

Ep.2.31 - Rod Hardamon

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Rod Hardamon

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente, and we're very fortunate to have Rod Hardamon, he's the CEO and Chief Strategist of Urge Imprint, and he's the CEO of Urge Development Group and I think he'll take time to explain both of those to us. Welcome to show, Rod.
- R** Rod Hardamon 00:44
Thank you very much, I'm glad to be on.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:46
Yeah, everybody speaks really highly of you, so there's a lot of pressure on you to deliver today. I know that we have a lot of common friends too. But let's say you go to a party, people don't know what Urge is or are what you do, what do you kind of tell people?
- R** Rod Hardamon 01:03
That's a great question. So you know, when I when I boiled down what Urge Imprint is and what Urge Development Group are, it's really comes down to two very basic concepts. We are, we

focus on transformative change, and systemic impact. And that is the guiding star and north light, the guiding light about everything that we do. So Urge Imprint is a management consulting firm that focuses on the public sector, small and medium sized enterprises, as well as the real estate sector. And Urge Development Group is a real estate development firm. We build, construct communities and neighborhoods and buildings. And so when I when it comes down to it, I play Monopoly and Legos for a living to have the most impact and communities that I can possibly have.

E

Ed Clemente 01:53

And I noticed even when I read over some of your stuff from the website is, can you explain the difference sort of between place keeping and place making? I think you just did, right?

R

Rod Hardamon 02:02

Yeah. So we consider ourselves, you know, creative place keepers, not placemakers. So placemakers, historically, has a conversation more about reinventing a community, injecting only new things, right? What unfortunately oftentimes get's associated with very horrible words like gentrification, right? But it's saying, it makes oftentimes community feel as though, what I have had no value. So I gotta take everything new from you. What creative place keeping does it says, how do we honor the historical legacy when we come into a community? How do we understand the rich cultural vibrance that's already existed, which is a reason why we want to come there in the first place, and how do we add to it? We still got to bring something new, something exciting, something that enhances the community, but it doesn't ignore the rich community context and historical significance that's already been there.

E

Ed Clemente 02:58

You know, and I don't know if you've, you've probably traveled some like to Europe. Yes. So I mean, but that's the thing that always amazes me, like when I go to like my folks from Italy, like, they, I go to some of their villages, and they've just figured out how to not tear stuff down almost, right? And it's sort of an American thing, especially in urban areas, right, where we, it seems like that was our only solution forever, was just like, let's not keep stuff, let's make it newer, better, faster, cheaper, whatever. And I think you're sort of like the antithesis of that. So what you're saying, yeah, we need to be a little slow a little slower roll on some of this stuff?

R

Rod Hardamon 03:40

Yeah, I think you know, I think there's a lot of energy recently, especially in Detroit, in Southeast Michigan, about preserving landscapes, historical value and projects. And I don't mean historical from a pure, it's a historically rich building, but communities have historical value. You know, and there's a lot of developers here folks like Richard Hosey, who's kind of made their angle and their focus on how do you preserve the historical value of our downtown and midtown? And we want to take that same concept. Well, there are times when new buildings are required structures don't fit, right? But even when you put a new structure in, how do you still honor the cultural historical relevance of the community? And so we want to

preserve it where we can, and we're working on some really cool products that preserve buildings, which we can chat about, but we'll also understand that even when you put something new in, how do you honor the community where you're in? How do you honor what has what makes the community feel vibrant, and uplifted? And then build upon that, so that with the end of the day, our goal is so the community says, This is not his building, they say, this is our building, right? And we get that a lot. Oftentimes, community members walk around and say, so when is our project gonna be finished? We hear that we know we gotta win.

E

Ed Clemente 04:54

Yeah, because then you got buy in and it's, it's their. They're gonna take care of it better. Are there make sure no graffiti or whatever, you know happens, because you know, it's the old broken, one broken window, you know, leads to a bunch more broken windows. So it never happens, people have invested in it. [Exactly.] And you and I both know, I served on SEMCOG's board for a long time, but, and I won't mention any specific cities, but there's a ton of cities in the metro Detroit, Southeast Michigan, that are struggling to create a downtown or to have any of that historic integrity, you know, versus strip malls and, you know, big box stores and things like that.

R

Rod Hardamon 05:32

Yeah. And I think that's, that's the beauty of, that's what makes Detroit development is so much different. Because we have so much, we have a rich inventory of well constructed buildings, it means you don't even have to think about the big projects, think about the single family home inventory here in Detroit, right? The building and architecture in the everyday neighborhood is so rich, right? The more you preserve that, right, it's okay to mix in some new stuff here and there, right? I'm not saying you got to only do the old, however, when you keep it, it gives us a reference point. It's like when you travel abroad, right? When you go to other countries that you can see something that's been there 100 years, it feels different, the town or the city feels different. And when it's juxtaposed with something that's new, that complements it. It all makes sense, right? And so the fact of the question, that it's not an either or solution is how do we find the right complement? How do we find the right thing to bring products that kind of fit the communities add to the communities, right? So you get back to this is our project, right? How do you find the common our?

