

# Old church makes a divine house



## Family renovates historic building in Highland Park

BY ERIC HERMAN  
Staff Reporter

This year, Michael and Dana Pinsel celebrated Rosh Hashanah — the Jewish New Year — in a church.

The Pinsels and their children have lived in a converted century-old church since July, when contractors finished a nearly two-year renovation of the Highland Park property. But for the Pinsels, the move was not about architectural novelty or real estate bragging rights. It was about their 11-year-old son, Jeremy.

The Pinsels' elder son is mildly autistic and suffers from a neuromuscular disorder called hyper-tonia. In looking for a new house, they sought a place where it would be easy for Jeremy to socialize and become a part of the community.

"What we tried to do was project into the future and decide where the best place for our family would be," said Michael Pinsel, 40, a lawyer with the Chicago firm Sidley Austin. When their search started in 2003, the Pinsels lived in northwest suburban Buffalo Grove.

### Good for socializing

They scoured the weekend real estate ads with specific requirements in mind. They wanted to be near a business district and mass transit so Jeremy, as he got older, could go places on his own without driving. They also wanted space for an indoor pool, since swimming gives Jeremy a means to socialize with other disabled kids and with non-disabled kids, including his brother Jacob, 9.

The best home, Michael Pinsel said, would give Jeremy "a good social atmosphere."

While looking at another home in north suburban Highland Park, the Pinsels met builder Mark Fettner of Fettner Development & Construction. They told him what they were looking for, and Fettner mentioned the First Church of Christ, Scientist, at 493 Hazel



The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Highland Park is seen in 1941 (at top) and today, after the Pinsel family renovated it. The steeple was removed and a second floor added.



The Pinsel family (from left), Jacob, 9, Dana, Michael and Jeremy, 11, moved into the house in July.

—JOHN J. KIM/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

Ave., in the heart of downtown Highland Park.

The building had long since ceased to be a functioning church. In the hands of a private owner, it had stood vacant for 10 years. Highland Park officials were eager to have someone put it to use again, Michael Pinsel said, since it stands next to City Hall.

Other potential buyers wanted to turn the 12,000-square-foot church into offices or a gym.

When the Pinsels first saw it, disarray dominated the church's interior. The windows were broken. Graffiti and lewd drawings bedecked the walls. The basement ceiling was collapsing. They saw the possibilities, though, and

decided to buy it.

Designed by architect Solon Spencer Beman and built in 1904, the church is part of a historic district. Beman made his mark on Chicago by designing the Pullman community, later incorporated into the city. He also designed the Fine Arts Building at 410 S. Michigan Ave., the Blackstone Public Library and several buildings in the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

### \$1 million in renovations

The Pinsels made the purchase contingent on Highland Park officials approving the changes they wanted. Their plan called for removing the steeple, building a garage, demolishing and rebuilding the rear, building a screened-in porch and adding a second floor — something the high

ceilings could accommodate. Michael Pinsel appeared before Highland Park's city council three times. In the end, officials approved the changes, and the Pinsels bought the property in 2004 for \$795,000.

Fettner's renovations cost over \$1 million, Michael Pinsel said. But the cost and the long wait have been worth it. "It's turned out really nicely," he said. "The community reaction has been very positive."

The few signs the building was once a church — the altar, the pipes from the church organ and the steeple — are gone. But that has not stopped people from making design suggestions. "I've had people ask, 'What did you do with the bell tower?'" Michael Pinsel said. "There was none. People say, 'Why don't you put one in?'"

cherman@suntimes.com