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# USGBC+

TRANSFORMING OUR BUILT ENVIRONMENT



## PAST

From grassroots efforts to industry leaders, Detroit's ruins are a thing of the past.

## PRESENT

Sustainable design is central to One World Trade Center's development.

## FUTURE

Adapting historic buildings into micro lofts offers an innovative urban housing model.

# DETROIT IS DYING,

People love to make sweeping proclamations about Detroit. Depending on whom you listen to, Detroit is in ruins, or Detroit is back. Detroit is the worst city in America, or Detroit is the new Brooklyn. Detroit is a hip town, or Detroit is a ghost town.

WRITTEN BY **Calvin Hennick**

**A**s Detroit rebounds from its lowest lows, some see the opportunity to make sustainable building practices key to the city's rebuilding efforts. But can a place built on the back of the internal combustion engine really become a hotbed of green development?

With 139 square miles of land and a population of around 700,000 people (down drastically from its peak of nearly 2 million in 1950, but still enough to keep the city ranked ahead of Boston, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.), Detroit is large enough to accommodate whatever story angle outside observers are interested in mapping onto it. A photographer sent to snap pictures of blight will see nothing but abandoned buildings. A reporter sent to cover urban agriculture will see nothing but community gardens and farmers' markets.

And so, when people start whispering in your ear about how Detroit is poised to become a model city for sustainable development, it's easy to be a little skeptical at first—to think that maybe this is just another angle. Detroit is, after all, a city with ample surface parking downtown but meager mass transit options; a city that still, in 2014, doesn't have curbside recycling for all of its residents; a city that greets visitors on their drive into town with a giant Uniroyal tire by the side of the freeway, backgrounded by smokestacks belching into the sky.

But Detroit is also a place where open space is plentiful and land is cheap; a place where a scarcity of resources makes the idea of reusing materials and saving on energy costs particularly attractive; and a place where residents—who've spent years reading about how the decline of the auto industry sealed their own doom as well—are eager to prove that there's life in Detroit after the assembly line.

"I think it's real," says Jeff Gaines, chairman of the board of directors for the U.S. Green Building Council's Detroit Regional Chapter, of Detroit's projected green boom. "I think what you're seeing is that the younger folks are demanding it and some of the more savvy folks are seeing the benefits. To me, sustainable

development is really smart development. If we are going to try and get the city back on its feet, I think we want to do it in an intelligent way. We're talking about doing things in a much more lean manner and on a much smaller scale than we've done them before."

On an official level, the city's 350-page urban planning document, "Detroit Future City," calls for improved public transit, increased density and walkability, better lighting efficiency, the creation of landscapes that actively clean the air and water, and other green features. And a number of building projects in the city and region have been awarded Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) certification, including Henry Ford Hospital in West Bloomfield, Habitat for Humanity in Pontiac, and Strategic Energy Solutions in Berkley.

But much of the buzz in Detroit surrounds the work of small groups, individuals, and organizations outside of City Hall: activists in the city's neighborhoods working on small solar projects and community gardens, business investments that are bringing people back to downtown, and an influx of young social entrepreneurs who consider sustainability an important part of their bottom line.

"We have finally reached a point where we have an open blueprint," says Gaines. "Before, we always had all sorts of encumbrances in the way. There was always a reason why we couldn't do this or why we shouldn't do this. We're at a point now where we can really start to re-map where we want to go. If we want to recycle, if we want to put in mass transit, we probably have a better shot of doing it now than we ever have."

"While other cities may be further along than Detroit in implementing sustainable building practices our projects tend to have a 'green boutique' feel to them that might not translate elsewhere," says Jacob Corvidae, a former member of the regional chapter board and the interim executive director of a nonprofit group focused on sustainable development. "Our feeling is that when we have sustainability solutions that work in Detroit, anybody can use them," he says.

In other words: If it works in Detroit, it can work anywhere.



# DETROIT IS RISING.

“ I feel like [the city] is coming back. I see more people out there volunteering for things. You have more people getting involved. It'll be back in a couple more years. I know that for a fact.”

