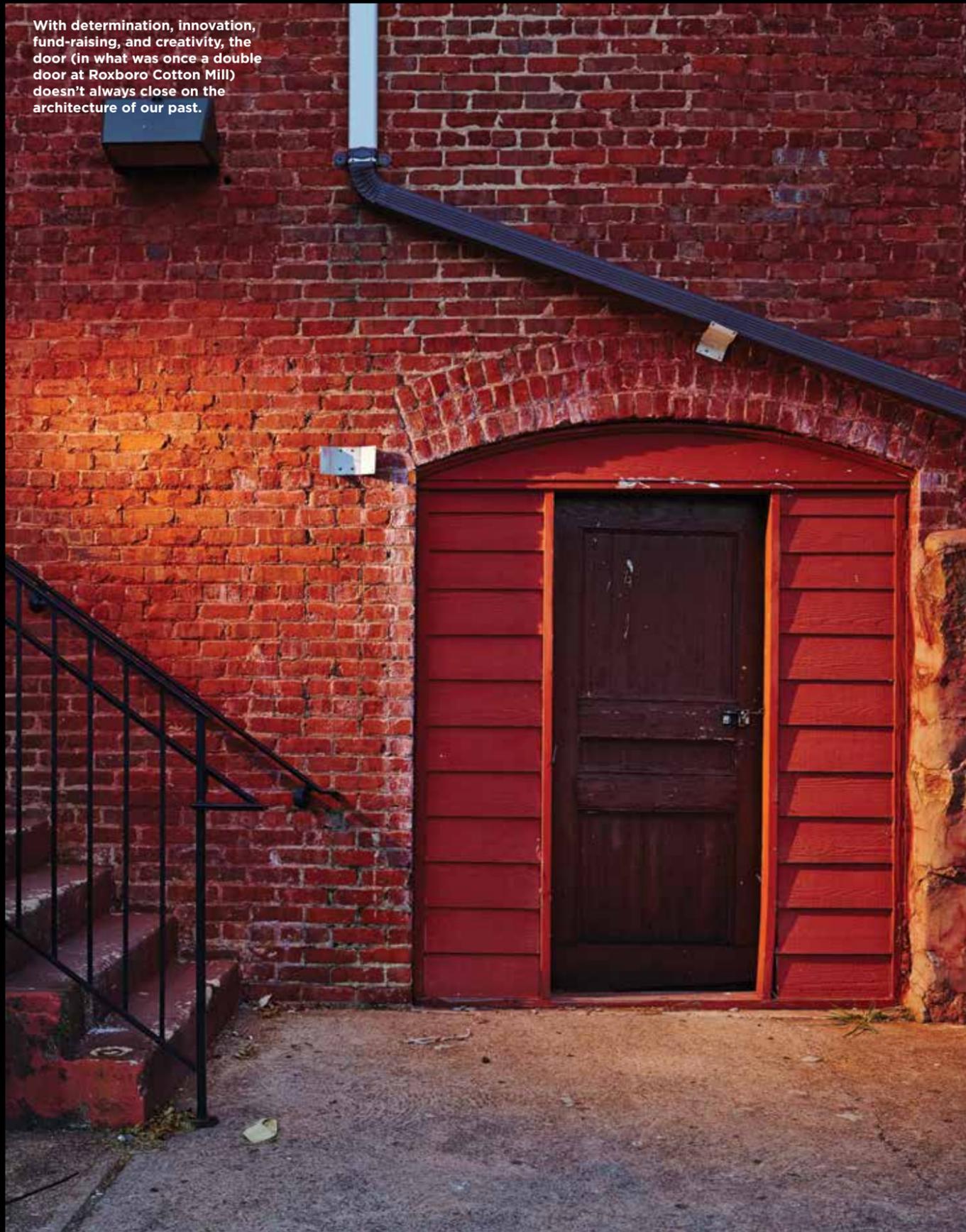


With determination, innovation, fund-raising, and creativity, the door (in what was once a double door at Roxboro Cotton Mill) doesn't always close on the architecture of our past.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL LUSK WRITTEN BY SUSAN STAFFORD KELLY

A PHOTO ESSAY

REMODELED
RECLAIMED
REBORN
RESTORED
REHABBED
REVAMPED
REVITALIZED
REIMAGINED
REFURBISHED
REPURPOSED



WAREHOUSE REWORKED

They weren't designed to awe or to be beautiful. They were designed to function. But in their new incarnations, the abandoned mills and factories of our state's historic enterprises — tobacco and textiles — do, and are, just that. And much, much more.

