

For Smaller Massachusetts Cities, Architects Spur Downtown Transformations

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by Andrew Stebbins and Matt Duggan

Can a former parking lot in Framingham, Massachusetts set the roadmap for the region's future? It just might. Located in a growing downtown amid a cluster of midsize cities and towns stretching from Boston to Worcester — locally known as “MetroWest” — the new, mixed-use, development called Alta Union House is hailed as a valuable model for higher-density, smaller city centers.



Alta Union House / Photos courtesy of Wood Partners

Designed by The Architectural Team (TAT) for developer Wood Partners, the award-winning community opened late this summer, marking the first new multifamily development in downtown Framingham in over 40 years. Already named a 2018 New England project of the year by the organization Smart Growth America while still under construction, Alta Union House is transforming a long-underutilized site across from the downtown park and close to the Framingham commuter rail station. With 196 units of housing and 2,587sf of ground-floor retail space, the modern five-story building dramatically alters the face of downtown Framingham by adding density, increasing walkability and reducing reliance on cars. And the formula is a first for this city of about 73,000 residents.

That's exactly the point.

The first significant project to result from a state-led 2016 rezoning effort, Alta Union House represents an important shift in land use policy for Framingham and offers a strong example for neighboring towns such as Natick and Marlborough. To compete with larger cities, attract new residents and spur economic growth, local leaders in the area — better known for its “golden triangle” of highways accessing a 1950s-era mall — are now welcoming new housing and commercial activity downtown, reversing half a century of low-density suburban sprawl.



Alta Union House

Like many other small and midsize cities across the country, Framingham's urban core is at the edge of transition, according to those familiar with the area. TAT knows this firsthand – the design team for Alta Union House, led by architects Andrew Stebbins, Matt Duggan, Mike Doherty, and Paul Humphreys, includes a designer (Duggan) who grew up in Framingham and knows the Alta Union House site well, along with the MetroWest area's history of economic development and land use decisions. This city made a smart long-range choice by rezoning to encourage greater density and reduce parking requirements, and by identifying strategic sites for infill development. Add to that, greater walkability, access to transit, more commercial and retail uses, and appealing new housing options, and you have powerful new reasons for people to consider relocating to one of these MetroWest downtowns, which they would never have considered five years ago.

TAT's design solution for Alta Union House appeals to this new resident by striking an approachable and contextual tone, with yellow brick façade elements that echo nearby historic structures as well as bay windows and balconies that create visual interest and activity. Offering one-, two-, and three-bedroom homes of up to 1,400sf in size, the building – with interiors by CBT Architects – also has shared outdoor space split between three courtyards, creatively designed by TAT and the landscape architect Copley Wolff Design Group.

Directly connected to indoor amenities, the smallest courtyard offers bistro style seating along Howard Street. The mid-sized courtyard activates a strip of land between Alta Union House and a neighboring building called The Kendall, with seating, a grilling area, and outdoor movie projection for residents. "Considering the urban setting of Framingham, it was all the more important to provide Alta Union House residents with green space," notes Copley Wolff Principal Andrew Arbaugh. "We were pleased to partner with TAT and Wood Partners to deliver outdoor amenity areas where residents can relax and connect, whether it be lounging by the saltwater pool, playing outdoor games, or grilling and dining by the outdoor fireplace."

Residents also share a fitness center with Peloton bikes, a saltwater pool, dedicated bicycle storage, and even a tech lounge for those who want to work from home yet outside of their apartment unit. Since construction began on Alta Union House, several other residential or mixed-use developments have kicked off within blocks, including a 270-unit multifamily property also led by TAT as architects.

TAT has worked on similar transformations in other small- and mid-sized cities throughout Massachusetts, including Loft Five50 in Lawrence, the Canal Street Lofts complex in Lowell, and more than 10 projects completed or currently underway in Worcester. The firm's recently completed Treadmark building plays a similar role within a larger urban setting, adding new retail and residential opportunities to Boston's re-emerging Dorchester neighborhood.

Alta Union House embraces the possibilities of Framingham, a city primed for success. It's a great example of how local leaders, developers, and architects can work together to encourage smart growth and catalyze the kind of development that benefits whole communities. We think this project will set the stage for transformation throughout Massachusetts.



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