Adapting Houses of Worship for Creative Uses



Three Massachusetts Case Studies on Adaptive Reuse

Prepared by Mass Cultural Council (2026)

Mass Cultural Council

Contents

Introduction 3

José Mateo Ballet Theatre, Cambridge 4
- Origin Story 4
- Planning, Negotiations & Leasing. 6
- Operations & Stewardship 9
- Key Lessons & Insights 12

Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity, Florence . . . 14
- Origin Story 15
- Planning & Negotiations 16
- Operations & Stewardship 22
- Key Lessons & Insights 25

Steeple Playhouse, New Bedford 29
- Origin Story 30
- Planning & Negotiations 32
- Operations & Stewardship 37
- Key Lessons & Insights 38

Conclusion & Recommendations. 40

Acknowledgements 44

Since 2006, Mass Cultural Council has been committed to supporting the development of vibrant creative spaces through technical assistance and Cultural Facilities Fund grants. Our hope is that this report provides guidance for other arts organizations and municipalities who may be considering a similar adaptive reuse of space within their communities.

Mass Cultural Council

Power of culture

MassCulturalCouncil.org

Images courtesy of the featured organizations.







Introduction

This case study examines three distinct models of adaptive reuse where performing arts organizations have taken over stewardship of houses of worship while still accommodating the congregation's space needs. Each project tells a different story of negotiation, collaboration, and long-term commitment.

These three cases share some common insights: the adaptation of religious spaces for cultural use is not a replacement of one function for another, but an expansion of purpose; locations can serve multiple constituencies – faith communities, artists, audiences, and broader community members; partnerships like these provide a vibrant and economically sustainable future for structures that might otherwise have deteriorated.

The three Massachusetts organizations profiled – José Mateo Ballet Theatre (Cambridge), Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity (Florence), and Steeple Playhouse (New Bedford) – represent different governance structures and relationships to the congregations, varying timelines as the facility was re-purposed, and a variety of revenue models. Common threads also run through the reuse projects: the necessity of long-term leases or ownership structures; the importance of patient relationship-building; critical professional real estate, design, and finance expertise; and municipal and nonprofit partners.

This document is intended to help other arts organizations, faith communities, and municipal leaders understand what's possible, what's challenging, and what matters when pursuing adaptive reuse of religious spaces.

Case Study #1

José Mateo Ballet Theatre

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Introduction

José Mateo Ballet Theatre represents a unique model of adaptive reuse in which a performing arts organization shares a historic church building with an active congregation. Located in Old Cambridge Baptist Church – a national historic landmark situated in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts – the ballet theatre has occupied the Gothic Revival structure since June 2000.



Archival image of Old Cambridge Baptist Church

This report is based on a first-hand account with Scott Fraser, Executive Director of José Mateo Ballet Theatre, who has stewarded the organization's operations within this shared space for 26 years. Fraser's experience navigating the complexities of a 39-year lease agreement, managing significant capital renovation projects, and fostering a productive coexistence with an active religious congregation offers insights for other arts organizations and faith communities considering similar arrangements.

Origin Story

The Search for Space

José Mateo Ballet Theatre's journey to Old Cambridge Baptist Church began with a fundamental challenge facing many dance organizations: access to adequate space.

Key Dates

- 1870: Old Cambridge Baptist Church erected
- 1982: Church listed on the National Register of Historic Places

During its first 20 years, the organization operated out of two different spaces, but these locations constrained growth and limited the earned income necessary for sustainability.

In the early days, the organization worked with the Nonprofit Finance Fund on feasibility and business planning.

“Our biggest obstacle to growth, which I’m going to suggest is very typical of dance organizations, was access to space. We didn’t have enough space to generate the kind of earned income that we needed to,” said Fraser.

The organization launched a search for a new facility and made several attempts to secure a permanent home.



Old Cambridge Baptist Church exterior

An Unexpected Connection

The turning point came through a chance conversation with the administrator at Old Cambridge Baptist Church, who called Fraser asking how to refinish a dance floor in the church’s parish hall, which the congregation had been renting to a ballroom group.

“Dance floors? You have dance floors. Where are you?” Fraser said. “And I lived in this neighborhood. I lived three blocks away and never even considered it.”

When Fraser visited the site, the condition was daunting. “There were literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in deferred maintenance on the space. I ran screaming,” he recalled.

However, one of the cultural organization’s board members – an architect – saw potential where Fraser initially saw only challenges.

The architect recognized that despite its poor condition, the building's physical characteristics were exceptional for dance studios: soaring ceiling heights (47' in the largest studio), expansive open floor areas (90' x 60') with no vertical supports, and multiple distinct spaces suitable for different types of dance instruction.

After much deliberation, the organization decided it would pursue the church as a new permanent home for their programs.

Planning, Negotiations & Leasing

The Lease Negotiation

What followed was an intensive negotiation that lasted about 18 months. Both the ballet theatre and church congregation recognized the stakes involved. As Fraser noted, "Everybody was negotiating on behalf of their organization. It was deeply personal. The most important thing of our lives."

> *"The thing that was most transformative for me was when I figured out that everybody we interfaced with - everybody - had some gift that could help us advance this, and it was just a matter of coordinating that.*
>
> – Scott Fraser, José Mateo Ballet Theatre Executive Director

The initial lease term was set at 20 years. The church's leadership wanted assurance that they could successfully coexist with a tenant over that extended period. Interestingly, they also experienced an unexpected benefit: the church saw "an uptick in growth, because the facilities become much more appealing for people to come into by virtue of the dance company being here," he said.

The negotiation process was led initially by José Mateo (the organization's founder and artistic director), one board member (the architect), and the church's long-range planning team. After about a year, the initial group reached an impasse. "Everybody threw up their hands and walked away from it."

Approximately 13 months into the process, Fraser took over negotiations, working directly with two representatives from the church to reach a final agreement.

Captial Needs Assessment

Before signing the lease, the organization conducted an assessment of the space's capital needs. However, this initial evaluation, while containing some useful information, significantly underestimated the true scope of required improvements.

"The first assessment was probably the least thorough and least accurate," Fraser admitted. "Probably had a vested interest in us moving ahead with the project and 25 years later, I can tell you I'm glad it happened that way because I don't think knowing what we subsequently learned, we would have advanced with leasing."

Based on that initial assessment, Fraser raised $400,000 to cover anticipated capital needs. "I had everything that the people said that we would need," he explained. But that estimate proved woefully inadequate. "$400,000 didn't even correct the deficiencies with the electricity, and I was not willing to spend a dollar in a place that in any way was a fire hazard."

