

The Boston Globe

Making New Homes From Old Workplaces and More

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It's the kind of story that gives you more cachet at cocktail parties. Your home used to be a what?

The adaptive reuse of old buildings sounds like an ecoconscious enterprise, and indeed it is, but homeowners and developers are also motivated by factors beyond material conservation and historic preservation. For individuals or families looking for vast open space, a warehouse or parking garage might be appealing. (Though the challenges they are likely to face might not.) And who in New England hasn't entertained the idea of living in a lighthouse?

The Boston area boasts about half a dozen churches in the midst of finding new life as town houses, condominiums, and apartments, and don't forget the transformations of numerous office buildings, a raincoat warehouse, a rubber-shoe mill, and a courthouse/jail. Many will be mixed-use developments, reflecting the current appetite for living,

working, eating, and shopping in a single neighborhood.

According to a recent report by Mayor Martin J. Walsh's administration, Boston needs to build 53,000 housing units by 2030 to meet the city's rapid population growth. "There are not enough places zoned to support that kind of urban growth, so rehabilitating underutilized properties as residential ones makes sense," André Leroux, executive director of the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, said.

Here's a behind-the-scenes look at six adaptive-reuse projects in the Boston area that offer insight into how such properties are identified, the challenges they pose, and the benefits they ultimately offer.

Commercial and municipal buildings are finding new lives as residential real estate.

They may be missing a shiny pole, but Belmont homeowners Kate James and Tony Dowers, along with their three young children, reap other benefits that living in a roughly 4,300-square-foot former fire station brings, such as its two big engine bays. One is now a cavernous family room, and the other is a garage where Dowers, who publishes the hot rod magazine Mag-Neto, works on cars and vintage bikes.

There's also the 50-foot tower where fire hoses were once hung to dry. S+H Construction, which oversaw the home's two-stage transformation, worked with the couple to convert the empty brick tower into three stacked rooms that decrease in size as you go up (from 10-by-10 down to 8-by-8) and are accessed by a spiral staircase. Two stories are occupied so far: The first is James's sewing room, and the second is devoted entirely to Legos. (Everyone in the family enjoys them.)

The perks of unconventional spaces are often also the drawbacks. While a fire engine bay makes a phenomenal family room, the carriage-style door with transom windows and sidelights cost \$27,000. "We wanted it to look period-correct. So we splurged on that," said Dowers who purchased the property (now a three-bedroom home) in 2008. And while it's reassuring to know the floor can support virtually anything (like a fire engine), thick slabs of steel-reinforced concrete are nearly impossible to drill through, so they had to get creative to accommodate the home's mechanical systems.



"Such a large place requires a lot of material," Dowers said, and "meeting residential building codes can be a challenge too when starting with a commercial property. Though I don't mean to discourage anyone. We would certainly do it again! It's worth the effort!"

As for the absence of a fire pole, James said, "It's probably for the best given our kids' ages, but we haven't ruled it out."

In one of the more dramatic conversions underway in the city, New Boston Ventures, working with Finegold Alexander Architects, plans to build a contemporary eight-story glass-and-steel addition on Holy Trinity German Catholic Church, at 136 Shawmut Ave. in the city's South End.

The envelope of the Gothic-style puddingstone structure, built in 1877, will remain intact, but inside, the design will be quite sleek. "Once you walk through the door," said Tony Hsiao, design director, "it will be a completely new building."

Still, some of the original elements will remain. Lower-story units will have the Gothic-arched window openings, although it will take some finagling to align them with the floors. And the church tower will

be part of several condos.

Existing white marble from the walls might be reused as wainscoting in the main lobby, and interior designer Alina Wolhardt might incorporate carved wooden rosettes from the church ceiling as a design element on the charcoal-colored entry doors of all 33 condominiums.

The work won't be easy. There are the intricacies of removing the roof and constructing the eight-story steel frame, for example, as well as the restoration of the existing stone walls.

But what's the biggest challenge here? "Making the building evoke still the spirit of its past," said James Alexander, principal at Finegold Alexander. "That's why we picked up on the stone piers and the vertical fins reaching to heaven — and why we wanted to complete something on the top of the tower."

David Goldman of New Boston Ventures said the neighborhood has enthusiastically embraced the conversion. Dennis Kanin, his partner on the project, hopes the development, on which construction should start this fall, will help revitalize Shawmut Avenue, breathing as much new life into it as into the vacant church itself.

Wooed by views of the Boston skyline and market trends, Medford native Christian Petrillo of Boston-based Entrepid Capital Partners felt it was time to invest in his hometown's real estate. And despite its nondescript yellow-brick exterior, the former school of St. Francis of Assisi Church — where Petrillo was married and his children were baptized — boasts high ceilings, large windows, and open interiors, making it an ideal candidate for condominium conversion.

