



*by joe flanagan  
photographs  
by andrew  
moore*

# running on empty

the plight of detroit and the postindustrial city

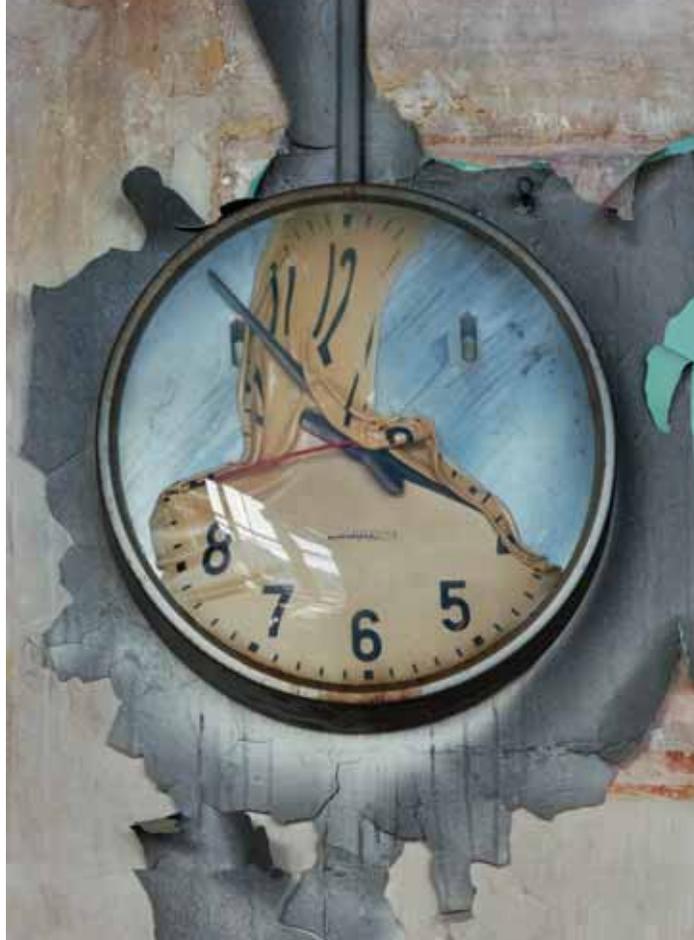


ALL PHOTOS © ANDREW MOORE

**DETROIT STRETCHES OUT ALONG THE RIVER LIKE AN INDUSTRIAL AGE POMPEII. IN THE** one-time Mecca of American car culture and symbol of economic might, everything looks emphatically *once* and *former*. Vacant and blighted, shockingly empty, Detroit is the most vivid example of what is being called the postindustrial city. Cleveland, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Newark are emptying, too. But none has fallen as far—or from such a height—as Detroit.

The decline of the city's manufacturing base—the automobile industry and its related businesses—is the root cause. The white flight that started in the 1950s set in motion a self-perpetuating atrophy. About a third of Detroit's buildings are abandoned. At its most prosperous, in 1955, there were almost two million residents in Detroit. Now there are fewer than 800,000. The sprawling city whose very name evoked prosperity and industrial might now looks more like a ruin left by another civilization.

The city is conducting a demolition campaign, seeded by \$20 million in federal funds. Its scope is massive: 10,000 structures by the end of Mayor



## CLEVELAND, NEW ORLEANS, ST. LOUIS, AND NEWARK ARE

Dave Bing's first term, if things go according to plan. Since there are some 90,000 vacant homes and lots, the effort will just scratch the surface. Still, it is welcome news to many Detroiters. Block after block of empty, decaying buildings attract crime and discourage home buyers. And it makes sense financially, since maintaining an infrastructure once intended to support millions is a drain on a city whose tax base is evaporating.

