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Unfiltered: Why Detroit?

Posted by **KAREN DYBIS** Tuesday, October 13, 2009 at 11:38 am

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When talking to Metro Detroiters for the blog, I always ask them the same question: Why Detroit?

Recently, I was interviewing Ron Harwood, president of Illuminating Concepts in Farmington Hills (a lovely suburb outside of Detroit.) His amazing company is best described as an architectural and themed lighting design firm. But they do far more than just create great lighting. They do something called "Immersion Experiences," environments that saturate visitors with elements like light, sound, water and more.

So if you've ever been to Branson Landing, the Hersey's store in Chicago, the Ferrari dealership and restaurant in Las Vegas or the Museum of Chinese Film in Beijing, then you have seen their outstanding work. Locally, they did the Fox Theater, Greenfield Village and most of the downtown streetscape as well as Comerica Park, our baseball stadium.

Enough from me. I'm going to let Ron Harwood tell you "Why Detroit?" in his own words.

Why Detroit?

The question I receive most often from both outsiders and those within the state of Michigan is some variation of, "Why would a company who works globally and which has no physical ties (such as a manufacturing plant) to the city of Detroit or Michigan wish to remain there?"

The answer, of course, is much more complex than the question. Often, these outsiders do not know the full story that is Detroit's heritage, present and future; and we as insiders do not do as good of a job telling it as we perhaps could.

The truth is, Detroit is much more than the gloomy photographs we see of abandoned houses and shuttered plants. Our greatest stories go untold, fueling the misperception that our city is a dying breed of an old-world manufacturing ethos, hopelessly unrecoverable. Reality is much more nuanced, and much more interesting.

My company, Illuminating Concepts, which is a global multimedia firm fortunate enough to have performed work for some of the world's most recognized brands, could be located anywhere. Some have suggested that New York or L.A. are more suitable homes for a company specializing in delivering theatrical experiences, as we do. From what we've seen elsewhere and here, however, there is no place like home. And you've seen what Hollywood can accomplish here, with local talent and resources, given the opportunity.

Contrary to what most believe, our city and region boast a phenomenal talent pool. Whether the talent be creative, illustrative, in production, editing, architecture, or other fields, I have never seen more passionate, more creative and more engaging talent in all of my travels domestically and overseas. Even as the automotive industry reshapes itself, displaced talent is finding new callings, and bringing a fresh perspective to seemingly disconnected fields (such as architectural lighting) and adding insights and expertise that you simply can't find in other parts of the country. Similarly, our universities are world-class, from the University of Michigan and Michigan State University to Wayne State University, Lawrence Technological University and the College for Creative Studies.

True, we could move anywhere. But we doubled-down two years ago to expand our offices and commit our company and its nearly 50 employees to southeastern Michigan. The reasons range from emotional and familial to strategic and, yes, economic. Our people love living here. The people are real, the state is beautiful and Detroit has famously unrivaled passion and grit. Staying here has allowed me to build a family business in the Detroit region — not in the sense that my family works for me, but that the people who work with me are truly my

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family. The people who have stayed here their whole lives know exactly what I mean by that. They, too, recognize that Detroit has so much to offer that many don't see at first blush — recreationally, culturally, aesthetically and in a vast diversity of interests and pursuits. And they understand that, if compensated fairly and generously (as we believe firmly we do), the cost of living, real estate and diversions are far more attractive than one could expect on either coast or in many other parts of the country.

The talent migration away from Michigan has been well reported, and much maligned. But what is less reported, and what I see everyday, are the people who come back. Or the many who move here as a first choice.

The reason? The city is itself a misunderstood entity, and within it live an incredible number of remarkable stories and case studies in ingenuity. We're not all automotive, though we are seeing a cross-pollination of automotive talent leveraging their expertise to apply it in new, exciting industries. We like to believe that Illuminating Concepts is one of those stories, but if you dig even remotely beyond the surface, you will unearth a great many innovative, hungry and truly inspiring tales of other companies in other businesses that you would never dream would be housed in Detroit.

Where do we go from here?

I am not one who believes that Detroit's best days are behind us. Things look bleak now, from behind a camera lens and from miles away. But on the ground, you see and feel something exciting happening.

