

Detroit Renaissance

A new Detroit is being born, founded in urban farms, local businesses, green spaces, youth engagement, the arts, greenhouses, fresh foods.

by Shawn Rhea

posted May 20, 2004

Detroit, Michigan, a once-thriving industrial center home to auto plants and 2 million residents, now has the third highest unemployment rate among the nation's largest cities and fewer than a million inhabitants.

The city has recently broken ground on a massive new world headquarters for Compuware, three new casinos, a new football stadium, and a remodeling of the Renaissance Center, now home to General Motors. But, as impressive as the rebuilding efforts are, this redevelopment push focuses on the city's relatively affluent downtown community. Yet Detroit encompasses nearly 600 square miles of land that is home to middle-class, working-class, and poor African-Americans, ethnic whites, Latinos, and Arabs.

These downtown projects don't begin to address the needs of neighborhoods in a city ravaged by racial conflict, the departure of the Big Three auto makers' plants in search of cheaper labor, and the loss of more than 100,000 housing units since the 1950s. Nor do they provide the space and sustained customer bases for small businesses, which, according to the Small Business Administration, create 60 to 80 percent of new jobs.

A true revitalization of Detroit—one that includes all of its citizens—will require a radical new vision for a post-industrial city, say many of the city's long-time residents, activists, and urban development experts. This vision must include green spaces, urban farms, environment-friendly small businesses, cooperative markets, living wage jobs, art, and intergenerational learning opportunities. Communities must become more economically self-sufficient so that the city and its residents never again rely on a single industry for their livelihood.

Vision for a post-industrial city

Getting city planning officials to consider these needs in a large-scale redesign of Detroit will undoubtedly be a challenge. But Detroiters across the city are not waiting for leadership from downtown. They are creating community gardens and urban farms, starting businesses that serve the immediate population, and turning toxic land into livable spaces. Others are fixing up old houses and painting murals that express the hopes of the city's young people for a revitalized, beautiful city. Alone, each of these initiatives may seem insignificant when compared to the city's vast needs. But the individual projects are starting to form a pattern for change, and with it, a profound rethinking of the future of Detroit and other post-industrial cities.

"We're trying to create a whole new paradigm," says Jim Embry, one of many visionaries behind this movement. "We have to create a very different kind of vision that's not based on the industrial age, [which is] very top down and disconnected."

Embry is the director of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center. Founded in 1995, the center furthers the



Paul Trombley at Back Alley Bikes gets kids involved in rebuilding bikes in the Cass Corridor

long-time activism of Grace Boggs and her late husband Jimmy, a labor activist who was instrumental in the city's workers' rights and civil rights movements.

The Boggs Center philosophy views community as the starting point for planning and revitalization activity, Embry says. Residents know their needs and how to address them better than a large bureaucracy.

Located on Detroit's eastside in a neighborhood devastated by the auto plants' mid-20th century exodus, the Boggs Center acts as a think tank for activists and as an agency for grooming grassroots leaders who will live and work in the communities they help shape.

Much of the center's work focuses on getting young people invested in their communities by showing them that they are integral to their neighborhoods' success or failure. Over the past 12 years, Grace Boggs (and now the Boggs Center) has co-sponsored Detroit Summer, which brings together 14- to 25-year-olds to clean up streets, plant gardens, and create public art in neighborhoods blighted by burned-out and abandoned houses and littered and weed-filled lots.

Bootstrap economics is a part of the gospel preached to Detroit Summer's young participants, who learn first-hand what neighborhood-based initiatives can bring to communities. Many Detroit Summer youth go to work at such grassroots businesses as the Back Alley Bikes shop located in the Cass Corridor, an area of the city where drug trafficking is obvious, but so too are efforts to transform the community. Back Alley is one of a growing number of enterprises that are helping to reclaim and revitalize this corridor, which was once home to Motown Records and is on the edge of Wayne State University.

The bike shop teaches young people bike repair skills. The kids are able to keep the bikes they build from salvaged parts, teaching them to appreciate recycling materials—a major goal of community activists who are concerned that the quest for all things new has encouraged rampant urban and suburban sprawl.

The youth from Detroit Summer have also worked with the Gardening Angels, an association of primarily southern-born African-American elders who plant flowers and vegetable and fruit gardens. Working the land together, the teens and senior citizens have cleaned up vacant lots, turning them into thriving gardens, and built greenhouses out of recycled materials. The partnership not only creates a training ground for future community leaders, it also builds transgenerational relationships so that all age groups are invested in the quality of life in the neighborhood, and no one gets left out of the development process. The gardens also produce an immediate benefit for the elderly:

“[Gardening] supplements my income because I don't have to buy vegetables. I can and freeze them for the winter,” says Maxine Turk-Elam, a 69-year-old eastside resident who over the years has purchased several vacant lots on her block and turned them into gardens that help feed her family, as well as senior and handicapped members of her church. And she plans to plant fruit and nut trees on a lot that she and a neighbor recently purchased together.

