

LAST DETAIL: ARCHITECTURAL LEADER

Presenting the Past

by **Megan Mazzocco**, Associate Editor



Before settling on architecture, Bob Verrier, co-founding principal of Chelsea, Mass.-based The Architectural Team, had an interest in archeology. Verrier has recently become a distinguished member of the AIA College of Fellows for his enthusiasm for digging up and restoring the past lives of a broad portfolio of historic buildings.

Sometimes history can be discovered through architecture, other times archeology; or sometimes, in the case of Bob Verrier and The Architectural Team, it's a little bit of both. The AIA Fellow digs through the existing building stock to excavate dinosaurs of the American Industrial Age: abandoned mills, factories and warehouses. "They are a focal point and often serve as important gateways to communities," recognizes Verrier.

Before historic preservation and adaptive re-use was a recognized market, Verrier was inspired to preserve old structures as a young student hitchhiking and sketching his way through Europe. "I came back with a great understanding of the importance of saving old buildings; they are connected to communities and [in Europe] they are deeply cared for." He has dedicated his life's work to the remarkable historic renovation and adaptive re-use of historical buildings. "The best approach to conserving a historic building is to preserve its utility for a new use after its original purpose is considered obsolete," says Verrier.

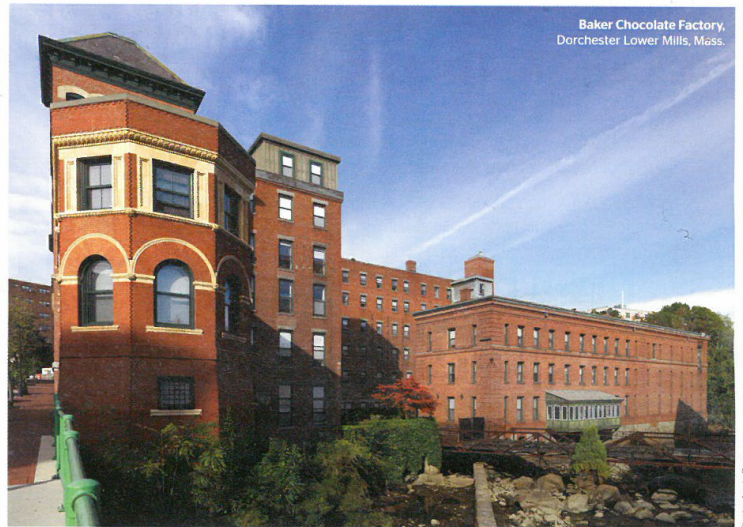
The Big Dig

During these historical renovations, the construction teams almost always discover age-old artifacts and manufacturing equipment that have been left behind. "Our firm's philosophy is to pay homage to the past, but also respect the future," says Verrier. When the jobsite turns into an archeological dig, the team tries to save architecturally significant artifacts to incorporate them as design or elements. Sometimes, the artifacts are monumental, such as a 20-ft. x 8-ft. granite marquee, which now serves as a sculpture, and one of world's largest band saws recovered at Building 114, formerly a U.S. Navy joinery shop, and today serves as a biotechnical lab and office building located in the historic Charlestown Navy Yard. "We refurbished the saw and placed it in the courtyard along the new Harborwalk so visitors have a glimpse into the building's past life," describes Verrier.

One Silo Short of Green

"Essentially these mills and historic buildings are green before you start rehabilitating them," says Verrier. "Given the size of these buildings, there are nearly a million bricks, half a forest worth of trees and yards of granite foundations; saving these original building materials is as green and sustainable as it gets." The Architectural Team has accomplished a myriad of other historic preservation and adaptive reuse projects, spanning schools, police stations, state hospitals, trolley barns and government buildings, Verrier lists. "The only type of historic building our firm hasn't converted in 41 years is a silo. I've always had a desire to take on the challenge, but as of yet, the opportunity hasn't presented itself."

Royal Mills at Riverpoint, West Warwick, R.I.



Baker Chocolate Factory,
Dorchester Lower Mills, Mass.

Photo: Alamy, Ryan

Many of The Architectural Team's renovations are LEED-certified or designed to LEED-certification standards, says Verrier. "For example, most of the mills we've completed have photovoltaic solar panels installed on the roof which allows for a renewable energy source." Another example is in West Warwick, R.I. Island at Royal Mills at Riverport. The Pawtuxet River runs through the former mill complex and today features a new low-head hydro-electric turbine. If you add in a green roof, high-efficiency windows and the most advanced mechanical systems, these projects are on par with any new LEED Platinum or Gold project.

Housing the Country in History

Buildings on the National Register of historic places are ideal for creating affordable housing, a factor as important today as it has ever been in this country. "Affordable housing has always been at the forefront of our business interest," says Verrier, who has also been recognized for a lifetime achievement award from Habitat for Humanity Greater Boston for affordable housing. In fact, his AIA Fellowship Sponsor, Diane Georgopoulos FAIA, of the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency writes in her sponsor letter to the AIA College of Fellows: "[Verrier] had the foresight to evaluate the New England legacy of abandoned industrial and long-shuttered public buildings that lined the rivers, harbors, canals, decaying city streets and small town centers. These locations, however, were the opportunity for those with vision to create something that the market could not provide; low income housing ... historic preservation spurs the economic vitality to these ... towns by creating new value, revitalizing local building trades and spawning the growth of local jobs."

The firm's philosophy has given the American public the opportunity to discover, appreciate and even live affordably in historic buildings—they become a celebration of American history and the American spirit of innovation. "These buildings are an integral part of the fabric of our country—they help root us to place," says Verrier.

Dream Team

"Team" in architecture is a critical concept, and often overlooked, but Verrier emphasizes the importance of collaboration in the success of complex historical adaptive re-use projects. "I think the lynch pin of historic conversion is the collaboration of all parties—the developer, architect, state, federal government and cities and towns," says Verrier. "We—architects—are the creative sounding board, helping to facilitate the strategic development, innovative design and financial components to come together to create a successful project." If Bob Verrier's firm is a "Team," then he is a legendary coach and his enthusiasm for his work is contagious: "I love being an architect. Every day I come to work there's a new architectural design challenge to solve. It's exciting and invigorating." □

