Erb in Detroit: Serving And Learning In Our Community

A LEARNING LAB FOR INNOVATORS

As Detroit begins to rebuild after decades of decline, Erb Institute students, faculty and alumni are helping entrepreneurs, businesses and community organizations find new ways to incorporate sustainability into the city’s revitalization. These Erb innovators see the Motor City as an urban learning lab where they can put classroom theory into practice and accelerate the transformation of commerce, neighborhoods and lifestyles into models of 21st-century social, economic and environmental vitality and resilience.

The Institute’s investments in Detroit build upon the long-standing philanthropic commitment made by its benefactors, Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb, and their Erb Family Foundation, which seeks to nurture environmentally healthy and culturally vibrant communities in metropolitan Detroit and support initiatives to restore the Great Lakes Basin.

PROJECT TEAMS FORGE PARTNERSHIPS AND POLICIES

REVITALIZATION OF DETROIT’S LOWER EASTSIDE

For their master’s project, “Sustainable Community Redevelopment: A Plan for Detroit’s Lower Eastside,” Zach Robin, Erb ’10, and his master’s project teammates assisted the Jefferson East Business Association in its strategic planning process by developing a replicable model of sustainable community redevelopment. Based on their assessment of the neighborhood, the team provided the association and community stakeholders with detailed next steps for restoring economic and neighborhood vibrancy in the Lower Eastside.

Read the report: http://bit.ly/U47XxQ

ADAPTIVE REUSE OF INNER-CITY BUILDINGS

Julia Koslow Currie, Erb ’10, explored the social, environmental and economic benefits of reusing, rather than razing and reconstructing, inner-city buildings as a means for sustainable development. Her master’s project, “Opportunities and Challenges in Whole-Building Retrofits,” focused on the architecturally distinctive buildings in Detroit’s Cass Corridor neighborhood. She recommended that the city focus on economic stimulation, financial incentives, education and process streamlining in order to encourage adaptive reuse development.


FUNDING ENERGY-EFFICIENCY PROJECTS

Energy efficiency offers Michigan municipalities an attractive opportunity to reduce energy use, save money and mitigate environmental impacts, but many cash-strapped cities lack the seed capital to invest in these projects. To resolve this dilemma, Michael Elchinger, Ryan Flynn and Graham Brown, all Erb ’12, partnered with Ypsilanti-based Clean Energy Coalition to develop a self-sustaining funding mechanism that would provide capital to eight of Michigan’s poorest cities for investments in energy-efficiency projects. Their master’s project, “Financing Strategies for Municipal Energy Efficiency,” evaluated both a fully grant-based fund and a hybrid L3C-based fund that combines grants with investor capital.


Projects continued on back page...
Jump-starting sustainability Projects in Detroit

The Ross School’s Revitalization & Business (R&B) Initiative has taken the lead in promoting Detroit’s assets while encouraging students to explore its business, educational, social and career opportunities. In January, R&B’s 2012 capstone conference, Detroit SHIFT, brought together prominent industry and city leaders and entrepreneurial-change agents for a two-day discussion of issues and ideas.

R&B’s Detroit Impact program recently completed eight projects that were spearheaded by student-led consulting teams. Over a four-month period, the teams deep-dived into issues, brainstormed with community leaders and applied design-thinking principles to come up with innovative ideas and solutions. Detroit Impact’s success in helping businesses and organizations achieve greater sustainability was driven by the talent and dedication of Erb students, among them: R&B President Cynthia Shih, Erb ’13; Detroit Impact project management co-chairs Grant Hughes, Erb ’13, and Neesha Modi, Erb ’12; R&B VP of Events/Logistics Anne Cronin, Erb ’14; and R&B VP of Conference Content Leah Zimmerman, Erb ’14.

“People all over the world are talking about Detroit, so it makes sense for a nationally recognized school like U-M to be involved with the city,” Modi said. "The reception we received was phenomenal. More Detroit-based organizations are expressing interest in working with Detroit Impact.”

The eight projects included:

- Racquet Up: A student team identified strategies to help the organization better position and promote itself to sustain and grow its after-school youth-development and sports-fitness program.
- Detroit Creative Corridor Center: Students gathered best practices and identified macro conditions that lead to successful creative clusters.
- Fresh Corner Cafe: A team helped the business create a marketing strategy for its new catering operation and secure a second revenue stream to supplement its current business model of providing high-quality, freshly prepared foods to local corner stores throughout the city.
- Kiva Detroit: Students pinpointed ways to promote Kiva’s microloan services for local small businesses in the Detroit market and developed clear communication regarding the specific advantages of a Kiva loan.
- hostel Detroit: Through a market analysis, a team outlined the hostel’s competition and customer base, identified potential partnerships and recommended an attractive pricing strategy.
- Whole Foods Market: The organic grocery store is establishing its first location in Detroit and was assisted by students who analyzed opportunities for community involvement and partnerships. “We developed new ideas for engaging the community before the store opens in spring 2013,” said Rachel Smeak, Erb ’13, who teamed up with project leaders Anne Cronin, Erb ’14, and Cynthia Shih, Erb ’13.
- Challenge Detroit: To advance the organization’s efforts to attract and retain young talent in Detroit, a team researched similar initiatives and established a go-to-market strategy for the group’s upcoming launch.
- Detroit Institute of Arts: Students analyzed the connections between city revitalization and the cultural sector and recommended ways for the Institute to participate in Detroit’s rebuilding efforts. “We helped the Institute look beyond its four walls for ways of engaging the community and for creative uses of DIA space and programs that connected more with revitalization efforts,” said team leader Jose Solis, Erb ’14. “We also worked with the DIA to determine how to expand its partnerships with other organizations in Detroit.”

Interns Heighten Erb Family Foundation Impact

Over the years, the Erb Family Foundation has inspired Erb students, faculty and graduates through its grant-making in Detroit and the Great Lakes region. In 2011, the foundation launched a summer internship program to engage Erb students in its philanthropic work.

Martha Campbell, Erb ’13, became the inaugural Erb Family Foundation intern in summer 2011 and helped the foundation develop a framework for creating dynamic philanthropic partnerships in the private sector. She also initiated a conversation around performance-assessment metrics to measure the outcomes and success of charitable work undertaken by the foundation and its grantees.

During her summer 2012 internship, Leah Zimmerman, Erb ’14, advanced the foundation’s grant-making efforts to promote green infrastructure in Detroit and helped a local watershed group called Friends of the Detroit River gain traction. She also convened Great Lakes funders to discuss strategic investments in water-and watershed-focused groups in Michigan and recommended effective philanthropic-evaluation practices to the foundation.
TINKERING IN THE GREEN GARAGE

A lot of entrepreneurs like to tinker in the garage. And many have launched new businesses in these humble outposts of innovation. That’s the idea behind Midtown Detroit’s Green Garage, an entrepreneurial enterprise and business incubator and accelerator housed in a green-renovated historic building that served as a showroom for Model T-based cars in the 1920s. Nic Wetzler, Erb ’11, joined this community of sustainability devotees in 2011 to consult on the development of a waste-to-energy company that would harvest discarded materials such as waste food oils and food scraps and process them to produce bio bunker oil, biodiesel, and electricity and heat from methane. The enterprise would “encourage people to invest their organic waste in the sustainable future of Detroit,” according to Wetzler, who serves as entrepreneur-in-residence.

The Green Garage also has attracted the attention of student impact investors working in the Ross School of Business’s Social Venture Fund. One of the fund’s four segments is the Urban Revitalization investment circle, led by Martha Campbell, Erb ’13, which invests in Detroit-based businesses that are advancing development of the city’s entrepreneurial ecosystem, work force and infrastructure. Co-founded by Tom and Peggy Brennan, the Green Garage is now one of several business-development organizations being considered for future investment.

STRENGTHENING GREEN COMMUNITIES

A ntonia Chan, Erb ’13, and her master’s project teammates were asked by the Michigan Green Communities network to help strengthen its sustainability outcomes using a three-pronged approach focused on policy, energy economics and outreach. For their “Michigan Green Communities” master’s project, the students revamped the Green Communities Challenge, promoted information-sharing within the network and developed a computerized model to help communities determine their energy usage and related emissions and expenditures, based on a case study of Wyandotte.  

Subsequently, the Erb Institute and the Michigan Green Communities network co-hosted the Michigan Green Communities Leadership Academy, where teams of senior officials and key stakeholders from cities across Michigan met July 16 and 17 to chart a course for advancing local sustainable-development solutions and improving health and quality of life. Attendees also focused on developing and financing new markets and collaborating across sectors and jurisdictions. Erb Director Andrew Hoffman and Erb Managing Director Rick Bunch made workshop presentations at the event.

PROJECTS CONTINUED …

GREEN ECONOMY EXPERT JOINS ERB

A s a newly appointed post-doctoral fellow at the Erb Institute, Laurie Nijaki brings to Erb a research background in green jobs and economic development that promises to draw new SNRE and Ross faculty into our research agenda, and to support the enthusiasm and commitment of many Erb students to understand and contribute to the sustainable revitalization of Detroit. Over the next two years, she will examine land-use approaches, financing mechanisms and workforce-development strategies that are integral to developing a broader green economy plan for cities and the state. She also will explore the important role green jobs can play in creating employment opportunities while reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and cleaning up environmental blight.

Laurie Nijaki