

STAINED GLASS

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE STAINED GLASS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

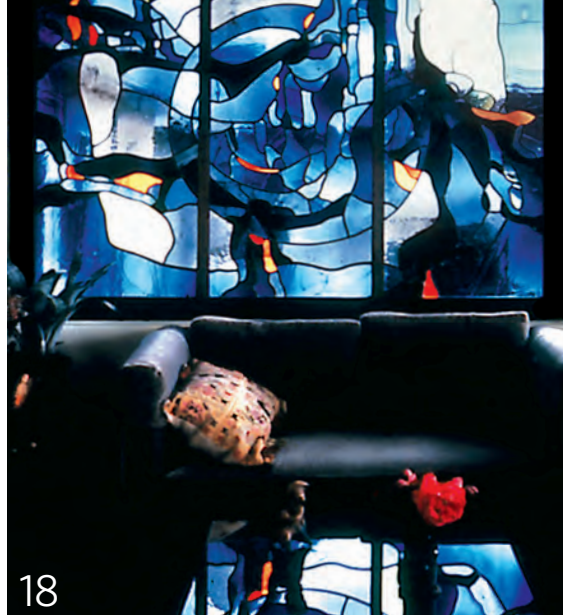
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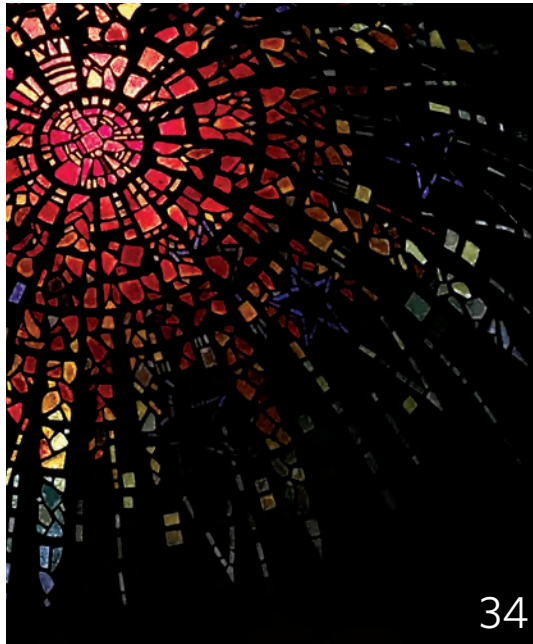
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Photo: Wayne Cain



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DESIGN

White Bicycle

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Melissa Barclay,
Amy Moritz, Laura Buchner,
Terry Mominee,
Wayne Cain, Jim T. Piercey

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Bryant Stanton, Megan McElfresh,
Susanna Conaway, Jim Piercey

BUSINESS MANAGER

Megan McElfresh


EDITORIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

255 Pratt Street
Buffalo, NY 14204
800-438-9581 / 816-737-2090
stainedglass.org

PUBLISHER

Stained Glass Association of America
255 Pratt Street
Buffalo, NY 14204
800-438-9581 / 816-737-2090
info@stainedglass.org
stainedglass.org

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was one of the victim's of COVID-19
within our association community.
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life and had an open, infectious
joy—he will be missed by many
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Learning From the Building

Assembly House 150 takes a unique approach to repurposing a decommissioned church in Buffalo

By Amy Moritz

It was Ash Wednesday when Dennis Maher walked into his building, a decommissioned Catholic Church. The day before, he and his crew had removed a section of plaster as they worked to stabilize the structure and repair water damage.

They didn't realize the plaster was actually helping to hold one of the upper level stained glass windows in place.

That window ended up crashing onto the floor.

Miraculously, the damage was minimal.

"It wasn't set really well within the frame in the sill so when the plaster came down, a day later the window came down," Maher said. "I was thinking, that's very interesting that this happens on Ash Wednesday, you know? This is a Lenten miracle. Even though it fell 30 feet or so, the lead cushioned the blow. So a lot of the pieces are pretty well preserved."

The window sits in the building, elevated off the floor, waiting for some restoration work. But there's no particular rush. Eventually, the fallen window will become the focus of a teaching project. The idea is to be purposeful with what the building presents to him.

It's a different philosophy on reusing old spaces. Maher has ideas he shares with the building, and the building talks back. The dialogue creates an educational environment that has not only transformed the space but has transformed lives.

"Basically the idea here that's different, I think, is that the whole space is a center for experiential learning," Maher said. "We're trying to push on this idea that experiential learning, how people come to understand their surroundings and gain skills that can help them

Interior view of Assembly House
Photo: David Schalliol



to be successful in terms of the things they pursue in construction and artistic related endeavors.”

The building is the former Immaculate Conception Church which celebrated its last Mass in 2005. The church sat empty for nearly a decade until Maher bought it in 2014.

“At that time, I had been looking for a space to initiate a program around art design and construction, and community engagement,” Maher said. “Just before the building was acquired the non-for-profit was formed—Assembly House 150.”

The former church had two significant holes in the roof and a lot of water penetration which would significantly contribute to making renovation costly and unwieldy. But Maher didn’t want to renovate the church. There was no thought of bringing it back to a long-lost glory. He wanted to repurpose the space and transform it into a teaching tool.

