

Why I Bought A House In Detroit For \$500

Drew Philp



The author boarding up his home, 2009. Photograph by Mike Williams

My first job out of college was working for a construction company in Detroit.

“We’re an all-black company and I need a clean-cut white boy,” my boss told me over drinks in a downtown bar when he hired me. “Customers in the suburbs don’t want to hire a black man.”

When a service call would come in, we would ask, “Does he sound white or black?” If it was the former, I would bid the job. If the latter, my boss would. Detroit is one of the most segregated metro areas in the nation, and for the first time I was getting what it felt like to be on the other side of that line. In contrast to the abstract verbal yoga students at the University of Michigan would perform when speaking about race, this was refreshing. And terrifying. I couldn’t hide behind fancy words any longer.

I grew up in rural Michigan, 45 minutes away from any freeway. I’m the first male member of my family in three generations never to have worked in front of a lathe, and aside from one uncle, I’m the oldest with all of my fingers intact. The university had given me some grandiose ideas like “true solidarity with the oppressed,” and I figured “the oppressed” lived in Detroit, never mind the patrimony. I thought I was making a sacrifice. I thought moving here was staying home when everyone else was leaving the state. I thought I was going to change the world and had some vague notions of starting a school. I cringe at how naive I was. I first rented an apartment in the city, sight unseen, that didn’t have a kitchen sink, so I did my dishes in the bathtub.

Aside from bidding jobs, I spent my days like everyone else: sanding floors in cheap rentals for \$8.50 an hour, which got me thinking: *I could buy a house and fix it up myself*. Not that I was sure how to go about buying, let alone renovating a house. It was just an inexplicit dream, some trick that would keep me from leaving like everyone else, make me a true Detroiter.

Not long after, I went to a Halloween party dressed as an organ grinder. At one point I set my cardboard organ down in a corner to dance, and when I went back to get a beer I’d hidden inside it, sitting next to the organ, all knotted up and looking out of place, was a guy named Will dressed as an organ grinder’s monkey. Between his fingers he held a hand-rolled cigarette.

“You want to go outside and have a smoke?”

After the usual pleasantries, him looking nervous and fidgety, me overeager to make friends, I told him I wanted to buy a house on the city’s east side.

He answered, “I just did.”



A corner in Poletown. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

Will told me that the best way to buy a house here is to find one you like and then figure out who owns it. He had lived in Detroit a decade before, but moved out to travel the country. This was his homecoming. He purchased the house for \$3,000 from the son of a woman who had died. It had been abandoned for years, but there was an upstairs room full of her possessions — steamer trunks, furniture, family pictures. Some of her photographs still hung on the walls, including a portrait of the first black mayor of Detroit, Coleman Young, and a painting of a white Jesus Christ. She had them arranged so the Christ appeared to be praying to Young. Only half the rooms in the house had electricity; he lit the rest with oil lamps. He let me live with him that summer.

There were almost no other homes around Will's, just scrubland and a few scraggly houses standing against the odds. Once they were packed in together like cardboard matches; only a five-minute bike ride from downtown, it was now the country in the city. The only other house nearby was a hideous cinderblock project house built by an architecture student from Cranbrook, the private school Mitt Romney attended as a teenager. It was abandoned, the frozen pipes burst from the cold.

Behind Will's house was a paradise of wretched forestland. Any homes or buildings had been torn or fallen down, nature reclaiming what it had lost more than a century ago. Full-grown trees stood between dumped boats and hot tubs and railroad ties and piles of rubble, smack-dab on top of where houses used to be. A sextuplet of abandoned grain silos towered over the neighborhood.

Scrappers would burn the insulation off copper wire at the bottom, and a rather congenial gentleman, since killed in a fistfight, lived in one of the boats. Occasionally Will and I would climb the towers and look out over the city, smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap beer. I'd try not to fall through the crumbling roof, and we'd point out landmarks, churches, schools, empty factories, trying to figure our place in it all.

"It's like the pilgrims," he told me, looking out over the city. "They came to America for religious freedom and got along with the Native Americans pretty well. It wasn't perfect, but they ate Thanksgiving together, you know. It was the people who came after. They said, 'I can make money from this.' They were the ones with the smallpox blankets, not the pilgrims."

