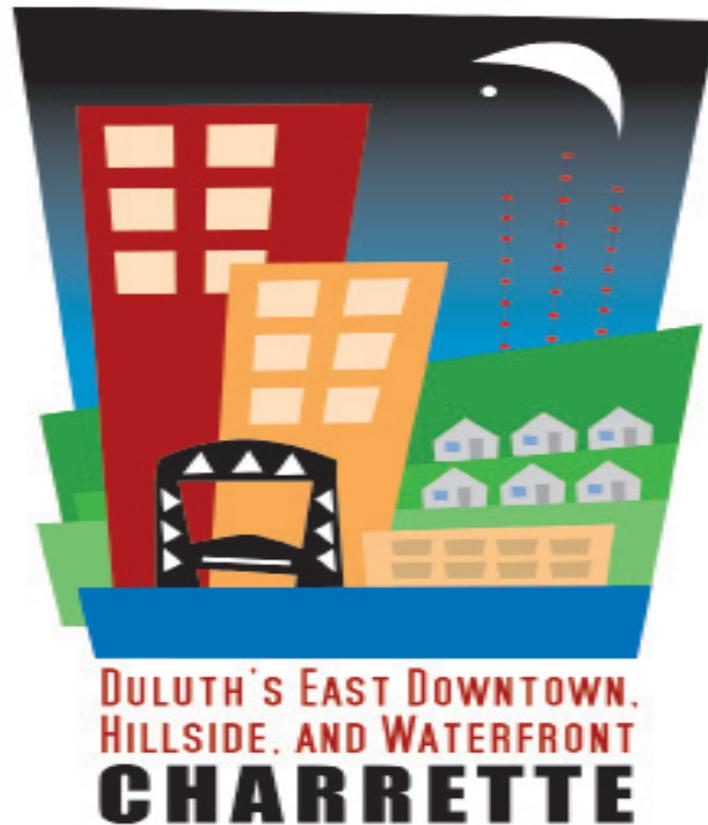


# The Duluth Creative Corridor

## Executive Summary

Progress Advisory Panel Report for  
Duluth's East Downtown, Hillside, and Waterfront Neighborhoods



*Prepared for the City of Duluth, Minnesota, the Duluth Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and the Greater Downtown Council. Based on the October 1-4, 2011, Site Visit by the University of Miami School of Architecture and a Team of Knight Community Building Fellows*

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# Executive Summary

In October 2011, Duluth city leaders, downtown businesses, and community organizations joined together to convene a mid-course review of progress in achieving the guiding principles and recommendations from its 2005 charrette. The review was sponsored by the City of Duluth, Duluth Local Initiatives Support Corporation (Duluth LISC), the Greater Downtown Council, and the University of Miami School of Architecture.

## The 2005 Charrette

The charrette (an intensive, week-long public design workshop) enabled the 1,000-plus citizens, business leaders, and city officials who participated to reach agreement on a vision and plan that would help facilitate the revitalization of Duluth's East Downtown and the adjacent Hillside and Waterfront neighborhoods. They also agreed on 10 overarching principles to guide redevelopment. The principles and charrette plan recommendations provided a blueprint for enabling new development that sensitively blends into and enhances the community's character and sense of place. The charrette ended with establishing a Charrette Stewardship Group to coordinate implementation of the charrette plan. That decision, coupled with strong city leadership, led to the remarkable progress since 2005. The Charrette Stewardship Group, working with Duluth Mayor Don Ness, has continued to track and benchmark progress since the charrette and initiated the progress advisory review as well as the creation of a Charrette Update Committee.

## The Progress Review

To receive the best advice possible, the progress review sponsors turned to the University of Miami team that spearheaded the 2005 charrette through the Knight Program in Community Building to assemble a panel of national experts to lead the review. Panel members came from different parts of the country and brought different areas of expertise and experience to the review process.

*"The 2005 charrette enabled us to think big about our community and its downtown, neighborhoods, and waterfront. What has happened in the last six years since the charrette has put Duluth well on the way to becoming one of the best places to live in and visit in the country. It is now only a question of how far and fast we can go. The Progress Advisory Panel enabled us to appreciate how much we have done and be strategic about our next chapter."*

- Don Ness, Mayor, City of Duluth



*Progress Advisory Panel members met with Duluth Mayor Don Ness and participants in the Duluth Progress Review Resource Group to report on progress and offer ideas for strategic next steps to advance the charrette vision and guiding principles.*

## The 2005 Duluth Charrette Principles

1. Boost Duluth
2. Evoke a sense of place
3. Foster public safety
4. Preserve and enhance heritage resources
5. Invest in the public realm
6. Establish and restore the unique urban ecology of the city's neighborhoods, districts, corridors, and downtown
7. Calm traffic and improve connectivity
8. Broaden the mix of uses
9. Expand housing opportunities for people from all walks of life to live downtown
10. Improve the regulatory framework

