

The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit: Properties in/of/for Crisis

by Andrew Herscher

"A purely imaginary fabrication of value is a key component of the financial game as well as gentrification processes... What might occur if the urban multitudes and the art world enter this valorization game and recover a common power over the chain of value production which these days is revealing its inherent fragility?"

—Marco Pasquinelli, *"Beyond the Ruins of the Creative City: Berlin's Factory of Culture and the Sabotage of Rent."*

"The most important change in the earth's landscape is not any shift that would be perceivable on an aerial photograph; it is the shift in what we value."

—William Bunge, *"The First Years of the Detroit Geographical Expedition: A Personal Report."*

For Sale: The \$100 House

Could Detroit—a "shrinking city," a "ruined city," a "disappearing city," a "dying city," a city that has defied all attempts at renewal—become a haven for enterprising young artists? What effect would an infusion of artistic creativity into Detroit have on the city's apparently abject condition? What sort of urban transformations would follow from artistic exploitation of an environment that is, at once, in sublime decay and severe economic decline? Would a migration of artists to Detroit comprise a kind of urban stimulus package, a self-starting program of urban renewal? Is there an artist-led urbanism, particularly suitable for post-industrial sites of urban crisis? Such questions were raised, if only implicitly, in "For Sale: The \$100 House," an op-ed piece by the Detroit-based novelist, Toby Barlow, in the *New York Times* in March 2009.¹

In this essay, which sparked a national and international media buzz about an emerging interest in Detroit on behalf of community-based artists, Barlow wrote enthusiastically about the artistic potentials of Detroit: "a vast, enormous canvas where anything imaginable can be accomplished." The title of his piece referred to a \$100 house in Hamtramck, an incorporated city within Detroit, bought by artist immigrants from Chicago. This house, cited in almost all subsequent media reports, seemed to stand for the creative opportunities afforded by a city where living expenses, from property on down, have descended to the absolute minimum. "A strange, new American dream can be found (in Detroit)," Barlow claimed, because artists can "leverage Detroit's complex textures and landscapes to their own surreal ends." In Barlow's essay, that is, Detroit's depleted economy is seen to yield a double reward to artists: real estate cheap enough to purchase, but also real estate set within an aesthetically evocative urban setting. Detroit here becomes an artistic resource that is at once culturally valuable, at least to artists, and economically available, even to artists.

But how strange is the dream that Barlow describes? How new is this dream? Is the phenomenon he sketches out even a dream—which is to say, unreal—at all? From dominant political, economic and even cultural perspectives, the dream at stake in Detroit is a dream of gentrification. According to urban theorist Richard Florida, for example, artists are the vanguard of a "creative class" that drives the economic development of post-industrial cities.² First come the artists and their creative colleagues, Florida argues, and then come improvements in property, the development of retail and service businesses, and a rise in property values and tax bases: creativity conjures disposable income and tax revenues and neighborhoods become renewed in the process. In this model, artists are first stage gentrifiers, preparing the ground for the doctors, lawyers and other professionals who would eventually follow them—and who, inevitably, would also replace them. This replacement, sometimes termed the "SoHo effect"

for the location where it first became visible, is the success of gentrification in its own terms.

It is also a success that occurs without the collaboration of the artists who facilitate it; artists are usually co-opted by gentrification, rather than advocates for it. Indeed, the "success" of gentrification is highly qualified. With the renewal that gentrification brings comes not only property development and rising property values, but also the displacement of those for whom ungentrified neighborhoods possess their own particular values—these are not only artists but also the working class, recent immigrants and communities marginalized in other ways, whether socially, culturally or ideologically. Through their facilitation of gentrification, then, artists start a process that sometimes leads to their own eviction and to the destruction of precisely the environment that attracted them and allowed their creativity to flourish in the first place.

Crisis as Opportunity

Whether artist-led gentrification might ever be successful enough in Detroit to yield the displacement of artists themselves remains an open question. But a much more salient question is whether art has to take on responsibility for such things as building communities, securitizing neighborhoods or raising property values in order to render itself worthwhile in the first place. Are there ways of thinking about artistic agency and urban crisis outside the frame of gentrification? Can an "urban crisis" comprise not only a problem to solve but also an opportunity to develop new ways of imagining, understanding and inhabiting a city? Detroit provides an ideal location to consider these sorts of questions, as well.

