



A former “Butler Building,” Mike Davidson considers this converted dry cleaners building on South Main Street his greatest achievement. It now contains 36 units of “industrial chic” studio apartments, half of which are permanently on lease to nearby Northern Stage, to house its constantly changing roster of actors and support staff. Photo by Carolyn Bates. Rendering (right) by Studio Nexus.



White River Junction, Then And Now

By Dick Nelson

There was a time, not so long ago, when White River Junction was not cool. In fact, it was more like the poor step sister to the larger and more prosperous

communities of Hanover and Lebanon, which make up what was once called the Tri-Town area.

That has all changed. Although the Town of Hartford (which also contains the villages of Wilder, Quechee, Hartford and West Hartford) still has its challenges, White River Junction has now become a drawing card rather than a burden.

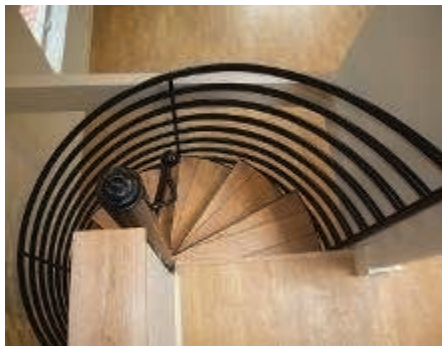
“We’re seeing investment in all parts of White River Junction, including uptown, near the interstates, and Taft Flats, near the high school,” says Lori Hirshfield, Hartford’s director of planning. “It’s infectious. Downtown White River has been the key.”

The turnaround in White River Junction began more than a decade ago

with the arrival of the Center for Cartoon Studies, which set up shop on South Main Street, and the conversion of the former Tip Top bakery building on North Main Street into a combination of stores, offices, studios and a restaurant, by entrepreneur and select board member Matt Bucey.

“You have to give credit to Lori, (zoning administrator) Joanne Ellis and their entire staffs,” says architect Jim Wasser of Studio Nexus, who has been able to witness the renaissance from the window of his second floor office, located in the historic former U.S. Post Office Building, which is now the main headquarters of the cartoon school.

“It’s also been driven by developers with a lot of foresight,” said Wasser, who



Studio Nexus Rendering

A spiral staircase in one of the studio apartments at 241 South Main Street.



When Big Fatty's BBQ was rejected in the renovated junior high building by the Lebanon Planning Board, Mike Davidson relocated the business into another of his properties on South Main Street in White River Junction.

has collaborated with developer Mike Davidson on many of Davidson's projects in White River Junction and Lebanon.

"We first met when he was planning to renovate the Lebanon Junior High School. I had bought a small apartment complex just up the street from there. So we were sort of neighbors. I also knew him through my wife. She's an '81 Dartmouth grad and was director of Alumni Affairs at Dartmouth and Mike's also a Dartmouth grad.

"We do a lot of work with Twin Pines (a non-profit affordable housing developer), so it was a natural fit. We hit it off. We have similar goals to Mike's, so it was an easy partnership."

After collaborating on the junior high project, Wasser's firm also assisted in developing plans for conversion of the historic School Street School in Lebanon to apartments, and on the conversion of a historic brick warehouse on Bank Street Extension in Lebanon into an apartment and home to several small businesses.

"It's a beautiful old brick building," says Wasser. "It will continue to be mixed use."

Their latest partnership has been the transformation of Roy's Gulf in Lebanon into Lucky's Coffee Garage, which opened in early December.

Says Wasser of Davidson, "He always has images in his mind. He knows where he wants to go before he even engages us. Lucky's recalls the painting Nighthawk

by Edward Hopper. Mike has a vision of what these places evoke and what they can become.

"He's always got plans. He's sometimes hard to keep up with. He'll call on a Thursday and say, 'Can you have drawings by Monday?'"

When Davidson and Nexus combined

forces on the conversion of the former College Cleaners on South Main Street in White River Junction into studio apartments, which have been in high demand since going on the market in 2017, Davidson had already had a dramatic impact on the area with other projects.



This newly constructed building, next door to Big Fatty's, was designed by Watershed Studio Architecture. In addition to a hydroponics store and brewery, it also is home to several offices.



The historic Freight House Building on South Main Street is where Mike Davidson opened his first enterprise in downtown White River Junction, the Elixir Night Club. Davidson explained that Elixir is a name for the substance alchemists used to turn lead into gold. "I like to think that's sort of what happened here (in White River Junction)." The building has also been home to several other businesses started by Davidson.

A Stunning Transformation

After decades of focusing on his painting business, property management business and apartment rentals in Lebanon, Davidson saw an opportunity on White River's South Main Street when no one else did. There had been signs of new life in the drab downtown area, Davidson had a hunch things were headed in the right direction and began investing, purchasing properties that ultimately became The Elixir Restaurant and nightclub, The Engine Room bar and restaurant, the Club Diesel Sports Bar & Lounge, and the former Tupelo Music Hall, all located in the former Freight House, a long building beside the tracks, left over the the glory days of the railroad, when White River Junction was a thriving port of call between Boston and Montreal. He also bought the building that now houses Big Fatty's Restaurant, which had been barred from the Lebanon Junior High building by the Lebanon Planning Board.

Also just relocated from the Freight House into the former L. F. Trottier building at 240 South Main, White River CoWorks, a communal co-working space

that offers both day and monthly passes as well as permanent office space. Single-handedly Davidson has now transformed what was 1,600 feet of forlorn streetscape into a diverse group of businesses, dining and entertainment venues and now housing. Says Wasser: "He essentially

owns all the properties on that part of South Main Street except COVER home repair (a non-profit that fosters reuse of building materials)."

