

Riverwood Pines Apartment Rehabilitation Case Study

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1. Intro

a. Building Typology

The importance of preserving and reusing historic multi-room schools has been receiving increasing national and local attention over the past few years, including being the featured topic in the September/October 2009 issue of *The Minnesota Preservationist*, the bi-monthly publication of the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota. These historic buildings can be found in nearly every community in the state. Many historic multi-room schools were constructed around the turn of the century in a style academics refer to as “Twentieth Century Functional.” This phrase is commonly used to reference buildings whose architectural details and ornamentation are built into the main structure, often through the use of inlaid brick patterns, projecting brick details, stone or glazed terracotta window sills, and small inlaid pieces of ornamental terracotta or decorative masonry. The rooms in historic multi-room schools often feature high ceilings, large windows, and many built-in features designed for the building’s use as a school. These unique built-in features can include built-in cubbies, closets, blackboards, as well as chair and picture rails. The hallways in historic multi-room schools are uniquely wide to accommodate the regular circulation of students between classrooms. All of these features that make historic multi-room school buildings easily identifiable can make the buildings difficult to rehabilitate into new uses or altered to accommodate contemporary education techniques.

Historic multi-room school buildings throughout the state are currently in various states of use – some buildings still function as schools or education facilities, some as housing, and still others are waiting for a future use. Rehabilitated and reused historic schools in Minnesota include: the 1916 Red Wing High School in Red Wing, the Central School in Grand Rapids, and the Little Earth Neighborhood Early Learning Center in Minneapolis. This case study will focus on the adaptive rehabilitation of the Our Lady of the Angels Academy into the Riverwood Pines Apartments in Little Falls.

b. Specific Building Intro

Riverwood Pines Apartments, located at 18795 Riverwood Drive in Little Falls, Minnesota is an excellent example of how a former school building can be reused as an affordable apartment complex. The brick 20th century functional style school, built by A. H. Harrison of Little Falls in 1911, was constructed as a parochial boarding school originally known as Our Lady of the Angels Academy for the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.¹ The building was purchased in 2004 from Teens Encountering Christ by MetroPlains Development, who developed the property for the current owners, MDI Limited Partnership #88 after the property sat vacant for nearly 30 years.



Figure 1: Restored main facade of Riverwood Pines. Photo from Preservation Alliance of Minnesota File Photo.

2. History/Property Background

Construction of the school began in 1911 when the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception decided to open a second academy in Belle Prairie, after the first was

¹ *Our Lady of the Angels Academy National Register of Historic Places Nomination* (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 2005), located in the Riverwood Pines file, Morrison County Resources file, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

destroyed by arsonists in 1889.² The 22 year window between the loss of the first academy and the construction of the new one was due to various events within the convent and a need to raise the funds to build the new school. The sisters hired A. H. Harrison from neighboring Little Falls to serve as contractor for the construction of the new academy.³ The academy was built in the 20th century functional style, like many schools constructed at this time, as the sisters had a limited construction budget and wished to construct a quality academy but did not have the funds to spend on extensive ornamentation.⁴ Rather than using extensive appliquéd ornamentation or carvings, the sisters and A. H. Harrison chose to have the building's ornamentation built into the structure through the use of brick inlays and projecting brick details. The 1911 classroom building served as the primary education facility for the boarding school, which catered to both commuter and on campus students. The primary materials used for the exterior of the building were yellow brick with limestone window sills, both of which were locally available and produced materials.⁵

From its construction in 1911, the Our Lady of the Angels Academy was owned and operated by the convent's sisters until its closure in May 1969. The sisters chose to close the academy due to extremely low enrollment numbers – the graduating class of 1968 had a total of 6 students.⁶ The sisters, who later left their convent in Belle Prairie, sold the property to Dan Brutger of St. Cloud after the academy's closure. Brutger leased the building to the Little Falls School District for the 1969-1970 school year, for use as a kindergarten and “head start” facility.⁷ After Little Falls left the former academy, Brutger sold the property to the Catholic parish, who rented the property to Central Minnesota Together Encountering Christ. In 2000, Teens Encountering Christ bought the building for \$1. Shortly after Teens Encountering Christ acquired the property, MetroPlains Development bought the property to redevelop the former academy into 14 affordable apartments.⁸