The Electricity Crisis

Electricity emerged as the first and most critical infrastructure priority. The building's electrical systems were not merely outdated – they posed genuine fire hazards. "The electricity took two years to solve," Fraser recalls. The work involved replacing antiquated knob-and-tubing wiring, consolidating three separate electrical services into one, and installing sufficient capacity to support theatrical lighting and modern dance studio operations.

Key Dates

- **1986: Artistic director and choreographer José Mateo founds the ballet theatre**
- **1998: Ballet theatre connects with Old Cambridge Baptist Church**

On the very first day of occupancy, Fraser discovered pennies stuffed into fuse boxes – a dangerous improvisation reflecting decades of deferred maintenance. The magnitude of the electrical problem forced a complete rethinking of the organization's financial strategy and timeline.

Lease Amendment & Long-Term Planning

Once the true scope of capital needs became clear, the organization realized that the original 20-year lease would not provide sufficient time to justify and finance the necessary improvements. Fraser and the church leadership amended the lease to 39 years – a timeline that would allow the organization to fully depreciate capital investments.



Old Cambridge Baptist Church exterior and "Resurgence," a sculpture by David Kasman.

This amendment had profound implications beyond financing.

"It made us consider for the first time whether we were a permanent organization that was going to exist past the lifetime of its founder and creator, so this had all kinds of organizational and balance sheet implications," Fraser said.

The organization shifted from a project-to-project mindset to thinking strategically about long-term viability.

The original lease terms had been closely tied to José Mateo's career arc.

"The first terms were really tied to José turning 65. It was approached from the perspective of, 'Do we have a place for this artist to work for his lifetime?' That was what the original business planning was about. And then once we understood the organization would outlive the founder our whole perspective changed."

Operations & Stewardship

Space Configuration

The José Mateo Ballet Theatre operates across four primary studio spaces within Old Cambridge Baptist Church:

- **The Sanctuary Studios:** The two naves of the original sanctuary function as either a classroom studio or as the Sanctuary Theater, which seats between 148 and 202 people depending on the configuration.

- **The Large Studio:** The primary dance studio measures 89’ x 39’.

- **The Parish Hall:** Originally rented to a ballroom group, this 40’ x 40’ space features one of the oldest Tiffany windows in the country, which the ballet theatre restored in partnership with the church.

- **Children’s Studios:** Two smaller spaces on the second floor (approximately 25’ x 25’ and 20’ x 24’) serve as beginning-level instruction spaces.

Shared Space Arrangements

The lease creates a carefully balanced coexistence. Under the lease and its amendments between Old Cambridge Baptist Church and José Mateo Ballet Theatre, primary shared areas include the Sanctuary (Studio #1) and the Parish Hall (Studio #2), with specific scheduling allocated across the week.

The church retains exclusive use of the entire building (except the tenant’s business offices) on Sunday mornings until 1pm, shares the Sanctuary on Sunday afternoons, and maintains access for weekday organ practice.

Additionally, the church may reserve the Sanctuary and Parish Hall for up to 15 special events annually.

Key Dates

- **2000: Lease negotiations result in 20-year shared use lease**
- **June 2000: A 2-year occupancy and electrical overhaul begins**

The ballet theatre operates the facility for the remainder of the week and has comprehensive responsibility for maintaining the spaces it uses for classes, rehearsals, performances, and administration.

Rent Structure & Capital Investment

The lease establishes an annual base rent that adjusts annually with the Boston-area CPI-Urban index, capped at a 5% increase for the initial adjustment, alongside a proportional share of building utility expenses.

A critical feature of the lease agreement stipulates that 50% of the base rent must be reinvested in capital improvements and deferred maintenance. This mechanism has proven transformative for both parties. “The metric has stayed the same, which has been very solid for both the ballet and the church, because it’s a space that’s exciting to steward because we have resources set aside for improvements all the time,” Fraser said.



Old Cambridge Baptist Church exterior and “Resurgence,” a sculpture by David Kasman.

The improvements funded through this mechanism have been substantial: new heating systems, new electrical systems, safety systems, working windows, functioning heating, fire alarm systems, and appropriate theatrical lighting. When the ballet theatre arrived in 2000, “the interior hadn’t been painted since World War II.”

Later, the mechanism would be supplemented by an inflation-adjusted per-ticket “restoration fee,” remitted to the landlord to fund facility capital repairs.

Ongoing Improvements

The organization has commissioned multiple capital assessments over the past 26 years – at least five comprehensive evaluations. Each assessment reflects the priorities of its time.

The organization's most recent assessment, in the COVID-era, identified a major need that previous evaluations had never considered: ventilation and indoor air quality. "Nobody ever thought about ventilation and air quality and that's a $400,000 bill," Fraser noted. When the organization reopened after COVID closures, the heavy respiration involved in dance practice made air quality a priority alongside the needs of other physically demanding activities like choir singing.

Staffing & Operations

The organization operates year-round with activities occurring daily. Staffing ranges between 7 and 11 full-time and part-time employees. The operating budget is approximately $2 million annually.

The ballet theatre operates several distinct programs:

- **Classes:** Instruction for students of various levels and ages
- **Performances:** Formal ballet productions and dance presentations
- **Dance for World Community:** An initiative aimed at utilizing dance's intrinsic power to address social issues and serve communities. This program has included fundraising concerts in response to events like the earthquake in Haiti and the war in Ukraine.

The organization also organizes a major annual event called "Harvard Square Dance" featuring five dance stages and performances representing the diverse communities of Greater Boston.

Fraser reflected on the significance of this programming: "It's how to take this art form and make it serve more than just the artists and the audience. To weave it into the fabric of community."

The organization has expanded beyond the primary location in Cambridge.

Key Dates

- **2002: Recognizing extensive capital amortization needs, parties extend lease to 39 years**
- **2008: "Dance for World Community" launches**

A satellite program operates at St. Mary's Church in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, offering classes and using the Strand Theater for performances. According to Fraser, "from an organizational strategy, that's what we will be working on predominantly going forward."



Interior of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church and José Mateo Ballet Theatre studio

Board Governance

The ballet theatre operates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with its own independent board of directors. There is no formal requirement for representation from the church congregation on the board, nor vice versa. However, in the early years, Fraser attended church building committee meetings and deacon meetings to maintain strong communication and transparency.

Key Lessons & Insights

Fraser reflected on the tension between careful financial planning and bold artistic vision. Two figures – architect Brad Bellows and founder José Mateo – pushed for improvements regardless of cost projections. "As the person who was responsible for finding the resources to realize that vision, it was absolutely infuriating. But in retrospect, it's the thing that I've done in life that I'll be the most proud of. Delivering on the fundraising to support the artistic and societal vision."

