

# STORES of KNOWLEDGE

## New England Colleges Are Turning Retail Space into Classrooms

ALBERT E. NEAL

Kids are frequenting some old New England department stores again. But they're not buying CDs and jeans; they're investing in certificates and degrees. The University of Rhode Island and the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth have purchased former retail space in historic downtown buildings—and refurbished them for educational uses. Boston University houses its School of Hospitality Administration in a former Cadillac dealership. Maine College of Art, the Rhode Island School of Design and Montserrat College of Art have all converted vacant downtown stores to gallery space. After Housatonic Community College spent \$27 million renovating the dilapidated Hi-Ho mall in Bridgeport, Conn., enrollment grew so fast, administrators began looking for more space—this time, in a former Sears building.

College officials find rehabilitating old downtown stores attractive for several reasons. Fixing up an existing building can be more cost-efficient than buying land and building from scratch. Town-gown relations are improved as the institution's investment helps

reinvigorate the central business districts and strengthen community ties. The college can also show the community its commitment to the environment by applying sustainable architecture practices to the site. And the inherent charm and history of the buildings markets the whole institution. Plus, department stores tended to be located right smack in the middle of downtowns. So, in their new lives, the buildings offer a central location for a sometimes-overlooked student market.

But redeveloping antiquated buildings also presents challenges. Will the building meet the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act? How will new technologies be integrated? What about preserving the building's architectural integrity? Are special permits or zoning required? Some examples:

### **Shepard Building, Providence, R.I.**

From the 1870s to the 1970s, Shepard's symbolized the vitality of downtown Providence. Residents would meet under the Shepard Co. store clock on Westminster Street or charge inside where they shopped until they dropped.

Just as the bustle of Shepard's echoed the verve of Providence, the store's 1974 closing confirmed the city's economic malaise.

Jump to the 1990s. The University of Rhode Island begins eyeing the deteriorated Shepard Building as the new location for its College of Continuing Education. Though the college's dean publicly voiced skepticism about the building, URI hired the architectural firm of Presbrey and Torrado and the old Shepard Building was gutted, refurbished and transformed into URI's Providence Campus at a cost of \$34 million.

Today, the 272,000 square-foot building features 60 fiber-optic wired classrooms, a 30,000-volume library, a 500-seat auditorium, science and language labs, a book-



The clock outside the old Shepard's department store was a favorite meeting spot in downtown Providence. URI photo by Nora Lewis.

store, even a full-service restaurant and a fitness center (as well as an experimental high school).

But it wasn't easy. The building sat idle for two decades and there was no roof. "When we first turned on the heat, the floor started to move," says Director of Facilities and Operations Gary Lulli. "We had a lot of nails popping through the vinyl tile." (Six years later, the nail problem remains.)

In addition, the old store's support columns were positioned every 16 to 18 feet in each direction, which would have put them right in the middle of the classrooms, auditorium and lecture halls. "Columns in the middle of offices are great because you can use them for a chase for wiring and for fiber-optics," says Lulli, "but in the middle of a classroom they're not so good."

But security has been a nagging concern since the project's inception. Many of the 4,000 students enrolled at the college are suburban women who work during the day. Security officers are on duty 24 hours a day at two of the building's entrances. A third officer patrols the Shepard Building by foot. Still, students tell local newspapers they fear muggers as they trek from classroom to parking lot late at night.

#### **Cherry & Webb, Fall River, Mass.**

The 67,000 square-foot Cherry & Webb building in Fall River, Mass., captured the imagination of planners at two New England institutions. Roger Williams University initially expressed interest in leasing one floor of the building for corporate training programs. But city and state officials favored a University of Massachusetts Dartmouth plan to lease both the second and third floors for its Center for Professional and Continuing Studies and the rest of the building for education and research purposes.



The old Cherry Webb building in Fall River, Mass., getting a facelift. Photo courtesy of Fall River Office of Economic Development.

Restoration of the building, which had stood vacant since 1995, is part of a larger effort to revitalize downtown Fall River, including a planned \$46 million courthouse across the street from the Cherry & Webb building.

The project, slated for completion in fall 2002, has highlighted the regulatory and political challenges inherent in downtown rebuilding. Officials charged that the building contractor began demolishing and stripping the building's interior and façade before securing the required permits, setting off a local political drama over the proper authority for permits and fee waivers.

The building is attractive to higher education administrators because of its downtown location and proximity to local high schools and community colleges. Fall River's economic boosters, meanwhile, see the university's presence as a way to ensure day and night student traffic, which equates to cash for the community.

