

Mid-Century marvel demolished in Ferguson

[by Shannon Howard, NOCOstl.com, Nov. 29, 2010]



Built in 1957, this sleek modernist building that once housed Universal Match was recently purchased by a neighboring company and is now under demolition

As a local history buff and fan of mid-century architecture, I gasped when I saw what was happening at 400 Paul Avenue last week. Bulldozers had descended on the former Ferguson headquarters of Universal Match Corporation, and by the time I drove by, the back half of this unique modern building was already gone.

Long and lean, with a minimalist style most people either love or hate, the 25,000-square-foot steel and masonry structure was built in 1957 and once served as the epicenter of North America's largest matchbook manufacturing operation. At the height of Universal Match, when the company was producing more than five million matchbooks every day (between Ferguson and sites in California, New York and Louisiana),

executives and office staffers worked out of this building while dozens of chemists, production artists, machinists and laborers filled the sprawling collection of factory buildings on either side of Paul Avenue.

Founded in 1925, Universal Match was a leader and innovator in the world of matches, weathering multiple mergers and at least one major fire before finally ceasing operations in Ferguson in 1983. Just a few years later, mirroring the dying match industry itself, the company dropped out of the production business altogether.

Since then, most of its 1930s factory buildings have been taken over by other manufacturers, including 325 Paul Avenue with its super thick blast-proof walls and expansive concrete rooftop just waiting for a garden. But that lovely mid-century headquarters...sadly, it has gone unloved. A church owned it for a while, using it for a revival center and prison outreach ministry, but mostly the building has sat vacant and neglected. By the end of this week, I suspect it will be gone forever...

Over the years, I tried to get inside several times, convinced that I'd find some secret cache of matchbooks or fabulous vintage cover art. But alas, the best I could do was check out the main factory building across the street, which only had a secret cache of bird carcasses, chemistry vials and unsavory donuts made by chain-smoking ex-cons (long story). Oh well. Here's what the factory looked like in 2005...

And... thanks to Ruth Brown and the Ferguson Historical Society, here's an awesome look at 400 Paul Avenue, Universal Match headquarters, back in the 1950s. What a beauty! I especially love that bold line of upstairs windows and the metal letters above the



entryway...

[Special thanks to Shannon Howard for her permission to reprint this article]