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# **<RE>DESIGNING DETROIT**



Photo: Mike Boening Photography





# THE CITY IS MAKING A COMEBACK.

BY JESSICA MEYER

There's still a lot of work left in bringing the new prosperity to all residents, but community leaders are now looking beyond basic stability toward cutting-edge inclusivity, diversity, and urban design. Meet six organizations and innovators leading the charge.

St. Agnes Church in Detroit





**J**ust seven years ago, Detroit's core neighborhoods were hemorrhaging residents. As of 2016, the situation has drastically changed. Housing is consistently close to capacity, with 97 percent of existing housing units in the greater downtown area currently occupied; small business districts are thriving; and crime rates have decreased significantly. There are more job opportunities, thanks to the downtown relocations of major companies like Blue Cross Blue Shield and Quicken Loans, and the establishment of new ones like Detroit Bikes. Meanwhile, more and more residents now have access to resources and support to help them pursue their own entrepreneurial endeavors.

With the basics starting to fall into place, Detroit's interconnected community of innovators, designers, and entrepreneurs is aiming even higher. The new challenge: Turn Detroit into a leader in inclusive, human-centered, and intentional urban and regional design.

A focus on inclusivity is especially key to this new vision. "The city has a unique chance to put equal opportunity front and center," says Bradford Frost, director of Capital Impact Partners' Detroit program. "It can be our shared goal in all of our community development activities, public investments, city services, and educational systems, and change strategy for a generation to come."

Here are six organizations and innovators honoring Detroit's history while looking toward the future.

## THE INSTIGATOR HUDSON-WEBBER FOUNDATION

Many of the organizations, partnerships, and projects behind the current boom in greater downtown Detroit are the result of an innovative shared vision led by the Hudson-Webber Foundation (HWF), a 75-year-old nonprofit whose mission is to improve quality of life in Detroit. Starting in 2008, HWF coalesced key members of Detroit's philanthropic, nonprofit, and corporate sectors around what would come to be called the 15x15 Initiative, a strategic vision to attract and retain 15,000 young, educated residents by 2015.

Around that time, reports from Michigan Future Inc., a data-driven, nonpartisan nonprofit, highlighted Michigan and Detroit's disproportionate loss of educated people under the age of 35. "If we didn't reverse [the flow of young talent], it would have had a ripple effect for generations," says David Egner, HWF's former president and CEO. "Our tax base would shrink, and we would see fewer philanthropic dollars."

So HWF began researching other cities to determine the most important factors and amenities that young, educated people look for. They identified four core focus areas in which to guide infrastructure improvements: jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, safety, housing, and retail and third spaces (the places you go outside of work and home). These four areas all saw incredible progress as HWF worked with partners throughout the greater downtown area to develop programs aligned with the 15x15 vision.

The initiative didn't hit its goal of 15,000 new households, partly because the pace of new housing units didn't keep up with demand. But 15x15 did generate huge momentum for the city, and proved that a diverse group of organizations could come together with a common purpose. "A lot of [partnerships] came along because people caught the vision of 15x15," Egner says. "We're now starting to ask the question, 'What lessons did we learn during this process that can be translated to the neighborhoods to start the same type of revival?'"





photo: Courtesy of Hajj Flemings



Hajj Flemings is rebranding neighborhood small businesses.

## THE MARKETER HAJJ FLEMINGS, REBRAND DETROIT

After working with individual small-business owners around the city, Hajj Flemings, founder of Brand Camp University, the largest personal branding conference in the Midwest, started feeling a disconnect between the revival of Detroit's core and lack of attention to other adjacent neighborhoods. So he began exploring what creating brand identities could do for Detroit's most promising but struggling commercial corridors. In 2015 Flemings won a Knight Cities Challenge grant for ReBrand Detroit, a project he designed to help revitalize these communities by applying branding, marketing, and other digital technology strategies to help revitalize entire neighborhoods or commercial corridors.

"For our city to be sustainable, we have to drive economic development into neighborhoods," Flemings says. "Our goal is to make Detroit neighborhoods [besides the core downtown] into destination spots for consumers, but that starts by first bringing visibility to the people who are doing amazing work in these neighborhoods."

ReBrand Detroit is also creating a Neighborhood Business Brand Accelerator, a six-to-eight-week program designed to help neighborhood entrepreneurs with branding, marketing, and design assistance focused on customer service. "Building brands is about more than creating beautiful logos," Flemings says. "It's about creating systems that create amazing experiences that convert visitors to customers."





## THE CONNECTOR LISA NUSZKOWSKI, DETROIT BIKE SHARE

As executive director of Detroit Bike Share, a program of the Downtown Detroit Partnership that will launch in 2017, Lisa Nuskowski is hoping to enhance public places by connecting them. The first phase of her program will begin with 350 bikes and 35 stations, with an expectation to expand into more neighborhoods. Nuskowski hopes Detroit Bike Share will address the needs of many communities, including residents who need more transportation options to get to work and run errands. Her team is currently researching how similar city programs maintain accessibility and inclusivity in order to develop a community engagement plan that builds resident ownership of the program.

“Detroit has a real opportunity to be a leader around mobility for the rest of the country and — who knows? — the rest of the world,” she says.



