



SQUARE FEET

An Old Textile Center, Refashioned for Luxury

By C. J. HUGHES
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NORWICH, Conn. — Just a few hours into his first day on the job here in November 2003, a piece of a window fell from an old building and crashed at Richard Kramer's feet.

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Photographs by Douglas Healey for The New York Times

Several 19th-century buildings in Norwich, Conn., are being renovated. The Wauregan Hotel, left, now has 70 rental apartments. The Flatiron Building, below, may eventually have a jazz club.

"I thought, 'Wow, it's going to be a very, very busy year,' " said Mr. Kramer, executive director of Rose City Renaissance, a local group that is leading the revitalization of Norwich, a former textile powerhouse in southeastern [Connecticut](#).

Now, after two and a half years and a \$1 million renovation, that building, which is at 130 Main, has four rental apartments, all leased, as well as office space and a bar, the Harp and Dragon, which opened on the ground floor earlier this month. Cap Realty, based in Norwich, developed the building.

It is just one piece of evidence of what seems to be a reversal of fortunes in Norwich, as developers convert its old mills and hotels to luxury apartments and open stores and restaurants. The city languished for much of the 20th century, after the closing of mills that churned out pistols,

Thermos bottles, radiators and, most notably, fabrics.

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Today, however, housing in the town is much in demand from workers at casinos in the area.

According to the city's planning office, 30 commercial projects are under way in Norwich, including both new construction and rehabs. Developers are also building 1,800 housing units, some of them single-family homes but most of them condos. The city expects another 700 units to be started this year. "This is easily the largest postwar construction that the city has seen," said Peter Davis, the planning director.

In downtown Norwich, a compact collection of ornate 19th-century buildings lining hilly streets at the junction of the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers, the finishing touches are being put on the Wauregan Hotel, an 1855 building within the Main Street district, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In its heyday, the hotel was billed as the most luxurious hotel between New York and Boston.

The \$25 million project, which was first proposed in 1997, has led to the creation of 70 rental apartments, with tenants expected to move in by July, according to Bruce Redman Becker, president of Becker & Becker Associates, the developer, based in Fairfield, Conn. Most are one-bedrooms, priced at \$650 to \$800 a month, slightly below market to qualify for state and federal tax credits. There are also two-bedrooms for \$870 to \$970, and some \$300 studios reserved for those who make less than \$15,000 a year.

Becker & Becker also restored the Wauregan's second-floor ballroom, which will be rented out for meetings and functions, he said.

Two of the four retail spaces on the ground floor, which are still under construction but should be completed by September, will hold a dry cleaner and a cafe with outdoor seating, according to Mr. Becker. The Wauregan will also have a new three-level parking garage.

The apartments, which are now accepting applications, will probably house workers from the state's two casinos, Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods, which are easily the region's biggest employers, with a combined 20,000 employees. And 2,500 more jobs could be added at the \$700 million conference center and hotel that was begun at Foxwoods this spring.

The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, which owns Foxwoods, helped push the redevelopment of downtown Norwich with the construction of the five-story red-brick Mercantile Exchange at 55 Main Street. The Mercantile, an \$18.9 million project completed in 2004, has 89,711 square feet of commercial space, both Class A office space and ground-floor retail space, although only 50 percent of the total space is leased, according to Konover Office and Commercial of West Hartford, Conn., which leases the building.

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Smaller projects in the downtown include the restoration of the Flatiron, a red-brick building that has sat empty for years, residents say, since its last tenant, a clothing store, closed. One idea includes putting restaurants and a jazz club on the lower floors and rental apartments on the upper floors, according to Mr. Davis of the planning office.

Nearby, at 16 Franklin Street, the Thayer Building, a four-story 50,000-square-foot former office building, built in 1914, is being converted to a residential building with 29 rental apartments, with one, two or three bedrooms.

Gary Tse, the developer, who is based in Chinatown in [Manhattan](#), bought the building for \$800,000 last June, to provide housing for Asians who want to move to the Norwich area to work in the casinos, he said. The building has a move-in date of the fall of 2007.

The former Chelsea Landing Pub and Galley at 86 Water Street is one of the few structures surviving from the preindustrial era, when Norwich was a major shipping port for the West Indies. The 17th-century structure is being gutted by Janny Lam, a local developer who has restored other downtown buildings, to make way for an upscale restaurant, according to Mr. Kramer.

Though outside the downtown area, Three Rivers Community College, now split between two campuses, is consolidating on its southern site, at 574 New London Turnpike, with new buildings to be paid for with a \$300 million state-approved bond issue. Construction is supposed to begin in the fall. The expansion could bring more foot traffic to the downtown, city officials said.

Restoration is also occurring in the handful of villages that are scattered throughout the river valleys near the town of Norwich, which has a population of 36,000.

In Taftville, Onekey, a developer from the [Bronx](#), is awaiting approval from the state to begin a \$40 million project to build 302 apartments, with plans to convert them into luxury units in a few years; 489 parking spaces; and a park at Ponemah Mill, an enormous former cotton mill with two distinctive spires.

And in the Shipping Street district, just south of downtown Norwich on the Thames River, the city is requesting bids to turn a series of dilapidated mills on a 36-acre parcel into marinas, restaurants and a public boat launch.

Norwich has gone after redevelopment proposals before, but never as ambitiously, and never receiving such a concerted response, according to past and present city officials.

"We've had a painful adjustment here as our economy changed," said Art Lathrop, who

served as Norwich's mayor in 2001 to 2005. "I can't say it's quite hopping, but it's a lot better than is used to be."

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