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Profiles - Right Where We Started: Celebrating New York City Organizations at the Same Locations Over a Century or More

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Right Where We Started: Celebrating New York City Organizations at the Same Locations Over a Century or More

Featuring these New York City not-for-profit institutions: The Art Students League of New York; The Bowne House Historical Society; The Bronx Zoo; Carnegie Hall; Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House; Middle Collegiate Church; Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanic Garden and Sailors’ Snug Harbor in the City of New York

This article was a collaboration among Professor James Hagy, Director of The Rooftops Project at New York Law School, and Alicia Langone, Jordan Moss, Sahar Nikanjam, Bridget Pastorelle, Colin Pearce, Jennifer Angie Rivera, and Ronna Zarrouk, student members of The Rooftops Project.

In conjunction with New York Law School’s own 125th anniversary celebration this year, we reached out to not-for-profit organizations that have been furthering their charitable missions in the same place for approximately 125 years or more. We were privileged to visit and chat with organizations across boroughs and mission types to be able to highlight these extraordinary organizations, their equally extraordinary properties, and to draw themes from commonalities and differences they experience in occupying mission-driven, historic structures.

Our adopted format is to provide background and context for each organization and its property at its founding (“then”), milestones in the organization’s mission and its property in the intervening years (“since”), links between mission and property as they operate today (“now”), and what each organization sees next for its property (“looking ahead”). In a final segment, we at The Rooftops Project offer reflections of our own on similarities and differences in their experiences in using location and physical space to advance their not-for-profit objectives (“thoughts and themes”). These are their stories.
The Art Students League of New York

Our visit to The Art Students League of New York was hosted by Ira Goldberg, Executive Director; Ken Park, Director of Communications & Institutional Fundraising; and Joseph Rossi, Deputy Executive Director.

Then

In 1875, dissatisfied students of New York's National Academy of Design determined to strike out on their own. Their move to independence led to the founding of The Art Students League of New York, present in the same Midtown Manhattan building since 1892.

"The National Academy was founded in 1825," explains Ira Goldberg, the League's current Executive Director. "Back then, people studying art didn't have all the options you do now. Education was much more rigorous. Before you could even go to a class with a live model, you had to master drawings from the plaster cast. A lot of the plaster casts were based on old Roman sculptures, the famous Belvedere Torso." Even in the 19th century, some students wanted a learning style more flexibly suited to them. They hoped to design programming — and space — in the atelier style of master and apprentice common in Europe from the time of the Middle Ages.

"They rented out a space on 5th Avenue and 16th Street, which apparently was half a room," Ira recounts. "Apparently it just took off after that." By 1878, their collaboration became the Art Students League of New York. There was a noteworthy, central cohort of women among its leaders, and participation by recognized artists such as Thomas Eakins and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. The group soon outgrew its space.

After several intermediate moves to other rented premises, the League created an opportunity to have a much larger, permanent home. Along with The Architectural League of New York and the Society of American Artists, the League founded the American Fine Arts Society. That organization, in turn, acquired the site at 215 West 57th, just down the block from where Andrew Carnegie was constructing Carnegie Hall (also celebrated in this article) and the Osborne Apartments, opened at the same intersection in 1885. "They were real cornerstones," as Ira puts it, in both the literal and the figurative sense. All three neighbors are extant today.

The American Fine Arts Building was designed by architect Henry Hardenbergh, who was also involved in the founding of the Society. Hardenbergh had designed the renowned Dakota Apartments further north, and within the decade would design the original Waldorf Hotel and Astoria Hotel (both of which were later razed as part of the site assembly for the Empire State Building). Hardenbergh would also soon wander just down the street, commissioned by Andrew Carnegie to make early changes and additions to Carnegie Hall.

From its founding, the Hardenbergh building was remarkable. Commonly described as French Renaissance in style, the American Fine Arts Building is now a New York City Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. "This was a grand place. The first floor was all exhibition space," Ira explains. "People used the space for independent shows. The Audubon showed here. And for a long time the Academy showed here. There was a central staircase, and on either side would be the galleries." A grand hallway oriented north from the West 57th Street entrance contained a sculpture of the god Mercury, donated by Carnegie.

As grand as the galleries and studios may have been, there are other curious and noteworthy spaces to explore in this environment that was then, as now, very much for working artists. Joseph Rossi, the League's Deputy Executive Director, joined the League in 1974 after a stint of his own in the military during the Vietnam War era. He led us on a tour that started with one of his favorite locations: the basement.

"I'm a sculptor," Joseph explained. "I find the basement the most interesting place to go."

The basement accommodates studios requiring floors with heavy load ratings, for projects like welding, stone grinding, and clay modeling. Joseph shows us a single life-size clay model on a turnstile that alone he estimates weighs 800 to 900 pounds. There are also shops for woodcarving, for ceramic sculpture, for bronze casting. Remarkably, true to the original building design, even in these basement spaces there are skylights, providing illumination from the busy Midtown Manhattan sidewalks above.

Everywhere the space is functional and well used. Signs mark studios with restricted access where artists' models are posing for classes in progress. Students of all ages, self-focused and covered with their favorite media — from paint to plaster — are everywhere. Even for a veteran real estate professional with good directional sense, wayfinding is mysterious for a first-time visitor. Many of the corridors and staircases, familiar to a veteran like Joseph Rossi, are a rabbit Warren to us.
Within a year after the Hardenbergh building on West 57th Street opened, there was already a need for additional space. Another of New York’s most prominent families enabled a timely expansion: the Vanderbilt Gallery, in the back of the property, fronting on West 58th Street. It is named for its donor, George Washington Vanderbilt. “It was a former horse stable. He gave the League the lot, the land,” Ira explains. “You had 4,000 square feet of space with 33-foot-high ceilings and natural light [from] a prism skylight.” A New York Times review in 1893 called it “the largest and best lighted gallery in the world.”

Today, the Vanderbilt Gallery space serves as additional studios to meet the programmatic demand for artist workspace. Still today, skylights at the sidewalk level on West 58th Street illuminate the studios below.

After World War Two, the League found an opportunity serving returning military personnel. The grand staircase was removed to provide additional classroom space. “Two-thirds of our students were GI’s,” Ira notes. “This basically saved the organization. In order to accommodate all the students, we converted the first floor from exhibition space to studio space.”

In 2003, the League underwent a substantial renovation of the property. “[Prior to the] infrastructure renovation in 2003, we had no air-conditioning and only 500 amps of electricity,” Joseph Rossi points out. “There were two huge, coal-fired boilers. We had to redo the whole vault area [which passes underneath 57th Street]; it was in really bad shape. By doing that, we reclaimed this area.” In walking us through the basement, we could see an area reclaimed under the West 57th Street sidewalk and, beyond a small door, leading out under West 57th Street itself.

New skylights were added for the fourth floor studios. The original Hardenbergh building staircases, which were narrow (a mere 24-inches), were widened. Updates were made to the safety systems. New plumbing was added. “We didn’t have handicapped bathrooms,” Joseph notes.

Funding for back of house improvements and deferred maintenance is often hard to raise, and in this case the price tag was more than $8 million. The League had the funds, though, accumulated over many years. Part of the money had been held for a renovation in 1996 that was delayed when the then executive director passed away.

Rather than attempting to operate through a period of such extensive construction, the League closed for an ambitiously short period, from April until the first of September, and rented space elsewhere for summer classes. “And we did it!” Ira proclaims with understandable satisfaction.

The building is still owned technically by the American Fine Arts Society, which remains a separate corporation but the shares of which are now held solely by The Art Students League. “The studios upstairs are more or less the way they were,” Ira comments. In this sense, the building continues to serve its original mission by providing the same accommodation for artistic creation that existed when the building first opened in 1892. “No question about it,” Ira agrees. “This is a building for art.”

“The mission has changed, and it hasn’t,” Ira reflects. “It is a combination of factors.” The League serves thousands of students each month and offers more than a hundred courses. There are no prerequisites; no degrees; no grades. Programs are open to artists and students of all levels of experience and ability.

“The environment that has evolved over the last one hundred-plus years is an amazing one,” Ira reflects. “We don’t have Painting 101, or Drawing 102. You come in one day. You haven’t lifted up a paintbrush and you are working next to people who have been painting for 20 years. The instructor is here, but you are also learning from the more experienced students, and that is what makes the environment special. There is a lot of social contact, interaction and learning from your fellow students. It becomes a second home. People stay.”

The list of notable former instructors and students alike is lengthy and impressive. Over time, hundreds of the country’s leading artists taught or studied within these studios: George Bellows, Daniel Chester French, George Grosz, Childe Hassam, Max Weber, Alexander Calder, Mark Rothko, Man Ray, Robert Rauchenberger, Maurice Sendak, Al Hirschfield, Red Grooms, Winslow Homer, Isamu Noguchi, Roy Lichtenstein, Al Weiwei, Cy Trombly.
“People say all the time that real estate is just another widget,” Ira comments. “[But] this place is about its history. To know that something has been preserved inside for the sake of its mission is very special. You can go upstairs and connect with a moment in time well before there were any recording devices. It really is about walking into the past, into a studio where Thomas Hart Benton taught Jackson Pollock, where William Merritt Chase taught Georgia O’Keefe, where Frank Vincent Dumont taught Norman Rockwell. It is palpable. People walk into this place and say ‘I can smell the paint.’”

Along with many accomplished, world-recognized visual artists, there are many who made their mark in other disciplines, like stage or film performance, or writing, but made art here: the Barrymores, Jane Fonda, Ellery Queen, Zero Mostel, or Peter Falk.

“While the people who founded this place were intent on being professional artists, most of our students are avocational. That’s been the composition of our membership for most of its history,” Ira notes. “We are always accessible, because tuition is low; we subsidize it [funded partially through endowment],” Ira explains. “That is our top priority; making sure tuition stays low and giving access to all those who want access. It is extremely important to welcome new people to maintain the learning environment.”

While most of the building’s volume is dedicated to studios and shops for working artists, support functions are offered in niches here and there throughout the building. An amazingly cozy art library rests on a small balcony or mezzanine space, overlooking the small, second floor Phyllis Harriman Gallery, which exhibits rotating student and faculty work. Classes get a week to show their work. The Gallery is open to the public.

A small café is operated by four paid employees, supplemented by students on scholarship. It offers drinks and snacks over long hours matching the League’s schedule and the artist community inside. The habit of offering a café service dates to the first days of the organization in 1892.

In an open essay on the League’s website, Ira Goldberg best expresses the experience enjoyed by past and future generations within the walls of the building over which he presides: “Art is the undiscovered country whose vast shores can be visited for a day, or experienced for more than a thousand lifetimes.”

Recently, the Art Students League made news by selling most of its air rights to the developer of an adjoining parcel, where a high-rise multi-use building is now being constructed. Targeted to open in 2018, the property will be one of the world’s tallest residential towers. Proceeds from the sale are restricted to use in capital projects.

“The air rights were always an asset that we were well aware of,” Ira notes. There were lengthy negotiations over more than a decade, with two stages of participation by the League: the first, in 2005, to grant air rights to the adjoining parcel, and the second, very recently, to permit the new building’s retail bustle to be cantilevered over part of the League’s existing buildings at an elevation of 300 feet.

The skylights are covered temporarily as a protective measure while the construction progresses next door. This leaves the artists to rely for the moment on artificial light. “We have some good lighting systems,” Ira comments, “and we are trying to make it as close to natural light as possible.”

The League looks forward to the restoration of natural skylight once the current construction is concluded next door. Studies were conducted to determine that, once the adjacent high-rise is completed, sun reflection will not alter the purity of light coming into the studio spaces. Ira equates skylight in the studio as “like God is illuminating the model and the painting surfaces.”

Beyond the mere end of nearby construction, the League also has the ambition to return the Vanderbilt gallery to its original purpose and condition. But that ambition is not new. “The ambition isn’t mine,” Ira explains. “It has been there for decades, ever since it had to be converted to studio space.”

Twelve thousand square feet of air rights have been reserved for future use by the League. There are about 5,000 square feet in the middle of the property that would permit new studio space to be built on several levels. Then, the League could reclaim the Vanderbilt Gallery as exhibition space.

This would not only allow for broader display of artwork, but help further to connect the League to the neighborhood and the City. The connection would benefit students and artists. “It’s not about charging admission,” Ira says. “It is getting people to see what we are doing, what we are about. You want people to see the art you are making.”
The Bowne House is the oldest house in Queens and one of the few 17th century buildings remaining in the city. Built by John Bowne in 1661, it is a City, State and National landmark. Its survival in a constantly changing urban landscape is remarkable, and is attributable to the history of the house and to the Bowne family, who realized its importance very early in its history and worked to preserve the house and contents for future generations.

The story of John Bowne would lose much of its message in another context. It is important to the visitor to visualize 17th century America, to learn that the house was built from trees felled on site – trees that have been dated through dendrochronology and were growing when Columbus discovered America. Flushing was then part of New Amsterdam, a colonial outpost. The events that took place in this house and in the town in the mid-17th century, however, were to have far reaching consequences.

John Bowne (1627-1695) came to the New World from England in 1649, first to Boston and soon afterward to Flushing, Queens. The family was from Matlock, Derbyshire. “We do not know why Bowne left England,” says Rosemary Vietor, Vice President of the Board of Trustees of The Bowne House Historical Society and herself a Bowne descendant. “But we do know that King Charles I was executed in 1649, and that John, his father, and sister Dorothy departed soon afterwards.” His home survives today under the operation and care of The Bowne House Historical Society and public ownership, since 2009, by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

At the time of the home’s construction, Flushing was in New Netherland, under the control of the Dutch West India Company. Flushing may have been a Native American village. “One of its main roads, Northern Boulevard, had been a Native American trail; it runs to the tip of Long Island”, notes Anne Perl de Pal, a licensed architect, who is the Resident Manager and Volunteer Coordinator at Bowne House. “Another 17th century property, Sylvester Manor, on Shelter Island, was owned by a Quaker family. John Bowne kept some horses there.” To the east of Flushing, Long Island had been settled by the English and thus had more in common with New England. Quaker settlements prospered from Flushing eastward.

John Bowne gradually acquired quantities of land around Flushing and was, at the time of his death, one of the major landholders in the area. “He also owned property in Pennsylvania, and retained ownership of his property in England,” Rosemary adds. “He traveled frequently for business purposes and also to attend Quaker meetings with his wife and family. Even though travel in those days was difficult, there was more movement than is often appreciated today.”

In addition to operating a farm, Bowne was a merchant. His account books show extensive dealings in textiles, tools, and other goods with merchants in New England. He exported goods such as cider and books to New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Bowne’s home until his death in 1695 was Flushing, and he had a total of three wives and sixteen children. Flushing’s fertile land, ideal location close to Manhattan but convenient to eastern Long Island towns, combined with
its proximity to navigable waterways made it a desirable place to settle. His descendants, the Bowne and Parsons families, would remain on the property for nine generations and almost three centuries. Today, his descendants make up a significant portion of the Society’s membership and are actively involved in the preservation of the house.

“The remaining site (of the original 300 acres) is a bit less than half an acre,” explains Anne. “We have some of the deeds. They acquired five acres here, five acres there, saltwater marsh, meadow land.”

