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Watch Factory: Offices with a view

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GateHouse News Service

Posted Aug 03, 2008 @ 11:57 PM

WALTHAM — Someone seeking an office with a window view probably couldn't hope for better confines than those found at the Watch Factory on Crescent Street.

That's because some 5,700 windows line the facade of the historic building, once home to the Waltham Watch Company.

"Every desk, every space has access to natural light," said Eric Ekman, project manager for Berkeley Investments Inc., developer of the site.

And because there's gobs of glass, it's likely to make the Watch Factory a big energy saver. With so much sunlight coming in, photo cells are located throughout the building to measure natural light levels to determine when light switches need to be turned on or off, Ekman explained.

The multitude of windows are just one of the unique features of the buildings, which also show off spiral staircases, exposed wood ceilings and sandblasted brick walls.

The first phase of the redevelopment of the site, which will feature 166,000 square-feet of office space, is already well under way. Passkey International, an online group hotel reservation system, signed up last month to be the first tenant.

Ekman said the initial phase should be completed by May 2009.

The second phase will include 96-loft style apartments along with a restaurant and cafe or deli.

Ekman said Berkeley Investments would come before the City Council sometime this fall seeking a special permit to build the apartments since the property is located in a commercial zoning district. Ekman said he's hopeful that if that hurdle is passed, construction could begin on the residential portion early next year and be completed by spring 2010.

A third phase of the Watch Factory will include another 77,000 square-feet of office space.

Ekman said preserving as much of the building's historic character as possible was "imperative" since state and federal tax credits, which are doled out to developers for historic rehabilitations, were used to finance construction. The site has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1989, Ekman said.

The Waltham Watch Company opened in 1854 where it became the first company to manufacture interchangeable watch parts. It remained a fixture at the Crescent Street site until closing its doors in the 1950s.

An exhibit detailing the history of the Watch Company will be a part of the first phase of the development. Ekman said Berkeley has worked with both the Charles River Museum of Industry and the Waltham Historical Society to create the exhibit.

Redeveloping the site, which was built about 150 years ago, did have its challenges, Ekman said. For instance, architects had to design around the building's narrow wings.

Ekman said what attracted Berkeley to the redevelop the site were the building's "Waltham address, its location on the river and it's wonderful historic character."

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