



Mary Parkhill, director of development, Michigan Opera Theater | Marvin Shaouni

Home Features Videos Blogs Cities Innovation & Job News Development News In the News Growth Companies FilterD

FEATURED STORY

2008 >

May >

April >

March >

February >

January >

2007 >

2006 >

Hollywood Rentals

BY: JON ZEMKE, 5/14/2008

The people at [Once Upon A Time Films](#) knew just what type of place they were looking to live in when they set up shop in Metro Detroit to shoot the made-for-TV movie "Prayers for Bobby" this spring - upscale apartments in a vibrant, urban center.

The Hollywood-based production company snatched up more than a dozen apartments in downtown Royal Oak from Urbane Apartments and The Fifth at Royal Oak. The idea is to put the cast and crew within easy walking distance of everything they need.

"It makes the cast and crew much happier," says Damian Ganczewski, a producer for "Prayers for Bobby." "When you go to a new place you have never been to no one wants to get into a car and figure out where they're going."

Unfortunately that is often the case when it comes to renting in Metro Detroit, a place where suburban home ownership is the standard. The living accommodations Once Upon A Time Films found are more the exception than the rule. What the few places like Urbane offer are a thin slice of NYC-inspired urban rental sophistication widely available in other major cities but that sadly lacks in the Motor City.

Of course there are posh local hotels, but most are closer to the interstates than main streets. They're also not always as comfortable as places that come with a feel of longevity. And often the places that can provide that here don't offer a lease flexible enough to allow firms like Once Upon A Time Films to only stay for the three months they will shoot their project.

"I don't like living in hotels," Ganczewski says. "When you come to work in a place for a couple of months it's more comfortable to come back to a place that feels like home."

Urban freedom rentals



[Urbane Apartments](#) can't produce its urban-centric rentals fast enough for the likes of new economy migrant workers looking for their slice of urban lifestyle. It's tapping into the



TOOLS:

SEARCH SITE

SEARCH

PRINT THIS PAGE

DIGG IT

DELICIOUS

RSS FEEDS

TYPE SIZE: T T T

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER

enter your email address

SUBMIT

Ads by Google

[Apartments Detroit](#)
Free Apartment Search at Rent.com. Report Your Lease To Us & Get \$100!
www.Rent.com

[Stylish Royal Oak Condos](#)
Granite Countertops
Hardwood Floors Under \$80,000 with No Down Payment
www.KaftanCondos.com

[Southfield Apartments](#)
Large Units & Great Amenities Move-in Specials Available Now!
www.CoachHouseApts.com



rental demand being created (partly) by Hollywood production companies coming to Michigan to take advantage of the state's new film-making tax breaks, like *Once Upon A Time* Films.

"They would take 50 apartments if we had them," says [Diane Sawinski](#), director of marketing and leasing for Urbane Apartments. "They're taking every apartment we have. As soon as we finish an apartment they want it and they're in."

The Royal Oak-based company specializes in renovating old apartment buildings most turn their noses up at into upscale homes that make up the dreams of yuppies and empty nesters. The studios and one-bedrooms command rents between \$895 and \$1,200 a month, while letting tenants put

in service calls through email, allowing pets or letting the renters personalize their space.

"For the most part Metro Detroit has apartment commodity. They're all the same," says [Eric Brown](#), co-owner of Urbane Apartments. "We allow people to be unique and choose the color of their walls."

Urbane Apartments has 280 rental units in eight buildings in the Royal Oak, Berkley, Troy and Clawson areas. It's now focusing on buildings near southeast Oakland County's vibrant downtowns, like Royal Oak, Berkley and Ferndale where most of the new workers and their new money from the new economy are clustering instead of the Office Spacesque apartment complexes adjacent to freeways.

Urbane Apartments is negotiating with a number of other film-makers to provide living spaces. But those companies are only interested in the downtown properties.

"One of the major reasons for our success is downtown living," Sawinski says. "We get higher rents than anyone else because of that type of access. Everybody wants to be close to downtown and they'll pay for it. There are also so many crappy apartments or rental homes. There aren't any high-end living options unless you buy an expensive loft."

