

Preservation is Revolutionary

ANNUAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION AWARDS

June 11, 2026 | 521 Overlook at Fenway Park



2026 People's Preservation Choice Award Nominee

The Fitchburg Arts Community

The Fitchburg Arts Community is a powerful symbol of transformation and a cornerstone of the city's cultural and economic rebirth. As a primary driver for the Academy Street Educational Historic District, this landmark campus features three historic structures—the 1869 Academy Street School, the 1889 City Stables, and the 1924 B.F. Brown Middle School. Once neglected and abandoned, these buildings have been thoughtfully restored into 68 affordable, unique residences, creating a vibrant hub where history and creative expression coexist.

The \$46 million project serves as the anchor for a massive \$100 million downtown revitalization. By blending historic preservation with artist-preference housing, it has acted as a catalyst for dozens of additional residential units and sparked significant private investment. This momentum has reversed long-standing vacancy trends, filling downtown Fitchburg with new restaurants, retail, and community spaces.

The focal point is the B.F. Brown Middle School, which literally rose from the ashes of a devastating 2016 fire. Today, it offers light-filled apartments with twelve-foot ceilings and expansive classroom windows. Original details—including chalkboards, picture rails, and wood trims—have been meticulously preserved, while playful wayfinding uses color accents to honor the building's academic past. Shared studios and a grand portico with restored cast-iron railings welcome a new generation of "students" of the arts.

Adjacent to the school, the City Stables provides seven one-of-a-kind homes that retain their utilitarian charm through exposed brick and timber beams. Restored carriage doors and the original horse ramp pay homage to the building's working-class origins. Meanwhile, the Annex features twelve residences bathed in light from nine-foot windows, showcasing the craftsmanship of the late nineteenth century through restored ceilings and a grand slate-and-copper mansard roof.

As the Commonwealth's second artist-preference housing development, the campus transcends simple redevelopment by dissolving the boundaries between historic preservation and contemporary utility. Former classrooms, cafeterias and gymnasiums now serve as sanctuaries for makers, creating a "living bridge" between Fitchburg's industrious past and its evolving identity. This continuity is best exemplified by the former students and teachers who rallied to save B.F. Brown after the fire and have now returned as residents.

The project also champions sustainability. By choosing adaptive reuse over new construction, the development significantly reduced waste and carbon emissions. Modern efficiencies—such as interior thermal envelope upgrades and high-performance climate systems—were skillfully balanced with the original masonry.

Supported by unwavering pride from local alumni and bipartisan backing from elected officials, the Fitchburg Arts Community proves that historic buildings are the ideal foundation for a resilient, inclusive future. It is more than a housing complex; it is a dynamic incubator that ensures the city's artistic soul remains both celebrated and accessible.