While operating as the Our Lady of the Angels Academy, the property underwent two major building additions. In 1931, the Sisters hired the architectural firm Buechner and Orth of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Riverwood Pines 2007 Minnesota Preservation Award Nomination* (Little Falls, 2007), located in the Riverwood Pines file, Little Falls community file, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, Landmark Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁶ *Our Lady of the Angels Academy National Register of Historic Places Nomination*, section 8, page 17.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Morrison County Record article, October 21, 2007, page 18.

St. Paul to design two cream colored brick wings for the school. The wings, located to the north and south of the original academy, were three stories tall, with a partially sunken basement – matching the original building’s design.⁹ Unlike the 1911 building, which had a hipped roof, the two wings were built with flat roofs. Buechner and Orth designed the additions to be less ornamented than the original building. Though purely speculation, based on available documentation, the wings were constructed with less ornamentation in order to further cut the cost of construction while also speeding up the construction time, in order to keep up with the academy’s tremendous growth through the 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1951, the sisters hired architect Fred V. Traynor of St. Cloud to design a two story gymnasium for the academy. The gymnasium was erected on the west side of the academy, with a single story brick connection linking it the original portion of the academy.¹⁰ The yellow brick gymnasium features large glass block windows with limestone sills along the second story to light the interior. Like many gymnasiums built around the time period, there are no windows on the first story, providing extensive wall space on the interior for athletic equipment.

3. Decline in Use/Disinvestment/Vacancy

Following a nationwide trend in the late 1960s, the Our Lady of the Angels Academy suffered from extremely low enrollment numbers. The academy closed following the 1968-1969 school year. Over the next thirty years, the former academy was sold to various parties and organizations. These parties and organizations had hopes for the property’s redevelopment, but all struggled to find an economically viable use for the historic multi-room school. As such, the building was primarily vacant from 1969 until MetroPlains Development purchased the building in 2004 and began to convert the historic school into apartments.

4. Advocacy

Advocacy for the former Our Lady of the Angels Academy’s reuse originated from within the ownership of the school. The Holy Family Church, the present incarnation of the original congregation, maintained controlling interest in the historic school throughout the nearly 30 years that it sat vacant. Not wanting to see their historic building succumb to demolition by

⁹ *Our Lady of the Angels Academy National Register of Historic Places Nomination.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

neglect or torn down due to a public safety mandate, the congregation contacted the City of Little Falls requesting help finding a potential owner to reuse the historic school. The City, in turn, got in contact with MetroPlains Development to discuss the potential for the company to rehabilitate the historic school. City officials knew of MetroPlains Development and their experience working with historic properties because of the company's prior work rehabilitating the Buckman Building, located in downtown Little Falls.¹¹

5. Rehabilitation

MetroPlains Development, in partnership with MDI Limited Partnership #88, purchased the historic school building in 2004 and began working on converting the property into 24 subsidized apartments. Funding for the rehabilitation came from a mix of public and private sources, including: \$2.2 million in low-income housing tax credits, \$650,000 in federal historic preservation income tax credits, a \$722,250 low-interest loan from the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development's Housing and Community Facilities program, \$285,000 in funding from the Minnesota Housing Finance Authority.

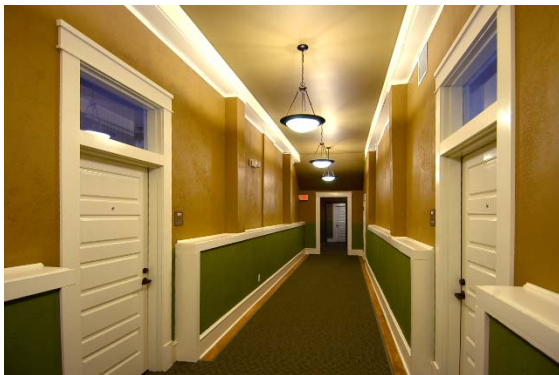


Figure 2: Residential hallway. Photo from Preservation Alliance of Minnesota File Photo.

