

# **CRAIN'S** DETROIT BUSINESS

## Retail revival: Business owners hope success breeds growth off Woodward corridor

Constance Crump Special to  
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*Photo by Nathan Skid/Crain's Detroit Business. Small shops beckon patrons along Willis Street, part of a retail corridor near Cass Avenue and west of Woodward Avenue. Flo Boutique is in the foreground, and Willys Overland Lofts are in the background.*

Simone DeSousa thrives on the neighborhood energy off and near the Woodward corridor, a place with pockets of retail and restaurant revival.

"We can't have enough gallery spaces," said the director of **Re:View Contemporary Gallery** in the **Willys Overland Lofts** on Willis Street near Cass Avenue.

"My inspiration is to create something in the city that serves the creative community. We have a beautiful space. I'm positive I would never have been able to do this in New York or L.A. It's such an exciting time in Detroit. Great spaces are available," she said.

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Herself an artist, DeSousa has had a Detroit studio for 12 years. She loves the Midtown area's energy, anchored by businesses such as the landmark **Avalon International Breads**.

“It's the reason everybody comes. This is a neighborhood with a great sense of community, a walkable neighborhood — one of the only ones in the city,” she said.

Re:View's next exhibit — a solo show by Cedric Tai — runs from Sept. 11 through Oct. 9. The gallery will be closed during most of August. Tai was a 2009 Kresge Artist Fellow, a new program funded by the **Kresge Foundation**. It provides \$25,000 grants to artists in many disciplines to develop their work.

DeSousa and her business neighbors are part of a retail revival in Midtown, the neighborhood that embraces **Wayne State University** and the medical center. Its heart is Woodward Avenue, but the surrounding streets also host a vibrant retail scene. There also are pockets of activity along Woodward closer to the central business district. The Avalon bakery, **Goodwells Natural Foods Market** and **Flo Boutique** occupy the same block as Re:View Gallery. Go north on Cass, around the corner, to find the **Spiral Collective (Source Booksellers, Dell Pryor Galleries, Tulani Rose and Textures by Nefertiti.)**

Next door is **Curl Up and Dye** salon. Flower gardens and retail charm soften the urban grit of the cluster of buildings. **Corridor Sausage Co.** also is set to open in the Willys Overland Lofts in September, selling its own sausages, charcuterie and cured meats.

A street north, on Canfield street, are unique Detroit stores **Bureau of Urban Living** and **City Bird**.

Real estate experts say Midtown is aided by elements like overlapping Wayne State University and Detroit police security.

“Midtown has done extremely well — the rents are a little bit higher there. There is not a lot of vacant space in the Midtown area, even on side streets. Landlords have become more selective,” said Greg Newman, an associate with **The Beale Group**, a Southfield commercial real estate company that works with properties in the area.

Ann Arbor vegetarian landmark **Seva Restaurant** will open a 110- to 120-seat branch this fall in Midtown's Sugar Hill Arts District. With the same menu as the Ann Arbor restaurant and a contemporary design by Aleksis Lahti, co-owner Jeff Jackson is expecting the best.

“I'm not doing this just to be good to Detroit. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was going to work. We're going there because it's good to me, too,” Jackson said.

The \$300,000 spot — financed in large part by Detroit financier **Invest Detroit** — will use 4,200 square feet at the back of a 16,000-square-foot former collision shop. Jackson expects to have 35 to 40 on staff, including 15-20 full-time positions.

Jackson said developer and gallery owner George N'Namdi first contacted him and his wife, Seva co-owner Maren Jackson, four years ago. N'Namdi wouldn't take no for an answer, Jackson recalls. The Jacksons said yes when N'Namdi helped arrange financing and the neighborhood began coming to life.

“A lot of people think Detroit's dead — but a lot is happening. Having the college (nearby) is very important for our type of restaurant. All the cultural things around the area will supply us with a good clientele, especially on weekends and evenings,” Jackson said.

Seva is in one of two spaces at 66 E. Forest between John R and Woodward being developed by N'Namdi. N'Namdi's eponymous gallery will occupy the front of the building. It will also include a performance space modeled on Ann Arbor's Kerrytown Concert House.

Seva's opening date, set for some time this fall, is contingent on a liquor license (“I won't open without one,” Jackson said.) and completion of the Midtown Loop. The two-mile-long walkway, currently under construction in front of the Seva space, connects Wayne State University and the **Detroit Medical Center**.

Near the new Seva on Woodward is **Kim's Produce**, which opened in January. Also on Woodward, **Ye Olde Butcher Shop**, a full-service grocery, is expected to open soon, as is the **Raw Café** gourmet raw-food restaurant at Willis and Woodward.

At Cass and Alexandrine, an art deco storefront is being renovated for **Slows To Go**, a new outpost for the Michigan Avenue barbecue restaurant. Closer to the **Detroit Institute of Arts, Rodin**, a new restaurant, is planned for opening late this year in the Park Shelton on Kirby.

The \$42 million retail, residential and office project called the **Woodward Garden Block** is progressing. A 302-space parking structure is complete, along with renovations to the historic Blue Moon building. Woodward lapses back into blight a few blocks south of Warren before recovering near the Fox Theatre.

Central business district retail is struggling, but there's midday activity Monday through Friday around Campus Martius. The Beale Group's Newman sees progress.

“I think there's hope in the central business district. Entertainment attracts retail. I believe Detroit has the second- or third-largest theater district in the U.S. We've also got a beautiful river, Compuware, Campus Martius, hustle and bustle during the day,” Newman said.

There's no word yet on a replacement for the former Detroit Breakfast House, although The Beale Group reports loads of local interest in a 55,000-square-foot building for sale next door. **Rub**, a new barbecue restaurant, is open in the former Brass Rail on Grand Circus Park.

Some regional and national chains that have taken a chance on Detroit are happy with their results. In Midtown, the mixed-use Ellington project is home to **Starbucks, Kinko's/FedEx, Bank of America** and **T Mobile**. Studio One has **Radio Shack, Starter's Bar & Grill, Fifth Third Bank, Biggby Coffee** and **Utrecht Art Supply**.

"I did a **Five Guys (Burgers)** deal for Greektown, at the corner of Monroe and Beaubien," said Matt Berke, vice president of The Beale Group. "They're very, very, very pleased."

"We need to push those success stories so people are aware of them, and that will spur growth."

The Five Guys Burgers chain is based in Lorton, Va. Several more Southeastern Michigan locations are slated, including in Ann Arbor.

Gallery director DeSousa is confident that Midtown can be a new model for the city.

"Detroit is an open book right now. This neighborhood is doing a good job of gathering the energy. It's truly diverse, with many women-owned businesses. I've had a really great experience, welcoming and supportive," DeSousa said.