

FASHION & STYLE

Detroit Pushes Back With Young Muscles

By JENNIFER CONLIN JULY 1, 2011

Detroit

THE rooftop party was in full swing when midnight approached on a warm Friday evening. Kerry Doman, 29, founder of an event planning business; Justin Jacobs, 28, head of a citywide recreational sports league, and Ara Howrani, 29, a photographer who runs a commercial studio, knocked back beers, while a group of office friends from a nearby dot-com chatted about the scratch-and-sniff wallpaper in their colorful new headquarters.

In another circle, a group of real estate brokers excitedly discussed the renovation of a 1920s office tower called the Broderick into a 127-unit apartment building with a restaurant, lounge and retail stores.

“I want the penthouse,” Jeffrey Hillman, 37, said jokingly as he pointed to the building’s ornate Baroque-style top in the distance. “I’ll fight you for it,” retorted Hank Winchester, 37, a local TV reporter.

The scene might have been run of the mill in Seattle or Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or other urban enclaves that draw the young, the entrepreneurial and the hip. But this was downtown Detroit, far better known in recent years for crime, blight and economic decline.

Recent census figures show that Detroit's overall population shrank by 25 percent in the last 10 years. But another figure tells a different and more intriguing story: During the same time period, downtown Detroit experienced a 59 percent increase in the number of college-educated residents under the age of 35, nearly 30 percent more than two-thirds of the nation's 51 largest cities.

These days the word "movement" is often heard to describe the influx of socially aware hipsters and artists now roaming the streets of Detroit. Not unlike Berlin, which was revitalized in the 1990s by young artists migrating there for the cheap studio space, Detroit may have this new generation of what city leaders are calling "creatives" to thank if it comes through its transition from a one-industry.

With these new residents have come the trappings of a thriving youth culture: trendy bars and restaurants that have brought pedestrians back to once-empty streets. Places like the Grand Trunk pub, Raw Cafe, Le Petit Zinc and Avalon Bakery mingle with shops with names like City Bird, Sole Sisters and the Bureau of Urban Living.

Those familiar with past neighborhoods-of-the-moment recognize the mood. "It feels like TriBeCa back in the early days, before double strollers, sidewalk cafes and Whole Foods," said Amy Moore, 50, a film producer working on three Detroit projects. "There is a buzz here that is real, and the kids drip with talent and commitment, and aren't spoiled."

The rooftop party was hosted by a group called Move Detroit 11/11/11, started with the aim of getting 1,100 new people to move to Detroit by November.

"The Broderick project is huge because, believe it or not, there is not enough housing in the greater downtown area for all the young people moving to Detroit," said Kevin Wobbe, 37, a founder of the group.

Kendyll Myles, 24, is one example of a new arrival. “I am mentoring young schoolgirls after work, modeling for a new fashion design company, and if I wanted, could be out every night at a different launch party or cultural event,” she said.

After finishing her master’s degree in public health last year, Ms. Myles had job offers from hospitals all over the country, including in Washington. Her family urged her to go anywhere but Detroit. “They thought I would be robbed and shot here,” she said.

But when she saw IAMYoungDetroit.com, a Web site profiling residents under age 40, she decided Detroit was the city for her. Those featured on the site (which she found after typing into Google “anything positive about Detroit?”) included Emily Doerr, 26, an M.B.A. candidate who recently opened Hostel Detroit, where guests pay as little as \$18 a night for a bed; and Sean Gray, 29, who reimaged a British slogan, “Keep calm and carry on,” into posters and T-shirts for Detroiters. The site’s publisher, Margarita Barry, 26, this month will open “71 POP,” a retail gallery showcasing the work of 71 emerging artists and designers on the ground floor of a previously abandoned building that now has 30 environmentally friendly lofts and artists’ studios. (Rents start at \$710 a month.)

Part of the allure of Detroit lies in simple economics. Real estate is cheap by urban standards (Ms. Myles lives in a \$900-a-month one-bedroom apartment with a garage), and the city is so eager to draw educated young residents that it is offering numerous subsidies to new arrivals. Ms. Myles, for instance, received \$3,500 from her employer, which, like many companies in the city, is offering rent or purchasing subsidies to staff members who choose to live in the city.

Detroit Venture Partners is offering start-up financing to early-stage technology companies; Techtown, a business incubator, research and technology park associated with Wayne State University in Detroit, is

providing support to entrepreneurs and emerging companies through its “Thrive” program. And Bizdom U, an “entrepreneurial boot camp” started by Dan Gilbert, the founder and chairman of Quicken Loans, is offering graduates of its four-month-long course financing opportunities of up to \$100,000 if they base their start-up in Detroit.

