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DRIVING DETROIT | PART 1 OF 5

City's hope often trumps its troubles

Neighborhoods transformed as new homes spring up among vacant lots, but plenty of work remains

December 16, 2007



NEAR WEST SIDE: Darlene Martin with her father, Walter Martin have seen things in their neighborhood go from good to bad. The block at Buchanan and 24th sits empty and boarded up except for the hardware store behind them that burned this year. You can hear the sound of water rushing out of a pipe in its basement. Neighbors said they've heard it for three years. (ERIC SEALS/DFP)

BY BILL MCGRAW
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

Of all the streets, avenues and boulevards in Detroit, Buchanan comes across as one of the saddest.

And that is why, given all the neighborhood has endured, it is miraculous to see the progress along its quiet corners and weedy sidewalks.

Buchanan connects Livernois and Grand River, bisecting an area mostly southeast of the intersection of I-94 and I-96. The neighborhood is old and poor. Houses are rickety, and many are empty and rotting.

The lush and unruly landscape looks more rural than part of the 11th biggest city in the United States. Piles of mattresses, furniture and other refuse dot overgrown fields. Pheasants, hawks and barking dogs are

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION



NORTH SIDE: Terrell Reese, 11, from left, Darrell Moore, 8, and Deontez Reese, 13, take a break from playing ball in front of their home near Adeline and Bauman streets in October. (AMY LEANG/DFP)



WEST SIDE: José Hernandez, 16, left, Yadira Lopez, 15, and Francisco Chavarin, 14, watch chickens grill at Delicious Pizzeria at McGraw and Central last month. Some of Detroit's neighborhoods are undeniably stronger than they have been in decades, some energized by Hispanic immigration. (KATHLEEN CALLAGHER)

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common, and residents walk long distances in the streets to a store.

"Fifty years ago, when I moved in, it was beautiful," said Walter Martin, 83, who lives on Buchanan near 24th.

"Little by little, everything left. I stand here and I almost cry."

Gradually, though, you can see signs of change along Buchanan, and along 15th, 16th and 17th streets, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and West Warren.

The reason for hope: Churches, nonprofit organizations and Habitat for Humanity are gradually transforming the neighborhood by building housing. There are hundreds of new units: Simple, sturdy single-family homes, senior-citizen centers, town houses and apartments. Next month, the University of Detroit-Mercy School of Dentistry will complete a long-planned move to the area.

In some places, you can hear the shards of a burned-out 19th-Century home flapping in the wind at same time as the mechanical groans of construction equipment preparing another site.

"I'm thrilled and fascinated with what's happening," said Marguerite Hite, 72, who lives in a cozy new apartment in the Alberta W. King Village complex, named after Dr. Martin Luther King's mother. "This whole area is changing. It's just mind-boggling."

Rebirth along Buchanan, though, has been painful.

For example: One of the new apartment buildings, at Hazel and Wabash, has burned-out homes on either side and a vacant lot covered with piles of junk across the street.

Homeless people were sleeping in one of the abandoned houses, and it caught fire at least twice within three weeks in May and June. Heat from one blaze was so intense it traversed a vacant lot and melted the siding on a new apartment building.

Willie Campbell, executive director of Core City Neighborhoods, which built that building and many others, said the organization tried to buy the abandoned home that burned, but the owner asked too much. The city has placed the home on its list of buildings to be demolished, but the process can take years because of bureaucracy and a lack of money for demolition.

James Canning, a spokesman for Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, noted that the city has hired inspectors, cracked down on code violations and created a blight court to step up its battle against illegal dumping.

But some illegal dumps are so large that the city doesn't have the equipment to remove them, Canning said. He added: "We do everything we can do."

The situation on Wabash is emblematic of issues facing much of Detroit: Neighborhoods exist seemingly outside of the establishment's consciousness, held together by longtime residents who refuse to give up and are helped by grassroots efforts to keep them going. But all the while they face the harsh reality of a municipal infrastructure crippled by too little money, too few human resources and too large an area to oversee.

Eventually, inspectors showed up this fall and ticketed the new owner of the vacant lot across the street from the apartment building, and he hired a crew to cut the grass and weeds. The piles of refuse remain. One large pile is covered with broken cement barriers.

Kilpatrick has been a big supporter of the neighborhood, and local officials credit him with helping to kick-start the redevelopment efforts. The mayor launched his re-election campaign with an event in the area in 2005.

But Campbell and others also partly blame the local dumping on Kilpatrick's decision last year to cut back on bulk-trash pickups from 12 to four times a year because of city revenue shortfalls.

"That created a bigger problem," said Campbell, Core City's executive director. "And the city never did like to pick up tires and construction trash. So people look for places to dump that."

