Ghost Houses of Detroit

Detroit Autopsy is my project documenting the remains of the city of Detroit. During my two recent trips there this summer I saw a level of urban devastation that was part war zone, part abandoned factory town. On Detroit’s East side, Gratiot boulevard was in ruins. Drive up and down the side streets where single family homes were build a century and more ago and see blocks in various states of despair, where the residents have been waiting forever to have the burned down and abandoned homes on their block finally removed. I have never seen such disinvestment in a major American city. There are blocks where there are so many destroyed properties that it made me think that this is not just a recent phenomenon, but a decade-by-decade stripping away of the core and life of the city. Yet on a Sunday morning on Detroit’s East Side, I saw dozens of African-Americans in Detroit wearing the same styles of clothing – from fancy hats – to sharkskin suits – that I saw in my native Cleveland and personally experienced as a child. While shooting photos of a dead house on a side street near the church I am referring to – which had a huge man working as a armed security outside wearing a bullet proof vest and carrying a massive handgun, I overheard Motown music hits playing. There was a woman in her early sixties on her front porch, enjoying the early morning summer sun in the Midwest, while reliving her days of youth when Detroit was swinging with all night block parties that celebrated the elevation of the Detroit sound into the world of popular American music. Nearby I also saw men driving everything from a 1973 Cadillac Fleetwood to a Buick Electra 225 (“A Deuce and A Quarter”) and 1960’s Thunderbirds. I could see that Detroit is much more like Cleveland that I had imaged, and nothing at all like Chicago, even in its heyday in the 1940s. My project will continue to document the disintegrating urban landscape of Detroit, and report upon new shoots of growth and life such as in Detroit’s Corktown.

Vincent Johnson

Los Angeles, California

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Detroit Luxury Bar – Corktown (2013). photography by Vincent Johnson/Los Angeles

Detroit Mercury Bar – Corktown. (2013). photography by Vincent Johnson/Los Angeles
Detroit – Two Houses Burned Down (2013), photography by Vincent Johnson/Los Angeles

Detroit Warehouse Being Disassembled (2013), photography by Vincent Johnson

Detroit Imagination Station House – Corktown (2013), photography by Vincent Johnson
Here’s a selection of my recent photographs of Detroit’s East side, shot in August 2013.

During my second trip to Detroit I came to realize much more of the degrees of destruction the city had experienced. It became apparent that there had been successive waves of economic disruption to working class neighborhoods, in the form of two and three mile long factory shutdowns that started at the end of WWII when Detroit was no longer the war machine manufacturer for the US military. Between 1947 and 1963, Detroit lost over 100,000 factory jobs. Working class homes made of wood were built on what now appears to be farmland, as were the factories themselves. There is also a haunting feeling of nature returning with an unbelievable force, to reclaim a part of the earth that it lost when concrete was poured over it to create streets and roads. While in Detroit in August I drove by homes where women were sitting on their porches while listening to the sound of Motown songs from the 1960’s. Motown was played in a Kentucky Fried Chicken where I stopped for lunch. People coming from church were dressed like I remember from the 1960’s, when I myself wore a sharkskin suit to church. There are entire streets of abandoned houses. There are clusters of burned down houses on hundreds of city blocks, which no longer look like city blocks but more like small town neighborhoods with a few houses still standing. I said to myself while there – what would it be like to live on a block where all of the other properties were destroyed? What would it be like to walk outside to a barren block with no street lights? Yet of the many people I spoke to while I was there, none seemed ready to give up home and leave. What also seems to have happened is that no one was held responsible for the abandoned properties, which later were destroyed during two decades of Hell Night, where crazed Greater Detroit residents rode into Detroit proper and set the city on fire, then blamed the citizens in town for the city’s destruction. Another thing I want to point out is that I first visited Detroit in 1977. I drove there from Cleveland, where I grew up. I had been to Chicago, New York, Atlanta, Buffalo and Minneapolis. I had never seen any place that was as beaten down as Detroit was then. I recall saying that it looked like the riots had just happened – but they had happened a decade before.
and burned out buildings were still there, unlike in Cleveland, which had torn them down. During this trip I was in Chicago for a few days at an artist retreat before arriving in Detroit. Chicago does not look like Detroit. It has a much more refined layering of dramatic architecture. It also mows down derelict buildings. It is clearly evident that Greater Chicago loves their city. It is also clear that Greater Detroit does not care about Detroit dying. Of course there are many dead cities in the US – Camden, East St. Louis, Gary, Indiana; but there are also completely devastated smaller cities in Michigan that when whole were never as broken as these places. I’m talking about Grand Rapids, and Flint, Michigan. Detroit gets all of the attention, yet there are tens of thousands of blown up homes throughout the entire midwest. Maybe photographing in those cities will bring them more attention. We’ll see.

Vincent Johnson
in Los Angeles
During the last days of May and early days of June, 2013 I visited and took photographs in San Francisco, Cleveland, Detroit, New York City and Houston. This is what struck me about my visit to Detroit: The astounding Henry Ford Museum – with its actual enormous Industrial Revolution machinery, the dazzling Charles Wright African-American History Museum, which has a sculptural display of what African slaves looked like on a ship from to the new World, and the total gem laden Detroit Institute of the Arts – whose extensive collection of contemporary art were a great surprise, was how there seemed to be an utter abandonment of the city. Whole avenues of derelict buildings. Historic office towers in downtown Detroit missing all of their windows. Yet in Detroit’s Corktown, the city’s oldest neighborhood, a small collection of great yet casual bars and restaurants has formed in the shadow of the mammoth,
dead Detroit Train Station.

What I had just seen in San Francisco, the Tenderloin was a densely populated zone of homeless persons who are provided a vast array of humane services. While massive and rapid gentrification is happening – with stunning new cocktail bars opening seemingly every week. Downtown Detroit is no more beaten down than San Francisco’s Tenderloin. What is different is the degree of investment into the area, from having the entire district protected by the National Register of Historic Places, because of its 1950’s jazz scene, to creating one of the most cool neighborhoods in which to party into the night in all of America. I know that Detroit has a phenomenal jazz festival, international auto show, and a mind-blowing 40,000 car show of every kind known to humanity. Yet I ask how can it be that Detroit, once the richest city in the world in the 1950’s, could have allowed itself to fall completely apart, yet at once have maintained its roaring rich suburban enclaves, where the executive class worked, while the inner city folk toiled in the endless factories, plants, mills, refineries. Detroit’s footprint is larger than Cleveland. Its land area is 139 square miles, while Cleveland is 78 square miles, same as Brooklyn.

I went to art school at Pratt in Brooklyn during the 1980’s, I have a distinct recollection of how deadly and dangerous, raw and rotten Brooklyn, and even most of Manhattan were at that time. Yet somehow even half or more of evil old gangster paradise Brooklyn has become a hipster paradise, Chicago is an Alpha City of the highest order – even with losing a quarter of its residents. It’s a dead town in terms of manufacturing, but a lively dynamo that has transformed even a bit of the South Side into a world of gorgeous condos, superb bars, phenomenal cooking in great world-class restaurants, international level shopping.

Now for me Chicago always had the best housing stock of any major U.S. city, with double pane lead glass windows and countless classy elements built right into their stellar apartment buildings. So much so that during the 1980’s it was difficult to tell what a bad neighborhood was – because besides the Robert Taylor Homes and Cabrini Green, many gangland areas in Chicago had just as great a set of dwellings as did the far more affluent neighborhoods, like Lincoln Park, Rogers Park, both on Chicago’s North Side. I lived in Chicago as an art student at the Art Institute of Chicago in Wicker Park. There were cheap places to eat. One place sold a foot long sausage on a bun and a paper bag loaded with hot French Fries for a couple of dollars. A Mexican food place sold meat stuffed sweet and white potatoes for a dollar. The area was historic and forlorn, and over the next decade became one of the most exciting places to live in the country. This happening of course after the tidal wave of gentrification washed over cities such as Portland, Seattle, Austin, but also Pittsburg, Miami Beach, Houston. How this tidal wave of gentrification by its local citizens missed Detroit is my question.

If you look at downtown Los Angeles, you see what I am saying. Downtown LA was considered an off-limits no mans land for more than 50 years. Sometime during the last five to ten years, a fire was lit under several of the locals, who decided to transform downtown Los Angeles into a high-end bars and upscale restaurants playground, in the midst of generational homelessness on Main Street, that featured as many as a hundred thousand people. So in may ways downtown Los Angeles is like San Francisco’s Tenderloin, ragged but also highly polished, defeated and forgotten yet being refreshed, invigorated and given a new life in a renovated and often restored physical body. Let me now speak to what is happening in Cleveland, which looks a lot like Detroit, but on a smaller scale, with many fewer homes burned to the ground, despite what I saw and recorded there as one of the most frightening scenes of American private family architectural collapse. In the center of Cleveland’s East Side, there is a five avenue wide, 50 block deep new building program happening that is taking control of dead city blocks with a single house on it. Brand new 4,000 – 8,000 square foot homes for urban professionals working in the nearby world-class Cleveland Clinic are giving dead zones a complete rebirth.

So I ask, outside of Cortecon’s stellar model transformation, which is such a draw that taxis bring in folk from downtown hotels, did I just miss these type of
Transformations in Detroit, when driving along its historic corridors of Michigan and Woodward avenues and beyond, or it is actually the case that the Detroit locals who are sitting on major paper from a century of automobile production, just cannot bring themselves to invest in their city because of it being the homes of generations of inner city working class African-Americans. I have no idea what the real and total answer is, but I did get a kick out of seeing luxury sports car owners, including a drop-top Testarosa, touring the same ruins in downtown Detroit that I was also witnessing.

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The Detroit Opportunity Project

Social justice and the American Dream in Detroit, MI

Bradford Frost

Social Justice and The American Dream in Detroit, MI

My Pages

August 14, 2011

America’s Destiny Divide – Alter Road, Detroit

This afternoon, I’ve been watching the MSNBC Special on “Making the Grade” in Detroit. Given the enriching discussion on the culture of schools, disadvantaged neighborhoods and the zip-code debate, I can’t help but submit some detail from my research on the nature of opportunity at Alter Road. I asked plain questions regarding American Opportunity based on one’s residence. Here’s an excerpt from my thesis to help add context, data, and scholarship on the issue of the difference between growing up in opportunity rich and opportunity poor neighborhoods:

Detroit’s geography—visibly blighted, with 26% of residential parcels abandoned—makes Thomas Sugrue’s thesis that “geography is destiny” both utterly compelling and profoundly troubling. [1] Cleaved by race and class as much or more than any large city in America, Detroit’s regional landscape paints the nation’s extraordinary diversity while illuminating the profound divergence of economic classes at every turn—from the ghetto poor, to the blue collar cul-de-sacs, to the estate class, and everything in between—you’ll find this brutal divergence throughout Detroit.

And nowhere is this chasm more poetically displayed than Alter Road.

In contrasts almost worthy of fiction, the 2005-2009 American Community Survey revealed the Detroit side of Alter Road at over 85% African American, more than 50% of households earn less than $30,000 annually, and less than
10% of adults have a bachelors degree; Grosse Pointe’s census tracts directly across from Alter Road are nearly polar opposite: over 85% white, only 22% of households earn less than $30,000 per year and over 50% of adults have a bachelors degree.[2] In one glaring example, median home values at this otherwise arbitrary political line are separated by over $150,000. Detroit’s side of Alter Road is marred by large swaths of urban decay and blight, while the pristine streets of Grosse Pointe mark the separation with lush green medians and sail-boat embossed street signs.[3] Over the course of 6 blocks in either direction, a devastating physical landscape unfolds which powerfully reveals the stark contrasts of America’s poor and privileged classes. To call the divide at Alter Road anything less than jarring would be an understatement of fact.

This divide is not new. Writing a full generation removed in 1985, Kenneth Jackson described it this way in Crabgrass Frontier “The most conspicuous city-suburb contrast in the United States runs along Detroit’s Alter Road. Locals call the street the ‘Berlin Wall’ or the ‘barrier,’ or the ‘Mason Dixon Line.’ It divides suburban Grosse Point Communities, which are the most genteel in towns anywhere, from the east side of Detroit, which is poor and mostly black. The Detroit side is studded with abandoned cars, graffiti covered schools, and burned out buildings. Two blocks away, within view, are neatly clipped hedges and immaculate houses – a world of servants and charity balls, two-car garages and expensive clothes. On one side, says John Kelly, a Democratic state senator whose district awkwardly straddles both neighborhoods, is ‘West Beirut,’ on the other side, ‘Disneyland.’[4]”

Stark inequality between Detroit and Grosse Pointe at Alter Road illuminates core questions: can it be sincerely asserted that children living on both sides of this divide possess equal opportunity? Is the American dream equally available to them?

For anyone taking these issues seriously, the answer is plainly no. Indeed, a gnawing sensation of injustice that hovers over this great American chasm. That some people that live in Detroit along Alter Road, through sheer family will or ingenuity, attend Grosse Point Schools for the apparent advantages such an education conferred compared to Detroit Public Schools should be evidence enough for the complicating nature of family strategies to overcome disadvantage based on their home address. That such practices are shunned or criminalized masks the fundamental problem of unequal access to high quality and learning rich school environments. As one parent told me: “My kids will have my mom’s address, it’s the same cycle. DPS schools just aint it!! I love Detroit, but it’s not it.” Although in practice an illegal act, such address switching based on zip code inequalities should reveal the depth of the challenge for disadvantaged parents.

