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Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Phil, left, and Ryan Cooley are two of the co-owners of Slows Bar BQ, which opened in a derelict building in Corktown.

Style & Substance

Downtown Detroit businesses open, expand

Restaurants, bars, independent shops capture creative spirit

Greg Tasker / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- From the outside, the faded brick and graffiti-sprayed building on Gratiot Avenue across from Eastern Market stands as another ghostly reminder of Detroit's once-bustling commercial past.

But inside, the same team that put Corktown on the culinary map with Slows Bar BQ has been busy renovating the old Detroit Candy Co. building into four upscale lofts. Brothers Ryan and Phil Cooley are taking the same great pains in design and decor that they did with Slows, creating a clean, modern feel with interesting elements such as Brazilian cherry wood from a sustainable farm and handrails crafted by local metal workers.

"Detroit is filling up with interesting, creative young people -- not all of them want to live in a hovel. It's probably time to start giving Detroiters more credit." Ryan Cooley said.

The Cooleys are not alone in either their



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outlook or their efforts.

They're among a small number of business owners in or near downtown who continue to show great faith in the city by opening or expanding businesses, despite the dismal economy.

It's visible at places like Park Bar and Bucharest Grill in the emerging tavern district along Park Avenue. It can be seen in Midtown with the opening of the Bureau of Urban Living, a home-goods boutique, and the planned expansion of Avalon International Breads bakery. Then there's Mezzanine, a contemporary design store on Broadway, and Asian Village, a food and entertainment venue on the riverfront just east of the Renaissance Center.

"It's clear there is a market for creative, thoughtful and quality stores, restaurants and products in downtown," said Eric Larson, president and CEO of Larson Realty Group in Bloomfield Hills and chairman of the Detroit District Council of the Urban Land Institute. "And that really is driven by resurgence in urban living. It is a very telling time in the city's life when people are willing to take a risk on things that are less mainstream, less common and, in effect, more trendy. It's a very good sign."

Attention to details

For the Cooleys, the loft project was a natural to follow Slows, which opened in September 2005. In the case of Slows, the pair and their partner Dean St. Souver, a Corktown woodworker, rehabbed two 1880s buildings on Michigan Avenue into one. They created an open, contemporary eatery with exposed brick walls and tables and floors made of sturdy wood salvaged from the original buildings and others in the neighborhood.

It's a pattern the Cooleys and partner Pat Deegan are following with the 1,500-square-foot lofts. They've created the same modern aesthetic and interesting design elements, including maple kitchen cabinets, hand-poured concrete countertops, and custom light fixtures, made from recycled wood. They are wrapping up the two-year project this week.

"We could go into these places and update them with the bare necessities, and it would definitely be a lot easier and a lot cheaper," said Ryan Cooley, who moved to Detroit from Chicago three years ago to open his own real estate office. "But we're committed to creating something more interesting than a cookie-cutter space."

Bustling Park Avenue scene

With its circular bar and 17-foot high windows, the Park Bar is the newest of the classy establishments on Park Avenue. The street -- just west of Woodward in the shadow of the Fox Theatre -- also is home to Centaur, Town Pump and Cliff Bells.

Owner Jerry Belanger and a team of workers



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Slows Bar BQ is across the street from the abandoned Michigan Central Station. See full image

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Jackie Victor, left, and Ann Perrault opened Avalon International Breads in Detroit's Cass Corridor about ten years ago. Their belief in Detroit's future is paying off with a

spent 16 months renovating the 1920s building, long vacant and a reminder of the city's decay. To create a distinctive, contemporary look, Belanger tapped the talents of Motor City artisans and purchased materials from Detroit companies.

"For people coming down here from the suburbs, I wanted them to feel like they were in someone else's city," Belanger said. "I wanted them to feel like they were in Detroit."

Home goods store fills void

Looking to fill a major void in the downtown retail scene, Claire Nelson and Francis Grunow opened the Bureau of Urban Living on Canfield in Midtown.

"We both studied architecture, design and planning and we wanted to come back to see what we could do to make Detroit a better place," said Nelson, who met husband Francis when both were architecture students in New York.

The 600-square-foot homes good store evokes the ambiance of a general store, with shelves stocked with modern, affordable items -- everything from dinnerware and coffee mugs to towels and kitchen gadgets.

Christopher Arvanites, a downtown resident who works in real estate, is among the Bureau's regular customers.

"Boy, things have changed," said Arvanites, who has lived in the city for six years. "I used to ride my bike only for exercise but now I ride it to the bank and other places that benefit my everyday life. There's this notion that people who live in Detroit don't have access to everyday things. That's no longer true. There's a lot of activity now and I have more choices."

Independent stores thriving

Across town, the city's changing vibe convinced Joe Posch to relocate his home decor shop from Ann Arbor to the Merchant's Apparel Building in Harmonie Park. The store sells moderately priced and upscale furniture, lights and ceramics by designers such as Marcel Wanders and Jonathan Adler.

"City officials are pushing for chain stores and national retailers, but what I'm seeing is the opening of these little independent stores," Posch said. "These are individuals who live in the area and see the potential. These are stores you'd expect to see in thriving neighborhoods in Chicago, San Francisco or New York. But you're seeing them here."

Next door, the Motor City Brewing Co. will soon open a small kitchen to serve organic pizza, a nod to an expanding and discerning customer base.

"What is taking place with some of these new businesses are the personalities behind them," observed John Linardos, owner of Motor City. "These people are passionate about their buildings and what they're doing."

Ann Perrault, who along with her partner, Jackie Victor, opened the Avalon bakery on Willis Street a decade ago, has noticed the new wave of businesses.

"It's starting to come into our city and it feels good. I live down here because I don't like the consumerism, but it's nice to have choices," Perrault said. "What we all have in common is that we are independent businesses."

Phil Cooley, a former model who moved to Detroit because he was impressed by the city's rich history and strong people, believes it's more than that.

"I think there is a younger generation coming up with different ideas on urbanism and ideas of being in the city," he said. "It's exciting to see. There's a different perception of the city. We're building a sense of togetherness."

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