

COMM 420 – White Paper

Detroit's Collapse: Can a New Narrative Based on Assamblages Inspire Social Change in
Broken Down City?

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Abstract

The central argument of this essay is the concept of the collapse of Detroit as a viable economic metropolis of the American Midwest and the examination of the most important causes for Detroit's collapse including the economic weakness within its culture of dependency on a single industry for its survival, the tense racial relations between White Americans and African-Americans in combination with poor political management.

This essay explores the prospect of identifying and building a proposal to rebrand and tag Detroit new businesses that are not dependant on the automotive and technology industry, the gaming industry (casinos), and the sports industry. At the same time, make Detroit a city attractive to new younger racially heterogeneous residents, to help build the city into a dynamic community that can become the new center of art and culture, and into a place that is safe, attractive, and unique.

Key Arguments

- Cultural problems, which were the result of a culture dependent on the auto industry, as a single source of employment for the city.
- The uncontrolled power of the labor unions. Political weakness interconnected with powerful labor unions and unbridled racism deprived the city of its racial diversity.
- Urban restoration and gentrification to attract new young professional residents who can bring back racial and cultural diversity. This will allow the emergence of a new middle class of people who are merchants, artists and trades people who can attract a new market for their services.
- Rebrand and tag Detroit. Promote good publicity based on the arts that are generating improvements for social change.
- Solicit the support of the city's famous artists.

Paper Outline

This paper is outlined in two parts. Part 1 is concentrated on the historical basis for the collapse of Detroit as a vibrant urban center of the 20th century and a critical analysis of the trending urban restoration, and gentrification to attract young professional residents to restore racial and cultural diversity. Part 2 is a critique of the city's problems based on political economic theory and the advocacy path to change.

Part one – The Basis for the Collapse of Detroit

- Introduction
- A Culture Based On The Auto Industry
- Political Weakness, the Power of the Labor Unions, and Unbridled Racism Killed Detroit
- Critical Analysis of Urban Restoration and Gentrification

Part two – Advocacy

- Critique of the City's Current Situation Based on Political Economic Theory
 - Limit the power of the union
- Rebrand And Tag Detroit
 - Refurbish the old architecture
 - Promote new ways of making a living through vibrant projects
- Solicit the support of the city's citizens who are famous in the arts

Conclusion

Part one – The Basis for the Collapse of Detroit

Introduction

The city of Detroit was built by a navigable river, “strategically located along the Great Lakes waterway, Detroit emerged as a transportation hub.”¹ During the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, Detroit boomed into a bustling economy. The new rail lines provided even

better and more economical access to the natural resources of the Upper Peninsula, and lumber from its forests. It was really a perfect place to transport goods and this enabled the new auto industry and other centers of industrialization to establish and flourish there. These industries attracted many workers and their families from the American south, and immigrants from Europe. “Many of the city's *Gilded Age* architecture arose, and Detroit came to be referred to as the *Paris of the West* for its beautiful buildings, and for Washington Boulevard, recently electrified by Thomas Edison.”²

A Culture Dependent on the Auto Industry

“In 1903 Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company. Ford's manufacturing—and those of automotive pioneers William C. Durant, the Dodge brothers, Packard, and Walter Chrysler—reinforced Detroit's status as the world's automotive capital.”³ Their brilliant product, the automobile, filled Detroit with many people and many inventive minds that exchanged ideas to make this industry bigger and better. Henry Ford, a firm believer in welfare capitalism, began to provide the \$5.00 per day wage for workers who were less educated thereby attracting many people from all over the country to the jobs in his factories. Eventually, every car manufacturer followed Ford's lead and Detroit became a city where all the talent and expertise were migrating to work in automotive industry.

The automobile changed the way we live in cities. Cities were regarded as a place where all business, residential activity, and communication happened. During the industrial development of the American Midwest, thousands of people moved to Detroit to work in the car factories and establish their residence close to their work. City taxes increased in order to pay for all the services required to run the city. When the automobile effectively replaced the horse and

buggy, the street car, and the city rail system then the car culture developed. The U.S. government built roads to support this new culture, which allowed the people to become mobile. No longer did they have to live next door to the factory or try to get along with others of different races, because they could move away from the city centers and drive to work each day.

