



**ALL ABOARD** JOEL LANDY TAKES PASSENGER MIKE BRADY, A TENANT IN THE ADDISON BUILDING (WHICH LANDY OWNS), ON A TRAIN RIDE. LANDY CALLS HIS PET PROJECT "ULTRA-LIGHT RAIL."

KEEPING  
MIDTOWNOn  
track

IN THE ONCE-SEEDY AREA NORTH OF DOWNTOWN, JOEL LANDY HAS ACTED AS A ONE-MAN CLEANUP CREW, BUYING SCORES OF PROPERTIES AND ATTRACTING BUSINESSES. BUT HE'S AS MUCH A COLLECTOR AS A DEVELOPER — AND HIS CURRENT FASCINATION WITH TRAINS HAS GAINED SO MUCH STEAM THAT HE'S ENGINEERED A MINIATURE RAILROAD COURSING THROUGH HIS DOMAIN.

BY MARK KURLYANDCHIK // PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LEWINSKI

Joel Landy has lost his keys, and that's a serious problem. They not only grant him access to his home and car, they also open the doors to his Midtown kingdom: the Burton Theatre, the Addison Building, Atlas Global Bistro, the Leland Lofts, a number of historic Victorian homes, and the dozens of rental units he owns — more than 50 parcels in all. Considering the breadth of his holdings, his key search could prove exhausting.

During the hunt, Landy surveys his Detroit backyard, an almost pastoral patch bordered by three scale miles of miniature train track that he laid to connect his properties. "I call it ultra-light rail," he says, pointing to a portion of track circling a koi pond. "I beat M-1 [commuter rail] to the punch. I'm one of the feeders in the neighborhood — my Peterboro-Charlotte Railroad." Landy likes to boast that it's the first light rail in Detroit in 50 years. When he demonstrates, chugging along on his battery-powered, three-seat locomotive, it's tough to argue with the guy.

A major catalyst for Midtown's current resurgence, Landy, 58, has invested \$30 to \$40 million in the area (by his own estimate) in the last 12 to 15 years. He has also had a hand in close to \$1 billion in other Detroit projects. Cleveland-based developer John Ferchik called Landy for advice on his redevelopment of the Westin Rook Cadillac, so did the team behind The Ellington Lofts.

But Landy doesn't like to self-identify as a devel-

oper. "I'm a developer to banks and the city," he told the *Detroit Free Press* in 2004. "But more of a word for me would be 'community developer.'" Whether it's developer or community developer, he doesn't exactly look the part. "First impressions, you'd scratch your head," says Bob Slattry, a fellow Midtown developer. "But he's such an intelligent guy." Picture a tall, hippie version of Albert Einstein with a shock of graying blond hair that dots the T of a long, thin face. Landy is a string bean of a man, with a blond mustache hugging his upper lip, and grease-stained hands. You can pick Landy out of a crowd, all right.

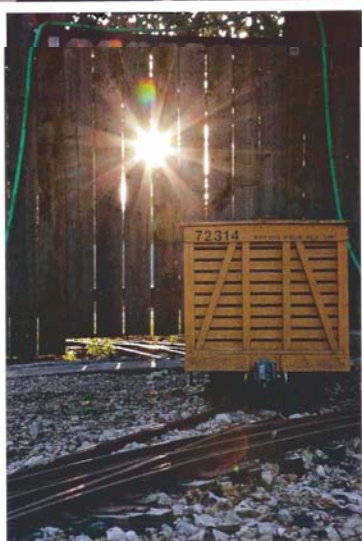
"My favorite gift to him was Skin So Soft, because his hands always looked black," says longtime friend Alan Lichtenstein, executive director of Broadway (Nederlander) in Detroit. "And he always wears black. Whenever I see a nice black-cotton T-shirt at the store, I buy it for him."

