Stop any person at random on the street and ask them about Detroit, and you will get a long litany of comments. "Oh, the crime." they might begin, followed closely by "Have you seen the abandoned houses...?" "Ruined the waterfront;" "Dead downtown..." and occasionally even, "Lost." The images that spawn such responses have been in both the national and local consciousness for so long that comments like these are often fired off in a rapid, sing-song succession reminiscent of preschool children reciting the alphabet-and often with as much critical consideration.

The problems of Detroit are such that we rarely need to think of them anymore; we can list them in our sleep. The implication is that Detroit's problems, like Santa or the Easter Bunny, have always been there even when we know that-like the background stories of both the erstwhile rabbit and ol' St. Nick-there is so much more that makes them what they are.

Now, flip the script and ask that same person to specifically mention something positive about Detroit, and you are most likely to be met with a blank, earnest stare, as if you had asked them to guess the current weight of Elton John or Paul Anka. "Well..." they might squeeze out, "there's certainly Greektown, Ford Field, yeah, I've been there, and of course, Comerica Park." The recent end of the NHL lockout might bring "Oh my God! Don't forget the Red Wings!" And, in an attempt to demonstrate their grasp of the more substantive, they will perhaps eventually follow with something erudite like, "...and how about that Mayor? He sure keeps things interesting..." only to later wonder if the latter statement might have found greater resonance as part of their initial reply.
My point is that-and this is particularly true about Detroit-the urban has too often been constructed as a place to be feared; a place to mitigate, not cultivate. However, such fictions miss the very real stories of individuals and communities that engage the city on a continuous basis and have alternate narratives about the urban experience like, "Oh, have you seen the new lofts along the riverfront, and won't the walk be nice when completed;" or "You simply must head to New Center;" "We just bought a house in Mexicantown;" "Land bank. Finally;" or even "The Chene Park concerts remind me of the ones I used to go to over in Palmer Park when I was in college..." Such stories have their origin in years of hard work done by community organizations based in these formerly distressed locations and, listening to these narratives might not only lead one to conclude that the 20-year-old stories of Detroit's demise have been, to quote Twain, greatly exaggerated, but also that there might be a reason-several, actually-to tap into that energy and become actively involved in the collaborative creation of more of the same.

At least, that's how we, at the nascent TCAUP Community Design Center, think.

In a recent Architectural Record editorial titled "It's in the air," editor Robert Ivy both prophetically and belatedly extols the revitalized academic and professional interest in community-based design, positing that architecture is "tilting in a new direction," away from formalism towards activism. Such work is destined to become a more essential, and profitable, component of contemporary architectural practice. Belatedly, because there has been a growing interest in this work across the country for some time; work that can be classified as activist architecture.

Activist architecture is best understood as a participatory process in which design aesthetics, communal sustainability, and environmental justice influence the physical growth and economic direction of the built environment. Its philosophical underpinning lies in a refusal to believe that local communities, working closely with architects, planners, and urbanists, are without power over their built environment; a belief that serves as the foremost motivation for the design center.

Through rigorous, disciplined, symbiotic interrogations in design, research, and education, our work will focus on providing ethical, participatory, socio-economically sensitive, aesthetically innovative and implementable design and planning solutions to public, private and institutional clientele in primarily, under-served urban communities. The community design center will provide space and opportunities for students and faculty to participate in this work via specific community projects, semester and summer internships, design workshops for high school students, preliminary research ideas, material for studio and thesis projects, and establishing a standing interdisciplinary design studio.

Ultimately, the design center is interested in exploring the aesthetics of equity; creating stories that have a positive impact on the daily lives of the residents, particularly those in under-served or neglected communities; progressive stories about the past and the future of the American post-industrial metropolis in general, and in particular its crown jewel, Detroit. We invite the TCAUP community to help us contribute to an ongoing tale, new chapters that will surprise, delight, engage, and inspire.