

# TINKER BUILDER MOGUL GUY

Joel Landy revitalizes  
Detroit, one movie  
theater at a time

by Inkoo Kang

Joel Landy is a collector. The 60-year-old land developer and Detroit native collects buildings (currently 40), cars (300 at one point), local art, and old machines—cameras, radios, and medical equipment. His lifelong love of industrial machinery bloomed on an elementary-school field trip to the Ford Motor Company. “I love the mechanism and the art of the design of early machines,” he says.

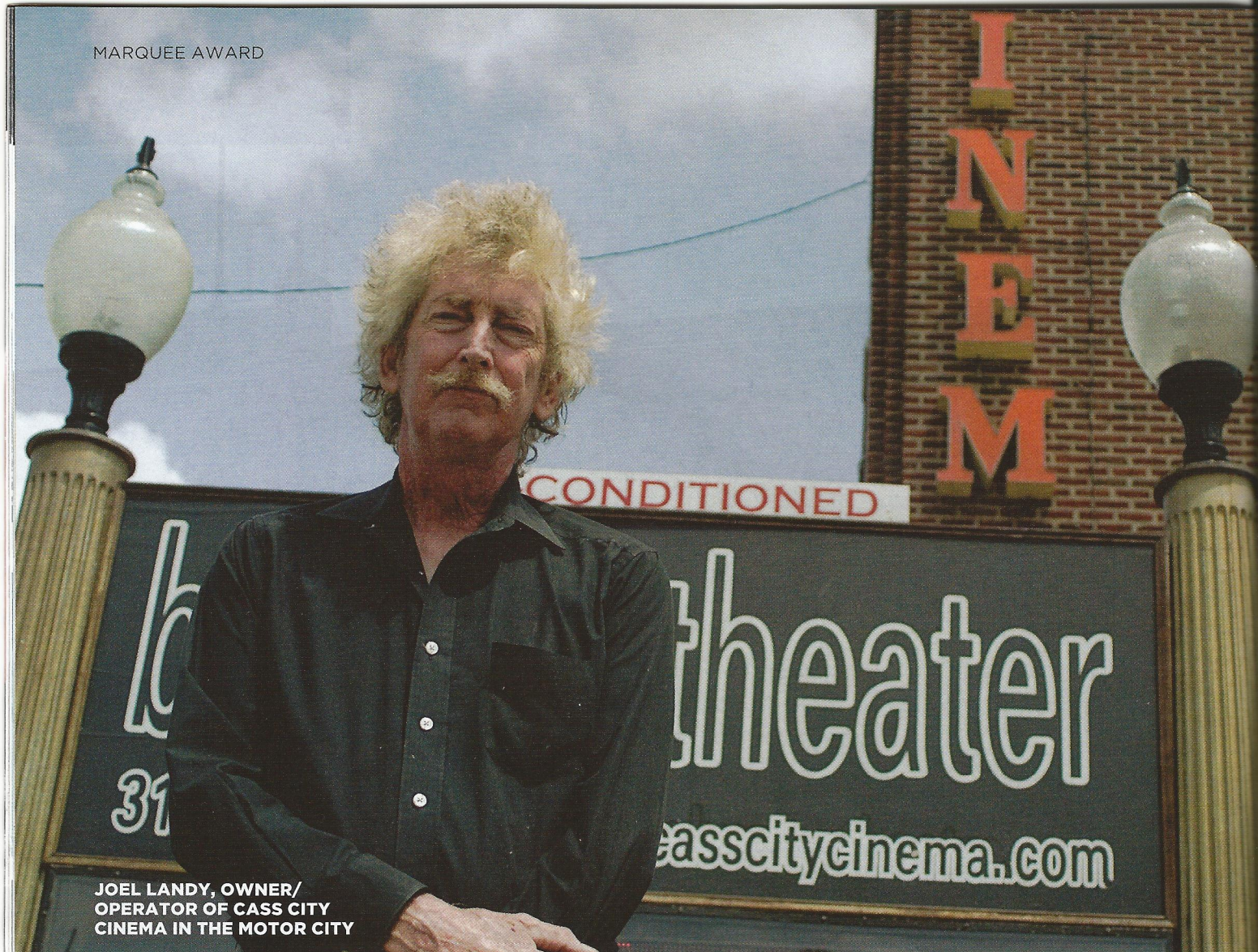
Over the past 10 years, Landy has been adding film projectors to his collection, but he never imagined he would own and operate a movie theater. Actually, that’s not exactly true: he once envisioned launching a “drive-in on the roof.” The plan was to take 30 of his restored British sports cars—Jaguars, MGs, Triumphs, and Rolls Royces—and crane them to the top of one of his buildings. Patrons would then get into one of these vintage automobiles and enjoy an old-fashioned but luxurious movie experience.

