

Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/nov05/368617.asp>

A Rust Belt relic is reborn

Allis-Chalmers redevelopment respects its gritty past while turning it into an office park

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Posted: Nov. 6, 2005

West Allis - Once it was an industrial powerhouse, churning out everything from tractors and turbines to generators and mining equipment.

But when Allis-Chalmers, a fixture of the city since 1902, went belly up in 1987, a victim of bad management and a prolonged recession, its fate mirrored the hard times of West Allis itself: an old working-class community with a shrinking tax base. The mighty machine maker, a veritable city within a city where as many as 45,000 people had worked during World War II, began falling to the wrecking ball. Those buildings that survived became a graveyard of sooty brick, broken windows and cavernous spaces full of pigeons.

Today the 157-acre site, at 6737 W. Washington St. just east of 70th St., is in the midst of a phoenix-like comeback that has its parallel in West Allis' own up-from-the-ashes rebirth: Allis-Chalmers' \$50 million transformation into Summit Place, a bustling office park, has helped spark what city officials estimate is another \$150 million in redevelopment nearby.

The guy who brought the worn-out site back to life was developer Dick Carlson, chairman of the board of Whitnall Summit Co. Carlson, who used to work at Allis-Chalmers as a research engineer, bought the property in 1994. "It was a true Rust Belt relic," he says. "Abandoned. Ready for a total teardown."

"We were kicking over dead pigeons," recalls John Stibal, West Allis' director of development.

In fact, a large swath of Allis-Chalmers' ghostly remains had been leveled for a strip mall before Carlson came on the scene. But the developer, who used the property for storage until he figured out a new future for it, saw something tantalizing in what

West Allis' Wonderland



Photo/[Jeffrey Phelps](#)

The atrium to the Summit Place in the former Allis-Chalmers complex in West Allis is part of the \$50 million transformation of the industrial site into a bustling office park. The rejuvenation has helped spark what city officials estimate is another \$150 million in redevelopment nearby.

others had written off: solid, honest construction, including 12-foot-thick concrete floors; plentiful natural light; proximity to the interstate and the downtown; an infrastructure (sewers, water, utilities) already in place; an accessible work force.

With the help of \$6 million in tax-incremental financing from West Allis, a \$300,000 brownfield-cleanup grant from the state, \$1 million from the Allis-Chalmers Trust and federal tax credits, Carlson began the renewal 2 1/2 years ago.

Three of the blackened old fabrication shops, built between 1915 and 1941, were cleaned of contaminants and buffed to a fare-thee-well, showing off their Cream City brick and Chicago pink brick faces and beautiful corbeling; a glassy new atrium was built between two of the buildings. From the top floor of the atrium, there's a panoramic view of Miller Park, the Hoan Bridge and Milwaukee's downtown skyline.

Old and new spaces hold light-filled offices for 47 tenants ranging from Alterra Healthcare and Siemens to AC Equipment and IKON Office Solutions. There's also an array of services, including a designer optical store, a fitness center, a café and a bank.

By July, when Blue Cross/Blue Shield moves into another building undergoing conversion, the complex will have 3,000 workers. Eventually, there will be 55 tenants in 630,000 square feet of leasable space, making this one of the largest office parks in the state.

Remarkably, Allis-Chalmers' gritty past has not been lost to renovation, thanks to Carlson's creative partnership with his architects: Glenn Roby of Eppstein Uhen, who did the interior work, and Jeff Natrop of Renner Architects, who designed the new construction and exterior remodeling.

Although the original steel-sash window grids have given way to larger, energy-efficient panes and new floors have been inserted, old skylights have been restored, flooding the offices with natural light. Muscular steel columns, beams, roof trusses and pulleys remain exposed.

Banana yellow skywalk

And two huge old cranes - one 100 tons, the other 40 tons - have been taken apart and reconfigured to create a 72-foot-long skywalk linking two of the buildings. The cranes, complete with one of their massive hooks, were repainted in their original banana yellow.

That bit of industrial recycling, like assorted other touches, was Carlson's brainchild. "A home run," Eppstein Uhen's Roby says, admiringly. "It's so much better than an out-of-the-box skywalk. It lets the history shine through."



Photo/Contributed

Allis-Chalmers was an industrial powerhouse that made everything from tractors and turbines to generators and mining equipment. The cranes reborn as skywalks at Summit Place are shown here in this undated factory photo.



Photo/Jeffrey Phelps

Two massive cranes, one 100 tons and the other 40 tons, were taken apart and reconfigured to create a 72-foot-long skywalk linking two buildings at Summit Place. The cranes were repainted in their original banana yellow.

Quotable

Another Carlson-inspired gesture: a huge, boldly colored mural in the atrium, depicting an abstract version of the 1955 Allis-Chalmers tractor the developer's father used on the family farm in western Illinois. Carlson's wife, Sandy, commissioned local artists Liz Fabritz, Dustin Slane and Timothy Haglund for the project.

"If you want a plain vanilla box, go out to Brookfield," Carlson says. "We're not a monolithic city here; we're a city with character. That's part of the appeal."

Kyle Harmon, president and chief operating officer of Whitnall Summit Co., agrees. But he says not everyone saw it that way at first. "When we started leasing, I had to beg and pull and pry people over here," he remembers. "They said, 'West Allis? Come on.'"

Alterra's move to the site, in November 2004, got the ball rolling.

Now that the site is a major employment center once again, Harmon sees Summit Place as a key player in the fight against suburban sprawl.

"To take a place like this, which was almost condemnable, and then turn it into something positive - it's almost spiritual," he says. "If you're going to ruin the land once, why not fix it and do it right, instead of ruining a farm field."

Stibal agrees. "When an older suburb like ours *doesn't* get involved in a project like this, you're really promoting sprawl," he says.

Another approving nod comes from Gloria McCutcheon., who as head of the state Department of Natural Resources' regional office in Milwaukee has signed off on brownfields money for West Allis, including a \$675,000 grant last week.

"They have really found a good formula for renewing an underutilized property and blending the old with the new," she says of Summit Place.

Stibal ticks off a long list of other projects under way nearby: a 17-acre site at National Ave. and 66th St. that will soon sprout 626 condos and apartments, along with a commercial center; another 40 or so condos in the works at 63rd and Greenfield Ave.; a 5-acre site at National and 80th St. that will become a residential and commercial development; the cleanup of another brownfield, at 67th Place and W. Becher St., for use by light industry.

"Things have really gotten hot in the last five years," he says. "It's synergy. Welcome to our bold new look."

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- Developer Dick Carlson, who used to work at Allis-Chalmers as a research engineer

A Site Reborn

DEVELOPMENT
ALLIS-CHALMERS REBORN
The 157-acre site of the former Allis-Chalmers plant in West Allis has been transformed into a \$50 million bustling office park called Summit Place.



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From the Nov. 7, 2005, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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