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A Resurgence in Cleveland

University Circle Is Being Revived With the Help of the Institutions Already There

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

CLEVELAND — Nottingham Spirk, an industrial design firm, was founded in 1972 by two recent graduates of the Cleveland Institute of Art, in an area known as University Circle. The young designers set up shop just off campus and proceeded to build a multimillion-dollar company.

Having outgrown their old space but reluctant to leave the area, the two men, John Nottingham and John Spirk, bought a historic church and invested \$10 million to convert it into both an industrial design studio and a prototype manufacturing center. They moved in last year, keeping 70 high-wage, high-skill jobs in the area.

"Our being here is a microcosm of what could and should happen in Cleveland," Mr. Nottingham said. "The University Circle area is the single hottest square mile in Ohio in terms of real development activity."

According to research by the Brookings Institution, the potential for high-wage job growth is less likely to be found in traditional downtowns than in districts like University Circle, areas referred to as "eds and meds" for their typical concentration of educational and medical institutions.

"What's been happening, through partnerships, eds and meds institutions are becoming actively involved in revitalization efforts," said Jennifer S. Vey, senior research associate at Brookings, a policy research organization in Washington. "While they've existed in these places for a long time, now they're expanding physically, developing real estate and forming partnerships to reconnect to surrounding neighborhoods that they might have turned their backs on."

Cleveland's eds and meds district, four miles east of downtown, is on the verge of a major transformation as a result of \$2 billion worth of infrastructure investment, with another billion dollars worth in the planning phase. Severance Hall, where the Cleveland Orchestra performs, has already been renovated, as well as the Cleveland Botanical Garden, and a new housing district has been developed by Case Western Reserve University.

Other projects under way include a new heart center at the Cleveland Clinic, an expansion of the Cleveland Museum of Art by the architect Raphael Viñoly, a new wing at the Stokes Veteran's Administration Medical Center, a new cancer center at University Hospitals Health System, and a newly integrated arts and sciences high school campus for the Cleveland Public Schools. A research park called the Quad by Case Western Reserve University is in the planning phase, as well as a renovation of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and others, all in anticipation of 10,000 new jobs over the next 10 years.

Some officials say all of this activity provides an opportunity to begin turning



around a city that was identified by the Census Bureau this year as the poorest big city in America for the second time in the last three years.

"Right now, University Circle is a patchwork of hospitals, universities and cultural institutions, and some beautiful but underutilized public space," said Chris Ronayne, president of University Circle Incorporated, a business improvement district founded in 1957. "What it could be is a world-class destination with its own brand identity. Getting all of these institutions to work together toward a common goal, and leveraging their considerable resources, is the only way that is going to happen."

University Circle institutions have not always collaborated well, according to people who have been trying for years to coordinate development plans. But that has begun to change.

"About a year and a half ago, I was looking around Cleveland at our opportunities and challenges," said Ronn Richard, president of the Cleveland Foundation. "The city has become very poor, and the mayor doesn't have the tax receipts to invest."

"I thought we could kill about four birds with one stone if we could create a lovely arts, culture and housing district" in University Circle, he said.

The Cleveland Foundation put up \$1 million of its own money and challenged University Circle's major institutions to help pay for infrastructure improvements, like rebuilding rundown train stations and reconfiguring what is known as "suicide circle." This dangerous convergence of streets is the gateway to the 100-year-old Rockefeller Park, but it is also the site of an average of 100 auto accidents every year. Efforts to fix the infrastructure problems are being undertaken not by the city, but by the foundation and its partners in the University Circle neighborhood.

"There's a convergence of benefits that overlap and make them possible to get done because they're important to the institutions, the neighborhoods, the circle and the city as a whole," said Lillian Kuri, a full-time consultant to the Cleveland Foundation who is coordinating the University Circle initiatives.

There are ripples of commercial development activity as a result of collaboration among University Circle's partners. Case recently announced it was negotiating with MRN Ltd. and Zaremba Inc., two local developers, to turn a site of eight and a half acres into a mixed-use arts, retail and residential district. The \$100 million project would produce more than 400,000 new square feet on Euclid Avenue, the main street that

connects University Circle to downtown.

"Up until now, we've built undergrad dorms and academic buildings galore," said Russell Berusch, vice president for commercial real estate at Case. "This is different in its orientation. Really this is a community project sponsored by Case and developed privately by a team."

In addition to retail and residential units, it will also become the new home of the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, the first building in the United States to be designed by Foreign Office Architects, based in London.

Another residential project under way is Lane Park Villas, once a residential hotel overlooking Rockefeller Park. It is being transformed by the Finch Group, based in Boca Raton, Fla., into 96 market-rate rental units using tax credits for historic preservation and low-interest loans from the city. The apartments will range from \$955 for a one-bedroom unit to \$2,355 for a three-bedroom unit.

"We're putting significant equity into the building because of what's happening in the University Circle area," said Robert A. James, executive vice president of Finch. "It's the most active cultural life in the city and a very convenient place to live."

The question of housing has been a difficult one for the area. Few people live in University Circle, and the surrounding neighborhoods tend to be poor. To that end, Charter One Bank of Ohio recently announced that it would make \$100 million in low-interest loans available to develop and improve housing in the neighborhoods that surround University Circle, as well as small-business loans for local enterprises in University Circle.

"The opportunity there is unquestionable," said Ned Handy, president and chief executive for the bank. "University Circle is a world-class gem, and everyone agrees the neighborhoods around University Circle need to be included to make this a vibrant center of the city."

Other housing initiatives being spearheaded by University Circle Incorporated with development partners include the \$3 million rehabilitation of a building formerly known as the Commodore Hotel into 198 units, 25 percent to be sold at market rate and 75 percent below market rate; and 60 upscale town homes and condos on land jointly owned by University Circle Incorporated and the Western Reserve Historical Society.

"For some of these cities, they've had employment loss and population loss over a long period of time," Ms. Vey said. "The ability to turn these cities around takes a concerted effort on the part of everyone throughout the entire metropolitan area. But this is the exact right approach, to focus on the existing assets."