

Brownfields Success Story

Harvesting Arts and Culture From a Former Brownfield Council Bluffs, Iowa

At the turn of the 20th century, Pottawattamie County in southwest Iowa was an agricultural hub of the nation. Dozens of companies would ship farming equipment to cities like Council Bluffs, assemble it in local facilities and then distribute it to points across the United States. The International Harvester Company of America operated one such facility in Council Bluffs until the mid-1960s. After that, various parties used the building, originally constructed by the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company in 1894, for storage. Then, in the early 2000s, the City of Council Bluffs took an interest in the property and set in motion a series of events that would result in a thriving arts and culture center that the entire region could enjoy.

The Assessments and Cleanup

In 2003, the city worked with the Pottawattamie County Development Corporation (PCDC), now known as the 712 Initiative, to purchase the Harvester property and begin planning for redevelopment.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) awarded the city two \$200,000 Brownfields Assessment Grants, one in 2005 and one in 2008, to identify any contaminants on the property and determine site cleanup needs. EPA Technical Assistance to Brownfields provider Kansas State University helped the city with applications and project planning. Assessments revealed several contaminants in the soil, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, benzene, lead and volatile organic compounds, as well as lead paint and asbestos in the building.

In 2009, EPA awarded the city a \$200,000 Brownfields Cleanup Grant to facilitate remediation of the site, which involved removing approximately 1,700 tons of material, including the upper 3 feet of soil in contaminated areas. PCDC contributed additional funds toward cleanup, which cost \$240,000 in total.



The International Harvester Company of America as it stands today.

EPA Grant Recipient:
City of Council Bluffs, Iowa

Grants:

- Brownfields Assessment Grants—\$400,000
- Brownfields Cleanup Grant—\$200,000

Additional Funding Sources:

- Iowa West Foundation Donation—\$9 million
- Iowa State Historic Preservation Tax Credits—\$3 million
- Federal Historic Tax Credits—\$2 million
- Iowa Economic Development Authority Enhance Iowa Tourism Grant—\$1 million
- Iowa Economic Development Authority Brownfield/Grayfield Redevelopment Tax Credits—\$800,000
- Iowa Great Places Program Grant—\$400,000



Facility in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where the International Harvester Company of America assembled farming equipment until the mid-1960s.

“ We transformed an old, abandoned warehouse into an arts and culture center that is helping the community become a more vibrant and livable place. ”

*Danna Kehm,
Chief Executive Officer,
PACE*

A late-breaking discovery of potential contamination where the parking lot was installed required further assessment, paid for by the EPA Resource Conservation and Recovery Act program. The site owners now have a covenant on the land that prohibits further digging or development without additional remediation.

The Redevelopment

In the late 2000s, the Pottawattamie Arts, Culture and Entertainment (PACE) organization and Iowa West Foundation were looking for space to build a new arts and culture center. The two organizations hosted several visioning sessions and one-on-one interviews with organizations in the community, and worked with local architects to select the old Harvester building as the site for the new center.

“The building had great bones and a lot of history,” says Danna Kehm, chief executive officer of PACE. “We could see the potential of using this abandoned warehouse to bring our vision for arts and culture to the community.”

In 2009, PCDC donated the Harvester building to PACE, and the city donated or leased, at a reduced rate, other adjoining parcels to PACE for what would become the new Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center.

To finance the redevelopment project, PACE raised more than \$27 million from various sources, with approximately \$23 million going toward construction and the remainder going into an endowment to help maintain the building for generations to come. Financial assistance included:

- \$9 million from the Iowa West Foundation
- \$3 million in state Historic Preservation Tax Credits
- \$2 million in federal Historic Tax Credits
- \$1 million in an Enhance Iowa tourism grant from the Iowa Economic Development Authority
- \$800,000 in Brownfield/Grayfield Redevelopment Tax Credits from the Iowa Economic Development Authority
- \$400,000 from the Iowa Great Places program

During cleanup and redevelopment, PACE and the State Historic Preservation Office of Iowa were keen to protect certain historical aspects of the building, such as the large windows in the grand entry. Handwriting in chalk is still visible on the original staircase, and the developers went to great lengths to keep the huge pulley-based freight elevator.

