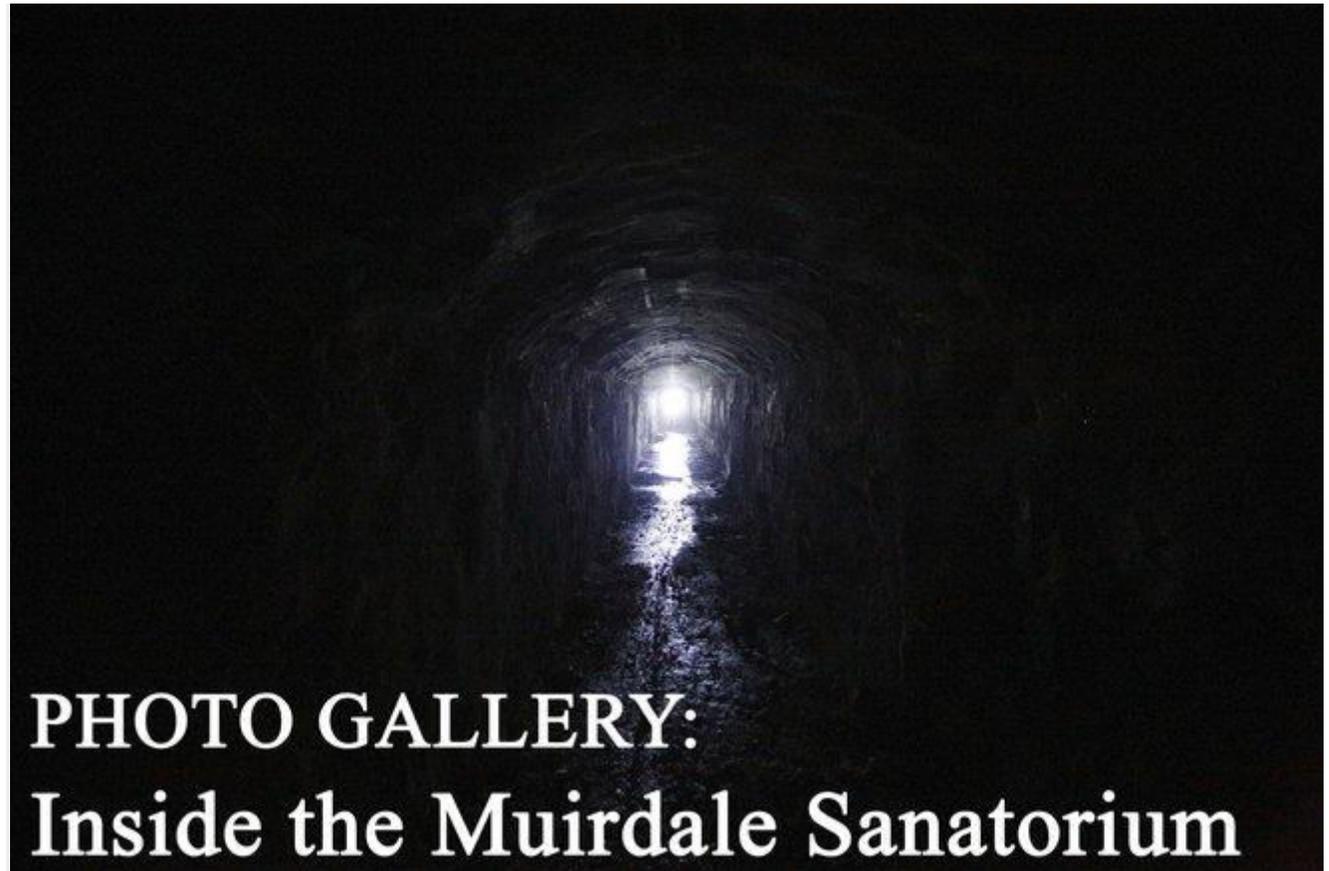


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## Hidden Tosa: Now on chopping block, Milwaukee County's business incubator was once tuberculosis hospital



By [Rory Linnane](#)  
Aug. 5, 2014

In a former morgue, a basement depository for victims of tuberculosis in the 20th century, Louisa Castillo makes light.

“I just don’t think about it,” Castillo says of the building’s past, as she walks through supplies used to manufacture LED lights for Illumination Optics.