The obvious layout — nine units on either side of the building's central corridor — would have given only half the residences at the new One St. Clare that Boston view. Instead, the developers, Petrillo and Ed Champy and Kieran McAllen of Waypoint Cos., directed Jim Zegowitz of The MZO Group to create nine triplexes with roof decks that look toward the city and nine flats. Now only three of the condo units miss out on that Boston view. Prices start at \$399,900 for a one-bedroom flat.

With the mind-set that sometimes it's necessary to leave behind the hallmarks of a building for it to reach its full potential, Petrillo opted for a slick urban feel rather than play on the building's Spartan vibe. "Preserving chalkboards," he said, "would have been elementary; no pun intended."

Designer Erin Gates followed Petrillo's lead for urban styling, tempering it with fresh touches favored by New Englanders, including white kitchens and bathrooms.

"You always run into some unforeseen costs and design changes on a renovation as opposed to building new," Petrillo said. "You can plan on paper as best you can, but once you get in and start opening walls and seeing and feeling the space, there's always tweaking."

Tired of driving past abandoned mills in his hometown of Leominster, real estate developer Jim Whitney took action. Nine years later, he's on his fourth plastics-factory conversion, turning the former Commonwealth Plastics site (later Paragon Plastics) at 108 Adams St. into 51 one- and two-bedroom

apartments. (Fun fact: The first pink plastic flamingo was “born” in Leominster.)

Staying true to its industrial roots, The Lofts at City Place will feature exposed columns and beams, unpainted wood ceilings, cinder-block accent walls, stainless-steel appliances, and dark wood floors. The majority of the units will have a loft accessed by a spiral staircase that can be used as an extra bedroom or office. The project is slated for completion in the summer of 2016, and rental prices are projected to average \$1,100 per month.

Whitney’s daughter, Nicole, who recently joined the firm as assistant project manager, notes that building an 80,000-square-foot structure from scratch would have required an enormous expenditure, but the mill was pretty solid and mainly needed a new roof and windows. Plus, given its factory origins, there was little to dismantle inside, she said.

Fitchburg-based architect Jay Ferrera, who’s been working with Jim Whitney for five years, carved out patios for 21 units and opened a portion of the second floor to add large skylights to the common area. As for the exterior, he chose an engineered-wood siding that will tie into the neighborhood behind it.

While its Back Bay location, limestone façade, and dramatic two-story windows make 100 Arlington St., built in the 1920s as the corporate headquarters for Boston Consolidated Gas Co., an obvious candidate for conversion to residential housing, its layout was a huge contributor.

Sam Norod, principal at Elkus Manfredi Architects , explained that because buildings of this era predated air conditioning and relied on natural ventilation, the footprint was not rectangular. The shapes of these buildings increased the perimeter, allowing more windows, and “the air moved over a smaller distance window to window than the modern rectangular planned office buildings that we produce today,” Norod said. “The narrow ‘wings’ of The Arlington approximate the ideal dimensions of a residential or hotel floor plan.”

But there are obstacles. “Finding pathways for . . . modern ventilation, electrical, and plumbing services is challenging in adapting a 1927 office building into a state-of-the-art residence,” he said.

The developers, Related Beal and The Congress Group , embraced the building’s listing on the National Register of Historic Places, repointing the façade and choosing windows with historic consultants. Decorative details, including bronze elevator doors and an unearthed fireplace were restored in the public spaces, while units were fitted with luxury finishes. “Aesthetic balance is important; we want the building to feel old and new,” said Kim Sherman Stamler, chief operating officer of Related Beal. In the 128-unit development, the one-bedrooms start at \$3,200 a month; the two-bedrooms at \$6,200.

Six anonymous Financial District office buildings lining an alleyway called Quaker Lane will be transformed. Developer Related Beal and the architectural firm Arrowstreet plan to reinvent the block into a vibrant destination with innovative workspace, condos, retail, restaurants, and a boutique hotel.

The proposal includes the joining of two six-story structures at 15 and 19 Congress St., which were built as banks in 1899 and 1902 respectively, and topping one with a five-story addition. “From ground level, a modern jewel will appear to be floating above the historic façades,” said Amy Korte, principal architect at Arrowstreet.

Although the buildings will essentially be stripped to their bones, the new high-end condos will retain many of the original architectural elements, including several fireplaces. As for the glass bridge that spans 19 Congress and the office building next to it, Korte is hopeful a buyer will opt to incorporate it into a unit.

In discussing the area’s rehabilitation, Stephen Faber, executive vice president of Related Beal, asserted that the best way to preserve a building is to keep it relevant: “The real testament to great architecture is when it can be adapted to meet different needs over time.”