"That sounds like a total bastardization of history."

"It may be. But it rings true."

Abutting the silos was the Dequindre Cut, a railroad trench dug from the earth during Detroit's manufacturing days. It had long since ceased to be a functional railroad and was teeming with flora and fauna: pheasants big as chickens, rabbits, the odd sapling, little red foxes, tawny waist-high grass. It was beautiful. Will swears he saw a deer down there once — five minutes from downtown — staring at him with glistening eyes before bounding off. After we cooked dinner from what we grew in his garden — lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, peas, beans, cabbage — we would take walks with his dog during that time on summer evenings when the sun rakes across the earth just right. We could walk for hours and not see a soul.

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We would ride our bikes around the city ducking into wide-open shells, houses with hanging porches and forgotten rose bushes, naked and ragged and proud, trash seeping from the orifices where windows used to be. We could walk right in, not even plywood covering the doors, stepping on glass and broken tile and abandoned dreams. I also looked into some move-in-ready foreclosures, pert brick homes in Detroit's stable and well-populated areas. I could have purchased many of these for less than the price of a 20-year-old car. I just couldn't bring myself to profit off of someone else's misery. All I could think of were the families once living in these homes and the day the banks and sheriff put them on the street.

I wanted something nobody wanted, something that was impossible. The city is filled with these structures, houses whose yellowy eyes seem to follow you. It would be only one house out of thousands, but I wanted to prove it could be done, prove that this American vision of torment could be built back into a home. I also decided I would do it the old-fashioned way,

without grants or loans or the foundation money pouring into the city. I would work for everything that went into the house, because not everyone has access to those resources. I also

wanted to prove to myself and my family I was a man. While they were building things, I had been writing poems.

One day Will and I rode past a white Queen Anne in Poletown on a quiet corner. Next to it sat two empty lots, plenty of space for a dog and a garden, a shed and a pond. The neighbors were friendly and kept their homes well-maintained, but there were four other abandoned houses on the block. The neighbors said the Queen Anne had been abandoned for a decade, simply left behind by the previous owner like a shredded tire on the highway, anything of value stolen long ago. It had a mangy wraparound porch and a big kitchen, but no chimney — I could build one of those — and the first time I cautiously walked inside, I knew it would be my home.

When I told the neighbors I wanted to buy it, they looked at me like I was insane. A young white kid stuck out like a snowball in Texas, and I was self-conscious and very aware of my color, stumbling over my replies for the first time in my life. When I was moving in, most other people, white and black, were moving out.



Photograph by Mike Williams

“Just looking at it, it’s a lot of work,” the neighbor across the street said, figuring I would give up after a month or two. There were no doors or windows, plumbing or electricity, nothing. There was a pornographic hole in the roof. It was just a clapboard shell filled with trash on a crumbling foundation. I’m talking chest-high piles of clothing, yard waste, empty tin cans, toys, diapers, those white Styrofoam trays that raw meat comes in, used auto parts, construction debris, liquor store plastic bags and bottles, rolls of old carpeting, broken furniture and glass, literal piles of human shit, uncapped needles. When I was clearing the house — which took me three months, with a pitchfork and a snow shovel — I also found the better part of a Dodge Caravan inside, cut into chunks with a reciprocating saw. From what folks who grew up around here told me, it was an “insurance job.” Someone had needed the money, so they reported the van stolen and paid a couple of guys to cut it apart and deposit it around the city. The backyard was a jungle of invasive plants and more trash, trash so old it had turned to dirt.

I purchased the house in October 2009 at a live county auction for \$500 cash. I was 23 years old.



The author in his home during the early stages of renovation. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



A block in Poletown. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

Detroit is the true 20th-century boomtown, the most American of stories. In 100 years, we went from a backwater hamlet to one of the richest cities in the United States. Referred to as the “Paris of the Midwest,” it was the city with the most theater seats in the U.S. outside of Broadway, the silicon valley of the ’60s, the highest rate of homeownership in the nation. We boomed and we busted, hard and early, and like an alcoholic drunk on 20th-century capitalism, we hit rock bottom first and hardest. My neighborhood is representative.