Though his eccentric-cool appearance is a look

PICTURE A TALL, HIPPIE VERSION OF ALBERT EINSTEIN WITH A SHOCK OF GRAYING BLOND HAIR THAT DOTS THE 'T' OF A LONG, THIN FACE. LANDY IS A STRING BEAN OF A MAN, WITH A BLOND MUSTACHE HUGGING HIS UPPER LIP, AND GREASE-STAINED HANDS.

right out of the New York or Los Angeles art scene, Landy is no carpetbagger taking advantage of cheap city real estate. The son of first-generation Russian immigrants, he was born in Detroit, grew up in Oak Park, dropped out of Cass Tech in the 11th grade, and spent a few years in Chicago before coming back to





the Cass Corridor (as Midtown was still called then), where's he's been a mainstay for the last 30-plus years. "I went to the Old Miami [bar] with a friend in 1977 and got drunk and stayed over at his house on Peterboro," Landy recalls. "I looked at his garage in the morning — it was this carriage house — and said, 'Can I live here?'"

He stayed for two years, heating the place with wood, until the 10,000-square-foot estate he lives in now became available. He split the cost of the property with two other partners, paying just \$1,500 each.

Landy bought the other guys out a few years later and has been living in the house since.

"It was just so great," he says of the old days. "When you had no neighbors, you could do whatever you wanted. And the people outside — at that time there was no crack; it was just winos and alcoholics — they were harmless. So we had big fences and a swimming pool and our own little world."

"Then, I kept buying stuff around me because I didn't want idiots moving in next door. I had all this property, and I had to do something with it. So I learned to be a developer — learned to work with nonprofits, learned historic tax credits, and was already into historic preservation."

His role as a Detroit developer didn't begin in earnest until the late '80s, though.

In the 1960s, Landy ran a printing company that was responsible for all the Grande Ballroom promotions, crafting posters for the MC5, The Stooges, Pink Floyd, Fleetwood Mac, and other rock 'n' roll luminaries who passed through the mythic venue. His print shop's next-door neighbor, the *Fifth Estate*, at the corner of the Lodge Freeway and Warren, afforded him the opportunity to write for the underground newspaper. In 1969, he moved to Chicago, where he wrote for another alternative paper, *The Chicago Seed*. The entire *Seed* staff lived in his rented, \$200-a-month townhouse on LaSalle, where activists Abbie Hoffman and Tom Hayden were among those who came and went. Landy also started Radio Free Chicago, an underground radio show on WTLV-FM, and helped run the Aragon Ballroom.

In 1972, Landy moved back to Detroit, where his career took another turn. "I don't know how I start-

ed fixing foreign cars," Landy says. "I had one that I fixed, and people just started asking me to fix theirs." The hobby, which explains the grease-stained hands, turned into J&L Foreign Auto Center at Gratiot and Conner, which he ran for nearly 25 years.

"I think you need a certain kind of mentality to fix cars to make a living, and I think Joel just felt that it wasn't worth it," Lichtenstein says, explaining Landy's reasons for selling the auto shop.

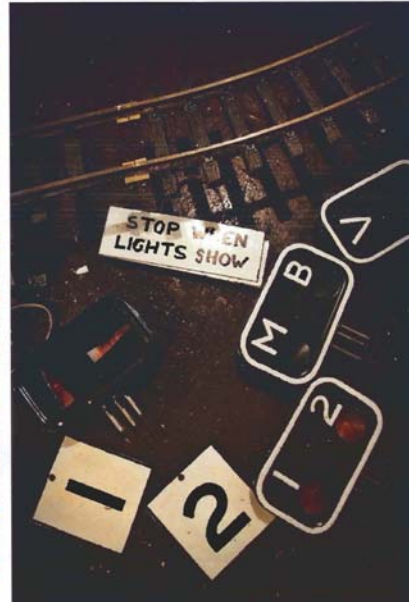
In 1990, Landy bought the former Addison Hotel on Woodward and converted it into 40 apartments (the building also houses Atlas Global Bistro on the street level). A year later, something Landy calls "a miracle" happened. He bought the Jefferson School from Detroit Public Schools for \$1,000. "They were going to tear it down," Landy says. "There were no charter schools back then. I put 900 windows in, sent 17 people to jail [for stripping copper] — protected it for nine years — until I got a lease when there were charter schools. Then I received \$65,000 a month rent for eight years. A month!"

"That's probably one of his biggest successes," Slattery says. Landy, too, is proud of it. Although he has a portfolio of rental properties, he admits that it's the school that funds most of his projects.

