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Architectural bright spot

College for Creative Studies bets \$136M on renovation of Albert Kahn's Argonaut

By Michael H. Hodges

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When the Argonaut building was abandoned in 1999, prospects didn't necessarily look rosy for reuse of the hulking, 11-story structure in Detroit's New Center — a district with more than its share of underused real estate.

But 12 months into the \$136 million, top-to-bottom renovation of the one-time General Motors Design Center, and with the building on track for a September reopening, there's no need to doubt whether this will come to pass. Instead, people are gearing up to celebrate its potential impact on the neighborhood.

"Any little bright spot in Detroit these days is good news," says Jeffrey Zokas, president of the Detroit branch of the American Institute of Architects. "But this is huge."

When the 760,000-square-foot art deco behemoth reopens this fall as an adjunct campus for the College for Creative Studies, planners anticipate 2,000 people will use the building every weekday. Detroit boosters see positive spinoff not just for nearby businesses, but also for the city's emerging reputation as a post-industrial arts center.

"The Argonaut project will only help make Detroit better known as a center for creativity and creative business development," says Olga Stella, vice-president for business development at the Detroit Economic Growth Corp.

The project looms particularly large in the current environment.

"The Argonaut is the only really big project going on in the city right now," says Steve Hamp, a past president of The Henry Ford who now heads both the Cultural Alliance and the New Economy Initiative, which contributed \$3 million to the renovation.

Michael Solaka, president of the business-oriented New Center Council, calls it "the biggest thing that's happened to the New Center since GM left. And it's a tribute to GM that they facilitated its reuse and repopulation."

Counting on Detroit rebirth

GM donated the Argonaut, built in the late 1920s by Detroit legend Albert Kahn, to CCS in 2006. The deal was engineered by former GM general manager of economic development and enterprise services Matthew P. Cullen. Detroit's Albert Kahn Associates is handling the renovation.

CCS's expansion represents a bold gamble on the part of college president Rick Rogers to turn his 1,400-student art school into an active agent in Detroit's rebirth, as well as a one-of-a-kind educational community with spanking-new design facilities second to none.

"It is a little unusual for a school the size of CCS to be taking on a project of this scope," admits Rogers, "but the kind of space the Argonaut offered" — allowing for both studios and dorm rooms — "was just right for the kind of education we do."

The vast project's many pieces include all CCS design programs; a new graduate school; a 300-student dorm; an 800-student arts-themed 6-12 charter school; a cafeteria; a 400-seat auditorium; rentable office space; and a retail promenade on the first floor.

The school's design programs will take up the building's top stories, with studios sprawling across mammoth floors. Light floods in through large windows whose art-deco mullion design was restored by Kahn architect Alan Cobb. Green concerns were front and center in the renovation, including an energy-recovery system that will ratchet down heating and cooling costs.

For design students, particularly those in transportation, the stars couldn't have arranged themselves more favorably.

The Argonaut's top floor was for years the home to GM's design czar, Harley Earl, and comes with a rotating "Lazy Susan" for elegant car display. That's still there, in a barrel-vaulted conference space available for rental.

The project was funded through private contributions, foundation support, and an innovative web of historic and other tax credits that amounted to \$63 million.

Troy's Kresge Foundation put up \$4 million, says president Rip Rapson, "because these major infrastructure investments along the city's central nervous system are indispensable to the long-term vitality of Detroit."

Linking two neighborhoods

For those bent on making Detroit into a bustling, walkable town, the Argonaut offers a chance to stitch together the Cultural Center, where CCS has its main campus, and the New Center one mile north.

"It represents a great chance to link the two neighborhoods," says Sue Mosey, president of the University Cultural Center Association, which has launched redevelopment projects throughout Midtown.

"Hopefully, students will be walking between the two campuses," she says. "And once the rail line goes up Woodward, they'll be taking the streetcar, which will make them more likely to visit other local haunts."

One unknown is whether a building with multiple services might discourage kids from patronizing local businesses. But Rogers doubts that will be an issue.

"Art students," he says, "don't like being confined inside."

At the CCS Cultural Center campus, graduating senior James Tabujara says he's heard great things about the Argonaut.

"I'm sort of jealous, really," he says. "Our facilities here are good, but the new ones are going to be great."

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