

June 2018



# Properties

NORTHEAST OHIO'S MONTHLY REALTY, CONSTRUCTION & ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE



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By Mark Watt | Photos by Matthew Carbone

**F**ounded 16 years ago, GBX Group is a Northeast Ohio-based company that specializes in acquiring historic real estate in urban markets. So when the company began looking for new headquarters to accommodate its growing staff, it made perfect sense to seek out a historic building in downtown Cleveland, says Drew Sparacia, CEO.

“We outgrew our old space at 1303 Prospect Ave., where we were based since 2007,” Sparacia says. “Because we do a lot of historic preservation work, not just here in Cleveland but all over the country, we knew we wanted our new headquarters to be a showcase for what we can do.”

In early March, GBX successfully achieved its goal with the opening of its new headquarters in the Empire

Improvement Building at 2101 Superior Ave., assisted by The Krill Co., Inc. as construction manager, Vocon as designer and architect of record and Sandvick Architects as exterior architect/historic preservation consultant, along with IQ Advisors’ Tim Panzica as owner’s representative.

A former garment factory, the five-story, timber-framed structure features a richly detailed red brick exterior that has

been meticulously rehabilitated. Inside, the 48,000-square-foot building has been creatively reimagined to house GBX Group’s 42 employees with a modern, interconnected office spanning its top three floors.

The firm’s headquarters is conceived as a collection of glass-encased and open work areas that appear to float within a rehabilitated historic, interior environment of exposed wood struc-



**EXPANDED VISION** The 48,000-square-foot building has been creatively reimaged to house GBX Group's 42 employees with a modern, interconnected office spanning its top three floors.

tural elements, brick exterior walls and expansive warehouse space. Visually connecting multiple levels of office space is a three-story atrium carved from the center of the building with a zig-zagging steel staircase that embellishes the building's industrial character.

"In simplistic terms, GBX's offices are kind of a grouping of new boxes within an old box," says Scott Rodenbaugh, technical project designer with Vocon, noting the existing building was comprised largely of wide-open, 8,000-square-foot floors with minimal visual obstructions. "The design is intended to be very open and transparent, so you can almost see through the new elements and view the original structure. It has this appearance of a modern office that's just sitting within history."

Highlighting GBX Group's professional prowess, the project benefits from a patchwork of federal and state historic preservation tax credits, JobsOhio grants and additional incentives that effectively paid for half of its \$13 million price tag, notes Antonin Robert, GBX Group's president of Community Development.

"These programs and incentives are tremendous tools that make projects like this economically feasible," Robert says, "and our expertise is in using these

various instruments, whether it's historic tax credits or tax abatement or historic preservation easements. So this works as a living example of what is possible when it comes to preserving historic assets."

### Tracing history

Designed by Pittsburgh architect Robert Clay and built by the William Dunbar Company, the Empire Improvement Building first opened its

*"[This project] works as a living example of what is possible when it comes to preserving historic assets."*

**Antonin Robert**  
GBX Group

doors in 1913 within Cleveland's bustling garment district. At that time, the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothing was one of the city's leading industries.

Situated on the prominent corner of E. 21st Street and Superior Avenue, the three-story factory would house numerous garment manufacturers in the ensuing years, with two stories added by 1920 as a reflection of the industry's growth. At its peak in the late 1930s, the build-

ing accommodated nine manufacturers at one time.

In the post-War era, however, Cleveland's apparel industry declined significantly and many buildings along Superior transitioned into offices and light manufacturing warehouses, or went vacant. Beginning in the '60s and '70s, artists began scooping up large, inexpensive industrial spaces to house studios and exhibit spaces – a trend that has carried on to this day in an area now known as the Superior Arts District.

The Empire Improvement Building has had its share of creative tenants as well, most recently housing a music recording studio called Crushtone Studios (now part of Superior Sound Studios, recently opened nearby) as well as Daffy Dan's, a prominent t-shirt printing company that previously occupied the building's bottom floor for nearly three decades.

"GBX Group and our investor partners own quite a bit of inventory within the Superior Arts District," Sparacia says. This includes about 60% of the frontage between E. 21st St. and I-90, totaling a little over a half-million square feet, he notes, including 10 buildings and four parking lots. "We envision a lot of redevelopment in this district in the coming years and we figured we'd start the process



**RESTORED + RESHAPED** Visually connecting multiple levels of office space is a three-story atrium carved from the center of the building with a zig-zagging steel staircase that embellishes the building's industrial character.

and establish a significant presence here on Superior."

So in late 2015, the firm acquired Empire Improvement Building.