E

Ed Clemente 06:35

Can I give you a weird analogy? [Go for it] So my friend of mine, the psychology teacher, she said, kids are starting to lose the ability to understand recognizing monuments, because they use GPS like everywhere, right? And what you're doing is you're basically leaving the monument so people aren't just passing through life rather than living life, right? Because they're experiencing the path versus necessarily just getting to their endpoint.

R

Rod Hardamon 07:04

Now, that's a great analogy. You know, I think one of our objects, they kind of, even though we weren't able to preserve the building itself we're doing a project called Sawyer Art Apartments

were not able to preserve the building itself, we're doing a project called Sawyer Art Apartments, which is in Detroit, on West McNichols between Wyoming and Livernois. And the structure just had too many environmental challenges to survive, right? However, when we built the new project, the shape reminds you of a historical building that was there. So while it's something new, it feels similar. But the other thing we did was, we actually integrated the building into the neighborhoods, so the buildings wrap around besides streets, right? And so what happens is, when you do that, you have a choice to make, how to make it feel integrated. So we changed the roof lines. So the roof lines of that part of the building match the roof lines of the the houses, it's adjacent too. So from a distance, you really can't even tell the difference between on that side street between our building and the houses, which is exactly the point. How do you integrate and support it? So people go oh, I like that, you thought when it tells what it tells folks, you thought about me, right? I was important enough for it to be factored into your design. And that's an interesting point. Like, oftentimes, when we do these development projects, people kind of bristle at community engagement. But what I always like to boil it down to, is people just want to be heard, right? When people when people feel like they're heard, and as many ways to do that, but when heard, it's all super supportive, and doesn't mean you got to do everything they asked you to do. But when you're hearing they go, Okay, I got it. You listen to me, therefore I can I can support that.

E

Ed Clemente 08:49

Yeah, it's first really learn as a State Rep. Most people don't want to have in depth conversations and just want to make sure someone in government's listening to them. And even though you might not be able to help them always, they at least know they are not, you know, screaming to a blank wall kind of thing. Yeah. And that's good that you do that sort of engagement. And you you grew up in the area, right?

R

Rod Hardamon 09:15

Yeah. I'm a native Detroitier went to Detroit Public Schools graduate from Renaissance High School, before I began my kind of winding journey through life. Ended up going to Atlanta for college and then spent a couple of decades in New York. But ultimately, I knew I had to get back home.

E

Ed Clemente 09:29

But let's give a shout out to Renaissance. I know you are better schools period, in the state right?

R

Rod Hardamon 09:35

Yeah, I will forever be a Renaissance Phoenix, its a great school. We're huge supporters of myself and our family of the public school systems here. You know, because again, it's about that common our, right? You know, no city survives if we don't invest and support the educational systems that you're in. And so it's a biggest important part of our you know, vibrancy and kind of our creative place keeping.

A

Announcer 10:01

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E

Ed Clemente 10:18

A lot of people that we talk to that have either sort of boomerang back like yourself a little bit, they usually come back almost like because they've been to like, places that we might envy. But the reality is, you come back and you realize, no, no, we got a lot of good stuff here too. But it helps you realize how good it is because you've gone out and seen other places.

R

Rod Hardamon 10:39

You're exactly right. So I can, you know, my reference comes from New York, New Jersey, Atlanta, I lived in Korea, and Hong Kong and Singapore, right? And I've done all this international travel. So when I tell folks that Detroit in southeastern Michigan and Michigan as a whole represents probably the most fertile ground of opportunity for growing innovative small businesses there is in the country, I'm very serious, right? Now, I could have continued my career in New York, on Wall Street and kind of tried to run the corporate ladder, but the amount of impact I could have had, doesn't compare to what we could have in Michigan. But more importantly, what I didn't understand before I came home, and I'm so glad I found it. when I got here, the amount of support we get from the public private ecosystem here is transformative. Whether it be working with the local municipalities, working with the state level, the amount of support both in pushing of ideas, supporting ideas, as well as any fiscal resource that can be provided, when you add that to the max, it creates a different opportunity that we have here. And honestly, that's why I think particularly in Detroit and southeastern Michigan, we have probably most, one of the strongest cohorts of small to medium sized developers that you're going to find anywhere else, right? Which also provides another opportunity for inclusion that you don't get everywhere else in the country, right? I tell that our black developer community as strong here in Detroit is is anywhere else in the country.