“Salt marsh was highly prized for growing hay, used for livestock and other purposes,” Rosemary tells us.

Beyond its remarkable architectural features, the property is linked to the establishment of the principle of religious freedom in America. Bowne hosted Quaker meetings (services) in his home. “This is the original room where the meetings took place,” Anne points out, as we sit in the heart of the Bowne House, near a somewhat later 18th century fireplace. It is also the room where, in 1662, Governor Stuyvesant’s sheriff, Resolved Waldron, arrested Bowne and took him off to jail in Manhattan.

“For visitors, being in the very room where this event took place resonates,” Rosemary finds. “A story without its setting loses some of its drama.”

“Quakers (known as the Society of Friends) were not popular in 17th century America,” Rosemary observes. “By the 18th and early 19th centuries, the sect had grown to reach approximately 20% of the population. They were much admired for their honesty, thrift and diligence. But in the mid 17th century they were considered troublesome.” Quaker worship was a violation of the edict of Governor Peter Stuyvesant, who then ruled the Dutch colony. In fact, Stuyvesant prohibited the practice of any religion other than that of the Dutch Reformed Church.

“The residents of Flushing, though, were predominantly English, and they had been guaranteed freedom of religion by Stuyvesant’s predecessor, William Keift,” Rosemary continues. “The settlers of New Netherland were bound by the Dutch Republic’s 1579 Union of Utrecht, which stated that ‘everyone shall remain free in religion and no one may be persecuted or investigated because of religion.’” So, in 1657, 30 residents got together, drafted and signed the Flushing Remonstrance, and delivered it to Stuyvesant.

“The Remonstrance is a remarkable document, making the argument for freedom of conscience for all, not just for Quakers, but for other religions as well. “These signers were risking their lives and property in a plea for the rights of others,” Rosemary relates. “Today, an original 17th century copy of the Remonstrance is in the State Archives in Albany, having survived the fire of 1911. At least two signers of this remarkable document had descendants who were in turn signers of the Declaration of Independence.”

Stuyvesant ignored the petition. In 1662, however, John Bowne, who had not been a signer of the Remonstrance, challenged Stuyvesant by allowing Quakers to meet in his home. He was arrested, jailed in Manhattan, and then deported to Holland. From there, he pleaded his case to the Dutch West India Company, and won. He returned home, victorious, in 1664. Freedom of worship was guaranteed in the colony. Over 100 years later, this principle was enshrined in the First Amendment. “Bowne House remained the house of worship for all religions until the construction of the Old Quaker Meeting House in 1894,” Rosemary concludes. [The Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House is another of the properties highlighted in this article.]

“Flushing from its earliest times was a community of many cultures,” Rosemary reflects. “English lived side by side with Dutch, Huguenots, Native Americans and Africans. The early population was about 17 percent African. We know that John Bowne’s wife Hannah spoke Dutch; he probably did as well, and they were able to communicate with the Native Americans. The multicultural environment has continued to the present day; Queens is probably the most diverse community in America. The borough today is very proud of its roots, and the Flushing Remonstrance is considered to be the seminal document in shaping its history.”

While the Bownes were a family of means, both Anne and Rosemary believe that the family’s Quaker values and traditions contributed significantly to so many elements of the original building today. Originally a single room, the house was expanded during Bowne’s lifetime as his family grew. Most of the footprint is 17th century; the last addition is thought to be the laundry, added in around 1815.

“Because the family was Quaker,” Anne explains, “they tended to make modifications very carefully and with deliberate thought.” The house was passed down through the generations, although it had gone out of fashion and the family had become more prosperous. A number of descendants remained in the town and built more stylish, larger houses. Modifications within the house tended to occur when the house changed hands within the family; fashionable wood paneling was added in the mid 18th century. Small, multi-paned windows were removed and larger, more contemporary windows were installed. “But they kept things, they respected those things that had been passed down to them,” Anne says.

Two fine examples of thrift, sustainability, recycling, and re-adaptive use are the circa 1720 highboy and the knocker on the front door. The fine New York highboy began life as a bedroom piece; by the time dining rooms came into use in the mid to late 18th century, the highboy had been moved downstairs and refitted with drawers to hold silver flatware. Similarly, an old stirrup was fashioned into a knocker for the Dutch-style two-part front door. The house has many similar, quirky elements. “They give it character and demonstrate the thrift and ingenuity of previous generations. ‘Waste not, want not’,” Rosemary observes.
“The method and techniques that were used in this original portion of the house were Dutch”, Anne confirms. The construction is of locally harvested white oak. Recent restoration work provided access to the timber frame, allowing rafters bearing Roman numerals to be seen. This suggests European-trained craftsmanship. Rosemary attributes knowledge of the site to its founder, too. “John Bowne kept meticulous records, including an account book and a diary, which also contribute to knowledge of the building’s construction. We know he employed Huguenot craftsmen, brought back from Holland.”

The orientation of the house is important. In good weather, tours of the museum start outside. “The house faces south,” Rosemary says, as she does when serving as docent to visitors. “Most of the rooms have a southern exposure, to take advantage of the sun and daylight. The placement of the house was very important because of weather conditions. People do not tend to think in those terms now because we have heating and air conditioning,” Rosemary continues. “The house is very large for its period. It grew as the family grew.”

Even after 350 years, new revelations about the house arise. The recent restoration project unearthed a very large cistern (a structure for collecting water). The cistern yielded hundreds of objects from the 18th and early 19th centuries, which help tell the story of the residents. “We have some pretty remarkable things inside these walls,” Anne observes. “For example, they insulated the house with mud and a kind of binding material [which can be viewed through a small glass window cut into the interior plaster]. In some cases it might be hay, or animal hair. All of this may be analyzed, and may tell you something about the family and the community.”

Rosemary provides another illustration. “I received an email. A woman was writing a book and she wanted to know about our ‘clome oven’. I said, ‘I don’t know anything about that, and she said, ‘Well, you have one’ [a clome oven is a clay or masonry oven with a removable door but no chimney, and sits and vents through a large fireplace in which it is located]. We know a man who lived in a Bowne House in Matlock, England, which dates from 1667. I got in touch with him and I said ‘What do you know about clome ovens? Is that a structure that would have been found in the Derbyshire area?’ He said, ‘as a matter of fact, no, it isn’t. It would have been found closer to Cornwall’. But it turns out we may have the only clome oven in the country. So there is another unsolved mystery.”

**SINCE**

“Before 1820, there was the agrarian period, when the property was farmed, and after 1838 the farm was transformed into an industrial production nursery specializing in ornamental horticulture,” Anne explains.

During the Revolution, Flushing was occupied by the British. British troops occupied the Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House. The experiences of the Bowne family are still unearthed. Recently, the archivist working at the museum discovered a letter, dated 1776, between John and Robert Bowne (the founder of Bowne & Co., financial printers in Manhattan), describing their situations. As Quakers, they wished to avoid violence but had been asked to serve in the war in other capacities. In any event, the house survived without damage, as did the family.

In the early nineteenth century, the Bownes became involved in the nursery business when Mary Bowne married Samuel Parsons, founder of Parsons Nursery. Flushing was famous for its nurseries, and the Quakers were skilled horticulturists. The 18th century Prince Nursery, founded by a Huguenot family, was visited by four American presidents, including Washington and Adams. Many area streets are named for trees. The Parsons Nursery supplied plant materials throughout much of the country. Many of the trees in Central and Prospect Parks in New York came from the Parsons Nursery; some still survive.

During this time, Rosemary continues, “The family, and especially the Bowne women, were heavily involved in the Abolition movement. The house is thought to be a site on the Underground Railroad. Flushing, still a Quaker community, was a hotbed of abolitionist activity. Robert Bowne was a founder of the New York Manumission Society [founded by John Jay to promote the abolition of slavery in the State]. In his obituary, Samuel Parsons is quoted as saying that he had helped more enslaved African-Americans to freedom than any man in Queens. Apparently, they transported wagons of plant material to the river, as they were exporting plants all over the country. Escaping slaves would be concealed in the plant material.”

The Bowne and Parsons families continued to occupy the property for almost 300 years. The family was mindful of its heritage and of John Bowne, and wished to preserve the legacy for future generations. Occasionally, visitors familiar with the Bowne family connection with religious liberty were allowed to visit the house. The last family occupants were the Parsons sisters. Anne tells us “Bertha and Anna were born in the mid 19th century, in this house, and lived here until 1945. I would call them guardians”.

“If this house were in Manhattan, I think the experience would have been different”, Rosemary believes. “It would have been torn down; it would have disappeared. The family and the community kept this going”.

Finally, in 1945, the property was acquired for preservation by a local group. “The Bowne House Historical Society was formed and raised funds to purchase the house from the sisters [who were in their mid-nineties],” Rosemary relates. “The Society owned and maintained the property, initially staffing it with volunteers, as a ‘Shrine to Religious Freedom’”.

Eventually, the age and condition of the property required substantial resources for maintenance and repairs. In order to restore the house, the Society closed the museum for repairs. It soon became evident that the magnitude of work needed exceeded the financial resources of the Society as a small not-for-profit.

Realizing the challenges ahead to complete the necessary work, the Society elected in 2009 to donate the property to the City of New York, under the auspices of the Department of Parks and Recreation. While the Society provides funding for professional costs associated with the restoration and with operations and educational programming, the City has undertaken responsibility for ongoing capital improvement projects. The Society retained ownership of the contents, collections, artifacts, and archives and operates the site under a continuing agreement with the City.

Paul Weiss assisted the Society with the donation and future operating arrangements as pro bono counsel. Previously, Wachtel Lipton had also
provided pro bono legal help. Rosemary underscores how important she believes this was to the Society. “Without them, this project could not have gone forward. Putting the arrangement in place with the City took years and the transfer required approval of the New York State Board of Regents, the Attorney General, and the New York Supreme Court. It would have been impossible to accomplish this without skilled legal help.”

**NOW**

The phased capital project to restore the property was preceded by archaeological work at the site, as well as by studies of existing historical materials such as paint and plaster. Led by an outside professional firm, the archaeological exploration included excavation around the foundations as well as within the cistern, believed to have ceased use in the 18th century and covered with floorboards in 1815. A wealth of household fragments and discarded items were recovered, even a pocket watch.

Phase I, the Structural Stabilization and Exterior Restoration, is complete. This work addressed the timber framing, siding, windows, doors, masonry, repointing, and replacement of the cedar roof. Other phases of work, including interior restoration and replacement of mechanical systems, are expected to follow.

The chance to study the original construction methods while the structure, walls and systems are open is a unique event, but it may have a tendency to slow the construction process. “It is not something that a typical construction process tends to support”, Anne points out. The balance between efficiency in time and cost of renovation and the unique chance to study the pre-existing conditions will be something the Society’s leadership team will try to balance.

The extended period of closure while awaiting restoration placed the museum at risk of becoming disconnected from its community and from its mission. “We concluded we had been closed too long, we needed to reopen”, Rosemary recalls. “We brought back a few pieces of furniture from storage, items that would support a school tour. John Bowne and the Flushing Remonstrance, freedom of religion, the challenge to religious liberty, are the story of this house.”

Meanwhile, with the assistance of volunteer staff, the Society is continuing to catalog and digitize its collections. “Anne has worked a lot with local interns, high school and college students,” Rosemary notes. “They have been here every summer, and they do special projects according to what their interests are and what we can offer them. We now have a Director of Education. Previously, Anne and I were giving the tours. Recently, one of our trustees, an expert in horticulture, gave a tour for a group focused on gardens. When you interact with visitors you can understand what their interests are and what we can offer them. That helps in tailoring future educational programming.”

An academic conservation program at the University of Florida visited on-site, completed detailed 3-D scans of the interiors, and created an electronic tool that allows everything from transference of existing conditions to CAD (computer-aided design), to digital walk-throughs, to furniture plans.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

There are four distinct parts of the mission of the Society going forward. One relates to property as a tangible teaching tool about the history of religious freedom stemming from the Quaker traditions in the Flushing community.

The second surrounds the opportunity to understand the history of New York, and of America, through the lens of a single family, the Bownes and the Parsons, in place in one location. As Anne observes, “there is a lot to learn from three hundred years of family life.”

The third is the opportunity at this moment of historic preservation and restoration of the property, to study and appreciate generations of construction techniques from a very early point, long before the founding of the United States as an independent nation.

The fourth facet is the horticultural history of the property and the area. Anne’s own background and interest in horticulture, as well as a commitment to sustainability and caring for the grounds, has led to her planning and presenting horticultural programming both on-site and in the Flushing community.

All missions will be advanced when a planned Visitors’ Center is constructed on the eastern edge of the property, replacing a 20th century auto garage. While the Visitors’ Center’s physical footprint will be small — some 1,100 square feet — Rosemary and Anne see its potential to make an enormous impact on the Society’s work and the success of the site.

The Center will include office space for educational and interpretive staff and gallery space. The Visitors’ Center is seen as a way to draw new audiences to Bowne House, and to encourage repeat visits. “We have huge collections, some of which have never been on display,” Rosemary notes. “Textiles and archaeological artifacts would be examples.”

“If we could have rotating exhibits, we could provide additional educational programming,” Rosemary is convinced. “We could have visitors return on a regular basis.”

The Visitors’ Center would also solve practical drawbacks to the historic property, such as the need for modern, accessible restrooms. There are no restrooms at the site available to school groups or other visitors today, a reality given the property’s age, but a significant practical limitation. As Rosemary notes, “We have never had a group come when there wasn’t a request.”
When it opened in 1899, The Bronx Zoological Park (now the Bronx Zoo) fulfilled the vision of William Hornaday, appointed as the first director of the New York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society) when the organization was founded in 1895. Hornaday was already a noted zoologist and a founder of the National Zoological Park in Washington. He would continue to serve the Zoo for some 30 years.

There had already been a zoo of sorts in New York City from the 1860s, but it was a setting designed not for animals but for spectators. Central Park Zoo began as a menagerie, a place to display donated species in the style of many popular amusement attractions of the 19th century. Once granted a charter by the New York legislature, Central Park Zoo became the second public zoo in the country (formed shortly after the Philadelphia Zoo). More than a century later, in the 1980s, Central Park Zoo would come under the operating umbrella of the Wildlife Conservation Society, too.

Landscape architects Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, who designed Central Park, envisioned a more formal and extensive zoo, perhaps in Prospect Park. The formation of the New York Zoological Society was the first step in achieving that dream. Hornaday’s task was to find a suitable location, oversee the design, and establish in the City of New York a zoo of significant scale with large spaces for the exhibition and housing of animals.

We spoke about the Zoo, then and now, with Sue Chin, Chief Architect of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Her perspectives about the Zoo, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and her lifetime of work in the sector have been previously featured in our Rooftops Project interview series.

For a history of the New York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society), as well as the Bronx Zoo, Sue suggests A Gathering of Animals, written by William Bridges. Published in 1974, it is now out-of-print but can be found used.

"It tells about William Hornaday, the first director, and how he picked the site of the Bronx Zoo. He did a lot of research, looked at a lot of parcels of land in the Bronx. This was the one, this struck him because of all the natural assets of the land: the topography, the Bronx River, the bedrock, and the forest. These beautiful natural resources made a good backdrop for our animals and exhibits. He picked an amazing site!"

