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New Life for Old Walls

Inside Detroit's Higginbotham School Transformation

By Mike Scott

There's a certain charm that comes with visiting an old building that has been renovated into a modern-day living space. Known as "adaptive reuse," these types of projects have been increasingly popular in Michigan and around the United States in recent years.

A 2024 report from RentCafe revealed a 17.6% year-over-year increase in the number of apartments created through the conversion of outdated buildings nationwide. While RentCafe indicated that 42% of the nearly 169,000 apartments in future adaptive reuse projects are redeveloped from old office building spaces, shuttered school buildings are also a common renovation target.

The Higginbotham School and Garden Apartments project in Detroit is a prime example of this trend. The \$35.9 million adaptive reuse of this 1926 Mediterranean Revival-style William E. Higginbotham School began in 2024 and will eventually result

in the creation of 100 affordable housing units, 40 of which will be contained within the former school building. The project also includes two new adjacent buildings housing 30 units each.

This transformative project is noteworthy because it preserves a significant cultural landmark in Detroit's Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood. The long-abandoned building has been an eyesore and security issue for its neighbors for more than a decade. The development will not only include 100 apartments, but will incorporate community spaces, including a public auditorium and a "tot lot" playground for youth.

Higginbotham School was built on approximately four and one-half acres of land just two blocks south of Eight Mile Road, the city's northern boundary, in the mid-1920s. It offered capacity for nearly 600 pupils, according to HistoricDetroit.org. Higginbotham began as a kindergarten through eighth grade school and changed its student profile several times over the years.



LEFT: Once a shuttered landmark in Detroit's Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood, the historic Higginbotham School is being restored and adapted into modern housing as part of a broader project that brings 100 affordable units, landscaped gardens, and community gathering spaces to the site. Rendering courtesy of McIntosh Poris

Ironically, the William E. Higginbotham School was named after one of the partners in Malcomson & Higginbotham, the architectural firm selected by the Detroit Board of Education as its architect for 30 years until 1923.

Adaptive Reuse Done Right

The Higginbotham project highlights the rising demand for creative redevelopment efforts across Michigan. These adaptive reuse projects generally include innovative and efficient design concepts that help overcome infrastructure challenges. They often create a positive economic and social impact for the local community. Higginbotham is no different, offering a level of sustainability through adaptive reuse, efficient systems, sensible landscaping, and community considerations.

Royal Oak-based Ronnisch Construction Group is the general contractor for both the school conversion and the new garden apartments. President Tim Honoway explained that his company has been involved with numerous adaptive reuse projects over the years, and that they value the opportunity to bring new

life to abandoned buildings. In fact, Ronnisch built its own headquarters in Royal Oak by redeveloping an old storage building. "We're very passionate about adaptive reuse and giving old buildings a new life," Honoway said.

One of the most valued things about the Higginbotham project is the unique architecture it offers. Like many old buildings that are slated for redevelopment, Honoway called the former school building one with character or "flair." It also has a historic component with such features as a clay-tiled roof and window design along with a brick exterior. "Buildings just aren't constructed like this anymore," he added.

McIntosh Poris Architects (MPA) is behind the design, blending fresh, modern living with a nod to the school's historic roots. The company has teamed up with Ronnisch before on other adaptive reuse projects, making them a natural fit for this one. While there's no way to "match" the two new apartment buildings to the renovated and redeveloped school building, thoughtful design choices will ensure they feel like an intentional extension of the same project. "It needs to be clear and obvious that you have one historic building and two related new ones," said McIntosh Poris's architectural lead John Skok.

Tax Credits Pave the Way

The development addresses local low-income housing needs, making it eligible for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) Low Income Housing Tax Credit. The credit is designed to increase and preserve affordable rental housing by replacing earlier tax incentives with a credit directly applicable against taxable income. Through the MSHDA tax credit, corporations, banks, and individuals who invest in affordable housing can reduce their tax bills each year for 10 years.

The project also qualifies for historic tax credits offered by the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). The NPS, in partnership with the State Historic Preservation Offices and the Internal Revenue Service, administers the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives Program, which provides a 20 percent federal tax credit to property owners who undertake a substantial rehabilitation of a historic building.

Those tax credits come with specific design requirements, including for the two new apartment buildings, which need to be "complementary" in nature. Each tax credit also comes with other requirements ranging from resident storage and accessibility to specifics for both indoor and outdoor amenities.

As a result, Skok's team was asked to redesign some features. "We did what we had to do, so there were some redesigns necessary to meet those requirements," Skok said. "As an architect, you have to be flexible with these types of projects."

McIntosh Poris also worked closely with the NPS and MSHDA to navigate conflicting requirements. For example, NPS requested that the projecting balconies for the two garden apartment buildings be removed, but MSHDA requires private balconies. The architects worked out a solution where Juliet balconies would be provided instead, so that residents could still get fresh air into their living rooms while satisfying both agencies' requirements.

