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Detroit's Midtown district is on a roll

District revived with jobs, housing and entertainment and cultural venues

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The Detroit News

Six neighborhoods that collectively were christened "Midtown" in 2000 have steadily improved and, in some pockets, boomed -- even as other areas of the city slip further into decay. An estimated \$1.8 billion in public and private investment have poured into the area that includes the infamous Cass Corridor, as well as Wayne State University and Brush Park.

With the investment came more residents.

The 2000 Census counted 17,000 people in the Midtown area, north of downtown and south of New Center. And while no one has kept count of how many moved out during the decade, an estimated 3,200 new residents moved in.

Some 1,500 housing units and 44 residential projects have been added to accommodate them, according to the nonprofit University Cultural Center Association, which promotes the area's growth.

"The difference between us and a lot of other parts of the city is that we have anchors that are not auto-related," said Midtown developer Robert Slattery.

"Wayne State (University) and the (Detroit) Medical Center mean fresh blood, maybe 400 or 500 people, coming in every year. Add the cultural institutions and the employment base is 70,000 and very much white-collar. That's like Troy."

A very funky Troy that includes high-brow as well as radical.

Norm Parducci said "it just made sense" to move from his native Southfield to Midtown last year.

"It's where I mainly hang out anyway," said Parducci, 27, an auto mechanic and sculptor. "Nobody here thinks it's weird I'm a mechanic and sculptor, which I can't say happens everywhere -- not Southfield anyway."

About half of Midtown's 3,200 new residents are college students, in new dormitories.

While some spots are now swank or "green," other stretches remain poor and desolate. No one denies, though, that much of area is on a roll.

"It's growing because it's attracting single people without kids. Detroit still can't attract families," said demographer Kurt Metzger, director of the Detroit-Area Community Information System.

Air of optimism

The gamble has paid off for some.

Slattery began investing in 1981, buying three dilapidated properties on Willis Street. Together they cost less than \$100,000, he said.

Around 2007, in what formerly was an undesirable place to live, he sold several refurbished lofts in his Willys Overland project for \$425,000 each.

Slattery admits that his multiple developments "are going painfully slow" at the moment, due to the lending crisis.

"But no way have I lost faith," he said. "A lot of people are planning when things start to bounce back."

Energy and money

Midtown -- bordered by I-75 on the east and south, the Lodge Freeway to the west and I-94 to the north -- resulted from a "convergence of a lot of energy" said Sue Mosey, president of the University Cultural Center Association, a clearinghouse and resource for developers and institutions.

Energy and money: Plenty of foundation funding, along with state, city and federal dollars aimed at boosting inner-city development, helped nurture Midtown's growth, she said.

The raw material on which to build a community already was there. In addition to Wayne State and the Medical Center, Midtown includes the jewels of the city's cultural institutions: the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and the Detroit Science Center, among others.

Wayne State and the College for Creative Studies built Midtown dormitories in the past decade. The University of Michigan and Michigan State University also have planted their flags in Midtown: U-M with its Detroit Center at Orchestra Place, and MSU through an extension of its College of Osteopathic Medicine and Community Music School.

The education facilities and medical center hired steadily through the decade. And while plenty of housing has declined in value, due to the widespread mortgage crisis, the Midtown rental market remains strong: The occupancy rate is 93 percent, Mosey said.

Magnet for small businesses

While other Detroit neighborhoods beg for stores, restaurants and basic services, small businesses stream into Midtown to capitalize on the demands of its new residents.

Joining established businesses such as The Whitney restaurant, Avalon Bakery, Cass Cafe, Union Street and Motor City Brewing Works are popular new stores and restaurants: Good Girls Go to Paris creperie, Leopold's Books and the Shangri-La restaurant.

"The difference is night and day in terms of foot traffic," said Shangri-La consultant Raymond Wong, who moved to Midtown from downtown.

Changing landscape

Growth is apparent in the Cass Corridor.

In the 1970s, the Corridor was filled with Appalachian families and still had an area called Chinatown, said Patrick Dorn, executive director of the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corp., which rehabilitates and builds affordable housing.

Those who could afford to leave the Corridor did and the neighborhood decayed under negligent owners, Dorn said. The slide worsened in the 1980s when the city made the area home to social service providers, such as homeless shelters.

And yet, as elsewhere in Midtown, new businesses are opening or expanding: Canine to Five doggie day care center, the Burton art house theater, Hub of Detroit bicycle shop and other scattered shops.

Even though commercial lending has dried up under the credit crunch, developer Joel Landy says rent is so cheap in the area that aspiring entrepreneurs can afford to try new things.

"Some of my rent is 50 cents per square foot," said Landy, who has lived in the area for 30 years and owns more than 30 properties, including storefronts, housing units and empty lots.

"We've all learned not to wait for pie-in-the-sky solutions and just keep going," he said.

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