

# The Charlotte Observer

January 25, 2018

[Link to Article](#)

## How a Charlotte factory where Ford Model Ts and missiles were built found new life



This is not your modern digital control panels on modern heating units. These are the control valves in the boiler room at Camp North End. **John D. Simmons** - [jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com)

By Ely Portillo

A maze of pipes snakes between huge valves and enormous boilers in the brick building that once powered a Ford Model T factory, while bird chirps drift in through some of the missing panes of wavy, ancient glass.

If this was where Camp North End stopped, next to the rusty water tower, it wouldn't look like much. But across the courtyard, a coffee roaster is firing beans in a computer-controlled roasting drum, a nonprofit is fostering black tech workers and entrepreneurs and a custom motorcycle builder is machining bricks of aluminum into shiny new parts.

"This was a bombed-out shell," said Damon Hemmerdinger, co-president of New York-based ATCO Properties, gesturing at the row of businesses taking shape in a former garage that, until recently, lacked doors. ATCO paid more than \$15.6 million for the 80 acres of industrial buildings between Statesville Avenue and North Graham Street. "A year ago, these buildings were empty."

The row of creative shops and businesses, which also includes a hair salon, muralist studio and event space, is the first phase of a plan that could ultimately bring up to 1,500 new apartments, a hotel and up to 1.5 million square feet of office space to the site. Junior Achievement of the Carolinas is renovating space and planning to open next school year, and Goodyear Arts, a studio and gallery space.

Building the first phase into a viable collection of small businesses and generating buzz with events like market days and food truck rallies is essential to luring bigger tenants, such as major office users, Hemmerdinger said.



This is not your modern digital control panels on modern heating units. These are the control valves in the boiler room at Camp North End. Camp North End is a 75 acre redevelopment on Statesville Avenue where Ford Model Ts were built and Hercules missiles were assembled into what the developers call an “adaptive reuse project” that is becoming “a catalytic hub of innovation and ideas”. Numerous industrial buildings have more than 1,000,000 square feet of space “for work, artistic expression, dining and hospitality, entertainment, recreation and community building.” We went on a tour of Camp North End on Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018.

**John D. Simmons** - [jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com)

“Everyone wants to be around an active, energetic space, and you need small and local businesses to make that work,” he said. For now, the first phase feels tucked away inside the site, which is still home to four active industrial tenants on adjacent portions.

Across from the boiler building sits a 240,000 square-foot former Ford factory, which once included a showroom that sold cars to Charlotteans and was later converted to an army munitions

depot and then a missile assembly plant, before finishing its industrial life as a Rite Aid distribution center.

The boiler and factory buildings – which date to the 1920s and were designed by architect Albert Kahn, who built famed automotive factories in Detroit – are currently idle. The smell of creosote floats up from the floor in the factory, made from slices of wood that go back decades, to the days when weapons were packed there.

Hemmerdinger said ATCO is still in the design process for renovating the factory building and investigating whether historic tax credits can be used to help pay for renovating the structure, which would ideally be leased by a handful of large office tenants to avoid chopping up the space too much.



Mitch Johnson, a fabricator with Prism Supply Company, works on one of several motorcycles being built at the business in Camp North End. Camp North End is a 75 acre redevelopment on Statesville Avenue where Ford Model Ts were built and Hercules missiles were assembled into what the developers call an “adaptive reuse project” that is becoming “a catalytic hub of innovation and ideas”. Numerous industrial buildings have more than 1,000,000 square feet of space “for work, artistic expression, dining and hospitality, entertainment, recreation and community building.” We went on a tour of Camp North End on Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018.

**John D. Simmons** - [jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com)

In future phases, ATCO plans to demolish less historic buildings on other parts of the sprawling site, which is dominated by low-slung industrial buildings.

“Most of what we’ve found is in suspended animation,” Hemmerdinger said, speculating that the boiler equipment would still work well if they fueled it up and turned on the switch.

## Old and new

For now, Camp North End is an incongruous blend of old and new – uncommon in Charlotte, a city with a reputation for tearing down old buildings and replacing them with plaques.

Many of the businesses at Camp North End have similar stories: A start-up that was in a smaller space and is looking to spread out and take the next step. Hex Coffee started as a pop-up cafe in 2015. Now, its owners are using a sleek, gas-fired roaster to process up to 350 pounds of beans a day. A few doors down, Prism Supply Co. is building custom motorcycles and parts, having moved out of their cramped accommodations in a garage.



Freda Hendley, publicity and community relations manager for BlkTechCLT, talked about the organization’s focus of bringing technology in an inclusive way to all communities.

**John D. Simmons** - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Freda Hendley, publicity and community relations manager for [BLKTECHCLT](#), said the organization’s space at Camp North End is designed to encourage minority entrepreneurs and tech workers, and connect them to capital and sources of funding.

“We needed a space to work,” she said. OrthoCarolina provided a grant to fund them for a year, and Hendley said the space is ideal for hosting labs to teach tech and business skills. “We just fell in love.”



Kyles Gates, owner of Alchemy: The Workshop, talks about moving to Camp North End. Camp North End is a 75 acre redevelopment on Statesville Avenue where Ford Model Ts were built and Hercules missiles were assembled into what the developers call an “adaptive reuse project” that is becoming “a catalytic hub of innovation and ideas”. Numerous industrial buildings have more than 1,000,000 square feet of space “for work, artistic expression, dining and hospitality, entertainment, recreation and community building.” We went on a tour of Camp North End on Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018.

**John D. Simmons** - [jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com)

Kyle Gates, owner of salon Alchemy: The Workshop, said he decided to move from South End as that area lost its “edgy” vibe and started seeing the first wave of entrepreneurs move out, replaced by [office buildings](#) and sleeker tenants.

“South End got really popular,” said Gates. “This is off the beaten path.”