

Omaha World-Herald

# REAL ESTATE & DEVELOPMENT

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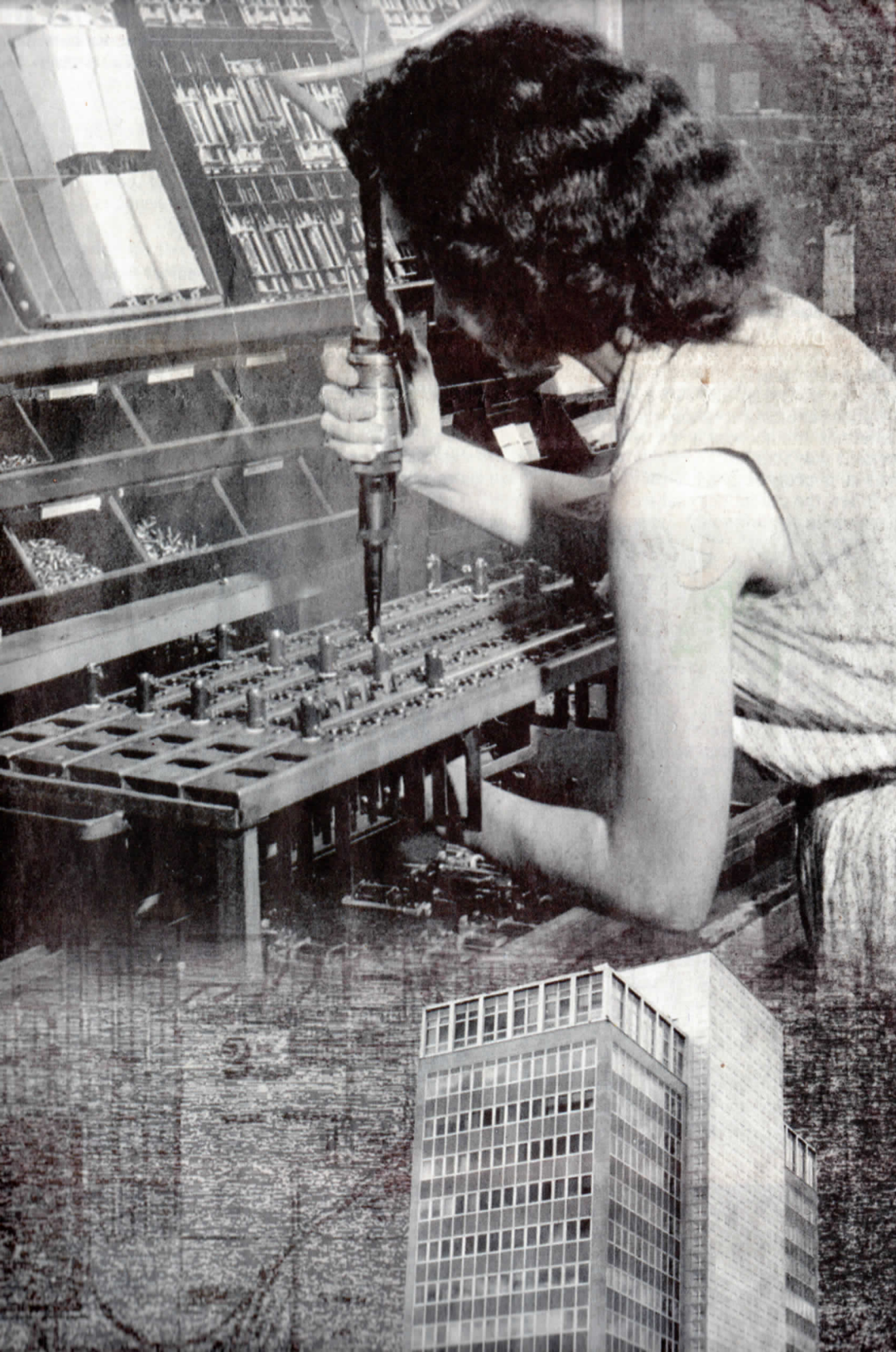


