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Near Michigan Central, pair plan to turn an abandoned school into a community hub



Candice WilliamsThe Detroit News

Detroit — In the city’s Corktown neighborhood, a nonprofit is working to turn an old school building into a community hub that will soon host an early childhood education center, an artist incubator, a retreat center and a culinary kitchen.

The former St. Vincent de Paul Middle School on 14th Street, which had been vacant for years, will also have a new name: Kintsugi Village.

“We’re very grateful for the opportunity to try to have an impact here in Detroit,” said Paul Spiegelman, co-founder of Kintsugi Village, as he stood outside of the building on a recent afternoon. “It’s a project we could have done in many places, but we became very fond of the area. These are the issues

we're passionate about because there's clearly a need, and a demonstrated need, especially in early childhood education."



The project is set to breathe life into a building in an area that's seeing revitalization, especially with the neighboring Michigan Central campus, where Newlab opened in 2023, followed by the Station this year. It's among other rehab efforts in the area, including a nearby apartment development.

Kintsugi Village will fill the 40,000-square-foot building with the early childhood center on the first floor. The upper floors will house artist studio spaces, meeting rooms, a gallery for exhibitions and a state-of-the-art kitchen for classes and community events.

Spiegelman said he and co-founder Hamsa Daher are committed to making the building a resource for Detroit residents. The project's name comes from Kintsugi, the traditional Japanese art form that involves mending broken pottery by mixing lacquer with powdered gold, silver or platinum.

“It’s been a dream of ours to create a place where education, art, food and collaboration can all come together to serve the community,” he said. “We want to offer a space where people can learn, grow and connect. It’s about creating a lasting impact on the community, and we’re excited to see this project take shape.”



Spiegelman has a background in law and business and founded Small Giants Community, a group for business leaders, in 2009. Daher is a business leader

and is on the board of directors for Small Giants Community after serving as its executive director.

The child care center will be the first part of Kintsugi Village to open, in the fall of 2025, just after Labor Day, Spiegelman said. The center will serve children ages 3-5.

The development comes as the city has said there is a need for child care throughout Detroit. An estimated 37,000 Detroit children ages 0-5 have parents who are participating in the workforce and need day care, according to the latest data released by the Office of Early Learning in 2023. There is a shortage of 15,500 places in the city's child care ecosystem. The city is considering an ordinance that would make it easier for day care operators to open and expand their operations.

Engaging the community

The three-story brown brick building, where the school closed in 2002, most recently housed offices and has sat vacant since 2020. The prior owner intended to convert the building into condos but those plans fell through, Spiegelman said.

Spiegelman said the nonprofit bought the building for \$3 million and that they are in talks with a designer and a construction firm to estimate how much it will take to complete the project.



The renovation plans include opening up the center of the first floor for students. The top floor appears to need the most work as it is unfinished and open to the elements. Spiegelman said he envisions the top floor housing a large event space that will serve about 150 people. An outdoor patio will provide views of the renovated Michigan Central Station.

Bob Roberts, president of the Corktown Business Association, said he's pleased that the building will be preserved. He said Kintsugi Village's public engagement has been purposeful.

"They want to drill down on it based on what the community wants to see," he said. "And so that's why they plan on doing so much engagement leading up to their final plan and their eventual opening."

Roberts said he's looking forward to the culinary kitchen, which will be used for classes. As owner of McShane's Irish Pub on Michigan Avenue, Roberts said he's hopeful the facility could help address the shortage of hospitality workers since the pandemic.

"It's very difficult that the talent pool in hospitality has really been diminished since COVID," he said. "So we're excited to see what they do with that."

Former Detroit City Council member Sheila Cockrel, a longtime Corktown resident and community advocate, said the project will help strengthen relationships within the neighborhood. She lives near the building, where she had office space in there before it closed in 2020.

