

The Garden City News

Interior is irreplaceable

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To the Editor:

As the regional advocate for historic preservation on Long Island, Preservation Long Island (PLI) is writing in support of the preservation and adaptive reuse of St. Paul's School. PLI included St. Paul's on our 2010 Endangered Historic Places list and we will continue to work with community groups to advocate for this significant building.

I am greatly concerned regarding the potential approach of facadism at St. Paul's School in Garden City. There is overwhelming support to save the exterior of this remarkable building, which is a critical first step. However, as lovely as the shell of the building is, to empty and completely modernize its interior would be to remove the heart and the soul of the building.

Facadism should only be considered as a last-resort preservation method. It involves retaining only the external facade of a historic building while demolishing or significantly altering its interior. This practice, although sometimes necessary in extreme cases of interior damage or alteration, is incompatible with the historical significance and integrity of St. Paul's School.

Roberta Gratz, in her book "Cities Back from the Edge," underscores that historic preservation should encompass more than just the exterior of a structure. When we reduce historic buildings to mere facades, we risk eroding the essence of our cities' historical continuity and authenticity. The interiors of these buildings hold narratives that are vital in conveying their history and making them relevant and authentic spaces for the future.

Facadism removes the significance of a building from its social and environmental contexts. It results in wasteful practices, overlooking the embodied energy of a building before it nears the end of its functional life. By removing features uniquely tied to a property's history and stripping away the context that allows one to understand or appreciate a historic building, its significance is diminished. While a historic facade combined with a modern interior may seem forward-thinking, inappropriate renovations can have unintended consequences for the overall value of the building. Historic interiors possess enduring appeal and quality that transcend passing architectural trends and remain relevant over time.

The interior of St. Paul's School is an irreplaceable asset.

The National Park Service's Preservation Brief No. 18 highlights the importance of interior spaces in defining a building's historic character. St. Paul's rooms, stained glass windows, oak trim, intricate ironwork, and tilework contribute to the school's authenticity and should be safeguarded with the utmost priority.

The historic interior at St. Paul's School in Garden City is comprised of invaluable assets that should not be removed. These are materials that, due to cost and lack of skilled craftspeople, could not be replicated today. For instance, St. George's Hall in Liverpool, England, boasts the largest Minton floor in the world, comprising 30,000 tiles. The floor is so valuable that it is kept protected under a wooden cover and only unveiled occasionally, with admission charged at £20 per person—highlighting the cultural and historical value attributed to such intricate craftsmanship. The original cost of 3,000 pounds

in 1860s, would be the equivalent of 250,000 pounds today—although the true cost of replicating would be in the millions. The interior of St. Paul's includes many finishes, including Minton floors, that are just as significant.

There are countless examples of buildings that have been renovated while retaining the soul of the historic structure. Thoughtful modern improvements and amenities that highlight and respect the historic interior spaces can be incorporated by experienced professionals into a community center that will be the gem of Garden City. At the time of its construction, St. Paul's School used only the best craftsmanship and materials available. Its value has only increased with time and would be impossible to replicate. Garden City residents deserve the best, and that requires a thoughtful restoration of St. Paul's that both safeguards and celebrates the interior and exterior of this historic landmark.

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