

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 2020

Building a New Sanctuary on Long Island for Culture Lovers

In Sag Harbor, April Gornik and Eric Fischl are converting a former church into a community arts center.

By DOROTHY SPEARS

Almost two years ago, the married artists April Gornik, 67, and Eric Fischl, 72, bought a deconsecrated white clapboard church in Sag Harbor, N.Y., a former whaling village on the East End of Long Island, where they have lived for more than three decades. Inspired by its stone foundation, rare in an area with mostly sandy soil, and the craftsmanship of its soaring rafters, the couple were loath to see yet another local building become an opulent private home.

Eager to draw upon Sag Harbor's history — the village is home to a vibrant and longstanding African-American community and Long Island's first synagogue, and is a haven for artists and writers — Ms. Gornik and Mr. Fischl have transformed the church into a community arts center and artists' residency.

The conversion of the Sag Harbor United Methodist Church has been a labor of love for the couple, who sold their lofts in SoHo to raise money for the project. It is also the latest and most ambitious of their arts-related initiatives in the area. For the Sag Harbor Partnership, Ms. Gornik has already researched a number of walking-tour apps, one featuring the local cemetery, where George Balanchine, Spalding Gray and James Salter were laid to rest.

And when the Sag Harbor Cinema burned down in December 2016, the couple led the campaign to buy and rebuild it. The new state-of-the-art cinema replicates the original's Art Deco facade and neon sign. It will open to the public once gatherings are again deemed safe.



The windows of the Church, a new arts center in a former Methodist church in Sag Harbor, N.Y., will feature portraits of creative figures historically associated with the village, including Herman Melville, seen here in a sketch by Eric Fischl.

The Church — as the new center is known — is a valentine to bygone eras, when Herman Melville haunted the town's docks and local bars; John Steinbeck relaxed by a wood-burning fire in Harbor Cove with his dog, Charley; Langston Hughes read poems aloud on a friend's porch; and the sculptor and performance artist Gordon Matta-Clark inhaled fragrant breezes in his mother's garden. It represents the couple's effort to restore Sag Harbor as a beacon



The site in January. Michael Heller.

for all artists.

Following are excerpts from an interview with the couple in their home in January. They have been edited and condensed.

Let's start with a brief history of the Church.

APRIL GORNIK It was built in 1832 as a Methodist church, and it was originally located on High Street, way up top of a hill that overlooked Sag Harbor. It was moved down to its present location on 48 Madison Street in 1864.

ERIC FISCHL It was deconsecrated about a dozen years ago and bought by a developer, who wanted to turn it into condominiums. When that didn't work out, an interior designer tried to use it as a studio and a showroom for her hand-painted wallpaper and design products. She found out very quickly that the building was severely compromised due to age — apparently, the tower leaned six degrees out into the street. Then somebody came along and put lots of money into reinforcing the structure, ex-



Eric Fischl and April Gornik inside the partly renovated church in 2018. Michael Heller.

pecting to turn it into a luxury home. But unfortunately, he and his wife broke up and he no longer had a use for his dream home. So it went back on the market.

What was your first impression when you saw it?

FISCHL On the ground floor, when I walked in, I saw these 11-foot stone walls with windows in them. My first thought was, “This is amazing!” The stones were fantastic. And there was this wonderful combination of openness and weight. The ceiling was covered, and the upstairs was full of scaffolding, so for a while you couldn’t tell how incredible the rafters were, but you could sense the bones were beautifully put together. The craftsmanship back then was remarkable. The 50-foot roof beams were hand hewn.

GORNIK It’s really amazing to see it all opened up. At the very top, there are two giant joists initialed by workers from 1864.

FISCHL One of the reasons Sag Harbor became a shipbuilding town was because there were forests of 100-foot white pines here, and white pine grows straight. So for masts, they were ideal.

GORNIK True to form, people decimated them. Decimated and didn’t replant.

So you basically bought a shell?