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Poletown was originally settled in the 1860s and ’70s by Polish immigrants, and it grew steadily through the 1940s thanks to the immigration of more Poles, Italians, Jews, and blacks looking for jobs in the factories, slaughterhouses, and auto plants. It was a hardworking and faithful community, the kind of place where people would take out second mortgages on their homes to build the half-dozen massive churches of stone, marble, and gold leaf that were built to rival cathedrals in Europe.

In the ’50s the neighborhood was bisected, north and south, by Interstate 94. In the ’60s, Interstate 75 cut through the neighborhood. It was run straight through [Black Bottom and Paradise Valley](#), two of the most economically and culturally

important black neighborhoods in the United States, both of which bled into Poletown. What was left was replaced with a model community, and the rest of the people moved to towering projects, the Jefferies and the Brewster-Douglass, where Diana Ross grew up.

In the early '80s, the entire north half of the neighborhood was demolished to make way for a 362-acre auto plant, heavily subsidized by the city, state, and federal governments. More than 4,000 residents were eminent-domained from their property; 1,400 homes, several churches, and 140 businesses were razed to make way for the promise of three shifts of work a day. (A Jewish cemetery is located inside the plant's grounds, as it was illegal to move it. If relatives wish to visit their ancestors, they can do so on two days a year.)

The Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, as it's officially known, sits just down the street from the massive abandoned Packard Automotive Plant, a 40-acre trash heap designed by Albert Kahn and the largest abandoned factory in the world. It's often on fire, and people mention it like it's the weather. Trees grow from the roof, and tourists come from all over the world to take photographs. Aside from the 18-story abandoned train station, it's the best ruin porn in the city.



Hamtramck section of Detroit in 1955, prior to the plant's construction. John Dominis/Time Life Pictures / Getty Images

Approximately 6,500 jobs were promised at the Poletown plant in exchange for demolishing half the neighborhood. At its peak employment, roughly 3,500 people worked there, less than the number of people kicked out of their homes to build it. It was the death rattle of American

manufacturing, the last attempt at making cars in Detroit for anything more than lip service or sentiment. Fewer than 1,500 people work there today, manufacturing the Chevy Volt, among other vehicles.



The Hamtramck Plant. Michigan Bell Telephone Company courtesy of the University of Michigan Library

The churches are almost all closed. The Catholic archdiocese agreed to sell two of them to General Motors to make way for the Poletown plant, and the rest are left unsupported by the church so the tithing of the faithful can be used elsewhere, the towering monuments to God falling into disrepair like the rest of the neighborhood. [St. Stanislaus](#) gave up the ghost in 1989, [St. Albertus](#) in 1990. Both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The projects are being demolished. It's costing the city \$8 million — not because they are unsafe, but because they look bad to investors driving along the same freeway that helped create them in the first place. I-75 continues to facilitate corpulent suburban sprawl. The Packard plant is a toxic landfill. Most of the people who once lived in Poletown are gone, left for the suburbs.

When people speak about “bringing Detroit back,” is this what we want to go back to?



St. Albertus Catholic Church. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



Sweetest Heart of Mary Polish Catholic Church. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

There was no way I could live in the house when I first bought it, so I moved out of Will's to Forestdale, a verdant block in Poletown that was walking distance from my new home. Twenty-five years ago, a wild and virtuous teacher named Paul Weertz bought a house on Forestdale after his downtown home burned down. Through the years, he's transformed the block into an arcadian oasis on Detroit's east side, where old Poles and young white artists live next to black doctors and immigrant mothers from Hungary or Mexico. He raised his now-grown children there, convinced friends and colleagues to move in, and saved the block from crack houses, fire, and neglect. Nearly all the homes still stand, a rather incredible accomplishment considering much of the rest of the neighborhood looks like a mouth full of broken teeth.

All but two of the houses on the block behind Forestdale are gone. Instead of letting it slowly fill up with trash and despair, Paul planted an orchard. In the summer peaches and pears and apples and plums grow on the trees, and vegetables of every make and model grow in the soil. Neighbors care for bees and collect honey in autumn. In the winter, Paul floods it to make a backyard ice rink. He's still tinkering with a homemade way to groom the ice, and recently I found him back there on his knees with a clothing iron plugged into an extension cord, trying to iron the ice smooth. That didn't work. He'll figure something out eventually.