Detroit's decline long predates the current recession; the latter has only exacerbated the decline, allowing its processes to more intensively unfold and its effects to further proliferate. Almost all narratives of this decline are premised on *loss*, with the loss of property value at once both fundamental and metaphorical, a cause of and figure for a whole series of other losses: of urban population, of urban territory, of urban infrastructure, of urban order, of urbanity itself. The postulation of loss yields, as its product, vacancy, absence, emptiness, shrinkage or ruin—the terms that are conventionally employed to characterize Detroit's novel condition. Seemingly tendentious proposals to cultivate Detroit as an urban landscape or museumify the city as an exhibition of ruins are based on the conventional narrative of loss, with either the nature of prairie or the culture of ruins standing in as a voided urban form. Even Toby Barlow's paean to Detroit as the potential locus of a "strange, new American dream" partakes of this narrative: "anything imaginable" can happen on the city's canvas because that canvas is, supposedly, blank.

But what if what has also been lost in Detroit is the capacity to understand new urban conditions, conditions in which value is no longer structured economically, in the terms of free-market

capitalism, but in wholly other terms? What if Detroit has not only fallen apart, emptied out, disappeared and/or shrunk, but has also transformed, becoming a novel urban formation that only appears depleted, voided or abjected through the lens of conventional urbanism? What if property in Detroit has not only lost one sort of value—a value brokered by the failing market economy, a value registered by the \$100 house—but has also gained other sorts of values, values whose economic salience is absent or even negative?

"Unreal estate" is a conceptual framework for exploring these propositions and thereby reconsidering the cultural agency of art and architecture in moments of urban crisis. Unreal estate is a name for urban territory that has slipped through the literal economy, the economy of the market, and entered other structures of value, including but not limited to those of survival, invention, imagination, play, desire and mourning. The values of unreal estate are unreal from the perspective of the market economy—they are liabilities, or *unvalues* that hinder property's circulation through that market. But it is precisely as property is rendered valueless according to the dominant regime of value that it becomes available for other forms of thought, activity and occupation—in short, for other value regimes. Thus, the extraction of capital from Detroit has not only yielded a massive devaluation of real estate but also, concurrently, an explosive production of unreal estate, of "valueless" urban property serving as site of and instrument for the imagination and practice of alternative urbanisms.

Speculating on Unreal Estate

The \$100 house could well comprise an example of such "valueless" urban property. Yet the development of unreal estate can and should be distinguished from the development of undeveloped real estate. The former is not an *investment* that will pay off in a better world-to-come, whether within or beyond the market economy; it is, rather, an *expenditure* in the present moment, critically refusing to mortgage that moment for another, different future. If the development of unreal estate involves an exchange, then, it is the exchange of a teleological system of progress in which the present is, by definition, inferior, incomplete or inadequate, for an ongoing commitment to that present as a site of exploration and investigation. In the frame of unreal estate, therefore, Detroit is not a problem to solve by means of already-understood metrics of evaluation, but a situation to understand, in terms of both its challenges and possibilities.

This is not a mere surrender to an environment suffused with social suffering, a bad present that calls out for improvement, whether that improvement be offered by artists or by governments. On the contrary: it is the postulation of the present as a temporary phase within a moralized continuum of progress that allows that present to be tolerated and accepted. The conditions of this temporary present are redeemable "problems" and "failures," subject to improvement in and by a future yet to come, rather than inexorable situations whose values and potentials must be analyzed rather than assumed. To explore unreal estate, rather than undeveloped real estate, is to confront the complex (un)reality of property that has been extruded from the free-market economy; it is to see the margins of that economy as sites of invention and creativity as well as suffering and oppression, a perspective that may very well be "so remarkable as to elicit disbelief."

The world of unreal estate thus offers a parallax position from which to assess value, an alternative to the single fixed vantage point established by the market economy. In the world of unreal estate, precisely those urban features that are conventionally understood to diminish or eradicate value (inefficiency, waste, redundancy, danger, uselessness, excess) are what create possibilities to construct new values. What usually appears to be the "ruin"

of the city thus becomes projective or potential. Reciprocally, the processes that are conventionally understood to support the "renewal" of the city (investment, community-building, securitization, functionalization) become, by contrast, banal at best and destructive of unprecedented futures at worst.

Not Everyday Urbanism, But Counter-Urbanism

Speculations on Detroit's unreal estate are being made not only by artists but also activists, anarchists, community associations, explorers, gardeners, neighborhood groups, scavengers, slackers and many others—a heterogeneous array of individual and collective urban inhabitants whose cultural agencies are diverse but whose skills, techniques and knowledges are specific, directed and often profound. A commitment to unreal estate, then, most certainly involves a commitment to the production of urban space and urban culture by a wide and diverse range of a city's inhabitants. In urban studies, this latter commitment has been claimed by a discourse that revolves around "everyday urbanism."³ Unreal estate, however, defines a crucially different object of study than that defined by everyday urbanism.

