

St. Joseph's Church in SoMa will become offices

Stephanie M. Lee, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Built nearly a century ago, St. Joseph's Church has deteriorated from a stately place of worship into a vacant and boarded-up eyesore.

In its next incarnation, it could be the hot destination for technology startups in the South of Market neighborhood. Or so its new owner hopes.

The 1913 city landmark, one of a handful of vacant churches in San Francisco, stands three stories tall on the southwest corner of Howard and 10th streets. It was forced to close when the 1989 earthquake damaged it to the point of being seismically unsound. For the next two decades, transients and drug addicts broke in, slept there and trashed it.

Then about three years ago, Chris Foley of the Polaris Group, a [real estate](#) group, bought it for an undisclosed sum with the aim of bringing it back from the dead.

"We realized that with technology businesses really growing, we could potentially make this office space and maintain the volume," he said.

Seismic upgrade

Under a plan the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission will consider today, the church would get a seismic upgrade.

Its faded stucco exterior would be cleaned and restored under the guidance of historic preservation architecture firm Page & Turnbull. New landscaping, entrances accessible to all, new fences, a restored skylight and reconstructed light fixtures based on the originals would brighten the facade.

The inside, once lined by pews, could host 21,000 square feet of open offices and a 1,000-square-foot cafe serving both workers and passers-by.

Organ to be donated

The altar and confessional booths would go. The pipe organ would be donated to the Salvation Army. The chapel would become restrooms, and the sacristy, a storage room for church furnishings, would turn into offices. The stained-glass windows, however, would be restored and kept.



"The goal is to rehabilitate a fabulous structure and reinvigorate a blighted corner," said developer Brian Spiers, who is overseeing the site's construction.

If the city approves the plan, Foley hopes to start work in July and open the space by 2013.

Foley acknowledges the process won't be easy - or cheap. After he bought it, he opened the door to find 2,000 rotting pigeons.

He estimates cleanup and renovation could cost \$15 million, and hopes to get tax breaks for fixing up a historic landmark.

When the rehabilitation wraps, Foley is counting on tech tenants trying to cram into the South of Market district. That area's vacancy rate was just 3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2011, according to an analysis by Jones Lang LaSalle, a real estate services firm.

"Some tenants say absolutely not, because it used to be a church ... just because of their views toward church and state," Foley said.

Yet he's confident the space's novelty and beauty will wow others. "It's pretty fabulous," he said.

Other vacant churches

While St. Joseph's Church is on its way to possibly reopening, other vacant churches in San Francisco are languishing. For example, developers are suing the city after it stopped them from demolishing First St. John's United Methodist Church, at 1601 Larkin St., and building residential units, according to the City Planning Department.

Sacred Heart Church, at 554 Fillmore St., was declared a state landmark, and there are no current proposals to redevelop it. The Second Church of Christ Scientist, at 651 Dolores St., is proposed to be converted into condos. And the Golden Gate Lutheran Church, at 601 Dolores St., was converted into a home that will be used by the nearby Children's Day School.

Jim Meko, who chairs the SoMa Leadership Council, said he thinks the St. Joseph's Church renovation will enhance the area, which will soon feature hundreds of housing units and Twitter's headquarters.

"Everybody is just waiting for him to do something to activate the space," Meko said of Foley.

As kids, Foley and Spiers were altar boys who attended Catholic school. They won't be using this church in quite the same way as they did then, but they hope to make it look just as good.

"It's a grand beautiful building," Spiers said. "Hopefully we'll be able to bring it back up to that same grandeur."

E-mail Stephanie M. Lee at slee@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/02/01/BA5N1N158P.DTL>

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