"The charter-school business sort of blossomed," Lichtenstein says. "There was a formula to making it work, and Joel is pretty quick on picking stuff up like that." But he attributes Landy's success to something other than mere lucky timing. Lichtenstein says Landy's varied skills — his ability to be the contractor, planner, roofer, electrician, and everything in between, on all of his development projects — has saved Landy a considerable amount of money.



Landy finally finds his keys — he's been holding them the entire time. Despite this oversight, his memory is nothing short of amazing. Lichtenstein calls him "the greatest multi-tasker you'll ever meet." And Slattery says Landy is "an idea guy" who's "always going in 10 different directions." Landy demonstrates, as he offers a scatter-shot tour of his extensive model-train collection, effusively offering tidbits on almost every piece. "This one was made by a model-maker in 1930. It's called a Sterling Single," he says



"That's a British model of an American engine. It's called a Columbia. It's a 4-8-4 engine. ... This was hand made. It's a copy of an African Garratt locomotive." And so on. His passion for trains is contagious. "He has such a lively, creative mind that he just gets such joy out of a steam boiler," Lichtenstein says. "It wouldn't do much for me ... but he finds his thrills in collecting things."

Landy's girlfriend of 12 years, Linda Morris, likens

That's why I say there's a fine line between hoarders and me. I collect old movie projectors, old cameras, old British sports cars (of which I have 30). I have about eight Jaguars, a Morgan, a Rolls-Royce, eight MGBs, and numerous other cars."

His friends observe the parade of

LANDY ALSO COLLECTS LOCAL ART, ANTIQUE FURNITURE,

EARLY 20TH-CENTURY MACHINERY — MEDICAL INSTRUMENTS, MICRO-

SCOPES, AND PHONOGRAPHS — IRONS, AND VACUUM CLEANERS.

their 23-room home to "the basement of the Smithsonian." And Landy acknowledges: "It's not the way most people live." The third floor is devoted almost entirely to railroading. An electric train track consumes much of the main room, while a functional cable car is suspended from one wall. Shelves line the room, holding miscellaneous trains. Decals that read "Michigan Central Railroad" lay on a table, next to some Brasso polish. A chair draped in a worn green quilt occupies a corner, with an overflowing ashtray next to it. "Sometimes I have a little more time — you know, like 2 or 3 in the morning — to work in the train room," Landy says.

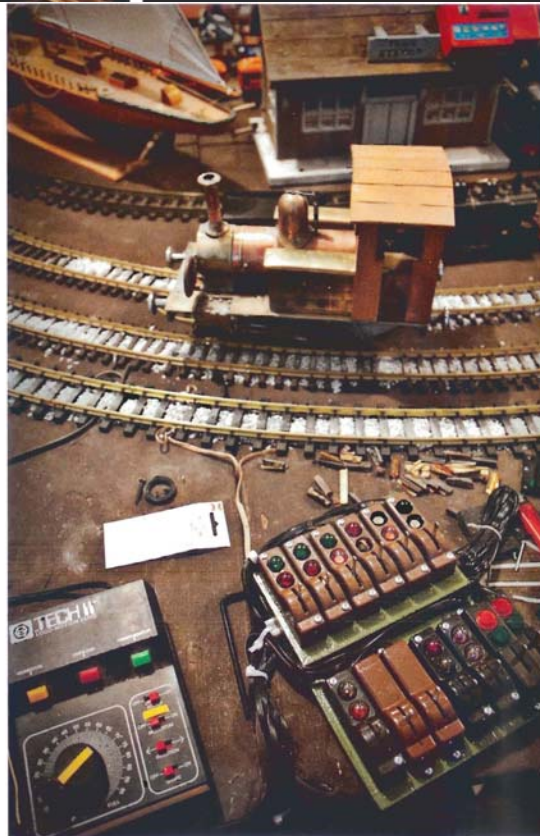
In the adjoining rooms, more shelves hold additional train parts and other treasures. A small workshop off to the side contains a computer-operated lathe, used for repairing parts. *Model Engineer* magazines are scattered about, along with manuals and other train books. What would happen if he ran out of shelves? Landy gestures toward brackets lying around, indicating he'd just build more shelves, then corrects, as if suddenly remembering the option: "Oh, no! I'd just get another building."