The framers of everyday urbanism pose it as an urbanism of the "mundane" and "generic" spaces that "ordinary" city-dwellers produce in the course of their daily lives—spaces that "constitute an everyday reality of infinitely recurring commuting routes and trips to the supermarket, dry cleaner, or video store."⁴ At the same time, everyday urbanism is also supposed to comprise a De Certeau-style catalogue of "tactics" apprehended by the weak and powerless, a kind of bottom-up urbanism that "should inevitably lead to social change."⁵ But this layering of political agency onto the quotidian practices of everyday life produces contradictions: everyday urbanism is posed as at once mundane and tendentious, at once descriptive and normative, at once inherent to a system and an alternative to a system. How does driving to the video store inevitably lead to social change? What sort of weakness and powerlessness mark those who rent videos? Why is it the customer at the video store, rather than that store's employees, that is of interest to everyday urbanism? In its received form, everyday urbanism cannot but prompt such questions.

The reality of everyday urbanism is that of public responses to professionally-designed urban environments; it is an urban version of reader-response criticism, a criticism focused on the experience of readers of texts as opposed to the intentions of writers. Everyday urbanism, that is, is an urbanism of reaction, whether conciliatory or contentious, to the professionalized urbanism that shapes urban space and life. As such, it cannot sustain the progressive political project the authors of the discourse want to endow it with. Indeed, the insistent elision in everyday urbanist discourse between "everyday life," on the one hand, and "experience," on the other, points to the interest in this discourse not so much in *alternatives* to hegemonic modes of

urbanism (as the discourse imagines itself to be interested), but rather in the ways in which these modes are *received* by their audiences or users. What's "alternative" in everyday urbanism is not political, a question of difference from a hegemonic structure, but rather authorial, a question of authorship *per se*.

Unreal estate, as a waste product of capitalism, is by definition an alternative to that structure's products. As such, the urbanism that unreal estate invites, provokes, sustains or endures diverges not only in its authorship from conventional urbanism, but also in its ideological orientations, cultural agencies and political possibilities. This is a counter-urbanism that involves agencies, activities, practices and values that diverge from their normative complements. This counter-urbanism emerges in situations of crisis; its practice is not an everyday matter except insofar as crisis passes for the everyday in the dominant social gaze. The urbanism of unreal estate, then, is not everyday so much as oppositional, insurgent, survivalist, ecstatic, escapist or parodic—anything that poses the dominant order as contingent, partial, inadequate, laughable, violent or any other quality that this order excludes from its self-fashioning. Counter-urbanisms emerge and develop in parallel to both the professional urbanism of architects and planners and everyday responses to that urbanism; yet it is their perceived character as subordinate, redundant or trivial that allows for their very oppositionality. The movement of a counter-urbanism is, then, double—at once an exit from and an opposition to a dominant urban regime.

A counter-urbanism takes place in a dead zone not only for free-market capitalism but also for formal politics. This is not to say, however, that counter-urbanisms are apolitical. Rather, it is to assert a distinction between governmental politics and nongovernmental politics and to locate the politics of counter-urbanism in the latter—a politics devoid of aspirations to govern.⁶ Just like exits or expulsions from the market economy, rejections of formal politics also comprise invitations: to neglect or parody rather than resist, to mimic rather than replace, to supplant rather than reverse. These are invitations to consider political change and political difference not even from the ground up, for "ground," too, is the province of government, but on other grounds entirely, grounds that can instructively go by the name of "unreal."

The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit: Selected Listings

The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit is a conceptual guidebook to the provisional, improvised and furtive urbanism of creative survival in Detroit—an urbanism that leverages the ready availability of unreal estate to tendentious and fantastical ends.⁷ The following listings, drawn from the *Guide*, are intended to depict some of the ways in which unreal estate is being imagined, apprehended and occupied.

Detroit Demolition Disneyland

Beginning in the winter of 2005, as Detroit's municipal government was preparing to host the Super Bowl by ramping up its demolition of abandoned houses and thereby "beautify" the city, a series of abandoned houses in Detroit began to be painted bright orange. In a communiqué to the online site, The Detrioter, a group of artists claimed authorship of the project, which the group termed "Detroit Demolition Disneyland."⁸ Describing its project, the group wrote that it simply endeavored to appropriate houses "whose most striking feature are their derelict appearance," and frame them by painting them Tiggerific Orange, "a color from the Mickey Mouse series, easily purchased from Home Depot."