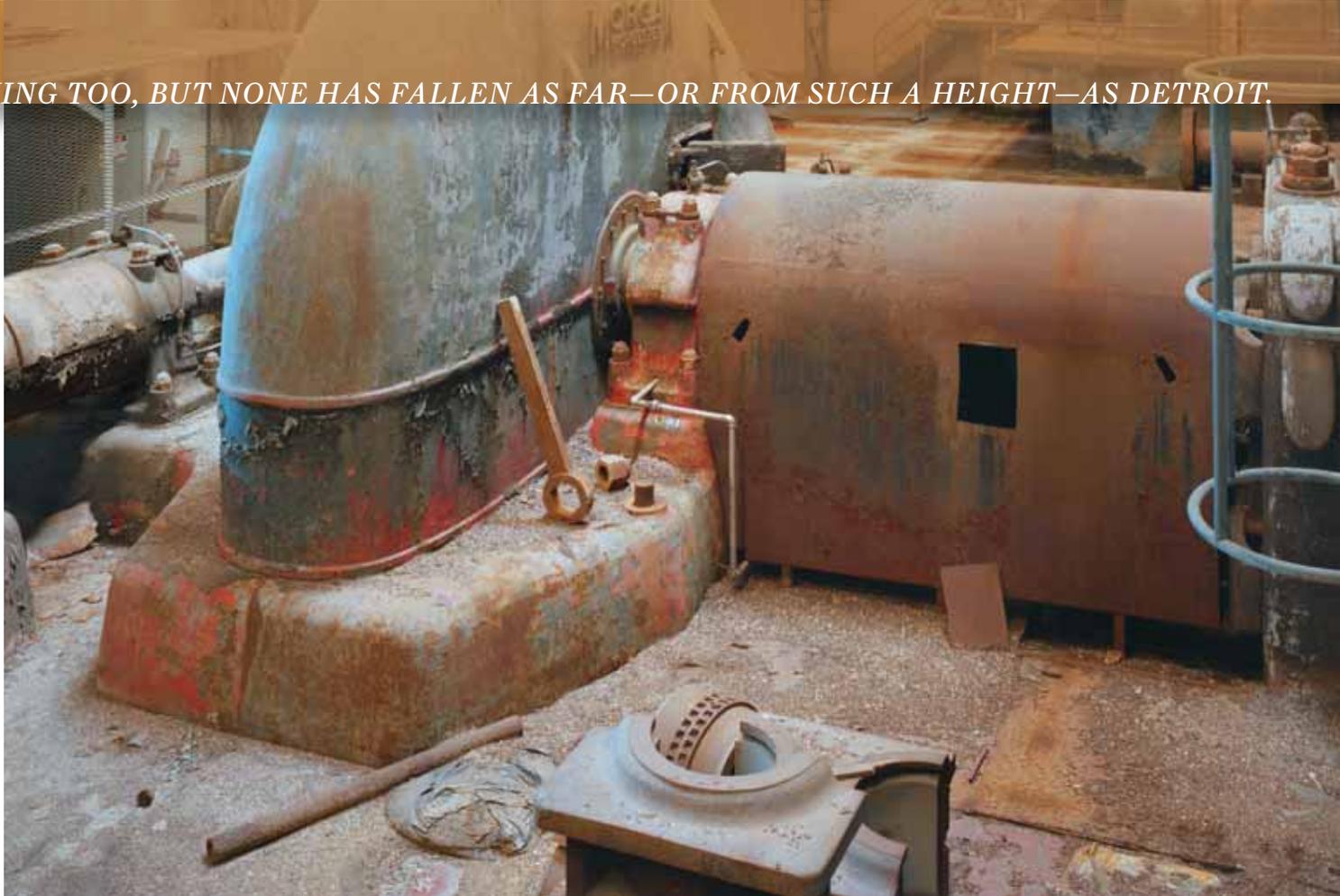
What the shrinking city phenomenon means for Detroit's rich architectural heritage is something different altogether. The city's Gilded Age mansions, the homes of industrial barons and auto company executives, its simple workers' housing, and its grand public spaces comprise a vast and remarkable historic record of the city. Detroit was once called "the Paris of the West" because of its architecture. Since 2005, a number of its old buildings have been on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's most endangered list, but it's not just individual structures, it's the entire historic downtown. According to commentary on the web site of Preservation Wayne (an advocacy group active in Wayne county, where Detroit is located), the city is losing one of the few assets that make it attractive, buildings that are "irreplaceable . . . a stock of wealth unique to Detroit that we squander at tremendous peril."

In a city whose needs are so profound, the idea of saving historic buildings would seem like a luxury it simply cannot afford, if not a case of misplaced priorities. "The fundamental problem is poverty," says Robin Boyle, chair of the urban planning department at Wayne State University. "Poverty in a city that is extremely large for the remaining population and their businesses. It can't afford to provide services to cover 140 square miles."

Detroit's strategic location on a waterway connecting Lakes Erie and Huron dictated its future as a transportation hub, center of commerce, and, later, an industrial giant. Throughout the 19th century it grew as shipping, shipbuilding, and manufacturing transformed the city. Detroit had a major carriage-building industry, which, with the advent of the internal combustion engine, began turning out the first automobiles. Henry Ford's work in a rented shop on Mack Avenue changed history.

