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BY KURT ANDERSEN



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NATION

Road to Renewal. Amid old Detroit's ruins, urban visionaries are plotting the city's comeback

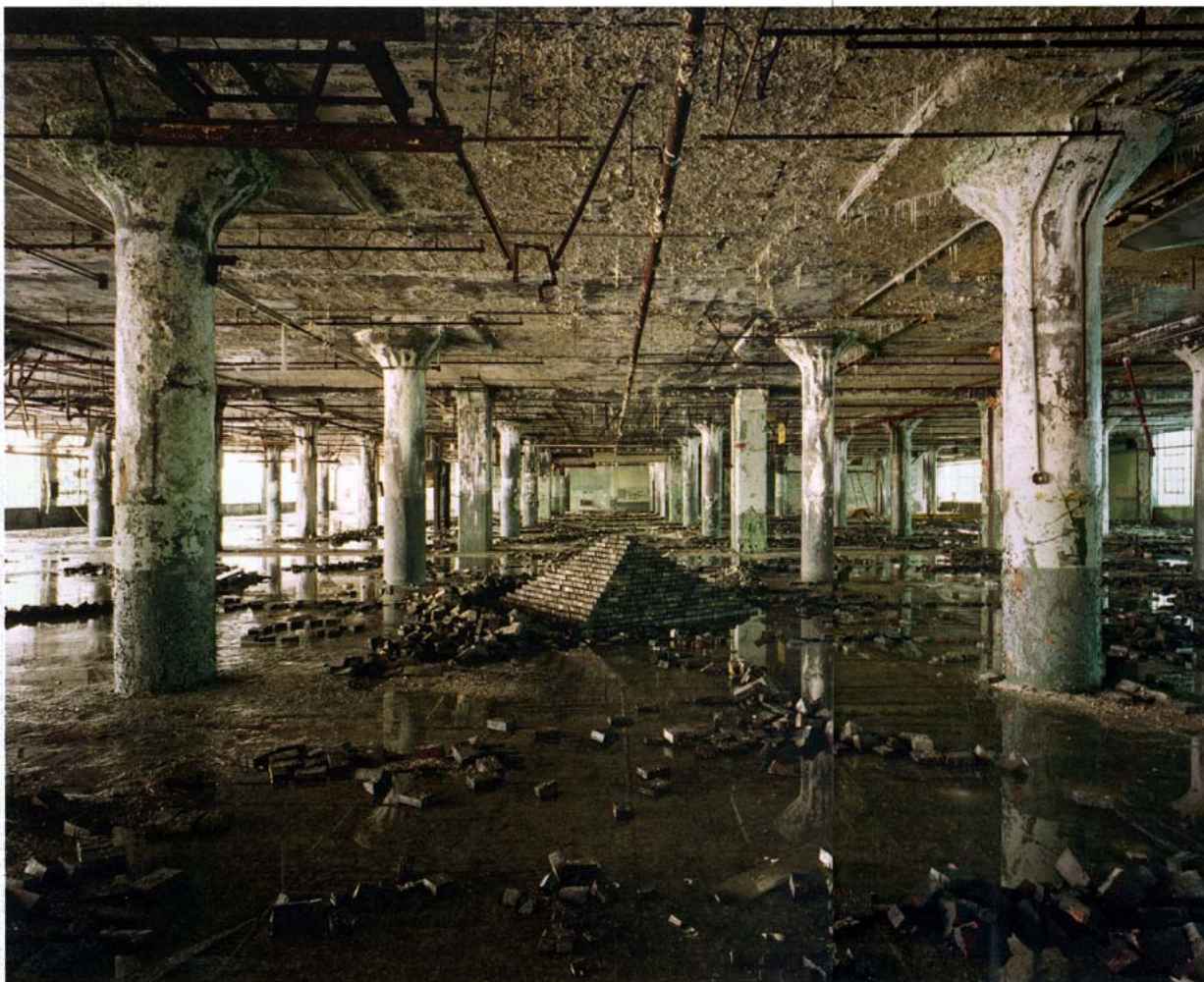
BY ALEX ALTMAN/DETROIT
PHOTOGRAPHS FOR TIME
BY SEAN HEMMERLE