Western Electric

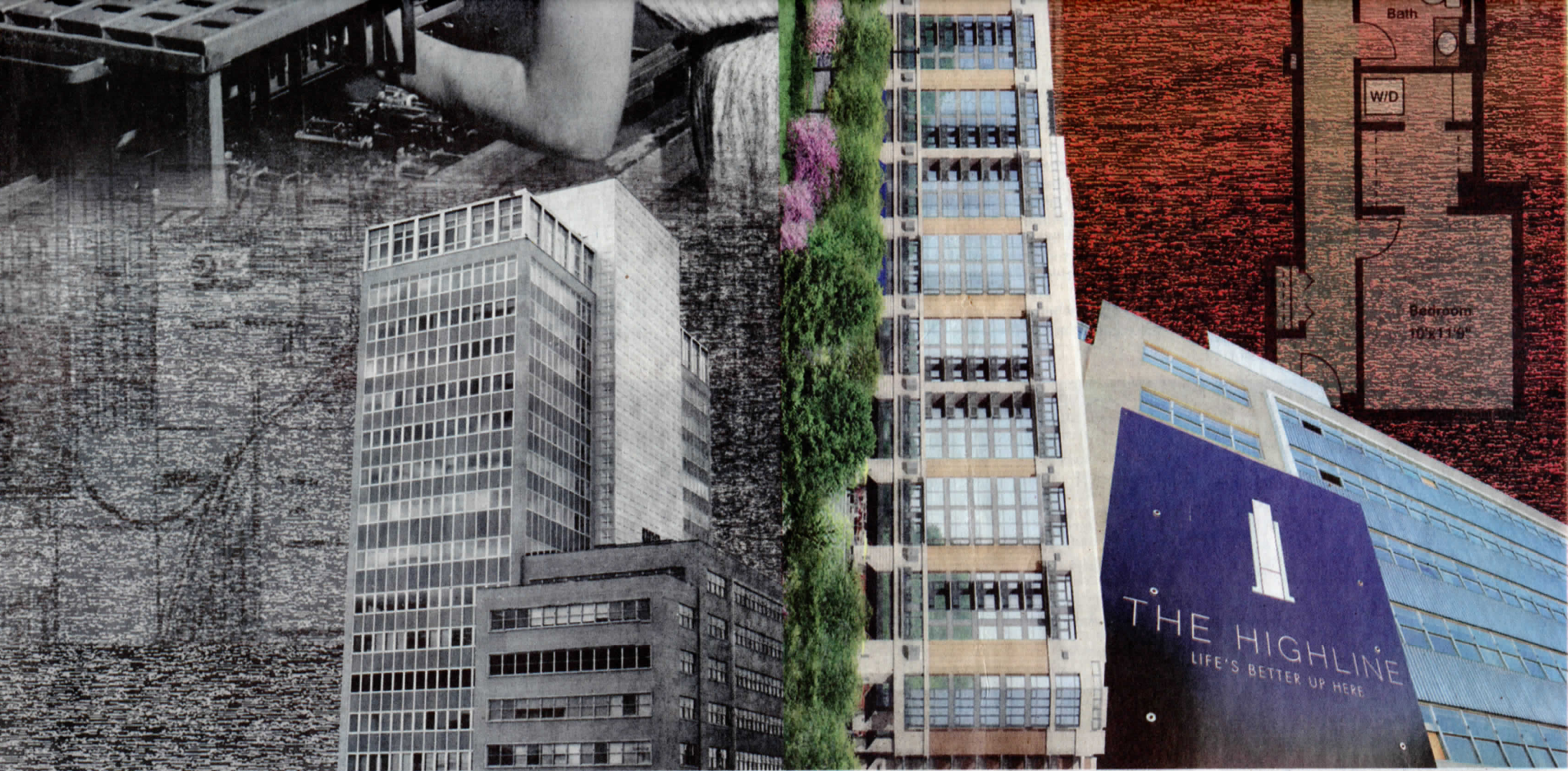


IN CROSS





A collage featuring a 'L Street' logo in a green square with a white outline, set against a blue background. Below the logo, the word 'Street' is written in a white, cursive font, and 'MARKETPLACE' is written in a white, sans-serif font. To the right, a floor plan is overlaid on a red textured background. The floor plan includes a Living/Dining area (11'x15'6"), a Kitchen (8'x9'), a Bath, a W/D (Washing/Drying) area, and a Bedroom (10'x11'6"). The floor plan also shows a staircase and a doorway.



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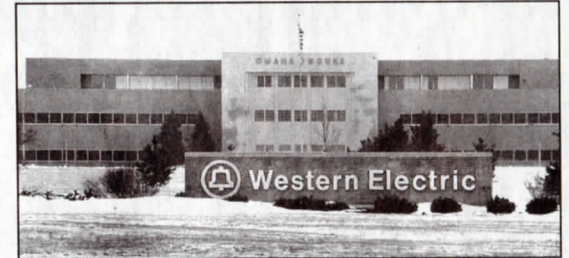
The former Western Electric plant is shown at the upper right in this September 2006 aerial view that looks northwest from 120th and L Streets. At the upper left are Home Depot, Walmart and Sam's Club. The green space in the photo — roughly half of what had been the plant's front lawn — was developed shortly after the photo was taken. Its occupants include L Street Marketplace and the Omaha FBI office.

