

PRESERVATION SUCCESS STORY

North Country



Franklin Building, Watertown, Jefferson Co.

The Franklin Building's main entrance and storefronts were restored during the rehabilitation project.

The rebirth of the Franklin Building in downtown Watertown is an outstanding preservation success story. The \$9 million project, which turned an eyesore into a community asset, features 9,000 square feet of commercial space on the building's first floor and sixteen affordable housing units on its upper floors. Located in the Public Square Historic District, which is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places, the building was constructed as shopping arcade in c1905 and substantially remodeled in c1919 for the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The Neighbors of Watertown (NOW), one of New York's most effective nonprofit housing and community development organizations, rescued the building and leveraged various sources of funding to return the property to active use, including the federal historic rehabilitation tax credit program administered by the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

The Public Square Historic District comprises the historic core of the city's business district and features nineteenth and twentieth century commercial and civic buildings surrounding a large, formally landscaped public square that is the focal point of downtown Watertown. The city became a thriving commercial and manufacturing center during the nineteenth century due to its location on the Black River, which provided abundant water power for industrial development. The Franklin Building (first called the Franklin Arcade) was constructed during a wave of development after the turn of the twentieth century when the introduction of the automobile opened up the North Country to tourism. As built, the Franklin Building boasted a shopping arcade, office space, and apartments. However, the arcade was not successful and the property was sold in 1918 to the YWCA, which remodeled the building, adding a gymnasium, indoor swimming pool, and residential rooms. While the YWCA was active for many years, the organization gradually declined and finally closed in 1997; the property was subsequently sold.

By 2001, the building was severely deteriorated and threatened with demolition. NOW recognized the building's potential as well as its contribution to the business district's historic character and stepped in to save it. As a first step, the organization stabilized the structure to prevent further damage. Although financing was an enormous challenge, the organization forged effective partnerships with the city, the local development corporation, and other entities as well as creatively utilized an array of private and public programs to progress the project, including funding from the state Housing Trust Fund, Community Development and Restore New York grants, state and federal low income housing tax credits, a grant from National Grid, tax incentives from the

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The Franklin Street facade before and after rehabilitation; the restored storefronts at right.

National Development Council, and loans from NOW and the local development corporation. The property underwent a complete rehabilitation (following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation), transforming a derelict structure into a modern commercial and residential complex.

The building's neoclassical front and rear facades have been restored and are protected under preservation easements offered through the National Park Service and held by NOW. Despite deterioration and later alterations, surviving historic features were saved and incorporated into the project. The original arcade has been restored (and opened to the public) and period window and doors surrounds were repaired in combination with new finishes, flooring, and fixtures. The first floor has been returned to commercial use, while the upper floors have been adapted for modern apartments. The project also made use of various environment friendly advancements, including soy-based insulation, Energy Star rated lighting, engineered flooring and framing, a high performance heating and cooling system, and a reflective roof that reduces air-conditioning costs during the summer.

By combining first floor commercial use with affordable housing above, the revitalized Franklin Building promises to infuse new life and vitality into Watertown's center business district. The project, which is an outstanding downtown redevelopment model, also demonstrates that adapting existing structures for alternate uses is the "greenest" approach to building sustainable communities.



Top: The lobby before and after rehabilitation; the restored arcade at right. Bottom: The upper floor before and after rehabilitation; a completed apartment at right.

