

Brian Doucet

## Four Days in Detroit: a Dutch urban geography field trip to the Motor City

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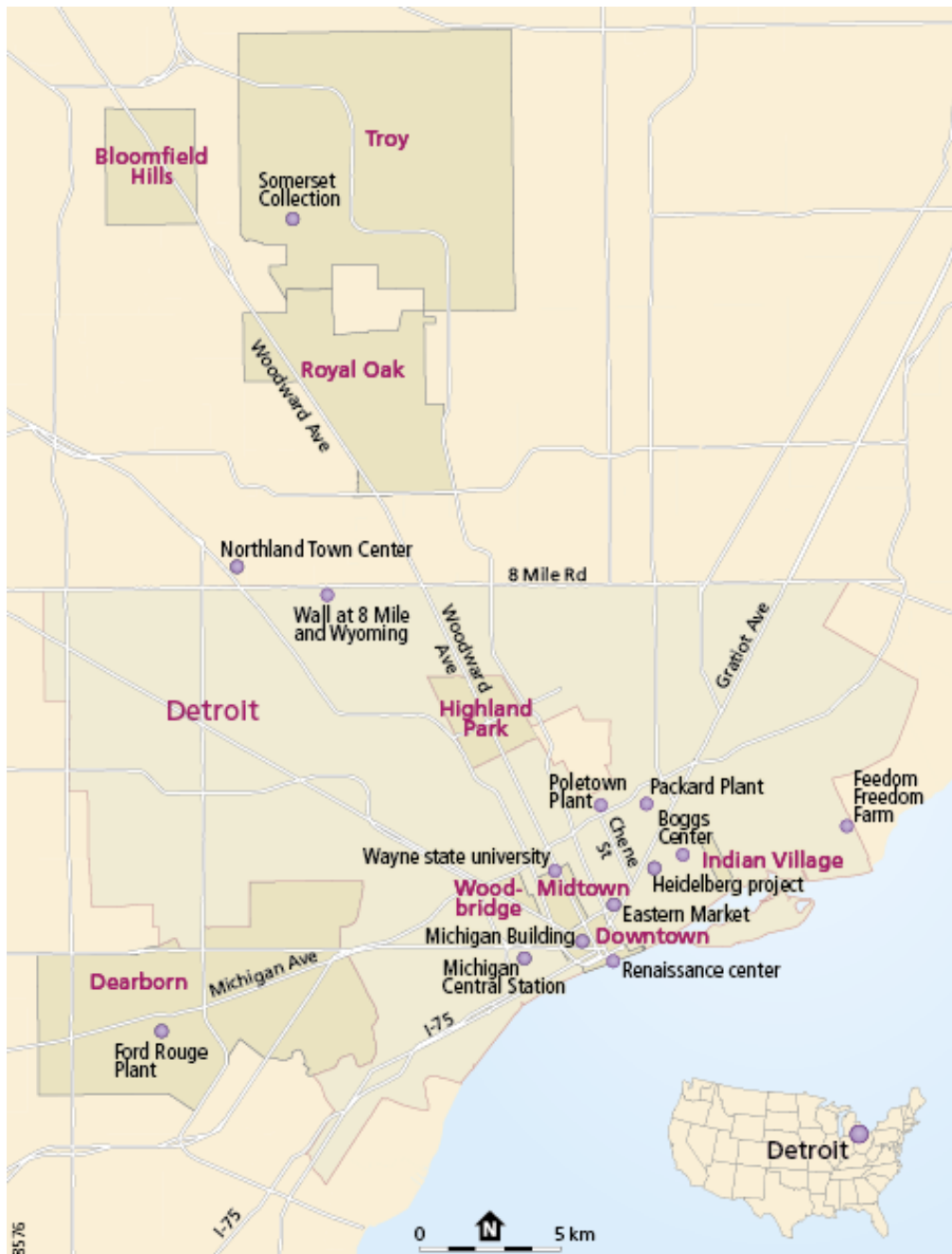
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**Brian Doucet**

# **Four Days in Detroit: a Dutch urban geography field trip to the Motor City**

## **Introduction**

- 1 For geographers, Detroit is one of the most fascinating cities in the world. At its height, it was one of the wealthiest cities in America, with high rates of home ownership, some of the best schools and a magnet for entrepreneurs and those just seeking a better life for themselves and their families. But the days when Detroit was a textbook example of the “American Dream” have been replaced by a city now more commonly associated with its industrial decay, racial strife, crime and abandonment. From a population of close to two million in the 1950s, the 2010 census recorded only 713,777 inhabitants. In July 2013 the city became the largest in America to file for bankruptcy. The reasons for this decline are complex but the result has produced a city where over one third of the land is vacant, large parts of the city look like a prairie and most mainstream retail and commercial activity which are taken for granted in other cities no longer exist (see Figure 1 for a map of Detroit and its northern suburbs).