The absence of equal life opportunities at birth in America and across the world is widely discernable.[1] Although no child chooses her parents, her nation or her opportunity structures, we are able with startling accuracy to predict the life outcomes of the vast majority of the world’s children based on a few arbitrary markers before their first days on Earth. Family income, parental education, and national citizenship are foremost among these; such predictors chillingly calculate the likelihood of a child surviving his 5th birthday, becoming literate, and securing economic or social mobility almost exclusively from exogenous factors, speaking little if nothing to his potential abilities, personality, intelligence, and drive to achieve in the world. [2]

The continued presence of such injustice in America, the world’s wealthiest nation, is striking. That persistent unequal life chances for any child isn’t more alarming given the national devotion to equal opportunity for all, raises questions for how to mobilize anew energy on behalf of the disadvantaged. Indeed, while many humble efforts have been made to isolate the root causes of urban poverty, and although it may be naïve to think it is possible to avoid a causal debate entirely, I emphasize the importance of exploring an integrative analysis for how culture and social structure intersect in urban poverty.

That intersection offers social policy pathways that could accelerate both the opportunity structures and the cultural mechanism for disadvantaged
populations so that we may yet break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

CASE STUDY DETAIL — ALTER ROAD

We can surmise that opportunity structures at Alter Road from 1960 to the present are largely the product of durable racial dichotomies and the cumulative effects of intergenerational poverty. The city’s suburban white flight, deindustrialization, and the low educational preparedness and family fragmentation patterns in low income black communities compound the challenge of fostering equal opportunity for these neighborhoods.

The polarized difference between Detroit and Grosse Pointe emerged over a relatively short period of time, and has truly deepened over the last 30 years. Such shifts in housing patterns matter because, as the Kirwin institute puts it, “due to geographic variation, not everyone has access to the critical opportunities needed to excel or advance in life. Many low-income communities, particularly communities of color, are often spatially isolated and segregated from critical opportunities. This spatial segregation from opportunity not only limits the development potential for individuals, but also reduces the development capacity of the entire region’s most important asset, its people.”[1]

I conclude by noting that one’s environment drives the context for lifestyles and acceptable social behavior. While values, beliefs and low individual and collective efficacy thwart renewal efforts, they are not the fundamental cause of the divide, but rather its consequence. They are the consequence of hostile political, economic and social environments, including schools, which foreclosed opportunity for most low income blacks on Alter Road. This context can lose the most crucial fact: real families live in these circumstances, make decisions, frame worldviews, develop personal narratives, and make cumulatively consequential decisions about how to pursue the American Dream, including whether and if such a dream is genuinely possible for them in the first place.

In order to “make the grade,” we must do better in our schools and as a nation to overcome the profound divides so palpably evident based on one’s home address. Whether its in Detroit at places like Alter Road, or in your own hometown, it’s time we change the narrative by opening up opportunity for disadvantaged children to attend the best schools possible and begin curbing the other effects that forestall economic and social mobility for all.

Unless and until we can overcome the destiny divide for anyone born at any address in America, then the struggle for social justice in the United States—the struggle for America itself—will remain incomplete.

[1] For land parcel data, see Data Driven Detroit’s land parcel survey. It found that 26 percent of the city’s residential parcels – or 91,000 lots – were vacant. See this page for more information: http://datadrivendetroit.org/projects/detroit-residential-parcel-survey/. An example map can be located here: http://datadrivendetroit.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/HsgVacRateBG.pdf


[3] Officially, Alter Road is situated entirely within the city of Detroit, but is the last line of housing stock on the city’s eastern border. Grosse Pointe Park is the first of “the Pointes” which run along the eastern border of Wayne County. Grosse Pointe is used here as short hand for the area overall, but it should be noted this town is slightly further east, and the census tracts used are in Grosse Pointe Park.
Ice House Detroit by Gregory Holm and Matthew Radune

Photographer Gregory Holm and architect Matthew Radune created this stunning piece of work called Ice House Detroit that gives a bit of commentary on the urban decay and frozen nature of the city of Detroit (a recent survey suggests that 1 out of 3 Detroit houses are abandoned or vacant).
This photo was taken in Detroit last summer on a skateboard trip in Detroit. Detroit is full of run down houses, this is one of em.

Photo: Aaron Wynia
SCROLL DOWN BELOW TO READ A COMPREHENSIVE HISTORICAL ARTICLE ON DETROIT BY HARPER'S MAGAZINE. IT POINTS OUT THAT SAN FRANCISCO WAS A BLUE COLLAR SHIPPING PORT UNTIL THAT INDUSTRY FADED AWAY IN THE AREA.

What’s Wrong With ‘Detropia’ – A Detroit Resident’s Perspective

by Andre Seewood
May 28, 2013 11:39 AM
19 Comments
The critically acclaimed and celebrated independent documentary by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, "DETROPIA (2012)" is a beautifully photographed and brilliantly edited film about the decline and attempted resurrection of the city of Detroit that I as a long time resident of the city eagerly anticipated and couldn't wait to see. Yet amid the powerful images of urban decay, ironic archival footage of “the city of tomorrow” and contemporary labor/management disputes, I found this film wanting on several levels.

Unfortunately, the documentary DETROPIA does not accurately capture the true sources of the city’s long and painful suffering that in my humble opinion were precipitated 40 years ago when the Black residents of Detroit elected its first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young in 1973. The bigoted and ultimately racist reaction to this election by Whites is what has contributed directly to the economic and political morass that has characterized the city’s slow and terrible decline.

The film, DETROPIA, while trying to put Detroit’s decline in a larger nationwide context of the erosion of manufacturing plants and outsourcing fails to mention or put into perspective the racial tensions that have long defined Detroit, segregated the mostly Black populated city from the mostly White populated surrounding suburbs and severely undermined the Black political power base that used to govern the city.

As many elderly residents, politicians and pundits who live in or near Detroit will tell you, the modern city that we know as Detroit did not come into being until just after the 1967 riots that exacerbated and polarized an already heated tinderbox of racial tensions between Whites in political power and Blacks as their subjugated victims.

Even though White flight from the city of Detroit into the surrounding suburbs had been in the process since the 1950’s, the 1967 riots arguably accelerated this White flight and the 1973 election of Mayor Coleman A. Young precipitated the segregated us v. them/White v. Black/Suburbs v. City polarization that fostered a stubborn and intractable regionalism where all would rather watch the city fall into ruin instead of accepting the fact that Detroit was and still is important to all of the residents of the State of Michigan, White and Black alike.

From the moment in 1973 when the newly elected Black mayor Coleman A. Young uttered the infamous words, "to all dope pushers, to all rip off artists, to all muggers… It’s time to leave Detroit. Hit Eight mile road." (1) His words were misconstrued by bigoted and fearful Whites, those in the suburbs just beyond the border of Eight mile road and those who wanted to flee the city, as the most important excuse that was needed to evacuate Detroit and segregate
DETROPIA, while skillfully documenting the current urban decay that was accelerated by Black flight into the suburbs and other States after 2001, it does not capture the background of urban decay and economic impoverishment that began directly after Mayor Young’s election. “Ironically, the political hope of the Black community was vested in the same inexorable process that was putting the city in economic peril—the unremitting flight of White people. Joseph Hudson of the department store chain [that once filled the Detroit skyline] said it well on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the 1967 riot: “The black man has the feeling he is about to take power in the city,” Hudson observed. “But he is going to be left with an empty bag.” (2)

One of the secondary lessons we can learn from Michelle Alexander’s book, “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” is that after the gains of the Civil Rights Movement to bring equality to all Americans, some eternally bigoted and prejudiced Whites in power sought alternate means to continue racial segregation and inequity as a “backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.” (3)

In Detroit, after the election of Mayor Coleman A. Young two of the ways in which racial segregation was intensified and continued was through the tactic of Insurance Redlining which caused the cost of car, home and business insurance to skyrocket for the residents of Detroit (using exaggerated crime statistics) and media misrepresentation (which concentrated on violent crimes committed within the city while giving a more nuanced and cautionary presentation of crime committed outside the city limits).

These unfair tactics of Insurance Redlining and media misrepresentation came together to provide a convenient ruse through which Whites could evacuate the city and contribute to urban decay without guilt or recrimination: Devil’s Night. The night before Halloween where childish pranks are practiced, known as Devil’s Night became a worldwide media circus in Detroit during the late 70’s and 80’s because of the many arson fires that were deliberately set allowing White home and business owners to cash in on their insurance policies, evacuate the city, and relocate in the suburbs while blaming the resultant urban decay on rampant crime and Black political mismanagement.

Further evidence of this continuation of racial bigotry and prejudice within Whites against the city and its residents was revealed during the 1992 murder of Black 36 year old substance abuser, Malice Green, who was bludgeoned to death for not opening his hand by two White police officers, Larry Nevers and Walter A. Budzyn. Both officers were convicted and served prison time for his murder. Although the convictions were overturned on appeal both were retried and convicted of involuntary manslaughter; although Nevers never accepted responsibility for his actions and remained unrepentant even to his death from cancer earlier this year. It would seem that both officers felt like they were the victims of suspect Black leadership and media misrepresentation.

Yet, in many ways the murder of Malice Green was an assault literally and figuratively by Whites against the notion of twenty years of Black power and leadership exercised against one of the Black community’s most vulnerable members. We must remember that the vicious attack began with the heavy police flashlights being struck against Green’s clenched Black fist before moving on to fracture his skull repeatedly. The bludgeoning by the angry White police officers in the middle of the night in a racially polarized city seemed to say,” How dare this nigger disobey our command!”

On that night in Detroit in November 1992, racial bigotry, prejudice and violence had been continued through other means.

DETROPIA while juxtaposing high art Opera performances held at the renowned Detroit Opera House with scenes of abandon houses, schools, factories and empty streets strewn with trash, the film does not address how racial segregation between Detroit and its mostly White and affluent suburbs contributed to a culture of political corruption within Detroit’s leadership and a
culture of collusion between the suburbs and State leadership. Economic and political segregation forced residents, city leaders and business owners to find illegal and/or ethically compromised means to maintain their middle and upper middle class lifestyles, in the face of hostile and prejudiced media misrepresentation on the part of Whites in power that had surrounded and cordoned off the city.

From Coleman A. Young and the Vista Sludge scandal as well as his dubious exchange of South African Gold Krugerrands from his associate, Kenneth Weiner, who was subsequently convicted of embezzlement of Police funds, to the indictment and conviction of his longtime Police Chief, Bill Hart also for the embezzlement of Police funds to Kwame Kilpatrick and his conviction on federal racketeering charges together with business owner Bobby Ferguson, the culture of corruption in Detroit’s Black leadership has its roots in the economic segregation of the city from its richer and economically viable suburbs by racial prejudices and bigotry that have festered and metastasized over 40 years.

It is a culture of corruption that was made more seductive and palatable to political leaders, business owners and residents by the winnowing of legal economic opportunities caused by the racial segregation that was continued by other means within the suburbs and the halls of the State legislature against the city.

So although, Ewing and Grady’s DETROPIA is beautifully photographed, brilliantly edited and even manages to sustain the eviscerated and lugubrious ambiance that haunts Detroit today, its flaw is found in its actual content which can be traced to the paradox of a Post-racial perspective. If by Post-racial we mean looking beyond race as the sole source of human misery and social stratification in the 21st century, then such a perspective is dangerous, even reprehensible, when we look back at the past- especially a past that was predicated upon race. Maybe the term Post-racial is itself too problematic, when what is really meant is that race is but one out of a panoply of tactics humans have at their disposal to discriminate and maintain inequality amongst one another.

In short, what’s wrong with DETROPIA is that it evades the issue of race as it documents a city that has been defined (and nearly destroyed) by racial bigotry, riots, segregation and prejudice. If this analogy is not too farfetched, watching DETROPIA is like watching a documentary on Hiroshima where the filmmakers never mention the dropping of the atomic bomb; you just know something is missing and it’s as clear as the color of the nose on your face.

Notes


(2) Pg. 197, Ibid.


Andre Seewood is the author of SLAVE CINEMA: The Crisis of the African-American in Fil

THE DETROIT NEWS

April 7, 2011 at 1:12 pm

DANIEL HOWES

Detroit’s story: decline or
revival?

As pundits try to explain Detroit’s population loss, it’s clear that no single answer exists for the decline

If there’s a prize for writing a city’s obituary 50 years too soon, the winner is Time Magazine. In October 1961, the early days of the Kennedy administration, the weekly described a city where “prosperity seemed to go on forever — but it didn’t, and Detroit is now in trouble.”

People were leaving, its population down 10.7 percent between 1950 and 10 years later. Auto jobs were disappearing, casualties of consolidation and competition. The new mayor, Jerome Cavanagh, inherited a city budget deficit that the Citizens Research Council of Michigan pegged at $15 million.

That was 50 years ago, and what’s changed? Nothing and everything. Detroit’s newest decennial population bleed to the suburbs and beyond is 237,500, or roughly 25 percent of the population. Its finances and tax base remain a mess, despite Herculean efforts by the administration of Mayor Dave Bing. And its automakers? Not what they used to be.

No wonder, then, that all this and more — collapsing public schools, a raw legacy of political scandal, a battered and rebuilt auto industry and, most recently, harrowing numbers from the U.S. Census — prompted headline writers at The Wall Street Journal to proclaim “A Requiem for Detroit.” The dirgeful score has been more than a half century in the making.

Chrysler Corp. long ago bolted for Auburn Hills, changed hands three times and collapsed into bankruptcy. General Motors Corp. did, too, a pair of searing workouts that radically changed their footprints, their leadership cultures and the size of work forces that Detroit and its neighbors used to build whole communities.

The steady decline is bad enough. Worse is the accelerating speed of the unraveling, punctuated by the automotive reckonings of 2008 and ‘09 and now the stunning census numbers. In a simple spreadsheet, the feds supplied the grist for a series of urban obits that have been a long time coming and the media — at least those who even bothered to care — duly obliged.

The Wall Street Journal headlined its story “Detroit’s population crashes,” which is painful to read but true. The New York Times head, also true, said, “Detroit census confirms a desertion like no other” and began its report like this:

“Laying bare the country’s most startling example of modern urban collapse …,” census data offered “… dramatic testimony to the crumbling industrial base of the Midwest, black flight to the suburbs and the tenuous future of what was once a thriving metropolis.”
This week, CNBC moved past the politics and got to the kind of dollars and cents issue that threatens the city’s viability far more than political finger-pointing: “Can Detroit Afford its Debt?” asked the headline. “The startling collapse of Detroit’s population raises doubts about whether the city can afford to shoulder its enormous debt load.”

