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A University in Detroit Pins New Hopes on Old Buildings

By LIBBY SANDER

Detroit

In the old industrial core of this struggling city, a boarded-up factory at the corner of Woodward Avenue and Burroughs Street tells the story of a long economic decline. Several letters have long since vanished from its rooftop sign, and trees grow out the top like the unkempt locks of a gritty giant well past its prime.

But while the incomplete lettering and overgrown foliage atop the American Beauty Electric Irons building may add a weary postscript to the tale of this city's strife, all around are glimmers of renewal. Cars are parked in nearby lots that, for years, were empty patches of asphalt. A new playground a block away adds a dash of color. Loft apartments are for rent.

With the help of Wayne State University, located just down the street, facelifts of a handful of old buildings, many of them once at the heart of the automotive industry, are leading the way in the revitalization of one small corner of this sprawling city. Building by building, block by block, the university is gradually helping to transform an area that was, until very recently, known more for its blight than for its bustle.

Just as its collegiate cousins in places like Philadelphia and Cincinnati have done, Wayne State is eager to spruce up the neighborhoods around its campus and bolster a local economy sagging under the weight of the foundering auto companies. Its early success is already evident. The areas known as Midtown, where Wayne State is located, and New Center, just a few blocks north, where the auto barons anchored their fledgling industry nearly a century ago, are gradually reviving at a pace not yet seen in other parts of the city.

Across the street from the old factory is a refurbished building used in the 1920s as a showroom for speedometers. Owned by Wayne State for at least a decade, it reopened last year as the new home of the university's police department. Dozens of start-up companies, meanwhile, have staked out office space across the street, in a five-story factory that General Motors donated to Wayne State in 2003. The old Cadillac sales building down the street, the university's property for many years, is also in line for a new use. But for now, the stately limestone building with the

famous coat-of-arms emblem still etched on its façade is home only to a geology professor's rock collection.

A similar revival is taking place less than a mile away, a few blocks closer to Wayne State's main campus. There, new apartments, businesses, and academic buildings are springing up every year. The city's only Barnes & Noble bookstore is located there, in the university's welcome center. A new engineering complex with ground-level, glassed-in workrooms and laboratories opened late last month. And more development is in the works.

"It's going to take several more years and a lot more investment to make the area outstanding," says James R. Sears, the university's associate vice president for facilities planning and management. "But unbelievable progress has been made, and I think you'll see more of it."

'Paris of the Midwest'

Wayne State is a public research institution of 31,000 students, the vast majority of whom work and commute to class. With its eclectic urban campus perched about three miles north of downtown, the scrappy, resourceful university sees itself as the logical driver of an ambitious vision for this corner of the city. It hopes to use the revitalization efforts to make the areas around the campus a more appealing place for students to live.

Officials repeatedly point out that they have several other partners in the revitalization efforts. But observers say the university's mere presence has fueled much of the growth.

Not everyone has been pleased with Wayne State's approach, including some preservationists who hate to see the loss of any old building, however decrepit.

University officials and neighborhood activists are fully aware that the plan for growth is completely at odds with the way the rest of the country views their city — as a dying town whose sole economic driver is the auto industry. It is a depiction they feel compelled to set straight.

The city once known as the Paris of the Midwest (yes, it's true) can rise again, they say.

"There's so much bad news and so much bad publicity about Detroit," says Randal Charlton, executive director of TechTown, a business incubator the university helped start in 2004 to invigorate and diversify the local economy. "Bad news can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So can good news."

The university's new president, Jay Noren, is among those who dream of an urban community similar to University City, in Philadelphia, where the University of Pennsylvania has waged a sweeping urban-renewal campaign since the late 1990s. Wayne State's goal for Detroit, following Penn's lead, is to lure 15,000 young professionals to work and live in the area by 2015 through stronger schools, security, and commercial attractions.

