



THE INTERACTIVE GUIDE TO DETROIT

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Eastern Market tops a list of the 10 best public spaces in metro Detroit. (Photo by: Cybelle Codish)

When in Rome

A search for civic life (and space) in Detroit

by **Constance C. Bodurow**
7/18/2007

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Design matters

Anyone who says that civic life doesn't matter to Detroiters hasn't driven down Michigan Avenue during a summer afternoon, when folks flock to sit in lawn chairs and barbecue in Roosevelt Park, in front of the abandoned train station. Those who assume Detroiters have no appreciation for well-designed urban spaces haven't been stuck in the bumper-to-bumper traffic on Belle Isle, where thousands of Detroiters open their trunks and lift their hatches to tailgate the night away by the water. And people who think our communities are stubbornly segregated haven't hung out in a Dearborn park, where friends and families sit in gazebos with food and hookahs, warmly inviting strangers to join the blossoming circle.

It is possible, however, to pass by Campus Martius any weekend without a festival — or after 5 p.m. during the week — and wonder why people aren't filling the tables. But there's a good reason: A glorified cafeteria, against a backdrop of corporate retailers and office buildings, just doesn't cut it.

While it's true that some of us need to cultivate a better sense of civic life, many Detroiters already have a highly evolved notion of what matters (a location's history and some space to roam freely, for starters) and have chosen ground to stand on. The train station's shaded yard, in that context, suddenly starts to make more sense.

This article is a first in a series by urban designer Constance Bodurow, called "Design Matters." Over the next few months Bodurow will examine the progression of Detroit's urban design ethic — when we had it, how we lost it and what we might yet do to regain it. —Rebecca Mazzei, arts and culture editor

Recently I had lunch at New Center Council's annual TasteFest (excuse me, I am dating myself as an aging urban hipster; I mean *CityFest*), one of the inspired uses of our city as backdrop for a public event during the summer season. As I strolled down West Grand Boulevard, considering my menu choices and dwindling tickets, I began to contemplate the nature of Detroiters' relationship with public space, in the context of urban design and our long predicted and anticipated revitalization. After all, the city is not merely about buildings and infrastructure, but the people who live, work and play here.

The city is a powerful and direct manifestation, for better or worse, of the values, aspirations, needs and ethics of its citizens. How do we think of and use our city and the public spaces in it? The streets, squares, parks and public institutions that make up our public realm? We Detroiters are good at hosting and attending special events. We shine at music festivals. We excel at parades and sports victory celebrations. We even stage a vigorous protest rally every once in a while. But do we have the habits that support great urban public space? Do we have a sense of community that makes a city urbane?

I recently returned from a month in the European Union, spending a majority of the time in Rome. Now there's a set of citizens who know how to use a city — and what a city! After all, the root of the English word "city" is the latin *civis*, meaning citizen. The Roman citizens' connection to their city and urban public space has been several millennia in the

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making. Imitating Greek and other ancient civilizations, the Romans created civic life and then exported it around the Western world, eventually having a major influence on the character of contemporary North America. But their notion of civic life is markedly different from ours. Romans are out and about at all times of day and night. Their use of the city is not just about special events, it's about everyday life. They are in the *via* (street) or *piazza* (square) or *parco* (that one's pretty obvious), not simply when there's a programmed activity, or because they are eating or shopping (though they do a lot of that too). They hang out in public because it's a fundamental part of their daily lives. I regularly observed Romans at all times of the day and night standing in the street, simply talking to one another.

OK, I can already hear the rebuttals: Why is civic life such a big deal? Why should we care? Americans are not Europeans. Well, it just so happens that civic life is the fundamental basis for a democratic society (another ancient idea that we profess to have a corner on these days). There are all sorts of arguments in favor of it — from maintaining civil rights to improved quality of life and public health to engaging other human beings that are different from us. And for those of you that argue that Americans behave differently than the Euros, I would not disagree. In fact, while visiting Warsaw recently, I was invited to talk to Polish architecture students about this very difference. Indeed, contemporary North Americans have created a distinct culture (dispite a strong European influence), particularly in regard to our cities and regions. The first 250 years of European settlement in North America were dominated by agriculture. Until 1850, the majority of North Americans lived on farms. We have had another 150 years of life in and around cities, but we continue to romanticize the middle landscape between city and wilderness and embrace the (far from human) scale of the one square mile grid that President Thomas Jefferson conceived of and laid out across the continent to survey, subdivide and administer land and property.

We North Americans tend to think of design of the street for vehicles; squares of open space are for occasional use; and private shopping malls, corporate lobbies and plazas, amusement parks and sports stadia are becoming our only public venues. Read *Downtown is not Disney World* by Michael Sorkin for an incisive criticism of this trend. He observes that such venues are privately owned with entrance fees and behavioral requirements, and are regulated by private security forces, and therefore, do not constitute the true public realm. Locally, Campus Martius Park and the Detroit Riverfront Greenway also match his description.

If you believe that Americans are so different from Euros, you obviously haven't been to Europe lately. Most European Union nations have adopted just about every bad habit we have exported, including auto-dependent suburban form and lifestyles. Still, they haven't destroyed, abandoned or devalued their center cities or the public realm that supports civic life. The Romans still have access to — hundreds, often thousands of years after their establishment — such urban spaces as Piazza Navona, Trastevere, Via Appia and the Villa Borghese Gardens. That's the particular requirement of civic life we need to demand that the public sector create and maintain: places that allow citizens to engage.