The extra time spent in the design phase was well worth it, Skok said. "There's a cool story there about it (Higginbotham) being one of those schools that was built in and thrived during Detroit's booming years (in the first half of the 20th Century)," Skok said.

From Classrooms to Community Living

The two-story school building covers 26,510 square feet. Its 40 units will be comprised of studios, one- and two-bedroom apartments ranging from 475 to 1,040 square feet.

As with many adaptive reuse projects, the old school building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was an active elementary school from 1926 to 2013 but has since suffered wear and tear from an apparent fire, water and moisture damage, a lack of heating and cooling functionality, and looting. A portion of the



The old Higginbotham school building before demolition. Photo courtesy of Ronnisch Construction Group

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basement was partially flooded in the years since its closure.

The adaptive reuse of Higginbotham will transform the building into high-quality housing for low-income residents, featuring amenities such as a fitness center, a community auditorium, and shared gathering spaces.

Adjacent to the historic school building, the two new multi-family structures are being developed to provide additional affordable housing for low-income individuals and families. All residents and nearby neighbors can use the outdoor playground. Residents will have access to a revamped parking lot behind the buildings, carefully tucked away to avoid impacting nearby homes.

URGE Development Group is bringing its arts-driven vision to life at the Higginbotham Art Residences, where affordable housing and local creativity converge. The development will feature an outdoor sculpture garden and display works by Detroit artists throughout the property. By integrating public art into the design, the project aims to strengthen community identity and celebrate the city's cultural roots.



The renovation of the school building has begun with an exterior facelift.
Photo courtesy of Ronnisch Construction Group

Adapting the Past for the Present

Historical building redevelopments of this magnitude often require significant utility upgrades, as is the case with the Higginbotham School project, according to Skok. His firm faced challenges with a vacated, largely unused street, a broken water main underground, and other elements that have become part of the development.

The original door placements in the former classrooms were integrated into the unit designs, leading to slight variations in the layout of the school building.

Inside the school, several repairs have been required, along with necessary upgrades like the addition of modern fire suppression systems. The most significant exterior challenge for the school building lies with the roof. Few professionals today have the expertise to restore this unique “corrugated, Spanish tile” roof, as Skok describes it, but these challenges are not insurmountable.

Since the building was last in operation about 40 years ago, the roof was leaking throughout and hazardous material including asbestos were present. That required the demo phase to include an abatement process. The basement is considered so hazardous that Honoway’s team can’t get in there until it is properly cleaned up by hazardous material experts.

“Like any old building that we develop, we’re flexible enough to figure out how to overcome the problems,” Honoway said.

“It’s hard for people to envision the fact that these schools can be converted to modern-day housing,” Skok said. “We just work as best we can with the way the schools were originally built.”

The interior of the school building has numerous features that help it to stand apart as a historical building. For one, Higginbottom was originally built with a Spanish revival theme.

Other features include:

- Multiple entryways with unique, handmade features
- Ornate tile and brick
- Specially crafted wood overhangs. “They’re beautiful,” Skok said.
- Terrazzo floors
- Large staircases and wide hallways. “These are tough to add to the design, but they are required to retain the desired width of the hall,” Skok said.
- Old student lockers
- An interior courtyard

The school building includes other unique spaces as well, such as an old cafeteria that is being turned into a multi-purpose room for the community. Skok explained that the developer envisions this room as one that can be used both by tenants and local community groups seeking a space to conduct business or hold small events. Skok estimates this space may hold around 100 people.

Even the old classroom chalkboards are being incorporated into the apartment design, and many will remain in place and be visible. The installation of historical, replica windows is part of the extra charm that the former school building will offer.

“The building just has great bones,” Skok said. “It is so durable. These old schools were built like tanks back in the day. We just want to make it an extension of the neighborhood in a modern way.” Along with the three buildings, the development will feature open spaces and sculptural artwork incorporated into landscaped gardens surrounding the property. “The design of the streetscape matters and (local) residents wanted to make sure that



A look down one of the school building's old hallways. Photo courtesy of Ronnisch Construction Group