1. The Importance of Building Assessments

For other organizations considering this path, Fraser's guidance would be to invest in multiple assessments by qualified engineers and architects – not just one preliminary evaluation. Each assessment should be thorough and honest about conditions, though organizations should also recognize that assessments are time-specific and new needs will emerge.

2. Long-Term Viability Through Extended Leases

The decision to extend the lease from 20 to 39 years transformed the organization's approach to planning and financial sustainability.

Long-term leases allow organizations to amortize capital investments responsibly and justify major fundraising campaigns to individual donors and foundations. They also force organizations to think seriously about succession planning and institutional permanence.

3. Harnessing Community Energy
Fraser identifies a critical shift in mindset: recognizing that every person and organization they connected with had something to contribute.

"The thing that was most transformative for me was when I figured out that everybody that we interfaced with – everybody – had some gift that could help us advance this project, and it was just a matter of coordinating that," Fraser said. "It wasn't always money. It wasn't always skill. You know, sometimes it was just a great spirit, and that is what we needed."



2nd floor bridge between José Mateo Ballet Theatre studios

Rather than focusing narrowly on fundraising, Fraser learned to think systemically about harnessing community resources and energy. "It wasn't just about where we're going to find the next dollar, but how we were going to harness and shape the community to get to this goal, and to understand that everybody could play an incredible role in that."

4. The Indispensable Role of Champions
Fraser emphasized that success depends equally on champions within both organizations. "The first minister [of Old Cambridge Baptist Church], when we came here, was an incredible supporter who became a friend," Fraser recalls. "José and I ended up churchgoers for a decade because of those relationships."

This personal investment built a foundation of trust that helped both parties work through difficult moments, stay engaged, and move forward together.

Case Study #2

Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity

Florence, Massachusetts

Introduction

Bombyx functions as a multi-use community cultural center that houses a historic sacred space for two active faith congregations, an established preschool, and a diverse array of arts programming and community activities.



Archival image of the Florence Congregational Church

Located in the Florence Congregational Church in Florence, a village in Northampton, Massachusetts, Bombyx came into being in 2021 through the initiative of Cassandra Holden, its Executive Director and Founder.

Built in 1861 by nine Christian denominations working together, the church structure embodies principles of religious tolerance, gender equity, and anti-slavery activism that remain central to Bombyx's mission. Now, five years into operations, Bombyx demonstrates how a purpose-built nonprofit can serve as a steward and revitalizer of a historic building while honoring its legacy and maintaining its original spiritual and community functions.

This report is based on an interview with Holden, whose background in event production, cultural programming, and housing development shaped a distinctive approach to acquisition, renovation, and operations.

Key Date

- **1861: Nine Christian denominations come together to construct the Florence Congregational Church**

Her experience navigating multiple stakeholder relationships, complex regulatory requirements, and the challenges of starting a capital-intensive nonprofit during the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insights for organizations and congregations considering similar adaptive reuse arrangements.

Origin Story

The Genesis of Bombyx

The story of Bombyx begins not with a single organization's space crisis, but with a faith community's uncertain future. In 2019, Priscilla Ross, who had served as musical director at the Florence Congregational Church for approximately a decade, observed a troubling trend: the congregation was aging and shrinking, and the building – a 13,000-square-foot historic structure with significant deferred maintenance – was becoming increasingly hard to maintain.



Exterior of Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity. Photo: Julian Parker-Burns.

The congregation made the difficult decision to quietly place the building on the market. However, their intentions for the property were specific and unconditional: they wanted any new owner to preserve the building as a community resource and allow the congregation to remain in place.

Adding more complexity, two additional constituencies depended on the building: Beit Ahavah, a Jewish congregation that had occupied space in the building for almost 30 years, and a preschool that had been operating there for 75 years.

As Holden explained, "The offers that they had on the building basically involved evicting all the tenants, both congregations and the preschool, and starting from scratch. So, they had refused any of those offers."

Priscilla's Vision, Cassandra's Hesitation

Priscilla Ross, drawing on her background in music and her deep community connections (she also founded the Florence Fireworks), began the work of founding a nonprofit organization and establishing bylaws to create a structure that could take over management of the building while honoring the congregation's values.

However, in spring 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced closures and social distancing, Ross found herself overwhelmed by her professional responsibilities in healthcare leadership. In summer 2020, she approached Holden – who was working in the for-profit event production sector – with an offer to take over leadership of the nascent nonprofit.

Holden's response was blunt, "Oh, absolutely not!" given the state of gathering spaces. She had recently navigated the process of producing live-streamed events with only artists and camera crews present – no audiences, no gatherings. Taking on a 13,000-square-foot church building seemed financially and operationally irresponsible.

Yet the idea would not leave her alone. "This building is really special, and the project stayed with me," Holden recalled. "Every time I would drive by, like some crazy thing would happen with the light, like the clouds would part, and there'd be a beam of light on the building."

By January 2021, however, something had shifted. Holden reached back out to the congregation. "It went from being a no to a maybe," she said. "I reached out to the congregation to say, okay, this isn't a yes, but let's begin to think about how this might work."

Planning & Negotiations

Holden's approach was shaped by her decade of experience in affordable housing development and her detail-oriented temperament.

Key Dates

- **1949: Cloverdale Cooperative Preschool begins operating in church basement**
- **1998: The Beit Ahavah reform synagogue joins the property as a permanent tenant**

Before committing to anything, she wanted a comprehensive understanding of what she would be inheriting.

The first step was architectural assessment. Holden reached out to Mark Sternick, an architect she had worked with for a decade in the affordable housing sector. She had observed his "really sensitive approach to working with historic buildings" and trusted his judgment.

Remarkably, Sternick had a personal connection to the space: he had been one of the founding members of Beit Ahavah, the reform synagogue housed in the building.



Florence Congregational Church's Short Attention Span Christmas Eve

Holden also approached Irv Gammon, the former pastor of the Florence Congregational Church. Before receiving his calling to the ministry, Gammon had worked for decades as a builder – giving him both deep knowledge of the building and familiarity with construction and code requirements.

Sternick and Gammon proved exceptional: "These two people are brilliant, heart centered, and very good at collaborating. Both of them together were really interested in creating a vision for the future."

> *The congregation was very eager to be released of their responsibilities for managing the building, and we were perhaps a little slow to say yes to that because I really wanted to understand what that meant.*
>
> – Cassandra Holden, Bombyx Executive Director

As-Built Drawings & Code Assessment

Mark Sternick first noted a challenge that the building had no architectural plans. Therefore, Sternick's team created as-built drawings – a necessity for understanding the building's current condition and what code compliance would require. They also commissioned a comprehensive code report that would guide prioritization and create a realistic roadmap for the next 10-20 years of work.