Down the street from Forestdale, Paul seeded a hay field on a lot a school once stood. Twice a summer we bale hay for the animals to eat over winter — 400 bales each time in a good year, heaved into hay wagons and pickup trucks by the neighbors. Paul taught at the Catherine Ferguson Academy, a school for pregnant and nursing teenagers, which at one time had a graduation rate of over 90% (when the national average for pregnant teens is 40%). He started a farm at the school to help teach the young women about science and mothering by caring for crops and livestock. The hay fed these animals too. One day I visited him in class, and he stopped mid-sentence during a lecture. One of the baby chickens was hatching in a fish tank and he gathered his students around to watch the tiny beak protrude from the shell and the new life emerge. In 2011 his school was closed by the city, citing cost, and was purchased by a charter school. Paul lost his job and the school is now run for profit.

Children run the length of Forestdale playing tag, riding skateboards, cross-country skiing on snow-covered streets — all the while in Detroit's east side, which reporters describe as "[bombed out](#)" and like "[Mogadishu](#)" — even the police say it's "[war-like... unsafe for visitors](#)." Which is the truth and it isn't. Because Forestdale is a special place, where people want to be left alone to live their lives and raise their children and tend the soil. Paul just wants to drive his tractor. They're people who value their privacy. (I've changed the name of the block.) On the whole, it's an incredible testament to the power of vision and community over anarchy.



Some goats of Catherine Ferguson Academy. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



A girl skates on the Forestdale ice rink. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

The house I stayed in was on the corner and had been purchased from an old Polish family who had left for Florida. It had no running water, walls, or heat. I could stay there free in exchange for looking after the place and doing a bit of upkeep and repairs. I worked on my house as long into the autumn as I could, swapping plywood boards for windows, demolishing walls, hanging doors. I bought a chainsaw with a neighbor, and when the summer storms came and the city left the downed trees lying where they may, we cut the logs from the road and stacked them on the porch.

The place where I was staying had a wood-burning stove but no furnace, and it became the first of two Detroit winters I lived without any real heat. Which isn't unusual. People told me their stories about frozen toilets, burst pipes, and small fires started by space heaters. Dozens and dozens of people without heat: ministers, artists, the elderly. It's one of the first things to go, and January averages in the teens.

I could never get the fire in the stove to burn all night, and I could see my breath all day, even with the fire going. I slept in a wool cap and sometimes my coat, under so many blankets my father thought I might asphyxiate. One morning I sat on the toilet and an icicle the size of a carrot hung from my faucet. When my pens froze, I thawed them out in a pot of water on the stove. I didn't have hot water.

A neighbor down the street — I'll call her Sophie — would let me shower in her house. She's the kind of person who once found two baby pheasants abandoned by their mother and built an entire room on her first floor into a habitat for them. It was complete with tree branches and grass where they could grow and run free. She would leave her front door unlocked so I could go in and shower whenever I wanted. Most people have bars on their windows.

Her roommate was a musician with the voice of a towheaded angel. She would sometimes strum on her guitar and sing sad, soft songs while I let the steaming water wash away the cold and filth from my unwinding body. "You never know how good it feels to be clean," she sang as she smiled at me, "until you've been really dirty."

Gunshots pierced the night, halting conversation with a shock. The talk resumed without comment, and nobody sitting around the fire ever thought to call the cops. Their average response time is about an hour. We would hear them two or three times a week at that point. It never stops being sickeningly, plainly, frightening.



Teens planting a spring crop of hothouse greens. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



Forestdale residents bale hay. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



Paul Weertz in his chicken coop. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

That summer, 2010, the United States Social Forum, a sort of ideological precursor to Occupy Wall Street, was held for a week in Detroit. More than 20,000 people came into the city from around the world, slept in tents, went to classes and discussions, drank and partied, networked. I would have liked to see more of the Social Forum, but I was working on my house and cooking at a French restaurant. I was also damn-the-consequences in love with a Greek woman who was about to get on a plane back across the Atlantic.