The city has stepped up enforcement of dumping violations. Campbell knows that first hand: An inspector gave him a \$3,500 ticket for trash dumped by an unknown person on land Core Cities owns and plans to develop. A judge dismissed the ticket.

There are other problems, too.

At Buchanan and 24th, you can hear the sound of water rushing out of a pipe in the basement of an abandoned hardware store. Neighbors said they have heard it for three years.

And the streetlights often don't work.

"It's black. Black like a blackout," said Martin's daughter Darlene, 45, who still lives in the

GALLIGAN/DFP



SOUTHWEST DETROIT: Irene Guzman helps her daughter Janet with a few finishing touches before a portrait at the Fred Mora Portrait Studio on Michigan Avenue last month. Janet was celebrating her quinceañera, a girl's 15th birthday celebration that is similar to a sweet sixteen. (KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/DFP)



FAR EAST SIDE: John Marlin of Harper Woods toasts Lou Danckaert of Eastpointe at the Cadieux Cafe in October. Danckaert had just scored two points playing featherbowling, a Belgium pastime akin to horseshoes and bocce. The bar proclaims itself as the only place to play featherbowling in the United States. (RASHAUN RUCKER/DFP)

5 favorites

Favorite surprise: New luxury homes along the Detroit River.

Second favorite surprise: New homes around 7 Mile and Chalmers.

Favorite street: Vinewood, south of West Vernor in southwest Detroit.

Favorite art: Graffiti under the West Grand Boulevard exit on I-94.

Favorite neighborhoods: Corktown, southwest Detroit and near west side.

Bill McGraw

The series

TODAY

Where the old meets the new

Near where the Ford and Jeffries freeways meet, thinly stretched services have led residents to hold their neighborhoods together on their own.

• [Click here to read this installment](#)

MONDAY

Blight creeps into best areas

neighborhood.

Despite the hassles, Campbell remains optimistic.

"This whole area is going to be totally renovated," Campbell said. "By 2021, there will be no more substandard housing."

Renewal spreads, as does decay

What's happening around I-96 and I-94 is happening across Detroit, from the area around Ste. Anne's church near the Ambassador Bridge to the corner of Mack and Alter, next to Grosse Pointe. New homes in every price range are rising. New neighborhoods are being born while some of the old ones are being resuscitated.

Some 5,000 units of housing have been built since 2000. According to a report by Comerica Bank, the development investment in Detroit from 1997 to 2007 grew to \$29.5 billion. Most of that activity is located downtown, in Midtown and along the riverfront, but construction and renovation have become common in a number of neighborhoods.

Yet decay continues to spread, and the revenue-strapped city is struggling to perform basic city services, from answering police calls to picking up trash, and the mortgage crisis puts even more blocks at risk. A surprising number of corners were even missing street signs.

Here's another example:

When you drive down St. Jean Avenue, toward the Detroit River on the east side, you pass a chemical processing plant at Freud and see the old Detroit Edison plant.

Suddenly, a new subdivision appears -- Morgan Waterfront Estates, with big, luxury homes that start at \$700,000.

When the developer, Jerome Morgan, a former plumber, dedicated the homes in September, the mayor showed up, underscoring the significance of someone reinventing a gritty industrial neighborhood.

Poignantly, right outside the gates of the new subdivision is a fire hydrant with a yellow sign hanging from its side. It reads: "Out of Service."

Travel the city and you will see plenty of evidence of the fresh, new Detroit bumping up against the old Detroit of decay and dysfunction: New homes with river views across the street from abandoned houses and wild vegetation; new casino hotels with expensive rooms within sight of broken streetlights and people sleeping under freeway bridges; insect-ridden piles of bulk trash stinking up neighborhoods of tidy old bungalows.

The city, in other words, is a supersized contradiction. Conditions can go from gilded to barren by turning a corner.

Some neighborhoods are undeniably stronger than they have been in decades: Southwest Detroit, energized by Hispanic immigration, has street life, a big-city feel and, with its *carnicerias*, *supermercados*, *taquerias* and *panaderias*, West Vernor has become the city's most viable commercial street.

Yet even in one of Detroit's most vibrant communities, there are problems with crime, poverty and gutted buildings.

The best known success story, of course, is the T-shaped area of downtown, Midtown and the riverfront. Next year, people will move into the historic Book-Cadillac Hotel's \$1-million condos. The announcement in November that Quicken Loans would move its headquarters and 4,000 employees downtown emphasized the central business district's re-energized renaissance dreams.

The state of many neighborhoods, on the other hand, seems increasingly precarious, and blight appears to be creeping into new areas.

