

Why this order of Catholic sisters converted their Milwaukee convent into affordable apartments

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For the School Sisters of St. Francis, each room of their cavernous, four-story convent on Milwaukee's south side brings up memories.

One room used to be an art gallery. Another, a children's daycare. A room with floor-to-ceiling shelves once served as a library for a precursor to Alverno College. A nearby outbuilding with a basketball court was where 85-year-old Sister Joann Riesterer used to take gym classes.

Now, developers have renovated the historic St. Joseph Convent into 63 affordable apartments for the public. There are four townhomes for families and 59 units for people ages 55 and up.

"We want to remain grounded in our neighborhood, and we want our properties to meet the needs of those who have needs," said Sister Deborah Fumagalli, president of the international School Sisters of St. Francis congregation.

Since 1886, the School Sisters' international headquarters has been based at its campus at South Layton Boulevard and West Greenfield Avenue. At the order's peak in the 1950s, it was the largest congregation of Franciscan women in the world, Fumagalli said.

But in recent years, faced with an aging — and dwindling — population in the U.S., the sisters took a hard look at their future.

Affordable housing was a need in the community

After completing renovations on other buildings on the campus alongside developer General Capital Group, the convent was the last major outstanding project.

“We looked at a bunch of scenarios, including, what happens if we reuse it as an office space?” said Sig Strautmanis of General Capital. “What happens if we just mothball it? What happens if you demolish it?”

But then, the sisters spoke with neighbors about what they’d like to see. There was a need for affordable housing, the neighbors said.

The sisters see the transition to apartments as a way to continue their ministry in the Layton Boulevard area of Milwaukee’s south side.

“We also had promised the neighbors that we were not going to pick up and leave the area. We were going to stay here with them to help stabilize the area,” Fumagalli said.

The first residents moved into the renovated convent, now called Chapel Garden Apartments, in mid-October. A grand opening is set for Dec. 12.

The renovated St. Joseph Convent isn't your average senior apartment complex

Along with members of the public, some of the new residents are Catholic sisters from other shrinking congregations who want to remain part of a community.

“That’s one of the things that we talked about, is promoting a sense of community that goes beyond any regular senior apartment building,” Strautmanis said.

St. Joseph Hall is used for musical events, lectures and other activities.

The sisters are eager to welcome new residents to Masses, concerts and other events at the attached St. Joseph Chapel – an ornate Catholic church built during World War I with 15 kinds of marble and stained glass windows imported from Austria.

A shop with snacks and pantry staples is planned at the convent, and residents also will have access to the meal service at Maria Linden, a senior apartment complex with independent and assisted living units on the campus.

The architectural character of the building, constructed in stages between 1890 and 1923, is another point of intrigue. No two apartments are alike, since the developers figured out ways to fit the units into the existing floor plan.

They preserved quirks like transom windows, extra-tall ceilings, a wall of wooden cabinets in a bedroom and, in one unit, even a sunroom — while fitting in updated kitchens and bathrooms and making everything accessible for aging residents.

In the newly renovated affordable housing apartments at the former St. Joseph Convent, original pieces to the property have been incorporated into the new design, such as this built-in for storage. There are 59 newly renovated affordable apartments and four townhouses.

Orders face tough decisions over the future of their properties

It's a unique approach to address an increasingly common issue. Across the country, dwindling orders of Catholic sisters are trying to decide what to do with their often extensive property holdings.

There are motherhouses, convents and retreat centers on prime plots of land, growing emptier. Half of all U.S. sisters are 80 and up, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. About 3% are under 40.

The Midwest has one of the highest concentrations of Catholic sisters in the U.S., according to Vatican data compiled by the Catholic GeoHub, a project of the nonprofit GoodLands.

And by one measure, Milwaukee is seeing the decline in sisters most acutely. From 2000 to 2016, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee recorded a drop of 1,800 sisters, according to the GeoHub data. That's more than any other diocese in the U.S.

The School Sisters of St. Francis are realistic about the age of their congregation and about their future as an order, but they also want to make sure they leave a positive legacy on the campus they've inhabited for over 130 years.

"We're here for two things: to ensure that our older sisters can retire with dignity and get the care they need, and also to continue our ministries," Fumagalli said.

Strautmanis commends the sisters for their clear-eyed planning for the future. Some other congregations only begin thinking about it once the convent is empty, he said.

"They really are forward-thinking and they didn't end up just reacting to the reality, they saw it coming," he said. "They got out in front of this idea of sustainability."

School Sisters of St. Francis 'delighted' by renovations

When renovations began last year, many of the retired sisters had bittersweet emotions about moving out, Fumagalli said. Most began their formation as young women at the convent decades ago and felt attached to the building.

Now that the plaster dust is cleaned up, they're "delighted" by the finished product and they understand that change is necessary, Fumagalli said.

"It's living in transition, letting go of what was, to look toward what the future is asking of us," she said.

At 85, Riesterer — the order's director of housing ministry — has overseen many of the School Sisters' building renovations in recent years.

She walks through the convent each morning to check on the progress. In early November, workers were rolling on the last coats of paint and moving in furniture for the common rooms.

She's loved seeing people finally moving in. Riesterer entered the order in 1954 and knows well what the convent used to be — library, daycare, art gallery, offices — home.

It's what she hopes the convent will be for its new residents.

"They're finally coming home. It's beautiful," Riesterer said.







