



Back to the Future

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"You can't just build buildings, you've got to build communities," says Dale Goodrich, looking over his shoulder at a view of Apalache Lake. The owner of Upstate Developers LLC focuses on historic renovations. His latest development — an adaptive reuse of the old Apalache textile mill in Greer — furthers this belief.

Renamed Lofts by the Lake, it is a work in progress. It stands on the site of the former Cedar Hill Factory, which was built in 1820 and is thought to have been the first textile mill in the region. During the first flush of the industry boom around 1900, the original wooden structure was torn down and the massive brick building that Goodrich sits in today rose in its place on the bank of the man-made, dam-controlled lake.

When refurbishment is complete, the building will hold 56 loft-style apartments. Each will showcase the wide windows, high ceilings and exposed brick walls inherent in industrial architecture. Goodrich hopes it also will house a core community of residents who appreciate the blend of the historic and the modern in close proximity to stores and recreation.

In this case, history repeats itself.

"Typically in the mill villages, life was centered on the mill," explains Chris Story, Spartanburg's assistant county administrator. "It was a landmark and the center of activity." The mill villages constructed across the Upstate in the 1880s and 1890s also provided residents with drinking water and electricity, as well as a school and stores.

Story points out that, as the textile industry declined, those facilities often stood empty and fell into disrepair. "The community surrounding them lost vitality," he notes, adding that adaptive reuse projects such as Lofts by the Lake and the 111-unit apartment complex Mayfair Mill, both in Spartanburg County, bring in new people and new investment. "It is a shot of life and energy that is very important to the county," Story says.

Bricks and mortar

Many mills have gone through a similar transition during the past 20 years. As American-manufactured goods could not compete with cheaply produced textiles coming from Asia, the mills ceased operation, standing empty for years. Mayfair Mill was unoccupied from 2001 to 2007.

"It takes a developer with a special heart and disposition to take on this type of project because the barriers are significant," Story says. "They have to have creativity and imagination to see the potential, mostly because it is often the first new construction that has happened (in that location) in years."

But Tommy Moore, developer of Simpsonville's Cotton Mill Place, says it was the structure itself that called to him. "When you see a piece of solid wood that is 26 feet long, you can't help but be impressed," he says.

Scott Johnston, architect and principal of the Johnston Design Group who worked on Cotton Mill Place, notes that the architecture of the textile plants lends itself very well to residential development. "The biggest challenge," he says, "is to get the developers to eliminate additions that came in the 1950s and later that were poorly done."

Cotton Mill Place was constructed in 1908 and was added to in 1913. Johnston says he kept that era in mind when designing the living spaces. Taking down some of the additions left the property with green space and places for outparcel buildings. "These will be developed with design guidelines that accentuate the main building," Johnston says.

He also says it is a challenge to phase in development so each section will not detract from later phases.

"It is more archaeology than architecture," Johnston says as he details efforts to preserve and restore maple floors, machinery plates and other artifacts. "We cleaned and resealed old paint so its distressed character remained intact. We cleaned scales and other equipment for display as kind of a heritage backdrop for the residents."

Ownership of the Apalache mill changed hands multiple times during the century, but it continued operation through the beginning of 2007. Goodrich says the constant occupation meant he didn't have to add cleanup of vandalism or pest infestation to the punchlist of renovation tasks. "The structure was sound," he says.

It takes a village

But Johnston points out that in addition to vision and sweat equity, repurposing a historic landmark takes community support. "Cotton Mill Place was adopted as a planned development within the city of Simpsonville," says Johnston, who has done multiple adaptive reuse projects on heritage buildings in the Upstate. He says the Simpsonville Planning Commission was involved in the process as well. Story, the assistant Spartanburg County administrator, says the communities around Apalache and Mayfair have been very supportive, as has Spartanburg County Council. "These mills are symbols," Story says. "This community could not be more tied to its textile heritage. In many cases, the occupants are only a generation or two removed from mill workers."

Greenville Mayor Knox White was a major advocate of David Glenn's redevelopment of Mills Mill. "This was a weaker site, as it bordered the city-county line. The Lofts at Mills Mill was definitely a shot in the arm to that area," says White, who points out the proximity of the neighborhood to the Greenville Hospital System.

A little incentive

Support for revitalization also comes in the form of local, state and federal funds. Moore and Goodrich are appreciative of the tax breaks offered by their county governments, although they both say the type of incentive varies with the level of historic designation.

Olympia Mills and Granby Mills in Columbia, the award-winning Mayfair Mill and the Lofts of Greenville in West Greenville are all on the National Historic Register and are rental apartment complexes. Moore says that with such a historic designation, “there are restrictions on what you can do architecturally.” He noted that several of these might offer the lessee a lease-to-purchase deal after five years’ agreement.

Moore chose to take advantage of Governor Sanford’s S.C. Textiles Communities Revitalization Act, signed in May 2004.

The law provides tax incentives to encourage renovation and redevelopment of abandoned textile mills. A taxpayer who meets the requirements of the law and improves, renovates or redevelops an abandoned textile mill building is eligible for one of two tax credits: a 25% credit against real property taxes or a 25% state income tax credit.

Both credits are calculated on rehabilitation expenses, which are “the expenses incurred in the rehabilitation of the eligible site, excluding the cost of acquiring the eligible site or the cost of personal property maintained at the eligible site.”

“We knew we would qualify, and the Textile Act does not require you to achieve a historic designation,” Moore says. “We did get Greenville County historic designation, which will give us a tax break.” Story says Spartanburg County offers owners a reduced tax liability for a period of years to recognize that their projects are on the leading edge.

Fringe benefits

Columbia Mayor Bob Coble quips that the Olympia Mill and Granby Mill property boasts the best view in the city. All joking aside, he acknowledges the location of the lofts, a half-mile from the University of South Carolina campus and a mile from Williams-Brice Stadium, as a key factor in their success.

“USC plays a huge role in our economy, and student housing is a big part of that. It is a big plus for our community even if we can’t put a specific dollar amount to its impact,” Coble says. He says the property value of the mills has gone from \$200,000 to \$35 million after the renovation.

S.C. state archivist Brad Sauls pointed out to Moore that the location of Cotton Mill Place is a unique feature. Two blocks off Main Street in downtown Simpsonville, it was near a rail stop, not a water source.

“Sauls said it may have been one of the first mills to take advantage of rail-delivered coal,” Moore said. Now, the proximity to downtown shopping and dining were big selling points.

And though he doesn’t have exact figures, Moore has been doing informal tracking of the area’s development since he began construction in 2005. “I drew a map of an eight-mile radius and used a formula of \$200 per square foot for commercial and \$150 per square foot for residential developments. In three years, that comes to \$1.2 billion in Simpsonville,” he says.

The results of the economic boost go right back into the community. Goodrich says, "You see a direct ripple in the immediate neighborhood that eventually extends beyond."

Recalling that this idea was the driving force behind his first project more than 20 years ago in downtown Lansing, Mich., he says, "That building was the rotten core of the neighborhood. Once it was turned around, the rest had a chance to spring back."

Goodrich, pointing to a row of mill homes just beyond Apalache Lake, says a couple from Charleston has already purchased one and plans to refurbish it.

Coble tells a similar story. "Olympia, like any mill village, is going through a transition," he says. "Now, it is an eclectic mix of different people, very vibrant. It is a part of town that is unique and will always remain that way."

Story sums it up. "We see absolutely no downside to this kind of redevelopment."