While the city is synonymous with the auto industry, it was the setting for other historical events as well. Detroit's proximity to the Canadian border made it a critical place in the chain of clandestine sites known as the Underground Railroad. This was the last stop for many formerly enslaved people who continued on to Canada and freedom. A large African American population established itself and would shape the city's culture. Industry-heavy Detroit was the scene of some of the defining moments in the history of American labor. Through two world wars, the city served as one of the most prolific sources of matériel. Detroit's contribution to America's effort in World War II was so important, President Roosevelt named it "the arsenal of democracy."

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** Ford plant in Dearborn; oil tank at the once-bustling Ford River Rouge facility. **ABOVE:** Clock at Cass Technical High School in Detroit. **RIGHT:** Silent equipment at River Rouge.



*EMPTYING TOO, BUT NONE HAS FALLEN AS FAR—OR FROM SUCH A HEIGHT—AS DETROIT.*



*“ONCE DETROIT’S BUILDING STOCK IS LOST, IT WILL BE NEARLY*





**THE WAR BROUGHT RAPID CHANGE. A RELATIVELY SMALL CITY WAS TRANSFORMED AS** billions of dollars in defense contracts and hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from the South flowed in. Suddenly, Detroit was overcrowded and tense. Federally built worker housing was pushed to its limits. What's more, the city was segregated. The situation touched off riots and generated an enduring atmosphere of distrust and resentment.

In postwar America, Detroit, like other cities, was looking to the future. President Eisenhower's interstate highway system was seen as a great modernizing force. The auto industry put its lobbying weight behind the system since it encouraged car ownership. In Detroit, the highway gave

**IMPOSSIBLE TO CREATE A LIVELY AND EXCITING DOWNTOWN.” —PRESERVATION WAYNE**



birth to suburbs and white flight. Between 1950 and 1980, about a million people left. Plummeting property values fostered the exodus. The automobile, which put Detroit on the map, also precipitated its decline. Says Karen Nagher of Preservation Wayne, “When you focus your whole economy on one industry, it’s dangerous. People were warning Detroit about this in the ‘50s and ‘60s.” Indeed, a 1961 *Time* article said the city’s decline was already underway: “Auto production soared to an all-time peak in 1955—but there were already worrisome signs. In the face of growing foreign and domestic competition, auto companies merged, or quit, or moved out of town to get closer to markets. Automation began replacing workers in the plants that remained.” Writes Don Keko of examiner.com, “People left Detroit for greener pastures and took their money with them.”

Detroit’s experience—while extreme—is similar to that of other former industrial cities. Reviewing a book on the subject—*Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*—historian Thomas Lassman writes, “By the 1970s, the American economy was in the midst of a wrenching transformation that eviscerated once-venerable manufacturing industries on a scale not seen since the Great Depression.” Layoffs and closings crippled cities like Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Baltimore. The economy had gone global, where “more nimble” foreign companies could thrive.

As Detroit turned out the stars of the auto industry’s golden age, the city saw the emergence of Motown Records. In the 1960s, Detroit became the unlikely capital of independent music. Motown became a force in American culture even as Detroit added social strife to its ills. The city proper was predominantly black, with most whites in the suburbs. While inner city schools enrolled more underprivileged children, the tax base continued to erode. Positive things were happening—education and police reform, federally funded improvements, revitalization plans, a prosperous African American middle class, and blacks in leadership positions. The *New York Times* said that Detroit had more going for it than most northern cities.

**LEFT: Detroit’s Michigan Central Station, built in 1913.**

# AT ITS MOST PROSPEROUS, IN 1955, THERE WERE ALM

**BUT IN 1967, ONE OF THE WORST RIOTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY BROKE OUT. A POLICE** raid on an after-hours club touched off five days of violence. Authorities called in the National Guard and the Army. When it was over, there were 43 people dead and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. The riot is often called a turning point in Detroit's history and the root of many of its problems today, though the claim is debated.

Court-ordered busing encouraged white flight further still, while the gasoline crises of the 1970s were a blow to an auto industry that was already on the ropes. Small, fuel-efficient foreign models were suddenly the rage. Foreign car companies got a purchase on the American market, and would command more of it as the decades wore on. In the 1980s, the city began knocking down abandoned structures because they attracted drug dealers. The result was entire sections that looked like what one writer described as "an urban prairie."

