

The Illusion of Occupancy

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The city of Detroit is larger than Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston combined¹. Yet, its population is roughly 1/5 the total of those 3 cities². It is 139 square miles of sprawling vacant lots, beautiful historic homes, automobile factories, small businesses, urban gardens, auto repair shops, liquor stores, Art Deco high rises, loving communities, families, children, prairies, taquerias, pheasants, wild dogs, wild flowers, and creative people. Driving from any point A to point B, while disregarding all highways, brings you through incredible corridors of history. At an average speed of 20-30 miles per hour and hardly any other people on the roads, you are invited to stare out the window and take your time here. What you are looking at can almost always be imagined through the lens of “*I wonder what this used to look like...*”

Due to its sheer size, it is difficult, almost inappropriate, to describe the city of Detroit’s current condition with any one-sided perspective. It has recently been branded as “up and coming” because it has a Shinola Hotel, cocktail bars, and street lights that are turned on (in some locations). What can be misleading though, is the assumption that having a Shinola Hotel, and street lights, is all Detroit needs to turn into a healthy city. This raises questions of - Is that really enough? Or were those new entertainment options, in singular locations of the city, developed just to make you feel more comfortable? For decades people have been saying things like “I just don’t feel comfortable going to Detroit.” Is it because the city’s vacancy rate shocks people? Or that

the landscape presents something that many people would prefer not to have to see? Poverty. Houses lost to fire. Abandoned schools. Abandoned hospitals. Homes lost to foreclosure. Boulevards lined with boarded up buildings.

The city has lost 60% of its population since 1950³. In the 1970-90's it was known for being the "arson capital of the U.S." and from 2010-2013, it was known as the graffiti capital⁴. Both of which are deeply visible in its landscape today. Something changed after Detroit filed the largest municipal bankruptcy case in United States history with an estimated \$19 billion in debt in 2013⁵. The city has felt significantly different as it has emerged from bankruptcy; one of the biggest influences are the government funded programs that were implemented to demolish vacant blighted homes, board up abandoned buildings, and to paint over graffiti. These initiatives became some of the city's top priorities. Since 2014, the graffiti task force has issued thousands of tickets to property owner's, put graffiti writers and artists in jail, and spent millions of dollars in taxpayers money to pay city employees to paint over any of the non-commissioned paintings or "tags"⁶. As a result of this, you are no longer confronted with layers of large spray painted single words everywhere you look. Homes that have been set on fire and deemed unsafe are less likely to surround an occupied home on all of its sides. An occupied home will be standing proudly and freely in a new vast grassy prairie.

In addition to the clean-up that these initiatives have achieved in many places around the city, they have also contributed to a kind of illusion. This illusion is one of the most powerful things the local government has funded over the past decade. It completely transformed the way people perceive their surroundings, but has also convinced people that the city as a whole is safer, more approachable, and better suits visitors who are looking to extract what it is that they want from the city. When really, the large amounts of investment have taken place within the 5 mile radius of the Downtown, Corktown and Midtown bubbles. The other 134

square miles outside of these mentioned areas continue to be left struggling, abandoned, flattened, or veiled with a new incohesive paint job. The majority of the city's structures are still sitting vacant. Look around. Do you see any lights? Are there actually people or windows? It is the task forces of removing and concealing that have convinced people that we are looking at a significantly more occupied city than in 2013. The illusion created is not only something that presents Detroit as having a ghost population, but it also falsely presents the maintenance that goes along with that. When something is occupied - there are lights on inside, movement, people gathering inside and out, surrounding traffic patterns, trash removal, and windows being cleaned. The majority of commercial buildings in the city today do not possess these signs of life. The boarding up of buildings and concealing their decay has presented just enough change for people from outside of the city to "feel more comfortable" to come here. It is something subtle enough that they can comfortably turn their head away from what they don't want to see. It is enough for those people to continue to press the narrative that things are getting so much better despite the continued vacancy and neglect of even the most basic needs of those who live in Detroit.

As a society, we are obsessed with image and the facade of familiar security to the extent that we can forget or just remain ignorant to what is really happening around us. We may so desperately want to feel comfortable that if something as simple as paint can create that illusion for us, we are all in. What does an elected official need to present to be praised and adored? Funding for the painting of abandoned building facades? Or real support and funding for education and literacy of residents and their children? Why are we dumping millions of tax dollars into painting walls of buildings that are not even accessible to the public? Why aren't millions of more dollars going into the public school system? Every dollar counts, right?... so millions...could really help.

