

(Re)Imagined Futures of Detroit: Dystopian and Utopian Views of the Motor City's Future

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Introduction

During the 2011 Super Bowl, the American automobile company Chrysler ran an advertisement featuring images of Detroit as the backdrop.¹ The commercial set out to answer a question posed by the narrator: “What does this town know about luxury?” It is framed as a response to “stories” written about Detroit, told by (according to the advertisement) “folks who’ve never even been here and don’t know what we’re capable of.” Though the primary purpose of the advertisement is to sell a product—in this case, the very same product to which Detroit’s economy has been tied for decades—it can also be read in a multiplicity of different ways. On one hand, it openly criticizes popular perceptions of Detroit. The advertisement addresses contemporary interpretations of the city, criticizing those that perpetuate certain “stories” about the city. It is also an attempt to exonerate the automobile industry (or at least, Chrysler) from any role in the city’s socioeconomic decline. Finally, it is a defense of the city and its people that is inextricably tied to visions of the city’s future as a city that would bounce back from hardship. Chrysler’s advertisement was one of the latest attempts to retell Detroit’s story, and in doing so, to stake a claim in directing Detroit’s trajectory; the two-minute spot set out to redefine notions of what Detroit was, and criticized outsider portrayals of Detroit as a city defined by images of suffering.

For much of the twentieth century—and even today—a large part of Detroit’s popular identity was rooted in its place at the center of the American automobile industry. The strength and centralization of the industry in Detroit led to the co-opting of the city’s name; just as Wall Street is symbolically linked to the world of finance, Detroit came to be synonymous with automobiles. As the automobile became a symbol of modernity and progress in twentieth century America, Detroit was positioned at the forefront of an automobile-driven society. This dominance would not last, however, as a variety of factors—among them the emergence of foreign automakers and gradual increases in the price of

¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKL254Y_jtc

fuel—would begin to weaken the domestic automobile industry. Though the rise and fall of this particular industry is tied to Detroit’s fate, to limit it to this would be an oversimplification of the city’s history. Issues of race and class, which are sometimes glossed over, have also factored into the city’s transformation, and Detroit occupies just one small piece of a national economic decline.

The American automobile industry has been symbolically and economically linked to the fortunes of the city; however, the name Detroit has taken on another connotation: that of a sense of dysfunction or decay. Contemporary portrayals of Detroit suggest it to be a site of the collapse of American urbanism in the twenty-first century. These portrayals—such as that of the 2002 film *8 Mile*—paint Detroit as a city that takes on nearly dystopian features. The film is scattered with images of emptiness and physical wear; characters are also seen lighting a fire in an act of arson, a reference to a history that Detroit is all too familiar with (Leubsdorf, 2008). However, if the imagined dystopian present of Detroit is grim, the image of Detroit as a city of ruins is even more so.

Like many other Rust Belt cities such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh, Youngstown and Flint—all former centers of manufacturing-centered industries—Detroit has been plunged into economic depression. These cities are characterized by abandoned factories and high unemployment numbers. Even amongst these cities, however, Detroit occupies a distinct space in the nation’s collective imagination. It is, in a sense, the poster child of an American city that has hit rock bottom.

The extremity of Detroit’s change makes analysis of the city’s future intriguing. Speculation surrounding Detroit’s future is borne out of a fascination with the city, one that makes it difficult to label it merely an “ordinary city” (Robinson, 2002); rather, Detroit not only evokes vivid imaginations of its current state, but serves as a metric for comparison to other cities. Recently, Detroit mayor Dave Bing traveled to Turin, Italy, a city described as the “Detroit of Italy” to witness firsthand some of the transformations that have taken place in the Italian city that followed a seemingly identical trajectory to the Motor City (Riley, 2010). Detroit has become its own descriptive class, a model city in of itself to which other cities around the world are compared. However, the symbolic tie to Turin is not grounded merely in the cities sharing a common industry, but also in the fact that the industry in both cities bottomed out. Detroit evokes a sense of fascination, not just in the contemporary era, but in the past as well. But while the city was once heralded for the power of its industry, today, it is regarded for something else entirely. What is it about Detroit that makes it hold this unique distinction? How does this affect images of a future Detroit?

