

A Tale of Three Cities

Arguably, the *best of times* is now, the *worst of times* as well, but the *grandest of times* – they’re long gone. The City was, and is, all those times – times that stir my imagination with thoughts, memories, and emotions. Causing me concern and wonder. But why?

You emailed me two years ago, in August, 2012: “*What’s up with Detroit?*” Attached, a New York Times article of a blown-out, bombed-out, rust-belt city - Detroit – former city of dreams – Car Dreams - *The Big Three*. That article was one of many you sent over the course of the next few years. And it caused me to wonder - *What IS the big deal with Detroit? Why Detroit? Constantly Detroit!?* I mean, the *Times*, after all - all that *big* coverage, *big* photos, *big* color!?! Month after month, even week after week.

So, is Detroit big now? Still the “Big Three”? “*Not them!*” railed my high school buddy, lifetime GM worker, now retired, living on GM stock “gone south,” 18 months prior. The smile on his face, the bounce in his step, gone. Replaced by a vacant stare, and the sores he picks at on his arms.

Your email coincided with a summer evening in Michigan in 2012, at a backyard picnic of Medicare guys, with big-ass RVs, unable to afford the gas, literally picking at the sores on their arms - sores that weren’t there three summers ago - in 2009 - *before* the crash, when they smiled, laughed, and talked about where in Florida they were wintering; “admiring” each other’s RVs, with slide-out living rooms and bedrooms, metaphorically kicking tires (and Obama), one-upping each other. It was one of those “mine is bigger than yours” gatherings, with no need to actually say it.

Besides RVs, they owned ‘Vettes, Impalas, and Humvees, and 2, 3, or 4-car garages. And the same theme - ever since high school, even earlier - was heard: “*Mine is bigger than yours.*” Inferring *Bigger is Better*, no matter the commodity, the accessories, or the appendages. And it was always the same with Detroit pride, and the Big Three output: *Bigger Is Better!* That’s what I saw and heard growing up - the pervading context and subtext of everything Motor City.

And I heard it at other gatherings, in other styles, on other subjects – U.S. foreign policy, our military, America’s war-winning ways, and eventually, politics. And no matter the age, it still seemed like some great high school championship powerhouse braggadocio.

That picnic in 2012 was near Thirteen Mile Road, in Royal Oak, Michigan, five miles north of rapper Eminem’s *Eight Mile*, the northern limit of Detroit – the Motor City - Motown - now *Slow-town* - a very black city, in the sense of race and mood - now blood-running-red, in the sense of finance.

The picnic was definitely not in black Detroit, but in very white Oakland County – and, by 2014, a very flourishing Oakland County. An Oakland County whose manager and myriad residents would be happy to see their big neighbor to the south slide off the map, for all its sad condition and troubles it’s caused them, their county, and the State of Michigan. Oakland County, where many residents boast of the decades since they’ve last been downtown (Lions and Tigers games excepted). And I’m sure many of the other dozen suburbs ringing Detroit boast the same.

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Let me explain my title, *A Tale of Three Cities*. To me, there are *three* Detroits. The “*Best of Times*” is today’s city. The “*Worst of Times*” is also today’s city. But the “*Grandest of Times*” – it’s the city long gone. The *grandest of times* is the past remembered – nostalgia. Think Pogues, Shiltoes, and The Big Red Machine.

By the *best of times*, I simply mean building and re-building; innovation and investments; creativity and inspiration; energy and vision; the right people, the right opportunities, the right balance of economics; all at the right time.

Sounds like “Chamber of Commerce,” doesn’t it? Campaign talk.

By the *worst of times*, I mean poverty of spirit and neighborhoods - poverty of infrastructure, ideas, hope, means, and abilities - poverty reflected in shuttered factories and abandoned, tattered, or destroyed neighborhoods; gutted and disconnected communities; scattered and clustered pockets of citizens of meager means, isolated and distant from the *best of times* that is at hand elsewhere.

The *grandest of times* would be Detroit's golden years, with its innovations, innovators, and booms that led up to its successes, its life, its reputation - all memories and nostalgia now.

