Say Nice Things About Detroit: Private Visions and Public Debate

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"American cities change faster than their inhabitants do, and it is the inhabitants who outlive the cities..."[1]

INTRODUCTION

Detroit as an urban phenomenon is particularly interesting and perplexing. Its advanced state of decay and defiance of renewal have been widely and dramatically documented in the press, so much so that it has become a poster child for the decline of the American city after Richard Plunz observed that "Detroit is Everywhere."[2] Hidden in the midst of the analysis of Detroit's rise and fall however, are several responses to its devastated physical fabric which are at the same time troubling and touching in their attempt to replace urban utility with poetry and restore urban fabric with art or archaeology.

Camilo Jose Vergara's American Acropolis proposal and Tyree Guyton's "Heidelberg Project" are both aimed at restoring vitality to the most bewildering zone of space in Detroit and cities like it: that ever-expanding zone of abandoned structures and vacant land which is equally dysfunctional as the private space it formerly was and as the accidental public space it has become. Vergara's proposal for "an urban Monument Valley" calls for a moratorium on the razing of the downtown's silent and forlorn pre-Depression skyscrapers and the creation of a twelve block national park of sublime ruins. Guyton's project a self-termed "museum park," has transformed an eastside neighborhood by appropriating vacant houses and lots as the starting point for everchanging assemblages of trash in the name of art. Both extremely controversial, these projects drew swift public dismissal for their embrace of ruins, symbols of impotence and failure to a city already reeling from decades of negative criticism.

Underlying the controversies are true critical responses which made acute observations and insightful propositions in an effort to restore meaning to the urban condition. These projects warrant examination not only for the valuable debate they triggered in Detroit, but also for the questions they raise as to the role of culture and theory in the redefinition of all American cities. In terms of culture: how do cities and the institutions respond to the shift from private to public space as buildings become abandoned? To what extent can individuals apply private visions to the ever-expanding public realm? What is the role of citizens in the determination of public space? In terms of theory: how do these projects relate to emerging urban strategies being posited by architects who have turned their attention away from new, discrete objects towards existing urban fragments and the space between them? How mindful are these theories of the complex urban psyche which changes at a far different, i.e. slower, rate that the physical environment?

THE AMERICAN ACROPOLIS PROPOSAL

"Is this a collection of irrelevant symbols, icons of a dead civilization? Their powerful forms in constant flux indicate that we are in the presence of something momentous."[3]

Camilo Jose Vergara, a New York journalist and photographer, began making observations and photographs of Detroit in 1992 as research for his book *The New American Ghetto*. Like others who confront Detroit beyond its image, he was appalled by the extent of the city's socioeconomic problems and its advanced state of decay. In soliciting views and opinions from Detroiters, he recorded anger, blame, and resignation but these sentiments were underscored with a surprising toughness to survive. "People are running, there is nothing to do here, there is no jobs here," said a retired carpenter, but he quickly followed, "I am not leaving. I am a Detroiter." A university official, when asked why black families who can afford to move choose not to leave the predominantly black city answered with an analogy of a poor family being left a large mansion, "They cannot heat it or paint it or keep up the grounds...but as long as they stay, they prevent the fixtures from being stolen and the pipes from freezing. If they manage to preserve it, it would be for those who stay."[4]

Vergara found that the persistence of the city's inhabitants was echoed in the forsaken, but struggling urban land-

scape. Detroit's physical environment both contributed to and resulted from the despair he had recorded in his interviews, yet he was moved by its evocative power. "The powerful spell of this magnificent skeleton city by the river forces us to go beyond the issues of blame, anger, and hopelessness; to ask questions about our national goals. Visits to Washington and New York City, our imperial capitals, should be followed by a visit to Detroit, a place for reflection."[5]

Vergara focused his interest on Detroit's downtown where he was struck by the concentration of 1920's skyscrapers built during the city's boom. He found scores of these structures empty or suffering from threateningly low occupancy, the result of tenants having been lured to newer downtown buildings or, in most cases, to the burgeoning suburbs. He also noted that cottage industry of salvagers had piked many structures clean, thus hastening the downward spiral of decay and decline. Yet Vergara was somehow drawn to the sheer beauty and sublime power of these shadowy structures which had outlived their former uses and which stood silent waiting for salvation or salvage crew, whichever came first.

