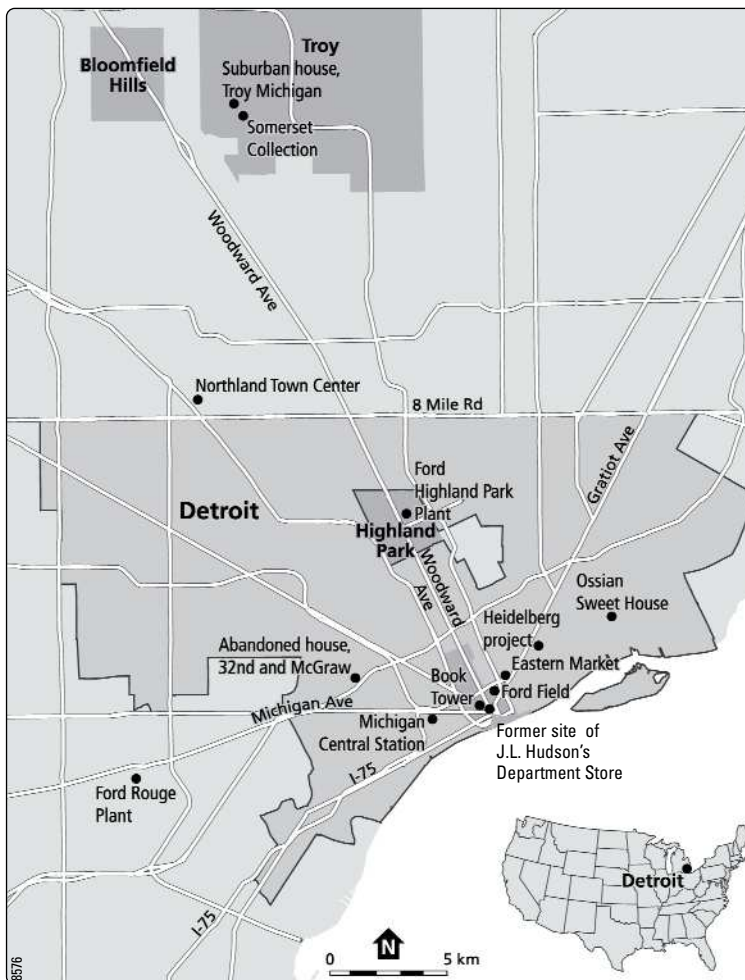


# the story of detroit through ten buildings

**Brian Doucet** uses ten buildings in and around Detroit to tell the story of the rise, decline and prospects of the Motor City



**Above**

Locations of the ten Detroit buildings

In July 2013, Detroit became the largest American city to declare bankruptcy. This was the culmination of decades of structural economic change in a highly fragmented region, where rich and poor, black and white, live in separate worlds.

This article tells the story of the city's meteoric rise to become America's fourth-largest city, its spectacular fall and its contemporary downtown renaissance, through ten buildings located in the city and its suburbs.

As the stories behind these structures attest, understanding what has happened to Detroit requires both an economic perspective (regarding the loss of tens of thousands of jobs through de-industrialisation) and a political perspective (the lack of regional planning and co-ordination exacerbates the city's problems and keeps the region's wealth in the suburbs). As several buildings also illustrate, race is central to understanding and explaining Detroit.

While Detroit may be an extreme case, the issues it is dealing with are not unique, and the city offers powerful lessons for other places around the world dealing with economic and population decline.

## Ford's Highland Park plant

'Fordism' has its origins in the Highland Park plant, where, in 1913, Henry Ford perfected the modern assembly line. It ushered in a new era of production which would revolutionise the world. But working on the line was extremely monotonous, and to begin with many workers quit. So, in 1914 Ford offered to pay his workers \$5 a day, twice the average wage at that time. He did this not for benevolent reasons: he needed to offer financial incentives in order to retain his employees. The higher wages also enabled his factory workers to purchase the very consumer products they were making; by the late 1910s, a

Model T was within reach of many industrial workers. The Highland Park plant was the birthplace of the idea that an ordinary factory worker could enjoy the consumer goods of the middle class. Detroit would lead the nation in both auto and home ownership.

When Highland Park became too small for purpose, Ford moved his main operations to the Rouge River Plant, the largest factory in the world. It was here that unions such as the UAW won struggles for wages, benefits and job security. The wealth available to workers in Detroit attracted hundreds of thousands of people – mostly black people from the rural American South – in search of the American Dream.