United States Social Forum protest. (CC BY-NC-SA [2.0](#)) Some rights reserved by **stuff and things** / Via [Flickr: 10342398@N02](#)

One of the events I did see was a march staged by professional protest coordinators who had come in from California opposing Detroit's trash incinerator, the largest in the United States. It's located in Poletown. We have an asthma hospitalization rate three times the national average. If you would like an inside look at Detroit's [Third-World level of corruption](#), a good place to start is [the incinerator](#). You can safely say there is a culture of corruption in your city when the top two politicians, including a former mayor and city council president pro tem, have been, or are currently in, prison for corruption, racketeering, and the like. One former city councilwoman allegedly requested a bribe including [17 pounds of sausages](#).

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The protest would march down Detroit's main thoroughfare and past the incinerator, presumably raising holy hell and sticking it to the man. They needed a place to stage the making of the props — hundreds of spray-painted sunflower pickets, miniature incinerators, signs. One of my well-meaning neighbors offered The Yes Farm, an abandoned apothecary where we occasionally staged art and music shows.

I guess no one saw the irony in cutting down real pine trees to make fake sunflowers. Or that a protest to demand clean air would use so much aerosol spray paint. But the real irony came when the Social Forum was over and it was time for the out-of-towners to leave for the next protest.

"What are you going to do with all this stuff?" we asked.

"Why don't you just recycle it?" they said.

“Where?”

They left it all in The Yes Farm and split, leaving it for us to deal with. Now we had another pile of trash to clean up and nowhere for it to go. So while they were gallivanting off to the next good deed, that shit went into the incinerator and into our lungs.

This was the first time I heard, “I love it here! I think I’m going to move next summer.”



Subtle commentary along Detroit’s Grand River Creative Corridor on the west side of the city. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



The author's dog, Gratiot, in his backyard. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

I made my kitchen counters out of century-old maple floors, rock-hard and pried from an abandoned soda-pop factory by a neighbor. I plucked my kitchen cabinets from a school that was being demolished. Aside from the cabinets made from old-growth oak, strewn about the school were beakers and other science equipment, books splayed open like dead birds, desks, marble slabs in the bathroom, granite tables, chalkboards that still contained notes. It looked like some catastrophic event had stricken the nation, nuclear war perhaps, and the teachers and students had fled at a moment's notice. After I got out what I could, it was all pushed into the ground with a backhoe. They say the functional illiteracy rate in Detroit is nearly 50%.

I replaced a load-bearing wall in the house with a laminated beam I got from a collapsed recycling center down the street. During Labor Day weekend, eight of my friends, all of whom have built abandoned houses into homes, helped me lift it into place. It got stuck as everyone was holding it above their heads. I used a bottle jack to lift the ceiling and as I hit the beam with a sledgehammer, my friends cheered with every inch it moved until it slid home. It now holds the entire house up.

I got an 8-pound puppy and named him Gratiot, after the main boulevard that runs up the east side. The date I set to move in was the day after Forestdale's annual block party to celebrate that year's harvest, which includes drunken hayrides, pressing our homegrown apples into cider, and bonfires. I moved in with a hangover. I didn't think it was safe to put anything in my house that was salvageable — plumbing, wires, or heating ducts — before living there, so I had no

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company to the electrical pole in the alley. On top of the box is a switch used to turn the whole system on and off, like Frankenstein awakening his monster. There's easily enough energy flowing through there to kill a buffalo. I had studied carefully how to set it up, talked to a few electricians, and the power company came and inspected it before hooking up the juice. But ultimately you never know. Plumbing leaks if done improperly, carpentry looks out of joint, tile feels uneven. There's always a moment of truth, and it came for me when the lines got hooked into the pole by a gruff suburban electrician who looked like he drinks cheap six-packs in an aluminum lawn chair in the backyard. He snickered at my house as he bolted the live wires to the service cable.

"You're either brave as hell," he said, looking down at me from the ladder, "or crazy as a loon."

electricity, water, or heat. The abandoned and wide-open house next door was close enough to touch from an upstairs window. I slept on top of my workbench.

