

Metamorphosis



Decrepit Grand Rapids locality becomes a potential urban renewal model

By Bill Kirtz

entrepreneurial vision, innovative tax incentives, keen historical sensibility and more than 30,000 pieces of glass have transformed a decaying Michigan neighborhood into a sparkling multi-use park and possible national model for urban renewal.

The prize-winning American Seating Park complex in Grand Rapids features glass fabricated in Seattle, pre-glazed in Denver and installed in Grand Rapids. It was meticulously matched to make high-performance window framing identical to the vintage steel sash system of a century-old factory building of the American Seating Co.

The \$28 million, 12-acre private apartment, condominium and office development complex, dedicated in June, stands in a "Renaissance" zone. Businesses and residents in a Renaissance zone get property, state and city income, and single business tax breaks. The Seating Park complex also has a brownfield status. In Michigan, a brownfield project's tax credits are equal to 10 percent of its value.

Brownfield redevelopment evolved from the federal government's Superfund effort in 1980 to clean up hazardous waste sites. It encouraged big city developers to rebuild, not tear down, old and contaminated properties. American Seating project developers see their undertaking as a potential blueprint for other cities its size. Grand Rapids has a population of 200,000.

The Project

American Seating Park LLC of Grand Rapids was formed in 2002 by Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Edward Clark of American Seating Co. and President Thomas Beckering of T.E. Becker-

ing Enterprises, both of Grand Rapids. The duo wanted to renovate more than 300,000 square feet of space in American Seating's century-old factory buildings. The company, with \$140 million in annual revenue and 625 employees, builds office furniture and stadium, school and transportation seating.

The project included 230,000 square feet of residential space and 100,000 square feet of commercial and retail space, including American Seating's 60,000-square-foot corporate headquarters. The project employed more than 700 people in construction trades and has created about 135 jobs in an area with a 6.1 unemployment rate that is below Michigan's 6.5 percent rate, but above the nation's 5.6 percent.

Clark's challenge was to restore, not raze, American Seating's vintage home. "I thought, 'what a waste' [not to use] this neat old place," he says. After the renovation, Clark says, the buildings have retained their original look "but are all new, and look great." There is a 23-foot ceiling in one building that uses glass, he says. "People can't believe it," Clark says. "It looks like the same land but a lot different. We're just thrilled.

"Some developers were scared because they hadn't done such a major renovation," Clark says. Beckering, however, had a redevelopment experience, and stressed the three key ingredients of real estate value: "location, location and location." The craze toward exposed wood makes these factories

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attractive to upscale condo owners, Beckering says, and helps create interest in similar historic renovations in other mid-sized communities.

The primary piece of the renovation process was the replacement of openings. Early 20th century buildings like American Seating had massive windows to maximize natural light and accommodate ventilation. The renovation replaced 600 openings of nearly 60,000 square feet of steel sash and single-pane glass with a high-performance true divided lite framing system.

American Seating Park complex

801 Broadway, Grand Rapids, MI 49504-4499

Cost: \$28 million

Size: 12 acres

Architects: Winkelmann Architects, 751 Burton St., S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49507
General contractor: Pioneer Construction, 550 Kirtland St., S.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49507

Contact glazier: Vos Glass, 902 Scribner, N.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49504

Interior design: K.B. Design, 550 Kirtland St. S.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49507

Landscape: Landscape Specialists, 3540 Jefferson Ave., S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49548-2246

Brian R. Winkelmann, project architect, calls the windows a key component of getting the historic tax credit. "Everyone raves about the windows—they speak for themselves," he says. "We wanted the authentic look of old steel sash, which isn't energy-efficient and wouldn't work with new apartments. We worked

with Custom Window Co. [of Denver] to match the sight line with the narrowest possible jamb dimensions and ended up with very authentic extrusions that would work." The intricately designed window work didn't cost "that much more than the standard slapped-on storefront 2-by-4-



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Sources

Ed Bartlett, Custom Window Co., 2727 S. Santa Fe Drive, Denver, CO 80110, 303/722-0822 or 800/255-1820, ed.bartlett@customwindow.com