When did you last see
hardwood floors in a school?
Classrooms at the old
Roxboro Cotton Mill boast
original bricks, beams, and
windows, as well.



ROXBORO COMMUNITY SCHOOL, ROXBORO

ROXBORO COTTON MILL REMODELED

The bell is a muted tone rather than a shrill clang, but 40 years-on, the small chaos is instantly familiar. Kids are changing classes at Roxboro Community School. They're wearing glasses and braces and backpacks; they're clutching water bottles and tablets. The little guys with tardy hormones mingle with — though certainly don't speak to — the confident, cooler element with near-beards. They galumph and glide and make their way over sanded and shellacked blond wood floors, weave between dozens of original 12 foot-by-12 foot beams, ceiling skylights, and in the streaming light of also-original windows, each with 24 panes. I want to be there. Here, I mean.

"I love your shoes," a teenage girl says to me.

Maybe high school is different now. Forty years later, I'm finally cool.

What's definitely different is that these 700 students in grades 7 to 12 are going to school in a mill, in the old Roxboro Cotton Mill founded by J.A. Long in 1899, which, with dedication and renovation, opened as a charter school in the fall of 2006. A handsome plaque in the square, airy foyer recognizes the building's 2009 inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Beneath my feet is the original concrete floor, slightly uneven from decades of other feet and machinery, its imperfections intact and undisguised by multiple coats of glossy Bulldog school colors.

No dust motes float in the halls of the two-story building. Pipes of every diameter, from an inch to two feet, ferrying heat and air-conditioning, water and electricity, have been left exposed. They're silver and black and red and only enhance the high, easily 25-foot ceilings. Middle school grades and administrative offices are located on the first floor, high school principal Darkarai Bryant explains. High school classrooms and the library are granted second-floor status, which, in the academic food chain, seems only fitting.

Bryant opens a nondescript door, and a single step transports us within the original mill, the cavernous space

the school plans to renovate as a gym and auditorium. “We’ve found three snakes,” he cautions. The mill smells of bricks and concrete and dust and disuse. The space is vast. Exhausted paint from brick walls — some bearing three different colors — lies in flaky piles on the floor. Here are the painted windowpanes, a practice I never understood — were mill owners trying to prevent employees from gazing outside, sliding into slackness? Or just afraid of sunlight bleaching the textiles? Here is a track of raised rails, upon which some long-gone conveyance transported goods across the expanse. Here are chunks of concrete pried from the floor, revealing boards beneath, and when we peer at light leaking through the slats, we spy the school’s band room below.

And here, too, are the support beams, the most distinctive, ever-present feature of these mills. On both floors, two corridors run parallel, bisecting the school, and I walk their length, lightly tapping each beam as I pass, counting. Forty-nine. Times four. One hundred ninety-six visible beams, and that’s only for the portion of the mill that’s been reclaimed. Standing at one end of the long, long hall, they create an optical illusion of infinity.

These huge, unclaimed spaces lacking interior walls mean that their rehabbed interiors are often sleek, modern, minimal, a wise decor decision in this place of teeming, talking adolescents. The rust and gold walls bear large, black, eye-level lettering: Early 20th century, Renaissance, Post-Impressionism, Baroque, with prints of their work by Klimt and Wyeth, Rothko and Picasso, Cézanne and van Gogh, displayed in their appropriate periods. The effect is both warming and educational. Behind the high, arched, gorgeous, and original windows of the library, at the rear of the mill, located just off Depot Street (of course), are the train tracks, which, like the structure itself, are still in use. They hark back to the intent of these mills, whether tobacco, furniture, textiles or, like Roxboro Community School’s heritage, cotton. They were money-making machines. Today, this one is making minds.



Light for the three R's isn't a problem at Roxboro Community School. The cotton mill's second floor has become a library, and downtown acreage provides for that all-important other class: recess.



IMPERIAL TOBACCO COMPANY REPURPOSED

We know where the people, and the products, went. The people moved or died or found other jobs. The products were spun or woven or rolled or sealed into something you wore or smoked or spat. But you have to wonder where the machinery — looms, processors, the unimaginably deafening equipment — of manufacture went. Now, in at least one present incarnation, the rooms are spare, silent, serene inside a once clacketing, racketing mill.