A site having been found, architects Heins & Lafarge were selected to design the park. Heins & Lafarge were important in other major City projects of the period, including the then innovative subway station entrance at City Hall and the initial elements of what became the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in upper Manhattan.

The result was a stunning collection of buildings in the area of the Bronx Zoo known as Astor Court. The structures are aligned in a row on each side along a central promenade. The earliest exhibition spaces included the Aquatic Bird House (1899), the Reptile House (1900), the Monkey House (1901), the Lion House (1903), the Large Bird House (1905), and the Elephant House (1908).
“The idea of Baird Court, Astor Court as it’s now known, was to create a sense of place,” Sue comments. “This is one of the most intact beaux-arts courts in New York City. There is a lawn with benches for people to sit, to socialize, to interact with each other. The vision was not just about exhibiting animals, but also a social experience for our visitors in a place that’s about wildlife and nature. There are a few people that come here alone, but for the most part people come here with their families and friends because they want that social experience, interacting, seeing the wildlife and learning about them.”

Each building façade has iconography associated with the species of animals it was built to house and display, serving both as a decorative element and as a means of identification of what awaited inside. Many of these figures were carved by the sculptor Alexander Phimister Proctor. Madeleine Thompson, the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Institutional Archivist and Digital Resources Manager, blogged last year on the Society’s site that Proctor and another noted artist, Charles R. Knight, had to compete for the commission to create the elephants that adorn the entrances to the Elephant House. Madeleine’s message invites guests to have a look for themselves. In the end, they were both chosen: each of the two entrances bears a work by one of the two.

Sue Chin sees Hornaday’s mark on these enduring structures. “Hornaday knew he needed to travel to see what other zoos were doing. He traveled to Europe to look at their exhibit designs and collections. That’s where a lot of innovative zoo design was happening at that time. He was inspired by what he saw, because when you look at these buildings, you can go to European zoos and see variations on them.”

Astor Court is approached today from the Zoo’s Fordham Road Gate. Visitors pass through the highly decorative Rainey Memorial Gate, designed by sculptor Paul Manship (added in 1934), and Rockefeller Fountain, brought from Cuomo, Italy and donated by William Rockefeller in 1903. Since its opening in 1899, the Zoo now has 144 buildings on its 265 acres. The Zoo’s grounds are New York City parkland (and, along with the adjacent New York Botanic Garden, comprise a property two-thirds the size of Central Park).
Among the Zoo’s residents are more than 13,000 animals and 1,700 species. Views about the appropriate settings and care for these residents have changed dramatically in the intervening 125 years, and much of the work of Sue Chin and her team of 30 designers and fabricators is to assure optimal conditions for the animals themselves. This takes constant prioritization of tasks, whether it is the immediate needs of the animals, the educational and curatorial programmatic objectives, or the familiar work of constant maintenance and repair of historic structures that crosses all mission types in this article.

“These buildings were built at the turn of the last century. We know a lot more about animal husbandry now,” Sue Chin notes. “The Lion House is now Madagascar, an exhibit that can be housed within that space with the appropriate amenities and to make sure that we’re offering really great facilities and care to the animals. The lions were moved in the 1940’s to a much bigger exhibit, African Plains.” Another section of the Madagascar building has been redone and set aside as an event space.

Other buildings in the original Astor Court group are now used as administrative offices rather than for exhibitions of the animal collection. “You can’t always repurpose the building for animals,” Sue has found. “The organization was in need for office space as we grew. The old Bird House was sitting empty and being used as storage until we renovated it in the 1990’s. The education building used to house a large collection of heads and horns, but at some point, it was converted to educational space. The Monkey House will probably always be an animal building, but it’s closed right now. At some point, we do want to return it to public exhibition space. Administration East was always an administrative building.”

The historic preservation of the property is another factor in the balance of how best to celebrate and at the same time use the buildings for mission-related purposes. “In addition to being the most intact assemblage of Beaux-Art buildings in New York City, one of the other things notable about Astor Court is that it is a landmark district – a New York City historic landmark,” Sue adds. “That means that the buildings and all of the façades of the buildings are landmarked. The Landmarks Commission has been wonderful in working with us to make the necessary changes to the buildings as we have developed them.”

For the Wildlife Conservation Society, future design and investment in the property is driven by programmatic priorities. “We do the best we can with the resources we have,” Sue underscores. “Old buildings are a challenge; there’s always something new to fix. Our highest priority is the animals and right after that is the visitor experience.”

Sue Chin sees the historic buildings, as well as the Zoo’s location and natural beauty, as being directly linked to the organization’s mission today as much as when the Zoo first opened.

“Our history defines us. The American Bison Society was established here in the Lion House. We saved the American Bison here. If it weren’t for the Bronx Zoo and the New York Zoological Society, there wouldn’t be bison in the wild. Hornaday saw that bison were being hunted to near extinction. He brought bison back to the Bronx Zoo, bred them, and ever since we have had a purebred bison herd. We have a long-steeped history in conservation from the moment we were established as an organization.”

Sue also comes back to her conviction that the Bronx Zoo is about education, but also about the social and cultural experience. “In A Gathering of Animals, you see pictures of ladies in long dresses and men out for a Sunday walking in the park and picnicking on the lawn. Part of what we do is provide a social context. It is part of our contribution as a cultural institution of New York City. All the cultural institutions in New York City provide a place to learn and to have those social interactions.”
Carnegie Hall

Our visit to Carnegie Hall was hosted by David Freudenthal, Director of Government Relations; Richard Malenka, Director of Administration; and Charles Baranowski, Administrative Assistant, Government Relations.

Then

Like New York Law School, Carnegie Hall celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. Unlike New York Law School, its chosen spot in 1891 was not Lower Manhattan, then the center of the City’s life and business. The world-recognized landmark began far to the north on Manhattan Island, a distant, at best suburban or even ex-urban, seemingly pioneering location. Yet Andrew Carnegie chose this site, and the Art Students League (in which Carnegie was also involved) would build one-half block away the following year.

It all began with a cruise. Industrialist Carnegie and his bride, Louise, were shipboard on the Atlantic Ocean en route to their European honeymoon in 1887. On the same voyage was Walter Damrosch, a young conductor. Damrosch was also director of the Symphony Society of New York and the Oratorio Society of New York, of which Damrosch’s father had been a founder. Louise Carnegie was an amateur singer and member of the Society.

While on the voyage, conversations turned to the idea for a new concert hall in New York City—a home for the Symphony Society and Oratorio Society—which eventually led to the Carnegie Hall project.

It was this plan that led Carnegie to what is now the corner of West 57th Street and 7th Avenue. The Osborne Apartments had been completed in 1885, but there were few other monumental structures.

Richard Malenka, Director of Administration at Carnegie Hall today, concurs that the Carnegie Hall site must have seemed remote at the time. “When Andrew Carnegie selected this site, it was known as Goat Hill. There were a lot of newspaper articles at the time that said that he was ridiculous to be putting a concert hall up there, because nobody is going to go that far uptown. The only thing [farther] uptown, of course, was the Dakota [the Dakota Apartments, still operating today]. It was called the Dakota because it was out in the wilderness.”

It is tempting to think that economical land price might have been an understandable motivator, even for someone of Carnegie’s means. “Carnegie Hall was built for profit,” Richard points out. “Andrew Carnegie did not endow the building.” A number of the later alterations and additions to the building, even during Carnegie’s time, were aimed strictly at generating revenue streams that would support operations.
The original, 1891 building included three performance venues, all of which still operate today: the Main Hall that is often thought of as “Carnegie Hall” (and known today as the Isaac Stern Auditorium / Ronald O. Perelman Stage), the Chamber Music Hall (now known as the Joan and Sanford I. Weill Recital Hall), and the original Recital Hall (now known as Judy and Arthur Zankel Hall). There were also assembly (meeting) rooms in the space above. While the property was initially referred to as a “music hall,” the connotations of the time brought vaudeville variety performance to mind, and that designation was soon discarded.

Richard describes for us the property as it was then and, in large measure, remains today. "It is designed as a classic Italian palazzo, combining three different colors of red Roman brick, with terracotta decoration. A single arch is on the ground floor, then increasing numbers of arches as you rise up the façade and originally crowned by a red tile mansard roof. [A year after it opened, there were plans to add a roof terrace atop the flat portion of the roof, which were abandoned then but resurrected in the most recent renovation.] It is a steel frame with brick and masonry."

Walking with Richard through the eighth floor administrative offices, we are able to view portions of the original 1891 trusses, which are at an angle faithful to the original red tile mansard roof. While the trusses now have intumescent paint (a fireproofing application), they are fully visible as a fascinating demonstration of the original design. “Owing to our namesake [Andrew Carnegie], the quality of steel that was used is much better than the norm, so that we can weld to it.” Richard points out. “On the southernmost truss, you can see the original articulation of the rivets and, as you go north, you can see trusses that are now reinforced with steel plates on either side.”

The engineering of the building mimics that used in more industrial project types of the day. “If you were to look west to east,” Richard notes, “these trusses would remind you of a railroad trestle and that’s exactly how they’re functioning. They are sitting on either end on four-foot thick masonry walls and they span the free volume of space that is the Stern Auditorium, instead of spanning a river or a train track. So there are no columns below us. Everything is suspended from the trusses, including beams that run north to south, in between which there are terracotta arches from which the Stern Auditorium ceiling is hung. And just as a train or bridge trestle gains its strength through its flexibility as opposed to its rigidity, so do these trusses have a great deal of deflection depending on the changing live weight on the new roof terrace above. You can see a new, very large beam atop each truss but not touching it.

It only touches it at the corners, the ends of the trusses, where those diagonals are reinforced. The important engineering design is that the increased weight of the rooftop terrace is spread throughout the new beams and channeled through those diagonals down through the original masonry and steel walls, thereby completely circumventing Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage.”

This construction style also enabled later additions and renovations of the building to be welded to the original structural frame. The technique is mirrored in the 8M mezzanine level, which is suspended from the new beams atop the original trusses. The mezzanine features transparent glass rails and translucent glass walkways. All of the offices are a modern, open plan work environment.

Thanks to a major restoration in 1986, Stern Auditorium now appears much as it did when it first opened in 1891.

“We know from descriptions of the house that it was a cream color,” Richard confirms. “It’s really quite restrained for late 19th century architecture. A notable difference is that the seats were rose-colored; now they’re more deep red. The balcony fronts are all cast iron, as are the columns that support those balconies. The rest of it is all plaster. You see a first tier of boxes that have anterooms, as well as a second tier [also with anterooms], then the dress circle and the balcony. [While Stern is a 2,804 seat house,] it seems more intimate to the artist and the audience owing to the Tuthill design, which is much more like an opera house than a traditional concert hall. The greatest thing about the space is the acoustics, the fact that audiences can hear as clearly in the rear balcony as they can in the Parquet [what’s typically called the Orchestra Section], and the artists can hear the audience as well.”

David shares a perspective from his own days studying at Columbia University. “What I have understood about these boxes is that it was revolutionary, far more democratic, to make them all open. Jim Polshek, who was the Dean [of Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation], gave us, the students, a tour. He told us that, during the renovation, [Carnegie Hall] was very careful to keep the aesthetics the same because the visual experience is so important to the aural experience of the concertgoer.”

Contrasting with the grand expanse of Stern Auditorium, Weill Recital Hall has 268 seats, about the same number as it has had since opening in 1891. “It is a classic European salon, meaning that it’s shoebox, twice as long as it is wide, and as tall as it is wide. It’s really quite a beautiful room,” Richard reflects. There are later touches here and there, like a chandelier added during the 1986 renovations.

The third performance space, now Zankel Hall, is the only one of the three completely transformed from its original function and appearance. “Zankel Hall was originally a recital hall with a balcony and plaster and decoration, similar to the other two concert halls,” Richard begins. “Then it became a legitimate theater for dramatic productions from circa 1900-1950, and after that, a Broadway house, an art house cinema, and a commercial cinema. In the process, it had been compromised beyond restoration, unlike the other two venues. We reclaimed it in 1997.”

New York Law School has its own connection to this early history of Carnegie Hall. The Law School’s first class graduation was held there in 1892. It has become a special tradition; this year’s New York Law graduating class will hold its ceremony in Carnegie Hall as well, as the school celebrates 125 years of both organizations.
“Carnegie Hall was built as a for-profit, but lost money in its very first year of operation,” Richard recounts. “The board of directors at the time decided to develop the real estate in alternative ways to generate income to offset the operating cost. They purchased the property directly behind Carnegie Hall, an apartment house that also contained a spring house that serviced a brewery on the city’s East Side. They demolished it (in 1894) and built a tower with artist studios that rises from the street level to the 12th floor [at what is now 881 Seventh Ave., the entrance to the Carnegie Hall Corporation administrative offices]. At the same time, they eliminated the mansard roof and installed two [additional loft] floors in 1894.

“That helped, but didn’t completely solve the problem. So, in 1896 they decided to build another tower of artist studios on the northeast corner of the building. The addition had concrete floor-slab construction [as compared with terra-cotta arches]; that illustrates the evolving building technology at the time.”

These renovations were designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh. Hardenbergh was the architect of the American Fine Arts Building that had become the home of the Art Students League of New York (an organization also celebrated in this article) down the block just a few years before.

The original design also included studios intended for visual artists. One studio space has been preserved, serving now as a research space for visitors to the Carnegie Hall archives. “This studio is one of our three pure preservation zones [within the renovation project completed in 2014],” Richard says. “It illustrates what these studios looked like when they were artist studios, with their coved ceilings and their fireplaces and their double height ceilings.”

Ira Goldberg, the current Executive Director of the Art Students League of New York, thinks it possible that Andrew Carnegie had at one time envisioned the Art Students League using the visual art studio spaces at Carnegie Hall. Whatever Carnegie’s intentions for the space, by the time Carnegie Hall opened, the American Fine Arts Building was already being constructed for the Art Students League less than a block away.

Richard Malenka emphasizes that the artists’ studios were intended as a central tenet of Andrew Carnegie’s original plan that Carnegie Hall generate self-sustaining revenue streams. “We know quite definitively from the board meeting minutes at the time that these studios were built as artist studios because they commanded the highest rental rates at the time, which is quite contrary to contemporary notions. These were studios in the style of Parisian ateliers. They were largely occupied by portrait artists, or wealthy patrons or dilettantes who could afford to indulge their pastimes. The studios would soon become home to an eclectic group of both visual and performing artists and related businesses.”

Today, the ninth floor of the tower is adjacent to the new roof terrace (the Weill Terrace). There is a dining room and other rooms with original fireplace mantels. From some windows there is a view of Central Park.

The development of the City had constant influences on the building, even from the early years. “If you look at the original building it appears less squat, because the subway raised the street circa 1905 to 1910,” Richard notes. “So for example, there are only two steps now on Seventh Avenue when there were originally five.” In 1920, West 57th Street was widened, changing the street elevation and entrance steps on that side of the property, too.” Also within a few years, newly-adopted safety codes would require the addition of a fire escape spanning the Seventh Avenue side of the building.