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But hold on! You asked about that haunting Times photo of a vacant Victorian framed-house falling in on itself. It's once fashionable, densely populated neighborhood now vanished. The house perhaps foreclosed, abandoned, maybe torched on Halloween Eve - "Devils' Night" it's called.

Far fewer houses now, and the lots are mostly vacant. And the vacant lots now spread to entire blocks - and the blocks now spread to vast acres - acres of high weeds, entire square miles of weeds, where once-neat shrubs grow to tall shaggy trees - where the scattered, few blackened houses suggest rotted teeth.

The once thriving neighborhoods of Blacks, Appalachians, Poles, Germans, Jews, and others in this vast flat land of Detroit, are now half-blighted, abandoned, or vanished. Add to the landscape, the stripped carcasses of long-abandoned factory hulks - like the original Model-T and Packard plants - lonely ancient remains, marooned in Detroit's weeds - desiccated symbols of corporate and civic dereliction and long-eroding economies.

These conditions represent the *worst of times*. You can only feel or judge them if you slowly drive up and down the streets. For instance, those running directly off the miles of Woodward Avenue, the main boulevard running from the suburbs in thriving Oakland County all the way down to Detroit's compact center - the "Downtown."

Surprisingly, you can still see pleasant, shaded rows of homes revealing a healthy, attractive sense of family neighborhood. Some streets and boulevards are even quite grand and impressive. However, driving beyond these viable pockets, all such pleasantries peter out, the forlornness ramps up, and quickly turns to desolation.

Shockingly, beginning at Woodward itself, along many streets abutting the still healthy, attractive family neighborhoods, the all too-pervasive weeds choke rotted hulks, with their broken or boarded windows, collapsed porches, gaping roofs, and toppled chimneys. As you drive these derelict streets, dazed and depressed, you wonder: Were there once real neighborhoods here? Only when you spy scores of driveway pads, all disappearing into deep weeds, do you realize how many closely packed homes there once were.

The tall weeds are everywhere. Perhaps it's only Nature reclaiming its own, reclaiming what once was, before the Boom – before the thriving success and expansion of the American Dream – before the Model-T and the assembly line, and all it symbolized.

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A hundred years ago, Detroit's vastness was on its way to being filled with brick and frame houses, apartments, tenements and mansions. Henry Ford was implementing his innovative assembly line and dreams of mass production, and his Model-T, in every color of black. His new office and factory acreage in Highland Park - a city within the City of expanding Detroit - was only a mile up Woodward Avenue from his home in the now historic Chicago-Boston Boulevard district.

Though Eli Whitney influenced Ford by pioneering interchangeable parts, particularly in muskets, Ford studied the efficiency of hog butchering. He conceived his modern assembly line by reversing that deconstruction process, achieving mass production of automobiles faster and more expansively than anything previous. He doubled the going factory pay from 2.50 to \$5 a day, easily attracting eager workers, who could then afford his new cars, and the new frame bungalows going up block after block, mile after mile. They soon filled them with furniture and appliances bought on the innovative installment plan. Ford conceived micro to macro, with hutzpah to spare.

Not to be outdone, the other automakers followed suit. And all over steadily-expanding Detroit, small shops built parts that combined with other parts, built in other shops, that were put together in sub-assemblies in yet more shops, then

trucked to Ford, or Chevrolet, or Dodge, or Willys, or Studebaker, or Packard, or De Soto, or Nash, or Cadillac final assembly plants to become cars. Coiled steel and pig iron, engines and bodies, tires and brakes all flowed into the city, across the city, and out into satellite cities with their own assembly plants. This area of the Midwest became criss-crossing automobile supply as the country expanded into criss-cross demand. And Detroit prospered, and prospered even more, and grew, and grew even more, developing empty acreage and annexing neighbors, becoming a giant of 139 square miles – the size of Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston combined.

Meanwhile, Henry Ford, not to be at anyone's mercy, developed South American rubber plantations, acquired copper and iron mines, forests for timber, and shipping lines on the Great Lakes to haul his ore to his huge new refineries, steel mills, and stamping plants at River Rouge – “The Rouge,” downriver a mile from central Detroit. No one would ever control him, his company, or his resources.