Within Detroit's current socioeconomic climate, the fate of these structures was obvious to Vergara. There was much more commercial space than was needed in the downtown and existing businesses predictably chose newer buildings clamoring for their leases. The viability of fringe buildings had to be weighed by their owners against the biggest business in the core: surface parking. But with lots already blanketing the downtown, many of them parked to well below capacity, even this had become less of an option. Most telling of the future of the core skyscrapers was a 1994 recommendation to the mayor by the Land Use Task Force calling for the demolition of "structures which are functionally obsolete and have no viable reuse."[6] Ironically, it was the lack of private and public resources for demolition that saved the buildings long enough for them to serve as Vergara's muses.

In 1995 Vergara made a somewhat quixotic but not entirely naive proposal in *Metropolis* magazine calling for a twelve square-block area in the downtown core to be declared a national park. He reasoned that the pre-Depression skyscrapers could be stabilized at a far lower cost than demolition or renovation and could be left standing as ruins, allowed to persist in the splendor of continual decay. He offered the proposal, which he called the American Acropolis, as " a tonic for our imagination, as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory,"[7] and a "memorial to a disappearing civilization."[8]

Not surprisingly, Vergara's proposal angered many Detroiters and was seen as an easy insult and a cheap shot by an outsider. Residents viewed the ruins as evidence of the city's persistent social and economic problems and as the root cause for Detroit's tarnished image. Business owners insisted that the ruins deflated commercial property values and inflated crime. In the ruins neither group could see power and allure, only neglect. "It's an insult to America and to what America stands for," said the owner of a building encompassed in Vergara's plan.[9] "Buildings represent an economic structure, not a romantic evocation of the past," responded an architectural historian. "Buildings have to be retrofitted for another use that creates a tax base and produces some form of employment," noted a journalist.[10]

Dismayed by the inability of Detroiters to look beyond the negative associations of ruins, worried by their insistence on waiting for businesses to return, troubled by the ease with which the city would raze the skyscrapers given the resources, Vergara argued for both the poetry *and* pragmatism of his proposal:

> "A memorial to a disappearing urban civilization is a realistic alternative. Costing little in comparison with the expense of rehabilitating or demolishing the old downtown, a ruins park would occupy only a miniscule fraction of the city's idle space, estimated at more than fifteen square miles. Not a firm basis on which to rebuild the local economy, but it preserves a wonderful space, a key to understanding an essential part of our recent past. If visitors come, new signs of life might appear with them."[11]

THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT

> "See the rhythm? It's positive and negative, it's got a beat. That's what it's all about."[12]

An interesting counterpart to Vergara's proposal began ten years earlier on the eastside of Detroit, although several important distinctions must be noted. First, the project targeted a residential neighborhood rather than the downtown. Second, this project was actually implemented beginning in 1986 and continues to this day. And finally, the response was provided by an insider rather than an outsider, a native son who developed his vision in the very place it took shape.[13]

Tyree Guyton, an African-American artist, was dismayed by the abandoned houses on Heidelberg, the street where he grew up. Furthermore, he was infuriated by the use of thes houses by crack cocaine dealers and the inability of the city to curtail this threat to the neighborhood. He responded as any artist would, through his art. Guyton appropriated the vacant houses and claimed them as the starting point in giant assemblages which he created with found objects hauled in with the help of his wife and grandfather. Guyton's interest in obsolete everyday objects, trash to many of his neighbors, began as a young boy when given castoff items by his mother to reassemble as art projects. In the Heidelberg Project, this palette was a conscious decision as a mature artist to give new life and meaning to domestic elements.[14]

With the Baby Doll House, Guyton's third work, he made two major developments which would figure prominently in subsequent additions to the project. The first was the exploration and expression of social themes in the assemblages, in this case the tainted innocence of children growing

up on the turbulent streets of Detroit. The second was the inclusion of the neighborhood, especially its children, in the execution of the project in an attempt to trigger community involvement and interaction. Guyton noted, "People from all over participated. City workers would leave me signs. Little kids would bring me toys. It was art that everybody took pride in."[15] Later came the Dotty Wotty House which was a celebration of color inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King's statement that "we are all the same color on the inside." Obstruction of Justice, sometimes referred to as the OJ House, mocked the media attention given to the Simpson trial in light of the pervasiveness of social injustice surrounding us all which goes virtually unnoticed.