## Book Tower

From the birth of the automobile until the Great Depression, Detroit grew like no other city in the world: its population jumped by 450% from 1900 to 1930. Skyscrapers such as the Book Tower, completed in 1926, housed dentists, doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals catering to the expanding city. But the boom was short lived. When white Detroiters began suburbanising after the Second World War, these businesses followed suit. As the city's population plummeted, so too did the number of businesses.

Bit by bit, the entire 38-storey building became vacant; the last tenants left in 2009. The Book Tower's fate emphasises the scale of Detroit's decline; while many other once-abandoned downtown skyscrapers have been restored in recent years, the Book Tower remains closed. It is a reminder that despite some much celebrated revitalisation, much of the city, even downtown, remains empty.



## Michigan Central Station



The former Michigan Central railway station has become *the* iconic ruin of Detroit, and the inability of civic or business leaders to either tear it down or refurbish it remains a constant reminder of how far the city has fallen. When opened in 1913, it represented a gateway to the land of opportunity; those who migrated to Detroit to escape the grinding poverty of the rural South arrived into the city here. Its peak was during the Second World War, when the city became the 'Arsenal of Democracy' and plants were running 24 hours a

day churning out weapons to defeat Nazi Germany. One of those who arrived in Detroit by train was Barry Gordy Sr; his son, Barry junior, would go on to form Motown Records and put Detroit on the international cultural map.

The station's decline was spurred by the very product Detroiters were building; the automobile reshaped post-war American cities and led to the decline of its once great railways. It closed its doors in 1988. Now a shell of a building, its busted-out windows allow you to see directly through the 18-storey structure. It is still a gateway to the city, of sorts, as it looms over the West Side, its hulk greeting motorists driving across the Ambassador Bridge from Canada, or passing along the I-75 Interstate. Redevelopment will be difficult; thieves made off with virtually everything of value, a common fate for the city's architectural treasures.

Today, however, as the city's most famous ruin, Michigan Central Station has become an attraction in and of itself. It has become a tourist attraction of sorts and the first port of call for visitors who want to take snapshots of abandoned Detroit – the genre of books and websites dedicated to such photos even has its own name: ruin porn. Michigan Central Station is one of its biggest stars.

## Ossian Sweet House

In 1925, Dr Ossian Sweet and his family purchased the house at 2905 Garland Avenue, on the far East Side of Detroit. When they moved in, a large mob of several hundred people gathered outside their house, throwing stones and shouting slurs. The reason: Dr Sweet and his family were black and had moved into a white neighbourhood. Restrictive covenants legally prohibiting the sale of houses to non-white families, intimidation and other policies kept most black people confined to overcrowded housing near Downtown. The house on Garland Street was several miles east of this black ghetto.

For protection, Dr Sweet brought two of his brothers, four other male friends, guns and ammunition. On the second night, when two of the protectors were charged at by the mob as they pulled up in a taxi, one of his brothers fired two shots from the house, killing one man and wounding another. The police then arrested everyone in the house, charging them with murder. The newly formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People got involved, arguing that defending one's home from a mob was self-defence, not murder. The first trial was declared a mis-trial; in the second, only Sweet's brother who pulled the trigger was charged, but he was acquitted.



Detroit's troubled race relations have often been played out through housing: blacks sought a better life beyond the ghetto and many whites were prepared to defend their neighbourhoods against incoming blacks by any means necessary. Such confrontations often ended with violent results. Eventually, whites voted with their feet and left the city for the suburbs; 8 Mile Road – Detroit's northern boundary – became a demarcation line between the black city and its white suburbs. Today only 10% of the city's population is white, and most neighbourhoods, including where Dr Sweet bought his home, are almost exclusively black.

## Somerset Collection, Troy, Michigan

Somerset Collection in suburban Troy, Michigan, is Greater Detroit's premier shopping centre. All the high-end brands are here: Louis Vuitton, Armani, Ralph Lauren, and Gucci. In order to understand what happened to Detroit, we have to look at the wider region: there is a lot of wealth in South East Michigan. Not far away from Somerset is Bloomfield Hills, which ranks among the wealthiest jurisdictions in the US. As the wealth has suburbanised, so too has the retailing.

