



THE PLAIN DEALER

The Quiet Crisis: The road back

A design whose time has come

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Greater Cleveland includes many consumer products companies whose success depends on industrial design.

Think of kitchen and bathroom faucet maker Moen, headquartered in North Olmsted. Its slogan is "Buy it for looks. Buy it for life."

Then there's Saeco USA, based in Glenwillow. The company doesn't just sell sleek coffee makers, but "Ideas with Passion."

The Cleveland Institute of Art has an industrial design program that is internationally acclaimed, and many of its graduates create things here.

This city, however, doesn't have the equivalent of banking's Wall Street or advertising's Madison Avenue for its design expertise.

Yet.

A group of Clevelanders wants to concentrate the region's design-related companies and expertise along Euclid Avenue near Playhouse Square. They picture wholesale product buyers from all over flocking to Cleveland, peering into storefront showrooms decked with cool gear and watching artisans fashion the next gotta-get gadget.

Some of the idea's backers are meeting today to talk about turning that dream into reality. To get there, enough companies must agree to move some or all of their operations to the district. Property owners and developers have to cut some deals to make that decision easier.

The brainstormers working on this plan have passed the just-talk-about-it stage. At least five companies have quietly committed to set up shop in the district-to-be.

After today's meeting, the group will query developers for ideas about turning empty storefronts into street-level showrooms. The hope is those displays would engage

passersby, trumpet the talent behind the windows and wow the traffic that would ply Euclid Avenue after the construction that now clogs the street clears.

Already, more than 140 design-related companies employ 1,400 workers in downtown and Midtown. Soon, artists, graphic designers and freelancers could follow.

The city, Greater Cleveland Partnership, economic development outfit Team NEO, Downtown Cleveland Alliance and others have tax credits in hand that could trim rents enough to persuade companies to settle in.

Buildings in that area are all owned by either Cleveland State University or Playhouse Square Foundation - which are eager partners in the plan - or Forest City Enterprises, which has been open to the idea. For example, planners hope the Halle Building at East 12th and Euclid could be the core of the district.

And if the district's backers are successful, it would lead to real economic development: jobs, new companies, ventures and investment.

Crucially, the district and the critical mass of design-related employment and the new prospects it could anchor might help solve a piece of this region's well-documented brain drain: Graduates of local design programs would get new reasons to stick around.

Much of the work needed to make the design district come to life is still on the drawing board. But many aspects that could make the idea possible are rooted in reality.

We hope city and regional leaders will help the district's backers find the support they need to get there.