



TAT Gives New Life to a Derelict Office Building in Springfield, MA

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CHELSEA, MA, – Reflecting its extensive 50-plus year expertise and influential approach to historic adaptive reuse, placemaking, and downtown revitalization, the architecture, interiors, and planning firm The Architectural Team (TAT) has announced the completion of ThirtyOne Elm – a mixed-use residential destination that is accelerating a resurgence in Springfield, Mass.’s Court Square neighborhood and setting the stage for the city’s long-term economic growth.

Once a premier office building and later serving as a major regional hotel and theater, the historic structure sat vacant and derelict for three decades at a prominent location in downtown Springfield. Following a complex multi-year preservation, restoration, and conversion effort, the transformed building now known as ThirtyOne Elm is officially open to residents and already fully leased. Its vibrant array of uses, including 59 market-rate and 15 middle-income one- and two-bedroom apartments, as well as 13,000 square feet of retail and commercial space and a planned

240-seat restaurant, are anticipated to further boost local businesses, downtown pedestrian activity, and a sense of community for Springfield residents.

The rebirth of this iconic and highly visible structure – designed by TAT for developers WinnDevelopment and Opal Real Estate – in fact symbolizes a decades-long goal for the City of Springfield. Similar to many cities nationwide, Springfield is prioritizing the adaptive reuse and conversion of underutilized structures and commercial properties to address the severe shortage of affordable housing, while reducing the environmental impact of new construction and helping to revitalize its urban core. Praising the ThirtyOne Elm project for embodying these goals, local leaders including Mayor Domenic Sarno have hailed its positive impacts: “the response for housing in this historic building has been incredible and exceeded all our expectations,” noted Mayor Sarno in a released statement.

The ThirtyOne Elm project team agrees with this assessment. “We have been advising clients on the viability of repurposing underutilized assets for more than 50 years,” says TAT senior partner and managing principal Michael D. Binette, AIA, NCARB. “ThirtyOne Elm is a prime example of a severely dilapidated property that many walked away from due to its complexity and structural damage. Partnering with longtime client WinnDevelopment we’ve been able to salvage the historic structure, provide a catalyst for future investment in downtown Springfield, bring vitality back to this central location, and retain the important architectural fabric that provides generations with pride of place.”



“This long-awaited transformation is a product of perseverance and partnership. It would not have come to life without the expertise of The Architectural Team,” said WinnCompanies Executive Vice President Michael O’Brien. “A unique group of stakeholders stayed the course through the pandemic, a supply chain crisis, and skyrocketing construction costs to make this adaptive reuse special. We are proud to expand our presence in Springfield, deliver much-needed housing, and contribute to the city’s vitality.”

Originally constructed in 1892 as a five-story office complex, with its brick-and-brownstone exterior and bay windows, the Romanesque-style building now known as ThirtyOne Elm instantly gained prominence as one of the most significant new structures in downtown Springfield – at the time, a major regional center of manufacturing, finance, printing, and insurance. In 1900, an expansion added a 6th floor to the original building, while the Court Square Hotel was constructed next door as a standalone structure with physical connections to the office building. As Springfield’s fortunes fell and then rose again by the late 20th century, local leaders looking to catalyze downtown reinvestment were drawn to the property’s size, unique architectural distinction, and central location as a prime candidate for transformation, recognizing its potential to serve as a valuable historic complement to new developments such as the nearby MGM Springfield hotel and casino, and to further reinforce the viability of downtown as a walkable, mixed-use economic and cultural hub.



Although successive mayoral administrations, development groups, and land use policy organizations including the Urban Land Institute identified the ThirtyOne Elm building as “the number one ‘linchpin’ of a broader transformative downtown project,” the opportunity could only be

realized with the formation of robust public-private partnerships who shared a sense of urgency to protect the National Historic Landmark and conserve the heritage building for a vital new use. These committed stakeholders include Mayor Sarno, WinnDevelopment, and Opal Real Estate – led by Springfield’s own Picknelly family, founders of Peter Pan Bus Lines, along with TAT’s expert designers, who all made ThirtyOne Elm’s adaptive reuse possible.

The Restoration and Conversion of ThirtyOne Elm

As a local icon and key to the broader Court Square neighborhood’s renewal, it was imperative for TAT’s project team to preserve the ThirtyOne Elm building’s unique character – an effort driven as much by the designers’ respect and admiration for the original architecture and ornate details as by strict historic preservation guidelines.

TAT’s experts deftly balanced the demands of historic preservation with contemporary functionality and building code requirements in every aspect of the project work. For example, to meet modern fire codes while preserving the grand, open appearance of three existing wooden staircases, where the stairs feed out into residential hallways the architects designed new fire-rated doors that remain open unless triggered by a fire alarm and slot seamlessly into the existing fabric of surrounding walls. Similarly, entry doors to individual apartments are all custom-designed and built by expert fabricators to replicate the level of detailing on the building’s historic wood interior doors, while meeting all the latest safety codes; many of the original doors were restored and fixed in place on unit walls and throughout hallways as decorative elements.

Another extraordinarily exacting element of TAT’s preservation efforts within the 131,595- square-foot building involved preserving and restoring the original interior detailing. The design team oversaw the removal, numbering, and cataloging of miles of historic trim, including elaborately carved woodwork, wood and plaster molding, marble wall and floor surfaces, and wainscoting, all of which were reinstalled in the project’s final stages. This painstaking process allowed the design team to update and retrofit existing walls to meet modern building codes without losing the structure’s defining character.