To which I have a two-word response: “Excellent point.”

In a blog post for the Washington Examiner, Detroit native Michael Barone noted the “utter devastation” in his hometown and the fact that it has lost 61 percent of its population since 1950. Then he struck a chord familiar to conservatives happy to blame Detroit’s implosion on everything from LBJ’s Great Society to Detroit’s entitlement culture, even if the plight goes deeper and wider than partisan politics:

“When people ask me why I moved from being a liberal to being a conservative, my single-word answer is Detroit,” he wrote. “The liberal policies which I hoped would make Detroit something like heaven have made it instead something more like hell.”

AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE

It’s not that the accounts are wrong. They aren’t. It’s that they’re often incomplete, oversimplified and laden with political caricature, the better to score partisan points, occupy some mythical moral high ground or both.

Detroit’s decline has many parents. There is the decided leftward tilt of politics that favored labor and government bureaucracy over business; the slavish reliance on an arrogant auto industry whose allegiance was to itself, mostly; an educational culture that valued teachers, administrators and contractors more than students; racial tension, inflamed by the ’67 riots, busing and crime that accelerated the exodus.

Conservatives cite unions and Democratic welfare-state policies; liberals blame business, white flight and trade deals. And that’s before locals get into the act with Detroiters blaming the suburbs and Republicans and suburbanites blaming former Mayor Coleman Young and forced busing. If only it was all that simple.

“The first problem that I see is the continuum of another negative national story that comes out of Detroit,” says Larry Alexander, president of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau. “Whether it’s the political scandals, the demise of the auto industry, the corruption that took place in our convention center or the collapse of our school system … people say, ‘My God, is Detroit going to survive?’”

The honest answer: Not sure. And, second, the continuing stream of semi-informed commentary on Detroit’s man-made disaster(s) doesn’t help sell the city to would-be investors, media types or average folks.

Oh, yes, something resembling a city called Detroit will emerge from the other side of these tempering fires, just like companies calling themselves GM and Chrysler emerged from federally induced bankruptcies. Like the automakers, the city likely will be smaller, leaner and more nimble because the alternative is a one-way street to the largest municipal collapse in the nation’s history.

CITY’S DECLINE BOTTOMING

In other words, the Perfect Storm that hit Detroit still rages, despite renewed energy downtown, demand for housing in Midtown and billions in investment by hospitals, high-tech firms and the hospitality industry. The population flight, recession-fueled foreclosure crisis, public schools in free-fall, declining tax revenue and a changing landscape among private sector employers cannot be neutralized by new investment in Midtown, the Detroit Medical Center, casinos, hotels and a $300 million rehab of Cobo Center.

They’re necessary, but not yet sufficient to reverse a trend that has been gathering momentum since Harry Truman was president. Worse, those are the
kind of on-the-ground changes that drive-by media types don’t see from their offices in New York or Washington.

But the granular truth is that more in Detroit is changing today than remaining the same because it has to. A former mayor and former City Council president sit in prison, but the new mayor and a reconstituted council are both more realistic about Detroit’s predicament than any time in years.

Michigan has a new governor, Rick Snyder, who professes a desire to help Detroit wherever possible. A revised emergency financial manager law gives appointees more power to force painful change on school systems and municipalities, up to and including voiding collective bargaining agreements.

Has the time for Detroit’s requiem arrived?

"I don’t think so," says Sheila Cockrel, a former City Council member who runs her own consulting firm and teaches at Wayne State University. "The window hasn’t been shut, but it’s closing rapidly. We’re running out of time," for radical change. "It has to be done or we’re going to be the first above-ground Pompeii."

From The Detroit News:
http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20110407/OPINION03/104070334#ixzz2XiIiaO00

THE ATLANTIC CITIES

Could Detroit Become America’s Design Capital?

- Steven Heller
- Jun 07, 2013
- 6 Comments

Could Detroit Become America’s Design Capital?

Courtesy of the College for Creative Studies

Last month I received my first-ever academic degree, an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. I had never heard of the school before it got in touch with me, and my sole knowledge of Detroit was the popular perception of it as a metropolis of modern ruins. But when I visited, I was blown away by this surprisingly little known but inspiring incubator of art and design – the rare collegiate creative enclave that engages with, reflects, and embodies the city it’s in.

That city is, of course, a poster child for urban blight and urban flight. But it’s also the storied home of American manufacturing and industrial innovation, and with the help of CCS, it could well become the design capital of the United States again.

The college began in 1906 as the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts “to encourage good and beautiful work as applied to useful service.” That notion of “useful service” soon expanded to include fine arts and what was called the “industrial arts” – the craft that would help power Detroit’s auto industry, which in turn over the years has helped power the college’s endowment and board of directors.
By the 1980s, though, enrollment had been dropping, the college was running substantial annual deficits, and the faculty was factionalized. In 1994, Richard Rogers, a vice president at the New School in New York City, was appointed CCS’s president with the mandate of fixing the problems, he told me.

“I arrived here at a hopeful moment,” he says. “A new mayor, Dennis Archer, had just been elected and got the business community more engaged in the city. A wave of downtown development began that led to the building of two new sports stadiums and expansion of many cultural and educational institutions, including the first expansion we did at CCS after I got here.”

CCS operates two campuses, both closely tied with the city’s history. The older includes the 1958 Yamasaki Building designed by Minoru Yamasaki (designer of the World Trade Center in New York) and the Josephine F. Ford Sculpture Garden (named after the school’s primary benefactor). The latest addition, the old Argonaut Building, was GM’s original engineering and design facility. It also once held the studio of Harley Earl, who introduced America to modern auto design and developed the concept of the “model year,” which used design changes to create demand for new vehicles.

GM donated the 760,000 square foot building to CCS in 2008, when it was renamed the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Design Education. It currently houses undergraduate and graduate design programs, as well as a unique art and design charter school for students from sixth to 12th grade (many of whom are inner-city), run by CCS and the Henry Ford Learning Institute. In the building, you’ll also find the showroom and factory of Shinola, producers of “Made in Detroit” bicycles, watches, and stationary.
Most of CCS’s students hail from Michigan, and many stay in Detroit, working in or around the auto industry. Fifteen percent of CCS graduates come from its transportation design department, the balance are in graphic, product, ceramic design, illustration, animation, video games, painting, sculpture, glass blowing, interiors, and more. While they’re in school, students work on research projects sponsored by a wide range of corporations and institutions. Shinola is one of the most involved of those partner companies, having facilitated class projects on branding, bicycle design, watch design, and fashion accessory design.

“Their physical proximity in our building makes these collaborations very easy, and the students have a lot of exposure to Shinola’s creative thinkers,” Rogers says.

The partnerships with local corporations and the charter school are two of the ways that CCS is contributing to Detroit’s status as a growing designer’s colony. CCS has played a role in that dynamic in other ways as well—managing the Kresge Arts in Detroit program, which awards fellowships and grants to artists, for example.

But Rogers is quick to point out that Detroit has long been a creativity hub, as shown in part by the fact that it’s home to two design schools, CCS in the city and Cranbrook just to the north. The city already has a robust arts community in part made possible by inexpensive real estate and the palpable sense that artists can be engaged in helping the city move forward. “I think [Detroit is] already a big ‘D’ design city but not adequately recognized as such,” he says, acknowledging that Detroit’s economic struggles more often define it in the public’s mind. “We have to do a better job of telling our story. We’re realists here. We know the problems. But we also know that there’s a lot of positive action in the city now, and designers are playing an important role.”
Detroit Arcadia
Exploring the post-American landscape

By Rebecca Solnit

Until recently there was a frieze around the lobby of the Hotel Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit, a naively charming painting of a forested lakefront landscape with Indians peeping out from behind the trees. The hotel was built on the site of Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit, the old French garrison that three hundred years ago held a hundred or so pioneer families inside its walls while several thousand Ottawas and Hurons and Potawatomis went about their business outside, but the frieze evoked an era before even that rude structure was built in the lush woodlands of the place that was not yet Michigan or the United States. Scraped clear by glaciers during the last ice age, the landscape the French invaded was young, soggy, and densely forested. The river frontage that would become Detroit was probably mostly sugar maple and beech forest, with black ash or mixed hardwood swamps, a few patches of conifers, and the occasional expanse of what naturalists like to call wet prairie—grasslands you might not want to walk on. The Indians killed the trees by girdling them and planted corn in the clearings, but the wild rice they gathered and the fish and game they hunted were also important parts of their diet. One pioneer counted badger, bear, fisher, fox, mink, muskrat, porcupine, rabbit, raccoon, weasel, wildcat, wolf, and woodchuck among the local species, and cougar and deer could have been added to the list. The French would later recruit the Indians to trap beaver, which were plentiful in those once-riverine territories—détroit means "strait" or "narrows," but in its thirty-two-mile journey from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie, the Detroit River also had several tributaries, including Parent’s Creek, which was later named Bloody Run after some newly arrived English soldiers managed to lose a fight they picked with the local Ottawas. Fort Pontchartrain was never meant to be the center of a broad European settlement. It was a trading post, a garrison, and a strategic site in the scramble between the British and the French to dominate the North American interior. Cadillac, the ambitious Frenchman who established the fort in 1701, invited members of several Indian nations to surround the fort in order to facilitate more frequent trading, but this led to clashes not just between nations but between races. Unknown Indians set fire to Fort Pontchartrain in 1703, and the Fox skirmished there in 1712. After the English took over in 1760, deteriorating relations with the local tribes culminated in the three-year-long, nearly successful Ottawa uprising known as Pontiac’s Rebellion.

This is all ancient history, but it does foreshadow the racial conflicts that never went away in Detroit, though now white people constitute the majority who surround and resent the 83 percent black city. It’s as if the fort had been turned inside out—and, in fact, in the 1940s a six-foot-tall concrete wall was built along Eight Mile Road, which traces Detroit’s northern limits, to contain the growing African-American population. And this inversion exposes another paradox. North of Eight Mile, the mostly white suburbs seem conventional, and they may face the same doom as much of conventional suburban America if sprawl and auto-based civilization die off with oil shortages and economic decline. South of Eight Mile, though, Detroit is racing to a far less predictable future.

It is a remarkable city now, one in which the clock seems to be running backward as its buildings disappear and its population and economy decline. The second time I visited Detroit I tried to stay at the Pontchartrain, but the lobby was bisected by drywall, the mural seemed doomed, and the whole place was under some form of remodeling that resembled ruin, with puddles in the lobby and holes in the walls, few staff people, fewer guests, and strange grinding noises at odd hours. I checked out after one night because of the cold water coming out of the hot-water tap and the generally spooky feeling generated by trying to sleep in a 413-room high-rise hotel with almost no other guests. I was sad to see the frieze on its way out, but—still—as I have explored this city over the last few years, I have seen an oddly heartening new
version of the landscape it portrays, a landscape that is not quite post-
apocalyptic but that is strangely—and sometime even beautifully—post-
American.

This continent has not seen a transformation like Detroit's since the last days of
the Maya. The city, once the fourth largest in the country, is now so
depopulated that some stretches resemble the outlying farmland and others
are altogether wild. Downtown still looks like a downtown, and all of those high-
rise buildings still make an impressive skyline, but when you look closely at
some of them, you can see trees growing out of the ledges and crevices, an
invasive species from China known variously as the ghetto palm and the tree
of heaven. Local wisdom has it that whenever a new building goes up, an older
one will simply be abandoned, and the same rule applies to the blocks of new
condos that have been dropped here and there among the ruins: why they
were built in the first place in a city full of handsome old houses going to ruin
has everything to do with the momentary whims of the real estate trade and
nothing to do with the long-term survival of cities.

The transformation of the residential neighborhoods is more dramatic. On so
many streets in so many neighborhoods, you see a house, a little shabby but
well built and beautiful. Then another house. Then a few houses are missing,
so thoroughly missing that no trace of foundation remains. Grass grows lushly,
as though nothing had ever disturbed the pastoral verdure. Then there's a
house that's charred and shattered, then a beautiful house, with gables and
dormers and a porch, the kind of house a lot of Americans fantasize about
owning. Then more green. This irregular pattern occurs mile after mile, through
much of Detroit. You could be traveling down Wa bash Street on the west side
town or Pennsylvania or Fairview on the east side of town or around just
about any part of the State Fair neighborhood on the city's northern border.
Between the half-erased neighborhoods are ruined factories, boarded-up
warehouses, rows of storefronts bearing the traces of failed enterprise, and
occasional solid blocks of new town houses that look as though they had been
dropped in by helicopter. In the bereft zones, solitary figures wander slowly, as
though in no hurry to get from one abandoned zone to the next. Some areas
have been stripped entirely, and a weedy version of nature is returning. Just
about a third of Detroit, some forty square miles, has evolved past decrepitude
into vacancy and prairie—an urban void nearly the size of San Francisco.

It was tales of these ruins that originally drew me to the city a few years ago.
My first visit began somberly enough, as I contemplated the great neoclassical
edifice of the train station, designed by the same architects and completed the
same year as Grand Central station in Manhattan. Grand Central thrives; this
broken building stands alone just beyond the grim silence of Michigan Avenue
and only half a mile from the abandoned Tiger Stadium. Rings of cyclone fence
forbid exploration. The last train left on January 5, 1988—the day before
Epiphany. The building has been so thoroughly gutted that on sunny days the
light seems to come through the upper stories as though through a cheese
grater; there is little left but concrete and stone. All the windows are smashed
out. The copper pipes and wires, I was told, were torn out by the scavengers
who harvest material from abandoned buildings around the city and hasten
their decay.

