Interiors sources

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Recovering the Past

As an industry veteran with a soft spot for adaptive reuse projects, The Architectural Team's co-founder, Bob Verrier, explains why historic buildings are of too great importance to our identity to be considered disposable.

By Robert Nieminen

Helping to revitalize the area of Dorchester, Mass., the Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center was completed in 2010. PHOTO BY ANDY RYAN

Bob Verrier has never met a historic building he didn't love. In fact, the award-winning architect speaks so endearingly about them you get the impression that he might get choked up as he recalls some of the more notable projects he's been involved with over the years. When Verrier describes the run-down mills in the Boston area where he has worked as an architect for more than five decades, restoring them and giving them new life, it's as if he's talking about old friends.

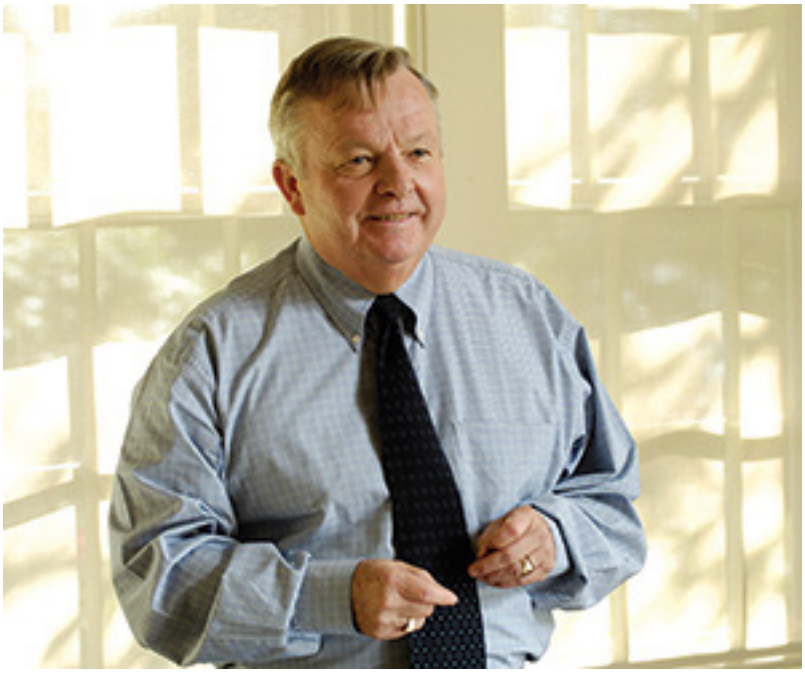
Such kinship with one's work is a rarity these days—especially one that is born out of an abiding respect for the past and for what architecture represents to communities.

"I've always been interested in old buildings because they're so incredibly beautiful, and when you see them empty and not being used, it's a terrible thing to see," explains Verrier, FAIA, vice president and managing principal of Chelsea, Mass.-based The Architectural Team (TAT), which he co-founded in 1971. "Many of these historic buildings serve as a gateway into communities, towns and cities, and ponder the historic past of these cities. They are a very important fabric to these neighborhoods."

His affinity for historic structures began at the ripe age of 19, when, at the suggestion of John McKee, then principal architect at Symmes, Maini & McKee Associates, the young architect took a trip to Europe. He spent five months traveling the continent, exploring how people and architecture relate, and learning the importance of maintaining historic structures.

"Nobody would tear down an old structure in Europe," Verrier says emphatically. "They would always maintain them, repair them. And as I said, these buildings become the fabric of the neighborhoods and the cities, and that's what makes the cities so interesting and gives them vitality—the old structures."

To illustrate his point, Verrier notes that during the Industrial Revolution, factories and mills were the focal point around which towns were built because they employed hundreds of people and represented an unprecedented opportunity for upward mobility.