In Detroit's heyday the best shopping was downtown. The J.L. Hudson department store, at one time the tallest in the world, used to employ 12,000 people. Today, the Woodward Avenue site of Hudson's is a parking lot. While Somerset did not kill off downtown retailers directly, it did suck the life out of a lot of early suburban shopping centres, such as Northland (the first suburban mall



in the world). And it was these shopping centres which were responsible for the death of Hudson's and downtown Detroit. The 'creative destruction' of capitalism is plainly evident in Greater Detroit's retail geography.



## Ford Field

Detroit's economic and population decline is decades old, and there have been numerous attempts to revive the city. Ford Field, and the Eastern Market and Heidelberg Project examples that follow here, tell of the different ideas underpinning growth and renewal initiatives.

The city's economic and civic leaders have been keen to promote big, downtown flagship redevelopment projects, which have included three major casinos and two new sports stadiums, including Ford Field, home to the Detroit Lions NFL (National Football League) team. Generous tax subsidies were given for the construction of these buildings. Ford Field's one day in the

spotlight was when it hosted the Super Bowl in 2006. Millions were spent on cleaning up downtown in preparation for the game, including the demolition of a long-abandoned hotel.

While the stadium and casino developments have brought some jobs, tourists and economic spin-offs, their impact outside of downtown and particularly on low-income residents in the city's neighbourhoods has been minimal. Yet this redevelopment model continues to be promoted by Detroit's leaders and boosters – in the same month that it filed for bankruptcy, the city agreed to help finance a new downtown arena for the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. This is the regeneration of Detroit based on spectacles and mega-projects.

## Eastern Market

Eastern Market represents another vision of revival. The city's main wholesale produce market has been turned into a highly successful market selling fresh food grown in the area, including from community-based farms in the city.

Eastern Market attracts a wide variety of people: suburbanites coming in for a Saturday afternoon, tourists, sports fans going for a pre-game meal, and low-income Detroiters who have few other alternatives for purchasing fresh fruit and vegetables in a city with very few supermarkets. It has become a focal point for selling produce grown on abandoned lots throughout the city – Detroit is a world leader in urban agriculture.

But it, and the restaurants and amenities nearby, have become particularly popular with a new breed of Detroiters: young, (largely) white professionals, entrepreneurs or artists who have been moving to Downtown and Midtown. Together with a few other locations, including the popular Slows Bar-B-Q restaurant opposite Michigan Central Station, these places have become anchors for gentrification. In this part of the city, there is reason to be optimistic: populations and incomes are rising and several long-abandoned buildings have been renovated into



apartments. The private sector is investing in the area, and there is even a Starbucks (an indicator of gentrification) in Midtown. Plans for a new light rail line linking the two areas are well under way.

However, despite much celebration, such changes need to be placed in a wider context. While Downtown and Midtown are growing, the rest of the city continues to decline. They also represent a very small geographic area; a few short blocks beyond Eastern Market is a world which has seen virtually no benefits from this revitalisation. Race is also relevant: there is a real fear that gentrification may end up displacing many low-income blacks who will no longer be able to live in their neighbourhoods.

## Heidelberg Project

Most of Detroit is still shrinking as houses are foreclosed, abandoned, stripped of their valuables and burned by arsonists. But even here, new ideas and visions are emerging. Situated in one such neighbourhood a few miles east of Eastern Market, the Heidelberg Project is an ongoing art installation created by Tyree Guyton, who began painting polka dots on abandoned houses on his street. The dots symbolised how we are all connected to each other. Guyton essentially makes his art out of the stuff that Detroiters left

behind as they abandoned the city for the suburbs: old TVs, stuffed animals, appliances and sofas feature in his art.

The Heidelberg Project is important to contemporary Detroit because it offers an alternative vision to the ruins and the decay. It turns abandoned homes and junk into art and, in turn, creates a sense of hope and of what could be possible. Unfortunately, over the past year, several of the houses have been victims of arson attacks. But Guyton and his team have not been deterred and are working with the community to continue to reimagine their neighbourhood.



## Suburban homes, Troy, Michigan



The final two buildings are important not for the specific structures themselves, but because of what they represent. The suburban home in Troy, north of Detroit, is one of thousands which are built every year on Detroit's urban fringe. Over four-fifths of Greater Detroit residents live in suburbs. Initially, the exodus from the city was characterised by white families searching for

better housing and jobs and fleeing racial violence in the city. The post-war decades saw Detroit change from a predominantly white city to one where over 80% of the population is African American. Recently, many black middle-class families have also sought a better life in the suburbs; recent trends have seen Detroit change from a city which was overwhelmingly black to one which is overwhelmingly black *and* poor.