UMass Dartmouth has also given new academic life to the former Star Store in nearby New Bedford. The university's arts programs share the 70,000-square-foot former store with Bristol Community College.

#### **Sprague & Carleton Maple Furniture, Keene, N.H.**

Antioch New England Graduate School prides itself as a progressive, down-to-earth institution with a genuine commitment to preserving the environment. School officials like to talk about how Antioch preserves the best of the past, while looking ahead to the future. No place is this more evident than in the school's new digs.

Established in Vermont in 1964, Antioch New England moved to Keene, N.H. in 1974 and soon outgrew its facilities. The Sprague and Carleton factory and showroom, where Frank L. Sprague and his partner William Carleton once produced and sold rock maple porch rockers and settees, emerged as an ideal location for the growing school.

The Sprague and Carleton building was an eyesore and a waste of nearly six acres of real estate. Antioch New England spent \$4.7 million to gut and refurbish the building, which is twice the size of the graduate school's former site and roomy enough to house all five of the graduate school's academic departments.

"The factory was abandoned for almost nine years and the property was essentially just sitting there deteriorating," says Antioch President James Craiglow. "We were able to purchase and rehab the building for under \$50 a foot, which was clearly more economical than buying land and starting from scratch."



By rehabbing the Foster Building, the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences helped revitalize downtown Worcester. Photo by Steve Dunwell.

The Sprague and Carleton restoration reflects Antioch New England’s “greenhouse” approach to education— cultivating students through holistic teaching practices, which address the individual in relation to the community and the community to the student. Natural light and air circulate in every classroom and workspace and the design of the building coincides with the slopes and shapes of the surrounding landscape.

Antioch New England Graduate School took the iron door of Sprague and Carleton’s original wood kiln and molded it into one of the walls in the building’s reception area. Other factory artifacts adorn the facility’s conference rooms. Says Craiglow: “There is some virtue in preserving bits and pieces of our history because it helps to explain our roots. We sometimes forget how important that is.”

### **Foster Building, Worcester, Mass.**

The Boston-based Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences (MCPHS) rescued, rehabbed and refurbished the historic Foster Building in downtown Worcester to be home to its innovative, three-year doctoral program.

The building was constructed in 1898 by Albert Lowell who designed and sold women’s hats and clothing from the site. The building at various times housed a skating rink, a bowling alley, office space

and cigar store. By the time, MCPHS bought the neglected building in 1999, it had suffered deterioration and fire and water damage.

The architects hired to redesign the Foster building, Boston-based Steffian Bradley Associates, faced special challenges meeting modern standards. The \$17.5 million renovation preserved much of the historic structure, including cast-iron pillars, red brick walls and a granite foundation. But dozens of cast-iron beams, which had been used to support the building’s four upper stories, crowded a new auditorium’s sightlines and had to be repositioned to support the floors in a more strategic design. Brick facades inserted over street-level windows were torn away to bring light into the lobby area.

Today, the five-story, 60,000-square foot building contains contemporary classrooms, an auditorium, library, study lounge, computer lab, teaching and research labs, student café, offices and support areas for 400 students and 50 faculty and staff. The campus is organized vertically with teaching functions on floors one through three and administrative and research functions on floors four and five. The basement houses student activities and support spaces.

The renovation of the building, renamed for Henrietta DeBenedictis, an alumnus who gave \$2 million to help restore it, also allowed MCPHS to play a role in revitalizing the community.

### **Building Town-Gown Relations**

The Foster building was deliberately designed without a cafeteria so MCPHS students would patronize local shops and restaurants. MCPHS also benefits the city by offering internships in community pharmacies and medical facilities and addressing the medical needs of urban residents.

That’s the kind of benefit that should keep host communities receptive to turning abandoned stores into colleges despite the fact that colleges don’t pay local property taxes. As Lulli says of URI’s move to downtown Providence: “Now, you’ve got 5,000 people directly in the heart of downtown that you didn’t have there before. You have 5,000 people who are indirectly paying for parking, they’re going to eat, they might go out after work for a drink, they go shopping downtown or at the new mall.”

For colleges, the biggest benefit in rehabbing downtown retail landmarks may be what it says about the institution’s role in the life of the city. Says Craiglow of Antioch’s move: “It made a statement that we were here to stay and that Keene was our home— our permanent home.”

---

*Albert E. Neal was a NEBHE/CONNECTION intern during spring 2002. He earned his master of fine arts degree from Emerson College in May 2002.*