Henry and his close friends, Tom Edison and Harvey Firestone, would camp together and discuss business and the world while roughing it, driving out into the woods over rutted dirt roads in Henry's specially outfitted RV of a Model-T. Henry and his friends dreamed and talked of how to remake the world in their image and philosophy, especially Henry. Henry even built his own little town of reconstructed history – Greenfield Village – an authentic collection of historic buildings recreating the quaintness of turn of the century life, from Edison's small lab hauled from New Jersey, to the Wright Brothers' bicycle shop from Dayton, to a stone church from the Cotswolds. Henry was God-fearing and practical. He re-assembled his one-room schoolhouse to teach select students the basics. They each received a new Model-T upon graduation. And in the much larger building elsewhere on the grounds, he built his indoor museum displaying hundreds of trains, planes, and automobiles, and thousands of allied products and objects that sprung from the genius of modern American production, gumption, and excellence.

East of Detroit, Pittsburgh steel blasted, poured, rolled, and shipped tons, feeding the automakers' voracious appetites. Big oil and concrete joined hands for new roads and bridges, requiring more and more output, consuming and transporting to the growing industries and consumers. It seemed almost a self-

perpetuating, ever-increasing, industrial-consumer economic engine, requiring an expanded infrastructure of every kind, from utilitarian to educational, from aesthetic to cultural to recreational, to employ, supply, and support its burgeoning, thriving workforce.

And, with the innovative auto industry, Detroit expanded financially and geographically throughout the 20s. Then came the panic and bust of the Great Depression, and my Welsh grandfather put down his carpenter's toolbox that built a street of small bungalows in Ferndale, Michigan, a mile north of Detroit's city limit of Eight Mile, and my grandmother took in boarders and cooked meals in the basement coal furnace to save gas. And their two daughters – my mother and my aunt - unable to afford college, went to work to help support the family, eventually working as secretaries to auto execs and magnates.

And while isolationist Charles Lindberg urged us to keep out of war in Europe, and Father Coughlin broadcast anti-Semitic, anti-Negro diatribes from his Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, the Japanese attacked early on Sunday morning, December 7th, drawing us into a revenge against both east and west; in turn, prompting the dreaded/despised Roosevelt's socialist mandate, converting all private industry in Detroit - and every other industrial center - to total war production.

And Detroit exploded into more jobs and factories than ever, demanding greater populations of workers, families, and supporters. The model of Henry Ford's coordinated mass production and assembly techniques, using the newest innovations and technologies of the 30s and 40s, transformed the U.S. into the uncontested manufacturing giant of the world. The City of Detroit boomed and expanded, expanded and boomed. Three shifts a day putting out record numbers of tanks and jeeps and bombers well-exceeded Roosevelt's targets, and overwhelmed the Japanese and Germans. Though, at its critical core, heroic men fought by the millions, it would be the unlimited supplies of industry and coordinated logistics that would insure ultimate victory against German equipment and fanatical Japanese sacrifice.

Negroes and Appalachians from the South streamed up to crowd into the older neighborhoods and oldest housing stock, as the more prospering workers moved to newer and better neighborhoods. Thousands of cars, as well streetcars and buses, brought workers to the factories and offices. Some neighborhoods, tightly ethnic, bound to Old World ways, remained intact, working in their neighborhood factories. Hamtramck, an exceedingly proud Polish working-class neighborhood, surrounded by Detroit's east central side, had Dodge Motors and other factories to benefit from its ethnic loyalty and substantial skills.

Racism and prejudice abounded as neighborhoods and people of different colors and cultures were wary, jealous, and often hateful of the other. Violence was normally capped but occasionally erupted, with stories of Negro riots passed down the years, frightening succeeding generations, from old white men to little white boys. And the majority of Negroes were - socially, educationally, economically - kept at or near the bottom for years.

