

Breathing New Life Into Old Bones

The Architectural Team's Bob Verrier remains committed to preserving and adapting historic structures.



Bob Verrier, FAIA, NCARB, president, managing principal and founder of The Architectural Team, believes historic buildings are too important to be disposable and has spent his 50-year career preserving them. IMAGE COURTESY OF TAT

“I have never been in a historic mill building that's been the same. None of them. They may look the same, but they're not. They all have interesting components. They all have details that are beautiful. They all have wonderful light coming in, but each is unique.”

That's how Robert (“Bob”) J. Verrier, FAIA, NCARB, president, managing principal and founder of The Architectural Team (TAT) in Chelsea, MA, describes the types of projects for which he's best known.

Historic preservation and adaptive reuse projects are the hallmarks upon which he's built his practice, which he founded in 1971 and has grown to nearly 100 employees strong. Since then, Verrier has designed more than 50 award-winning historic buildings and preserved the architectural heritage of hundreds of historic structures across the country.

Guided by the conviction that “historic buildings are of too great importance to our identity and national diversity to be considered disposable,” Verrier has demonstrated that nearly no historic structure is beyond preservation and restoration. After nearly 50 years, his passion for his work remains as vibrant.

“The idea of restoring and bringing a building back to usefulness is very rewarding,” he says. “A new building is a new building, but restoring a historic building, it gives more energy. It's like taking something that's not being used, something that was very functional at one time, and now you bring it back to life. That's what you're doing: breathing new life into old bones.”

interiors+sources profiled Verrier in September 2012, and recently caught up with the industry veteran to find out what's happening on the historic preservation side of the business and what TAT has been working on during the past decade.

CHALLENGES IN PRESERVING HISTORY TODAY

The last time *i+s* spoke with Verrier, the industry was just coming out of a recession. TAT was heavily involved in historic preservation and adaptive reuse projects, particularly converting abandoned mill buildings in the northeast into mixed use and condominiums. The firm has continued its seminal work but is encountering new sets of challenges.

“We're finding out that it's more difficult to get good mill buildings because if they're 40 years old and then shuttered for all those years, sometimes it's 60 or 70% rotted on the inside, so it takes a lot more money to do it,” Verrier explains. “But we've been very successful and are doing different kinds of buildings now.”

Whether it's a manufacturing facility for nails or tanning or weaving, each building

has its unique set of challenges from the spacing of columns to the floorplate or its structural integrity. And in many cases, the location must be conducive to housing or multiple buildings need to be converted to help establish a residential community.

But they are becoming increasingly difficult to find due to an increase in demand, Verrier says.

"All of these tax credits have led to an increase in popularity and demand, and that's why it's so hard to find mill buildings on the east coast," he explains. Nevertheless, since 2012 TAT has completed about five historic renovation projects each year, including 20 mill preservation projects.

As demand has increased, so have construction costs, which have risen more than 23% since 2004, according to BuildZoom. Compounding the problems for historic preservation projects are new building codes that require they meet higher

energy efficiency standards. "We're having lots of conflicts [with codes] by leaving all the exposed brick because you don't get the insulation that's needed," Verrier says.

Additionally, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy in 2012 that devastated many parts of the northeast, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has since redrawn flood maps and, in many cases, raised the flood levels by more than a foot. As a result, Verrier says they have had to raise the floors of many buildings to accommodate for the change, which adds significant costs and time to renovation projects.

NEW APPROACHES AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

On the bright side, Verrier says historic preservation work is still strong because of the availability of tax credits, new technologies and unique approaches to the problems associated with adaptive reuse projects. ➤

YARN WORKS | Fitchburg, MA

The 100-plus-year-old Nockege River Mill Building, formerly home to the Fitchburg Yarn Company, is on 7.4 acres on the bank of the Nashua River.

The restoration and adaptive reuse spans 182,500 square feet across three floors. It features 96 units, 57 of which are oversized, modern market-

rate loft units, and 39 designated as affordable.

The space now offers community areas, a fitness center with yoga room, and a grand central atrium gallery, featuring exposed brick, beams and columns throughout. The building boasts more than 280 8-foot-by-10-foot win-

dows, providing expansive views and an abundance of natural light.

Due to the building's proximity to the river, flood mitigation was central to the design solution; a concrete slab was built 27 inches higher than the original wood deck, resulting in the first floor sitting above the 100-year

floodplain.

Additional restoration work included repointing and repairing the exterior brick envelope and chimney stack, as well as structural reinforcement to the roof.

Yarn Works is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDY RYAN



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Capitalizing on federal and state tax credits for historic buildings is a bit complicated, but it can be done and bundled with other incentives, Verrier says.

For example, the Federal Historic Tax Credit program provides a 20% federal tax credit to property owners who undertake a substantial rehabilitation of a historic building in a commercial or other income producing use, while maintaining its historic character. The program contributed more than \$12.2 billion in output in terms of goods and services to the U.S. economy, and added \$6.2 billion in gross domestic product in 2017, according to the National Park Service, which administers the program.