The code report revealed the magnitude of the challenge. Deferred maintenance was substantial, and the decision to change the building's use from "house of worship" to "place of assembly" (with arts programming, events, and community activities) triggered additional code requirements related to occupancy, accessibility, egress, and safety systems.

Zoning Challenges

An unexpected complication emerged through the zoning assessment. The building sat at the edge of two zoning districts: residential on one side, office/industrial/commercial on the other. While churches can be placed in virtually any zoning designation, arts centers cannot.

The proposed mixed-use model – combining worship space, performance venue, community programming, rental spaces, preschool, and event hosting – did not fit standard zoning categories. Rezoning was required.

"We were in regular conversation with the planning department and the building department to make sure as we were introducing new uses that we were code compliant," Holden recalled.

The process required presenting the case to the planning department, which then recommended the change to the city council. The proposal had to address potential neighborhood impacts: noise, parking, frequency of events, and types of activities.

Community Engagement

The zoning process revealed a communication gap. Neighborhood residents learned about the proposal only days before the city council meeting. Timing was poor. They were still emerging from COVID restrictions, and modes of municipal communication had not fully normalized.

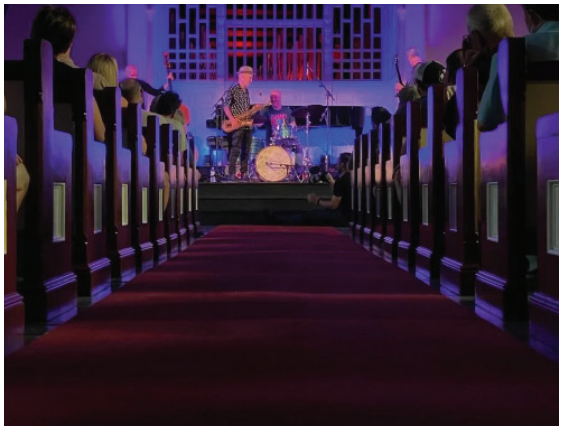


While Holden and her team believed they were being transparent – meeting with city officials, inviting them to walk through the building, sharing plans – the message had not reached neighbors effectively. Once friction became apparent, her team shifted course. “We began a series of regular meetings with the neighborhood property owners to share what we were doing and what we were working on.”

This proactive engagement helped rebuild trust and demonstrated the organization’s genuine commitment to being a good neighbor.

Negotiation with the Congregation

Parallel to architectural and regulatory work, Holden negotiated with the congregation about the terms of transition. She moved cautiously.



A couple examples of how space is being used at Bombyx - religious services and a music performance.

“The congregation was very eager to be released of their responsibilities for managing the building, and we were perhaps a little slow to say yes to that because I really wanted to understand what that meant,” said Holden.

Bombyx had no initial capital reserves. Any arrangement would have to allow them to collect rent from existing tenants while simultaneously generating revenue through programming and space rentals – all while addressing deferred maintenance and code compliance.

The solution was a memorandum of understanding (MOU) followed by a structured lease-to-own agreement. The MOU gave Bombyx authority to operate the building, conduct programming, make improvements, and collect revenue from tenants while the more detailed purchase and sale agreement was negotiated.

"We began with an MOU, and once we had that in place, we were able to do our first round of renovation, which was to demolish the lectern and pulpit in the sanctuary space to open up the stage so that we could have performances," Holden recalled.

This first renovation – a modest $10,000 investment – enabled programming to begin almost immediately, demonstrating viability and building community engagement.

Mark Sternick's history as a founding member of Beit Ahavah and Irv Gammon's decades of experience as both pastor and builder gave them credibility, community connections, and genuine commitment to preserving the building's integrity and history.

"There wasn't an attachment to everything being the way it was. Both of them together were very interested in creating a vision for the future."

Purchase & Sale Agreement

After approximately 18 months of negotiation, Holden and the congregation agreed to a 6.5 year lease-to-own agreement with a purchase price of $200,000, which she described as "a very generous price offered by the congregation."

The structure was mutually beneficial. The congregation received guaranteed income over the lease-to-own period, providing financial stability as they searched for new pastoral leadership. The two congregations and preschool gained certainty

Key Dates

- **2019: Facing an aging congregation & heavy deferred maintenance, church seeks a buyer**
- **2020: Priscilla Ross offers project leadership**

about their futures. Bombyx gained the authority and incentive to invest in the building while working toward full ownership.

Most importantly, this timeline addressed a regulatory reality: as soon as the deed transferred, the building would have to meet all current code requirements for a place of assembly. By extending the purchase over six-and-a-half years, Bombyx could phase improvements and continue generating revenue without a closure period.



Sweet Honey In The Rock at Bombyx. Photo: Julian Parker-Burns.

As Holden explained: “We didn’t have to close the building while in transition which would have prevented us from generating revenue to do all the work before reopening. So, the tricky part is that we had to stay open to generate revenue while moving toward these important goals for code compliance.”

The building department and city officials accepted this approach, allowing Bombyx to work methodically through a 38-page code report, tackling less expensive items first and building toward more expensive structural work.

Operations & Stewardship

The Multi-Use Model

Bombyx operates in a fundamentally different way than a single-use arts venue. The building simultaneously serves:

- **The Florence Congregational Church:** The Christian congregation continues to hold regular worship services. They organize monthly potlucks and maintain an active community presence.

- **Beit Ahavah:** This 30-year resident operates regular Shabbat services and holy celebrations. Rabbi and congregational leadership are integrated into building discussions and collaborative programming.

- **Cloverdale Cooperative Preschool:** Operating from designated basement space for 75 years, the preschool serves young children and families. New board leadership has begun exploring integration with arts programming.

- **Arts Programming & Events:** Bombyx presents collaborative performances, concerts, dance, theater, educational workshops, and community gatherings. Independent presenters bring diverse projects into the space throughout the year.

- **Community Functions:** The building hosts birthday parties, corporate events, private rentals, educational workshops, classes (dance, music, etc.), and community organizing activities.

- **Catering & Commercial Kitchen Operations:** The building includes a commercial kitchen where chefs prepare food for events, meetings, and gatherings.

