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Building A Creative Corridor

BY: JON ZEMKE, 12/20/2007



"Impressed" wasn't the first word to come to [Mike Bernacchi's](#) mind when he moved to Detroit. In fact, the only way he would use that combination of letters was if a "u" and an "n" preceded them.

At the time, 1973, a real-estate agent was showing [University of Detroit Mercy's](#) then new marketing professor around the downtown area, talking up the city and its bright future while traveling

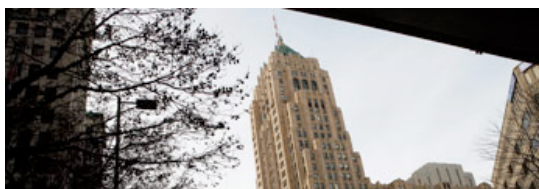
down Woodward Avenue. To drive home his point, the agent pointed to the rising [Renaissance Center](#) as the genesis of it all; the key to Detroit's rebirth as the Paris of the Midwest and its revitalization as one of America's prized cities.

"So this is the revitalization, huh?" Bernacchi recalls saying at the time. "And the clock ticked and ticked. That's all there was for a very long time."

A lot has changed since then, a fact Bernacchi readily acknowledges. A number of big name projects have joined the Ren Cen, ranging from new casinos, stadiums and skyscrapers downtown to the reinvention of [Wayne State University](#), the [Detroit Institute of Arts](#) and TechTown in Midtown.

And there's more, much more.

So much so that [Detroit Renaissance](#) is trying to build its "Creative Corridor" initiative around that concentration of institutions, big and small. The initiative, part of the larger "Creative Economy" effort, plans to compile and



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coordinate as many of the region's creative people and businesses in the Woodward corridor between [Downtown](#) and [New Center](#) so they can grow off each other.



The idea is to create a central cluster of creativity to jump start the region's new economy businesses, producing the safe, high-paying jobs Metro Detroit envies. If it proves successful, local leaders envision a Woodward Avenue renaissance connecting venerable institutions like UofD Mercy and [Cranbrook](#) to a string of vibrant downtowns --[Hamtramck](#), [Ferndale](#), [Royal Oak](#), [Birmingham](#) and [Pontiac](#).

"If the creative corridor is successful we can take some of these strategies and use them in other places," says Katy Locker, the project lead for the Creative Economy initiative. "The key to this is creating links between these nodes. If we can connect downtown and New Center it won't be hard to connect Ferndale and Royal Oak."



For now local officials are focusing their efforts on the Lower Woodward corridor in hopes that the cluster of major institutions and big investment will enable it to fill in the blanks with the creativity so many hope will carry Metro Detroit into the 21st Century.

"When the big dogs invest themselves there it definitely makes a difference," Bernacchi says. "There are a number of reasons to be optimistic, really

optimistic. Then it was, 'What's the second act?' Now we have other acts."

Acts on the Avenue

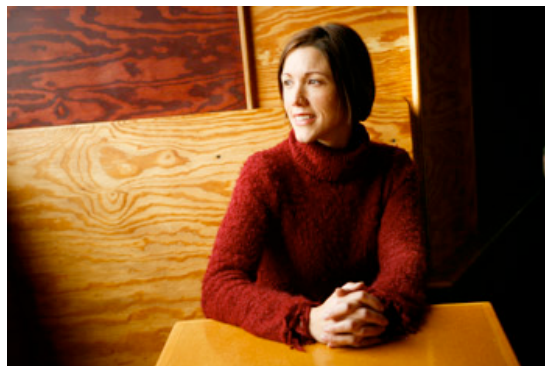
Similar clusters have worked in the past and are producing big dividends today. Think Silicon Valley's [Sand Hill](#), Massachusetts' [Route 128](#) and the Carolinas' [Research Triangle Park](#). Some pop up organically (Sand Hill) while others are planned government initiatives (Research Triangle Park).

In the case of Sand Hill and Route 128, they are roads that connect major institutions and businesses. Sand Hill Road bridges [Stanford University](#) and the high-tech-business Mecca that is [Silicon Valley](#). Route 128 is the major connector for a number of high-tech businesses that snakes around major research universities, such as [MIT](#) and [Harvard](#).

[Woodward Avenue](#) can become Michigan's equivalent of those two corridors. It has a number of vibrant urban areas (such as [Midtown](#)), landmark cultural institutions ([Detroit Opera House](#)), leading education centers ([College of Creative Studies](#)), big league sports teams ([Tigers](#), [Lions](#) and [Red Wings](#)) and major corporations ([Compuware](#)). More than 300 historic sites are located along the corridor's 27 miles, along with 150 events, 55 key venues, 11 municipalities and five of Metro Detroit's most vibrant downtowns.

"It's very unique to have that kind of concentration," says Heather Carmona, executive director of the [Woodward Avenue Action Association](#). "A lot of places don't have that type of concentration in one city, let alone one roadway."

Organizers behind the Creative Corridor initiative hope bringing these institutions, businesses and people together will serve as a magnet for yet more. Locker notes that creative people are not only drawn to each other but are driven by one another. The type of people who



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"don't want to be isolated in silos," she explains.