Tom Beckering, T. Beckering Enterprises, 940 Monroe Ave., N.W., Apartment 144, Grand Rapids, MI 49503, 616/456-6966

Rick Chapla, Right Place, 2056 Wilshire Drive, Grand Rapids, MI 49506-4061, 616/452-9261, Chaplar@rightplace.org

Edward Clark, American Seating Co., 901 Broadway, N.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49504-4496, 616/732-6600, www.americanseating.com

Linda Vos-Graham, Kenneth Graham, Vos Glass Inc., 902 Scribner Ave., N.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49504-4411, 616/458-1535, www.vosglass.com

Rick Nelson, Northwest-ern Industries, 2500 W. Jameson St., Seattle, WA 98199-1294, 800/426-2771, rickn@nwglass.com

Brian B. Winkelmann, Winkelmann Architects PC, 751 Burton St., S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49507, 616/245-5551, wink@iserv.net

foot aluminum storefront glass," he says. "That would have been the most economical solution but wouldn't have gotten historical approval. It didn't cost so much more to do it right."

The Renovators

Linda Vos-Graham, president of Vos Glass Inc. of Grand Rapids, says that her father, Clarence J. "Jake" Vos, the company's founder, had for generations worked with Pioneer Construction, Beckering Enterprises' parent company. He was deeply involved with the American Seating job before he died in April 2003 at the age of 70, she says.

"I've lived in Grand Rapids all my life," she says, remembering the site's shabby pre-redevelopment state as she surveys the now-gleaming complex from her first-floor conference room. Besides the 2004 Grand Rapids and statewide historic preservation awards, Vos Graham says, her contributions have won the project the Associated Builders and Contractors' Western Michigan chapter award of excellence in the glazing category.

Vos Glass' project manager Kenneth Graham details the magnitude of the effort that went into the project. "We had 560 openings, 1,500 preglazed frames, 126 different types of windows, with openings up to 18-by-16 feet that took a crane 125 feet in the air to install," he says. "The logistics were intense. We worked hard to match window sizes, and it was a challenge with a tight tolerance."

The workers fit 3½-inch-wide thermal break frames that incorporate 1-inch thick insulating glass units into ½-inch steel sash framing. A ¾-inch custom extrusion was used to match one of two different sash-muntin profiles. It took 20 trucks to deliver more than 1,500 pre-glazed pieces with 30,000 individual glass units to the work site.

Four openings at street level were reglazed and refurbished so that people could compare the old and new window systems. Onlookers have found



it hard to differentiate between the vintage steel sash and the new high-performance windows.

This visual magic was achieved by Custom Window Co., a specialist in historic renovation. The company often converts old structures to accommodate modern use while maintaining the original look needed to qualify for historic restoration tax credits.

The Process

The old American Seating buildings had drafty, rusted, single-pane original steel windows that couldn't be changed without jeopardizing tax credits. Custom Window architects modified a product they had designed for Sears Landmark Building in Boston to replicate the look, sight lines and profiles of the original American Seating structures. The National Park Service, an organization that approves renovation projects for historic preservation credits, assigned the Sears building replacement windows as a model for other buildings with comparable windows that are deteriorated and are in need of replacement.

Only Custom Window makes the 7/8-inch wide true divided light muntins used on the Sears and Grand Rapids projects, claims Ed Bartlett, national sales manager of Custom Window. The company developed a custom low-profile 1/4-inch reveal insulating glass spacer, so that the IG unit edges could be hidden behind the 7/8-inch muntin profile. The challenge was manufacturing very large windows with a true divided lite system, factory glazing them, and then shipping and installing them in one unit, Bartlett says.

On what Bartlett calls the "huge" Grand Rapids project, his company worked with Seattle's Northwestern Industries Inc. that manufactured 1-inch insulating glass units with a makeup of two 1/4-inch clear lites and a 1/2-inch special spacer. Despite its magnitude, Rick Nelson, Northwestern's national sales manager, calls the job "quite a standard order," shipping one or two truckloads a week from August to October 2003. "We modified our production procedures to run it," he says. "It was a pretty basic job [with] lots of small units. To keep track of them all was quite challenging."

