

Portland-style planning revs up the in the Motor City

The SERA urban design director takes his expertise to Detroit as demand for the firm's Oregon experience rises across the country

by Alison Ryan

Tim Smith grew up in Detroit.

And for the past two years, the SERA Architects director of urban design has been going back to his hometown, offering Portland-style expertise at design workshops that pulled in University of Michigan faculty, students and planning pros to take a look at Detroit's changing urban scene.

"The city agreed to do this workshop, but only if it would not be academic, if it would be focused on coming up with real-world projects that could actually be funded," Smith says.

Detroit, he says, is ready to see change. His workshop group, one of four that looked at redevelopment opportunities in different sections of downtown, folded an empty casino into a Main Street-style plan that would offer shops, restaurants, movie theaters, and big box stores – all the things the huge number of downtown and close-in residents have to drive away from the city center to get.

"75,000 people are considered downtown and adjacent," he says, "and they don't have grocery stores."

DJC: This year, then, you were looking at this area of downtown that they were working to put a light-rail line through?

Tim Smith: They're always talking about some form of public transportation, and they can never quite figure out who's going to pay for it. Everybody knows they should do it, but it's a car culture there.

DJC: Well, the Motor City.

Smith: More so than any other place in the country, and maybe the world. So they have a hard time focusing on doing things like public transit.

DJC: What is the existing public transit like? Do they have a bus system?

Smith: They have a bus system. It's pretty sparse, I would say. And that is because the population is, of course, decreasing. I think Detroit might be down under 900,000 now. At its peak, it was about 1.8 million.

DJC: Wow.

Smith: It's getting down there. However, I would say that the area we focused on, which is the downtown, is actually, this is very interesting. We had a market economist on our team and they did a study, and they found that the fastest-growing, in terms of population area, in the entire state of Michigan, is downtown Detroit. Right downtown.

DJC: Are they doing a lot of redevelopment down there, or is something else happening?

Smith: Well, they are. I think what's happening is, they've done a lot of market studies, and they've discovered that Detroit, as it turns out, is the third-most-popular entertainment destination in the United States. And I mean adult entertainment, so that would be casinos, gambling, nightclubs, that kind of stuff. It's behind Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and then Detroit, if you can believe that.

DJC: I almost can't.

Smith: I almost couldn't either.



DJC: I would have never thought of that.

Smith: I wouldn't have, either. But when we were there, we saw that they have a new baseball stadium and a new football stadium, right downtown. They're talking about relocating the hockey arena to an area also in downtown from another part of downtown. They have a convention center, they have convention center hotels. And there's a new development almost right in the heart of downtown, on their main drag called Woodward Avenue, that's very mixed-use. It's got office space, an outdoor park that in wintertime is an ice skating rink, there's a new Borders bookstore right there. I couldn't believe it. They're finding that there's a lot of people interested in living downtown. There are a lot of buildings that could be rehabilitated, a lot of historic buildings. It has one of the most beautiful stocks of historic buildings that you could find anywhere in the country. Many of them are vacant, however.

DJC: There's a lot of projects planned there, and some that have already been undertaken, to enhance "quality of life." That seems to be their catchphrase. There's an under-construction waterfront promenade that's going to connect to a series of bike and pedestrian trails. And then this "next Detroit neighborhood initiative" focuses on the same quality of life ideas, but from the economic and community development perspective. Do those things relate to what's happening downtown as well?

Smith: I think they do. The waterfront initiative will actually extend a trail from downtown and allow people to go from downtown to neighborhoods above downtown along the river. So it's doing that, and yeah, a lot of those things focus on downtown as well.

DJC: They're also looking for funding for light rail from Ann Arbor to Detroit.

Smith: The route that they talked about coming from Ann Arbor would go, I guess, along the freeway and then eventually come along Michigan Avenue, which is one of the radials. Detroit has these incredible radial streets; they're like spokes on a wheel. And Michigan Avenue goes right downtown. It goes right to the heart of downtown, and actually terminates in that new mixed-use development.

Our area was on the west side of downtown, and this light-rail line would go right down the middle of it. We were planning for residential neighborhoods, and transit-oriented development. All that kind of Portland stuff.

DJC: I was just going to say, so much of what we're talking about sounds like things that have happened, or are happening, in Portland.

Smith: It's exactly right. I think one of the reasons they were interested in having me participate is all of our experience here at SERA in doing light rail.

DJC: Because you guys are working on the Transit Mall?

Smith: We did some urban design settings. We were a sub-consultant along with ZGF, who's actually doing the real design work. We did a lot of the conceptual designs for some of the stations.

DJC: I've heard that SERA's urban design and planning department has been expanding.

Smith: We're now up to 10 people. Five years ago we had two people. So, in five years' time we've quintupled. We're doing a lot of work, mostly in the Pacific Northwest, but we're starting to grow out of here, too. We're doing work for California; we have a project in a town called Westerly, Rhode Island, of all places. We seem to be getting invited to do projects all over the place.

DJC: Do you think some of that is linked to Portland's reputation as a model of good urban planning and design, or is it you guys?

Smith: There's a number of things going on. Definitely what you say: There's a certain cachet in the planning and urban design world that Portland is such a nice downtown, and the region is so well-planned, so we must know what we're doing. So if we hire these guys, they'll be able to help us do that, too.

There's that, and one of the things we're focusing on very strongly is sustainable urban design and planning. Which is also something our region is known for. We're getting invited to do a lot of things because of that.

The next thing is, there's a firm called Urbsworks, and they are now part of SERA. We've been working on this for a while, and we're so thrilled to have them, because their work and their values are so similar to ours. It just made so much sense to pool our resources. So we're pooling our resources, and what's happening is the marketplace is beginning to realize, oh my goodness, they have so many talented urban designers over there.