

Insider



The Lousy Neighbor

This long-idle factory, might be the best redevelopment target in the Menomonee Valley. It's also become the target of vandals.

By **RICH ROVITO**

The rebirth of Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley has been, by almost any measure, a major success. But a few dilapidated old industrial eyesores remain, none more noticeable than the vacant four-story former metalwork factory at North 15th Street and West St. Paul Avenue.

Much to the chagrin of its newcomer neighbors, the Cream City brick building has been a repeated target of vandals who have covered the lower portion of its east wall in graffiti. Many of the building's windows are shattered, missing altogether or boarded up.

The empty building, which at 324 N. 15th St. sits immediately east of the sharply renovated Third Space Brewing, "remains the biggest opportunity" in the St. Paul Avenue corridor, says Corey Zetts, executive director of Menomonee Valley Partners, the nonprofit formed in 1999 that has led the valley's redevelopment. "MVP has always believed that the four-story Cream City brick property holds so much potential," says Zetts. "We have toured it several times over the years with potential tenants but, unfortunately, no plans yet had enough traction to redevelop this property."

Across the street sits Plum Media, which has brought life to a building that once housed the offices of the Milwaukee Casket Co. “I see a lot of activity happening there that shouldn’t be. I see a lot of kids breaking in there and others that I can only suspect aren’t there to do nice things to the building,” says Plum Media President Rich Schmig. “It’s very sad. When I bought our building, that building had all new windows on all sides and now you see all of them are busted out.”

The 63,000-square foot building once housed Geuder, Paeschke & Frey Co., a manufacturer of cooking utensils and household items, according to the Wisconsin Historical Society. The company operated there in the valley’s industrial heyday, from 1890 until 1984, when General Press & Fabricating Co., a neighboring metal-stamping operation, took over the remaining operations. It’s unclear how long the building has sat vacant.

The building is owned by Readco, a holding company run by the Read family that purchased it in 2000, according to city records. Members of the family are also partners in Cream City Yards LLC, a development group that also includes Steve Looft, that bought and renovated the single-story, 12,000-square-foot building that houses Third Space.

While the city has nixed residential development in the area, Looft believes the property could be transformed into a corporate headquarters office because of its proximity to Downtown and the Marquette Interchange, though demand for office space has softened since the pandemic hit. “It’s a signature landmark industrial property in a city that’s known for industry, and it’s a cool building,” Looft says during a conversation on Third Space’s expansive new patio, the vacant structure looming in the background. “This is the kind of area where you can do funky, historic renovations and do it cheap enough that you can make it work and still be close enough to an urban center.”

Looft is a developer whose partners own the troubled building; could he be the developer the building’s neighbors are looking for? “Yes and no,” Looft says of his interest. “At this point in time, it’s a big project. It’s a 60,000-square-foot historic rehab. That’s harder than new construction.”

The building has attracted young vandals who have shared their malicious mischief on social media, Looft says. He estimates that the Reads have spent \$50,000 to \$100,000 to board up windows over time, only to have vandals continue to target the property, using crowbars to break in. “It’s a real problem,” says Looft.

Multiple attempts to reach the Read family, directly and through Looft, were unsuccessful.

The situation with the vacant building deeply troubles Christopher Kidd, who co-owns the former factory of Milwaukee Casket at 422 N. 15th St. It’s now home to Kidd’s architectural firm as well as River Valley Historic Venue, a wedding and event spot operated by his wife. “One of the issues is the security and safety of our employees



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and our guests, and that building across the street has steadily gone downhill since we purchased our building in 2017,” Kidd says. “It keeps going from bad to worse. The unfortunate thing is that it doesn’t seem like anybody cares.”

The building’s deteriorating condition has cost the venue business, Kidd says. “One of the great things about the wedding venue is that it really activates the street on the weekends,” he says. “We’ll bring in 100 or 150 guests. The challenge for us, though, is as that building has slowly been destroyed and people have been breaking in, my guests or potential clients see that, and it scares them,” he said. “They’ll ask us if the neighborhood is safe.”

Kidd responded by spending \$50,000 in December on security cameras for his property. “That’s how big of a deal it is for us,” he says.

With the building’s future uncertain at this point, concerns about its effect on other businesses in the Menomonee Valley continue to heighten.

“It’s just a matter of time until something horrific happens over there. I truly believe this,” Kidd says. “That building is affecting everybody down here.” ●