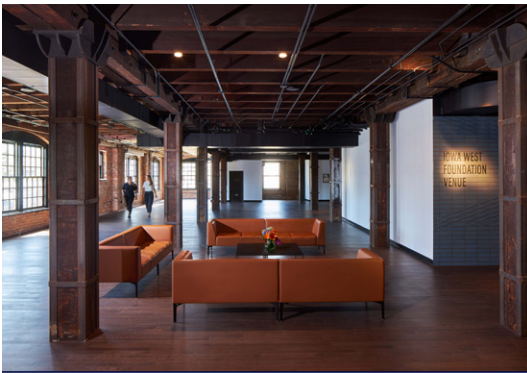
“We wanted to keep the building as close as possible to what it was originally,” Kehm says. “The industrial charm of the building definitely adds to the character and the experience when you’re in this space. The arts center is itself a work of art.”

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact the Region 7 office at 800-223-0425 or R7_Brownfields@epa.gov.



The Harvester building as it stands today. Developers protected certain historical aspects of the building, like the large windows, during the restoration.



Interior space of the Harvester building, now home to five local arts and culture organizations.

The Results

PACE officially opened the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center in February 2020, only to shut it down three weeks later due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The facility reopened in stages over the next year and a half and became fully operational in October 2021.

Today, the 95,000-square-foot building includes a 280-seat theater, rehearsal space, gallery, artist studios, classrooms, a one-and-a-half-floor commissary kitchen and more. It is home to five organizations:

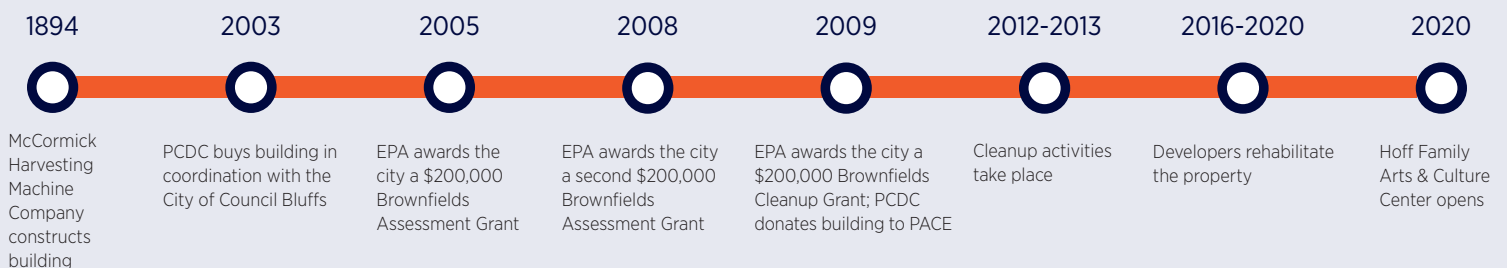
- PACE, which offers arts and culture programming for the community
- Chanticleer Community Theater, which has provided local productions in the region for more than 60 years
- Kanesville Symphony Orchestra, a volunteer orchestra based in Council Bluffs
- American Midwest Ballet, a resident professional dance company and school
- Kitchen Council, a food startup incubator for entrepreneurs

PACE employs nine full-time and 13 part-time staff, and engages with more than 50 creative contractors every year. The Kitchen Council currently has 18 food entrepreneurs working out of its kitchen, and the American Midwest Ballet employs 20 professional dancers and teachers. The tourists who visit the center contribute to tax revenues for the community.

Jennifer Morris, an EPA Region 7 project manager who supported the effort, has noted the cultural benefits for Council Bluffs as well. The city has a poverty rate of approximately 14%, making income a barrier to families looking for arts and cultural experiences, particularly in the industrial area where the new center is located. “The new center brings a cultural resource closer to communities that haven’t had this kind of access before,” she says. “Prior to this, residents had to go to Omaha to enjoy the arts in this way.”

Courtney Harter, Community Development Department director of the City of Council Bluffs, is amazed by what the community, developers and their partners have accomplished. “The city started this project 19 years ago and has had assistance from so many organizations along the way,” she says. “The folks who looked at these old buildings all those years ago had a vision, and that vision persevered.”

McCormick Harvesting Machine Company Building Redevelopment Timeline



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