



Remaking Western Penitentiary: It's huge and historically significant — but what happens next?



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With thick walls, a large campus, and the architectural features of a 19th-century prison, the former State Correctional Institution Pittsburgh site is historic, but would likely be costly to redevelop.

“Turning it into something else will be very challenging. Even tearing it down will be challenging. The thing is just massively constructed,” said Matthew Craig, executive director of the Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh.

Mr. Craig was part of a group of preservation officials who toured the site last summer.

“It could be saved and it should be saved, but it is going to be a very costly proposition because of the nature of the building and the interior,” said

Karamagi Rujumba, director of development and communications at The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation.

“It’s filled with structural walls that would be costly to maneuver around in any adaptive reuse that you might do,” Mr. Rujumba said.

The state prison closed in June of last year.

Earlier this month, local and state officials said [more work studying the site needed to be done](#) to learn more about environmental, floodplain, historical and other issues prior to any development.

Howard Pollman, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission, said a contractor has been hired by the State Historic Preservation Office to record the current appearance, significance and history of the property.

A charrette to investigate the feasibility of adaptive reuse of the property is also underway and is being led by AIA Pittsburgh, a chapter of the American Institute of Architects, he said.

What was then called the Western Penitentiary was built from 1876 to 1882 by architect E.M. Butz.

The prison was built in the style of the Auburn system, a penal method popular in the 19th-century where people worked during the day in groups and at night were kept in solitary confinement, said Matthew Falcone, president of Preservation Pittsburgh.

The site continued to evolve over the years with different administrative and workshop spaces in different architectural styles, said Mr. Falcone, who also toured the facility last year.

“The site in its entirety presents a tremendous amount of opportunity,” he said.

He said he was struck by the enormity of the former penitentiary.

“It was built for permanence. How do you remove something like that? It wasn’t ever intended to be removed,” he said.

It’s a significant campus architecturally, though years ago the state removed the pitched roof and gave it a flat roof, which changed the look,

feel and character of the main building, Mr. Rujumba said.

“Until the 1970s, the roofline was varied at points with steep hip roofs that had dormers with round-arched windows and little spiky turrets,” according to “Pittsburgh’s Landmark Architecture: The Historic Buildings of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County” by Walter C. Kidney, published by PHLF in 1997.

Any redevelopment should aim to save the long wall that faces the river, Mr. Rujumba said, and explain what was once on the site.

Mr. Craig said the warden’s quarters also should be preserved, in his view.

“As far as the rest of the facility, our stance is open. ... We’re open to hearing what people’s ideas are,” he said. “I know a lot of folks in the preservation [community] are hopeful that it can be preserved. That begs the question, ‘As what?’ ”

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