

Loft apartments

Built on the Rock the church doth stand,
Even when steeples are falling;
Crumbled have spires in every land,
Bells are still chiming and calling;
Calling the young and old to rest,
But above all the soul distressed,
Longing for rest everlasting.¹

Choir loft, that is

Elizabeth Bolton, a Coldwell Banker residential real estate broker in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has launched a website called *Centers and Squares*. On the home page, under the headline *Condos in Renovated Churches*, she writes:

Churches and synagogues converted to condos often result in dramatic spaces with soaring ceilings, beautiful oversized windows, and preserved architectural details. A number of former churches have been turned into condos in Cambridge, Somerville, and Watertown. Loft buyers will appreciate the wide-open spaces in these reused buildings.

Scroll down the page and you find photos of eight different former church buildings, with accompanying listings:

The church at 101 Third Street in East Cambridge is one of the oldest church buildings in Cambridge. Built in 1827 as a Unitarian Church it became the Holy Cross Church in 1940. In 2000 it was converted to four luxury condos. The condos range in size from 1300 to 3160 sq.ft. and sold for \$585,000 to \$1,300,000.

Other features noted in Ms. Bolton's listings include "heated indoor garage," and "ceiling heights soar to 60 ft." in one of the units. The trouble with ceilings that high is that the Christmas tree costs five grand. But what a great place for a radio-operated helicopter—the ideal Christmas gift for a kid (or daddy) living in a converted organ loft. One of the properties is called "Bell Tower Place," another is "The Sanctuary Lofts."

In my work with the Organ Clearing House, I've been in and out of countless buildings destined to become loft apartments. Having seen quite a few of these completed projects, I can tell you that it takes a really skillful architect to make usable comfortable living spaces from old church buildings. I've seen the top five feet of a large gothic stained-glass window rising from a dining room floor—*The Ascension of Christ* from the nave up. I've seen a 10-by-10-foot home office with a wood ceiling sloping from 20 feet high on one side to 24 on the other. Changing the battery in the smoke alarm is an ordeal. And I've seen a fourth-floor bathtub placed in what was the top eight feet of an apse.

About ten years ago, a grand stone church building in Meriden, Connecticut was purchased by a comedian whose vision was to create a comedy club. The belly-gripping name of this inspirational venue: "God, That's Funny!" (I'm not kidding.) The magnificent three-manual 1893 Johnson Organ (Opus 788) has been on the OCH website for years. In response to a recent inquiry, I tried to track down the owner, who was of course long gone. (I guess God didn't think it was funny.) A few calls around town revealed that two different worshipping communities had subsequently purchased the building. I drove through that town last Saturday hoping to track down the present owners to see if the organ is still intact. There was a fancy electronic sign out front, flashing information about weather, time and date, bible study, and Sunday "Praise!", but no phone number. A Google search revealed a phone number that rang endlessly with no chance to leave a message. I guess I should go by on a Sunday morning.

Yet another committee

We're all familiar with the traditional list of church committees: Memorials, Flower, Property, Finance, Education, and Music. Lots of church members think that the Nominating Committee is the worst assignment, because you spend your three-year stint listening to people explaining why they have to say "No." But I think the worst assignment for a church member is the Dispersment Committee. (Spellcheck says there's no such word—but I've worked with several such groups, so I know it's true.) These are typically the last members standing, the most loyal, diehard people in the pews. By the time the Dispersment Committee gets down to work, the work of the Dissolution Committee is complete. The corporation has been closed, the denominational leaders have followed the rules of deconsecrating the property, the last service has been held, the building has been put on the market, the congregation has found new spiritual homes (or not), and all that's left to do is empty the building.