Dr. Noren sees the crumbling old Victorian mansions scattered throughout Midtown being bought, renovated, and inhabited by junior faculty members or young workers. He sees more students living on or near campus, eating at local restaurants, and traveling to downtown attractions on a proposed light-rail line. He sees life, energy, and foot traffic along streets that, for decades, have lacked all three.

"There is a real passion and commitment to revitalizing Detroit," Dr. Noren says during a recent interview in his office, from which he can spot the old General Motors headquarters. When he arrived last year from the University of Nebraska, he says, he was taken aback by the fervent desire among residents and activists to show the world beyond 8 Mile Road — the boundary between the city and its northern suburbs — that Detroit was more than a cityscape littered with foreclosed properties and unemployed workers.

"There's a lot of hometown pride," he says. "There's a lot of grit."

A Neighborhood in Transition

Still, grit and pride can only take a city so far. Not far from Wayne State's campus are some of the crumbling remnants of the auto industry, the very empire that shot Detroit to the top of America's industrial economy and dragged it, just as dramatically, to its current depths.

Only blocks from the pocket of renewal in New Center, giant factories still stand, ghostlike structures in a flat expanse of overgrown urban prairie. Traffic is rare on the quiet streets, and pedestrians rarer still. On a recent blustery day, the only sign of life was a stray dog who limped across an empty intersection under a flashing red traffic light.

The area used to teem with tens of thousands of auto workers for companies like Ford and Studebaker during the industry's early decades. But today, the only visitors to the long-abandoned plants are the vandals who leave shattered windows and exteriors streaked with graffiti.

Closer to the campus, the disintegration has been less industrial but no less devastating. It is best seen along Woodward Avenue, a street known in Motor City's heyday for having all the hustle of Broadway and the glamour of Sunset Boulevard. It is the main artery through Wayne State's campus, and university officials want to clean it up and show it off.

In the dozen years that Mr. Sears has been at Wayne State, the university has acquired seven properties along Woodward. It now owns 16 buildings on the street. Two years ago, it leased a large tract of land housing an old ginger-ale factory to a development company, which built a \$36-million mixed-use residential, commercial, and parking complex called South University Village.

The university now has its sights on a tract that includes a handful of nondescript buildings and a sandwich shop. The owner of the sandwich shop, however, does not share the university's enthusiasm for redevelopment and has resisted its offers.

Mr. Sears says the university is always quietly on the lookout for new land. "We've been deliberately, purposefully silent on the issue of acquisitions," he says, to avoid driving up selling prices. "But everyone around here pretty much knows if a parcel becomes available, the university may be interested in it."

Open for Business

TechTown is one of the university's most ambitious efforts. It is based in a 500,000-square-foot factory, built in 1927 as a service department for Pontiac. It later became the Chevrolet Creative Services building, where the Corvette was designed.

TechTown serves as headquarters for more than 70 start-up companies in such areas as alternative energy, information technology, and stem-cell research. Many of the companies were spun off the research of Wayne State faculty. Although TechTown is an independent nonprofit organization, Wayne State officials are closely involved in its efforts. Eventually, university and TechTown officials hope to have more than 300 companies stationed there and in surrounding buildings.

Mr. Charlton, TechTown's executive director, says that unlike some universities "with perhaps more-famous names," Wayne State is ready and willing to engage with entrepreneurs and residents alike. "That's what drew me to the place."

The long-term economic effects of TechTown have yet to be seen. But the immediate impact is evident, with fluorescent-lit laboratories now occupying the very floors that once outfitted cars. There is life once again in a part of town where, as Mr. Charlton puts it, "even the pigeons flew in pairs."

As for the fate of the American Beauty Electric Irons building, nobody knows. University officials are tight-lipped about its future. It might be the third wave of TechTown or house offices for a local nonprofit organization. It might become an urban market. It might, they acknowledge, be torn down.

But for now, spring is finally on its way after another long Michigan winter. The rooftop trees, for one more season at least, will bloom again.

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