

Making the Brutal Beautiful

Modern **Detroit's** mixture of regenerated buildings, community-driven art and ambitious design projects are defining a new, layered narrative for the Motor City

Words by **OLIVIA SQUIRE**
Photos by **DYLAN JOHNSTON**

I'm standing on the corner of a residential neighbourhood, squinting into the afternoon sunshine. To my left a pink car is half-submerged in the grass. To my right I can see the skeleton of a house, its walls pinned with broken vinyl records. The pavements are covered with plastic mannequins and faded deckchairs, while the houses that line them are painted with kaleidoscopic polka dots and numbers. I happily pick my way past a carousel horse bursting out of a van marked "ICE CREAM" towards a chain-link fence strung with pairs of shoes. It might look like chaos, but it's exactly what I'd hoped for.

Whenever I told people back home that I was going to Detroit – by choice – their reaction was an incredulous, half-laughed: "Detroit? But why?" It was hard to counter their cynicism by explaining that this ramshackle installation had inspired my journey. The Heidelberg Project was started in 1986 by the artist Tyree Guyton as a response to the shock he felt on returning to his childhood block and finding it in disrepair. Working with local children, he transformed it into a colourful, optimistic piece of art that operates as a non-profit focusing on art production, educational programmes and community development. This sense of multiplicity – of layers of narrative and purpose – is a luxury that Detroit has not often been granted in recent times.

Over the years Detroit has become a byword for a broken city, the American Dream turned the American Nightmare. Once a hub for the manufacturing and automobile industries, the loss of jobs over the past few decades hollowed it out, with the population plummeting from two million in 1950 to roughly 700,000 today. As those who could afford to escaped, those who stayed watched its monuments crumble and its neighbourhoods fall prey to blight. Essential services also disappeared – as Gary, a Detroitier in his sixties, told me: "Trash wouldn't get picked up for weeks,

the streetlights were all out, and if there was trouble in your neighbourhood the police wouldn't come out if you called them."

This decline culminated in the city filing for the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history in 2013, at which point the media's interest in Detroit was largely for "ruin porn" – apocalyptic images of dilapidated, graffitied buildings. Aside from a few nods to its musical and manufacturing legacy – Motown and motors, techno and rap battles – the narrative had been crushed, like a written-off car, into one tiny square of failure and abandonment.

Against the odds, however, new headlines have emerged charting Detroit's design-driven resurgence. Investment has begun to creep into the city, and in 2015 it was named a Unesco City of Design, the first in the USA to be granted the accolade. The most obvious markers of this "fall and rise" are clustered around Downtown, which is rapidly redeveloping, largely thanks to the billionaire Dan Gilbert. Having moved the headquarters of his company, Quicken Loans, here in 2010, Gilbert has bought and set about restoring around 90 buildings.

As I drive into Downtown, cranes criss-cross the sky and glass skyscrapers rub shoulders with art deco and beaux arts buildings. Families wander the sidewalks, and I pass a skating rink that I'm told transforms into a beach during the summer, complete with sand and loungers. The construction of several boutique hotels underpins the hope that, finally, people may want to come to Detroit for more than just a business conference or sports game – 2018 will see a hotel launched by the furniture brand West Elm, as well as the opening of the anticipated Shinola Hotel, the first from the watch and leather goods company, which has its manufacturing base here. >>



DETROIT, MICHIGAN



My destination, however, is the Foundation Hotel, a converted fire-department headquarters in Downtown. As the huge bright-red doors swing open I'm struck by the sheer scale of the place. The city's design heritage is apparent throughout thanks to the presence of local creatives – the bartenders wear denim vests by Detroit Denim, cloud-like clusters of bulbs by the artist Kim Harty hang in the corridor and I find smoke-scented candles from Detroit Rose in my room. The emphasis seems to be on inviting the city in rather than striving to keep it out.

