Dead Moines

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Why the capital city isn't so capital.

Story by Kate Kompas

Des Moines, Ia. — For anyone who is searching for the perfect analogy to illustrate why Des Moines, the state's capital, our most populated city, is about as exciting as a church ice cream social, I offer this: my mother. My mother is a 46-year-old children's librarian who lives outside the Quad Cities, which, it seems, is one of the few, larger Iowa communities that is really thriving, but I'll get to that later. She watches the Hallmark Garden channel. She likes crafts and says, "Bullroar" when she means "Bullshit." She's a great lady, but she's not exactly hip. And even she realizes that Des Moines is lame.

"I've been to a few conventions there, and it seems that at 5 p.m., the whole city just closes up," she said to me not too long ago when I was complaining about the city's dilapidated look. "We wanted to go out to eat and everything, but we had to drive away from the downtown area." She prefers the Quad Cities, which I have to admit looks a little less hick and a little more metropolitan every time I go home. There's always more construction and projects in the works, more restaurants, more stuff to do in general. It's far from being New York City, Chicago or even Minneapolis, but you, likely a 20-something reader, could probably manage to live there and not get too bored.

Des Moines, on the other hand, seems boring. You know it, too, because if you're like most Iowa State University students, you probably never go there unless you get fed up with North Grand and get a hankering for a mall that doesn't have a Strawberry Patch store, or if you decide the journey to Iowa City during Veishea weekend seems a little too long and you must find somewhere to get sloshed in peace. Why am I picking on Des Moines? Because Des Moines, even though rural folks hate this fact of life, is indicative of how the rest of the state's doing as far as quality of living. Why would I expect Des Moines to be, say, more interesting than the rest of our notoriously boring state?

That's exactly the point. As college students in Iowa, we know the statistics. We hear the phrase "brain drain" as often as "soybeans." We know that more than half of us will leave the state after graduation, in part because of a lack of good-paying jobs (especially if you're an education major), but more likely because of the culture of the state. Or lack thereof. Studies show that Iowa's graduates will risk the crime and other unpleasantness that come with bigger cities to get a little excitement.
Marc Hansen, Des Moines Register columnist

The bottom line: If you want us to stay here, give us a little incentive. You'll have to make the state a more interesting place to be. If Des Moines shapes up, it will only be a matter of time before the rest of the state follows its lead (at least one can hope). It might seem frivolous to suggest pumping money into making Iowa "more fun" when the state's in dire financial straits and we're up to our ears in tuition increases, but we should consider what will be most beneficial in the long term. So here's a look at Des Moines' lackluster status, what action area leaders are taking to change its status, and possible solutions to make the capital something more than a stop on the way to Kansas City.

A Field-Research Experiment

It's nearing 10 on a Saturday night when I decide to do my "research," i.e., go to Court Avenue, about a three-block stretch in downtown Des Moines, to see what's happening. Or not. I get there, and much to my surprise (a pleasant surprise), my companion and I find a parking spot within 30 seconds. I work in Des Moines during the day, so I'm well aware of the precious commodity that parking spaces are during the day. Tonight, no problem. We start to walk to the "heart" of Court Avenue, which was accented by some really, really bad, really, really loud dance music that I can recall from high school dances. It was a typically frosty Iowa fall night, and there was almost no one on the streets. No one. There was a line for one bar, and it consisted of about three people (which, as every ISU student knows, would be a blessing on an overly congested weekend night in Campustown). There are a bunch of cool-looking restaurants and clubs, but there's only a spare amount of people in them. I stop to talk to a fellow ISU student, Jeff Julich, 20, sophomore in electrical engineering, who was there with a woman who goes to an out-of-state school. He said he rarely goes to Des Moines to party, in part because the majority of the hot spots are 21 and over, just like Ames. "It's Iowa," he says as explanation for the empty streets on the night of the ISU vs. Baylor football game. It should have been a big night for Des Moines. It didn't seem to be. "We're going to go walk over there and look at the river," says Julich, gesturing to a spot about a block down. "That's how much fun we're having."

Troy Hebbelethwaite, 23, drives almost an hour to get to Des Moines to hang out. Yeah, it's boring, he says, but it's better than his Podunk Iowa home. "I'm from Kansas City, so this is really dead," he says. "It's seems like there's a lot of stuff going on, but nobody's spilling out into the streets."

My partner in crime and I get out of the cold and into Court Avenue Brewing Co., a pretty classy bar and restaurant. There's no waiting for a table (I guess the best thing you can say about Des Moines on a weekend is that it doesn't inconvenience you). Court Avenue Brewing Co. briefly closed down and then reopened a few months earlier. The Raccoon River Brewing Co., located in the same downtown area, also had to close down and reopen because the owner told Des Moines media that he was losing too much money, while a similar establishment he owned thrived in Omaha.

