

METRO PULSE

Our Abandoned Schools

Once the centerpieces of Knoxville neighborhoods, many of our oldest and finest school buildings sit empty. Why can't we find new uses for them?

By Jack Neely

Thursday, January 10, 2008

Look around town. Certain buildings are hard to miss, placed in the center of a community, often on a commanding prominence, on the largest plot of land. They're often the most expensive and best-looking buildings in their neighborhoods, so central to the communities' identities that often the neighborhoods themselves are named for them. Some of them look almost like big-city art museums or upscale apartment buildings.

But then, surprisingly often, we abandoned them. The buildings are still there, seven or eight of them around town, almost as handsome and prominent and permanent-looking as they ever were—just quiet now. And once they go quiet, after a while they tend to lose their windows, and their roofs, and then their value.

To the school system, or to county government, our old schools become inventory. Sometimes they're used for training, or storage, or administrative offices of some sort. But they're rarely maintained well, and it's only after a complicated series of bureaucratic reviews that they can be sold.

Typically the government's reuse of a school is never more than a shade of what it had been. When schools close, more often than not, they attract vagrants or criminals or random vandals. Residential property values around them tend to decline. Their final legacy to the neighborhood is sometimes a roaring fire.

The problem is particularly frustrating to those in tenuously reviving neighborhoods. Jeff Talman, the dependably outspoken advocate for the historic residential sections of town, lives in one, near vacant schools, and works as a renovation specialist for Wells Fargo's mortgage company. "It's been shown that abandoned schools have the single most negative impact on property values," he says. When the school system closes a school, he says, "There's got to be a larger sense of duty and obligation to the community around it."

He brings up an irony: During the years that the neighborhood was trying to find developers for the empty school, thieves stole some of its antique accessories, like its light fixtures. "Vandals, when they were stealing it, at least appreciated the value of it." He's not sure the school system, and the county government, are there yet.

McCallie's fate, common to many vacant and untended buildings, is not necessarily isolated. A recent fire beside long-vacant Oakwood School was put out before it caused real damage.

"Who manages their assets that way?" Talman asks. "I don't. You don't. How come the school system manages its assets that way?"

Though it's been more than 100 years since the first public school was closed and left to other purposes, the problem has been especially fierce in the last 20 years. City-County school consolidation in the 1980s led to

closures of several schools.

Adding to the difficulty were underlying demographic shifts: one, the postwar phenomenon that schools no longer had to be within walking distance of homes, and larger schools, reachable by bus routes or moms in cars, could often be run more efficiently than several small schools. Suburbanization shifted populations, as many households, especially families with school-age children, moved out of town.

Many modern school buildings, built in pragmatic designs and without ornamentation or much in the way of esthetics, may one day be razed without protest. But several of the schools closed in the last 20 years had been built in what must have been a golden age of school architecture, roughly in the 30 years before World War II.

Kim Trent, director of Knox Heritage, has made a study of Knoxville's historic school buildings, and has spent much of her last few years on the job working on ways to save them in sustainable ways.

"The schools we are most concerned about now were built between 1910 and 1940," she says. It was, for various reasons, an unparalleled time of school building in the Knoxville area. A progressive and at least occasionally well-funded city school system, as well as some pre-annexation municipal corporations, built a number of stately, almost grand brick-and-marble edifices, most of them in the residential neighborhoods in a ring around downtown.

"We are fortunate to have a nice inventory that includes Colonial Revival, Georgian Revival and Neoclassical Revival buildings," Trent adds. "They are examples of the work of the best local architects practicing in the first half of the last century, including Barber & McMurry and Baumann & Baumann. They are constructed of brick and stone with large windows, hardwood floors, interesting detailing and open, airy spaces. This is exactly what makes them appealing today—and what makes it possible to redevelop them for residential or office uses."

Some of those have already gotten lucky, at least as buildings. Old Park Junior High, located in what some had considered a dangerous neighborhood on the east side, was nonetheless a lovely brick building. It had hardly been closed before maverick developer Kristopher Kendrick rebuilt its interior as upscale condos, a move that in 1980s Knoxville seemed risky and a little bizarre; occupied and apparently prosperous for more than 20 years now, Park Place is a signal success.