“When Andrew Carnegie passed [in 1919], he bequeathed Carnegie Hall to his widow, Louise. She sold the property to Robert Simon, Sr. [in 1925],” Richard continues.

There was a contingency; it was sold with the understanding that it would not be demolished for at least five years or possibly longer unless “another hall, capable of taking its place, is constructed.” Simon may have assumed a replacement would appear on the New York music scene. “[Mayor] LaGuardia started the idea of creating what would eventually become Lincoln Center,” Richard notes. “But it wouldn’t happen until many years later.”

During the Depression, storefronts were created at the entrance level to provide additional operating income. It would be decades before the street level’s original appearance would be restored. Meanwhile, Robert Simon, Sr. passed away in 1935, leaving majority ownership to his son. In 1947, Robert Simon, Jr. made a number of cosmetic changes (including successive changes to the Hall’s color scheme, which was at one point orchid and at a later point burgundy). A former art gallery space became a cocktail lounge. “It was actually the first time that an alcoholic bar was put into a performing arts institution [in New York],” Richard believes.

By 1955, the future of the property was in question. The decision by the New York Philharmonic (which had merged with the New York Symphony Society in 1928) to move its performances to the then new Lincoln Center complex made continued operation of Carnegie Hall as a for-profit performance venue in doubt. This was prime real estate and there were plans to demolish the building for construction of a skyscraper. A group of Carnegie Hall employees, musicians, and notable celebrities led by violinist Isaac Stern, worked tirelessly to save the building. Eventually, under special legislation that predated current landmark laws, the City of New York acquired the property in 1960. Carnegie Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964. It became a New York City landmark in 1967.

“The purchase was a mechanism to save the building [before the advent of landmark preservation laws]. The establishment of the not-for-profit was about the programming,” notes David Freudenthal. “But you don’t separate the building and its purpose ever. The formation of the not-for-profit [The Carnegie Hall Corporation] was a consequence of its purchase.”

Like the Wildlife Conservation Society and Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanic Garden (each of which are featured elsewhere in this article), Carnegie Hall Corporation is one of the 33 members of the New York City Cultural Institutions Group (“CIGs”), a special category of not-for-profit that manages and operates City-owned cultural properties. “The Carnegie Hall Corporation was created through an act of the New York legislature,” Richard adds. “It had no endowment. It operated largely as a rental facility. From the outset, the idea was that Carnegie Hall would present great music. When Carnegie Hall was built in 1891, presentation of classical music was commercially viable. By the late 1950’s with the explosion of pop music, the explosion of recorded music, you have the creation of more not-for-profits for the presentation of classical music. The Corporation was established to fill what would otherwise be but an empty vessel [the Carnegie Hall building]. From that point forward, we started doing our own concert presentations and educational programs.”
“Absolutely,” David concurs. “So while it’s a venerable New York building, it’s a relatively young institution.”

Periodic improvements to the property continued. The center aisle of the Main Hall was removed in 1966 as part of interior upgrades, replaced with dual aisles. “It was to create better access. A center aisle meant that you had to move more deeply into seats. With two center aisles, it was more convenient,” Richard reasons.

In 1978, the Carnegie Hall Corporation commissioned an extensive facilities assessment. This evolved into a Master Plan to address deferred maintenance and upgrades to enhance both building infrastructure and programming. A major renovation was undertaken in 1986, during which Carnegie Hall closed for what became known as “the 28 week miracle”. Richard Malenka joined the staff just before this project began.

The Main Hall (now Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage) was renovated, as was Weill Recital Hall. Most of the commercial storefronts were removed then. This also enabled the addition of backstage and rehearsal spaces, lacking in the existing design. “Stern and Weill were interpretive restorations,” Richard reflects.

Other aspects of the modernization of the space were carefully incorporated to minimize changes to the aesthetics and acoustics. David Freudenthal describes the original, 1891 cooling system for the auditorium. “There was a rudimentary air conditioning system with ductwork and large blocks of ice in the basement that would provide some cooling throughout the auditoria.”

“Prior to 1986, the facility was pretty much as it was in 1891, including no modern air conditioning,” Richard describes. “It was truly an historic relic. We used that venting for the HVAC (heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning) installation, so there really is no change in the interior configuration of the hall which is really what determines the acoustics. And when we inserted elevators in the front of the Hall, we received a reconsideration (sometimes known as “grandfathering”) to only make it ADA compliant up to the dress circle, because to take the elevators up to the balcony would have required a change to the interior configuration of the auditorium at risk of changing the acoustics.”

In 1987-1989, a 60-floor office tower designed by Cesar Pelli & Associates opened on the adjoining property. The building was privately developed, part of the three-way partnership among Carnegie Hall, Rockrose Development Corporation [now TF Cornerstone], and the City of New York. Lower levels connect with and are occupied by Carnegie Hall, starting in 1991, providing additional backstage space and banquet and food service areas. All the systems that are within the envelope occupied by Carnegie Hall are seamlessly connected to the landmark building.

Another major undertaking was the renovation of the original Recital Hall, which by now had seen decades of irreversible commercial use and wear. Richard gives us a picture of what was involved in the project from 1997-2003, and the resulting Zankel Hall space today.

“Zankel Hall was recreated in the original envelope of the original recital hall. Because that concert hall had been compromised architecturally and acoustically, [it] was a gut renovation, actually excavating bedrock in order to increase the volume of space to create a contemporary facility instead. We excavated 6,300 cubic yards of bedrock from underneath the building. The excavation took two to three years and was done very carefully given the historic structure above and the limited seismic allowances. Much of it was done by drilling holes, inserting chemicals that would expand and crack the rock [that was] then hand removed from the site,” Richard points out. “That’s why the street was raised when the subway came [in the early 20th century]. Because they got tired of digging.”

During construction of Zankel Hall, a small area has been left as exposed rock that can be viewed within the hallways front of house. As we view it, David Freudenthal notes that this same tough, Manhattan geology is what enabled skyscrapers to be built densely on the island.

“But really, the greatest challenge was a spring, located underneath Carnegie Hall. That’s why there was a spring house on the original 881 Seventh Avenue site. The [Zankel Hall] seating area is a bathtub, a concrete tub. Once we excavated the rock, we created this reinforced concrete ellipse that acts like...
an egg in its tensile strength and transfers the load of the landmark building onto it. Then we built Zankel Hall within that free volume. Extensions of the cast iron columns actually support the balconies of Stern Auditorium.

“The fundamental design concept of Zankel Hall is that it’s a complete inversion of Stern Auditorium. Stern Auditorium is a curvilinear concert hall within a rectangular volume, and Zankel Hall is a rectangular concert hall within a curvilinear volume, using many of the same materials and same colors.”

Modern techniques have been used to make the space highly adaptive. “The facility is a flexible facility that can be changed to different configurations,” Richard explains. “What you see here is traditional end stage, but it can be transformed into a center stage or a flat floor facility. The entire floor is built on a series of lifts that move up and down, and seats are attached to seat platforms. Pressurized air creates a 1/32-of-an-inch air cushion that enables these very heavy seat platforms [‘chair wagons’] to float across the flat floor, into and out of a storage ‘garage’ behind the stage.”

The most recent renovation has been to the studio towers. These included the renovation of the remaining former studio spaces into what is now the Judith and Burton Resnick Education Wing.

“Above the finished ceiling is an upper ceiling acoustical batting, and interstitial space for mechanical systems, and a lower, finished ceiling. The floor is built on a series of pucks, so it’s isolated from the new concrete slabs. The room itself is a trapezoid, two walls slightly angled because you don’t want to create an echo effect. These angled walls are covered in silk fabric, behind which there are acoustical panels that have varying degrees of absorption and deflection depending on the size and purpose of the room. Acoustical banners provide a modicum of change in sound absorption depending on the instrumentation in the room. The percussion studio has carpet on the floor, because we need more absorption. All of these rooms have various shade and lighting controls. The idea is that the end users can make the environment more compatible to what they want. You’ll see very generous HVAC ductwork on the ceiling, to avoid ambient noise that is made when large volumes of air go through narrow spaces. All the rooms are piped to accept contemporary communications systems as technology changes.”

The conceptual, schematic, and design phases of the project began in 2007, with construction starting in 2009 and the facility opening in 2014. During the renovations, elevators were installed both for guests and backstage, requiring new vertical penetrations of the structural flooring, no inexpensive task in and of itself. Like so many other specialized aspects of the upgrades, the elevators also were planned to eliminate impact on the acoustic characteristics of the performance and rehearsal spaces. “They are independent structures,” Richard explains. “[Each] shaft is a series of steel columns with masonry. Between each floor, there are neoprene pads, and the shaft is pulled away from the rest of the slab so there’s no transfer of vibrations from the elevators into the surrounding spaces.”

NOW

Carnegie Hall’s three stages are in constant use today for performances and rehearsals. Each venue has its own lobby and visitor entrance. “We use all three facilities simultaneously,” Richard confirms. “There are about 700 concerts a year, so we’re very busy.”

Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage still attracts audiences for its renowned programming, its acoustics, and its history. “Weill Recital Hall is significantly more intimate,” Richard observes. “It’s great for solo piano, for chamber music. Zankel Hall is a little brighter as opposed to warmer which is great for baroque music, for certain contemporary music, for small jazz ensembles and the like.”

“And for amplified music,” David adds.

Richard agrees. “That’s an important point. Amplification was taken into account in the design of Zankel Hall, while in Stern and Weill that was never the case. We have to keep this in mind when we have amplified music in Stern Auditorium because it is so reverberant.”

“And there are many rental events here,” Richard adds. “It is part of the tradition of the place, making it available to other music organizations and arts organizations, in addition to Carnegie Hall’s own programming.” Carnegie Hall’s performance halls are dark a few months each summer, which allows an extended period for annual major maintenance.

“One of the defining elements of Carnegie Hall is its simplicity,” Richard reflects. “It is all about music. The building is not multi-purpose in that it is not designed for other performing arts genre such as opera and dance.” This
programmatic characteristic eliminates the need for extensive backstage prop or set storage and staging. But operation and maintenance of the extensive property requires a significant staff.

“While Carnegie Hall certainly [was] built on the European model, it did have distinctly American characteristics from inception. Carnegie Hall gained a distinctly American character early on. It was one of the first concert halls, predominantly known for classical music, to also welcome jazz onto its stages—an appearance by James Reese Europe’s Clef Club Orchestra in 1912 was considered one of the first jazz performances in a concert hall. It was one of the first to have performances by African-American musicians—soprano Sissiretta Jones appeared at the Hall in 1892, a year after the Hall opened. It was here that Billie Holiday sang her famous Lady Sings the Blues concert in 1956. Prior to that, a concert featuring Benny Goodman was one of the first performances to feature African-American and white musicians performing together on stage as well as one of the first times an audience sat to listen to swing music, and not dance to it. These performances are all a very important part of Carnegie Hall’s history, representing the best of the American tradition.”

Andrew Carnegie proclaimed at the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone that “It is built to stand for ages, and during these ages it is probable that this Hall will intertwine itself with the history of our country”. At the conclusion of our visit, we asked Richard and David how they see Carnegie Hall’s position today measured against that aspiration.

“I think that there’s no doubt that he was prophetic in his vision,” Richard begins. “The performance history at Carnegie Hall is essentially the history of the best in musical performance in America, if not the world. Then you add in the great dignitaries, the great political figures, and the great thinkers of the 20th century who espoused their views from Carnegie Hall’s stage, from Albert Einstein, to Booker T. Washington, to Martin Luther King, to Amelia Earhart, to Robert Burns, to Robert Baird. All the suffragettes were on our stage, making the case for women’s vote. Many world premieres have happened here. The list goes on and on. That’s also an important part of our history. Walter Damrosch had the first Young People’s Concerts in 1891. Leonard Bernstein revitalized that tradition through television broadcasts with the New York Philharmonic in the late 1950s. Today we have so many education programs, we’re working in prison populations, we’re working with young people, we have a national youth orchestra.

“Our artistic director has often said that our fundamental challenge is to make next season better than the previous season, which is no small task. The theme of the upcoming season is that Carnegie Hall is not only expanding music into the future with 125 commissions to be presented over the next five seasons as a part of the Hall’s 125th anniversary, but we’re actually expanding into the past with music – Renaissance, Baroque – that has been largely lost to contemporary audiences.”

David sees it similarly. “It was a place of public assembly as well as a place of concerts. The history of America is told here. Another piece of the story is our commitment to access, the things that we are doing on our stages and communities around New York, around the country, around the world, to make creative experiences and exposure to music broadly available no matter who you are. Moving toward mission-related, purpose-related activities is enabling us to be open and welcoming and accessible in a way that Carnegie Hall never was before. It’s an extraordinary manifestation of Andrew Carnegie’s vision. Carnegie Hall is not only an elite experience. I love that.”
**FLUSHING FRIENDS (OLD QUAKER) MEETING HOUSE**

*Our visit to Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House was hosted by Linda Shirley and John Choe, members of the Flushing Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Linda also serves as convener of the Flushing Friends Building & Grounds Committee.*

**THEN**

Quakerism was a new religion in the 17th century, founded in England and soon spreading to the New World. Many Quakers came to Long Island, New York. Linda Shirley, member of the Flushing Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, and convener of its Building & Grounds Committee, notes that at one point there were more Quakers on Long Island than any other religious denomination.

The Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House is regarded as the oldest place of worship of any denomination in continuous use in New York State. There was only a short hiatus during the American Revolutionary War, when the British occupied the property. Believed to have been built in 1694, the property is still today the religious home of its Quaker members, who hold weekly worship and other programming there throughout the year. It is purposefully a place, as Flushing Monthly Meeting’s website puts it, of “comfort, quietness, and simplicity.”

“Denominations other than the Dutch Reform Church, and particularly Quakerism, were prohibited. In response, members of the Flushing community drafted a declaration, the Flushing Remonstrance, as a statement of religious tolerance. This document served as a foundation of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights when America became independent one hundred years later.”

The provenance of the Meeting House is a direct extension of the establishment of religious freedom in New York by Quakers including John Bowne, at whose home informal Quaker worship occurred starting some thirty years earlier. “We have a very close relationship with Bowne House (also celebrated in this article),” John notes. “Many people consider Bowne House to be the first Quaker meeting house [in New York]. Before this building was built, people worshipped there.”

That religious observance led to suppression by Peter Stuyvesant, governor of the then Dutch New Netherland, including Flushing (then called Vlissengen).

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**Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House, Northern Boulevard frontage**

“Our official name is the Old Quaker Meeting House, Flushing New York,” Linda explains. “That is our Landmarks designation.”

“Our religious designation is Flushing Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends,” adds member John Choe. “That is the name we use when we talk about what we do here. The building has different names depending on whether you are referring to the Quaker worship perspective. Quakers tend to write “Meetinghouse” as one word, but that is not necessarily how Landmarks writes it.”

“If you read the Remonstrance, it is a very modern document,” John reflects. “It talks about Muslims, it talks about Jews, it talks about other Christian denominations and says that we are all children of God. It still has resonance today, especially today.” [See the section of this article about Bowne House Historical Society for more on this earlier period in Quakerism in Flushing.]

A large landowner of the period, Bowne first provided a plot for a Quaker burial ground. By 1692, Bowne and another Quaker, John Rodman, acquired an adjoining parcel that became the site for the Meeting House.

