Detroit’s fall has been long in the making. The largest city ever to declare bankruptcy, it has suffered out-migration since the 1950s, as people followed the jobs that left the city. Auto manufacturing declined and eventually collapsed, taking Motor City down with it. In its wake, Detroit has come to symbolize the changing economy of America, and many see it as a victim of structural forces. For some people, Detroit’s demise represents the consequences of a new age of globalization and the end of an era of American hegemony.

Detroit is all of that—victim, symbol, sign of the times—but it is something else, too. In this photographic essay, I explore the theme of agency. I want to show how the structural shifts that led to the city’s decline also afford human creativity, play, and entrepreneurship. The photographs presented here highlight the ways Detroit blurs the boundaries between art and ruins, occupied and vacant spaces. Detroit’s citizens have made the city an urban museum. Part of the attraction for tourists is what also entices millions to flock to Rome and Athens every year: a chance to see the glory of times past. Like classical cities, Detroit symbolizes the end of an era—in this case, of American manufacturing. The dramatic ruins of wealth sit alongside a wealth of ruins.

Some have described the phenomenon of those who flock here as “disaster tourism” or “ruin porn,” where tourists enjoy sights of destruction from the safety of their cars. But this description fails to recognize the agency exercised by those who make and keep this urban museum; the ruins you find in Detroit are not garbage sites: they are places with names and stories, and are well-mapped and easily accessible. Walk through a ruin site, and you find rubble but no garbage; there is a scent, but no stench. You can feel the human touch but see little human presence. (Compare this to the litter-covered, rat, dog- and cat-infested monuments of Rome!) A vibrant bed & breakfast industry, run by entrepreneurial locals and newcomers, provides cheap accommodations for those who want to visit the urban museum, and an estimated 16 million people do so annually.

Public art colors the streets of Detroit, and tags and slurs accompany the graffiti art murals. Meanwhile, Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project brings arts to the streets and residents into art in what is statistically one of the most struggling neighborhoods of the city. The pavement is brightly colored, sculptures populate the front and back yards, and a totem pole of stuffed animals marks the spot where Tyree welcomes visitors. These and other street art scenes echo the Diego Rivera frescos painted on the walls of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the city’s major art museum and one of America’s top art collections. Rivera’s murals of the industrial process symbolize the connections between the art held in private collections and art that appears in public spaces. Richard Estes’ paintings and David Barr’s sculptures, on display at the DIA, evoke the empty factory halls you find outside. Detroit’s abandoned auto plants themselves resemble art installations that explore color, form, and space.

In Detroit, some even cultivate vacancy. After it declared bankruptcy, the Michigan Theater was repurposed as the world’s most atmospheric parking lot: a ruin re-used. Longtime citizens and new immigrants grow crops and keep chicken in once-empty lots as part of large- and small-scale initiatives in urban farming. These playful, creative, and entrepreneurial uses of space illustrate how human agency in Detroit blurs the lines between ruin and art, real and manufactured. They make us question what we see when we encounter vacant spaces, and what it means for a place, a building, a city to be used and inhabited.

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As an empty People Mover public transportation train takes its route, a guard tries to keep a watchful eye at the movie set of *Transformers 4*. The set represents the city of Hong Kong as it lies in ruins. The movie’s production crew used real rubble to create a set of artificial ruins in the heart of downtown Detroit.

Tourists pose for “disaster porn” at the Packard Automotive Plant.
A street corner at the edge of the Heidelberg Project “public art museum.” Founded in 1986, the project invites residents to make their home ground and neighborhood into an art installation. Here, the pavement is covered in colorful drawings, an empty suitcase reveals another (in Russian doll fashion), and a Stop sign is taped over to read “ST...ART.” The project seeks to embrace “diverse cultures and artistic attributes as the essential building blocks for a fulfilling and economically viable way of life.” The neighborhood draws over 200,000 visitors annually.

On the corner of Ellery and Heidelberg Streets, a truck, disappearing into the grass, provides fertile ground for weeds and flowers.
Michigan Building opened in 1926 to accommodate offices on its upper floors and a concert hall and theater on its ground floor—its 4,500 seats made it one of the largest in Michigan. When the theater closed in 1976, office tenants threatened that they too would leave unless they had adequate parking. In the late 1970s, the Michigan Theater was converted into a parking lot; its ceiling and walls feature original decorations that have stood the test of time.

As a pawnshop retires, a sign on the front reads: “Retiring after 86 yrs. Everything must go. Up to 70% off all pawn merchandise. Still buying everything.”
A work of graffiti art as seen on a Detroit street, showing a woman in trench coat, wearing a gas mask, helmet, and assault rifle. From the rifle’s shaft grows a rose.
A panel of Diego Rivera’s fresco cycle in the Detroit Institute for Art depicts a Ford plant factory worker. Like some of the graffiti art one finds on the streets of Detroit, Rivera’s project, painted on walls and panels, addresses social ills, speaks up for those lacking a strong voice, and celebrates ordinary working people.
in pictures

The Fisher Body Plant 21 was designed by Albert Kahn, “the architect of Detroit,” one of America’s most prolific architects. The plant is the signature building of the Fisher Corporation, which employed more than 100,000 people at its peak. The exterior and interior of Detroit’s abandoned factories are enduring works of art.

A sign behind the window of a shop reads, “Sorry, we’re DEAD.”
The Temple Hotel is one of the last buildings standing in a rundown neighborhood south of Midtown. Last September, its managers became local celebrities when they sold the small hotel, which had been frequented by prostitutes and their clients, to real estate developers for a sum rumored to be about $3.7 million.

While Sam’s Loans on Michigan Avenue has closed for business, it remains a sight to behold.