

# Homes to answer your prayers

Former churches can make spectacular living spaces but may be tricky to convert, says **Claire Carponen**

There was a time when Sunday church services were so popular that they attracted long queues. These days, if you see a queue outside a church, it is more likely to be people looking to snap up a new home. This year, people queued around the block to view a chapel conversion in Barry, south Wales. Brownfield Green, a property development company that specialises in the conversion of historic buildings, says that about 500 people came to the launch of its Romilly Quarter scheme.

Church and chapel conversions offer the opportunity to live in a characterful home that is built from high-quality materials. They can command a premium — depending on where they are located — and because they look unusual they tend to attract a lot of interest.

As a result, developers are keen to buy empty or “redundant” churches. Despite needing a huge amount of restoration, St Paul’s Church in Battersea, southwest London, attracted 30 bids when it went on sale a few years ago. James Laurence Group — the developer that bought the church — was drawn to the property because of its location and attractive features. “It was an iconic building — albeit derelict — and we saw an opportunity to restore it to its former glory,” says Nick Laurence, co-founder of James Laurence Group.

Will Kerton, of Knight Frank’s Worcester office, says that because churches come in all shapes and sizes and in all types of location, they appeal to a range of buyers. “The character, original features and the fact that they are well designed and built also appeals,” he says. “They feel solid and peaceful; that feeling does come through.”

He adds: “Church conversions hold their value and have stayed in step with the market. They do not come with a huge premium in my area — they would have a similar guide price to a stone cottage.”

One drawback is that they are difficult buildings to convert into homes. Alex Fawcett, of Brownfield Green, says: “They never have enough light, they are massive and the windows are in the wrong place.”

Laurence says that even though they specialise in conversions and have worked on many historic buildings, they knew that St Paul’s was going to be a huge challenge. “Converting a church into a home is a very difficult thing to do,” he says. “You have to think ‘how can I turn it into an interesting residential building?’”

They converted St Paul’s Church, which is now called The Sanctuary, into four two and three-bedroom apartments. Although the original features are ornate — there are lots of arched beams and doors and unusual-shaped windows — they have created a light, modern look with pale-wood floors, a celestial blue



Roman Hall, above, a former chapel dating from 1835, in Henshaw, Northumberland, is on sale with Finest Properties with a guide price of £325,000



The Tower in Hackney Wick is on the market for offers over £1 million with Fyfe Mcdade

and pale grey colour scheme and sleek kitchens by Roundhouse. The apartments start from £1.65 million and are being sold by Douglas & Gordon.

Fawcett says that keeping things looking modern works. “We avoid pastiche; we make sure that everything that is new looks new. Some people add period features, such as fireplaces, to try and pretend it was always a house,” he says. The homes at Brownfield Green’s Romilly



St Saviour’s in Faversham, above and inset right, is £300,000 (Strutt & Parker)

Quarter in Barry, a conversion of a chapel and Sunday school hall, have kitchens with white stone worktops and Scandinavian Velfac doors and windows. Prices start from £170,000 for a two-bedroom home.

The developer of The Tower in Hackney Wick, east London, has gone for a more simple look, so the features really stand out. On five floors, which are reached via a narrow stone staircase to the side of the building, the converted church tower is a one-of-kind home. It has sandblasted stone walls, painted stone mullion windows and hi-tech fittings. The scale of the library/dining room is impressive; it has a gallery and a triple-height ceiling where the bells used to be. On top of the tower is a 400 sq ft terrace with views over east London.

The tower is part of a development called The Mission, which includes the conversion of a listed mission hall into 25 apartments and the refurbishment of the St Mary of Eton church. It is with Fyfe Mcdade for offers over £1 million.

So, what makes a bad conversion? The most common mistake is to merely add a mezzanine. “People do this because they want to keep the feeling of grandeur but it can look odd,” Fawcett says. “Leave it mainly as one space, and it will feel like

you are living in a great hall. However, if you divide it up too much, it will look institutional. You need a good balance between grand and cosy spaces and this is not easy to do. Dividing up windows to install a floor is an architectural faux pas. Churches don’t make good homes just by virtue of being a church. It’s about how you design it.”

Should it be left to the professionals? The general consensus seems to be yes, if you don’t have the right team of experts, including a good architect, to help you. Another concern is runaway costs. Church roofs are notoriously expensive, as is restoring stonework.

“You have to decide how much money you want to spend on the conservation,” Fawcett says. “You can restore it until it is as good as new or accept that it is not going to look perfect.”

Are there any types of churches that Fawcett won’t take on? “Ones with graveyards are a step too far for us. They spook people out and the owners may have to allow people to visit the graves, so we tend to avoid them,” he says.



This former chapel in Gislingham, Suffolk, has been converted and extended. It is on the market for £625,000 with Bedfords