While the craftspeople that constructed the Old Quaker Meeting House are unknown, it seems likely that it was a communal effort. “In general, Quaker meetinghouses were built by members,” John confirms. “The pews, for example, were built by individual families for their own use.” The benches in the room now are centuries old. They are believed to represent in their own way the human history of the Quaker experience in the building. The original benches are believed to have been burned by British soldiers for firewood during the Revolutionary War.

**Interior, Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House**

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**Benchmark detail, Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House**

Our visit to Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House was hosted by Linda Shirley and John Choe, members of the Flushing Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Linda also serves as convener of the Flushing Friends Building & Grounds Committee.
The main meeting room has windows that date back to the earliest times. There is a dividing wall between the two sides of the main floor, allowing men and women to hold separate business meetings and then to open panels in the wall to worship together. An early stove survives in the center of one room of the central meeting spaces. Much like the clome oven at Bowne House a few blocks away, Linda indicates that the stove “makes stove enthusiasts go wild” when they visit.

While the second floor is now separate, at one time it served as a mezzanine, increasing the capacity of the space for events such as the Quakers’ yearly meeting, at which up to 3,000 people may have been in attendance. Upstairs, the remarkable early construction of the frame can be better observed. “I always love to point out these beams,” Linda says with a broad smile. “They are from 400-year-old white oak trees. [Each beam spans 40 feet, created from a single tree.] We would just never be able to find another beam like that. The wainscoting came in the 1830s. We believe the floor here is the oldest in the Meeting House.”

Downstairs and up, large “ship’s knees” can be observed. They are a form of bracing, in this case made of wood, often seen in maritime construction but occasionally in period timber construction, too.

While there was some outside speculation that the original building may have been demolished in the early 1700s and replaced by the current structure, this has not been demonstrated. Linda and John, and the Flushing Friends’ professional consultants, are skeptical.

“The dendrochronology [scientific methods to date wood based largely on the study of tree rings] did not convince [the consultants] of that entirely. All the lore of this building is that it was extended and expanded. It strikes us as being realistic. We know how cheap Flushing [Friends] is. We have this feeling that if they could save any bit of money, they would reuse that building and expand it rather than tear it down,” Linda reasons.

The Meeting House has served as an active place of worship for Quakers ever since, and today. In addition to being a place for regular Quaker worship, the Meeting House also became the location for annual yearly meetings of Quakers throughout the region. In the early 18th century a school for Quaker children (and eventually for other needy students) was also operated there. Later visitors included many prominent figures in American history, such as George Washington and William Penn.

The curatorial staff at Bowne House attributes the Quaker simplicity of habit of the Bowne family as a factor in its enduring authenticity of design. Here again at the Meeting House, Linda too is convinced that the inherent frugality of the Quakers had the fringe benefit of sparing the building from more extensive paint, drywall, or other pragmatic adaptations over centuries that might have been the case with other occupants.

As with most historic properties, and especially places of worship supported largely by member donations, the list of worthy deferred repairs at the Meeting House is extensive [see the discussion later in this article]. But the needs don’t stop with the structure, either. Founding families like the Bownes and Parsons were in the nursery business, and this site itself was once an orchard. “We have had a lot more trees,” John points out. “These are 100-year-plus trees, but they are slowly coming down. We are trying to replant. The idea is to have more apples and local fruit trees. Some of the new trees are Newtown Pippin apples, which are native to the area.”
John gives us an overview of a Quaker business meeting. “To me, decision-making is the most radical part of the faith that we practice, because it is about manifesting our spiritual understanding in real life: decisions that can affect all of our lives, individual families, people’s incomes, the state of this house. We try to focus on the corporate sense of unity, the interests of the greater spiritual community, a process that tries to strip away people’s egos and individual interests. We have clerks who try to facilitate, to promote decision-making in a worshipful way. In the recent renovations, there was always an effort by all people to keep each other informed, to make decisions in a worshipful manner together.”

Linda traces this to George Fox, one of the English founders of Quakerism in the middle 17th century. “George Fox has a whole lecture about how the tone of your voice is important, how you address your friends. It is never a personal attack. You address the clerk.”

Quaker practice includes a model to manage business decisions that may seem to most organizations, for-profit or not-for-profit, to be unfamiliar but charmed.

“The fact that the building is still here is a testament to our processes, our methods, our techniques,” Linda believes. “There is a real discipline to a good Quaker meeting. Quakers from day one have been talking about the beloved community.”

John concurs. “The fact that we are even still here is a testament to that ongoing effort to try to make sure that everyone is heard, everyone is listened to, that the decisions are based in faith, in worship.”

Anyone who has sat through a particularly long or difficult board meeting can admire the Quaker precept, for example, that persons “who have once expressed their views adequately and clearly are not to address the meeting again”. But it is also about mutual respect.

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John Choe sees this, too. “It is really a manifestation of our testimony of simplicity, and peace, and integrity, and all the values that seem very quaint in this time, when it is a very consumer-oriented society, very materialistic.”

“Linda and I have been brainstorming to see how we can continue to have more than just a community space. But when you walk in here, you experience that testimony in a way that you can’t in a modern structure.”

Flushing Friends has a small membership of about 25 practicing Quakers. As with many denominations, its membership is aging. While it has an endowment from which it can draw to supplement operations, sustaining the property and its many needs is worrying for the members. Yet Flushing Friends has managed to remain debt-free.

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Even by the standards of many single places of worship with a building of similar size, the challenges can sound daunting. In 2005, Flushing Friends faced the typical milestone of replacing the building’s roof. But, given its unique construction and historic nature, the price tag was some $600,000. Flushing Friends was fortunate to attract State and City funding that enabled that project to go forward. Given the landmark status of the property and the public funding, the work was administered through the City and implemented with knowledgeable help from the New York Landmarks Conservancy. “Our training and background is not in historic preservation,” Linda acknowledges. “New York Landmarks Conservancy has held our hand.”

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Looking Ahead

There is a statement on Flushing Friends’ website that: “No place is particularly holy, but all places are holy.” It made us curious as to whether this belief statement influences how Flushing Friends regard the building, even given its historic significance.

“It is a struggle,” John admits. “Quakers are not necessarily wedded to religious institutions, and buildings do not necessarily have a particular role in worship. However, there is a sense that this is a sacred space. And this has been a space for the community for more than 300 years. So we want to preserve this sacred space for as long as possible, not just for our worship purposes, but to be a resource for the entire community.”

Like any major metropolitan area, Flushing has changed over the years, and the centuries. What is outside the doors of the Meeting House today is dramatically different from what John Bowne would have seen in 1694, or what Quaker members might have seen even a few years ago.

“Definitely, the neighborhood has been changing dramatically over the past couple of decades,” John agrees. “As a faith group, we are doing a lot of outreach into the community. We are part of the Flushing Interfaith Council. I don’t think this Meeting House is as important [to the community] as it was in the 1600s or 1700s. But I also run the Flushing Chamber [of Commerce] here [he is the Executive Director], and we are trying to find ways to raise the profile of our historic and cultural assets, including this Meeting House, to bring the community closer together. There are many people, including myself, who are trying to find ways to make this Meeting House more relevant. Linda has been doing a lot of advancement, and heritage home events here, to make people feel welcome.”

Linda believes that even in an active, urban environment like today’s Queens, there is a sense of mutual community support. “The Meeting House and the Quakers are really well-beloved in Flushing. It is always amazing to me how they rally to our side if we are in trouble. There are representations of us in St. George’s Church’s glass windows and there is another one of the Meeting House in the post office frescoes. Lots of Flushing’s historic stuff has been torn down.”

Flushing Friends is also aware of recent federal legislation that requires the National Park Service to conduct a special resource study to determine whether to include the Meeting House (as well as Bowne House) in a proposed Flushing Remonstrance National Park that would celebrate the role of the community, and the properties, in the establishment of religious freedom in America. While the outcome is unknown, John points out that this is another indication of renewed public interest in the Flushing Remonstrance, and in the roles of Flushing Friends Meeting House and Bowne House in that history.

John thinks the continued presence of Flushing Friends Meeting House is important as a living reminder to those founding principles. “People lose sight of why people came to this country in the first place, which was for religious freedom, for the right to be human, and to build a community that is welcoming and that is represented through the Flushing Remonstrance. [Many of] the people who signed the Flushing Remonstrance were not originally Quakers. They were defending the right of all people to come and worship freely and to be part of a community. This [property] represents that ideal. It is manifested physically. For me, even though I am a Quaker, it is not necessarily because I worship here that I want to preserve this space, even though I believe it is a sacred space. It represents that ideal of what American really represents.”

Linda sees this as a direct extension of Quaker faith. “Quakers believe that you wage peace, and that when you stop waging peace, that is when war breaks out. Peace is the effort, peace is the work. War is the chaos and the breakdown of that.”

“We have visitors coming here all the time, especially schoolchildren, learning for the first time that there was a time in our history when people led a much simpler life around integrity, and peace, and all of these things that we feel are very central to who we are as Quakers,” John concludes.
The Collegiate Churches of New York, of which Middle Collegiate Church is one, are the oldest part of the Reformed Church in America. The other Collegiate churches are Fort Washington Collegiate Church, Marble Collegiate Church, and West End Collegiate Church, each of which also has historic property with imposing architecture. Another Collegiate ministry, Intersections International, leads people to unite across lines of difference in mutual pursuit of social justice, globally and locally.

The first Christian religious services in the small colony of New Netherland on Manhattan Island were most likely conducted by Comforters of the Sick (Krankenbezoekers), who were empowered to baptize and marry the inhabitants of the fledgling province, but were not authorized to administer Holy Communion. In 1628, the Dutch West India Company sent over the first ordained minister, beginning the Reformed Dutch Church in America. Under the direction of Peter Stuyvesant in the mid 1600s, the Church flourished, but also struggled with questions of religious freedom in this new world.

“The Collegiate Churches are special because they are the remnant of the 1628 church – so they are the oldest part of the oldest church [in North America],” notes Reverend Adriene Thorne, Middle Church’s Executive Minister. “The Collegiate Churches of New York predate the state of New York. This was a Dutch colony, of the Dutch West Indies Company. So New York was New Amsterdam before it was New York.”

“The history of the Reformed Church in America is rooted in the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands,” she continues. “In 1696, the Reformed Dutch Church was granted the first charter of any religious body by the English and became known as the Collegiate Church. The charter made it possible for the Church to elect officers, have an income, buy and sell property, and more.”

The Collegiate Churches of New York, including Middle Church, are still governed centrally today and share administrative staff and resources. “Each church has a local consistory, which is like a board,” Reverend Adriene tells us. “Then the entire operation has a collegiate consistory, made up of members from all of the Collegiate Church ministries.”

The first Middle Church property was constructed on Nassau Street in 1729. The church’s bell was rung on July 9, 1776, marking the publication of the Declaration of Independence. During the American Revolutionary War, the property was occupied by the British. It was operated for a time as a prison, housing what are believed to have been hundreds of soldiers of the independence movement. The first constitution for all the Collegiate Churches was developed in 1792, by which point the United States had emerged independent of both Dutch and English rule.

The current Middle Church sanctuary, described as Neo-Romanesque, fronts on Second Avenue between East 6th and East 7th Streets. It was constructed in 1892 pursuant to a design by carpenter and architect Samuel B. Reed. It is perhaps Reed’s most recognized commission.

The sanctuary space is largely as it was historically. In about 1910, a second structure, serving originally as a church residence, was constructed behind the sanctuary, facing East 7th Street. At the front of the sanctuary, a door and hallway was added to connect the buildings. The two buildings together form an “L”, with communication at the street level and the basement level only.

Its sanctuary is still adorned by more than a dozen original Tiffany windows. They are accompanied by a memorial to the tragedy of the General Slocum, a steamboat disaster in which more than 1,000 people, mostly women and children on a Lutheran church outing, perished after a shipboard fire.

Profiles: Right Where We Started: Celebrating New York City Organizations at the Same Locations Over a Century or More
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The 7th Street building narrows at its higher floors, the fifth floor having perhaps half the floor area of the main level. On the fifth floor, there are Tiffany windows, placed there during modern restoration work. Dutch tiles, reflecting the church's founding connections to the Netherlands, are often admired by neighborhood children and their teachers when they are studying New York colonial history.

“This [the 7th Street] building had floors and half floors,” Reverend Adriene points out. “This original floor [in what is now the nursery] was at this height [a small step up to the window]. So when they did the gut renovation they made all the floors level. That’s why the windows look [today] like they’re down in a valley.”

**SINCE**

Within just the past few years, Middle Church has made significant renovations and upgrades to the property while also preserving its essential, historical characteristics. To achieve this, many of the modernizations have been incorporated into the former residential building on 7th Street, leaving the original sanctuary largely intact. “Two main things that we wanted were more [and accessible] bathrooms and the elevator,” Reverend Adriene notes. The work realizes six years of planning and design.

The close quarters along the street and the unknown condition of the historic structure made engineering more complex. “This building shares a wall with the apartment building next door,” Reverend Adriene explains. “So there was lots of bracing, and lots of praying I think.” It proved to be a successful combination.

The sanctuary space saw only minimal updates, allowing worship services to continue throughout the process. Other programmatic and office functions had to relocate offsite for a period, including meetings normally hosted for outside community organizations with which Middle Church collaborates.

“[The construction team] was discovering all sorts of things as they got down to the bedrock,” Reverend Adriene continues. “The water table is very high here in the East Village. This neighborhood is quite a significant number of feet below sea level. When [Superstorm] Sandy happened, there was flooding. We actually had very little water damage during Sandy. Our floors may have buckled a bit, but no standing water. [But the neighborhood] had tides and water rushing in. There were cars floating down here.

“There was a lot more rock. And there was a lot more dampness. We have a water issue. If you don’t catch those early then you have a really huge problem. We have some exposed brick on the south side of the building that they chose to leave exposed because it sweats and it gets salty. So we have this nice exposed brick.”

For persons with limited mobility, the sanctuary space was not fully accessible from Second Avenue. There are stairs leading up to the sanctuary entrance, which can pose accessibility challenges even though there is a lift and there is a security guard for Sunday morning services. In the renovation, a new elevator and other accessibility improvements were made possible at the 7th Street entrance.

“When you came into the lobby [of the 7th Street building], there was a big staircase to go up,” Reverend Adriene helps in picturing the conditions before the renovations. “Originally, that big staircase was outside, so when you came to our building you would have had to walk up stairs. We wanted people to be able to roll in from the street. The building was gutted and then they put the elevator in.”
“On Sundays, people come in through the office space. We’ll have coffee there. People will sometimes come very early to chat with friends and when it’s time for worship people will come through [the office space]. What’s challenging is that there’s no bathroom in the sanctuary. And because of who we are we wanted our bathrooms to be gender neutral. [In new bathrooms in the 7th Street space] there’s a common sink and two stalls. In the cellar, there are multi-stalls that are separate. There’s an all-male one and there’s an all-female one. So we mixed it up.”

