

LIFE

What will we be losing if the Immaculate Conception cathedral is demolished?



Dan D'Ambrosio

Burlington Free Press

Published 5:01 a.m. ET Feb. 14, 2022 | Updated 9:16 a.m. ET Feb. 14, 2022

Correction: This story has been updated to correct the spelling of the last name of Landscape Architect Dan Kiley.

The former Cathedral of Immaculate Conception does not announce its presence with a flourish of imposing stonework, as many large churches do. Instead it rises above a surrounding grove of locust trees as a weathered, copper-clad monolith, topped by a simple cross, unlike anything else in downtown Burlington.

"It was really a big deal when this design was selected," Vermont State Architectural Historian Devin Colman said.

As the Burlington Free Press reported in December, the parish of the Immaculate Conception applied for a permit to demolish the former cathedral, which is no longer active, having been unable to sell it at an asking price of \$8.5 million after nearly four years on the market.

Meg McGovern of the commercial real estate firm Donahue and Associates withdrew the application last Friday, Burlington Principal Planner Scott Gustin said, but he expects the parish to reapply for a permit. Donahue represented the parish in the attempted sale of the building.

Previously: This downtown Burlington church was for sale, but now it may be demolished.

"They are working on a more comprehensive redevelopment plan, so I anticipate we'll see another application including redevelopment in the future," Gustin said.

Preservation Burlington has launched a campaign to save the building and repurpose it. The nonprofit organization was formed more than 20 years ago, President Gweneth Langdon said, "to watch these types of buildings and properties," and advocate for them.

"My thesis in graduate school was adaptive reuse of religious structures," Langdon said. "This hit a chord with a lot of us."

Langdon worries that the cathedral doesn't resonate with residents because of its stark, modernist design, and because it's not particularly old, having been completed in 1977.

"It's cold, it's geometric, everybody has moved past that being appealing," Langdon said.

Langdon herself loves the building.

"I'm an enthusiast for clean, geometric style," she said. "I see the beauty in it."

David Sellers: Mad River Valley architect explains why your next house should be made of concrete

Immaculate Conception designers worked on major projects across the country

The building represents "the collaboration of two of the foremost designers of the 20th century," architectural historian Colman said.

The collaboration Colman refers to was between Edward Larrabee Barnes, who designed the cathedral building, and Dan Kiley, who designed the landscaping surrounding the cathedral, which includes 123 locust trees. Kiley, based in Charlotte, worked on major projects internationally. Barnes, based in New York City, was equally prominent. The two were frequent collaborators, according to Colman.

Both Barnes and Kiley died in 2004, at 89 and 91 years old respectively. Both graduated from Harvard University. Barnes's most famous project is the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle, Maine, Colman said.

"Because it's the coast of Maine he designed these beautiful complexes of semi-detached, shingle-clad studios and apartments," he said. "A modernist fishing village, if you will."

Another of Barnes's famous projects is the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which Colman said is still regarded as one of the best venues for contemporary art in the country, even though it's more than 50 years old, because of its seamless flow of space.

"Barnes was a modernist architect who studied at Harvard, but unlike a lot of his colleagues, he was very sensitive in the design and placement of his buildings in the urban fabric," Colman said. "He really thought about the context and how the building would relate to the surrounding cityscape, unlike other modernists who design a glass box, plunk it down and you're done."

The eyes have it: These new Vermont buildings snagged top architectural honors in 2021

Barnes's sensitivity explains the relative unobtrusiveness of Immaculate Conception, Colman said, although as Preservation Burlington's Langdon points out, not everyone would agree.

"It's very quiet, almost like an oasis," Colman said. "That was kind of the point. It's a church, a place for quiet reflection, pulling out of the urban environment."

Kiley was considered as "one of the most important landscape architects of the 20th century," according to Colman. The fact that he was based in Charlotte makes Immaculate Conception even more important in Colman's view, as it is one of very few public projects in the state that Kiley worked on.

"Kiley did a lot of corporate and international work, including huge landscaping projects in Paris," Colman said. "He did landscaping for the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the Dallas Museum of Arts. The Dallas

museum was one of the projects where Barnes and Kiley collaborated."

Toshiko Mori, who has had her own architectural firm in New York City for nearly 40 years, worked with Barnes on the cathedral as a young architect just out of school — her first job. Mori worked on the building's interior design, including the furnishings, lectern and pews.

"Ed Barnes made sure the materials had a lot to do with local materials," Mori said. "I remember for the lectern we used Vermont slate and white oak from the area."

Even though he was designing a cathedral, Barnes made the building more like a community space, according to Mori.

