

From The Atlantic

**CITYLAB**

## NAVIGATOR

# To Understand Detroit, Look in at Night

A new exhibition uses darkness to highlight the nuances of blight and revitalization—and the culture that has stayed rooted all along.

JESSICA LEIGH HESTER | [@jessicahester](#) | Nov 28, 2016 | [1 Comment](#)



"Edsel Ford River, Supermoon Sewer Slam, 2014" (Scott Hocking)

Love CityLab? Make sure you're signed up for our free e-mail newsletter.

Sign up

When he can't doze off, Scott Hocking roams Detroit, camera in hand. Some of the photographer's late-night images take on a somnambulist quality: They

look ambiguously trippy and unsettling, a scene your brain might tape together with just enough off-kilter details to feel uncanny. In one, a car slogs through cloudy water drowning the expressway and muddying the grass flanking it. The headlights forge a feeble path ahead; the road is deserted, and it's hard to tell whether there's anyone behind the wheel. In the background is a billboard commanding passersby to "Be Active." The photo was taken in 2014, a year when Detroit's [aging infrastructure](#) was [slammed by historic storms](#) that submerged interstates and caused [\\$1 billion in damages](#). Hocking's picture depicts a motor and a city sputtered to a halt. It's tempting to wonder whether the artist intended viewers to wonder who to hold accountable: Was someone not working actively enough to bail out the soggy city, or prevent it from flooding in the first place?

Hocking's photo is on display in the new exhibition [Detroit After Dark](#), installed at the Detroit Institute of Arts through April. More than 60 images—all from the museum's collection—look unflinchingly at the factors that have abraded the city without losing sight of the residents and stalwarts that have animated it.

Many of the photographers are homegrown artists, sidestepping the problem of [outsiders parachuting in](#) to [gawk at](#) the most ruined buildings. These pictures don't glamorize decay or varnish the crises that attend blight. Familiarity has led to tender images of even the city's most jagged edges.





"Night Shift, Pontiac Assembly," 1987. (Russ Marshall/Detroit Institute of Arts)

"Photographers working at night sometimes romanticize the industrial horizon flickering with glittering city lights and factory smokestacks seen from afar," the curator writes in the accompanying text. And some of the artists do take a dreamy approach: Jon DeBoer's *Southwest Detroit* recalls Edward Steichen's [photograph of the Flatiron building](#), plumes of smoke smudged like charcoal, lights flickering atmospherically. But others take a decidedly less poetic view. In 1987, Russ Marshall shot a portrait of workers trundling to their night shifts at the Pontiac Assembly plant, hands shoved in their pockets as they lope across a snowy parking lot scuffed with tire tracks. Here, the night feels bone-cold and exhausting.

The Pontiac plant closed in 2009, a relic of a receding manufacturing history. Many other photographs also offer timestamps for the city's changing topography. A Robert Frank image from 1955 shows a bustling city hall, cars sidling up to the curb beneath dangling streetcar cables—a trace of the system that would be eliminated in 1956, as the auto-focused city [doubled down on bus transit](#). Another photo showcases the empty footprint of the flagship

Hudson's department store, which closed 1983, as the population had already begun a dip from its high three decades before.



"In Between," 2014. (Jon DeBoer/Detroit Institute of Arts)

Many of the photographers use darkness as a tool to illuminate social inequalities. As the city's population shrunk, streetlights were [extinguished or left broken](#) in the sparser areas. Meanwhile, the photographer Jon DeBoer embarked on a project to document "party stores" selling liquor—"often the only source of light in some neighborhoods," he wrote in the show. He captured an inky block in [a 2015 photograph titled \*Von's Express\*](#): On a winter evening, two boys—hoodies and shadows obscuring their faces—pass beneath

floodlights in front of the shop. Little else is visible. "A fire across the street was responsible for the mistiness in the air," DeBoer wrote.

But, for Detroit, nighttime has also been a time of vibrancy, when the city could show off the stuff it did best off of the assembly line. A spate of images pays homage to Detroit's legendary music landscape. There's Marcus Belgrave at [Baker's Keyboard Lounge](#), and the White Stripes in 1999; Jenny Risher photographed Awesome Dre and the Hardcore Committee, plus many other local hip-hop and rap acts. The thrum of the city's electronic scene continues to [lure festivalgoers](#), and the photographer Steven Shaw captured its one-time heart. In 1989, he photographed the chalkboard menu at the Music Institute's concession stand, advertising Hawaiian Punch, orange juice, apple juice, and lemonade; a no-alcohol policy kept it accessible to fans of all ages. The sense of community extends beyond concert venues, too: Another photographer captured neighbors congregating on their porches and patchy lawns, craning their necks back to watch fireworks spew orange and yellow on July 4th. The city's culture is a salve and a pulse, the images suggest, wherever you find it.



"The Music Institute," 1989. (Steven Shaw/Detroit Institute of Arts)

The story of Detroit is often told in extremes: nadirs and resurrections, the city constantly on the cusp of destruction or of greatness. It's cast as either a warning or a template for how to piece a fragmented place back together. While the city—[and its residents](#)—have [ambitious plans to rethink land use](#) and expand crucial services, the splashiest revitalization campaigns still tend to be waged along one central corridor. Jon DeBoer distilled some of these efforts in an aerial view of glittering Campus Martius park, a 2.5-acre public square that hosts performances, the city's Christmas tree, and [a smattering of restaurants](#). Throughout the show, many photos ask viewers to consider the aesthetics (and shortcomings) of renewal. In one image, the lights from the Comerica Park stadium glint behind an old Brush Park building with splintered, boarded windows, puddles out front, and ivy crawling up the side.

At the same time, the show challenges the idea that Detroit is newly emerging from its own kind of darkness. The photos remind viewers that there have always been Detroiters working hard, and working together, in the darkness and the light.

*[Detroit After Dark](#) is on view at the [Detroit Institute of Arts](#) through April 23, 2017.*

## About the Author



Jessica Leigh Hester is a senior associate editor at CityLab. She writes about culture, sustainability, and green spaces, and lives in Brooklyn.

ALL POSTS | [@jessicahester](#) | [Feed](#)