On another visit, I took a long walk down a sunken railroad spur that, in more
prosperous times, had been used to move goods from one factory to another.
A lot of effort had gone into making the long channel of brick and concrete
about twenty feet below the gently undulating surface of Detroit, and it had
been abandoned a long time. Lush greenery grew along the tracks and up the
walls, which were like a museum of spray-can art from the 1980s and 1990s.
The weeds and beer cans and strangely apposite graffiti decrying the 1993
passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement seemed to go on
forever.

I took many pictures on my visits to Detroit, but back home they just looked like
snapshots of abandoned Nebraska farmhouses or small towns farther west on
the Great Plains. Sometimes a burned-out house would stand next to a
carefully tended twin, a monument to random fate; sometimes the rectilinear
The nature of city planning was barely perceptible, just the slightest traces of a grid fading into grassy fields accented with the occasional fire hydrant. One day after a brief thunderstorm, when the rain had cleared away and chunky white clouds dotted the sky, I wandered into a neighborhood, or rather a former neighborhood, of at least a dozen square blocks where trees of heaven waved their branches in the balmy air. Approximately one tattered charred house still stood per block. I could hear the buzzing of crickets or cicadas, and I felt as if I had traveled a thousand years into the future.

To say that much of Detroit is “ruins is, of course, to say that some of it isn’t. There are stretches of Detroit that look like anywhere in the U.S.A.—blocks of town houses and new condos, a flush of gentility spreading around the Detroit Institute of Arts, a few older neighborhoods where everything is fine. If Detroit has become a fortress of urban poverty surrounded by suburban affluence, the city’s waterfront downtown has become something of a fortress within a fortress, with a convention center, a new ballpark, a new headquarters for General Motors, and a handful of casinos that were supposed to be the city’s economic salvation when they were built a decade ago. But that garrison will likely fend off time no better than Fort Detroit or the Hotel Pontchartrain.

Detroit is wildly outdated, but it is not very old. It was a medium-size city that boomed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, became the “arsenal of democracy” in the second, spent the third in increasingly less gentle decline, and by the last quarter was a byword for urban decay, having made a complete arc in a single century. In 1900, Detroit had a quarter of a million people. By midcentury the population had reached nearly 2 million. In recent years, though, it has fallen below 900,000. Detroit is a cautionary tale about one-industry towns: it shrank the way the old boomtowns of the gold and silver rushes did, as though it had been mining automobiles and the veins ran dry, but most of those mining towns were meant to be ephemeral. People thought Detroit would go on forever.

Coleman Young, Detroit’s first African-American mayor, reigned from 1974 to 1993, the years that the change became irreversible and impossible to ignore, and in his autobiography he sounds like he is still in shock:

It’s mind-boggling to think that at mid-century Detroit was a city of close to two million and nearly everything beyond was covered with corn and cow patties. Forty years later, damn near every last white person in the city had moved to the old fields and pastures—1.4 frigging million of them. Think about that. There were 1,600,000 whites in Detroit after the war, and 1,400,000 of them left. By 1990, the city was just over a million, nearly eighty percent of it was black, and the suburbs had surpassed Detroit not only in population but in wealth, in commerce—even in basketball, for God’s sake.

The Detroit Pistons are now based in Auburn Hills. According to the 2000 census, another 112,357 whites left the city in the 1990s, and 10,000 more people a year continue to leave. Even three hundred bodies a year are exhumed from the cemeteries and moved because some of the people who were once Detroiters or the children of Detroiters don’t think the city is good enough for their dead. Ford and General Motors, or what remains of them—most of the jobs were dispatched to other towns and nations long ago—in trouble, too. Interestingly, in this city whose name is synonymous with the auto industry, more than a fifth of households have no cars.

“It’s Future Is Looking Brighter,” said a headline in the Detroit Free Press, not long after another article outlined the catastrophes afflicting the whole state. In recent years, Michigan’s household income has dropped more than that of any other state, and more and more of its citizens are slipping below the poverty line. David Littmann, a senior economist for the Michigan think tank the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, told the paper, “As the economy slows nationally, we’re going to sink much farther relative to the other states. We’ve only just begun. We’re going to see Michigan sink to levels that no one has ever seen.”

In another sense, the worst is over in Detroit. In the 1980s and 1990s, the city
was falling apart, spectacularly and violently. Back then the annual pre-Halloween arson festival known as Devil’s Night finished off a lot of the abandoned buildings; it peaked in 1984 with 810 fires in the last three days of October. Some of the arson, a daughter of Detroit’s black bourgeoisie told me, was constructive—crackhouses being burned down by the neighbors; her own respectable aunt had torched one. Between 1978 and 1998, the city issued 9,000 building permits for new homes and 108,000 demolition permits, and quite a lot of structures were annihilated without official sanction.

Even Ford’s old Highland Park headquarters, where the Model T was born, is now just a shuttered series of dusty warehouses with tape on the windows and cyclone fences around the cracked pavement. Once upon a time, the plant was one of the wonders of the world—on a single day in 1925 it cranked out 9,000 cars, according to a sign I saw under a tree next to the empty buildings. Detroit once made most of the cars on earth; now the entire United States makes not even one in ten. The new Model T Ford Plaza next door struck my traveling companion—who, like so many white people born in Detroit after the war, had mostly been raised elsewhere—as auspicious. But the mall was fronted by a mostly empty parking lot and anchored by a Payless ShoeSource, which to my mind did not portend an especially bright future.

When I came back, a year after my first tour, I stopped at the Detroit Institute of Arts to see the Diego Rivera mural commissioned in 1932 by Henry Ford’s son, Edsel. The museum is a vast Beaux-Arts warehouse—“the fifth-largest fine arts museum in the United States,” according to its promotional literature—and the fresco covered all four walls of the museum’s central courtyard. Rivera is said to have considered it his finest work.

It’s an odd masterpiece, a celebration of the River Rouge auto plant, which had succeeded the Highland Park factory as Ford’s industrial headquarters, painted by a Communist for the son of one of the richest capitalists in the world. The north and south walls are devoted to nearly life-size scenes in which the plant’s gray gears, belts, racks, and workbenches surge and swarm like some vast intestinal apparatus. The workers within might be subsidiary organs or might be lunch, as the whole churns to excrete a stream of black Fords.

Rivera created this vision when the city was reveling in the newfound supremacy of its megafactories, but Detroit had already reached its apex. Indeed, the River Rouge plant—then the largest factory complex in the world, employing more than 100,000 workers on a site two and a half times the size of New York City’s Central Park—was itself built in suburban Dearborn. In 1932, though, capitalists and Communists alike shared a belief that the most desirable form of human organization—indeed, the inevitable form—was not just industrial but this kind of industrial: a Fordist system of “rational” labor, of centralized production in blue-collar cities, of eternal prosperity in a stern gray land. Even the young Soviet Union looked up to Henry Ford.

But Detroit was building the machine that would help destroy not just this city but urban industrialism across the continent. Rivera painted, in a subsidiary all-gray panel in the lower right corner of the south wall, a line of slumped working men and women exiting the factory into what appears to be an endless parking lot full of Ford cars. It may not have looked that way in 1932, but a lot of the gray workers were going to buy those gray cars and drive right out of the gray city. The city-hating Ford said that he wanted every family in the world to have a Ford, and he priced them so that more and more families could. He also fantasized about a post-urban world in which workers would also farm, seasonally or part-time, but he did less to realize that vision. Private automobile ownership was a double blow against the density that is crucial to cities and urbanism and against the Fordist model of concentrated large-scale manufacture. Ford was sabotaging Detroit and then Fordism almost from the beginning; the city had blown up rapidly and would spend the next several decades simply disintegrating.

Detroit was always a rough town. When Rivera painted his fresco, the Depression had hit Detroit as hard as or harder than anywhere, and the unemployed were famished and desperate, desperate enough to march on the
Ford Motor Company in the spring of 1932. It’s hard to say whether ferocity or desperation made the marchers fight their way through police with tear-gas guns and firemen with hoses going full bore the last stretch of the way to the River Rouge plant. Harry Bennett, the thug who ran Ford more or less the way Stalin was running the Soviet Union, arrived, and though he was immediately knocked out by a flying rock, the police began firing on the crowd, injuring dozens and killing five. The battle of the Hunger March or the huge public funeral afterward would’ve made a good mural.

No, it wasn’t cars alone that ruined Detroit. It was the whole improbable equation of the city in the first place, the “inherent contradictions.” The city was done in by deindustrialization, decentralization, the post–World War II spread of highways and freeways, government incentives to homeowners, and disinvestment in cities that aided and abetted large-scale white flight into the burgeoning suburbs of those years. Chunks of downtown Detroit were sacrificed early, in the postwar years, so that broad arterial freeways—the Edsel Freeway, the Chrysler Freeway—could bring commuters in from beyond city limits.

All of this was happening everywhere else too, of course. The manufacturing belt became the rust belt. Cleveland, Toledo, Buffalo, and other cities clustered around the Great Lakes were hit hard, and the shrinking stretched down to St. Louis and across to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Newark. Now that it has entered a second gilded age, no one seems to remember that New York was a snowballing disaster forty or fifty years ago. The old textile district south of Houston Street had emptied out so completely that in 1962 the City Club of New York published a report on it and other former commercial areas titled “The Wastelands of New York City.” San Francisco went the same way. It was a blue-collar port city until the waterfront dried up and the longshoremen faded away.

Then came the renaissance, but only for those cities reborn into more dematerialized economies. Vacant lots were filled in, old warehouses were turned into lofts or offices or replaced, downtowns became upscale chain outlets, janitors and cops became people who commuted in from downscale suburbs, and the children of that white flight came back to cities that were not exactly cities in the old sense. The new American cities trade in information, entertainment, tourism, software, finance. They are abstract. Even the souvenirs in these new economies often come from a sweatshop in China. The United States can be mapped as two zones now, a high-pressure zone of economic boom times and escalating real estate prices, and a low-pressure zone, where housing might be the only thing that’s easy to come by.

This pattern will change, though. The forces that produced Detroit—the combination of bitter racism and single-industry failure—are anomalous, but the general recipe of deindustrialization, depopulation, and resource depletion will likely touch almost all the regions of the global north in the next century or two. Dresden was rebuilt, and so was Hiroshima, and so were the cities destroyed by natural forces—San Francisco and Mexico City and Tangshan—but Detroit will never be rebuilt as it was. It will be the first of many cities forced to become altogether something else.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is in one of those flourishing parts of Detroit; it is expanding its 1927 building, and when I said goodbye to the Rivera mural and stepped outside into the autumn sunshine, workmen were installing slabs of marble on the building’s new facade. I noticed an apparently homeless dog sleeping below the scaffolding, and as I walked past, three plump white women teetered up to me hastily, all attention focused on the dog. “Do you have a cell phone?” the one topped by a froth of yellow hair shrilled. “Call the Humane Society!” I suggested that the dog was breathing fine and therefore was probably okay, and she looked at me as though I were a total idiot. “This is downtown Detroit,” she said, in a tone that made it clear the dog was in imminent peril from unspeakable forces, and that perhaps she was, I was, we all were.

I had been exploring an architectural-salvage shop near Rosa Parks Boulevard...
earlier that day, and when I asked the potbellied and weathered white man
working there for his thoughts on the city, the tirade that followed was similarly
vehement: Detroit, he insisted, had been wonderful—people used to dress up
to go downtown, it had been the Paris of the Midwest!—and then it all went to
hell. Those people destroyed it. My traveling companion suggested that maybe
larger forces of deindustrialization might have had something to do with what
happened to the city, but the man blankly rejected this analysis and continued
on a tirade about “them” that wasn’t very careful about not being racist.

On the Web you can find a site, Stormfront White Nationalist Community, that
is even more comfortable with this version of what happened to the city, and
even less interested in macroeconomic forces like deindustrialization and
globalization: “A huge non-White population, combined with annual arson
attacks, bankruptcy, crime, and decay, have combined to make Detroit—once
the USA’s leading automotive industrial center—?into a ruin comparable with
those of the ancient civilizations—with the cause being identical: the
replacement of the White population who built the city, with a new non-White
population.” It could have been different. “In more civilized environs, these
facilities might have easily been transformed into a manufacturing and
assembly center for any number of industrial enterprises,” writes the
anonymous author.

A few months before the diatribe in the salvage yard, I’d met a long-haired
counterculture guy who also told me he was from Detroit, by which he, like so
many others I’ve met, meant the suburbs of Detroit. When I asked him about
the actual city, though, his face clenched like a fist. He recited the terrible
things they would do to you if you ventured into the city, that they would tear
you apart on the streets. He spoke not with the voice of a witness but with the
authority of tradition handed down from an unknown and irrefutable source.
The city was the infernal realm, the burning lands, the dragon’s lair at the
center of a vast and protective suburban sprawl.

The most prominent piece of public art in Detroit is the giant blackened bronze
arm and fist that serve as a monument to heavyweight boxing champion Joe
Louis, who grew up there. If it were vertical it would look like a Black Power fist,
but it’s slung from cables like some medieval battering ram waiting to be
dragged up to the city walls.

Deindustrialization dealt Detroit a sucker punch, but the knockout may have
been white flight—at least economically. Socially, it was a little more complex.
One African-American woman who grew up there told me that white people
seemed to think they were a great loss to the city they abandoned, “but we
were glad to see them go and waved bye-bye.” She lived in Ann Arbor—the
departure of the black middle class being yet another wrinkle in the racial
narrative—but she was thinking of moving back, she said. If she had kids,
raising them in a city where they wouldn’t be a minority had real appeal.

The fall of the paradise that was Detroit is often pinned on the riots of July
1967, what some there still refer to as the Detroit Uprising. But Detroit had a
long history of race riots—there were vicious white-on-black riots in 1833,
1863, 1925, and 1943. And the idyll itself was unraveling long before 1967.
Local 600 of the United Auto Workers broke with the union mainstream in
1951, sixteen years before the riots, to sue Ford over decentralization efforts
already under way. They realized that their jobs were literally going south, to
states and nations where labor wasn’t so organized and wages weren’t so
high, back in the prehistoric era of “globalization.”