*(continued on page 20)*





**“ WHEN YOU OWN [A] BUILDING, IT’S NOT YOURS. YOU’RE HOLDING IT IN TRUST FOR THE PUBLIC ... [MY DREAM IS TO MAKE DETROIT A] QUALITY PLACE FOR MYSELF AND MY FRIENDS TO LIVE AND HAVE THE FREEDOM NECESSARY TO PROMOTE OUR CREATIVE LIVES. - JOEL LANDY**



**JOEL LANDY, OWNER/  
OPERATOR OF CASS CITY  
CINEMA IN THE MOTOR CITY**

The “drive-in on the roof” idea turned out to be impractical, but that didn’t keep Landy from opening a ground-floor movie theater when opportunity knocked. Opportunity, it turns out, came in the form of two “silly young kids [who] didn’t know where money came from.” In 2009, a pair of fledgling impresarios approached Landy with a proposal to convert the auditorium of the Burton International School, an abandoned public school the developer had recently acquired, into a 140-seat picture palace. At the Burton Theatre, the two twentysomethings ran a steady program of cult horror films like *The Human Centipede* and attracted enough attention to brag to the *New York Times* that they spent only \$6,000 to start a movie theater in downtown Detroit—never mind the \$280,000 Landy paid to renovate the auditorium. Then one night, they absconded away without a word after 18 months of shaky business.

Thus began Landy’s new career as a movie theater owner. He was unfazed by the challenge, declaring, “I’ve had lots of lives. I’m not afraid of change.” It’s true: before he was a “community developer,” he was a high-school

dropout, a printer, a writer, an activist, a community organizer, a foreign-car mechanic, and the general manager of a contracting company. “I can do every trade,” he boasts.

Landy quickly set out to remake the Burton Theatre in his image. He renamed it the Cass City Cinema at the Burton Theatre, paying tribute to a Chicago institution where he saw political and experimental films during his youth. Then Landy put his collector’s savvy into constructing what he calls “the theater that eBay built.” From the online auction house he bought projectors, steel seats, and the popcorn, cappuccino, and hot cocoa machines. He built the sound system after purchasing the equipment on eBay and taught himself how to repair or reconstruct all the machinery by reading manuals on Film-Tech and watching videos on YouTube.

Cass City Cinema boasts other Landy-esque touches. A lifetime spent marveling at the Motor City’s grand, ornate stage theaters inspired him to decorate with proscenium art, a Victorian settee, and chandeliers obtained from a Catholic church. There are more idiosyncratic details too, like the pool table in the men’s

restroom, which is technically coed, and the elegant, women-only “powder room.” The programming is first-run art-house but includes films Landy “feel[s] compelled to show my audience.”

But Cass City isn’t just a hobby for Landy; it’s a business investment. And he has plenty of reasons to be confident it will prosper. It’s the only movie theater within a 10-mile radius and the first one built in Detroit in three or four decades. After the Burton underwent twinning and acquired a digital projector, revenue shot up substantially. And thanks partly to theater rentals, it passed the break-even point in the first year.

Most importantly for a developer like Landy, theaters bring in the crowds. Cass City is a landmark in “Landyland,” as he calls the three city blocks in the historic Cass Corridor neighborhood he owns. Landy even has a battery-powered, three-seat miniature train—“it’s ultralight rail”—that connects the theater to a nearby bistro and to his 19th-century mansion (that he purchased for \$4,500). Landy laid the 1,000 feet of track himself after buying the train on—of course—eBay.

Cass City Cinema is a cornerstone of the revitalization of the neighborhood, as well as part of Landy's broader strategy of starting new businesses in the area, selling them, then collecting the rent. His investments in the neighborhood—\$30 million to \$40 million by his own estimate, and well over a billion elsewhere in Detroit—are definitely paying off. As a landlord, Landy's currently enjoying 100 percent occupancy in his properties, and the theater itself shares the building with a Montessori nursery school, two law offices, an art gallery, and several artists' and photographers' studios. New restaurants appear regularly, and a Starbucks and a Whole Foods recently opened franchises a few blocks away. He is a fervent optimist about his hometown's future, claiming, "Detroit is booming. I have 20 people moving into Detroit looking for a place to live every day, four or five people looking to open a business in the midtown area."

