



## Can a few gutsy artists turn Detroit in "Detro"?

BY ANDREW HERSCHER • APRIL 3, 2009

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There is currently a flurry of media attention on Detroit as a haven for enterprising young artists, sparked by Toby Barlow's recent opinion piece in the New York Times . Nationally and internationally, this attention has been suffused with wonderment, if not astonishment, and also hope. Can artists really save a piece of a "ruined city," a "dying city," a city that has defied all other attempts at renewal? What has yet to be acknowledged, however, is how an artistic revival of Detroit might present the city with challenges in its very success.

In his op-ed, Barlow described Detroit as "a vast, enormous canvas where anything imaginable can be accomplished." The title of his piece referred to a \$100 house bought by one couple, artist immigrants from Chicago. This house, cited in almost all subsequent media reports, seems to stand for the creative possibilities afforded by a city where many living expenses have descended to a bare minimum. Yet, while these possibilities are undeniable, the effects that would follow from their realization are not at all clear.

From some perspectives, these effects would be valuable and desirable, and so the colonization of decimated neighborhoods in Detroit by artists would be cause for celebration. Urban theorist <http://www.creativeclass.com/> Richard Florida, for example, poses such artists as the vanguard of a "creative class" that drives the economic development of post-industrial cities.

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 a city becomes 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—but it is a success that, from other perspectives, 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

advantages—these are not only artists but also the working class, recent immigrants and other marginalized communities. Through their facilitation of gentrification, then, artists start a process that eventually leads to their own eviction and to the destruction of precisely the environment that attracted them and allowed their creativity to flourish.

It might seem utterly bizarre to decry the future effects of gentrification in Detroit, a city that is now desperate for investments of any sort and hopes of any kind. And yet, what might be even more bizarre is how just this same desperation and hope once characterized SoHo itself. In 1962, the City Club of New York published a report entitled *The Wastelands of New York*, which focused on the area that is now known as SoHo. The report described that area as an “enormous commercial slum” with disastrously low property values. A few decades later, of course, the problems facing SoHo became entirely different—the problems of a massively overdeveloped enclave of and for the wealthy.

So how to proceed from SoHo to Detro? Mitch Cope and his wife, Gina Reichert, are among Detroit's artist pioneers. In an interview a few days ago on ABC Cope said that “money isn't on my radar; we're going about it all wrong if we're trying to make a profit.”

But as the very question that elicited his answer illustrates, money is indeed on the radar, and not only for the media, but also for Detroit's property developers, investors and landlords, and a host of municipal and state agencies besides. Money would certainly change Detroit; who would benefit from that change is, however, an open question. One can only hope, then, that Cope, Reichert and the artists who are gathering around them can negotiate the emergence of "Detro" without losing what attracted them to the city in the first place.