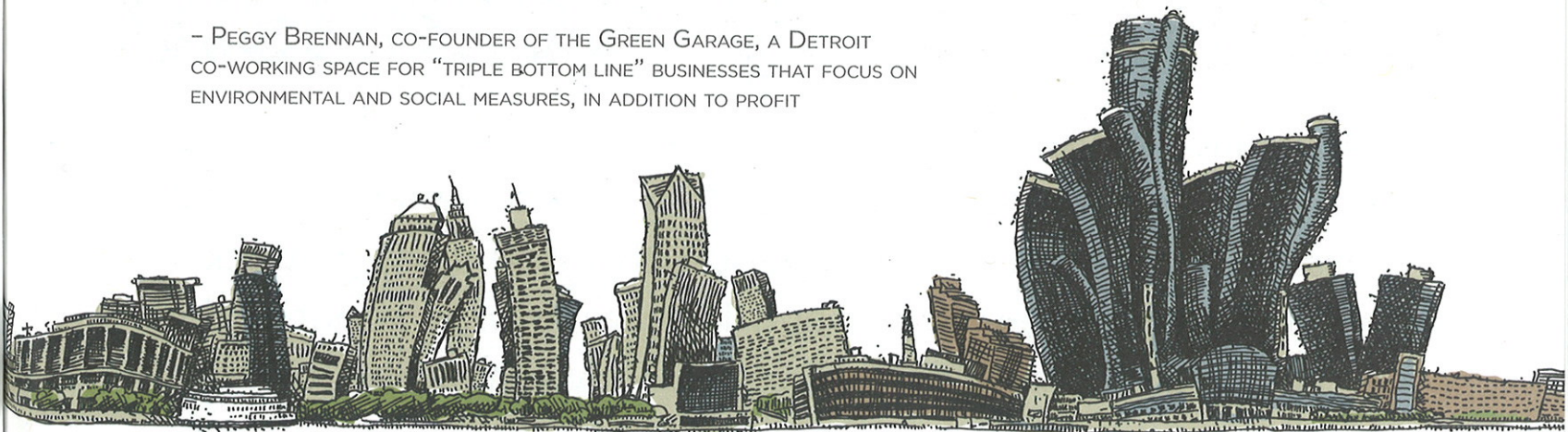
– YOLANDA ELEY, MEMBER OF THE GREATER WOODWARD COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION'S BLIGHT REMEDIATION TEAM

“ Adaptation and resilience are two keys to success for a sustainable future. We have to adapt to climate change. And we have to pick ourselves back up and be successful despite the challenges. Those are two qualities that the people of Detroit have more of than anybody else in this country. We have been adapting for decades.”

– EMILE LAUZZANA, DIRECTOR OF ENERGY AND SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“ I think in order to develop an area that has so many significant financial challenges, you're going to need to be very, very careful about where money is spent. And when you spend money on sustainable areas, often you see a payback.”

– PEGGY BRENNAN, CO-FOUNDER OF THE GREEN GARAGE, A DETROIT CO-WORKING SPACE FOR “TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE” BUSINESSES THAT FOCUS ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL MEASURES, IN ADDITION TO PROFIT





# Community Activism

"How much more do you want to see?" asks Reverend Joan C. Ross, driving past block after block of blighted homes in Detroit's North End. "I hate showing people this stuff. They go back and this is what they write about. They don't write about all the great ideas coming out of Detroit. They write about this."

**“Yeah, we cut down the grass, but you can cut down grass, and if you don’t change people’s outlook, if you don’t change their perspective, then cutting down the grass means nothing. It’ll just grow back.”**

– REVEREND JOAN C. ROSS



Left: Green activist Reverend Joan C. Ross stands in front of “progress house” in Detroit’s North End, which has been rehabilitated using green practices.

Right: Volunteers work on the upkeep of the property.

Photos: Ara Howrani. [www.howranistudios.com](http://www.howranistudios.com)

**R**oss, whose close-cropped hair is dyed to match her stylish red eyeglass frames, came to Detroit 30 years ago to become a McDonald’s franchisee. She later co-owned a local nightclub and only went to school to become a minister in 1999. She preaches in a nondenominational service at an Episcopal church each Sunday and she’s an outspoken advocate for the North End, her language veering toward the unprintable when she talks about outsiders’ perceptions of her neighborhood.

She’s also a fierce defender of the city’s image, and she makes it clear that she doesn’t want to be party to yet another article focusing solely on blight.

In truth, no one needs a tour guide to find bombed-out buildings in Detroit. They’re everywhere, a fact that has been painstakingly documented in slideshow after Internet slideshow. (This phenomenon has been derisively dubbed

“ruin porn,” and it reached its peak sometime around 2009, when *VICE* published an article titled “Something, Something, Something Detroit.” The story took lazy journalists to task for parachuting into the city and depicting its decrepitude while ignoring any signs of progress or stability.)

What’s shocking isn’t so much the boarded-up homes, or the homes that have been left open without boards, or the ones where all the windows are broken, or the ones that have no windows at all, or the ones covered in graffiti, or the ones whose porches have completely collapsed, or the ones resembling dumpsters with trash spewing out into their yards. You’ve seen these. You’re prepared for these. No, what’s shocking are the houses next to them—the ones with a fresh coat of paint, flower boxes on the windowsills, or kids’ bikes leaning against a fence. The ones cropped out of the “ruin porn” photos.

