

# Award-worthy renovation for old showroom



**BLAIR KAMIN**  
Cityscapes

Mention the last name "Kahn" to architecture buffs, and they're sure to think of Louis Kahn, the great mid-20th-century Philadelphia architect who gave us such transcendent masterpieces as the Salk Institute near San Diego.

Only a few will bring up "the other Kahn," Detroit's Albert Kahn, whose portfolio was hardly limited to the light-filled, concrete-frame factories that made him the leading American industrial architect of his day. Among Kahn's most recognizable creations: the Ford Motor Co.'s sprawling River Rouge plant, Detroit's art deco Fisher Building, and standouts on the University of Michigan campus such as the classically inspired Hatcher Graduate Library.

Often called "the man who built Detroit," Kahn, who died in 1942, made a smaller mark on rival Chicago. The streamlined General Motors and Ford buildings at the city's 1933-34 Century of Progress Exposition were his, but like the vast majority of buildings from that fair, they're long gone.

Still, a piece of Kahn's legacy here survives, and, not surprisingly, it has Motor City roots.

In 1927, Kahn designed a sober but handsome two-story Cadillac-LaSalle auto showroom and maintenance garage on Frank Lloyd Wright's home turf—Oak Park. Reshaped two years ago into a four-story

building with 51 affordable apartments, the transformed car dealership will be among the winners of the 21st annual Chicago Neighborhood Development Awards when they're announced on Feb. 17.

It's a good choice, one that speaks to the joint social and aesthetic mission of the awards, which are presented by the Local Initiatives Support Corp. of Chicago.

Designed by Chicago architecture firm Weese Langley Weese for the nonprofit Interfaith Housing Development Corp., the nearly \$17 million building, now called Grove Apartments, is a model of architectural recycling and humanistic design.

Located at 820 Madison St., the auto showroom originally belonged to Oak Park's "Motor Row." Its concrete bones created a column-free first-floor space that was perfect for displaying cars and moving them around. Befitting the image of a luxury carmaker, Kahn sheathed his low-slung, structurally expressive design with fine materials, including Indiana limestone on the first floor and richly articulated brickwork above. A tall, thin sign, like those adorning movie theaters, advertised the cars to passers-by.

In the 1980s, however, aesthetic disaster struck: A cable television company turned the old showroom into offices and covered Kahn's once-proud exterior in bland synthetic stucco.

To carry out the revamp, Interfaith Housing not only had to strip off the faux stucco. It also had to overcome intense opposition from some neighbors who argued that Oak Park already had plenty of affordable housing.



CHUCK BERMAN/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Grove Apartments was once a handsome auto showroom designed by the distinguished Detroit architect Albert Kahn.



The lobby, where cars were once driven into the repair shop at the former showroom, receives lots of natural light.

Architect Dennis Langley, a principal at Weese Langley Weese, brought something special to the job: modesty. He didn't try to make the building his own. He ignored architectural dogma that calls for differentiating an addition from the original design. Instead, Langley asked: What would Kahn do?

He was building, literally, on Kahn's foundation; only the footings had to be reinforced to carry the additional two floors. Kahn's original, cast-in-place concrete piers were extended upward with new steel columns. Exterior materials were carefully matched,

including bricks of richly varied colors and a raked texture that were procured from Alabama.

The outcome is impressive: a seamless transition between old and new elements that avoids the architectural equivalent of a tan line. The design achieves better proportions than Kahn's somewhat squat original, even as it adheres to his vision of a nobly simple, bone-beautiful design. The Grove Apartments are also a good neighbor, and not simply because Interfaith didn't skimp on the materials.

New fencing comes complete with an old-



New fencing pays homage to the past with an old-fashioned car silhouette.

fashioned car silhouette that pays homage to the original dealership. Once an organic food co-op settles into the former showroom's ground-floor retail space this spring, the building should draw customers from the neighborhood.

The floor plans are as good as the facade work. By slicing off a chunk of the old building's northeast corner, Langley turned a massive rectangular block into an L-shaped structure that draws natural light into residents' apartments.

The lobby, where cars were once driven into the repair shop, and corridors get lots of natural light. The apartments, all one-bedrooms of less than 500 square feet, are arranged not as open-plan studios but as a series of rooms. Typically, a low-ceiling kitchen opens to a high-

ceiling bedroom and living room, making the apartments feel bigger than they actually are. "It's kind of a Frank Lloyd Wright thing. You come in low, and you go up high," Langley said.

For most residents, rent is \$679 a month. But Perry Vetti, Interfaith's chief operating officer, sees the project in broader terms than just providing affordable housing. It's a way to offer housing in the community for "people who take care of our kids, who work in the restaurants that serve us."

The Grove Apartments have a surface parking lot next door, to be sure, but if those workers walk to their jobs instead of clogging the roads on long commutes from Chicago or distant suburbs, they'll help reduce energy usage and pollution.

How ironic that a former car dealership, designed by the Motor City architect who shaped factories that made America the world's leading purveyor of automobiles, could wind up contributing to a way of life in which more people get around on foot.