

# St. Mark AME: Sustaining and Adapting

## SUSTAIN YOUR PARTNERSHIPS

***This case study focuses on preservation efforts between community partners and Georgia Tech students to document, restore, and reactivate the historic church as a community anchor, despite challenges in securing funding due to its compromised state, by leveraging digital tools, educational projects, and incremental development to sustain the site's resilience.***

Contributed by:

Danielle S. Willkens, Associate Professor, School of Architecture @ Georgia Tech, Initiative Lead for Just, Resilient, and Informed Communities (IPaT)

I have been working with Pastor Winston Taylor and his non-profit (The Beloved Community, Inc.), the Atlanta Preservation Center (APC), Landmark Preservation, and several other partners at the historic St. Mark AME in the English Avenue neighborhood since the fall of 2020. The Stone Mountain granite shell is all that remains of Western Heights Baptist Church, built for a white congregation and replacing a wooden structure on the site. Situated on the prominent corner of Kennedy and Chestnut Streets (now 491 Cameron M. Alexander Blvd. at the intersection of James P. Brawley Dr. NW), the stone building was a physical representation of the fire phobia running through Atlanta following the great fire of 1917.

The structure was designed by an English-born immigrant architect, Charles H. Hopson (1865-1941). The congregation left the building for a larger structure in 1938, and it was eventually purchased by a Vine City AME congregation looking for a new home when their church suspiciously caught fire in the summer of 1948. That congregation left in 1976; the site was abandoned and susceptible to illicit use in an infamous area called "The Bluffs." Pastor Taylor purchased the site in the mid-1990s and has been working to incrementally save and restore the distinctive building and its critical role as a community anchor.



Georgia Tech architecture students with Pastor, architect, and St. Mark AME owner Winston Taylor.  
Credit: Danielle Willkens

Digital documentation surveys (e.g., 3D LiDAR scanning and drone footage) started in late 2020, recognizing the need to record the building and study if the unreinforced walls were experiencing any movement. Student work at St. Mark began in February 2021 through ARCH 4823/6160 Race, Space, and Architecture in the US. Working with the APC to identify sites needing documentation, research, and advocacy, particularly in underserved areas of Atlanta's historic neighborhoods, St. Mark was one of eight sites selected by student teams as a semester project. In the summer of 2021, St. Mark became the subject of an interactive design research studio (ARCH 4016/4017) for senior architecture students at Georgia Tech.

Pastor Taylor was a crucial community partner for the spring seminar and the summer senior studio and continues to be a partner for work to advance the site, and the area's resilience. Working directly with his vision for the site, students executed a [HABS set](#), then conducted zoning, feasibility, programming, and schematic design studies to use St. Mark AME as a generative spark for economic and educational development.

Feedback from students in the anonymous course evaluation tool consistently noted that the project and client were solid motivators for maintaining the relentless pace and a greater sense of purpose for the work.

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### LESSON LEARNED

“Share space – events and meetings should be split between project partner sites and GT bases. We always extend invites to GT School of Architecture events; and attend invited events from our partners.”

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We have authored and submitted multiple grants and foundation applications alongside Pastor Taylor. Many of these have been unsuccessful because of problematic frameworks in the preservation realm: the building is in a ruined state, so state and federal regulations deem its integrity compromised. To bolster its eligibility, we have worked hard to establish a well-sourced history of the site, contributed to the unprecedented City of Atlanta Landmark listing for the building, and are currently forwarding efforts to develop a National Register listing for the site that will make it eligible for more grants and tax credits.

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### LESSON LEARNED

“Grant and fellowship applications are taxing, and continued communication is critical to maintaining momentum and learning from unfunded projects. Keeping an accessible and well-organized project archive ensures that various partners can build upon, instead of reinventing, content. We also present at conferences and write together to publish content about the project and disseminate our methodology and lessons learned.”

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Reactivation is critical for the site: we contributed to community events, such as the summer 2024 jazz night,

and we’re exploring a projecting mapping project for early 2025. We are also supporting the partners on a Main Street application for a site along MLK: our work has expanded from one site to an urban scheme. Additional information about the site’s history and some of the challenges within the established preservation policy are [here](#).

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### LESSON LEARNED

“Organize a lunch or coffee to catch up; not all meetings should be focused on applications or events, as this can easily shape a transactional relationship.”



*A collage of reinvented St. Mark AME from the 2021 Georgia Tech summer studio, led by Danielle Wilkens.  
Credit: So Min Park*

## Principles in Action

- » *G1 - Sustained Relationships:* Continue to show up: responsibilities and relationships should not end just because a project does.
- » *G2 - Connectivity:* Maintain communication and connection to partners in between projects and funding cycles so as to build long-term, trusting relationships.

### Related Resources:

- [Preserving African American Places: Growing Preservation's Potential as a Path for Equity](#)
- [A Manual of Anti-Racist Architecture Education](#)
- [Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? Chaos or Community](#)
- [The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past.](#)