In its communiqué, the group claimed that, through painting houses, Detroit's citizens were invited to "look not only at these houses, but all the buildings rooted in decay and corrosion." This scrutiny, claimed the group, brought "awareness," and this awareness, in turn, brought possibilities for "action." Yet what, exactly, the awareness of Tiggerific Orange-painted abandoned houses involved was left undefined: Abandoned houses themselves? The city's attempt



image captions and credits:

1. Detroit Demolition Disneyland, "Hancock #2." Photograph by Object Orange, courtesy of Paul Kotula Projects.

2. Car Wash Café. Photograph by author.

3. Hygienic Dress League, intervention at Grand Army Building. Photograph by author.

4. Heidelberg Project. Photograph by author.

to repress awareness of that abandonment by destroying its most conspicuous examples? The agency of art to critique that repression? Or the limits of art, able to rhetorically critique an urban disaster without proposing alternatives to it? Indeed, while invoking "action," the only action that the group attempted to incite in its audience was mimetic: "Take action. Pick up a roller. Pick up a brush. Apply orange." But it is just this sort of action that casts the Detroit Demolition Disneyland as an occupation of unreal estate—an occupation that registers a site's deviation from a norm without destroying that very deviation in the process.

Car Wash Café

The Car Wash Café is a open-air auto storage facility/party venue/barbeque garden/personal museum operating on the site of a former car wash and café. The owner of the site, who also owns a nearby auto styling salon, purchased the site of the Car Wash Café to use as a storage facility for cars that he was in the process of repairing. He introduced a car wash that employed teenagers from the surrounding neighborhood and, when customers of the car wash and neighborhood residents began to congregate at the car wash, opened an ice-cream stand to provide refreshments and a place to spend time. The stand eventually became a sit-down café, which spilled over into the adjacent auto storage facility, sponsoring the transformation of the latter into a barbeque garden. The explicit programming of the site is complemented by its use as a space to display a rich cross-section of auto-related urban ephemera: cars, car parts, gas pumps, signal lights, roadside signs and so on.

The ability to program the site of the Car Wash Café without concern for profit-making has allowed its functions to emerge and transform over the course of time through a series of improvisational programs. Moreover, these programs, and the equipment that supports them, are themselves collected in the Car Wash Café, so that the site also serves as a museum of its own history. The signs and advertisements that fill the site publicize not a current reality, but layers of the past—a historical project that is all the more powerful by not being marked as such. The Car Wash Café is, at once, abandoned, completed, musealized and waiting to re-open for the next party.

Hygienic Dress League

The Hygienic Dress League is a corporation that creates nothing but its own image. It therefore uses video, fashion shoots, branding and advertising not as means to the end of selling products or services but as reflexive artistic works. Recognizable as advertising, albeit of an enigmatic variety, these works invite thought about themselves (what exactly are they advertising?) and about corporate modes of identity and publicity more generally.

The League's project exploits the availability of urban space and urban surface in Detroit to unprofitable expertise. Its advertisements are painted on the boards that seal up abandoned buildings, re-purposing instruments of physical closure into ones of conceptual opening. Announcing the presence of the League and the "coming soon" of something left unspecified, these advertisements also focus attention on Detroit as an object of relentless campaigns of betterment. These campaigns, premised on the inadequacy or incompleteness of the city in its current state, pose Detroit's

present as nothing but the pre-history of a hoped-for future. Exaggerating this condition, the Hygienic Dress League brings Detroit's obsessive futurology into public visibility and allows it to be questioned or opposed in new ways.

Heidelberg Project

The Heidelberg Project appropriates abandoned houses and vacant lots on the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street, on Detroit's East Side, as sites for the display of made and found objects assembled by the artist, Tyree Guyton. Guyton, who grew up in a house on the block, collects and exhibits objects from the detritus he finds in and around his neighborhood: stuffed animals, vacuum cleaners, television sets, shoes, hubcaps, telephones and other items of domestic urban life. According to Guyton, the project's original agenda emerged as a defamiliarization of what was conventionally perceived to be mere garbage: "there was no plan and no blueprint, just the will and determination to see beauty in the refuse."⁹ The waste objects of this oppositional aestheticization are carefully curated, arrayed on empty lots or hung from the walls of abandoned houses or trees, and at times decorated with colored polka dots, which also adorn houses, cars, trees, street surfaces and other objects on the site of the project.