Structurally, the historic school was in good shape when construction for the 24 subsidized apartments began. This did not mean the project was without its share of challenges to overcome. Many of the funding sources utilized by the developers on the project were tied to stipulations in how the building was rehabilitated and the energy efficiency of the property. These stipulations, on their own, are not overly challenging; but when paired in a way such as with the rehabilitation of Our Lady of the Angels Academy, they can create new challenges when sets of requisites clash with one another.

To obtain the \$650,000 in federal historic preservation income tax credits, the work completed on the property had to undergo review by the State Historic Preservation Office and National Park Service to determine that the project followed the Secretary of the Interior's

¹¹Tina Snell, "Our Lady of Angels Academy transformed," *Morrison County Record*, November 16, 2006, available at: <http://www.mcrecord.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=41579&SectionID=2&SubSectionID=2&S=1>.

Standards for Rehabilitation.¹² Following the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation meant that the project architect, JLG Architects, had to design the apartments and circulation space in such a way to work with the historic room arrangement and circulation corridors, as well as to maintain character defining features on both the interior and exterior of the building, all while creating living spaces that meet modern tastes and needs.¹³

Additionally, to obtain the \$722,250 loan from the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development’s (USDA) Housing and Community Facilities program, the property had to meet specific energy efficiency requirements. One of the biggest challenges with following both sets of standards was regarding the original, historic windows throughout the property. The windows were determined to be a “character defining feature” by the National Park Service, but did not meet to energy efficiency requirements by the USDA. To balance the two sets of requirements, JLG Architects and MetroPlains Development had to submit a full window conditions assessment to the National Park Service to determine which windows could be replaced with contemporary reproductions permitted by the USDA. After reviewing all of the window conditions and the overall project, the National Park Service returned with a compromise requiring that all windows on the primary façade be restored and maintained, but that windows on the three remaining elevations could be replaced with contemporary reproductions to improve the energy efficiency rating of the property.¹⁴

In addition to following the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation, MetroPlains and JLG Architects, along with contractor Flannery Construction, Inc, had to bring the historic school up to the local residential life and safety codes. The developers worked with local



Figure 3: Riverwood Pines community room. Photo from Preservation Alliance of Minnesota File Photo.

¹² The rehabilitation of the historic Our Lady of the Angels Academy qualified for federal historic preservation tax credits because the building was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in December 2005. *Our Lady of the Angels Academy National Register of Historic Places Nomination.*

¹³ *Riverwood Pines 2007 Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Preservation Award Nomination.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

inspectors and officials to find solutions and techniques that would meet the intent of current life and safety codes, while still following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. To help find potential accommodations within the local building codes, the developers and the City of Little Falls referred to the International Code Council's publication, "Guidelines for the Rehabilitation of Existing Buildings."¹⁵

Finally, JLG Architects worked to find ways to make the building handicap accessible while maintaining historic character defining features. This was done in a number of ways, including: building an accessible rear entry in addition to restoring the original elevated main entryway in addition, and installing a central elevator in addition to maintaining historic stairways. A covered parking area for residents, communal laundry facilities on every floor, and a large community room were also incorporated into the property for the residents' comfort and convenience.

Completed in March 2007, the rehabilitation, now known as Riverwood Pines Apartments, created 24 subsidized apartments. Of these apartments, nine are one bedroom/one bathroom and fifteen are two bedroom/one bathroom. A grand-opening of the complex was held on March 23, 2007 to welcome the public as well as local, state, and national officials to view the recently completed apartments and community spaces.¹⁶ In the fall of 2007, the rehabilitation of Our Lady of the Angels Academy was honored with the 2007 Preservation Alliance of Minnesota Adaptive Reuse Award.¹⁷

6. Conclusion

The rehabilitation of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception's Our Lady of the Angels Academy in Little Falls has helped to create quality affordable residential rentals for residents of Little Falls who wish to live in a more tranquil environment than downtown living provides. The project demonstrates how funding for historic preservation is not limited to private financing and federally available historic preservation income tax credits. Rehabilitation of historic properties can become extremely financially viable if additional

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Riverwood Pines Apartments to have grand opening March 23," *Morrison County Record*, March 14, 2007, available at: <http://mcrecord.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=43056&SectionID=9&SubSectionID=9&S=1>.