Photo: Courtesy of Downtown Detroit Partnership

Lisa Nuskowski,  
executive  
director of  
Detroit Bike Share

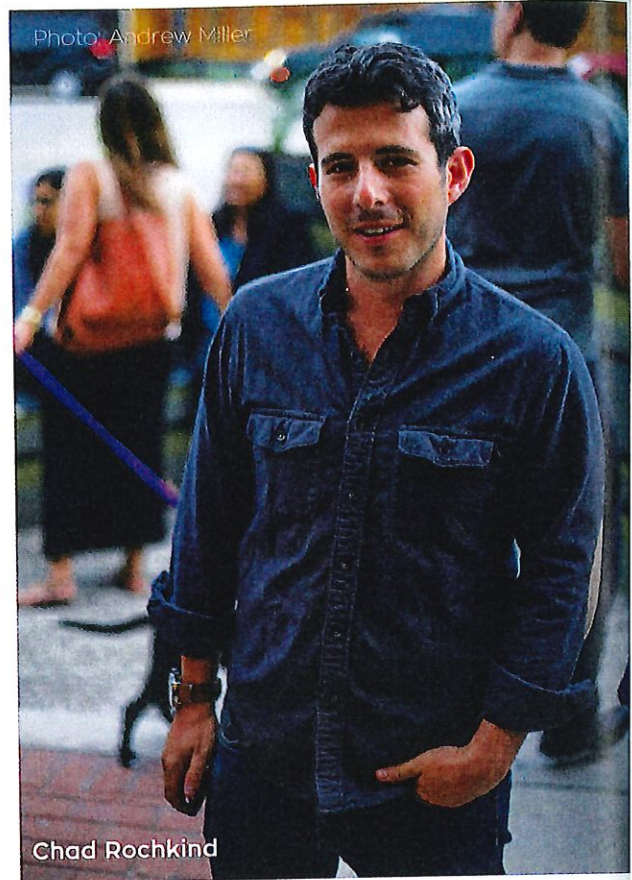


Photo: Andrew Miller

Chad Rochkind

## THE URBAN DESIGNER CHAD ROCHKIND, HUMAN SCALE STUDIO

Chad Rochkind, founder of Human Scale Studio, an urban planning firm, and executive director of the Corktown Economic Development Corporation, is rethinking how urban design influences the way people interact in their environment. Corktown prides itself on being Detroit’s oldest neighborhood, with a rich history of welcoming immigrants through Michigan Central Train Station and sports fans at the old Tiger Stadium. But a state highway, Michigan Avenue, cuts the neighborhood in half over nine lanes of traffic. Rochkind is working with the city, state, and community on a shared plan for transforming the road into a complete street, which means extending sidewalks for cafe seating, adding protected bike lanes, and supporting and nurturing public life on the street level.

“For decades, city governments have been dominated by top-down, auto-centric planning,” Rochkind says. “We’re striving to move toward a more participatory and human-centered approach. Leading with policies that encourage public life should be our main objective. When you put people-centered places at the center, you get vibrancy and strong economic development.”





NEIdeas winner Nefertiti owns Textures by Nefertiti, a spa and salon that helps black women embrace their natural hair.



Photo: Ali Lapetina

## THE ENTREPRENEURS NEW ECONOMY INITIATIVE

In addition to growing a jobs base for residents in development-related trades, Detroit also has an opportunity to help its residents define their own economic destinies through entrepreneurship. The New Economy Initiative (NEI), a special project of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, works to build a network of support for entrepreneurs and small businesses. In 2014, NEI launched NEIdeas, a program focused on supporting neighborhood businesses through grants and technical services with an emphasis on minority and female entrepreneurs. The pillars of NEI's work continue to be collaboration and inclusion; it focuses its financial support and program development on creating an entrepreneurial network for all stages and needs of business growth, in particular helping entrepreneurs from communities historically cut off from capital build confidence in pursuing funding.

NEI's leadership thinks Detroit has a chance to do something unique if it can build relationships between neighborhood small businesses and tech startups that are clustering in the city's greater downtown area. "We're in the process of learning how to reinforce ties between small business and the high-tech and innovation world," says Pam Lewis, director of NEI. "They are not mutually exclusive. There can be a meaningful connection between those two worlds. Some of our work will focus on articulating that connection so we and others in the ecosystem can understand it better."

## THE REHABILITATOR DIANA VAN BUREN, ZACHARY & ASSOCIATES INC.

For more than 30 years, Diane Van Buren, president of Zachary & Associates consulting firm, has worked at the intersection of Detroit's history and future by sustainably redeveloping historic buildings. She has worked on housing developments across the city and led efforts to achieve historic designation for more than 300 buildings. She conceived of a bed and breakfast, the Inn on Ferry Street, as a way of attracting visitors — and eventually residents — to the often-overlooked Midtown Art Center area. And she also contributed to creating a new investment pool called Invest Detroit.

She has worked with leading local art dealer George N'namdi on revitalizing the Sugar Hill district, whose name pays homage to the enclave of African-American jazz clubs from the '20s and '30s in a section of Midtown adjacent to the Detroit Medical Center. "We kept saying, 'What's keeping people from investing in this area?' It was the perception of a lack of safety, cleanliness, and livability," Van Buren says. "People would live here if these conditions were met, so we had to push it to that next level."

Part of the Sugar Hill revival included redeveloping 71 Garfield into a green residential and commercial building that includes a solar roof, a geothermal heating and cooling system, water recovery, and Energy Star appliances, elevators, and windows. It's a model of how to use both historic and energy tax credits to economically and sustainably renovate historic buildings in Detroit. Van Buren sees huge potential for Detroit to become a leader in new sustainable energy and green infrastructure development, which could bring desperately needed job-training opportunities to residents of a city with a poverty rate of nearly 40 percent. ✨



Jessica Meyer moved to Detroit from Chicago in 2011 to serve in the City Year Detroit AmeriCorps program and never left. She is director of engagement for Human Scale Studio. She is also a graduate of Build Institute, board member for Detroit SOUP, founder of The Pack, a writer for Model D media, and a comrade in the Black Lives Matter movement.