**Figure 1. Map of Detroit and its northern suburbs.**

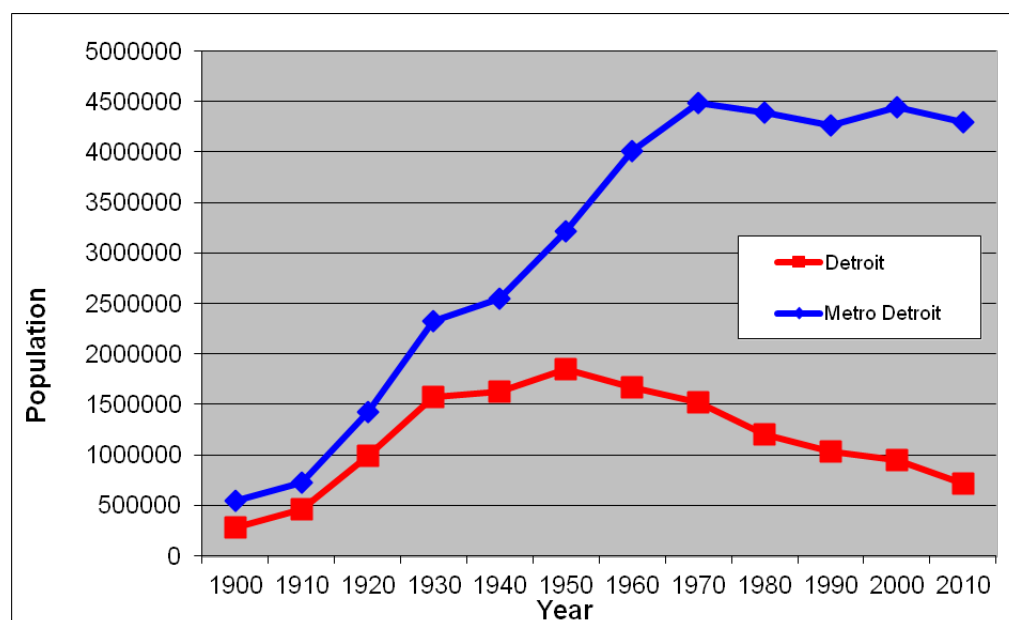
- 2 This is the Detroit most known to outsiders and often the only one which reaches us in Europe, particularly in the media (Binelli, 2013; Guardian, 2013; Volkskrant, 2013). This is the city that my students knew about before taking my course *Urban Reflections in Practice*, which culminates in a fieldtrip to Toronto and Detroit in April, 2013. Twenty-eight students in the one-year *Urban Geography Master's* program participated in the course.
- 3 The aim of this field trip was to see beyond the ruins and understand the meanings and implications of the physical, economic, political and social changes which have affected a major American city. Within the *Master's* program, the aim of this course was to offers the opportunity to apply key concepts and theories into real-world examples. As Herrick (2010, p. 109) notes, Field trips “bring students into those real-world settings and situations which contextualise material taught in the classroom” (Herrick, 2010, p. 109).
- 4 Each day in Detroit was about showing a different side to this story, which continually challenged images and messages from the previous days: seeing the ruins, of course, but then seeing the ruins the next day reimagined as art. Many of the issues facing Detroit – deindustrialisation, population decline, regional fragmentation – are also confronting

contemporary European cities as well, albeit generally on a smaller scale. But Detroit offers powerful lessons for the rest of the world and, through our engagement with members of the city's artistic, academic, activist and political communities, as well as walking and coach tours I led, I wanted to show the students that what happens to Detroit matters for other places too.

## Detroit: from paradise to nightmare

- 5 Founded by the French on the banks of the Detroit River in 1701, Detroit (*the Straight*) was ideally situated at the heart of the Great Lakes to become a focal point of America's industrial power. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the city grew rich through the lumber trade and the production of ships and railway carriages. This wealth produced the venture capital which would fund entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford and others who were working on early automobiles at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Detroit became the Silicon Valley of its day, attracting creative risk-takers and entrepreneurs.
- 6 In 1913, Henry Ford perfected the world's first modern assembly line in his new Highland Park Plant. A year later, he offered to pay workers \$ 5 a day, which was double the average wage at that time. The efficiencies of mass production brought down the cost of a new car to within reach of the factory workers. It was here where many have argued that our modern, consumer society began (see Boggs and Kurashige, 2012). This promise of a new level of affluence for a working family, combined with the plentiful jobs at the assembly lines of the major car companies meant that Detroit became a magnet for migrants, particularly from the American South. Fuelled by this migration of both rural African Americans and whites, Detroit's population exploded from 285,000 in 1900 to over 1.5 million by 1930 (see Figure 2). The Ford Rouge Plant became the largest factory in the world and employed eighty-five thousand workers at the end of World War II (Sugrue, 2005).

**Figure 2. Detroit population statistics (city and region) 1900 - 2010.**



- 7 In some respects, Detroit represented a paradise. The historian Thomas Sugrue described this period as "a blue collar mecca, magnet to tens of thousands of migrants who found relatively secure, well-paying jobs" (Sugrue, 2005, p. 20). Jobs in the auto industry allowed working-class families to purchase modest homes (Figure 3) and fill them with consumer goods that would have been unimaginable to previous generations. At the same time, however, for Detroit's growing African American population, the city was fraught with racism, inequality and overcrowding. Blacks were forced to live in small pockets of substandard housing in the inner-city.