E

Ed Clemente 12:08

And I would imagine the economies of scales like in a New York, just for the real estate alone almost prices people out to even be able to be a, kind of a smaller startup, right? [Very much so yes.] And so, I imagine Singapore to if you lived in Singapore, that's even more expensive.

R

Rod Hardamon 12:24

That's a whole like that. You got to put zeros upon zeros upon zeros.

E

Ed Clemente 12:29

Ed Clemente 12:19

Sometime, we'll have an offline conversation about Singapore. Because I do want to know more about it. And just as a side note, do you do ever walking tours, by the way of neighborhoods or like your projects and things?

R

Rod Hardamon 12:42

We do, actually, oftentimes, so we get a lot of invitation requests, actually, we probably do two or three tours, at least a year, if not one a quarter. There's always a group that want to understand our perspective. And our perspective is usually pretty unique in that, we're oftentimes very early in neighborhoods and communities. And that's the big place keeping, you gotta go early, right, which is a different risk profile that some others are willing to take. But so our project called the OCR Departments, which is on Grand River, that's, you know, one of the last rays off downtown, we started pushing net with my partner Giorgio Nandi. You know, probably he started parsing and appraising Grand River a decade ago, I've been on the project about seven years, right, as much as I've got back. And when we first started, it wasn't obvious that you could actually build an activate the commercial corridor of Grand River. Let's fast forward to our announcements what we're doing today, individual already building further behind us, right? We've already stimulated attract a lot more attention, whether it be commercial, retail activity, restaurateurs are common on Grand River. And so when you go in early enough, and kind of set the fertilize the ground, there are some wonderful plants and harvesters that are reaped from it, and we try to do that everywhere we go. And it's that it's that ability, I think, to do that, and because we so we've had success doing that. That's why people want to come talk to us and kind of see what we have going on. How do you blend it? How's the community engagement working? How do you build something that seems quite stark or new, but it feels like it fits quite seamlessly in a community. That's how you know you hit the mark.

E

Ed Clemente 14:20

Well, the only reason I mention it, I just had in 10 people from Singapore as international guests, but they were very interested in how they can apply some of the things we're doing in Detroit here to some of the neighborhoods they are. And I wish I would have known that because I would have given you a call and say hey, maybe you can help these guys out.

R

Rod Hardamon 14:40

When next time you give me a call. We'll be Johnny on the spot.

E

Ed Clemente 14:42

I will. I will I just wish I would have known you but you sooner. But you know your reputation came really through the MEDC because I know you've done a few projects now with the MEDC. And why don't you touch on that then also mentioned our other friend Keona Cowen too.

R

Rod Hardamon 14:57

Yeah, so we have so on the real estate development side, we have two projects under construction currently, which I've mentioned the OCR apartments, and we also have the Sawyer Art Apartments, those have both been wonderful partnerships with support from the City of Detroit, the State of Michigan, we leverage, MEDC has been a huge supporter of ours. For the CRP program, which have been instrumental in us kind of building these products over the finish line, that support is critical, especially when you're going into emerging neighborhoods, you need that type of support and patient capital to make these products viable. In addition, one of the things that's also what makes part of our ecosystem very unique and very viable for smaller inclusive development, is that significant state support you can get, right? Project makes sense than MEDC is trying to help your project get to the finish line. Not a barrier. But let me help you get there if it makes sense. So you do your part, we can do our part. The other piece of that puzzle, which makes the tray very unique is our CDFI community, right? From the Invest Detroit's of the world, which is a big partner of ours, whether it be from the capital impacts the list, those individuals are quite important, our ecosystem. What I think is oftentimes goes understated is, you know, any small business has a challenge getting capital from a traditional bank. If you're a real estate firm, it's even bigger, right? So the CDFIs here locally, have stepped in and filled that senior funding gap. They let you know, again, if the project makes sense, you have a fair chance of getting that support and funding. With that type of calm confidence or certainty the back of your head, you continue a project along, you take the necessary risks, to get a deal done. And that's why folks like Invest Detroit and Keona Cowan in particular been really important. She's such an advocate in the community, she's such an advocate for inclusive development, that when you have partners and advocates like that pushing, it gives developers, especially of a smaller size, the chance to push through. Now I don't know if I can continue to call myself a small developer at this point with what we got going on. But we're relatively small in the grand scheme of things, right? And so but again, when you have partners and champions pushing, you're doing that with at the city level, whether it's the Don Renchers the Antoine Bryants of the world the Keonas and the Dave Blaszkiewicz's of Invest Detroit, or whether it be the team Quentin and the team at MEDC, that all kind of makes it work and makes us a very unique place to be.

