

New Development

Historic School Transforms into Housing

By Donna Kimura

A long-standing school building has been adapted into the Voke Lofts in Worcester, Mass.



Voke Lofts features 84 units, half of which are affordable. Photo: Erb Photography

WinnDevelopment has transformed the historic structure into 84 apartments, half of which are affordable housing for households earning no more than 60 percent of the area median income.

With its oldest section dating back to 1909, the building was first known as the Worcester Boys' Trade School and later the Worcester Vocational Technical School, where students studied machinery, electrical work, and other trades. When the institution moved to a new site in 2006, it left behind the venerable building.

It became frozen in time, standing much as it did on its final day of class, until WinnDevelopment breathed new life into the campus.

The adaptive-reuse of the 116,306-square-foot building was tricky. Although it looks like one large structure, it's really made up of three segments, with additions having been built in 1912 and 1926, says Elizabeth Fish, vice president at WinnDevelopment.

"Each had its own challenges and different structural issues," she says. WinnDevelopment and Fish have worked on other complex historic preservation projects, including the Oliver Lofts, a recent conversion of a historic Boston factory into 62 housing units.

At Voke Lofts, the team retained and refurbished the exterior to resemble the original building. It also reused the existing structure, floor deck, and masonry walls. In addition, brick walls along with wood and steel columns were left exposed in the apartments and common areas.

The unit mix consists of 50 one-bedroom, 31 two-bedroom, and three three-bedroom units.

To finance the \$20 million project, the team assembled a blend of federal and state historic tax credits and

federal and state low-income housing tax credits. Bank of America Merrill Lynch was the tax credit investor for the set and was also the construction lender.

Voke Lofts was also financed with tax-exempt bonds through MassHousing and funding from the city of Worcester.



Photo: Erb Photography

“The Voke Lofts project is a shining example of the positive things that can happen when government and the private sector work together to address community challenges,” said U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, who is from Worcester, in a statement. “This major investment will transform a brownfield site and rundown school facility into a vibrant mixed-use community right in the heart of downtown Worcester.”

The project stands out because of its many amenities, including a “think tank” that features a computer lab. It’s also where Becker College will be offering classes to residents. Voke Lofts also includes an art gallery, featuring work by students at the current Worcester Technical High School.

The project created more than 230 construction jobs and three permanent positions.

Dellbrook Construction was the project’s general contractor, and the architect of record is The Architectural Team. Winn Residential is the property manager.

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