Three of the five advisors were members of the 2005 charrette team. The panel’s work involved a three-step process to ensure that its recommendations were grounded in understanding the progress since the 2005 charrette, consider the next set of challenges to address, and identify new opportunities to build on. The three steps included extensive pre-visit homework (reviewing numerous studies and plans produced since the 2005 charrette), careful listening to a wide and varied cross-section of citizens and stakeholders, and on-the-ground observations. The panel members stayed in the area, toured it by foot and van, interviewed stakeholders, and heard progress reports. The panel was asked to focus on the areas of housing, connectivity, the arts, economic development, marketing and branding involving over 50 local organizations.

**Panel Observations and Recommendations**

Duluth’s progress since the 2005 charrette has been remarkable. In six years the city has accomplished what would take many places two decades. It is also the right city at the right time. In today’s economy, successful communities are those that can create distinctive, vibrant, walkable urban places capable of attracting and retaining businesses, investment, residents, and visitors. And that is exactly what the panel’s overarching recommendation aims to build on and secure with the creation of what the panel dubbed “The Duluth Creative Corridor.”

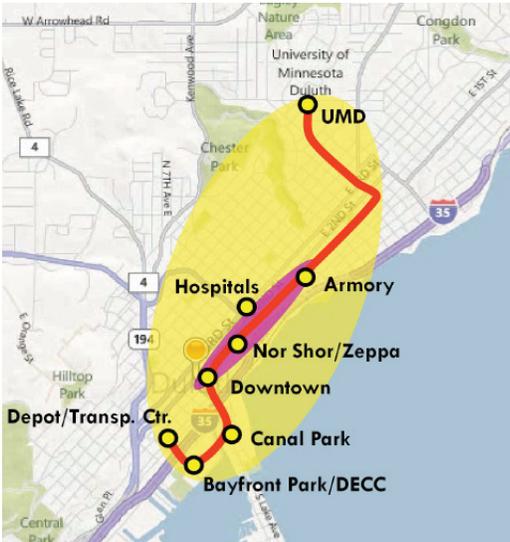
*A city at the right time*

As captured by Richard Florida’s groundbreaking research, cities that have shown an ability to attract and retain vibrant, knowledge-based industries and professions and the workforce they employ (dubbed the “creative class”) have proven to be exceptionally competitive and have resilient economies. Creative class businesses and industries rely heavily on local quality of life, including natural and urban amenities, to attract and retain employees. Place making is now a city’s best economic development tool.

Reversing what prior generations did (live where they could find work), today’s work force works where they want to live. They prefer cities that offer beautiful, natural environments for active living and exciting, interesting urban environments – the connected walkable places where they can live close to work and have convenient access to education, the arts, transit, and good shopping, dining,

**The Duluth Creative Corridor Vision**

*The Duluth Creative Corridor is where residents, visitors, and employers want to be: a cohesive, walkable urban place that contains and connects an interesting mix of arts, culture, and entertainment along with great public spaces (large and small) and all types of housing (for all incomes and stages, including students, artists, empty nesters, recent grads, and seasonal visitors). It is also a place that offers a spectacular view of – and connections to – beautiful Lake Superior.*



*The Duluth Creative Corridor (in yellow above) includes an urban living area that connects the downtown and waterfront with the Hillside campuses and arts and entertainment nodes along the corridor. A branded, high quality transit line (denoted in red above) connects the district and major destinations (yellow circles above) within it.*

and gathering places. Those kinds of places are attracting the country's two largest demographic groups (baby boomers and their children, the Millennials) and are what many consumers want.

As economist Chris Leinberger points out in a Brookings Institution article, "The Next Real Estate Boom," the next economic engine is providing the places that consumers coming out of the recent great recession want: "homes in central cities and closer-in suburbs where one can walk to stores and mass transit..." That is exactly the vision for the Duluth Creative Corridor. In the creative corridor concept, the plan envisions building on existing assets and amenities to propel Duluth to be an emerging success story for creative, knowledge-based industries in small-to-medium sized cities that can compete regarding quality of life.

### *A strong record of process to build on*

The Duluth Creative Corridor builds on and expands the city's accomplishments since the 2005 Charrette. Those efforts have advanced the charrette principles that focus on the uniqueness of place, walkability, connectivity, a mix of housing choices, a great public realm, and protection (and restoration) of the city's distinctive heritage and urban ecology, its neighborhoods, corridors, and downtown. A major accomplishment has been the adoption of form-based districts in the new Unified Development Code that provides a critical implementation framework to guide the creation and maintenance of great urban places.