"From there, it was a 24-month process of relocating the two existing tenants, taking inventory of the building and its historical significance, identifying what aspects of the building would be kept or fixed, and then coordinating with the City of Cleveland, while working to satisfy ADA requirements and historic preservation requirements as well," he says.

### Exterior detailing

Working with the State Historic Preservation Office and National Park Service to meet requirements for historic tax credits, the team referenced a photo from 1920 to guide the process of restoring or replicating original exterior details.

"This building presented numerous challenges," says Elizabeth Crooks, project manager with Sandvick Architects. "Not only do we have different brick on the top two stories, which were added two years after the building was originally constructed, but those floors are actually different construction than the rest of the building with steel beams above all windows and within the masonry walls. Plus, there are a lot of power lines all around the building and that made it challenging to fully evaluate the building in the design development stage. We had to get creative and handle challenges that were uncovered as we went along."

The scope of exterior work was extensive, with all masonry cleaned and completely repointed. Additionally, each of the building's 147 windows was replaced in kind, with 10 differ-

ent styles utilized around the building. PVC downspouts were replaced with cast-iron spouts more fitting to the building's historic character, along with new copper flashings.

Entrances on the south and west sides of the building were restored and repaired, including replacement of ornamental stone. To meet ADA requirements, a new entry with an accessible ramp was constructed on the building's rear elevation to the north. Just inside, an existing freight elevator was replaced with a modern elevator, while an original passenger elevator at the building's front entry was fully refurbished.

As with any renovation, unexpected surprises were encountered on the project – perhaps most significantly on the fifth floor where the team discovered a portion of the western wall was bowing

out and back in from parapet to the level of the window sill.

“We ended up deconstructing the entire west elevation on the fifth floor,” says Kyle Konczos, project manager with Krill. “So there was a point where the wall was gone and you could look out over the Cleveland skyline with nothing but jackposts holding up the roof. We reconstructed the whole wall.”

The roof was fully replaced with a brand new EPDM system, while new rooftop HVAC units were tucked back from the roof edge to preserve historic sightlines, Konczos says. In addition to a new, high efficiency HVAC system, the building has been updated with new water, gas and electric.

### Overcoming challenges

Inside, the team carved out the building’s first two floors and half-story basement to create move-in-ready, leasable space for future tenants, while the building’s top three levels were prepped to house GBX Group’s headquarters. Throughout, each 8,000-square-foot floor was stripped bare to expose historic elements, including original wood floors, joists, beams and columns.

“Getting the floors level was a considerable challenge,” Konczos says. “Because it’s a wood structure, we had sag between column lines or existing structural members. In some areas, the difference in floor elevation was six inches from one point to another. We couldn’t just pour Gypcrete and level the floors because the weight would be too much.”

Instead, floors were flattened with a layer of lightweight polystyrene-infused cement compound and several layers of resilient mat, which was then topped with Gypcrete, Konczos explains. New, thin plank oak floors were then installed.

To support increased floor loads resulting from added sound separation and floor leveling, every wood girder throughout the building has been reinforced with a steel beam underneath which has been plate-bolted to the wood columns and exterior walls.

Perhaps the greatest puzzle to solve was creating the three-story atrium. GBX Group expressed its desire for such a space early in the project, but building code dictated that no more than two



Photo courtesy of GBX Group

**CUES FROM THE PAST** The project team referenced a historic photo from 1920 to guide the process of restoring or replicating original exterior details of the building.

floors could be connected in such a way without an approved means for smoke evacuation, says David Swentor, president of Real Estate with GBX Group.

“We had to get creative,” he says. “We sat down with the fire marshal

*“We envision a lot of redevelopment in this district in the coming years and we figured we’d start the process and establish a significant presence here on Superior.”*

**Drew Sparacia**  
GBX Group

and came up with an innovative solution that worked to satisfy building code and was financially viable. It’s really a feat of engineering.”

A series of automated smoke curtains were installed to close off the atrium between the fourth and fifth floors in the event of a fire, including one which cleverly cuts through a staircase and railing, which is likely a first in the U.S., according to Rodenbaugh. “It’s completely hidden otherwise,” he says. “Unless you’re looking for it, you don’t notice that it’s there.”

Presenting yet another hurdle was stacking and properly aligning all three floors, which was particularly necessary since each is visible from within the atrium, Rodenbaugh explains.

