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Detroit's 'Castle' Inspires as Innovative Model of Revival

Francis Grunow · Wednesday, August 14th, 2013

G.A.R. Building Under a Full Moon, 2009. Photo: Jeffery White

One of Detroit's most beloved boarded-up structures, the Grand Army of the Republic building, or simply "the G.A.R." as it's often called, is being renovated. For as long as most can likely remember, the flatiron-shaped building sat, nobly vacant, on a small, triangular lot at the intersection of Grand River and Cass avenues — a silent sentinel guarding the northwestern edge of the central business district.

The G.A.R. holds sway in the mind's eye. On the one hand, it is curious and odd, with its association to American Civil War veterans and their [descendants](#). And then there is what looks to be a terribly impractical floor plan. How could a structure like that ever find a new use in Detroit, when scores of buildings actually designed for commerce are abandoned?

On the other hand, the building has a certain, stubborn allure that would throw convention out the window. Built with rough-hewn stone at the dawn of the 20th Century, the G.A.R. is a petite yet massive urban castle on an itty-bitty parcel, as if it were a life-sized version of one of the pieces in the incredible *Games of Thrones* title sequence.

My first distinct memory of the G.A.R. was staring up at the old pile for what must have been a day's worth of time over the course of a couple of years, while waiting on the Grand River bus to take me home from high school. I imagined what the G.A.R. was like inside and how I might figure out a way to somehow make it my home. I've come to find out that others share this fascination, and I believe that among Detroit's plethora of vacant buildings, its monument to the Grand Army of the Republic captivates the imagination.

Brothers Tom and David Carleton fell in love with the G.A.R. about the same time I did, from their vantage point inside City Bites a few blocks away, in the ground floor of the old Leland Hotel. The diner was one of the few places open downtown while the brothers were renovating their first building, a six-story loft on Library Street, in the shadow of the vacant Hudson's department store. If the "creative class" defined a social movement in the '00s, the Carletons might count themselves among the "crazy class," those who opened businesses and chose to live in downtown Detroit in the early 1990s. The brothers, and their handful of neighbors, were so early to adopt the idea of a 24-hour downtown that they more or less created that community from scratch.

"It was 1992 and we had just bought a 30,000 square foot building on Library Street for \$120,000, to live and work in," recalls David.



G.A.R. Building, 2013. Photo: Andrew Galbraith

"It was literally a 'fire sale' since we had to tear down a wall for wood to heat the building one

winter. Most times, the only traffic we had on the street was when I went out to play catch with the dog. But we always had this idea that downtown would revive and we wanted to be a part of that. Thinking creatively about buildings like 1250 Library Street and what could happen with a building like the G.A.R. inspired us to do our best so we could do more.”

Twenty years ago, the Carletons took a chance on downtown Detroit because it made sense for them. They saw something that most other people didn’t: opportunity to build a business and fashion a way of life for themselves in the “left behind” spaces that didn’t seem to make sense for others.

Over time, the creative production company they co-founded, [Mindfield](#), supported the continued redevelopment of the Library Street building into company offices and six residential units, which have been occupied by folks hailing from Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C. over the years. The popular Vicente’s Cuban restaurant would come to occupy the space on the ground floor of 1250 Library Street.

Fast-forward to 2013, and the Carletons and their business partner Sean Emery (who gives a great [TedxDetroit](#) talk) are once again ahead of the curve with the G.A.R. After a five year slog to convince the city that their plan for the building was feasible, the group was finally given the go ahead to redevelop the G.A.R. at the end of 2011.

Mindfield, now numbering 16 people, and offering full-service film and video production, and other web and mobile services, will be the anchor tenant on the top floor. The development also includes offices for other small creative firms on the second and third floors, along with two restaurants — a classic diner and an upscale American bistro — on the ground floor, as well as a small display of G.A.R. related items, which was a condition of the sale.

“We still get the doubters,” David muses, as he relates his experience to the [Detroit v. Everybody](#) T-shirt, one of his favorites. “Sure people say, ‘You guys are nuts!’ or they make quips about how we’re going to get bullet holes in the plate glass. But I’ve always liked the quote, ‘If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.’”



Hollywood Set Designer Peter Gurski is part of the renovation team. Photo: Lindsay Yeo

Even with the haters’ hate, the self-professed baby steps the Carletons and their small and medium sized compatriots have made downtown are culminating into a tide of activity. Their moves are a vital counterpoint to the bigger moves by the likes of Dan Gilbert (owner of Quicken Loans and Cleveland Cavaliers), and make for a more interesting, well-rounded city. What is significant about Mindfield’s G.A.R. project is the organic growth and creative approach the group has taken to the project, to create value in what would otherwise be unusable space.

Tom Carleton, who has been quiet up to this point chimes in, “Detroit is becoming more intriguing to people across the country and around the world. We travel to L.A. and New York for work and can feel it. There is a buzz, especially in the creative community. And if you can get them here, then they get hooked. What captures them though, is the feeling of realness and organic activity.”

Tom continues, “It’s the same approach we’re taking with the G.A.R. Right now, outside is high function. Inside is low function. But we knew that what makes this whole project work is the image, not necessarily the function, at least not at first. For us, the uniqueness of the building is what sells it. We can monetize that image so that it becomes the greatest space to take a meeting between New York and L.A.,” he says, pointing to the elegant assembly hall, with its cast iron columns, and high ceiling.

Mindfield will have access to both the latest technology and historic character. Tom believes the other tenants will feel the same way. “What an awesome opportunity to be a creative person, or a small professional company to have one of the turret rooms, overlooking the city. Every day you

will walk in thinking, ‘This is where I want to do business.’”



Circle window close up of the G.A.R. Building

Since Mindfield started the project, 139 windows have been replaced, a new composite roof (which is made to look like slate) was installed, new doors hung, constructed from the original design, and the façade cleaned and repaired. Going forward, the floors and wood elements will be refinished, entirely new electrical, HVAC and plumbing will be installed, and the interiors will be built out, including the commemorative area devoted to the Civil War, visible from the restaurants and stairway. It shows what can be done when people believe in a place.

The G.A.R. building has come a long way in a relatively short time. My second distinct memory of the G.A.R. occurred in 2006, when the city first offered the building up as an RFP (Request for Proposal), and I was invited in my capacity as director of [Preservation Detroit](#) (then Preservation Wayne). Interested parties met at the corner of Cass and Grand River and entered with hard hats and flashlights.

One of the tour guides was Alexander Pollock, Detroit’s Principal City Planner at the time, and the man responsible for Eastern Market’s super graphic [animal murals](#). Alex came dressed in union attire, including a Prussian blue greatcoat and hat — Hardee or Kepi, I can’t remember. For added effect, he brought a bugle and went in first, playing a mournful military call. Alex progressed quickly through the building, leaving the rest of us to ponder the G.A.R.’s fate as the muffled sound of the bugle ricocheted back through the eerie pitch black.

At that time, Mindfield applied, but lost out to the Ilitches (the family that owns Little Caesars and the Detroit Lions and Red wings) who held the building for two years before giving it back to the city. Luckily for Detroit, the right team finally emerged, and now light is streaming into the building for the first time in three decades, plate glass and all, only 150 years after the Battle of Gettysburg.

“We will do right by this project,” promises David. Thanks David, Detroit is taking note.

NOTE: This article was originally published on July 23, 2013 by our friends at [ModelD](#).

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 14th, 2013 at 11:41 pm and is filed under [Architecture](#), [Discourse](#)

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