The industry's complaisance during the latter part of the 20th century worked against the city. In the 1980s, the auto industry experienced a serious decline. Losing market share to Japanese vehicle manufacturers was a clear sign that the auto companies had failed to recognize the new social trends affecting the industry. A large number of its "blue-collar" employees were either forced to retire or were permanently laid-off causing an exodus of workers leaving Detroit for better opportunities in other states and eroding the tax base.

Political Weakness, Power of the Labor Unions, and Unbridled Racism Killed Detroit

"After World War II, the automobile industry, requiring more lateral space than was available in a city, and desiring to avoid city taxes, decentralized its operations." ⁴ People, especially white residents, were now able to follow the businesses established by the car companies away from the city and leave the problems of racial tensions and crime. The system of interstate highways enabled a commute from the suburbs, which led to the erosion of taxes. Detroit which was only known as an industrial motor city of the Midwest was in trouble.

The 1967 race riots, which left several people dead and many homeless, marked a new decline for Detroit. The Mayor, Jerome Cavanaugh, was criticized for the way he handled the riots. The remaining white residents moved away from the city in what became known as the *white flight*, leaving Detroit as a majority African-American city, "this exodus institutionalized racial divisions that have only hardened since." ⁵ In 1974 Coleman Young was elected the first

black mayor of the city of Detroit. In response, the remaining white residents left the city. Young was mayor for five terms, but his 20 years in office were often marked by dependency on the auto industry. Crime and murder epidemics, white racism, and unspeakable corruption were rampant during his administration. Today's Detroit demographics is 75.7% African-American, 13.3% White and 11% other races. ⁶

The automotive labor union which sprang in the 1930s won its fight to unionize the auto companies in the late 1940s and soon became a political force that overcame Detroit. The city's culture and economics became union-driven and rejected any regard for supply and demand. The unions' international representatives make an annual income of approximately \$126,551. ⁷

“Union leaders tailored their policies to suit the mighty auto industry, whose leaders ignored the growing threat from abroad. When the carmakers stalled, Detroit was left without a diverse industrial base.” ⁸ The jobs which were created by the UAW paid higher salaries for people who only had a high-school level education. This made the cost of the average American-made vehicles so expensive that they priced themselves out of the market in favor of the foreign car manufacturers.

Critical Analysis of Urban Restoration and Gentrification

Urban development in Detroit has expanded over many decades. Since the 1960s there have been plans to revitalize, refurbish, and bring the city back to its former glory. ⁹ One of the earlier responses came from mayor Cavanaugh after the racial riots of 1967, when a group of business and community leaders called the “New Detroit” committee, assigned to explore solutions to Detroit's urban problems. ¹⁰ The next group with the same plan was “Detroit Renaissance,” in the 1970s, they were aided in great part by the Coleman Young administration,

and its successor, "Business Leaders for Michigan," has continued to facilitate development to date.¹¹ "Projects have included new commercial facilities, revitalization of neighborhoods, hospitality infrastructure, and improvements to recreational and public facilities."¹² The building of the Renaissance Center by the shores of the Detroit River as the future headquarters of Ford Motor Company did not materialize; the building was later sold very cheaply to GM.

The long list of urban problems in Detroit raises the question of whether the issues of the city are really material (political economy) or based on the social interactions of its inhabitants over the past 47 years (cultural studies), or both. Before gentrifying an entire community, city planners should ask the question what are the urban bonds that uniting these people that keeps them trapped reproducing the same patterns of behavior? Gentrification and racial diversification can disintegrate the semblance of a community of African-Americans that currently resides in the poorest and disadvantaged areas of the city. Bringing in the wrecking ball, removing burned out houses, and clearing slums to gentrify an entire section of inner city may not do away with a culture of poverty which has created limited opportunities for economical advancement and on racial segregation.

Race in Detroit is a major issue and its ramifications are embedded in the people who live in the city, to the point where the entire body of local government is completely comprised of African-Americans. This is an indication to any outsider that there is no room for someone of another race, white or otherwise. They do not want to listen to anyone who is non-black or suspected of being somewhat black, as was the case of former Mayor Dennis Archer. The language and behavior of Detroit is the one of the segregated, disadvantaged African-American, welfare bred with no role models to follow. Detroit has been "tagged" as a place where the

population is African-American, indigent, violent, some even homeless and drug addicted, and therefore, a bad place to be. Gentrification brings with it the people of other races, largely up-and-coming whites and in the experience of the poor African-American residents, they become displaced and the cost of living goes up, after which they are forced to leave. Consequently, the city remains socially disadvantaged regardless of the projects and money that is channeled into it from myriads of sources.

