

The Boston Globe

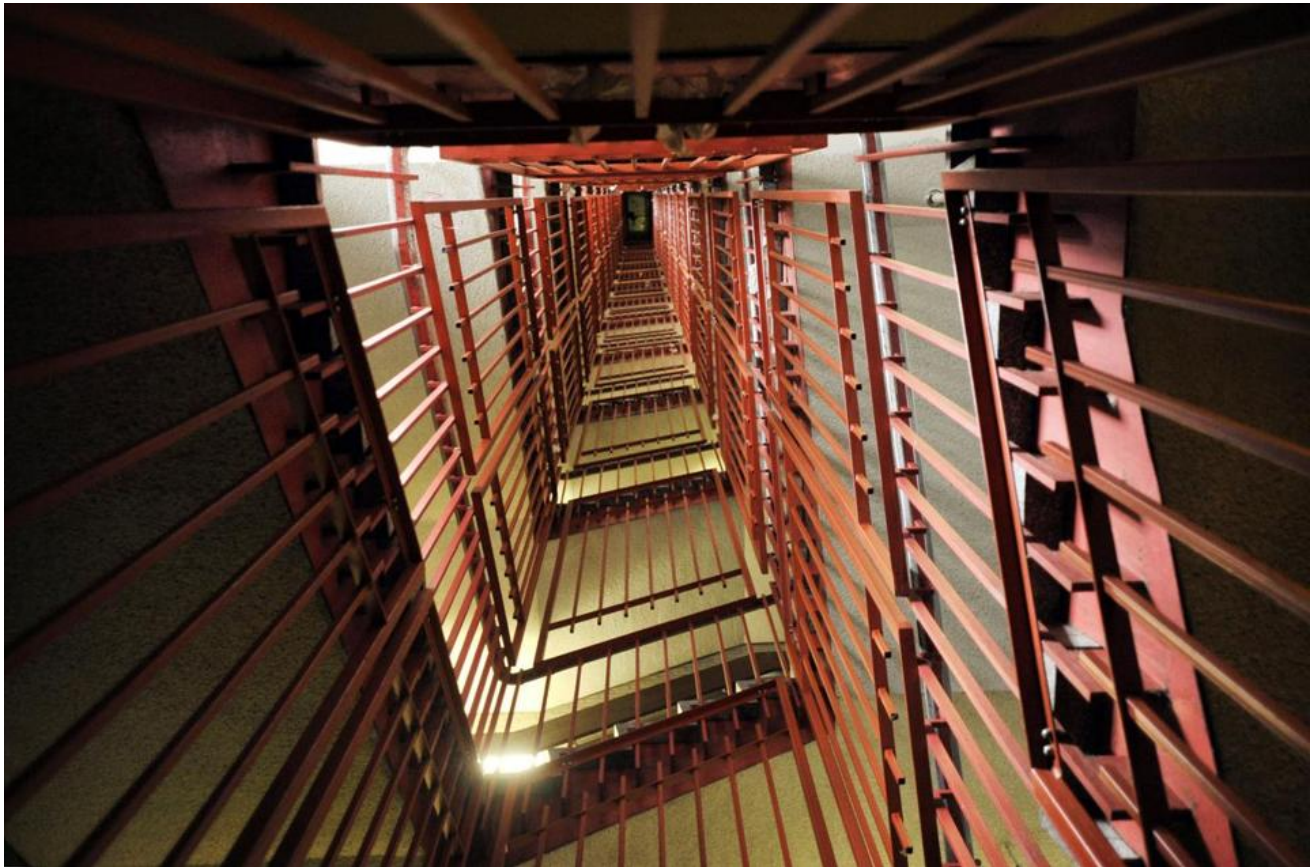
# Lifestyle

G COVER

## Anybody want to buy a used jail?

For sale: 22-story high-rise, mostly abandoned, walking distance to Kendall Square. Prisoners not included.

By Linda Matchan | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 21, 2012



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**A stairwell in the old Middlesex County courthouse building in East Cambridge, which is for sale - including the jail on the top floors.**

CAMBRIDGE — The ad describes the property at 40 Thorndike St. as “an exciting and rare opportunity for private investment.”

It's a state-owned high-rise building for sale in East Cambridge, boasting "unimpeded views" of the Charles River. An easy walk to Kendall Square. "Notable" proximity to historic Bulfinch Square.

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Buried in fine print, though, is a small detail about the nearly 40-year-old building, the former Middlesex County Edward J. Sullivan Courthouse. The top four floors of the 22-story building are the Middlesex Jail, and it's full of prisoners.

Herein lies the thorny predicament facing the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: How to unload a building considered such a white elephant that the Cambridge city manager said it should be "imploded." What happens to the prisoners? And how does an architect contend with a labyrinth of 8-by-10-foot cells, a fortress-like "chow hall," narrow windows that impede those unimpeded views of the Charles, and floor after floor of abandoned courtrooms? To say nothing of the asbestos.

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It's a situation faced by an increasing number of communities, particularly those with older jails that are now long past their prime.

"Jails are not first and foremost things cities and states want to build, and they're kept in use for much longer than they should have been," said Gary Johnson of architecture firm Cambridge Seven Associates. He was the lead architect in the redevelopment of the former Charles Street Jail, built in 1851 and now home of the Liberty Hotel.

Johnson was also a consultant in the redevelopment of the Litchfield Jail in Litchfield, Conn., built in 1814. It went out to bid in 2010 and remains without a tenant.

