



## THE CUMMINGS CENTER ~ 10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY

# New life at 'The Shoe'



Courtesy photo  
**THEN:** This photo shows the United Shoe Machinery Corp. building before it was bought by Cummings Properties in 1996.



BEVERLY — Bill Cummings remembers the first time he laid eyes on The Shoe, the mammoth concrete factory that stood like a fading monument to the industrial age on Elliott Street.

"I had no interest at all," he said. "I didn't think we could do anything with it."

Today, the former United Shoe Machinery Corp. factory known as "The Shoe" bears Cummings' name. The real estate developer from Woburn bought the empty, aging factory on April 29, 1996, for \$500,000.

Ten years later, the Cummings Center is a gleaming office park with doctors' offices, biotech companies, day care centers and bagel shops. More than 4,000 people work for the 393 firms that lease space there. The 90-acre property is assessed at \$92 million.

"We had people laughing at us at the time," Cummings said. "It wasn't, 'Wow, look what they did,' it was, 'Wow, can you believe what they did?' It looked like such an impossibility."

The Shoe, which made the machines that made shoes, was built in 1903 and employed as many as 6,000 in the 1940s. It was the city's major employer for decades until it closed down in 1989.

The huge factory — it was the world's largest

reinforced concrete structure until the Boulder Dam was built in the 1930s, according to Cummings Properties — stood mostly vacant for the next seven years, an aging eyesore on a major road to the city's downtown.

Cummings, who owns the Woburn-based Cummings Properties, was enticed to buy after the sale price dropped from \$40 million to \$5 million. Cummings offered \$500,000, and owner Black & Decker — which was losing money on the building — accepted.

Cummings said his company spent \$80 million renovating the complex. More than 300 construction workers toiled for three years, replacing 2,200 windows, installing hundreds of miles of plumbing and wiring and planting 450 trees.

In October 1997, Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote a review calling The Shoe's renovation a "miraculous rebirth."

"This is more than a success story," Huxtable wrote. "It is a dream come true."

Unnecessary tax break?

But the Cummings Center wasn't embraced by everyone. Some were troubled by the fact that the

city and Mayor Bill Scanlon gave the office park a tax break that allowed Cummings to pay taxes on less than the full value of the property for 10 years.

Cummings had already purchased the property, so some people wondered why the city was giving a tax break, which is often used to entice a company to redevelop an undesirable property.

But Scanlon said the tax break encouraged Cummings to develop The Shoe beyond his original intentions.

"I think it has been the single most important factor in the rebirth of the city," Scanlon said. "It may well be the most successful redevelopment in New England in the last decade."

Even one of the Cummings Center's toughest critics has softened her opposition. Toni Musante, an activist who has spoken out against the tax break and the rapid development at the Cummings Center, still bemoans the increased traffic and says the tax break was "overly generous." But overall, she said, "I think it's turned out to be a good thing."

The 10-year tax break expires on July 1. The Cummings Center will start paying taxes on the property's full value, which should amount to about \$1.8 million in 2007 — \$800,000 more than this year — according to Scanlon.

The Cummings Center is now about 70 percent full, well below its high point of 93 percent occupancy in 2000. The six-story building that went up in 2001 is still 80 percent vacant, but a mortgage company and a private school for children with special needs have signed leases.

Cummings also still plans to build a hotel on the property. The plans have been approved by local boards, but Cummings is seeking a hotel company to take on the project.

Bill Cummings said he is proud of the efforts to preserve The Shoe's history and make the once-imposing building more inviting to the public. Black-and-white photos of Shoe workers hang on the walls and shoe-making machines are displayed in glass cases. The walkway around the Shoe Pond, once overgrown with grass, is now cleaned up and open to the public.

"In some cases, there are decades of family connection to The Shoe," Cummings said. "When former employees come there and do a walkthrough, it's fascinating to see the looks on their faces. It's so rewarding."