More than One Life—Buildings Can Be Creatively Adapted to New Uses

Jerry Krusinski is President and Chief Operating Officer of Krusinski Construction Company located in Oak Brook, Illinois. He has more than 30 years experience in all facets of construction. Jerry helped to found the I-39 Logistics Corridor Association, an economic development organization, and currently sits on its steering and marketing committees.

Steve Moeller is a Project Manager with Krusinski in Oak Brook, Illinois. He has broad-based experience in construction and construction management. In 2009, Steve earned his certificate in the Healthcare Construction Program through ASHE (American Society for Healthcare Engineering) and the American Hospital Association.

By Jerry Krusinski and Steve Moeller

What's old is new again in more than just fashion. In urban and suburban communities across the country, obsolete, vacant buildings are getting a second lease on life. Instead of sitting idle, they are being renovated and refurbished for new, productive purposes.

The concept of adaptive use isn't new, but it's gaining ground for a number of reasons, including the shift toward sustainability and smart growth initiatives that save energy and resources. Consider it the ultimate form of recycling. An increased focus toward historic preservation is also behind the movement as a means of protecting historically-significant buildings from demolition. Others see adaptive use as a catalyst for revitalization in economically distressed areas. This is especially so in areas where factories are shuttered and the jobs associated with them are a distant memory.

The infusion of activity surrounding adaptive use is also being driven by budget realities. Repurposing old buildings can make as much economic sense as starting from scratch, particularly with the potential for federal, state, and local tax deductions and credits that owners can use to defray their costs. Availability of these deductions varies widely, but they may cover buildings in designated historic districts, those on the National Register of Historic Places, and those in industrial areas. Finally, depending on the integrity of the building to be redeveloped, owners can save money on materials by taking full advantage of the materials that are already there.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Not every property is a good candidate for adaptive use. Aging facilities may need a lot of repairs and retrofitting to make them compatible for new uses. For example, the closely spaced exterior support columns found in many concrete buildings create small bay sizes that are difficult to configure. More interior support columns in older structures also make build-out a challenge. Other hurdles can include restrictive zoning and codes, wetlands and storm water requirements, structural problems, and community opposition.

Unexpected conditions can also get in the way of a cost-effective project. Older buildings don't always come with detailed records of the work they have undergone over their lifetimes. For example, doors, windows, closets, and staircases could have been closed off. Sometimes owners don't learn about these changes until renovations are well under way.

An owner who encounters a growing list of challenges might consider razing instead of rehabilitating, but this might not be the best solution. Existing buildings can be costly to demolish if they contain environmentally sensitive materials that require abatement procedures. Lead, asbestos, and other potential hazards are most often an issue when converting a building from industrial uses. While not insurmountable, these challenges and their potential cost implications should be considered early on.

From the Inside Out

So how does an owner make an educated, informed decision about whether to convert an existing building or pass on an unsuitable property and opt for new construction? The answer lies in a comprehensive feasibility analysis that looks at the financial viability of redevelopment proposals, design and construction costs, comparable use strategies, and other factors.

Some of the key areas that need to be evaluated include an existing building's structure, systems, materials, functional suitability, code compliance, historic and cultural significance, and adaptability. Questions to address include:

- Is the structure sound?
- What is needed to bring the building up to modern standards—to make it safe and to comply with building codes?
- What is the condition of the existing heating and cooling equipment?
- Is the building historically significant?
- Does it contain materials that can be left intact or recycled?
- Will it qualify for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) credits?
- Are tax credits available to offset associated refurbishing costs?
- The answers to these and other questions will determine whether a project is economically feasible or prohibitive.

An appropriate redevelopment strategy for one owner may not work for another. Each owner should weigh his or her own unique situation to take advantage of development opportunities and gain the necessary support to ensure success.

The Past Gets a New Future

Converting buildings for new uses while retaining the structures' unique features can turn yesterday's great old buildings into today's foremost destinations—and it doesn't have to cost more than new construction. Depending on site and building conditions, owners can help ground a community to its history and give residents an appreciation of the past while reaping tax advantages.

Adaptive use is also the ultimate form of recycling, as building materials are kept out of landfills and there is less demand on the environment for the production of new construction materials. All told, the advantages associated with refurbishing old structures often far outweigh potential drawbacks.

Krusinski Redevelops Office Buildings for Synagogue

In one adaptive reuse project, the Krusinski Construction Company is redeveloping former office buildings for the B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim synagogue in Deerfield, Illinois. Three, single-story 1980s-era structures are being redeveloped into a 71,380-square-foot facility. The project includes a 600-seat sanctuary, a chapel, social hall, library, youth lounge, "village center" area, education wing, administrative offices, and more. The project is slated for completion in November.

Krusinski was able to reuse the office buildings because they were sound inside and out and didn't have environmental issues. The only issue was their nine-foot ceilings. As the existing ceiling height would not accommodate all the areas of the synagogue, 60 percent of two of the buildings had to be demolished and the remaining portion of the building was gutted and renovated to make way for the sanctuary, social hall, village center, and administrative offices. Extensive improvements inside the redeveloped space mask any signs of the buildings' former purpose and include high-end millwork, floor finishes, a cascading staircase, specialty fixtures, and other treatments.

The third office building, the final component of the total project—the educational wing—remained. During the next phase, Krusinski will gut the existing structure and remodel it to meet the congregation's needs.

Two SIOR members, Steven J. Goode, SIOR, and Roy L. Splansky, SIOR, were instrumental in choosing Krusinski Construction, a firm experienced in adaptive-use projects—and LEED-accredited as well—to lead the process, ensuring a successful transition to the new use with minimal delays. www.krusinski.com.