**Figure 3. Modest houses such as these enabled ordinary factory workers to live the American Dream. Near 8 Mile and Wyoming.**



- 8 Race and racism has been a dominant feature of Detroit's history over the past one hundred years. As with many other northern industrial cities, African American migration from the south changed the racial composition of Detroit. In 1900, blacks represented only 2% of the population, or about 4000 people. But two distinct wave of migration, from 1910 to 1930, and again from 1940 through the 1970s, would see the black population reaching 358,000 by 1950 and representing roughly half of the city's population by 1970 (Galster, 2012). However, the city was (and the region is today) extremely segregated along racial lines, although these boundaries are constantly shifting.
- 9 As conditions in the inner-city became unbearable, many African Americans sought better housing in the largely white parts of Detroit. However, blacks into white neighbourhoods faced intimidation, legal restrictions or politicians who protected their white communities. The most notable of these was Orville Hubbard, mayor of the suburb of Dearborn from 1942 to 1978 and an outspoken proponent of segregation (Good, 1989). During his tenure, Dearborn remained a largely white community with both Hubbard's rhetoric and intimidation from residents making it clear that blacks were not welcome.<sup>1</sup>
- 10 Racial tensions manifested themselves in riots in 1943, when blacks and whites ended up fighting on the streets and in the city's largest park. As the population of Detroit was changing, whites continued to defend "their turf" (Galster, 2012; Sugrue, 2005). However, when it became clear that more and more blacks were moving in, whites voted with their feet and left the city for the suburbs. The civil unrest in 1967, where blacks rose up against police brutality and overcrowding left forty-three people dead and proved to be a turning point in the racial geography of the city. Many whites who remained left, or moved to the distant northwest and northeast corners of the city. Since 1999, when a residency law requiring city employees to live in Detroit was repealed by Michigan lawmakers, these corners of Detroit have dramatically declined as white police officers, fire fighters and other municipal employees could now live in the suburbs. Today, the city of Detroit is 83% black and less than 10% white. Its suburbs, where three quarters of the regional population live, are almost a mirror image of this (Galster, 2012).
- 11 Those who remain in the city are increasingly both poor *and* black. Middle-class African American families have also began to cross 8 Mile Road into suburbs such as Southfield. As crime, blight and a chronic lack of municipal services increases, many of those who remain also dream of leaving. A major survey done by the Detroit News in 2012 concluded that forty per cent of the city's residents could leave within five years, with crime and a lack of services in the city's periphery cited as the main reasons (MacDonald, 2012).
- 12 Even before the people left, many of the well-paying factory jobs which had attracted them to Detroit were also disappearing. In addition to racial tensions, structural economic changes in the city's economy are what drove many people out of Detroit. While many look at Detroit's recent decline, Thomas Sugrue has taken a long-term view to the city's economic troubles. Between 1947 and 1977, the number of manufacturing firms decreased from 3,272 to 1,954, with associated employment changes from 338,400 to 153,300 during the same period (Sugrue, 2005, p. 144). Blight and abandonment have been characteristic of Detroit's landscape for

decades, as these factories closed and their adjacent neighbourhoods (home to their workforce) went into decline. The East Side of the city was hit particularly hard; the Packard Factory (Figure 4, see also Dixon, 2012), closed in 1956, leaving once thriving commercial streets like Chene, now resembling a warzone (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. The Packard Plant used to be the largest employer on the East Side of Detroit. Today it is Detroit's largest ruin.**



**Figure 5. As factories closed, the neighbourhoods surrounding them declined. Shopping streets like Chene Street on the East Side fell into ruin.**



- 13 Many of the factories and people did not move very far. As the population left Detroit, many families simply crossed 8 Mile Road – the dividing line between Detroit and its northern suburbs in Oakland and Macomb Counties. Auto executives and other affluent households moved to suburbs such as Bloomfield Hills, where 87% of the population is white and the per capita income ranks among the highest in America. The mansions they left behind in urban neighbourhoods such as Indian Village have not escaped the blight and arson which is characteristic of most parts of the city (Figure 6) Middle- and working-class households who left Detroit moved to suburbs such as Dearborn, Warren, Birmingham and Troy (Figure 7).



**Figure 6. Neighbourhoods like Indian Village used to house auto executives in mansions such as this. While blight in these enclaves remains minimal, it is possible to see abandoned houses in Detroit's most prestigious neighbourhoods.**



**Figure 7. As Detroit declined, its suburbs grew as predominantly white Detroiters fled the city in the post-war decades. Middle-class suburban housing in Troy, Michigan.**



- 14 With such a long period of economic and population decline, civic leaders have tried numerous strategies to revive the city. Downtown, Ford-family money helped to build the Renaissance Center, now home of General Motors, as an attempt to revive the city's economy after the 1967 riots (Figure 8). One popular approach has been to construct downtown stadiums and casinos to attract tourists and investors; three casinos, and new baseball and football stadiums have been built in the last fifteen years and, despite the bankruptcy, the city is still discussing financing a new downtown home for the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. This strategy has been criticised in academic literature as leading to "two speed revitalisation" where the core regenerates as the periphery continues to decline (see Harvey, 2000; MacLeod, 2002; Rodriguez, et al., 2001).

**Figure 8. A major attempt to revitalise Detroit was the Renaissance Center, opened in the mid-1970s. In many ways, it had the reverse effect, its self-contained shops, restaurants, cinema, hotel and offices served to create their own bubble, sucking life out of the rest of downtown.**



15 In recent years, there have been some small signs of renewal, particularly in Downtown and Midtown. The Eastern Market has become a destination for many and its public private governance model offers a different approach to traditional management of the city's assets (Gallagher, 2013). The successful "Live Midtown" scheme offers up to \$ 20,000 for employees of three major institutions (two hospitals and a university) to purchase and renovate homes in Midtown contributing to small pockets of gentrification in neighbourhoods such as Woodbridge (Figure 9). Many of the long-abandoned downtown office buildings are being bought up by investors and renovated (Segal, 2013); even Richard Florida (2013) is starting to be optimistic about Detroit's future. However, these developments have largely been confined to a small proportion of Detroit and most areas outside of Downtown and Midtown have not benefited from it. Even Downtown, many buildings remain vacant (Figure 10). Outside the core of the city, many neighbourhoods are in free fall and overall, the city's population continues to decline. Detroit is now planning for decline in unprecedented ways, with the new city plan encouraging many residents to leave these declining neighbourhoods and move to stable ones, thereby closing off large parts of the city (Detroit Future City, 2012). This long-term decline, with political (Bomey and Gallagher, 2013), economic and racial motives behind it, culminated with Detroit's bankruptcy.

