where to look for that information. A publicly available database at the municipal level can aid local communities to fulfil such needs. Currently, all efforts are piecemeal and different for every church that is threatened by demolition or is placed on the market for sale. Partnering with local institutions like universities and high schools can also get students involved in creating such a database, and make them more involved and aware of communities facing challenges of population loss and vacancy.

**Coordination between local and state agencies**

Better coordination between different agencies can also help streamline the process of conservation and/or reuse of vacant church properties. The aforementioned municipal
A database on churches in the city, for example, could include or connect to information from the NYS Cultural Resources Inventory System (CRIS) and vice versa. For example, according to CRIS, in 2004 the Queen of Peace Roman Catholic Church (Jami Masjid today) was surveyed as part of an archaeological survey and was deemed to be National Register eligible. Dr. Hamad, in conversation with the authors (24 July 2018), however, did not have any information about the eligibility of the church, even though he was aware of its historic character. However, since the church was not bought with the express intent of conserving it, and the new owners did not have any additional information, they did not follow any of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines. Their intent was to find an appropriate space for their worship, and in the process, they saved the building from further neglect and possible demolition. Dr. Hamad, however, was interested in learning more about local, state, and federal programs that could help leverage funding and grants for building maintenance projects.

In the case of the former Saint Agnes Roman Catholic Church, the monks involved with the temple and some of the congregation members indicated that while they had not heard of ‘historic preservation’, they were interested in knowing more. The authors briefly outlined the process of historic preservation, and invited the monks and congregation members to engage further to understand local, state, and federal designation processes and their connection to tax credits for income-producing properties, for example, the currently vacant school building, and the Sacred Sites program offered by the New York Conservancy. As of fall 2018, graduate students from the University at Buffalo were working on a National Register nomination for the property to assist them with grant opportunities. In November 2018, the property was deemed National Register eligible based on the research conducted by graduate students.

**Preservation non-profits and advocacy groups can help**

Cities need to take note of this serendipitous conservation process. Special policies and programs targeted at these kinds of projects can help streamline the process, and also provide communities with the essential information that they currently lack while reusing historic properties. Outreach programs to communities (immigrants and refugees in particular), for example, can help them understand the process of conservation, and the associated resources for conserving and/or maintaining their properties. Additionally, while tax credit projects follow the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and Guidelines, faith-to-faith conversion projects can also benefit from more informed decision-making regarding historic properties. Such a program can also help familiarize immigrants and refugees with local, state, and federal policies related to historic properties and their care. It can also help dispel misinformation. The current stakeholders of the Jami Masjid, for example, have refused any offers of assistance with a National Register nomination, fearing federal or state government interference in their place of worship.

Additionally, if the conversion from one faith to another is done sensitively, then new stakeholders can also try for local/state/federal designation of their properties, and take advantage of the funding sources that are available to designated sites. There is some progress towards this locally. In response to the growing need for owners of religious properties in the city to understand the resources available, the regional advocacy group, Preservation Buffalo Niagara, is preparing to offer community workshops for stakeholders like those discussed in this paper. The workshops will help stakeholders to get more familiar with the resources available to them to take their serendipitous conservation one step further, and engage in active and deliberate conservation and designation of their properties.
Recognizing the role of the new use in the community
Past research has shown how places of worship form an integral part of the urban landscape, but can also be difficult to adaptively reuse due to typology, floor area, socio-cultural, and religious limitations (Mine 2013; Simons and Choi 2010). These faith-to-faith adaptations are, therefore, a win-win: the historic property is saved from demolition, new communities have a ready-made space for their worship, and these converted spaces begin to positively impact blighted neighbourhoods by building a sense of community. Several congregations visited during the course of this project have been playing active roles in rebuilding the local community within various neighbourhoods east of Main Street through youth camps, street clean-ups, park clean-ups, construction of playgrounds, and holding open houses and community events (Williams 2017a; Cardinale 2005).

