why detroit matters – lessons and visions

Simplistic narratives of Detroit as an urban failure or as a ‘comeback city’ are equally problematic, says Brian Doucet; but while the city may be an extreme example of many of the challenges facing cities around the world, its experiences – and particularly the pioneering initiatives of its people – also offer hope.

For several years I have taken Dutch university students to Detroit. I never have to work very hard to sell the trip to them. Detroit. The very word evokes powerful images and strong meanings, especially to those who study cities. While Detroit is known for its cars and its music, it is perhaps most famous for being a symbol of urban failure.

There are an estimated 90,000 vacant buildings in the city. My students come to Detroit wanting to see them. I take them there because I want to challenge them to look beyond them.

Detroit attracts more than its share of visitors who come to see these ruins for themselves. Most head straight for the city and some of its infamous
landmarks: Michigan Central Station – an 18-story shell of a building that has not seen a train depart from it since 1988; or the Packard Automotive Plant – which was the largest factory in the world when it was built and produced some finest luxury cars ever made. It closed in the 1950s and is North America’s largest ruin today.

Seeing only these ruins, and others like them, impressive though they are, does not help to understand why a city like Detroit is the way it is. So I start my visits to Detroit by entering the city via its suburbs, winding our way through ordinary landscapes that look as if they could be anywhere in America. Metropolitan Detroit has around 4.5 million inhabitants, and over 75% of them reside in approximately 100 separate municipalities in the suburbs. Here, there are some of America’s wealthiest post codes and most-upscale shopping malls, as well as more mundane middle- and working-class communities. You cannot understand and appreciate Detroit without putting it in a wider spatial context.

When we cross the famous 8 Mile Road and enter into the City of Detroit, the students watch, as virtually all of what they think they know about cities literally crumbles right before their eyes. The businesses that lined the main thoroughfares north of the city are replaced by boarded-up shells of buildings and vacant lots; the few enterprises that exist offer, in the words of Detroit scholar George Galster, ‘liquor, lotto and the Lord’. On residential side streets, which in the suburbs featured neat rows of tidy, well-kept homes, there are more burned-out and abandoned homes than occupied ones. Some blocks look like an urban prairie, with only one or two of the houses still left standing.

This landscape goes on for miles and miles as we drive towards Downtown. While the suburbs are predominantly white, Detroit is more than 80% African American. It is also a very poor city; in the Motor City, roughly a quarter of the population does not have access to a car and 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Driving through the city’s neighbourhoods, there are occasional bright
spots: abandoned houses turned into art, or small plots of land where food is being grown. But for the most part the scenes are grim and many students are saddened by what they see.

As we approach our downtown hotel, however, things literally get brighter. There are more people on the streets (most of them white), more cars on the road, and even signs of new investment and development. In contrast to much of the rest of the city, Downtown Detroit is booming. By seeing Detroit this way, rather than heading straight for the ruins, we can better appreciate the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty, renewal and decay that characterises this region.

Detroit is often portrayed in simplistic, one-dimensional terms. But for those who are able to look beyond the ruins, the city offers powerful lessons, insights and visions. This is because, by doing so, one is forced to confront the structural inequalities around race, economics, de-industrialisation, politics and geography that have produced a region in which so much wealth and so much poverty can exist side by side. In the words of Jackie Victor, a local entrepreneur who co-founded Avalon Bakery, a triple bottom line (earth, community and employees) business in Midtown: ‘There are no answers without addressing issues of race and class.’

Seeing how these encounters challenged my students to look at Detroit – and cities more generally – from new perspectives prompted me to put together an edited volume, *Why Detroit Matters*, which features contributions from the people we meet on these tours, as well as others who offer powerful insights and visions for a fair and just city.

**Detroit as urban failure**

For decades, the narrative on Detroit has been one of urban failure. It has been used as a warning in national and international media: ‘If we don’t change our ways, we will end up like Detroit.’ Seattle, New York, Calgary and Oberhausen, Germany have all been called the ‘next Detroit’. In one particular example, the *Guardian* ran a story titled ‘The North-East of England: Britain’s Detroit?’ Apart from in the title, Detroit was mentioned just once in the main text, and only briefly in passing. The article provoked a strong response from the North East, the general tone of the critique being: ‘How dare they compare our region with Detroit?’