The popular story wasn’t about the caprices of capital, though; it was about the
barbarism of blacks. In 1900, Detroit had an African-American population of
4,111. Then came the great migration, when masses of southern blacks traded
Jim Crow for the industrialized promised land of the North. Conditions might
have been better here than in the South, but Detroit was still a segregated city
with a violently racist police department and a lot of white people ready to work
hard to keep black people out of their neighborhoods. They failed in this
attempt at segregation, and then they left. This is what created the blackest city
in the United States, and figures from Joe Louis and Malcolm X to Rosa Parks
and the bold left-wing Congressman John Conyers—who has represented much of the city since 1964—have made Detroit a center of activism and independent leadership for African Americans. It’s a black city, but it’s surrounded.

Surrounded, but inside that stockade of racial divide and urban decay are visionaries, and their visions are tender, hopeful, and green. Grace Lee Boggs, at ninety-one, has been politically active in the city for more than half a century. Born in Providence to Chinese immigrant parents, she got a Ph.D. in philosophy from Bryn Mawr in 1940 and was a classical Marxist when she married the labor organizer Jimmy Boggs, in 1953. That an Asian woman married to a black man could become a powerful force was just another wrinkle in the racial politics of Detroit. (They were together until Jimmy’s death, in 1993.) Indeed, her thinking evolved along with the radical politics of the city itself. During the 1960s, the Boggses were dismissive of Martin Luther King Jr. and ardent about Black Power, but as Grace acknowledged when we sat down together in her big shady house in the central city, “The Black Power movement, which was very powerful here, concentrated only on power and had no concept of the challenges that would face a black-powered administration.” When Coleman Young took over city hall, she said, he could start fixing racism in the police department and the fire department, “but when it came time to do something about Henry Ford and General Motors, he was helpless. We thought that all we had to do was transform the system, that all the problems were on the other side.”

As the years went by, the Boggses began to focus less on putting new people into existing power structures and more on redefining or dismantling the structures altogether. When she and Jimmy crusaded against Young’s plans to rebuild the city around casinos, they realized they had to come up with real alternatives, and they began to think about what a local, sustainable economy would look like. They had already begun to realize that Detroit’s lack of participation in the mainstream offered an opportunity to do everything differently—that instead of retreating back to a better relationship to capitalism, to industry, to the mainstream, the city could move forward, turn its liabilities into assets, and create an economy entirely apart from the transnational webs of corporations and petroleum. Jimmy Boggs described his alternative vision in a 1988 speech at the First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Detroit. “We have to get rid of the myth that there is something sacred about large-scale production for the national and international market,” he said. “We have to begin thinking of creating small enterprises which produce food, goods, and services for the local market, that is, for our communities and for our city. . . . In order to create these new enterprises, we need a view of our city which takes into consideration both the natural resources of our area and the existing and potential skills and talents of Detroiter.”

That was the vision, and it is only just starting to become a reality. “Now a lot of what you see is vacant lots,” Grace told me. “Most people see only disaster and the end of the world. On the other hand, artists in particular see the potential, the possibility of bringing the country back into the city, which is what we really need.” After all, the city is rich in open space and—with an official unemployment rate in the mid-teens—people with time on their hands. The land is fertile, too, and the visionaries are there.

In traversing Detroit, I saw a lot of signs that a greening was well under way, a sort of urban husbandry of the city’s already occurring return to nature. I heard the story of one old woman who had been the first African-American person on her block and is now, with her grandson, very nearly the last person of any race on that block. Having a city grow up around you is not an uncommon American experience, but having the countryside return is an eerier one. She made the best of it, though. The city sold her the surrounding lots for next to nothing, and she now raises much of her own food on them.

I also saw the lush three-acre Earth Works Garden, launched by Capuchin monks in 1999 and now growing organic produce for a local soup kitchen. I saw a 4-H garden in a fairly ravaged east-side neighborhood, and amid the utter abandonment of the west side, I saw the handsome tiled buildings of the
Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, a school for teenage mothers that opens on to a working farm, complete with apple orchard, horses, ducks, long rows of cauliflower and broccoli, and a red barn the girls built themselves. I met Ashley Atkinson, the young project manager for The Greening of Detroit, and heard about the hundred community gardens they support, and the thousands more food gardens that are not part of any network. The food they produce, Atkinson told me, provides food security for many Detroiter. “Urban farming, dollar for dollar, is the most effective change agent you can ever have in a community,” she said. Everywhere I went, I saw the rich soil of Detroit and the hard work of the gardeners bringing forth an abundant harvest any organic farmer would envy.

Everyone talks about green cities now, but the concrete results in affluent cities mostly involve curbside composting and tacking solar panels onto rooftops while residents continue to drive, to shop, to eat organic pears flown in from Argentina, to be part of the big machine of consumption and climate change. The free-range chickens and Priuses are great, but they alone aren’t adequate tools for creating a truly different society and ecology. The future, at least the sustainable one, the one in which we will survive, isn’t going to be invented by people who are happily surrendering selective bits and pieces of environmentally unsound privilege. It’s going to be made by those who had all that taken away from them or never had it in the first place.

After the Panic of 1893, Detroit’s left-wing Republican mayor encouraged his hungry citizens to plant vegetables in the city’s vacant lots and went down in history as Potato Patch Pingree. Something similar happened in Cuba when the Soviet Union collapsed and the island lost its subsidized oil and thereby its mechanized agriculture; through garden-scale semi-organic agriculture, Cubans clawed their way back to food security and got better food in the bargain. Nobody wants to live through a depression, and it is unfair, or at least deeply ironic, that black people in Detroit are being forced to undertake an experiment in utopian post-urbanism that appears to be uncomfortably similar to the sharecropping past their parents and grandparents sought to escape. There is no moral reason why they should do and be better than the rest of us—but there is a practical one. They have to. Detroit is where change is most urgent and therefore most viable. The rest of us will get there later, when necessity drives us too, and by that time Detroit may be the shining example we can look to, the post-industrial green city that was once the steel-gray capital of Fordist manufacturing.

Detroit is still beautiful, both in its stately decay and in its growing natural abundance. Indeed, one of the finest sights I saw on my walks around the city combined the two. It was a sudden flash on an already bright autumn day—a pair of wild pheasants, bursting from a lush row of vegetables and flying over a cyclone fence toward a burned-out building across the street. It was an improbable flight in many ways. Those pheasants, after all, were no more native to Detroit than are the trees of heaven growing in the skyscrapers downtown. And yet it is here, where European settlement began in the region, that we may be seeing the first signs of an unsettling of the very premises of colonial expansion, an unsettling that may bring a complex new human and natural ecology into being.

This is the most extreme and long-term hope Detroit offers us: the hope that we can reclaim what we paved over and poisoned, that nature will not punish us, that it will welcome us home—not with the landscape that was here when we arrived, perhaps, but with land that is alive, lush, and varied all the same. “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” was Shelley’s pivotal command in his portrait of magnificent ruins, but Detroit is far from a “shattered visage.” It is a harsh place of poverty, deprivation, and a fair amount of crime, but it is also a stronghold of possibility.

That Rivera mural, for instance. In 1932 the soil, the country, the wilderness, and agriculture represented the past; they should have appeared, if at all, below or behind the symbols of industry and urbanism, a prehistory from which the gleaming machine future emerged. But the big panels of workers inside the gray chasms of the River Rouge plant have above them huge nude figures—
black, white, red, yellow, lounging on the bare earth. Rivera meant these figures to be emblematic of the North American races and meant their fistfuls of coal, sand, iron ore, and limestone to be the raw stuff of industrialism. To my eye, though, they look like deities waiting to reclaim the world, insistent on sensual contact with the land and confident of their triumph over and after the factory that lies below them like an inferno.


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Essay: Jerry Herron

The Forgetting Machine: Notes Toward a History of Detroit

David Barr and Sergio DeGiusti, _Transcending_, Hart Plaza, Detroit, 2003. [Photo by Flickr user kiddharma]

Decline and Fall

The classic text on ruins is Edward Gibbon’s _The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_, completed during the last decades of the 18th century, when the English were cultivating a special interest in historical empires that their own advancing empire might yet surpass — a compensatory preoccupation brought on by the recent loss of the American colonies. Toward the end of his massive opus, Gibbon contemplates what it would have been like to “discover” Rome in that late medieval moment when the great metropolis was first appreciated as a ruin. Here, in a passage of vicarious self-reflection, he imagines the 14th-century poet Petrarch encountering the city:

> When Petrarch first gratified his eyes with a view of those monuments whose scattered fragments so far surpass the most eloquent descriptions, he was astonished at the supine indifference of the Romans themselves; he was humbled rather than elated by the discovery that … a stranger of the Rhône [i.e., Petrarch himself] was more conversant with these antiquities than the nobles and natives of the metropolis. [1]

It might seem self-aggrandizing to say that the post-industrial and post-millennial metropolis of Detroit works in much the same way; but it does. I can think of no other American city that feels at once familiar historically, and also alien. Familiar because this is the place where the life we all live — cars, strip malls, shopping centers, freeways, exurbia — was invented; alien because nobody here seems bothered that so many recognizable signs of wealth and culture — things that really matter elsewhere — have been so thoroughly abandoned, as if they had suddenly lost all meaning.

I feel like Gibbon’s Petrarch, then: astonished at the seeming indifference of the local citizenry to Detroit’s monumental fragments, humbled at the discovery that after 30 years in the city I seem to know more about its crumbling relics than the natives do — many of them, at least. But these are not ruins from some distant age; they are distinctly mine; and I find it hard to recover Gibbon’s hearty self-satisfaction at the “supine indifference” of Roman natives. Here in Detroit, the city has been ruined by the same people who still inhabit it. So the question is, who understands better what the place really means: the person who tries to remember it, or the one who lets it go?
There is no culture — for lack of a better word — no context of public memory and social expectation that would bind together all that the city contains. What does it add up to, all this abandonment of lives and buildings, neighborhoods and property? It doesn't seem to add up to anything, other than the decontextualized spectacle itself and the demographic souvenir-hunting opportunities it provides. This city is never coming back; whatever happens next will be without urban precedent because the context of city no longer applies in this place where history has finally run out. And so the reason we come to Detroit — immigrants, tourists, artists, journalists alike — is to engage a fantasy about how we can always walk away from the past, from the now blown promise of an erstwhile prosperity that was once made real for generations of Americans. There's probably not a better place in this country, maybe in the world, for this kind of work.

Consider a recent issue of Harper's, which features an image and excerpt, titled "Eulogy: Nobody's Detroit," from one of the latest limited-edition exercises in dystopia, Detroit Disassembled, a collection of photographs by Andrew Moore with an introduction by the Detroit-born Philip Levine, now poet laureate of these United States. I find myself thinking of Marx on Hegel, his famous statement that "all great world-historical facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice ... the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." A tragedy of world-historical proportions has occurred here in Detroit; and now it is being reproduced, in personal anecdotes and news stories, in books and films, and above all in those now clichéd photographs of rot, dereliction and decay. All of which is perhaps not exactly farce (although there is surely something farcical about the putative bravery of all those on-site observers and their sententious discoveries: I'm so bad, I party in Detroit! the images seem to say, just like the slogan from one of my favorite t-shirts). Instead of farce, our historic tragedy is being turned into art; which is precisely why the ex-pat poet has been coaxed into talking about photographs of a city he hasn't lived in for more than half a century. But I'll give him this much; in his introduction to Detroit Disassembled, Levine gets one thing exactly right:

> What we see taking place in [these] photographs is no doubt happening everywhere, but it would appear that in Detroit the process has such extraordinary velocity it seems to have stepped out of time to become the sole condition of being.

Images stepped out of time that's what turns tragedy into art. The poet continues:

> These photographs are among the most beautiful I've ever seen: their calm in the face of the ravages of man and nature confer an unexpected dignity upon the subjects of his camera, the very dignity I had assumed daily life had robbed them of.

So things once tragic become beautiful — images for artistic appreciation — with the ravages of daily life being redeemed by photographic dignity. That's what art can do: it transforms this Everyman's catastrophe into "Nobody's Detroit," as the Harper's subtitle puts it — an object for aesthetic contemplation, like the Grand Canyon or a summer sunset.

Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, The Ruins of Detroit (Steidl, 2011), featuring Michigan Central Station. [Photo of book cover by Justin Rowe]
underway. The photographs from *The Ruins of Detroit* were exhibited at the Gun Gallery in Stockholm, among other venues; *Detroit Disassembled* was the subject of an exhibition at the Akron Art Museum. I saw the Akron show, and it was truly amazing, transformative even. Moore’s images were blown up to old masters’ scale, mounted and lit as if we were being presented with the canvases of Rembrandt or Velasquez. Moore uses a large-format camera, and he stalks the usual “ruin porn”[4] sites — abandoned theaters and churches and schools, derelict houses, collapsed industrial buildings — but never have I seen work quite like this, whether in his book, or on the museum walls. “I’m not just photographing derelict buildings,” Moore told an interviewer from the *Detroit News*, “I’m looking for beauty and their poetic, or metaphorical, meaning.”[5] I’d say that just about sums things up.

And that’s where the crucial transformation happens, with the museum conferring the status of art upon work that might otherwise be construed as photo-journalistic documentary. John Berger has referred to this process as “mystification.”

