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Watch Factory is back in the flow

By Joyce Kelly/Daily News staff
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WALTHAM — A "sleeping giant" has awoken in the heart of the city, said state Rep. Peter J. Koutoujian, at an event celebrating the rehab and reuse of the former Watch Factory.

Standing in an enormous room in the bowels of the Watch Factory during its grand opening yesterday, Koutoujian, D-Waltham, and other local dignitaries boasted of the city's claim-to-fame as being home to the nation's first watch-making factory.

Factory workers produced 4 million watches there, he said.

Women comprised almost half of its 2,400-person work force when its doors were first opened in 1854, he said, adding, "When it left in 1957, it was a dark day for Waltham."

Yesterday, city officials and developer Berkley Investments Inc. of Boston unveiled the completed first phase of rehab to the 400,000-square-foot building - and its 3,000-plus new windows.

Berkley has finished phase one of the project, having prepared 160,000 square feet of office space in 12 historic buildings, and expects to complete the work - building 96 loft-style apartments, two restaurant spaces, and more offices - by 2012, said Eric Ekman, Berkley project manager.

One restaurant will offer fine dining, the other will be a cafe or deli, he said.

More than 250 people have worked on the project so far, Ekman said.

By redeveloping the Watch Factory, the city is creating new business and good-paying jobs, Koutoujian said.

Establishing businesses in the "heart of the city," at 223-225 Crescent St., is good for the community and local economy, Koutoujian said.

"This is truly a part of our city's heritage. There's nothing more at the heart, at the guts, of this city than the Waltham Watch Factory," Koutoujian said.

"What a building it is," Mayor Jeannette McCarthy said.

"I can't say enough about the work of (Berkley President) Young (Park) and Eric (Ekman)," said McCarthy, also commending Ward 8 City Councilor Stephen Rourke and Councilors Sarafina "Sally" Collura and Kathleen McMenimen for their support of the project.

McCarthy said the factory revitalization has personal significance for her, as her grandmother left England to work at the Watch Factory, and her grandfather, a machinist, was the last person to leave it.

Gesturing across the Charles River to Mount Feake Cemetery, McCarthy joked that she wants a view of the factory when she is laid to rest there.

Rourke proudly rattled off a list of industries and activity that has sprung along the banks of the Charles River since the area was first settled. (He noted it was so-named by King Charles, after himself.)

When industrialists came to the city in the 19th century and set up shop along the Charles, they quickly made Waltham "one of the most industrialized areas in the country," Rourke said.

McCarthy and other city politicians were not the only local people pleased with the developers' work thus far.

Historical Commission member David L. Smith said he wants to make sure everyone knows how great Berkley has been in redeveloping the factory and preserving its historic integrity.

"The developer worked so well with us, they were cooperative in every way. They are an example of how a project should be done," Smith said.

McCarthy presented Park with a proclamation commending his work in phase one of the development.

Park said he was honored and challenged in developing the Watch Factory.

"It's not every day a development company has the opportunity and burden of revitalizing a project which happens to be on the seal of the city of Waltham," Park said.

Berkley is close to achieving 30 percent occupancy on the newly completed offices, which is remarkable, he said, since the company only began

marketing the project a few months ago.

The revitalized factory boasts aesthetically pleasing and environmentally friendly landscape designs, such as rain gardens and infiltration systems, which control stormwater and pollutants, Ekman said.

The Watch Factory "celebrates historic character" and integrates modern features, he said.

Anthony M. Almonte, principal engineer with Avid Engineers in Billerica, which worked on the project, called the developer's work "amazing," saying, "You should have seen this before - it was just brick and dust and dirty wood."

Today, the "brick-and-beam"-style buildings have the best of both worlds, using, for instance, contemporary lighting, suspended ceilings, an abundance of great natural light and careful architectural design, as well as exposed brick and contemporary, symmetrical silver ductwork and beams.

"I think it is fantastic, it's really something," Almonte said.

Said Eckman, "This is a direct result of the passion and hard work" by a dedicated team, including the community.

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Lisa Cassidy

Waltham City Councilor Stephen Rourke talks about the Charles River during the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the refurbished Watch Factory on Monday.



Lisa Cassidy

A guest tours the Watch Factory during the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday.



Lisa Cassidy

Project manager Eric Ekman gives a tour of the Watch Factory during the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday.