FORM Q&A: The Architectural Team

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Adaptive Reuse,Architecture, Design, Features, Firm, Profile, Preservation, Q and A

The exterior of the Baker Chocolate Factory. Photo by Bruce T. Martin, courtesy of The Architectural Team.

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In 1971, The Architectural Team (then known as the Boston Architectural Team, Inc.) opened its doors and began rehabilitating the 19th century bow-front buildings on West Newton Street in Boston. Since then, the award winning design firm has established a legacy of revitalizing forgotten industrial sites and restoring historical buildings. We spoke with co-founder and managing principal Robert J. Verrier, FAIA NCARB, about the importance of adaptive reuse.

What are the benefits of an adaptive reuse project to both a community and the environment?

Adapting historic buildings for new uses makes both environmental and economic sense. Two significant trends in the United States are converging to ease the strain for building space. One is the conversion of use – taking advantage of existing structures for unintended occupancies – and the other is renovation of older, historic facilities and structures. These movements are leading to an unintended and highly beneficial effect: boosting the sustainability of the communities and campuses where they take place.

Opting for renovating existing buildings in lieu of constructing new buildings reduces the community's carbon

footprint; further new program uses tend to utilize square footage more efficiently and obviate considerable amounts of construction energy and resources. This cost savings is also a primary benefit of the second trend: restoring and renovating older architecture. Adapting historic structures into multifamily housing, community space, campus housing, corporate offices and even lab space is cost-effective and green – after all, the greenest building is the one that has already been built.

In fact, environmentally conscious community and institutional leaders are recognizing the attractive triple bottom line in their oldest buildings: preserving sizeable embodied energy in the existing structures, reaping gains from recurring embodied energy savings that grow dramatically for buildings over 50 years old, and reducing the use of many energy-intensive new materials – aluminum, plastics, and steel, for example. Traditional building materials, such as brick, plaster and concrete, have among the lowest levels of embodied energy.

Throwing away old buildings also has its share of associated costs too. Construction debris constitutes approximately one-third of our waste stream, says the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), estimating that 27 percent of U.S. buildings will be replaced between 2000 and 2030, a significant strain on the environment. Many adaptive reuse projects are unlocking value in buildings never previously considered as assets – decommissioned power plants and old storage spaces, for example, or defunct mills on the periphery of the community.

You've worked extensively in this area, what would say are your favorite or most successful projects?

The firm's broad portfolio of historic conversions includes more than 150 structures and a wide range of unique building types into new uses: former trolley car barns, U.S. Navy joinery buildings, schools, hospitals and police stations to name a few. One of my favorites is Baker Chocolate Factory, which over the decades saw the conversion of eight abandoned mill buildings – transforming a once derelict industrial site into a thriving, trendy, multi-generational, mixed-income development. Thirty years ago we completed phase one of its decades-long renovation. Its transformation began in earnest in 1983 as a collaboration with the late Bob Keuhn, of Keen Development Corp– a visionary for historic rehabilitation, affordable housing and community development.

After its completion, President Ronald Reagan honored the firm with the 1988 National Historic Preservation Award. Over the next few decades, the project grew to encompass three phases of master planning and adaptive reuse to convert its centuries-old buildings and factory facilities into live/work artist lofts, affordable rentals, an assisted living facility and market-rate apartments developed byBeacon Development Company and WinnDevelopment. With sprawling courtyards and access to the adjacent Neponset River, the development has become a catalyst for new businesses and active street life in Dorchester, Mass., which began to suffer declining prominence and creeping urban blight in 1965. That year, production of Baker's Chocolate moved to Delaware, leaving the site subject to decay and vandalism. Yet, nearly a half century later, the neighborhood is enjoying the campus as a safe, quality, memorable and striking place to live, shop and visit –

a renaissance largely due to the conversion of the Baker Chocolate campus. Baker Chocolate is a national model for other gateway cities with evolving industrial bases. The design techniques that transformed the facilities into highly desirable homes and real estate for residents, businesses and others can be emulated elsewhere.

Among the projects we've worked on, Baker Chocolate is certainly one we are most proud of, and which I have great affection for. As for other favorites – as many who know me will tell you – I've never met a historic building I didn't love. Decommissioned mills and factories are great to work with: enormous windows, waterfront locations, masonry of the kind you don't see much anymore. We recently celebrated the opening of Lovejoy Wharf in downtown Boston, for which we were architect-of-record. The centerpiece is a former warehouse that now serves as headquarters for Converse. We returned not only the warehouse but the one-acre wharf to public use**.** The community retains the iconic building, and the mixed use project offers office space, retail, and a promenade on the water.

Malden Mills is also an interesting project – the original manufacturer of Polartec polar fleece and badly damaged by a fire in 1995 – our team just finished phase 2 of the Loft Five50 mixed-income housing community there now.

Livingston School Apartments, a historic middle school building in Albany, NY, was recently converted into housing for active over-55 adults. The colonial revival building is gorgeous, and we preserved even the smallest significant details of the structure's architecture: the magnificent campanile, the decorative entryway with its cornice and columns.

Boott Mills, a textile mill campus at the heart of Lowell, Mass., centrally located and set on the Merrimack River is an all-time favorite – we even dedicated some square footage to a museum depicting the city's contributions to both the labor movement and women's rights. Look up the Lowell Mill Girls for some background on its fascinating history.

If you created a greatest hits of adaptive reuse projects (not necessarily your own), what would be on the list?

I was encouraged to travel to Europe by my neighbor – an architect and mentor – in 1960. That trip and exploration fueled my passion for historic preservation and adaptive reuse. It seemed that the culture in Europe was such that no one would tear down an older structure, opting instead to maintain and reuse them if possible. There are far too many wonderful examples of historic preservation and adaptive reuse throughout the world to name all my favorites. It is the overall deeply rooted connection of people to their cherished historic buildings that continues to make the biggest impression on me.

What our firm hopes to achieve is to help a new generation of young professionals develop the expertise, skill set, collaborative mindset and creativity that is necessary to design new uses for these amazing historic structures – and develop them in a thoughtful, sustainable and innovative way such that the community is able to celebrate the legacy of their past through the buildings' new uses. Historic landmarks represent our

history, culture and significant past events, evoking memories of some of our most fundamental cultural touchstones: the industrial revolution, the labor movement, mass immigration. Because of the legacy it carries, a mill, factory, school or church is not so easily replaced. Preserving the architectural heritage of exemplary structures and adapting them to new uses can be a powerful, meaningful expression of a community's ties to its past and an important catalyst for how it plans to face the future.

Salvage can be an important part of the adaptive reuse process. How do you decide what materials to save and when it's better to incorporate new materials?

Our primary goal is the successful restoration and preservation of the building's architectural significance, this challenge requires flexibility and inventiveness. We focus on salvaging and exposing as much of the original architectural elements to the fullest extent possible: structural columns and beams, wood decking, brick walls. The goal is to allow these elements to be part of the structure's resurgence, and help tell the story of its past. The embedded energy of wood, steel, and concrete saved by reusing major structural elements is a win for the planet as well as the community. By preserving sturdy stone foundations, intricate masonry walls, and massive wood timbers, the architectural and historic character is restored and maintained whenever possible, which is the best kind of sustainable development.

As for whether to incorporate new materials, the structures need to be made energy efficient and sustainable, and the project must meet exacting aesthetic challenges (historic tax credits depend upon it), including restoring the original masonry and exposed structural elements to their former glory, and finding a solution for the windows, often to recreate the historic appearance. Much of this requires new and innovative materials.