

**Final Report to the Newton Community Preservation Committee
of the New Art Center Preservation Plan for the
Church of the Open Word (Swedenborgian)**

19 Highland Avenue, Newtonville

July 11, 2023

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the CPA Grant Agreement, dated December 2021, the New Art Center is pleased to submit this final summary report to the Newton Community Preservation Committee, describing the work that was accomplished in the planning for the proposed use and historic rehabilitation to the buildings of the Church of the Open Word (Swedenborgian) at 19 Highland Avenue in Newtonville.

The New Art Center requested and received a CPA grant to help fund a planning process for preservation and rehabilitation of the two historic buildings on Highland Avenue. The church building was designed by architect Ralph Adams Cram; the Parish House's designer is unknown. We entered into a 12-month Option to Negotiate a purchase price (which was extended an additional four months) with the Massachusetts New Church Union, owners of the Church of the Open Word, with the end goal of purchasing, restoring, and renovating the Church and the Parish House to become a new home for the New Art Center.

During the May of 2022, NewArt prepared and issued an RFP for architectural design services for Conceptual Studies and Schematic Design to upgrade the existing buildings to house a new New Art Center. The Center received several proposals and the building committee interviewed four firms in June. NewArt selected the firm of Utile Architects of Boston for this phase. Among their other qualifications, Utile was chosen for its significant experience in the rehabilitation of historic structures, and for their planning studies in Newton. Michael Kaufman, chair of our building committee, served as NewArt's owner's project manager.

Utile performed an existing conditions survey of the buildings to assess their physical condition, and the configuration of the various rooms and spaces. The surveys were deemed necessary to determine the ultimate design project. These assessments defined the physical conditions, problems, zoning issues for both buildings, building codes and historical rehabilitation requirements, as well as an ADA accessibility review.

Utile met with various members of the NewArt community, and prepared a detailed building program with required areas and adjacencies, for approval by the building committee. The architectural program emphasized three main categories: accessibility, create barrier-free access to as many spaces as possible; historical appropriateness, fulfill overall treatment plan in compliance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Properties; and comfort, safety, efficiency, and utility for all classes, exhibitions, and programs. The New Art Center also worked with a cultural planning consulting firm to conduct a needs assessment and from that develop a program for the functional uses and sizes needed for the

Center's growth into the next many decades. That assessment also informed the building program for the preservation and design project.

From the program, Utile proceeded to produce a number of alternative configurations, which were presented to and discussed with the building committee over a series of meetings. From that direction, the architects developed two preferred schemes for study: one that kept the most of the Parish House intact, and one that included demolition of the Parish House. Both schemes preserved the Church building, both its exterior and majority of the interior. The architects advanced both schemes into a set of schematic plans, elevations, building sections, and site plans, with layouts that would accommodate the established program, as well as make the buildings accessible.

For the major parts of the existing buildings, Utile specified that the exterior stone walls be restored and the slate roof be repaired. Gutters, downspouts, and flashing would be restored or replaced in kind. Windows were to be replaced with new energy-efficient clad wood windows with profiles to match the existing. Much of the stained glass would be removed and restored, and reinstalled, as appropriate. Existing wood doors would be repaired and restored. All of the above work was to be performed in compliance with the Secretary's Standards.

In order for the New Art Center to grow strategically and serve a greater number of Newtonians and regional students, NewArt determined that it is necessary that we move to a facility that provides more classrooms space, as well as safe studios and classrooms for our patrons that are accessible to all people. Additionally, relocating the New Art Center to the Church of the Open Word property would enrich Newtonville, providing an additional reason for the public to visit this recently redesigned downtown neighborhood, increase revenue for local businesses, as well as rehabilitating a property that is currently a magnet for vandalism.

Our intention was to restore, preserve, and rehabilitate the historic church building to house an exhibition gallery, lecture and performance space, and a function venue for other Newton cultural institutions. We have also been in contact with City regarding shared or joint uses with the new NewCAL (senior center) project, which is located caddy-corner to our site.

Our preferred scheme for the Parish House was to renovate the handsome Richardsonian-era building to house the other functions of the New Art Center, including classroom and studio space, small assembly spaces, and our administrative offices. We hoped to be able to preserve the exterior of the original structure, but anticipated there will be selective demolition of some areas to be able accommodate the construction of a new addition wing or wings needed to house much of program requirements. Our studies also looked at the architectural advantages and disadvantages of the potential demolition of the building which would be replaced with a new state-of-the art studio building which would connect to the existing church building.

This process resulted in conceptual designs that NewArt used to obtain accurate construction costs estimates from an experienced construction company. With these documents in hand, we hoped to be able to approach the CPC, the Massachusetts Cultural Council Capital Facilities

Fund, private foundations, and individual donors with studied and fact-based data to create a capital campaign to raise funds to be able to purchase the property and perform the long-overdue renovations of these centrally located buildings.

During this process we also had a series of meetings with various groups and individuals to explain and gain support for our project.

1. Met with Susan Albright, Newton City Council president, to introduce her to the project.
2. Met with a representative of MassDevelopment to discuss tax-exempt bond financing for the project.
3. Met with officers at Village Bank to discuss mortgage possibilities.
4. Had an informal meeting with chair of the Newton Historical Commission to introduce the project.
5. Met with Ward 2 Councilors Lucas and Norton, both of whom expressed enthusiasm about the project.
6. Met with Mayor Fuller, Barney Health, and Jonathan Yeo to share the conceptual renderings.

The New Art Center has been working diligently since March 2021 to determine if 19 Highland Ave. would be a suitable future home for the center. Over the past two years, we have secured funding not only from the CPC, but also the Mass Cultural Council and our own operating fund for a marketing feasibility study, a Business Plan and the conceptual architectural studies developed by Utile. Our building committee has met for hundreds of hours as we worked in good faith to move this project forward. We have worked extraordinarily hard to understand the opportunities as well as the challenges of this regrettably long neglected property.

In January 2023, we presented one offer to the Massachusetts New Church Union, which was not accepted. Undeterred, we put together a second offer in March. We are extremely disappointed to report that, as of this date, the MNCU has again rejected our offer and indicated their plans to move forward to hire a commercial broker to sell the property.