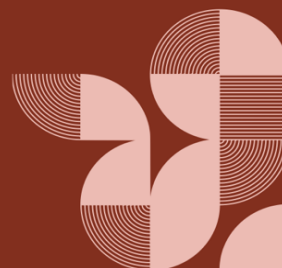


DETROIT: 2025 LEARNINGS



OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE OF DESTINATION-BASED PROGRAMMING

Since 2008, the Downtown Denver Partnership has brought people together from across sectors and industry groups of downtown Denver to learn from some of the best cities in the world. Through immersive experiences in fourteen destinations over sixteen years, spanning ten domestic and four international cities, we annually engage more than 100 participants in transformative learning that brings global vision and innovation back to Denver.

At its core, our Urban Exploration program exists to **accelerate Downtown Denver's transformation** by connecting diverse community leaders with global best practices and innovative solutions.

Urban Exploration operates on the belief that Denver's future prosperity depends on bold discovery. This place-based program provides the opportunity to actively seek and adapt proven innovations from global cities to address our own challenges. We strategically select cities domestically and internationally to deliver diverse perspectives.

Through this place-based program, the Downtown Denver Partnership is committed to cultivating a vibrant community of leaders who return to Denver equipped with the vision, tools, and collaborative spirit necessary to ensure downtown's long-term resilience and success.

2025 PROGRAM SUMMARY

This year the Partnership's Urban Exploration program brought together more than 140 public and private sector leaders to observe Detroit's remarkable urban transformation and resilience. This report synthesizes the intentions of the program in Detroit and the learned outcomes. Overall, the participants of this year's program saw how a shared pride in place, strategic collaboration, and authentic storytelling can grow businesses, increase inclusivity and facilitate lasting investments in placemaking. A common theme resonated among everyone we engaged with - from small business owners to artists to civic leaders - that the deep sense of shared pride in Detroit has had the power to shape a city and its future.

LEARNING LENSES OVERVIEW

With guidance from the Urban Exploration Steering Committee, three Learning Lenses were identified. These pillars provided a foundation for learned outcomes of the program and guided conversations and other programmatic elements in Detroit.

Collaborative Investment in the Legacy

How are the unique + powerful mix of funding sources synchronized to advance economic diversity, neighborhood livability, and a city for the future?

Intentional Community Building

How might historic systems of oppression be eroded through story-telling, investment in community, and focus on increased access + innovation?

Belief in the Dream

How are positive perceptions and pride in place established and contributing to a safe + accessible city center?

KEY LEARNINGS

Over two and a half days in Detroit, we immersed ourselves in the city's transformation story, guided by visionary community leaders like Jeanette Pierce on "Learning Journeys" that revealed the vital connections between downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods. We learned from NFL Draft co-chair Alexis Wiley and her partners how they transformed a major sporting event into a powerful celebration of Detroit's resurgence.

Participants experienced the city firsthand—riding buses and bikes through iconic landmarks like Michigan Central, Campus Martius, the Riverwalk, and Eastern Market—witnessing Detroit's remarkable evolution at every turn. Our exploration revealed these transformative insights:

Building Collective Ownership and Pride

In Detroit, pride is a driving force for urban transformation that's deeply woven into the city's fabric. When people are proud of their city, they protect it, invest in it, and invite others in. Detroit leaders have also embraced the power of storytelling, refusing to let outside voices frame the city through a lens of decline and instead becoming the loudest voice in their own narrative.

Collaborative Investment and Partnership

Private sector leaders in Detroit invest substantially beyond their own office towers, supporting mission-critical infrastructure from world-class public spaces like Campus Martius Park to safety programs and entrepreneurship initiatives. This reflects an understanding that no single entity is wholly responsible for the city's success. The result is a powerful ecosystem that combines locally invested private industry with significant philanthropic resources.

Creating Authentic Downtown Experiences

Detroit has successfully used downtown assets like their vibrant public spaces, safety programs, sports venues, and major events like the NFL Draft to bring people back to the city's core. By combining world-class spaces with sports, cultural celebrations, and community activations, the city has fostered a downtown where locals can see themselves and visitors feel welcomed. This revitalization has restored downtown as a shared community space where pride, belonging, and possibility thrive.

Economic Diversification and Entrepreneurship

Detroit is building on its automotive heritage to lead in emerging fields like mobility technology and advanced manufacturing while fostering a unique spirit of hustle, grit, and DIY culture. This has positioned the city as one of the nation's most promising startup hubs, supporting both high-growth ventures and neighborhood businesses. The city is proving it can adapt to changing economic realities while attracting new investment and creating a more diverse, resilient economy.

DETROIT LEARNINGS LEADING INTO LOCAL ACTION

Our experiences on Urban Exploration Detroit showed us that true urban transformation and resilience requires bold investment, embracing your identity as a city, leveraging your assets, and not being afraid to be loud and proud in telling your own story. These lessons from Denver have shaped the way we in Denver approach city building and storytelling in Downtown Denver.

The Power of Pride & What It Means to Say “We”

All too often the narrative about Downtown Denver is portrayed in a way that is jaded, too narrowly-focused, or all-together untrue. Acknowledging that Denver has its challenges is okay, but the residual sentiment must resolve to a point that “better is possible.” In the closing discussion for the Detroit program, participants (re)committed to a positive and productive outlook for Denver and opportunities to tell the story to others. The group identified the compounding benefits of taking a simple action, such as inviting someone to dinner downtown. Out of this conversation, a mantra of “I Choose Denver” resonated with the group and is being advanced with several participant-associated community organizations.

***What are we doing?** The Downtown Denver Partnership is launching an initiative to convene like-minded organizations to explore a unified collaborative for marketing, media and public relations and storytelling. Partners will bring assets (including positive stories, downtown activations and additional downtown champions) and resources to fuel a powerful effort to continue to shift downtown perception.*

Reframed Focus on Philanthropic and Legacy Investors

Leveraging a renewed sense of pride and commitment to Denver, the downtown community will work together to find those partners who care deeply about the potential for Denver by investing in legacy programs and projects. As proven in Detroit, these investments have the potential to create catalytic actions that reverberate throughout the city.

***What are we doing?** The Partnership will be convening downtown stakeholders and philanthropic interests to align on a shared vision for investments that will fuel downtown's next chapter.*

Strengthening Downtown as Denver's Gathering Place: A Shared Responsibility

Detroit showed us how to better activate our existing public spaces through shared responsibility for safety, cleanliness, and programming. Downtown must appeal to both local and regional residents by strengthening connections with surrounding neighborhoods and celebrating Denver's identity through sports heroes, cultural icons, and large-scale gatherings (including those that have the power to attract national and global audiences). Most importantly, downtown stakeholders and leaders across the city must partner to evolve premier gathering places into open platforms for the city's history and people.

***What are we doing?** Public-private partnership and investment models are already guiding the Partnership's rethinking of 16th Street activation and influencing early Downtown Development Authority investments. We're now supporting efforts to rethink event permitting and policies, find ways to utilize security more effectively, and explore innovative services like drop-in childcare at playgrounds. These insights will help Denver advance new approaches to public space programming and access beyond traditional activities.*