



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Gillette State Children's Hospital, West Wing St. Paul, MN A Case Study in Reuse

Address 987 East Ivy Ave.
St. Paul, MN 55106

Date of Study September 1989

Date of Construction 1925

Owner City of St. Paul
Mn Humanities Commission leases the space

Cost of Study \$15,500

Sponsors City of St. Paul, SHPO, with a CLG grant
from the federal Historic Preservation Fund

**Projected Rehab
Costs** \$2.8 million

Actual Rehab Costs \$2.8 million

Past Use Education building for physically disabled
children

Current Use Retreat center and offices for Minnesota Humanities Commission



Background:

The Gillette State Children's Hospital was established in 1887 to provide free care for children with disabilities. Over the years the campus grew to include a diverse collection of buildings including this Spanish Colonial-style education building built in 1925, featuring stucco walls, a red clay tile roof and central arched portico with marble columns.

In 1977, as demand for its services diminished, the agency relocated to smaller quarters in downtown St. Paul. All vacant buildings on the old campus except were razed for the West Wing, or education building, seen by area residents as worthy of preservation. The City of St. Paul, which owned the property, and the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) attempted,

without success, to find tenants for the building. After a small fire set by vandals, the city proposed demolition in 1989.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Historical Society had deemed the West Wing eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the City of St. Paul designated the property under the provisions of the local preservation ordinance. That allowed the HPC to deny a request for a demolition permit. Once again under pressure from the HPC to find alternative uses for the property, the City of St. Paul brought in a task force to conduct a feasibility study.

The Reuse Study: Process and Conclusions

To help fund the \$15,500 study, the City of St. Paul received a CLG grant from the State Historic Preservation Office, awarded from the Minnesota SHPO's share of the federal Historic Preservation Fund. The four members of the reuse study team brought to the project their expertise in preservation architecture, development consulting, historical architecture, and preservation planning. After touring the building, its surrounding property and the Lake Phalen neighborhood, the team conducted a series of interviews with neighborhood residents, developers, realtors, bankers, city officials and District 5 Community Council Representatives.

From this input the team produced a report with its recommendations and suggested strategies. Recommendations for future use of the property focused on low-intensity uses such as assisted living for the elderly or office space. Assisted living was seen as most compatible with seniors housing nearby; the building would also serve as a "dignified office environment," the team noted. Total rehabilitation costs for private development, including architect fees, developer fees and site work, were projected at \$2.8 million.

The wait for a suitable tenant lasted several years.

Current Building Use

In February 1993 the Minnesota Humanities Commission (MHC), searching for new quarters, toured the Gillette building. Shortly thereafter, the organization decided to develop the property as a residential educational center for its teacher outreach programs – a use well suited to the West Wing's original design and floor plan as an educational facility. Light, airy interior spaces and a central location in a serene, lakeside setting would create an ideal environment for the Commission's conferences, seminars and retreats.



At a cost of approximately \$2.5 million, the MHC restored the West Wing with little alteration to its interior spaces, making practical use of already existing classrooms, library and auditorium. The latter two spaces were expanded to accommodate large receptions, meetings and dinners. Even the building's intricate detailing works well with the Humanity Commission's focus: Plaster figures and wooden carvings depict people reading and playing instruments, and scenes from American History are painted on decorative tiles.

The old Gillette Hospital site has indeed proven an ideal location for the organization's programs in family literacy training, teacher development and elder learning, all of which further the MHC mission to provide leadership, resources and programs that advance the study of humanities and enhance the work of schools, colleges and cultural organization throughout the state.

The MHC continues to lease the building from the City of St. Paul.