**Figure 9. A small pocket of gentrification on Avery Street in Woodbridge, near Wayne State University and Midtown.**





**Figure 10. Many downtown skyscrapers built in the early part of the Twentieth Century are now vacant. The tallest of these is the Book Tower; its last tenant left in 2009.**



16 This decline produces statistics which are hard to grapple with. George Galster's book *Driving Detroit*, provides us with some telling facts and figures about contemporary Detroit: in 2009 the average price of houses sold in the city was less than \$ 13,000; fewer than 1% of homes in the city (a mere 1700 units) were valued at over \$ 300,000 (the houses adjacent to the burned out mansion depicted in figure 6 are occupied, but sell for hundreds of thousands, rather than millions of dollars as they would in other cities, such as Toronto). Estimates are that 160,000 homes were abandoned between 1970 and 2000 (see Figures 11 and 12, Galster, 2012, p. 220-221). He goes on to note that from 1950 to 2005, Detroit lost 29% of its homes, 52% of its people, 55% of its jobs and 60% of its property tax revenue (p. 238). Because there is virtually nothing in Europe which compares to the extreme nature of Detroit's situation, these statistics can only be fully appreciated by visiting and experiencing the city for one's self. The vacant land in Detroit is roughly the size of the municipalities of Leiden and The Hague combined. The remainder of this article describes our four day fieldtrip to Detroit and the experiences which my students had while visiting the city and learning from Detroiters.

**Figure 11. In many ordinary neighbourhoods, abandonment has been rampant and on-going for decades. There are tens of thousands of abandoned houses in Detroit.**



**Figure 12. After abandonment comes demolition. On many Detroit streets (not just in the inner-city), virtually all of the housing is gone and the land is reverting back to nature.**



## Day 1

- 17 In order to understand what has happened to Detroit, you must see the city for yourself. The scale of the abandonment, the sense of open space, the silence and emptiness of a city which has lost over one million people in the past fifty years and the emotion of the people who still live and work in Detroit cannot be conveyed from afar. My students had already seen images of the city and learned about its history and geography described above. The first day was all about giving the students an introduction to the city and its geography. The emphasis was on showing them the abandoned city they thought they knew, the images which are portrayed in the media to the outside world.<sup>2</sup>
- 18 Because most stories about Detroit focus on the decline and decay, when most people visit Detroit, they want to see the ruins. Many come away from the city with photos of various abandoned buildings, or they purchase one of the many glossy, coffee table books depicting ruins (Marchant and Meffre, 2011; Moore, 2010). This genre is often critically referred to as “ruin porn” (Carducci, 2011; Gallagher, 2013). But most people never get a chance to see these ruins up close; our students were fortunate enough get a chance to experience them for themselves.
- 19 There are three major ruins that most people want to see: the Michigan Building, the Michigan Central Station and the Packard Factory. Our first stop on day one was the Michigan Building. The entire building is not a ruin; many of the offices are still in use, including one occupied by our first guest, Lowell Boileau, an artist and founder of the DetroitYes website, a forum for all things Detroit. Boileau’s work often depicts the ruins of Detroit; in his office he had a painting of the William Livingston House, built in 1893 in the Brush Park neighbourhood and one of the first buildings designed by the famed Detroit architect Albert Kahn. While the house was demolished in 2007 after lying dilapidated for many years, Boileau’s painting, called “Open House” depicted it restored and full of life, a future which it sadly never enjoyed. He pulled out a picture of what the building, nicknamed *Slumpy*, looked like before its demolition to show the contrast between the actual and the possible.
- 20 The highlight of our visit to the Michigan Building was when Boileau took us to see the parking lot. The Michigan Theater Building, as it was known when it opened in 1926, was a combination movie theatre and office building. The theatre had seating for over 4000 people and there were (and still are) thirteen stories of offices in an L formation around the theatre. It sits on the site where Henry Ford built his first automobile. Boileau explained that in the early 1970s, the theatre died because there was no parking in the area. Office workers in the building also threatened to leave because there was no secure parking. The solution was to gut the abandoned theatre and turn it into a parking lot. So here we were, standing on the top deck of a specially-build three storey garage inside the ruins of the old, majestic theatre. The ornate ceiling, grand staircase and even the stage curtains were all still in place, though in a very deteriorated state. I think it is pretty safe to say that most of the students had never seen anything like this before in their lives.

