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Detroit: The Death — and Possible Life — of a Great City

By Daniel Okrent

If Detroit had been savaged by a hurricane and submerged by a ravenous flood, we'd know a lot more about it. If drought and carelessness had spread brush fires across the city, we'd see it on the evening news every night. Earthquake, tornadoes, you name it — if natural disaster had devastated the city that was once the living proof of American prosperity, the rest of the country might take notice. ([See pictures of the remains of Detroit.](#))

But Detroit, once our fourth largest city, now 11th and slipping rapidly, has had no such luck. Its disaster has long been a slow unwinding that seemed to remove it from the rest of the country. Even the death rattle that in the past year emanated from its signature industry brought more attention to the auto executives than to the people of the city, who had for so long been victimized by their dreadful decision-making.

By any quantifiable standard, the city is on life support. Detroit's treasury is \$300 million short of the funds needed to provide the barest municipal services. The school system, which six years ago was compelled by the teachers' union to reject a philanthropist's offer of \$200 million to build 15 small, independent charter high schools, is in receivership. The murder rate is soaring, and 7 out of 10 remain unsolved. Three years after Katrina devastated New Orleans, unemployment in that city hit a peak of 11%. In Detroit, the unemployment rate is 28.9%. That's worth spelling out: twenty-eight point nine percent.

If, like me, you're a Detroit native who recently went home to find out what went wrong, your first instinct is to weep. If you live there still, that's not the response you're looking for. Old friends and new acquaintances, people who confront the city's agony every day, told me, "I hope this isn't going to be another article about how terrible things are in Detroit."

It is — and it isn't. That's because the story of Detroit is not simply one of a great city's collapse. It's also about the erosion of the industries that helped build the country we know today. 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?

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My City of Ruins

On my trip to Detroit, I took a long drive around my hometown. Downtown, I visited a lovely new esplanade along the riverfront, two state-of-the-sport stadiums and a classic old hotel restored to modern luxury. In leafy Grosse Pointe, I saw handsome houses anyone would want to live in (and, thanks to the crash of the auto business, available at prices most Americans haven't seen in decades). At the General Motors Technical Center, in the industrial suburb Warren, the parking lots were mostly empty — an awful lot of engineers have been thrown out of work — but the survivors showed me some pretty impressive technology. I liked the cars that "talked" to other cars, making accidents all but impossible, and I was especially impressed by a prototype Chevy fueled entirely by hydrogen. Hydrogen! ([See pictures of Detroit's beautiful, horrible decline.](#))

But to a native, downtowns and suburbs, even suburbs hurting from an economic calamity, are not the real Detroit. The Detroit I both wanted to see and was afraid to see was the city itself, the elm-lined streets of fond memory where my friends and I grew up and went to school and lived idyllic 1950s lives, the place that America once knew as the Arsenal of Democracy.

The neighborhood where I lived as a child, where for decades orderly rows of sturdy brick homes lined each block, is now the urban equivalent of a boxer's mouth, more gaps than teeth. Some of the surviving houses look as if the wrecker's ball is the only thing that could relieve their pain. On the adjacent business streets, commercial activity is so palpably absent you'd think a neutron bomb had been detonated — except the burned-out storefronts and bricked-over windows suggest that something physically destructive happened as well. ([See the most important cars of all time.](#))

Similar scenes are draped across most of the city's 138 sq. mi., yielding a landscape that bears a closer relation to a postapocalyptic nightmare than to the prosperous and muscular place I remember. The City of Homeowners, some called it, a city with endless miles of owner-occupied bungalows and half-capes and modest mock Tudors that were the respectable legacy of five decades of the auto industry's primacy in the American economy and Detroiters' naive faith that the industry would never run out of gas.

But it did. Detroit fell victim not to one malign actor but to a whole cast of them. For more than two decades, the insensate auto companies and their union partners and the elected officials who served at their pleasure continued to gun their engines while foreign competitors siphoned away their market share. When this played out against the city's legacy of white racism and the corrosive two-decade rule of a black politician who cared more about retribution than about resurrection, you can begin to see why Detroit careened off the road.

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Who Killed Detroit?