Detroit’s imagined futures are just that—imaginary—but they go a long way toward informing the more likely path that the city will take; these futures inform what interventions will be made, and serve as directions that guide efforts to change the city. Detroit’s imagined futures

occupy a wide spectrum, with poles of what are—at least on the surface—dystopian and optimistic trajectories for the city. While all cities have these divergent trajectories, Detroit appears to occupy a distinguished position of having a wider range of feasible possibilities. As far as the shaping of city image goes, this is a double-edged sword: images of a dystopian future (and present) for Detroit have permeated mainstream consciousness such that that identity has become strongly linked to Detroit, more so than other cities. Conversely, Detroit’s characterization as a “dysfunctional” city has relegated it to a drawing board for new American city futures. Thus, the future of Detroit is not a single future; rather, it is a spectrum of futures that are informed not just by an inclination toward optimism or pessimism, but also by opposing evaluations of the current state of the city. Futures that are possible but improbable in other large American cities are not entirely outlandish in Detroit. This paper will look at different imagined futures for the city of Detroit, a city whose name connotes a panoply of different meanings. I argue that these extreme futures are problematic because of the implications they have on the city’s present. However, these futures are also productive in creating new possibilities to address the problems Detroit is currently facing.

Detroit as a Dysfunctional City

The reality of ruins at least calls forth a constructive, “manly” rhetoric of looking into the abyss, learning from our mistakes, confronting our enemies, and thus retroactively conferring some modicum of meaning to the senseless destruction.

Hell and Schönle, 2010, p. 5

In the April 1995 issue of *Metropolis* magazine, artist Camilo Jose Vergara described a massive project for downtown Detroit. His proposal, however, was not a large-scale development, but rather, one that took a somewhat different approach to reshaping the built environment: “I propose that as a tonic for our imagination, as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory, a dozen city blocks of pre-Depression skyscrapers be stabilized and left standing as ruins: an American Acropolis” (as cited in Herron, 2001, p. 35). This proclamation drew widespread criticism, as the prospect of a city with a population of (at the time) approximately one million being declared “ruined” was absurd to many. Though it was widely acknowledged that the city had experienced socioeconomic decline, to regard it as a dead city would certainly be going too far; critics argued that Vergara’s proposal was marked by elitism, and pointed to ongoing efforts to revive the city’s downtown.

Shocking as the proposal was, perhaps even more troubling is that it even struck such a chord. The plan was regarded as outlandish, but not so far out of the realm of possibility that it could immediately be seen as implausible. A similar proposal for a city like San Francisco would be met with little more than scoffs; however, the fact that this idea was so heavily criticized is perhaps because of fear that such a grim proclamation on the

city's future could come to fruition. In fact, fifteen years later, Vergara's proposal has had an impact and reach that even he did not anticipate: while his image of ruins is constrained to the city's downtown, the motif of a city in ruins has stretched far beyond this limited space to symbolically encompass the entire city. However, while Vergara's fascination with Detroit was centered largely on the architectural merits of the buildings he deemed ruined, popular media images of Detroit imagine it as more than a landscape of abandoned structures, but of a decaying civic order. Initially constrained to pre-Depression skyscrapers, the notion of ruin has become a trope for the entire city; images of derelict houses, abandoned factories, and empty lots have been merged with these skyscrapers to create an image of what can be described as a post-urban wasteland, occupied by ruins that serve as monuments to a past age and a city that no longer exists. This is perpetuated in national publications such as *Time* and *Life* magazines as well as many newspapers. Articles written about Detroit cite statistics about a waning population or focus on the vacant lots and houses that litter the city; images of the city focus on abandoned houses or empty factories in ragged condition. Journalists and tourists are accused of descending onto the city to capture "ruin porn," a term that captures the sense of voyeurism that accompanies the construction of his narrative of ruin. In particular, sites of physical decay are objectified—and sometimes intentionally misinterpreted—to tell a dramatic story of decay and abandonment that exaggerates the on-the-ground conditions of the city. In the age of new media, blogs have also picked up on this trend, often using images of derelict buildings as the face of the city. A prevailing theme is a sense of emptiness throughout the city; it is not just the downtown that is in a state of ruin, but the entire city.

