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Death and Life of American Cities: Is Detroit the Next Artists' Haven?

12:33 pm Tuesday Jun 30, 2009

by [Heather Schwedel](#)

Feedback



We just read that 18 visual artists received a boost in the form of [\\$450,000 in grant money from the Michigan-based Kresge Foundation](#). As the [Detroit Free Press](#) reported, “Advocates say the fellowships could have a galvanizing effect on the local arts scene — boosting public perception of an overlooked community, inspiring artists to create more ambitious work and offering them an incentive to remain here rather than leave for New York or elsewhere.” Plus, next year the grants will recognize non-visual artists.

Does this spell a mass exodus from Brooklyn, the current unofficial borough-of-choice for struggling artists, toward a land free of gentrification and [trust-funders](#)? Let’s take a look at the evidence.

- Last summer [New York magazine suggested](#) that Buffalo might eclipse Williamsburg as an epicenter for all things hipster. We don’t have population statistics on hand or anything, but that doesn’t seem to have happened. Meaning that maybe it’s time to give Detroit a shot. As of December, the average price of a home there was [\\$18,513](#).

- In a recent [video conversation with the New York Times](#), author and Detroit native Jeffrey Eugenides

(and a frequent pick for our [Big Brother Book Club!](#)) mentioned that returning to his hometown fills him with [Ruinenwert](#), which is German for “the pleasure of ruins.” The pleasure of ruins is hard to come by in rapidly developing Brooklyn, which is why some artists might find inspiration in Detroit’s [“beautiful, horrible decline.”](#)

- Back in May [Ron English](#) told us that he was involved with a campaign to buy houses in Detroit. “They’re like super cheap — like \$4,000 a piece. The idea is to create an artists neighborhood and artists housing. He’s having all of us pop surrealists donate art to help raise money for this project. A lot of people have said, what kind of person is going to want to live in a neighborhood where the drug dealers are armed and it’s very dangerous? People don’t understand that artists... All they want is space and time.”

What do you think: Is Detroit the next Bushwick?

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Feedback



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 [Pak-Kei](#) · 1 day ago 0  

If I'm not tied to my job in the NYC area, I'd move to Detroit to take my wonderland in the ruins too. I think Detroit will become popular to those who are either already established or those who just don't care about earning money to lead a stable life.




But for those of us who work a normal job so that we can devote our free time and money to the arts... it won't happen until there are actually jobs in Detroit.

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 [motorless](#) · 1 day ago 0  




It's difficult. Areas like Brooklyn always had the necessities nearby. Detroit doesn't. You may have to drive 20 to 30 minutes to get groceries. It takes a very specific and hardy individual to want what Detroit offers...and doesn't offer.

[Reply](#) ▼ [1 reply](#) · active 1 hour ago

 **Jess** · 1 day ago +1  




Ferndale is right outside Detroit - 10 min in fact - where you can buy groceries, etc. There are many suburbs right outside Detroit that are that close. You don't have to drive 20 to 30 min for necessities unless you want to.

[Reply](#)

 **jm3** · 2p · 1 day ago +1  

"New ideas need old buildings" as Jane Jacobs said, and Detroit has both in spades. The combination of a rich hands-on mechanical past, a strong underground music scene, two respected design universities, nearly infinite cheap warehouse studio space, and a well of untapped ingenuity and frustration is a powerful combo.

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 **jm3** · 2p · 1 day ago +1  

@motorless well, your mileage may vary. You need to be hardy to succeed in Detroit, just as you'd better be hardy if you want to succeed in art, business, sports, or anything else. That said, I think it takes a bit of vision or a bit of madness to see Detroit as the creative and technical incubator it is and can be.

As Paul Graham said, "wild animals [look] beautiful because [they've adapted to] hard lives."

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 **justsayin** · 20 hours ago 0  

Stories like this seem to be all I hear about Detroit: <http://abclocal.go.com/wtv/story?section=news/na...>




I think it's still too dangerous to be a good place to live.

