



Owners like the sound of downtown

Friendship spawns a high-end stereo shop in unlikely area of Milwaukee

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Leather couches in the showrooms, track lighting on the ceiling, sophisticated stuff for sale - you'd expect a store like this in Mequon or Brookfield, or maybe the Third Ward.

But Jonathan Spelt and Scott Wilson are betting that a downtown spot west of the river is a good place to sell stereo systems that average maybe \$10,000 to \$15,000.

They've located their business, Ultra Fidelis, a high-performance audio and video shop where you can get a stereo system for as little as \$2,000 or drop \$30,000 just on a pair of amplifiers, in a neighborhood whose retail profile runs more to convenience stores and fast-food outlets.

And they're confident enough to have invested \$325,000 in the real estate, a former day care center at 740 N. James Lovell St.

"My experience in this business tells me it's pure destination," Spelt said. "We really don't rely on walk-by" traffic.

If he's right, it will be a coup for the west side of downtown, an area that, despite some successes, has struggled to attract retail stores.

"It reaffirms that downtown is in fact becoming a locale that retailers are once again going to come back to, and I think that this is a great example," Beth Nicols, executive director of the Downtown Management District, said of the Ultra Fidelis opening. "I mean, you talk about an upscale retailer."

Spelt, 47, and Wilson, 48, met about 14 years ago out of a mutual passion for audio equipment. Spelt at the time was running an audio store in Naperville, Ill.

Wilson was a high-ranking computer networking executive in the Chicago area with a taste for classic rock.

Spelt sold Wilson a \$9,000 stereo system, and Wilson was hooked.

The executive turned into one of Spelt's best customers, and the two became good friends.

Spelt, a Milwaukee native, later returned to the area and, in 1997, started Ultra Fidelis, running it from the back of his Wauwatosa home.

Development



Photo/Jack Orton

Jonathan Spelt (left) and Scott Wilson, owners of Ultra Fidelis, a high-end audio and video shop at 740 N. James Lovell St. in Milwaukee, test the keyboard control of their \$100,000 audio and video home theater system. The friends opened the business together in November.



Photo/Jack Orton

Ultra Fidelis opened at 740 N. James Lovell St., an area of downtown with a retail profile that runs more to convenience stores and fast-food outlets. Co-owner Scott Wilson found the location and immediately liked the character of the century-old, two-story structure.

Quotable

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Management District

Wilson, meanwhile, fled the corporate world after Ameritech bought the business he'd been running in 1999. For a few years, he and his wife traveled extensively.

But he couldn't sustain that lifestyle indefinitely and, seeking a way to combine passion and income, thought of Spelt.

Wilson had continued to be a customer.

Now he proposed expansion of the business and a partnership. Spelt had been thinking along the same lines.

They agreed to try it, and Wilson was assigned to be the real estate scout.

He scoured a broad swath of the Milwaukee area for stand-alone retail properties. Checking out the building on James Lovell St., he immediately liked the character of the century-old, two-story structure, did a little reconnaissance on the property at the tavern next door and called the real estate agent that day.

A week later, he and Spelt made an offer. They opened the store in November.

Wilson said his Chicago background helped in his property search because he lacked the local biases.

"Every place in your town just seems so nice to me," he said.

Spelt acknowledged a bit of hesitation in choosing a west-of-the-river spot for a high-end store but was charmed by the building and believes it suits the business well.

It has twice the space of a Third Ward building he and Wilson considered, and at a much lower price.

And as a former residence, the property can recreate the home environment - a sonic advantage, Spelt said.

The freestanding location in an off-the-retail-track neighborhood also means customers tend to be more serious than some who used to wander into other stores, Spelt said.

At one, people actually would come in slurping cones from the nearby frozen custard stand, he said.

Those don't tend to be good prospects for, say, a \$16,000 pair of speakers.

"What we do is really much more like going to a custom tailor to have a suit and some shirts made," Spelt said, "and you just would never think about doing that with an ice cream cone in your hand and three kids along."

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