In her 35 years of living in the same home, Turk-Elam has witnessed her block go from being a close-knit group of homeowners who groomed the block and watched out for each other's children to a community of mostly renters and squatters challenged by a growing number of abandoned homes in various states of disrepair.

“So many people want the homes, but they don't have the funds right away to repair them,” says Turk-Elam. Many of the houses were abandoned because insurance red-lining devalued the property, preventing owners from securing home-improvement loans, she notes.

Nevertheless, Turk-Elam, a member of the Gardening Angels, is encouraged by what she calls growing interest in the neighborhood. Turk-Elam says that children on the block are showing an interest in the gardening

efforts: “The younger kids stop by when they don't have anything to do. They enjoy it whenever you can catch up with them.”

When beloved urban agriculture crusader Gerald Harriston died in June 2001, another neighbor bought the plots he'd been farming and continued his work.

These self-determined community improvements are precisely the kind that staff at the Boggs Center feel will play a pivotal role in redefining the future of Detroit. “The efforts might be small, but that's what we think it needs,” says Embry.

Arts, kids, and vision

These efforts are as diverse as the people who dream them up. Arts and Children Creating Community Together (AC3T), for example, uses public art projects to help revitalize and beautify communities. Supported by the Boggs Center, the organization encourages elementary school students to develop pride in their neighborhoods and to become invested in the well-being of Detroit at an early age.

“We want to get them thinking about a new vision for their city,” explains Embry.

AC3T seeks to revitalize older structures and encourage holistic, ecology-conscious community redevelopment of Detroit's neighborhoods. The group has created murals at several elementary schools throughout the city, including one unveiled last June at Thirkell Elementary School on the westside. The project paired a group of Thirkell students with student members of Black Artist Researching Trends from the nearby College of Creative Studies to paint four murals that decorate the school's exterior.

The semester-long project brought a much-needed face-lift to the Virginia Park/Northwest Goldberg neighborhood. It also brought together two groups of future leaders who through their murals created and captured a vision for the Detroit they would like to see. The seeds of these visions can be planted by the older students and nurtured by the younger ones.

One of the most ambitious projects created by Detroit's growing network of community development activists is Adamah, a comprehensive plan to create housing, greenhouses, grazing pastures, food-producing gardens, a shrimp farm, artisan shops, a tree farm and lumber mill on 3,000 acres of blighted eastside property. No price tag has been put on the proposed redevelopment, but the design calls for turning an old Packard car plant into housing and small business spaces, uncovering a paved-over stream called Bloody Run Creek, building an irrigation system for farm land, constructing windmills to generate electricity, and covering freeway overpasses with ivy to help clean the air.

Dan Pitera, director of University of Detroit Mercy's design center studio, sees Adamah's village-within-a-city design as a way to address the needs of Detroit's disenfranchised poor and working-class populations. “Architecture is a political act,” says Pitera. “It can provide social justice. If a child grows up in a space that's beautiful, that space can help begin to mold the child in a positive way. Architecture shouldn't be only for the rich.”

Still in its visionary stage, Adamah began in 1999 and grew out of collaboration between the Boggs Center, the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, visiting architect and urban design specialist Kyong Park, and Detroit residents. A year previously, Park, who was guest lecturing at the university, moved to Detroit and purchased a house in an eastside neighborhood that would be encompassed into the Adamah design. Park set up in his home the International Center for Urban Ecology, a nonprofit center that focused on developing ecologically conscious designs for urban areas. He and Steve Vogel, Dean of Mercy's School of Architecture, began discussing ideas for redeveloping the neighborhood where both Park and the Boggs Center were located. Located just a half-mile from downtown, the neighborhood is in a good location for small businesses

to attract customers. Eastern Market, a popular downtown farmers' market that draws restaurant chefs and patrons from all over the state to purchase meat and produce, is also nearby, offering an opportunity for urban farmers to sell their goods. They talked about how uncovering the creek would create a water source that could be used to support agriculture.

The colleagues' discussion soon took on a life of its own, and they found themselves posing a series of questions: What type of housing and services were needed in this community? What type of goods-producing businesses would create jobs?

Their brainstorming quickly turned into a challenge for University of Detroit Mercy architecture students to create Adamah—a model community that would show one possible future for communities within post-industrial cities. The students began working with the Boggs Center to get a sense of the community's demographics, needs, and history. They canvassed the eastside neighborhoods, asking residents what they wanted to see the community become.

The Adamah design grew out of those conversations, and in July 2002, the students, university faculty, and the Boggs Center staff created a walk-through installation detailing an economically thriving ecological urban community on the site of the proposed redevelopment.

“Detroit is an example of how post-industrial cities will end up,” says Vogel. Cities worldwide, such as Berlin, Germany, St. Petersburg, Russia, and Manchester, England, are experiencing similar declines due to loss of industry, Vogel notes. Small-scale redevelopment that encourages localized economies will be needed to revitalize former industrial meccas, Vogel believes.