Most recently, the foreclosure crisis and the recession delivered another blow, inciting more departures. Yet, there is no shortage of ideas on how to stabilize the city. Community groups, nonprofits, and trade organizations have all come up with strategies. They all involve re-thinking the space and how people occupy it. Some advocate triage for the traditionally stable neighborhoods to act as anchors for growth. One suggestion is to go for rural appeal. With so much space reclaimed by nature, why not have urban homesteading where residents live in a country-like setting and pay lower taxes in exchange for going without some utilities? John Hantz, a Detroit businessman, plans to invest millions in urban agriculture. This would be a large-scale, for-profit enterprise, intended to take advantage of the empty space and the trend to locally grown food. The plans are grand and include raised multi-level terraces and entire blocks of corn. The American Institute of Architects says the city is a good candidate for it. While the plan has its critics, the Garden Resource Program, a cooperative working with Michigan State University, has been supporting almost 900 urban gardens and farms.

In the wake of downtown buildings being named to the National Trust's most-endangered list, a number of preservation groups formed a coalition. Their plan is to ensure preservation's place in the city's future, bringing the message to developers, businesses, communities, and local politicians. In 2008, the 84-year-old Book-Cadillac hotel was re-

stored thanks to \$8 million from developer John J. Ferchill combined with funds from almost two dozen other sources. Today, the downtown landmark houses condos, a hotel, restaurants, and a spa. Though by no means a trend, preservationists would like to see more of this. "We've lost a lot," says Nagher. She runs down a list of landmarks: the Statler, the Madison-Lennox, Tiger Stadium. No one seems to be under the illusion that historic preservation will turn things around, but some believe the leaders don't realize the role preservation can play. According

to Preservation Wayne's blog—called *Speramus Meliora*, Latin for "We hope for better things"—"Once Detroit's building stock is lost, it will be nearly impossible to create a lively and exciting downtown." The city's historic structures are a sustainable resource in a world in need of sustainability.

Cities such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh have managed not only to survive, but to keep their historic cores thriving. Pittsburgh has diversified, embracing the health care industry, research, and technology; Buffalo has marketed its waterfront, Olmsted-designed parks, and its many historic neighborhoods.

But Detroit is a huge metropolis designed for three times the number of people who live there. As Boyle points out, it all comes down to economics. "Detroit is a poor city because people with income have moved away." The preservation groups know that basic needs must be met. Tied to the preservation message are the ideas of attracting investment and jobs, intelligent urban planning, effective transit, sensible tax policies, and sustainable development.

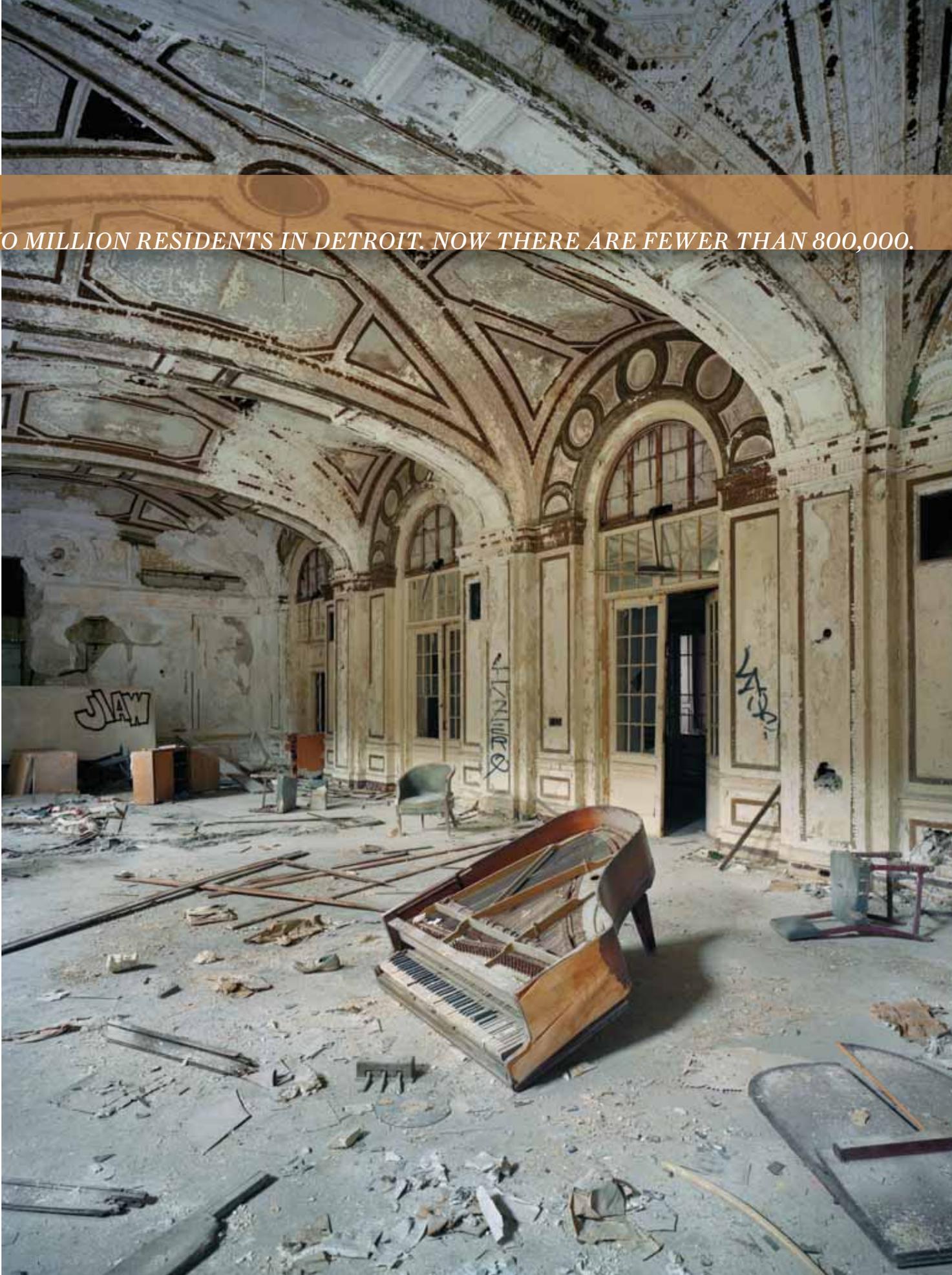
In the meantime, the depressed economy works to preserve the city's historic fabric. "From a preservation standpoint, the city may be blessed to have been on its heels for so long," says an article in *The Next American City*. Little investment equates to fewer teardowns.