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Finally, the war was ended by one "Fat Man" and one "Little Boy" - modern science and technology's first atomic bombs. The soldier boys-now-men came home, some terribly wounded and others worse, sequestered in VA hospitals located way far away, it seemed. And little boys in vacant lots played Japs and Germans, with their stick guns, helmets and army surplus canteens, until the new war-not-a-war in Korea and Pork Chop Hill replaced Japs in our comic books with look-alike Chinese Commies in tennis shoes, padded coats, and earflap hats, brandishing Russian machine guns, who suicide-charged by the thousands the few grimacing GIs and Marines firing water-cooled machine guns in fox holes till they ran out of ammunition, and had to fight hand-to-hand trench knife warfare. While overheard, shark-like F-86 Sabre jets shot down Russian-made North Korean-Red Chinese Migs-15s , 30-to-1, in Saturday newsreels.

And in Detroit, in the 50s, war or no war, we couldn't wait till September when the new car models came out. We contorted to peek through paper-covered

windows to see the new dealer models a day or week early, burning with the same intensity and excitement of Christmas Eve.

And any boy who was a boy knew every make and every model and argued about the best brands, reflecting parental choice, defending parental honor, over a Ford, a Chevy, or a Plymouth. And God forbid your parent bought a Nash or other stylistic dud. But if there was a big Chrysler or a Buick, a Cadillac or a Lincoln in the family, even a relative's, you were special. And if a convertible, Corvette, or T-Bird, you were God.

New cars were wondrous – Detroit was creating a fantasies that were unsurpassed 'til Disneyland. As us kids grew into Little League, and dances with girls, and girls grew breasts, Detroit grew fins – big fins, vertical fins, horizontal fins, and scallops, and air scoops, all with curving, slanting, sloping lines. Chrome became heavier, more ostentatious, gaudier. And color schemes showed up in twos and threes. The interiors came rolled and tufted and multicolored in leather, real and simulated. Chrome knobs abounded, multiplying for heaters, radios, air conditioners, and power seats. Bucket seats appeared, copied from Europe. And we argued: how could T-Birds, Corvettes, or big Indy cars not stand against the Europeans? Then some of us began to eye the odd MG, Jaguar, Austin Healy or gull-winged Mercedes that occasionally appeared in Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, or Grosse Pointe, three exclusive suburbs where the rich kids lived.

Imports from Japan in those days seemed like cheap tinny “toys,” and we laughed. And “Made in Japan” was nothing substantial 'til transistor radios and Sony TVs appeared. But certainly not cars, Detroiters claimed.

The wild exuberance and experimentation of the auto stylists - the designer gods to any artistic kid - manifested itself in the originality and audacity of the new curves of the front and back windshields, the cadence of chromed grill teeth, the lyrical lines of sculpted chrome strips dividing coral paint from cream, black from yellow, red from white. And bigger was always better – bigger, longer, wider - and more of anything was even better. We laughed at small cars, like the Crosley and the Metropolitan. But soon the Volkswagen bug became the new favorite. I didn't know the word “cachet” then, but the VW had it – the ads *and* the car. The car wasn't all

that great to ride in, but the ads were way cool and made you want one. That's when I became aware of the influence and power of sleek, cool, hip ads, and the term "Madison Avenue."

Then, while we were checking out the new '57 Chevies, the Russians put Sputnik into orbit, and our invincibility exploded. To regain supremacy, every smart kid immediately attacked his science and math with the greatest fervor.

But quickly came humiliation and discouragement, from the continual failure to launch a grapefruit-size satellite more than a few hundred wobbly feet above Cape Canaveral. That is, until Werner Von Braun put one atop a modified German V-2 - the Redstone - and sent it into orbit, followed by a monkey and Alan Shepherd into sub-orbit, and, finally, John Glenn circling the earth. And then John Kennedy patriotically proclaimed, "We will put a man on the moon by the end of the decade." He never lived to see it, but the U.S. did get to the moon ahead of schedule. So now America was on top once again - Number One against the Soviets, against anyone. And the new aerospace and computer technology eclipsed Detroit's smokestack industry.

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Meanwhile, throughout the 50s and 60s - early Cold War years - Detroit battled the trade unions, that were out to wreck the American economy, or certainly that of American industry, or at very least, The Big Three. Jimmy Hoffa and his United Auto Workers took on The Big Three in contract talks that always deteriorated into fights in the papers, and arguments between families and neighbors. Besides, a lot of unions were infiltrated by Communists, out to ruin our car companies, and America, many said. Even my mom - especially my mom.