I had a friend staying with me those first few weeks, Chris, a native Detroiter, and his dog Dana. He had a bad breakup and needed somewhere to crash. He's the rare soul whose vast and hard-won personal knowledge of the world hasn't beaten him down and made him cynical. When I was heartsick for that Greek girl he told me, "The best way to get over a woman is to get over a woman."

My house's original electrical box and all the wires had been stolen, so I set up a new box in the basement. I hooked serpentine wires into the top that would be connected by the power

When he left, I put on rubber gloves thinking they might offer some protection against the current, and told Chris to follow me downstairs. We stood in front of the box like we were going to dismantle a bomb. He held a flashlight and looked serious. (He would later be the one to convince me to buy a gun.)

“All right, man,” I told him. “If something happens, you’re going to have to tackle me off of here because I’ll get stuck by the current, but I’ll probably be dead before you can get to me. It might blow up and kill us both.”

Chris held the light in front of the box and solemnly hunched himself to strike. I said a little prayer and took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly through pursed lips.

“You ready?”

He nodded once.

I stepped up to the box and touched the switch quickly with my fingertip like testing a skillet.

Safe.

I put my index finger on the switch. I looked over at Chris. He nodded.

Click.

It flipped.

Nothing.

I looked down at my chest and at my hands, then over at Chris. He straightened up and took a deep breath. Everybody still alive. Curiously we walked upstairs.

“It’s your house, you do the honors.”

Watching the bulb on the ceiling, I flipped a switch.

Light.

We didn’t say anything for a moment, looking at the shining bulb. Then Chris burst into laughter. We ran around the house turning lights on and off in jubilation, one little victory against the darkness. He leaned back and outstretched his arms, pumping his legs in a happy dance, and I shuffled around the room twirling my hips to the silent music of success. It was the first time I really felt I was bringing something back to life, like performing CPR on a corpse that just took its first greedy gasp of air.



The Detroit Fire Department battle a Poletown fire. Photograph by Garrett MacLean



A wedding party arranges for group photos in front of the trash incinerator. Photograph by Garrett MacLean

I've lived in the house for more than three years now. The neighbors don't think I'm so crazy. They've brought me lemonade while I was working on my house, or they've cut my lawn when my mower was broken. They've invited me to barbecues and into their homes. I guess they're happy there's one more set of eyes looking out. "We're glad you're here," is a refrain I hear often. I'm still very aware I am a young white kid in a mostly black neighborhood, but for the most part people have made me feel welcome. I'm grateful and feel an even deeper sense of responsibility to stay.

The house is comfortable, and I have heat, plumbing, and all the other modern amenities, but there are still rooms to be fixed, still boards on some of the windows, still a basement that floods. Someone keeps breaking into the abandoned house next door and I keep boarding it up. I'm terrified it's going to burn and take my house with it. That puppy turned into a 90-pound dog who roared as someone tried to kick in my door late one night. I stood at the top of the stairs, wearing little but my boots, shotgun braced, knowing I would end a human life had he tried to come inside. He didn't.

I built a 34-foot-tall chimney out of bricks I collected from an exploded building. I worked 64 days in a row to afford an \$8,000 roof, more money than I've ever had at once. On weekends I worked in a restaurant, and during the week I was a substitute teacher in an ultra-high-security juvenile prison.

At the school, I started a program where the students wrote a newspaper. The day before we were to go to our first print, one of my favorite students stayed up all night to finish a picture he drew for the paper, handing it to me just before I walked out the door. It was a pencil drawing with a jagged streak cutting diagonally across the picture plane. On one side of the line was a depiction of what his neighborhood "on the outs," in Detroit, looked like: broken beer bottles and windows, overgrown grass, gloom. On the other was what he imagined it could have looked like, the place he wanted to live: shining sun, nice clean homes, neighbors, flowers.

Just weeks after he was released from the prison, he was shot and paralyzed.