As the project grew, so did the reaction to it. The art community was solidly in support of Guyton. "Artists relate to Tyree's work. Its very exciting to see such fresh vision, such awesome talent," said a local artist.[16] The Detroit Institute of Arts recognized the work by awarding Guyton a one-man show in its Ongoing Michigan Artists Program.[17] A curator at the museum observed "the message in his work is very complex. It ranges from the humorous to the sober to the very serious to the enlightening. His work is very positive even when it's dealing with difficult and negative issues."[18] Word spread of Heidelberg's shear visual energy and mostly white outsiders, including foreign visitors, could be seen slowly driving through the neighborhood. Doors locked, of course.

But the project had numerous detractors as well. "What Mr. Guyton is calling art is what residents are calling garbage," said a member of a citizens group who felt it was difficult enough for black neighborboods to present a positive image without adding trash parading as art. The group's chairman added, "People around the country see what he's doing on the news and think that's the way we live. Detroit's not like that."[19] A neighbor of the Numbers House commented, "I'm not against his work, but how would you like this next to your home?"[20] "Junk is junk is junk," wrote a resident in a letter to the *Detroit News*.[21] A city spokesperson was quoted as saying that the city received complaints daily.

In the fall of 1991 Guyton began a new project entitled Street People which sharpened criticism of his work. He scattered hundreds of discarded shoes in the street with the intention that they be run over by cars and pummelled by the elements, the plight of homeless people as he saw it. This strong act drew a harmless littering ticket, but may also have forced the city's hand to curb the growing media attention to the Heidelberg project and it statements about Detroit's shortcomings. "When complaints come through, whether we like it or not, we have to act on them," said a public works official.[22] On a Saturday morning a month later, Guyton was given fifteen minutes notice that city bulldozers were on their way. They arrived, escorted by six police cars, by order of the mayor who "didn't really consider it art."[23] By the end of the day four houses had been flattened and removed. "A shame?" responded Guyton, watching six years of effort being summarily erased, "There's three crack houses the city left standing right behind here. That's the shame."[24] A supportive neighbor lamented, "That man was making something out of this neighborhood. Now that it's gone, we really do live in a ghetto."[25]

But the project wasn't gone for long and continues to this day. Guyton began again, this time targeting the vacant lots left in the wake of the demolished houses. If you drive down Heidelberg you will see the People's Tree, a memorial to the first phase of the project assembled with objects salvaged from the wrecker's piles, Tithes and Offerings with its handbags twisting in the breeze as symbols of portable vaults of resources which continue to flee the city, and a tribute to Rosa Parks called The Bus, created with a bus manufactured in the same year as her historic ride. These assmblages are contrasted with Field of Grasshoppers, a lot left untouched and overgrown like countless others in the city as a testimony to the desolation which could creep in if not for the Heidelberg Project.

SAY NICE THINGS ABOUT DETROIT

> "To look at Detroit is to look at all of our cities, but with the symptoms of our urban decline enhanced."[26]

Guyton's choice of trash, like Vergara's choice of ruins, alienated many Detroiters who see junk and abandonment as the visible evidence of the city's failure and the cause of a persistent tarnished image which has plagued the city for decades. These reactions unmask a general frustration and anger with the urban condition which faces all cities. Overwhelmed by problems and shrinking resources, city governments struggle with day-to-day matters and can generate few if any large-scale solutions to urban problems. Residents who are inundated with their own personal problems feel powerless and frustrated by the unresponsiveness of city institutions to their needs. One of those needs is a voice in the struggle for social and cultural control, yet if there are no actions taken and no proposals offered, debate about the urban public sphere remains unfocused and can lead to scant discussion.

Vergara and Guyton's embrace of the widening gaps in the city's fabric and their attempts to reprogram rather than replace the obsolete urban fabric alienated them from prevailing sentiment in a city which considers abandonment a symptom of rejection, failure, and decay. At the same time, their attempts to deprogram this space which exists uncomfortably between private and public and revitalize it with open programs detached from traditional notions of utility, aligns these projects with a strain of urban theory which claims discontinuity as a strategy for re-energizing contemporary cities.