Behind the sanctuary is an open space, known by the congregation as the social hall. It is surrounded by an original narrow balcony that overlooks it. The social hall provides meeting room for programming, as well as overflow if the sanctuary fills up during religious services (sound and video can be broadcast and projected into this area). The space has both historic characteristics and lots of functional use and potential.

“We’re pretty full on Sundays,” Reverend Adriene states. “The sanctuary seats 349. And we have overflow. We close the [sanctuary] door when worship starts. People go into the social hall. We are able to live project what’s happening in here on a screen in there. We live stream [our service] on our website on Sunday. We have people who watch across the country and in other countries. We get a lot of visitors from all over the world, I think because of the gospel choir. Almost every Sunday we ask if we have any visitors and there are usually some people from France.”

Like many places of worship, Sunday is a time for worship but also a scarce opportunity for rehearsal before the program begins. A choir, for example, may wish to rehearse while early worshippers may want to be seated. Reverend Adriene confirms this is a trade off familiar to Middle Church, too.

“The Middle Church choir rehearsal is on the third floor. The gospel choir rehearsal is in the community room. But they all come [into the sanctuary] for sound check just before 11:00. Worship starts at 11:15. We let people come in and experience the sound check.”

The original balcony in the social hall was preserved as a design element. In the past, Sunday school was taught with presenters in the space below, and students gathered around the balcony, looking down and listening. “It is very much connected to the style of the original church,” Reverend Adriene reflects. “We had to stabilize it, because it was sagging. The balcony railing was about this high [lower hip]. We [raised it] to bring it to code.”

The balcony space borders a domed ceiling with an original, Tiffany glass dome. “They were not able to clean the glass as you can see, because it’s not stable.” Reverend Adriene says with regret. “They wanted to take it off, but it’s fragile so they couldn’t. They wanted to take it apart piece by piece, but they couldn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t break it, so they didn’t move it.”

The project also incorporated familiar elements of any significant renovation of an historic property, including new heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning and other mechanical systems. Asbestos abatement was also accomplished.
The renovation was able to incorporate repurposed materials in several spots. A dance rehearsal area uses attractive, refinished flooring reclaimed from an old bowling alley.

Concurrently with the renovations, Middle Church marked a milestone that is represented inside the social hall, just beyond the renovated 7th Street entrance. Ministers who have served in the Collegiate Churches for ten years or more have a portrait commissioned and displayed. The Reverend Jacqueline Lewis, PhD., senior minister at Middle Church, is the first female and the first African-American senior minister within the Collegiate Churches to be so celebrated. The unveiling of her portrait occurred about two years after the renovations.

"We’re listed on social services websites for the city. The food bank of New York promotes the food pantry. And we put a sign out on Sundays — a lot of word of mouth gets out there. People who need the food know that we’re here. We attract a huge population from Chinatown. We also get people from the neighborhood and some of our members as well."

Unexpected opportunities can connect the renovated building, the Middle Church beliefs and mission, and the community, too. "We had a graduate student at NYU, Elegance Bratton," Reverend Adriene illustrates. “He made an award-winning film about homeless, LGBT youth. Because of our stance on LGBT inclusion, he sits right in the middle of what we do. He’s African-American, formerly homeless, [so we had] all of these points of connection. The movie was about a young man who is transgendered, and his mom is looking for him. She comes to a ball and finds her son. Elegance was shooting the ballroom scene here at night. He had dozens of ballroom queens, who were just stunning. We will get a mention in the film. He also will probably screen the film here and make tickets available for Middle people to go to the premier."

As with most places of worship of every denomination today, available funds can prove insufficient to meet the operational and programmatic demands of a vibrant worship community, much less one located in one of the country’s most expensive zip codes. The Collegiate Churches enjoy a common endowment, which helps significantly to reduce the fraction of the budget dependent on member donations. "Each of the Churches receives each year what we call an assessment, what is like an allowance. This church used to run completely on the money that the corporation gave it. Prices are going up, so we have to raise money. It’s moving into a balance – the saying was “50/50 by 2020,” Reverend Adriene says. "The plan is that the Churches will take on more of their own budgets, and our membership is owning that challenge with amazing generosity because we believe this place is powered by God, powered by love, powered by us.”

Middle Church continues to innovate in both its programming and in its outreach. The renovated property supports all of these efforts.

Middle Church operates its own food pantry two Sundays a month, with what Reverend Adriene sees as a special approach. "We have what’s called a client choice food pantry. It used to be that churches would pack bags of groceries and give them to people. The newer idea empowers people to come and be able to choose from two or three items. We work with the food bank here in New York. The volunteers take the food and it all gets put out on tables. People come and shop along the tables. We find that this is really great. It’s empowering for clients to choose what they want.”

The Church also operates a program that distributes “back to work” clothing. "We got very focused after the renovation. We took everything before the renovation. And people would bring things that we couldn’t use. Now we take work-ready clothes.”
In 1801, Captain Robert Richard Randall, the third generation of a wealthy American seafaring family, prepared a will in which he proposed to create and fund a charity in New York for what he envisioned and expressed as “an asylum, or Marine Hospital, to be called “The Sailors’ Snug Harbor, for the purpose of maintaining and supporting aged, decrepit, and worn-out sailors.” Within a week, he would be dead.

As Erin Urban, Executive Director of the Noble Maritime Collection, expresses it, “Robert Richard Randall’s father, Thomas, was a friend of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. Alexander Hamilton was both Thomas’ and Robert Richard Randall’s lawyer. And he had a very deep feeling about people who go to sea and maybe never make it home again.” The result of that bequest was the founding of what many believe to have been not only the first home for American sailors in need, but innovative approaches foreshadowing modern elder health care. Sailors’ Snug Harbor in the City of New York would continue to the present day as a support network for maritime families. The property at which it opened operations more than 175 years ago would eventually be transformed into a campus for the cultural arts, public parks and gardens, and the preservation of the history of its original social service purpose.

Randall’s estate included 21 acres of farm property on Manhattan Island near what would soon become Washington Square (today in Greenwich Village), where he envisioned Sailors’ Snug Harbor to be built. Randall’s will provided for the oversight of the original Sailors’ Snug Harbor by a designated group of trustees, those from time to time holding specified, prominent New York state and city political offices, including the Mayor of New York City, as well as local leading clergy of the Presbyterian and Episcopal religions.

Over several decades, plans to act on Randall’s vision waited while several challenges to the estate played out. By the time the trust was free to move ahead, his Manhattan farm was at the edges of the City’s development. Seeking and receiving legislative approval in 1828 to deviate from the original bequest, the Trustees developed and leased the Manhattan property for commercial purposes and determined to use the income for a location as Sailors’ Snug Harbor in a less urbanized environment. They settled on what was originally 130 acres of farmland on the north shore of Staten Island, acquiring the property in 1831.

A young architect, Minard Lafever (1798-1854), won the commission to design the first buildings at the site. The central structures, still in existence, were designed in what now seems a remarkable Greek Revival style. It is impossible to visit Snug Harbor today without marveling at the stunning row of columned, Greek Revival facades that remain the centerpiece of the campus. Within two years, it opened Sailors’ Snug Harbor to “snugs”, resident sailors. From its outset, it precept was to welcome all; it served sailors and their families across all racial and ethnic groups.

At its peak period of operation about 1900, Sailors’ Snug Harbor had 55 buildings and some 1,000 residents in its care. The facility included a 400-bed hospital, a nine-ward sanatorium, bathhouses, and a children’s orphanage. It enjoyed then emergent technology such as the first powerhouse on Staten Island and the first running water on Staten Island, drawn from natural springs that had been a feature for which the Trustees had originally selected the site in 1828. Sailors’ Snug Harbor was largely self-sustaining, growing much of its own food.
Some of the original structures were renovated; in 1884, a three-story gallery, stained glass, and murals were added to the Greek Revival central administration building. In 1892, a Music Hall was constructed and opened, used for musical and vaudeville-style entertainment for residents and on occasion also open to the public.

The Music Hall, which is undergoing restoration and still operates today, is believed to be the second oldest in New York, dating only a year after Carnegie Hall’s own opening in Manhattan (and another of the organizations we are celebrating in this article). Its contemporary uses even include featuring in a Lady Gaga music video for her Born This Way album in 2011.

Once again, as they had in 1828, the Trustees determined that a change in operating focus might best achieve the fundamental purposes in the mind of Captain Randall, its 1801 founder. Adapting to the changed needs of its charitable recipients, once again they sought regulatory approval to alter the approach, moving toward one of financial support for qualifying sailors and their families in need all across the country.

The residential programs at Staten Island were discontinued. There was a brief period in which some residential care was offered at a site in North Carolina near Duke University. The Trust built a new retirement home in North Carolina and served mariners there until it was sold in 2005. Today there is still one mariner living there, supported financially by the Trust. With the North Carolina sale, the Trustees ended what had been a 140-year continuous history of Sailors’ Snug Harbor’s direct care model.

This fundamental shift is reflected in the charitable work of Sailors’ Snug Harbor still today, known as the Mariner Outreach Program. Today, there are close to 250 mariners, meeting eligibility requirements tied to their time at sea, age, and financial need, who are helped with their bills though the Trustees of The Sailors’ Snug Harbor (SSH), The Trust.

“We support mariners all over the country,” Rae Linefsky confirms. “Once a mariner is being assisted by the Trust, with rare exceptions they’re with us until they die. We exist off the endowment, which dates back to the original days of Snug Harbor [in 1801], and the land that is in the Village [Greenwich Village in Manhattan].”

The Trustees reflected on how to realize the potential of the now-vacant Staten Island complex for the benefit of its ongoing mission as a funder to the needy. Much like the analysis made in the early 1800s with respect to its original, Manhattan property, the initial solution appeared to be redevelopment. In the case of 1970s Staten Island, a plan emerged for the large-scale construction of condominiums and related uses.

“A group of concerned Staten Islanders were worried about what was going to be the future use of this site,” Lynn Kelly observes. “The buildings were in...
mixed condition, some dilapidated, some better than others. They knew there was architecture that was worth fighting for and saving.” Lynn is President and Chief Executive Officer of Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanic Garden, which oversees and operates the property today. She joined the organization and assumed its leadership in 2010.

A turning point in the efforts to preserve the complex was a visit by heiress and former first lady Jackie Kennedy Onassis, whose presence drew the attention of both the media and then New York City Mayor John Lindsay. As mayor, Lindsay also served as a trustee of Snug Harbor, a vestige of the governance structure of the Trust as originally established by Captain Randall in 1801.

The result was the purchase of all remaining 83 acres by the City. At the outset, two organizations, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and the Snug Harbor Botanical Garden, were formed to operate the property. They were eventually merged into what is now Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanic Garden. SHCCBG is one of 33 members of the Cultural Institutions Group, a special category of not-for-profit organizations formed and maintained with the specific mission of operating one or more cultural properties owned by and under contract with the City of New York. [Other CIGs featured in this article include Carnegie Hall Corporation and the Wildlife Conservation Society (which among other properties operates the Bronx Zoo)].

Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanic Garden today includes 26 buildings, located on the campus which also is mapped City parkland open to the public from dawn to dusk, 365 days a year. It is an ambitious property management job, which its Chief Executive Officer, Lynn Kelly, sees as unique among the City’s CIGs.

“We run a little cultural city,” Lynn explains. “Our mission is twofold. We maintain and steward the site. But we also spend significant time in programming. When I came here, Snug Harbor’s mission was largely focused on the cultural piece. It didn’t even mention caring for the site. I said to the board ‘there is a fundamental disconnect, because the decisions – the financial decisions – one makes as a property manager are very different than those one makes as a programmer.’

“We have five distinct programming areas,” Lynn explains in sketching out Snug Harbor’s own programs. “There are the visual arts, as well as a residency program for artists. There are the performing arts and a residency program for performing artists. There is horticulture, with nine botanic gardens throughout the campus, the New York Chinese Scholar’s Garden being probably the biggest, most popular attraction. There is also now agriculture with the Heritage Farm.” The Scholar’s Garden was fabricated in China, then assembled on-site at Snug Harbor in 1988 by a team of some 40 Chinese craftsmen over a six month period.

The Music Hall continues to draw audiences to the property, an effort led by Larry Anderson. “Today, we use the Music Hall on a regular basis for lots of different types of programming. We have local community theater groups that use it on a regular basis. We’ve also had mayoral State of the City speeches from here, different types of swearing-in ceremonies, town halls, and community events. Carnegie Hall is one of our partners and we do a lot of free concerts with them, at least two or three a year. We have an outdoor concert stage here. We have had Willie Nelson, Jethro Tull. We have also been working with Lincoln Center Out of Doors.”

Larry is passionate about the Music Hall from a back of house facilities perspective, too. “The building was closed in 1954 and was dark for many, many years. It didn’t reopen again until 1996, with the first of several phases of restoration. We’re doing a new capital campaign to provide ADA access to the stage, which we don’t have for actors in wheelchairs or with any type of impairment. We don’t have the original dressing rooms. There are no restrooms backstage, so cast and crew have to run to the next building. We’ve been in design consultation for a year-and-a-half. We do not have the RFP [request for proposals] out yet.”
Larry believes that the arts programming is the clearest way to develop audiences for the future, too. "We're geared toward the young kids, because if they don't get to see a show as a child, then they're not going to go to the theater as an adult. And if the parents have missed out on that opportunity, then chances are they're not going to recreate that for their kids and then that's a whole generation lost."

"We have one of the largest educational farms in New York City, two-and-a-half acres," Lynn says. "It is a relatively new endeavor, now in its fourth season. Snug Harbor is chartered as an educational facility in New York State. So everything we do is about teaching, incubating, and finding emerging talent."

Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanic Garden is a Smithsonian affiliate, one of only three in New York City (the others are The Museum of the American Indian and Cooper Hewitt). This provides additional opportunities to coordinate resources for programming, lectures, and artist exhibitions.

Yet all of this is only one aspect of the activity to be found today at the site. The expanse of the property allows both Snug Harbor's own breadth of cultural programming and that of other resident not-for-profit organizations.

"There are forty other organizations or individuals that are on this property," Lynn says. "And so we also have a significant landlord function. The tenants that are on this property range from a Montessori school based in arts programming, to an art school, to individual artists' studios: for sculptors, painters, photographers, musicians."

Beyond this, three organizations (two of which are themselves CIGs) occupy parts of the property not presently administered directly by SHCCBG. These are the Noble Maritime Collection, the Staten Island Museum of Arts and Sciences, which recently moved to the property, and the Staten Island Children's Museum. Together with SHCCBG, all four organizations play their part in drawing attention and visitor traffic to the property. The Children's Museum plays what Lynn sees as a special role, since guests of the Museum often are visiting the property for the first time as a child.

The organizations and programs occupy repurposed, architecturally significant buildings from the early days. The Noble Maritime collections, galleries, and offices are located in one of the original, 1833 Greek Revival dormitory buildings, while the Children's Museum is in a former maintenance building. The recreation hall for the sailors, another of the Greek Revival structures, is now a catering and event venue. The Veterans Memorial Hall (originally the Sailors' Snug Harbor Chapel) is now used as a recital and concert space and as an intimate, black box theater.