Anyone who's been involved with the life of a church can picture the list:

- 533 hymnals
- 346 pew bibles
- 7 rolling coat racks with Christmas pageant costumes
- 26 adult choir robes, 33 child choir robes
- 433 monogrammed teacups with saucers
- 275 ten-inch dinner plates (ivory with green edge stripe)
- grand piano
- 4 upright pianos (one blue, one black, two white)
- 58 small bottles Elmer's glue
- 6 framed 8x10 "Smiling Jesus"
- 7 boxes elbow macaroni, 2 cans gold spray paint
- 3 step ladders (6-foot, 8-foot, 12-foot)
- 1 Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ, 49 ranks, 1937 (G. Donald Harrison)

It all seemed so essential a few years ago. Now it's a pretty forlorn collection.

When a church has reached this stage, about the best thing that can happen is a crew arriving to dismantle the organ. When the organ has been sold and renovation has been planned, the members of the Dispersment Committee take solace in knowing that some last breath of their beloved church will blow its inspiration across another congregation. Often, when we arrive to dismantle the organ, committee members comment that for just a few more days there's real activity in the building. They arrive in the morning with family photos they've taken off the walls in their homes—photos of their parents' weddings and funerals, their children's baptisms and confirmations, or an empty sanctuary decked out in Christmas finery. In each photo, that organ is standing proudly in the background, a monument to a century or more of parish life—celebrations, tragedies, triumphs, and disappointments.

As we thunder through the nearly abandoned building setting up scaffolding, building pipe trays, and unpacking tools, taking down the first façade pipes, we see people sitting quietly in the rear pews with tears streaming down their cheeks.

A movable feast

Through the disappointment and sadness of the loss of a church, the organ lives on, and it's fun to be able to share a couple stories in which the relocation of an organ brought a little light to a story.

In the middle of 2011, Christ Episcopal Church in South Barre, Massachusetts



Hook & Hastings Opus 2344, Christ Church, South Barre

closed its doors, and most of the remaining parishioners transferred their memberships to St. Francis Church in nearby Holden. The Diocese of Western Massachusetts contacted us to place the organ in a new home, and after only a few brief conversations, someone had a bright idea. The outdated and malfunctioning electronic instrument in the chancel at St. Francis Church needed only a little push to make way for the quick installation of the lovely 1910 Hook & Hastings organ (Opus 2344). How bittersweet for the members of Christ Church to be welcomed into a new congregation with the opportunity to bring a beautiful and living piece of their church with them. It took a little more than three weeks to make the move, and as I write, the relocated organ is to be dedicated in a recital by Robert Barney the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

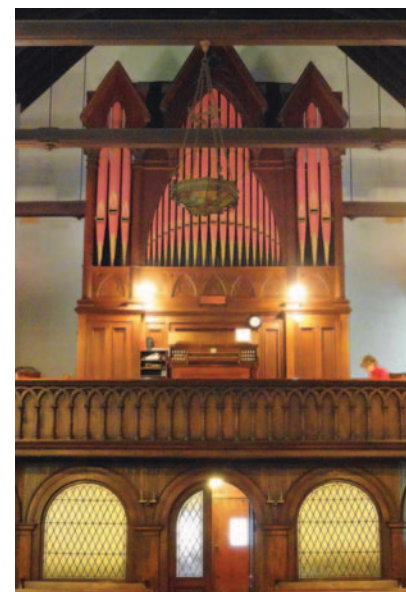
Some 20 years earlier, the First Unitarian Church in Woburn, Massachusetts closed. The three-manual 1870 E. & G.G. Hook organ (Opus 553) was sold to a church in Berlin, Germany. The money from that sale was entrusted to church member Charley Smith, who salted it away confident that a good use for the funds would come up someday. And in 1995, the Stoneham (Massachusetts, two miles from Woburn) Unitarian Church closed. The two-manual 1868 E. & G.G. Hook organ (Opus 466) was placed in storage, and advertised in a U.U.A. District Newsletter as available, "free to a good home."