Oakwood Elementary, on the north side, which closed as a school 12 years ago, is as attractive a building as old Park Junior was, a handsome, large brick structure built just before World War I and located prominently in the center of a neighborhood that seems to be well on the upswing, with young adults moving in and lots of home renovations in the works. Its difference, in part, is that the school system held onto it much longer after its use as a fully functioning school was over. It's not in quite as good shape as it was when the last kids ran screaming out the front door.

Daniel Shuh is a young prospective developer, an architect who had worked on renovations in Charleston, S.C., before founding Knoxville Preservation and Development. This afternoon, he's having a look at the place, and several local officials are tagging along; there are holes in its roof, and each new rain brings more water damage. Pigeons fly in and out of the building as if it were a pigeon mall. It's lined with asbestos tiles which would take tens of thousands of dollars to remove. Because part of the building is still in use, plastic sheeting seals off the wings that seem afflicted with asbestos. On a wall, a framed Whittle Communications poster, *The Big Picture*, touts the latest Olsen twins project, the 1995 movie *It Takes Two*.

Shuh, who has done about 20 rehabs of historic houses and commercial buildings in the Knoxville area, seems a

little discouraged by what he sees. The first thing to fix, he thinks, is the roof, and that might run up to a quarter-million dollars. "I see possibilities here, but it'll be a very, very expensive thing to do," he says. "If only we'd gotten in here a few years ago."

"After the school was gone, it became a neighborhood issue," says one of the party, Community Development Director Madeline Rogero. She'd like to see some form of "mothball policy" implemented with all schools, to keep those no longer used from deteriorating past the point of no return.

Interim School Superintendent Roy Mullins admits the school system is often reluctant to surrender, or "surplus," a building to the county for sale to private developers. "There's no policy that says once a school is abandoned, it has to be surplus within six months," he says. "Once you've given it away, it's gone," and no longer useful for various school purposes.

There's a subtext that adds some anxiety to Mullins' remarks. When the school system surpluses a building, it goes to the county. If the county sells it, the money doesn't necessarily go to the school system. Some preservationists wonder if, by policy, school property, and any financial returns for it, were dedicated to the school system, it might give the school system more of a motive to maintain the properties and to sell them for more propitious development.

In the case of Oakwood, Rule, South High, and Eastport, parts of the schools—usually the more modestly designed newer additions of each school, as a rule—are still used for various school-related purposes. At Oakwood, that addition and the school's old gym are used as a teacher supply depot. For several years, the second floor of the historic building was used for teacher training.

School Board member Indya Kincannon suggests, in effect, that most empty schools are for sale, at a price. "If someone came along and said, 'We have this great idea for making Oakwood into an asset for the community, and we have the means to do so, and the neighborhood's going along with it,'" then the school board and County Commission would consider it, she says—assuming they can find alternate spaces for whatever remaining school services might be located there.

However, the rub is that such buildings might not ever get approved for even the most basic maintenance, like repairing roofs, and will therefore deteriorate and lose whatever value might have appealed to potential buyers. Prospective developers say Oakwood would have been much more appealing 10 years ago, when it was in better shape. Today, the roof has given way in places, and caused extensive water damage to some parts of the interior. "The Board of Education is always strapped for money," says Mullins. Saving old school buildings, he says, "takes a back seat" to maintaining school buildings that are still in use.

"What are your priorities?" Mullins asks. "A roof over a building kids are using, or a roof over a building sitting there empty?"

In 2003, the School Board adopted a policy that "Whenever it is anticipated that a school facility will be vacated, the Superintendent shall determine whether it is needed for other school uses. If not, he/she shall recommend to the Board that the facility be (1) leased to another agency or (2) declared surplus and turned over to the County general government for disposal. If the structure is thought to have historical significance, the Superintendent shall notify preservation organizations such as Knox Heritage in order that they make proposals for preservation and/or reuse of the facility."