I soon head out to explore the Albert Kahn-designed Fisher Building, the first European-style department store in the country, which was commissioned by the manufacturing moguls the Fisher brothers in the early 20th century. My guide, Jacob, explains that Kahn was given a blank cheque to finish the project, which he completed in only 13 months. I'm taken aback by the excess on show – million-dollar chandeliers hang from the ceiling, the walls are made of polished marble and the hand-painted murals are tipped with gold leaf. At one point the building even housed a theatre inspired by a Mayan temple, with macaws and turtles roaming inside. An inscription above the entrance reads: "Commerce is the life of the nation" and words including "thrift" and "industry" are stamped on the gold lift doors. It's impossible not to feel a little sad upon hearing that at the height of its popularity 22,000 people would pass through the Fisher every day – however, the spirit of entrepreneurship on which the building was built is beginning to return in unexpected corners of the city.

At Wright & Company, a smoky, sultry restaurant concealed in a second-floor loft space, I find diners nibbling mini-sliders and arancini beneath a silver ceiling in the shadow of a colossal maritime painting. The speakeasy-style Bad Luck Bar is concealed behind thick curtains in a backstreet just past a dumpster. Another night I join the queues outside The Skip and Standby, which are bustling bars tucked away down the Belt – an alley decorated with murals by world-renowned street artists including Shepard Fairey.

These pockets of creativity extend to the nearby Library Street Collective gallery, and to the concept store *Détroit is the New Black*, where a selection of local and international fashion brands hang from the racks. Possibly my favourite space in Downtown, though, is the artist Lisa Spindler's appointment-only studio. In this former department store escalator tracks snake up the wall, an old elevator shaft reveals layers of peeling wallpaper, and the complex wiring of the ceiling has been purposefully left exposed. Spindler laughs: "It's all part of the beautiful imperfection that is Detroit. The crumbling walls work with who I am." The space is packed with her own work – piles of manufacturing equipment

found on the riverfront contorted into compelling new shapes, for example – as well as pieces by some of the artists she finds interesting. "There's an element of serendipity and community to what happens here", she explains.

When Leon Dickey, an artist who worked with Andy Warhol in Seventies New York, drops in, I ask if Detroit's comeback reminds him of the Big Apple. He replies: "New York was one thing; Detroit is another. The resurgence here is difficult to describe – it's like music. You have to hear it to understand. It's about making the brutal beautiful." Another Detroit artist, Ed Fraga, tells me: "Detroit is a humble place – there's no pretence here because it's a hard city. But you can make it malleable to your desires." Before I leave I ask Spindler how she feels about Detroit's regeneration. "I never thought the city would come back," she replies. "But now I feel a sense of responsibility to share what I've learnt by being here, as well as keeping its soul and diversity alive."

While many are heralding the city's revival, there are also clear signs that creativity never left Detroit. At the African Bead Museum, started by the artist Olayami Dabls 16 years ago and now something of a Detroit icon, bead collections and installations aim to connect with the local community and visitors. Holding court from a counter surrounded with strings of colourful beads, Dabls explains that, just as beads were used to communicate ideas rather than simply for adornment in African culture, so "art should be used to educate the people, not pacify the artist". The museum is testament to the fact that when the rest of the world wasn't looking, Detroit's residents were still finding ingenious ways to solve their problems.

Now a new generation of entrepreneurs is daring to imagine a different future for Detroit. At True North – a collection of space-age live/work units created in partnership with Frank Gehry's design director, Edward Chan – Philip Kafka has taken an unloved corner of the city and turned it into an award-winning experiment. "Detroit invigorates and inspires the desperado spirit", he tells me from the prototype hut he built out of materials from Home Depot. "You don't have to be somewhere uber relevant to create something with international relevance – and good design doesn't cost, it pays." He shows me around his next project, an assortment of broken buildings that by May this year he assures me will become a new district with 13 apartments, a coffee roasters, a bakery and a sister restaurant to TAKOI, his hip Corktown eatery.

Meanwhile the Eastern Market, a farmers' market that draws around 40,000 people weekly, has evolved to accommodate artists' studios, galleries and restaurants. I explore the local

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artist Jason Yates’s exhibition at Wasserman Projects, a former firehouse turned gallery. A short walk away, the Red Bull House of Art combines artists’ residencies with a public gallery – two of the current residents, Julie Schenkelberg and Lucien Shapiro, take me through the spellbinding, Detroit-influenced collections that they’ve created under its roof. I also drop by Orleans + Winder, an industrial yet elegant boutique shop created by Erin Wesser – who moved here eight years ago attracted by “the beauty in the old bones of the city” – before meeting the letterpress entrepreneur Megan O’Connell for coffee.

