

Detroit Shoreway community celebrates Detroit Avenue streetscape completion

by Frank Barnett

(Plain Press, October 2009) Who would have imagined when a struggling grassroots Cleveland Public Theater started years ago, it would lead to revitalization of the entire neighborhood-- creating the Gordon Square Arts District? And, more recently, it seemed many months of torn up street and sidewalks would never go away. However, September 26 marked the dedication of the nearly complete streetscape, a half-mile of Detroit Avenue from West 58th to West 73rd streets. An investment of \$3.5 million was more than double of what was initially planned.

A lot of the near west side development has been reminding us why the neighborhood is called Detroit-Shoreway. The lakeshore is not far away, though it is easy to forget that fact. As barriers are gradually decreasing with new housing with lake views, we've been watching the business center at West 65th and Detroit get revitalized.

"The architecture, the proximity to the lake, the history make this neighborhood different than any other in Cleveland," said Pete Leneghan of the popular new Stone Mad Pub and Restaurant.

In the past three years, belief in the vision has so far lead to an impressive 33 new businesses in the area, 13 of those along Detroit Avenue. That includes 9 new restaurants and bars, 4 retail shops along Detroit, and several artist studios and galleries as far down as the district's western border of the Studios at 78th Street, just off Lake Avenue between Detroit and the entrance to the Shoreway. One of the most exciting projects, along with the continuing renovation of Cleveland Public Theater and the new home being built at West 67th for Near West Theater, is the restoration of the Capitol Theater for movies.

Councilman Matt Zone praised Mayor Frank Jackson at the dedication ceremony for realizing this as economic development, not just physical development. The Mayor returned the praise, saying for such an ambitious undertaking, "there has to be a honcho. (Zone) and Detroit Shoreway (Community Development Organization) were the head honchos on this project."

It's not simply recognizing the economic advantages of such development. The fact that it is an arts district that is fueling this is very unusual.

Greg Peckham, executive director of Cleveland Public Art, spoke at the dedication, noting the collaboration between the architects and environmental artist Susie Frazier Mueller. The artist needs developers to incorporate and complete the concepts, but art is usually more of an afterthought. The extent to which the artist was incorporated in this project allowed for very striking elements that only enhance the overall experience.

Mueller designed a series of irregularly shaped backless benches that will soon have lighting underneath, as well as very distinctive laser-cut paving bricks. Her paving concepts are two-fold. Swirling bright yellow and red patterns at select points of the sidewalk will eventually be extended through the crosswalks at W. 65th. And then there are the deceptively simple dark gray pavers at a few points. At a glance, they look just like squiggly lines but one of those patterns, which look like a fingerprint, actually includes an abstract letter G for Gordon Square and is the logo used by the Gordon Square Arts District. Even more profound is Mueller's idea behind it all—the shape of the benches, the red and yellow swirls and the squiggly lines. The relative proximity to the curving Lake Erie shoreline, as well as the wood grain of its trees, inspired all these irregular shapes.

Barry Withers from the Department of Public Utilities and Ivan Henderson of Cleveland Public Power were also acknowledged at the ceremony because of something that can't be seen. Months of torn up street and sidewalk not only narrowed the street and widened the sidewalk (prompting a thanks to the Ohio Department of Transportation for allowing that), but hid unsightly power lines underground.

When all is complete, there will be 40 new trees, 42 new light poles, improved signage, 10 stainless steel bike racks, and two abstract internally lit bus stops.

“Resilient” was the word of the day. Susie Mueller's benches were called resilient, designed to withstand the harsh winter. Zone thanked the resilience of the business owners who tolerated the long construction impediments. Zone also noted how resilient everybody was that morning when a lot of the opening ceremony couldn't happen because of a heavy rain.