Preserving a piece of St. Paul’s history: Redepveloping the O’Donnell Shoe Factory

When the O’Donnell Shoe Company constructed its factory in St. Paul in 1914, the Minnesota shoe industry was at the height of its prosperity - and the O’Donnell Shoe Company had become a leading firm. The building, designed by the Butler Brothers, is one of the only shoe factories remaining in St. Paul today. Much of the city’s 19th- and early 20th-century industrial buildings have been demolished, making the preservation of this building essential in protecting the community’s heritage.

*Once a leading state industry*

In 1888, shoes were listed as one of St. Paul’s top manufactured products, with $1.4 million of goods produced.

William O’Donnell, a son of Irish immigrant farmers, worked at several Minnesota shoe companies prior to forming the O’Donnell Shoe Company in 1909. That same year, shoe manufacturing was the state’s seventh-most profitable industry and contributed greatly to St. Paul’s industrial strength.

Within a year, William O’Donnell built a factory on the corner of Sibley and East Tenth streets. With continued success, the O’Donnell Shoe Company built its second factory across the street at 509 Sibley Street in 1914. The six-story, 67,000 square-foot factory cost $65,000 to complete. The two factories were linked by a tunnel under Sibley Street.

The building’s design - known as the Turner concrete column structural system - allowed ample space for employees and machinery. The four steps of the shoemaking process - cutting, stitching, lasting and bottoming - were organized to begin with raw materials on the top floor and the finished product on the ground floor.

The O’Donnell Shoe Company was large enough to cater to the region’s needs without major national competition and by 1928 became the largest shoe manufacturer in Minnesota.
The Decline of Shoe Manufacturing in St. Paul

Several factors contributed to the decline of Minnesota's shoe industry. After World War II, the price of leather rose sharply and maintaining stock was difficult. Additionally, new union agreements resulted in higher wages throughout the industry, especially in the Midwest. These factors, combined with the stock-market crash of 1929 and the depression of the 1930s, precipitated the closing of many Minnesota shoe factories.

Midwestern shoe manufacturers were also negatively affected by southern states who offered cheaper labor wages. The Minneapolis Teamster's Strike of 1934 in which 35,000 truckers and building trades workers walked out was devastating to the region and may have been the final blow for the O'Donnell Shoe Company. It moved operations to Tennessee in 1935.

Subsequent uses of the building

The factory at 509 Sibley was leased to the Market Seed Company and Albert Wholesale Produce after the shoe company’s departure. Since 1999 the O’Donnell Shoe Company building has been known as the Renaissance Box, housing tenants such as a theater group and other arts and retail ventures. Aeon purchased the mostly vacant building out of a foreclosure situation.

Honoring the past while meeting current needs

The redevelopment of the Renaissance Box pays tribute to Minnesota’s heritage while meeting today’s needs for quality affordable apartment homes. Public and private funders came together to create 70 apartment homes in this historic building.

Aeon - a leader in historic preservation - has preserved this historical building in a sustainable and feasible way through a partnership with the Center for Sustainable Building Research and the Center for Energy & the Environment.

Aeon has worked with the National Park Service to obtain historic preservation certification. The Minnesota state review board has approved the building to be on the National Register of Historic Places.

Aeon is a nonprofit developer, owner and manager of high-quality affordable homes in the Minneapolis St. Paul area. Established in 1986, the award-winning nonprofit has built or renovated more than 2,000 apartments and townhomes, which provide stability to more than 3,500 people each year – including individuals and families with low to moderate incomes and formerly homeless individuals. The organization’s inspiration to create community assets that last for generations is illustrated in its name “Aeon,” which means “forever.” Its vision is that every person has a home and is interconnected within community.