

## A factory revision

The Boston Globe

In Fitchburg, a developer turns his family's former shoe mill into affordable apartments



(FITCHBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY)

By Kathleen Pierce  
Globe Correspondent / September 21, 2008

**FITCHBURG** - In the 1970s when the assembly line workers at Anwelt Shoe went on break, that was Robert Ansin's cue. Jumping into a cardboard box at the top of the conveyor ramp, the dimple-faced boy would send his makeshift ride zooming down several stories to the shipping room.

As the son of the owner, "Little Bobby" could get away with hijinks like that. He also did odd jobs around the factory, and it remains a source of childhood memories.

"It was hot, and it was loud. Each room had a different smell. The leather room on the fourth floor had a cowhide leather smell, the glue room smelled like melting glue. Whenever I walk into an old mill I can smell things that were there before," he said.

His grandfather, Sidney Ansin, opened the factory in 1936. His father, Ron, bought it from Sidney in 1966. Since then, though, the shoe making business, like so much old manufacturing in New England, either withered away or relocated outside the United States.

So when it was Robert Ansin's turn to take control of the family legacy, he chose a different future for the four-story brick building, one more in keeping with his profession as a real estate developer: He bought the old mill from his dad and

converted it into a mixed-use complex, and this spring opened Anwelt Heritage, affordably priced apartments for people age 55 and older. In doing so, he felt he was preserving not only an Ansin family monument, but an icon of American industry.

"I've always thought the most American elements of America are present in these buildings. It bothers me that the world has passed them by," he said. "Young people have no idea what these mills were about."

Ansin is president of MassInnovation, a real estate company in Lawrence that specializes in environmentally friendly developments. The firm is struggling to complete a much-larger mill conversion in Lawrence, the 600-condo Monarch on the Merrimack. Ansin recently secured new financing and said he will resume construction on the Monarch in November.

So far, 30 of the 86 Anwelt units are rented. The complex also includes several small businesses and the North Central Charter Essential School.

Ansin's redevelopment is also something of a repayment to the Fitchburg community. The factory had ceased operation years before he bought it from his father in 2002. And the surrounding Cleghorn section of this old mill city was struggling.

But since he bought the building, Ansin's handiwork has begun to change the feel of this section of Fitchburg. In addition to refurbishing the old factory, Ansin joined forces with the city, another local developer, and a not-for-profit development corporation to buy 15 single-family homes in the area. Some were torn down to create new green space and others replaced with new single-family homes and duplexes.

"Always give back to the places you work - that was burned into my head by my father," said Ansin, who grew up in neighboring Leominster.

Moreover, the 55-plus housing development is allowing former Anwelt Shoe factory workers such as Glenyce Sowerbutts to afford to retire in style. She began working a half-century ago at the shoe factory, assembling the tops of shoe boxes. This weekend she returns to the building as a resident of a new 930-square-foot apartment.

"I didn't think in a million years this would be happening," said the 69-year-old Sowerbutts. Her unit and the others look like the trendy lofts sold to young professionals, with high ceilings and exposed brick. But Ansin has also augmented the building's natural features with a raft of eco-friendly additions: geothermal-powered heating and cooling and electricity from solar panels on the roof and on trellises in the courtyard. A TV monitor in the building's lobby provides a continuous display of the system's conversion of sunlight into power.

Such modern features are costly. But Ansin received state and federal tax breaks that allowed him to install the systems and still keep units affordable to residents

on limited incomes. Apartments rent from \$200 to \$900 a month. Though the building's new tenants hail from the pre-global warming generation, they admire their new home's energy benefits.

"There are no fossil things used in this. I think that's important for the generation after us," said Olivia Tate, a 71-year-old from Townsend who recently moved into a two-bedroom unit with her mother. The complex has also become something of a neighborhood center, with community gardens and a landscaped courtyard with fountains. On a recent balmy evening, kids from the neighborhood zipped in and out on bikes. Outwardly Anwelt Heritage seems like a smart, well-executed business plan. But, it's not just any project in any town. This one's in his DNA.

"I think one of the reasons I do what I do is to be closer to my grandfather," Ansin said, "because I never knew him."■

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