

**Project Smart Growth**  
**Burnham Building – Irvington, New York**



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**September 23, 2008**

**ENVS 664-660**

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## The History of the Burnham Building

The city of Irvington is situated by the Hudson River about 25 to 30 miles north of New York City. Its growth coincides with the expansion of the railroads about 150 years ago. In 1870, a parcel of land by the New York Central Railroad, adjacent to the Hudson River, was purchased by Frederick A Lord to be the new site for Lord's Horticultural Works, a manufacturing facility of greenhouses and conservatories. The company originally began operations in Syracuse, New York, but moved to Irvington to be closer to its customer base, which typically lived in the Hudson Valley's many large estates. The original facility was destroyed in a fire in 1880, less than 10 years after it was built. A new facility was rebuilt on the same site the following year. The company was renamed the Burnham Horticultural Works in 1890, when Fredrick Lord's then son-in-law took over the business and became president.



Burnham Building – Early 1900's

Of the many conservatories built during that time, the most famous was the greenhouse at the New York Botanical Garden.



The New York Botanical Garden Conservatory

In the early 1900's the company expanded and began making boilers and heaters, and by 1912, the company employed over 250 people. Over time, sales decreased and by 1988, only 12 people were employed at the facility. Later that same year, the company closed its doors and abandoned the building.

Four years later, in 1992, the city of Irvington was shopping for a location to build a new public library. The Library Board in charge of the project believed the vacant

30,000 square foot Burnham building, with its central location and proximity to the train station, had good potential. The Library Board created a bond referendum and proposed it for the citizens of Irvington to decide. They approved it. Since the ground floor, by itself, was sufficient for the library, the next hurdle was to figure out what to do with the three upper floors. After considering plans for offices and retail shops, it was decided that the space would be converted into 22 affordable housing units. In the mid 1990's, the average sales price for a house in Irvington was \$450,000 and apartment rents ranged from \$1,000 to \$1,200 per month. Housing options for low income residents were not plentiful.

Despite being approved in 1992, by 1995, the project had failed to get off the ground because the developer could only raise about half of the funds needed to complete the project. It was a good thing that the city planners originally decided to offer affordable housing as part of the building conversion, because this allowed the Affordable Housing Development Corporation of New York to step in and offer local, state and federal grants. AHDC secured the additional \$1.2M that was needed to finish the project and by 1998 construction resumed. The housing units were completed in September 1999 and the library was completed in January 2000.

The Burnham Building project is a good example of smart growth. The building itself was considered a landmark in Irvington and many of the residents wanted it preserved, but certainly not in an abandoned state. By converting it to something useful, Irvington was able to achieve 3 goals – the expansion of the Library, the creation of low income housing, and the preservation of a landmark. The conversion's success also sparked the interest of other developers and soon a plan was in the works to revitalize the nearby waterfront.

### **Bridgeview Place Historic Condo Association**

A similar type project took place in Old City Philadelphia in 1984. I am very familiar with this conversion, because I have owned one of the units in the building for about 10 years. The "Bridgeview", located at 315 New St., (1 block North of Race St.),

was built in 1908 as a boiler manufacturing plant. Then it became a leather shop where shoes and women's purses were made. In 1956 it was purchased by Thomas Scientific where they used the facility for corporate offices and warehousing. In the early 1980's Old City began to transform from a manufacturing environment to a residential one and the company sold the building in 1984 to Historic Landmarks for Living, a Philadelphia-based company which, at the time, was the largest historic rehabilitation company in the country.



Bridgeview Condo – formerly Thomas Scientific

Between 1981 and 1986, over 900 apartments were developed from former commercial structures in Old City. According to census records, only 80 people were reported living in Old City in 1970. By 1980, the population increased to 300 and by

1986 the population increased to 2,200. By the year 2000, the population grew to almost 8,500 people.

In comparison to the Burnham Building's 22 units and a Library, the Bridgeview has 165 apartments and nothing else. Both buildings made creative reuse of former manufacturing facilities. Both did so by converting them, either partially or entirely, into residential space. However, the Burnham building was designed to provide affordable housing, whereas the Bridgeview was designed for upscale buyers willing to pay a premium for cobble stone streets and the serenity offered by the adjacent churches, St. George's and St. Augustine's.

### **The Benefits of Conversion...**

The benefits of converting an older or abandoned building are very apparent. First, many of these vacant buildings are centrally located near cities and transportation hubs making travel to and from easy. In the case of the Burnham building, it is centrally located within Irvington and across the street from the train station which is only a 30 minute ride to New York City. In the case of the Bridgeview, the building is located at the base of the Ben Franklin Bridge, right by the entrance to 676, 76 and 95 North and South. It is also a 5 minute walk to the Blue Line and a 15 minute walk to Center City. In both cases, there was a desire by citizens and lawmakers to preserve what was considered a national landmark. Converting the building prevented it from abandonment, decay, and eventual destruction.

Both buildings saved tremendous resources and energy as a result of their conversion. Site clearing, foundation preparation and new construction materials were all averted since most, if not all, of the original structures were retained. Interestingly, both buildings either created or were created because of a "monkey see, monkey do" effect, where developers, encouraged by success, looked for other conversion opportunities. In Irvington, developers looked into re-developing the nearby waterfront. The successful conversions of the Chocolate Works in 1982 at 231 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the former factory of Wilbur's chocolate company, and the Wireworks in 1983 at 310 Race St, a former wire

and cable company encouraged developers to invest in the much larger Bridgeview project. Both buildings are also seen as original and unique. Their design and history is preferred by residents over conventional “new” construction.