Part two – Advocacy

- Critique of the City's Current Situation Based on Political Economic Theory
 - Limit the power of the union
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Critique of the City's Current Situation Based on Political Economic Theory

Political economies work in physicality; consequently, people who control the means of material reproduction, and in this case is the auto industry, also control the ultimate reality of the environment.¹³ The economic motives of the car manufacturers determined the freedoms and the constraints of the city's environment, because "the outputs of the culture industry are consciously and purposefully manufactured by elites whose intent is to make money (Babe, pg.26)." ¹⁴ The symbol of the automobile as the ultimate product that implied personal identity, desirability, happiness, the level of success and life achievements of the driver is one that can be "moved" from one location to another in a "show and tell" situation that cannot be applied to the architectural structure of a house in which a person lives because of its geographical

permanency. The male owner of a car can be seen in the media riding with beautiful women, beautiful women can be seen driving luxury vehicles while surrounded by affluent people. They became an expression of uniqueness about me and I believe that in part, they express my personality, social class, education, level of success, and concept of beauty.

In 2008, Jaguar Automotive came out with a commercial branded for women as follows: "Gorgeous deserves your immediate attention. Gorgeous makes effort look effortless. Gorgeous stays up late and still looks gorgeous. Gorgeous has no love for logic. Gorgeous loves fast. Everyone cares what Gorgeous says. Gorgeous gets in everywhere. Gorgeous can't be ordinary even if it tries. Gorgeous pays for itself in the first five seconds. Gorgeous doesn't care at all what others are doing. Gorgeous was born that way. Gorgeous trumps everything. Gorgeous is worth it."¹⁵ A version for men was also created; this one plays on the sense that men want to be linked to someone like James Bond.¹⁶ The ad hit on all the subconscious images people want to relate to themselves even if they are not. More mundane media for cars portrays the car as the home by saying that there is comfort in a car that cannot be found in the home. People are shown eating breakfast in their cars or saying that they live in their cars. The gerbils portrayed in the Kia commercials are natives of inner city, they dance and sing, and so the car becomes as all things "happy" and it is the signifier for all pleasurable things, material success status and the relaxation oasis that people could not find anywhere else.

In a capitalist society, people's economic lives are dependent on the groups that control the flow of messages, so the meanings are shaped in the interests of this dominant group to such an extent that they become one-dimensional in their insistence on the dominant order as the necessary and inalterable nature of reality.¹⁷ Thus, the automobile industry was commodified as

something that was deeply needed in order to achieve culture happiness. The culture industry constructed the reality for the city and this hyperreality became indistinguishable from the real to the point of displacing it, eventually creating helplessness.

After the auto industry began its domination of Detroit, the creativity of the people still living in the city was arrested. They started seeing the industry as their only bread and butter to the extent that it shaped their cultural inheritance into one that they later could not escape, because they saw their economic lives in very individual ways (Engler, class notes).¹⁸

The current social redistributive policies to attract wealthy residents to share the tax load or further plans to get the government to tax the rich to equalize their stark differences with the poor in Detroit does not make any sense unless there is a radical culture change in the people of the city. The government should continue its basic investment in education and food assistance programs which are not design not as a hand out, but in the form of authentic dialogues to inspire the people to move out from their culture of racial hatred, loss, abandonment and poverty and create a better life in the city.

Limit the Power of the Union

In Detroit, labor unions matter. Organized labor made great sense at the time of its inception to define labor laws that were not existent in the new industrial economic model; however, many decades later that good influence is questionable. Today they paralyze the public sector and prevent companies in the private sector to become competitive again. Organizations have been forced to move their operations to the southern states where there is a *Right to Work Law*¹⁹ and the unions are not as attractive there. When the automotive industry started to decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it became challenging for other industries to gain any political

and economic influence. Labor unions made it very difficult for industries that could potentially set up their operations in Detroit. “The stereotyped images of abused workers under Right to Work Law manufactured by the unions prevent the members and those under its influence to think beyond the given (Babe, pg. 28),”²⁰ the orthodoxy of its members is unquestionable and they would rather sink a company than compromise their outdated beliefs.²¹ In the end they are part of the political and economic power that is hegemonic of the city, the interdependence of the people with the unions and the unions with the auto manufacturers and the government, are economically interlinked, with no possibility of going their separate ways anytime in the near future²² even though the single industry economic model is more than confirming that this type of economic domination has no future sustainability.