O’Connell recently moved out of her studio space in the Eastern Market, but tells me how in the five years she was there it became “an embassy for creativity”. Although she sometimes worries that the raw creativity of the city might disappear as people get priced out, “ultimately I don’t think that will happen – there is space to expand”. Next door at Antietam, a beautifully restored art deco-flavoured restaurant, the owner Greg Holm is less optimistic, calling it a “bittersweet renaissance – Detroit’s edge will definitely be lost the more money that comes here”.

Certainly some worry that the revitalisation of the city threatens to create a bubble that will exclude its more eccentric elements. It’s true that initiatives such as the People Mover, a train line in Downtown, and the Dequindre Cut, a High Line-like public path along an old railway track, cannot overcome the hard-to-navigate nature of a city built for the automobile, and many of Detroit’s more idiosyncratic, community-driven projects lie outside its increasingly gentrified core. The Heidelberg Project is one, and Hamtramck Disneyland is another. This loopy, fairground-style structure towering above a suburban backyard is the work of the late Ukrainian immigrant Dmytro Szyrak. Now owned by the art collective Hatch, the house has been turned into three apartments and one artist’s residency, with plans for the garage to become an exhibition space.

Meanwhile at Oakland Avenue Urban Farm, one of 1,400 urban farms in the city, the design firm Akoaki is working with the local church to turn it into a sustainable combination of agriculture, art and public space. There are even murmurings about reviving an old shoeshine-slash-speakeasy where Aretha Franklin used to play. Anya Sirota, the design lead on the project, tells me: “There is potential for design to have a substantial impact. Our challenge is to convince people of its value.”

On my last day in the city, Jesse Cory, one of the founders of IxRUN, an art platform that also organises the annual Murals in the Market street-art festival in the Eastern Market, takes me to see the vivid murals that pepper the walls, with up to 50 new artworks commissioned every year. “It’s a massive misconception that once an artist puts up murals the area gentrifies,” he insists. In his view the murals give him an opportunity to knock on the doors of local business owners and find ways to work together in “a beautiful choreography of commerce and creativity”. On the way to IxRUN’s new location in an old warehouse he points out the galleries and production companies hidden in unassuming buildings along the way. “You don’t have to have a lot of money to create something here,” Cory argues. “You just need willpower.”

Perhaps this is the defining characteristic of modern Detroit – it rewards those who try. Alex Trajkovski, the founder of the subversive magazine Grand Circus, tells me: “Detroit is a city that has to work for its living.” Although there are no easy answers to the question of how the new wave of investment can be made to work for everyone, the consensus seems to be that Detroit’s sheer size and multiplicity of voices mean there is opportunity here for those who aren’t afraid to look for it. In some ways it’s as close to the American Dream as you can get – a place where those with grit and curiosity can realise their ambitions. “It would do people good to come and see a city like Detroit. It’s a really weird city, but in a good way”, Trajkovski finishes. I can’t help but agree. ▶▶



STAY

DETROIT FOUNDATION HOTEL

250 W LARNED ST
detroitfoundationhotel.com
 Rooms from £155

A converted fire station in Downtown where original details jostle with pieces by contemporary artists and the restaurant The Apparatus Room serves up artfully constructed plates in a cavernous yet cosy setting.

THE NEST AT TRUE NORTH

4711 16TH ST
truenorthdetroit.com
 Rooms from £95

This Airbnb is part of the sci-fi community of Quonset huts founded by Philip Kafka. Climb the external staircase to reach a cosy studio space. A yoga studio below runs regular classes.

TRUMBULL AND PORTER

1331 TRUMBULL AVE
trumbullandporterhotel.com
 Rooms from £130

Located in the Corktown district, Trumbull and Porter is a renovation of a former Fifties hotel. Its millennial makeover includes a building-length mural, outdoor fire pits and a coffee shop complete with hanging plants and vintage typewriters.



TRUE NORTH

EAT

ANTIETAM

1428 GRATIOT AVE
antietamdetroit.com

There's a smoky, vintage feel inside this art-deco building bordering the Eastern Market. Sink into one of the black-leather banquettes for brunch and order the photogenic beet tart, which tastes as good as it looks.

