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Shri development revitalizes the commuter rail neighborhood - by Donald Grebien

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Donald Grebien

It started in 2010 when Alison Bologna, a Pawtucket resident and local news anchor at NBC 10, decided to open a yoga studio in one of our empty downtown storefronts. She named it “Shri Studio” with the intention of bringing light (the definition of “Shri” in Sanskrit) into the district by offering low cost and free yoga outreach classes to students who otherwise wouldn’t have access.

While serving more than 8,500 students every year, Alison outgrew three leased spaces in the city and began to look for something more permanent. Knowing this, and a bit about her love of design and architecture, myself and members of my administration convinced her to invest in a 15,000 s/f underutilized mill near the new MBTA commuter rail hub in the Conant Thread District in 2018.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Alison soon learned the mill was built in the early 1800s in the Italianate style, and she became determined to preserve its history while meeting its modern needs. On a recent tour, she showed me how a walk-in safe is being transformed into a board room, while another is being repurposed into a staircase. Instead of plastering over rough, paint-stained brick walls, she is exposing them. And in a desire to continue to tell the mill’s story today, Alison has salvaged from the cleanup a number of things including antique sinks, 10-foot-tall interior doors, turn-of-the-century windows, vintage sewing machines, textile equipment, stand-alone safes, stools, and rolling fire doors.

After closing on the property in January 2020, a massive fire destroyed one million s/f of space adjacent to this mill, the pandemic shut down the state for two years, and inflation has driven up this construction budget by more than \$700,000. However, with continued support from the city, along with the Pawtucket-Central Falls Development Corp. (a nonprofit development agency hired by Alison), architect Ed Wojcik, and general contractor Stand Corp., we have figured out ways to move forward, by value engineering plans and fundraising (privately and with the state) while not sacrificing on the aesthetics, form or function of this building. We also continue to jumpstart development in this district, by working with state lawmakers to create an Opportunity Zone, which gives developers tax credits and also creates a “super TIF” (tax increment financing) to serve as a financing tool for developers.

When construction is complete on this \$3.7 million project in late 2022, this mixed-income, mixed-use property will house three first-floor social enterprise businesses (including Shri, which expects to double the number of students served), and eight residential apartments, five of which will be deed-restricted, affordable housing units. The result: a creative live, work, wellness community.

“The revitalization of 390 Pine St. is not about one person, or even one project,” Alison said. “It’s really about designing space, for good work, to inspire others.”

If you would like to learn more about the city’s economic development projects/incentives, contact commerce director Sandra Cano, at scano@pawtucketri.com.

Donald Grebien is the mayor of Pawtucket, R.I.

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