- 21 After the Michigan Building, we proceeded to Wayne State University, the main university in Detroit. Robin Boyle and Jeff Horner, from the department of Urban Studies were our hosts for coach tour around the city. The aim of this tour was to get a sense of the geography of the city and see the ruins and destruction for ourselves. As we left Wayne State, Robin Boyle got the students to time how long it would take for us to travel from the safe and prosperous confines of the university, to complete urban decay (answer: less than two minutes). He pointed out to us one of the latest trends in the city: the abandonment of thousands of boats in vacant lots and buildings across Detroit (Figure 13). In many ways, all these forlorn boats make sense: the epitome of the middle-class dream was a house, and maybe a place out in the country on a lake where you could have your own boat. In Detroit's (and Michigan's) current economic state, the place in the country and the boat would be among the first things to be lost as households fell on tough times.

**Figure 13. An abandoned boat has somehow managed to get itself into the ruins of the Packard Plant.**



- 22 They also took us to a less known piece of Detroit's racial history: a wall erected in the 1940s near Eight Mile and Wyoming on the city's northwest side (Figure 14). When built, the wall divided a small existing African American community with a proposed whites-only subdivision. The developers would only get federal housing loan and mortgage guarantees if they built a wall to separate blacks and whites, so nearly a kilometre long wall almost two metres high was constructed. White flight and suburbanisation have meant that many of the adjacent houses are now abandoned and almost all are currently occupied by African Americans, but for a few decades, this small wall, which today is painted by local artists, acted as a dividing line in racially polarised Detroit (Associated Press, 2013). This tour both confirmed what the students already knew of Detroit – there are a lot of abandoned buildings – and introduced new ideas to them including a greater sense of the complexity of the problem and of the city's history.

**Figure 14. The wall at 8 Mile and Wyoming.**



23 Seeing the scale of Detroit's abandonment was something none of the students had experienced before; driving to 8 Mile and Wyoming, we passed through some of the most blighted neighbourhoods in the city, including State Fair Grounds, and Highland Park (actually a separate municipality whose population has plummeted from over 50,000 to around 12,000; Mark Binelli (2013, p. 183) has called it "Detroit's Detroit"). The images they saw as we drove around the city were one of a city in disarray and ruin. Many were saddened by what they saw but it confirmed what they thought they knew about Detroit. The next day would involve showing them a different side to the city which would challenge these assumptions.

## Day 2

24 Day two was about trying to find hope amongst the ruins of Detroit. Our first stop was the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership ([www.boggscenter.org](http://www.boggscenter.org)). Founded by Grace Lee Boggs and her late husband James, a former autoworker, the centre is the focal point for grassroots initiatives and bottom-up ideas focused on people helping and caring for themselves.

25 We all gathered on the top floor of the Boggs Center, which is still Mrs Boggs's home. At ninety-eight years old, Grace Lee Boggs is a living legend in Detroit. While less mobile than in her younger years, she still travels around the country giving talks and is mentally as sharp as ever. She continues to write a weekly newsletter together with Shea Howell, an activist, writer and professor at Oakland University, who also joined us for the conversation.

26 Mrs Boggs began by explaining that when she first moved to this neighbourhood in the 1960s, if you threw a stone up in the air, it would come down to the ground and hit a Chrysler worker. After the factories closed, if you threw the stone up in the air, it would hit a vacant lot, such as the destruction and abandonment of this (and many other) neighbourhoods in Detroit. But today, she said smiling, if you threw that stone up in the air, when it landed it would probably hit an urban farm. She went on to explain that as more and more vacant lots began to emerge throughout the city, older African Americans who had grown up in the South and were used to farming, began to tend to the land and grow their own food once again. This was all part of methods in which, in the words of the Boggs Center's new slogan people "find a way out of no way"; a former slogan, still widely heard in these circles is "Detroit: city of hope".

27 To further the discussion about these different visions of Detroit, we were joined by Wayne and Myrtle Curtis, who run the Freedom Freedom Growers, a relatively large farm on the far East Side of the city. The students all sat silently, many scribbling down as much information as they could during the discussion, all keenly focused on what was being said, trying to absorb it all in. At times it was very intense and emotional; Myrtle passionately and angrily described how she had seen the rise of dialysis clinics across her city and that not having access to fresh food was leading to health epidemics, particularly among the Detroit's children. One student broke down in tears when asking a question, because she had so much respect for what they were all doing. As we all sat in silence as she gathered her thoughts and emotions, you could sense that the students now saw the city and its people from a different perspective than on day one.

28 Mrs Boggs, and those at the Boggs Center believe that there is a new American Revolution coming, one which will be led by people. Their ideas involve changing our relationships with one another and with the land. She believes that Detroit, once the epicentre of the American Dream, is at the heart of this new vision and a new American Dream. And when you delve a little deeper into examining the city and look beyond the chaos and destruction of the ruins of Fordism, you can see how there is a sense that some people are creating something new, making a new city out of the ashes of the old and that this is being done by ordinary people. This discussion at the Boggs Center certainly influenced how the students saw Detroit as we continued on our journeys around the city; it challenged us to reimagine what we thought we knew about the ruins and abandonment.

29 Our lunch stop was the Eastern Market, the old produce market which has grown into a major destination for Greater Detroiters. Much of the food grown in Detroit is sold here and there are numerous stalls in the market and restaurants on adjacent streets in which to enjoy a good lunch. This is one of the few places in Detroit that feels like other cities: busy, bustling and



filled with different sorts of people. It is also a great place to meet ordinary Detroiters, who are always happy to tell you something about their city. Again, it gave the students a glimpse of what could be possible in the city.