### **The Downsides of Conversion.....**

Conversions are not for the faint at heart. If the site was used as a manufacturing facility during the industrial age, there is almost always an element of hazardous waste to contend with – not just in the ground, but in the building itself. To prevent fires, the use of asbestos was rampant in older buildings. Recently, in Gloucester County NJ, Kiddie College, a Day Care facility for children was closed when high levels of mercury were found in the walls and floor. Many children became sick. The building was once an industrial site that manufactured thermometers in the 1940’s. The building was converted through state grants into a Day Care facility after being abandoned by the former owner. After all the time, energy, expense and resources to convert the building, it was only used for only a few years before being demolished by the state. The media buzz surrounding the sick children and the wasted state resources gave conversions of abandoned buildings a bad rep.

Zoning laws, which have changed significantly since the buildings were first erected, make conversion projects very difficult and the costs associated with getting buildings “up to code” are sometimes more expensive than demolition and new construction. Oftentimes, provisions must be made to accommodate elements of technology that didn’t exist when these buildings were built – most notably cars. Most zoning laws require provisions for parking. It is no wonder that projects like these don’t ever seem to get off the ground unless there is buy-in from local politicians, (unless the politicians themselves are the ones pushing for the conversions). In the case of Irvington, city officials and the Library Board, worked with zoning officials to make the conversion possible. In the case of the Bridgeview, the conversion was spurred by the Federal Government’s Investment Tax Credit, which was approved in the late 1970’s and provided for accelerated depreciation on historically certified structures that were restored. In 1981, the Government strengthened the legislation, providing a 25 percent

tax credit in addition to the accelerated depreciation. In doing so it created a robust historic rehabilitation industry. Had it not been for intervention on the part of lawmakers, neither project would have gotten off the ground.

The most common problem thought to be associated with conversions is preserving as much of the old style as possible while still making the building up to code with plumbing, wiring and thermal efficiency. Based on my experience after living in the Bridgeview, this is all true, but in addition, because these structures were originally not designed and built as a residence, designers have to get creative to make the space usable, or find ways to cover and mask flaws. In the case of the Bridgeview, it resulted in a terribly un-level, uneven warehouse floor that was covered with extra thick padding and carpet. Of course, I only learned of the uneven floor after ripping out the carpet in anticipation of installing hardwood floors – an impossibility with the concrete floor in that condition.

The Bridgeview also has an unusual raked ceiling because mechanical units, including the hot water heater, were placed in the “crawl space” overhead. Replacing a leaking water heater that is suspended 9 feet in the air, several feet away from a removable panel in the closet ceiling, is not easy. I believe it was originally installed before the drywall. After calling several plumbers and meeting with rejection after rejection, (because the job was considered too difficult), I had to resort to changing it myself with the help of 3 strong friends.

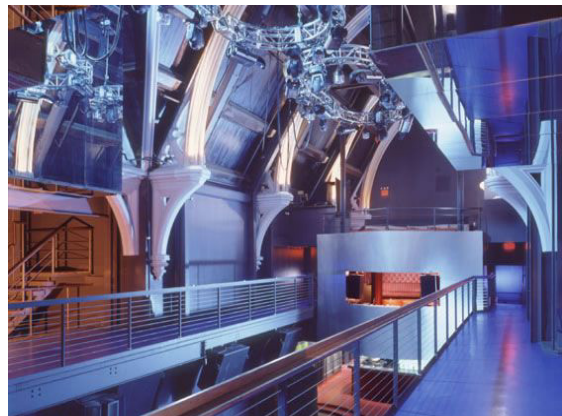
The ceiling height in the Bridgeview is almost 12 feet and the windows extend almost 8 feet high. My unit faces south and the walls are over 1 foot thick and solid brick. They are not insulated. The windows let in tremendous amounts of light and an equal amount of heat. The bricks act as a thermal mass absorbing the sun's rays during the day and radiating heat at night. In the 10 years I have lived there I have rarely used the heat. Even on the coldest of winter days, the apartment never dipped below 58 degrees. However, in the summer, the air conditioning can run 24/7 and the temperature never falls below 80 degrees. I have spoken with neighbors on the North side of the building and for them, the reverse is true.



Bridgeview - Exposed Brick Walls and irregular sized windows. Living Room on Left Bedroom on Right

### **Giving a Whole New Meaning to Environmentally Friendly....**

Lastly, the final problem with conversion is that sometimes it creates moral dilemmas. In 1983, during the wave of historic conversions, Peter Gaiten, a developer in New York purchased a church on 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. and converted it into a night club. The night club, (the Limelight), was know for very risqué activity involving both sex and drugs and people were outraged that a holy relic of the city was tuned into a “house of sin”.



Exterior & Interior of the Limelight Night Club, (now Avalon Night Club) on 6<sup>th</sup> Ave. in New York City

Taking the boundary even one step further, in 2003, I signed up for a 2 day off road driving course in East Hadem, Connecticut. I made the journey from Philadelphia up Interstate 95 and about 15 miles or so from my exit, traffic suddenly came to a standstill. As I inched my way through, I eventually came upon the cause of the backup and realized that it was not an accident that slowed traffic, but a public demonstration that could be seen from the I 95 corridor. A very gothic looking church was converted into a strip club and a prominent sign hanging over the double arched doors was offering lunch and dinner “specials”. A crowd of protesters was picketing outside and the entire spectacle, including the demonstrator’s signs, could be clearly read by passer-bys on 95. My first thought after passing this spectacle was, “What was the zoning board thinking?” With all the benefits of converting old structures into something usable, there is still something to be said for appealing to not just environment sensibilities, but moral sensibilities as well.

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