The other main feature people are willing pay for are flexibility. Urbane Apartments offers a "Freedom Lease," which is a three-month lease that automatically renews. Signers pay a fee that is returned if they stay 18 months or more.



About 40 percent of Urbane Apartments leasers sign these types of leases while the rest go for the standard year-long lease. Of that 40 percent, only a small fraction don't stay long enough to take back their fee. Often people just want the ability to pick up and leave whenever it's necessary or desirable. Places like Urbane Apartments provide that piece of mind.

"Nowadays, no one has a typical job anymore," Brown says. "You listen to these folks and they have a six- or three-month contract away from home. They don't come here and buy a home. They rent. There are a lot of contract workers out there."

Unleashing leases

Mike Whitty isn't one of those workers, but he understands their predicament. The business professor at the [University of Detroit Mercy](#) recently went to San Francisco on business for a few weeks and successfully avoided hotels with the help of a short-term lease through Craigslist.

"I could get one week or two weeks or six months," Whitty says. "I could use Craigslist to tailor my trip to San Francisco."

As much as some people wish it were (and others glad it isn't), Detroit is not San Francisco. The two distinct cities are built differently from different times. While San Francisco has more 19th Century high-density housing filled with apartments, most of Detroit is built in the 20th Century single-family home tradition.

It's an unfortunate set of circumstances that leaves one more adaptable to an apartment lifestyle.

"We're a very provincial Midwestern town here," Whitty says. "We don't have a very sophisticated rental market, even though we have an ever more mobile landscape of high-tech workers whether it's young workers or filmmakers."

[Royal Oak Apartments](#)
Thousands of Apartment Listings. Free Pictures, Descriptions & More.
www.AreaGuides.net

[Housing Rentals](#)
Housing Rentals Directory. Find It Near You!
www.usdirectory.com



John Hanna sees that type of out-of-town demand every day. The co-developer of [The Fifth Royal Oak](#) started out selling the units in his 18-story high-rise but now includes rentals in the 78 luxury units. Going with that [strategy](#) has allowed his company to fill the about 75 to 80 percent of the tower.

He would not confirm or deny whether there are any filmmakers in his building because of confidentiality reasons. However, he did say there are high profile people buying and renting in The Fifth Royal Oak from all over.

"We get inquiries from Australia, Ireland, Germany and California," Hanna says. "We expect to be full by the Fourth of July."

They're all looking for the cosmopolitan lifestyle where cars are more optional than necessary. A robust rental market that accommodates this type of lifestyle is starting to catch on whether its innovative companies like Urbane Apartments or developers who are being forced to explore the rental markets such as Hanna or traditional rental companies like [Village Green Companies](#) building a [new apartment building](#) into downtown Ann Arbor.

And the timing is right as more and more filmmakers come into Michigan and more and more new economy jobs help transform the state's brawn-based economy into a brain-based one. And these people are looking for one thing more than any other in such a market.

"It's really a matter of convenience more than anything else," says "Prayers for Bobby" producer Ganczewski. "It's really working out well for us."

Jon Zemke lives in a high-rise rental in downtown Detroit where he does most of his work as the News Editor for [metromode](#) and [Concentrate](#) and the Innovation & Job News Editor for [Model D](#).

Photos:

Once Upon A Time Films logo

Urbane exterior - courtesy

Downtown Royal Oak

The Fifth Royal Oak

Photographs by [Marvin Shaouni](#)

Marvin Shaouni is the managing photographer for [Metromode](#) & [Model D](#).

[DOWNTOWN LIVING](#) , [FILM](#) , [TRAVEL](#) , [HOSPITALITY](#) , [WORK/LIFE](#)

[ROYAL OAK](#) , [BERKLEY](#) , [FERNDALE](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Signup for E-Newsletter](#) | [metromode Links](#) | [Have a tip for us?](#) | [About metromode](#) | [RSS](#)