

Recycling Detroit

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Detroit began its life 300 years ago as a fortified French garrison and trading post strategically located on a navigable river, surrounded by wilderness and danger. After decades of struggles between the French and their English rivals for domination of the North American interior, and between European settlers and Native American Indians, the wilderness gave way to a prosperous agricultural community, then a thriving nineteenth-century commercial center, its wide streets radiating from city center like the spokes of a wheel. By 1950, Detroit had reached its peak as an industrial mecca, with turreted mansions, luxury department stores, and two million inhabitants--the fourth largest city in the U.S.

Now, 60 years after its heyday, Detroit has lost more than half its population, and the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments estimates that its numbers will shrink to 700,000 over the next 25 years. Gutted hulks of Victorian mansions loom over side streets like dying elephants. A full third of the city's area is wasteland—about 40 square miles, or nearly the landmass of San Francisco. Forty-five thousand homes stand empty, subject to the vicissitudes of weather, thieves, and rodents. After decades of factory layoffs, a third of Detroit's remaining population lives below the poverty line. Derelict factories bespeak the city's abandonment by industry. Boarded-up storefronts and weed-choked lots tell of white suburban flight that has left Detroit 83 percent black. Entire residential blocks are now fields of brush and glass, punctuated here by a burned-out frame, there by a tumbled roof, resembling a giant hat flung to the ground.

Interstate 75 slices through formerly vibrant neighborhoods nearly to the river's edge, dumping out motorists from the suburbs into the downtown area for only a block or two before the road ducks under a high concrete berm that encloses the five-towered General Motors center with its gleaming walls of one-way glass. From the cluster of high-rises surrounding the riverfront developments, a wilderness of devastated neighborhoods stretches on for miles. In a cycle of abandonment, collapse, and decay, the city regresses back to its origins as a fortified riverfront settlement.

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Brush Decay.

But abandonment and decay are not the only stories in the poorest, fastest shrinking major American city, which came in first on *Forbes* magazine's inaugural "Miserable Cities Index" in 2008. Detroit is also a tale of ingenuity and reinvention born of necessity. Among a stretch of burned-out storefronts on one of Detroit's main arteries, an enterprising merchant has nailed up a sign on a former White Castle, offering "Gold, Silver, Firewood." Down the street, another sign promises "Cars, Jewelry, Boats." A vacant drugstore has turned into a dance club. An unlicensed outlet selling barbeques fashioned from oil drums has been jammed into the gutted remains of a movie theatre. Abandoned shops and restaurants are being recycled as storefront churches and as headquarters for neighborhood associations with names like "Recover Detroit" and "U Snap Back." Everything is being reinvented.

This is Detroit's other story, a tale of human resourcefulness that is as much the city's essence as its widely publicized reputation as "Murder City." Among the third of its inhabitants living below the U.S. poverty line, many depend on the city's extensive underground economy and on urban recycling in its various manifestations. Transforming the city's images of blight and abandonment into social, artistic, or religious statements is a long-established art form.

One spring day as I drove through the Detroit neighborhood where I raised my children in the 1980s and 1990s, I noticed what appeared to be a tsunami of trash: oil drums, boards, tires, fenders, shoes, gloves, bicycle wheels and broken toys. But as I looked closer, the intention behind it emerged. The fenders and boards were rigged into crosses; the tires and cans were stacked into towers and painted with religious symbols

and Biblical quotations; gloves were stuck on poles, reaching for the sky.

“Everything I do has meaning,” said Rose Bell, who emerged from the house behind the towers of trash she’d been salvaging for years. A small, slightly stooped woman with a white shirt wound into a turban around her gray hair, Mrs. Bell was balancing two buckets of wash water, shuffling from tower to tower in oversized shoes. She picked up a fallen glove and carefully replaced it on a broomstick next to a five-foot headless giraffe. She straightened a formaldehyde container and with her sleeve buffed its labored message: “Notice. What is this? God.”