The End Result

Rick Chapla, an economic-development specialist and vice president of Right Place, a nonprofit economic-development organization in Grand Rapids, lauds American Seating and its fellow developers.

"The property is historically and architecturally in a unique setting, a half-mile from downtown," Chapla says. "Beckering made it work; he transformed a tired, time-worn obsoles-

Suppliers

Glass: 1-inch insulating units with a makeup of 1/4-inch clear glass and 1/2-inch special spacer by Northwestern Industries Inc., 2500 W. Jameson St., Seattle, WA 98199-1294, www.nwiglass.com

Access doors, bath accessories, hardware: S.A. Morman, 1100 Gezon Parkway S.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49509-9582, www.samorman.com

Elevators: ThyssenKrupp Elevator, 8044 Montgomery Road Suite 285, Cincinnati, OH 45236, www.thyssen-elevator.com

Vertical blinds: Bali Verticals, Triangle Window, 3025 Sangra Ave., S.W., Grandville MI 49418



company profiles

■ Vos Glass Inc.

Founded in 1982, Vos Glass is a professional, full-service glass company that provides glass products and services for automotive, residential and commercial applications.

Owner: Linda J. Vos-Graham, president

Gross sales: \$6 million to \$10 million

Employees: More than 50

Locations: One plant and headquarters

Top managers: Linda J. Vos-Graham, president; John Merryweather, vice president and head of contract glazing division; and Kenneth Graham, project manager

Connections: Vos Glass Inc., 902 Scribner Ave., N.W., Grand Rapids, MI 49504-4411, 616/458-1535, www.vosglass.com

■ Northwestern Industries Inc.

Northwestern Industries Inc. has been fabricating glass since 1975 at its 300,000-square-foot manufacturing complex. The company uses raw glass products from five major domestic glass manufacturers—PPG Industries Inc., Guardian Industries Corp., Pilkington, Visteon Corp., and AFG Industries Inc.—as well as imported products.

Owner: Central Glass of Japan

Annual sales: \$36 million to \$40 million

Employees: 260

Locations: One headquarters

Top managers: Tim McQuade, president; Scott Goynor, vice president of human resources; Rick Nelson, sales manager; Ron Murphy, purchasing agent; and Darrell Aldrich, general manager

Connections: 2500 W. Jameson St., Seattle, WA 98199-1294, 206/285-3140, www.nwiglass.com

■ Custom Window Co.

Custom Window manufactures extruded aluminum window systems for institutional and commercial projects