Key Dates

- **Jan 2021: Feasibility work with an architect begins**

- **Mid-2021: An MOU grants Bombyx operating authority**

> *We were in regular conversation with the planning department and the building department to make sure as we were introducing new uses that we were code compliant.*
>
> – Cassandra Holden, Bombyx Executive Director

Collaborative Programming

Rather than segregating activities, Bombyx has intentionally created programming that brings faith communities and arts audiences together. Early examples include performances by the Campbell Brothers (interpreting John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme") attended by members of both congregations, and collaborative projects like "Yearnings," which celebrates musical traditions from multiple faith perspectives.

Monthly Sunday potlucks organized by the church, Shabbat services, Hanukkah celebrations, and preschool activities create a baseline of shared community life. Arts programming and events layer atop this foundation rather than replacing it.

"The preschool has their own designated space in the basement where they've been for decades. That works really well for them," Holden said. "The sanctuary is still used as a worship space by both of our faith communities."

Staffing & Operations

Given the scale of work required, Holden volunteered for the first two years without compensation while continuing full-time work in for-profit event production. Current staffing remains lean. Holden is now paid as executive director alongside three recently hired part-time roles for a development professional, hospitality manager, and technical director.

Holden shares office space with the church administrator, trading desks depending on the day of the week – a physical manifestation of the organization's commitment to integration rather than separation.

Programming operates year-round with the organization aiming to break even on most events, with a few occasional successes generating modest surpluses. The bulk of earned revenue comes from rental income – space rental for classes, rehearsals, private events, and performances.

Nonprofit Status & Funding

Bombyx submitted its nonprofit application in fall 2021 and received 501(c)(3) status retroactively by year-end. Interestingly, the lack of official nonprofit status during the initial phase was not a stumbling block.

Fundraising sources have included:

- **Private loan:** A bridge loan from a private individual to provide initial working capital
- **Rental income:** From the synagogue and preschool (once lease-to-own agreement was signed), plus event and class rentals
- **Grants:** Multiple rounds of Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund grants including a Systems Replacement Plan grant for a 20-year capital needs assessment, ARPA funding from the City of Northampton, and security grants through the Office of Grants and Research (following bomb threats and an arson threat)

Although through unfortunate circumstances, the security grants became particularly valuable, funding approximately $200,000 worth of building improvements including door replacement, security systems, fire alarm upgrades, and – as a co-benefit – ADA compliance improvements through properly functioning doors with accessible hardware.



Bombyx steeple

Revenue Model

As it stands, the majority of Bombyx's revenue is earned. Rental income (from tenants and space rentals), combined with event revenue, generates the bulk of operating funds. Contributed revenue currently sits at approximately 20% of budget.

Holden acknowledged growth potential: "We have about three dozen independent presenters who bring projects into the space. Our community has been very generous to us, and we actually earlier this year were able to bring in a part-time development person to begin helping us to build out contributed income which is a real area of potential for us."

Challenges & Lessons

One unexpected regulatory constraint involves Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds – a Massachusetts financing tool for historic preservation. Northampton's city solicitor determined that because the congregation still owns the building, CPA funds cannot be applied to improvements (as the beneficiary would technically be the faith community, not the nonprofit).

This restriction may impact timing of full ownership transfer, as Bombyx will gain access to potentially substantial CPA funding once deed transfer is complete. For organizations in other communities, Holden strongly recommends investigating CPA eligibility early in planning, as such funds can be "game changing amounts of money."



Supaman at Bombyx Center for Arts and Equity. Photo: Julian Parker-Burns.

Key Lessons & Insights

1. The Importance of Due Diligence

Unlike some adaptive reuse projects that move quickly once opportunity is identified, Holden prioritized comprehensive understanding before committing. The 18-month negotiation period allowed time for architectural assessment, code analysis, zoning research, and financial modeling.

For organizations considering similar arrangements, this approach prevents costly surprises. "Your first call should be for an architect," she said.

2. Navigating Regulatory Complexity
The transition from single-use (house of worship) to multi-use (arts center/community gathering space) triggered complex interactions between zoning codes, building codes, and use categories. Holden emphasizes the importance of early municipal engagement and clear communication about intended uses.

"The zoning department talks about building use in one way, and the building department talks about building use in another way, and so those are also really important conversations to have."

Investing in an architect fluent in these regulatory languages proved essential. Mark Sternick's role extended beyond design to "communicating with those municipal departments in the way that they need to be communicated with and documenting everything."

3. Managing Stakeholder Expectations During Transition
The congregation experienced emotional turbulence as changes appeared in the building they had known for generations. "Some members of the congregation would just burst into tears at the sight of me, because we had made changes in the building, and it's not that they hated it. It's that change is hard."

"It's like when you go off to college and your parents redecorate your bedroom, you're like, 'Whoa, what's going on?" she said.

Having trusted figures connected to the congregations serve as intermediaries made an enormous difference. They could communicate both the organization's intentions and the congregations' concerns, building bridges rather than widening divides.

"Mark was a founding member of Beit Ahavah, and Pastor Irv led the Florence Congregational Church for 15 years. They were really important intermediaries."

Key Dates

- **Oct 2021: Bombyx officially opens to the public**
- **Spring 2022: Northampton approves zoning for mixed-use & arts programming**



Terence Blanchard with the E-Collective and the Tutle Island String Quartet at Bombyx. Photo: Julian Parker-Burns.

4. Communicating a Multi-Use Identity

Bombyx doesn't fit neat organizational boxes. It is simultaneously a faith community steward, a cultural venue, a community center, an event space, a preschool partner, and a caterer. This complexity can confuse external stakeholders.

Holden recommends proactive communication to elected officials, neighbors, and potential community partners about the full scope of activities and identities.

5. The Role of Community Champions at Municipal Level

While not as formally required as with faith communities, municipal champions proved valuable. Holden reached out to local city councilors early, inviting them to walk through the building and understand the vision.

"One of the first things we did is reach out to our local city councilors. So we're in one ward, but there's another ward literally on the other side of the street. So we reached out to our elected leaders to say, 'Hey, we're here!' and walked everyone through our project, talking about what we want to do."

These relationships opened doors to municipal resources and created political support when needed.

6. The Long View on Profitability
Unlike commercial venues, Bombyx approaches programming with community benefit as the primary metric. Most individual events break even or lose money; programming collectively aims toward break-even over the course of the year or modest profit.

The real value lies in building community goodwill, establishing the venue's identity, and creating pathways for deeper engagement and contributed support over time.

7. Legacy
Holden chose this building deliberately because of its history. Built in 1861 by nine Christian denominations working together, the Florence Congregational Church embodies principles of religious tolerance, gender equity (women were full voting members from the beginning), and anti-slavery activism.

"For me, that really resonated. It seems to me the modern version of all of those things are what we as a society are still working on, and the arts are a powerful tool for doing that work," she said.

