Detroiter Find “Way!”

Out of No Way

By Jose Flores

Former autoworker Rich Feldman began working in Detroit’s auto plants in 1970 with a belief that labor unions were the driving force of revolution in the U.S. Like other young activists at the time, he joined the factories to organize workers after having been involved in the radical student movement of the 1960s. Today, globalization has decimated the autoworkers. (Figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in this decade alone, the number of autoworkers in Michigan has decreased from 320,000 to 109,000.)

At the old abandoned Packard plant just outside downtown Detroit, Feldman reflects: “It’s the end of the economic American dream, which was also very destructive. On one level we have to grieve, but we also have to welcome it. Now we can move on to create another kind of American dream that is based on quality of life versus a standard of living.”

Out of necessity, the people of Detroit are shaping alternatives to the urban wreckage left by the collapse of the auto industry. And new possibilities are emerging across the city: Eastside residents have transformed their neighborhood into an outdoor public art exhibit with waste materials collected from vacant lots. Just a short drive away, a group has purchased storefronts, planted fruit trees along a few city blocks, and renamed the area “Hope District.” Elsewhere, another group has reclaimed two acres of unused and underutilized land in the city to grow produce that feeds community members. In short, the movement in Detroit is putting forth a model for creating solutions rooted in frontline communities and place-based relationships.

Nurturing Community Leadership

The Boggs Center has been at the heart of the rebuilding process happening amidst the ruins of deindustrialized Detroit. Founded in 1995 by friends of lifelong activists James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, the center supports grassroots leaders who create and implement innovative strategies for transforming communities from the ground up. In 2007, the Boggs Center and 32 endorsing organizations commemorated the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s anti-war speech and the Detroit rebellion of 1967—an event that inspired the creation of the Detroit City of Hope campaign.

The campaign focuses on expanding urban gardens, connecting education to community-building, establishing cooperatives to meet local needs, and creating Peace Zones to stem violence as put forth in the article, “Love and Revolution” by Grace Lee Boggs. Earthworks Urban Farm, which provides produce for the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, Avalon...
Bakery, which employs and sells baked goods to local residents, Back Alley Bikes, which provides affordable repairs and used bikes, and the Boggs Educational Center and Live Arts Media Project, are all supported by Detroit City of Hope.

From Urban Decay to Public Art

Artist Tyree Guyton watched his neighborhood on Heidelberg Street gradually deteriorate through the deindustrialization of the 1960s and ’70s. By the 1980s, Heidelberg Street was a neighborhood of vacant lots and abandoned homes littered with refuse. In 1986, with the help of his grandfather Sam Mackey, his former wife Karen, and neighborhood children, Guyton began cleaning up trash from vacant lots in the area, which led to the creation of the now famous Heidelberg Project, an outdoor art project made entirely from collected waste materials.

Nowadays, Guyton’s neighborhood block contains an assortment of brightly colored houses and outdoor art sculptures made entirely from car tires, telephones, old shoes, plastic bottles, auto parts, store carts, television sets, metal barrels, and other discarded items. Even so, Guyton’s “Dotty Wotty House” stands out on Heidelberg Street with its bright polka dotted exterior representing the diversity and unity of all people.

In 1991 and again in 1999, the city demolished parts of the Heidelberg Project but neighborhood residents fought back with a successful civil lawsuit asserting their First Amendment rights of “political speech.” So, the Heidelberg Project continues to evolve artistically and provide arts education programs to neighborhood youth. And art installations, such as “Building Bridges One Step At a Time” and “Meet Me Halfway,” assert the transformation process currently underway in Heidelberg and throughout Detroit.

Revitalization through Reimagination

Within walking distance from the Boggs Center, decorated billboards occupy a corner lot in the Hope District. But instead of the usual product advertisements, these makeshift billboards publicize the thoughts, aspirations, and concerns of local residents facing mass unemployment and home foreclosures. The idea is a brainchild of Lillie Wimberley and her son Mike Wimberley, longtime residents and founders of the group, The Friends of Detroit and Tri-County. Local residents are encouraged to use the signposts as part of the neighborhood’s community engagement and revitalization project. Reimagining a better future plays a vital role in the efforts to rise above the grinding poverty and despair of the Hope District.

The Friends of Detroit and Tri-County purchased neglected commercial storefronts and residential properties to create long-term job opportunities and affordable housing in the area. Residents have established Peace Zones—public spaces for conflict resolution and alternative pathways to violence—where mediators, rather than police, are called in to help resolve disputes among neighbors and families. Produce harvested from the community gardens is used to feed the neighborhood. (Future plans include making jams and other value-added products from harvested fruit.) Weekly classes provide residents an opportunity to acquire training in community entrepreneurship, computer skills, culinary arts, sewing, and craft-making. The courses are intended to spur the creation of cooperatives that can produce local goods for local needs.

“[The neighborhood needs] more people involved in what we do around here,” says one middle-aged resident working on turning over the soil for a vegetable garden one humid afternoon in the Hope District. “Me, here by myself, doing this everyday—I can use some help. What we need is more volunteers because we don’t have the money.”

He himself plants the garden every year to help people in the community, he says. “They’re welcome to come and get what they want out of the garden. I’m just staying busy… just trying to keep up the neighborhood.”
Generating Food from Fallow Land

One glaring impact of deindustrialization has been the disappearance of grocery stores from the neighborhoods. Since the economic decline there has been an exodus of supermarkets and grocery retailers away from the city to the more lucrative suburbs. No national grocery chain currently operates within the city limits, which makes access to healthy fresh food difficult for Detroit’s predominantly African American residents.

Over half of the city’s population has to travel twice as far to get to a grocery store than to a fast food outlet or convenience store, according to a study by Mari Gallagher, a Chicago-based researcher whose focus is “food deserts”—areas without grocery stores and other healthy food resources. Consequently, there has been an urban agricultural movement underway in Detroit. Empty lots and unused land throughout the city are being reclaimed for growing vegetables and fruits to feed city residents. One of Detroit’s biggest urban farms is the D-Town Farm, a two-acre site established in 2006 by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Chairman Malik Yakini described D-Town Farm as a “community self-determination project” on Democracy Now. “We’re showing how unused and underutilized land in the city of Detroit can be put to productive use both to create greater access to fresh produce [and] to mobilize people to work on their own behalf.”

The farm incorporates fruit and vegetable plots, beehives, composting, and a hoop greenhouse for year-round food production. It uses sustainable and organic farming methods to grow produce that is sold at local farmers’ markets, food cooperatives, and to restaurants. Jackie Hunt, D-Town’s assistant farm manager, views the site as part of a citywide collective effort. “It’s not like our organization can grow enough produce to feed everybody in Detroit,” she observes, “but we can start a movement that will get people interested in providing produce for themselves.”

At present, there are close to 900 urban gardens and farms in Detroit, and the urban agriculture movement continues to expand, according to the Detroit Agricultural Network. “Things need to be done,” says Hunt, “and it seems that when you start, people just help. Spirits get moved. Events happen.”

Where Hope Stays Alive

And so, Detroit’s long-term residents are transforming the city’s desolation into new opportunities. Hope stays alive in Detroit through small organizations cultivating place-based relationships to meet people’s needs and create a profound sense of community.

Autoworker Rich Feldman, who now serves on the board of the Boggs Center, finds his inspiration these days in the growing number of community groups working together in Detroit. “It’s all about the relationships,” he says excitedly. “Relationships of hope come from the people we work with and the people we dream with.”

Endnotes

1. In These Times, July 30, 2009. www.inthesetimes.org/article/4666/love_and_revolution/
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