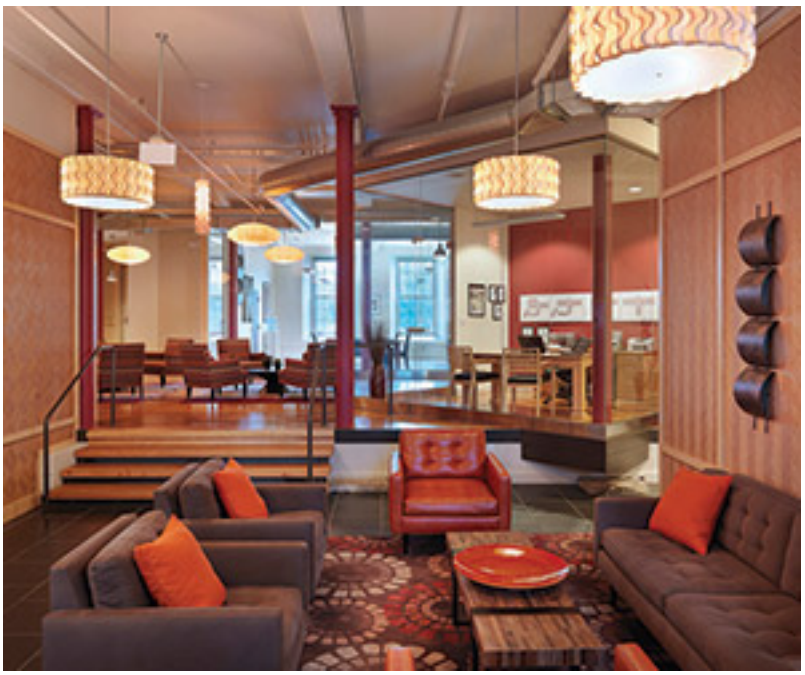


Robert J. Verrier, FAIA, NCARB, managing principal, co-founded the firm The Architectural Team in 1971, originally

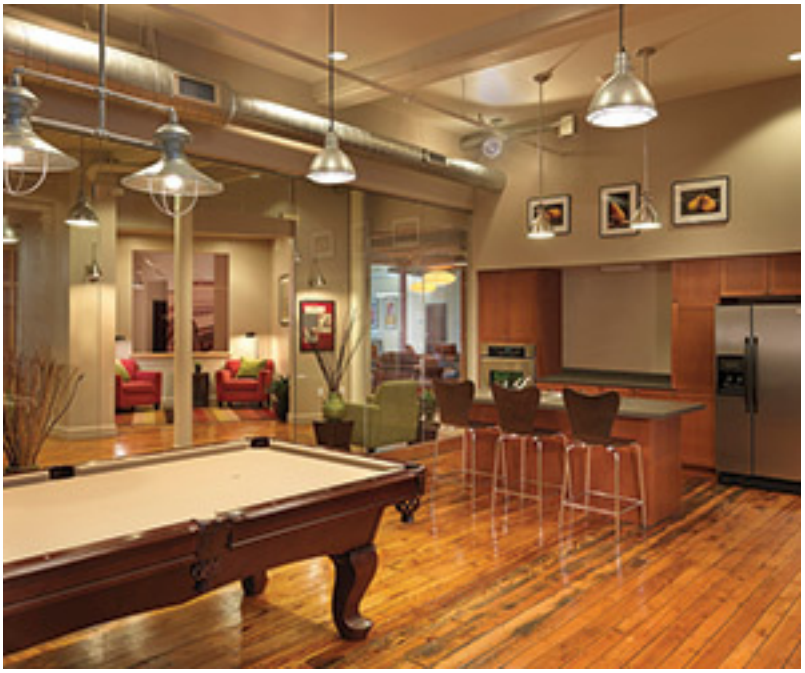
"One of the interesting things about these buildings is that, once you go in them, they're intriguing. You walk through and you can imagine all the people working with all the equipment they had, and the buildings were one of the most important things happening to these people their entire lives," he explains. "They worked there, they shopped there, they had medical care, and it's all because of the mill building and the owners of the mills."

