



Speech by Rip Rapson:

## **In honor of Ruth Adler Schnee, Kresge Eminent Artist for 2015**

*The pioneering textile designer and entrepreneur practiced creative placemaking long before it had a name.*

September 3, 2015

*Delivered Sept. 2, 2015, at a community celebration of 2015 Kresge Eminent Artist Ruth Adler Schnee. The celebration at the Carr Center in Detroit coincided with the release of the Kresge Eminent Artist monograph on Schnee's life and work, and the opening of an exhibition of her work at the center. Rapson followed Ronit Eisenbach, one of the contributors to the monograph.*

Thanks, Ronit, for such an extraordinary perspective on Ruth's monumental contributions to modernism and the design world. And I want to thank you and the other contributors to our new monograph on Ruth's life. Your scholarship and perspective were invaluable in helping capture the many dimensions of Ruth's talent and legacy.

I hesitate to say too much after Ronit's marvelous depiction of Ruth's career. But I would like to situate that story within the context not only of the city of Detroit, but also the efforts our foundation is making to change Detroit's arc of aspiration.

A year after Ruth Adler was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923, Sebastian S. Kresge, the founder of the pioneering S.S. Kresge five-and-dime store chain, marked the 25th anniversary of his good fortune by creating The Kresge Foundation.

The foundation had – and still has – a mission to promote human progress. We interpret that mandate today by working to expand opportunities in America's cities. Translated to Detroit, that means we seek to strengthen the physical, economic, social and cultural fabric of the city to advance long-term revitalization. Lifting up, honoring and amplifying the artistic and cultural vitality of our region is central to that goal.

- We provide operating support currently to 65 arts and cultural institutions – from small organizations to the largest.
- We support the biannual Art X and Dlectricity festivals, which bring thousands of people to support our artists and arts in public spaces.
- We invest in a growing roster of Kresge Artist Fellows, who now number 126.
- This summer, we recognized our first two emerging artists through an award in honor of the late

Gilda Snowden, an extraordinary artist and teacher whom so many of you knew.

And there is one more piece: the Kresge Eminent Artist, in which we honor each year one person's lifelong arc of exceptional achievements and contributions to the cultural vitality of metropolitan Detroit.

We've honored the painter Charles McGee, the playwright Bill Harris, poet Naomi Long Madgett, opera impresario David DiChiera, the photographer Bill Rauhauser and the musician Marcus Belgrave, who sadly passed this summer.

Each Eminent Artist has invigorated our community with their creativity. Each has recast the meaning and stature of their chosen discipline, both locally and nationally. Each stands as an example for younger generations, calling for them to embrace the same standards of excellence.

We approach all of these segments of Kresge Arts in Detroit as interlocking and mutually reinforcing. Each of them contributes to and reconfigures a cultural and artistic ecology as artists and art presenters, audience members and patrons, activists and critics, educational institutions and neighborhood organizations all interacting in varying combinations, bridging our past and hinting at our future, creating new ways of approaching challenges we thought were insurmountable, forcing us to unsettle our biases and to embrace our shared circumstance.

All this makes it abundantly clear that an arts community isn't something the private sector or government or philanthropy can fund into existence. It has to thrive organically – as it has for so long in this city. But can it be nurtured? Should it be nurtured? We believe the answers are, emphatically, yes.

Which brings us back to Ruth.

As a Jewish immigrant whose family escaped the Holocaust, as a newcomer who made Detroit her home and launched an influential business here, as a woman who broke through barriers in the male-dominated world of architecture and design, as a Detroiter who helped shape an international sensibility – in many, many ways, Ruth Adler Schnee's story speaks to the profound role of the arts in nurturing our souls. It speaks to our collective need to keep dreaming, challenging and creating. And it speaks to the sometimes unsettling, always indispensable, role of artists in laying down tracks for others – as pathfinders, as leaders, as individuals who set examples for all of us.

Ruth has said that design must not only speak in its own terms, but must also "*S-I-N-G*." And her designs have sung from auto showrooms to medical clinics, from the World Trade Center lobbies to uncounted homes and offices that are to this day using her exquisite fabric designs for draperies, wall coverings and furniture.

Ruth quite literally enlightened the drabness of post-World War II interiors and brought us into a world of color we now take for granted. Her classic designs of decades past are still in production – and she is still creating new ones. She is both a Detroit treasure and one of the founding figures of contemporary textile design.

Pebbles, trees, snowflakes, the geometries of neighborhoods and railroad yards – these are just some of the forms that have been transformed by Ruth's deft touch. She brings echoes of the natural world to the interiors where we live and work. And on the walls of this exhibit you can read about the precise thinking behind patterns that invoke in us feelings of freedom and spontaneity. Ruth says that her work brings her "the thrill of discovery" – and we, too, find ourselves elated.

For many in Detroit, Ruth is most familiar for the Adler-Schnee store, particularly in its final incarnation downtown in the Hemmeter Building, right across the street from where we are gathered tonight.

This retail collaboration between Ruth and her late husband, Edward, is hard to describe. Folks who *were* there sometimes say, “You *just* had to be there.”

The store was an emporium of well-designed delights, in what the Shnees’ daughter, Anita, described as “the wackiest combination.” In addition to Ruth’s fabrics, you went there for Jensen silver and Scandinavian glass, items then available nowhere else in this country. You went for honey dippers and nutmeg mills, for specialty coffees decades before everyone was drinking them. And you went for new “inventions” like the beanbag chair and the hibachi grill.

The Schnees didn’t just display and sell good design, they preached it. They did everything they could to spread the good word about good design. They had a newsletter. They printed leaflets, like the one on lighting with the witty title: “No More Glaring Mistakes.”

Their radio ads proclaimed beauty belonged in your kitchen as much as in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Long before Apple computer’s multimillion-dollar “Think Different” campaign, the Schnees worked the same territory with an arguably more elegant – not to mention more grammatical – slogan. There’s a card bearing the slogan on one of the walls here. It reads: “Not just different – better.”

The Schnees didn’t confine their vision to the floor-space of their store. They promoted art fairs and Detroit Symphony Orchestra performances across the street in Harmonie Park. They even planned to bring architects and designers to occupy the upper floors of their building.


Some of you recognize these ideas as parts of what we now call creative placemaking. Creative placemaking is now considered one of the most powerful tools in community development – the idea that arts and culture should be at the center of urban rejuvenation strategies.

In other words, Ruth Adler Schnee – together with her beloved husband, Edward – was here again a visionary, a pioneer.

We tell much of that story in her 2015 Eminent Artist monograph. The book and this exhibit were overseen by Cynthia Shaw, our deputy director of communications for publications and special projects at Kresge. Cynthia told me that it is one of the great privileges of her professional career to be able to work so closely with this utterly one-of-a-kind figure. She was assisted in producing the book by the expert creative direction of Sue Levytsky and the gorgeous graphic design work of Julie Pincus, together with other members of her team and the many contributors to the monograph and exhibit. So thank you all for your hard and heartfelt work.

We’re proud to release that book today with a copy for each of you here. And copies will be distributed at no cost to libraries and schools and art lovers around the country.

Ruth, I know I’ve gone on too long and still left out too much. But before I surrender the mic, I know you have family here today, and I wonder if I might recognize your brother Charles, your son Jeremy and your granddaughter Sarah. On behalf of Kresge, and the community, I want to thank all of you for sharing your Ruth with us.

Read about the exhibition open  in Kresge News.

Download a monograph on the life and work of Ruth Adler Schnee.