



Travesías Media

American Prototype

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As you might hear a local say, if you want to see the future, come to Detroit. You will not know if this is an invitation or a warning until you get here. Some cities wow you with their skyline, others grab you with their natural beauty, or electrify you with their vibrant culture. Detroit has all of those things but Detroit is not about you, it is about Detroit. Come here and you will find a city that is proud of what it is today, while simultaneously and aggressively working towards whatever is next. This is not a place to be idly consumed, but a place to become. What you end up doing here, as a resident or a visitor, says more about you than it does about Detroit.

A sense of becoming has been the spirit of this place since before it was called Detroit. The Anishinaabe peoples used the riverbank as a place for hunting and gathering food. French colonialists settled here at the beginning of the 18th century as fur traders looking to take advantage of the location nestled amongst the waters of the Great Lakes. Two centuries later, as the center of industry, Detroit was the shining example to be followed by other cities. As the home of America's black middle class it was a model that brought hope to millions. As the symbol of economic collapse, it was the cautionary tale—the bottom of the scale against which all other cities were measured. And now, Detroit is a prototype.

To think about Detroit as a prototype is to adopt the term from Matthew Angelo Harrison, one of the city's most important artists practicing today. His work explores thematic of colonialism in Africa, often using craftwork figures or animal bones which he carefully dissects and casts into striking, minimal resin sculptures. Harrison uses the term "prototype" to describe the "in-between state" of objects that can be "both a reality and a possibility"—simultaneously a real thing in the world and an indication of how the world could be in the future. As a prototype, the reality of Detroit is possibility. Though the financial collapse of the city took more than its pound of flesh from Detroit, what this catastrophe also gave back was the opportunity to imagine a new reality, one where the creative community is prominent in a city that was previously driven by industry.

At the peak of its population nearly two million people lived here. Eventually two thirds of them left, some to nearby suburbs but many further afield in search of better jobs and easier living. Politicians speak of bringing those people back and growing the population again, but the creatives at work on the ground show us a more clever idea. Think about it through a humble example. House parties start in the kitchen, right? That's because it's easier to make a small room feel crowded. The vibe of a good party relies more on density than headcount. If the party feels full, things are good; if not, everyone bails. So while Detroit's political class are concerned with convincing bodies to move back to town, the people building things on the ground are focused on creating dense nodes in the existing city fabric that feel active and lively even as other parts of the city are more bucolic.

Eastern Market is a prime example of this. Located just beyond the downtown core, Eastern Market it true to its name. This is a site of food processing, production, and sale serving Detroit (and the region) with a farmers market every Saturday that has been operating in some form for nearly 200 years. The area is going through a period of transition at the moment, with a lot of fear of the dreaded G-word: gentrification. Walk through the market in the mornings and you may very well see

(or at least smell) cattle coming in to be slaughtered or Michigan's prodigious harvest of fresh produce being dropped off at one of the local distribution hubs.

Many of the walls around the market are painted with murals by artists from all over town and around the world as part of the Murals in the Market project. Thanks in no small part to the presence of College for Creative Studies and Cranbrook Academy of Art (not in Detroit but close by) the city has a healthy population of artists and craftspeople, some of whom paint these murals. Detroit's creative pipeline is so strong that not all of them ply their creative trade day in, day out. But their those energies have to go somewhere, and so in Detroit everyone seems to have a *something else* they're working on, be it a mural project or otherwise. Meet the waiter who is a conceptual artist. Meet the lawyer who also runs a gym. Meet the architect who writes for Mexican travel magazines. Detroit is a city of side hustles.

Now the Market's footprint is starting to expand again. Today on Division street you will find a clumsy brick building that was until recently just an empty shell, disused and forgotten. Today it is home to Floyd, a furniture company that started as a Kickstarter campaign in 2014 and now sells charming flat-pack tables, beds, and sofas. Floyd is Detroit's answer to IKEA. Less quirky than you expect and more durable than you suspect.