Many of these details including original wainscoting, curved wooden bannisters, marble walls and doors, and terrazzo flooring were restored, and historic components that could not be restored were exactly recreated, such as the ceiling beadboard in the first-floor amenity spaces. Additionally, the original grand stair and vaulted plaster ceiling were preserved during construction and carefully restored to their original detail and character, while a specialized craftsman beautifully restored an original stained-glass window.

In addition to this challenging preservation and restoration work, TAT’s experts also undertook extensive stabilization efforts on the building structure itself. “The existing structure was certainly a challenge at ThirtyOne Elm,” says TAT Associate Phil Renzi, one of the project’s key leaders. “The building’s façade and roof were in good condition, but our team discovered significant rot and related damage to the original wood beams and columns. We sistered joists, repaired a number of existing connections, and also installed new steel posts and beams to provide additional structural integrity while carefully preserving the six-story interior load-bearing masonry walls.”

The masonry walls provided another challenge, too: in order to meet the strict historic guidelines for preserving the character of ornate corridors and hallways, TAT's team was compelled to route sprinkler and air conditioning lines through the individual units, rather than along corridor ceilings as is typical in new apartment buildings. "This required intense coordination between the architects, mechanical engineers, and structural engineers," notes TAT's Renzi. "We had to strategically insert these mechanical systems through the masonry walls and into apartment ceilings without disturbing the walls' structural integrity and creating a need for costly reinforcement – while also being mindful of preserving the relationship of individual units' ceiling heights to the ornate historic window trim."

Finally, to balance preservation and energy efficiency goals, TAT's design team replaced hundreds of original windows with new high-performance, double-paned glazing in 20 distinct window styles ranging from bay to half-moon, round top, and rectangular. The architects also added high-performing insulation to the previously uninsulated exterior walls and significantly enhanced the roof insulation. All-new high-efficiency heating and cooling systems utilizing energy recovery ventilators (ERVs), LED lighting, energy Star-rated electric appliances, and low-flow fixtures in the individual apartments heighten energy efficiency as well, as do onsite electric vehicle charging stations.

Modern Living that Respects the Past

With much of the building's existing floorplan retained, the original layout of the corridors and lobbies now leads to former office spaces and hotel rooms transformed into apartments. "A key challenge," notes TAT project manager Ryan Hagler, "was creating comfortable layouts for the units within the relatively shallow depth of the original office spaces." The architects carefully designed floorplans to maximize open living space, locating kitchens and baths around the perimeter of the apartments, creating an open, light-filled living space.

In a related challenge, one wing of the building held a very narrow hallway, which historic preservation agencies required TAT to keep intact. To ease access and maneuverability, TAT designed apartment doors with a recessed entry pocket and ensured they aligned with the existing exterior window openings – matching the historic layout of the hall and also enhancing the perception of space.

"We took care to maintain historic markers and elements within the units while at the same time creating comfortable spaces that feel welcoming. Large bay windows with original casework and high ceilings allow for plenty of natural daylight and scenic views of Court Square," says Hagler. The unit mix includes 49 one-bedroom apartments and 25 two-bedroom residences, appealing to a broad range of renters eager to live downtown.

ThirtyOne Elm's new lobby-like first-floor corridor serves as an expansive communal area and welcoming passageway seamlessly connecting to a fire-placed community lounge, fitness center, two private work areas, and mail lockers, providing inviting gathering places for residents and visitors. The eclectic community space includes a welcoming lounge space with a gaming area, full-sized kitchen, and concealed moody speakeasy. The level's four retail and storefront spaces ranging from 697 square feet to 1,887 square feet, are conveniently accessible from exterior entrances.

The spaces are enlivened by the restored original detailing, blending unique historic character with contemporary residential offerings. “The overall design aesthetic pays homage to the 1930s, with a classic art deco feel and look,” says Hagler, in a nod to the theater that once stood at the back of the site. “We created a modern environment that adds an element of glamour to the building, especially in the first-floor speakeasy, with an interior palette of charcoal gray combined with jewel tones and gold creating a moody atmosphere reminiscent of old-world show business.”

The transit-oriented building’s location can be entered from both Elm Street and State Street and is also within walking distance of rail and bus lines for easy accessibility. The renovation is now a catalyst for a broader urban revitalization, with the City of Springfield undertaking substantial updates to surrounding sidewalks and an adjacent park – further reflecting and contributing to Court Square’s ongoing renaissance. Since work commenced at ThirtyOne Elm, the project team also notes that numerous other new construction and adaptive reuse initiatives have been initiated in the immediate vicinity, inspired by the ambition and potential of this exciting redevelopment.

“Transforming this historic building and enhancing its relationship to Court Square has been a rewarding process,” concludes the TAT Associate Renzi. “We’re proud to have collaborated with the many people invested in the renewal of downtown Springfield, and it’s an honor to see the leading position of ThirtyOne Elm in the city’s revitalization. Just as important, this project also serves as a testament to the belief held by our late firm founder Robert J. Verrier, FAIA, NCARB, that preserving and revitalizing the historic fabric of American cities is at the heart of placemaking, spurring economic growth, and honoring our collective cultural past and our shared future – an outlook that remains at the core of TAT’s mission.”