Numerous preservation case studies have shown how a site actively in use can have far-reaching impacts on the surrounding community. In 2017, for example, the Jami Masjid administration undertook major fundraising efforts to raise $80,000 to build a new playground on their property for the neighbourhood children. The neighbourhood had been in desperate need for a new and safe playground because the only other park, Schiller Park, is unsafe and unhygienic for children to play in (Williams 2017a). Shortly after, they were able to raise the funds and received $10,000 from the KIND foundation. The playground was opened to the public in August 2017 (Williams 2017b). Since then, it has been a successful space for neighbourhood children to safely play and interact (Dr. Hatim Hamad. President of Darul Hikmah, in discussion with the authors. 24 July 2018). These kinds of positive outcomes can help municipalities like Buffalo create a more nuanced approach to the problem of vacant churches, and also try and incentivize the process to encourage more stakeholders to take on empty buildings.

Conclusion
Shrinking cities like Buffalo are constantly at risk of losing their urban heritage, particularly iconic places of worship that lose congregations to suburbanization and other processes. Gradual changes in urban populations within distressed inner-city areas, however, brought on particularly by incoming immigrant, refugee, and low-income families can have a significant impact on the urban landscape. While denominational changes have been taking place over time (Simons and Choi 2010, 12), faith-to-faith conversions are uncommon. The changing religious landscape of the US, however, is making this more and more possible (Prothero 2006). As communities associated with Christian denominations and other faiths move into blighted communities, they seek to establish their own places of worship. Abandoned or vacant churches and other sites are prime candidates to accommodate this need; they turn out to be economical, feasible, and quicker to establish.

As the growing number of examples from Buffalo’s eastern neighbourhoods have shown, faith-to-faith adaptation of places of worship is a very viable solution to the problem of at-risk urban heritage. They are increasingly becoming essential tools in rebuilding, re-densifying, and reclaiming distressed inner-city urban areas. Local communities, who are often opposed to such conversions, can, therefore, look to examples from Buffalo to assess if increasingly vibrant, in-use places of worship in slowly recovering communities are preferable to the alternative: widespread demolition, excessive lot vacancies, and irreparable loss of historic buildings and community fabric.
Notes

1. The Pew Research Center estimates that several Christian denominations (including Catholic) declined between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center 2015, 3).

2. These planning communities were defined during the city’s comprehensive planning process in the early 2000s to organize ongoing research and engagement activities around the city’s 2006 comprehensive plan “Queen City in the 21st Century.”

3. It is estimated that capital investments in the city are now more than six times what they were at the end of the twentieth century. Between 2010 and 2013, more than 4.4 billion in real estate and economic development projects were completed in the city.

4. We define church-like properties as those that have a church/liturgical function but may be housed in former single-family residences or commercial/institutional establishments.

5. The Lafayette Lofts project was completed in 2014 within the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in the historic and in-demand Elmwood Village historic district. The historic church, built in 1894, was designed by Lansing & Beierl (Napora 1995). The National Register-listed site (listed in 2009) was losing its congregation for years and decided to undertake what was called an imaginative solution to their problem. The project cost about $7 million and converted part of the church into 21 residential units, event spaces, meeting rooms, and Pre-K classrooms (Preservation League of New York State 2015; Epstein 2017).

6. The cornerstone on the church was laid in 1927.

7. Several other Muslim congregations were already in existence in the area by 2007, catering to various sects and ethnicities within the Islamic faith.

8. Dr. Hatim Hamad, DDS, is an endodontist with a private practice in Buffalo, NY. Dr. Hamad, a former US Navy serviceman, hails from California and is also Clinical Assistant Professor at University at Buffalo’s School of Dental Medicine in the Department of Periodontics and Endodontics.

9. Bhiksu Thich Minh Tuyen returned to California in 2012 and was subsequently replaced by the current monk, Bhiksu Thich Minh Chanh.

10. Currently, all demolition applications are referred to the Buffalo Preservation Board for review. The Preservation Board reviews to see if the property is contiguous with any properties that are on the National Register of Historic Places as Historic Landmark properties or if the property is eligible for designation. There is a thirty-day waiting period from the date of the application before a permit can be issued, with the exception of emergency declarations (City of Buffalo Department of Permit and Inspection Services 2018).

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