Residents do deeply benefit from the blight removal. This is undeniable. Visibility is a critical component in the urban planning of healthy cities. Being able to see clearly what is around you while walking down a street helps increase a sense of security. Even if in Detroit that visibility means walking down a street with an incohesive paint job and plywood walls. It feels much more secure than walking next to a building wide open with broken glass, debris, and who knows what. Neighborhoods have significantly less groups of random outside people stopping by to spray paint and claim walls with their tag names. Overall, there is more nature. But, residents psychologically know that many of these structures are still unoccupied. That is why their energy and concern is devoted to demanding their taxes go towards a better funded school system that provides a healthy education, renovation of buildings and an end to shut-offs of water services⁷. Residents demand that something as simple as a grocery store come into their neighborhood to combat the food deserts found throughout the city.

The illusion of occupancy in Detroit is working to cognitantly avoid addressing things that are urgent to confront by covering them up and channeling our attention elsewhere. It is similar to the message that consumerism can exist while simultaneously solving the climate crisis or that connecting on social media can help with isolation.

Detroit's identity as a metropolis of the past still reverberates everywhere. Its existing landscape screams at you to imagine the dense blocks of residential homes and small businesses that used to have so many people contributing to its pulse. When you spend time here, beyond just visiting a new restaurant, you realize that it possesses a slower rhythm to life, and has for many years. It's external stimuli is soft, the people feel familiar, and the presence of authority feels distant. Similar to a rural experience in a way. It can truly be disorienting, because unlike other large American cities it is not fast paced enough for you to be oblivious to your surroundings; the pace is slow, giving you time to observe and

really build relationships with what is around you.

Imagine you were dropped down at a random street corner in the city of Detroit on foot, similar to dropping the street view pin on Google maps. The probability of being dropped at the highly surveillanced downtown streets is not very plausible. What is more likely is that you may look around you and not be able to find a single building that is open to the public. There may be zero glass storefronts or windows. There may not even be a single other person around. The structures that would surround you may not have had any presence of life behind their walls in decades. They may not even have a roof.

It is a priority for the City of Detroit to find ways to make the police authority and government control more visibly present. If someone boards up an abandoned building, they are asserting that the general public cannot enter that property, even if it hasn't been occupied in 20+ years. Countless buildings that have been abandoned for ages are wide open on all sides, have no windows, no doors, no storefronts, no progress of improving the building has been made. They are genuinely just rotting away in the rain and freeze thaw cycles of winter. In the present day, the owner of a property can get a blight ticket for a "graffiti" tag quicker and more frequently than they can get a blight ticket for failing to provide a roof, windows, or doors. If a building is "boarded up" and "secured", it passes the city's current expectations. A rotting building is not a danger to society as long as its rotting on the inside and not the street face. But, if you have brightly colored paint that was not commissioned lining the exterior of your building, that is treated like a danger to society.

Strangely enough, the presence of hundreds of graffiti writers and painters may be the largest presence of life that has occupied these buildings in decades. The city would prefer that you are not confronted with the presence of unoccupied buildings and people reclaiming that space as their canvas. They need their authority and "care" to feel present.

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This is what the veil of buffing provides the public. It is not a question of artwork or vandalism but more of a question of psychological security and psychological disillusionment. In a perfectly rational world, it would make sense to spend millions of dollars on public school education resources and providing quality affordable housing. In the actual and highly irrational world of American politics, campaigns and financing continue to be centralized around things like graffiti removal. They would even prefer that it be buffed gray.



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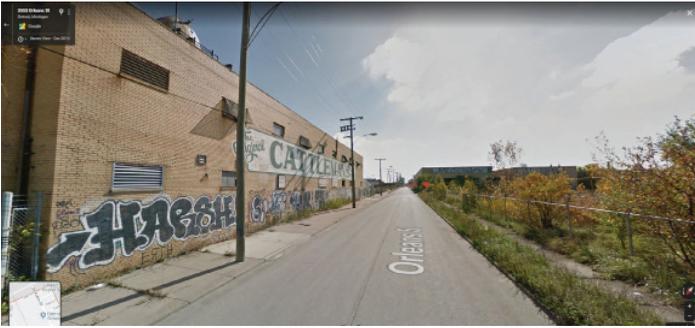


