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RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS

As congregations shrink, more churches are selling properties to residential developers. High ceilings and stained glass create ambience, but aging buildings make going from God's house to townhouse a challenge.

















TEMPLE TRANSFORMED A former synagogue in Manhattan's East Village.

BY LAUREN SCHUKER BLUM

WHEN COLIN BODELL moved into a new 3,000-squarefoot condo in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood in August, he was looking forward to living with its 30-foot ceilings, polished-marble floors and 20-foot-tall stainedglass windows. One thing he didn't anticipate, however, was people knocking on his front door to ask what time services were or to speak to the pastor.

"People still thought it was a church because of its ex-



MODERN LOOK The stained-glass windows were preserved when renovating a former church in Utrecht, Netherlands.

terior," says Mr. Bodell, a 50-year-old technology executive at Amazon. "They didn't realize it had been transformed into a home."

Mr. Bodell's apartment, which he bought for about \$1 million, sits inside a former Christian Science Church that was converted into 12 townhouses earlier this year and renamed the Sanctuary.

The building is one of a number of church-to-home luxury conversions popping up around the country. As dozens of churches close or move to different quarters each year, they're finding second lives as condo developments

and townhouses.

The conversion process is growing more common as shrinking congregations and shifting demographics have made it difficult for some congregations to stay afloat financially. According to a March report from CoStar Group, a real-estate research firm, 138 church-owned properties across the country were sold by banks last year, compared with 24 three years earlier.

The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has closed hundreds of churches in recent years. In 2000, there were Please turn to page M6



The Fettler & Firkin pub near Paddington Station, built in 1841 as the Queens Railway Tavern, was converted to apartments after closing in 2009. A contemporary onebedroom, third-floor flat in the building is now for rent for about \$3,025 a month.



MOVING INTO THE CORNER PUB

A rec room in the beer cellar? Londoners are not amused

BY RUTH BLOOMFIELD

THE PHENE ARMS, a traditional back-street pub, has been catering to the thirsty of Chelsea, in fashionable west London, since 1851. Dylan Thomas, Agatha Christie and Mick Jagger are among the luminaries who have crossed its threshold.

But after more than 160 years, it may soon find itself catering to a much smaller clientele—say, a wealthy family of four.

The owners of the Phene Armsproperty tycoon Robert Bourne and his wife, theater impresario Sally Green-have applied to convert the old public house into a private home, complete with a swimming pool, steam room and sauna in what is currently the beer cellar. A final ruling on the project from the government's planning authorities is expected in early 2013.

All over prime central London, developers responding to rising prices

and seemingly insatiable demand for landmark residential properties are turning to the local pub, that quintessential British institution, and a nice piece of real estate at that.

"Pubs can be converted into very stylish, characterful homes as they often have interesting interior features such as carved doors, stained glass, and large cellars which can be converted into spacious basements," says Alex Michelin, co-founder of boutique developer Finchatton.

Mr. Michelin is currently at work converting the Grouse & Claret public house in London's pricey Belgravia section into a 10,500-square-foot, sixbedroom house with a movie theater, gymnasium, roof terrace, and a swimming pool in the old cellar. Homes of this scale in the area can sell for up to \$48 million, according to government property records.

Please turn to page M8



INSIDE

Losing a grand Montecito home in a divorce—and then buying it back eight years later M4

AFTER THE FLOOD Insurance to keep homeowners from going underwater M10

PINE BARONS



Top Christmas-tree types, by state M8

In reframing interior walls, some

Window and door openings were

Pews made of vertical-grain fir

A stained-glass dome was pre-

served and now accents the lobby.

were remade into stairs.

cut into the exterior.

plaster details were preserved.

The Sanctuary In Seattle It's the real-estate version of the Ref-

ormation. To transform a Christian Science Church in Seattle into townhouse residences, construction crews had

to fabricate a new interior framework while preserving the exterior "skin" of the building. Brian Runberg, the architect on

CL,CN,CX,DL,DM,DX,HO,KC,MW,SL,SW

BGN, BMT, CPD, CXT, DRG, HLD, KCS, MLJ, NMX, TDM

the project, designed a concrete floor and a steel frame to support the new interior structure. The project's design team also built floors to divide the 45-foot-tall space into three stories, creating 12 distinct units. To give residents more light, about a dozen additional window and door openings were cut in the church's exterior-made from Bedford limestone, the same material used on the Pentagon and the Empire State Building. They also reused some of the his-

torical details and furnishings. Pews-built with 100-year-old vertical-grain fir—were cut up and used to make stairs in some units. Some of the stained-glass windows were installed onto sliding tracks, with clear glass panels behind them. Those let natural light permeate the structure and allow residents to open and close their windows.