As is typical with such accounts of Detroit, no engagement with the city was ever actually made. In the *Guardian’s* article, no experts on Detroit were consulted, no locals interviewed, no attempts made to try to understand what, specifically, it was about Detroit that led to the use of this headline. But because so many stories, reports, videos and books depict the city as an empty place of ruins, no further articulation was necessary to reinforce the idea of Detroit as a dead city. Just mentioning the word ‘Detroit’ evokes images of urban failure.
I want to highlight here two reasons why this simplistic narrative is problematic. The first is that when we start to examine why there are so many abandoned buildings in Detroit, the picture becomes far more complex. George Galster, Professor of Urban Studies at Wayne State University, argues that much of Detroit’s decline has been due to factors outside of its control, such as the unrelenting sprawl built in the suburbs. According to his estimates, there have been an average of 10,000 extra homes built per year than were needed to house the region’s population.

Why did this happen? Because developers could make huge profits by building new housing in the suburbs, and suburban mayors were all too eager to encourage development in their jurisdictions. In this context, each one of them was vying for a greater piece of the pie. As Metro Detroit’s population is not growing, most of the extra homes built in the suburbs were surplus to the region’s housing needs. This over-supply of housing meant that the worst-quality housing in the worst locations (inner-city Detroit) became abandoned as people moved further and further out to new houses in the suburbs.

The City of Detroit is powerless to stop development at the region’s fringes, yet it faces most of the negative consequences of this. The city has also lost half of its manufacturing jobs in every 20-year period since the Second World War, from 333,000 in 1947 to only 23,000 in 2007. Reynolds Farley, from the University of Michigan, also argues that Detroit’s inability to grow its municipal boundaries into the expanding suburbs limited its potential tax base. Detroit’s land base has remained pretty much the same since 1950. However, other ‘Rust Belt’ cities which were able to annex outlying areas tended to face fewer fiscal crises compared with Detroit: Columbus, Ohio and Indianapolis, Indiana increased their landmass by 551% and 655%, respectively, during this period (‘Sun Belt’ cities fared even better: Austin, Texas saw an increase of 928%; San Jose, California 1038% and Jacksonville, Florida witnessed a massive 2,474% increase in its landmass since 1950).

As Detroit’s share of the region’s population decreased from 58% to 17% during this time, it is easy to see why the city entered a prolonged period of fiscal stress which culminated in its 2013 bankruptcy. As these issues have not been addressed, it is also easy to understand why scholars such as George Galster are pessimistic about the future financial stability of the city; in his words, bankruptcy ‘treated the symptoms, rather than the cause’.

Another powerful symbol of emptiness and failure in Detroit surrounds the topic of food. Detroit is often described as a ‘food desert’, and in many neighbourhoods access to fresh and healthy food is virtually non-existent. Dan Carmody, President of Detroit’s Eastern Market, one of the largest food...
markets in the US, vocally critiques the term ‘food desert’:

'It's wrong to call Detroit a 'food desert' when you have our market, as well as the Detroit Produce Terminal on the city’s south-west side; both are portals through which some of the best food in the country enters Detroit. ‘Food desert’ doesn’t convey the deviousness of how we devise a food system that can get really good-quality food near people with higher incomes, but not necessarily to neighbourhoods near the market where people with low incomes reside.'

A second problem with portraying Detroit as an urban failure is that it produces an image of a blank slate: to an outsider, Detroit is empty, therefore I can come here and do what I like. The city has attracted many people to either visit or come to live there in recent years.

That raises the question of how one enters into a community – a question which applies to all places, not just Detroit. While some, such as the Utrecht-based Expodium, come with the attitude of learning from Detroit and using this knowledge to reflect on practices back in the Netherlands, many others come with a frontier, or even colonial mentality, where they see themselves as ‘saviours’ of the city. Detroit resident and author Drew Philp uses William Easterly’s distinction between ‘planners’ – those who come in to implement their own ideas – and ‘searchers’ – those who arrive and are willing to listen and contribute to the efforts of those who are already there – to distinguish between these two types of ways in which one can enter into a community.

In this analogy, ‘planners’ tend to ignore the fact that there are almost 700,000 people currently living in Detroit (putting it between Leeds and Glasgow in population size) and many of them have been working on solutions for many years. Many Detroiters are highly critical of the blank-slate mentality, including the three founders of the Boggs School, a place-based primary school on the city’s East Side, which focuses on rooting education firmly in the local context in what is one of the city’s poorest neighbourhoods. In the words of the principal, Julia Putnam:

'I also wonder if the community needs what people are coming to offer. ‘You need what I have to offer you’; that’s not usually framed as a question, but rather as an assumption. ‘And you should feel grateful to me that I’m even here to offer my presence.’ Maybe. But maybe wait and see and look and learn and listen. Maybe there are people already doing that. When urban farming got really popular, a lot of people came in and got involved with that. But there are people who have been farming and gardening in Detroit for a really long time. Is another garden what a community needs?’