"As I recall, it's less authoritarian, very open, with a sense of light coming through," she said. "Religious symbols are more contemporary, less imposing. It has a kind of semi-circular layout that could be used for poetry reading or musical performance."

Mori said she re-visited the site "a long time ago," to see how the building was holding up.

"It's a very simple building, but very good materials are used," she said. "There's a dignity to the materiality and geometrical shape. It's actually a beautiful building. I thought it was weathering very well."

'We must make every effort to save this property'

David Bouffard, 55, is an architect who lives near the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle. Barnes's design for the school was recently put on a list of the 25 best buildings of the 20th century by the New York Times, according to Bouffard.

Bouffard grew up in Milton, and practiced for many years in New York City before semi-retiring to Maine.

"I saw the story and thought it was sad the city is entertaining demolition, because it really is a significant building for Burlington," Bouffard said.

Bouffard understands that the cathedral's stark, tent-like design isn't for everyone. Preservation Burlington, which wrote about the cathedral in a special addition of its newsletter in Spring 2019, said parishioners entering the new cathedral "may have been startled by the unaccustomed austerity."

"Modernist architecture from the 1970s was controversial because it was such a departure from what was there before," Bouffard said.

What was there before was the first Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, built from 1863 to 1868 from Isle La Motte stone, according to Preservation Burlington. The first cathedral was built in the traditional Gothic Revival style of hundreds of other Roman Catholic Buildings in the Northeast designed by Patrick Charles Keely. It was made of locally quarried redstone, and featured a soaring bell tower that crashed to the ground shortly after midnight on March 14, 1972, when the cathedral was destroyed by fire.

"By dawn, the cathedral lay in ruins, unsalvageable," Liisa Reimann wrote for the Preservation Burlington newsletter. "Bystanders took chunks of rubble home, and grieved."

The fire was set by a former altar boy, 22-year-old Timothy Austin, in the confessional after the priests had retired for the evening, Reimann wrote. Austin pleaded innocent by reason of insanity.

An insurance policy of approximately \$2 million paid for the replacement cathedral currently under threat of demolition. The bishop at the time was reluctant to rebuild, since the thriving St. Joseph's church was only a couple of blocks away, Marge Allard wrote in the Preservation Burlington newsletter.

"However, the Cathedral parishioners were adamant, and the decision was made to rebuild," Allard wrote.

Perhaps anticipating the current state of affairs, Preservation Burlington argued for preserving the cathedral in its Spring 2019 newsletter.

"We hope that this significant property, which has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, can be reused with its historical and architectural integrity intact," the newsletter stated.

"As one of a few Modernist buildings left and our only Modernist landscape in Burlington, the cathedral and its grounds are a critical part of our built environment and our story as a community. We must make every effort to save this property."

Running out of time?

The cathedral closed because there were no longer enough parishioners to support it. As the Burlington Free Press reported in October 2018, Immaculate Conception had been reduced to fewer than 100 parishioners and all of its masses were transferred to St. Joseph's, two blocks away on Allen Street. The surrounding neighborhoods that supported the cathedral disappeared under urban renewal in the 1960s.

Monsignor Peter Routhier of the Parish of the Immaculate Conception sent a letter to the City of Burlington's Zoning Division on Oct. 8, saying the parish would be seeking a permit to remove the church building and tree grove, leaving it as an "open lawn," while maintaining the existing parking area.

Routhier did not return a call or an email for comment for this story. Ellen Kane, executive director of development and communication for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, said it's up to the parish to decide what should be done with the property, and the Diocese is supporting the parish's decision.

"As far as the historic significance of a building less than 50 years old, that will be determined in the permitting process," Kane said.

Burlington Principal Planner Gustin said the Parish's original plan for redevelopment, submitted with the application that has now been withdrawn, called for leaving the site as open lawn. That was never going to fly, according to Gustin.

"Basically what (the application) needs is a redevelopment plan. It doesn't have one," Gustin said. "Because the building is historically significant, they have to deal with the criteria of historic preservation."

That criteria, Gustin said, requires that whatever the diocese is proposing to do must benefit the community more than the historic structure that's being demolished. Gustin doesn't believe a lawn will do the job.

Gustin said the diocese understands they'll need to redevelop the site, but hasn't said what that redevelopment might be.

"They haven't talked to me about repurposing the existing building," he said.

The final decision on the application, if it is resubmitted, will be made by the Development Review Board, a process that will likely take months to conclude.

Contact Dan D'Ambrosio at 660-1841 or ddambrosio@freepressmedia.com. Follow him on Twitter @DanDambrosioVT. This coverage is only possible with support from our readers.