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When I was sixteen, I worked weekends in my uncle's yard. He occasionally loaned me his metallic blue convertible to drive home and return in the morning. It was a wide track Pontiac Grand Prix with bucket seats. I looked twelve, was short,

and the car seemed a good twenty feet long. Driving home with the top down, I felt more like Macaulay Culkin, than a cool dude. I still can't figure why I was never stopped?

Then for Senior Prom, my Uncle loaned me his block-long, four-door, black Cadillac Sedan de Ville. (He didn't think my mother's four year old Rambler station wagon befitting.) The Cadillac was even bigger and longer than the Pontiac, its fins up to my shoulders. And I looked even younger in my rented, over-sized dinner jacket. Adding even more quirkiness, I double-dated with Jivad, the Iranian exchange student, who was not allowed to put his hands on a steering wheel, but couldn't keep them off his buxom date, once she'd batted her eyes and inhaled.

On weekends, we cruised Detroit – actually, the suburbs – specifically, along Woodward, from 10 Mile up to 19 and back, endlessly, with slow-trolling detours through three drive-ins *en route*. Serious cruising still goes on in August, drawing 40,000 vintage cars and one-million-plus spectators, all caught up in the great frenzy known as *The Woodward Dream Cruise*. The Fonze urges you to check it out.

Meanwhile, back in the early 60s, gas was only 31¢ a gallon, and the driver would collect 50¢ from each of us. A cheeseburger and shake or a movie was extra. So, all tolled, you could actually blow 4 to \$5 on a big night.

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Then, in '74 came Carter, the oil crisis, and the Iran hostage debacle. All disasters.

You couldn't buy gas. Or if you could, the lines were blocks long. Running out of gas on the 101 near King City, in the Salinas Valley in mid-California, I had to duck and crawl under bushes to hand over \$5 for a plastic jug of illegal gas to restart our car, stranded several miles back, in the middle of the night.

Being reasonable, American Motors President George Romney, unveiled more reasonable-sized, gas-saving cars. They were understated and unexciting, plus their pedigree – Nash Rambler – was horrible, so very few people took interest. Meanwhile, Detroit continued to snub and discredit the new little Japanese imports.

Also the summer of '74 in California, my mother-in-law had a powder blue and white Corolla two-door – one of oddest looking, toy-like cars I'd ever seen. My Ford station wagon was there, and though aquamarine, it was still more manly and legit by comparison. But it sure didn't fly like that little jet of a Corolla. I chose her Toyota more often, despite its appearance - much more fun, zippy, and comfortable.

But once back in Michigan, the guys at cocktail parties, especially the older ones, and the ones in the car business, trash-talked the cheap Japanese cars. "Rusted right out." "Shitty steel, etc., etc." No, it was the opinion of one and all that Japanese cars would never touch what Detroit made. Look at the sales, look at the styles, oil crises or not, they'd say. Eventually, the Big Three did condescend to offer up a few low-profit, little economy models just to show the Japs they could do it too. And when those fizzled, they generally retorted, "We told you so." But they also pulled me aside and cracked, "Hey, son, don't be driving that VW or Volvo, or whatever the hell it is, up here in Detroit if you know what's best."

Meanwhile, at a backyard barbecue midway between Flint and Detroit, encircled by a heavy presence of Detroit cars, a cooler dude suddenly pulled a handsome new Datsun station wagon into the drive. I circled around and slid inside, into the enticing compartment of soft leather bucket seats and fascinating accessories, all in a handsome understated style. "See all this stuff," the owner gushed, "It's standard – one basic price! And power everything. Listen to this – *surround sound!*" The total effect was mesmerizing. Suddenly, to me, it was the coolest vehicle there, and not too Detroit-gaudy or ostentatious. Though its sticker price was beyond my budget, it still cost less than most vehicles at the party.