FISCHL With some wonderful structural integrity to it. And that became a goal of our design: to see the structure as the finished product. Our architect, Lee Skolnick, refers to this type of job as archaeological architecture.

How did you go about choosing an architect?

GORNIK In 1985, we bought our first home here, a little farmhouse on Harrison Street. A year or so later, we were looking for someone to renovate it. The artist Susan Rothenberg, who then had a place on Burke Street, said,

“Oh, you should use my architect, he’s really great. He lets you draw on all of his drawings.”

FISCHL That was Lee. Since then we’ve used his firm for numerous projects.

GORNIK Including this house. Lee has also worked on a number of public spaces. He’s been wonderfully generous in contributing most of his fees.

FISCHL We’re all acting in good faith, which seems perfect for a project in a church.

So, it’s just the two of you funding it?

GORNIK Right now, yes, but we’re establishing a new 501(c)3 — a kind of public charity, which means that donations are tax deductible, and the money goes to the programming and operations moving forward. The plan is to finish construction and open as soon as safety and public health allow it.

Why do you see Sag Harbor as a good fit for a community center of this kind?

FISCHL When the cinema was being rebuilt, one thing that was so inspiring to me was that, of the \$8 million raised for the purchase price, a million of that came from small donations, which meant that the base for this effort was broad and popular. The Sag Harbor cinema represented part of the identity of the town. And that got me thinking. If you have the cinema bringing in all kinds of interesting films, and doing educational programming, there’s an opportunity to reinforce that with other cultural programs elsewhere.

GORNIK If you do a little research into Sag Harbor, you come across these wild stories about how resilient the town is, and how people didn’t give up after fires and floods and blizzards and the collapse of whole economies.

FISCHL It’s a small town that has impacted the larger world. That’s in the DNA of this place. There’s always been an arts



A support inscribed with the date 1864 inside the building. Michael Heller



The bell tower has been lit to honor front-line workers during the pandemic.

culture here because the town is, on some level, inherently cosmopolitan.

Did you weigh in with the public about your plans?

FISCHL I organized two panels to talk about various aspects of the art ecosystem in this area. They weren't specifically about the Church. They were co-sponsored by Guild Hall and the Church.

GORNIK Eric said, "We have to stop thinking about art as art. We have to start thinking about how the Church can bring creativity to the community on a larger scale."

FISCHL With art, everyone thinks if they can't draw a straight line then they're not an artist. Our feeling is that art happens

way down the road, but there's a lot in between that is stimulating and enriching, individually and collectively. We're hoping to do a combination of programming that is based on creativity exercises and activities. We're going to do exhibitions, conferences, lectures, demonstrations. We also see residents adding a level of stimulation to the artists' community out here, and creating an energy for the town.

How much space have you set aside for the artists' residency?

FISCHL There are four residences in back, plus a small kitchen and a dining area. And four studios.

As artists yourselves, what do you consider fundamental to include in an artist's studio?

FISCHL I actually don't know what other artists need. What I've found is that every artist has a different practice. We don't know what medium the residents will be working in, whether they'll be a composer, or a visual artist, etc. What we're trying to do is create flexible work spaces. There will be movable walls, so you can expand or shrink the space, and plenty of outlets for computers and different kinds of lighting or power equipment or whatever might be needed. To a large extent, we're still in the "build it, and they will come" stage.

How will you go about picking the residents?

FISCHL We are not going to do it by application. We are going to seek out recommenders who will find people in their various fields, and we will ask them if they'd like to come. It is still very much in the discussion phase.

GORNIK The bottom floor just feels like an incubator to me. It feels like the right place to do any creative act. Then there's a mezzanine off which there will be a small library.

FISCHL The building used to be a meeting place for Alcoholics Anonymous.

GORNIK And the Rainbow School, a very popular local preschool, used to be there.

FISCHL So it has all of that energy still in it, an energy that has served people in need. And I think that's the nature of a church, anyway.