

The Many Lives of Workshop St. Johns

with history by Ken Unkeles, abridged

For more than a century, this 5-acre site just one block from the Willamette River has continuously reinvented itself. Today, Workshop St. Johns is a 147,000-square-foot building made up of several interconnected buildings constructed between 1911 and 1970, reflecting over a century of Portland's industrial and creative spirit.





Originally built as a woolen mill, the blankets produced here were considered so essential that operations were effectively “nationalized” by the federal government during World War I. Ownership returned to the private sector just as the post-war depression took hold. By 1927, the mill carried \$650,000 in debt. A major reorganization in the 1940s fueled by the demands of another world war, restored the operation to financial health. At its peak, the mill employed 650 people, with 70 percent of production dedicated to the U.S. military.

Following the war, the complex entered a gradual economic decline. By the early 1960s, it was taken over by Northern Specialty Sales, a wholesale toy distributor owned by Lou Buchwach, Herb Bodner, and Herb Shapiro. By the early 1970s, the company had grown into the third-largest toy wholesaler in the country. Buchwach was known for adding roofs, connecting buildings, and constructing new spaces as needed. The result was a maze-like floor plan that persists today.



Northern Specialty Sales ultimately succumbed to industry changes in the 1980s, as factory-direct purchasing by big-box retailers like Toys “R” Us drove traditional toy wholesalers into decline.



“TOUGH MOTHERS.”
—By Tim Boyle, President, Columbia Sportswear

Durable. Rugged. A little baggy and slightly faded. That pretty much sums up our new jeans – and my mother, Columbia Sportswear’s chairman. Her steely toughness permeates our corporate structure. As well as the structure of our clothing.

For example, Mother insists that longevity be built into the very fabric of these jeans. The denim is yarn dyed, a process which preserves a true indigo blue. And the way we “age” our jeans is done with durability, and the environment, in mind. We use a biodegradable enzyme which fades the fabric a bit, yet maintains a consistent texture. Stone washing, on the other hand, pounds the fabric and the seams.

And although Mother wears, and designs, the pants in our family, I got to choose the rivets – long-lasting pewter ones at all the stress points. Mother says you’ll like the rugged durability and comfortable, relaxed fit. Based on personal experience, I wouldn’t argue with her if I were you.

Columbia Sportswear Company

The property’s fortunes shifted again with the arrival of Columbia Sportswear in the 1990s. Led by the formidable Gert Boyle and her son Tim, the company expanded to occupy 120,000 square feet across the upper floor. Throughout the 1990s, the Boyles undertook another major reconfiguration of the space, reshaping the space to support a fast-

growing global brand. By 2002, Columbia had outgrown the building and relocated its headquarters to Beaverton.

In January 2003, Ken Unkeles and David Gold acquired the largely vacant complex. While attempting to resist the impulse to further “Buchwach” the building, they began filling the space with an eclectic mix of artists, small businesses, and warehouse tenants. Today, the complex is home to more than 100 tenants, forming a vibrant and unconventional community within its winding corridors.



In 2018, the property was acquired by Workshop Cathedral and rebranded as Workshop St. Johns. Since then Workshop St. Johns has been focused on continuing an inclusive community of like-minded individuals who follow their passions, and on creating a community we believe in. We're proud of our neighborhood and our city, and do what we can to both support their growth and recognize their history. Here, you come as you are, and you go as far as your sweat and ideas can take you.