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And meanwhile, guys at that party, and other parties around the suburbs - particularly the older generation guys, the ones who'd been old enough to fight in World War II - would brag how they hadn't been downtown in 10 to 15 years. "The niggers, the slums, the riots – they tried to burn the city down in '67. Fuck 'em! Mayor's no good now. City's gone to hell. Besides, the shopping centers are all out

here, and my office is just out the expressway. Why the Hell should I go all the way downtown? And they're building the new Silverdome out here for the Lions. A guy'd have to be crazy to go downtown anymore. You heard about Gordy Conn? Beat to death outside the London Chop House, right downtown, right after the '68 World Series. Hell of a thing - niggers."

I couldn't help cringing, because Gordy Conn was a long-time friend of my mom's, and I couldn't stand the tunnel vision and insensitivity of Detroit's racism.

In the late 60s and 70s, backyard bullshit railed against blacks and their riots; slammed Rap Brown ("Violence is American as apple pie") and the Black Panthers; mocked longhairs and hippy girls with unshaved legs. But, whether you escaped the draft or not, most agreed: Vietnam was a bad deal. We grew up and grew old, and the 2000s became Bush 43, with white Oakland County mostly in favor. 9/11 was our Pearl Harbor, but then things went downhill - there was no cathartic victory or cheering liberation, only exploding IEDs and PTSD.

The crash of '09 made Oakland County seem as grim as Detroit. Then, there was *Obama*. Obama, for that group, was a tipping point. Then two of the Big Three went hat in hand, asking for bailouts. Not unlike Detroit's retired City workers, policemen, and firemen begging their pensions be kept whole, in spite of the City's shrinking population and tax base, and the increase in retirees. The Boomer population made the system top heavy; and the population and economic declines shrunk its base. And the actuarial consultants had forecast higher returns than panned out. The City went bankrupt. And made the news - lots of New York Times news.

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What impelled such an "attitude" or bias - upbringing, infatuations of success and materialism, or class arrogance? Had it been *full speed ahead America*, 'til the wake-up call of the oil embargo? - 'Til automation and robotics made vast armies of workers too expensive, unprofitable, and redundant? - 'Til a quarter century of "off-shoring" undermined our technical skills in exchange for cheap, plentiful products? - Or 'til Detroit cars just didn't cut it anymore?

Was it the world, the government, or the City itself that caused all the woes? Be careful who you ask. Because in backyards, the simple answer is: It's *the blacks* - the mayor, the police, the council, the unions, the dopers, the dealers, the this, the that - *all black*. Factual or not, it's *believed* they cause the crime, corruption, inefficiencies, and the largest urban bankruptcy in U.S. history.

Only 17% of Detroit is white and, to a large extent - in or out of the closet - racist. Has been since well before I sensed it, younger than 10. Anti-Semitic, too. That young, I sensed a palpable fear of blacks - and hate - even though we felt sorry for poor blacks, especially those whose car we'd see, broken down on Woodward Avenue, the family inside, marooned in our white suburb. Those boasts of "not going downtown in years" are fear-driven. You often hear that around Cincinnati.

Some of us went downtown. As high school seniors, we cruised lower Detroit to stare at black whores. Though mugged once in LA at a black concert, the only arms-length, inner-city stick-up I ever witnessed, was by a clean-cut white kid in a dark blue hoodie flashing a big black gun. Meanwhile, three school friends - ones with top grades, sharp clothes, and too much privilege - pursued thievery, vandalism, and stole cars for kicks. Two others tossed Molotov cocktails, set off homemade pipe bombs, and fired marbles at car windshields. I loved pranks, but I drew the line.

Recently, they even laughed about it, but would be quick to bring the hammer down on black kids doing it. Mine were friends whose family paid for their college, leading to careers, and sometimes, even the family business. Three friends were caught and given minor penalties. If black, they'd have served serious jail time, and bad futures. Though friends think racial problems are as simple as skin color, they don't think about the considerable burden and pressures of poverty. And in Detroit - 83% black - a third are mired in poverty.

In Cincinnati, with its sizeable, stable middle class black population, you cannot imagine or appreciate Detroit's poverty, without seeing it, first hand, square mile after square mile. It was the compelling reason for this paper.