Bringing this history forward through intentional programming and stewardship honors the building's original mission while extending it into contemporary forms.

Key Dates

- **2022: Bombyx executes a 6.5-year lease-to-own**
- **2023-24: $200,000 in safety/security grants secured, first development staff hired**

Case Study #3

Steeple Playhouse

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Introduction

Steeple Playhouse in New Bedford, Massachusetts represents a more complex adaptive reuse model examined in this series. The First Baptist Church constructed in 1829 is a Greek Revival style 3-story white clapboard church and an expansion of the Tiverton Baptist Church established in 1685 by Mayflower passenger, John Cooke.



Archival image of New Bedford's First Bapist Church from the New Bedford Free Public Library Collection

The First Baptist Church carries extraordinary historical significance as the site that gave birth to Robert's Rules of Order. In 1863, Army Lt. Henry Martyn Roberts was attempting to moderate a meeting at the First Baptist Church about port defense when bedlam broke out. Attendees became boisterous, arguing and shouting. Altogether, the meeting is reported to have lasted over 24 hours. Lt. Roberts vowed "never again" and set about creating a standard set of rules for meetings.

In December of 1874, he took his manuscript to a pressman and the rest is history. *Robert's Rules of Order*, a guide to parliamentary procedures, forever changed how meetings are run around the world.

The 13,000-square-foot structure, has been transformed into the home venue for Your Theatre at Steeple Playhouse, a community theater company with 80 years of history in New Bedford.

Key Dates

- **1829: First Baptist Church constructed**
- **2009: Church listed as a Most Endangered Historic Resource by the state**

This project is the product of a 14-year collaboration between a historic community theater company, a preservation-focused nonprofit, municipal leadership, and a small congregation whose building needed saving. It represents a governance and financing arrangement involving historic tax credits, prevailing wage requirements, multiple municipal departments, and careful choreography among diverse stakeholders.

This report is based on interviews with key figures who brought the project to completion: Opal Tener Wade, Executive Director of Steeple Playhouse; Eric Paradis, financial advisor and 20-year volunteer with Your Theatre; Erin Miranda, Executive Director of the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE); and Kathryn Duff, architect and founding principal of Studio2Sustain.



Steeple Playhouse exterior, courtesy of Your Theatre. Photo: Opal Tener Wade.

Origin Story

A Building in Crisis

The First Baptist Church building came onto the radar of preservation advocates as early as 2007-2008, when preservation efforts began discussions with city leadership about the structure's precarious condition. By 2009, the building appeared on the Massachusetts list of most endangered resources – not for its potential, but for the urgency of its deterioration.

The congregation that inhabited the space had shrunk to a fraction of its historical size. The building's future was uncertain, and no obvious path forward existed.

A Theater Searching for Home

Meanwhile, Your Theatre – a community theater organization founded in 1946 – was searching for a permanent home. The company had occupied multiple spaces over its 80 years, most recently spending 27 years in a city-owned building (paying only $1 per year in rent) and prior for 20 years in a church hall in the south end of New Bedford.

Eric Paradis, who has volunteered with the theater for 20 years, described the motivation: "We had to get control of our destiny in terms of space after being displaced from our home of 27 years."

Your Theatre began conversations with the mayor's office about available properties. Unknown to the theater company at the time, the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) and municipal leadership were already having conversations about the endangered Baptist church. The conversations converged.

> *"Collaboration is not a given. It's not something you can take for granted. You have to work at it, and these projects succeed because you have collaborative leadership.*
>
> – Kathryn Duff, Founding Principal of Studio2Sustain

Municipal Leadership & Coalition Building

A critical ingredient was mayoral support. Mayor John Mitchell was described as "a real history buff" who wanted to preserve the building not just as a solution to an eyesore, but because of its historical significance as the birthplace of Robert's Rules of Order.

WHALE, under the leadership of Terry Bernert, took the lead in convening stakeholders. The organization's mission – a historic preservation nonprofit with 64 years of bricks-and-mortar preservation work in New Bedford – aligned perfectly with the challenge. But WHALE alone could not solve the problem.

The breakthrough came when community organizations facilitated relationship-building. Reverend Lima, Executive Director of the Interchurch Council, convened "sharing evenings" where religious leaders from various denominations met informally. WHALE participated, as did the congregation's pastor, Reverend Saeed. Volunteers from Your Theatre

who had personal connections to religious community leaders attended these gatherings. These personal relationships created a foundation of trust that supported the future transactional negotiations.

Planning & Negotiations

The Long Negotiation

Between 2014 and 2017, the parties negotiated terms of the sale of the property to WHALE and leasing back space to the congregation. A preliminary purchase and sale agreement was drafted in 2014 with the actual purchase occurring in late 2017.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) and lease agreement governed the congregation's continued use of specific spaces in the building. Space was allocated specifically for the congregation's use, ensuring they had clearly defined, protected worship space.

A critical realization emerged during the negotiation that the congregation could not access the funding needed to save the building. Federal and state historic preservation grants, tax credits, and other incentive programs were unavailable to religious institutions. "The church just couldn't get the grants even though the building had historic significance," Paradis noted.

Tax credits proved to be the largest potential funding source. Shifting ownership from the congregation to a nonprofit entity – Your Theatre – became essential to accessing this financial resource.

Assessment, Zoning & Code

The Church had a full structural and existing conditions report performed in 2006 by Foley, Buhl, Roberts & Associates, which was later updated in 2016 by Peterman Architects as part of a feasibility analysis completed by WHALE and Your Theatre.

Key Dates

- **2014: Letter of Intent signed for feasibility study**
- **2015-2017: Negotiations between WHALE, Your Theatre, and church congregation**





Steeple Playhouse interior, courtesy of Your Theatre

The report and resulting plans and specifications outline the priority restoration needs of the church, while also providing improvements for ADA compliance, historical compliance, and the conversion of the main sanctuary into performing arts space.

Once a formal arrangement between the church and Your Theatre was in place, Duff and Studio2Sustain were brought in to create detailed as-built drawings – the building had no existing architectural plans. They commissioned a code report that would guide prioritization of activities and create a realistic 20-year roadmap.

The building presented dual historic challenges: the 1829 main sanctuary is wood-frame construction and an early-1900s addition is masonry.

"The building was in catastrophic condition. Windows were broken and open to the elements. Plaster had separated from ceiling trusses by as much as 18 inches. Electrical, plumbing, and HVAC systems were primitive or non-existent," said Duff.

The change in use from "house of worship" to "place of assembly for performances" triggered zoning and code requirements. The building sat at the intersection of residential and commercial zoning districts. Theater use required specific accommodations. Working with the planning and building departments, the team addressed these systematically.