State tax credits vary by state, but Verrier says they can be combined with the federal program to maximize cost savings. "The state tax credits [in Massachusetts], they give them out twice a year, but they're in small amounts of money, so if you need the state tax to piggyback on the federal tax, then you have to get a piece of property you can hold for two to three years before you can start construction," he explains.

Verrier notes that many cities now require 10-15% low-income housing and offer

an additional tax incentives for owners and developers, which can be applied to historic preservation projects as well. Further, there are additional infrastructure financing options for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) projects that bring together housing, transportation and jobs that can defray costs even further, Verrier says.

"So, even though the cost of construction has dramatically increased since [2012], all of these subsidies still make it possible to do historical preservation," he says.

Likewise, developments in technology have enabled firms like TAT to better assess and address some of the inherent challenges with aging structures. Case in point: For the Back Bay Hotel in Boston, which used to house a police headquarters, Verrier recalls when the project team used X-ray equipment to scan the steel of the building, they found that most of it had deteriorated. To address the problem, TAT used a new technique utilizing a carbon-fiber wrap to strengthen the columns.

"We can use that to wrap the columns, and it adds a structural strength to ➤

STERLING LOFTS | Attleboro, MA

This historic conversion transforms a sprawling four-story jewelry factory, originally built in 1891 for Watson & Newell Co., into 91 mixed-income units for active adults 55-plus. Located on an 8.8 acre wooded riverfront site, TAT's design approach involved the rehabilitation of the original 139,365-square-foot brick structure and a series of later additions. Preservation efforts included the restoration of more than 350 original window openings, many of which had been hidden beneath siding. Other significant project work involved realigning floor heights between the building's various wings, and raising the first floor by 9 inches to mitigate potential flooding from the adjacent Ten Mile River.

Taking advantage of the building's dramatic interior spaces, the team sought creative ways to encourage resident socialization. The former boiler room is now a double-height tenant lounge with exposed brick, steel structure and 28-foot timber ceilings. Six original 5-foot-by-7-foot wood windows, the original wood loading dock door and cast-iron furnace doors were salvaged and rehabilitated to their original form, adding to the historic fabric of the renovated building.

Various furniture configurations provide seniors with socialization preferences. The light-filled lounge features a community kitchen, TV nook and game area. Additional amenity spaces include

a computer room and library, theater and fitness/yoga area.

The community's 75 one-bedroom and 16 two-bedroom units feature design

elements such as original steel and wood beams and columns, exposed brick and wide-plank wood ceilings. Artwork and interior details are inspired by antique

sterling-silver patterns. Nature-derived colors create visual interest and enliven the environment by adding vibrant hues throughout.



IMAGES COURTESY OF TAT

them, and we can also use them to reinforce the floors before we pour over them. So that's kind of a new technique that we had never used before, and it's interesting," he says. To preserve the historic character and details of a building while still meeting energy efficiency requirements, Verrier says they utilize LED lighting and more efficient HVAC systems, of course. But they've also doubled up the insulation in the floors and ceilings to allow the original bricks and wooden beams to remain exposed.

PRESERVING COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT


When *i+s* last profiled Verrier, he commented on the inherently sustainable nature of historic preservation: "Before people even knew about LEED, restoring these old buildings was absolutely green," he said. "What could be more green than saving a building?"

The industry veteran still holds to the conviction that historic preservation not only benefits the environment but also revitalizes entire communities. When comparing the carbon footprints of new construction versus renovation, for example,

Verrier points out how much waste can be reduced by preserving buildings.

"You're saving thousands of bricks, you're saving 500 trees for every building," he says. "Every beam is a tree, and all the floors are 4 inches of wood. So, if you think of the materials like granite foundations and granite facades, you can't replicate that and build like that anymore."

After a building has been rehabilitated, Verrier says many buildings will have another 50 to 60 years of useful life before the next round of improvements. By doing so, neglected communities can be brought back to life. He recalls how many towns and cities were originally built around mills and manufacturing plants because they were the lifeblood of the community. When Baker Chocolate Factory in Dorchester, MA, shut, the whole community was abandoned, Verrier says.

"Five mill buildings were closed, people moved out, churches were empty and there were no stores," he recalls. "We did one building at a time, and now it's a brand new community. So, bringing back the buildings is very important, it's very rewarding and it's a wonderful experience." 

RESIDENCES AT MILL 10 | Ludlow, MA

Built in 1907, Ludlow Mill 10 was originally part of the larger Ludlow Mills industrial complex and home to one of the world's largest producers of jute cloth, rope and twine. Once a powerhouse of manufacturing, the building remained derelict for nearly a decade prior to its rehabilitation and adaptation.

TAT design team's work included a complete restoration of the structure and facade, as well as adapting the building's 108,000 square feet to 75 modern apartments for seniors. Amenities include a fitness center, resident lounge, reading book nook and computer lounge.

Tenants of the Residences at Mill 10 enjoy access to the adjacent reestablished Riverwalk on the Chicopee River and co-location with small manufacturing and design businesses, a micro-brewery and a rehabilitation hospital.

All buildings within the complex are contributing resources to the Ludlow Village Historic District and are listed in the state and national registers of historic places.



IMAGE COURTESY OF GREGG SCHUPE



IMAGE COURTESY OF ANDY RYAN