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Fitchburg looks to the arts to jump-start its economy

\$45 million project to develop artist-preferred affordable housing is critical piece in broader bid to leverage culture to help revitalize the Gateway City

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, March 28, 2025



Fitchburg Mayor Samantha Squailia on the Main Street steps of City Hall. Fitchburg is leaning into arts and culture to help revitalize its downtown area. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

FITCHBURG - When Nick Capasso arrived at the Fitchburg Art Museum more than a decade ago, the abandoned school opposite the museum served as a stark reminder of the challenges facing this once-prosperous mill town on the banks of the Nashua River.

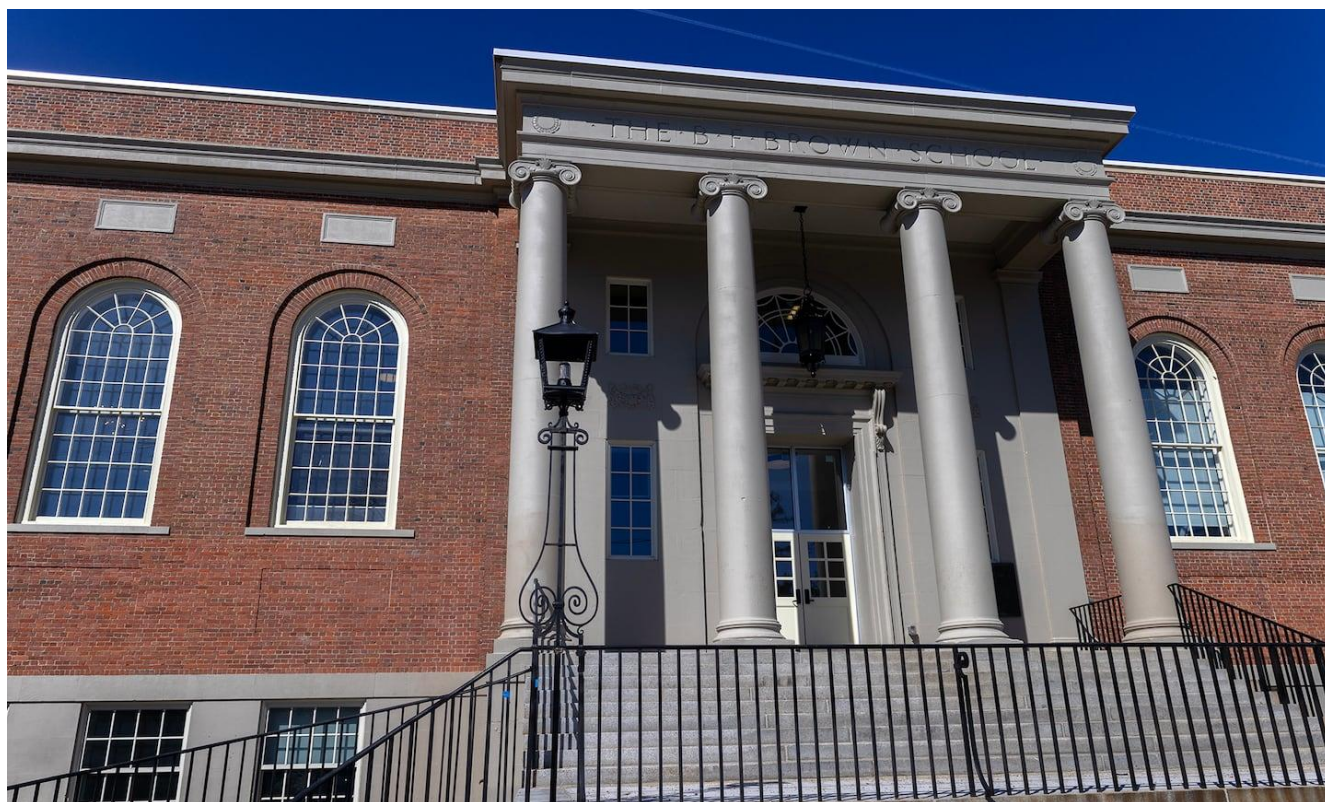
The city's downtown had been hollowed out as the paper and other industries departed. Median household incomes had fallen well below state levels, and the old B.F. Brown School, attended by generations of area schoolchildren, sat gathering dust, its windows covered with red plywood.

So Capasso, FAM's director since 2012, was receptive when developer Marc Dohan approached him with an idea to convert the school and two other buildings into affordable housing for artists.

"The last thing I wanted was three boarded-up buildings across the street from the art museum," said Capasso, whose museum played a supportive role in the project. "If our community doesn't thrive, the art museum's not going to thrive. It's just that simple."

Now, after more than a decade of work, developers have completed renovations to the erstwhile school, which began leasing 68 units of artist-preferred affordable housing in March. The \$45 million project, where one-bedrooms start at less than \$1,200 and roughly 70 percent of the units are deemed affordable, is a critical piece in Fitchburg's broader bid to leverage arts and culture to revitalize the Gateway City.

"We decided to build on our unique strengths and try to stimulate the local creative economy," Capasso said, "which in turn would help to stimulate investment in the city, and that's exactly what's been happening."