Putnam and her colleagues are among those Detroiters who are rethinking the role of education in our society by asking what education means in a city where there are no jobs. As we increasingly move towards more automation in the labour force,
this is a question that is not only pertinent to Detroit. Examples such as this offer, in the words of the late activist Grace Lee Boggs (after whom the school was named), the possibility of ‘finding a way out of no way’ in the ‘Detroit city of hope’. This is one of the best ways to challenge the image of a dead and failed city: engaging with those who are already forging new visions and practices in some of the most challenging contexts and circumstances.

Comeback city? A critical assessment of Detroit’s new narrative

While for decades Detroit’s image was of a failed city, a few years ago the dominant narrative started to change. Around the time that it emerged from its bankruptcy, stories began to appear which portrayed the city in a more positive light. National Geographic called the city ‘cool again’; the Toronto Star ran a story titled ‘Detroit is America’s great comeback story’. Even academics began to sing the praises of this new Detroit; Richard Florida, an eminent scholar noted for his work on the ‘creative class’ and how it shapes cities, ran an online series of articles called ‘Detroit rising’ which struck a decidedly celebratory tone.

In Greater Downtown Detroit, there are many visible signs of this renewal – skyscrapers which had been abandoned for decades are being renovated, many turned into high-end lofts; new restaurants and businesses are opening on a regular basis; and more jobs, particularly in the high-tech sector, are relocating Downtown. One of the most prominent faces of this renewal is Dan Gilbert, the billionaire owner of Quicken Loans. Gilbert has purchased dozens of Downtown buildings and moved thousands of his employees into them, and has even hired companies to restore public spaces, provide security, and operate shuttle buses and cycle hires for those who are associated with his companies.

But as with the narrative of failure, the new narrative of renewal only tells part of Detroit’s contemporary story. Some sections of Detroit are indeed doing very well, but this represents a very small fraction of the city, a geography which has been quantified into 7.2 square miles of the Greater Downtown.

Within ‘The 7.2’, as it is often referred to, gentrification and renewal are certainly taking place. But The 7.2 represents around 5% of the surface area of Detroit and 5% of its population. Rather than being a rising tide that lifts all boats, the regeneration taking place here means that this area is pulling away – economically, socially and racially – from the rest of the city. It is becoming whiter and wealthier than the rest of Detroit, and the private services and amenities that Gilbert and others have initiated mean that access to these resources is becoming highly fragmented along racial and class lines, a textbook example of Graham and Marvin’s concept of ‘splintering urbanism’.

While Detroit’s renaissance is being celebrated in many circles, it is also being criticised by scholars, writers and community leaders who worry about growing levels of displacement and exclusion. René Kreichauf, a PhD candidate from Germany who has conducted extensive research in Detroit, argues that ‘the city’s deeply one-sided redevelopment fails to tackle the city’s core problems of disinvestments, social-spatial and racial inequalities, and poverty’. For many Detroiters, race is central to their critique of this renaissance. Amid talk of the ‘renaissance’ is the idea that ‘Detroit is coming back’. For many African Americans, that notion is problematic. The old Detroit was fraught with racism, tensions and exclusion, and the new Detroit that is emerging is seen as a white takeover. Furthermore, despite being some of the city’s poorest and most crime-ridden areas, gentrification is a real threat to many neighbourhoods adjacent to The 7.2. If these areas ‘improve’ as The 7.2 expands outwards, it will most

A typical food store in a Detroit neighbourhood, Hamilton Avenue
certainly not be for the benefit of their current inhabitants, and many community leaders worry about future displacement.

And while there was much celebration when Whole Foods (an upmarket, organic supermarket chain) opened in Midtown, food insecurity remains a pressing issue for much of Detroit’s poor African American community. Low-income neighbourhoods lack places to buy fresh and healthy food, meaning that many Detroiters are forced to purchase their food from petrol stations.

In 2006, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) was formed to address these issues. Malik Yakini, its leader, is acutely aware of the divisions within the city. ‘Many say that there are two Detroits developing now,’ he says when we meet to discuss food, development and the future of Detroit. ‘I’m very disturbed by that. I’m not anti-development, but I’m anti-inequity in development and concentrating development in certain areas with the idea that somehow that prosperity will trickle down to the rest of us.’

The DBCFSN’s vision for Detroit is that African Americans have more control over the systems which shape their lives; they do this partly by operating D-Town Farms, one of the city’s large urban agricultural projects.