Whether these turn-of-the-century factories produced machinery, cotton, wool or beer, each one is distinct from the next and presents unique opportunities for adaptive reuse—a practice he says was not very popular when his firm opened its doors, and is still overshadowed by flashier new construction projects.

"The first few years we did this, nobody was really doing it. We were doing it because we enjoyed it. We liked the challenge," Verrier recalls. "You have to have an imagination as to what you're going to do in these buildings, because sometimes they're too wide, sometimes they're too thin, sometimes there's so much structural damage that people walk away from them. So you really have to know what's going on with these buildings. It's a lot of work you have to do up front."



Bourne Mill in Tiverton, R.I., involved the adaptive reuse of 11 existing mill buildings—including the oldest cotton gin in America—into mixed-income housing. Shown above are the resident common areas and management office. PHOTO BY NAT REA



Bourne Mill in Tiverton, R.I., involved the adaptive reuse of 11 existing mill buildings—including the oldest cotton gin in America—into mixed-income housing. Shown above is the billiard

The hard work has certainly paid off for Verrier, who has been has been the architect of record for more than 30 notable historic structures that have been recognized with distinguished honors, including four J. Timothy Anderson Awards for Excellence in Historic Rehabilitation, two Paul E. Tsongas Awards, and 11 awards from the Boston Preservation Alliance and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, among others. He was also personally honored by President Ronald Reagan with a National Historic Preservation Award for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Baker Chocolate Factory in Dorchester Lower Mills, Mass. Additionally, Verrier was recently elected to the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) prestigious College of Fellows, one of the highest professional honors for American architects.

With each project he tackles, Verrier applies the conviction that the best approach to conserving a historic building is to preserve its utility for a new use after its original purpose is considered obsolete. According to Verrier, historic buildings are of too great of importance to our identity and national diversity to be considered disposable. This philosophy not only pays homage to the past, but also respects the future, as extending the life of buildings is innately sustainable—a practice that predates modern green building strategies and rating systems such as LEED.

"Before people even knew about LEED, restoring these old buildings was absolutely green," he says. "What could be more green than saving a building?"

Case in point: In a typical adaptive reuse of a mill that will become a housing complex with 80 units, the existing structure contains so many raw materials that to simply demolish and replace them with newly sourced components would be nothing short of wasteful. A large mill might contain 500 wood beams, for example, and up to 800,000 bricks that would require far more energy and added costs to replace than to refurbish them and extend their useful life, he adds.

Although Verrier says not every project they undertake applies for LEED certification, the design team at TAT tries to design and build to the rating system's standards and conduct historical studies of the building so as to preserve its integrity, although they are afforded some flexibility with the interiors.

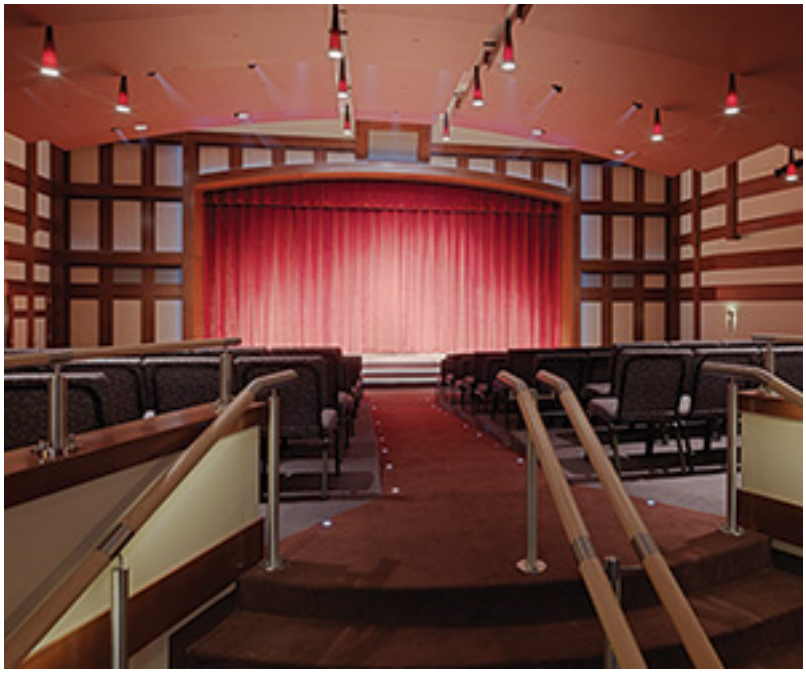
"One of the interesting things about the interiors of these buildings [is that] they all have common areas that we're allowed to do contemporary," he explains. "As long as we don't disturb the existing interior—in other words, we can't chop out beams—we can do interiors that are quite fascinating."

