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## Historic McDermott Lofts bring a vacant school back to life in Buffalo's Valley Neighborhood

The restoration of the McDermott Lofts at 169 Elk Street in Buffalo's Valley neighborhood is now complete. Savarino Companies, the Western New York Land Conservancy, City of Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, and Senator Tim Kennedy gathered with community members on Thursday morning to cut the ribbon at McDermott Lofts. This \$1.6 million mixed-use redevelopment transformed a vacant catholic school into 11 market rate residential units and a modern industrial commercial space. It is one of several recent redevelopment projects in the area, spurring a revitalization in The Valley neighborhood in Buffalo.

The former St. Clare Catholic School was built in 1896. The Lofts get their name from Eugene McDermott, the founder of the church next door. The complex, including church, rectory, and school, was originally named St. Stephen Roman Catholic Church from its date of founding in 1875 to 1991, when it was renamed Shrine of St. Jude. In 1995, it was changed back to St. Stephen Church and in 2007 after a merger of five diocesan parishes it was again renamed as the St. Clare Parish until its closing in the summer of 2016. The historic school on the site was closed in 1970 but continued to serve as support space for parish functions and activities. The rectory and church remained in use until 2016. Savarino purchased the building from the diocese in March 2017 and renovated it with private funding as well as Federal and New York State Historic Tax Credits.

The historic significance of the property embodies the story of a working-class neighborhood parish, a center of life and services within the neighborhood. It also embodies distinctive architectural characteristics of the period. St. Clare's (now McDermott Lofts) is in the small former immigrant neighborhood known as "The Valley". The community gained its moniker as The Valley in the 1960s and was so named because it was surrounded by the river to the south and railroad tracks on all other sides so the only way in or out was over a bridge, contributing to a sense of isolation. The Valley has always been culturally similar to the neighboring First Ward neighborhood, the historic home of Buffalo's Irish immigrant community. Prior to receiving its own moniker, The Valley had always been culturally considered to be the easternmost part of the First Ward, even though it technically fell across the boundary into the fifth ward of the City of Buffalo.

To create a sustainable, environmentally-friendly project and respect the site's historic significance, the developer restored the building's essential design and structural elements. The historic windows were painstakingly restored or replaced with new windows of similar design. Classroom footprints were retained and became apartment units. In total, 11 apartments are housed in the building with seven unique layouts ranging from 530 to 1,200 square feet. On the top floor, the hardwood floors and barrel

ceiling of a former gymnasium remain and were incorporated into apartments and tenant activity space. Chalkboards were repurposed and framed out with reclaimed hardwood and mounted in each unit and in common areas.

The Land Conservancy's office features a stunning chalk mural by MJ Meyers on the floor-to-ceiling chalkboard wall. "Opening our new office in McDermott Lofts near the DL&W corridor will help us get to know our neighbors—the people who live and work in these vibrant communities along the Buffalo River," said Nancy Smith, Land Conservancy Executive Director. "Many of our employees now live and work in Buffalo. When you can bike to work, decreasing your carbon footprint is not only an environmentally friendly thing to do, it is also good for your health and really fun."

The Land Conservancy is excited about working with its new neighbors in The Valley, and next door in the Old First Ward, and the Perry neighborhood. Together the organization, the community and many project supporters and collaborators are reimagining the now dormant DL&W rail corridor as an innovative and inspiring multi-use trail and greenway right in the heart of the city, connecting downtown and the Buffalo River.

This new office will help the Land Conservancy connect people to nature, and to one another. Being in the neighborhood will help the organization work even more closely with the community and contribute to a shared vision of a healthy, inclusive, and opportunity-rich city with vibrancy in every neighborhood.

The building was designed by *Abstract Architecture*. Construction and permanent financing for the project was provided by *The Bank of Akron*. Historic Tax Credit consulting has provided by *Flynn-Battaglia Architects*. Major subcontractors for the project included *Northeast Mechanical (now MJ Mechanical)*, *Little Wheel Restoration Company* and *Deltex Electric*.

#### **About Savarino Companies**

Founded in 2000, Savarino Companies is a full service general contracting, construction management, and project development firm. Savarino has completed many noteworthy projects throughout Western New York including nearby projects such as *500 Seneca*, *Buffalo River Landing*, and several developments in Buffalo's Cobblestone District. Through its affiliate Savarino Properties, the firm provides property management services for many commercial and multi-unit residential facilities. More information about Savarino is available at [www.savarinocompanies.com](http://www.savarinocompanies.com).

#### **About Western New York Land Conservancy**

The Western New York Land Conservancy is a regional, not-for-profit land trust that permanently protects land with significant conservation value in Western New York for current and future generations. The Land Conservancy envisions a future in which open spaces, working lands, wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty are cherished and protected as part of the landscape and character of Western New York. The Land Conservancy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and is one of 1000+ land trusts nationwide, including 90 in New York State. Land trusts have protected 56 million acres of land. For more information on upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, or the mission of the Land Conservancy, please call (716) 687-1225 or visit [www.wnylc.org](http://www.wnylc.org).

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