A ‘visionary’ home for Junior Achievement in St. Paul’s Midway

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The future home of Junior Achievement, at 1745 University Ave. W. in St. Paul, is a sturdy brick building with large windows that will bring natural light into the interior. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Junior Achievement’s future home in St. Paul’s Midway Neighborhood has been around for more than a century, but the box-like brick structure has aged well — and was arguably ahead of its time when it opened in 1916. The 58,000-square-foot building, at 1745 University Ave. W., boasts windows as high as 13½ feet from floor to ceiling. It was designed to welcome natural light into the interior spaces, long before the concept of “daylighting” became a popular trend. “They talk about the visionary new environment to work in — daylight, ventilation and all those kinds of things,” David Serrano, principal of Minneapolis-based RSP Architects, said during a tour of the building on Monday. “I think we are building up from that foundation.”

A project team led by RSP and Golden Valley-based Mortenson Construction is overseeing a $16.7 million renovation of the building at 1745 University Ave. W., which is next door to the St. Paul YMCA and overlooks the Green Line Light Rail Transit line.

When the renovated building opens for programs early next year, it will enable Junior Achievement to serve 34,000 students in “experiential” learning labs, roughly double the number served at the organization’s existing facility in Maplewood, the organization said.

According to Junior Achievement, labs will include “JA Biz Town,” where students in grades 4-6 work in 18 different shops sponsored by Minnesota businesses; JA Finance Park, where middle and high school students learn about personal finance and careers; and JA Innovation Incubator, where high school students “cultivate their entrepreneurial interests.”
Gina Blayney, CEO of Junior Achievement, said the Maplewood space, at 1800 White Bear Ave. N., worked well for the organization for about 18 years, but it was “a little bit off the beaten path.”

As Finance & Commerce previously reported, Junior Achievement closed on a $4.75 million acquisition of the St. Paul building in July 2017. The building was constructed as a printing operation and more recently housed the Avalon School. The St. Paul building is ideal because it’s well-served by mass transit and is “in between the two economic engines of the great state of Minnesota,” Blayney said. It also has some advantages from a bricks and mortar standpoint.

“The building was built like a tank,” Blayney said as she showed off the progress of the renovation. “And Mortenson has discovered very few construction issues with it.”

Even so, workers have encountered a few surprises along the way. For example, the project team learned after starting interior demolition that a stairway was hung from the elevator shaft, “which in this day and age is a no-no,” said Kelly Mansell, Mortenson’s project manager on the job. “It’s a 100-year-old building. So no matter how much exploratory work we’ve done, there are always things that come up once you open the walls,” she said. “But it’s a very structurally sound building. It was built for printing, right? That’s the good news.”

Crews began interior demolition in March, stripping each of the four floors down to the exterior structure, floor slabs and columns, the organization said. About 40 workers are onsite currently. A new glass canopy with painted steel supports should be finished by the end of August, followed by a grand staircase in early September, the organization said.

After installing sustainability features ranging from rooftop solar panels to highly efficient building systems, the project team hopes to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for building operations. Major funding sources include $4 million from local businessman Jim Hemak and his wife, Pat; New Market Tax Credits; and $1.4 million from the Junior Achievement of the Upper Midwest Board of Directors. Hemak participated in Junior Achievement in 1961.

The organization says it’s less than $2 million away from its $20 million fundraising goal.

Since 1949, Junior Achievement of the Upper Midwest has served students in Minnesota, North Dakota and Western Wisconsin. Students in grades K-12 learn about “financial literacy, college and career readiness, and entrepreneurship education,” according to its website.