The Follen Community Church (UUA) in Lexington, Massachusetts (five miles in the other direction from Woburn) was contemplating the future of the home-built instrument in its historic sanctuary when their minister noticed the bit about the Hook organ and handed it off to the chair of the committee. It didn't take long for the arrangements to be made and the Bishop Organ Company was engaged to renovate and install the organ in Lexington. Charley Smith in Woburn got wind of all this, and presented the Follen Church with the funds from the sale of the Woburn organ to support the organ's maintenance and to assist in the presentation of annual organ recitals. Charley passed away before the project was complete, but his widow and several past members of the Woburn church were in attendance when the Stoneham organ was dedicated in its new home. Two organs, three Massachusetts towns, one European city, and a lot of good will in the face of disappointment.

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The Organ Clearing House was an active presence in Boston in the 1970s. I was in high school then, and was assistant organist at a church in Woburn,

Massachusetts (across the town square from the former Woburn Unitarian Church), where there is a three-manual E. & G.G. Hook organ built in 1860 (Opus 283). Organbuilder George Bozeman was the *titulaire*. Mentors George Bozeman and John Skelton both made sure that I was aware of the quality and significance of organs like that. In 1972, Bozeman-Gibson & Company relocated a terrific two-manual, 17-rank Hook organ (Opus 538, 1870) from Our Saviour Methodist Church in Boston to the United Parish in Auburndale, Massachusetts. John Skelton (my private organ teacher) took me to the dedication recital. That was a landmark project—the organ is of the highest pedigree, it was the first project of the fledgling firm, and just recently the church celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the installation of the organ.



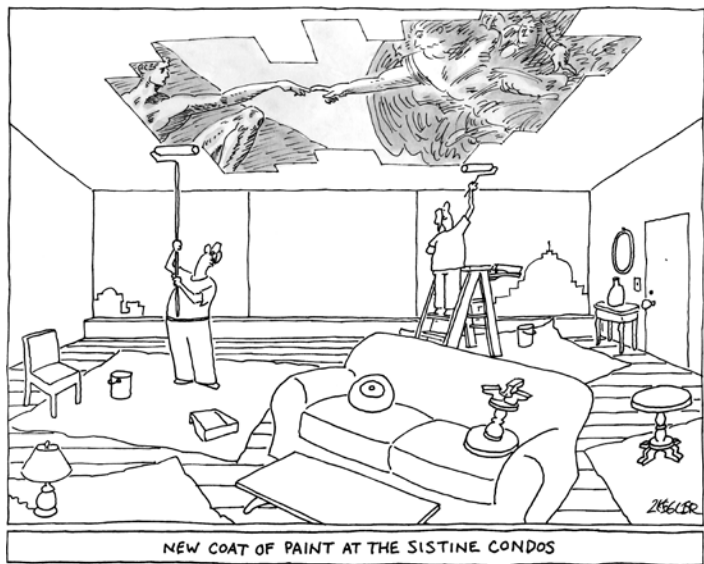
Hook Opus 538, Auburndale

My first organbuilding experiences were in the workshops of Bozeman-Gibson during the summers of 1975 and 1976, and several of the projects on the books then came through the Organ Clearing House. Among others, there was a small two-manual organ (I think by George Ryder) being installed in a Salvation Army Chapel in Providence, Rhode Island (the arrangement for meals was a little sketchy), and an E. & G.G. Hook organ going to a Roman Catholic Church in Marine City, Michigan.

Fifteen years later when I joined the Organ Clearing House as executive director, those memories were refreshed, and I looked forward to being able to help with preservation of wonderful organs across the country. It didn't take long for me to realize a couple hard truths: Not all organs are worth preserving, and many organs worth preserving will be lost.

Without identifying organbuilders, it's simple enough to say that there are thousands of non-descript two-manual nine-rank electro-pneumatic organs strewn across the country. They all seem to have the same stoplist (Diapason, Dulciana, Melodia, Octave, Stopped Diapason, Viole, Harmonic Flute, Oboe, Bourdon), and each is presented as huge, rare, and world-class.

