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Majority of CPS schools shuttered in 2013 are still vacant

Many north-side buildings have been repurposed, but most buildings in low-income south- and west-side communities remain empty.

By Zavi Kang Engles



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Bontemps Elementary School in Englewood has been repeatedly vandalized and burglarized since it closed in 2013.

ZAKKIYAH NAJEEBAH

At the intersection of Ashland and Foster in Andersonville sits a striking art deco building spanning an entire city block.

There's no signage out front, save for "You are beautiful"—a recent public-art installation—spelled out on the marquee outside the main entrance. This building, once home to Trumbull Elementary School, was sold last September to Svigos Asset Management, a private developer, for \$5.25 million, according to Chicago Public Schools. Trumbull was one of nearly 50 schools the district closed in 2013, and its sale price is the highest price the district has fetched for any of the shuttered buildings. Building plans include residential

units, a community arts space, and a theater in what used to be the school auditorium.

"The sale of Trumbull shows that when communities rally around a vision and the private and public sector work together, we can repurpose facilities, revitalize neighborhoods and bring much-needed additional revenue to the District," CPS CEO Forrest Claypool said in a statement at the time of the sale.

But near the opposite end of the city, in Englewood, another former CPS school has met an entirely different fate. Unlike Trumbull, which was considered one of then-head CPS architect Dwight H. Perkins's most successful buildings, Bontemps Elementary is modest in size and utilitarian in design. Neglected and vacant for more than three years now, the building has been overtaken by vines, and plywood boards seal off every ground-floor entrance. Litter and rusted gates complete the picture of a blighted former school site.

"Bontemps is a shell that has been completely vandalized," says Asiaha Butler, president of Resident Association of Greater Englewood. It's "just horrific on the inside."

Butler and other Englewood residents have been organizing for years to try to repurpose this derelict site. The building is located at the end of a proposed elevated parkway similar to the 606/Bloomington Trail, tentatively called the Englewood Line, and Butler and other activists have been working to incorporate the building into the trail plan.

"Our last conversation was with a potential tenant that would be interested in some kind of housing development, like maybe for people who work on the [Englewood] Line or do urban agriculture around the line could actually live in the space as well, and it'd be open to the community as an urban agriculture hub," Butler says.

But with the building's power transformers gutted and, according to Chicago Police Department incident reports obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, multiple burglaries that have stripped the building of wiring, pipes, and other necessary building parts, the prospects of repurposing Bontemps as an innovative center for urban agriculture seems daunting at best.

CPS's decision to close 50 public schools in 2013—despite protests from parents, students, teachers, and community organizations—made national news, with many calling it the largest mass school closing in the nation's history. District officials vowed to repurpose the buildings to benefit affected communities, the majority of which are communities of color.

In March 2015, Catalyst Chicago reported on the messy, protracted progress CPS had made in repurposing these closed schools. Its

findings were grim: property crimes had gone up on campuses of former schools and, despite Mayor Rahm Emanuel's advisory committee's suggestion that CPS create an evaluation committee to assess the conditions of each building, no such committee had been formed.

Now, three years after the closings—and despite CPS's pledged commitment to prioritizing the needs of the affected communities—the majority of these shuttered former school buildings remain vacant and unutilized. And while architecturally significant and well-preserved schools on the north side have been snapped up by developers for millions of dollars, the majority of the vacant schools are unevenly distributed on the west and south sides, languishing and vulnerable to burglaries and other crimes. Additionally, many community members have criticized the repurposing process as opaque, confusing, and lacking in sufficient accountability.



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“I think overall there’s a sense of hopelessness, seeing that a school is vacant for so long and boarded up.”

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—ENGLEWOOD ACTIVIST ASIAHA BUTLER

"We are not happy at all with this process," says Sarah Hains, a researcher for the Chicago Teachers Union and part of its facilities task force, which serves as an unofficial watchdog over the repurposing process. "We just met with CPS [in July] and it's going

really slowly. We have all these buildings sitting empty—beautiful, beautiful architecture in some cases."

Out of the 50 schools that were facing closure in 2013, 42 were actually closed, and 14 have since been repurposed or sold. Five former schools—Canter, Dodge, Lafayette, Owens, and Pope—were repurposed by the city for administrative offices, among other uses. Nine schools—Trumbull, Leland, Drake, Stewart, Overton, Von Humboldt, Near North, Peabody, and Marconi—have been sold, earning CPS a total of \$24.2 million to be used for maintenance of and programming in other CPS schools, according to the district. Finally, CBRE, the commercial real estate firm responsible for brokering sales, issued bid solicitations due September 15 for seven more schools—Attucks, Dett, Kohn, Mays, Songhai, West Pullman, and Woods. In a statement, CPS says it "will move forward with the highest bid that meets the identified usage requirements."