DETROIT HAS BECOME an icon of the failed American city, but vast swaths of it don't look like city at all. Turn your Chevy away from downtown and the post-card skyline gives way first to seedy dollar stores and then to desolation. The collapse of the Big Three automakers has accelerated Detroit's decline, but residents have been steadily fleeing since the 1950s. In that time, the population has dwindled from about 2 million to less than half that. Bustling neighborhoods have vanished, leaving behind lonely houses with crumbling porches and jack-o'-lantern windows. On these sprawling urban prairies, feral dogs and pheasants stalk streets with debris strewn like driftwood: an empty mail crate, a discarded winter jacket, a bunny-eared TV in tall grass. Asked recently about a dip in the city's murder rate, a mayoral

Dead Zones

Decades ago, Detroit was the U.S.'s manufacturing hub and fourth largest city. Today about one-third of it lies vacant





Salvaging the Wreckage

Fisher Body #21 was built in 1919 to supply Cadillac and Buick. Since closing in the early 1990s, the plant has become a symbol of industrial decay. The pyramid was created by local artist Scott Hocking

candidate deadpanned, "I don't mean to be sarcastic, but there just isn't anyone left to kill."

Detroit's motto, coined in 1827 to memorialize a devastating fire, translates from Latin as "We hope for better things; it shall arise from the ashes." But hope is in short supply. At 13%, Detroit's unemployment rate is the worst in the country among major metropolitan areas. City hall, long racked by corruption and cronyism, became a punch line last fall amid former mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's imprisonment. To make matters worse, the city is struggling to bankroll potential remedies. Its projected \$300 million budget deficit recently spurred ratings agencies to downgrade its municipal bonds to junk status.

And yet if Detroit is the nexus of the Rust Belt's decay, it's also a signpost for where other ailing cities may be headed—and a laboratory for the sort of radical reconstruction needed to fend off urban decline. "People know that times are bad. But we're not going to roll over and die," says George Jackson, CEO of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation. "To me, this is war. And I think we're going to win."

In a bid to resuscitate the economy and create jobs, developers have opened gleaming new hotels, touted investment opportunities and rolled out the welcome mat for Hollywood studios. But most residents say Detroit needs to prepare for a future that bears little resemblance to its storied past. Factories that once drove a mighty manufacturing empire are home to hordes of scavengers, who flip valuable metals for a quick buck. "We are probably not going to have 2 million people ever again," Jackson says. To "right-size" the city, as he puts it, "we're going to have to really rethink land-use policies and do some pretty bold, innovative things."

What would a new Detroit look like? Many say it will

have to be smaller, greener and denser. The city can start with the chunks of town that have withered into wasteland. The exodus from Detroit—triggered by suburbanization and the 1967 race riots—dovetailed with the national foreclosure crisis, which has battered few cities as badly as this one. According to a regional listings service, the median home-sale price has plunged to a paltry \$5,737—yet tens of thousands of dwellings stand vacant. But the "long-term perspective," says Heidi Mucherie, director of the organization leading the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, "is that these are opportunities." It's the hopeful note sounded by Detroit's optimists: The approximately one-third of the city lying empty or unused—an area about the size of San Francisco—is not just an emblem of its corrosion but also the blank slate on which to chart a path to renewal.

The Russell Industrial Center, an Albert Kahn-designed former auto-body manufacturing plant converted into more than 1 million sq ft (93,000 sq m) of studio space, is one example of how to find new uses for Detroit's vacant structures. "It took us about a year before we realized we weren't going to get big manufacturers in here," says Chris Mihailovich, whose development company took over the complex in 2003. Mihailovich started leasing cavernous parcels at bargain-basement prices, and a community flourished. "This is the future: small business. The auto industry is all people knew, but it's not coming back." In the Russell's warren of dingy hallways, more than 150 artists hone their craft. Some salvage supplies and inspiration from the city's wreckage. Artist Albert Young, 57, sifts through scrapyards for metal he can assemble into sculptures—a process he calls "resurrecting refuse from another time."