[Reply](#)

 **Southbound** · 13 hours ago 0  




Anyone considering relocation here should suit up with body armor and rose-colored glasses and come for a visit. Hurry before the lovey winter sets in. There is no place like Detroit in the wintertime. Regarding the affordable home/studio opportunities here, they are cheap for a reason. Good luck on your decision. As for me, I am leaving this place. Last one out turn out the lights.

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 **max** · 3 hours ago 0  

Brooklyn is/was a haven for artists because it was cheap & in close proximity to the commercial art world, not just because it was cheap.

[Reply](#)

 **Robert** · 3 hours ago 0  

Detroit already is -- and has been for decades -- one of the world's premier artists' havens.

I'm from Detroit and I live in Brooklyn. Same goes for a huge number of my talented Detroit friends. There's a reason for that. Several, actually.

Detroit is a great place to make solitary art. It's also a great place to get practice space if you're a band. In fact, the only people worth a damn who are 18-40 and live in Detroit are artists -- and the bravest among them are entrepreneurs.

If you want to get a house for next to nothing, move to Detroit. Lots of people are doing it right now. Just get ready for "rebuilding Detroit" to take over as your life's work.

Reply



Beefalo · 3 hours ago

0

Buffalo's a lot safer and friendlier (and just as cheap)... and it still hasn't 'boomed' in any way for a very very long time.

Reply



Douchio · 2 hours ago

0

Yeah, good luck with that. One winter in Detroit and any hipster foolish enough to try it will be back in Bushwick before you can say LES spillover.

Wake up, people. Most of Detroit needs bulldozing and what's left will become a small, provincial midwestern town.

Reply



Tammie · 1 hour ago

0

I will never cease to be surprised by the amount of hatred and spite people have for Detroit. Particularly as most of these people have never done anything more than passed through the city. I'm originally from Virginia, came to U of M to get my Masters, and have fallen in love with the city. So much so that I'm limiting my job search to the area.

Yes, Detroit has its problems. But the arts can play an integral role in addressing those. And the community embraces those who come to the city with this kind of vision - providing support in ways you won't find anywhere else.

There are places to buy food in Detroit, albeit not enough. The HoneyBee Market in Mexicantown is an amazing place to shop, and Eastern Market has a spectacular selection. No, it's not as easy to get around as a New York or Chicago, but with some planning and ingenuity, you'll be just fine. There is an extensive bus system, and private investors have spearheaded bringing lightrail to the city, which may arrive as early as 2010.

If you're looking for a posh lifestyle where things are made easy, Detroit is not for you. But if you want to be a part of something bigger, helping to redefine a city that so much of the nation has given up on, Detroit should be one of your top considerations.

Reply



d_times_two ·

0

Feedback

When I last went to Detroit in December, I saw the opportunity in the ruins. But, it will never be the next Williamsburg. Why, you have to drive, drive, drive to do anything in the D. Brooklyn, & all of NYC is a public transportation lover's paradise. The elevated train in Detroit only makes a baby loop around the convention areas along the river. That's NOT where the \$4000 homes are, trust me.

I love the city, at least the idea of it, and in a perfect world where I was not already unemployed and hard strapped for income (let alone getting off of unemployment...I'd say YES to moving there. And it's true, I just don't see Brooklyn trustfunders parading around in tight jeans and fixed gear Bianchis when it's -15 degrees for 20 days straight.

To Tammie, yes the Bee is cool. But, it's one store. There's a market like that out here in LA on every block. We have problems out here too, but I wouldn't trade it for the world...even if we aren't the hipster capitol of the world.

At best, Detroit will be the Midwest's Portland...a cool, cool town to get a cup of coffee or PBR, but not to have a job. That is, if you're not already living off of that family wealth. Being a working artist, I don't have an extra \$4000 to buy the house, an extra \$50,000 to fix it up, and another \$20,000 to live off of and pay the bills for the 1st year of existence in Detroit which, God bless it...just doesn't have any sort of support network or familiar security for me.

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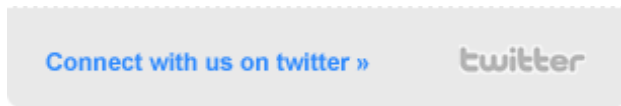
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