I've come to understand that not all organs can be saved. When an organ like this is discarded—and they often are—I feel that it's justifiable. There is a finite amount of money available to be spent on pipe organ projects of any description in the United States in a given year. I think it's important to avoid squandering any of it on projects destined for a mediocre result. If a church owns an organ like that I describe, loves it, and wishes



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Above all, this cartoon speaks of irrelevancy. To many modern Americans, the church is irrelevant. To many modern churchgoers, the pipe organ is irrelevant. Is the instrument truly a symbol of yesterday, or is it a modern, vital, thrilling, inspiring part of our heritage, just as appropriate in the 21st century as it was in the 16th? If we really believe that, are we using it to its fullest as a 21st-century vehicle for expression?

Of course, the pipe organ made the transition very well from Baroque to Classical to Romantic, and into the unique language of the twentieth century. In 1976, jazz pianist Keith Jarrett made a recording, *Spheres*, of improvisations on the venerable organ by Josef Gabler in the Abbey church at Ottoberen (available on Amazon.com), but I don't think we can claim that the organ has been used as flexibly or as imaginatively as the piano. Why not?

I've seen an ornate Victorian organ case with stenciled façade unceremoniously spray-painted sky blue (along with the sanctuary walls) because the rector felt threatened by the power of

the music. Think of your favorite grand organ case (Haarlem, Sydney, Lübeck, or the Mormon Tabernacle) and picture that crew of painters, caps on backward, approaching with ladders and buckets.

What you are doing to ensure the future of the pipe organ? ■

Notes

1. Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig, in *Sang-Vaerk til den Danske Kirk, 1837 (Kirken Den Er Gammelt Hus)*; translated from Danish to English by Carl Døving, 1909, and Fred C. M. Hansen, 1958.

to keep using it, I'm a big champion of developing as economical a renovation project as possible. But in my opinion, it's hard to justify leaping in ahead of the wrecking ball to scoop up an organ, and encouraging a small church to purchase, renovate, and relocate it when organs of excellent pedigree are equally available.

of condominium ceilings with white paint that conceals sacred frescos and architectural decoration. Having seen a lot of church buildings in the throes of de-consecration, I can tell you, this is not a great stretch.

The Sistine Condos

The New Yorker magazine is a huge read. Each week, a new issue appears, chock full of commentary, fiction, news, poetry, investigative reporting, and a comprehensive view of the arts and culture in New York City. As a newly settled New Yorker, I think I understand how critical the New York view of the arts is to the rest of the country. Nowhere else is there such a concentration of performance spaces, museums, theaters, speakeasies, galleries, and arts festivals of every description. Any American who is interested in or depends on the arts would do well to read the first ten pages of each issue, "Goings on About Town," which lists by category everything that's going on. There are comprehensive listings of concert programs from the New York Philharmonic to organ recitals, and the listings, synopses, and reviews of cinema are unsurpassed.

Each issue includes new original fiction and poetry, and each includes original artwork in the form of cartoons and the eloquent commentary of the drawn cover art. Any tourist in Times Square will recognize the ubiquitous double-decker tour buses, run by rival companies, that roar up and down the avenues providing in-depth exposure to this most complex of cities. One *New Yorker* cover showed two rival buses as battling square-rigged frigates, unleashing broadsides at one another. Another cover showed Aesop's Hare climbing into a taxi while the tortoise plodded quietly into the subway. (The subway always gets there faster.)

In the September 10, 2012 issue of *The New Yorker*, I was startled to find a cartoon that depicted "New coat of paint at the Sistine Condos." I see two painters, none too skilled or too careful, rubbernecking white paint across Michelangelo's masterpiece, and I see the dome of St. Peter's in the background. I've asked several friends who know Rome well if they recognize the building on the left in the background, but none seem to think it represents an actual identifiable building. (Please be in touch if you know it.)

I see here comment on what would be the ultimate church closure, and the ultimate desecration of the artistic and architectural heritage of the church. I've mentioned the top five feet of the *Ascension of Christ*. There are plenty

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