

SQUARE FEET

With Books as a Catalyst, Minneapolis Neighborhood Revives

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

MINNEAPOLIS — Back in the heady days of Web 1.0, it seemed that every city tried to create its own Silicon Alley, and this one was no exception.

Along Washington Avenue, between the University of Minnesota and downtown Minneapolis, there were acres of parking lots, a large warehouse-style liquor store and a smattering of commercial spaces that had once served the thriving flour mill district along the Mississippi River, but later became seedy bars and flophouses.

The city tried to rebrand the area as a technology corridor, but not a single dot-com materialized. Instead, three nonprofit organizations formed a partnership in 1999, bought three adjacent warehouses and renovated them into Open Book, which says it is

Home to the largest literary and book arts center in the United States.

the largest — if not the only — literary and book arts center in the United States.

It is not uncommon for the arts to revitalize a neighborhood, but it is certainly unusual for old-fashioned literature and books to lead the way.

Since Open Book made its debut in May 2000, however, a steady flow of arts organizations have followed, including the Guthrie Theater, designed by Jean Nouvel, who recently won the Pritzker Architecture Prize. There is the Mill City Museum, the MacPhail Center for Music, Minneapolis Central Library and a few smaller theaters and art galleries.

More than 1,000 new residential units have been built as well as new and redeveloped commercial property, increasing the value of neighborhood property to \$334 million in 2006, from an estimated \$25 million in 1994, according to the Metropolitan

Council, a Twin Cities regional development organization. Where a sea of parking lots once existed, there is now a parking problem.

"We know for a fact this was the first real estate home for the literary arts in the nation," said Liz Petrangelo, the chairwoman of Open Book's board, which was formed by the three organizations to develop and manage the 55,000-square-foot property. "We don't know if anything like it has happened since, but we get calls from all over the country asking how we did this."

If literature and book arts could revive a city neighborhood anywhere, it would be here. According to a study conducted in 2007 by Central Connecticut State University, Minneapolis is "America's most literate city," based on an array of measures, including the number of libraries and bookstores, newspaper readership and education levels.

The Loft Literary Center, the largest of the three nonprofit groups that formed Open Book, offers writing classes, provides work space and grants for writers and is host of book events in a performance space designed for readings.

The Minnesota Center for Book Arts provides equipment and space for professional artists and novices alike to work in letterpress printing, hand bookbinding and papermaking. Some of the resulting creations are unique and functional books, but others are more like art and sculpture.

And finally Milkweed Editions is, by some measures, the largest independent nonprofit literary publisher in the country.

The building's success and the neighborhood's resurrection seem all but inevitable in hindsight. But it took quite a bit of effort by the architect, who had been hired by the three agencies to explore the feasibility of becoming partners in a building, to take a risk on this area back in 1999.

"I had to convince them that the whole area was worthwhile," said Garth Rockcastle, the building's architect, whose firm, Mey-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BILL ALKOFER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A design element at the Open Book is a spiral staircase with translucent acrylic panels that fan out like the pages of a book, top. Abigail Woods Anderson operates a letterpress, above.

er, Scherer & Rockcastle, also designed the award-winning Mill City Museum, which chronicles the flour-milling industry that fueled the growth of Minneapolis.

"The neighborhood was precisely the exact center of three things: downtown Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota, and the three main highway arteries," which was important, since few people lived in the area then. Mr. Rockcastle said the obvious way to design the building was to give each organization one of the three warehouses for its own use. But he favored integrating the organizations throughout the building. Not only do the three now

share some public areas, but their spaces cut across the buildings horizontally, rather than being isolated vertically. Once the decision was made about the location and building, a deal was struck with the property owner, Scott Tankenoff, to sell it for \$560,000, a price considered below market value.

Since then, it has just been a matter of making the space reflective of the tenants and their missions, incorporating both modern and historic literary references.

For example, a central design element by Karen Wirth, a sculptor who is also an instructor at

the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, is a contemporary steel spiral staircase with translucent acrylic panels that fan out like the pages of a book.

Some of the oldest printing presses still in operation are in the storefront window. Many other design details, like sliding steel doors, layers of wallpaper and paint-chipped windows, were preserved from the historic warehouses. "This being a literary center, we wanted the building to tell its own story, too," from its history of commercial uses to a flophouse, Mr. Rockcastle added.

The building's revitalization has helped not only the three nonprofit organizations, but also the neighborhood. The renovated warehouse space raised each organization's profile, and in fact, the Guthrie held the first fundraiser for its new theater at Open Book.

Every year since it opened, growth has exceeded expectations. For instance, at its previous space, the Loft Literary Center's tuition revenue totaled \$255,010 but at Open Book, tuition totaled \$570,320 in 2007. Membership has grown from 1,500 to more than 3,000. Classes and workshops, open to outsiders as well as to members, have doubled, with some 160 classes and 100 workshops offered each year.

Drawing even more people to the space are a cafe, an art gallery and a gift shop run by the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, where half of its inventory is work by the center's book artists.

After eight years, the building was finally able to get a new sign recently; this was a long time in coming because the area's technology zoning restricted commercial signs.

But the city is going to change the technology corridor designation of the area to the Washington Avenue Arts Corridor. Mayor R. T. Rybak has formed the Great City Design Team to come up with public art and street design proposals for this and other neighborhoods throughout the city. The first public art installations for Washington Avenue will be designs inspired by literature and book arts.