The Newhouse Gallery for Contemporary Art occupies part of another of the Greek Revival buildings, the original main hall, which includes Tiffany glass commissioned in the 1880s by Governor Thomas Melville (the brother of author Herman Melville). The stained glass transoms depict ships and lighthouses, tying to other nautical elements of the décor. These include blue glass etchings in the upper clerestory representing constellations that would be familiar to Snug Harbor's resident sailors, and painted images of Neptune, ropes and anchors, even parrots. The building also has artists' residences for visual and performing artists who spend a period of time, typically up to six weeks, in residence and then show their work in gallery exhibitions. The public can purchase a single ticket to visit both the Newhouse Gallery and the Chinese Scholar's Garden, perhaps the most popular of the site's outside visitor attractions.

"This was not only the main office building, but where the sailors lived and worked," Larry explains. The building is an example of the progressive efforts to restore the original finishes, and still offers secrets under decades of over-painting, plaster decomposition, and water damage. The original, Greek Revival buildings are connected by what is referred to as "hyphens", small porticos between the buildings. "During inclement weather, the sailors wouldn't have to deal with the snow and rain," Larry explains.

Erin Urban of the Noble Maritime Collection illustrates the benefit. "You didn't need to go outside if, say, you were sick, or you were blind, and you needed to get from this building to dinner in the building where they served the food, or even if you needed to go all the way back to the hospital. You could walk through the hyphens, or also through tunnels underground."
"We may be one of the largest adaptive reuse locations in the United States," Lynn reflects. "And it has triple landmark status: City, State, and Federal. But that does not necessarily create a sustainable not-for-profit."

The organization operates the property, including all of the groundskeeping, snow and leaf removal, and security for the public park and care of the complex' buildings, with the exception of two or three interiors used by the primary outside organizations. Funding comes from a combination of City support, earned revenue, and private fundraising. "Our operating budget here is about four million dollars a year," Lynn explains. "It is not enough to operate a property of this size and scale. We have a bare bones staff and we suffer from decades of disinvestment in infrastructure. We are trying to change that."

The ways in which the public engages with Snug Harbor is different from most, perhaps all, of the other Cultural Institution Groups from a financial perspective, too. "There is no access or gate fee to the grounds," Lynn explains. "We don't charge for parking. The absence of fees is a long-established part of the license relationship with the City.

"I often describe us as a forty-year-old startup organization," Lynn says. "We are reinventing ourselves with branding, visitor experience, capital improvements. To some we are simply a park. People come every day. They walk their dog, they jog, they picnic. We encourage it. They might then explore, going in the buildings. Then there are also people who come specifically because they have one interest here; they go to a museum, or they want to see a show in the theater, or they enjoy specific programming in the gardens."

Lynn also notes the complexities of managing capital planning and unscheduled repairs, given the unusual scale of the not-for-profit site. Not unlike an industrial factory complex of similar age, the campus is served by a central utility plant, including in this case a heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system housed in Building L.

"When you have decades of deferred maintenance, unfortunately you are in the reactive mode most of the time," Lynn laments. "Last winter was a nail in the coffin. By December 1st, we had 48 independent steam leaks, just pipes bursting because of the freezing and unfreezing and their age. We had a plumber do some emergency repairs on the 38-year old boiler [that heats all of the campus buildings] to keep it going. It was working too hard to produce heat and steam, which also fried the electrical panel. I said to the plumber, 'Well, at least you can get parts while we figure this out?' He looked at me and said, 'Lady, George Washington couldn't get parts for this panel.'"

"It's like whack-a-mole," Larry says with a resigned laugh. "We fix a pipe and, 20 feet down the road, another pipe bursts open because of the added pressure."

"Even this week, I was told by someone on my team that they discovered a tunnel pipe that they didn't know existed," Lynn adds. "I think there is nothing sexier than a full underground infrastructure analysis of all the pipes," Lynn says. "How can you make a maintenance plan or an operations plan or an infrastructure plan for the next 15 years when you don't have a baseline understanding of what's under the ground? The average age of the buildings here is 135 years old. We're on a waterfront, at the very end – the base – of a hill, so environmental considerations, outfall requirements, were never considered when the site was built."

The age and condition of the buildings and infrastructure can be a distraction for staff at all levels, including leadership. "We're all involved," Lynn emphasizes. Larry [Anderson] is coming on the weekend in work boots to help plug the leak. My chief financial officer is running to another building. That is not in their job descriptions. But we have no choice. We have a skeleton crew that is overworked, doing a lot. I have one facilities fulltime director, one fulltime facilities assistant, and a part-time coordinator." Larry notes that this is down from a staff of about 72 some years ago, while the visitor traffic has increased as programmatic activities have expanded.

Lynn is not a stranger to advocacy for historic properties, having previously been responsible for the redevelopment of Coney Island while she was with the New York City Economic Development Corporation during Mayor Bloomberg's administration. "That had its own issues of infrastructure, land use, rezoning. I love these unusual New York City places that just need someone to fight for them."

LOOKING AHEAD

The Snug Harbor leadership team sees opportunities in the dramatic changes underway in the surrounding neighborhood. "I grew up here," Lynn says. "Never in my lifetime have I seen this level of private and public investment in this borough."

There is active development, supported through initiatives of the City's Economic Development Corporation, bringing new retail, entertainment, hotel, and residential. Tourism is projected to grow, the anticipated opening of the New York Wheel (a large, observation-style Ferris wheel to be located nearby to Snug Harbor) being only the most prominent example.

Rae observes that many visitors to Snug Harbor aren't New Yorkers. Larry agrees. "If you're here on a weekday, nine times out of ten visitors will have an accent from another country. They will be from Australia, from Germany, from China. They are intrepid travelers. They have been to Manhattan several times and they want to see new stuff. They go back home and say 'Wow, we went to this place called Staten Island.'"

Transportation to and from the Island is a recognized factor, one we heard also when we visited Staten Island's Jacques Marchais Museum of Tibetan Art for a past Rooftops Project article. "We're never going to get a subway here, let's face it," Lynn acknowledges. "The distance is too great, the cost is too large." But Lynn and her team note that transportation choices are improving. Increased real estate values and the Wheel, among other factors, are driving increases in the frequency of both public and private ferry service. The recommissioning of a dock out of service since Superstorm Sandy will help, too. As Lynn expresses with optimism in a leadership essay on the organization's website, "Snug Harbor is well positioned to overcome its reputation as one of New York City's greatest hidden treasures."

Other opportunities might involve optimization of the property to support funding priorities for programs, maintenance and operations, while balancing preservation goals. "The next hurdle in my long-range plan is to have a discussion about parkland alienation," Lynn says. "I have vacant land here. There is a lot of land here that is frankly under-utilized. In my opinion, it could be put to a better use without affecting the historic nature of the campus, or the contextual zoning of the area, or impacting any ecological system that is here. There are mission-driven users that we could house. But it's a big conversation to have."
The worn adage that real estate is always about location proves equally apt when examined through the lens of history. Carnegie Hall, as well as the Art Students League of New York, took what may have seemed to contemporary observers as the bold move of building at an uptown corner populated more by goats than by lovers of the arts. But the City soon followed, as would the New York subway system, making these locations today among the most central and accessible in the metropolitan area.

Ira Goldberg, Executive Director of the Art Students League, believes the location, in the midst of Midtown Manhattan, remains important to the League's mission. It’s not just about welding or drawing anywhere. “I don’t think there is another location in the City with more train and bus lines than right here. Access to this place is really easy.”

That ease of accessibility comes with occasional drawbacks, nonetheless. Richard Malenka, Director of Administration at Carnegie Hall Corporation, identifies how his team wrestled with the omnipresence of the subway during the recent renovation of the Zankel Hall performance space.

“Very important component of this project [Zankel Hall renovation] was that the subway is only eight feet from the perimeter of the wall of the concert hall. And of course the subway didn’t exist when it was first built [in 1891]. In the intervening years it was transformed from an auditorium for music to other purposes. So this renovation was the first time music was happening since the subway. Much work went into attempting to isolate the subway noise. You can still hear the subway; we knew we always would hear the subway. But it’s certainly something that New York audiences are used to. I think the truth is the artists, interestingly enough, never hear it because they’re so focused.”

Sue Chin, Chief Architect of the Wildlife Conservation Society, celebrates its first director, William Hornaday, for his selection of 265 acres in the Bronx for its topographical and natural characteristics that still serve well its mission, and its critters, after almost 125 years.

For Bowne House and Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House, location was a product of proximity to the Quaker religious observers who practiced their faith on and near the farms carved from what had been a Native American community before the arrival of the Europeans. It is their narrow purposes, and as their current caretakers see it, Quaker frugality, that allow them to be found still in place, and largely intact, more than 350 years later.

Middle Collegiate Church was founded in a more populated setting in the 19th century. Yet the organization’s presence in Manhattan is traced back to the earliest days of Dutch New Amsterdam.

Of the examples in this study, Snug Harbor is perhaps the most curious and avant-garde from the perspective of real estate strategy. A 21st century panel, like one at The Rooftops Conference NYC 2014 entitled Harvesting Assets or Eating the Seed Corn? Assessing and Addressing Core and Non-Core Properties, might advocate for the review and sorting of not-for-profit owned assets against both current mission and commercial real estate realities. Snug Harbor demonstrated exactly this model 200 years ago. Its trustees decided to monetize the Trust’s initial bequest of property in a rapidly developing Manhattan, in favor of serving sailors and their families at a more bucolic, maritime, and as importantly affordable, site at the north end of Staten Island. That pattern repeated itself more than 150 years later, when the Trustees both reexamined the means of the Snug Harbor mission (shifting from a model of a direct delivery of services to funding sailors’ care) and acknowledged the challenges of maintaining an extensive campus of historically and architecturally distinguished but dated properties.

The recent sale of air rights by the Art Students League of New York, a modern example of asset maximization familiar across New York City, permits the organization to remain in place with all of its normal operations while extracting value that can be used for capital projects supportive of the future mission-driven needs for the property.
ADAPTATION TO MISSION

For some organizations in our study group, the fit between mission and property remains much as it was a century or more ago. Middle Collegiate Church and Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House endure, serving worshippers and inviting the community in ways and with structures largely the same as when they first opened. While the general demographics and membership of mainline religious denominations may be shrinking (and often aging) across the country, this is less a function of location (and certainly not of the historic nature of space) than shifting trends in levels of active participation in organized worship.

Similarly, the art education and artistic methods in the studios of the Art Students League of New York look largely the same today as 125 years ago. While some techniques may be new, and art itself is never static, the studio and the process of artistic creation would be recognizable today to its earliest distinguished instructors and their students. Additions and adaptations of the building have been more about creating extra space than changing conditions.

Ira Goldberg, The League’s Executive Director, also believes that the property speaks to the identity of the organization. “Our history is very much part of our brand. When you see the list of artists that went here, knowing this gives [our statement of mission] more impact.” While the League does not advertise the property as a tourist site, it does get requests from art groups from around the country. Ira believes that the reopening of the Vanderbilt Gallery would be a chance to connect the League’s and the property’s history with the public.

Like many museums and other visual arts organizations, the League also has collections stored offshore, again due to space constraints at its Midtown home. “It is an expensive proposition. We have a painting that George O’Keefe did when she was studying with Chase. We have a drawing that Rockwell did that earned him a scholarship. Who knew what Jackson Pollock was going to paint like? When he was studying with Benton, he pretty much painted and worked like Benton. But it is a nice overview of the history of [the League].”

The Bowne House Historical Society confronted what might have been crushing capital requirements to maintain, repair, and conserve its unique property by transferring ownership to the City. It continues to pursue its roles in education, interpretation, and operation, retaining and utilizing the collections and artifacts entrusted to it by the Bowne and Parsons families, which had been its stewards for almost 300 years.

The history of the Carnegie Hall property, and its various adaptations, is a remarkable example of property serving mission. Within a few years of its construction to Andrew and Louise Carnegie’s original vision, the couple were adding and tinkering with the mix to serve the passion for music while striving for sustainable income streams that could offset operating costs. Changes to the programmatic spaces, meanwhile, have retained a singular focus – always faithful to the mission of music as the centerpiece. The Carnegie Hall website does an amazing job of tracing each step in what has been, and remains, incredibly dynamic changes under a set of roofs that are an international icon managing on a single city block.

Under the century of continuous oversight by the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Bronx Zoo has been able to adapt its buildings to conform with and support modern standards for the care and display of the animals that are at the heart of its mission not only at the Zoo itself, but in its preservation efforts around the world.

Once again, however, the most dramatic transformation must be that at Snug Harbor. Having been the vehicle to provide a home and continuing care for sailors and their families for almost 150 years, the campus now sees a completely new life. Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanic Garden serves the broader community as a City park, has become a center for culture and the arts, education, and agriculture, as well as host to compatible not-for-profit organizations seeking their own places in Staten Island’s cultural life, and at the same time works to preserve, repurpose, and celebrate its extraordinary buildings and their past service to so many in need.

SCARCITY OF SPACE TO SERVE AND PURSUE MISSION

For most of the organizations we visited, regardless of mission type, a presence in contemporary New York City poses the same constraints of limited space as it does for those seeking affordable housing or renewing an office or retail spot, whether in Manhattan or increasingly in any of the boroughs. Skyrocketing rents, and land prices, are a constant theme in The Rooftops Conference programming.

“We are starved for space,” Ira Goldberg, Executive Director of the Art Students League of New York, concurs. The Art Students League longs to restore its Vanderbilt Gallery to exhibition space, but to achieve that would require losing artists’ studio space that is in demand. And the League lacks adequate on-site office and administrative space, too. “When you own your own building outright, you don’t want to be renting space. But, at the same time, you need more. If you gave me money, it won’t create space, and that is the biggest issue.”

Much the same can be observed about Carnegie Hall. Richard Malenka, Director of Administration at Carnegie Hall Corporation, expressed it this way. “The power of Carnegie Hall and its acoustics is the fact that its public spaces are so very limited. If you look at the size of the main lobby as opposed to the capacity of the house or the circulation spaces around it, it doesn’t even begin to compare to other institutions like Lincoln Center. Yet patrons are still drawn to Carnegie Hall, which again speaks to the extraordinary and incomparable quality of the concert halls themselves.

“If we had more space we would have a more generous bar area, we’d have a larger banquet space, we would have a larger lobby,” Richard imagines. “If we had more space, we would have more restrooms. And one of the very challenging components is that a concert hall wants to be horizontal, you want to be able to move all of your instruments on one level. We are street-locked and we are necessarily vertical. So to answer your question more directly, I think our challenge is constantly trying to make the most of our limited public spaces that surround the performance venues and that contribute to the overall experience.”

Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House has an adequate building footprint for the size of its membership and programming. While its grounds are limited, this seems consistent with its precepts: do more, as much as possible, with the least.
Middle Church enjoys a sanctuary with an honored past and both an artistic and a spiritual aesthetic. Yet the footprint of that space, and indeed of its site, limits the number of worshippers or visitors who can participate together, necessitating the use of adjoining rooms for overflow. To gain additional offices, some of the staff is located at the basement level as part of the property’s recent renovations. Rehearsal spaces for cherished music programs are fitted where they can. And while there is a small, commercial grade kitchen, the adjoining dining facility can seat only 92 while the sanctuary accommodates 349.

