
FEATURED STORY

Royal Oak's Second Story

BY: TERRY PARRIS JR., 2/4/2010



Everyone knows Royal Oak's first story. It's the story of retail and restaurants and bars. A city where you can grab a bagel or a slider, pick up a pair of high-heels, get a haircut, do a shot of whiskey (or something fancier), and buy a bowl of noodles. And everything is within a half-mile radius. But that's just a small sampling of what goes on around here.



There's a fairly good chance you haven't noticed that there's more than one floor up and down Main Street and Washington, save for [The Fifth's](#) 18 floors of lofts. Up above Andiamo's, [Sangria](#), Leo's Coney Island, and the like, is a whole other Royal Oak. A Royal Oak you're probably not aware of. It's a different story, both literally and figuratively. It's void of [popped collars](#), bar tabs, and soups of the day, but chock-full of Mac computers, Photoshop users, IT nerds, and hundreds of cereal boxes – yes, cereal boxes.

There are 452 total tenant spaces in the downtown Royal Oak area, which the Downtown Development Authorities has running from Lincoln north to 11 Mile and West Street east to Troy. Of those 452 spaces, 155 are on the second floor or higher.

[Iwerk](#) is one of them.

Started 20 years ago, Iwerk is a software development and technical services company on West Fourth Street, next to Sangria Tapas Café. (The business really starts on floor one-and-a-half, encompassing a second floor.)

But in the beginning, as the Old Testament kicks off, Iwerk was split into two. Before it became part of Royal Oak's second story, the software development side of the company was housed in a space next to the Detroit Zoo and the IT and technical services branch was in Pontiac.

"It was very important for us to be in one location, in one place," says Iwerk's COO Paul Tucci.

Iwerk's projects range from the sole creation of software for one of the largest mental health organizations in the state to developing an iPhone app for the NHL. The other side of the company offers text support and technical services that fall under large scale IT implementation, emergency IT fixes, and Internet connectivity for hundreds of clients.

"It was important for the Iwerk culture," he adds. "We're very non-traditional and we wanted that environment. We want a place where people will want to come and work. Downtown Royal Oak was a natural fit for us."

It also doesn't hurt that Tucci and founder Tom Lewis can walk to the office from home. But Tucci says the atmosphere and creative culture in Royal Oak were also a big factor. "Even right here in this building there is a post-production video company, an audio studio, advertising, and a fiber installing company," he says.



Of the 452 spaces, 237 are office spaces. According to [Royal Oak's DDA](#), 65 of those office businesses are deemed to be creative – we're talking advertising firms, web and graphic designers, software designers, IT firms, photographers, post-production operations, and film and music industry companies. That's nearly 30 percent.

And, after a quick survey and a few Internet inquiries, it's quite apparent that above the smoky bars, popular eateries, and quirky shops, is a canopy of creatives all leasing spaces with a street view below.



There's [Octane Design](#), a graphic and interactive design firm on Main Street, above Leo's Coney Island. Sitting atop Andiamo is [CrashEdit](#), a post-production film and video company. Down a few blocks, on East Third Street, is the Warrior Woodshed, a subsidiary of New Balance and the advance design headquarters for Warrior Sport's lacrosse equipment. The list goes on and on. And then there is Bob Konrad from the [Graphics Factory](#), perched above Caribou Coffee on Main Street.

Konrad and the Graphics Factory have been part of Royal Oak's second story since 1976. These days he's rolling off large format prints

for ad agencies, corporations, and various artists. He's also a collector. You can't tell from the street but the 24 rooms that Konrad now rents above [Caribou](#) and [Elie Wine Co.](#) are shelved and lined with Wheaties boxes, board games, Pez dispensers, Matchbox cars, and a bunch of other dusty things. Most of the rooms are filled with these collectibles, causing his offices to resemble the Catacombs of Rome (but with Pez instead of bones). There is a printing business in there somewhere, jammed between decades of collectibles.

"How did I end up here?" He says, as if he can't believe it himself. To his left are two large printers running the length of the wall. Every other surface in the room is covered with prints. "Well, my partner" – though no longer a partner – "and I saw a sign at the bottom of those same stairs that said for rent. My partner and I both lived in Royal Oak. Caribou used to be a dress shop. Fields Woman Apparel it was called. Rent for this place was \$100. Even if the printing business didn't happen, we were gonna rent it anyway." With inflation, \$100 today would be just a shade under \$400.

Royal Oak has changed a lot since '76. Konrad says there is less retail and more bars and restaurants. Yet, the one thing that hasn't changed is Konrad's penchant for being downtown. "I like it," he says. "Everything is here."

Jim Berry, senior editor and founder of CrashEdit, says, "Royal Oak is vibrant. It's filled with activity. It's like a real city." Berry started the company in his bedroom, upgraded to the dining room, spent the next seven years at Royal Oak's Washington Square Building (on the corner of Washington and West Fourth Street), and is now the new lessee of a corner space above [Andiamo](#) on Main Street.



CrashEdit's clients include [Mr. Alan's](#) and Wallside Windows. They've also designed and authored a newly released Spinal Tap DVD as well as a Dolly Parton DVD.

"You run into people from the industry on a day to day basis," Berry's partner Deb Agolli says. "It's nice to come to a place where we aren't on an island."

Octane Design is a graphic and interactive design firm that calls the second floor above [Leo's Coney Island](#) home. Some of their clients include the Ypsilanti and Detroit visitors' bureau, the Henry Ford, and John Deere Landscaping. When projects get too large for them – for whatever technical reason – Octane calls up their buds over at Iwerk or another second story web service company called [Fluent Consulting](#) (housed in the Washington Square Building). "It's a good location for that," co-owner and designer Tom DeMay says.



"The resources down here are great," says the "Chief" of the [Warrior Woodshed](#), Matthew Winingham. The Woodshed is the advanced design space for Warrior Sports, a subsidiary of [New Balance](#). "Chief" is the title Winingham goes by, though, he says, "Director of Advanced Design" could also apply

"I have a photographer a block away. A local guy does my web design. We use a lot of local cats," he says. "It's perfect. And most of

us here live within a mile and a half of here." At the Woodshed (about a block east of Main on East Third Street), Winningham and his crew design the hard equipment used in lacrosse. We're talking the sticks and pads and helmets of the game.

Warrior Sports, which was bought out by New Balance six years ago, was started 15 years ago by Princeton lacrosse star and Bloomfield Hills' [Brother Rice](#) graduate David Morrow. The company now has 500 employees, a 250,000-square-foot headquarters in Warren, and a few guys designing on a second floor in Royal Oak.

Not all the businesses upstairs are part of this creative industry. Royal Oak's upstairs encompasses its fair share of lawyers, doctors, dentists, and even one licensed marriage counselor. But there is little doubt that this second story creative community has taken root and continues to grow.

"Royal Oak is having a resurgence," Winningham says. "There are so many creatives down here. The creative community is getting bigger and bigger. And that's good for everybody."

So, even though you want to look down – best-case scenario is you find a quarter – glance up once in a while. It might not look like much, but there is a whole mess of things going on behind those second floor windows – not to mention hundreds of cereal boxes.

Terry Parris Jr. is the utility in-fielder for IMG, contributing regular features to *Metromode*, *Model D* and *Concentrate*.

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