

Design industries are critical to Detroit's future but need nurturing

John Gallagher, Detroit Free Press Published 6:00 a.m. ET April 26, 2018 | Updated 6:03 p.m. ET April 27, 2018



Photo: Design Core Detroit)

Back in 2002, urban guru Richard Florida published his influential book "The Rise of the Creative Class," which highlighted the importance of so-called "creatives" — artists, graphic designers, architects, and others — to the vitality of cities trying to overcome long-term decline.

Florida's book helped set the agenda for many a city, including Detroit, where the CEO group Business Leaders for Michigan launched the Detroit Creative Corridor Center in 2010. The DCCC was a small enterprise, based in the College of Creative Studies building in New Center, dedicated to attracting more design firms to the Woodward Avenue district.

Lately, though, the vision has evolved and expanded thanks to a year-long study of what design means in a city like Detroit. The DCCC has adopted a new name — Design Core Detroit — and a new mission that goes well beyond attracting well-educated and well-paid millennials to the downtown and Midtown districts.

Now, said Olga Stella, director of Design Core Detroit, we recognize that design means more than a few creative individuals and firms. Rather, it's an entire eco-system that accounts for as much as 20% of metro Detroit's total economy and includes a diverse population of people with all sorts of skills.

That eco-system, she told me, includes not only the artists and product designers themselves but all the suppliers and downstream workers who turn designs into reality — carpenters and builders who turn architectural designs into bricks and mortar, or assembly line workers who build the vehicles crafted in the design studios.

And in a key finding of the year-long study, Stella said that 70% of all "design" firms in metro Detroit have fewer than 10 employees, and as many as half have just one or two

workers. Design, it turns out, is a small-business phenomena, and we need to figure out how to nurture those firms and workers.

"Part of what we came to realize is that sustainable and equitable development in Detroit meant inclusive growth and we needed to talk about it that way," she said.

A good example of what they may mean is the work under way along Detroit's west riverfront. The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy recently selected Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates to design the 22-acre west riverfront park.



This rendering of "The Cove" is part of the West Riverfront winning design done by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. (Photo: Michael Van Valkenburgh Assoc.)

Although among America's elite landscape architects, the Van Valkenburgh team is engaging with local Detroit residents, developing ideas and getting feedback on its preliminary designs.

And the conservancy itself, before it picked the Van Valkenburgh team, sent a couple dozen everyday Detroit residents to civic parks in other cities to gather ideas for the west riverfront.

The process recognized that design, at its best, is no longer a mystery open only to the elite, but an everyday way of life in a city like Detroit. Design Core Detroit's just-

completed report, titled "Detroit City of Design Action Plan," outlines three broad strategies.

First, focus on talent.

"We've got to be constantly pushing forward on the talent agenda and making sure the talent pipeline is representative of the community and able to compete in the 21st Century," Stella said.

That puts an emphasis on education and improving our schools. It also dovetails with Gov. Rick Snyder's recent Marshall Plan for Talent that outlines ways to boost opportunities and career paths that may not require a four-year college degree.

Second, invest in design firms.

Keep in mind that so many design firms are those one- or two-person shops that struggle with financial requirements.

"These are very small businesses," Stella said. "We've got to find ways to increase their capital access. We have to have a real focus on investment in design businesses."

And third, focus on policy.

"We need to create an environment that really demands inclusive design as a way of working," she said.

The action plan grew out of the 2015 designation of Detroit as a UNESCO City of Design, a recognition from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization on cities demonstrating a legacy of and commitment to using design as a tool of economic development. Detroit is the first — and so far only — U.S. city to receive the designation.

Creativity, it turns out, works best when it's by and for all of us.

Contact John Gallagher: 313-222-5173 or gallagher@freepress.com. Follow him on Twitter @jgallagherfreep.