

# Integral Urbanism in Philadelphia

Church property is crucial for  
community-oriented development

By Nathaniel Gotcher

In recent years, many in the architecture and urban development professions have been exploring the potential for the more intensive use of land owned by churches and other faith-based organizations. The focus has largely been on housing (especially affordable housing), which would benefit the community by addressing housing shortages without over-developing the shrinking amount of available public land. Creating housing on church-owned land can also provide revenue for a church, allowing it to maintain its presence in the community despite a shrinking congregation.

While housing is an essential part of any urban planning policy, there are even more important considerations that should shape any urban design effort a community undertakes. Beyond addressing the need for comfortable shelter, communities should also create spaces that bring people together to share the things that enrich their common lives: schools and libraries for education, parks and gymnasiums for recreation, and places of worship to address our spiritual needs. Masterplans should integrate the satisfaction of material needs with providing for the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual well-being of the whole community. This “integral urbanism” should form the basis for urban development.

Our focus here is on spaces that support spiritual well-being – such as places of worship – and specifically how the use and organization of church-owned land can contribute to integral urbanism. An underlying assumption of the conversations around church-owned land today is that congregations are shrinking and require outside aid to continue operation. This can lead to the conclusion that churches are unsustainable organizations that drain public resources. On the other hand, the material and spiritual outreach a church provides is an asset to the community, and every effort should be made to allow churches to use their land to sustain this outreach. For some churches, providing affordable housing is an essential part of the mission, and communities can form partnerships with these churches that allow for the development of church-owned land for housing.

There are, however, other mission-related public services that benefit the community, such as soup-kitchens, community education, or recreation, which churches can accommodate on their property as well. Church-owned land can also provide good opportunities for creating public space, an essential component of any urban masterplan. Historically, many churches have been built with some sort of courtyard or plaza, located outside the church building, where people

could gather for some aspect of their common life, whether that be prayer, political action, entertainment, recreation, or commerce. Ultimately, communities have an interest in spiritual centers that are flourishing, not merely on life support, and promoting active and growing church congregations can help communities achieve their long-term land-use goals.

Planning efforts for church-owned land should engage with the planning process of the neighborhood in which it is situated and vice versa. On sites with room for more than one building, special attention should be given to how they are situated, especially where new development is proposed. The scale, composition and orientation of urban features, including the open space around a church building, are important in meeting the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual needs of a community.

Finally, we should remember that to build *sustainably* means re-using structures that have already been built. Many churches have auxiliary buildings that are historic and well-built but under-utilized. Rectories, convents, and similar residential structures can be incorporated in an affordable housing plan or provide housing for those struggling with homelessness. School buildings can be adapted to housing but are also well-suited to community educational programs and meetings. Church halls can be used for larger community gatherings, entertainment, workshops, exhibitions, etc. Parts of these buildings can also be rented to commercial enterprises.

Philadelphia is home to many historic churches and faith communities with a significant presence in their neighborhoods; this presence includes real estate. Partners for Sacred Places and their Philadelphia Fund for Black Sacred Places—and similar organizations—are on the front lines of preserving, and more importantly revitalizing church property. I recently had the privilege of participating in a charette at New River Presbyterian Church, which reimaged their property to engage better with their Girard Avenue neighborhood. The opportunities for this type of engagement are everywhere in the city and surrounding communities.

At present, advocates for this type of mutually beneficial arrangement face a variety of challenges, both legal and cultural. Zoning regulations often prohibit multiple uses on a single property or limit the number of buildings on a lot. The alteration of historically designated structures faces additional restraints. Many congregations have no desire to develop their properties, while some communities do not see churches as desirable partners.

The need for housing may help to overcome some of these challenges, but we should look at church-owned land within a broader consideration of how we want to organize our communities and neighborhoods. Church-owned land has a unique role to play in promoting the overall well-being of the community and needs to be integrated into a broader strategy of urban planning policy and design.

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