> Fear of the present leads to mystification of the past. The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. Cultural mystification of the past entails a double loss. Works of art are made unnecessarily remote. And the past offers us fewer conclusions to complete in action.[6]

That is precisely the point of Moore’s work — to mystify into “poetic” inconsequence and remoteness the past that is represented by Detroit, and along with it the conclusions we might draw as a result. Those otherwise troubling conclusions, and the actions that might follow from them — actions undertaken in the name of shared responsibility — are now translated into matters of taste and technique. A sense of “bogus religiosity,” to use another of Berger’s terms, pervades the images; action is foreclosed, except for the connoisseur-like contemplations of the solitary spectator, who is freed to look at the worst, without any necessity of further exertion. The “naked” facts of Detroit, in all their frightening and accusatory detail, are turned into museum-piece “nudes,” spot-lit on the gallery walls; they’re titillating perhaps, but also unreal, just like a centerfold image is unreal; and the more gorgeous, the better.[7]

Andrew Moore, *Detroit Disassembled*, at the Akron Art Museum, 2010. [Exhibition postcard]

The same can be said for *The Ruins of Detroit*, a compilation of large-format photographs taken by Marchand and Meffre, who were associated with the team of reporters from *Time* magazine that spent a well-publicized year in Detroit.[8] This is a heavy piece of work, in every sense, weighing in at almost seven pounds — at least according to my bathroom scale — and containing enough gloomy images to turn the most ebullient booster into a post-apocalyptic nihilist. There’s an appropriate introduction by historian Thomas Sugrue — author of *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*[9] — outlining the relevant facts about the city’s industrial decline. As Marchand and Meffre write: “True ‘capital of the twentieth century,’ Detroit has literally created, produced and manufactured our modern world, creating a logic that has eventually annihilated, destroyed the city itself.” These guys get it, I thought.

But then I started looking at the photographs, which so completely contradict the insight of that opening statement. The images fail to capture the complex logic that links creation and destruction necessarily together — in Detroit and in America. Marchand and Meffre reduce everything they encounter to a dead zone of already-seen sights; they deploy a visual idiom that has all the wit and insight of a post-mortem Polaroid, with the same dismal color palette, and the now-to-be expected prohibition against any human being ever entering the frame. Why have these photographers settled for so much less than their own introductory statement might lead you to expect? Perhaps the cliché-propagating idiom of ruin porn is so powerful that it simply takes over, duping
otherwise intelligent artists into a tedious banality that not even the volume’s pretentious scale and price can conceal.

“We don’t sell ink here anymore”
At so many now-familiar ruins — the Michigan Central Station, the Packard Motors Plant and Fisher Body Plant No. 21, the jazz-age United Artists Theater, the American Hotel, the Grande Ballroom, the Lee Plaza Hotel, the Vanity Ballroom, the Metropolitan Building, the libraries and schools and churches, etc. etc. — the photogenic decline and fall of the Michigan Empire has been captured by countless observers. Less well known — perhaps because less represented in the archives of ruin porn — but no less monumental in scale and consequence, is the now-demolished headquarters of the J. L. Hudson Company. Joseph Lowthian Hudson was an immigrant from Newcastle-upon-Tyne who became Detroit’s premier upscale retailer in the early 20th century. Hudson’s flagship department store, located at the center of Detroit, on Woodward Avenue, was among the largest in the country — 28 stories, plus four basements, comprising 2.2 million square feet of interior floor space. Completed in stages between 1924 and 1929 under the architectural supervision of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, the store had 5,000 windows, 700 dressing rooms and 50 passenger elevators, each with its own white-gloved attendant. At its height in the 1950s, Hudson’s employed a staff of 12,000. Only Macy’s in New York City was bigger.

Left: J.L. Hudson Building, Detroit. [From postcard, ca. 1951] Right: Woodward Avenue, Detroit, in 1925. [Courtesy of the Library of Congress]

The building was no architectural masterwork; it expanded piecemeal over the years, annexing adjacent structures into an ungainly agglomeration clad in dull red brick. When it comes to commercial signifying, Hudson’s lacked the grandeur and pretension of early 20th-century retail palaces like Marshall Field’s or John Wanamakers or B. Altman and Co. For all its attempts at elegance, the classical flourishes and Beaux Arts details, Hudson’s was an efficient and practical undertaking — much like Detroit itself — a machine for making money, which it did, for over half a century, with sales peaking in 1954 at $155 million ($1.26 billion in 2011 dollars). At which point the J.L. Hudson Company, like other retailers, began developing suburban alternatives to its emporium on Woodward Avenue.

In the first decades of the new millennium it seems clear that the best years of our American lives were precisely when the mechanisms for abandoning our cities were being put in place. The boom years that followed World War II saw the construction of the Interstate highway system, the promotion of suburban single-family housing construction by the Federal Housing Administration, the dispersal of services, commerce, entertainment and eventually jobs to the ever-expanding exurban ring. And it all seemed to happen so rapidly, the result of convergent forces operating so efficiently you’d think there was some kind of deep design at the bottom of things. After a half-century of cultural and economic dominance, Hudson’s, and downtown Detroit along with it, plunged into sharp decline. By the time the flagship store was closed, in January 1983, the company had been reduced to a chain of suburban mall clones, owned since the late ’60s by the Dayton Company, of Minneapolis, all traces of local origin to be erased by corporate ersatz.

People in Detroit still talk about Hudson’s as a retail institution, but they give little thought to the actual old building, which became a gutted, vandalized wreck, and no less irrelevant than Michigan Central Station. Both are rightly understood as monuments for a disappeared history: the train station because nobody here seems to bother much about the ruin that still remains; Hudson’s because everybody claims to remember so fondly the building that’s no longer there. But what people remember is not exactly historical reality; instead, the memory of Hudson’s has become a kind of screen upon which we can replay
an idealized past — a past without any of the problems that made the utopian promise of suburbia seem worth abandoning the city to fulfill. Consider one of the customer reviews, on Amazon, for a recent photo collection, Hudson’s: Detroit’s Legendary Department Store:

Anyone who shopped in Detroit’s once bustling downtown Woodward corridor should have this book. Starting in the 1930s my grandmother would take the bus downtown at least once a week to shop at Hudson’s and the surrounding stores. As a young girl in the mid 1960s, I occasionally traveled with her and some of my earliest and fondest memories are of wandering around the upper 12 floors and two basement levels of merchandise. You would drop your coats off on the forth [sic] floor, have lunch on the mezzanine or perhaps the basement cafeteria, shop all afternoon, catch an early dinner at the Riverview room on the 13th floor and then head home with your purchases shipped to your home within a day or two. It was truly an experience that no mall today can come close to. … I cried the day the store was demolished and I am sure that Grandma was rolling in her grave. [10]

The review is titled “Memories of a true shopping experience!” Nostalgia, of course, is just a higher form of forgetting. Hudson’s failed because it ceased to attract shoppers; Grandma notwithstanding, the customers were at the mall.

My first visit to Hudson’s was in 1982, soon after I’d accepted a job in Detroit. I arrived by plane from New York City, rented a car at Metro Airport, and drove downtown to look for a place to live. I settled on an apartment on Washington Boulevard, and the building manager informed me enthusiastically that we were just around the corner from Hudson’s! So I walked over to take a look. I found a forlorn place that could have been the stage set for a period movie, all the elements of commercial presumption intact, though threadbare. What was missing was the cast; on the higher floors, I seemed to be walking through the aisles alone. In the stationery department, I looked at fountain pens, some costing hundreds of dollars. I thought I would buy a bottle of ink, my own pen having gone dry. “We don’t sell ink here any more,” the exquisitely polite clerk explained.

And the story was pretty much the same in all the last-vestige establishments I would visit in my early years in Detroit: restaurants and movie palaces, clubs and exclusive men’s stores. The apparatus of city life was there, but none of it was fully operational — like those expensive fountain pens that nobody was expected to buy, so that ink had become superfluous. What had once been a viable, commercial downtown — “bustling,” as the Amazon customer remembered — had tuned into something else entirely, something spectral and forlorn.

Illustration of Hudson’s departments in LIFE, December 1958. [via The Department Store Museum]

“A city within itself” is how many of the early 20th-century department stores were described, and the comparison is apt. Hudson’s, at its height in the mid-1950s, served 100,000 customers per day; the store boasted its own telephone exchange, with the third largest switchboard in the United States, exceeded in size only by the Pentagon and the Bell System. [11] And like the city, Hudson’s had a necessary purpose — to teach people how to live in society. J. L. Hudson ascribed to a calling higher than mere commerce, and he communicated this in “The Hudson’s Creed,” which his employees were expected to espouse:

My faith is not alone a faith in the store, the organization — it’s a faith in the ideals of men, those who are responsible for this great house of industry. And so I stand, inspired with the blazing truth that I am taking an active part in building, through honest effort,
The great department stores, and their owners, came naturally by the evangelizing mission. The making of shoppers, like the making of citizens, was an essential function of both store and city, especially the city of middle-class arrivals made possible by the flourishing of modern industry. In Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class, Jan Whitaker observes:

No longer primarily a purveyor of basic necessities, and by now a venerable and trusted establishment in a rapidly changing society, [the department store] took on a larger role as arbiter of middle-class taste and lifestyles. From the 1920s into the 1960s, stores exercised an almost moral authority to define in material terms what it was to live as a middle-class American. They poured creative energy into encouraging Americans to “trade up,” to demand a higher standard of living. Marshaling their enormous promotional resources, they expanded their entertainment and educative roles. They broadened services, upgraded buildings. They emphasized style as never before. In short, department stores deployed their skills in interpreting and managing the symbolic significance of the goods they sold. [13]

The mission of the department stores, with their encyclopedic arrays of “departments” (Hudson’s had 200), was city-like: their goal was to teach people how to be together in an unprecedented condition of plenty and upward striving. The well-articulated “stories” of the great emporia told a compelling narrative of desire, with an infrastructure that mirrored the cities they proudly represented. But the pedagogy of these grand establishments had a perhaps unanticipated outcome. In Detroit, J.L. Hudson’s taught its lessons so effectively that citizen-shoppers quickly graduated and were ready to set out for the suburban malls, effectively forgetting how to remember that they had ever needed the department store — or the city — to send them on their way.

In 1996, a newly elected city government identified as one of its first objectives the demolition of the abandoned and vandalized Hudson’s on Woodward Avenue. If anything different was ever to happen downtown, the feeling was, that place had to go. As soon as the decision was announced, the nostalgia industry shifted into overdrive. The Detroit Historical Museum mounted a semi-permanent display of Hudson’s memorabilia; a documentary aired repeatedly on local public television. The city newspapers created special series dedicated to reminiscences about Hudson’s (they were already running weekly columns focused on recollections of bygone neighborhoods and vintage cars). And in a surprising twist, the company hired to demolish Hudson’s pioneered a
new and distinctively American form of urban archaeology. Because of the building’s age, and because no accurate architectural plans existed of the five structures and thirteen construction types incorporated in Hudson’s expansion over the decades, the demolition team determined that a thorough excavation was required — not to preserve the past, but to destroy it completely, in the most rational and efficient way possible. So one evening in October 1998, the mayor of Detroit pushed the button that set off the explosive charges, and Hudson’s, once the tallest department store in America, became the tallest building ever to be imploded. The enormous structure collapsed in a vast cloud of dust that enveloped the whole of downtown, darkening the sky in a Pompeian gloom.

**Eternal Return**

You can read the history of Detroit as a history of what philosophers have called the eternal return. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera created a masterpiece, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which he struggles to grasp this phenomenon; he speculates on the loss represented by an understanding of time that is content to abandon — to forget — the past.

> Let us therefore agree that the idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia. … This … reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted. [14]

In Detroit there is one place where the eternal return seems especially palpable, and also a little frightening, which is to be expected of a site where the past is undead, where it is neither thematized nostalgically nor banished outright. I’m thinking, of course, of the Michigan Theater, the great jazz age movie palace created by the architects C.W. and George L. Rapp, or what’s left of it these days: the theater was shut in the mid-1970s and partly demolished and gutted and converted into a parking garage. In an earlier essay published in *Places*, I quoted a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, who exclaimed upon the building’s opening in 1926: “It is beyond the human dreams of loveliness.” I left out the next part of the review: “Entering it, you pass into another world.” [15]

**Michigan Theater**

Entering the Michigan Theater today, you do indeed feel as if you’re passing into another world, as if you’re drifting through the sunken Titanic, or the fanciful dungeons of Piranesi. After the downtown movie palaces went dark in
the 1970s and began their inexorable slide into dereliction (which efforts to turn them into blaxploitation venues or X-rated cinemas did little to halt), the Michigan’s owners hacked away at the lobby and main auditorium, installing a parking garage under the proscenium arches in the space that once accommodated 4,000 moviegoers.

But the crude and hasty retrofit left many of the decorative elements intact, allowing the interior, “the heavily carved and ornamented walls,” to decay, along with the tattered velvet curtain that is still hanging, and disintegrating, behind the old proscenium. [16] Plaster fragments and withered carpet strips litter the floors, and daylight filters in through holes punched in the walls, bathing the interior in a half-lit gloom. It’s an extraordinary spectacle — as countless photographers, professionals and amateurs alike, have been quick to realize, and a few filmmakers too, notably the director Curtis Hanson, who set a crucial scene of _8 Mile_, with Eminem, in the theater.

The old Michigan Theater is one of the most suggestive sights in the whole city of Detroit: neither an abandoned ruin nor a precious, restored fetish, but a working statement about making do with the past. The tenants of the offices adjacent to the theater threatened to move out unless they were provided with secure parking, so that’s what the landlord improvised out of the otherwise useless auditorium. And that is the genius of the place. One can only marvel at the dramatic parable being enacted by the current occupants — the returnees — who drive in and out of the vast space, past the former ticket booth, brought daily into conversation with the past, and what our desires have made of it: the desire to ride Henry Ford’s cars out of town, onward to a better life that lay, we imagined, beyond the city. But still the city is here, outmoded and abandoned but necessarily returned to, that contradictory fact of life rendered in an architectural colloquy so extraordinary it cannot help but be felt.

The truth I’m trying to present is one about site-specific forgetting. If our history is a history of forgetting how to remember the past, as I am arguing, then the city of Detroit is the engine of our conflicted deliverance. It’s the machinery we’ve used for particular acts of forgetting, each connected to the place and time where the forgetting got done.

