Creative reuse of a polluted site

The home of Cre8play is not your typical manufacturing plant. It's crawling with wolves, spiders and other wild creatures.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," admits Todd Lehman, founder and CEO (aka "Design Guy") of Cre8play, which designs and manufactures custom themed play environments for customers around the world. "I get to come to work every day and play."

Less than six months before the move, that warehouse, at 5121 Winnetka Ave. N., was "a contaminated, inefficient, underutilized property," said Scott Tankenhoff, Managing Partner of Hillcrest Development, which specializes in polluted site redevelopment. With the help of a $443,000 grant from the Metropolitan Council's Livable Communities program, the lead contamination was removed and the property was transformed into an attractive, functional and healthy workspace.

Cre8play craftsmen hand-sculpt concrete for a play structure.

The products of that play are inspiring. Take Brendan's Playground, a colorful bug-themed playground with a giant mushroom, whimsical bugs to climb on, slides, interactive sounds and a fully functional giant-size piano that kids can run, roll and climb across to make their own music. All of Cre8play's designs are ADA-accessible.

Cre8play has grown from a one-person shop in 2006 to a fully integrated design-build operation with 25 employees. In 2011, Lehmann consolidated three locations at a newly refurbished former industrial warehouse in New Hope.

"We loved being able to start from scratch and design a fun, creative work environment," Lehman said. Like their products, the facility is environmentally friendly, he said. For example, no wastewater leaves the shop floor – it is all recycled for reuse in the manufacturing process.

With one grant round remaining, the Council in 2011 approved 16 grants totaling $2.6 million to help fund brownfield cleanup in six communities. Expected results: 307 jobs created or retained; $1.8 million increase in net tax base; $247 million in private investment.