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Valerie Capone, Marketing Communications + PR Manager

C 781.720.9906 T 617.889.4402 E vcapone@architecturalteam.com

Abandoned Boiler Building Yields Dramatic Duplex Lofts at Historic Factory Near Boston

Exemplifying the national trend of adaptive reuse, The Architectural Team announces the completion of The Watermill Lofts, the final phase of the Baker Chocolate Factory development, an adapted historic mill complex that has become a vibrant, mixed-income community. A derelict boiler building has been converted into 17 new luxury apartments with high ceilings, exposed brick and beams, and river views.

Chelsea, MA, February 23, 2011 – The award-winning architecture and master planning firm The Architectural Team has announced the opening of The Watermill at Baker Chocolate Factory, the dramatic final chapter in transforming the former mill complex into a lively, revitalized community of artists, families, seniors, and mixed-income residents. The project exemplifies the national trend of adaptive reuse projects.

Located close to Boston in Dorchester Lower Mills, the new Watermill loft units are big, bright multilevel units spanning the tall, arched windows of the historic factory's powerhouse. The apartments average 1,250 square feet each, with dramatic interior staircases and views out to the Neponset River and other nearby converted buildings built between 1891 and 1906.

The completion of The Watermill caps 25 years of planning and development of the Baker Chocolate Factory complex, transforming the defunct factory into an economic engine that has revitalized Dorchester Lower Mills and attracted new shops, cafés, pharmacies, and destination restaurants. The Architectural Team has served as architect for the conversion projects and interiors from the beginning.

“Watching this project transform the neighborhood while preserving the history and collective memory of Dorchester has been a profound honor,” says Robert J. Verrier, AIA, principal of The Architectural Team. “With the addition of Watermill, we’re able to accommodate new residents seeking a fashionable lifestyle mixed with classic New England industrial history.”

The 17 units, which fit into the old Watermill boiler building like interlocking puzzle pieces, expand the Lofts at Lower Mills residential complex to nearly 130,000 square feet. Residents began moving into their units in late January, and a few remain on the market, according to WinnDevelopment, the Boston-based real estate firm.



From the outside, the Watermill projects the historical, utilitarian feeling of the 100-year-old Baker Chocolate Factory on the Neponset River. Yet the defunct boiler house (right) has new interiors offering bright, luxurious living spaces within duplex lofts with large windows. Photo Credit: Andy Ryan

“We began work on the Baker Mill and Carriage House redevelopments in 2007, using both state and federal historic tax credits to help ensure their beauty and historic significance would be sensitively preserved,” says Larry Curtis, president of Winn Development. “We selected The Architectural Team based on their strong track record in converting historic New England mills into marketable yet historically sensitive properties.”

Energy efficiency, comfort and charm

The Watermill apartments also reflect The Architectural Team’s deep knowledge of adapting historic structures to exploit their inherent charm while making them energy efficient, sustainable and elegant. The adaptive reuse project preserved the historic exterior and 30-foot-tall arched windows of the old boiler building, offering 12- to 20-foot-high ceilings and exposed brick and beams in the finished units. Inside, gourmet kitchens and high-end fixtures offer the amenities of modern living, with appliances and systems that are rated for low energy and water consumption.

A number of challenges faced the architects in adapting the massive structure for residences. The new floors, for example, had to align with existing window mullions in order to meet regulations for the historic building. Old masonry walls were fitted with new insulation and other features to improve energy efficiency and comfort inside.

The Architectural Team’s work on the Baker Chocolate Factory complex, the oldest of its kind in the United States, has not gone unnoticed. There are waiting lists for many of the residential units. □Lofts at Lower Mills has won the prestigious Paul E. Tsongas Preservation Award, the Preservation Achievement Award from the Boston

Preservation Alliance; and the 2009 J. Timothy Anderson Awards for Excellence in Historic Rehabilitation, and has been reported extensively in the media. In 1988, former President Ronald Reagan presented Verrier with the National Historic Preservation Award for phase one of Baker Chocolate Factory.

Over 40 years, dozens of mills reborn

For The Architectural Team, the work on The Watermill is just the latest in a 40 year career of award-winning historic preservation and adaptive-reuse projects, including more than 150 structures certified as historic landmarks by the National Parks Service, from schools and hospitals to trolley barns and department stores. “I’ve never met a mill I didn’t like,” quips Verrier, a Boston-area native, who cofounded The Architectural Team (www.architecturalteam.com) in 1971. “I hope we get to do a hundred more conversion projects in the future, because they are inspiring to work on, and result in such a dramatic, optimistic change for their communities.”

The firm views recycling old buildings as truly sustainable, saving untold amounts of energy and resources as compared to new building construction. The adaptive reuse project enlivens communities and strengthens the local economy, too.

Yet it takes a creative, strategic design approach to make it work successfully for both residents and developers. “Literally building upon the strong foundations laid by America’s industrial pioneers is a vital step toward a greener, more sustainable and economically viable country well into the future,” says Michael Binette, AIA, principal of The Architectural Team. “Our firm has developed methods for cost-effectively making these historic structures not only more energy-efficient, but also more marketable to residents, owners and lenders alike.”

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About The Architectural Team, Inc.

Founded in 1971, The Architectural Team, Inc. is a 55-person master planning and architectural firm that has grown through its design excellence and commitment to responsive and collaborative client relationships. The firm has developed a portfolio of distinctive design solutions for a broad range of building types and programs, and has earned more than 75 awards for design excellence. These include the new construction of large urban mixed-use developments, residential, commercial, hospitality, recreational, and academic facilities, as well as a national reputation in the area of historic preservation and adaptive reuse. The firm is located in the restored 1840s-era Commandant’s House in Chelsea, Mass. Visit the firm’s website at www.architecturalteam.com.

PRESS CONTACT: For more information, photographs and interviews,

contact Chris Sullivan at 914.462.2096 or chris@ccsullivan.com.

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