The old B.F. Brown School now offers artist-preferred affordable housing, part of a broader bid to leverage arts and culture to revitalize the Gateway City. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

That's not to say Fitchburg, population 41,000, is bustling. Downtown has plenty of empty storefronts. One of the city's two breweries closed in 2023, and its unemployment rate, at [6 percent](#), is 2 points higher than the rest of the state.

But there are also signs of new life: An art gallery, dance studio, and restaurant incubator have all opened on Main Street in the past few years, and there are several new cafes and restaurants. The Fitchburg Cultural Alliance began offering affordable downtown studio space in 2022, and an arts and culture group is opening a performance, events, and studio space in a former nightclub.

Meanwhile, the library, also downtown, is undergoing a \$40 million renovation, and Fitchburg State University is working to redevelop a property that includes a 1,600-seat theater and a suite of adjoining storefronts.

The net result, said Mayor Samantha Squailia, is that developers have become more interested in downtown residential and commercial projects.

"There's a lot more opportunity to develop housing in Fitchburg than in some other more built-out areas," Squailia said. "We're trying to incentivize conversion to housing in our upper stories in downtown."

City leaders are calling the new artist-preferred housing development, known as the Fitchburg Arts Community, an important "proof of concept." Roughly 1,000 people have expressed interest in leasing an apartment in the new development, which consists mainly of one- to three-bedroom units.

During a recent tour, Dohan pointed out several artist-specific amenities: The old auditorium has been reimagined as a shared workspace, and in addition to a sound-isolated room for rehearsals or recording, there are common spaces for meetings or talks.

“It’s hard to figure out how the space will be used until the artists move in,” said Dohan, executive director of NewVue Communities, a community development corporation.



Developers Marc Dohan (right) and Steven Cook preserved the school's auditorium, which they envision as a shared artist workspace. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

Jacqueline Pelnar, a retiree and watercolorist from Leominster, plans to move in at the end of April. She said she was excited about the auditorium and the prospect of living in a community of artists.

“It just makes you want to do art,” said Pelnar, who added she was a little apprehensive about living in Fitchburg, a city she doesn’t know well. “Is it a good section of town? I don’t know any of that stuff.”

Capasso said FAM plans to work with tenants, adding that the museum could offer portfolio reviews, exhibitions, or seminars for neighboring artists.

“We’re committed to having a dialogue with the community,” he said. “It just depends on what they want and what they need.”

The project has faced plenty of obstacles over the past decades, including a fire that destroyed a portion of the building’s roof. But during that time, Dohan, Capasso, and a variety of city leaders met each month to strategize how Fitchburg could reenergize its economy.

“They’ve been really instrumental to helping us advance this vision,” said Dohan, referring to the monthly group. He added that members have supported each others’ projects, testifying at City Council meetings and presenting a unified message when outside funders came to visit.

The approach has helped Fitchburg attract significant outside investments geared toward economic redevelopment and sustainable cultural infrastructure.

Derek Craig, who administers a grant known as Creative Cities, said the funding has supported a variety of projects, including an annual music festival and start-up costs for an art gallery.

Craig’s own arts and culture group, CoFF33 Corp, is preparing to open a new events and performance space in an old nightclub on Main Street.



“If our community doesn’t thrive, the art museum’s not going to thrive,” said Nick Capasso, director of the Fitchburg Art Museum, which has been instrumental in the city’s bid to enhance arts and culture. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

“There’s a lot more openness to change,” said Craig, who’s also preparing for a local art week in April.

Still, he said, some residents remain pessimistic about the city, which can make it difficult for new ventures to get off the ground.

“It’s hard to escape some of the negativity,” said Craig, noting that some good businesses have failed to make it. “How do you expect to continue to get nice things when you don’t treat the new thing that you just got nicely?”

Progress can also be slow. Fitchburg State, which originally planned to renovate the theater with an eye toward presenting shows, is reassessing that plan. The region’s needs and economic landscape have shifted, a university spokesperson said, and the school is now exploring plans that would address the city’s needs for market-rate housing, innovation spaces, and community-oriented uses.

Donna Hodge, who became the university’s president last year, described the school’s future as “inseparable” from its namesake city.

“That’s why we’re investing in projects that reflect real regional needs — from creative spaces to housing — while partnering with civic leaders and cultural institutions to imagine what’s possible,” she said in a statement.

During a walking tour downtown, Liz Murphy, the city’s executive director of community development and planning, pointed out some of the area’s new cultural features. Main Street, previously a one-way thoroughfare, has been converted to a more pedestrian-friendly two-way road. A retro arcade is set to open, and developers have renovated a smattering of older buildings, creating ground-floor commercial space with housing above. The city is seeking to establish a cultural district, and there is a series of frames to display public art along a walkway that leads to a small outdoor stage. Work will also begin soon on a pedestrian bridge connecting downtown with a rail trail that links Fitchburg to Leominster.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of properties that could use some love, including a stretch of storefronts where tenants have used fabric to block out the windows. The city is also working to redevelop the old courthouse, a stately Neo-Gothic building just off the central strip.

“What I would love to see is a boutique hotel,” said Murphy, who earlier that day had recalled going to Boston when she was younger with no real plan for the weekend.

“Just go hang out — there’s always something to do,” she’d said. “I want people to think about Fitchburg in that way.”