

Rise and Shine, Detroit

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The vaulted artistry of the Guardian Building impresses doorman Christopher Roddy—and is just one of the reasons Detroit is looking up.

Photograph by Melissa Farlow

By Andrew Nelson

It's not called a “tug” of memory for nothing: I'm outside Detroit's railroad station, and I instantly recall my mother's gloved hand pulling mine as we rushed through the vast atrium that was inspired by the imperial baths of ancient Rome. We are in a hurry to get somewhere, and Detroit is, too. Even a little boy in the mid-1960s notices the tempo. The Motor City is in motion. We build America's cars. Thanks to Berry Gordy's Motown, the world hums our songs. The city, fifth largest in the U.S. by population, is at the top of its game.

Today, Michigan Central Station still looks Roman, but it's a Roman ruin. Closed since 1988 and stripped of valuables by vandals, or “scrappers,” the empty hulk symbolizes my old hometown's decline, buckling beneath crime, corruption, and events such as the 1967 riots, the 1970s gas shortages, and the rise of Asian auto imports. My family, like others, moved away. A city of almost two million residents in 1950 shrank to 713,777 in 2010.

To visitors, Detroit's attractions verged on the desperate: Three new casinos corralled gamblers inside windowless rooms; a desultory monorail circled downtown. The city's collapse actually created a new business in “ruin porn,” as locals escorted tourists eager to experience the postapocalyptic atmosphere of decaying factories and abandoned offices.

But Detroit has been down so long, any change would be up. And “up” is why I've returned. Something's happening in Michigan's southeast corner. Call it a rising, a revival, a new dawn—there's undeniable energy emanating from Detroit. America noticed it first at the 2011 Super Bowl. Chrysler debuted a TV commercial with rapper Eminem, star of the film *8 Mile* (named after the road that serves as Detroit's northern border). The ad crystallized the city's spiky, muscular pride and won an Emmy, but Detroit was the real winner.

“This is the Motor City,” Eminem declared, “and this is what we do.” And, increasingly, Detroiters are *doing*:

Working-class Latinos in Southwest, recent college grads in Midtown and New Center, and African-American professionals in Boston Edison are improving their neighborhoods. An expanding Detroit RiverWalk edges downtown, where corporations like DTE Energy, Quicken Loans, and Blue Cross Blue Shield have moved in thousands of workers. A favorite 1960s-era restaurant, the London Chop House, has announced its reopening. And that badge of gentrification, Whole Foods, plans to build a store in the inner city.

Even outsiders have started arriving, drawn by a sense of adventure. A new resident had told me: "If you visit Detroit, you're an explorer. Be prepared for a rich, very soulful experience."

A flashing red light jolts me back to the train station's razor wire and rubble. A fire engine pulls up alongside me.

"Anything wrong, officer?" I ask, nervously. Maybe they think I'm a scrapper.

"Naaah," says Ladder 28's Capt. Robert Distelrath, with the backslapping, broad *a*'s of the Midwest. "Just checking things out. What are you doing?"

I tell him I'm here because I hear Detroit is coming back.

Distelrath grins. "There's more to us than this train station. Go to Slows Bar BQ," he says, pointing into Corktown, the neighborhood bordering the station. "The owner, Phillip Cooley, he's at the center of a lot of things. He's trying to bring Detroit back all by himself."

It's only 11 a.m., but Slows is full up for lunch. Customers crowd tables made of reclaimed timber. Waitresses serve sandwiches, the bun tops tilted backward to accommodate the pile of brisket heaped under them. Pints of beer and platters of waffle fries slathered in melted cheddar follow. No shy portions here.

"Detroiters don't like fancy-pants food," a local tells me. True that. It's a town where you can still score a plate of eggs and hash browns for \$2.50 (at Duly's Place, a 24-hour diner on West Vernor), and where restaurants selling Coney Island hot dogs—invented in Michigan, despite the name—inspire intense loyalty.

Cooley isn't around, but I can't resist ordering a pulled pork. Afterward, I continue my search for the urban pioneer. I eventually find him down the street at a just opened coffeehouse called Astro.

Cooley, 33, is an unlikely city savior. The Michigan native and former Louis Vuitton model traded Milan's fashion runways for Detroit's pockmarked sidewalks to start a new life. He and his family opened Slows six years ago.

"We've got lots going on," he admits. He's lent his expertise to Astro and to Sugar House, a craft cocktail bar next door. He's even helped finance and build a community parking lot.