Asked what inspires her work, Mrs. Bell looked amused. “I got the Lord up in me telling me what to do,” she explained, telling me she’d hauled in everything she could find left behind in the streets and alleys to build her shrine. A cross motif dominated the towers: crosses painted and taped, contrived of boards, branches, metal, plastic: One was formed by the front wheels of a rust-eaten tricycle. A blue figure wedged into a white-painted tire suggested the blue-and-white Madonnas of more traditional shrines, but revealed itself, on closer inspection, to be a Mr. Magoo squeeze doll. The whole effect was at first unsettling, a vision of our buried refuse sprouting defiantly back up. But when the sun glinted off the metal and glass, highlighting the pinks, pastel blues and greens, Rose’s creation took on a fantastical quality—like a forgotten Disneyworld. “The Lord got to pick up the pieces,” she explained.

In the 1980s, a Detroit artist named Tyree Guyton laid claim to the forsaken southeast side neighborhood where he’d grown up, using a block of abandoned houses to construct what he called his “autobiography,” now known as “The Heidelberg Project.” Guyton painted giant pink and purple polka dots, his personal imprimatur, on walls, dumpsters, fire hydrants, and telephone poles. He nailed hats to the trees and encrusted the houses with car doors, oilcans, rusty mufflers, and street signs. Old dolls marched along the spines and ridgelines of the sagging roofs. Shoes dangling from fence posts were Guyton’s memorial to “times I didn’t have shoes.” He hung mirrors on the skeletal structure that had once housed a beauty salon. “This corner used to be dope central,” he said. “Look, you can see yourself in that mirror. I feel like, if people would’ve seen themselves, they’d have stopped the way they were living.” When Guyton’s creations spilled onto the next block, they drew warnings from the mayor’s office and busloads of gawkers from out of town.

When my children were growing up in Detroit, we often drove down to Heidelberg Street, hauling trunkloads of leaking stuffed animals, orphaned boots, and broken Mr. Potato Heads. Inevitably, Tyree would appear in his paint-bespattered Levi’s with hammers and screwdrivers dangling from a tool belt slung around his waist. He’d welcome us enthusiastically and immediately begin nailing our stuff onto a wall or a roof. Eventually, the mayor’s office declared Guyton’s work a nuisance and a health hazard and bulldozed it several times during the 1990s. But with no shortage of abandoned houses at his disposal, the artist would cheerfully set in again.



Polka Dot House

Now in his early fifties, but with the impish gleam in his eye undimmed, Guyton took me along on one of his scavenging tours through a neighborhood where 55 houses had once stood on a single block. Eight now remained, some boarded-up, some torched, some overgrown and crumbling for decades. Here, recycling had taken more ominous forms in this city with the nation's highest rate of violent crime. From a porch of one of these houses, we watched a rusty Buick pushing a late-model Cadillac up the street to a makeshift chop shop between a lively crack house and a field where a neighbor had once stumbled upon a corpse in the weeds.

Guyton stopped before the remains of one house on the gap-toothed street. He pointed out an artificial rose fastened to the yellow scallop of a curtain. He studied the house's warped and water-logged contents that spilled from the door to create a wash of forms and textures and colors. "Look at those shapes, what time has done to them," Guyton said. He took in the desolate landscape with a sweep of his arm. "The world, even this place, has been put here for us to look at. I'm just one of those people that pays attention."

Further on, Guyton knocked on the door of a wheel-less, bullet-pocked school bus, one of several vehicles rusting away in the neighborhood park that had long since ceased to be a place where children played.

"Prentis," he called out.

"He's moved back across the street," someone shouted from within the bus. We crossed the street to the fire-gutted house where Prentis lives as a squatter. In the yard were heaps of tires and broken doors, a stack of plastic lawn chairs, a jumble of corroded mufflers, gas tanks and oil drums. Like many others who don't turn up on the city's official 15 per cent unemployment statistics, Prentis lives off the urban landscape much as Indians once lived off the land. "He makes things from stuff he picks up," Guyton said. "Planters out of tires, barbecues from oil drums. He sells garage doors, car tops—you name it. Sometimes I buy his stuff to use in my art."