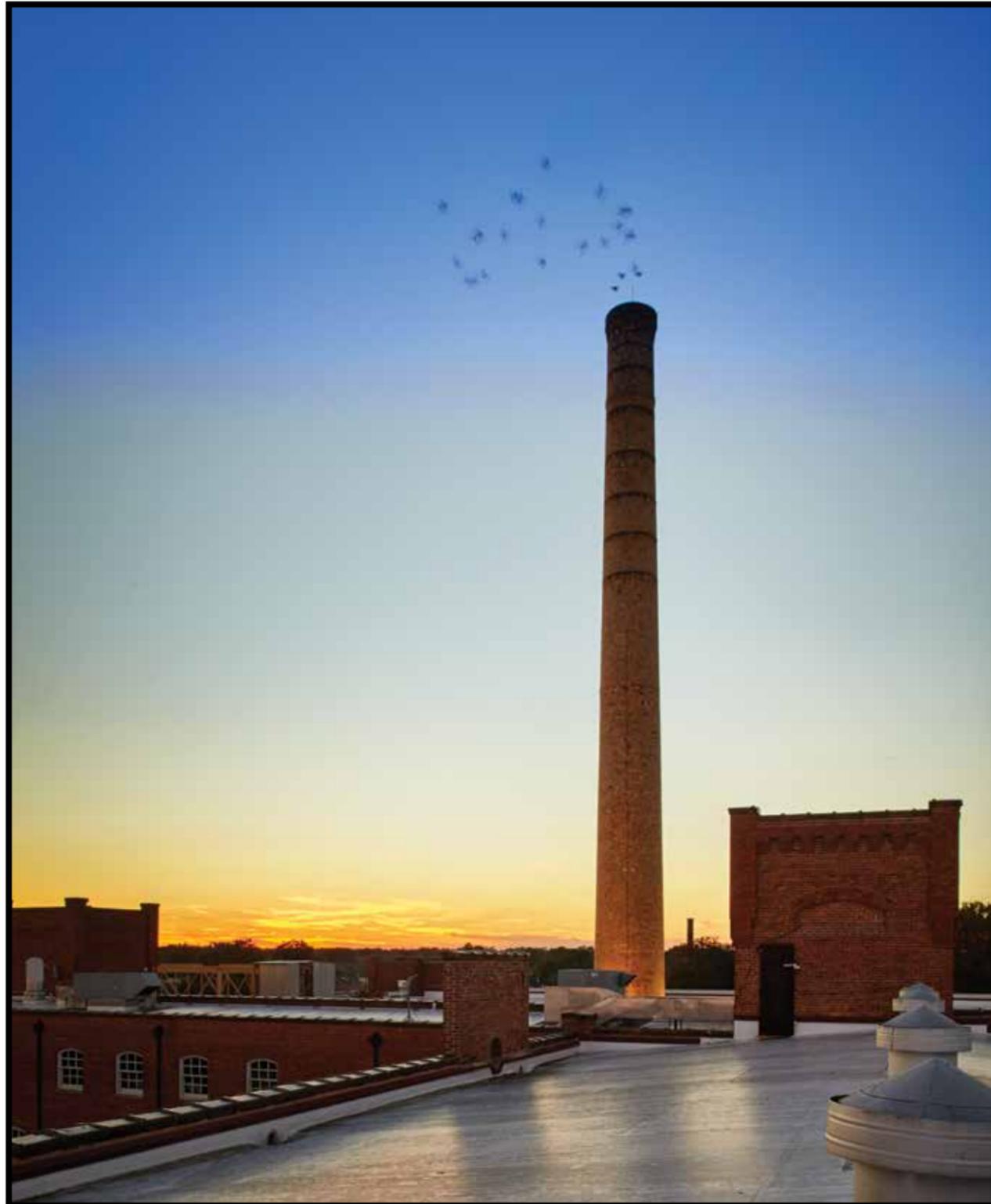
From outside, it still looks like a mill, a really, really big one, with its irregular rooflines and Lego-looking, low-slung additions, and chimney and steel conveyor. The builders of these buildings, dating from 1903 to 1923, weren't messing around. They were constructing a version of Medieval Romanesque architecture based on European fortresses built in the 9th and 10th centuries. And the mill had a big name to go with it, too: the Imperial Tobacco Company of Great Britain and Ireland.