As pointed out by Herron (2001), the ideation of a place as a "ruin" is not performed by those who live in the place, but by those outside of it. The conception of Detroit as a ruinscape is an inherently voyeuristic act; Vergara's proposal is just one means through which this attitude is fostered. The grandeur of these structures are juxtaposed to their current state of ruin; the spectacle lies not just in the actual structures but in that these buildings—which in any other city might be well-preserved as monuments—have fallen into such a state. In the same way, there is a fascination with the ruining of Detroit as a whole. Part of this is likely the result of fetishism with the aesthetic of decay in the city's physical fabric. The ruined city bears relics of a former age: empty factories refer back to a once-dominant industry that changed the landscape of the nation; abandoned homes to the widespread realization of a middle-class American dream. However, other American cities have experienced similar socioeconomic declines—why is it that this characterization is so strongly tied to the city of Detroit?

I contend that another significant factor in the association of Detroit with ruins is the extent of its "fall from grace." Once viewed as the capital of modernity, Detroit now no longer occupies its position as the center of

the automobile industry and the brink of the future. Rather, any present conception of Detroit is inherently linked to the image of the city as a dysfunctional city. Central to these interpretations is the notion that Detroit exists in an unnatural state, and that it is not stable, but rather, awaiting an intervention. The fascination with this process is reflective of the notion of Detroit as a non-normative—arguably dysfunctional—city, a fascination that is tempered by a sense of fear that this is the image of a failed city in the developed world, and serves as the dystopian future of the developed world.

The “ruining” of a city is a loaded proclamation that goes beyond the simple implication that old buildings are not in use. Rather, as Hell and Schönle (2010) suggest, a ruin is more than a reflection of the past on the present; the present is also imposed on the past. Ruins do not just suggest physical decay; rather, they imply the ruin is a mere physical embodiment of something larger that has expired in usefulness or functionality. To declare something ruined is to argue that the age it represents has passed, and then to deem that it is worth commemoration. With this in mind, we must ask: If Detroit is to be viewed as a city of ruins, *what is it a ruin of?*

The historical narrative that explains the abandonment of Detroit varies. As stated, the city’s decline is most often tied to that of the American automobile industry. Others point to Detroit’s history of racial violence as a deterrent to living there; still others point to the phenomenon of “white flight,” a frequently-cited phenomenon in urban studies literature, characterized by the post-World War II exodus of middle class Americans—the majority of them white—to newly-constructed suburbs. The city’s ruins can be interpreted as physical markers of these changes: factories represent the passing into a post-industrial economy; empty houses remain as dilapidated shells victimized by the neglect that followed an exodus of the middle class. Steinmetz (2010) offers another interpretation of what the ruins of Detroit represent. He claims the ruins are regarded by white suburb-dwellers in the greater Detroit region as monuments to Fordism in a post-Fordist economy. To him, they encapsulate a longing for a past that no longer exists, but remains a point of nostalgia.

A common critique of this view of Detroit’s future is that it discounts what is happening on the ground and in the existing social fabric of the city. This has a marginalizing effect on city residents, who—according to this imagined present and future of ruin—live as non-citizens of their own city. Critical responses to these practices point to the absence of people in this visual narrative of decay. A project entitled *Can’t Forget the Motor City* by artists Roman Blanquart and Brian Widdis responds to these images by capturing that which is unseen in the popular narrative surrounding Detroit, the city’s citizens.² Others point to the grassroots

² <http://cantforgetthemotorcity.com>

efforts taking place to redefine urbanism in Detroit, a phenomenon that will be explored more in depth in the next section.

Regardless of the cause of Detroit's perceived ruination, I contend that the model of a post-industrial dystopia in Detroit is one future that cities around the world—particularly in the “developed” world—should strive to avoid, a warning sign of sorts. This ruining of Detroit carries with it a fetishization of the city's misfortune, conflating a city that has come upon hard times with one in need of saving from the outside. Furthermore, while some deterioration of the city's buildings and infrastructure is undeniable, the repetition of images of physical decay unduly propagates a narrative of despair. It is perhaps because of the severity of these depictions, and of this imagined future, that some feel the impulse to imagine newer, more positive futures for Detroit.

Detroit: The Re-imagined City

If we see the opening up of Detroit's landscape as an opportunity and not a calamity—or, perhaps, as an opportunity wrapped within a calamity—we may achieve some good from it yet.