"I think the school board policy is well-meaning, and the spirit of the policy is good," says Kincannon. "But that policy doesn't have any teeth to it. Even if we keep a school under our control, we're at the mercy of people willing to invest in it."

That often falls back on the condition of the building. A building well-maintained (namely, with a roof) might sell to a developer at a considerable profit to the county and the school system. Others might be considered to have no value at all, and might be turned over to a community group, as was the case with South Knoxville's Galbraith School, which is currently being used by a church.

Developers say it's unclear whether Oakwood is too far gone to renovate profitably. Mullins understands the frustration, but underscores his primary obligation to use his limited funds to tend to the active school buildings. Of Oakwood's damage, and the prospect that the school could have been a positive economic asset to the school system if sold a few years ago, he says, "it's water over the dam now." But he adds he's working with the county law director to explore the possibility of developing the historic building privately, and some local developers have expressed interest in it.

"I think you can always find places that you can do a better job," says School Board member Robert Bratton. "But we're not just going to sell a building to anybody. Like old South, that's attached to a building we're still using. With these bigger structures, it's harder when you can put together a condo deal to make the revenues work."

Looming over the condo prospects like a waterlogged ceiling is the current housing market. The national glut raises new questions even about conventional residential development, but especially after disappointing public response to the auction of Brownlow School condos in the fall, developers may not be quite as eager to turn schools into condos as they were a couple of years ago. Brownlow was surplused after it closed in the mid-'90s and was used for storage (and, briefly, did a star turn playing a role as an Indianapolis school, the setting for a science-project competition in the 1999 motion picture *October Sky*). One vigorous developer saw potential in it, bought it, then sold it to another, who, after some delays, put up the building to auction its units as residential condos, a strategy that had been successful a few months earlier and about a mile away at another old building, the Candy Factory. Only about half the units sold; at this writing, the developers, Kinsey Probasco of Chattanooga and Cardinal Enterprises of Knoxville, are tentatively going forward.

But housing isn't the only use for old schools. Here in Knoxville, several old schools have been converted into office space. Regal Tyson Junior High, on Kingston Pike near UT, sat vacant for many years until real-estate magnate Sam Furrow redeveloped it for a variety of offices in 1997. The old Perkins School on Portland Street, off Sutherland, had been closed for about a decade before the accounting firm of Pershing Yoakley and Associates renovated it to be the firm's headquarters.

"We default to the condo-ification of schools," says Talman. "We default to that as if it's the only thing that can be done." He mentions one remarkable exception. On a visit to Portland, Ore., he saw a recent project at the former Kennedy School. "It's beyond cool, it's fantastic," he says. The 1915 public-school building is now a 35-room hotel, with guest rooms in the old classrooms. Also in the building, accessible to the public at large, are a restaurant, pool, brewery, movie theater, and art gallery. When Talman was there, a wedding was setting up in the gym.

Knoxville has a few tentative examples of that outside-the-box approach. East Knox County's Riverdale Elementary closed in 1985. For years, the 11,000-square-foot building attracted vandals, druggies, and cultists, but is now the capacious home of one middle-aged couple, Connie and Wayne Whitehead. Connie Whitehead, an agricultural food specialist, discovered that the old girls' room was an excellent space for her office; lately, the Whiteheads have been using it as their bedroom, too. Though a relatively small building by public-school standards, it makes for an enormous house; during the winter, they keep only parts of it heated. Though the building is primarily their home, the Whiteheads often open it up to friends and neighbors as a sort of ad-hoc community center. They've hosted several acoustic-music concerts in the building. During the holidays, they

backed a community production of A Charlie Brown Christmas, which involved 20 local kids and drew about 250 attendees to the old school. In their gym, when the mood strikes, they take on challengers in badminton and ping-pong tournaments.