But Landy, who may well be America's nicest developer, doesn't solely measure Motown's success by properties rented and leases signed. If anything, he seems rather humble about his role in drawing people back to downtown Detroit, asserting, "When you own [a] building, it's not yours. You're holding it in trust for the public." His dream is to make the once-proud Motor City a "quality place for myself and my friends to live and have the freedom necessary to promote our creative lives."

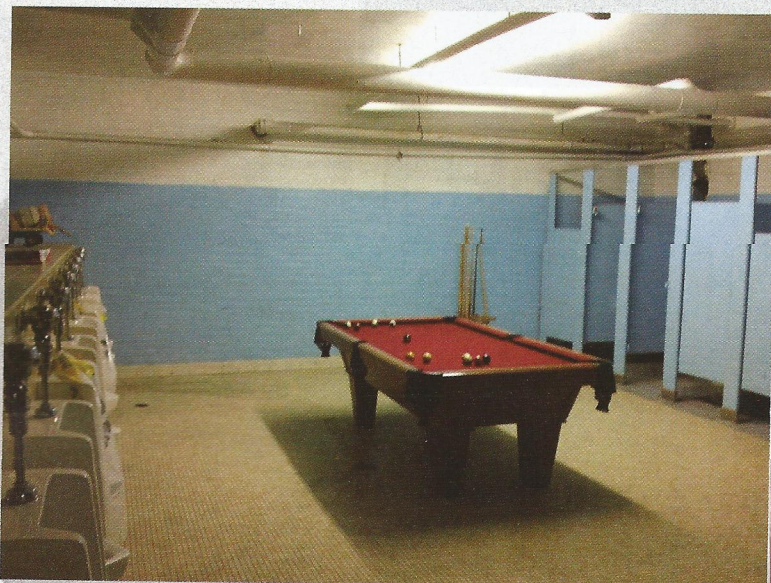
He's doing his part to support Detroit's burgeoning film scene. Landy keeps in touch with film schools in the area and hosts monthly screenings called "Detroit at the Movies," a program that features films by local directors. "It's so encouraging," he says. "Every week I meet a new filmmaker!"

To be sure, safety and security are still issues in downtown Detroit. Cass City is located in an area that's been called "the worst neighborhood in the world." Landy and his staff take every precaution, like installing floodlights in the parking lot for extra brightness and restricting entry into the auditorium by having the theater's only door located in the back of the building and past a roundabout corridor. Theater employees are constantly watching the security monitors, and Landy himself regularly checks on the property via his iPhone. In 30 years, he's never had an incident.

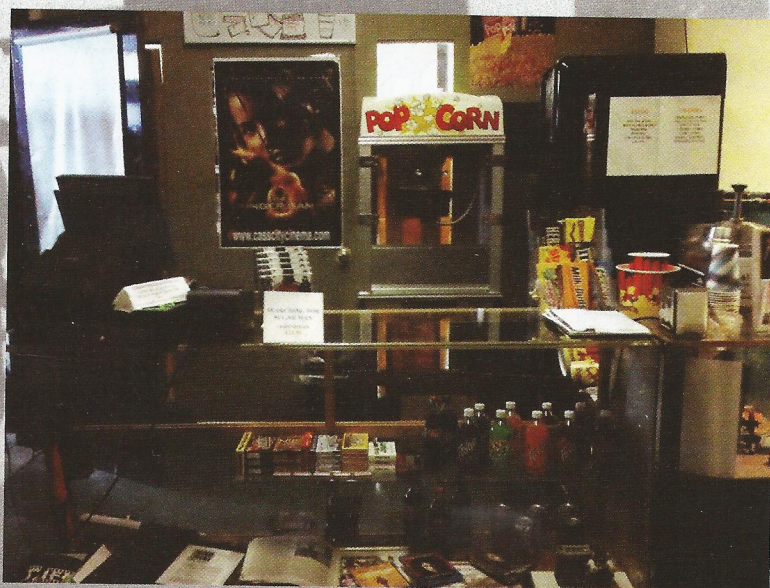
These days, Landy says he devotes 50 hours a week to running his three-year-old theater and another 80 hours managing his other properties on 21 computers scattered across various buildings. Does he sleep? "Not a lot," he admits. His role model is Thomas Edison, who slept in "20-minute power naps."

"I have a lot of important things I want to get done," he says. "My life is short. I want to get them done now." With all he's accomplished, does he feel like a mogul? "No. I feel like a hardworking ant."

**YUP—THAT'S  
A POOL TABLE  
IN THE COED  
BATHROOM**



**"THE THEATER  
THAT EBAY  
BUILT"**



**"I LOVE THE  
MECHANISM  
AND THE  
ART OF THE  
DESIGN  
OF EARLY  
MACHINES"**