Many people talk about the city being a “blank slate” or “fresh canvas” on which Detroiters can create anything they want. But driving through the North End, it’s clear that there’s no such thing as a blank slate. There’s only what’s here. These homes are just a few miles from downtown, right off Woodward Avenue—the city’s “spine”—and unlike some farther-flung neighborhoods, the North End has not turned into an urban prairie. Plenty of people remain, people who never left no matter how bad things got, people still trying to make a go of it in Detroit even as the world around them literally falls apart.

Standing among these still-making-a-go-of-it homes is 250 Alger Street, a rambling six-bedroom house on one of the neighborhood’s better blocks (at around 2,500 square feet, the structure is actually on the smallish side for the North End, once a seat of African-American wealth in the city). Ross, until recently, was executive director of a group called the Greater Woodward Community Development Corporation, which bought the house in 2010 and rehabbed the property using green techniques.

Although this “project house,” as Ross calls it, is certainly in better shape than many of the surrounding homes, a visitor wouldn’t necessarily guess at first blush that this is a “home of the future.” The kitchen is decades beyond dated, and some of the bedrooms’ lusterless hardwood floors are splattered with paint. But visitors can catch a glimpse of the cutting-edge in the home’s systems and also in its story.

The house had been abandoned and pillaged before Ross’s former group snagged it for \$5,000, and it was redone using repurposed materials. The trim work comes from other abandoned houses, including two reclaimed piano legs that adorn the passageway between the living room and dining room. A greywater system collects water from the bathroom sink and uses it to flush the toilet. Outside, there are solar panels on the roof and when rain falls, some is captured for irrigation and much of the rest is harnessed by rain gardens to help keep water out of storm drains.

“Green is our future,” Ross says. “So if we’re going to look toward the future, we have to start teaching. It has to start with something simple that people can see. They can walk around this house, they can see a solar panel



Photo: Ara Howrani. [www.howranistudios.com](http://www.howranistudios.com)

and they can begin to see into the future. They never thought about climate issues. They never thought about a rain garden as a way of protecting the Great Lakes water basin and not overloading the storm drains. They never saw that. But if they walk through a project house and see this stuff in action, then it brings the future closer to them, today.”

Funded by a grant from the Kresge Foundation, the Greater Woodward Community Development Corporation trains people—most of them unemployed, some of them homeless—in the ways of sustainable development. Trainees are compensated with stipends or in the form of “sweat rent” (free lodging at the project house) and work in one of five teams. One team does blight remediation, one rehabs properties, one works on solar projects, one deconstructs old homes to keep usable materials out of landfills, and one restores wood windows to help conserve energy and lower heating bills.

In addition to the project house, the organization has installed solar panels at a local farmers’ market (the panels power the fans in the market’s hoop house). Ross also plans to work with another group to install solar-powered lawn lights in the neighborhood to help supplement the city’s notoriously spotty street lighting system. The achievements are impressive. But, in a neighborhood with more than its share of problems, ranging from crime to chronically underperforming schools to substandard city services, why the emphasis on going green?

## Ross says she sees practical benefits to sustainable practices—the potential to improve the quality of life and cut costs for people in the neighborhood.

Ross says she sees practical benefits to sustainable practices—the potential to improve the quality of life and cut costs for people in the neighborhood. Urban agriculture isn't a fad or a hobby here; it's a reliable way for people without access to good grocery stores to get fresh produce. Solar panels and window repairs won't just save the environment, they'll also save people money on their energy bills. And, Ross hopes, the trained workers will eventually use their acquired skills to open their own small businesses.

"One of the guys on the team told me his only hope was to see Detroit in his rearview mirror," Ross recalls. "That's how bad it was for him. And when we started the program, he felt there was some hope, that there was a future."

William "Bud" Eley, who stands 6'10" and played professional basketball overseas for a number of years, works on the organization's blight remediation

team. "To me, green is the number one thing," he says. "It's cleaning up. What better place to start cleaning up than your own community?"

"People come outside and thank us a lot," Eley continues. "You give kids something to do, someplace to play." His cousin, Sophia Eley, says the group's work has had a noticeable impact. "When I left [the city] in 2005, it looked terrible," she says. "When I came back, you could tell somebody had made a change."

For Ross, getting people involved in the community is even more important than the blight team's work boarding up vacant homes or mowing untamed lawns. "We try to empower people to get their voice back," she says. "They have a right and a responsibility to this community. Whatever it is, it is what it is because of them too."

"Yeah, we cut down the grass," Ross adds. "But if you don't change people's outlook, if you don't change their perspective, then cutting down the grass means nothing. It'll just grow back." 🍁

**Left: Ross works to transform the perception of her town from blight to hope.**

**Below: Detroit's revitalization includes the development of community gardens where residents can grow their own food.**

Photo: Wojtek Arciszewski

