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## From expensive suits to affordable housing: Transformation of old mill building is complete

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LAWRENCE — For decades, its floors were filled with huge pieces of machinery and bustling employees working to make some of the best men's suits that money could buy.

Now, the old Southwick Clothing factory at 60 Island St., once a source of Brooks Brothers garments, is a quiet sanctuary of polished wood floors, soaring loft ceilings and energy-efficient windows overlooking the Merrimack River. The top three floors of the complex are made up of 60 apartments, mostly set aside for low-income tenants, who have just begun moving in after a frantic year of construction.

The lead developer in the complex, Lawrence CommunityWorks, put together a deal with local real estate developers and computer company entrepreneurs Lou and Juan Yopez to purchase the property from Southwick, along with some adjacent mill property from local businessman Chet Siddell.

The \$40 million deal was finalized in 2008, and ground-breaking on the apartment complex started last summer, once Southwick had moved to its new home in Haverhill.



*John Deloia, vice president of Eckman Construction, and Katy Easterly, project manager for Lawrence CommunityWorks, stand in one of the model apartments at Union Crossing.*

Then, it was a race to finish Building No. 9, which has three upper floors of apartments and two lower levels of commercial space, to meet all financing guidelines, said LCW Project Manager Maggie Super.

One of the first tenants to move in, Carolina Hidalgo, 32, said she and her two children love their three-bedroom apartment.

"It's amazing," said Hidalgo, who moved from Methuen last week into the new apartment with her son and daughter. "It's brand-new and I don't have to pay oil."

With heat and hot water included in the rent, the apartments are set at affordable rates to attract working families, said Super.

The rents are set depending upon a person's income. For example, someone at 50 percent of the median income for the area would pay \$933 a month for a 900-square-foot unit. Someone at 60 percent of the median income would pay \$1,231 a month, said Anna Maria Montana, the rental agent for the project.

Hidalgo, a hairdresser and makeup artist in Lawrence, declined to say exactly what she paid for her 1,300-square-foot unit, but said it was "pretty fair."

So far, about 26 of the units have been rented.

Super, leading a tour of the complex with other LCW officials and John Deloia, vice

president of Eckman Construction of New Hampshire, pointed out some of the unique features of the site.

Common spaces on every floor, with big windows and polished wood floors, can be used by tenants and their children for parties or informal gatherings, while a conference room on the first floor can be used as a meeting space.

Laundry rooms on every floor offer sweeping views down the river.

The wide hallways are meant to serve as interior "Main Streets" where people have enough room to gather and children room to romp. Benches are set up outside each apartment door, and a bright color scheme harkens back to the colors of the dyes used by Southwick on its clothing.

The floors are mostly the original woodwork of the mill, although the dirt, grime and tar

left there from years of industrial use has all been scraped away. In its place are multiple layers of polyurethane.

The apartments themselves have high ceilings and exposed brick, much like many mill buildings. They are heated with high efficiency air-conditioning and heating units in the apartments, fed by condensers on the roof. A 95.5-kW solar array on the roof provides power to the common areas of the building.

Deloia explained that each unit is essentially air-tight, and that testing was done to make sure that air doesn't leak out of each unit.

The walls have multiple layers between each unit, ensuring that cooking smells, along with sounds, don't travel from one apartment to the next.

Meanwhile, the first and second floors offer commercial space. While there has been interest in the space, LCW Project Manager

Yovani Baez said that just one client so far has committed, United Way, which is opening a family support center for tenants of the complex as well as the community at large to help families with financial and other affairs.

While much work went on the inside of the building, an equal or greater amount of work was necessary on the outside, where a new, 452-space parking lot can now be used by tenants of the site as well as those in the adjacent buildings owned by the Yopez brothers and the Essex Art Center owned by the Siddells.

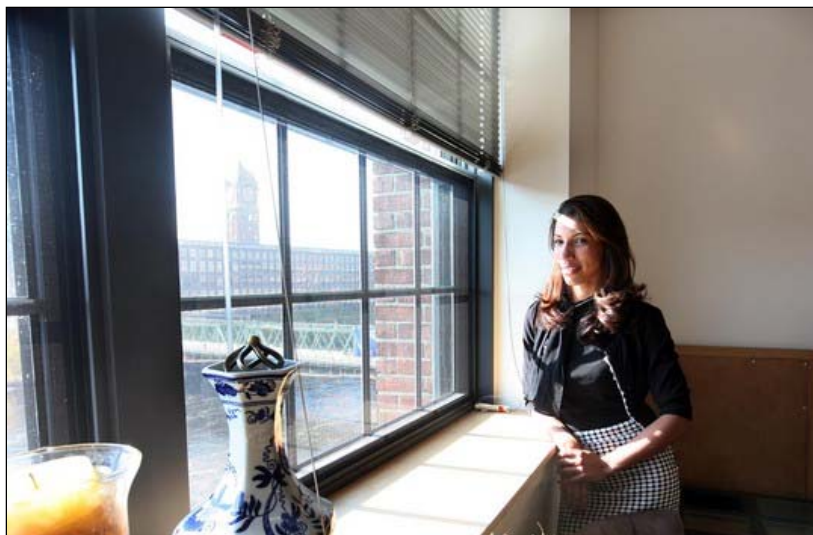
Super said the entire property was a Brownfields site, contaminated with chemicals and oil that had to be pumped out of the ground before the land could be used.

All utilities had to be replaced and a bridge has been built to Canal Street. Island Street itself is being completely redone, with benches, lighting, curbs and new sidewalks and paving.

A new entry road off Marston Street is still in the works, while construction continues on the new Duck Bridge. Work on those projects is slated to be done next year some time.

Meanwhile, an older building once known as the Dye Factory, where all the chemicals were made to dye the clothing, sits idle until Phase 2 of the project. Super said that building could be for a variety of commercial uses.

Also outside is a new playground and community



*Carolina Hidalgo looks out over the Merrimack River from her new apartment at Union Crossing*

garden for tenants to watch their children and fruits and vegetables grow.

Project Manager Katy Easterly explained that local artists were used for some of the creative touches throughout the building, including impressive mosaics on the walls around the elevators on each floor. On the second floor, for example, an array made by

Yetti Frankel and Josh Weiner shows local flora and fauna as well as the buildings at the site.

"These are species you'd see in the river," she said, pointing out ducks and other water fowl created using individual flecks of ceramic tiles.

Many of the subcontractors on the project were also local, such as Acorn Wood Products of Lawrence which built the

welcome desk on the second floor.

"We used a lot of local workers and companies on this project," she said.

At its height, the complex employed some 100 workers each day, Deloia said.



*Rogelio Villalta puts finishing touches on one of the walls leading to a common area at Union Crossing, a housing development at the old Southwick Clothing site on Island Street in Lawrence.*