



Posted: Jan. 9, 2011

# Detroit's profile grows as investors, young professionals return to city

By STEVE NEAVLING  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Some called them crazy.

But as outsiders declared Detroit all but dead, a passionate network of nonprofits, local developers, small-business owners, universities and hospitals poured cash and sweat into culturally rich areas that are emerging stronger and more popular than before the brutal economic downturn.

Hotels, theaters, art galleries, charter schools, condos and dozens of restaurants have opened, primarily in abandoned buildings, in the past year or are to open this year in the Midtown, New Center and Woodbridge neighborhoods.

"We are onto something great in this city," Detroit artist and muralist Jennifer Quigley said. "People who want art and culture are gravitating here."

The revitalization is being driven by generous grants, new state tax credits and more investor confidence in the city's ability to attract young professionals, art enthusiasts and others, said Sue Mosey, president of the University Cultural Center Association, a nonprofit community group based in Midtown.

At least seven major condo and apartment projects -- most in ornate, restored historic buildings -- are planned to begin this year to meet an increasing demand for housing.

**Vibrant Detroit enclaves, investment attract newcomers to city**

Their friends and family gasped at the news.

*You're moving to Detroit? Are you crazy?*

A year ago, Blake Vanier and Rachel Perschetz, both 29, vacationed in the Motor City out of curiosity. Instead of finding the dangerous wasteland often depicted on TV and in the national media, the best friends discovered a city with friendly people, eclectic hangouts and great potential.

Enamored by the city, Vanier, who works in finance, moved from New York City to a loft in Midtown near Wayne State University in mid-October with a new job. A few weeks later, Perschetz joined him from Washington, D.C., to continue working as a real estate consultant.

They are considering opening a bar or restaurant in Midtown in the near future.

"In New York or D.C., you feel insignificant," Perschetz said, sipping a beer at a bar near her loft. "But here, we bump into nice people. It's a very uncomplicated existence."

[Page 2 of 4]

## Community collaboration

Advertisement

**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

momslike.me.com  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

Powerhouse institutions -- WSU, the Henry Ford Health System, the Detroit Medical Center and the College for Creative Studies -- are joining forces and building schools, condos and commercial space for restaurants, coffeehouses and specialty shops.

Last year, for example, foundations spent \$125 million to \$250 million to spur development, more than anyone can remember.

"The collaboration is greater and more organized than it ever has been," said Sue Mosey, president of the University Cultural Center Association, a nonprofit community group based in Midtown.

With the demand for housing on the rise, developers are in various stages of at least seven ambitious condo and apartment projects, most in ornate, historic buildings that had stood vacant for years. Since 2009, more than \$425 million has been invested in building new housing, according to the UCCA.

Thousands of students who used to commute to WSU and CCS are moving within walking distance of classes because of the theaters, bars, restaurants and art galleries, officials from both schools said.

"Detroit is getting a reputation as a very lively, hot place to live," said Richard Rogers, CCS president. "People are gravitating here because they are finding a high quality of life."

About 92% of Midtown's 4,300 rental units are occupied, according to the UCCA.

### Who's moving in?

At 29, Austin Black II is an unlikely force in Detroit's real estate scene.

Last year, Black founded City Living Detroit, a firm that sells lofts, condos, historic homes and apartments in the city. His reason: a resurging interest in the city's revitalized areas.

"More and more people feel stuck in the

suburban lifestyle," said Black, who lives in Midtown. "They want something unique and vibrant."

Although many people in his industry are being bruised from the economic downturn, the opposite is true for Black. City newcomers, attracted by cheap properties, are buying lofts, houses and apartments as quickly as they become available, he said.

[Page 3 of 4]

"Beautiful, one-bedroom lofts in emerging neighborhoods of Boston are going for half a million dollars, while the same property is available here for \$150,000," Black said.

### Finding private help

The future of areas such as Midtown, Woodbridge and New Center is brightened by increasingly generous nonprofits and business leaders.

Area leaders estimate that foundations spent between \$125 million and \$250 million in the city in 2010, about twice the amount handed out just five years ago.

In an unusual show of support in October, for

Advertisement



**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

**YES, at least she's dressed!**

**NO, I have some rules!**

**momlike.me**  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



example, 22 of some of the world's largest foundations pledged \$21 million to boost urban vitality and promote locally owned businesses along Detroit's Woodward corridor, which runs through Midtown and New Center. The effort, called Living Cities, will help finance charter schools, mixed-use development and new homes.

Foundations, with the help of business leaders, are planning to spend \$125 million for a Woodward rail line between Jefferson Avenue and New Center. The money would supplement a \$425-million plan to extend light rail from the heart of downtown to the suburbs.

"We wouldn't invest in Detroit if we didn't recognize its potential as a vibrant city," said Cynthia Shaw, spokeswoman of the Troy-based Kresge Foundation, which donated more than \$50 million to city projects in 2010. "We see Detroit becoming a great city again."

Mayor Dave Bing agrees, adding that the three neighborhoods will gain more strength under his long-term plan to reshape the city by encouraging residents to move to better neighborhoods with strong services. "Detroit is a lot of vibrant pieces of a yet-to-be connected puzzle," Bing said. "We are more confident than ever that the Detroit Works Project will fuse these areas of interest, support and vitality to create a city that works."

### The rise of Woodbridge

Three decades ago, Larry John moved into a house in blighted Woodbridge, a neighborhood just west of Midtown.

With an abundance of single-family homes in disrepair, Woodbridge was a far cry from its heyday in the 1920s and '30s.

[Page 4 of 4]

Where others saw blight and hopelessness, John found an opportunity in the historic homes.

Beginning in the 1980s, the lawyer bought about one house or apartment building a year.

Now the owner of more than 25 residential properties, John is helping transform Woodbridge into a neighborhood infused with public art. Murals grace the walls of historic homes. Colorful statues and other art installations are increasingly common. Art galleries are popping up.

"Woodbridge is improving every year, and it really has become a unique place to live," John said.

For artists such as 39-year-old Andy Jenkins, moving to Woodbridge was a no-brainer.

"Per capita, I challenge you to find a place with more artists," said the painter, who moved from Rochester Hills to a brick house near Trumbull and Warren. "I feel at home here. I couldn't imagine moving."

As restaurants, specialty shops and other small businesses struggled through the recession in the rest of southeast Michigan, new and young entrepreneurs found success in the New Center, Woodbridge and Midtown.

After researching hip communities such as Ferndale and Royal Oak to open a raw food

Advertisement

**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

**YES, at least she's dressed!**

**NO, I have some rules!**

**momlike.me**  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™



restaurant, LaKeta McCauley settled on Midtown.

This autumn, McCauley, 48, opened the Raw Café on Woodward and Canfield, next to Kim's Produce, a small but popular grocer that opened a year ago.

"People are realizing that Midtown is the best destination spot in the area," McCauley said. "There is a tremendously high level of consciousness here that you wouldn't have found a decade ago."

Seeing big hope for entrepreneurs, Claire Nelson cofounded Open City, a resource for prospective small-business owners, in 2007. Since then, the 34-year-old said attendance at monthly meetings has tripled.

"There is a trend for entrepreneurs to find the creative class," Nelson said. "Detroit values creativity. It always had the legacy of making things work."

Contact Steve Neavling: [sneavling@freepress.com](mailto:sneavling@freepress.com) or 313-223-3327

Advertisement



**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

**momlike**me.com  
where Local moms meet

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™