# Redevelopment and rebirth

Over the years, the site of the now-closed Western Electric plant



## Western Electric plant timeline



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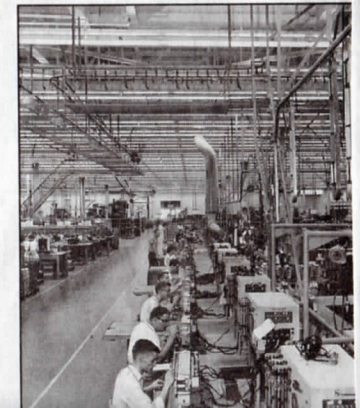
At top is the Western Electric administration building as it appeared in January 1983. The building is now owned by Industrial Realty Group LLC and houses Kiewit Business Center and other tenants.

**March 1956:** Western Electric Co., a subsidiary of American Telephone & Telegraph Co., announces plans to build the plant, estimating that it will ultimately have a workforce of 4,000.

**September 1958:** Company begins production with 2,000 employees.

**May 1959:** Plant becomes known as the Omaha Works of Western Electric.

**June 1970:** Employment at the plant reaches its all-time high of 7,700, thanks to unusually high demand for its copper cable and electromechanical



# Over the years, the site of the now-closed Western Electric plant has been transformed into an office, retail and dining hub.

By HOWARD K. MARCUS  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The front lawn alone was about 100 acres — a kind of welcome mat for the thousands who once worked at Western Electric's Omaha Works. These days, it's a destination for shoppers, diners and others.

As a subsidiary of American Telephone and Telegraph, the plant near 132nd and L Streets produced switches, cables and other equipment that made the nation's communications system hum.

When it opened in 1958 and for decades thereafter, it was a boon to the economic life of nearby Millard. Many Western Electric workers moved to live close to the plant, which boosted Millard's population from hundreds to thousands in just a few years.

But as time and technology marched on, much of what the plant produced was no longer a necessity. The final Western Electric-related company operating there closed its Omaha manufacturing operation in November 2011.

By that time, redevelopment of the approximately 375-acre property was well underway.

The changes began in 2003, with transformation of the front lawn into retail space. Bordered by 120th, 132nd, L and I Streets, the lawn was the most visible feature of the Western Electric property to passers-by.

The western half was developed first. Known officially as Home Depot Plaza, that portion includes a Sam's Club membership warehouse, a Walmart superstore and a Home Depot, with a Wendy's restaurant and a Great Western Bank branch in the outlot.

When the western half of the lawn was developed, Omaha's rules for redeveloping industrial property were less defined than they are today.

"The way the code was structured,



HOWARD K. MARCUS/THE WORLD-HERALD

The L Street Marketplace shopping center is situated on the eastern half of what was the front lawn of the Western Electric plant near 120th and L Streets. The design promotes pedestrian traffic between stores.

you were able to develop retail and office projects on property that was zoned industrial, and it was allowed, by right," said Steve Jensen, a former director of the City of Omaha Planning Department.

"The industrial zoning part of the code didn't require much. Part of the whole issue there was that the planning board and the (Omaha City) Council realized that what might be developed might be less attractive than what they wanted," he said.

"Here you had what at the time was a beautiful lawn that folks in the city really appreciated, especially folks in that Millard area. They saw it as almost a park — very well maintained, very nice, very attractive, nicely landscaped. And then suddenly it was going to have some big parking lots put on the site with a whole bunch of signage. People didn't like that and wanted to have the city either say no or require them (the developers) to do something better. But the code didn't really give the city that kind of authority," Jensen said.

In the end, the council and planning board asked the developer to do some nicer things, he said.

"And they agreed to some things, but really, people didn't feel that was good enough. People realized we didn't have the kinds of tools we needed to create more attractive, better laid-out projects," Jensen said.

By 2006, when development began on the eastern half of the lawn, the city was

formulating new rules.

Developers came forward with proposals, options and concepts that took the new guidelines into account, even before the new code was adopted.

"It was all in progress, and so they tried to follow the guidelines that we were developing at that point," Jensen said.

The eastern portion of the lawn, known officially as L Street Plaza, is bordered by 126th Plaza and 120th, L and I Streets. It includes the L Street Marketplace shopping area — with stores such as Target, OfficeMax, Michael's, Ulta, Shoe Carnival, Sports Authority, Books-A-Million, Kirkland's and PetCo — along with more than a dozen other businesses.