The Bowne House Historical Society yearns for the new Visitors’ Center. While the site is small and constrained by the dynamic, surrounding Flushing community, it has just enough land. The Visitors’ Center would allow exhibition and storage of its collections, office and administrative space, and restrooms and other amenities necessary to advance its educational aims. Design and capital funding from the City are the steps to make this happen.

The legacy of its original site selection and planning offer the Bronx Zoo the flexibility of operating on 265 acres of ideal terrain. Adequacy of land, and of space, is also a hidden strength in the scenario facing Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanic Garden, one that Lynn Kelly, its President and Chief Executive Officer, fully appreciates. For Snug Harbor, the puzzle is to raise public awareness of the resources of Snug Harbor, to overcome what may be perceived as the invisibility of Staten Island, and to advance further attraction of capital and like-minded partners in both government and the not-for-profit sector to more fully utilize its abundant real estate resources.

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE AND MODERNIZATION

Forecasting, budgeting, and funding of property maintenance and repairs are problematic at some level for virtually every not-for-profit organization. Anticipation of eventual funding and implementation of major capital projects can influence the appetite for interim repairs, too. “If you know what you want to do down the road,” Ira Goldberg, Executive Director of the Art Students League of New York observes, “you are less inclined to deal with small stuff that you know will have to be replaced later on.”

From its first days in the late 19th century, the League was fundamentally a shared, collaborative space, a hot trend now in the early 21st century. “We are an atelier, the French word for studio,” Ira notes. “It is based on the Académie Julian, where there is a lot of participation. The model is there, the artists are there, there will be a master to critique your work. You might say that each studio is the domain of the instructor, who determines what’s being taught, even who is in the class. If the instructor thinks you’re not suitable for the class, he can throw you out. But the spaces are being used all the time. We have morning, late afternoon, and evening schedules, plus morning and afternoon Saturday and Sunday.”

A typical facilities manager (or law professor!) might think that the methods and tools employed to create art — paint, chisels, kilns — might be hard on any building, much less one with historic roots like the American Fine Arts Building. And by the open nature of the membership and use of the studios seven days a week (and most nights), lots of different users put demands on the space, too. That can require lots of maintenance.

But this does not discourage Ira Goldberg; it is about service to artists. “I don’t really see it that way. Our classes are large; we have 30 people max per class, or more. You have an empty room with easels and stools, and a model stand. We have a large senior population. We look out for safety. We are still fulfilling the mission for which the building was designed.”

With the transfer of ownership of the land and structures to the City, The Bowne House Historical Society is spared fundraising for capital repairs. But the Society still needs to fund soft costs such as interpretative studies, some architecture and design fees, and routine building operations, as well as collections care and conservation and staff expense.

If additional money became available beyond the immediate necessities, Rosemary Vietor would invest in interior finishes tied to the interpretation and use of Bowne House for school groups and educational programs. “We will have a furnishing plan. We have been out to the warehouse and rationalized what will go where. But we don’t have any textiles. For example, I would love to have curtains. [The family] would have had blinds, rugs, curtains. We don’t have any of that.”

Linda Shirley and John Choe of the Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House think that there could be a variety of views among its members as to where funds might next be applied for the physical facilities.

“The [exterior] stairs are cordoned off,” Linda indicates. “Our foundation needs repointing. The shutters weren’t done in the restoration, we ran out of money. So those have to be completely redone. We have a couple of minor gutter repairs. We desperately need a paint and plaster job. We have major work to do in the backyard; our fencing is falling apart. I would put a woodshed out back [to hold materials now kept in a small storage room drywalled off from the main first floor meeting space]. There was some talk about putting a kitchen in. We don’t even have sewers.”

John illustrates how difficult the choices about deferred maintenance and anticipated capital repairs can be for many organizations. “We probably need $100,000 for a new heating system. The one we have now was built in the 50s. It is nearing [the end of] its lifecycle. And it is full of holes, so it is not like the hot air is going where it is supposed to, either.”

“There is no air-conditioning,” Linda notes. “That is not a priority, absolutely not.”

“But we do need heat,” John replies, triggering laughter among the group.

“And we have literally no insulation,” Linda reflects. “If you walk around you can literally see through the cracks.” As we talk, the heat turns on with a loud rush. “It’s a real gas-guzzler. That is an expensive bill, too.”

As we did with all of the organizations in this article, we asked what Snug Harbor might choose if it received an unexpected donation that was restricted only for immediate use for physical property repairs or improvements. An initial response was a practical answer, familiar in many of our field interviews at The Rooftops Project: an additional boiler. “If I had $50,000 cash today, I’d be calling a plumber,” chuckles Lynn Kelly, its Executive Director. City funding is expected soon to meet the need for the purchase and installation of new boilers. A new directional signage program also came quickly to mind.
Lynn illustrates for us this ongoing challenge for any organization combining current programmatic mission with an historic property. “Do I fix this pipe that’s burst, because it’s part of my responsibility?” Lynn says by way of example. “Or do I bring back a groundskeeper I had to let go because of budget cuts?”

Lynn grapples not only with the operating challenges but the financial impact to the future health of the organization. “We’re in debt as a result of the infrastructure, because we have had to borrow from Peter to pay Paul too many times. That is not sustainable. It keeps me up at night. We need to start having these conversations up front, not at the back end,” Lynn concludes.

On the day we visited Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanic Garden, Lynn had come from a meeting with the City Council to discuss funding priorities. The City has made a substantial capital award for underground infrastructure and electric upgrades.

“Meanwhile, I may have a funder or a donor that might want to give me money for programmatic elements. I can have the greatest performing arts program in the world, but if the building is flooded, or I can’t get the lights on, or I don’t have heat to bring to it, or it’s not going to look clean afterwards, what is the point? I always have a real conversation with donors about whether they would consider some percentage of their donation to be applied to that. We have to be able to pay staff, salary, and property costs in order to run these programs.”

Another continuing focus of Snug Harbor is making the buildings, as well as the grounds, more accessible. “Things here were designed long before the ADA (the Americans with Disabilities Act),” Lynn recognizes. “When we do programming, we use as many spaces as possible that we know are accessible before we would choose one that isn’t. We are putting an addition on the music hall that will have accessibility. But if you walk around [the campus], it’s gravel paths. We are working with the City.”

Staffing models vary widely. For the Art Students League, general maintenance is an in-house staff function. “General cleaning we do ourselves,” Ira Goldberg confirms. “There are about 30 people in maintenance, mostly part time. People involved in maintenance are students and artists, about 75 percent are artists. For specialized things we use vendors.”

At Snug Harbor, staff is considerable but the leadership group believes more is needed. Keep in mind that the entire property is open dawn to dusk every day as a public park facility, requiring security and groundskeepers. As for the buildings, there are only two staff maintenance personnel, supplemented by vendors and volunteers.

Carnegie Hall has a staff commensurate with not only the nature of its property, but the scope of its programmatic activities. “We have almost 200 administrative staff and another 200 union staff, give or take, depending on the production needs,” Richard Malenka says. “We have eight different unions, we’re completely union: all the building maintenance, the engineers, the lobby attendants, the painters, the mechanics, the box office, the stage hands, all union.”

At Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House, in the Quaker tradition there are no clergy. And all of the organization’s administrative functions are addressed by member volunteers, except for the very basics of property maintenance. “We have one part-time caretaker,” Linda Shirley confirms. “He is wonderful and has been with us for 25 years. He does the lawn. He does rudimentary cleaning. It is only 20 hours a week. He is as loyal to the building as anyone here. He is more than a caretaker, he is a friend. He is a better Quaker than some of us.”

John Choe joins easily in the caretaker’s contribution. “We would not be able to keep this meeting house open without his service. We probably don’t pay him what he is worth, but even that sum is a struggle for us.”

Middle Collegiate Church has the advantage that the Collegiate Churches, as owners of the properties, provide centralized facilities management. “Facilities management is a centralized responsibility,” Reverend Adriene tells us. “Corporate has a Vice President of Sacred Buildings and that person is responsible for maintaining these properties. So we [at Middle Church] are not paying significant amounts of money to restore things.”

**Preserving Site History, Archival and Practical**

Throughout our visits, we heard how important these organizations are to the story of New York past and present. It was surprising, and instructive, to learn how involved and only recent have been the efforts to preserve the history of organizations and properties alike.

While Carnegie Hall is a legendary institution, its historical artifacts have only been deliberately assembled over the past few decades. They are preserved today in a formal archive and selected objects (starting with the trowel that Louise Carnegie used to lay the building’s cornerstone) are displayed in its on-premises Rose Museum.

“When Carnegie Hall was slated for demolition [just before its acquisition by the City in 1960], it was basically ransacked,” reflects Richard Malenka, Director of Administration at Carnegie Hall Corporation. “At that point there was just the beginning awareness of landmarks preservation. That’s how we lost Pennsylvania Station and almost lost Carnegie Hall. So it’s somewhat surprising now that there was no archive, but when you look back America only became aware of preserving its history in the last several decades.”

Ira Goldberg, Executive Director of the Art Students League of New York, offers two stories tying property maintenance and art history together. “This is the folklore of the Art Students League, except that I was there to witness it. Before the renovation [in 2003], we were heated by steam. That meant that the bottom two floors were too hot during the winter. The top floors were freezing and the middle floor was just right. We had a printmaking department up there. They were actually wearing coats every day and we obviously had to do something about it. We hadn’t planned the renovation at that time, so we were going to just put some units up there to heat the top floor, which is essentially one studio. Outside that studio is a closet, right underneath the roof. I had asked our superintendent, ‘What’s in the closet?’ He responded with, ‘I don’t know, it hasn’t been opened in 50 years.’

“It had to be opened with a crow bar. Fifty years under a roof yields a great deal of soot, pure black soot. Underneath, from floor to ceiling were drawings done by students going back to the turn of the [20th] century. It was an amazing find. You can see the quality of the work these guys were doing.”

The resulting portfolio was published by Sterling Publishers as *Classical Life Drawing Studio* (2010).
Ira then shares another story. “There is a studio upstairs where, when we were scraping the walls one day about five or six years ago. Someone came down and said ‘you gotta see what we found.’ There was a stencil that said ‘Peace, November 11, 1918,’ celebrating the armistice [the end of World War One]. When you find stuff like that, you realize the connection with the past. You realize how art embodies the time in which it was created.”

The Bowne House Historical Society credits the Bowne family with the richness of the collections the Society oversees today. The Bowne family, mindful of its history, carefully preserved almost 300 years of documents – including deeds, correspondence, wedding certificates, wills, journals, diaries, records of Quaker Meetings, and, later, passports and photographs. Continual occupancy by nine generations of family helped preserve these materials. Records of the Society have been kept since its founding in 1945.

Recently, with assistance in the form of private grants, the Society has had a team of professional archivists working to organize, digitize and preserve these records. Rosemary Vioter, Vice President of the Society’s board of trustees, explains. “There is a wealth of material from the 17th through the 20th centuries, most of which has never been in the public domain. As one of our archivists said, ‘This house is an archivist’s dream.’”

The Society has also retained reports from the many consultants who have studied Bowne House over the years. These reports include two historic structure reports, various paint analyses, dendrochronology studies, archaeology reports, historic landscape studies, and documentation of any restoration work performed on the house.

At Flushing Friends (Old Quaker) Meeting House, the search for documentary history had a more practical application when, in connection with government grant funding, Flushing Friends was asked to prove record title to its real estate. You should see our deeds,” Linda explains. “The one from 1686, I have it here…. They are in Dutch. They are from Dutch times. The document wasn’t lost, but the record in the Queen’s County Clerk’s Office was. The microfiche was in a box that was turned around so you couldn’t see the label. One of our members, who was very clever, went up, found the box, turned it around, and finally found [the deed]."

For Middle Collegiate Church, the task was also practical. One of the biggest challenges in the recent renovation? “There are no building drawings,” comments Reverend Adriene Thorne, Executive Minister. “The building is so old.”

The search for the past can also create new not-for-profit futures. The closure of the property by Sailors’ Snug Harbor fostered the launch of an entire new charitable endeavor, the Noble Maritime Collection. This organization, which occupies one of the original Greek Revival buildings, has as its mission the preservation and interpretation of the work of maritime artist John Noble. It also serves as a home for the archival preservation and exhibition of artifacts about Snug Harbor’s history.

As part of our visit to Snug Harbor, we visited The Noble Maritime Collection. We were hosted by Erin M. Urban and Ciro Galeno, Jr., who together constitute the fulltime staff of this jewel-box museum and labor of love. It is located in one of the first Snug Harbor dormitory buildings, constructed in 1841 and opened in 1844. The 28,500 square foot building is one of the most extensively restored, the work of a dedicated group of volunteers known informally as “the Noble Crew”. The National Trust for Historic Preservation recognized the eight-year effort as extraordinary, with donated goods and services of an estimated value in excess of $1 million.

Bringing together the archival heritage of Sailors’ Snug Harbor initially arose in many respects as a rescue effort. Rae Linefsky, Executive Director of the Trustees of Sailors’ Snug Harbor in the City of New York, recalls the situation at the time Snug Harbor was closed. “Noble Maritime takes a real human interest in maintaining the history of Sailor Snug Harbor. The earliest archives were found literally hanging out of the trash.”

Erin notes, too, “when Sailors’ Snug Harbor moved away, they took most of their furniture. They had giant lawn sales (with dressers and such). Whatever was left was basically stolen. The benches [now displayed in the Noble’s galleries] were still here, but they were a mess.”

“A lot of items taken to North Carolina by the Trust were also returned back here, to their home,” adds Ciro. “They brought back the paintings.” Erin says. “Some of the [other] art was scattered around the site, in the hospital or in dormitory rooms.” Today, Sailors’ Snug Harbor’s extensive archive collection is housed at SUNY Maritime College (located in the Bronx). Much of its art and artifacts are on loan to the Noble Maritime Collection.

The building is adapted to accommodate the collections and the visitor experience. As additional instructive and fun elements, one room has been preserved as it was when it served as the dormitory room of two resident sailors. There is also a cutout showing the building’s structure and condition before restoration. There are artifacts reflecting the broader maritime heritage of Staten Island, too, such as a small boat that John Noble saved from a bone yard and used as an artist’s studio. “Staten Island has a huge maritime history,” Larry explains. “With its passing, a huge bone yard of old boats decayed. This fascinated John.” The boat is now displayed intact in one of the galleries.

Similarly, the Noble curatorial staff has created an exhibition celebrating the life of Kate Walker, a Staten Island feminist who in 1890 succeeded her deceased husband as the operator of Robbins Reef Light Station, a lighthouse off the Staten Island shore. She lived at the lighthouse, with her children and grandchildren, for more than 30 years.

The Collection now receives some 4,000 visiting students a year, in addition to members of the general public. The educational programs are imaginative and interactive, such as “Young Jack’s Voyage,” in which the Collection’s part time education director dresses up as a sailor who goes to see for the first time. “Annie’s Trip to America” highlights the intersection between immigration to America and Staten Island’s seagoing history. There are also art, music and writing programs and a print studio (John Noble himself was a printmaker). A knitting program creates knitted items for mariners around the world, further extending the spirit of Captain Randall’s original vision for Sailors’ Snug Harbor.
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