"I have 40,000-square-foot worth of collections.

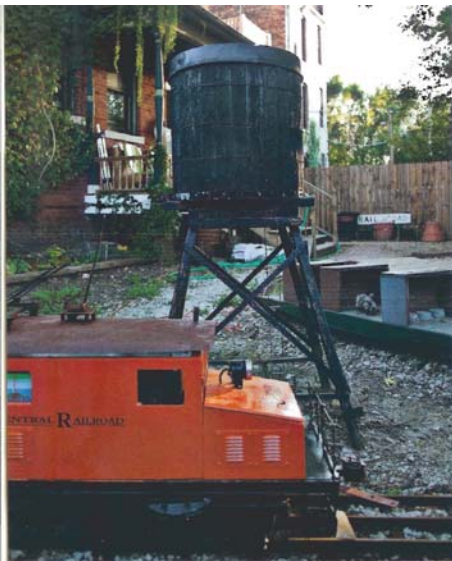
belongings with bemusement. "At one time, he had titles to over 300 cars," Lichtenstein says. "I think he probably owns more Jaguar engines sitting up on a shelf than anyone in the country." Landy also collects local art, antique furniture, early 20th-century machinery — medical instruments, microscopes, and phonographs — irons, and vacuum cleaners. He owns every "Dally in the Alley" poster created, and has a collection of memorabilia for every Detroit mayor since Coleman A. Young.

"Oh, I collect Victorian buildings," Landy adds. "I own a whole historic district." And, in fact, Landy owns three city blocks, including the entire Peterboro-Charlotte historic district.

As for his trains, one would think the accumulation was the result of decades spent flea-market bartering and scouring trade shows. Not so. Landy bought almost everything on







eBay. And he's amassed his entire train collection — indoors and out — in just three years. "I've got to work fast," Landy says, because of Crohn's disease. He was diagnosed with the autoimmune disorder when he was 8. "[Crohn's] makes you an overachiever

"He doesn't take a day off or go on vacation."

As for the rest of Landy's estate, he plans to donate part of it to charity and museums. He has no children ("I have tenants," he deadpans when asked about posterity), so other pieces will be left to select individuals. "I'd like to help some of the people that have helped me along the way," he says, although he's not counting on going anywhere anytime soon.

Things have changed in the neighborhood surrounding Landy's kingdom over the last three decades. "We used to play baseball in the middle of Woodward when I first moved here, and only had to

stop for a car every few hours," he recalls. Since then, his goal has been to get as many people to move into the area as possible. Prospects seem to be only improving. "He owns so much property that the big boys are finally moving into his neighborhood; it's finally starting to happen for him," Slatery says. And the occupancy rate of Landy's rentals is at 100 percent for the first time in 20 years.

As for that "other" light-rail project, the M-1, Landy says he's excited for it, because he's learned two things about public transportation: It doesn't alleviate congestion, it promotes it; and tourists are more prone to use a train, "because if they see the tracks in the ground, they know that the train will be there."

Although he's constantly in motion, Landy's tracks are laid. Unlike tourists, he isn't going anywhere. ■

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er, because you don't know if you can do anything tomorrow. I could be sick — couldn't do anything. So I've got to do it all today."

Another explanation: Landy moves on quickly. He admits that trains are just one fascination that will likely soon be replaced with something else, although he's absorbed by them for now. "He goes whole hog until he gets everything he wants on it, and then he gets bored with it," Lichtenstein says. "And then he goes on to something else to collect."

Back outside, the train tracks — laid in concrete — run through what he refers to as "the tunnel," a garage with "doorways" cut into its sides for the train to pass through. He explains that it will be more impressive when he constructs the actual gypsum tunnel. "It'll be late next year," Landy says, "before we can go around the block and do a tour of the Victorian houses [on Peterboro], have dinner at Atlas, and get to a movie [at the Burton Theatre]."

He has no plans to open up the train tracks to the public, though. So why go through all the trouble? "I guess I'm motivated by the fact that I can't get out of here. I can't go and hang out at Greenfield Village or the Henry Ford Museum and look at their trains," he says, because his properties keep him tethered to the neighborhood. "He's a workaholic," Lichtenstein adds.

