

# What Do You Do With an Empty 1865 Mill? Throw an Art Party

By PETER CRABTREE

**BENNINGTON** — An empty mill and seven artists attracted more than 300 people Sunday to an unusual "building exhibition."

The show, "Projects for the Holden-Leonard Mill," celebrates an emblem of this town's industrial past, hopes for the 125-year-old building's future and the sometimes eccentric visions of the participating artists.

The former textile mill's entire fourth floor — measuring about 160 by 200 feet — is given over to the artists' response to the space and its history.

The work ranges from meditations on the rhythms of the day of those who once produced paisley cloth to a quirky "treasure hunt" with directions for exploring the grimy but window-ringed room.

"This space is so full of light and life," wrote Debra Joy, who typed her message on an index card and posted it on a wall, per the treasure hunt's instructions. "It's good to see it full of people again, albeit without the OSHA hazards that must have once festered here."

Empty since 1984, the mill has been restored in part with the

help of \$1 million loans from both the Vermont Industrial Development Authority and the federal government.

The mill's owner, the Southern Vermont Development Corp., has failed so far to either sell or lease space to light industry. With the project overbudget, and extensions required to repay loans, the development corporation is considering alternatives to the mandated industrial use, including artists' studios and even a minimum-security jail.

Sen. Mary Ann Carlson, D-Bennington, suggested Sunday that the building be considered for housing, while the director of the local vocational center envisioned a school.

The artists, however, were both more abstract and particular in their responses to the mill.

Using PVC pipe and a variety of mirrors and clamps, Tony Caruthers examined aspects of the factory space. In one corner of the room he extended a mirror over rotting floor boards, giving a view of the space below sprinkled with multi-colored glitter.

Iain Machell hung five "skins" of pasted paper from nearly the

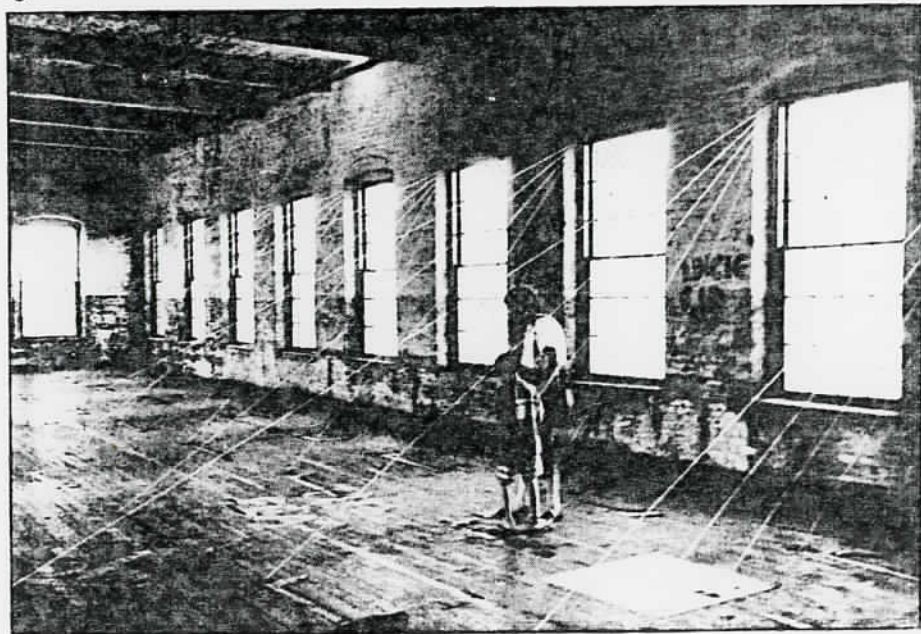
ceiling to the floor. The skins bore stains, impressions of broken boards and dents from industrial machinery, becoming "metaphors for the fragility of the building, reminders of its recent history, and vehicles for exploring abstract visual ideas," according to Machell.

Sue Rees contributed a 12-foot-long, barbell-like sculpture, its conical ends painted in bright swirls of color. Connected by a cable to a motor drive, it slowly began inching its way Sunday across the length of the building.

Shaun Brice, a music major at Bennington College, offered an "ambient sound installation ... which gives the feeling of a factory."

In a darkened alcove off the big room, Linda K. Ryder used fluorescent chalk, charcoal, projected slides and black light to create an environment exploring the mill's "layers of change."

William Botzow scraped portions of the factory floor clean, tracing the patterns of light throughout a day. Dancer Meg Cottam created the treasure hunt.



Staff Photo by Peter Crabtree

Visitors to the Holden-Leonard Mill consider the work of seven artists participating in a show celebrating the 19th-century building