



**ITS**  
**NUMBER 6**

**Interpreting**  
**The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation**

**Subject: Preserving Historic Church Interiors**

- Applicable Standards:**
1. Compatible Use
  2. Retention of Historic Character
  5. Preservation of Distinctive Features, Finishes and Craftsmanship
  10. Reversibility of New Additions/Alterations

**Issue:** The appropriate rehabilitation of a historic structure must always preserve significant interior spaces, features and finishes. Large, multi-story interior spaces are often found in theaters, school auditoriums and gymnasiums, meeting halls, and religious buildings. These spaces characterize such building types and should be preserved in rehabilitation projects.

Redundant churches have often been rehabilitated for other uses, some more successfully than others. In historic churches, architectural features such as stained glass windows, choir lofts, altars, and large open spaces are important in defining the historic character of the building. Libraries, museums and historical societies, performing arts centers, community centers, and artists' studios are often appropriately selected as new uses for historic churches, as there is no need to introduce major architectural changes into the sanctuary space. However, the conversion of churches into apartments, shops or offices may not be as successful since these new uses are likely to require too many changes that are not compatible with the historic character of these interiors. Alterations which compromise or destroy these spaces or which cause the removal of distinctive architectural features and finishes, or which subdivide these two-story spaces and that result in compromising the integrity of these significant spaces, will not meet Standards 2 and 5, and, in some cases, also will not meet Standards 1 and 10.

**Application 1 (*Incompatible treatment*):** A simple Gothic Revival church constructed in 1858 was rehabilitated for combined office and residential apartment use. The interior still possessed a high degree of integrity before its rehabilitation with its tray ceiling, twelve large stained glass windows, choir loft, and the large, two-story space of the sanctuary itself. During the rehabilitation the choir loft was demolished, and the construction of a full second floor resulted in bisecting the two-story interior space horizontally. The combination of these treatments resulted in a loss of interior features and loss of the interior space itself in this historic church building. Inserting the new floor level removed the choir loft and, most importantly, resulted in the loss of the



*1858 Gothic Revival church building prior to rehabilitation.*



*Sanctuary with choir loft prior to rehabilitation*



*Sanctuary after rehabilitation with new floor and newly divided windows.*

historic spatial volume so characteristic of church building interiors. The new second floor also negatively impacted the tall Gothic-arched windows by cutting across them, effectively reportioning them and reducing their appearance to smaller segments. This rehabilitation, because it did not preserve the integrity and historic character of the church interior, did not meet Standards 1, 2, 5 and 10. Although this particular rehabilitation was not successful, some subdivision may have been possible if a sense of the historic interior space and volume had been preserved, as was achieved in the second example.

**Application 2 (Compatible treatment):** In another example, a small, two-story, rectangular Shingle-style church, built in the late-19th century, was rehabilitated into a single-family dwelling. Prior to rehabilitation, the interior historic finishes still remained intact, as did the sanctuary space itself lit by original clear glass casement windows. As part of the rehabilitation, approximately a third of the first floor sanctuary space was partitioned off at the rear and modified for use as two bedrooms. The remaining two thirds of the sanctuary was retained intact as the living room, and the apse became the dining area. The corner rooms (the cloakroom, vestry and rear entry vestibule) were kept in their historic configuration and converted into a bathroom, kitchen and mudroom, respectively. To permit more light into the interior, plaster panels at the back of the apse were removed and replaced with clear, single-paned glass windows. The existing stairway provided access to the choir loft which was converted into a master bedroom and bath with only a minimal amount of alteration, even allowing retention of the historic church organ. This rehabilitation successfully preserved the primary, character defining features, finishes and spaces of this historic church interior.



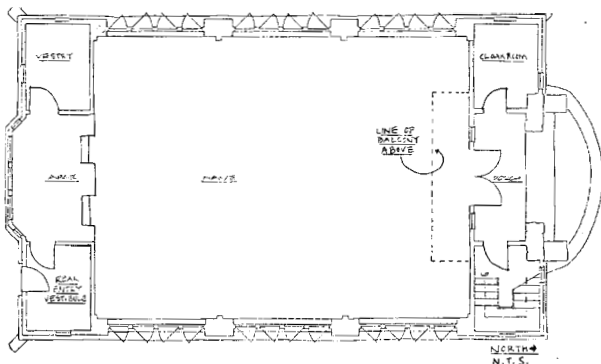
*Shingle-Style church. North and east elevations after rehabilitation.*



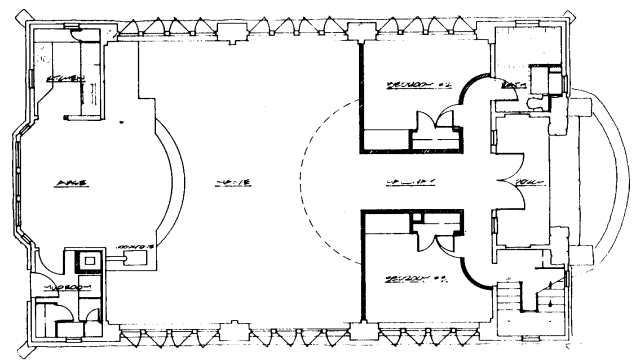
*Sanctuary and apse before rehabilitation.*



*Sanctuary after rehabilitation. View toward kitchen and dining area from living space.*



*Before rehabilitation first floor plan with reflected line of balcony.*



*First floor plan after rehabilitation.*