30 After lunch, we stayed on the East Side and visited the Heidelberg Project, an on-going art project created by Tyree Guyton, who began painting polka-dots on abandoned houses in his neighbourhood and later made art out of rubbish and other stuff left behind in Detroit (Figure 15). These polka-dots, which can be found on houses, garages, streets and sidewalks throughout the project, which now covers more than two city blocks, are an interpretation and representation of the diversity of people – different sizes and colours – who are all joined together. Our two guides took us around and explained the meaning of the various installations. Seeing the ruins of Detroit turned into art was very powerful for all of us. The Heidelberg Project has become an international success and attracts people from all over the world. After our tour, we met Tyree Guyton; one of his first questions for us was “what is art today?” The discussion continued with questions about what is life and the meaning of neighbourhoods and communities. These questions challenged us to look at the city from a new perspective. He also asked one of the students to paint an orange dot on the street, thereby contributing to the on-going and continually evolving art installation (Figure 16). Like the Boggs Center and Eastern Market, the Heidelberg Project gave us a new perspective on the city’s ruins; where yesterday we had seen decay and abandonment, today we were seeing the same landscape transformed as art which created a sense of place and community.

**Figure 15. The ruins as art at the Heidelberg Project.**



**Figure 16. Artist Tyree Guyton looks on as a student paints an orange dot on Heidelberg Street.**



31 After the Heidelberg Project, we drove out to see two important sites in the city: the Ford Rouge Plant in Dearborn, once the largest factory in the world and the abandoned Michigan Central Station, the second of the big three ruins. As we drove to these places, the students began to see the city in a different perspective. They saw hope and opportunity. Day two had



successfully challenged their initial ideas about the city and made them question many of the things they thought they knew about Detroit.

### Day 3

32 Today was all about putting the city of Detroit into a greater regional context. Over three quarters of the regional population lives in the suburbs and you cannot understand what has happened to the city, without examining the economics and politics of the entire region. According to George Galster, the normal message about Detroit is one where the city failed financially because it was corrupt, inept and unable to make the necessary budget cuts. What our tours today – and our discussion with Galster the following afternoon – tried to demonstrate was that the city has been powerless to stop many of the problems it has faced and that solutions need to be found at a regional, state or even national scale.

33 The day started by with a walking tour I led downtown. It emphasised the numerous attempts to lure suburbanites and their businesses and tax dollars back to the city (the stadiums, casinos and developments such as the Renaissance Center), as well as pointing out the buildings still abandoned in downtown Detroit. Many of these are currently being bought up like monopoly pieces by two of the city’s richest men: Dan Gilbert, founder of Quicken Loans, and Mike Ilitch, owner of the Red Wings and Tigers as well as Little Ceasars Pizza. I pointed out the site of the old Hudson’s Department store (at one time the tallest store in the world). It closed in the early 1980s, was demolished fifteen years later and still remains a parking lot waiting for a developer to build on it. To cover more ground, we rode the People Mover, an elevated automated sky train which loops around the downtown, mostly carrying air, rather than people (we had the entire carriage to ourselves). Built in the 1980s, it was another attempt at downtown regeneration which has failed to live up to its expectations.

34 After lunch, we headed out to the Somerset Collection, Greater Detroit’s premiere shopping centre in suburban Troy, Michigan. In addition to the obvious purpose of shopping, we went out to Troy to show the contrasts with Detroit itself. In the post-war years, Hudson’s was active in building new suburban shopping malls in the region, such as Northland Town Center, situated just north of 8 Mile Road. While Somerset did not kill off Hudson’s downtown store directly, these early shopping centres did, as retail followed the people into the suburbs. And, with the arrival of new high-end malls such as Somerset, many of the early post-war malls have either gone down market or closed altogether. Seeing the changing geography of retail in the region helped to illustrate Marx’s “creative-destruction” of capitalism, which, because of a stronger role for the state, is not as evident in European countries. On our way back to Detroit, we drove along Woodward Avenue, the city’s principal north-south thoroughfare, rather than taking the expressway. As we passed through different suburbs, of which there are more than one hundred in Greater Detroit, we drove by the mansions of Bloomfield Hills, as well as more middle-class suburbs such as Royal Oak or Birmingham, with their bustling shopping streets, walkable downtowns and high quality of life.

35 The lack of regional governance and coordination is one of the most pressing problems in Greater Detroit (Galster, 2012). As with most American regions, there is no pooling of resources and each municipality must raise its own taxes to pay for local schools, police and other services. The lack of regional planning also encourages suburbs on the fringes of Greater Detroit to continue to build houses to increase their tax base while the regional population is declining. The result is that each year thousands of new houses are built in these suburbs and thousands of old houses are abandoned in Detroit. George Galster calls this the “housing disassembly line” (2012, pp. 237 – 238). Many contemporary commentators fail to understand how the current regional governance perpetuates decline in Detroit; it feels the negative consequences of unrelenting growth on the fringes of its region, to which it is absolutely powerless to stop or otherwise influence.

### Day 4

36 Our final day tried to bring together everything that we had learned about the city. The day was divided into two parts. We continued our theme of hope amongst the ruins as we were re-joined by Rich Feldman from the Boggs Center for a coach tour around the city. One felt

very safe with Feldman as he took us around the city; his commanding voice required no microphone on the coach and, wherever we stopped, he would wave to anyone walking or driving by. Our first stop was the last of the big three ruins in Detroit: the Packard Automotive Factory which is the largest ruin in Detroit, if not North America (see Figures 4 and 10). “This was the American Dream”, proclaimed Feldman as we stood outside in the forlorn parking lot, “and look at it now”. He gave us time to look around the ruins of the Packard plant, reminding us to watch out for broken glass and homeless people sleeping (lots of the former, none of the latter). For almost every one of us, walking around this enormous and utterly ruined edifice was unlike anything we had ever done before. But because we understood so much more about the city, we could appreciate what the loss of Packard and other businesses meant for Detroit. Rich Feldman asked us if we saw with our eyes or with our hearts and our minds; what we experienced at Packard was not just exploring around the ruins. It was giving meaning to everything we had learned about the city.

