Detroit, MI: The Past and Present of the American City

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Evolving Significance of Detroit

• Detroit as American Dream
• Detroit as American Nightmare
• Detroit as Laboratory for the 21st Century American City

• Content analysis of national news publications
  – New York Times, TIME, Newsweek

A City That Forges Thunderbolts

The battle lines are clear and dangerous: the white suburbs vs. the black city.
Detroit Today

- Second-most segregated metropolitan area in the nation
  - Detroit = 77% black
  - Suburbs = 84% white
- Population
  - 1950: 1.8 million people → 2010: 713 thousand people
  - A 25% decrease in 10 years, lowest population since 1910
- Vacancy
  - 1/3 of 140 square miles
- Poverty
  - 33% live below poverty line
- Unemployment
  - Nearly 30%
- Education
  - $219 million deficit Detroit Public Schools
  - 1/4 of schools to close by June 2011
  - 47% adults functionally illiterate
- Crime
  - 1,200 violent crimes per 100,000 people (highest in 2009)
2\textsuperscript{nd} most segregated City: Detroit = 77\% Black, Suburbs = 84\% White
Detroit as the American Dream

“Detroit, and the automobile it manufactures, have changed the face of the world. Though by global standards Detroit is not a large town, it is probably as well known throughout the world as any town in existence. It is the symbol of the almost incredible productive capacity of America.”

–Sam Boal in the New York Times, 1951

• “Arsenal of Democracy”
• Automobile Industry
  – Wealth
  – Mobility
• Modernist/Fordist progress narrative of society
Detroit as the American Nightmare

“How can you begin to describe a disaster the size of the nation’s sixth largest city?”
– John Lowell on Detroit in Newsweek Magazine, 1976

- Crime
- Nostalgia and ruins
- Racialized inner-city proletariat, affluent suburbs
- Failure of Fordist economic model and modernist progress narrative

From top left: Arresting black youth in Detroit; Woodward Dream Cruise; Michigan Central Station
“Fixing Detroit: A Laboratory for Saving America’s Cities?”

“The ultimate fate of Detroit will reveal much about the character of America in the 21st century. If what was once the most prosperous manufacturing city in the nation has been brought to its knees, what does that say about our recent past? And if it can’t find a way to get up, what does that say about our future?”

–Daniel Orkent in TIME Magazine, 2009

• Emergent Narrative
  – Reclamtion of Detroit for America
  – Democratization of discourse of civil society through media-based organizing

• Detroit offers new model for conceptualizing the American city in the 21st century
Aspects of Revitalization

- Shrinkage or “right-sizing”
- Urban gardening
- Art
- Entrepreneurialism
- Media-based organizing
- Second United States Social Forum

Slow’s Bar BQ
Earthworks Urban Farm
Heidelberg Project
Detroit Becomes “Cool”

- Distinction and gentrification
- Complications of “blank canvas” narrative
  - Negates existence of existing residents
  - Little integration
  - Potential to displace existing residents

Starbucks in Midtown Detroit

“Detroit is the New Brooklyn”
Detroit Tells Us…

- City is set of stories being told
- Identity rooted in place
- Community involvement as way forward
- “Green” sustainability, normalizing shrinkage
Selected References

• Title: http://www.wallpapersweb.com/dlwall.php?image_id=8242
• Slide 2
  – Stills from Chrysler Advertisement, “Imported from Detroit”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKL254Y_jtc
• Slide 3
• Slide 6
• Slide 7
• Slide 9
  – Slow’s Bar BQ: http://www.letssavemichigan.com/blog/entry/a-model-citizen-for-detroit/
  – Heidelberg Project: Photo by self.
• Slide 10
• Slide 11
  – Telling Our Detroit Story: http://ourdetroitstory.com/