The problem, or maybe it's the part of a problem that's not necessarily a problem, is that there's not any one culprit, or any one solution—and the abandoned schools are scattered across three different stages of divestment, with different people or agencies in charge of each. Some underused schools, like Oakwood in North Knoxville, are still controlled by the School Board. Some, like South High, have been surplused—they're still owned by county government, but no longer under direct control of the school system. Rule High, surplused by the school system, is partly used by the county for vehicle maintenance, but has partly been subject to an apparently disappointing private effort to rehabilitate it as a community center. Some, like Brownlow and Flenniken, a 1919 South Knoxville school recently considered for a restaurant project, are in private hands.

But there are some consistencies among the problem buildings that Talman says he can't ignore. The school buildings abandoned for long periods of time tend to be in the less politically powerful neighborhoods.

"Sequoyah School's about the same age as some of these empty schools," he says. "Do you think it will ever be abandoned?" He mentions that Fountain City has made use of former school buildings for other purposes or schools. "No way would you close a school in the middle of Fountain City."

"He definitely has a point," Kincannon says, but adds there are other differences, too. Most of the schools that have been closed have been small schools, close enough to other school populations to suggest consolidation into a larger, newer school building elsewhere. Christenberry, an elementary school made up of several smaller school districts on the north side, is the example that comes to mind. "Oakwood and Lincoln Park [another closed school, now used for vocational education] were much smaller than Sequoyah," she says. "Ask parents whether they'd rather their kids were at Oakwood or Christenberry, and I bet they'd say Christenberry." She adds that Fulton and Austin-East, which are not in affluent or politically powerful neighborhoods, have been expanded and improved, and that Maynard, though very small, is still open.

The path from a working school to a private development is an obstacle course, sometimes with unexpected perils. South High, closed since 1991, was slated for demolition until community objection got Knox Heritage involved in finding alternate uses for it. The 42,000 square-foot building, originally built in 1937, was a challenge, but after years of paperwork, it appeared to be close to a deal with successful downtown developer Leigh Burch to redevelop it as 26 residential condominiums, a \$3 million project. The School Board had been talked into surplusing it; it had been through the Metropolitan Planning Commission hoops; it waited only for County Commission's okay. However, the deal was contingent on only a nominal purchase price of \$100.

Paul Pinkston, who represents the part of the district where the building is located, objected. "We can get more for it," he said. Commission narrowly turned the project down, a particularly disheartening anticlimax to what had already been a long struggle for preservationists and neighborhood activists.

Apparently encouraged that there was interest, the county tried to sell the school as is, asking for bids of at least \$25,000. No one responded to that, but one firm that offered \$20,000 encountered financing problems, and withdrew. Other proposals have gotten hung up on parking issues with the site. Two and a half years after County Commission declined Burch's offer, the school is still empty, and still owned by the county.

"Personally, I'd like to see the property pass back to the School Board," Mullins says, suggesting that gathering school services taking up parts of other old schools, like Eastport, Oakwood, and Rule High, and concentrating them at old South High, would free the other historic schools for private development.

It's just an idea. If the city's promised south-side development project proceeds as planned, it may raise demand for property in the South High area. There are credible rumors that still another private developer is in the wings for South High—though no work is expected any time soon.

Each old school's story is different from all the others; Eastport is a good-looking, sound building, but it's on an obscure road across from an indifferently kept graveyard and a public housing project. Rule is a huge high-school building with an unusual hilltop view, and an opportunity, help to revive a neighborhood adjacent to other reviving neighborhoods. Flenniken is tucked behind ever-changing Chapman Highway, beside a new residential development for retirees.

It's been a long time since the City of Knoxville was involved in building schools, but the city is agreeable to help with old ones. Tax-increment financing was available for Brownlow and might be there for South High and other projects. City director of policy and communications Bill Lyons says the city has a precedent for making schools pocket redevelopment zones; the incentive could be applied to other surplus schools in the future to "close the gap."

Answers aren't simple; between the city, the county mayor, the County Commission, the School Board, the school administration, the more daring developers of Knoxville, the pigeons, the vandals, and the whims of the unpredictable market, there may be lots of gaps to close. ("It is a twisted mess, isn't it?" remarks one erstwhile developer.) But a visit to the several thriving examples of rehabilitated school buildings may make it seem worth the trouble.



© 2008 The E.W. Scripps Co.