There were signs of distress -- like boarded-up homes -- in such classic, upwardly mobile neighborhoods as Palmer Woods, Sherwood Forest, the University District, Rosedale Park and East English Village. These communities find themselves struggling with a relatively unusual number of empty and deteriorating houses and the problems that accompany them -- crime, squatters, scrappers and fires.

"There are no pockets of stability left," said George Galster, a Palmer Woods resident and professor of urban affairs at Wayne State University who is a national expert on neighborhoods. "The middle and upper-middle-class neighborhoods of Detroit are being threatened much more in the last two years than in the past."

Reputation vs. reality

Detroit has a mythic reputation for reasons both good and bad: Its post-industrial bleakness, its music,

English Village and Rosedale Park

From North Rosedale Park on the west side to East English Village on the east, Detroit's best neighborhoods are fighting decay.

• [Click here to read this installment](#)

TUESDAY

Detroit's creative side lends hand

Gotta have art. Drive the streets and you'll see the city has an energetic, creative class that spreads color, whimsy and provocation across the landscape.

WEDNESDAY

Nature reclaims urban wasteland

Construction waste sits dumped for years. Gradually, grass, weeds and trees take over, transforming the piles into green mounds.

THURSDAY

Detroiters' spirit keeps city going

The streets around Lenox and Averhill on the far southeast side is a Detroit in miniature. Luxury homes are rising on the edge of a proud, struggling neighborhood.

Download the map



• [Driving Detroit: Impressions of the city \(PDF\)](#)

The Driving Detroit team



Motor City Journal columnist Bill McGraw had help from a team of staff members to document the sights and sounds of Detroit. Front row, from left: photographers Hugh Grannum and Kimberly P. Mitchell. Second row, from left: photographers Mary Schroeder, Mandi Wright, Patricia Beck, Regina H. Boone, Susan Tusa and Amy Leang. Third row, from left: Deputy Director of Photography and Video Kathy Kieliszewski; page designer Tim Good; Assistant Managing Editor/Technology A.J. Hartley; Graphics Director Eric Millikin; project editor James G. Hill; photographers William Archie and Kathleen Galligan. Back row, from left: Deputy Director of Digital Media/Presentation Brian Todd; graphic artist Kofi Myler; columnist/reporter Bill McGraw; photographers Rashaun Rucker and Romain Blanquart. Not pictured: copy editors Dan Austin and Jim Rogers, photographer Eric Seals and videographer Brian Kaufman.

its blackness, its spirit. Earlier this month, the New York Times put Detroit on a list of places to visit in 2008. In November, a report resurrected an old problem, crime, and anointed Detroit the nation's most dangerous city.

But there was nothing scary about the city I drove through. It was peaceful and almost like a small town.

I mostly saw people simply living their lives: Watering the lawn, unloading groceries, playing catch with a football and talking to neighbors. Many people smiled or nodded amicably as I rolled down their street.

Kids rode fancy bikes at Appoline and Pembroke one day. An older couple at Ashton and Curtis, played cards under a tree on one of summer's hottest afternoons. A family at Sussex and St. Martin put up a banner praising their graduating daughter, Jewel. A man on Mansfield painted his curb white.

Along an eviscerated stretch of Linwood, a middle-aged man lay on the sidewalk, his arms stretched upward, apparently drunk. Two women stepped off a bus and walked toward him. They helped him stand; they steadied him; they walked him south on Linwood, past graffiti that said, "One love."

On Cloverlawn near Cortland, a young man walked down the street with a heavy-duty dolly and jokingly tried to persuade a young woman to hop on. She reacted as if he was making a comment about her weight, and hit him with her purse, laughing.

While a few people offered to get me high, and occasionally scrappers boldly dismantled awnings and carried pipes down streets in broad daylight, I saw no major wrongdoing -- unless you consider it a crime to hang purple awnings on a traditional colonial, or place a statue of a baboon in your front window.

But I also saw the manifestation of concern about crime: Razor wire, bricked-up windows, Plexiglas shields, window bars, alarms, guard dogs and street memorials to victims of violence. Lots of residents, including Cardinal Adam Maida, live in private, gated communities; their homes surrounded by fences or elaborate barriers made of brick and wrought iron.

Vitality but also apathy

On some streets, I saw crowds of young men hanging around, killing time. They are southeast Michigan's black proletariat, the people Kilpatrick likely was thinking of in October when he said the city has plenty of jobs, but too few residents who want to "get off their porches" and take responsibility for their lives.

But I saw virtually no places advertising that they were hiring.

One hot afternoon, a woman on Mack Avenue licked her lips as I drove by. She wore tight pants and straddled a bike, so I took her gesture as that international symbol of friendship for money.

I kept driving. But when I looked in the rear-view mirror, I saw her pedaling furiously, chasing my company car.

I accelerated.

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