

Headline: Nature reclaims urban spaces; City goes green in unexpected ways

Source: Detroit Free Press, December 19, 2007

What: This was a three-page story in the Free Press "Driving Detroit" series.

Context: The fourth of a five-part series that we ran after I had driven all the streets of Detroit, this story detailed the way nature had re-asserted itself in Detroit.

<https://media.freep.com/drivingdetroit/partfour.html>

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Probably more than any major city in the country, Detroit abounds in nature.

And that can be both good and bad, and it can be really bad when nature combines with a major by-product of daily life, garbage.

Driving through the city this summer, I saw family gardens, a 4H club and well-tended parks. I also saw a tree growing inside a vacant house, long grass overtaking a sidewalk on East 7 Mile Road and weird mounds that dot the landscape, the result of old dumps alchemizing with weeds and soil.

Across the city, you can see the work of the nonprofit Greening of Detroit, which has planted more than 50,000 trees, reclaimed vacant lots, removed debris, beautified buildings and reached out to residents with help and education.

You can taste the results of the urban gardening movement, which has taken off in recent years in backyards, lots and community gardens. There's a 4H Community Center on McClellan, and a growing army of *locavores* -- advocates of locally grown food -- plus gardeners selling their produce under a new Grown in Detroit label.

You can visit Detroit's numerous parks. Many of the bigger ones appeared to be in good condition, though some of the smaller installations needed the grass trimmed or new equipment.

On East Ferry, fed-up residents erected a sign on a play lot they said was ignored by the city and Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. The sign said: "Kwame Park. Closed Due to Neglect."

There's another side to nature in Detroit, though, that is quite different, quite unruly and quite remarkable.

In many parts of the city, you can see aggressive trees, bushes and weeds that have surged through soil, wood and cracks in the concrete to reclaim empty lots, garages,

alleys and even some streets, such as Hawthorne, west of I-75 East McNichols; and Legrand, near Mt. Elliot and I-94; and West Jefferson around 16th Street.

Camilo Jose Vergara, an internationally known sociologist and photographer who has spent years documenting the decay of Detroit and other cities, calls the reforestation a "veil of vegetation creeping over the city."

Trees have been growing from the roofs of abandoned buildings in Detroit for years; on Strasburg Street, I saw a cottonwood growing *inside* the second floor of an abandoned house. At East Lantz and Russell, a cottonwood sapling sprouted from the top of the pole holding a stop sign. On Chalmers, north of East Jefferson, Siberian Elms, Mulberry trees and Catalpas swarmed over an abandoned apartment building, covering it almost completely in green.

And, frequently in Detroit, resurging nature is accompanied by a decidedly unnatural product -- garbage -- and the combination creates scenes that give the city its reputation as the epicenter of the Rust Belt.

Piles of trash, large and small, sometimes dumped by trucks and sometimes by people, sat in streets, fields, even inside abandoned buildings this summer.

"The problem is so big that it is heartbreaking to me," said Durene Brown, the city ombudsman, who calls the city's dumped-trash problem "Detroit's dirty little secret."

She added: "Can you imagine children living in a neighborhood with abandoned houses and trash? It is horrible."

One notable blending of trash, nature and abandonment is the almost completely empty Packard Plant complex on the east side. Many of the 47 buildings are filled with dumped refuse. Big trees grow on the roofs, and chalky stalactites hang from some ceilings, apparently the result of rainwater coursing through the walls. Green moss grows out of the floors in some areas and out of walls in others.

Sometimes, when nature and trash combine, the result is strange, subtle and seemingly permanent changes in the city's topography.

Here is what happens: Trucks illegally dump piles of heavy-duty materials such as cement, drywall, used soil or rusty metal bars. As the piles sit, nature gradually takes over. Grass, weeds, trees and soil swarm over the piles, transforming them into green mounds. Before long, the mounds look as if they've been sitting there forever.

There are hundreds of mounds across the city. Some are knee high; others are big as a garage.

Nowhere is the mound-building process happening more flamboyantly than in the orphaned neighborhood north of Mt. Elliott and I-94, on the near northeast side.

When you drive along Georgia Avenue, west of St. Cyril, you enter a vast, decomposing zone of tall grasses, weeds, trees, dozens of piles of loose refuse and numerous mounds.

One of the mounds, off of Huber Avenue east of Mt. Elliott, is more than two stories high. A large Detroit Water and Sewerage Department facility sits across the street.

Inside the zone, which extends for several blocks, there are no homes, no factories, no parks, no people and no street signs. Some of the streets themselves have been obliterated by decay and vegetation.

At the eastern edge of the zone is the Elyton Missionary Baptist Church. The Rev. John Kelly is pastor.

"We ignore it," Kelly said defiantly, though he acknowledged the remoteness of the area probably helped thieves break into the church three times in recent years. They stole air conditioners, exhaust fans, computers, televisions, faxes and other equipment. Now, the rooftop machinery is enclosed in wrought-iron gates and topped by razor wire.

"It's costing us," Kelly said. "We've had to put in a whole different security system. Even if we call the police, we can't count on them coming. It's not a priority."

The area, largely owned by the City of Detroit, is known as the I-94 Industrial Project, a nearly 10-year attempt by the city to build a suburban-style industrial park. So far, only the extreme northwest corner of the area has been developed.

The rest is composed of red oaks, London plane trees, silver maples, Little Siberian elms, Catalpas, Norway maples, American elms, lamb's quarters, Queen Anne's Lace, foxtail grass, and Kochia, which forms a multi-branched stem that can grow to a height of 8 feet.

Orin Gelderloos, a professor of biology and environmental science at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, said Kochia was common in the Great Salt Lake area of Utah. Here, in local dumps, it likely is feeding off the alkaline content in such things as concrete parking blocks, which soaked up many winters of Michigan road salt.

Near the busy corner of West Grand Boulevard and Grand River, an artist who goes by the name of Dabl used a mound of concrete and iron bars as the centerpiece of an elaborate artistic installation behind his African bead gallery. The installation includes masks, glass, fencing, a car, and a washing machine. It tells the story of Africans in the New World.

"Most of this stuff was dumped here," Dabl said. "Our thinking was, 'You don't try to destroy or throw away, you make it work for you.' "