Prentis answered the charred front door, an elderly man with a grey beard, wearing a stained suit jacket and a yellow construction hat. He'd dragged all this stuff and more to the yard when he moved in last month, Prentis told us. "But the city come and scooped it up. Took it away." He gestured toward a wooden pallet. "You can make a picnic table from that. Someone will pay 50 dollars. The city come down and took all my lumber. They make a criminal outta me. They call it 'litter.' I call it wood."

Prentis draws a sharp distinction between himself and the scavenger thieves who break into houses and strip them of water heaters, copper pipes and wires-- anything they can cart off. "Politicians don't see that, if you can't get nothing, you got to steal. You got to rob," he said. "But, hey, here I am recycling. I pick up stuff other people done passed by. You get those gas tanks off the street. Set 'em on a metal chair base. You got yourself a stove. Or I sell stuff to Tyree here to put up there on those houses. I ain't thinking about no art. I'm selling my merchandise. I'm the king junker of Detroit. I'm eighty years old, but you got to double that because I'm up night and day."

As we entered the house, the door swung shut with a bang and plaster rained onto the floor. The room was cluttered with more fruits of Prentis's scavenging and stank of must and scorched wood, but the junker had added functional touches. The front door was fastened with a wooden stake. Newspapers were stuffed into cracks in the walls. He'd fashioned a wood-burning stove from a bed frame and an oil drum. "This stove will put the gas company out of business," Prentis said. Smiling broadly, he pointed to a toilet seat perched on a plastic bucket. "That's the latest model," he said. "It come along with the phone."

As Prentis showed off his recovery work, Guyton clambered up a ladder propped against a hole in the ceiling where the stairs used to be and returned, carrying a lump of ash-covered metal.

"Prentis, can I have this waffle iron?"

"Got some electric? Go ahead and cook. Save me a waffle."

Later, I followed Guyton down the street to a house where a bed sheet tacked to a window frame flapped in the afternoon breeze. Inside, Guyton glanced around the room. "I'm looking at the colors, the way the paint's peeling off the walls," he said, as he picked up an oversize light bulb and turned it in his fingers, like a connoisseur admiring a piece of sculpture. "It's not just the forms--it's where I got the stuff, the story it tells." Parked

behind the house was a 1980s-era Chevrolet, painted canary yellow. A sheet of clear plastic served as a homemade sunroof. “This is the kind of stuff I’ve been seeing all my life,” Guyton said. “The people around here, they just take what they got and make something out of it.”

As I drove down a rutted street away from Guyton’s neighborhood, a buff-colored bird emerged from an overgrown lot and set off across the street up ahead. Swerving to the curb to avoid it, I saw a line of tiny stubby-tailed chicks trailing behind the bird, whose mottled brown and barred tail feathers identified her as a Ring-necked Pheasant, a not-uncommon sight in a city with 36 square miles of abandoned property, and where the Department of Natural Resources once staged pheasant roundups, transporting the birds up north to repopulate the state’s dwindling hunting stock. The birds reached the shattered footpath, where dandelions and Queen Anne’s Lace had invaded every crack in the concrete—then skittered into the bushy vegetation of another vacant lot. As neighborhoods die, new orders move in to fill the gaps. Nature, too, is a patient recycler.

Burned houses provide soil with the nitrogen plants need to flourish. Yards morph into grasslands and fields where ragweed and cottonwood grow. Stray dogs revert to the ways of their ancestors, roaming in packs through vast stretches of abandoned property where rabbits, quail, and rodents now thrive. Red-tailed hawks dive after the burgeoning ground life, and owls come whispering out at night. In the morning remaining residents hear the throaty calls of pheasants in the bushes.