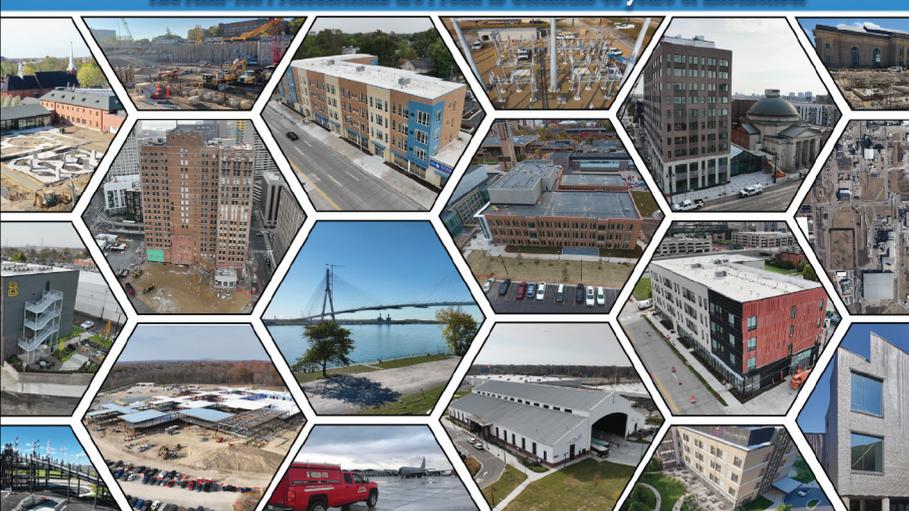


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it was designed with security in mind,” Skok said.

Honoway stated that the project will integrate the original student lockers into the building’s hallways. Additionally, they plan to preserve and repurpose as many school-related elements as possible for use in the new design. Once the final architectural plans are in place, Ronnisch team members will make sure the room configurations fit the layout of the former school building.

City Support Clears the Way

One of the potential roadblocks to any project is red tape from local governmental entities. But the City of Detroit has been proactive in pushing approvals through so the development can progress. Ronnisch had to get several special permissions from the City of Detroit for a variety of goals, such as a permit for the community gathering space and other structural changes to the old school building.

The goal is to reduce the red tape to allow these projects to be completed in a timely manner. “The City of Detroit has been a great partner in taking strides to make what we want to do with this



This exterior rendering reflects the thoughtful design approach behind the Higginbotham School and Garden Apartments, where historic preservation, affordable housing, and sustainable landscaping come together to strengthen Detroit's Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood. Rendering courtesy of McIntosh Paris

development more feasible," Honoway said. "We've been getting some approvals pretty quickly, allowing us to stay (on schedule)."

On Track for a 2026 Opening

Honoway expects to be ready to start installing the foundations for the new buildings by the end of this spring, around the time that the abatement and demo phase is being finished. His team is also involved in the structural modification and replacing the roof deck. "We'll make corrections and repairs in the roof as needed," he said.

The current timeline is for the three buildings to be open and operating by the end of fall 2026. There are numerous steps the project will need to achieve before that open date, but even with the plan's many complexities and various challenges, Skok expects that the progress needed for the development to be completed will continue. "We'll just need to figure out some parts and mechanisms here and there and harmonize it all," Skok said.

The project team has the majority of 2025 and part of 2026 to complete this work. Both the team and the subcontractors involved are eager to showcase the project. "What better way to give back to the community than to do what we do," Honoway said. 🍷

The following is a list of trade contractors that participated in the construction of the Higginbotham School and Garden Apartments project:

Lead Developer: URGE Development Group

Construction Manager: Ronnisch Construction Group

Architect: McIntosh Paris Associates

Trade Contractors:

- Abatement Services – Southeast Abatement, LLC, Warren
- Asphalt – Asphalt Specialists, Pontiac
- Carpentry – Leonard Wranosky and Sons Carpet, Romeo
- Concrete – Metropolitan Concrete Corp., Sterling Heights
- Consulting Engineers – Testing Engineers & Consultants, Detroit
- Demolition – Blue Star, Inc., Warren
- Doors – LaForce LLC – Green Bay, WI (with Troy office)
- Electrical – A-Z Electrical Engineering, Warren
- Electrical – ETS Engineering, Royal Oak
- Elevators – Thyssen Krupp Elevator, Livonia
- Excavation & Underground Utilities – East Edge Excavating, Novi
- Fire Suppression Affordable Fire Protection, Shelby Twp.
- Gypcrete – Kent Companies, Grand Rapids
- Interior Design Service – Dokes Design Architecture, Detroit
- Landscape Architecture – Jima Studio, Detroit
- Landscape Contractor – Green Giant Services, Shelby Twp.
- Lumber Supplier – Builders First Source, Saginaw
- Mechanical – Clark Trombly Randers, Lansing
- Mechanical – Matrix Consulting Engineers, Lansing
- Mechanical – JRED Engineering, Livonia
- Metal Fabrication – Metal City Fab, Warren
- Plumbing – Plymouth Plumbing, Wixom
- Regulatory Compliance Services – Labor Compliance Services, Birmingham
- Roofing – Four Seasons Roof & Sheet Metal, Roseville
- Structural Steel Services – Judd Industrial Contracting, Detroit
- Surveying Services – Alpine Engineering, Shelby Twp.
- Utility Work – Energy Group, Inc., Detroit
- Windows – Michigan Windows & Door Co., Whitmore Lake