WHALE and Your Theatre examined the market demand for a community theatre, black box theatre, and expanded educational programming during the business planning process. The plan surfaced the need to address a critical deficit in downtown New Bedford: the lack of a well-equipped, small-to-medium performance venue.

While major touring acts are accommodated by the larger Zeiterion Theatre, local arts groups have historically lacked permanent, climate-controlled spaces for rehearsals and intimate productions. The creation of a flexible 165-to-200-seat main sanctuary and the dedicated lower-level black box theatre would directly resolve this gap, serving both nonprofit and commercial community groups while creating an adaptable venue for private events, conferences, and intimate music showcases.

Team Formation & Financing

The core partnership consisted of three organizations:

1. Your Theatre: The end user and operator, responsible for programming and tenant viability.

2. WHALE: The preservation developer managing permits, grants, and regulatory compliance.

3. Studio2Sustain: The design firm specializing in adaptive reuse and energy efficiency.



Steeple Playhouse exterior, courtesy of Your Theatre

Weekly construction meetings and biweekly grant/budget meetings kept the entire team aligned on both physical progress and financial status.

The project pursued multiple funding streams:

- **Historic Tax Credits:** State and Federal. The single largest source, but requiring complex compliance
- **Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund:** Grants for planning and capital work

- **Community Development Block Grants (CDBG):** Creating both opportunities and constraints
- **Bridge Loans:** Necessary because tax credits only release funding after project completion

The cost of the renovation was $2.8 million. WHALE and Your Theatre's capital campaign include Your Theatre's donation of $365,000, State Historic Tax Credits of $420,000, Community Preservation Act funds of $496,400, Cultural Facilities Funds of $620,000, and a $150,000 CDBG grant. A volunteer group of union carpenters and tradesmen have also restored more than 40 historic windows providing in-kind donation of $90,000.

WHALE carried a construction bridge loan for First Baptist Church with a local bank. This covered State Historic Tax Credits of $386,400 that was awarded but wasn't placed in service until the end of the project. The loan was at 3.5% for a term of 24 months. The collateral for the loan was the State Historic Tax Credits.

"When you're going after sources of funding, you have to know what the requirements are. Does this work have to be publicly bid? Do you have to pay union wages? Some funding sources have restrictions and requirements where the cost of the requirements has to be considered," Duff said.

Design & Construction

Working with a historic structure while creating a functional theater space required constant oversight. Theaters have specific technical needs: fly space, lighting grid, sound systems, dressing rooms, etc.

The team met these needs through careful collaboration. Lighting would not hang from the original roof structure – the wood trusses could not support the weight.

Key Dates

- **Summer 2016: Feasibility study and business plan completed, Historic State Tax Credits Approved**
- **Oct 2016: Restoration project starts**

Instead, Studio2Sustain designed freestanding lighting towers.

The original ceiling plaster had separated from the trusses. Rather than removing it, the team locked the failing plaster into the old trusses and reinforced the trusses with timber lock screws every 16 inches. The ceiling was replastered over this hidden support structure.



Steeple Playhouse Jazz Fest performance by Yoron Israel, courtesy of Your Theatre. Photo: Hugh Fanning.

The 14-inch void in the 1829 structure's double walls provided an unexpected opportunity. The team filled it with insulation. Combined with interior storm panel systems and blackout panels designed for theatrical blackouts, the envelope became energy efficient.

Paradis noted: "Our operating costs are far lower than we thought they were going to be. We over budgeted on heat and electricity."

The Steeple Challenge

The steeple required significant repair. However, because a portion of the project used Community Development Block Grant funding (which mandates union shops and competitive bidding), the steeple work was subject to prevailing wage requirements. A steeplejack specialist company bid accurately but was undercut by another contractor unfamiliar with steeple repair. That contractor won the bid but then issued extensive change orders.

This became a critical lesson: funding sources that mandate competitive bidding require careful contractor qualification. Duff and her firm have since developed a four-page bid qualifying matrix to evaluate bidders on qualifications, experience, and past performance – not just price.

Operations & Stewardship

Programming & Staffing

Your Theatre operates the Steeple Playhouse with two primary program anchors 1) main stage productions produced by Your Theatre and 2) partnership programming with community organizations. The organization has chosen to prioritize its core mission and build community partnerships rather than maximize room rentals.

Rather than calling other organizations "renters," they're termed "partners." This reframing acknowledges that contributed revenue subsidizes rental rates below market, allowing partner organizations to afford the space.

Your Theatre operates with minimal paid staff and relies heavily on volunteers. A key volunteer, Larry Hubre, brought 60 years of experience working in multiple theater spaces and proved essential to theater design decisions. This saved $20,000-$30,000 in consulting fees.

Congregation Lease

The congregation occupies two floors of the building under a 30-year lease. A hard-line agreement prevents Your Theatre from using the congregation's main chapel space, ensuring they can worship undisturbed.

The spaces are sufficiently separated so that simultaneous use works well. The team intentionally avoids scheduling amplified events before noon on Sundays.

Key Dates

- **2017: Capital campaign launches, building acquired from church**
- **2019: Exterior rehabilitation complete**

Key Lessons & Insights

1. Municipal Leadership & Partnership
The project would not have happened without mayoral support and a city leadership committed to preservation. Mayor Mitchell's interest in the building's historical significance created political momentum for the project to proceed.

The collaboration between Your Theatre, WHALE, Studio2Sustain, and city government proved essential. Weekly construction meetings and biweekly budget/grant meetings kept everyone aligned.

Duff stressed: "Collaboration is not a given. It's not something you can take for granted. You have to work at it, and these projects succeed because you have collaborative leadership."

2. Relationship-Building and Trust
The Interchurch Council's role in facilitating relationship-building between the congregation and the theater company proved crucial. Personal relationships created trust where transactions alone could not.

3. Understanding Funding Implications
Every funding source carries requirements and constraints. The steeple cost overrun resulted from competitive bidding requirements meeting contractor gaming—avoidable with better contractor qualification processes.

4. Financial Projections
Paradis advised: "Diversify the opinions as much as possible on where you're getting your information for the proforma. Talk to other people from other organizations and say, 'Hey, here's what we're trying to do, and you look at my numbers and tell me what am I missing?'"

Key Dates

- **2017: Capital campaign launches, building acquired from church**
- **2019: Exterior rehabilitation complete**



Steeple Playhouse interior

5. The Long View
Miranda emphasized: "It's going to take way longer than you anticipate, and even then, if you overestimate, overestimate again. There's going to be a long time where it may appear to the outside word that nothing is happening." From 2007 (when preservation advocates first became aware) to 2023 (when the project opened) represents 16 years. Patient persistence proved essential.