For the first time in my many years here, I see reason for hope — hope that things are about to change. I see a sense of collaboration and cooperation unprecedented in my years here. We are almost in a post-disaster mindset, much like you'd see in parts of the country that have experienced true crisis or collapse in recent years. Companies that would just five years ago vigorously compete are now collaborating and joining forces. Individuals that once regarded one another as enemies are now reaching out to work together for a greater common good. You see a sense of, "We're all in this together, so let's work together to dig ourselves out and begin the reconstruction." It's heartening to see, and even more exciting to be a part of.

Two examples. As GM wades through its much-publicized challenges and restructuring, and discretionary spending is scrutinized, it was forced to discontinue a high-profile sponsorship of a water feature at the Comerica Park baseball home to the Detroit Tigers. In response, the owner of the team, Mike Illitch, offered GM (in addition to Ford and Chrysler) the opportunity to keep its name on the electrifying fountain that eyeballs and cameras would capture as home runs left the park. Family came before business; and Detroit is a family. For my part, I have offered an open door to the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, whenever they are looking for ideas and inspiration on ways to help facilitate Detroit's rebirth and growth. I could certainly charge for my time, as I would others. But in this day and age, and for our common purpose, I wouldn't dream of it. All for one.

So, yes...the highly publicized migration from our state and city is rooted in reality. But the bigger reality is this: The weak have left, and it is the strong who have remained. I, for one, believe the smart money is on those who have stayed to fight another day.

(Thanks, Ron. Check out his company [here](#).)

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1
 If you believe in Detroit why don't you move your company into the city? For a company like yours (employs members of the creative class) I would think the urban, downtown environment is much better than an office park out in suburban sprawl.

Consider it this way. Imagine a graduate of one of the fine universities you mention choosing between a job offer located in a downtown area of a city like Chicago vs. working out in the 'burbs of Detroit. A view of the city or of a surface parking lot, guess which one they are likely to choose?

Now that people realize we are dependent on each other in this region maybe you will realize the benefits of a revitalized downtown that serves as a business, social and economic center to the region.

motownspartan
 October 13, 2009
 at 1:38 pm
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1.1
 Why does everyone have to be IN Detroit to still support the city? The region benefits because companies like Illuminating Concepts is here. I struggle with the idea that you're not a "good" company because you don't want to be taxed just to have a storefront inside city limits.

TIME
Karen Dybis
 October 13, 2009
 at 2:50 pm

2
 typo: revitalized
motownspartan
 October 13, 2009
 at 1:39 pm
[Log in to Reply](#)

3
 In addition to agreeing with the previous post, I take offense to the statement "The weak have left, and it is the strong who have remained." I was born and raised in Detroit and attended undergrad in west Michigan. My father, and many of my other relatives still live in the city of Detroit. After working in Grand Rapids part time for a year after college just as Michigan's single-state recession was beginning to gain momentum, I got married and



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relocated to Northern Virginia with my husband. We both now work in Washington, DC.

Why did I leave my hometown and ultimately, the state? Certainly not out of weakness. I left the city so I could attend college without worrying about getting mugged or being harassed on my way to and from class. I the state left for a job that was worthy of my education, for an excellent salary and benefits, and for the mild winters, diversity and culture in DC that the city of Detroit simply can't compete with. I spent a year trying in vain to find a job in my field armed with a degree that I thought would be my ticket to living a comfortable life. I split my time between a part-time office job and bartending while I waited for my husband to finish college so we could get out of dodge. After 12 years in private school and four at one of Michigan's great state schools, that's some return on investment. It took me two weeks to find a job in DC. Is the cost of living high? Sure, but it's a small price to pay for job security, access to preeminent cultural institutions, and knowing that not only will my children grow up attending the best public schools in the nation, but they won't have to suffer through growing up in one of the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the country. Call me what you will, but to me, and scores of others who have fled the state, those things matter.

motowntranspla...

October 13, 2009

at 2:22 pm

Log in to Reply

3.1

I'm happy that you were able to find suitable employment in DC, if I didn't have a job in MI, I would leave too. However, I feel like I should point out two things.

