

Sacred Spaces Assistance Program

Case Study: Saved by Local Landmarking

King Urban Life Center, Former St. Mary of Sorrows

938 Genesee Street, Buffalo, NY



St. Mary of Sorrows parish was established in 1872 for the local German Catholic community. Their extant building, known today as the King Urban Life Center, was dedicated in 1891. It served the congregation for nearly 100 years—but in 1985, as the city faced continuing depopulation, the diocese decided to close the parish as part of their larger consolidation efforts. Having determined that the repairs the building required were prohibitively expensive, they planned to demolish the structure.

However, neighborhood residents and others came together to advocate for the building's preservation, and in 1986 it was locally landmarked by the City of Buffalo (passing by one vote). This provided the layer of protection needed to stave off the demolition. Soon the idea of turning the building into a community center and school took hold, and a group called the Sacred Sites Restoration Corporation was formed to oversee the building's restoration and adaptive reuse. They purchased the building in 1989 and subsequently turned it over to the City of Buffalo.

With funding provided by a variety of grants, HHL Architects performed the repairs and designed the interior classroom space, keeping the sanctuary open while still allowing for smaller, divided areas. In 1998, the building officially opened as the King Urban Life Center. The King Center Charter School—the first charter school in Western NY—moved into the building in 2000, remaining through 2015. Today the Center continues to serve the community with an after-school program as well as other programming and events.

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Timeline

- 1886-1891: Constructed
Architect: Adolphus Druiding
- 1985: Closed by the diocese
- 1986: Locally landmarked
- 1987: Listed on the State Register of Historic Places
- 1989: Sold to the Sacred Sites Restoration Corporation
- 1998: King Urban Life Center opens



617 Main Street, Suite 201 · Buffalo, NY 14203
716-852-3300
www.PreservationBuffaloNiagara.org