

Business

Creative firms find homes in old fire truck factory

By Chloe Teasley

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The Fort doesn't have to try: It comes by its industrial chic atmosphere honestly.

The Fort at 2000 S. High St. is an industrial complex of buildings dating back to 1892, when it was a fire truck factory until 1962.

Its current use is much different. Owned by furniture maker and reupholstering company Fortner, its many rooms, floors and buildings have become places for small businesses to rent space.

You know you have found it when you see an old water tower poking out of the property—now with some Wu Tang Clan graffiti and a very old label on it. It will be repainted once a new design is decided upon. Fortner President Justin McAllister says the ascent is too treacherous to make more than once.

“Yeah, so the idea is, let's get it right the first time, and as everything has continued to evolve really quickly, we really want to make sure we're getting the right message up.”

The Seagrave fire truck company was founded in Detroit in 1881 and moved to Columbus in 1891. When it was acquired by FWD Corp. in 1963 and moved its headquarters to Clintonville, Wisconsin, the South Side complex was shuttered.

Some parts of the factory weren't opened again until Fortner purchased the property. McAllister says what they found was like a time capsule.

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“When we came in, it was like Mad Men had left the scene. It was like desks and some of them had coffee mugs on them—from the 1960s,” he says. Some of these treasures are now being stored in a 30,000-square-foot portion of unused space, including a small vintage silver refrigerator with iconic rounded edges.

The building has 25 available makerspaces that occupy 240,000 square feet.

More than 20 businesses rent space in The Fort, which McAllister wants to be a haven for creatives. Menges Design was one of the first. Owner Dylan Menges has turned the office he chose into a comfortable and modern space with California vibes. Also in the building is the Columbus Printed Arts Center—a place where subscribers can use printing equipment—and many other designers and artists.

John Mally with NAI Ohio Equities is the commercial agent marketing the space.

Sharing its parking lot and across the street are other Fortner-owned buildings housing Via Vecchia Winery and Wild Ohio Brewing.

Fortner itself occupies 60,000 square feet making furniture and reupholstering it, plus it has offices.

“In three years, on one hand, it feels like we’ve gotten a lot done. On the other hand, there’s so much to do,” says McAllister. “We’re trying to time it right and just not overextend ourselves. We’re a furniture maker first. There’s been a learning curve to that. But fortunately I’m surrounded by so many great folks in the community have been willing to jump in and help us get to speed. [NAI] Ohio Equities has been a great partner.”

Chloe Teasley is former staff writer for Columbus CEO.