Finally, the design and construction team repaired and preserved the stained-glass oculus in the church's ceiling. The area below that dome became the lobby, where residents can mingle. Last month, Colin Bodell, an Amazon executive, threw a 1920s-speakeasy-themed party for 80 people there, complete with a jazz band.

Construction on the project began in 2007, and the first resident moved in earlier this year. Total cost for the makeover: about \$12 nillion.

"Every historic building has a unique story to tell," says Mr. Runberg. "In this case, we tried to build

-Lauren Schuker Blum



Continued from page M1 19,236 Roman Catholic parishes across the U.S.; that figure fell to 17,644 by 2012, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a nonprofit research organization that compiles church statistics. United Methodists have seen the number of churches shrink by about 7% over the past decade or so, with 300 to 400 churches closing or merging each year. In 2000, United Methodists had 35,537 churches, compared

with 33,069 in 2011. The Seattle church where Mr. Bodell now lives was built around 1908 as First Church of Christ, Scientist, and counted about 800 regular attendees in its heyday. But by 2006, its congregation had dwindled to about 25 people, so the congregation relocated and sold off the church property for \$1.3 million. Architects have found creative

ways to convert these historic buildings-which often have 40- or 50foot-high ceilings, few or no interior walls and stained-glass windowsinto homes and apartments that will

sell for millions of dollars. But it isn't an easy process: Not only do the structures need intensive interior reconstruction and upgrades to meet modern building codes, but they often have been granted landmark status, further complicating renovations. "The good news with churches is

that you have 40-foot-tall ceilings,



BELIEVETI





Colin and Rosemary Bodell, above, at their home in The Sanctuary, a former Christian Science Church. At right, the building's restored dome, shown in a panoramic composite photograph. The Believeth sign at top marks one of the building's entrances.



ATMIDIA

NEW YORK A former synagogue in Manhattan's 📱 East Village, above and at right, was converted into a residence in 2005.

FOR WHOM THE BELLS TOLL Scan this code to see a video about divinely inspired homes, or visit





WATERTOWN, MASS. A former Baptist church, above right, was bought for \$1.4 million in 2003 and divided into eight condos. Many of the original details were preserved, such as the wood-paneled vaulted ceiling, above left.

WSJ.com/Man

Religious Conversions: Challenges of Turning God's Houses Into Townhouses

but the bad news is that you have 40-foot ceilings," says Continuum Co. chief executive and developer Ian Bruce Eichner, who in the early 1980s renovated an 1846 Greek Revival-style church in Manhattan's Greenwich Village to create 15 co-op units. "And because churches are usually landmarks, you can't change the facade," he adds. Most big urban renovations cost about \$10 million and can take two to four years, or in the case of the Seattle project,

about \$12 million over a five-year period.

In the Boston area, more than a dozen churches have been converted to residential projects over the past decade or so. That's in part because there has been a steady supply. The Archdiocese of Boston closed 76 parishes in the metro area under a 2004 consolidation plan, selling 38 of those for just over \$73 million. (To signify that a church is no longer a church, the archbishop

THE NETHERLANDS

Two years ago, Dutch architect Ruud Visser converted a 1930s church along a river n Rotterdam into a home for a family of four, shown above and below.



signs a decree that relegates the building to "profane use.")

One of the churches closed was a Tudor-style church called St. Aidan's in Brookline, Mass., where John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy were both baptized. It reopened in 2009 as a residential project. The church's stone facade and slate roof were preserved, but the interior walls were reframed to support two additional floors. The church was converted into nine high-end condo units that each sold for between \$1 million and \$1.8 million.

Many of the units in St. Aidan's have two-story windows, granite countertops and double-height living rooms with overlooking balconies. Some units also have exposed wooden trusses from the church as well as the church's original dentil molding.

Those rarefied architectural details are a major attraction for many occupants of church-to-home conversions. Shankar Sundaram, 34, a research engineer for Boeing, recently moved into a 2,900-square-foot, two-bedroom townhouse in the former Christian Science church in Seattle with his fiancée. "We figured that a place would hold its value more if it was unique, like a piece of art," he says. "And it's pretty hard to replicate a 100-year-old church."

Mr. Sundaram and his fiancée love to entertain in their four-story townhouse, which has 35-foot-high ceilings. The dining table sits underneath two 20-foot-tall stained-glass windows. "It's the perfect space to play music," he says of the space. "Whatever you play sounds like it's live, like you're in a concert hall as opposed to listening through a stereo."