In the suburbs, the sprawl created through new home construction, and the tax revenue it brings in, fuels growth at the region's edge. This is capitalism's 'creative destruction' of the housing market. These suburban taxes remain in municipalities like Troy and don't get shared with Detroit. Despite new houses being built every year on the region's fringe, Greater Detroit's population has remained stagnant for more than four decades, meaning that many of these homes are actually surplus to the region's housing needs.

## Abandoned home, 32nd & McGraw

The derelict house on the corner of 32nd and McGraw Streets on Detroit's West Side is an example of what happens when sprawl continues to be built on the fringes of a region which is not growing: for every new house which is built in the suburbs, one is abandoned in the city. It is estimated that between 1970 and 2000 160,000 homes in Detroit were abandoned. In his recent book *Driving Detroit*, George Galster described this as the 'housing disassembly line'. This is why it is impossible to understand what has happened to Detroit without putting it into a wider, regional context. And this is also why any long-term solutions to Detroit's problems will have to involve not only a structural adjustment to the city's economy, but also some form of regional co-ordination. This will not be easy: many suburban

politicians built their careers bashing Detroit, and most suburban residents do not support sharing their wealth with a city that many of them fled from and abandoned. Again, racial prejudices do not lie far below the surface.

There are thousands of structures just like house pictured, and many more abandoned lots. The city's Midtown and Downtown areas may be on the way up, and new art and urban agricultural projects are breathing some life into some decaying neighbourhoods, but more than one third of the city (roughly the size of San Francisco) looks like this. This image offers a sober reality check for those who see the gentrification of Downtown and Midtown as offering a future from which all of the city's residents will benefit. The challenge remains that any real, long-term solutions for Detroit's problems will also need to find alternative uses for landscapes such as this, too.



## Why Detroit matters for the rest of the world

Despite its dramatic decline, there are a lot of exciting and innovative things happening in Detroit. From the revival of Downtown to artwork by Tyree Guyton and others, new hope is emerging in a city in which it has long been lacking. In Detroit, where one third of the land is vacant, 'normal' planning rules do not apply. Detroit is rich in ideas of how to use its key abundant resource: land. Urban agriculture is growing and the city is attracting those who think outside the box when it comes to cities. Planners should embrace this new reality. Indeed, the new *Detroit Future City* plan is revolutionary in terms of how planners and civic leaders have accepted that growth is not coming back. The plan, while controversial, is pioneering in the ways in which it deals with decline.

However, these ideas will not transform the city on their own. The story of what has happened to Detroit is rooted in wider regional, national and even global geographic scales. From the globalisation of production to the rapid growth on the fringes of its suburbs, Detroit is powerless to stop these forces outside its boundaries, yet it continues to feel their negative effects. This means that solutions to the city's problems will have to come from larger geographic scales. Some form of regional planning and co-ordination (however unpopular in the suburbs) will be essential to Detroit's future. The city would also benefit from better state and national urban policies.

## 'Detroit is rapidly becoming the first truly post-industrial city. What this city will eventually be like, we do not yet know, but the world should take note of what has happened, and what is happening, in the Motor City'

Many people look at Detroit and say: 'That can't happen to us.' While Detroit is indeed an extreme case of de-industrialisation, regional fragmentation and racial tensions, it is by no means unique. Manchester, Glasgow, Essen, Bilbao and thousands of other cities around the world are dealing with these same forces. As in Detroit, many other cities have invested in their city centres in order to promote regeneration and growth. But just like in Detroit, the museums, stadiums, cultural spectacles and shopping centres that they have built only help to revitalise a small proportion of the city and often merely paper over the growing poverty and

inequality which has become endemic in many inner-city neighbourhoods. Here, parallels with British cities are striking.

Detroit offers a glimpse of the future that may be heading to more and more places as well-paying jobs continue to disappear or be moved 'offshore' and as competition between cities for jobs and investment increases.

Detroit has always been ahead of the curve. It was the first city in the world to develop mass production and perfect the assembly line, the first to build superhighways and therefore allow ordinary citizens to suburbanise, and it is now one of the first cities to feel the full effects of de-industrialisation. Detroit is rapidly becoming the first truly post-industrial city. What this city will eventually be like, we do not yet know, but the world should take note of what has happened, and what is happening, in the Motor City.

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### Note

- 1 *Detroit Future City: Detroit Strategic Framework Plan*. Detroit Works Project, Dec. 2012. <http://detroitworksproject.com/the-framework/>