6. Telling the Story Matters
Wade, coming into the project near completion, emphasized: "Don't be afraid to share the story of all of that behind-the-scenes work. You think it's super boring, but the community needs to hear that and be connected with it."

Key Dates

- **2020-23: Phases I-III of interior rehabilitation**
- **Nov 2023: Building opens as a theater**

Conclusion & Recommendations

The three projects profiled in this case study demonstrate that adaptive reuse of historic faith spaces can create vibrant cultural anchors that serve multiple constituencies and revitalize neighborhoods. All projects required patience, real estate expertise, clear-eyed financial planning, and genuine commitment to honoring both the buildings' histories and the congregations' spiritual missions.

Comparative Ownership Structures

These cases demonstrate different ownership and governance approaches suited to different contexts:

> *"Don't be afraid to share the story of all of that behind-the-scenes work. You think it's super boring, but the community needs to hear that and be connected with it."*
>
> – Opal Tener Wade, Steeple Playhouse Executive Director

José Mateo Ballet Theatre operates under a long-term lease (39 years) with no ownership transfer. The congregation retains ownership; the ballet theatre maintains operational control and has invested heavily in the building. This model works well when the congregation is stable, engaged, and committed to the partnership.

Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity follows a lease-to-own model with a 6.5 year path to ownership. The congregation receives guaranteed income during the transition, providing financial stability. Once Bombyx gains full ownership, it will have access to funding sources (like Community Preservation Act funds) that were unavailable to the congregation.

Steeple Playhouse demonstrates a preservation-developer model where WHALE brings the project across the finish line and then transfers full ownership to the operator (Your Theatre). This structure allows the preservation organization to leverage its expertise and funding access while ensuring the end-user is set up for success.

Each project chose a different path suited to its context. Yet all three share a commitment to:

- Long-term stewardship over short-term profit
- Building community relationships as foundational to the project
- Bringing diverse expertise (architectural, financial, community relations) into early planning
- Patient, transparent communication with stakeholders
- Preserving the buildings' historic character while adapting spaces for contemporary use



Rehearsal at José Mateo Ballet Theatre studio

For organizations and communities considering similar adaptive reuse projects, these three cases offer both inspiration and practical guidance. The path is long, but the outcomes – buildings preserved, communities enriched, cultural institutions thriving, and congregations intact – justify the effort.

Guidance to Others Taking on this Work

1. Start with a comprehensive building assessment.
Before committing to ownership, hire a qualified architect to create as-built drawings, a code compliance report, and a 10-to-20-year capital needs projection. This costs $10,000-30,000 but prevents far larger surprises later. "Your first call should be for an architect," said Holden.

2. Assemble diverse expertise from the beginning.
Don't wait for a crisis to engage an architect, fundraiser, or lawyer. Bring these perspectives into initial planning so financial, regulatory, leases, and design realities shape the vision rather than constraining it later. When possible, recruit team members with deep community and institutional knowledge.

3. Expect patient relationship-building.
Plan for the negotiation to take time and conduct due diligence before any formal agreement. Invest in personal relationships with congregation leaders. Use intermediary organizations (like interfaith councils) and trusted community members to build bridges. As Scott Fraser noted, "Finding committed stakeholders in the community is key."

4. Clearly allocate spaces and use rights.
Define exactly which spaces each party (congregation, arts organization, community) can use, when, and for what purposes. Put this in writing. This prevents ongoing disputes and provides the congregation with certainty about their place in the building's future.



Bombyx steeple

5. Structure ownership transfers carefully.
Consider whether long-term leases, lease-to-own agreements, or ownership transfer best serve your context. Each has implications for fundraising access, long-term stability, and alignment with mission. WHALE's approach of bringing a project to completion and then transferring ownership to the operator proved effective because it leveraged preservation expertise.

6. Understand funding implications before committing.
Different funding sources carry different requirements (prevailing wages, competitive bidding, preservation restrictions, ongoing compliance). Map out your funding strategy before construction.

7. Historic tax credits are powerful but expensive to access.
They require historic documentation, preservation compliance, third-party consultants, attorneys, and accountants. For smaller projects, the compliance costs may outweigh the benefits.

8. Build contractor qualification into contracts.
When funding mandates competitive bidding, develop a weighted matrix that evaluates not just price but qualifications, experience, and past performance. This prevents contractors from underbidding and then issuing a slew of change orders.

9. Invest in energy efficiency during restoration.
Historic buildings carry high operating costs. Seize opportunities to upgrade insulation, HVAC, windows (within preservation constraints), and lighting. This reduces long-term operating burden on operations.

10. Communicate constantly with all stakeholders.
Weekly construction meetings and biweekly grant/budget meetings prevented surprises. Keep architects, nonprofit leadership, funders, and government liaisons all informed of progress and emerging issues. This catches problems early when they're cheaper to solve.



Performance at Steeple Playhouse, courtesy of Your Theatre

11. Prepare financial projections conservatively and have others fact-check them.
Pro forma revenue projections are typically optimistic. Seek input from peer organizations, board members with financial acumen, and peer consultants.

12. Tell the story continuously.
Communities invest in projects they understand. Share behind-the-scenes work, milestone progress, and the long-term vision. As Tener Wade emphasizes, the community needs to understand not just the final product, but the years of relationship-building and perseverance that made it possible.

13. Accept that ownership structures are not permanent.
José Mateo amended its lease after 2-3 years when capital needs became clear. Bombyx negotiated a flexible MOU before formalizing the lease-to-own agreement. Steeple Playhouse took 9 years to purchase. Be prepared to revisit and revise agreements as circumstances change.

Acknowledgements

Prepared by Jay Paget, Program Director of the Cultural Facilities Fund, based on interviews and content provided in early 2026 by:

Scott Fraser, Founder and Artistic Director
José Mateo Ballet Theatre
Cambridge, MA

Cassandra Holden, Executive Director
BOMBYX Center for Arts & Equity
Florence, MA

Opal Tener Wade, Executive Director
Steeple Playhouse and Your Theatre
New Bedford, MA

Erin Miranda, Executive Director
Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE)
New Bedford, MA

Eric Paradis, Board Secretary
Your Theatre
New Bedford, MA

Kathryn Duff, Founder and Director
Studio2Sustain
New Bedford, MA

Special thanks to:

Miranda Cook, Program Officer
Mass Cultural Council
Boston, MA

Additional Resources for Adapting Buildings

- Cultural Facilities Fund
- Guide for Developing Artist Space