Owner: Karen Gann, president

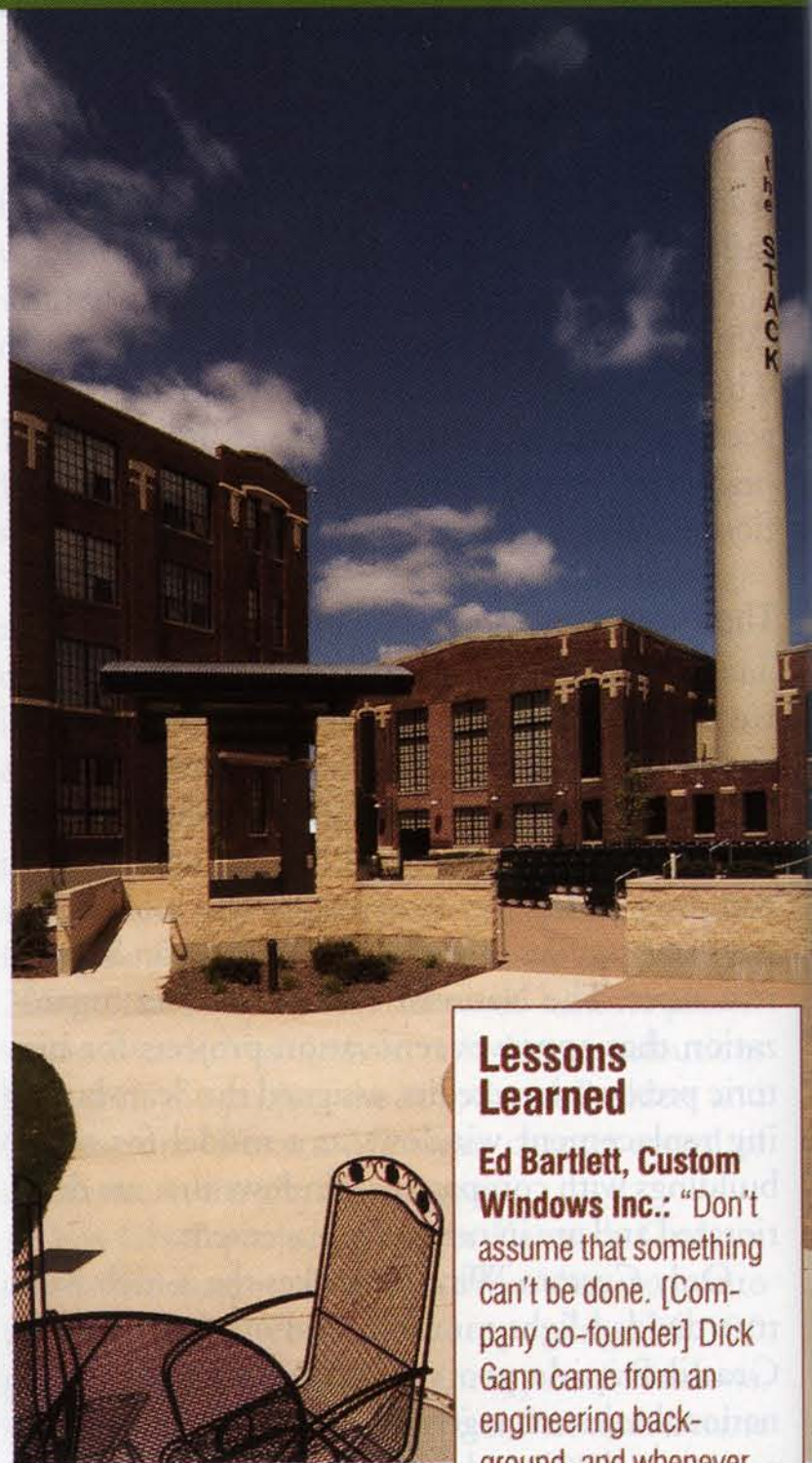
Annual sales: \$15 million to \$20 million

Employees: Approximately 100

Locations: One factory

Top managers: : David Gann, vice president and general manager; Ed Bartlett, sales manager; Tim Collard, plant manager; Greg Gibson, design engineer

Connections: 2727 S. Santa Fe Drive, Denver, CO 80110, 303/722-0822 or 800/255-1820, www.customwindows.com



Lessons Learned

Ed Bartlett, Custom Windows Inc.: "Don't assume that something can't be done. [Company co-founder] Dick Gann came from an engineering background, and whenever he was told, 'You can't do that,' he'd always ask, 'Why can't you?'"

Rick Nelson, Northwestern Industries Inc.: "We've [now] been accustomed to a challenging job of this size and learned how to better organize shipping, boxing and crating so many units."

cent industrial building into a notable example of a mixed reuse project that adds value not only to property and buildings, but to greater commerce for the next 100-plus years."

Chapla sees the American Seating project as "continuing a trend, not just a blip," he says. "I have nearly 40 properties that are in the completion or approval process. It hasn't caught on in the United States that the reuse of existing buildings and lands have untapped potential. Tax incentives help, but we need private entrepreneurs with the vision to see the potential. We have to respect and reward financial risks to make [historic renovation] work."

Chapla, who remembers working in the old buildings during his college vacations in the 1970s, feels the windows make a big difference in highlighting the buildings' architecture. He loves to look at them at dawn and dusk. "It's cool," he says. ■

Photos by Kevin Beswick, People & Places & Things Photographics, Grand Rapids, MI