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## \$3M Grant Building renovation one of largest in Bath's history



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A historic rehabilitation of 31 Centre St. in downtown Bath is nearly complete. Courtesy / WOODHULL

By Laurie Schreiber

**T**he Grant Building in downtown Bath has been a big part of the community for the better part of a century.

Now a 2 1/2-year historic rehabilitation is nearly complete — said to be one of the largest and most extensive projects in Bath's downtown history.

“The Grant Building will become one of the most dynamic mixed-use historic redevelopments in the state of Maine,” developer Sean Ireland told Mainebiz. “Union + Co will be one of the largest coworking spaces in northern New England.”

The building, at 31 Centre St., is expected to reopen in the coming weeks as a mixed-use redevelopment regulated by the National Park Service, the Maine Historic Preservation Office and the Bath Planning Board and Historic Review.

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The building will feature four residential units, three commercial spaces and co-working and flex event spaces.

Ireland said he invested just over \$3 million in the renovation. Local financing partners have been Gorham Savings Bank as the federal tax credit investor and Coastal Enterprises Inc. as the state tax credit investor plus a loan for solar installation. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America program provided a small solar grant. The city of Bath provided a modest tax credit through its tax increment finance district and a small grant from its façade improvement program.

The building will feature four residential units, three commercial spaces and what Ireland said will be one of the largest co-working and flex event spaces in Maine.

Ireland, of Windward Development, bought the building from Sagadahock Real Estate Association in 2021.

At the time, the building was one of the last parcels left in the Morse family's downtown real estate portfolio and the fourth building in three years to be sold to Ireland.

## Building history

The Art Deco-style W.T. Grant Building was one of 28 regional department stores and a downtown anchor when it opened in Bath in 1936.

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In the mid-1940s the building underwent a major addition and operated as Grant's until the store moved to Cook's Corner in the early 1960s.

Shortly thereafter, W.T. Grant stores closed as a result of bankruptcy.

The building was occupied by Bath Iron Works in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. BIW retrofitted the building to meet the needs of U.S. Navy and Coast Guard seamen's onshore duties and training while their ships were being built or repaired.



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Ireland teamed with Bath photographer Joshua Langlais to document the Grant Building redevelopment for posterity.

R.M Tate, a salvage warehouse, took occupancy in 1995. After its departure in 2014, the building remained largely empty for nearly a decade.

During the pandemic, the building was occupied by an indoor community park called Beacon Park Redevelopment.

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At nearly 22,000 square feet, the building is one of the largest in downtown Bath.

When Ireland began looking into the restoration, he asked the community for input on the building's future.

Ireland is a founder of Union + Co, a coworking, art and innovation space at 48 Front St., as well as Bath Brewing Co. He's also the developer of the Harvey Block/Morris Povich Building and the Medanick Building, both of which have been named Maine Preservation Honor Award winners.

Historic redevelopment of the large space required a mixed and multi-use approach, Ireland said.

"I don't really consider myself a developer — I'm a redeveloper," he said. "I haven't built anything new from the ground up."

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Ireland said he's attracted to historic buildings of significance.

"They are architecturally beautiful, well-built, located in downtown districts and incredibly underutilized," he said. "This combination satisfies my creative energy and my belief that the thoughtful re-envisioning of the past creates the best possible future opportunities."

## Multiple uses

The redevelopment split the building nearly evenly into commercial, retail and residential space. The lower level has three commercial spaces and two locker rooms that will serve as an amenity for the entire building. The rooftop features 80 solar panels that will produce over 30% of the building's energy needs.

A theater collective founded in 2016 in Brooklyn called Invulnerable Nothings will establish Cellar on Centre, a small theater for live performances. The performance group, recently relocated from New York, will use the space as its home base for performances and rehearsal space.

Four residential units include two 1-bedrooms and two 2-bedrooms. Energy-efficient features include fully insulated exterior and interior walls, high-efficiency windows, doors and appliances, and heat and cooling from mini-split heat pumps.

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**Co-working space**



Union + Co, which opened in 2019 at 48 Front St. as a membership-based co-working, private-office and events venue, will relocate to the Grant Building.

“We believe that what we’ve created here at the Grant Building is built to meet what we see as the current and growing future need for remote working and event flex space,” said the facility’s operations manager, Mandy Reynolds. “During COVID we learned so much about remote working. The need and desire for it – to have private spaces but with access to amenities and a working community. So that’s what we’ve built – a space that is private and dynamic and professional and interesting and offers the flexibility to host a myriad of events that will welcome and engage the community.”

Union + Co offerings will include 19 private offices, 15 dedicated desks, six flex desks, two conference rooms, four phone/zoom booths, a technology/copy center with office supplies, a large kitchen, two bathrooms and 4,000 square feet of flex event/member lounge space.

Ireland said the redevelopment aims to be “both unique and relevant – in order to attract the kind of people and businesses that combine to make up a community that will sustain over the long term.”

He added, “Bath is genuinely unique and we’re just trying to do our part to make sure that we’re redeveloping our projects in ways that make our spaces more relevant for future use by the people of our community.”

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