Last year Detroit became the largest municipality in the U.S. to declare bankruptcy. Our debt is about \$18 billion and there is talk about cutting the pensions of people who worked for the city for 30 years and selling the masterpieces from the city's publicly held fine art museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts. The governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, appointed Detroit an emergency financial manager with autocratic control over the city's finances and major decisions; almost half of the African-Americans in Michigan have lost the option to select who will represent them on the local level. The Detroit NAACP recently [filed suit](#) in federal court challenging the law as a threat to voting rights and democracy. This bears repeating: In the United States of America, I am not, nor are any of my neighbors, able to select who will lead us locally. We have a mayor, but he can't do anything aside from what the emergency manager tells him he can. During World War II, when the auto factories were retooled to make the bombing planes and tanks that won the war against fascism, Detroit was nicknamed the "Arsenal of Democracy."

In the last year or two, though, Detroit has also become fashionable. *The New York Times* called it a “[Midwestern TriBeCa](#),” *The Atlantic* a “[Magnet... for young, creative people](#).” Thousands of young, mostly white educated people are moving in. The first chain grocery store in the city since 2007 just opened, a Whole Foods, subsidized by the city, state, and federal governments. The [Write a House](#) organization recently made headlines for giving away renovated homes to writers. The boomtown is back.

A nice young couple from Brooklyn just moved in down the street. Bars that were once gritty and dark now look like after-hours Starbucks. Tour buses full of people show up in my neighborhood to gawk at the devastation and the people that live amidst it. People from all over come to take photos, even wedding parties.

[Dan Gilbert](#), the owner of Quicken Loans, has moved more than 7,600 employees downtown. He also just sent a notice to one of my ex-girlfriends, explaining he has purchased the apartment building she’s lived in for the last 16 years and his future plans don’t include her. The city is talking of disinvesting in entire neighborhoods such as mine — literally letting the neighborhood go to seed and removing city services, shrinking the city in what some have termed as “white-sizing”; upstarts backed with foundation money are talking about [transforming an entire neighborhood](#) into an 2,475-acre urban farm. The state just approved a \$350 million subsidized giveaway for a hockey stadium with a suburban fan base that’s going to tear down another portion of the city and push more people out. Of course, the divide between the gentrifying Detroit downtown and the bankrupt Detroit that is the rest of the city mirrors what is happening in a lot of this country.

These changes are making me feel a bit threatened and defensive. Instead of a lone weird white kid buying a house in Detroit, now I’m part of a movement. I shop at the Whole Foods, knowing every step into that store is a step away from a brand-new city that could be. And if someone tries to break into my house again I will not hesitate to defend myself and someday my family. Some days I feel caught in a tide I cannot row against, but these are the realities. Maybe I’m feeling a bit like the good people of Detroit must have felt to be counted amongst the citizens of “Murder City.”

But there’s another Detroit, too, of which I am but a small part. It’s been happening quietly and for some time, between transplants and natives, black and white and Latino, city and country — tiny acts of kindness repeated thousands of times over, little gardens and lots of space, long meetings and mowing grass that isn’t yours. It’s baling hay.

It’s the Detroit that’s saving itself. The Detroit that’s building something brand-new out of the cinders of consumerism and racism and escape. I’ve attended a four-person funeral for a stillborn baby that could have been saved but for poverty. I’ve nearly been shot by the police during a stop-and-frisk. I’ve seen three structure fires within a block of my house. But I’ve also walked out of my house to see hundreds of tiny snowmen built by neighborhood children. I’ve seen tears in the eyes of a grown man releasing a baby raccoon into a city park that he had saved from being beaten to death by teenagers. Some scrappy teachers just opened a school in a formerly abandoned building behind my house. I stretched a ladder through the missing window of the abandoned house next door and nailed it to the kitchen floor to reach the peak of my own roof.

As we rebuild this ashen city, we're deciding on an epic scale what we value as Americans in the 21st century. The American Dream is alive in Detroit, even if it flickers. I hope this time it includes that kid who drew a picture of two neighborhoods and was shot in the one he went back to.

I'm not certain I've accomplished anything other than taking one abandoned home off the street, teaching a few kids how to read, or bearing witness to a something larger than myself. I'm not certain I've become an example to anyone or necessarily changed a whole lot for the better. But I'm still here. I go to bed and I wake up every day in Detroit, in a house I built with my own hands. Sometimes success means just holding on.

As a friend who grew up in Poletown put it, "We want things to flourish, but we want them to have roots."



Photograph by Garrett MacLean