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Halfway house

Business accelerator gener8tor moves -- temporarily -- to 30 on the Square

BY **LIZ MERFELD** JANUARY 30, 2014 3:00 PM



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Scrappy gener8tor goes for elbow room and sunlight.

It has everything to do with more open space and natural light, and not a thing to do with abandoning StartingBlock Madison, the **proposed coworking space** for startups.

Gener8tor co-founder Troy Vosseller clarified this right away, discussing the business accelerator's Jan. 6 relocation across the Capitol Square -- from 1 E. Main St., over Starbucks, to 30 W. Mifflin St., on the fifth floor above the Veterans Museum.

The announcement of the lease signing by real estate advisory firm Cresa Madison did raise a few eyebrows, though. That's because gener8tor is a stakeholder in StartingBlock, the proposed redevelopment project that seeks to transform the vacant Mautz Paint building on East Washington Avenue into a bustling tech and entrepreneur hub.

One of many committed partners, gener8tor also plans to be one of two "anchor tenants" of StartingBlock. **Sector67**, the cramped tinkerspace on Winnebago Street where soap-making, 3D printing and iron pouring happen side by side, is the second.

But anyone who guessed gener8tor's recent move signaled a freezing of the StartingBlock project wouldn't be thinking like a startup. Gener8tor simply signed a month-to-month lease. It roughly coincided with the kickoff of its winter session, a 12-week boot-camp-style program where five promising young "technology-enabled" companies are fed cash, ideas, mentors and Ian's pizza.

"We're opportunistic. We took the space as is," Vosseller says, motioning around the fifth-floor space, spartan enough to host a karate class or two while still leaving room for entrepreneurship.

He supposes that frequent, temporary moves are “emblematic of startups in general.” To put it in perspective, “in the last two years, our Milwaukee office has moved three times.”

“We’re scrappy,” Vosseller continues. Indeed, there are no pods of matching IKEA desks topped with 27-inch iMacs. The conference table, occupied by pupils quietly tapping laptop keyboards, is decorated with red plastic Solo cups and paper plates littered with gnawed-on pizza crusts.

“With startups, there’s not an emphasis on ‘Class A’ office space. More important is clustering, the ability to work together -- and prices,” Vosseller believes.

But what the space in the 30 on the Square building lacks in frills, it makes up for in elbow room and sunlight, with generous windows overlooking the Capitol and 100 block of State Street.

Gener8tor alumni had suggested that the old space, a former law office with windowless “filing cabinet rooms,” was too segmented and sunless to foster collaboration and inspiration. It was a fine place to grow from, though.

"When we got started two years ago and wanted an office on the Square, Urban Land Interests made it happen and gave us a great deal," Vosseller quickly points out.

The new space features an unmanned reception area, a waiting alcove doubling as a video-chat lounge, two expansive rooms and six private offices. Gener8tor alumni **Quietyme** and **MobileIgniter** rent two offices, and outside startup **InHub** rents a third. In the remaining three, a speed-dating-style mentoring happens.

In month one of the program, 120 mentors meet privately with each gener8tor company. "From there we facilitate a mentor-match," where mentors commit to four to five additional follow-up meetings with one of the startups from the batch, Vosseller says.

Gener8tor's winter session wraps on April 3, with the next one happening this summer in Milwaukee. What then? That depends on StartingBlock's progress. Last October, some **raised questions** about its feasibility, citing hurdles ranging from funding to parking.

Despite some thorny, yet-to-be solved details, this much is clear: gener8tor is still fully committed, Vosseller promises. It's just that "when you're serving a lot of constituencies, it takes longer to get everything moving. None of us are stopping."

Echoing his sentiments is downtown alder and **Hardin Design & Development** vice president Scott Resnick, also involved in the project. Every Thursday morning the group spearheading StartingBlock meets to finish pieces of the business plan and fundraising plan. "Troy shows up every week," Resnick notes.

While the steering group has no breaking news just yet, Resnick says it should have some updates in the next month or so. He's careful to match his excitement with a dose of patience; the group could be looking at anywhere from nine to 18 months before construction begins.

In the meantime, gener8tor and other committed partners "have to be housed somewhere," Resnick points out.

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