This is a history created by serial default. Nobody really planned the ends — the ruins — of these buildings, any more than they planned Detroit, or America for that matter, despite our dedication to continental-scale projects, beginning with the Declaration of Independence and moving through Manifest Destiny and continuing with the Urban Renewal programs that destroyed America’s cities. We’ve all had a hand in our collective making, and now we’ll have to live with the consequences, not the least of which is our ignorance about the origin of things, so that we stand stupefied or angry or fascinated — camera at the ready — before the monuments to ruination.

But the improvisation of the Michigan Theater is powerful because it doesn’t remove people from the city; on the contrary, it involves them dramatically in the production of their own situation. The ruin of urban space becomes a participatory drama: memory versus forgetting, the city dead or the city alive. The trick is seeing both at once, and comprehending them as equally true and mutually implicated.

Adding a special resonance to the history of the old theater is the fact that was on this very spot — then 58 Bagley Avenue — where Henry Ford lived when he was a hired workman at the Edison Illuminating Plant, two blocks over, on Washington Boulevard. In the 1890s Ford rented part of a house on the site, along with a shed out back, and right there, in the spring of 1896, he built his first horseless carriage — the “Quadricycle,” he called it. His gasoline-powered contraption turned out to be wider than the door he had to push it through to take a test drive, so to get the machine outside, he was forced to
Detroitism

By John Patrick Leary

January 15, 2011

What does “ruin porn” tell us about the motor city, ourselves, other American cities?

Photograph by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre courtesy Steidl.

Red Dawn 2, the forthcoming sequel to the nineteen eighties B-movie about a Soviet occupation of America, was shot last year in downtown Detroit. A long-abandoned modernist skyscraper coincidentally undergoing demolition served...
as a backdrop for battle scenes between American guerrillas and the Communist occupiers, now Chinese. For weeks, Chinese propaganda posters fluttered in the foreground of the half-destroyed office building, whose jagged entrails were visible through the holes opened by the wrecking ball. A pedestrian routinely bumped into Asian-American extras with Michigan accents and fake Kalashnikovs, while a parking garage played the role of a Communist police station. It was an uncanny spectacle: the very real rubble of the Motor City’s industrial economy serving as the movie backdrop for post-industrial America’s paranoid fantasies of national victimization. What made it even weirder was the fact that the film’s producers just left the posters hanging when they packed up. A red-and-yellow poster on that same parking garage assured us for weeks afterward that our new rulers were “here to help.”

“Do you have any books with pictures of abandoned buildings?” demanded a customer of a bookseller friend of mine at Leopold’s Books in Detroit. The man marched to the cash register and abruptly blurted out his question, looking, perhaps, for one of the recent pair of books on Detroit’s industrial ruins and its abandoned homes, Andrew Moore’s Detroit Disassembled and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s forthcoming The Ruins of Detroit. These two books, along with the architectural history Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City’s Majestic Ruins, are part of a small Detroit culture boom over the last year. Besides the new books by Moore and Marchand and Meffre, photographers have chronicled the city’s decaying structures in the likes of Slate.com, the New York Review of Books online, and Time, which moved a troupe of Detroit bloggers to an old mansion on the city’s east side, an old-fashioned news bureau mixed with a bizarre-Real World social experiment. A new graphic novel, Sword of My Mouth, imagines a band of survivors living in a depopulated Detroit after the Rapture has swept up the righteous, a clever satire of the clichéd description of Detroit’s “post-apocalyptic” landscape and the moralizing that has always bolstered public discussion of the social problems of American cities. And while empty buildings would seem more suited to still rather than moving images, filmmakers like Julien Temple have recently explored industrial ruins in his Detroit exploitation documentary Requiem for Detroit?, while Detroit boosters respond with their own, sunnier films (Johnny Knoxville’s Detroit Lives and Florent Tillon’s Detroit Wild City) about entrepreneurs, artists, and urban farmers amidst the ruins.

Detroiters often react testily to this kind of attention (as I do), even when it is done skillfully and with good intentions, as much of it is. Some of the criticism of negative publicity is just boosterism, as when the City Council denounced the producers of the ABC crime drama Detroit 187 for peddling the idea that there are criminals in Detroit. Others, weary of condescending criticism from outsiders, will defend Detroit’s reputation, or at least their privileged right to defame it, something like defending a bad parent: I can say anything I want about the old man, but don’t you dare. Ruin photography, in particular, has been criticized for its “pornographic” sensationalism, and my bookseller friend won’t sell much of it for that reason. And others roll their eyes at all the positive attention heaped on the young, mostly white “creatives,” which glosses over the city’s deep structural problems and the diversity of ideas to help fix them. So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city. And to see oneself portrayed in this way, as a curiosity to be lamented or studied, is jarring for any Detroiter, who is of course also an American, with all the sense of self-confidence and native-born privilege that we’re taught to associate with the United States.

The city has been a bellwether of each major urban crisis since World War II.

That some of the recent focus on Detroit ruins is exploitative in its depiction of Detroit’s impoverishment bears repeating, but more compelling are the reasons for our contemporary fascination with images of first-world urban decline, and not just in the Motor City. Ruin websites, photography collections,
and urban exploration blogs chronicle industrial ruins across North America and Europe, from Youngstown, Ohio to Bucharest, Romania. Yet Detroit remains the Mecca of urban ruins. Its impressive collection of pre-Depression skyscrapers have been memorably lionized as a “American Acropolis” by Camilo José Vergara, the pioneering photographer of American ghetto landscapes. Buildings that have escaped the wrecking ball have also, for the most part, escaped gentrification, since most of Detroit’s economic elite remain sequestered in the suburbs, with little of the desire for urbanity that one finds among the leisure classes of Chicago, New York, London, or Philadelphia. Nor has the city ever been able to do on any significant scale what Pittsburgh has accomplished with its defunct Homestead steel mill, now a shopping mall, or what New York has done with upscale condos in old warehouses—leverage the hollow shells of a productive economy into the shell games of the credit economy.

For media workers from more prosperous cities, Detroit’s spaces of ruination appear to tell a history, or at least evoke a vague sense of historical pathos, absent in those other, wealthier cities. Indeed, one of the notable features of this Detroit boom is the fact that few of the people driving it actually live here. For someone from New York, Paris, or San Francisco, history seems more visible here, and this is the visual fascination that Detroit holds. As Marchand and Melfre write on their website, “Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our societies and their changes, small pieces of history in suspension.” In a country perennially plagued with a historical amnesia, ruins are rare permanent reminders of a history unsuited to the war memorials and equestrian statues that dot the national landscape. Another reason for the fascination with Detroit’s decline is less about history, though, and more about the future.

Coleman Young, Detroit’s charismatic and still-controversial mayor during the years of the city’s most precipitous decline in the nineteen seventies and eighties, put it well in his fascinating 1994 autobiography, Hard Stuff: “Detroit today,” he wrote, “is your town tomorrow.” From the 1967 riots, when Detroit became the flashpoint of the country’s political and racial crisis, to the deindustrialization and crime of the nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties, the city has been a bellwether of each major urban crisis since World War II. Today, Detroit, to use an overused but appropriate metaphor given the city’s scarred appearance, is “ground zero” of the collapse of the finance and real estate economy in America. Detroit has been hit as hard as any city by the foreclosure crisis and by unemployment, and so it embodies the looming jobless future, or more precisely, our worst fears about that future.

Photograph by Andrew Moore courtesy DAP.

The Three Detroit Stories: The Metonym

Every week, it seems, brings another “Detroit Story” somewhere in the popular media: of laid-off auto workers, of the recently bankrupt auto corporations, tributes to hardy inner-city entrepreneurs, and more pictures of abandoned buildings. There are three principal conventions of Detroit writing in the major media. First, and most common, is the one that has the least to do with the city itself: the Metonym. In auto industry reporting, “Detroit” is a textbook example of metonymy, the trope in which a complex thing is replaced by a simpler, easily recognized equivalent: “10 Downing Street” for the British government, “Wall Street” for high finance, “Silicon Valley” for computer hardware, and so on. The substitution of “Detroit” for the auto industry bears within it an implicit, bitter irony, however, since the name of the city stands in for an industry that has largely abandoned it. “Detroit” can hold other, subtler meanings, too. For liberals, like George Monbiot in the Guardian newspaper, “Detroit” equals dirty industry and corporate welfare. His headline “Let Detroit die,” from a 2009 article that denounced the U.S. government’s loans to the Big Three automakers, sounded a bit callous if you happen to live or work here, and are therefore more often the victim rather than the beneficiary of pollution or corporate welfare. For rightists, “Detroit” also connotes unions and other bogeymen of urban Democratic politics. Thus, the conservative columnist
Charles Krauthammer warned of “lemon socialism” once “the government owns Detroit,” a possibility almost as improbable in the literal sense as the People’s Liberation Army on Woodward Avenue.

The Detroit Lament

The second style of Detroit reportage I would term the Detroit Lament. The Lament turns from the purely rhetorical use of Detroit as metonym for something else to a more visceral depiction of the city’s scarred landscape, and occasionally, though only occasionally, its residents. The Lament is typically mournful in tone—elegiac at best and sanctimonious at worst. Because the Lament is thematically preoccupied with loss, of people, of buildings, of the always ill-defined “way of life” said to be nurtured by the old automotive economy and union wages, its primary subject is spatial: the empty lots, the derelict buildings, the overwhelming vastness of a city mutilated by freeways and marked by more vacant land than it can ever plausibly develop. For this reason, the Lament lends itself to the visual media, and for their elegiac emphasis on loss and decline we can classify Detroit Disassembled and The Ruins of Detroit in this category. The Lament signals a fascination with what seems to be all that we have of our twentieth-century history (at least besides those war memorials): the brick-and-steel spectacles of the industrial age, out of which some explanation could be found for the present desperate predicament of urban America.

*Detroit remains the Mecca of urban ruins.*

The Ruins of Detroit and Detroit Disassembled are products of a collaboration. The photographers are friends, and Moore was introduced to the city by the two Parisians Marchand and Meffre. They often take pictures of the same abandoned buildings, even the same rooms, sometimes from the same angles, showing how conventional and well-trod Detroit ruin photography has become, despite its pioneering posture and the real danger of some of these decrepit structures.

Moore’s pictures in Detroit Disassembled play heavily on a pervasive, uneasy sense of quietude. His photos of interior spaces and exterior architectural shots are similarly uncluttered by superfluous details, and the emptiness creates the eerie effect of evoking the absent people who once inhabited the offices and classrooms he depicts. One expects an urban ruin to be filled with debris and destruction, yet some of these rooms, like an empty nineteen-nineties corporate meeting room or an upended office, look as if the occupants only just left in a great hurry, knocking over chairs to flee an impending disaster that never arrived. The sparseness of his photographs is sometimes comically banal, as in the old dentist’s office frozen in time, and sometimes macabre, as in his picture of the rusting hulk of the Bob-Lo island ferry at sunrise. His captions offer only the most superficial details about the buildings depicted or the rare individuals who appear, which on the one hand suggests a lack of interest in these places in their own right. On the other hand, the evacuation of context from the photos gives them the uncanny feeling of a place you might have been before in some other time or place—and if you’ve ever been inside a corporate office, a Catholic school classroom, or a dentist’s office anywhere in America in the last thirty years, you have. Some of Moore’s photos evoke Young’s old dictum as a warning from the urban future—“Detroit,” a picture of a vacant offices whispers, “coming to your town soon.”

But other photos tend towards overwrought melodrama, like the photograph of an abandoned nursing home tagged with a spray-painted slogan, “God Has Left Detroit.” Moore leans on the compositional tactic of ironic juxtaposition, an old standby of documentary city photography since at least the days of Robert Frank and Helen Levitt. In one photograph (repeated in Marchand and Meffre’s collection) of the East Grand Boulevard Methodist church, its Biblical invocation, “And you shall say that God did it,” looms above its sanctuary. The irony is obvious, heavy-handedly so, yet the photographer’s meaning is less clear. One feels obliged to raise the obvious defense of the Almighty here: If anyone or anything “did it,” General Motors and the Detroit City Council had a hell of a lot more to do with it than God did. And who said God was ever here
in the first place?

But of course, no photograph can adequately identify the origins for Detroit’s contemporary ruination; all it can represent is the spectacular wreckage left behind in the present, after decades of deindustrialization, housing discrimination, suburbanization, drug violence, municipal corruption and incompetence, highway construction, and other forms of urban renewal have taken their terrible tolls. Indeed, what is most unsettling—but also most troubling—in Moore’s photos is their resistance to any narrative content or explication. Moore’s shot of a grove of birch trees growing out of rotting books in a warehouse might be a sign of Detroit’s stubborn persistence, as the Detroit poet Philip Levine argues a bit too optimistically in his accompanying essay, but it could easily be a visual joke on the city’s supposed intellectual and physical decrepitude, a bad joke that does not need repeating. One often finds oneself asking of Detroit Disassembled, The Ruins of Detroit, and indeed all ruin photographs, first, “What happened?” followed swiftly by, “What’s your point?” This comes partly from the awkwardness of the photographers’ aestheticism and postmodern detachment, which jars with the social violence of the history being depicted, and it’s partly down to their lack of interest in the human inhabitants of the city. But it’s a bit more than that.