All in all, that leaves 28 vacant school buildings scattered across the city. Seventeen are in south-side neighborhoods and 11 are in west-side neighborhoods. The nine buildings that have sold in these areas were sold at much lower prices than schools sold on the north-side; for example, west-side Marconi sold for \$100,000, and south-side Overton for \$325,000, according to CPS.

To be sure, the comparative strength of the real estate market in affluent as opposed to poor neighborhoods—Andersonville versus Englewood, for example—is a factor in these disparities.

"The strength of this recovery has been very uneven," Geoff Smith, executive director of the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, says of the city's real estate market since the foreclosure crisis of the late aughts. "In some areas like Lincoln Square, North Center, Lincoln Park, or West Town, house prices have reached or surpassed previous peak levels." But in struggling areas on the south and west sides of the city, prices for single-family homes can be up to 50 percent less of what they were at their previous peaks. And in some cases, Smith says, prices in these areas are near or below what they were in 2000, before the housing bubble.

Yet critics argue that this is all the more reason to push for immediate repurposing of vacant schools in long-suffering neighborhoods, so as to not exacerbate the entrenched problems their residents already face.

When asked about the impact an abandoned Bontemps has had on the surrounding neighborhood, Butler responds: "I think overall there's a sense of hopelessness, seeing that a school is vacant for so long and boarded up . . . the community is just in a complete state of disarray. And you know, the fact that our schools are a part of this kind of disinvestment is just a reminder that folks just don't know what's going to happen in the community."

According to police reports obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, since the school's closing, there has been at least one reported armed robbery on the property, four burglaries, and two incidents of criminal defacement, including gang graffiti. The lack of electrical power also means there are no working alarm systems or surveillance cameras in the building.



Trumbull Elementary School in Andersonville was sold to private developers who intend redevelop the building as residential units and a community arts space.

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In general, critics see the repurposing process as touch and go. Though CPS created a website intended to track and inform the public on the process as a whole, its time line hasn't been updated since January 2015.

The site details the three-phase process put together by an advisory committee that Emanuel selected in 2013. The first phase was to identify immediate reuse for buildings to help meet "programmatic needs." Five schools were repurposed in this phase, mainly as administrative offices. The advisory committee recommended that, in phase two, communities "be engaged to solicit input through their respective Alderman, who will convey that input to CPS and will direct CPS to put the property up for sale." The committee also recommended that the proposed use of the renovated building be considered along with the sale price for each property.

The final phase for any schools remaining after phase two is to "engage a Revitalization partner . . . in the repurposing of the remaining properties where a community or financial benefit is not readily available or apparent." CBRE appears to be playing that role, although it's unclear whether the firm is obligated to consider community input in selecting buyers. CBRE declined to comment for this story, and CPS didn't respond to requests for clarification on the third phase of its process.

However, in a statement, CPS says that it "remains committed to partnering with Aldermen to complete the community engagement process, and the District will explore all options to maximize assets once the engagement process is finalized."

Still, there appears to be no clear process in place to ensure these options are explored in a transparent and public manner.

"An alderman can have a hearing, and who they post it to, how they do outreach, how they inform the community, who shows up . . . community participation is very subjective," Hains says. "You can have a meeting with your ten favorite community residents and say that you heard from the community. But whatever the aldermen decides is pretty much final, so there is no legal or policy process that I know of where the public can voice their concerns against the use of a building."

Some aldermen, though, point back to CPS, saying the district is ultimately responsible for the process.

"It's all within CPS," says Ardena Samuels, the ethics officer of the 16th Ward, in which Bontemps is located. "They tell the clients what the criteria are and what the price is. . . . We can bring the organizations in for a meeting, but it's up to them."

Back in Englewood, behind Bontemps's empty parking lot, the raised railway that might become the Englewood Line is already teeming with wildflowers and native plants in the height of summer. The underpass below is covered with street art, ranging from a series of colorful geometric patterns to a memorial to a young woman from the neighborhood.

Butler acknowledges that, in its current state, Bontemps will be a difficult sell, and that a plan for the building "would have to come from someone with a vision, someone who believes in the community, in the work we're doing, and really wants to see Englewood progress and get out of the current situation it's in."

The building's fate—and that of the other shuttered schools—now hinges on the repurposing process already in place, and on CPS making good on the promises it made in 2013. 

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