Each new attraction becomes another beam for shoring up Corktown, a neighborhood of sagging factories, revitalized gingerbread Victorians painted in bright colors, and empty lots transformed into vegetable gardens.

"We're a scoot-up-to-the-bar-we'll-make-room sort of place. Everyone's welcome," Cooley tells me as we finish up our americanos. He's talking about Slows, but he could be describing the city. "Detroit's authentic," he says. "It is a very unique city."

I DISCOVER THE TRUTH OF COOLEY'S STATEMENT the next day, visiting Dearborn, the suburb that's home to both automaker Ford's world headquarters as well as a burgeoning Arab-American community. After touring the Arab American National Museum with my guide, Fay Saad, a native Michigander of Lebanese descent, I'm welcomed at Habib, a lavishly furnished Middle Eastern restaurant that does a brisk business in wedding, graduation, and birthday banquets.

"Our families are just like everyone else's," Saad says in the same hearty Midwest accent as fire captain Distelrath's. She invites me to accompany her to Dearborn's Islamic Center of America, the largest mosque in North America. She dons a head scarf as we enter the holy building. It's quiet. Services aren't being held. We head back downtown via busy Warren Avenue.

"It's like a mini Beirut," Saad says as we pass an Arab coffee roastery that fills the air with the smell of toasted beans. "And a mix of everything," she adds, as I point to a sign touting the "Best Halal Pizza in Town!"

We stop at her favorite bakery, Shatila's, where the counters groan with abundant varieties of baklava and honeyed dates and other sweets from Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, and where the attendants chat sociably with

the customers. Though many women wear head scarves and the conversation is often in Arabic, it's as much Middle America as Middle East.

In fact, non-English migrants enjoy a long tradition here. Travelers often forget that Detroit was born as French as New Orleans. Founded in 1701 by Antoine Laumet de La Mothe Cadillac, Detroit shows its Gallic roots in street names such as Livernois, Cadieux, and Gratiot.

I visit another religious spot—the redbrick Ste. Anne de Détroit church, founded by Cadillac's settlers and the second oldest continuously operating Roman Catholic parish in the United States. The church and its exterior plaza exude an Old World charm that mixes with the growl of the semis rumbling over the Ambassador Bridge to Windsor, Canada.

Such contrasts make up the Detroit *terroir*, the French concept for the characteristics of a region that impart a distinct flavor. Detroit is a welter of opposites—like Slows's old-school smoked barbecue dished out in a hip setting. I visit Midtown, site of many of Detroit's cultural gems, to tour the Detroit Institute of Arts. The DIA is a classical, white-frosted cake of a building that harbors Diego Rivera's dynamic, colorful murals of the auto assembly lines. The murals were commissioned by Edsel Ford in 1932. Ford may have been a wealthy industrialist, but he hired a Mexican Communist to paint his workers.

While some of the city's buildings are scruffy, others are gleaming again, especially the prewar skyscrapers. Detroit's art deco towers make those in Miami's South Beach look like anthills.

To get a feel for them, I take a tour with architectural historian Dan Austin. "Detroit has one of the largest collections of Roaring '20s architecture anywhere in the country," Austin says. "You'll find them downtown, in the neighborhoods, in the suburbs." He ticks off a series of greatest hits: "Fox Theatre, the Fisher Building, the Penobscot. And it's not just art deco buildings, either—a town house development, Lafayette Park, is the largest collection of mid-century modernist Mies Van Der Rohe residences in the world."

Austin is explaining this as we approach the 40-story Guardian Building. Built in a damn-the-expenses manner, this 1929 tower is machine-age bravado in stainless steel, marble, and nearly two million tangerine-colored bricks. "I like to call it 'holy cow' architecture," says Austin, as we push through the heavy glass doors and enter the lobby. "You see it and say—"

"Jesus!" I gawk at the vaulted space rising five stories above the 60-foot-long lobby. This interior would not be out of place in Oz. The ceiling is finished in an Aztec-inspired design of Technicolor tile hexagons. The walls and floors are clad in rare Numidian and travertine marbles. A decorative metal grill with a Tiffany glass clock in its center separates the lobby from the onetime banking hall. I make a feeble attempt to capture the dazzling beauty on my iPhone's camera. But not even Apple's ingenuity can do this place justice.

Other architectural beauties are getting makeovers as well. DoubleTree by Hilton has reopened the Fort Shelby hotel. The revamped, 34-story Broderick will rent apartments to downtown office workers.

