

July 16, 2007 *Southbridge Evening News*

Renewal comes to Crane Street

Former factory refurbished with eye toward arts, offices

by [MATT REYNOLDS](#)
[NEWS STAFF WRITER](#)

SOUTHBRIDGE — The Flat Iron building, sandwiched at the intersection of Hamilton and Crane Streets, is living proof that old industrial landmarks don't have to wither and decay when old industries move elsewhere or slide into obsolescence.

Refurbished in 2004 by the dynamic husband-wife duo of Gabriel McCarthy and Margaret Morrissey, the historic property now brims with new apartments, displays of local artwork and flourishing businesses, including Aoife's Ices and Sturbridge Coffee Roasters.

Not wanting to rest on his laurels, McCarthy, together with business partner Roderick Murphy, fixed his gaze on another creaky industrial structure just across the street and set about working a turnaround of similar magnitude.

Their brainchild, which is just now beginning to bear its first fruit, is 12 Crane: not just an address, but a way of life.

Patterned largely after the Flat Iron building's overhaul, the renovation project at 12 Crane St. seeks a close-knit community of artists, entertainers, merchants, restaurateurs, office workers and apartment dwellers.

This patchwork method of business development has a proven track record of success, McCarthy said, so long as the grouping is not done haphazardly.

"Everything here is carefully thought out so that it should interact," he said. "It should create a synergy."

"This is the kind of thing that happens in Boston, not Southbridge," Murphy said.

When construction is complete on the 50,000-square-foot complex on Crane Street, it will house an art gallery, an upscale restaurant, a downstairs pub, an entertainment hall, a cigar shop, a brewery and a bakery, as well as offices and apartments.

The art gallery, Sevensgaits Studios, recently opened its doors, and the Dark Horse Tavern



Shawn Kelley photo
Owners Gabriel McCarthy and Margaret Morrissey hope the silver paint job at 12 Crane St. can be a metaphor for future success — as well as a conversation-starter. (*click for larger version*)

should be up and running within a few weeks, McCarthy said.

After that, the remaining businesses should open on an incremental basis, as the pace of construction allows. The idea is to give each business its moment in the spotlight and to avoid heaping too much responsibility on the owners' shoulders at once.

The owners envision the renovated structure, which will employ environmentally friendly or "green" technology, serving as a magnet for artists and other creative, avant-garde types — the kind of people, they say, upon which redevelopment schemes often hinge.

In its long history on Crane Street, the massive industrial complex has served as a cold storage warehouse, a dog food factory, a distribution center for the Palmerino Wholesalers company and, most recently, a plumbing supply depot.

"It's nice to preserve some of the past, to rework these buildings," said Morrissey, the adult services librarian at Jacob Edwards Library and chairman of the town's Historical Commission.

Not merely an expression of nostalgia, that spirit of renewal is also vital to future economic growth in Southbridge, as "the heavy industries that were popular in the last century are no longer applicable to this area," McCarthy said.

Before McCarthy and Murphy snatched it up, the Crane Street building had fallen into disrepair and exhibited none of "the shiny exuberance that it exudes now," Morrissey said, alluding to its gleaming silver façade.

In choosing that color, McCarthy heeded a lesson learned during the Flat Iron renovation: the importance of standing out from the crowd.

"Everyone suggested that we paint it to blend in with everything else," McCarthy said, "but I don't want it to blend in."

However, passers-by may have reacted to the distinct shade of yellow in which the building was eventually coated, at least it grabbed their attention.

"Everybody had a comment," he said. "Some people hated it; some people loved it. But everybody had something to say about it. It's the same with the silver building: it's not my favorite color or Rod's favorite color, but everybody has a comment on it."

Crane Street runs along the path of the Quinebaug River, a resource whose full potential has not yet been harnessed, McCarthy believes.

"One of the things I've felt about this area is that the river is completely underused," McCarthy said. "Any community that I've seen for the last 30 years where the river has been focused on has turned itself around."

An outdoor patio outside the Dark Horse Tavern affords patrons a view of the river, and McCarthy looks forward to the completion of a bike path running alongside it.

"This place, before we got here, was completely grown over," Murphy said. "You wouldn't have even known there was a river down there. There were old toilets, old refrigerators, broken down cars," and other refuse.

Moreover, the rear wall of the complex had been liberally festooned with unsightly and occasionally obscene graffiti.

The cleanup effort, Murphy said, has restored the area's natural grandeur and had a salutary effect on the wildlife that inhabit the region.

It just goes to show, Morrissey said, that "despite what might seem like an ugly building to start out with, you can see that with some work and vision, it can be transformed into something very pleasant."

She sees the redevelopment of the Crane Street facility not in isolation, but within the broader framework of ongoing efforts to revitalize the Southbridge downtown.

McCarthy said the new building will, "without a doubt," act as a catalyst for further residential and business development in the Hamilton Street corridor and beyond.

"There's this great surge of everybody getting interested," Morrissey said. "They see that it's possible to do something, and they become confident enough to do something themselves, and that's when the plan really works."

Jacob Edwards Library, she said, will at some point in the near future host a screening of a movie, "Downside Up," about how updated industrial properties and a thriving arts culture helped transform the town of North Adams.

Like that community, and other tourist-friendly outposts throughout the state, Southbridge can become a "destination," in and of itself, McCarthy said.

"We have something here for almost everybody in the area," Murphy said. "We would like them to come and see what we've got, and maybe they will be pleasantly surprised."

Part two of this story will appear in tomorrow's edition.