

Old Ford Auto Plant Revs up for Life Again

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Seven decades ago on Richmond's waterfront, workers rolled up their sleeves and churned out Ford cars for American consumers at a plant lauded for its brick-and-glass architecture. Later, with the dawn of World War II, they switched to assembling jeeps and tanks by the thousands for the military.

After its closure in the 1950s and after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the sprawling Ford Assembly Plant sat vacant, a ghost of its once-bustling past. Rain falling through broken skylights and windows drowned the floor. Vandals jumped the fence and scrawled on the walls.

"Some of the old beams and columns were really deteriorating and had to be replaced," said Steve Duran, head of Richmond's Community and Economic Development Agency. "It's an incredible building -- and it couldn't even be occupied."

But a multimillion-dollar restoration effort that corralled city, federal and private dollars has restored the building to a working hub. Tenants are moving in. Hundreds of workers walk the halls and huddle over tables in meetings.

New tenants started moving in a year ago, for the first time since Loma Prieta. Now, for the first time since the 1950s, the building is nearly in full use.

Six tenants take up 90 percent of the space, the largest of which is the solar panel manufacturing company SunPower, said Troy Peterson, project manager for Orton Development, which owns the building. Most tenants have signed 10-year leases with an option to renew, ensuring that about 600 to 800 workers will be housed here for the next decade.

In addition, the massive 40,000-square-foot craneway with waterfront views of San Francisco is being transformed into a restaurant, banquet hall and concert venue that is scheduled to open as early as this spring.

A historic landmark, the Ford Assembly Plant was the largest on the West Coast when it was built in 1930. It employed 1,000 people and quickly became an economic mine for Richmond, according to city and National Park Service records. Cars assembled here were routed to dealers in Northern California and Hawaii.

Among architectural enthusiasts, the building was praised for the skylights and windows that brought in natural light even on the foggiest of days.

World War II brought a federal order banning the production of "civilian" cars, federal reports say. In 1942, the plant switched to preparing jeeps, tanks and other military vehicles for shipment overseas. Workers churned out 49,000 jeeps and 90,000 tanks during the war.

The plant reverted to assembling Ford cars when the war ended. With demand for cars growing, Ford built a larger plant in Milpitas and shut the Richmond site in 1956.

In subsequent years, the building was partially used for storage.

The magnitude 6.9 Loma Prieta earthquake severely damaged the building in 1989, Duran said. Windows shattered. A brick parapet atop the roof dropped to the ground.

"Before the earthquake, it was pretty much underutilized. It was sitting in mothballs," Duran said. "After the earthquake, it couldn't even be occupied until the seismic work was done."

The city considered tearing it down at one point, but history lovers rallied to save the building. More than \$28 million in federal and city redevelopment dollars were pumped into a seismic retrofit and other repairs.

In 2003, the city sold the building to Orton Development for \$5.4 million, less than the \$7 million the city had paid to acquire it.

Crews installed miles of pipes and conduit for water, heating and sewer. About 6,000 skylights and 15,000 windows were added, said Eddie Orton, owner of Orton Development.

Orton declined to disclose the cost of renovations.

Much of the building will be off limits to the general public because it is leased to private companies.

But the 55-foot-high craneway won't be. Chefs will offer breakfast and lunch by day; bartenders will serve drinks at night.

The space also will be used for banquets, weddings and parties, said James Madsen, craneway project manager. Talks are under way to book bands for concerts in the spring or summer.

The city owns the craneway and has arranged for Orton to manage it. Space will be set aside for the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Homefront National Historical Park's visitors center, Duran said.

"You've got a very unique and notable building, and now you've got companies moving in that will create several hundred jobs and bring it back to life," Duran said.

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By the numbers

- ARCHITECT: Albert Kahn
- BUILT: 1930
- CLOSED: 1956
- SQUARE FOOTAGE: 561,000 square feet
- LENGTH: quarter-mile
- WINDOWS: 40,000