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The Architectural Team's Unusual Solution for an Apartment Conversion

By Jeffrey Steele, Contributing Writer

Lowell, Mass.—The conversion of old warehouses into multifamily buildings is not particularly newsworthy anymore. But it's an entirely different matter when the building is an iconic, two-century-old warehouse, and designers are tasked with retaining historically significant railroad tracks inside the building.

That was the test facing designers on the three-story Counting House Lofts in Lowell, Mass, within the Lowell Locks and Canal Historic District. The apartment building opened several months ago, its 52 units entirely occupied, and the railroad tracks that once carried shipments of textile goods are still there. The preservation of the tracks was mandated by the National Park Service.

This delicate historical work called for the challenge to be tackled by The Architectural Team Inc. which for four decades has preserved New England history by restoring and converting hundreds of historic buildings to new uses.



“We believe these buildings are too important to our identity and national diversity to be considered disposable, and our approach is to preserve their utility for new use after their original purpose is considered obsolete,” Robert J. Verrier, FAIA and vice president of The Architectural Team, told MHN.

“In Lowell, we’ve had the privilege of transforming Boott Mills, Lawrence Mills and now Counting House Lofts into multifamily housing. As it relates to The Hamilton Manufacturing Company, now Counting House Lofts, our long-term relationship with WinnDevelopment goes back more than 25 years. We consider their successes our successes. Our collaborative partnership works exceedingly well because it is based on trust and mutual respect. We have an acute understanding of their unique strategic goals and design objectives for each property, and we’re able to transform historic buildings of all types—schools, hospitals, mills, warehouses—into new assets for the community in the form of housing, hospitality, mixed use and more.”

The team worked closely with the historic consultant, Lowell Historic Board, and the energy conservation consultant to coordinate new construction and ensure it would meet NPS standards and achieve Energy Star MFHR standards. Sandblasting samples were meticulously reviewed and exterior masonry cleaning and restoration was performed prior to completing the entire building.

Showcase walls were identified and left exposed in living rooms and common areas, while other walls were insulated to conserve energy in bedrooms and maintenance areas. Energy Star-labeled appliances and lighting were installed to meet the program standards and air sealing was performed at the exterior wall and unit demising walls. Finish materials were made from recycled content, and low or no VOCs paints and adhesives were used, said Scott Maenpaa, project manager with The Architectural Team.

The train tracks inside the building were originally used in the late 1800s to drop off raw materials to distribute to the rest of the community and to pick up finished materials for distribution nationwide, when the building was the Hamilton Manufacturing Company, Maenpaa said. “The train would enter and exit through the same doors on tracks spanning the length of a football field. The ceilings were made of metal to limit fires from the embers coming from the locomotive. These ceilings were maintained throughout the train bay units.”

In addition to preserving the train tracks, The Architectural Team also preserved the exterior train bay doors, exposed column-and-beam grid and the iconic watch house tower.