Gallagher, 2010, p. 150

On one end of Detroit's spectrum of futures is a city defined by its decaying physical fabric; on the other is a city seen as a space for the imagination of new urban futures. Re-defining Detroit by its development and innovation potential is an optimistic response to stories and images of the city's decay, exaggerated or otherwise. By reframing decline as an opportunity rather than a loss, optimistic visions of a “new” Detroit suggest an impending dramatic revitalization. Despite—or perhaps because of—the physical state of the city, it has become increasingly viewed as a blank canvas by planners, designers, and artists alike, hopeful of transforming the city's narrative into a story of revival.

While the prospect of restoring Detroit to its former glory is nothing new, Peter Eisinger (2003) argues for the need to frame changes in Detroit as “re-imagining” rather than simply reconstructing. He argues that existing rhetoric suggests a return to a flawed history of race-based injustices, or a move toward a future based on idealized futures of other cities. Eisinger argues that existing “imagination” were simultaneously limited in their focus on establishing the city on a world stage and overly ambitious in casting expectations that are visibly out of line with Detroit's trajectory.

At the center of “re-imagining” is the implication is that Detroit needs to be treated as a blank slate, to be replaced by something radically different. The argument suggests that existing practices are not sufficient to address Detroit's problems; rather, bold, innovative steps need to be taken. One such proposal is to convert the city—and its acres of underused space—into a self-sufficient urban farming community. This plan is very much reminiscent of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City, known more for being a work of imagination than for the two English cities—Letchworth

and Welwyn—constructed according to this model. While Howard’s plan was a response to the ill effects of the Industrial Revolution on urban conditions, the creation of a new Detroit centered on agriculture is a means to deal with the remnants of a city that the failure of industry left behind. The city is hailed as a prime target for urban farming as a means of uniting communities and providing fresh produce; some proposals even go so far as to suggest the applicability of a corporate agricultural model in the city (Schwartz, 2009).

However, this treatment of Detroit as a virtual *tabula rasa* for new urban futures brings with it troubling implications of the city’s present. Much like the ruining of Detroit, utopian visions of the city’s future suggest the invalidation of the existing city. Just as Le Corbusier’s vision for Paris required the wiping away of the existing city fabric, proposals for Detroit connote a similar disregard for the city’s past and functional present. These visions of a new urban future not only assume but also depend on an interpretation of Detroit’s troubles: that the city is not merely struggling, but has hit rock bottom. It is despair that justifies these bold visions; they tell the story of a sweeping new order, which can only happen in a “ruined” city, or at the very least, a city as troubled as Detroit is alleged to be. While these proposals are tinged with a sense of optimism for Detroit’s potential, they impose a colonial city framework on Detroit’s present. Detroit in its current state, according to these visions, is insufficient or “broken;” the city requires intervention to be “fixed.” Detroit, in this case, must be “colonized” or brought into a dialectic of urbanism that fits within the normative definition of a city.

Improvements are framed as beneficial to existing residents and communities; however, this happens not through working with those on the ground, but through importing a “better” way of life. Rather than importing imperialism or capitalism, this new brand of colonialism is framed in a reinterpretation of existing race and class politics. This is especially pertinent given the racial and class-based conflicts that, in part, define Detroit’s history. For instance, in accounts of artists moving to Detroit—often to “save the city” or “bring about change”—long-time Detroit residents are portrayed as the dissenting (but ultimately relenting) figures (Guerra, 2009). While the potential of Detroit as a haven where artists and creatives can flourish is part of a utopian reimagining of Detroit, it is one that frames incomers as heroic figures; accounts like these reinforce a colonizer-colonized dichotomy. Just as symbolically reducing Detroit to a city of ruins suggests the passage of a former age, restricting Detroit to a city defined by potential for change implies that the on-the-ground reality of the city is unnatural, and in need of help from the outside.

This sense of need is rooted in a fatalist view of what is happening on the ground. The process of creating a new Detroit is similar to that which is described by Tsutsui’s (2010) article on Tokyo in the Japanese fiction, in which the sense of impending disaster (repeated so often in fiction), has

normalized the phenomenon of the destruction of a city. While Tsutsui's analysis points to Tokyo as the victim of an outside force (often an unexpected natural disaster or monster), Detroit's decline is attributed to factors that are internal and already underway. The extrapolation of a dystopian future from Detroit's present warrants, and perhaps even necessitates, the imagination of new futures for Detroit. The extremity of the consequences of inaction, when associated with the milder (but very real) decline of the city create an environment in which proposals for change in Detroit can be stretched to embody more ambitious (and unlikely) goals.