E

Ed Clemente 17:19

Yeah, I don't want to give you a challenge, but she had a lot of downloads for her podcast.

R

Rod Hardamon 17:24

Yeah, I don't know if I can hit her downloads, but I'm going to do my best. And one of the things about one of things about like that great partnership with Keona and I, you know, we explore new ways to fill gaps, right? And so one of the biggest things we've come up with recently is that we talked about what's great about our ecosystem, we're never afraid to say what's missing. And one of the biggest things we realized was missing was we still need more equity support for black and brown developers in Detroit. And so we created a new firm, a new project called Ebiara, which Ebiara is a fund that puts dollars and capital into the development firms with black and brown developers doing projects in Detroit to help ease that capital gap. Figure out what's the one of the best ways to remove systemic historical barriers, is to provide the capital solutions that folks need, and we're trying to do that as well.

E

Ed Clemente 18:11

Yeah, the resources are always a big barrier at times. Y you're gonna laugh, but we're close to the end already and I told you, it goes by fast. But if you had a chance to go back and talk to your high school self, now that you've explored the world and you've been around, what would you go back and tell your 17 year old self or even a high school kid today?

R

Rod Hardamon 18:34

Yeah, luckily, I have kids so I do have conversations like this quite often. But it's probably comes down to two basic things. One is, find your true self as soon as possible, and learn to be who you are. One of the biggest things my challenges early in my career is that when I first went to New York and Wall Street, I wasn't sure I could be Rod Hardamon, be a intelligent, articulate, super hyper competitive, black man on Wall Street. Can I do that and be accepted. And so I spent probably the first year trying to figure out how to do everything but that, and we, I call it we call it the imposter syndrome. And if you're working hard, you have one hand covering your mask, what kind of a masking face and what hand working, there's no way you're working at your optimal capacity, right? But when you let that mask go, and you get to use bring your full self to the table, that's when the magic happens. So the biggest thing is, you're valuable, right? You're important, value yourself in the world of value you as well. And if they don't go somewhere else. So that's lesson one. Lesson two is oftentimes we'll focus on the failures of life, where they tripped, right, where they fell down. One thing that we say in our household, we don't have, we don't say losses, we only have lessons, right? So every opportunity for stumbling for tripping for even falling down to having a momentary failure, it's just an opportunity to have a life learning lesson to repare yourself for further. And, you know, my son's a wonderful budding recording artists, he says, you know, why does stardom have to come, right with a trip in the fall? Because if you don't have the pain, the experience of failure, you never appreciate it, nor understand how to take yourself and put yourself to the next level.

E

Ed Clemente 20:27

Here's a quote, I'm going to paraphrase it for your first statement is that Confucius says everybody has two lives. And you, when you figure out you have two lives, that's when your second one begins. [There you go.] And you know, it took you a while maybe to go through New York to figure that out. But at least you figured it out.

R

Rod Hardamon 20:45

Now I'm back on my real life has already begun.

E

Ed Clemente 20:48

I'm glad to hear it. And the very last question for you is, you've got kids, you said, what do you like doing in Detroit or in Michigan? Like what do you like doing either activities or places?

R

Rod Hardamon 20:59

Yeah, we love just about everything. So we're big fitness buffs. So whether it be running the parks, you know, whether it be going out into the riverwalk whether it be going out to Palmer Park in our own neighborhood, right? There's just so many beautiful places in Michigan to really just not only be in nature, and explore nature, that was one of the things I didn't appreciate until I left and came back. Now going in New York, or even New Jersey, there's not the just the common population of trees and life that you have on every day in Michigan, which I love, right? So that's a big thing. And then we're just like every other family we love, we love the movies, we support the local scenes. We're were big foodies, right, so if it's a new restaurant, we're gonna find it. You know, we try to, you know, thoughtfully spend our money, right? We want to use our money to support the local economy and so I love entertainment and food, that's an easy way to do it.

E

Ed Clemente 21:54

Wow, that's a lot of stuff you guys do? Glad to hear it. Well, anyway, you've been a wonderful guest, Rod, and you again are Rod Hardamon, he's the CEO and Chief Strategist of Urge Imprints as well as the CEO of Urge Development Group, and Rod, you're a lot of fun. I hopefully keep in touch with you. I hope we can do some projects together ourselves.

R

Rod Hardamon 22:15

Let's do it. And when you get those guests from Singapore to come back, let me know.

E

Ed Clemente 22:18

I'll let you know for sure. All right, thanks again. [Take care] Make sure you join us next week where I guess there's gonna be Francisco Betti is the Head of Advanced Manufacturing and Production at the World Economic Forum in Geneva, Switzerland.

A

Announcer 22:36

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