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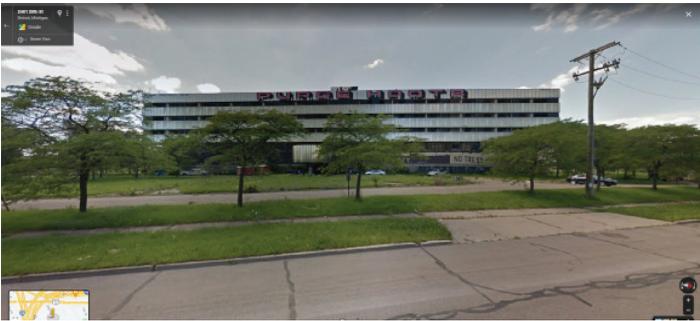
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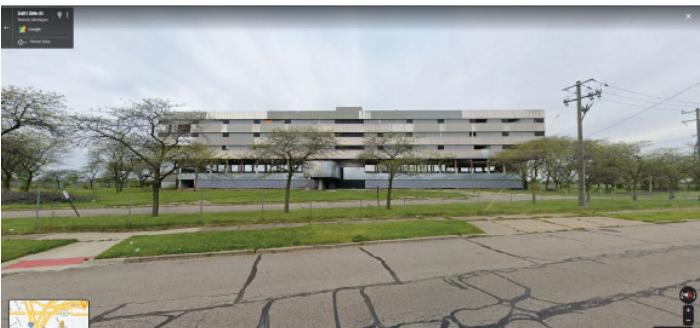
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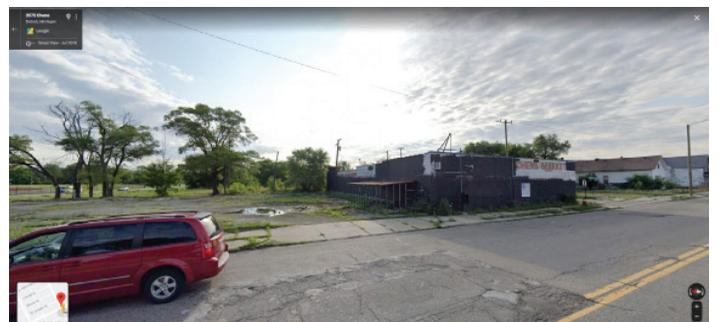
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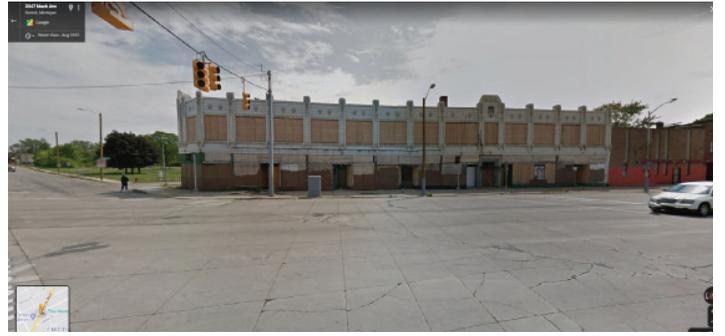