Most of us thought Detroit was pretty wonderful back in the '50s and early '60s, its mighty industrial engine humming in top gear, filling America's roads with the nation's signifying product and the city's houses and streets with nearly 2 million people. Of course, if you were black, it was substantially less wonderful, its neighborhoods as segregated as any in America. On the northwest side, not far from where I grew up, a homebuilder had in the 1940s erected a six-foot-high concrete wall, nearly half a mile long, to separate his development from an adjacent black neighborhood. Still, white Detroit believed that the riots that ravaged Los Angeles in 1965 and a number of other cities the following summer would never burn across our town. Black people in Detroit, enlightened whites believed, had jobs and homes, and even if those homes were on the other side of an apartheid wall, their owners had a stake in the city.

Some did, but too many others, invisible to white Detroit, did not. The riots that scorched the city in July 1967, leaving 43 people dead, were the product of an unarticulated racism that few had acknowledged, and a self-deceiving blindness that had made it possible for even the best-intentioned whites to ignore the straitjacket of segregation that had crippled black neighborhoods, ill served the equally divided schools and enabled the casual brutality of a police force that was too white and too loosely supervised. ([See pictures of 50 years of Motown.](#))

The '67 riots sent thousands of white Detroiters fleeing for the suburbs. Even if black Detroiters with financial resources wished to follow, they could not: the de facto segregation was virtually de jure in most Detroit suburbs. One suburban mayor boasted, "They can't get in here. Every time we hear of a Negro moving in ... we respond quicker than you do to a fire."

Soon Detroit became a majority-black city, and in 1973 it elected its first black mayor. Coleman Young was a talented politician who spent much of his 20 years in office devoting his talents to the politics of revenge. He called himself the "MFIC" — the *IC* stood for "in charge," the *MF* for exactly what you think. Young was at first fairly effective, when he wasn't insulting suburban political leaders and alienating most of the city's remaining white residents with a posture that could have been summed up in the phrase *Now it's our turn*. But by his third term, Young was governing more by rhetoric than by action. These were the years of a local phenomenon known as Devil's Night, a nihilistic orgy of arson that in one especially explosive year saw 800 houses burn to the ground in 72 hours. Violent crime soared under Young. The school system began to cave in on itself. When jobs disappeared with the small businesses boarding up their doors and abandoning the city, the mayor seemed to find it more useful to bid the business owners good riddance than to address the job losses. Detroit was dying, and its mayor chose to preside over the funeral rather than find a way to work with the suburban and state officials who now detested him every bit as much as he had demonized them.

When Young finally left office in 1993, he bragged that Detroit had achieved a "level of autonomy ... that no other city can match." He apparently didn't care that it was the autonomy of a man in a rowboat, in the middle of the ocean, without oars.

But Young isn't the only politician to blame. In 1956, when I was 8 years old, my Congressman was John

D. Dingell. There are people in southeastern Michigan who are still represented by Dingell, the longest-serving member in the history of the House of Representatives. "The working men and women of Michigan and their families have always been Congressman Dingell's top priority," his website declares, and I suppose he thinks he has served them well — by resisting, in succession, tougher safety regulations, more-stringent mileage standards, relaxed trade restrictions and virtually any other measure that might have forced the American automobile industry to make cars that could stand up to foreign competition. ([See the most exciting cars of 2010.](#))

By so ably satisfying the wishes of the auto industry — by encouraging southeastern Michigan's reliance on this single, lumbering mastodon — Dingell has in fact played a signal role in destroying Detroit. He was hardly alone; if you wanted to get elected in southeastern Michigan, you had to support the party line dictated by the Big Four — GM, Ford, Chrysler and their co-conspirator the United Auto Workers. Anything that might limit the industry's income was bad for the auto industry, and anything bad for the auto industry was deemed dangerous to Detroit.

The UAW had once been the most visionary of American unions. As early as the 1940s, UAW president Walter Reuther was urging the auto companies to produce small, inexpensive cars for the average American. In 1947 and '48 the union even offered to cut wages if the Big Three would reduce the price of their cars. But by the early 1980s, the UAW had entered into a nakedly self-interested pact with the auto companies. After the union's president joined GM's chief congressional lobbyist to defeat a tougher mileage standard in 1990, the lobbyist declared that "we would not have won without the UAW." It was, he said, "one of the proudest days of my life."