“Downtown Detroit is quickly becoming a hotbed for both entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial companies,” said Mr. Gilbert, who plans to fill two downtown office buildings he recently bought, as well as one he has a contract to buy, with tech and Web-based companies.

In addition, Green Garage Detroit, an incubator for environmentally friendly companies, plans to open its doors in August to lend support to at least a dozen start-ups. And there’s the Detroit Creative Corridor Center, which supplies infrastructure, strategic counseling, consulting and resources for those wanting to start businesses in film, fashion, digital media, production or architecture. With all this help, the city seems like a giant candy store for young college graduates wanting to be their own bosses.

All that has helped create an entrepreneurial spirit that that has led to start-up ventures like the independent clothing company Aptemal begun by two twentysomethings, who are most noted for their “Detroit Hustles Harder” hand-printed T-shirts worn by Eminem, among others. The Wheelhouse, a bike store begun by two young women, and the Hub, another cycle shop, are turning the Motor City into a cycling city. And Inside Detroit, a nonprofit organization offering city tours and relocation advice, was begun by a Detroiter at just 25 years old.

“There is so much space and opportunity here,” said Jason Murphy, 34, one of two Bennington College graduates who bought an iconic restaurant, the Russell Street Deli, in the city’s Eastern Market area, three and a half years ago. “What we hope is that our movement of young people with businesses in greater downtown Detroit can help the many people in the outlying

neighborhoods who are still living below the poverty line.” He and his business partner support the many urban farms popping up in vacant spaces throughout the city, he said, like Grown in Detroit and Brother Nature, and buy locally whenever possible.

Liza Bielby and Richard Newman, both 30 and directors of the Hinterlands Ensemble, moved to Detroit from Milwaukee eight months ago, seeking a sustainable work and living environment for their physical theater company. Between them, they have lived all over the world, from Kosovo, where the couple worked on a multi-ethnic project, to Berlin and China, where Ms. Bielby, a Fulbright scholar, studied traditional Sichuan opera. “The minute we visited here, I felt as engaged by the people and projects going on as I had felt living anywhere abroad,” she said.

Luckily, Mr. Newman, her boyfriend, agreed. “Not only is it more affordable for us than other cities,” Mr. Newman said, “but no one is doing exactly what we are trying to do here, which gives us more of a chance to succeed and offer something new to the community.” They pay \$400 a month, he said, to live in a house that is part of an artist’s residency project called Filter Detroit.

Detroit’s revival is also being attributed to the city’s “15 by 15” initiative, started in 2008. With a goal of getting 15,000 young talented households to downtown by 2015, government workers, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, business leaders and individuals, along with nonprofit groups, have been working to entice the 94 percent of college graduates who initially migrate to cities, according to recent census figures.

“Our goal is to attract and retain this young talent pool,” said David Egner, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Hudson Webber Foundation, spearheading the “15 by 15” initiative. “We want to give them affordable housing, interesting jobs and business opportunities they cannot find in other cities.” His biggest obstacle, he added, is still the city’s reputation

of being a dangerous place to live. “Crime in downtown Detroit is actually 37 percent less than the national average, but few people know that,” he said.

Perhaps no one is more passionate about the city, though, than those who grew up in Detroit — like Monica Blaire, 29, a singer her fans call the “new Aretha Franklin.” “It is fantastic to see all these people rediscovering the city,” said Ms. Blaire, who last year was one of 12 Detroiters to receive a Kresge Artist Fellowship, a \$25,000 award that also included professional development and support for her songwriting.

This spring the opening ceremony for Hostel Detroit seemed more like a college party. While Mr. Howrani shot photos of Ms. Doerr, the hostel founder, thanking her supporters, Ms. Bielby of the Hinterlands Ensemble entertained the crowd on her trombone as part of the Detroit Party Marching Band, a makeshift musical troupe with colorful uniforms. On several picnic tables were sandwiches and treats donated by local restaurants, like the Russell Street Deli. Among the guests were officials from the office of the city’s mayor, Dave Bing, as well as the lieutenant governor.

Between greeting friends and shooting photos, Mr. Howrani, who had previously lived in Los Angeles, explained why he and his sister, Ana, who had been living in Seattle, happily left the West Coast: “Basically, being a part of Detroit’s resurgence is incredibly fun.”

Correction: July 10, 2011

An article last Sunday about revitalization in downtown Detroit referred incorrectly to the Detroit Party Marching Band. They received their uniforms from a high school band director in Iowa; the uniforms were not found in an abandoned Detroit public school.

A version of this article appears in print on July 3, 2011, on page ST6 of the New York edition with the headline: Detroit Pushes Back With Young Muscles.