Other accomplishments, to name but a few, include the progress in growing a creative culture (the Zeitgeist Arts Center and purchase of the NorShor Theater, for example), a safer public realm during the daytime, and a number of new housing developments in and near the downtown, demonstrating a strong demand for close-in living. Also notable is a new spirit of cooperation between UMD and the city that also could grow the creative culture and downtown housing for students and faculty and further the use of transit. However, the most important achievement (that led to all the others) is the strong, consistent leadership and spirit of partnership that was demonstrated by the community in the 2005 charrette.

*"Duluth is sometimes called the 'San Francisco of the Midwest' because of its dramatic topography, proximity to Lake Superior, and abundance of historic architecture in its downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. This, combined with its location in the northern alpine wilderness, gives it a distinctive character among small U.S. cities. The charrette team was inspired by Duluth's stunning geographic setting juxtaposed with the traditional urban fabric imposed on the landscape."*

- 2005 Duluth Charrette Report,  
Knight Program in Community Building

The Duluth Creative Corridor provides a policy, design, and investment framework for investments in:

- Arts and Economic Development
- Housing
- Institutional Partnerships
- Marketing
- Planning, Urban Design, and Connectivity
- Leadership

*Specific actions to pursue*

➤ *Arts and Economic Development* – Treat the arts (visual and performance) as a retail and entertainment anchor; create additional places where artists can live and work, and in the process, liven up the street. Cluster arts and synergistic residences, retail and educational facilities in nodes to maximize the economic spinoff, and use public art and signage to connect nodes. Partner with area educational institutions to add to the arts mix.

➤ *Housing* – Duluth has benefitted from strong public, private, and non-profit sector partners led by LISC that have helped stabilize and diversify housing options within the downtown for a wide variety of household types and income levels. The panel advocates maintaining a strong commitment to expanding downtown housing opportunities, including the addition of more market-rate housing and getting the word out about the fun and sophisticated living options in and near the downtown. Duluth’s economic and downtown development groups all need to help tell the story in addition to investing in making the Duluth Creative Corridor work even better as a regional economic engine. The city and its partners should set quantifiable goals, provide the incentives to achieve them, and document successes.

➤ *Institutional Partnerships* – Capitalize on the presence of anchor institutions, including hospitals, and universities, in or near the Duluth Creative Corridor that provide two of the essential amenities (access to good health care and education) that are always top drivers in the “best place to live” studies and reports. Four critical “to dos”: 1) Create joint campus/neighborhood-friendly plans; 2) Provide incentives for employees to live near where they work (a household money-saver); 3) Encourage students to volunteer and live in the corridor; and 4) Invest in improving the off-campus environment.



*As depicted above and on the next page, Duluth’s many assets make it the right city at the right time to attract and retain vibrant, knowledge-based industries and professions and the workforce they employ, as called for in the recommendations for the Duluth Creative Corridor.*

➤ *Marketing* – Strengthen and tell the Duluth story, but not just in the Midwest. Duluth is ready to compete with great urban places like Boulder and Asheville that are mecca’s for young creatives and outdoor enthusiasts. The identification and study of peer communities such as these and others can provide valuable insights into how communities of similar size and resources capitalize on their unique assets and strengths to compete. With its spectacular shoreline, dramatic topography, the Canal Park area, connections to northern vacation destinations, and burgeoning downtown nightlife and arts scene, Duluth has the natural and urban livability assets to become a national destination.



➤ *Planning, Urban Design, and Connectivity* – Adapt existing codes and adopt new regulations and review procedures that support and actively facilitate the realization of the Duluth Creative Corridor (treating street design in a context-based manner, for example). Great cities are defined by great streets. Connect the higher education campuses physically, visually, psychologically, and through branding efforts to the downtown and waterfront as one seamless, walkable urban living area. Invest in making Superior Street a cultural hot spot and a great street of urban stature.



➤ *Leadership* – Get institutional leaders more actively involved and invested in realizing the corridor vision. Establish a regular, ongoing coordinating group to keep the vision alive, assign actions with clear and trackable outcomes, monitor and document progress (the numbers are important), stimulate excitement and innovative thinking, and tell the Duluth story. The coordinating group must include community leaders from business, government, industry, non-profits, and academia that can take decisive actions that move implementation forward: marshaling resources, forging partnerships, removing obstacles, and empowering staff to effect change.



In short, the panel concluded, the Duluth Creative Corridor will reposition Duluth as one of the country’s great urban places. As evidenced by its exceptional progress to date and the continued support for a bold, shared vision, the city has the requisite public and private leadership and fortitude to make that happen.