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KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR OFFICE-TO-HIGHER EDUCATION FACILITY CONVERSIONS

By Dan Sullivan, AIA

SINCE THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, office-to-alternative-use conversions have become a recurring subject of urban development discourse. Office utilization rates across major U.S. cities remain below 50%, with vacancy rates exceeding 27% in San Francisco and 16% in New York. This surplus of underutilized space has inspired a wave of proposals—most commonly residential conversions—but these often stall due to challenges inherent in adapting office buildings for housing: zoning regulations, floorplate dimensions, access to light and air, and vertical circulation constraints.

In contrast, higher education facilities present programmatic and spatial use cases that align more readily with the typical characteristics of commercial office buildings. While residential conversions often require significant reconfiguration of the building's structure and systems, many of the demands of academic institutions can be met within existing office typologies.

Programmatic Compatibility

There is a functional overlap between the contemporary office and the higher education environment. Both rely on a mix of individual and collaborative spaces, meeting rooms, support areas, and amenities. Activities such as research, teaching, team-based learning, and student services map relatively easily onto the spatial vocabulary of office design.

In parallel, the urban context that supports commercial activity also benefits educational institutions. Proximity to transit, services, and industry is attractive to students—particularly graduate and continuing education populations—and the presence of students contributes to the economic and cultural vitality of business districts. Many universities, including USC, Penn, Northeastern, ASU, UC Berkeley, and UCLA, have already expanded into urban centers to increase visibility, diversify revenue streams, and reach broader student populations.

THE LONG-TERM SUCCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS—PARTICULARLY IN AN INCREASINGLY URBANIZED, RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED, AND FLEXIBLE WORLD—DEPENDS IN PART ON THEIR ABILITY TO ADAPT.

Assessing the Existing Structure

The viability of a conversion project depends heavily on the characteristics of the building being converted. Initial assessments should focus on the structural grid, core configuration, egress, vertical conveyance systems, electrical capacity, mechanical system layout and capacity, and other building characteristics such as percentage of open facade and clear floor heights. These elements establish the basic framework within which programmatic and technical systems must operate and can determine the feasibility of a conversion.

Newer office buildings, especially those in urban high- and mid-rise categories, often feature deep floorplates with centralized or side-core layouts. These layouts tend to accommodate academic programs well, supporting both compartmentalized and open-plan configurations. The adaptability of these floorplates becomes particularly valuable when planning for infrastructure-intensive uses, such as laboratories or technical learning environments, which demand robust MEP systems and often higher structural load capacities. In many cases, office buildings already meet or exceed these requirements.

Of course, not every office building will be immediately compatible with a conversion—often requiring upgrades that under-

ILLUSTRATION: CHATGPT

mine the feasibility of early-stage financial models. Legacy systems may not comply with current code, existing structural elements may limit layout options, and unanticipated conditions can complicate construction timelines and budgets. Despite these limitations, adaptive reuse remains a compelling option for both environmental and experiential reasons. The embodied carbon savings associated with avoiding demolition and new construction are significant, and when thoughtfully executed, conversions can offer strong ROI across cost, lifecycle performance, and social impact metrics. Additionally, a well selected building, in the right location, can connect students with buildings of character in places that offer more diverse experiences than isolated university campuses can.

Institutional Identity and Urban Integration

Higher education facilities often carry a distinct architectural identity that supports institutional branding and recruitment. Converted office buildings may not conform to traditional campus aesthetics; however, location and context frequently outweigh form in determining the success of off-campus expansions. In many cases, urban satellite facilities are selected not for their architectural distinction, but for their strategic placement within a city's fabric.

These locations—often in close proximity to industry clusters, research institutions, and public transit—support experiential learning and foster connections between academia and the broader economy. In cities like New York and San Francisco, adaptive reuse projects allow institutions to integrate into their surrounding communities more fully, breaking down the physical and symbolic boundaries that often separate campus life from urban life.

By reconsidering the concept of a campus as a decentralized, embedded network of spaces, institutions can increase visibility, accessibility, and relevance while reducing environmental impact and capital expenditure.

Designing for Adaptability

Future-proofing is an essential consideration in any conversion project. The pace of change in education—from pedagogy to technology to enrollment patterns—requires environments that are inherently flexible. Buildings should be designed to accommodate a range of uses over time, reducing the need for major renovations or disruptive retrofits.

In this context, spatial adaptability is critical. Learning spaces should support a range of activities, from lectures to group work to independent study, with flexible partition and furniture systems, acoustical privacy, and integrated technology. While specialization (e.g., for labs or studios) is often necessary, general-purpose spaces should be designed to accommodate multiple modes of use today and in the future.

Libraries offer one of the clearest examples of how institutional typologies evolve in response to shifting pedagogical and technological demands. Technology has made libraries themselves somewhat less relevant as the volume required to house information shrinks. However, the buildings themselves now support student-focused learning: open collaboration zones, quiet study areas, and small meeting rooms were introduced, while the physical collection remained accessible but no longer dominated the space. In other areas, technology is changing lectures with more distance learning. So the most predictable outcome for university building typologies is evolution and our buildings should be able to respond.

A Shared Operational Logic

At their core, both office environments and academic settings are organized around similar operational needs: spaces for concentrated work, areas for collaboration, support zones for circulation and services. While specific requirements differ by program and discipline, the baseline functionality is remarkably aligned. This makes office buildings a strong foundation for institutional adaptation.

Conclusion

The long-term success of higher education institutions—particularly in an increasingly urbanized, resource-constrained, and flexible world—depends in part on their ability to adapt. The same is true of buildings. Few buildings continue to serve the purpose they were originally designed for over their full lifespan. By prioritizing adaptive reuse and designing with future change in mind, we can better align our built environment with evolving educational, environmental, and economic realities.

Office-to-higher-ed conversions are not only feasible—they may be one of the most strategic ways for institutions to grow, diversify, and contribute to a more resilient urban future.

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