Is that where Des Moines is right now? Not even in the same league as Omaha? Come on, we're never going to be a Chicago, New York City, Kansas City, New Orleans, etc., but at the very least we can be an Omaha, right?

Wrong-o. Omaha gets more major shows, has a far more happening bar scene, a better zoo, a better minor-league baseball team, a better local music scene, a thriving downtown night district and all this smack dab in the middle of one of the most conservative areas in the country, freakin' Nebraska. Sure, Omaha has more people, about 200,000 more when you compare the two metropolitan areas. Still, they're just kicking the cultural crap out of us.

We may not even be as hip as Cedar Rapids anymore. The state's second-largest city is interesting enough that a high school friend of mine who just graduated with a college degree doesn't want to move away from the C.R. bar scene. No one says, "I don't want to leave Des Moines, where else could I have so much fun?"

My partner and I exchange explanations for what could be going on in Des Moines and in a greater sense, Iowa. He suggests that maybe Des Moines residents in themselves are boring (maybe, but too simple. They're out somewhere. They're just not out in Des Moines). That leads to another question, what do we, we being the collective "youth of Middle America," want anyway? As Des Moines Mayor Preston Daniels pointed out to me, he knows kids who live in the heart of the Big Apple and still complain about being bored. I believe it, but it's something more than just a function of our youth.

A Solution?

At least people are talking about the fact that Des Moines is boring. That means they realize it's a problem. And that means they are trying (or at least talking about) doing something about it. For some the start is the Iowa Events Center, a multimillion-dollar Vision Iowa project that is, of press time, bogged down in legal battles. To advocates of the Iowa Events Center, which would ideally hold conventions, big-name concerts that right now pass Iowa by, etc., it is one of the keys to revitalizing the city.

For Des Moines Register Metro columnist Marc Hansen, supporting the Iowa Events Center in his columns was a no-brainer. As a former sports columnist for the Register he's seen what stadiums can do for cities like Denver and Cleveland. "I think it's a start," he says. "It's a very competitive thing. Cities are vying for conventions, and if you're going to be competitive you have to get them there and keep them there." He has concerns about projects such as the Gateway Center because he doesn't want just a pretty industrial park. "We need to make Des Moines a 24-hour city," he says. "It can't just be a ghost town at night."

Mayor Daniels says the Iowa Events Center will attract more restaurants, housing and the like to the area. Right now, he gives Des Moines a "C" grade in terms of stuff for young folk to do. The Iowa Events Center would be part of "continuing to work to try and create a dynamic atmosphere." He warns, though, that

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- Marc Hansen, Des Moines Register columnist

photos by Nicolle Ausen
there's only so much that can be done. "You can't expect government to entertain you," he says. "Most areas that are highly successful have a lot of people." Daniels knows a little something about a lack of entertainment in Des Moines - the city hasn't been able to effectively support a jazz scene, one of his favorites.

Hansen doesn't blame young people for wanting to relocate to places such as Minneapolis, Chicago or Kansas City when they're just starting out. He'd even recommend it to them. "But I think that Des Moines should be considered a good place to come back to, and right now, I'm not sure that it is."

Daniels says that's one of his goals - to make Des Moines more palatable to young professionals.

Hansen says there's probably plenty of activities for families to do in Des Moines. For young people, that's a different story, especially for the city, he says. "We have to do more than lip service to make this a better place for families to do in Des Moines."

For young people wanting to relocate to places such as Minneapolis, Chicago or Kansas City, Hansen says there's probably plenty of opportunities for them to do in Des Moines. For young people, that's a different story, especially with the city leaders in effect canceling concerts by denying promoters liquor licenses like they did the last few days. They heard about it, too, in tons of phone calls. They even spurred some people to register to vote.

As far as giving signs that say they don't want to keep young people, they're failing miserably," Hansen says. "A concert isn't that big of deal, but it's still of symbol of the way Des Moines thinks."

Chris Coleman is the only Des Moines City Council member who voted against the liquor license and did not run for reelection, says he's sympathetic to a point. He says the problem is that everyone complains and no one does anything about it. Youth-Advisory Councils just don't work, he says, because the same people who say Des Moines needs to change only show up for one meeting. "We can't get anybody to come to the meetings," Flagg says. "It's really just us."

As for whether he wants young people to stay in Des Moines: "I'm not going to beg them or cater to them. There are plenty of things they can do on their own. Individuals can take care of their own happiness." (Flagg goes on to bring up recently cancelled raves in the area, calling them "depraved" and saying that he has no idea why anyone would want to go to them. I didn't bring up raves, but whatever).

Councilman George Flagg, who was the only City Council member who voted against the liquor license because she said the reason bars such as Drink in Clive and Vieux Carre in West Des Moines are so popular while Court Avenue remains empty is because they're new. Councilman Brooks agrees and is more succinct: "If it wasn't for Des Moines, the suburbs wouldn't exist," he says. "No one community is going to provide everything."