Civic life is a lost art in North America, and particularly in Detroit. I would say that very few North American cities, despite the trend for revitalization of buildings in downtown cores over the last 30 years, with the exception of New York and a precious few others, really embrace civic life. Why? The answer is complex, involving consideration of form, use, and the social, political, technological and economic forces that shape the city. Erosion of civic life is largely a post-World War II phenomenon, when private space, such as a home and yard in the suburbs, became more desirable and valued (by those who could afford it) than public space and institutions in the central city. Part of our condition has to do with changing social behaviour and value systems. (Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* both address our preference for isolation and virtual reality over communal activity and human contact.) This partially has to do with the forces that drove our current regional condition: Federal policy and funding has favored a dispersed urban form, via highway construction, urban renewal and targeted mortgage guarantee programs. But the most significant factor has been the formal deterioration of venues where civic life is practiced and encouraged: the street, the square, the park, the public institutions.

We Detroiters have been schizophrenic about our precious urban public spaces — bulldozing, abandoning or neglecting them, stigmatizing them with racial politics,

designing them badly, but also, in rare instances, keeping them in continuous and affectionate use.

For me, the jury is still out as to whether Detroiters will ever regain our pre-World War II urban ethic (topics for future segments in this series). But my lunchtime walk through New Center made me hopeful that we may again have an appetite for it. In support of this, I compiled a list of 10 top urban public spaces in regional Detroit: shining stars in our vast, banal metropolitan landscape.

When I teach urban design at Wayne State University or University of Detroit Mercy, I give an assignment called "Finding good urban design in Detroit," and, before the search, I remind my students that great urban space is more than just great architecture, and then arm them with my five criteria for good urban design:

- **Quality:** Think form and beauty — the physical attributes of urban space, including scale, enclosure and other architectural and landscape elements that relate to human physiology and comfort
- **Place:** Think authenticity, originality, and mix of use — spaces that carry embedded meaning and shared identity both in terms of collective memory and relevance for contemporary society
- **Process:** Think collaboration — spaces that are created, maintained and changed through inclusive public processes engaging an array of stakeholders
- **Equity:** Think fairness and diversity — spaces that are open and accessible to all, regardless of demographic, social or economic status
- **Sustainability:** Think long term — spaces that meet (and evolve to meet) the needs of today without compromising the future socially, environmentally and economically.

In compiling the Top 10 list, I evaluated numerous urban public spaces, some of which met a few of my criteria, but finally selected 10 that best meet all five, anytime, year round.

Top 10 urban public spaces in regional Detroit:

- 1.** After 130-plus years, Eastern Market, Rivard to Riopelle between Gratiot and Wilkins (especially on market days), is the one place in the region that still attracts and welcomes a diverse cross-section of citizenry around a need we all share: fresh food.
- 2.** Capitol Park (especially when the buses are running) is the most intact and significant remnant of the Woodward Plan, supporting a mix of uses for a diverse group of individuals. Because of access to public transportation, it remains the most active pedestrian zone downtown.
- 3.** Hart Plaza (especially during a festival) is the original site of human settlement in our region, beginning with the First Nations (as the Canadians wisely call Native Americans) and continuing to the present day. It's a public place that we all think of as ours, one that is large enough to allow us to come together to celebrate or mourn as a community.
- 4.** Woodward Avenue between Kirby and Warren (especially during the Thanksgiving Day Parade) is a stretch featuring a concentration of our region's premier public cultural and educational institutions, the DIA, the main branch of the Detroit Public Library, Wayne State University and the Detroit Historical Museum.
- 5.** Tie: Both Belle Isle and Dieppe Gardens sit on the Detroit-Windsor international riverfront, the ecological epicenter of our region, the Detroit River, and are maintained to provide citizens (particularly families and youth) equal access to natural beauty and recreation.
- 6.** Clark Park (especially attractive during Cinco de Mayo or ice skating season) and its surrounding context continually evolve, through community engagement, to meet the needs of the diverse and growing population in Southwest Detroit.

7. Despite urban renewal origins that leveled the existing Black Bottom, Lafayette Park (especially during a community event, like Jazz in July) celebrates more than 50 years as a neighborhood of diversity, beauty and stability.

8. West Grand Boulevard between Third and Woodward (especially on work days or during CityFest) still features some of our region's highest quality architecture and streetscape, the result of a sophisticated and inclusive urban advocacy effort.

9. Macomb Place, between North Main and Pine streets in Mt. Clemens is an example of a pedestrian-friendly main street restoration with an emphasis on its historic identity as "Bath City," because of the mineral baths.

10. Nine Mile Road, between Livernois and Woodward in Ferndale, provides a big dose of authentic urbanity while still remaining accessible with a variety of one-off, affordable local retailers and services.

These excellent urban public spaces are awaiting your contribution to regional Detroit's civic life. Take time this summer to experience each for yourself. You may have other suggestions for the list or the criteria. Weigh in and begin the dialogue, also an important part of a restored urban ethic and rich civic life.

Constance Bodurow is Founding Principal of Detroit-based Design Equity Urban Design + Planning, and is currently conducting urban design research at the University of Detroit Mercy. Send comments, including your own Top 10 lists, to letters@metrotimes.com.

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