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Detroit May Need Some Razing, But Does Not Need "Saving"

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This post is by guest blogger Sarah F. Cox, who is from New York City, New York. You can follow her on Twitter or visit her website.



Introductions are important. In the opening paragraph of the New York Times article, [Razing the City to Save the City](#), author Susan Saulny describes Detroit as a "hollowed-out city" that is hoping to be "reborn." She calls the plans to demolish abandoned buildings "heretical" to hope. She goes on to say that, in Detroit, "creativity is partly a function of desperation." Fortunately, she is wrong, and her biblically tragic language was not my introduction to Detroit.

I live in New York, but I came here for a month to participate in a residency program located in the neighborhood just north of Hamtramck, "No Ham," if you will. Artists Jon Brumit and Sarah Wagner purchased a home in the neighborhood for \$100 last year, and bolstered—also somewhat overwhelmed by—the tidal wave of publicity (their names appeared in The Times) they decided to use the house to get outsiders to Detroit. Calling the project [DFlux](#), they invited 12 artists, researchers, writers, and students to come see the neighborhood as they did, not as a target for demolition hoping to be reborn, but as a vital community with potential for growth.


Saulny's article is correct about the need for demolition, just not the tone it sets for locals. This is not a desperate move, it's a prudent way to re-use space; emptiness and desolation are not synonymous. Much of the reporting on the city focuses on the fact that it was built for 2 million but now houses around 800,000 (census data forthcoming). However, many of the articles fail to state that the two-million figure is more than 50 years old. It's from the 1950s. For new residents like Jon and Sarah, who will never remember that more-bustling past, they don't mourn its loss. Young Detroit is used to this open space, and has lots of ideas for it.

Across the street from Jon and Sarah's, a house is being razed. At 7 am last Saturday, a crew of about 8 men spent more than 8 hours in tyvek suits, removing cladding. This sparked a conversation with the neighbors about opportunity. Sarah and Jon are hoping to buy the lot from the city and construct a green house with a plentiful supply of donated Plexiglas they imported from a friend in Chicago. Their neighbor Mohammed, who lives adjacent to the lot, dreams of turning it into a basketball court for his sons. Not every razed house is so lucky to have two potential investors willing to turn it around, but this attitude is much more indicative of the enthusiasm I have found here than the attitude taken in the Times reporting.






This combination of low prices, space, and a supportive community is anything but creativity via desperation. A few blocks away from Jon and Sarah, Cranbrook graduate Charlie O'Geen is remodeling a house into what he calls, "a floating house," part of his graduate thesis (but more importantly as his future home). On another block, students from University of Michigan's Architecture School

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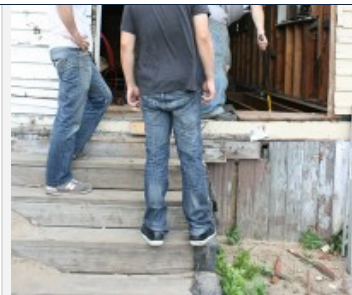
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 Conversations About Detroit



DFlux residents lend a helping hand to Charlie O'Geen

transformed a house into a design lab. With this sort of energy to tap into, it is no wonder that visiting artists and DFLux residents Finishing School decided to build a tribute to the DFlux house. Two LA-based artists and one from Chicago built a mini model home on the site of an entire neighborhood that was demolished. Other projects planned for the "No Ham" neighborhood include a "found objects" [skate park designed by Macro Sea](#). Work will continue in the area all summer and the best source for the neighborhood is the [Powerhouse Project website](#), run by local artists Mitch and Gina, whose Design 99 show was at MOCAD this month.

I'm heading back to New York this week, but my time here in Detroit has forever changed my enthusiasm for cities. Stuck in the density of New York, it's easy to overlook the little changes; a house being re-clad in colorful tiles, or a vacant lot now blooming with flowers. In Detroit, neighbors look out for each other. Maybe The Times needs to step back, take a deep breath, and rethink its attitude on vacancy.

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[@AshleySFlintoff](#) · 8 weeks ago 0

In a word. Amen.

Thank you Sarah for seeing Detroit as we see it - with an open, optimistic mind uncluttered by the negativity of the outside world. Thank you for believing in our city as we do and for seeing the phoenix rising from the ashes of the world's abandonment and negativity as we have done in the past and will continue to do because in Detroit, we don't take anything lying down. Bravo on a superbly written piece!

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