Moving the Middle Ground: Pragmatic Approaches between Two Extremes

If you're afraid to make the decisions, then we're going to lose anyway. There are going to be fights out there, there are going to be disagreements, there are going to be frustrations. I understand all of that, but we've got to not only deal with the problems we have today, but we've got to start thinking about 10, 20 years down the road: what is this city going to look like?

Detroit mayor Dave Bing, speaking to radio station about "right-sizing," 2010

It is likely that Detroit's trajectory will be more of a "middle ground" rooted in the realities of city administration and the historic and social contexts of the city. Nevertheless, examining these different imagined futures for Detroit is helpful, not just on an analytical level, but on a more creative plane of envisioning frameworks through which Detroit's very real problems can be addressed. While the sensationalism of a narrative of ruin limits interpretations of present-day Detroit, it has also led to radical re-imaginings of the city's future. However, these re-imaginings also have problematic implications.

Nevertheless, these imagined futures for Detroit have also served to inform approaches to addressing problems currently facing Detroit. What would otherwise be perceived as fairly radical solutions are normalized; efforts that would otherwise draw suspicions are able to be reframed as pragmatic and even corrective. For instance, in 2010, the Bing administration described his support of a plan that would allow targeted demolitions of certain under-occupied neighborhoods. The idea, framed as "right-sizing" the city, is one that has been explored in other Rust Belt cities including Youngstown, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, but never in a city on the scale of Detroit. The fairly radical proposal is one that is framed in terms of "promoting growth in stable areas" and making "smart business decisions;" the alternative, as suggested by Mayor Bing's administration, would be to allow the city to move further toward the dystopian future it is already on the trajectory toward.

Though these proposed positive futures for Detroit are rather comprehensive in scale, they are reflective of smaller, more modest grassroots efforts to impact the city. One popularly cited example is The Heidelberg Project, started by Tyree Guyton. Guyton, an artist, covers

abandoned houses with artifacts recovered from throughout the city.³ Started as a means of warding off arsonists, the project soon came to define the neighborhood in a unique way. The project has grown to become an attraction for tourists traveling to Detroit, and though some residents disparaged the unsightly means Guyton took to preventing crime in an under-populated neighborhood, it has inspired a movement of using art to combat some of the conditions that Detroit suffers. While this may be an atypical approach to address problems that the city faces, it is one that is pragmatic and contextually appropriate when framed within the extremes of Detroit's imagined futures.

Conclusion

Detroit's future is a contested one; it operates at an intersection in which it is simultaneously a city in despair and an arena of hope for a new future. While Detroit's imagined futures will likely never be played out in their most extreme forms, looking at these trajectories enables one to see how different efforts to "re-imagine" the city attempt to rationalize the physical state of Detroit. It also allows for an expanded view of the implications of pursuing particular visions of the future.

The closing sequence of the Chrysler Super Bowl advertisement concluded with the spokesperson Marshall Mathers (better known as Detroit native and rap musician Eminem) driving to and entering a theater emblazoned with the words "Keep Detroit Beautiful" across the marquee. He addresses the camera and proclaims, "This is the Motor City, and this is what we do." The commercial then ends with the words "Imported from Detroit." Though it appears throughout the advertisement that Chrysler is urging this "re-imagining" of Detroit, it is in fact attempting to reinforce the company's ties to the city, and to preserve its own industry's grip on the city's future. Chrysler's re-imagining of Detroit is, in fact, an urge to carry on, but with a positive lens. It certainly does not allow Detroit to be an "ordinary" city, but attempts to reinforce the identity of Detroit as tied to the automobile industry.

However, the automobile industry is notably absent in other imagined futures of Detroit; rather, the city will be defined by other features. While the auto industry is, and likely will remain a strong part of the city's economy, it is to the symbolic Detroit, at best, a relic of history in these futures. A re-imagined Detroit is one that has the opportunity to redefine itself, and the act of imagining allows for the exploration of possibilities thought to be impossible, and that likely will never be manifest. This paper has looked at the implications of these different imagined futures. Though both ends of the spectrum of Detroit's futures are problematic, they serve to normalize more creative approaches to solving real problems in Detroit.

³ <http://www.heidelberg.org/>

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