In Detroit, even the buildings have side hustles, so nestled between the two wings of Floyd's offices is Anthology coffee which was started by Joshua and Annie Longsdorf. They roast and serve their own beans, design their own coffee bags and shop interiors, and do everything else as well. As you meet people here, you learn that some Detroiters have so many side hustles they're polygons.

Floyd and Anthology breath life into a former beef warehouse together even though they don't have any real connection as businesses, but this coming together creates the early density that helps get the party going. A similar spirit of huddling continues downtown. Roslyn Karamoko started the clothing brand Detroit is the New Black in 2013 and grew it from a bedroom project to a boutique selling her own designs as well as a curated selection of other labels, some so experimental that their product line is merely a few pieces. What was a side hustle has quickly become one of the city's rising star businesses, which is exactly how it's supposed to happen.

The shop sits on Woodward Avenue, the main thoroughfare of the city and first paved road in America—a prototype in its own right, and an example where possibility overwhelmed reality. Detroit, like most cities, could do with fewer roads. The most interesting roads in Detroit are not avenues, but alleyways. During the city's industrial heyday, Detroit's alleyways were well utilized moving supplies and waste in and out of buildings, and since this period of time coincided with Prohibition in America, probably a fair bit of illicit alcohol flowed through there as well.

More recently they had been all but abandoned until Library Street Collective, a local street art gallery decided to forsake the perfectly good street that their gallery faces onto, and instead open a bar in the alleyway behind their art space. That small bar grew into two bars, and then two bars, a subterranean club, and some public art. Now it's known collectively as The Belt, named after the clothing accessory that keeps everything in just the same as the alley shelters a feeling of vitality and togetherness on a busy evening. On a weekend the Belt is one of the densest outdoor spaces in the city, even when just a block or two away there may be no one to be found. Like a good house party, it's not the headcount that matters, but the density. Megacities work hard to manage the density so people can escape the crush of it, but pipsqueaks like Detroit do the opposite. We have to creatively manufacture a feeling of density, and it's leads to some unexpected moves like the Belt.

A few minutes by car from downtown is Core City Park, a privately developed public outdoor space built by Philip Kafka, a now-developer, now-Detroiter who came here a few years ago from New York where he had previously operated a billboard company. What was that about side hustles? Pay close attention to the ground plane at Core City Park and you will find a metaphor for Detroit itself. A mix of reclaimed materials, each bearing witness to the reality of their true past as fragments of homes, businesses, and so many other precious things, and simultaneously testament to the possibility of imaginative re-use. These chunks of concrete, strips of asphalt, tumbled bricks, and carved stone are also reminders that every future is built on the past. The buildings that ring Core City Park are an extension of this metaphor. Inside what used to be an appliance wholesaler, a salvage warehouse, and a radiator repair shop, today you will find offices, a jewelry studio, and some of the city's nicest restaurants and cafes. Shops and housing are currently under construction that will flesh out this nascent development. In a few years, Core City Park will be an open space in the center of a relatively dense ring of experimental structures of various types, all tucked between the leafy residential neighborhoods of Woodbridge and the eponymous Core City.

Continue in your rented muscle car a mile up West Grand River and you'll come upon MBAD African Bead Museum. It's not a museum like the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) is a museum, but the African Bead Museum is every bit as vital. Institutions of the 20th century like the DIA are stately and concerned with impressions from the exterior. A 21st century spot like MBAD thrives not on first impressions from the outside, but on the production and continuation of culture from person to person. The "museum" and its shop are one and the same, everything is on sale and all of it comes with a hearty dose of conversation and story—a metaphorical string connecting the beads back to their origin on another continent. At the DIA you will find Diego Rivera's masterpiece Industry Murals deep in an inner courtyard, but Oldeyemi Dabls, the proprietor of MBAD, placed his own masterwork murals on the exterior of humble buildings that make up his museum's small campus. In a city entirely too large to experience by foot alone, it's smart to make your building impossible for drivers to miss. The expansive use of murals is also a great way to distract from the toll that deferred maintenance has taken on these buildings. MBAD has been able to raise funds and begin improving the structures, but this is a relatively new development. The low years were tough here, as they were across the city.