Enter Ryan Halterman, a member of Des Moines' FORCE committee, who was formed by Coleman. Halterman's 29, and he says for the most part, he likes Des Moines just fine, thank you very much, but admits, "there's always different things that could be done." Halterman, an employee of the city's parks and recreation department, says the committee has held events such as concerts and disc golf events to give area youth something to get jazzed about. He says the 10 volunteers on the FORCE committee have attended all the meetings regularly and are looking forward to beefing up their event calendar soon. The attitude that there's nothing to do in Des Moines is part of a general perception, he says. "A lot of peo-
ple assume that other cities are better. They don’t really realize until they get to other cities that Des Moines is a nice city to live in. They realize Des Moines is a good place and they actually move back.”

Some people don’t want to wait for Des Moines to get better so they can move back and move it. Some people want to enjoy it now. Jon Gaskell, editor of Cityview, Des Moines’ weekly alternative newspaper, is one of those people and he doesn’t mince words when it comes to what he thinks of the City Council. “I think Des Moines is doing as well as it can for a city that doesn’t lack balls when it comes to its leadership,” he says. Gaskell says he manages to keep fairly entertained, especially considering that he counts Los Angeles and Chicago as two of his former residences. “There’s a lot of cool things to do in Des Moines. … Des Moines’s like any other place in that we could always do more and always have more variety. Des Moines suffers from the fact that there’s a very vocal minority.”

Gaskell blames the vocal minority for keeping Des Moines far from its potential, whether it’s crusading against the Iowa Events Center or just being reluctant to change in general. If Gaskell could do anything to revamp Des Moines, first things first, he’d make sure that there was a really good sushi bar. Then, he’d start a campaign to make sure that “the squeaky wheel doesn’t always get the grease.”

“It’s pretty disconcerting that we seem stuck in the status quo,” he says. “Are there smart, vibrant people trying to do everything they can for Des Moines? Yes, absolutely, but there’s always an uphill fight. Every single thing is an uphill battle. Most of the people that complain are older and don’t want anything that will cost them money. They don’t want $30 more a year in property taxes. They’d rather sit at home and watch Cops.”

Gaskell writes about the state of Des Moines regularly in Cityview, and he doesn’t want to sound overly negative about his hometown, even though he considers his negativity targeted toward others’ negativity. He says he doesn’t want to leave Des Moines either, because he feels it’s on the verge of getting better, and he doesn’t want to miss that. But he might.

“The people who say, ‘This isn’t a race,’ it is a race; it’s a sprint,” he says. “We’ve been moving like molasses since Truman was in office. Des Moines’s been moving one mile an hour forever. It’s time to put it into second gear, or maybe even fifth.”

So what’s the answer?

I got the point expressed by the city leaders I talked to. I agree that individuals can take care of their own happiness. I know there are plenty of people who hear these same arguments here at ISU when they complain that there’s nothing to do here. And what they hear is the truth: Yes, Virginia, there are a lot of things to do here. There’s the Maintenance Shop and Free Friday Flicks and ISU Lectures programs (on a related note, a hilarious, nationally known comedian played here at CY Stephens near the beginning of the school year, and the auditorium was filled up maybe a fourth of the way. And it was great. And it was free. And I guarantee that he was way funnier – not to mention smarter – than any-

thing that was on your television that night. But I digress).

But city officials are wrong when they say young people complain and don’t do anything about it. They do. They leave. There’s nothing worse than feeling as if you’re in a state that has little to offer in terms of culture, stimulation, etc., a state with relatively few minorities, a state where we even get fashion trends about five years after the fact. Is this my youth talking? Maybe. Or maybe I’m just more proof that things need to change to ever survive.

The bottom line is this: Maybe I don’t have a Field of Dreams poster hanging on my bedroom wall, but I — for the most part — think Iowa’s a decent place to live. That’s why I was harsh in the beginning. It’s tough love. It’s because I care. We do a lot of complaining, but we sometimes forget that there’s good education (for now at least, hopefully we’ll stop with the budget cuts and tuition hikes sometime soon), low crime and to paraphrase Hy-Vee, a smile in every cornfield. We’re basically nice people. I do accept some responsibility that those of us — me included — who complain probably aren’t doing a lot to maximize our experience here. That’s my part of the blame.

Here’s the rest: all of Iowa (not just Des Moines) needs to get some better entertainment, better attractions and more diversity to become an interesting place to not only live but stay. If not, young people will continue to leave. I hope the optimists are right, that Des Moines and the rest of Iowa will improve rapidly. Because truth be told, I wouldn’t mind living in Des Moines. But I wouldn’t want my mom to get bored when she comes to visit.

Kate Kompas is a senior in journalism and mass communication. She is copy chief for Ethos.

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