Rebrand and Tag Detroit

Detroit is currently being rebranded as the “new digital” place to be, where new technology businesses that are not driven by unionized factories should get established, one example is Compuware. The drop of its brand tagline “The Motor City” was replaced with “The D,” to herald a new identity away from the automotive woes that have been so much a part of the city’s rise and fall. The D brand attaches a new meaning to Detroit’s desire to become the next “digital” city, but it is difficult to envision Detroit as being right for the digital tech move that will put it on par with Silicon Valley with all of the problems still plaguing the city. Creating a new vision for the city is going to require not only that corporations want to move to the city, but addressing the dilapidated, broken school system, the crime epidemic and the limited education of the majority of the people who live there.

Media messages about Detroit must depart from the its rusty, heavy machinery and associations with cars to see it anew in the light of a fresh canvas ready to be painted with new colors for the first time. Money investment should be made to prevent violent crimes and educate the citizens to prepare them for opportunities in a new Detroit with less crime and poverty. Any media message that emphasizes the labor unions and blue collar past should be counteracted in order to inspire a new tag line that conveys a message of “urban, smart, international, business oriented and diverse.”

Refurbish the Old Architecture

Detroit had beautiful architecture some of which have been left to become ruins of the city's gilded past. To date, the old buildings in the city are being transformed into lofts, condominiums, and luxury high rise residential units at an accelerated pace along with new Formstone and brick rowhouses construction. These buildings can be as beautiful as those in any European city. Detroit is also a place with some of the most beautiful movie theaters in the country. These movie palaces were built in the 1920s and featured luxurious ornamentation and chandeliers that would make an evening at the movies a rich experience in such a wonderful environment. The Detroit Film Theatre in the Cultural Center of Detroit is one of these examples.²³

Promote the Arts

Governor Snyder's elimination of the business credits awarded to the film industry in Detroit and its metro areas was actually a very bad policy. The movie business was beginning to give new hope of fresh jobs that are not associated with the auto industry, the technology sector, or the sports industry, and that can become Detroit's next source of financial support.

Detroit has a deep bond with music. The sound of Motown was born in Detroit and found its success there before they packed their bags and moved to California. In the 1990s, Detroit once again was the birthplace of techno music, a new music genre that was popularized all over the world. Detroit can still be an icon for music; it definitely has many new artists that found their start in Detroit; Eminem and Kid Rock are two, to name a few.

The cuisine of Detroit is somewhat obscured because soul food originated with the African-Americans and they are the people who still eat it. The best BBQ ribs and fried chicken are made in neighborhoods which are deemed as too dangerous to visit; this kind of unknown flavoring of certain foods made in Detroit is worth promoting. There also exists the cuisine of immigrants to the city; for example, the Greek, Polish, Arabic, Hispanic, who also have a rich culture in dance.

Another possible vein of creativity and inspiration could also come from art movements such as postmodern realism. The narratives of everyday ghetto life can be exemplified in the theaters. The social reality of the people who live in Detroit can be portrayed in works of art and in theater librettos showing empathy for the people trapped in a world of marginalization and economic misfortune.

Support from Detroit's most famous artists should be pursued. Personages such as Eminem, Madonna, Kid Rock, Aretha Franklin, Tim Allen, Alice Cooper, Tom Hulce, Lily Tomlin, Tom Selleck, Diana Ross, should be solicited for good publicity and to begin a positive tagging of Detroit in the media.

Conclusion

Historically, the industry that made Detroit “the city” to move to and where to live in the 1940s and 1960s changed and the city was left waiting for another change that could bring it back to its former glory. It is very clear that it no longer functions as a part of the assembly process that was made the standard of production by Henry Ford. Its homogeneous racial culture and the cultural narratives of limitation, marginalization, welfare, social inequity, white racism that are legacies of African-American history in its relation to post slavery psychology must change in order for Detroit to be born again. Diversity should be welcome as a refreshing change for everyone to benefit from economic growth and cultural diversification.

“The city as ‘assemblage,’ as a whole that is aggregated contingently – i.e., without logical or inherent, functional necessity -- from parts that retain their individual character and can thus be detached and aggregated differently in other assemblages.”²⁴ Assamblages from media, marketing, the arts, and different cultures can bring stability and shape the culture of Detroit in a more appealing way.

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