"It's an art to update an old building yet stay true to the spirit of the original," says Bradley McCallum, who helps manage the Westin Book Cadillac, one of Detroit's premier hotels, which reopened in 2008 following a \$200 million renovation.

McCallum and I are dining later in the day at Roast, chef Michael Symon's restaurant in the Book Cadillac. I'm working on a Rock City burger, topped with bleu cheese, caramelized onions, and the restaurant's signature savory "zipp" sauce, and keeping tabs on the hive of activity. An elegant couple, the woman in silvery lamé, swan past us to their table in the buzzing main room. Outside, on Washington Boulevard, a Hollywood film crew is shooting a scene. Klieg lights dazzle like diamonds. "I think New York has a bit of a crush on Detroit," McCallum remarks. Hard to believe nightlife in this town was once so moribund visitors would drive to Grosse Pointe, a plaid-and-preppy suburb, for fun.

I end up at Café d'Mongo's Speakeasy with McCallum and an ever growing crowd of hipsters, artists, and night crawlers. The bartenders serve up ribs and cocktails that mix Captain Morgan rum with Faygo, a local soda pop that Detroiters seem to guzzle with everything.

It's the far side of midnight. Maybe it's the rock-and-roll shaking the speakers, or maybe it's the Faygo cocktail. I'm tired. I say my goodbyes and head for bed. I have a big day tomorrow. I am going to circumnavigate an emerald.

The jewel is Belle Isle, Detroit's grandest, greenest park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who also

designed New York's Central Park. I'm exploring Belle Isle's 5.5-mile ring road by bike, an easy choice given the city's flapjack-flat topography and the creative tours by Wheelhouse, a start-up bike shop located on the city's new RiverWalk. Co-owner Kelli Kavanaugh rattles off the list of guided rides: "We do automotive heritage, haunted Detroit, architecture tours—did you know we were a huge station on the Underground Railroad? We'll take you to historic districts like Indian Village on the east side. Detroit's got great things, and it has problems. We show you both."

I set off with 15 people around the 982-acre island, pedaling a tough single-speed Kona. Set in the middle of the Detroit River and connected to the city by a single bridge, Belle Isle looks a bit scrubby. Tour guide Pat Ahrens talks frankly about the park's lack of money but also tells about the groups working to solve that. We glide past steamship enthusiasts coming to the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, South Asians playing cricket, and picnickers grilling their burgers to hip-hop. The island's charms—a botanical garden and conservatory, an art deco marble lighthouse, the prestigious Detroit Yacht Club, and the stunning views of Canada and downtown—explain the draw.

Returning to RiverWalk, we take the Dequindre Cut Greenway, a 1.35-mile-long below-grade railroad track the city has turned into a bike path stretching from the river almost to Eastern Market. I make a note to myself to visit the market later, on a Saturday.

I was just a kid when I last saw Eastern Market, but it's very much alive—thriving, in fact. But it's no temple to precious foodstuffs; it's a working produce and meat showroom, supporting 250 independent merchants and vendors whose offerings attract 40,000 shoppers every Saturday morning (and Tuesdays in the summer and fall).

It's already crowded when I arrive at 9 a.m. The smells of melon and cider hang in the air as I weave my way past forklifts trundling bags of onions. Chalk-lettered signs tout smoked lake trout and white perch, Red Haven peaches, green wax beans, and sweet corn. As I walk past Dave Wilson, the hirsute flower seller in stall 468, he calls out in a voice so clear it cuts through the hubbub: "Good morning! Good morning! Oh yeeaaaah!"

Wilson sounds like a herald for a new city. Detroit's problems are still big ones. I heard plenty about corruption and red tape, but it's the context of the complaining that's important. People are trying to get things accomplished, rebuilt, reborn.

In Detroit it seems natural I fall into conversation about these things with a friendly stranger in the market parking lot. Thomas Page, 62, is a retired Los Angeles cop wearing a T-shirt that says, "Detroit: The Fun Side of 8 Mile."

Born and raised here, he left southern California to move home. After my discoveries, I'm not surprised when he tells me he hasn't looked back.

"Detroit's never going to have the weather," he admits. "But in the last six months I've seen more change than what's taken place in the last five years. We're revving our engines. Detroit's moving again."

"Good morning!" I hear the flower seller, his voice rising above the din. "Oh yeeaaaah!"

New Orleans-based writer **Andrew Nelson** and photographer **Melissa Farlow** last teamed up for the feature "Tweet Me in Miami" in the April 2010 issue.



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