37 After the Packard factory, we drove past the GM Hamtramck Assembly Plant, colloquially referred to as the Poletown plant after the neighbourhood which was bulldozed to make space for the factory in the 1980s. It is still in use today, though employs a fraction of the jobs promised when houses and businesses were being expropriated and a neighbourhood destroyed to prepare a site big enough for a modern-day auto factory. Our final stop with Feldman was the Freedom Farm, run by Wayne and Myrtle Curtice who we met on Day two. The small farm on Manistique Street on the far East Side of the city provides vegetables for local residents and is used to educate local school children; some of the produce is sold at the Eastern Market. Seeing a working urban farm was a real highlight for the students; this is one of the new images emerging from Detroit and it gave us a sense of optimism and inspiration.

38 Our final stop in Detroit was back at Wayne State University with George Galster, professor of Urban Studies and Planning. We had all read his book *Driving Detroit* before coming to the city. While this discussion did not completely shatter the image of hope and optimism, Galster, who lives in Detroit proper, is generally rather pessimistic about the city. This final conversation served as a necessary reality check as to the severity of the city’s problems and what needed to be done to fix them. His main message was that most of the problems of Detroit stem from and require solutions from outside the city’s own borders. This makes any real improvements to the fortunes of the city far more challenging than initially thought; local planners in Detroit cannot redress these regional structural inequalities which result in the deck being stacked against Detroit. Most of the talk was negative: 70% of kids in Detroit Public Schools are poor; he vividly explained his concept of the “housing disassembly line” with the statistic that the Detroit region has added 10,000 more houses than it needs per year since the 1950s. According to Galster, regional coordination is desperately needed but politically unfeasible. When asked about positives in the city, his initial response was that if you are an artist, you can live and work here cheaply and find stuff for your art. But in the end, our discussion closed off on a more optimistic tone. As Galster was asked for his final words, he stated: “the population in this region is very psychologically rooted to this place. People are fond of Detroit and proud of their city. They will still continue to struggle. Maybe some of the struggles will turn into something more possible. But we won’t give up”.

## **The value of the fieldtrip: respect for Detroit and an understanding of key urban issues**

39 A recent conference in Bochum, Germany – a city about to see the closure of its GM/Opel plant – was titled “This is not Detroit”. If you take this view that “Detroit can’t/won’t happen here – Detroit is unique” then there are not many lessons you can gain from the city. Its dependence on one industry, its racism or its political corruption all make it an outlier and are used in the argument that “we are different”. However, many of the people that we met in Detroit share the view that my own research has led me to conclude: what happens in Detroit matters and is already happening in other places. At the conference, Tyree Guyton and a colleague from the Heidelberg Project gave presentations to artists, politicians and journalists from across Europe. Their message was: “we are all Detroit”. If this is what you believe, then what happens

in Detroit matters for other places too. In this perspective, Detroit is seen as a pioneer and a glimpse of what may be coming (in one form or another) to other places in the future. Therefore visiting the city and engaging with Detroiters is not only useful for understanding this fascinating city, it offers the opportunity to bring back powerful lessons that can be applied in European cities as well.

40 Detroit has always been ahead of the curve. Through entrepreneurs like Henry Ford, it was the first city to industrialise based on the modern assembly line. Because of his and others' products it was the first city to suburbanise based around the automobile. Through the combination of Fords \$ 5/day pay packet and the strength of the region's unions, Detroit was the first place where ordinary factory workers could climb up to the ranks of the consumer middle-class. More recently, because of deindustrialisation, Detroit has become the first city to truly feel its full consequences. Greater Detroit is a politically fragmented region; in many countries, including the Netherlands, there are discussions about reducing or eliminating regional governments and Detroit offers a powerful example of the type of polarisation which can occur when each municipality is forced to sink or swim and fend for itself. Even today, Detroit is entering uncharted waters; through the visions of Grace Lee Boggs, Tyree Guyton and other artists, activists and ordinary people who are searching for a better future, Detroit is at the vanguard of a truly post-industrial city. This is why Detroit matters. To learn about the transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial society, we need to visit the place which has felt this transition more extremely than any other place on earth.

41 Our journey through Detroit went through several distinct phases: curiosity and shock at the scale of destruction, seeing hope amongst the ruins, understanding the regional economic and political context of the city and its suburbs and finally a reality check as to the severity of the problems. These experiences could only be felt by visiting Detroit for ourselves and engaging with people who are actively involved in the city's civic, academic, artistic and activist communities. The emotion and passion – both positive and negative – could only be fully appreciated on a field trip, rather than in a classroom. The different statistics and facts, were given a whole new meaning when we saw the Packard Automotive Plant in ruins and the urban prairie of the old neighbourhoods surrounding it.