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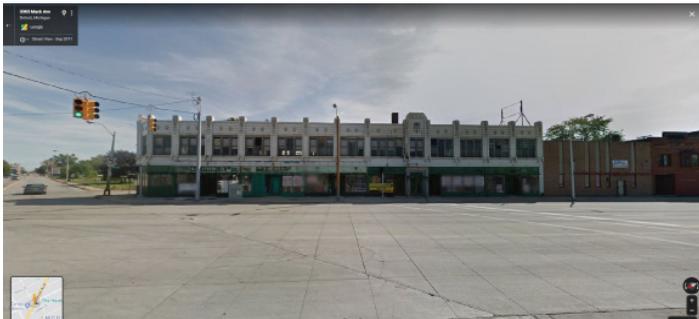
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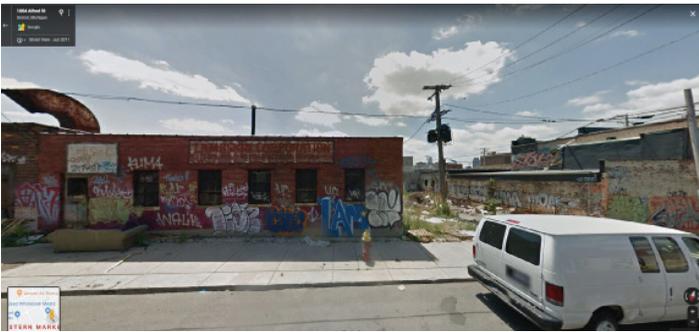
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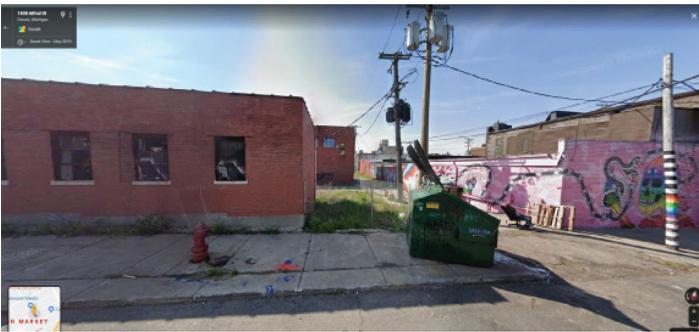
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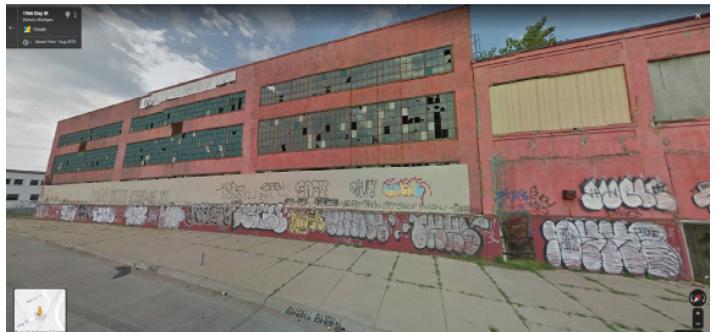
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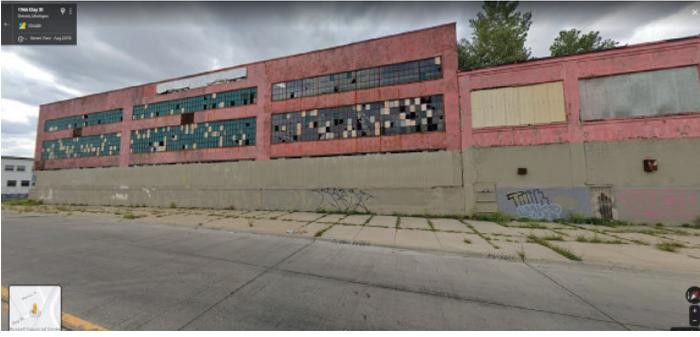


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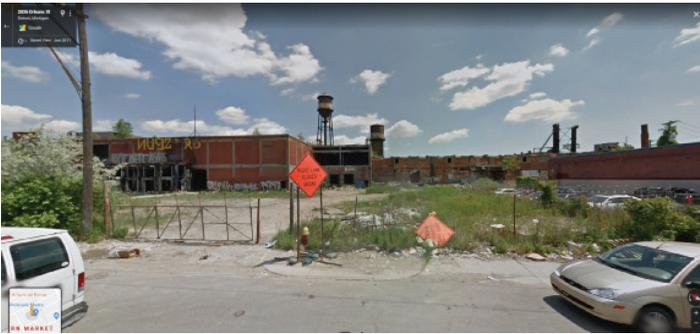
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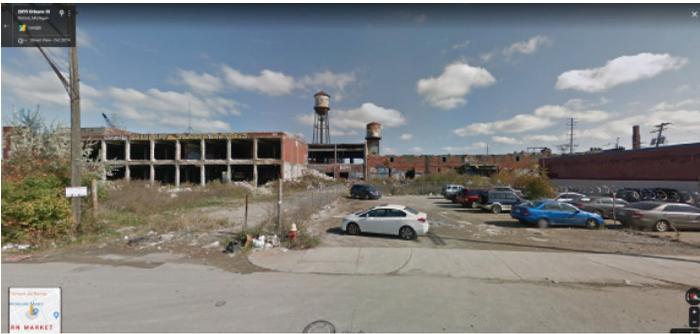
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1. Detroit Collaborative Design Center. University of Detroit Mercy. Map by Dan Pitera. 2008. <http://www.dcdc-udm.org/detroit/>. Accessed 28 Dec. 2020.

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