You're going to need a map to tell the scale room from the boiler house, the stemming machine room from the cooperage shop. Don't worry; Rocky Mount's Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences provides maps in the foyer of this grand old lady made even grander by its reformation as a spectacular arts center containing a digital planetarium, live animal gallery, café, shop, theater, and numerous permanent and changing galleries. Immense black steel doors, whose raised lettering reads Erie City Iron Works, Erie PA USA, loom overhead in an atrium with 25-foot ceilings, though in the same room, an original arched doorway is a mere head-bumping 5 feet and 6 inches high. Brick pavers honor donors, as do benches and galleries and fountains. Lest one forget origins, the Universal Leaf Tobacco History Room is adorned with a silvery metal gate and rail of tobacco leaves by Greensboro sculptor Jim Gallucci.



New steel support beams at Rocky Mount's Imperial Centre echo the wooden ones still present in every mill. It's doubtful, though, that the floors were as glossy back in the day.

IMPERIAL CENTRE, ROCKY MOUNT



Sleek, industrial, yet authentic: From original chimney to modern sculpture at its entrance, to boiler room and chamfered support beams, the Imperial Centre in Rocky Mount is an art museum, theater, and education center.

Not that you could forget: The mill's chimney rises — immense, impressive — from the middle of the room.

I'm looking for the support beams.

After Hurricane Floyd in 1999, Centura Bank and other community leaders planned the restoration ("adaptive re-use" is a phrase on a plaque, and an apt term) of the abandoned Imperial Tobacco Company mill. The feel of the original industrial design is still present in its new guise, with steps constructed of I-beams and wooden planks; in the spacious galleries, with visible ductwork; in the huge bolted metal supports shoring up entranceways; in the suspended track lighting that illuminates a juried art show. The new spaces, with shining floors, carry that lovely hushed feel of museums, or magazine photos of urban lofts. The Student Gallery features blackboards, canvas-covered paint tables, and a mini-stage complete with spotlights and curtain and five theater seats I'd have loved when I was pretending to be Jane Banks meeting Mary Poppins.

But I'm still looking for the beams. They have to be here — just like the railroad tracks — somewhere near the upstairs bridge overlooking the boiler room, beneath original corrugated tin roofs, the odd, unexplained niche in the wall, and the ubiquitous arched windows, these covered in a material that allows diffused, unobtrusive light for the paintings and sculptures.

And there they are, running the length of the N.C. Collection, embedded in the walls behind the glass cases displaying Samantha Henneke's Red Weevil Mushroom Jar and Ben Owen's Jugtown pottery. There they are in the museum store, as well, where the clerk informs me that they're beveled because beveled edges retard the spread of fire — that constant threat — and that the foot-high, perforated concrete bases around the beams aren't for sturdiness, but to deter termites.

Which reminds me: the fire doors. They must be here somewhere, too. And I find those, as well, the size of this mill necessitating a trio of the sliding steel doors.

Consistency is a comfort.

AMERICAN TOBACCO FACTORY REVITALIZED

An enduring aroma from my childhood is that of a cigarette being pressed to the orange coils of an automobile lighter. Tobacco smoke, and its heady, lulling scent, filled the car, and I loved it. Aroma memories refuse to die, thank heavens. And, thank heavens, so do mills.

“SWAT teams trained here,” isn’t an ideal marketing slogan to attract The Nature Conservancy, WUNC radio station, or Duke University’s Office of Information Technology. But it’s the truth. The American Tobacco factory declined into such a “center of decay” in the 20 years following its 1987 closing that it was the ideal location for law enforcement to practice anti-crime and anti-terror tactics.

Having celebrated its 10-year anniversary last year, the American Tobacco Campus has been referred to nationally as “the definitive example of re-purposing and re-developing historic properties,” and began what has been dubbed the Durham Renaissance of downtown. On any given summer night, a baseball game, a showing at the 100-seat theater, and a concert on the “island” beneath the iconic Lucky Strike water tower might take place. More than one million people this year will walk the original sidewalks — once loading docks — beneath corrugated tin awnings, into bays beneath criss-crossing metal structures that once ferried tobacco bales from building to building, beginning in 1874.

Because it still looks like a mill. That’s the beauty of its resurrection. When Capitol Broadcasting bought and reopened the American Tobacco factory in 2004, it covered one million square feet. Two hundred thousand have become parking; 800,000 comprise an office, residential, and entertainment complex. The names of its



In downtown Durham, restaurants, tech start-ups, Burt’s Bees, and WUNC have all found a home where SWAT teams once practiced.

AMERICAN TOBACCO CAMPUS, DURHAM