1) DC metro is segregated too. Maybe not more than or even as much as Detroit, but it's not exactly integrated. There is a large, poor, disenfranchised black population in that city. It's a very hard place for the poor to get attention since so many of the people who work there every day are from other places in the country and/or head home to Virginia every night. Maybe you just don't notice the segregation because you can't see it, but it's there. Same with Chicago Metro, New York, etc. etc. Here's some data for your town:

<http://www.neighborhoodinfocdc.org/pdfs/DC-Segregation-data.pdf>

Maybe one thing in Detroit's favor, at least we know it's happening? I'm not sure.

2) No other city in the country is going to be able to compete with the national collections and archives being kept in DC (and they shouldn't be able to, really, it's the capitol). But, if you felt like there wasn't culture or diversity in Detroit, you probably just didn't know where to look. I am overwhelmed by the amount of cool/interesting/historic/new/fantastic cultural things going on here.

Sounds to me like you moved because of the weather (weak!) and/or a job (totally understandable). Period.

cecile468

October 13, 2009

at 3:05 pm

3.2

One can be mugged anywhere, in any city, at any time....muggers have no borders. I also don't understand how one would "suffer" due to growing up in a "racially segregated" area. It's just geography, not a way of life. I could never leave this area but would not begrudge anyone who has to or wants to...but IMO those two reasons just don't fly.

zforcaptain

October 13, 2009

at 5:02 pm

4

Interesting "glass is half full" viewpoint, though I think motownspartan and motowntransplant both have valid points. Many of those who defend Detroit do not live in the city. There is a huge difference between Farmington Hills and Detroit.

I too find a lot interesting in Detroit, and see some signs of hope. But having also lived in Portland, Oregon, Madison, Wisconsin, D.C., and now residing in Denver, Colorado, I constantly meet those who have left metro Detroit. They didn't leave because they were weak, they left because, as motowntransplant pointed out, Detroit is especially lacking in so many areas. There's no need to debate these points as statistics clearly point out Detroit's glaring problems.

I too love my hometown, but always struggled to find decent paying work in the area. Since moving to D.C., and now Denver, I've never had a lack of much higher paying opportunities, great urban living, a variety of cultural and art institutions, and recreational opportunities that are so lacking in metro Detroit.

The real problem for Detroit's, and Michigan's, future is not that the weak have left, but rather, that the young and educated are leaving in massive numbers. And that's not reassuring.

motorless

October 13, 2009

at 3:56 pm

Log in to Reply

5

Karen,

The entire region suffers because we lack the kind of vibrant/city center downtown that is present in other growing cities (like Chicago). Certainly, you do not have to be "IN" Detroit to be a booster nor does locating your company "IN" Detroit make it "good" or bad.

As a fairly recent graduate, I can tell you that young professionals in their 20s and 30s generally don't get excited about the prospect of working in a suburban office park. Sure, at the end of the day people want a job and want to work for a good employer but the atmosphere created by having mile after mile of suburban office parks actually contributes to the brain drain in this region, not the other way around. It's better to have Illuminating Concepts in the region than not, but they could do much more good for the region by being located downtown (it's not like we're in Manhattan or somewhere where they might be able to argue that the move is cost prohibitive - clearly there is plenty of office space in downtown).

At the end of the day, the sprawl that this company is located in is a factor that leads many recent graduates and others to choose to re-locate to cities like Chicago. On the micro-level, I can understand why this particular firm might have a good reason to be in the burbs. But on the whole, their location contributes to the deficiency of downtown as a true city center. We know from research that it is precisely this lack of a vibrant, urban, walkable city center that is contributing to the city's (and ultimately the region) decline.

Illuminating Concepts moving to downtown Detroit wouldn't solve the problem by itself. But they just may find that if they make the move downtown, it will encourage other companies with creative talent to also make the move. This will help grow and sustain the critical mass necessary to make the downtown area desirable and thriving, thus making it easier for Illuminating Concepts to recruit new talent and retain current workers.

motownspartan

October 13, 2009

at 4:52 pm

Log in to Reply

6

Cecile, I completely respect your opinion and have enjoyed your previous posts. I recognize that the District is segregated. I mentor a young black teenaged girl and am an active volunteer in the Junior League of Washington, so I am well aware of the segregation, crippling poverty and illiteracy that are prevalent in parts of DC. However, when it comes to the the bitterness and hatred that exist among races in the metro Detroit area that have continued to isolate the city from residents in surrounding areas since the riots in 1967, no, I have not experienced that here. As a black woman married to a white man, trust me. The difference is palpable.

