



Could converting vacant office space to apartments help alleviate the region's housing crisis?

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Finding an affordable place to live in the Boston area is close to impossible.

On the other hand, finding a sign that says “Office Space Available” is easy.

One idea to alleviate the shortage of housing is to convert vacant office space into apartments or condos.

100 Shawmut Avenue, which straddles Chinatown and the South End, has had several lives over the years.

“It was originally built in 1912 or so, originally as a manufacturing building,” explained Michael Liu, a senior partner at The Architectural Team, Inc. “In its last iteration, before it was converted, it was essentially an office building.”

Today it contains 132 units of housing.

In a city where rents can easily top \$3,000 a month and those “Office Space Available” signs are as plentiful as Bailey Zappe fans, some people are wondering if more conversations like this should take place.

“Buildings eventually become obsolete for their primary or indicated use. Economies change, and so older buildings, I think in particular, present an opportunity,” said Michael Cantalupa, chief development officer for Davis. “Some of the oldest buildings, in fact, are here, and are candidates for conversion.”

Liu and Cantalupa both worked on the 100 Shawmut Ave project.

“You’d have to think of the apartments that would go into such a building differently,” Liu said.

He says apartments here traditionally have been about 30 feet deep to allow for enough natural light.

That tends to be achievable in many buildings constructed thru the middle of the 20th century, but not in modern skyscrapers which have larger floor plans.

“If you thought of it like it’s a traditional New York style loft building where they’re narrow, they’re quite deep, tall ceilings. . . you can make it work,” Liu added.

Going residential can also inject life into downtown commercial areas, particularly in a city like Boston, which has one of the highest percentages of remote workers in the country.

Boston Mayor Michelle Wu is reportedly interested in the concept of conversion.

Segun Idowu, Boston’s chief of economic opportunity and inclusion, told the Boston Globe “Every major city is rethinking the downtown core and its future. . . We cannot only rely on the workforce coming back to the office.”

This is not a panacea to the region’s housing crisis, but with a little imagination, conversions might help relieve some pressure on prices.

“Think of all the mill conversions,” Liu said. “Those buildings were not designed to be residential buildings and yet there are many really quite wonderful renovations, countless, 1000s, of those that have been done in New England. “If you can convert a mill building that was producing cotton or shoes into housing, I think that it wouldn’t be a stretch to convert office buildings.”

Although the Boston commercial real estate market has softened, it’s in much better shape than many other major cities.

According to www.commercialedge.com, the vacancy rate here is about 9% which is about half the national average.

Boston 25 News reached out to Mayor Wu’s office about converting office space and they said they didn’t want to comment now.