"Everything in that center has been done to meet those requirements. So even the fast-food restaurants or Cheddar's, they needed to have what we call 'four-sided buildings,' where you didn't have just nice materials facing out to L Street and then everything else was concrete block painted some color. You are required to really give the building four nice sides — even the rear," Jensen said.

In a recent visit to the center, Jensen said he saw people who were walking between stores, which was the whole idea behind the design changes.

In other, somewhat similar kinds of projects, Jensen said people might park in front of one store, then get in their cars and drive half a block down the parking

See Rebirth: Page 8

plant reaches its all-time high of 7,700, thanks to unusually high demand for its copper cable and electromechanical switches.



WALTER S. CRAIG

**January 1984:**

Plant's name changes to AT&T Technologies' Omaha Works after the court-ordered breakup of the Bell System. Employment that year stands at about 5,000.

**April 1996:** Plant becomes a property of Lucent Technologies when AT&T spins off its telephone equipment operations. Plant has 3,300 employees.

**September 2000:** Plant becomes part of Avaya Inc., the company created when Lucent spins off three businesses. The Omaha plant, with 3,500 employees, becomes the headquarters for Avaya's Connectivity Solutions unit.

**November 2002:** Plans emerge for Walmart, Sam's Club and Home Depot to build on the property's front lawn, the first retail redevelopment on the site.

**October 2003:** Avaya announces that it will sell its Connectivity Solutions division and the 1,200-employee Omaha plant to CommScope Inc.

**January 2010:** CommScope announces that it will lay off 110 people at the plant and says it will consider closing the plant to reduce costs.

**March 2010:** CommScope announces that it will close plant by the end of 2011, laying off the remaining 400 manufacturing workers and relocating 70 corporate employees.

**November 2011:** Shutdown of CommScope's Omaha manufacturing operation. An office with some non-manufacturing CommScope employees remains on the site.

Sources: World-Herald files; CommScope



The former Western Electric property has undergone significant redevelopment in the past dozen years. The companies and organizations listed on this sign near 120th and I Streets represent a sample of the many entities that occupy the approximately 375-acre site.

HOWARD K. MARCUS/  
THE WORLD-HERALD

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# Rebirth: The site of the now-closed Western Electric plant

*Continued from Page 6*

lot to the next store.

But in the L Street Marketplace area, that is less often the case.

"It's a nicer kind of pedestrian experience. There's seating and there's landscaping and there's nicer sidewalks, and windows to look into and see displays," he said. Having more ground-level windows encourages people to walk between stores.

"It's designed for pedestrians. If you go over to the front of the Home Depot and the Walmart and then the Sam's Club, they're laid out and designed to be separate projects. The design

that they follow is getting people from the parking lot in front of the store into the store," he said. "They're designed very much as completely independent packages, and that's one of the fundamental differences between the way things used to be designed and the way things are designed today.

"I think the retail frontage on L Street that's developed is probably a good reuse of that front lawn. If you're going to lose the front lawn, it was probably better to have what we got rather than see industrial buildings out there."

Though redevelopment of the former Western Electric plant

itself proceeded less noticeably than development of the front lawn, the square footage that has since changed uses or otherwise become available for development or redevelopment is substantial, totaling more than 2 million square feet in the property's primary buildings alone.

"I think that whole industrial area ... is just another example of that kind of ongoing evolution of the industrial portion of the property, where you're changing from one industrial use to another industrial use, but not really changing the overall use of the land," Jensen said.

Los Angeles-based Industrial Realty Group LLC, a nationwide

real estate development and investment firm, owns 93 acres of the former Western Electric Omaha Works site, including two key buildings that were part of the original complex: Building 20 (the property's iconic office building) and Building 30 (a former manufacturing/warehouse facility). The land and buildings were purchased in November 2011.

"IRG likes the Midwest, and this was a project of large enough scale to allow us to enter this market," said Stuart Lichter, IRG's president and chairman of the board.

"Our focus on this development has been a mix between

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office and industrial. The office building is currently 100 percent occupied, and we have a goal of converting approximately 25 percent of the warehouse building to office space as well, with the remaining portion left as warehouse," he said.

"We have not reached the desired mix yet, but have solid momentum. The market conditions have continued to improve. We recently added an additional office tenant in the warehouse portion, and we believe as we continue to convert the space to office, other users will see our vision."

Jensen, the former Omaha city planning director, said

redevelopment of the Western Electric site has been a positive for Omaha.

"The plant itself and the entire project going back to its very early days when it was first created — I think was pretty impressive. It was built very well. It was laid out well, it was constructed well. It was a state-of-the-art kind of facility back in its day, and I think that's why it's still there today," Jensen said.

"And consequently, it lent itself to be redeveloped and divided up in different ways and reused."

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