“Getting everything to line up was a major accomplishment because this building isn’t rectangular,” he says. “It’s a parallelogram, with the east and west walls parallel and north and south walls



THE EMPIRE IMPROVEMENT BUILDING WAS BUILT IN 1913 AND WAS DESIGNED BY PITTSBURGH ARCHITECTS

**ARTISTIC ENVIRONMENT** The wide-open atmosphere (opposite page) is complemented by including creative details throughout, including recessed linear lights on the wood-paneled outer walls of huddle rooms (top), murals in the office area that tell the story of GBX Group and the history of the surrounding neighborhood (middle), and custom furniture crafted from reclaimed wood and found objects (bottom).

parallel as well. When we design, we always set column lines and those are the center lines for everything else, but these columns don't stack. They twist. They're out of alignment with each other. You could try to measure off of exterior walls, but they weren't level either. So we used lasers to measure the whole building."

### Layout + artwork

Programmatically, each floor of GBX's headquarters is arranged similarly. A variety of meeting rooms, offices and workstations populate the core of each floor, while open spaces are left along the perimeter.

"It maintains a sense of volume, so that as you look through the windows from outside, the building looks similar to its original use," says Peter Ketter, director of preservation with Sandvick Architects.

As the eastern wall has no exterior windows, it now houses all utility chases, pipes and ductwork, along with restrooms and other support spaces. Along the south side of each floor are open collaborative areas – including a fifth-floor café – that take advantage of exceptional views of the surrounding neighborhood. Lastly, on the northeast corner, a hidden column rises through all three floors, containing a huddle room at each level.

Supporting local talent, area artists were commissioned to contribute custom furniture and art pieces, which are prominently featured throughout. This includes a unique bar cart converted from a vintage industrial sewing machine, a conference room table incorporating reclaimed wood and an old foundry base, plus a globe sculpture fashioned from a massive mooring buoy.

Custom murals on each floor tell the story of GBX Group, identify the

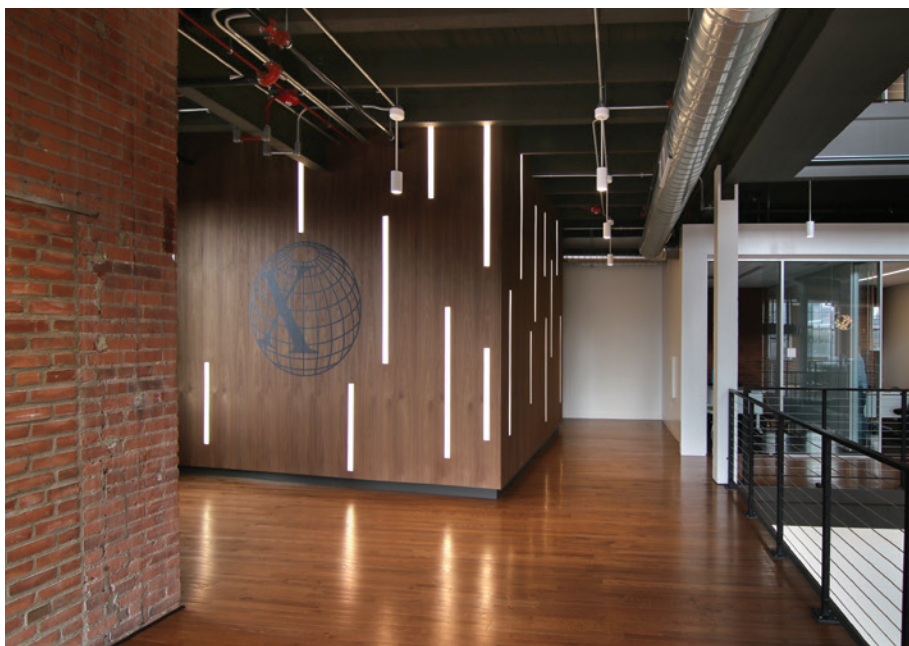


Photo by Mark Watt



Photo by Chris Jasinski



Photo by Ken Koych



**NEW VIEWS** Along the south side of each floor are open collaborative areas (top) that take advantage of exceptional views of the surrounding neighborhood. This includes a fifth-floor café (bottom), which has become a popular informal meeting space with flexible seating, a kitchenette and vibrantly colored interior finishes.

company's core values and illustrate the history of the neighborhood.

### Positive outlook

Several months after the firm has settled into its new headquarters, the feedback from staff has been overwhelmingly positive, says Rachael Price, project manager with GBX Group.

"People really want to be here in the office and they want to work," Price says. "It's incredible how much we've

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**Kyle Konzos**  
The Krill Co., Inc.

been using collaborative areas like the huddle rooms or even the café. Culture is really important to us here – work hard, play hard – and I think the design reflects who we are as a company."

Sparacia says the team is proud of its dynamic new space. "This shows how creative you can get with the interior of a historic building while still meeting National Park Service requirements for historic tax credits," he says. "It is a showcase for us and this team did a phenomenal job designing it and seeing it through." **P**

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