For Detroit activists Richard Feldman and Shea Howell, there are now two conflicting visions for the city: a corporate, capitalist, gentrification-oriented...
remake of Downtown; and a more grass-roots, community-centred vision focusing on empowering local people. According to Feldman and Howell, these two visions are now at war.19

Seeing Downtown’s renaissance from this perspective, we are confronted with difficult questions about who profits from it, who has access to it, and who does not. These are questions that are not just relevant for Detroit; as our planet continues to urbanise, and cities are celebrated for their dynamism, creativity and resilience, the question of who is part of this celebration, and who is excluded, is becoming ever more pertinent. The new narrative being written about many long-struggling cities (Glasgow, Rotterdam, Bilbao) is one of renaissance, culture and comeback. But these, and Detroit, remain poor cities where massive economic and social problems sit side by side, but largely unconnected to pockets of affluence, regeneration and renewal. By focusing only on celebrating today’s urban renaissance, we lose sight of many of these pressing social issues, as well as the voices advocating fairness, justice and equity.

Why Detroit matters

Many portrayals of Detroit sketch it as something different from ourselves. Seeing from a perspective of either a ‘failed city’ or a ‘renaissance city’ leads us to ignore some of the harsh realities of capitalism. As Malik Yakini says: ‘If the only driving factor is profit, then you’re going to constantly have gentrification and the removal of people; those who have access to wealth will always be in control and those who don’t have access to wealth will be victimised.’18

Detroit, as an extreme example of racial injustice, de-industrialisation, political fragmentation and social and economic inequality, represents many of the challenges facing cities around the world. It also offers hope: the pioneering initiatives which are rethinking the role of work, education, food and community can serve as inspiration for inclusive and socially just futures. As Julia Putnam, from the Boggs School, stated: ‘Detroit is a place where people had stopped waiting for other people to come in and solve their problems. By necessity, Detroiters had to figure out how to take care of themselves. I think that is what’s so inspirational about Detroit for other people.’12

This is why what happens in Detroit matters: the visions, struggles, conflicts and lessons from this highly divided city are important because their economic, political, racial and social structures are central to the core of how our societies are organised. The fault lines for conflicting visions of Detroit are clearly drawn: while corporate capital is investing heavily in remaking Downtown into a gentrified playground, grass-roots communities and individuals are forging new practices which are centred on justice, solidarity and inclusion.

For planners, policy-makers, and other urban practitioners, I have two pieces of advice which I have learned through my conversations with Detroiter and through taking my students to the city. The first is that many of the ‘problems’ facing cities such as Detroit have emerged from outside their boundaries. Consequently any genuine solutions to these structural issues need to be addressed at similar geographic scales. Co-operation, particularly within an urban region, is of the utmost importance.

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The second point centres on the question of who is part of the conversation and who is able to influence the shape and direction of cities. Many of the people and organisations I have described here have powerful visions, yet they are often excluded from the mainstream debates about cities. They are not part of today’s ‘celebration’ of cities. Their visions are clear and offer genuine alternatives, but they rarely become part of the conversations that shape cities. For policy-makers, planners, and politicians looking to build equitable and just communities, actively searching for, and listening to, these voices and reaching out to groups and individuals who do not normally take up the call to ‘participate’ is an important step. It is about more than just ‘inclusion’; this involves thinking about power relations to ensure that people – especially poor and marginalised groups – have control over the systems which shape their lives. This approach taps into David Harvey’s idea of the ‘right to the city’, the most important element being the ‘right to change ourselves by changing the city’.20

For my students, seeing these perspectives and visions is perhaps the most powerful lesson that they take away from Detroit. Those who are able to look beyond either the ruins or the renaissance to understand how the two are, in many ways, opposite sides of the same coin, are also able to
critically reflect on the power relations and divisions within their own societies as well.

With that in mind, I end this article with a question that I often pose to students. Rather than asking ‘What will it take to ‘fix’ Detroit?’, I challenge them to think of what conditions are necessary to ensure that the poverty, racial injustice and inequality that they have seen in Detroit are no longer possible. Only by reframing the question in this way can we genuinely address the issue of divided cities and societies.

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Notes
9 G. Galster: ‘Detroit’s bankruptcy: treating the symptom, not the cause’. In Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
10 R. Farley: ‘Detroit in bankruptcy: what are the lessons to be learned?’ In Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
11 D. Philp: A $500 House: Rebuilding an Abandoned Home and an American City. Scribner Press, 2017; and D. Philp: ‘Make sure you are helping: experts, solidarity, and effective partnering with locals’. In Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
12 J. Putnam, A. Rosman and M. Teachworth: Interview in Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
13 For more on the life and vision of Grace Lee Boggs, see the (r)evolution website, at www.boggsscenter.org
17 R. Kreichauf: ‘Between economic revival and social disruption: the redevelopment of Greater Downtown and the emergence of new socio-spatial inequalities’. In Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
18 M. Yakini: Interview in Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)
19 S. Howell and R. Feldman: ‘Visions in conflict: a city of possibilities’. In Why Detroit Matters (see note 2)