



Human Energy (and Historic Tax Credits) Help "Re-Boott" Historic New England Mill

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By Robert Verrier, FAIA, NCARB



Boott Mills, before and after its adaptive reuse

Human energy is the force behind successful economic development -- even when that energy began centuries ago. Along with my partner Michael Binette, I saw the power of this fact unfold around Boott Mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, one of the oldest surviving cotton textile mill yards in the United States -- and an engine of the city's rebirth.

Tax credit incentives were a key to the city's success, helping restore one of America's most dramatic historic sites while also injecting vitality and pride into a now-flourishing neighborhood and tourist attractions. It's also a good case study in what a community can achieve with tax incentives, foresight, and positive energy.

With its memorable belltower and fortress-like presence just two blocks from downtown Lowell, Boott Mills addresses the original source of its power, the Merrimack River. (In fact, Francis Cabot Lowell already had a mill in Waltham, Mass., and he expanded to his namesake city for its abundant water power.) Readable today on the building's exterior are later additions of steam power and electrical systems, a living catalog of America's industrial changes.

After mill operations ceased in 1958, plans eventually emerged in the 1970s to save the complex, intact, as part of Lowell National Historic Park, complete with a historic riverwalk. In time, deterioration of their mid-1830s brick masonry and wood windows plagued the buildings. The ornate Italianate clock tower and wood cupola suffered from a gas explosion, and lightning savaged the 200-foot smokestack.



Boott Mills during the industrial era

National Park Service leaders and private forces, including WinnDevelopment, a savvy real estate firm with a passion for revitalizing and restoring historically sensitive communities, planned an ambitious adaptive reuse. A weave room exhibit, condominiums, apartments, and offices were in the mix, along with a remarkable row of restored “mill girl” housing.

Our firm, The Architectural Team, was tapped in 2003 to direct an ambitious exterior restoration to retain the priceless architectural detailing, red brick patterns, and overall historic integrity. Completing a major part of Lowell's urban planning, our work for Winn added 154 units of housing to a rejuvenated waterfront. Both federal and state historic tax credits helped drive this key phase.

Work by our firm and others became a catalyst for growth in Lowell -- a dramatic turnaround for a city long dismissed as an industrial-era remnant. In fact, since the Boott Mill restoration and reuse, the city has attracted 2.6 million square feet of high-quality redevelopment, “adding new life to formerly vacant and derelict buildings,” say local officials.

In total, Boott Mills and similar projects at Lawrence Mills and Appleton Mills added 2 million square feet of renovated space representing \$150 million in private investment, more than 1,500 new housing units, and countless new jobs.

“Much of this development activity has occurred in Lowell’s most historically significant mill complexes,” the city announced in November, crediting the cooperative spirit among developers, municipal officials, and the National Park Service, which lent technical assistance and access to historic and new market tax credits. **Observers far and wide have also noted how preservation and green thinking combined to literally save a city.**



PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE T. MARTIN/THE ARCHITECTURAL TEAM

Boott Mills, restored

The story isn’t over yet, either. The next chapter for Boott Mills will add new mercantile and residential offerings, with talk of new work artist studios, to open next fall. (Call it the “re-Boott,” as some insiders do.) The buildings are old, even by mill standards, and very narrow. New apartments are included, along with removing a recently added cooling tower to preserve the location’s historical accuracy.

The Lowell Historic Board and the National Park Service deserve kudos for their vigilance -- and their outreach. (I’ve been told that 30,000 students visit their working museum each year.)

Our practice has worked on other similar preservation projects -- including adapting Francis Cabot Lowell’s Waltham mill, almost 40 years ago -- but I encourage architectural and history enthusiasts to visit Boott Mills. **You’ll experience firsthand the best that New England’s rich history has to offer and what these recent projects have preserved for future generations, all carried out in a fun, lively and authentic way.**

And while you're there, remember what made it possible: historic tax credits, creative planning, and, yes, human energy.

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The National Trust for Historic Preservation is committed to raising awareness of the importance of the historic tax credit and advocating for strategic improvements that would expand its already impressive track record of saving places, creating jobs, and revitalizing communities. You can help! Visit SaveHistoricCredit.org.

Interested in learning more about historic tax credits? The Spring issue of Forum Journal (a benefit of joining the National Trust at the Forum Level) takes a comprehensive look at the credit and its role in revitalizing historic communities. This issue will be available in early April. For more information and to join, visit Preservation Leadership Forum.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation works to save America's historic places. Join us today to help protect the places that matter to you.