PRIVATE VISIONS AND PUBLIC DEBATE

> "Detroit did not become great through centrally planned visions. Detroit became great through the millions of

spontaneous, very personal and not always beautiful visions of its people."[27]

The strain of urban theory which I refer to is that being developed by architects who came of age in the socially turbulent Europe of the 1960's. Rem Koolhaas, Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi are the most prominent names among a group who have begun to direct their interest towards the space between rather than the structures of the city, and make, in Koolhaas' words "urban voids at least one of the principal lines of combat, if not the only line."[28] Recognizing the disjuncture of program and object in the city, each has turned their attention to a more open architecture, a kind of Situationist detournement that not only accepts but exploits the discontinuity that now defines much of our cities' urban fabric. Tschumi states, "Architecture is not about the conditions of design but the design of conditions that will dislocate the most traditional and regressive aspects of our society and simultaneously reorganize these elements in the most liberating way."[29]

These architects feel that the strata that comprise our cities, fragments of modernity as Koolhaas calls them, which physically negate the traditional city through their openness and their decay, may offer new themes with which to renew this very terrain. These strata become the starting point for new projects with open programs and non-traditional hierarchies. Koolhaas favors dense clumps of buildings which through their density preserve the gaps rather than filling them in. Coop Himmelblau prefers open structures created with tangents and vectors which may be used without codes. Wolf Prix explains, "In order to live in a city people must have the possibility to create their own spaces, without codes or rules...this would give a city the varieity we are thinking of. This is the parasite city: saving existing structures and transforming them like parasites using the host to live."[30] Tschumi believes a strategy may exist within the conjoined/disjoined condition of space and event, and that deregulation along with rupture and realignment of elements drawn from the existing strata may suggest a new definition of urban architecture: "Ex-centric, dis-integrated, dis-located, disjuncted, de-constructed...dis-continuous, de-regulated...de, dis-, ex-. These are the prefixes of today."[31]

These strategies are predicated on a city which is no longer defined by its built space but by its empty space and are accepting of the fragmentation which is repulsive but at the same time emblematic of the contemporary city. "Leave Paris and Amsterdam," Koolhaas says, "and go look at Atlanta, quickly and without preconceptions."[32] Apparently he has not visited Detroit where he could ponder the projects of Guyton and Vergara which together serve as a litmus test for this redefinition of the city. Koolhaas and the others could hear the reactions of decent, city-dwelling Detroiters who cling to memories of the traditional city, are fearful of open gaps in the fabric for the control they lack and the crime they attract, and who feel that the city is chaotic enough without deregulation.

These sentiments reveal some of Detroit's psyche. Though global redeployment of industry and commerce has stripped the Motor City of its nickname, it still maintains a strong belief in progress, an uncanny faith in modern technologies, and favors replacement over repair. Alex Krieger observed that the Renaissance Center set a precedent for replacing the downtown fabric rather that renewing it, a tendency which has slowly taken place over the subsequent twenty years. "Maybe this is expected of Detroit," he wrote, "the automobile-made city, where last year's models command little attention."[33]

But if Plunz is correct that "Detroit is Everywhere," then the Europeans would encounter not only the psyche of Detroit on their visit, but that of urban America itself which cannot appreciate urban decay as something romantic until it is safe and clean. This psyche is also colored by a temporal and spatial proximity to the ruins that does not allow the detachment necessary for their appreciation. Vergara admits as much when he writes, "Our very closeness to them prevents us from seeing them clearly, from meditating upon their significance, while a strong taboo, marked by rage, impotence, and despair keeps us from admiring their evocative power,"[34] often pulls in opposite directions.

The dimension missing in this strain of urban theory is its relationship to the social, cultural, economic, and political forces which have formerly contributed to the expansion of the industrial city and now must bear on the contraction of the post-industrial city. It is precisely this dimension, the confluence of these forces which are far more complex in the contemporary city than ever before, which is the value of the American Acropolis proposal and the Heidelberg project.

CONCLUSION

The specificity of these projects managed to give substance to far-ranging issues, theoretical and socioeconomic, which could then be identified and discussed. Since they challenged traditional approaches to urban planning, they generated much needed debate that previous planning proposals could not. And because the projects were presented in an open forum with public scrutiny, they were in turn challenged by considerations often secondary in theoretical strategies. Open debate, as was generated and focused by these two projects, is often painful in the short-term but is ultimately healthy for the vitality of civic engagement in discussions regarding the future of our contemporary cities.

