



Once-Abandoned Mills are Now Home to Thousands of Massachusetts Residents

By [Sam Turken](#)

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Lesly Melendez grew up in Lawrence when many of the city's massive manufacturing buildings had begun to decay. All around her, the red-brick mills that once made Lawrence a global leader in textile production were vacant and "bombed out," with pigeons and rats often the only inhabitants.

"You think about pictures of war-torn areas, and you see buildings kind of their bricks falling apart and windows not existing," Melendez said. "When you went outside Lawrence and people [asked], 'Oh, you're from Lawrence?' as a kid, that was not a really good thing."

Many of those same mill buildings with their towering smokestacks still make up Lawrence's skyline. But now, they look brand new and have thousands of families living inside them.

As Massachusetts continues to **suffer from a shortage of affordable housing**, former mills like those in Lawrence are a bright spot. With the assistance of state and federal funding, developers have renovated and converted more than a hundred mills around the commonwealth into housing complexes in recent decades – projects that both provide much-needed homes and help revitalize post-industrial areas.

But the conversion process can be expensive and slow, often involving the cleanup of pollutants from past industrial operations on the properties.

And even when mills are redeveloped, some cater solely to people who can pay higher rents. Housing advocates say in order for Massachusetts to combat its affordability crisis, developers should prioritize converting more mills into apartments for lower-income people.



The ‘albatross’

In the 18th and 19th centuries, merchants built thousands of mills across New England, making the region a center of the American Industrial Revolution. Cities like Lawrence, Lowell and Holyoke were established for the sole purpose of becoming manufacturing centers.

The mills used rivers and canals for energy to produce everything from textiles to paper. Because there were few environmental regulations at the time, the production processes often released toxic industrial chemicals into the air, waterways and ground.

By the mid-1900s, the manufacturing sector around New England collapsed as companies moved operations to the South and overseas where labor was cheaper. Cities struggled to address the contaminants at the large, abandoned mills and find a new use for the buildings as environmental regulations started taking effect.

“So this ends up becoming essentially an albatross,” said Justin Hollander, an urban and environmental policy professor at Tufts University. “Even if the owner wants to get rid of it, the new owner is burdened by this. They simply can’t say, ‘I’m just going to demolish the building.’ ... State law obligates them to invest in the cleanup.”

Not only did the polluted mills pose health hazards to people living nearby, but they also became signs of neglect.

Lesly Melendez, who now runs Groundwork Lawrence – a nonprofit that cleans up polluted industrial land – said the run-down buildings fueled a common feeling in Lawrence: that state and local leaders didn’t care about the people of color who lived near them. She remembered how crime and drug use surged around the 1980s. At one point, the city had the most incidents of arson and car theft per capita in the country.



Lesly Melendez grew up in Lawrence and remembers seeing the abandoned mill buildings falling apart.
Sam Turken / GBH News

“It was a community that was impoverished, blighted, and people were looking for a way out and a way to numb the pain,” Melendez said. “The fact that you can now walk down Canal Street and see these beautiful, magnificent buildings brought back to life — it gives you a sense of pride, right? A sense of belonging.”

The conversion process

The redevelopment of mills into housing has become more common over the last two decades thanks to changes in local zoning codes that have allowed residential development in what were once solely industrial areas. To help cover the high cost of cleaning up the contamination and renovating the massive buildings, developers have relied on expanded state and federal tax credits that reward them for preserving historical structures and creating affordable housing.

Larry Curtis, the president of Boston-based WinnDevelopment, said the commonwealth offers more tax benefits for the mill projects than other New England states.

“Massachusetts is the model,” said Curtis, who noted his firm has converted more than 30 mills in Massachusetts into mixed-income housing.

There are several mill revitalization projects across the state underway or being planned, including in Worcester, Dudley and New Bedford. In Lawrence, Winn is converting the city’s oldest mill into a mixed-income housing complex with 69 units reserved for lower-income families.

During a recent tour of the Stone Mill site, project director Angela Gile pointed to areas where workers removed toxic lead and asbestos that are common in languishing mills. And an old underground canal that once powered the mill still moves some water beneath the building, so she said workers had to elevate the ground floor to mitigate any flood risk.

Other mills around the state have been harder to convert.



The Stone Mill is the oldest mill in Lawrence. Boston-based WinnDevelopment is converting it into a mixed-income housing complex.

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Near downtown Haverhill, Mayor Jim Fiorentini walked the perimeter of a sprawling abandoned shoe mill one recent afternoon. Fiorentini has overseen the redevelopment of other Haverhill industrial facilities into affordable housing and wants to do the same with the crumbling shoe mill. But that hasn't been possible because the building is polluted and connected to an old dam on the Little River, which developers fear could collapse and flood other parts of the city.