Above her are five more stories of offices and laboratories remodeled from the old wards and community rooms of the Muirdale Sanatorium. Now they

serve 40 businesses that employ 220 people as part of the Technology Innovation Center, a business incubator in the Milwaukee County Research Park in Wauwatosa. The county owns the building and leases it to the non-profit Milwaukee County Research Park Corp.

The building's age, now about 100 years, is seen alternatively as an asset and a fault. As the Milwaukee County Board considers demolishing it, the incubator's director, Guy Mascari, is hoping to save it.

A county consultant, CBRE, recommended in a [report](#) last year that the county sell the site to a developer because of the cost of upcoming improvement needs. Mascari said it would cost about \$8 million to give the building a sustainable future, with improvements such as adding central air conditioning. But he said there also would be unforeseen costs in demolition due to the building's age.

"You don't know what you have here," Mascari said. "No one knows what it's going to cost to tear this down. We think it's going to make more sense to save this building than to try to build a new building,"

Plus, Mascari said, there's some advantage to being in a place with history.

"When they built buildings back then, I think they thought more of creature comforts," Mascari said. "People enjoy being in a building that has some character."

### **A place to live and die**

Muirdale's heavy masonry walls haven't budged since their construction, setting apart wide hallways. Copious windows are a relic of the belief that fresh air and sunshine would help tuberculosis patients recover. Other touches like stained glass, porches on the roof and a former projection room illustrate how the hospital served as a longtime home — and sometimes a last home — for hundreds of patients.

"A lot of people would come here and die," Mascari said.

When Muirdale opened in 1915, with a \$760,000 appropriation from the Milwaukee County Board, it was called "one of the finest sanatoria for the

treatment of tuberculosis in the entire United States and certainly the finest county institution of its kind” by the Crusader, a publication by the Wisconsin Anti-Tuberculosis Association.

With a starting capacity of 275 patients, it filled quickly and had a waiting list, according to the Crusader.

Patients began in the main administration and hospital building, which is now the Technology Innovation Center. From there, the Crusader reported, they were seen by a physician and transferred to departments based on the severity of their cases. If they improved, they were transferred to cottages on the property, which have since been razed.

Life at the facility was not like that at a normal hospital. Muirdale was a leader in the then re-emerging use of exercise and occupational therapy in treatment, according to the Crusader. Designed to house a self-contained community, original building plans showed the hospital had a barber shop and a movie theater.

The Crusader recalled a visitor’s experience visiting the property who was awed at the amenities.

“It was Janet’s first visit to a tuberculosis sanatorium and as she rode up the driveway to the colony of handsome buildings which comprise Milwaukee County’s magnificent institution for the treatment of all stages of disease, she braced herself for what she felt sure would be a disagreeable experience,” the Crusader reported. “Her feeling of horror vanished rapidly.”

The Crusader described sun parlors, an “immense dining room with sunshine flooding in through the windows on either side,” and private rooms with goose-feather pillows for “those on whom the disease had fastened its hand so securely before it was recognized that there was no hope of shaking it off.”

## **New life**

A few areas of the building have been hardly touched since the sanatorium years. Mascari walks out on the roof and into a hut through a three-foot-tall

door to point out a Motiograph projector, likely from the early 20th century, which was used to play films in the theater.

Nearby, an old whiskey bottle is among dusty discarded items one could imagine the operators relying on to pass the time. Mascari said he doesn't move anything there; they're artifacts now.

Below the building are two tunnels that also have been largely unused. One, which had led to a cottage, has been sealed off partway on its course to where the Crowne Plaza now stands.

Another tunnel still transports steam from the power building. Above the door someone has written, "Lose hope all ye who enter herein."

"A lot of these techie guys, they have vivid imaginations," Mascari said, unsure of who left the message.

Other than these dusty escapes behind locked doors, the rest of the building has been renovated. Rooms have found new purposes, some that oddly relate to their pasts.

The former kitchen is now used by Agro BioSciences, which is working to make antioxidants more readily available in foods. From the old dining area, a new smell emanates each day (July 31, bubblegum) as a company develops flavors for electronic cigarettes.

Solariums, rounded protrusions lined with windows once meant to help patients recuperate in sunlight, now provide sunny conference rooms.

"People say it's not historic but certainly as something representative of a tuberculosis institution, there's not a lot of these left," Mascari said. "The good news here is we have a good use for it."

Mascari said the incubator is planning to have its own report on the best future for the building and the businesses in it complete by the end of September. It will then be presented to the County Board for consideration.

**[Photo gallery: Inside the Muirdale Sanatorium](#)**