Experts say repurposing space now occupied by abandoned buildings and vacant lots is one of the city's biggest challenges. The \$47 million in federal funds recently allocated to Detroit for razing or redeveloping foreclosed properties will test its approach to rebuilding

In other ways, Detroit is moving on. In place of assembly lines, hundreds of urban farms and gardens have taken root. Nonprofit organizations are helping residents transform barren neighborhoods into fertile plots that feed impoverished families, beautify blighted blocks and raise home values. Others are taking the initiative on their own. Last April, after losing his job, Mark Covington hauled away the garbage piled on his street and began planting squash, tomatoes, collard greens and kale to give away. His Georgia Street Community Collective devised a mentoring program for kids, held a holiday fundraiser for an evicted family and purchased a vacant building for \$1 to convert into a community center and store—a useful commodity in a city vexed by food deserts. “We have to step up and do things for ourselves,” Covington explains. “My idea is to have some type of garden on every block.”

At the Heidelberg Project, an outdoor art installation that has become one of the city’s top tourist attractions, founder Tyree Guyton says Detroit’s struggles could help unlock creative solutions. Standing amid houses awash in Technicolor polka dots and trees festooned with stuffed animals, Guyton poses the billion-dollar question: “What might the future look like?” Plenty of people are trying to envision it. Among the ideas are the reforestation of the city’s dead zones, the planting of large-scale networks of parks and commercial farms, and schemes to repurpose unused space—such as in the Brightmoor neighborhood, where Justin Hollander, an urban-planning professor at Tufts University, suggests converting vacant housing into parking lots that would accommodate the local trucker population. But progress has been fitful. “I don’t see a lot of action on the city’s part,”

says University of Michigan urban-planning professor June Thomas, who cites the absence of a master blueprint. John Mogk, a professor at Detroit’s Wayne State University Law School, issued a different indictment to the *Detroit Free Press*: “The plan is not focused on building a first-class city with a smaller population but, unrealistically and wastefully, on rebuilding the city to its former size.”

For those who have already written the city’s obituary, plans to shrink or green Detroit are merely cosmetic solutions to terminal decline. Detroit faces a unique tableau of challenges, from the moribund car industry to its tattered public-school system and the income gulf separating its slums from the McMansions of Oakland County next door. But it’s hardly the first town to rust when its economic engines sputtered. As an example, experts cite Youngstown, Ohio—a dying steel city attempting to revive its fortunes by curbing population sprawl, embracing green industries and slashing residential land use 30%. Jackson says Detroit is also looking for tips from abroad, where cities across Europe—from England to the former East Germany—have grappled for decades with the scourges of population loss.

As America’s 11th largest city tries to mount a comeback, locals battling lean times are far from the only stakeholders. “The problems facing Detroit are definitely going to be cropping up in cities all over the country,” says Hollander. “The kind of devastated postindustrial landscape we associate with the Rust Belt is starting to creep into the Sun Belt and may start to become a universal problem.” Says Covington: “The rest of the world is just catching up to the hard times we’ve been experiencing.” Which is why the world is now watching Detroit with interest—and waiting to see if it finds a way to rise from the ashes. ■



Windows on a Wasteland

The Russell Industrial Center, a former auto-body plant converted into studio space, offers bleak views of a city often described as postapocalyptic. Many of Detroit’s vaunted factories have fallen silent

A sprawling seven-building complex originally home to the Murray Manufacturing Co., the Russell boasts **more than 1 million sq. ft. (93,000 sq m) of studio space**. Massive parcels and low prices have drawn a burgeoning community of more than **150 artists and artisans**



Ruins of Detroit
For more of Sean Hemmerle’s photographs, go to time.com/detroit