



Project

Start Your ENGINES

AN ABANDONED BOX-BOX PROPERTY IS RECYCLED INTO AN INDOOR AUTO SHOWROOM WITH SPACE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT *By Barbara Knox*

When Todd Snell, whose family has been in retail car sales in Mankato for about 30 years, recognized that the small-town car dealership was going the way of rotary phones and drive-in movies, he knew he needed something extra to succeed. So he joined forces with Paulsen Architects, Mankato.

The firm has a reputation for renovating under-utilized big-box properties and reinvigorating them with new uses, and the design team saw promise in a drab pole shed that was once a Menards store. Today, Snell Indoor Auto Center, retrofitted into the shell of the aban-

doned Menards, is the architectural equivalent of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

“In some ways this project was a classic example of sustainable design,” says Bryan Paulsen, AIA, principal, whose team began working on the project in 2001. “In lieu of building a new dealership on a site where a building had been knocked down and put in a landfill, we opted to take the dilapidated building and renovate it into a thriving business. There was also a conscious effort to reuse materials wherever it made economic sense.”



Adds Snell: "I wanted to be close to the River Hills Mall, which generates tremendous traffic, but I also knew it wasn't economically feasible to build from scratch. Bryan and his team took an existing pole barn and turned it into a jewel, and it gave me the twist—the indoor angle—that I needed to make this dealership work."

The new dealership is definitely not, as the commercials say, your father's dealership. Completed in 2003, Snell Indoor Auto Center includes a 22,000-square-foot showroom that holds 70 vehicles, a business center with high-speed Internet connections for customers and a video-monitored children's play area. The showroom has floor-to-ceiling, glass garage doors so that vehicles can be easily moved in and out of the space.

Snell insisted on this feature, Paulsen explains, because he was committed to providing a large space for community gatherings.



Located in a former Menards building, the auto showroom includes finished interiors (top) that reflect the company's customer-friendly orientation, and new façades (above and left) with a strong, fresh look.



Last fall, for instance, the showroom was quickly emptied of cars to make way for a fundraiser attended by 700 people. “We actually think this is an important part of the project, as it illustrates Todd’s forward-thinking business vision and his civic-minded support of our community. It has also provided much-needed event space in Mankato,” Paulsen adds.

Elsewhere in the building, deals are closed not over a desk in a back office but in a sun-drenched café, where buyers can nosh on something sweet while they sign papers. The remainder of the 83,000-square-foot building includes a drive-in service station, auto-body shop, auto-parts department and community room. It’s one-stop shopping for all your auto needs, with space left over for civic pride.

Although the location near the mall was outstanding, the old Menards building was decidedly not. Substandard construction had left the structure in dire need of attention. Paulsen and project designer Sally Oberholte, Assoc. AIA, began by adding numerous shear walls and structural steel framing. They corrected the thermal envelope by adding insulation and sheeting the building’s exterior in EIFS (Exterior Insulation Finish System). A new heating-ventilation-and-cooling system was added to the body shop and service center.

With the building shored up, the design team turned its attention to programmatic requirements. “We had to translate Todd’s vision for an indoor auto center with many different elements into a plan that made sense,” Paulsen explains, “so the circulation study really came first.” To improve the planning process, Snell solicited input from all of his key department heads. Once the circulation patterns were established, the design team turned its attention to the task of giving the building a strong new identity.

The design team removed existing exterior metal panels and replaced them with glass curtain walls and EIFS. Wherever possible, Paulsen says, they simply covered the existing panels, rather than trashing them. To allow for larger expanses of showroom glazing, they removed the five-foot, on-center, wind-bracing



columns and added structural-cable cross bracing over the windows to pick up the additional wind loads.

They also removed as much of the mansard roof overhang as structurally possible and re-clad the remaining roof with silver-metallic panels. Vertical architectural elements were added to the two primary façades to break up the strong horizontal lines. These protruding EIFS elements also work as a visual guide to identify customer points of entry.

While the inside began as an empty warehouse with challenging 28-foot-high ceilings, the finished interiors reflect Snell's vision for a customer-friendly, full-service auto center. Greeters welcome each customer at the door near a large circular desk; various services spin off in either direction from the desk. Carpet tiles define circulation routes for customers, directing them to waiting areas, the café, service and parts centers, or the showroom floor. The showroom floor is covered in creamy-red 12-by-12-inch tiles.

The design team specified new energy-efficient, metal halide fixtures for the showroom; recessed, track and pendant lighting above all carpeted areas creates a more human scale. Paulsen reused existing site lighting outside, adding fixtures where needed.

Now that Snell's operation is tucked snugly under one roof, he is more than pleased with both the renovation of the building and the success of the center. Customers apparently love the concept, too.

Snell reports that in the first quarter after opening, sales were up a whopping 286 percent; at the one-year mark the business had exceeded projected sales by 100 percent. "Bryan and his team deserve great credit for taking an abandoned building and turning it into a Class A space," Snell says.

Snell Indoor Auto Center
 Mankato, Minnesota
 Paulsen Architects
 Mankato, Minnesota



Deals are often closed in the sunlit café (opposite), while the spacious indoor showroom (top) can be quickly emptied of cars for major civic events (above).