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Henry Ford II staged a Detroit comeback, building the Renaissance Center in '77 along the river - a tall cluster of glass towers and a Hyatt Regency like San Francisco's. They built a monorail emulating Disneyland and the World's Fair. This modern "People Mover" would rejuvenate the city, they enthusiastically claimed, neglecting to adequately research the expense to build and maintain a monorail, compared to, say, a streetcar. Detroit and other cities already ripped theirs out and shipped them to Mexico. Their replacement - modern GM buses, with Firestone tires, burning Standard Oil diesel. Quite a conspiracy, some claimed.

But who was going downtown to ride the People Mover anyway, others argued. "White flight" to the suburbs had been going on for years, thanks to plentiful cars and expressways, affordable houses, lower taxes, cheap gas, lots of jobs, paychecks, and American Express cards.

There was still a bit of art and culture downtown - a good museum, an aspiring opera, and a regarded symphony - and ethnic enclaves that offered exotic food, music, and diversion - and pro sports that generated excitement and passion.

But still, the City was neglected and underperforming. There seemed more welfare checks than paychecks. "Get a job" was a common white refrain in the suburbs - from those that never took the time to look around, or think about the jobs and factories that had moved or closed down. "Because the goddamned unions made it too expensive," they'd curse. In a way, it was true, but hardly the entire picture.

Meanwhile, the Japanese cars - Toyota, Honda, Nissan (formerly Datsun) - and the German - Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes, and Audi - and the Swedish - Volvo, SAAB - began to sell a bit more and then a lot more, to yuppies, to intellectuals, to Easterners, and to Californians especially, but still not Detroiters. To Detroiters, the foreign car buyers were eggheads, liberals, and kooks, so what did it matter? Miles per gallon wasn't important, power was, size was - size always was. Small foreign cars were inferior, period. They were made of shitty steel, they fell apart, they rusted, cost a lot to repair, and the styling didn't change often enough, .

These were the refrains, in and around Detroit for years, all while the foreign competition made greater and greater inroads.

One day, the price of a Mercedes increased 10 to \$20,000 a car, becoming an instant status symbol. Then Toyota introduced the beautiful Lexus SUV, instantly creating the “luxury SUV” concept, as Ford soldiered on with its stolid Explorer, unchanged for years.

Meanwhile, sleek Euro-styling became more popular, and foreign competition reverse-engineered many of Detroit’s ideas. Ironically, while Detroit continued its stylistic aesthetic, many foreign competitors hired American design studios. Foreign companies often reflected higher degrees of craftsmanship and technology. They also seemed to be more sensitive to urban space limitations, higher fuel costs, and natural resource depletion. Thus, they appealed more to regions like California, than, obviously, Detroit.

The distance and isolation that had always protected America from foreign attack, had also isolated many of its corporations and public from adequately evaluating foreign competition, trends, and culture. Americans had become too over-confident and complacent in their perceived number one position.

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And men in the suburbs wondered why it was their business to take an interest in a failing city, especially if they didn’t work or visit down there. The City’s bad fortune wasn’t their fault. The poor weren’t their responsibility. They’d moved to the suburbs for the good life. Others could follow, if they wanted to. But that is not always true.

Many Detroiters - the survivors - stick around in the brave or resigned colonies and holdout-neighborhoods I’ve described. They work one or two low-paying jobs, send their kids to school, hold their family together, and sometimes plant small civic gardens, and sometimes get their picture taken, and their urban story told. Even in the New York Times. The majority work in the suburbs where

jobs are, shops in the suburbs where stores are, and fills gas tank where it's safe to leave keys in the ignition. But that doesn't mean they can afford to move there.

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All this prompted me to tell the story of the *Grandest Times* and the *Worst Times*. So now you're wondering about the *Best Times*. On top of Detroit's disastrous heap of economic failures and social troubles, how can there be a *Best of Times*?