Developers have told Haverhill officials they'll only convert the site once the city removes the dam and the contaminated sediment in the water behind it. But that process alone could cost nearly \$10 million, which city officials are still trying to secure funding for.

"It's been frustrating," Haverhill community development division director Andrew Herlihy said. "This is a relic to 20-some odd years ago when Haverhill really had this depressed, post-industrial atmosphere."

In the meantime, city officials have said they've spent more than \$100,000 repeatedly boarding up the vacant mill's broken windows to keep teenagers out, to no avail.

"We're looking at a dump," Fiorentini said.

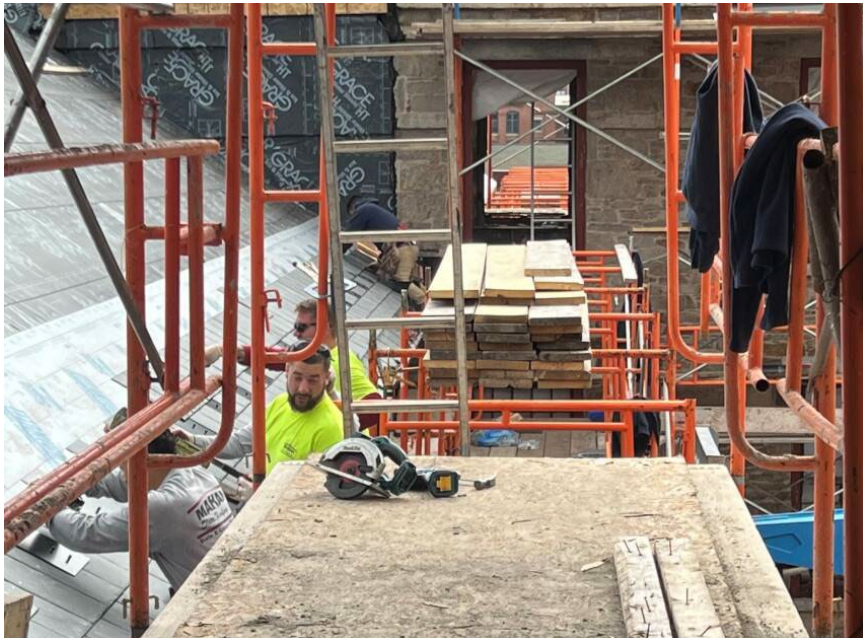
A need for more affordable housing

While post-industrial cities closer to Boston like Lowell and Lawrence are nearly finished redeveloping their old mills, other localities farther west with smaller housing markets lag behind.

That's because developers usually take out loans to build housing, knowing they'll be able to repay the debt with future rental income. But average rents in western Massachusetts cities tend to be lower, which squeezes profits, so developers are more likely to invest in a larger city than converting a mill in cities like Holyoke.

Housing advocates say that's even though Holyoke has begun experiencing its own shortage of affordable housing and would benefit from the creation of new units in former mills.

"There's probably a good dozen [mills in the Holyoke area] that are just completely vacant and not in any use," said Michael Moriarty, executive director of One Holyoke, a nonprofit trying to create more affordable housing in the city. "So whatever needs to be done has to be done. Converting old mills is a tried-and-true method."



Workers replace the roof of the Stone Mill in Lawrence as part of its conversion into housing.
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The state tries to incentivize the inclusion of affordable housing in mill redevelopments – the quasi-public MassHousing, for example, only provides loans for redevelopment projects that include at least some affordable units. Still, many mills are converted into luxury housing.

Jessica Andors – who leads Lawrence CommunityWorks, a nonprofit that converts mills into affordable apartments – noted that about two-thirds of the more than 2,500 total housing units in Lawrence's former mills are too expensive for people with lower incomes.

“[The conversions] are absolutely a success story,” Andors said. “The thing is in mill redevelopment — as in all housing redevelopment — we have to pay attention to what the affordability mix is, what our vision is for our communities. Are they going to be inclusive? Are they going to be equitable?”

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JESSICA ANDORS, WHO LEADS LAWRENCE COMMUNITYWORKS

Andors said the hope is that as developers keep converting mills, they help more people like Isabel Echavarria. She previously lived in a run-down two-bedroom attic apartment with her parents in Lawrence for \$1,500 a month. The uneven floors of the apartment regularly caused her 87-year-old father to trip and fall, and the fridge would randomly stop working at times, spoiling their food.

The family now lives in an income-restricted three-bedroom mill apartment, paying \$1,300 a month. Echavarria said they couldn't be happier.

“I've had a fabulous experience,” she said in Spanish through an interpreter. “The building is clean and safe. ... This is a great opportunity, especially for low-income families.”