These photos of uninhabited ruined spaces do little more than confirm what the most casual observer already knows about Detroit and cities like it. Moore is sensitive to this danger, and does includes a few photos that represent Detroiters leading lives amidst the ruins. Besides two portraits of Detroiters at home, Moore also includes a photo of a rooftop party by twenty-something white urban explorers, a self-conscious reflection, perhaps, on his own access to these spaces and on the well-beaten paths of ruin fetishists. Vergara, the Chilean-born photographer whose photographs of Newark, Detroit, Chicago, Camden, and New York are collected in The New American Ghetto, addresses the ahistorical failing of much ruin photography by investing much more heavily in the ruins: Revisiting the same site over a period of years, or even decades, Vergara’s pictures show with often heartbreaking clarity the slow, painful transformation of a house, a street, a neighborhood. And Austin and Doerr’s Lost Detroit combines ruin photography with architectural history, seeking to fill in the historical gaps. The ruin photos in Detroit Disassembled and The Ruins of Detroit, despite the authors’ obvious reverence for their brick-and-steel subjects, are also spectacles of degradation, in which, as Frederic Jameson writes about the postmodern condition, our “putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles.” In requisitioning the ruin’s aura of historical pathos, ruin photos suggest a vanquished, even glorious past but, like the ruins themselves, present no way to understand our own relationship to the decline we are seeing. After all, this is not Rome or Greece, vanished civilizations; these ruins are our own, and the society they indict is ours as well. As a purely aesthetic object, even with the best intentions, ruin photography cannot help but exploit a city’s misery; but as political documents on their own, they have little new to tell us.

Some of these rooms look as if the occupants only just left in a great hurry, knocking over chairs to flee an impending disaster that never arrived.


“In their shadows, the glazed eyes of the street zombies slide into view, stumbling in front of the car. Our excitement at driving into what feels like a man-made hurricane Katrina is matched only by sheer disbelief that what was once the fourth-largest city in the U.S. could actually be in the process of disappearing from the face of the earth.”

This is the style denounced locally as “ruin porn.” All the elements are here: the exuberant connoisseurship of dereliction; the unembarrassed rejoicing at the
“excitement” of it all, hastily balanced by the liberal posturing of sympathy for a “man-made Katrina,” and most importantly, the absence of people other than those he calls, cruelly, “street zombies.” The city is a shell, and so are the people who occasionally stumble into the photographer’s viewfinder.

Photograph by Andrew Moore courtesy DAP.

The Lamenter is both a very contemporary phenomenon and one of American literature’s oldest urban types. Over a hundred years ago, Jacob Riis wandered into the slums of downtown New York with a police escort, a flash camera, and a mission to document and improve the city’s “other half.” The Detroit Lamenter adopts a similar posture, although with less of Riis’s sense of moral purpose. How could the national conscience tolerate such misery, Riis asked, in the midst of ever-increasing abundance? And how is this possible, Temple’s film repeatedly asks, in a first-world country that put the world on wheels? What makes this subgenre of urban expose particularly contemporary, though, is the historical and economic phenomenon it struggles to represent, a phenomenon the newness of which few of us can adequately comprehend. Just as for Riis the teeming industry of the turn of the century created new spaces, like the urban factory and tenement, and therefore a new people, the shrinking cities of the first world are the equivalent new “problem” spaces of the twenty-first-century urban world. Across the global north, city-dwellers flee job-scarce shrinking cities, leaving behind an urban economy increasingly cut out of the national economy. Some estimates, for example, place real unemployment in Detroit at a staggering 50 percent. The third-world megaslim—cities like Mexico City and Jakarta, with populations close to twenty million inhabitants—and the first-world shrinking city look increasingly like the true cities of tomorrow. Yet the teeming cities of the global south seem like the least shocking of the two, since we expect that cities be crowded, dirty, busy, and always growing. The shrinking city, on the other hand, defies much of what we think we know about cities and their development, at least as long as “growth” and “development” are the only measures of vitality.

**Detroit Utopia**

The third major subgenre of the popular Detroit narrative is a backlash against the pornographic excesses of the Lament and is, at best, an attempt to find a new definition of urban vitality. The Utopians are well-meaning defenders of the city’s possibilities. Locally, they are often politically active, often young, and, it should be noted, often white. This class of Detroit story chronicles Detroit’s possibilities, with a heavy emphasis on art and urban agriculture on abandoned land. It can also take the form of human-interest stories about local entrepreneurs persevering amidst the destruction. Toby Barlow’s series of New York Times articles on bicycling and one-hundred-dollar houses in the city anticipated a gentrification-fuelled Detroit Renaissance that most honest observers must admit will never come. (If Detroit is really so full of possibilities, why do so many of the possibilities so closely resemble a cut-rate version of what western Brooklyn already looks like?) Despite their differences, the common problem with many of the Lamenters and Utopians is that both see Detroit as an exception to the contemporary United States, rather than as one of its exemplary places. Detroit figures as either a nightmare image of the American Dream, where equal opportunity and abundance came to die, or as an updated version of it, where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have the one-hundred-dollar house and community garden of their dreams.

> An imposing, neoclassical behemoth even in life, the windowless station has become a melancholy symbol of the city’s transformation in death.

The city fascinates because it is a condensed, emphatic example of the trials of so many American cities in an era of globalization, which has brought with it intensified economic instability and seemingly intractable joblessness. Detroit is also iconic, intimately familiar to generations of Americans who associate R&B music, automobiles, and the modernist skyscraper with urbanity itself, and yet the decline depicted in ruin photos is frightening and at times grotesque. While
unique in its scale, however, Detroit's entrenched infrastructural and economic problems are themselves as American as apple pie, reproduced on varying scales in Newark, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Camden. Detroit, then, isn't an exception to a general rule of class mobility and meritocracy, the pillars of the so-called "American Dream," as it's often seen.

It's a clear example of how that term, these days at least, increasingly looks like an optimistic delusion—and maybe it always was.

In viewing *Detroit Disassembled* and *The Ruins of Detroit*, one is conscious of nothing so much as failure—of the city itself, of course, but also of the photographs to communicate anything more than that self-evident fact. This is the meta-irony of these often ironic pictures: Though they trade on the peculiarity of Detroit as living ruin, these are pictures of historical oblivion. The decontextualized aesthetics of ruin make them pictures of nothing and no place in particular. Detroit in these artists' work is, likewise, a mass of unique details that fails to tell a complete story. Both books include a picture of a melting clock in the shuttered and soon-to-be-demolished Cass Tech High School; the clock is emblazoned ironically with the brand name "National Time," inviting clucks of recognition from Salvador Dalí fans and armchair allegorists.

Michigan Central Station on the city's west side is an abandoned depot from the golden age of rail travel, designed by the architectural firm that produced New York's Grand Central Station. The station is the Eiffel Tower of ruin photography and probably Detroit's most recognizable modern monument other than the downtown Renaissance Center complex, as shown by the hobbyist and professional photographers who descend upon it on every sunny day.

An imposing, neoclassical behemoth even in life, the windowless station has become a melancholy symbol of the city's transformation in death. Moore and Marchand/Meffre both treat the depot, appropriately, as a monument as much as a ruin. In Marchand and Meffre's exterior photograph, the station fills the frame; there is no outside to this massive structure, no escaping its gaping windows and shattered glass, or the overcast daylight that lends the scene a grey, deathly pallor. Moore takes a subtly different approach, photographing the station as afternoon sunlight bathes one side of the building in shadow, while a tiny figure in red ambles brightly across a thin ribbon of parkland at the bottom of the frame. The figure is dwarfed by the massive station, and if it weren't for his shirt, we probably wouldn't see him at all. Similarly, it takes a careful observer to note, amid the wall of broken windows and grey brick, the "SAVE THE DEPOT" graffiti painted by defenders of the station, which is criminally neglected by its slumlord owner and periodically threatened with demolition by grandstanding politicians. If you look close enough, there is life here.

Michigan Central Station appears to be a potent symbol of decline and the inevitable cycles of capitalist booms and busts. But there's also money to be made on destruction. The decrepit station has been owned for years by the city's most notorious real estate mogul, Matty Moroun, a politically-connected, Teflon-coated trucking magnate who owns the bridge to Canada and covets land near the city's major transportation hubs. Alas, a photograph can tell us little about the city's real estate industry and the state's cheaply-bought politicians. All it can do is show the catastrophic results. Taken together, all the images of the ruined city become fragments of stories told so often about Detroit that they are at the same time instantly familiar and utterly vague, like a dimly remembered episode from childhood or a vivid dream whose storyline we can't quite remember in the morning: Murder city! Unemployment! Drugs! White flight! Crime! Because the ironic appeal of modern ruins lies in the archaeological fantasy of discovery combined with the banality of what is discovered—a nineteen-eighties dentist's office is not implicitly fascinating for anyone who inhabited one in its intact state—a ruin photograph succeeds in providing the details of a familiar story whose major plot points we can't piece together.
Photographs like Moore, Marchand, and Meffre’s succeed, at least, in compelling us to ask the questions necessary to put this story together—Detroit’s story, but also the increasingly-familiar story of urban America in an era of prolonged economic crisis. That they themselves fail to do so testifies not only to the limitations of any still image, but our collective failure to imagine what Detroit’s future—our collective urban future—holds for us all.

John Patrick Leary teaches American literature at Wayne State University in Detroit and is at work on a book on the place of the “third world” in the American imagination. He lives in southwest Detroit.

Writer’s Recommendations:


Dan Austin and Sean Doerr, Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City’s Majestic Ruins. Detroit ruin photography that fills in many of the architectural and historical gaps.

Camilo José Vergara’s American Ruins and The New American Ghetto depict dereliction and abandonment in cities like Detroit, Camden, Chicago, and New York City.

Thomas Sugrue’s essential The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit is a powerful account of Detroit’s twentieth-century history.

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3. Detroit has over 90,000 abandoned, condemned or vacant houses

If one city could hold the title of Urban Decay Capital of the Western World, it would arguably be Detroit. Despite a revitalized downtown, various urban renewal efforts have failed to save many of the Motor City’s troubled neighbourhoods. Surveys have revealed a staggering percentage of residential lots either vacant or unsuitable for occupancy, and a 2010 plan escalated the clearing of entire neighbourhoods to effectively “downsize” the city.

Scott Carey has documented a selection of Detroit’s abandoned houses on largely depopulated streets. In some cases, the dilapidated structures are the last ones standing in their immediate neighbourhoods, as adjoining buildings have already met the wrecking ball.
Now a paradise for urban explorers, Detroit was America’s fourth largest city during the 1950s, a boom town riding the wave of automotive production. But decades later, and exacerbated by the economic downturn of 2008, the city’s considerable modern ruins have multiplied.

Some streets boast more abandoned residences than occupied ones. Elsewhere, isolated homes stand amid vast swaths of green that now blanket areas of suburban Detroit, lonely reminders of neighbourhoods past and harbingers of demolition yet to come.

Some of them even resemble artist Mike Doyle’s acclaimed abandoned homes
Dilapidated houses in Detroit

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**Detroit: The Ghost City Gradually Being Reclaimed by Nature**

2 years ago Travel

Haunted House

Shane Gorski

In 1966, the Fermi Nuclear Power Plant near Detroit overheated and partially melted. The incident was detailed in a book called *We Almost Lost Detroit*. The facility was closed down, and the utility company hopes someday to remove all traces of the abandoned power plant.

While Detroit avoided a nuclear disaster, riding through Detroit today feels like a post-apocalyptic experience. The city is experiencing the worst stages of neighborhood decline. Detroit’s “138 square miles are divided between expanses of decay and emptiness” among tracts of surviving communities, according to Bloomberg.
In 1950, Detroit was one of the richest cities in America, with the highest median income and highest rate of home ownership, its downtown full of architectural gems, as noted in The Guardian. But the collapse of its manufacturing base struck what may be a death blow to Detroit. The city that once held close to 2 million people now holds less than half that. The retreating population left behind an estimated 33,500 abandoned homes and 91,000 vacant lots. In some areas entire blocks have been bulldozed and cleared of housing. Neighborhoods have vanished, taking with them all traces of human existence.

Detroit is turning into an urban prairie, with grass overtaking sidewalks, sapling trees towering over fences, and utility lines competing with tree branches. Old alleys resemble hiking trails, and empty lots are thick with wildflowers. In the summer, plant growth overtakes many abandoned houses. Giant trees are growing on the roofs of skyscrapers. Abandoned buildings are full of pigeon roosts and feral cats that keep the rat population in check. Wild dog packs roam neighborhoods, hunting the pheasants, turkeys, opossums, roosters and raccoons that have returned to the city. *Ailanthus altissima* – also known as the “ghetto palm” or the tree of heaven – has spread throughout the city. Over time the remaining homes will become crushed by these trees planted by homeowners decades ago. The plaster walls will eventually fade into dust.
Detroit is a city in decline, and resisting this may be useless. According to Karina Pallagst of the University of California, Berkeley, there is “both a cultural and political taboo” about admitting decline in America. But people can be creative when trying to survive under difficult conditions. The remaining people are not giving up without a fight.

One option Detroiter are using to deal with the decline is urban farming. Many non-profit agricultural organizations are springing up across Detroit. In a city without a major chain grocery store, people are again growing their own food. The 5,000 vacant acres are more than capable of supplying enough fruits and vegetables to supply the entire city’s needs.
Urban gardening

Should the people of Detroit band together, they could sell their extra produce in farmers’ markets that could grow into full retail outlets. Options for entrepreneurship remain unlimited. Gardening and small-scale farming equipment would be needed, and Detroit’s manufacturing background could be called into play.

Whatever its future, Detroit is a fascinating place of contrasts, rich in history and perhaps the first of many American cities to become a ghost city. Detroit has faced many difficult times in the past – and its future may be an indicator of America in the 21st century. It is possible that Detroit may one day resemble the original Fermi Plant, with all traces of civilization removed, the area returned to its wild state before human settlement. Its future depends on the hardy people left behind.

Written by: Lisa Hossler
ed winkleman
frieze magazine editor’s blog
i call it oranges
Miami Basel Countdown Report 2012
Never Precisely Repeating

VINCENT JOHNSON LINKS

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Miami Basel Art Report 2009
Miami Basel Art Report 2010
Miami Basel Countdown Report 2011
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Vincent in LATimes review "Post American LA"
Vincent in NYTimes review "Freestyle" at the Studio Museum in Harlem
Vincent’s review in Artforum

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