The American Acropolis proposal and the Heidelberg Project may also be valued for more general questions they raised about abandonment and its inevitable role in the contemporary city. Questions regarding the role of culture and theory in the future of the nebulous terrain which results from abandonment, a terrritory which is neither private or public but which inspires private visions and public debate. Their importance is not as long-term solutions but rather as fluid proposals for urban public space which is shifting as much as the contemporary condition which creates it.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, "American Cities," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: hutchinson Publishing Company, 1955).

[2] Richard Plunz, "Detroit is Everywhere," *Architecture,* April 1996, p. 55-61. An exhibit of student proposals for Detroit's revitalization, held May 20 through July 1, 1995 at New York's Storefront for Art and Architecture, took the same title.

[3] Camilo Jose Vergara, "Downtown Detroit-American Acropolis or Vacant Land?" *Metropolis*, April 1995, p. 36.

[4] Al, a retired carpenter, and Arthur Johnson, vice president for community relations at Wayne State University, quoted in Camilo Jose Vergara, "Detroit Waits for the Millenium," *The Nation,* May 18, 1992.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Vergara, "Downtown Detroit," p. 36.

[7] Ibid., p. 33.

[8] Ibid., p. 38.

[9] Constantine Roumel quoted in James Bennett, "A tribute to ruin irks Detroit," *New York Times,* December 10, 1995.

[10] Carol Willis, an architectural historian, and Michael Goodin, a journalist with *Crain's Detroit Business*, quoted in Vergara, "Downtown Detroit," p. 37.

[11] Ibid., p. 38.

[12] Tyree Guyton quoted in Greg Lopez, "Street Surrealism," *The Detroit News*, August 24, 1988.

[13] An interesting precedent for Guyton's project was destroyed the year his began. Rosetta Archie began assembling a pile of junk seven feet high by a block long in the early 1970's claiming she was God's messenger and was creating a shrine. After a litany of littering tickets, the pile was hauled off by city workers in March 1986.

[14] Art critic Joy Hakanson Colby was an early and steady chronicler of Guyton and his project. See "Urban renewal-Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project turns junk into jewels," *The Detroit News*, August 17, 1988, p. 1D.

[15] Guyton quoted in Ann Sweeney, "Art everyone took pride in...it's gone," *The Detroit News*, November 24, 1991, p. 1A.

[16] Colby, "Urban Renewal," p. 7D.

[17] Tyree Guyton's exhibit in the Ongoing Michigan Artists Program of the Detroit Institute of Arts was held June 30 through August 19, 1990.

[18] Patience Youn, curator of education the Detroit Institute of Arts, quoted in Scott Walton, "Rising from the razing," *Detroit Free Press*, December 18, 1991, p. 1E.

[19] Sentiments of the McDougall-Hunt Citizens District Council are expressed in William Kleinknecht, "Neighbors say it's not art, seek to end show in street," *Detroit Free Press*, November 5, 1991, p. 1A.

[20] Heidelberg resident Otila Bell quoted in Nancy Ann Jeffrey, "Flattened creation draws a crowd," *Detroit Free Press*, November 25, 1991, p. 1A.

[21] Gerald P. Klosky, Detroit resident, in a letter to the editor, *The Detroit News*, November 25, 1991.

[22] James Bledsoe, an official in the environmental control division of the Detroit Department of Public Works, quoted in Jim Schaefer, "Heidelberg down at the heels," *Detroit Free Press*, October 10, 1991.

[23] Joy Hakanson Colby, "Deconstructionism," *The Detroit News*, November 26, 1991.

[24] Heidelberg resident Teresa Woods quoted in Sweeney, "Art everybody took pride in," p. 10A.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Plunz, "Detroit is Everywhere," p. 55.

[27] Thomas Stull, "Is saving Detroit ruins truly absurd?" *The Detroit News*, December 24, 1995.

[28] Rem Koolhaas, "Toward the Contemporary City," *Design Book Review*, no. 17 (Winter 1989,) p. 16.

[29] Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994,) p. 259.

[30] Wolf Prix, quoted in an interview with Ziva Freiman in *Progressive Architecture*, September 1991, p. 137.

[31] Tschumi, p. 225.

[32] Koolhaas, p. 15.

[33] Alex Krieger, "The American City: Ideal and Mythic Aspects of a Reinvented Urbanism," *Assemblage*, no. 3 (1987,) p. 47.

[34] Vergara, "Downtown Detroit," p.38.