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Rehabbing the Colt Armory: A Functionally Related HTC Success



CINDY HAMILTON, HERITAGE CONSULTING GROUP

In the mid-2000s, initial work began on the rehabilitation of the former Colt Armory and manufacturing complex in Hartford, Connecticut. After 15 years and three separate historic tax credit (HTC) projects, the 17-acre site consisting of eight rehabilitated buildings was officially completed.

As a result, the buildings within the campus were converted to serve a variety of new uses, including residential, commercial and educational. The complexity of the rehabilitation offers a unique look into functionally related properties and how they are viewed within the HTC program.

The rehabilitation of the Colt Armory illustrates that, though challenging, it is possible with thoughtful planning to successfully complete multiple HTC projects on functionally related complexes.

The Colt Armory

Samuel Colt began his career in weapons manufacturing in the first half of the 19th century. It was not until 1855, however, that he founded the Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Company, which

Image: Courtesy of Jim Fiora Studio LLC

Following completion of Project 3 in 2020, the Colt Armory's famed blue onion dome atop the East Armory was restored as one of Hartford, Connecticut's premiere landmarks.

would grow to become a household name with guns such as the Colt Single Action Army revolver and its equally well-known cartridge the .45 Colt. The same year the company was founded, it erected the initial manufacturing armory buildings along the banks of the Connecticut River. The complex was added to numerous times between then and 1942, though use of the plant significantly decreased in the post-World War II period.

The Colt Armory remains highly distinctive owed much to its blue onion dome, which serves as one of the most unusual components of Hartford's skyline. The armory complex, as well as workers' housing and Samuel Colt's personal residence, are contributing resources to the Coltsville Historic District, which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2008.

The Rehabilitation of the Colt Armory

The National Park Services' (NPS's) functionally related guidance explains that "for rehabilitation projects involving more than one certified historic structure where the structures are judged by the Secretary to have been functionally related historically to serve an overall purpose ... rehabilitation certification will be issued on the merits of the overall project rather than for each structure or individual component." In short, this means that for an HTC project that involves multiple buildings within a functionally related complex, it is judged as one overall project, as opposed to numerous singular ones. More often than not, this guidance is applied to industrial complexes.

The rehabilitation of the Colt Armory was undertaken by Colt Gateway, which is also the rebranded name of the complex, led by Larry Dooley, managing partner. When completed in late-2020, the project rehabilitated eight buildings, with approximately \$126 million going into the rehabilitation. Three separate tax credit developments were undertaken to navigate the challenges posed by the inherent complexities of rehabilitating functionally related sites, which require that the stars align with market conditions, tenant identification and the challenges of rehabilitating buildings in varying states of disrepair.

In reflecting on some of the reuse challenges Dooley posited, "Colt Gateway is a mixed-use development (including residential, commercial, educational and retail spaces) with buildings that were erected from the 1850s to the 1940s. Materials, construction methodologies and end users differ with each building, and sometimes within each building, so specialized design, construction, and property management techniques are required."

Though originally conceived as a single, comprehensive development, project circumstances necessitated that the rehabilitation of the buildings be undertaken in smaller groupings. Concerning this challenge, Dooley said, "Colt Gateway was developed as a phased project, one building at a time, so the extended development timeline made it difficult to prepare for legislative, regulatory, market and technological changes."

For Colt Armory, Dooley and his team of advisors devised a schedule that allowed for three separate HTC applications to be submitted.

The Colt Armory rehabilitation was completed accordingly:

Project 1: (2006-2011)

The rehabilitation of the Colt Armory began in earnest in 2006. The first project included a portion of the South Armory (built c. 1916), which was rehabilitated to become apartments; the Sawtooth-Roofed Machine Shop Building (c. 1916), reused as leasable commercial space; Building 39 (also known as the Warehouse, built c. 1916), converted to a school; Building 25 (also known as the Garage, built c. 1916), converted to the school's gymnasium; and the Boiler House (c. 1916), which retained its historic use as the site's power plant.

The first project was completed before the NPS's most recent issuance of guidance for functionally related properties and obtained final Part 3 approval in 2011.

Project 2: (2013-2015)

Following a two-year period, work on the second project began in 2013. Unlike the first project, the

second included only two buildings within the armory complex: the South Armory and the U-Shaped office building. The work conducted on the South Armory resulted in the renovation of the remaining portion of the building for use as a school and leasable commercial space. The U-Shaped Building, as it is commonly referred to, was built in 1942 as the Colt corporate offices and was an unlikely candidate for reuse as it had been abandoned for many years and survived in a state of deterioration unrivaled on the campus. Under the second project it was converted to a school.

The two buildings, which are separated by both Sequassen Street and additional armory buildings, were reviewed as one overall project due to their common ownership and functionally related status. Project 2 received final certification in early 2015.

Project 3: (2016-2020)

In 2016, the NPS issued additional guidance for functionally related complexes. The updated guidance offered options for projects with multiple buildings located within a functionally related complex including a “gap year” solution during which no rehabilitation work occurs, in order to separate into multiple projects. Had work not paused for a year, the third HTC project at the Colt Armory would have extended Project 2, potentially impacting financing.

The third project within the rehabilitation of the Colt Armory complex focused on the East and North Armories. The East Armory, the most prominent building within the complex, fronts the Connecticut River and is topped with the landmark blue onion dome. Built in 1867 as a replacement to the original

1855 factory, the East Armory was converted to leasable commercial space. The North Armory (built c. 1916), which sits directly to the west of the East Armory, was converted to a mixed-use residential/commercial space.

The third HTC project at the Colt Armory capped roughly 15 years of work for Larry Dooley and the Colt Gateway team. According to Dooley, the key to success was, “to assemble a team of professionals to help negotiate through the historic restoration process and navigate through the potential pitfalls of historic preservation.” Developing a strategic approach to tackling such a large complex is necessary to formulate a project schedule that will work for the investor and anticipates the market demands and spatial needs of the ultimate tenants.

The rehabilitation of the Colt Armory serves as a premiere example of how large multiple-building complexes can be successfully rehabilitated. Just as important as a strong development team, Dooley pointed out the importance of the state and federal HTC programs on the overall success of the projects. As he explained, “the importance of the HTC program cannot be overstated. The program creates the foundation to a secure financial plan. Without the federal and state HTC programs, it would be impossible to secure the funding sources required to complete projects like Colt Gateway.”

Rearmed with a new identity, the historic Colt Armory has returned to its place of glory among the Connecticut capital’s most important economic drivers. ❖

Cindy Hamilton is president of Heritage Consulting Group.

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