

Photo Essay

Blurred Lines: Structure/Agency, Presence/Vacancy in Detroit's Urban Museum

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Detroit has come to symbolize the end of American hegemony in manufacturing. Faced with globalization, market competition, and political change, Detroit's citizens seem the victims of structural forces beyond their control. Yet, this photographic essay explores Detroit precisely through the lens of agency, highlighting citizens' creativity, entrepreneurship, and play. The photographs highlight the ways Detroit's citizens have blurred the boundaries between ruins and art, presence and vacancy, and structure and agency.



Guarding the real rubble on the movie set of *Transformers 4*. Movie makers used real rubble to create a set of artificial ruins, depicting a dystopian Hong Kong in the heart of downtown Detroit. Source: Mijs 2013.

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“Disaster tourist” in Detroit’s urban museum. Tourists visit Detroit for the same sights enticing them to Rome and Athens: the glory of times past. Like those classical cities, Detroit’s ruins symbolize the end of an era. They are places with names and stories, well-mapped, and easily accessible. Walk through a site, and you find rubble but no garbage, a scent, but no stench. Ghostly, you can feel the human touch, but see little human presence. Source: Mijs 2013.



Ruins reused: Michigan Theater parking lot. The Michigan Building opened in 1926 with offices on its upper floors and a 4,500-seat theater on its ground floor. When the theater closed in 1976, office tenants threatened to leave unless they received adequate parking. Thus, the Michigan Theater was converted into a parking lot. Its ornate ceiling and walls feature original decorations that have stood the test of time. Source: Mijs 2013.



“Hi, you’ve reached Dr. D.” Public art colors the streets of Detroit, graffiti art murals together with tags and slurs. Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, part of which is shown here, aims to bring arts to the streets in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Founded in 1986, the project invites residents to make their neighborhood into an art installation that embraces “diverse cultures and artistic attributes as the essential building blocks for a fulfilling and economically viable way of life.” Source: Mijs 2013.



“Public art museum.” Blurring the lines between art and ruins, presence and vacancy, and internal and external spaces, these sculptures populate citizens’ front and back yards and decorate their houses. The pavement is brightly colored, and a totem pole of stuffed animals marks the spot where Guyton welcomes visitors to the “public art museum,” which draws more than 275,000 visitors annually. Source: Mijs 2013.