Cottonwood and pointy-leafed ailanthus trees shoot up inside vacant buildings, their branches poking through windows and roofs, reaching for light, and trees grow on the rooftops of derelict skyscrapers, factories and hotels.



Roof Trees

Just across Interstate 94 from Tyree Guyton's neighborhood, a vast tract of land once crammed with houses is now a mile-square stretch of prairie. Recently I drove out there with University of Michigan-Dearborn natural history professor Orrin Gelderloos.

We parked at one end of a street to nowhere that was littered with bottles, a solitary shoe, the skeleton of a TV, a waterlogged *Abnormal Psychology* textbook. Shards of plastic milk jugs crunched underfoot as we trudged through the field. My tall, bespectacled companion stooped down at one point in our trek to pull aside some underbrush and reveal a buried sidewalk.

This expanse of milkweed, dogbane and white aster, sprinkled with small Chinese elms and cottonwoods is not technically a prairie, Gelderloos told me. It's an "old field habitat," a phase in a vacant lot's natural succession. He plucked a pod from a milkweed plant, tore it open, and pulled out a clump of the white fluff that women once used to stuff pillows. As the old field progresses into a woody plant stage, the naturalist said, trees will crowd in and steal the sunlight from lower plants like this five-foot-tall milkweed. Seed-bearing fluff will drift off to establish the plant in a younger, more hospitable habitat. Left to its own devices, this land once lush with forest will gradually return to forest.

As Gelderloos pointed out natural features, joyfully naming each plant, bird and bug, explaining the old field's complex ecology, I caught a glimpse of this land through his eyes. Where I'd seen destruction, desolation, and rot, the naturalist saw a landscape of hope and reclamation—a vision not merely of Detroit's decline, but also of a post-industrial future with greener cities and more open spaces. Where I'd viewed the rooftop trees as yet one more image of the city's collapse, Professor Gelderloos saw a process of natural recovery.

"Seeds hide in every crevice and crack in the buildings," he said. "As they mature, their roots reach down into walls and plaster for nutrients they need to grow." Rooftop trees also figure in his vision of the future. "They're wonderful places for trees because they're sunny and balmy and get the rainwater. They're also a very favorable habitat for the production of food. That's part of the vision many of us have for renewing cities. We're wasting a tremendous urban resource by letting the rooftops in our cities lie vacant, fallow."

The naturalist thanked me for bringing him here to this beautiful place. He said the field could serve as a laboratory for students to learn about natural succession. When we heard the rustle of pheasants in the bushes and caught a glimpse of iridescent green, he told me that had made his day.

Later I returned with a photographer, Pam Guenzel, and parked by the edge of the field near an olive-drab warehouse and a former primary school standing open to the elements. A pigeon fluttered out of a glassless window frame, then another. From inside the school came the sound of scraping and pounding. Amidst a carpet of windswept debris knelt a man in a blue baseball cap, using the claw of a hammer to pry up the oak treads of a staircase, one of the few remaining features within the ransacked building. Above him a half-dozen bird's nests were perched on the beams.



Barrier Dots

Soon the scavenger in the blue cap emerged from the school building, a lumpy plastic sack slung over his shoulder like a hobo's bindle. As I watched him trudging away past some slabs of concrete that blocked off a half-dozen roads to nowhere, I spotted some three-foot-wide pink, purple, and yellow polka dots painted on barriers. Then more polka dots swam into focus: a blue one on the warehouse door, a green one on a sun-bleached wall of the school, now possessed by the pigeons.

As nature, subdued for 300 years, reclaims Detroit, the human recyclers are still in the game. Out of habit, necessity, desperation—even love, they're not giving up on America's "Most Miserable City." "Hello there!" I hollered to the man in the blue baseball cap, and he turned my way—the first human being I'd come upon during hours of wandering here in the very heart of Detroit. I pointed to the polka-dotted barriers, but before I could ask my question, he answered it. "My man Tyree's been here," he called out.

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