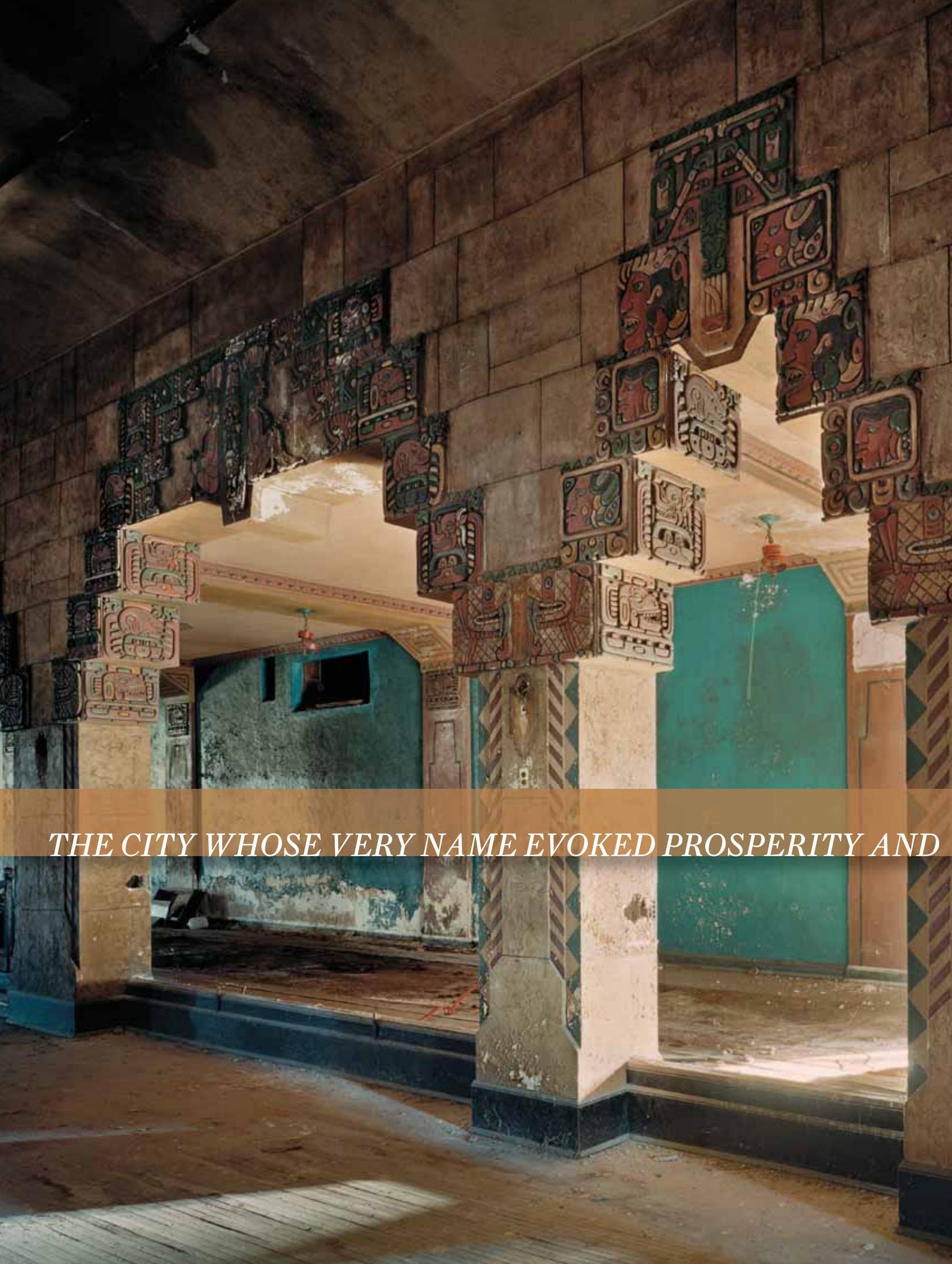
Buildings bought in the hopes of a rebound sit vacant—a familiar story in a city that has undergone several unsuccessful attempts at revitalization. Just because there are no plans to demolish them does not mean they are out of danger. If not secured properly—and many of them are not—they fall prey to vandalism, fire, and weather. As Nagher says, "Water always wins." She recounts the story of the 1923 Lafayette Building in downtown. Empty for a decade, the building was in limbo. There was a movement to have it designated a local historic landmark, but the city government was on the fence. The Lafayette wasn't properly se-