With the help of an Our Town grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the backing of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery’s Innovation Lab, Maher created the SACRA program—Society for the Advancement of the Construction-Related Arts. In cooperation with the Erie County Department of Social Services, Maher created a 15-week program to train a new generation of skilled craftsmen and women from Buffalo’s underemployed communities and fill a skills gap in a city with plenty of construction projects.

“The mission from the outset was to bring together diverse groups of people with an interest in architecture, design, construction, artisanal craftsmanship, kind of coalesce them with the intention to share skills and knowledge,” Maher said. “Our intention from the get-go was to mix those things and think strategically

about combining workforce development, arts and culture, and education in a way that was creating an interesting hybrid.”

Interesting as well was the way Maher physically used the space. After making sure the building was structurally sound, he left parts of the building open so that students could see how things were built, gain some historical knowledge, and perhaps find some inspiration.

“I think the space suggested certain things from the outset because it has the beautiful stained glass, it has the ornamental plaster work, it has the decorative woodwork, but the more we got into it, the more it lent itself to particular things,” Maher said. “So when we had to take down the plaster in this section of the roof to shore up water damage, it was like a beautiful reveal because there were these scissor trusses and then you see the stone, the sandstone, and it’s like ‘wow, this is how it’s made.’ The building kind of talks back. There are things that we intended to do, but then there are other things that are showing up. That’s how it should be—the active and reactive.

“A board member used to say ‘transform the space, transform the person.’ So it’s the relationship between the environment and the individual. It was never the idea to go as a classical restoration project but to look more in terms of how do we stabilize and then learn from and then use different parts of the building in new ways in order to enrich the overall experience for the different participants.”

While the program focuses on carpentry and wood-working skills and helps to place program graduates in construction jobs, it’s not merely vocational training. The 15-week program includes tours of historically significant architecture in Buffalo—from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Darwin Martin House to grand Victorian mansions to a tour of stained glass windows.

“The whole idea of thinking about design arts, construction arts is that there’s so much in our contemporary culture that is in need of enrichment through creative

SACRA workshop with Roycroft artisan Jim Cordes
Photo: Douglas Levere

SACRA stained glass workshop with Kitty Mahoney
Photo: Alex Johnston

and artistic means,” Maher said. “In initiating a project, which in some ways is intended to serve the construction industry, it’s also important for us to think about the wonder of places and what makes places special and unique. The reason why we take field trips to different sites and look at cool stuff, like beautiful old inlay, is to develop awareness and an appreciation for all the fantastic and wonderful places that we’re surrounded by in this particular part of Western New York. And it’s all over the place. It’s like a treasure trove of amazingly wonderful places. It was always integral to think it’s not just a nuts-and-bolts vocational training. We’re opening it up, using the specialness of places.”

Part of the specialness of places includes the use of stained glass and, in the case of Assembly House 150, historic stained glass. The former church has F.X. Zettler windows, which are in good shape thanks to polycarbonate panels installed on the outside of the windows at an unknown point in the church’s history. While there are no immediate plans to use the stained glass windows, they are part of the potential for future projects.

Currently, the 15-week program includes lessons from a rotating cast of skilled craftspeople, including Buffalo stained glass restoration artist Kitty Mahoney.

“We do it every term. It’s getting more intense each time,” Maher said. “In the past we did these small, little things but this last session, the idea was to do one larger window.

“It’s an area of specialization that is sitting there waiting for someone to take that on. Is it possible for us to conduct a series of workshops that not only draw inspiration and awareness and knowledge from examples here, but also through the guidance of someone like Kitty and help to build some capacity for taking on those kinds of projects in the city? Is it about incubating other businesses or creating more opportunities for projects in the community to be realized through the auspices of people going through the program?

“Although carpentry and woodworking is the bread and butter, how cool would it be to do a three-week workshop that’s really targeted on (stained glass) and is a special thing? We have the capacity to do that. I like the idea of not just a little bit of stained glass, but discreet workshops that can take place around these particular topics.”

On July 30th, amidst the continuing global pandemic, Assembly House 150 graduated their 5th cohort, the Spring 2020 class of the Society for the Advancement of Construction Related Arts (SACRA), from their construction skills training program.

“While navigating a global health crisis, we’ve been energized by the necessity for social progress through Black Lives Matter and, more than ever, our learning environment has resounded with powerful stories and dialog. Through it all, the crew demonstrated resilience and hard work, and emerged as capable craftspeople determined to build their own versions of success,” Maher wrote in the announcement email.

Indeed, the small class sizes and specialized mission has been even more crucial during a time of social distancing—building skills in touch and place when our society as a whole must deny these things for the whole community’s safety. And despite the jobs crisis, members of the graduating class have found work in everything from wood window restoration and business interiors assembly to treehouse construction.

The early successes of the SACRA program are very hopeful not only for the continuing resurgence of Buffalo, NY, but for the built assembly spaces in all of our communities.

To learn more about Assembly House 150 and the SACRA program, visit assemblyhouse150.org and follow them on social media.

Amy Moritz is a former staffer at the SGAA and currently serves as a Literacy Coordinator with Literacy Buffalo Niagara. ■



SACRA cabinet room project with stained glass installation, Photo: David Schalliol

SGAA Directory

The heart of the SGAA is our community—a group of individuals and studios with a passion for the art and craft of stained glass. The efforts of many dedicated volunteers make our programs a reality.



David Judson
SGAA President

President's
Message *pg 5*



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From the
Editorial Board *pg 7*



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255 Pratt Street, Buffalo, NY 14204
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