In the guest bedroom, there's a skylight that looks onto the church's main stained-glass dome. The couple installed an electric blind over the skylight so they can surprise guests with it when they visit.

People who live in church conversions say that they easily find uses for some of the more unusual artifacts. Automotive executive Bob Jensen and his wife bought a converted 1920s Presbyterian church in 2007. It's now a 3,463-square-foot home 20 minutes outside Denver. They say that their four granddaughters like to come over and ring the steeple bell, pulling a rope hanging in the home's foyer. "We have a tradition of ringing it on New Year's," Mr. Jensen adds.

Mr. Jensen and his wife eat breakfast every morning in a nook where the altar used to sit. The couple sleeps in the choir loft, which overlooks the space. "When you're in bed, you're in the center of the church, which is a great feeling," says Mr. Jensen. There are exposed wooden beams remaining from the original structure throughout the home, and one wooden pew from the church sits in the living room, along with more plush couches. Despite its novelty, the pew is often the last seat chosen by guests, Mr. Jensen notes.

Developers of church projects say they are sometimes hesitant to convert sacred structures into commercial enterprises. Brian Badrigian, who developed a late-19th-century Baptist church in Watertown, Mass., into eight condo units, says he had "mixed feelings" about buying the

property in 2003 for \$1.4 million, especially because it was located in the same town where his family had lived since emigrating from Armenia in the early 1900s. "While the sale allowed the congregation to move to a more suitable location, it was also a move away from a special place," he says. "But I have very good feelings about saving a historic building."

Mr. Badrigian spent about \$9 million on renovating the property, which includes eight units in the church, two units in the former rectory and four townhouse units he built on the church's former parking lot. Of the eight units in the church, five have sold for between \$700,000 and \$1.5 million. The four townhouse units sold for around \$1 million each, and the two units in the former rectory sold for about \$700,000 each. Mr. Badrigian says he tried to build units with modern amenities, such as dishwashers, cellulose insulation in the walls and laundry rooms with washers and dryers, while also retaining some of the unique architectural elements of the church, such as its wooden trusses and paneled ceilings. Some of the units on the second floor have living and dining areas with 36-foot-high ceilings.

"Our unit isn't churchy at all, but it definitely feels unique and different and not boring," says Mary Shia, a fundraiser who moved into a threebedroom condo there. Ms. Shia says that she has, however, experienced some backlash in the community over living in a former church. "The cable guy had a hissy fit about having to install cable in a church," she says. "He acted like the world was ending because people were now live ing inside churches."

Although it's still relatively rare in the U.S., the adaptive reuse of churches has become a popular practice in other countries, like the U.K. In 2006, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors found that since 2001, about 500 churches in London alone had been converted into homes. In other countries, such as Germany and Russia, people still regard the concept of living in a church as disrespectful, says Bart Kellerhuis of Utrecht-based firm Zecc Architects, which has done several church-to-home conversions in the Netherlands.

One of challenges in such conversions is reducing the vast space of a church into something more livable. Living spaces can feel overwhelmingly grand, and heating costs can be considerable.

Andrew Sudds, who with his wife, Kristin Conley, paid \$600,000 for a former Lutheran church in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood last year, says it is virtually impossible to keep the room where he they sleep warm. The roof isn't insulated, making it hard to heat the 3,500-square-foot space with a 39-foot ceiling.

"We don't keep the heat running, otherwise we'd owe thousands of dollars in heating bills," says Mr. Sudds, an information-technology specialist for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois. "But even if we did, the heat would just rise and escape through the roof. The fact is that this structure wasn't built for continuous habitation."



Built in the 1920s as a church, this home located about 20 minutes outside of Denver was converted in the late 1900s. It has five bedrooms and three bathrooms. A previous owner added a choir loft, where the master suite is, as well as stained-glass windows. Wood flooring, peaked windows, a steeple bell and antique glass doorknobs remain.

Agent: Linda T. McConnell, Keller Wil liams Realty



5910,000 Somerville, Mass. 2,465-square-foot condo

This converted Baptist church, built in the 1800s, has three bedrooms and three bathrooms. The unit features 45-foot-high ceilings, stained-glass peaked windows, exposed beams and hardwood floors. It also contains multilevel loft office spaces. There are seven units in the building overall.

Agent: Paul Santucci, Boston Lofts



\$1.495 million New York's Greenwich Village 1,351-square-foot condo

This 19th century Greek Revival-style Presbyterian church was converted into a co-op in 1982. It has two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Ceilings range from about 91/2 feet to 14 feet high. There are also five skylights scattered throughout the unit, which is located on the top floor. There are 15 co-op units in the building.

Agent: Kim Larkin, Corcoran



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