The union really can't be blamed for pushing for fabulous wages and lush benefits for its members — that game required two players, and the automakers knew only how to say yes. But the union leadership's fatal mistake was insisting that workers with comparable skills and comparable seniority be paid comparable wages, irrespective of who employed them. If a machinist at a prosperous GM deserved \$25 an hour, so did a machinist who worked for a barely profitable Chrysler or for a just-holding-its-own supplier plant that made axles or wheels or windshield wipers.

This defiant inattention to market reality not only placed the less healthy firms in peril, but by pricing labor so uniformly high, it also closed off Detroit to any possible diversification of its industrial base. When the automakers' inattention to engineering, style and quality caused them to crash into a wall of consumer indifference, there was no other industry that could step forward and employ workers who would have been thrilled to make even a fraction of what they once earned. Now nearly 1 in 3 Detroit residents is out of work — and not many of the unemployed have a prayer of finding a job anytime soon.

[Read "For Iraqi Refugees, Detroit Is Still a City of Hope."](#)

[Read "Detroit Tries to Get on a Road to Renewal."](#)

Reviving Motown

If white racism, Coleman Young and a delusional dependence on the auto industry's belief in its own virtues put Detroit where it is today, what — if anything — can pull this tragic city out of its death spiral?

You could do worse than to begin with some form of regional government. During Young's reign and for many years thereafter, the possibility of city-suburban cooperation — which is to say, black-white cooperation — was close to nil. The black city didn't want white suburbanites telling it what to do, and white suburbanites had no interest in assuming the burden of a black city. ([Read a TIME postcard from Detroit.](#))

L. Brooks Patterson, the long-serving and exceptionally able chief executive of suburban Oakland County, a prosperous community that borders Detroit to the north, represents the latter view well. "They say, 'As Detroit goes, so goes Oakland County,' " Patterson said a few weeks ago. "Not true!" He apparently believes that Eight Mile Road, the fabled thoroughfare that defines Detroit's northern border, is an impermeable membrane insulating his county from the city's ills. But Patterson knows that Oakland's prized AAA bond rating is in peril because the rating agencies are mindful of the county's proximity to Detroit to the south and Flint to the north. A downgrade could cost his constituents millions of dollars, and as the situation in Detroit deteriorates, he and his counterparts in adjacent counties will have no choice but to seek common solutions.

For its part, Detroit must address the fact that a 138-sq.-mi. city that once accommodated 1.85 million people is way too large for the 912,000 who remain. The fire, police and sanitation departments couldn't efficiently service the yawning stretches of barely inhabited areas even if the city could afford to maintain those operations at their former size. Detroit has to shrink its footprint, even if it means condemning decent houses in the gap-toothed areas and moving their occupants to compact neighborhoods where they might find a modicum of security and service. Build greenbelts, which are a lot cheaper to maintain than untraveled streets. Encourage urban farming. Let the barren areas revert to nature.

Most crucially, the entire region has to realize that defining itself solely by the misperceived needs of a single industry has left all of southeastern Michigan dazed and bleeding. And yet the conditions for resetting that economic model couldn't be more favorable. The collapse of the UAW's prohibitive wage scale, coupled with the vast unemployment, is turning what was once the nation's most expensive labor market into one of the cheapest. For the first time since Henry Ford offered \$5 a day to the men who assembled the Model T back in 1914, Detroit is open to new industry.

America isn't so keen on national industrial policy. But in Detroit's past, you can find an idea for its future — and the nation's. Back in the '50s, the Federal Government began investing what would eventually reach half a trillion dollars in what became the interstate highway system. You could have considered that an incredible subsidy for the auto industry — which it was — but it was also an investment in the nation's future.

It's an adaptable model. The fuel-cell technology that dazzled me at the GM Tech Center is less about autos than it is about energy — energy, as hydrogen, that exists in every molecule of water. What's to stop us now from turning Detroit — its highly trained engineering talent, its skilled and unskilled workforce desperate for employment, its underutilized production facilities — into the Arsenal of the Renewable Energy Future?

If we did, Detroit could go back to building something America needs. As a nation, we could prove that we can still make things. And while we're at it, we could regenerate not just a city but our sense of who we are.

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