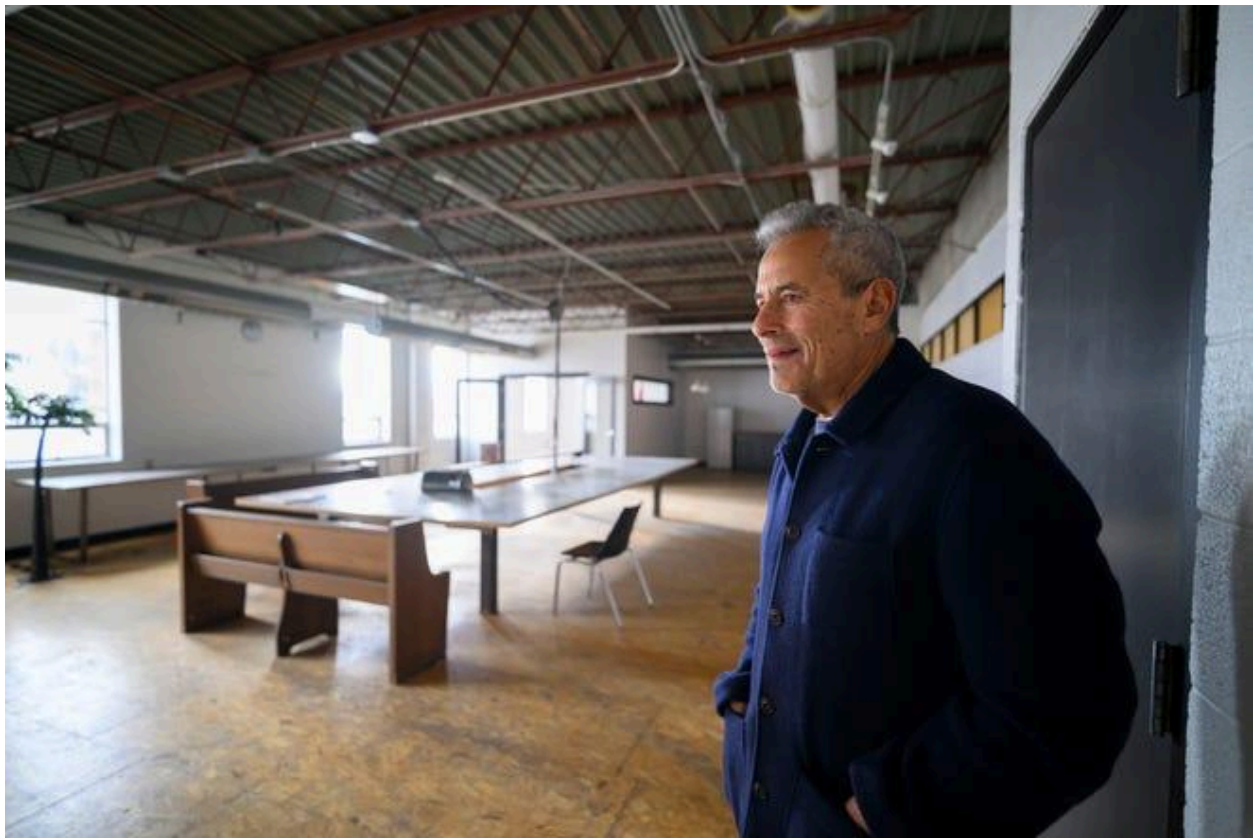
"I think the programming they're planning — especially for the artists and the community retreat space — is really exciting," she said. "It's exactly the kind of creative, community-driven initiative that Corktown needs. The school building is returning to its original use, and that feels like a real win for the neighborhood."

The project will include its own parking, which is much needed as development draws more visitors and workers to the area.

"We're putting in parking on the north side of the building to ensure that the people coming to Kintsugi Village — whether it's for the Early Childhood Education Center or for an art exhibit — won't contribute to the parking congestion in the area," Spiegelman said.

Cockrel said she appreciates that they're being proactive about parking.

"The last thing we need is more cars blocking up the neighborhood," she said. "The garden, the open spaces and the parking they're planning will help make this a great addition."



Although the building sits next to Newlab, the school will focus on serving families living in the neighborhood first, Daher said. She said they plan to meet with the community in December and work on tuition pricing, along with a sliding scale.

“Our hope is to really pull from the neighborhood and community first,” she said. “That's what it's for. If there's open spaces, we'd love to accommodate others ... We want kids who are living in the neighborhood to be able to walk to the school.”

Daher said she is particularly excited about the return of a school to the neighborhood, noting that many residents have personal ties to the former St. Vincent de Paul Middle School.

“I think everybody’s really excited to have this idea of kids running around and all the sounds that come with that,” she said.

Another Corktown project

Down the street from Kintsugi Village, another renovation project is generating activity. Piquette Partners is rehabbing a vacant former 24,000-square-foot warehouse at 2150 Bagley into 14 loft-style apartments. According to city documents, the project cost is an estimated \$6.8 million.

Construction recently started on the building, which was purchased in 2022. Plans include preserving the timber structure, said Tarun Kajeepeta, co-founder of Piquette Partners.

“We're actually going to pretty extensive lengths to keep that structure in place because I think we're just a lot more excited about adaptive reuse than just building new if you have the option,” he said.

Once complete in 18 months, the 14 units will include a mix of studios, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments, ranging from 500 to 1,500 square feet. Twenty percent of the units will be affordable, with rents set at 80% of the area's median income.

The ground floor will feature commercial space, Kajeepeta said, with an emphasis likely on food and beverage, though retail is a possibility.

"I've been living in Corktown for 10 years, so I've seen a lot of the transformation and have been really excited about just more and more vibrancy, density and it being a walkable neighborhood for me as a resident, but also an attractive neighborhood for people who are visiting the city to eat, work, play," he said. "I think with the announcement of the train station development and seeing this kind of center of gravity at that intersection of 14th and Bagley, we were excited about the opportunity to contribute to that."