



What can you do with an abandoned building? Build an Epic Cat Fort!

👤 Amanda Waltz 🕒 January 16, 2017 📁 Business & Tech News

When Phillip Rhodes bought the historic St. Clement Church and school in the borough of Tarentum, he knew he wanted to do something creative with the 43,000-square-foot property. After considering a number of options, including bringing in trampolines or travel trailers, he settled on creating one very large cat fort (<http://epiccatfort.com/>).

"I love building things and this was something so outlandish that it tickled my fancy to think about it," says Rhodes, a software engineer who resides in Highland Park.

Dubbed the Epic Cat Fort, the undertaking would serve as a temporary art installation in the 3,000-square-foot church. Rhodes believes the project could generate necessary support to turn the long-neglected church and school into The Clement, a mixed-use space and event venue (<http://theclement.com/>).



Artistic rendering of Epic Cat Fort. Image courtesy of Epic Cat Fort.

Founded in 1903 as a Slovak parish, St. Clement Church and its adjoining private school, Holy Martyrs, have stood abandoned for nearly 20 years. In 2015, Rhodes purchased the church and school for around \$55,000 and has since poured around \$90,000 into renovating both spaces. He also received financial assistance from the Allegheny-Kiski Valley Historical Society (<http://akvhs.org/>).

Rhodes envisions turning the three-story school into a “community-based arts organization” where artists can rent out the 15 classrooms located within. The church would serve as a resource for tenants and the public to use for a variety of events, from art shows to weddings.

The Clement website states that plans for the project also include providing office space for local businesses and functioning as Tarentum Tech, the “soon-to-be home of leading technical entrepreneurs.”



School room in The Clement. Image courtesy of The Clement.

Rhodes believes The Clement could play a role in revitalizing Tarentum, a part of Allegheny County he says qualifies as “economically distressed.” Once an industrial center that produced plate glass and bottles, the town has recently struggled with blighted properties like St. Clement.

“What I really wanted to do was have an impact and see what we could do that’s sustainable and would create jobs,” says Rhodes, adding that the idea was inspired by the Union Project, the formerly abandoned East Liberty church that was transformed into a thriving art and event space.

While the school is nearly complete, the church still requires more work to make it event-ready. Rhodes sees the Epic Cat Fort as an opportunity to bring attention to The Clement and help raise more funds for its renovation. He plans on launching a Kickstarter once enough interest has been generated, and is in talks to receive a \$400,000 funding package from the Allegheny County Department of Economic Development.

So far, the Epic Cat Fort has received plenty of public support. The Pittsburgh-based recycling nonprofit Construction Junction (<http://www.cjreuse.org/>) donated cardboard tubes for the fort’s construction and Animal Rescue League (<http://www.animalrescue.org/>) will provide adoptable cats to play in it during the opening event.

Rhodes and his team also need volunteers (<http://epiccatfort.com/volunteer/>) to build, design or sponsor the fort.

“There are a lot of different things that we can divvy up and make it into a really cool project,” says Rhodes.

The Epic Cat Fort grand reveal will take place during The Clement’s soft launch on March 15, 2017.

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