For all the historic work that Verrier undertakes, advances in technology are simplifying the process for design firms, and he predicts that the trends in sustainable design and 3D modeling will continue to push the industry forward.

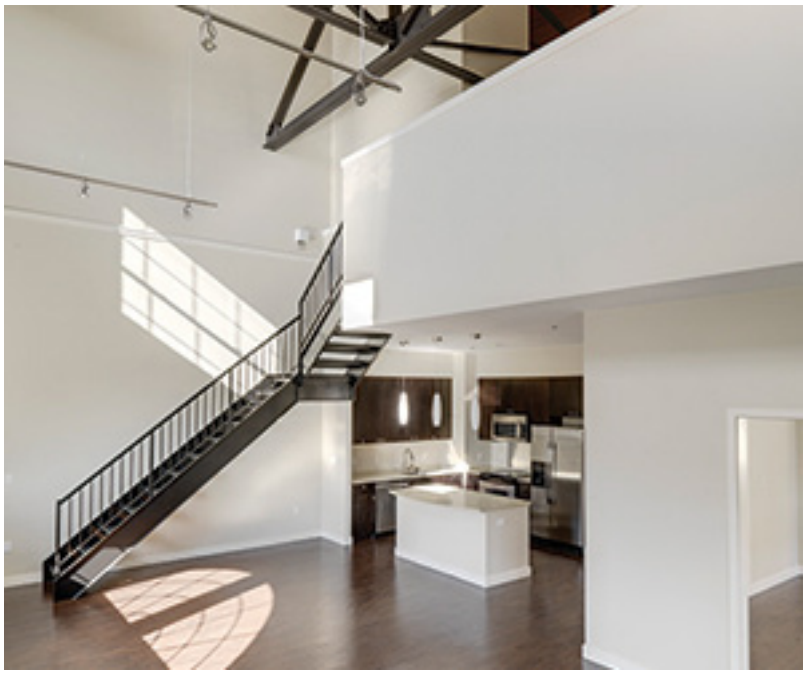
"I would say that in the next three or four years, all architectural firms will be doing 3-D BIM drawings. Along with 'green' and LEED, you're going to find more advanced technology in the industry from a manufacturing side as well. There are some disadvantages," he says, "but the advantages of doing CAD and BIM are that the drawings are so much more efficient, and it reduces time and energy. The cost of producing drawings now is less expensive, really, and they're more accurate [with] less delays and less change orders. So it's made life easier for the architect."

Speaking of the future, Verrier warns that unless tax credits for historic preservation are maintained by federal and state governments, the outlook for adaptive reuse projects isn't positive. He says they've received word from the National Trust for Historic Preservation suggesting that some government agencies and politicians running for office are trying to stop the tax credits, which would destroy the engine that drives historic renovation projects.

"That's very important and very dear to my heart," he says. "So we're working very hard with different agencies and different people in the government to maintain this tax credit, which we feel is vital to the industry."



While the lobby is like its heart, the 250-seat theater and chapel presents the soul of the Salvation Army Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in Dorchester, Mass. PHOTO BY



Watermill Lofts, completed in 2010, represent the final phase of the historic conversion of the former Baker Chocolate Factory complex in Dorchester Lower Falls, Mass., into a vibrant mixed-use community. Water Mill is an old boiler building, one of eight historic factory buildings the firm converted into multifamily housing. PHOTO BY ANDY RYAN