I also take great offense to your statement that "It's a very hard place for the poor to get attention since so many of the people who work there every day are from other places in the country and/or head home to Virginia every night." Living in poverty is difficult anywhere and the District has a lot of services in place to assist those in need, from a newspaper run by the homeless that enables them to learn critical job skills and encourages literacy to a free, mobile service that provides meals and emergency medical care to the homeless. It isn't a perfect system, but please, tell me how it's easier to be poor in Detroit than it is here.

And to imply that people come into the District to work and then head for the hills at 5:00 pm with their blinders on, is offensive. What is this assumption based on? Some of the most passionate, active and sympathetic volunteers and activists I know are people who live in the suburbs and have an unwavering commitment to making life better for their "neighbors" in DC. And anyway, most rational people have an inclination to invest time, money and energy into improving, and maintaining the area in which they work. A case in point: Campus Martius Park will likely continue to stay in pretty good shape as long as Compuware is around.

Finally, I will acknowledge that Detroit has some cool things to see and do - I did spend 18 years of my life there. If you find it overwhelming and enjoy it, I can respect that. Just know that at the end of the day, I left for a good job, a strong public school system, and peace of mind. The weather was just a bonus.

motowntranspla...

October 13, 2009

at 4:52 pm
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7
 I should add that it is my experience that young people and creative class types don't move to a city because "it has nice suburbs" with good strip malls and restaurants (obviously surrounded by parking lots since most of these places are almost if not completely unwalkable). They move to cities like Chicago (young folks from Detroit in particular seem to flock to this city - which is why I use it as an example) because they crave the urban atmosphere that can't be provided in these suburban environments.

motownspartan
 October 13, 2009
 at 4:59 pm
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8
 Another reason why Detroiters are so optimistic: All the pessimists leave. 😊

announceofactio...
 October 13, 2009
 at 5:11 pm
 Log in to Reply

9
 One shouldn't begrudge anyone's choices. Alls I can say is that I've lived in San Francisco, Brooklyn and Santa Fe and I've never been happier than I am now living in downtown Detroit. I can walk to ballgames, ride my bike all over town, hit the open air market on the weekends, and see great live shows any night of the year. It's affordable and the people are really friendly. It's got the best used bookstore I've ever seen (King's Books, incredible) one of the best pizza places I've ever eaten at (Supinos) and a great supermarket (Honeybee, try their guac!) It's really a completely fascinating, vibrant, intense and incredible place. Swing by sometime.

tobybarlow
 October 13, 2009
 at 5:17 pm
 Log in to Reply

9,1
 I second Honeybee's guac! And pick up a case of Coke made with sugar instead of high fructose corn syrup while you're there!

announceofactio...
 October 13, 2009
 at 5:20 pm

10
 It's the same old song and dance just with a different article. As to the comment of the "the weak have left and only the strong remain" there is some validity. As much as I hear that jobs are nowhere to be found in Michigan, I have noticed jobs are available. That is not to say that other cities are not offering the same jobs just at higher rates. The issue that hides beneath is the fact that saying there are no jobs available is an easy way out of Detroit. This raises an interesting question....if Detroit does not find a solution to it's issues and the auto industry dries up completely, don't you think that many of those jobs that were taken in various other US cities will no longer be needed? I read in another post something similar that maybe as far as Detroit is behind, maybe we are actually ahead....At it's peak, Detroit was the backbone of the American Economy with the automobile but that is all that held this city together....Those who stay and help in the redesign of Detroit whether it be IN the city or IN the burbs will ultimately prove their strength and eventually those who come back will show their weakness when begging for jobs as other cities reach the point Detroit is at now.....Economists say "it's all about trends" and unfortunately Detroit started this trend. Let us not forget Detroit boasts one of the best creative schools in the nation in CCS and it's only a matter of time that Detroit's potential in the entertainment field is realized. Detroit is a canvas waiting to be explored and recreated, it's perfect for the creative minded and the ground work is already laid. Time will only tell if this city will swallow its pride and let another industry take the wheel and drive this city to its resurgence.

bnalband
 October 14, 2009
 at 12:19 am
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