The Heidelberg Project appropriates both abandoned objects and abandoned property; the latter appropriation could also be framed as "squatting," or illegal occupation, and the City of Detroit has twice destroyed parts of the project, in 1991 and 1999, in response to protests from local community organizations against the unusual circumstances created by the project: a neighborhood that was, also, an open-air urban art exhibition. These protests comprise a friction against Guyton's expression of his project's intention, which is cast in the language of community-building: "to improve lives and neighborhoods through art."¹⁰

What and where is the community? Who can legitimately speak on behalf of the community? Who is able to listen to the community? How can art benefit the community? The Heidelberg Project raises these complex questions without providing simple answers in response, a provocation particularly suited to unreal estate and one that may yet comprise the project's most profound social effect.

**For Sale:
The \$1,000,000,000 House**

Only a few weeks after Toby Barlow's editorial on the \$100 house appeared in the *New York Times*, ABC's 20/20 broadcast a segment on some of the artist-inhabitants of those houses. In an interview on that segment, Mitch Cope, co-owner of the original house that sparked Barlow's op-ed, said that "money isn't on my radar; we're going about it all wrong if we're trying to make a profit."¹¹ But as the very question that elicited Cope's answer illustrates, money is indeed on the radar, and not only for the media, but also for Detroit's property developers, investors, and a host of municipal, state and national agencies besides. No matter the ideological co-ordinates of Detroit's artist-urbanists, that is, their projects are easily

enmeshed within the market economy, the economy of real estate.

Yet this enmeshment itself could become a subject for art. In the same week as the 20/20 broadcast appeared, a "For Sale" sign was posted in front of a house that was owned and occupied by an artist on Heidelberg Street, amidst Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project. The owner/author of the house for sale, Tim Burke, identified the house as the "Detroit Industrial Gallery," designed, in his own words, as "a work of art," "a raw, whimsical sculpture," and "an unfolding story."¹² Technically, Burke's house was produced in a manner than was indebted to the Heidelberg Project and its use of scavenged material, swatches of bright colors, and abandoned urban space as exhibition area for defamiliarized detritus. Artistically, however, the most interesting aspect of the Detroit Industrial Gallery was its sale price—\$1,000,000,000 as posted on the "For Sale" sign—and the relationship, established by that price, between the house and the free market economy.

By pricing the Detroit Industrial Gallery at \$1,000,000,000, Burke was stridently attempting to participate in the real estate market, albeit not at all in a straightforward manner. Describing his thoughts on putting his house up for sale, Burke wrote in his blog, "Why not stimulate the Detroit real estate market? Let's get things moving in Detroit again!"¹³ That is, precisely the imperatives of the market economy that many artists of urban renewal explicitly attempt to refuse are what Burke is engaging, but critically, through an overt over-identification. In this over-identification, the market is neither the object of denial nor the instrument of exploitation, but rather a site of play.

The \$100 houses purchased by artists in Detroit take advantage of conditions in the free market economy—a strategy that is constituent to that very economy—while the \$1,000,000,000 house put up for sale by Burke parodies that economy and the values that it produces. The former strategy yields an easily-defined profit—cheap property—while the latter's intended profit is so extreme as to be ridiculous. But it is precisely this ridiculousness that renders the \$1,000,000,000 house an estate that is wholly unreal, and thus, at least in the context of *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit*, worthy of much further speculation.

Notes

1. Toby Barlow, "For Sale: The \$100 House," *New York Times*, March 8, 2009.
2. Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
3. See *Everyday Urbanism*, eds. John Leighton Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008).
4. Margaret Crawford, "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life," in *Everyday Urbanism*, 24.
5. Margaret Crawford, "Introduction," in *Everyday Urbanism*, 10.
6. On nongovernmental politics, see *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
7. Andrew Herscher, *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).
8. "Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland: A Project," <http://www.thedetroiter.com/nov05/demolition.php>. The group later changed its name to "Object Orange."
9. Tyree Guyton, "From the Artist," in *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), vii.
10. See <http://www.heidelberg.org/mission.html>.
11. Bob Brown, "The \$100 House: 'Wonderful and Sad'," <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/story?id=7123194&page=1>.
12. Tim Burke, "My Home is Sculpture," http://www.detroitindustrialgallery.com/Site/my_home_is_sculpture.html.
13. Tim Burke, "What's It To You?" <http://www.detroitindustrialgallery.com/Site/Blog/Blog.html>.

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