**ABOVE:** Tiger Stadium, built 1912, listed in the *National Register of Historic Places*, demolished 1999. **RIGHT:** The Lee Plaza Hotel.

*MOST TWO MILLION RESIDENTS IN DETROIT. NOW THERE ARE FEWER THAN 800,000.*





*THE CITY WHOSE VERY NAME EVOKED PROSPERITY AND*



cured and a large water tank on the roof rusted through to drain its contents throughout the building. It wasn't the coup de grace for the Lafayette, but it nudged the building closer to its demise. The city spent \$1.4 million to demolish it in 2009.

Unsecured buildings attract vandals and thieves who pilfer copper and other valuable items. They also attract "urban explorers" who enter abandoned buildings and post photographs of their exploits on the internet. The activity is known as "urban spelunking" and "building hacking." The empty buildings of Detroit have become a hot destination for explorers from around the world. "Pictures," says Nagher, "aren't the only thing they take."

Preservation advocates are looking at ways to convince developers and property owners that money spent mothballing is actually an investment in the future, when these structures could be the showpieces of a revitalized city. Preservation Wayne has compiled an historic building inventory and conducts guided walking tours of Detroit's historic districts. Michigan recently established a historic preservation tax credit program—similar to that administered by the National Park Service—that offers financial incentives to developers who agree to restore old buildings. Working with the city's historic district commission and its historic designation advisory board, advocates have tried to introduce preservation into the wider dialogue of addressing the city's problems. While the issue has gained a higher profile over the past 20 years, preservation seems an unlikely prospect in a place that the documentary *Requiem for Detroit* describes as the victim of "a slow-motion Katrina." But there is idealism in the act of preserving an old building, and if nothing else, advocates for Detroit's heritage have shown a tenacious idealism. It serves as instruction for other cities that are trying to remake themselves in postindustrial America.

## INDUSTRIAL MIGHT NOW LOOKS LIKE A RUIN LEFT BY ANOTHER CIVILIZATION.

**contact points** **web** Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board [www.detroitmi.gov/CityCouncil/LegislativeAgencies/HistoricDesignationAdvisoryBoard/tabid/2531/Default.aspx](http://www.detroitmi.gov/CityCouncil/LegislativeAgencies/HistoricDesignationAdvisoryBoard/tabid/2531/Default.aspx)  
Preservation Wayne [www.preservationwayne.org/](http://www.preservationwayne.org/) Our Shared National Heritage  
Travel Itinerary [www.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/](http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/).

**LEFT:** The Vanity Ballroom, built just after the stock market crash of 1929.