¹⁷ Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, "2007 Minnesota Preservation Award Winners," Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, <http://www.mnpreservation.org/programs/minnesota-preservation-awards/2007-minnesota-preservation-awards/>.

funding sources, including non-preservation specific government programs such as the USDA office of Rural Development's Housing and Community Facilities and low-income tax credits, are utilized. The success of Riverwood Pines also illustrates that with the proper owner and use, buildings with long-term vacancies can be preserved and rehabilitated to become vital spaces for a community.



Figure 4: Restored main facade of Riverwood Pines Apartments. Photo from Preservation Alliance of Minnesota File Photo.

Appendix 1: Table of Advocates

Organization/Company Name	Advocate Name and Contact	Advocacy Role
Holy Family Church	A: 18777 Riverwood Dr Little Falls, MN 56345 Ph: 320-632-5720	Former owner of property
City of Little Falls	A: 100 7 th Ave NE P.O. Box 244 Little Falls, MN 56345 Web: http://www.cityoflittlefalls.com Ph: 320-616-5500 E: info@cityoflittlefalls.com	Intermediary to locate potential developer

Appendix 2: Table of Rehabilitation/Restoration Key Players

Company Name	Contact	Rehabilitation / Restoration Role
MDI Limited Partnership #88		Owner
JLG Architects	A: 322 First Ave North, Suite 200 Minneapolis, MN 55401 Web: http://www.jlgarchitects.com Ph: 612-746-4260 E: info@jlgarchitects.com	Architect
MetroPlains Development, LLC	MetroPlains Development, LLC A: 1600 University Ave, Suite 212 St. Paul, MN 55104-3825 Web: http://www.metroplains.com Ph: 651-646-7848 E: metroplains@metroplains.com	Developer
MetroPlains Management, LLC		Marketing/Management
Flannery Construction, Inc	Jamey Flannery A: 1375 St. Anthony Ave St. Paul, MN 55104 Web: http://flanneryconstruction.com Ph: 651-225-1105 E: jflannery@flanneryconstruction.com	General Contractor

Appendix 3: Table of Funding

Funding Name and Contact	Type of Funding	Funding Amount	Year
USDA Rural Development	Low-interest loan	\$722,250	2006
Minnesota Housing Finance Authority	General funding	\$285,000	2006
US Bank	Loan		
M&I Bank	Loan		
Federal IRS	Low-income housing tax credit	\$2.2 million	2007
	Historic rehabilitation tax credit	\$650,000	2007

Appendix 4: Bibliography

Our Lady of the Angels Academy National Register of Historic Places Nomination (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 2005). Located in the Riverwood Pines file, Morrison County Resources file, Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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"Riverwood Pines Apartments to have grand opening March 23." *Morrison County Record*, March 14, 2007. Available at:
<http://mcrecord.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=43056&SectionID=9&SubSectionID=9&S=1> (accessed July 30, 2009).

Riverwood Pines 2007 Minnesota Preservation Award Nomination (Little Falls, 2007). Located in the Riverwood Pines file, Little Falls community file, Preservation Alliance of Minnesota, Landmark Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Snell, Tina. "Our Lady of Angels Academy transformed." *Morrison County Record*, November 16, 2006. Available at:
<http://www.mcrecord.com/main.asp?Search=1&ArticleID=41579&SectionID=2&SubSectionID=2&S=1> (accessed July 30, 2009).

"Untitled Article." *Morrison County Record*. October 21, 2007, page 18.