TAKOI

2520 MICHIGAN AVE
takoidetroit.com

This squat building surrounded by trees and chain-link fences contains a nightclub-cum-spaceship of a restaurant where you can watch the chefs whipping up creative Asian food under neon lights.

WRIGHT & COMPANY

1500 WOODWARD AVENUE
wrightdetroit.com

Enjoy piles of crispy shrimp and crab cakes next to slowly rotating custom-made ceiling fans. The best table is the corner booth underneath the chandelier.

GREY GHOST

47 WATSON ST
greyghostdetroit.com

A sophisticated new opening with a no-nonsense menu – think baked potato pierogies – alongside an elegant and creative cocktail selection.



ANTIETAM

DO

WASSERMAN PROJECTS

3434 RUSSELL ST #502
wassermanprojects.com

When visiting the Eastern Market, pop into Gary Wasserman's converted firehouse to get a feel for co-created art in the city today. The friendly curators and assistants are always happy to start a conversation.

EASTERN MARKET

easternmarket.com

Head here on Saturdays to see the largest farmers' market in the country in action, with a focus on local entrepreneurs. You can also stroll round to see the area's many murals and explore its burgeoning food and art scene.

THE AFRICAN BEAD MUSEUM

6559 GRAND RIVER AVE
mbad.org

Olayami Dabls' bead museum and public art installation is a must-do to understand the spirit of community art in Detroit – particularly if you find him behind the counter for a chat.



WASSERMAN PROJECTS

THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT

3600 HEIDELBERG ST
heidelberg.org

Tyree Guyton's transformation of an abandoned neighbourhood has become one of Detroit's most-visited attractions, both as a symbol of hope and for its characterful collection of objects.

DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

5200 WOODWARD AVE
dia.org

This majestic building hosts an impressive collection of international and American art leading up to the present day. The gallery's heart is Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals. ▶▶



THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT

SHOP

DÉTROIT IS THE NEW BLACK

1426 WOODWARD AVE
detroitisthenewblack.com

Roslyn Karamoko's shop feels part-workspace, part-gallery, with sculptures by Leon Dickey and sections dedicated to local and international clothing, jewellery and cosmetic brands.

ORLEANS + WINDER

2501 RUSSELL ST #200
orleansandwinder.com

Erin Wesser's raw, industrial-style space in the Eastern Market aims to bring the boutique experience to Detroit, with an emphasis on slow fashion and labels she has encountered around the world.

SHINOLA

441 W CANFIELD ST
shinola.com

Alongside its handmade watches, leather bags, bikes and sound accessories, the Shinola store is also home to a flower shop and a café, so you can sip a latte while perusing.

THIRD MAN RECORDS

441 W CANFIELD ST
thirdmanrecords.com

Jack White's label was founded in Detroit – in addition to browsing its back catalogue and merchandise you can record your own song for \$20 in the booth, hear local bands play on gig nights and see vinyl being pressed in the back of the shop.



ORLEANS + WINDER

DRINK

SUGAR HOUSE

2130 MICHIGAN AVE
sugarhousedetroit.com

Something of an institution in Detroit's speakeasy scene, this is the big sister bar to Bad Luck, and recently served drinks paying tribute to Hemingway and Fitzgerald through spirits.

BAD LUCK BAR

1218 GRISWOLD ST
badluckbar.com

Previously the storage space for a dry cleaner, this back-alley bar is now one of Detroit's most high-end cocktail spots. Expect elaborate creations with names like Mysticism and Death – but make sure to book in advance.

CHARTREUSE KITCHEN & COCKTAILS

15 E KIRBY ST D
chartreusekc.com

This farm-to-table concept is named after the French liquor made from 150 herbs – which make their presence felt in the lime-coloured room with bunches hanging from the ceiling.

STANDBY

225 GRATIOT AVE
standbydetroit.com

Located a few doors along from its sister bar, The Skip, the entrance to Standby is marked by a piece by the Portuguese graffiti artist Vhils. The menu is split by spirits, but our favourite is the wonderfully named Mescal Me Maybe.

