



FEATURE STORY

Building Blocks

How a corner the neighborhood had stopped expecting anything from became a destination in East Tosa.

Ten years ago, the intersection of 64th and North Avenue in Wauwatosa was a vacant lot, an underused storefront, and an abandoned office building, a corner the neighborhood had stopped expecting anything from.

Today it's a destination in East Tosa: Idyll Coffee Roasters, a place people drive across town to spend a morning in; Pipsqueak Wine next door, a neighborhood gathering spot that filled a gap the block had been missing; and the 1921 log cabin that houses GCA's office, saved from demolition and moved to its new home on a rainy night in 2019. Three buildings, ten years, and a corner that functions the way a corner in a healthy neighborhood should.

None of it required a master plan or a major developer. What it required was someone willing to look carefully at what was already there, ask what it could become, and invest in the answer with patience and intention.

“North Avenue is a commercial strip. Having the life and vibrancy of a coffee shop that’s open at 6 a.m. and operating all day, that’s important to neighborhoods. It provides that third space for people to come out and meet and work in and enjoy the neighborhood that they live in.”

— Nick Carnahan, Partner, GCA

The log cabin that anchors the corner today was built in 1921 as a family home, later converted to offices, and by 2019 buried under decades of renovation decisions that had nothing to do with what the building actually was. A developer on 76th Street offered to donate it rather than demolish it. Joe Galbraith and his son biked over with tape measures and found it fit their vacant lot with eight inches to spare. On a rainy night in March 2019 at 10:30 p.m., the cabin came down North Avenue and settled onto a new foundation less than a mile from where it had stood for nearly a century.



THE LOG CABIN IN TRANSIT, NORTH AVENUE, MARCH 2019

The renovation stripped out twenty-three dumpsters of accumulated finish: carpet, paneling, ceiling tiles, every layer that had been applied over the decades that was not the building. What remained was worth the effort: logs on the outside, six-by-eight posts, a building with real character restored to the surface after years of being covered over. The cabin drew attention to the corner almost immediately, an early signal that something meaningful was happening at 64th and North.

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Pipsqueak Wine came next, a rehabilitation of the underutilized storefront next door. Smaller in scope, but important for the same reason: a neighborhood commercial strip works when it gives people reasons to stop, and each investment in the block made the next one easier to imagine and easier to justify.



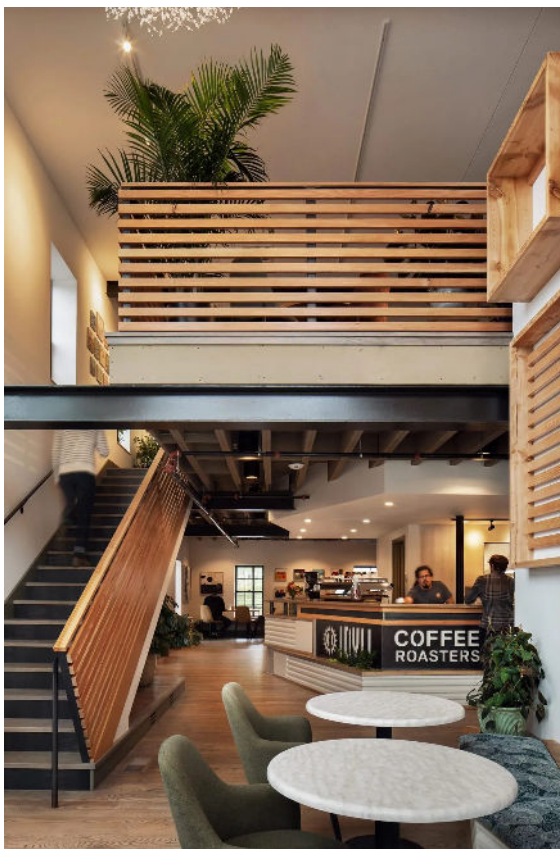
PIPSQUEAK WINE · 64TH & NORTH AVENUE, WAUWATOSA



THE IDYLL BUILDING BEFORE RENOVATION · 6330 W. NORTH AVENUE, WAUWATOSA

The building across the street was the harder case. Concrete block and steel from the early 1960s, vacant for years, a roof leak that had flooded the basement. The city had owned it long enough to lose patience and was moving toward demolition when Idyll Coffee Roasters came looking for a home. The building wasn't beautiful, but it was structurally sound, and with a careful eye it was possible to see what it could hold.

The design responded to what was already there. Pulling the second floor back from the south wall opened a soaring light well at the cafe line and made the upper level visible from the entrance, drawing you upward after you get your coffee. A raised front porch connects the building to the street without surrendering to its traffic. Toward the rear, the space settles into lower-ceilinged corners with a fireplace, a quieter counterpoint to the openness at the front. The result is a building with different rooms for different moods, different kinds of work, different kinds of company, a place people seek out and linger in.



THE TWO-STORY LIGHT WELL AND CAFE LINE



THE ON-SITE ROASTERY



UPPER LEVEL SEATING

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What the intersection of 64th and North demonstrates is not a formula but a disposition: that the buildings and blocks a community already has are worth understanding before they are replaced, and that sensitive design and creative planning can find lasting value where a spreadsheet sees only liability. When someone is willing to do that work, the community around it tends to respond.

“You might be thinking of a similar spot that you’re familiar with, that you think could be better. You could see the possibility in it.”

— Nick Carnahan

Most neighborhoods have a corner like this: a building that has been empty too long, a block with more potential than its current state suggests, a community that would benefit from someone paying careful attention to what is already there. That is where this kind of work begins, and GCA would be glad to be part of the conversation.