

INTRODUCTION

MY LOVE OF RUINS FIRST ATTRACTED ME TO DETROIT, to a city far removed from its golden age. Unexpectedly, this passion led me to the wider culture that had developed over several decades in extremely segregated areas of the city. I had visited the ruins of Gary, Chicago, Newark, the Bronx, and Camden, New Jersey, and each one had impressed me in its own way. But none had anything like the effect of Detroit's abandoned skyscrapers, derelict industrial plants, and avenues of faded grandeur. I wanted to follow the trajectory of these urban leftovers—toward greater decay, disappearance, or revival—and to see where the new crop of ruins would emerge. That is, I went from regarding ruins as spectacle to noticing the elements of the declining city: small-scale inventions, additions, recycling of materials, signage, murals, and other components that make up the urban fabric. The ruins led me to an entire ghetto culture within the postindustrial city.

People in the future, I believe, will want to know about the evolution of postindustrial Detroit in terms of the visual forms of everyday life. But there are disincentives to probing this subject. Scholars interested in Detroit and other cities undergoing depopulation, disinvestment, and dereliction are eager to find ways to return them to prosperity—usually, however, at the cost of ignoring the physical adaptations and new beginnings made by locals in their struggle to survive. At times I have also felt discouraged by the guardians of Motor City's reputation, who complain that photographic documentation of decay makes the city look "grotesque, ugly, and bad." An interest in urban decline and deterioration clashes with the prevailing cult of hope that favors such dictums as "Nothing Stops Detroit," "Don't Dump on Detroit," "Speak Positively About Detroit," "Detroit vs. Everybody," and "If You Can't Say Something Nice About Detroit, Don't Say Anything At All." My view is that grand ruined buildings, and a green, largely vacant city, can coexist with economic development.

Emphasizing achievements such as the new restaurants, entertainment venues, high-tech ventures, and incoming businesses has led the world media to report extensively on the revival of a small, safe, lively, and predominantly white core of Detroit. Contrastingly, the African American community believes that a revival is taking place elsewhere in the city, but may not reach their communities in their lifetimes. Meanwhile, the progress of decline and the local residents' efforts to mitigate the effects of extreme inequality are left unmentioned. And as Detroit's downtown and midtown grow stronger, representations of the neighborhoods grow weaker. In trying to mitigate this, I persist in documenting the neighborhoods. My research relies on what my eyes see, what my camera can record, and the answers to my questions that people from all over the city have given during unstructured interviews. When initiating conversations, I bring with me my whole sensual memory of the place as well as my collection of images, and these shape the questions I ask.

Detailed locations, street names, and precise urban descriptions have been a feature of all my work. My notebook is as much a part of my equipment as is my camera. I also take frequent time-travel trips through the streets using Google Street View investigating changes and collecting images as I go along. And I have searched online for additional information about every place mentioned in this book. I contact people whose names and numbers appear on buildings. I go to the websites of restaurants, churches, and businesses. I follow how the city is being discussed online by looking up "Detroit," followed by keywords such as authenticity, God, ruins, crime, soul food, symbols, and folk art. In a continuous loop, field searches followed by online searches enrich my observations and insights and provide me with with new and more refined questions to ask on return visits.

I am always eager to return and find out what the next step will be in the life of a derelict building, city lot, or vacant land on which life once thrived. For example, I returned to the desolate block on Detroit's east side where the church of St. Cyril and St. Methodius and its adjacent Catholic school once stood. I could remember looking through books left in the abandoned library and passing by the dusty old pews, the broken columns, and the remains of the organ, and smelling the odor of wet plaster. Then, walking across the empty lot, I felt astonished at how this erasure could have come about. I imagine a Mass in progress, hear the choir singing, and smell incense, all the while being intensely aware of the absence of these things. But then I move on, my interest now piqued by some mounds made of discarded building materials on nearby vacant land, and in a parking lot, broken pieces of floats from The Parade Company.

I follow developments—sometimes pathetic, sometimes encouraging—that take place adjacent to derelict landmarks. For example, in 1943 the Packard plant employed 36,000 people; now, in the immense parking lot there stands a social services building that houses Operation Get Down, an alcoholism treatment center. By contrast, the Michigan Central Station has attracted a vibrant complex of restaurants, music venues, and hotels, and the neighborhood is now a magnet for tourists.

I see my role as an informed, stubborn witness. The humble ways in which people in inner-city neighborhoods shape their surroundings deserve to be recorded and understood—even if this may appear insignificant when compared to the ways the rest of the nation is being shaped. In the process, my photographs are a record of evolving relationships between the city and its suburbs, of relations between blacks and whites, and of the residents' beliefs, their sense of aesthetics, and their successes and failures in making do. I follow the way people from all over the nation and the world flock to the

city, leaving their mark. At the same time, in tracking the way Detroit is recreated in cyberspace, I find how the virtual city shapes the “real” city.

Every year, starting a quarter century ago, I have spent at least a week, and often more, in Detroit. During my visits to the city, I always stay downtown on Bagley Avenue at The Michigan Building, one of the city’s landmarks. (In 1896, Henry Ford built his first automobile, the “quadricycle,” in a small garage at the site. The former Michigan Theater, built inside it in 1926, was turned into an equally famous parking garage in the late 1970s.) Upon my return to New York, I caption and organize the images, researching issues that come up, and conducting telephone interviews.

From Bagley Avenue I have traveled as far as the city limits, taking such commercial thoroughfares as West Front Street, Michigan Avenue, Grand River Avenue, Woodward Avenue, Jefferson Avenue, and Gratiot Avenue. To survey the city’s downtown, I walked or used the People Mover. My yearly visits, which continue, have included over 500 miles of driving through streets and alleys, surveying the entire city at a cruising speed of 12 miles per hour. Driving along the main commercial and residential streets, I visit the city’s landmarks, parks, and cemeteries, taking numerous detours into residential streets and alleys. I have explored inside abandoned buildings and photographed panoramas from their rooftops. Now Google Maps influences where I visit, the photographs I take, and the conversations I have with residents.

The way I came to the title of this book exemplifies a situation in which Detroit, as it evolves, draws together a surprising conjunctions of elements. In this case, the following came into alliance: the former Missionary Baptist Church’s 1928 brick building, now housing the small Ruth Chapel congregation headed by Pastor Diane Chapelle, and a secularist, all-woman Dutch design group called

the Pink Pony Express. Four of its members came up with the idea of asking pastors to replace the word “God” with “Detroit” on their signboards. They thought that interventions like this, in hundreds of churches throughout the city, would help lift the spirits of the residents. Pastors were not very receptive to the idea of sponsoring announcements such as “Detroit Is Love,” “What About Detroit Coming,” and “Detroit Cares for You.” While attending a service at Ruth Chapel AME Church, on Kirby Street in a poor, depopulated neighborhood, Pink Pony Express was inspired by the sermon given by Pastor Chapelle, who quoted from the Book of Ezekiel about new life being given to “dry bones.” After the service the designers got permission to paint a text adapted from this scripture on the side of the church, and they rendered it as “Detroit Is No Dry Bones.” I mistakenly took this evocative phrase, written neatly in all caps, for an example of religious folk art. Pastor Chapelle, though, told me about Pink Pony Express and put me in touch with Annemarie van den Berg, a member of the team, who explained that the purpose of their project was “to flood the city with strong messages of OPTIMISM . . . to boost the city’s weary image, and that of all its people.”

In this book I pay heed to this trend in Detroit’s evolution, namely the ways in which the local culture has garnered the attention of global culture, leading to imaginative interventions and creating new opportunities.

It is an Isle under Ionian skies
Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 1821