It's very simple: when real estate hits rock bottom, but skilled workers can be attracted, you can develop and generate business and employment. And when you create employment and housing, and transportation is good, you need amenities and necessities – shops, restaurants, services, and recreation. And if you care about aesthetics, you need to create pleasant surroundings, even beauty, and attract Culture. If you're clever, hip, visionary, and driven, you can become a force - an engine - to drive the rebirth of an entire neighborhood, town, or even city – a substantial city. That is, if you can attract resources and financing. All this may require serious promotion – serious hype. And, at this time, *there is no greater hype than the Motor City's hype*.

I wondered, at the beginning of my story, who or what was behind the nonstop hype of Detroit. My wife thought it was basic journalism. But press agents - those inveiglers of PR – aren't journalists. So who or what is behind Detroit's hidden "press agency?" I suspected the Big Three. But thinking back, I can't remember the Big Three doing anything cooperatively.

So, I asked the backyard guys. "Dan Gilbert," they answered. "Who's Dan Gilbert?" I asked. "The Cleveland Cavaliers owner - Quicken Loan's boss – he beautified the Downtown boulevards for the All-Star Game - built a hotel-casino - and a few other things we can't remember," they all chimed.

"Bingo!" I thought.

Then, one Sunday, I picked up a New York Time Magazine and "Double Bingo!"

But the backyard guys' list fell far short. In the Times article, there was much more ascribed to, and accomplished by, the dynamic Gilbert, in the 10-page feature, shared with a team of two young black entrepreneurs, re-developing a small section of the City where they'd grown up.

The cover shot revealed the impressive heart of Detroit. Inside, a double-page shot, from high in the Renaissance Center, showed a panorama where most of Gilbert's 60 nearby properties are located; beyond, the spread-out City receding to the horizon. Another large color shot showed a close-up of his impressive modern Quicken Loans headquarters in the City center.

Typically, the redevelopment I see in Cincinnati, Columbus, or St. Louis happens piecemeal. I was not prepared for Detroit's massive core renewal. Especially after reading multiple stories on blight, and driving through the City's dead and dying neighborhoods. The scale and condition of renovated Downtown office buildings and handsome new ones astounded me. And, as we drove along, the size and vibrancy of the noontime crowds excited me. Before the tour, I anticipated disappointment, I came away much impressed.

Though nearby, the new residential town houses, apartments, and condos are pleasant and handsome, the neighborhoods are only moderately built up. But new residences and amenities may soon rise along the planned Woodward light rail line, past the large hospital complex, to Wayne State University, and the highly regarded Detroit Art Institute. Detroit intends to re-capture some of the 60% of its working population, who commute to jobs and shopping outside the City.

* * *

What has Dan Gilbert's strategy been, besides gambling that Detroit's bust is his golden opportunity?

Initially, the Quicken Loans headquarters was located in the Farmington suburb. He built a new headquarters Downtown and required all employees to live in the City; then he rented them new housing, but subsidized their rents. He bought or leased 60 properties along the Downtown Woodward corridor at bargain

basement prices, redeveloped and leased them out, thereby growing the working population and businesses, and, in the process, his own income.

His investment funds flow out in one direction, to acquisition and rehab, and flow back from another, as rental income. Either directly or indirectly, whatever Gilbert acquires and rehabs, supports and supplies - housing, business, employment, transportation, amenities, or recreation and entertainment - creates a circular-flowing economic engine; drawing money from one pocket and returning it, increased, to the other; in the process, providing the means and structure for many Detroiters to work, live, profit, and enjoy. In a word, he is “growing” the City by growing its economy, while growing his own.

* * *

I’m not an economist, but the dots I connected and arrows I drew tracing Dan Gilbert’s strategy, made a fascinating flow chart suggesting perpetual motion and, seemingly, mimicking his own perpetual energy.

Is it any wonder that Detroit’s significant, ongoing journalistic coverage – so ably collected, dissected, and balanced by the Times – might be engineered by the same person who created such a dynamic economic engine for the new Motor City?

Gilbert is a gambler who calculates cost, evaluates risk, estimates gain, then bets on the spread. Is it any wonder he owns four casinos? As they say, the house never loses. We are all hoping Detroit, and Dan Gilbert, draw a full house.

c. Paul R Shortt, The Literary Club, Cincinnati, November 3, 2014