There is evidence that the Adamah design is spawning serious dialogue about such an approach. A video of the installation has garnered substantial interest. Dutch filmmaker Boris Gerrets was so taken by the Adamah concept and by similarities between post-industrial Detroit and post-industrial St. Petersburg, Russia, that he has begun filming a documentary about the two cities. When Vogel gave a lecture about Adamah at Harvard University, university officials became excited about its implications and asked him to author a chapter about the plan for inclusion in a forthcoming book on urban development.

“There are two ways to take the project,” says Grace Boggs. “One is to get a piece of land and begin developing the vision. The other is to look at the activity already in Detroit.”

Many Detroiters are taking the second approach. At monthly meetings of the Adamah committee at the Boggs Center, a growing number of residents and activists assist each other with realizing these redevelopment dreams. Instead of awaiting large-scale city funding to begin rebuilding their neighborhoods, these activists are moving ahead with the building of the self-sufficient communities that will meet resident's needs.

Fresh-baked bread, coffee, pizzas ...

There is indeed a litany of activities spread out over Detroit's vast land tracts. The 30-year-old Cass Corridor Food Cooperative has anchored a renewal in parts of the Cass Corridor neighborhood. The cooperative, which started as a neighborhood buying club, has grown into Detroit's largest natural foods store, offering hard-to-find, nutritious products to inner city residents as well as jobs.

Now, the one-block strip along Willis Street right off of Cass Avenue—where the food coop was located until when it moved for increased space—has become home to a collection of thriving businesses. Among them are a small bookstore, an art gallery, a boutique, and an old world bakery.

Motivated by the grassroots development manifesto promoted by Grace Boggs and others, business partners Ann Perrault and Jackie Victor opened Avalon International Breads in the Corridor in 1996.

“What I really liked about what Jimmy and Grace talked about is that it was a very practical approach to revolutionary concepts,” says Jackie Victor. “They had a big picture vision for the city and planet, but very tangible methods for reaching it. You can actually see the results of your labor after four years, not four decades.”

Serving fresh-baked organic breads, pastries and focaccia pizzas, as well as coffees, Avalon serves area residents, suburbanites, and city restaurants that feature the bakery's breads on their menus.

Perrault and Victor believe that community-based businesses must economically and spiritually uplift their neighborhoods. The bakery keeps money circulating within the Cass Corridor community by hiring at least 50 percent of its racially diverse staff from the neighborhood. It recycles, and, though it is a small business, offers full-time employees health insurance and average wages of \$9.00 an hour.

Perrault and Victor's success flies in the face of nay-sayers who predicted that the business would fail because of the duo's insistence on locating it in a rough-and-tumble area of the city and placing a large plate-glass window on the storefront.

“People felt like we were crazy,” says Victor. “Even the landlord said the neighborhood wasn't ready for windows.”

There are so many other projects in the works. Brother Rick Samyn, head of the Capuchin Monastery Soup Kitchen, is working with The Greening of Detroit (a nonprofit group dedicated to reforesting the city) and a southwest Detroit neighborhood to create a five-acre farm and orchard inside Romanowski Park. Students, parents, and faculty at nearby O.W. Holmes Elementary School were involved, too, holding design parties to create a framework for the farm's development.

“I see this [project] as a business model, not just a farm park,” say Samyn, who believes that the project's success will be measured in large part by community members' willingness to put in the sweat equity needed to produce bountiful harvests that can provide food for the entire neighborhood.

In addition to providing food to the community, Samyn believes that the work of building and maintaining the farm park will create a cultural bridge in a highly diverse community that has nearly an equal number of blacks and whites, and a large population of Latinos.

The Romanowski farm park project is but one effort among a growing list of alternative development projects flourishing inside Detroit's city limits. Others include The F.A.R.M., a teen agricultural program started by John Gruchala; a hands-on farming curriculum that is teaching agricultural skills to pregnant teens and young mothers attending the Catherine Ferguson High School; and ecovillages and co-housing in neighborhoods in southeast Detroit. If successful, these grassroots efforts may well convince residents' that they are a part of Detroit's rebirth—that they are in fact creating a new kind of life-sustaining post-industrial city that may be a model for the world.

Shawn E. Rhea is an award-winning journalist. You can learn more about these initiatives from the Boggs Center at www.boggscenter.org or www.adamah.org, or call 313/923-0797. This story was produced under the George Washington Williams Fellowship for Journalists of Color, a project sponsored by the Independent Press Association.



yes! See more articles from our Summer 2003 issue
Finding Courage



Help YES! thrive ... Your donation makes this website possible

David Korten's new book:

- 1
- 2
- 3

3 Ways to Get It Before It Hits Stores



2nd EDITION, UPDATED & EXPANDED
A DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE from WALL STREET
AGENDA FOR A NEW ECONOMY
From PHANTOM WEALTH to REAL WEALTH
DAVID C. KORTEN

yes!
a click here

NONPROFIT. INDEPENDENT. SUBSCRIBER-SUPPORTED.