42 But it is not just walking around or driving through these places; an essential part of the field trip was hearing the stories of Detroiters: their struggles through everyday life; the hope they feel for their community; the energy and pride they feel towards their city. As one student wrote to me after we got back: "I'd like to thank you once more for the incredible journey you led me and my fellow students through. I really had one of the most impressive experiences in my life, not only because of the things we've seen but particularly because of the stories that came with them".

43 The Detroit portion of our ten day fieldtrip was less focused on "active" learning than is often associated with geography fieldtrips (see Hovorka and Wolf, 2009). More active forms of learning were done in Toronto, including student-led walking tours (in groups) and independent observation assignments. Much of our time in Detroit was spent using Panelli and Welch's (2005) "dependent observation" category of student field work; we met and listened to many different speakers. However, there were two elements which made this passive form of learning far more engaging. The first is related to how this fieldtrip course fits into the Master's program. The title of the course – Urban Reflections in Practice – reflects how the aim was to enable the students to apply the theoretical and conceptual issues learned in other courses during the year into a real world and non-local environment (Hovorka and Wolf, 2009). Not only did the students come away with a greater understanding of Detroit (and Toronto) but they also contextualised these geographic concepts (Herrick, 2010), thereby providing them with a better understanding of core approaches and theories as well.

44 Second, the students were very well prepared. We had a lengthy introduction to the city before we left which included a lecture, two films and numerous readings, including George Galster's book. Therefore, the passive "lectures" in fact became more active "discussions"; I have been very conscious not to use the word "lecture" when describing these events throughout this article. Because the students already had a base knowledge about Detroit and American cities,

their background as Dutch urban geography students enabled them to share their insights and ideas with our guest speakers. After the trip, many of our guests commented to me how rewarding and helpful our discussions were because of the insights given by my students.

45 The connections forged with Detroiters through these discussions also contributed to another reason why the trip was a success. The students all developed a strong personal connection to the city and its people (Doucet, 2013). One student, the same one who painted the dot on Heidelberg, was in New York after the field trip. While in a shop in Harlem, he mentioned to the shopkeeper that he had just been to Detroit. The shopkeeper responded that he thought Detroit was awful and if he had family there, he would insist that they came to New York as he would never want to go there. My student responded with a much more complex response, not arguing that Detroit was a paradise, but also believing that there were reasons to see hope.

46 After four days in Detroit, the students' interest in the city has only continued to grow. As their teacher for this trip, this is something I am very proud of. After the course was done, many students stated that this trip was the highlight of their entire university career, an experience noted by other academics leading fieldtrips (Herrick, 2010) and certainly a reason for continuing to provide room in the curriculum for such courses. In addition to a greater knowledge of what has happened to Detroit and what we can learn from this, each student came away with an immense amount of respect for Detroit and Detroiters. And as they graduate and start their working careers, they will carry this knowledge and passion with them and continue to challenge the assumption that what happens in Detroit is irrelevant for the rest of the world and be able to vividly critique the one-sided image of Detroit as a dead city without hope.

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## Notes

1 In the years since Hubbard left office, Dearborn has become home to one of the country's largest Arab-American communities, with more than forty thousand living in the suburb, representing around 40% of the population (Chavan A., 2013).

2 Two good media accounts of this depiction of Detroit are CBS's 60 Minutes "Detroit on the Edge", 13 October 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50157064n> and Fox Detroit's "Charlie Le Duff golfs the length of Detroit", <http://www.myfoxdetroit.com/story/18945787/2012/07/03/charlie-leduff-golfs-the-length-of-detroit>

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## *Droits d'auteur*

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## *Résumés*

This article describes a four day field trip to Detroit, Michigan with twenty-eight Urban Geography Master's students from Utrecht University. Detroit is known for its population decline, industrial collapse and racial strife. However, the city is far more complex than that and understanding what happened to Detroit can teach us a lot about contemporary cities more generally. Each day of our visit built up a different narrative of Detroit and challenged what we thought we knew about the city and its people. This process evolved from the shocking scale of the ruins and destruction, to seeing this same landscape turned into art and hope, placing the city in a wider regional context and finally providing a reality check as to the city's problems and potential solutions. Through our interactions and discussions with Detroiters, the students have come away with a great respect for the city and an understanding of why Detroit matters.

## Quatre jours à Detroit avec des étudiants en Master de géographie à Utrecht : récit d'une excursion dans la capitale de l'automobile

Cet article relate une excursion à Detroit organisée avec 28 étudiants du Master en Géographie urbaine de l'Université d'Utrecht. Cette ville, réputée pour son déclin démographique, son effondrement industriel et ses conflits ethniques, présente toutefois un aspect bien plus complexe que cette image désolante, et comprendre ce qui s'est passé à Detroit peut nous apprendre quantité de choses sur les villes contemporaines de façon plus générale. Chaque jour de notre visite nous avons été confrontés à un récit différent sur Detroit, remettant en question nos *a priori* sur la ville et ses habitants. D'un constat choquant des ruines et destructions nous sommes passés à une vision de ce même paysage métamorphosé en art et en espoir, plaçant la ville dans un contexte plus large pour finalement nous ramener à la réalité quant aux problèmes et aux solutions potentielles. Suite aux interactions et autres discussions avec des habitants, les étudiants sont repartis avec un grand respect pour la ville, en ayant pu appréhender tout l'intérêt qu'elle présente.

## *Entrées d'index*

**Mots-clés** : Detroit, excursion, expérience d'étudiants, désindustrialisation, fragmentation régionale

**Keywords** : Detroit, field trip, student-experience, deindustrialisation, regional fragmentation