This is why dense urban city centers are stereotypically characterized as prime breeding grounds for creatives to spawn the next big idea. It also explains why so many of Michigan's brightest brains drain out of stereotypically neglected cities like [Detroit](#) and [Flint](#) and into more cared for locales, such as [San Francisco](#) and [Boston](#).

There is hope in some local city centers as communities like [Ann Arbor](#), [Wyandotte](#) and [Mt. Clemens](#) reinvent themselves as dense cores of urban oasis. Even so, many local leaders recognize that southeast Michigan's best chance to establish a regional creative center is to invest in and promote the area's original city center – Detroit. So many of the features that attract creative talent are already in place ... and there's room to grow.

"It [Detroit] already has nodes of activity that we feel we can take advantage of by promoting them and building up in between them," Locker says. "That way we can fill in the area with more creative businesses."

Moving toward momentum



Getting there won't be quick or easy. Sand Hill and Research Triangle Park didn't just pop up as the economic powerhouses they are today. It took several decades of diligent work and leaders of the Creative Corridor Initiative concede this will be a multi-year process just to lay everything out.

"The real question is, 'Are you trying to just make an impact or are you trying to change the game?'" says Richard

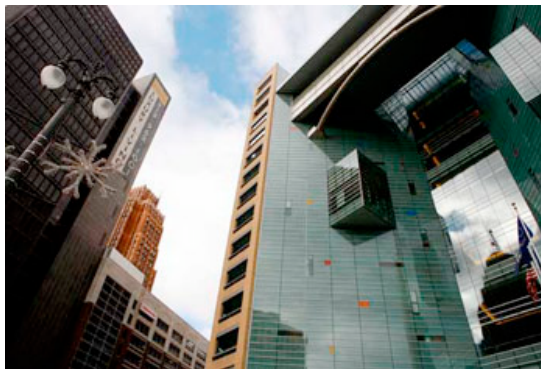
Weddle, president of the [Research Triangle Park](#) incubator in North Carolina.

"Game changing strategies are probably a decade long. Farming and milking the existing flows of opportunities could be five-year plan."

The vision of new economy businesses lining what is commonly referred to as "Michigan's [Main Street](#)" is undoubtedly a distant one. But that doesn't mean a significant amount of groundwork hasn't already been laid.

Locker points out that the consultants working on the project have been surprised with their findings. Things they were sure the region would have to build are already present. Among them, the innovative policies and incentives to attract and cultivate non-traditional Michigan businesses.

These have enjoyed a bit of success in recent years, attracting the likes of Compuware and [Marketing Associates](#) to new downtown office buildings. And of course there is the impressive yet impending [Quicken Loans](#) headquarters development that hopes to spearhead the creation a Sand Hill-type community by attracting other high-tech companies downtown. (We're looking at you [ePrize](#).)



Add in the billions of dollars in reinvestment along the Woodward corridor and it's easy to come to the conclusion that Metro Detroit has more assets than commonly perceived. Assets that [Crain's Detroit Business](#) is trying to inventory for the Creative Corridor initiative [here](#). (Detroit Renaissance is also trying to survey the business climate for these companies [here](#).)

"This is a key time," Locker says. "There is a lot of energy being dedicated to the new economy. There is a lot of effort to take advantage of all of Detroit's assets. This is the right time to do it."

And there is the opportunity. Opportunity that Prof. Bernacchi says creative people, natural risk takers in his opinion, search out. Much of the Woodward corridor is undervalued compared to other big thoroughfares in major cities.



[TechTown](#) officials like to point out that the high-tech business incubator started in an area composed of abandoned warehouses, crumbling streets and broken windows; the type of place more likely to be mentioned in a newspaper's police blotter than its business section.

But TechTown's founders saw the opportunity to create something from nothing at a bargain price. The 12-block area, just north of Wayne State but on the wrong side of

the tracks of the [Fisher Building](#), is now filling with new office space, rehabbed buildings and a burgeoning vibrancy.

It might not seem like much momentum on the surface but it's one of those little things that can easily help push the proverbial snowball downhill for the whole region. And once it gets rolling, watch out, because things will start to happen quickly. Bernacchi says that once momentum really starts building, it can quickly change the area's reputation to what everyone wishes it would be.

"You build this a piece here and a piece there," Bernacchi says. "Twenty years ago it would have been, 'Are you insane?' Ten years ago it would have been 'Who else is coming?' Today if you throw that idea out there, there are fewer skeptics than ever before."

Jon Zemke is the editor of metromode's [Development News](#) and a Detroit-based freelance writer. His previous feature for 'mode was [Investing In Transit](#).

Photographs:

Mike Bernacchi - U of D marketing professor - Detroit

Fisher Building - New Center Area - Detroit

Wayne State University - Midtown - Detroit

Heather Carmona, executive director of the Woodward Ave. Action Association - Woodward Ave Brewery - Ferndale

Developments in The Research Triangle Park - Photo courtesy of The Research Triangle Park - North Carolina

Compuware - Detroit

Techtown - Detroit

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