The hardships that Detroit has experienced, and continues to experience in some ways, have a way of sharpening the focus here. Locals are fired up about the fundamentals, such as schools, clean drinking water (nearby Flint suffered a catastrophic failure of its water infrastructure due to negligent administration in 2014), and public safety. As a city that has struggled a long time with declining public budgets (and episodes of corruption), Detroiters suffer a lack in public services but have deep strength of community. Rosa Parks made Detroit her home after helping to ignite the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King prototyped his "I have a Dream" speech here to an audience of more than 125 thousand people. Union organizers like Grace Lee Boggs and the United Automobile Workers labor union came up here, using Detroit as their platform to speak for the rights of workers everywhere. Detroit is a place of block clubs, of neighbors checking in on each other, and of churches and community groups. You may come to Detroit, but you have not been here until you get to know the people, so smile and say hello when you pass a stranger on the sidewalk.

Lafayette Park is a good place to put this to the test. The people there are quite used to strangers walking around because it's home to a large cluster of buildings designed by famed German architect Mies van Der Rohe. While van der Rohe is known for his high-end furniture and exquisite private villas, Lafayette Park's townhouses and Highrise condos were designed as middle-class housing. The buildings are laid out in a shared and richly planted green space where you will often find 'free range children' playing in the gardens without parents hovering nearby—a rarity in 21st

century America, and an indication of the community here which one can feel palpably even when strolling through as a visitor.

Shortly after the neighborhood was built in the late fifties and early sixties it was converted to a housing cooperative, which is an unusual move in an American city, but an important one. As the majority of Detroit scraped through the financial downturn with scars to show for it, the collective nature of Lafayette Park helped it thrive as a landscape, a pristine architecture, and a spirited group of neighbors. This place is a prototype too. The cooperative model is not for everyone, but those that come here are bound together by a belief in shared possibilities. Cooperatives offers a different way to think about housing compared to the commercial standard that has become business-as-usual around the world. This is important at a time when Detroit and most other American cities are struggling with climbing cost of living. But there's also a deeper way in which finding more ways to create tightly knit social fabric is important. We need communities that are tight knit and diverse so we can deal with the complexities of our own backstory.

The reality of Lafayette Park is that it stands on what used to be the center of African American life in Detroit, before it was declared a "slum" under a federal program, razed, and replaced with new homes and a highway. No amount of platitudes about the area now being an architecturally significant, mixed-income, mixed-race community can paper over this fact, which is literally in the soil beneath us.

Buildings may become emptied of furniture and neighborhoods may be drained of population, but the stories stick to a place. In the same way that buildings and open spaces around town are preserved and eventually inhabited in hopeful new ways, Detroit's activists and artists are digging deep to protect the city's many histories so that the lessons of its reality may help shape the city's future. In Lafayette Park and every other corner of the city, one of the things that makes Detroit special is that you will hear those lingering stories without any sugar coating. You might end up discussing the racism of police surveillance while waiting in line for ribs, or hearing about exclusionary housing policies while walking along the riverfront. Some of the stories may be difficult or even make you squirm a little, but you'll be a better person for listening, and I dare to suggest that we will be a better people if you join in the discussion.

Beware: If there's one way to annoy the locals, it's to ask them, "is Detroit coming back?" Card games collapse when you too many people walk away, but a city does not work like that. Detroit with fewer people is still Detroit, and the city would like you to know that it did not go anywhere. This may be the largest municipality in the US to have ever gone bankrupt, but it's also a capital sitting at the center of 20% of the world's fresh water supply. It's the place that gave the world the automobile, and with it the Fordist assembly line. It's the birthplace of Motown *and* American techno—both of which you're equally likely to find as a soundtrack around town. Detroit is all of these places at once: a community of uncannily resilient people, a prototype of the American city, a litmus test that sorts the optimists from the tourists.

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