

LAND AND SPACE

MIAD art gallery is coming to downtown's The Avenue. The developer hopes it attracts more tenants.

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Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design's gallery coming to The Avenue mixed-use development in downtown Milwaukee will provide a high-profile place for the college's students, faculty and staff to display their work.

Named MIAD Gallery at the Ave, it also could help The Avenue attract more commercial tenants – with the project's developer replicating a tactic he first used at his Minneapolis buildings.

"This is my secret weapon," said Josh Krsnak, whose Minneapolis-based Hempel Cos. co-developed The Avenue.

Work is underway on the MIAD gallery, 301 W. Wisconsin Ave., with a grand opening scheduled for April 6, said Monica Miller, gallery manager.

The gallery is next to the main entrance to 3rd Street Market Hall, 275 W. Wisconsin Ave.

"It's a really exciting opportunity," Miller said.

"We're expanding our reach to a different neighborhood that's still within walking distance" of MIAD's Historic Third Ward campus, Miller said.

A place to display and sell MIAD student art

The 2,500-square-foot, street-level space will provide a place for MIAD students to display their work, Miller said. That helps fulfill the college's mission of educating students who create and sell art.

"This is first and foremost an education space," she said. "We're modeling what we're teaching."

"It's a place where they can take risks while having a support system," said Miller, a 2013 MIAD graduate. "I can give them real time feedback."

The gallery also gives faculty and staff a chance to showcase their work, Miller said, while providing a place for MIAD alumni to reconnect with the college.

Plans for the gallery were announced in October 2021. But the project was delayed mainly by supply chain issues, Miller said.

The delay turned out to be "a bit of a gift to continue to explore different artists to work with," she said.

The gallery is within the historic Matthews Building, among a mix of older and newer buildings that make up The Avenue, formerly the Grand Avenue mall.

Space previously was used by OfficeMax

The Matthews Building's street-level space for 10 years housed an OfficeMax store, which closed in 2015.

That closing was the latest in a series of blows to Grand Avenue, which was sold later that year to a group led by Krsnak and Interstate Parking President Tony Janowiec.

The former OfficeMax was last used by BrewCity CrossFit as temporary space before that business moved in 2017 to 1539 W. St. Paul Ave.

By then, Krsnak and Janowiec were starting to convert the former mall into The Avenue, a mix of apartments, offices and retail space anchored by 3rd Street Market Hall.

The MIAD gallery is filling one of the few remaining vacancies at The Avenue.

The college is paying no monthly rent. That agreement runs to Dec. 1, but could be renewed.

Also, Hempel Cos. can terminate the arrangement with a 60-day notice but may then offer MIAD an alternative location.

That's according to documents filed with the Milwaukee Board of Zoning Appeals, which recently approved a special use permit for the gallery.

That arrangement gives MIAD a high-profile renovated location for a nominal cost – while also giving The Avenue a way to show off space to potential commercial tenants.

"We are aware that another tenant opportunity may arise for the space and look forward to working with Hempel to relocate to another space within The Avenue," Miller said.

Strategy worked in Minneapolis buildings

Krsnak has used that tactic at some of Hempel's Minneapolis-area buildings.

"It's actually super helpful for us," said Krsnak, Hempel chief executive officer.

In 2009, Hempel provided space to artist Drew Beson at the company's Rand Tower in downtown Minneapolis.

That space was later leased to a TV station, and Beson was relocated to another downtown building's skyway level.

That location had been vacant for around four years before Beson's gallery helped attract a bank to lease that space within a year, Krsnak said.

Beson has since relocated to two other Hempel-operated buildings and is now based in suburban Eden Prairie.

"I feel like a well-loved pet," Beson said. "And maybe a good luck charm, too."

Beson said the arrangement with Hempel allows him to focus more time and resources on creating art.

"This is a very challenging way to make a living," he said.

The spaces where he's operated both a gallery and studio have typically been places that needed some "sweat equity," Beson said.

They also have been locations with good visibility, ample space and other advantages, he said. Beson's current location is around 5,000 square feet and includes parking.

More art along West Wisconsin Avenue

In Milwaukee, the MIAD gallery will be the latest in a series of art-related developments along West Wisconsin Avenue.

The others include Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's Bradley Symphony Center, which opened in 2021, and the annual summer public art display known as Sculpture Milwaukee.

"We really like the arts and, obviously, what it does for the area," Krsnak said.

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