

Master's Report

The Reuse of Surplus School Sites in Ottawa, Ontario: An Examination of Community Interests and Public Participation in the Acquisition, Planning and Conversion of Surplus School Sites

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The education demands of Canadian neighbourhoods are changing. As a result, schools are closing. While much has been written on adaptive reuse as it relates to industrial or heritage sites, relatively little has been written specifically in the context of former school sites. This report contributes to the existing literature by identifying trends in the use of former school sites in Ottawa, and making recommendations to improve the reuse process. An inventory of Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) surplus school sites was created. This inventory was separated into four categories; elementary schools constructed prior to 1940; elementary schools constructed after 1940; secondary schools constructed prior to 1940; and, secondary schools constructed after 1940.

The most prevalent trend in the use of former school sites occurred among elementary schools built prior to 1940. Others, with a few exceptions, continue to be used for educational purposes. All schools constructed post 1940, which were sold by the OCDSB, were purchased during the initial 90 day period by other Ottawa school boards. As a result these sites never reached the general market and were unavailable to developers.

Surplus high school sites are much larger in size and value compared to elementary schools. As a result, when purchased by a private developer, these sites need to be purchased by a large firm eager to yield maximum financial returns off of the land. In instances where these sites were kept by school boards, they were used for continuing education because of the specialized facilities they provided.

The selected case studies included Crichton Street Public School, Overbrook Public School, Ottawa Technical High School, and Laurentian High School. Four prominent themes

emerged in the study of these cases; schoolyard development; community organization; collaboration; and, public participation. The school site is appealing to developers because of the large amount of open space and a building which rarely exceeds three stories. As a result, any space for development typically takes a higher intensity of land use. The developers' urge to intensify the site and develop the schoolyard is contrasted with the community's attachment to the building, as well as the schoolyard which is often used as a community park.

The presence of a school closure and perceived threat of a private owner creates a catalyst for increased community organization. Ultimately, attempts at collaboration on an individual property had mixed results. While public-public collaboration on the planning stages has had success, the actual sharing of space has not proven to be successful.

Recommendations to improve this process include a collaborative framework between the City of Ottawa and the OCDSB for public involvement and information sessions. This could emulate the initiative taken by the City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board, by shifting the bulk of the public involvement to earlier stages in the process. Additionally, incorporating schoolyards into the park planning process would recognize these well used community parks and allow the city to recognize their importance when the school site is sold. Assistance in their mobilization efforts should be provided to community groups in the form of time, legal counsel and collaboration. Finally, the planner must take a proactive role to recognize the community connections to the entire school sites. On the policy side, plans surrounding surplus school sites should be active from the earliest stage possible.

Schools and their community are tied together in several ways, physical and social. These recommendations can improve the process of disposing of and redeveloping surplus school sites by considering the needs of the OCDSB, the City of Ottawa and the local communities.