

# Amid history and exposed brick, this area flourishes

BY BILL MCGRAW • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MARCH 25, 2009

---

On Tuesday I wrote about a block of W. Robinwood, near 7 Mile and Woodward in Detroit, that is harrowing in its abandonment.

Today, in a coincidence, I'm writing about another block in Detroit: W. Willis, between Cass and Second, south of Wayne State University.

As Robinwood has declined in the past decade, Willis has flourished. The multi-unit buildings on the street, some of which have been converted to condos, date from the World War I era, but they look like they've had a lot of TLC. The Avalon Bakery, a natural food store, clothing boutique and art space on the north side of Willis, near Cass, give the street the feel of a thoroughfare in Chicago or Brooklyn.

And one of the final pieces in the street's gentrification is gradually coming alive — the Willys Overland Lofts, a five-story former showroom and garage that was built in 1917.

Converting old buildings in the WSU area has, happily, become business as usual in the past several years. But visiting one of the newly occupied Willys Overland units was eye-opening. The space — more than 2,200 square feet — the two-level configuration and the nifty fixtures and exposed brick walls were impressive bordering on stunning.

The view from a large deck, across the west side of Detroit to Dearborn, was extraordinary. You see a classic urban landscape of old church steeples, water towers, smokestacks and lots of dark brick buildings. You look down on the roofs of Mario's restaurant and the Traffic Jam. From above, you can see something that doesn't come through from the street: How TJ's is built around an old house.

What also caught my eye in the Willys Overland development was something you don't see every day, even in renovated buildings in Midtown — an art gallery.

It's the Re:View Contemporary Gallery, operated by Simone DeSousa, a Brazilian transplant who lives in Ypsilanti Township and works a lot in Ann Arbor and the Russell Industrial Center in Detroit. She chose to open on W. Willis because of the chemistry of the street, the area and the local artistic community.

"It's in a great neighborhood, and all the elements were there," she said today. "It's very Detroit. I have this deep connection with the city."

The gallery's current show, featuring Detroit artist and designer Andy Kem's art from wood and manmade wood products, closes Saturday. A new show opens April 11.

DeSousa plans to expand the Re:View's offerings through its Web site — <http://www.reviewcontemporary.com/index.html> — and programs at the gallery itself. It bodes well for Willis.

Jason Peet, who deals with prospective tenants at Willys Overland, said 8 of 77 units have been sold. He's encouraged by a pilot program through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority that will offer down-payment assistance for qualified buyers who earn less than \$82,000 a year and purchase a unit for \$225,000 or less.

"Eventually, we could have 100 or more people living in this building," Peet said.

That bodes well for Willis, too.