“Jails have a way of closing people in and when you go in there it’s kind of hard to envision any type of uses,” said Perley Grimes, president of the Greater Litchfield Preservation Trust. “Frankly, you have to be very, very visionary in order to see what could be done.”

### **A jail with charm**

That’s easier when a jail has selling points such as history or charm. The Charles Street Jail was such an example. Designed by one of New England’s foremost architects, Gridley James Fox Bryant, it features a breathtaking rotunda, arched windows, and lots of natural sunlight. Likewise, the Old Salem Jail near downtown Salem, built in 1813 and later enlarged by Gridley Bryant, was in 2010 converted into luxury apartments and a restaurant with the cheeky name Great Escape.

But charm is something thing the Middlesex Jail lacks.

“It doesn’t have the grand Draconian look of the Charles Street Jail,” said Sheriff Peter J. Koutoujian. “It’s more like a modern Draconian look.”

It’s got other strikes against it, too. Inmates, for example — about 400 men awaiting trial and bail hearings for everything from shoplifting to first-degree murder.

Plans are underway to relocate them by the end of 2013, according to the Division of Capital Asset Management (DCAM), which is overseeing the sale for the state. But a spokesman for the sheriff’s office said there are no specifics in place so far. (There is however an escape clause – for buyers, not inmates – in the purchase and sale agreement. The deal can be canceled if the jail isn’t empty.)

Empty or not, the building itself — a dour concrete tower near the CambridgeSide Galleria — is anything but beloved.

“It’s been a blight on the neighborhood ever since it was built,” said Chris Matthews, vice president of the East Cambridge Planning Team, a neighborhood group. “It has completely dead street frontage on all four sides, which creates enormous wind and snow drifts. . . . This is something you would never wish upon your worst enemy.”

Built between 1966 and 1974, the high-rise housed the Middlesex Superior, District, and Juvenile courts, the district attorney’s office, and a law library. By 2008 they were gone, relocated to Woburn, Medford, and Cambridge. Last year DCAM announced it would try to sell 40 Thorndike St. to a private developer, saying it would cost too much to remove the asbestos.

Today it’s a hollow, grim shell of its former bustling self, and in real estate lingo, it doesn’t show well. It’s mostly empty, save a few remnants of the unhappy business of the court. Rows of hard benches in courtrooms. A hole punched through a waiting room wall. A sculpture-like jumble of metal file drawers (“Criminal, 1973”) piled high in what was once the law library. A wall clock with hands stuck a minute before 12.

## **The tenants**

Upstairs, the jail lives on, off limits to anyone signed up for site tours “for security reasons,” according to Dana Harrell, DCAM’s acting deputy commissioner.

“It’s like it’s own little city here,” Jail Superintendent Scott Brazis said.

A city with infrastructure problems. It’s overcrowded, built for 160 inmates but holding more than double that number. There is no air conditioning. Elevators often don’t work, including at critical times such as July 5, 2009, when a jail uprising led to flooding and the evacuation of nearly 200 inmates. The elevator broke down so the last 32 prisoners were led down the stairs in handcuffs.

Still, both Brazis and Sheriff Koutoujian sound wistful about the prospect of leaving.

“I tell you, the views are spectacular,” said Brazis, during a tour of the lockup with a reporter, which included a stop in the 19th-floor chow hall.

“You can see the Zakim and everything. And the Chuck,” he added. “Some people call it the Charles. Here we call it the Chuck.”

“It could be the cafe for a biotech company,” said Koutoujian, a personable former state representative from Waltham who became sheriff last year.

There’s also a chapel, which a security guard unlocks. “Stunning,” said Brazis. “You’d never know you’re in jail.”

It has curved brick walls, a large skylight, and a balcony.

“This is an oasis,” said Koutoujian. Inmates get visits from priests, imams, and rabbis, and the sheriff hopes it will remain a chapel, “or something that preserves the spirit of what it stands for. Something respectful of all the good work that was done here.”

And the 140 cells? “They could [offer] good work cubicles for the right employer,” he added.

Not far away, a den of stark steel caves is known, redundantly, as the “Isolation/Segregation” unit. There’s only one inmate today, furiously peddling a stationary bike under a guard’s watchful eye.

“Hello, Mr. Mortimer,” Koutoujian said.

“Hello,” the man said pleasantly.

The man on the bike is Thomas Mortimer IV, the Winchester man charged with the grisly 2010 murder of his wife, mother-in-law, and two young children ages 2 and 4.

“He looks like someone I’d invite over for lunch,” the sheriff said, dryly.

### **Potential buyers . . . denied**

When DCAM issued a request for proposals from developers last November, about 75 developers and financiers toured the building. In the end only eight firms submitted bids to redevelop it, including the HYM Investment Group, and Trinity Financial,

whose team waxed lyrical about the possibilities in a letter to DCAM.

“The hulking, brutalist exterior of this high rise behemoth on the Cambridge skyline will be transformed into a more visually appealing residential high rise building,” the group wrote. “The heavy jail floors at the top of the building will be replaced with the selective use of curtain wall elements and recesses in the facade that are finished in glass with exterior balconies and greeneries.”

The HYM Investment group had a different plan, combining townhouse-style housing, retail, and office space. As for the jail, it would be lopped off, “to take off some of the height,” said managing director Thomas O’Brien.

But as it turned out, the jail got an 11th-hour stay.

In March, DCAM unexpectedly announced it was rejecting all eight redevelopment proposals. A spokesperson declined to elaborate but said the agency is starting the bid process over again.

“It’s extremely disappointing to us,” said Matthews, of the neighborhood group. “The prisoners are still in it. And it remains a blight on the neighborhood.”

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