THE ARTS TO THE RESCUE

Historic buildings enjoy new lives as performance venues.

BY MARLAINA COCKCROFT | ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABY HOVLAND

CAN A CONCERT, play or painting save a historic building from the wrecking ball? In New Jersey, yes. Centuries-old buildings have been converted into performance spaces, preserving the past while revitalizing the arts scene in local communities. It's not unusual for an historic building to maintain its original function after a renovation, says Glenn Caponick, principal historic-preservation specialist at the New Jersey Historic Trust. Historic homes, for example, are typically transformed into updated homes. Reenvisioning a building as a performance space, he says, is less common, but it is especially appropriate in communities lacking a theater or concert hall.

Being able to experience historic buildings helps people understand how we developed as a nation, says Dorothy Guzzo, executive director of the Historic Trust. "Having that past all around you helps you face the future." On these pages are four examples of buildings reborn as performance spaces.

HISTORY PERMEATES

The 1700s English-style barn—unusual for its Dutch framing—is on the property, but the local historical society lobbied against it. Residents, meanwhile, wanted a performing-arts space. "There's been two projects going parallel this whole time, preserving the site and building an arts organization," says Carolyn Kelly, vice president of development for Farmstead. "We felt that they go hand in hand because it allows us to create a living history." The arts center opened on the farm in 2010.

The 1700s English-style barn—unusual for its Dutch framing—is on the state and national Registers of Historic Places. The renovated barn is used for concerts, theater camps, barn dances and productions by the Lord Stirling Theater Company. The 1750s farmhouse holds smaller concerts and art exhibits. Artists rent studio space upstairs, which provides steady revenue.

Restoring the site was a community effort. "It did take a town to roll up their sleeves," says Kelly. "I myself have waxed these floors." The barn's foundation was repaired and the site was made ADA accessible. The township used its open-space trust fund to buy the 50-acre property (the farm sits on four acres) for $1.4 million and helped fund the restoration. Farmstead also got funding from the New Jersey Historic Trust, the Somerset County Historic Preservation Grant Fund and the 1772 Foundation. The restoration has cost $1.8 million so far, according to Rosenblum. Farmstead is using a grant this spring to convert another building into a history and welcome center. Another goal is to add staff and extend operating hours. For now, operations manager Kathy Harris is the only paid employee.

"Artists are extremely happy to have this place," says Rosenblum. The center gets more requests to display art than it can handle. Bernards Mayor Carolyn Gaziano says many concerts and lectures sell out. "They like the fact that we're a little rough around the edges. It's a reason to put their boots on."

WHAT'S ON

**The Farmhouse Art Center will host an exhibition and sale of works by Farmstead studio artists, teachers and students from July 22 to September 9. On September 9, mandolinist Wayne Fugate will lead a bluegrass barn dance.**

**Bernards Township**

On September 23, Bernards Township School District teachers will lead private workshops in Farmstead Arts Center's conference room. Cost: $100.

**Farmstead Arts Center**

September 7: "The Foundation of Somerset County," by Carolyn Gaziano, Mayor of Bernards Township.

September 11: "Jazz on the Farm," with the Somerville Swing Band.


October 2: "Democracies in the Making: The United States and France," by Christopher J. B. Hyland, Assistant Professor of Political Science, City College of New York.


October 16: "The Art of the American Revolution," by Mary N. Manthy, Assistant Professor of Art History, Montclair State University.

October 23: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.

October 30: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.

November 6: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.


November 20: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.


December 4: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.

December 11: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.

December 18: "The American Revolution and the Atlantic World," by Susan Ruskell, Visiting Assistant Professor of History, New Jersey College of Art and Design.
Every summer who appeared 1867 Sanctuary

WHAT'S ON
Andrew Demuro , based jazz pianist (August 3).

WHAT'S ON
Emily Barnes (July Thursday, The factory before restoration $800,000, renamed it Stangl Factory of America's first retail-only factory and turned it into a buzzing arts and volunteers of Flemington Rocks productions. The company kicked off the initial renovation, Steinberg estimates they've spent another $500,000 in 2012 and began renovations, including replacing the boiler, patching the walls, creating a stage area and installing wood flooring. A combination of grants and private donations funded the work. The Sanctuary (101 Scotch Road) began to host performances in February 2016. “Everybody hears everything perfectly; even the most quiet performer,” says Bob. “A lot of performers are used to playing weddings at clubs or bars or restaurants. They keep calling us because it's a treat to be there, where people are actually paying attention.” Recent performers included jazz-pop vocalist Michelle Wiley and classical guitarist Allen Krantz, both Philadelphia-based artists. Preservation New Jersey will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the building this fall. In the meantime, they are trying to spread the word about the venue. “People are telling us that we're doing the right things,” Bob says. The Kulis estimate it costs between $3,000 and $5,000 a month to run the venue; $250,000 has been spent on sanctuary renovations since 2012. “It's still a very spiritual place,” says Helen.

Cape May Stage is housed in a former church.

CAPE MAY
cape may stage
to ROY STEINBERG, artistic director at Cape May Stage (30 Lafayette Street), there's nothing unusual about using a former church building as a theater. “The way the theater started—Western theater, anyway, going back to the ancient Greeks—it was a religious festival. And in medieval times, literally, in the church, they would have these medieval mystery plays, and the buildings would act out the stories in the Bible on the steps of the church. So it makes sense to me that we're in what was once a church.”

The building, which dates to 1833, served the Cape Island Presbyterian Church as well as Methodist and Episcopal congregations. It was nearly demolished in the 1930s, but it's not the state's economic growth. Eckelmann says just like the factory, the road it stands on was empty when he and Banish signed on. “As soon as our restaurant opened, we were jamming all the time. We estimate that we get about 40,000 visits a month. It provided a spark at that end of the town, and now all the stores on the street are full.”

1867 sanctuary at ewing

“IT LOOKS LIKE A CHURCH, but it's not church,” jokes Bob. “People will come in, and they'll sit in the back like it's church.” 1867 Sanctuary hosts jazz, classical and folk concerts, open mic nights and stage shows. Kulis handles event scheduling for 1867 Sanctuary. His wife, Helen, is on the board of Preservation New Jersey, which holds the lease on the building. The stately stone structure, built in 1865, is one of New Jersey's few Romanesque Revival churches. It was the fourth building used by the First Presbyterian Church of Ewing on the site, beginning in 1772. The surrounding cemetery includes the graves of 39 Revolutionary War veterans.

The Presbyterian congregation (of which the Kulis are members) left the building in 2007 because they couldn’t afford to maintain it. But, the community didn't want the building demolished. “Many people have been married there, or their loved ones had memorial services there,” says Helen.

Preservation New Jersey signed a 30-year lease with the Presbytery of New Brunswick for the building in May 2012 and began renovations, including replacing the boiler, patching the walls, creating a stage area and installing wood flooring. A combination of grants and private donations funded the work. The Sanctuary (101 Scotch Road) began to host performances in February 2016. “Everybody hears everything perfectly; even the most quiet performer,” says Bob. “A lot of performers are used to playing weddings at clubs or bars or restaurants. They keep calling us because it's a treat to be there, where people are actually paying attention.” Recent performers included jazz-pop vocalist Michelle Wiley and classical guitarist Allen Krantz, both Philadelphia-based artists.

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Cape May Stage presents The Tale of the Alligator's Wife, a comedy about Upper West Side malaise, through August 4. Pulitzer Prize-winner The Gin Game will be on the boards from August 9 to September 22.