St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch

Short description of the project

St Leonard's Church, usually called Shoreditch Church, stands on possibly the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in England. The site is the origin of the first Roman military settlement from 46 BC. When the later 12th Century church became structurally dangerous, a new church was built and opened in 1740. This was, and is, of utmost historical importance in architecture. The Victorians vandalised it by ripping out the galleries and actually made it unstable. Bomb damage meant that by the late 20th Century the building was in perilous condition. When a new vicar appointed in 1983, it was said that the church was no longer viable: the residential population had shrunk to less than five thousand and more than a third were Bengali Muslims. The fabric was also in a very bad state.

St Leonard's cares for historically significant items such as the last great organ built by Richard Bridge, Handel's organ master. Shakespeare's actors are buried under the floor, as well as James Burbage, the first man to build a theatre in England.

The decision was to rebuild the church in as much of its original form as possible rather than demolish it. The group responsible for this included Hackney Council, English Heritage and the congregation. It is not possible to over-emphasise the historic importance of this church, yet when the decision was made to keep the building the VAT rate was being argued. It was acknowledged that it would be cheaper to build a brand new church rather than repair the current structure but nevertheless it was agreed that saving and restoring the church was of prime importance.

The aim of the project was not to build a museum: there had to be a recovery of an important building that would be of value to the community today. The project cost in the region of £1.2 million; since then another £750,000 has been spent on rebuilding the roof. English Heritage has contributed about 65% of total costs.

What would have happened without this project?

If the church had not been saved, it would have been mostly demolished. The site could have been reused, but it would have given very limited use. The gardens hold many thousands of human remains and must not be disturbed.

Rescuing the church also rescued two major projects:

1. The Spitalfields Music Festival. The festival would have ended because of the closure of St Leonards, now it has become an intensely community orientated festival (twice yearly) and has achieved an astonishing educational program.
2. The Crypt Trust. This Trust was going to fold but the project offered to build them a new purpose designed building close to the church if they could

hibernate for two years. Now they have a 17 bed rehabilitation facility plus a large space for retraining experience. They manage the drop in and use the offices and meeting rooms.

What has the project achieved, or difference has it made?

The church now has nearly ten thousand users a year this ranging from top professionals to happy amateurs. There are two narcotic anonymous groups, an alcoholic anonymous group, a drop-in centre catering for the homeless and a carer's support group. There is not a week when a non-regular group does not use the building. There is also significant office space that houses the administration of some charities.

Shoreditch now has a rapidly expanding population and is a hub for new industry, home to the Silicon Roundabout. The residential population is over 11,000 and is planned to rise a further 6,000 within eight years. 20,000 people work here and an astonishing 40,000 use the area for its night-time economy. The building is at the centre of all this.

The popular BBC television comedy was filmed here, a series which is now shown worldwide. Although most people realise that it is not about St Leonard's priest or the project itself, it is very much the story of the church building and its environment. It shows painfully how a church can have so few resources that a massive building cannot be sustained.

There is now a prayerful and holy church in the heart of Shoreditch.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges overcome?

The first important lesson is to get a group of users, funders and permission givers to work together at the earliest opportunity. The second is to have an enormous contingency amount in reserve. It is not easy to raise contingency funds but our unforeseen problems will inevitably arise. Finally, it is important not to make any major changes after a project has started: if it is wrong at the beginning, cut your losses and terminate if possible.

What is the future of the project?

The church building is now in a good condition for another century. Even when some users finish their work and projects, there is a long queue of new occupants. This will be of immeasurable value to this community for many years. It will cost around 90,000 a year to keep the building open. St Leonard's are currently working on a project to further retrieve the Georgian building by restoring the bricked up windows and would like to paint the interior. The biggest ambition is to reopen that part of the crypt that will allow access onto the 12th century floor.

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