Davidson says it was his opening of the Elixir nightclub more than a decade ago that precipitated it all.



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“Elixir is what the alchemists needed to turn lead into gold,” he says. “I like to think that’s sort of what happened here. Elixir was the first step in taking what was essentially a dump and turning it into something special. We don’t own the restaurant anymore, but in the early days it was a beacon.”

“These properties had just sat there. Look at what you have now. I’d like to say it was all planned,” says Davidson, “but it wasn’t. Piece by piece, it was cobbled together. When opportunity knocks, we jump on it. We also have a brewery there, a landscape business, a hydroponics store. All cheek and jowl. It’s an example of people living and working together instead of it all being zoned off into suburbia.”

The crown jewel to it all, on the

opposite side of the street in a repurposed Butler Building that once housed a dry cleaning business, are 36 units of chic industrial style apartments at 241 South Main Street. The formerly ramshackle building now contains two stories and 20,000 sq. ft., including two penthouses.

“I’ve done a lot of things that are worthwhile, successful” he says, “but there’s really only one that I think is unique. Putting housing into a used Butler Building was my own original idea.”

Project A Challenge

“It was one of the most difficult buildings I ever worked on,” Wasser says. “Some real technical challenges.”

Half the units are now permanently

rented by the newly expanded Northern Stage theater, which opened its own new building two years ago around the corner. These are styled similar to a college dorm, with three bedrooms attached to a single central room with a kitchen and living area. The rest are rented on the open market.

“Half of (the rest) are studio apartments,” says Wasser, “which is what Mike likes. It’s where the market is trending. Mike understands the market. There’s lots of single folks coming into White River and working at the college, the hospital, or wherever, and they need a place where they can just crash. Six units are one-bedroom, with a spiral staircase.”

Says Davidson, “They were all rented as soon as it opened (in July 2017). My wife and I stayed there for a few nights before it opened. They’re great units. People want to live there. It’s unique when you take a boxy, metal building, add steel cabling, skylights, metal ceilings. Suddenly, it’s ‘industrial chic’. You’re living in a tin box, but it’s a beautiful tin box.”

“Of all the naysayers, and there have been plenty of them over the years, they were the loudest about this project. They said, ‘Who would want to live on South Main Street?’ Turns out, lots of people.”

A Happenin’ Place

“Mike is willing to look at things in an open-minded way,” says architect Daniel Johnson, who teamed with Davidson on the GoPro/River Roost building, next to Big Fatty’s, as well as the redesign and renovation of the building that houses Davidson’s business, LedgeWorks, on Water Street in Lebanon. “Just because things have been one way in the past doesn’t mean they have to be that way in the future.”

“He saw the potential (of South Main Street) and he was willing to take the risk. He wasn’t afraid of it like some others might be. He’ll do small things as well as big things. He can see the potential in rundown buildings. And he’s clever about not being overambitious. It’s all been incremental, not grandiose.”

“Mike spends a lot of time thinking about things. He’s not all about the money. He also cares about the town, the community and bringing people into town. When things go right, everybody is happy. The building occupants are happy and the town is happy.”

Hirshfield, the planning director, Johnson, Wasser and Davidson himself, all agree it has been a collective effort among the town and several dedicated individuals

Watershed Studio photo



Carolyn Bates photo



Above are two more historic buildings in downtown White River Junction that have been converted to modern use. The Gateway Building (top), the original home of Gateway Motors, now houses the Loewen Window Center of Vermont and New Hampshire, Watershed Studio Architecture and other businesses. The former post office building (bottom) is now headquarters to the Center for Cartoon Studies and Studio Nexus, among others.

that has spurred the reinvention of downtown White River Junction. Through those efforts, the downtown has gone from seedy to hip over the past decade and a half.

“Besides Mike,” says Hirshfield, “you have Matt Bucey, Bill Bittinger, David Briggs, Byron Hathorn, Bailey Drubel and the people at Northern Stage and the Center for Cartoon Studies. They have all been major investors.”

Bucey not only reinvented the Tip Top building to start it all, but also recently converted the former American Legion building on South Main Street into popular apartments. Bittinger has over the past decade constructed a series of office buildings on Railroad Row near the Amtrak train station, in an industrial motif and is currently putting up a four-story office building on the site of a former strip club at the entrance to downtown. Hathorn is nearing completion of a three-story assisted living and memory care facility next door to a church and Northern Stage. Briggs, still owner of the downtown Hotel Coolidge, has long been stabilizing force and downtown advocate. Drubel has had her hand in a number of projects over the years.

Says Hirshfield, “It is so critical to have property owners who have been willing to make the investment and who have stuck it out. They’ve continued to be active, even through some of the tough times.”

Davidson admits there were tough times, for himself and for White River Junction. But they are mostly in the past.

Davidson says: “If you develop a critical mass, it will attract people, attract businesses, create jobs, create excitement. Density is the key. These days, White River is the place to be. It’s hitting its stride. I’m very proud of White River. From the film festival (held every May), to Northern Stage to the cartoon school. It’s the way things like this happen. Organically, not overnight. It takes hundreds of people, but we’ve done it.”

The following businesses are happy to partner with Mike Davidson:

- Accessibility Systems, Claremont, NH
- Barre Tile, Lebanon, NH
- Bonardi Steel, Enfield, NH
- David Juare, Cambridge, NY
- Dead River Co., Woodstock
- Kinney Pike, White River Jct.
- Loewen Window Ctr, White River Jct.
- Purcell Landscaping, White River Jct.
- Studio Nexus, White River Jct.
- Watershed Studio, White River Jct.

Congratulations, Mike, on a job well done!



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Congratulations Mike & the Ledgeworks team!