



THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Is Motor City ready to collaborate?

April Greene — September 30, 2014

We escaped from New York this month and spent a week in Detroit for our partnership in the Detroit Innovation Factory pilot.

We've all read poignant headlines and stories about Detroit: the collapse of its economy and infrastructure, the questions about its future, and, more recently, the tales of grit and hopeful determination as more people begin reinvesting in one of America's great cities.

We went to Detroit planning to connect with potential collaborators to help bring [our Detroit Innovation Factory project](#) to life, but we wound up doing and seeing much more. What we found was a city brimming with such creative energy and entrepreneurial spirit it was palpable. After spending some time with its people and neighborhoods, I came away with the sense that Detroit is ready for a unique kind of renewal and urban leadership—it is, in fact, already happening.

Detroit has begun to attract skillful, creative, hard-working people in droves. This was evident everywhere we went, from the [Techonomy Detroit Conference](#)—a massive gathering of thinkers, urban innovators, and technology stars—to the [Detroit Homecoming](#), where dozens of successful business leaders from around the country (either expat Detroiters or others having some link to the city), gathered for three days to reconnect and reinvest in Detroit. It was there we met Michigan Governor Rich Snyder, and heard from such business heavyweights as Bloomberg L.P. CEO Dan Doctoroff; Roger Penske, founder and chairman of Penske Corporation; and Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors.



Left to right: A woman sews convertible coat-sleeping bags at The Empowerment Plan; TechTown, a Detroit business accelerator and incubator; and metalsmiths at work in Smith Shop. The Empowerment Plan and Smith Shop are located in Ponyride, a nonprofit event and studio space.

All this buzz and energy was inspiring to see, but then it seemed almost paradoxical when we learned one of Detroit's major challenges: people are resistant to working together. Collaboration isn't a strong part of current culture in Detroit, and understandably so, with the city's history of distrust and fear stemming from systemic breakdowns and failures across many sectors.

Here was where Pilot Projects' unique perspective on collaborative design came in. In our conversations with Mayor Mike Duggan's office and potential partners like [TechTown's SWOT City](#), I got to share the hands-on, inclusive tools we've developed that bring people together to solve difficult urban problems. Our unique method of creating a physical space to foster collaborative design and problem-solving—we call it [the Sandbox](#)—was met with much curiosity and enthusiasm both for our Innovation Factory pilot and other applications.

What's most exciting to me about Detroit is that it represents an extreme version of what's going on in many other cities around the world. It's beginning to feel like a unique moment in history where social, economic, and urban sustainability are being sought with intensity and a view toward radical integration. We believe we can learn so much from this and are very excited to be working in Detroit!

We'll be returning there in December to work with SWOT City on assessing needs and opportunities for both immigrant and local entrepreneurs in Southwest Detroit, as part of the Innovation Factory project. I look forward to sharing our progress with you then.

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