

SPRINGTIME AND THE MOTOR CITY

Thoughts on the decline and revival of Detroit

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So I promised Mom that I wouldn't talk about taxes or the problems of big government in my column this week. Well... okay, if my thoughts do lead me in those directions, I promise to at least tread lightly.

To the Detroit Institute of Arts...

At the Wednesday night pub gathering of eagles last week, my friend Byron J. Slabotsky mentioned that he spent a father-daughter day down at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), where the Norman Rockwell Exhibit is being shown. He and his family travel down to the DIA and other oases frequently, kind of his personal statement of resistance to white flight (an affliction stemming from many things, mostly the riots in 1967, "urban renewal," and the 20-year, angry-black-"pain-body" administration of Mayor Coleman A. Young, which began in 1973).

Winter has taken a long time disappearing this year and the morning we pick starts out in the 30s with a chilly breeze. I'm not like Slabotsky, who grew up in a once-vibrant Polish-American neighborhood of Detroit along Michigan Avenue out toward Dearborn. No, my connection to the city that put the world on wheels is less loyal, and more tenuous... I didn't move to SE Michigan until '68 when I was 19; no old-neighborhood roots for me.

Which isn't to say I never became fond of the place.

As Mom and I drive SE along the John C. Lodge freeway, witnessing block after block of houses—mostly hollowed-out tombstones—that were new maybe as late as the 1940s, I think back how this is the town where I officially became a dude:

I arrived just in time to see the Tigers win the '68 World Series, then entered Wayne State University engineering college (determining that bricklayer's helper was not the ideal career path). I was on campus in July 1969 when Armstrong-Aldrin-Collins landed on the moon[1]. In politics, I basically launched an Objectivist[2] insurgency—via a bombastic, moralistic (leaving no Randian cliché unturned) letter to the Wayne Engineer—in the Michigan Young Republicans, then helped to found the Libertarian Party of Michigan. When not offending leftists at the literature tables of "Commie Corner" in (get this) State Hall or by selling grapes during the César Chávez grape boycott, I was actually trying to learn some engineering so I could make a living when I got out.

That and trying to impress this gorgeous young brunette I met when I debated a Catholic priest about God. Then I asked her out during a tax protest I organized downtown. [Actually I asked out her identical twin, who was married at the time but graciously accepted and gave me her sister's phone number.] I remember taking my bride-to-be to the Detroit Symphony at Ford Auditorium in the spring of '74, where, after we had listened to the performance of his Fourth Piano Concerto, I carried on like Schroeder[3] about the composer's heroics. We drove there in my '69 green MG Midget with the top down; I tied her red scarf around the rear view mirror like Snoopy in his Sopwith Camel.[4]

My world was such a blur 1970-1975, with love in my heart, radical libertarian stars in my eyes, and great causes and ideas churning in my mind: from Robert Heinlein (The Moon is a Harsh Mistress) to Robert Ettinger (The Prospect of Immortality) to (the increasingly American-corporate-state-apologetics of) the Rand enclave itself... and the many individualistic authors that broke from the orthodoxy. All of these raging hormones and grandiose visions emerged for me in the city of 'the strait'—downtown, Wayne State, Detroit Medical Center (DMC), Tiger Stadium, Strohs' Brewery, the David Stott Building (where we recorded the Voice of Reason on WABX), Palmer Park, Better Made Potato Chips, Carl's Chop House, Little Harry's restaurant, the Windsor Tunnel, my rental habitat with other revolutionaries in the Greenfield-Grand River area, Lafayette Clinic, Greektown, Poletown, Corktown, Eastern Market, The German Club, Cass Technical

High School (where the twins graduated), the Roostertail (restaurant), Detroit Athletic Club, and I'm leaving out maybe a dozen other main venues—and the near-in suburbs like East Detroit and Ferndale.

Anyway, these definitely were a few of my favorite things, and they were centered around Motown, even if I didn't float in the mainstream of the city (or state or country) intellectually or socially. This morning driving with Mom down to the Wayne State area again—the university is midtown and directly across Woodward Avenue from the DIA—the one book that rolls over and over again in my mind is Jane Jacob's *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. I remember her classic assertion: "The cities of America did not die, they were murdered... by the city planners."^[5]

As I take the Lodge freeway exit for the university and the DIA, I forget that you're supposed to make a U-turn before the Forest Road cross street, then head back north to pick up Warren Avenue. So I wind up wandering around in the Martin Luther King Drive area for a while—why does every major city name a street MLK Drive: to advertise the seemingly hopeless desolation of contrived-VFW^[6] neighborhoods?—before I right the ship and return to the Wayne Oasis. Now I'm looking at Slabotsky's directions that say "after Warren, find Woowurph." Woowurph? What the heck is the Slab Man talking about?

I perform a Vulcan mind meld with my former self 38 years ago when I spent so much time driving to and walking the streets of the WSU campus and surroundings. But I come up empty. Was Woowurph a tiny cross street that never hit consciousness, or did someone come up with a new street entirely? Damn. Decision time. Well, they sure haven't moved the DIA, and it's due east of the main part of the WSU campus on the other side of Woodward... Aw, heck. That's it, funny guy, Byron has laid some 'hoodspeak on me, the dipwad. 'Woowurph' is 'Woodward.' Slap forehead.

No probblem, it's just a matter of finding parking now. A lot of one-ways in this vicinity, which includes the DIA, Wayne State, the Science Center, the DMC, Orchestra Hall, the International Institute, a handful of restaurants and bars, and a couple of classy old hotels still standing. The main parking lot is full, but there are spots left on the streets bordering the museum: \$1 per hour with a two hour maximum. Well, all right, I'm going with the flow and figure we'll take the quicker get-acquainted tour today, possibly forgo the Rockwell exhibit. Check out the picture on the left. Pretty impressive building for sure.

We see the main entrance to the DIA with a the Rockwell banner. What I notice early is that unlike years ago when you could simply walk up the stairs—and it seemed the Institute was open every day—and go in. No standing in line, free admission, at least for students. I don't even remember security guards, only attendants and docents to help you understand the exhibits. Times have changed, even in the Midtown Oasis. The lower windows and doors have iron bars, the main entrance is for show, not for go. We must enter from the Farnsworth street entrance, and it feels like we're coming in from the shipping and receiving dock.

We stand in line for a bit outdoors; no one is there to direct traffic or to let newbies know what the procedure is. I tire quickly of the line, it's single file, and the clerk seems to take an eternity with a dingdong transaction. How about we just walk over and open the doors and go inside. Good 'nuf. There are some multithreaded lines here, it's warm, and we get immediate service. For just the main areas, not the Rockwell exhibit, it's a grand total of \$14 for Mom and me.

Now even though I've never had any kids of my own, I genuinely enjoy talking one on one with younger people, meaning children 4-12ish. This afternoon there seems to be a minimal number of school buses parked nearby, so that's good. Still, I'm annoyed by adults who feel they impart culture to children by taking them to a place of art, then letting them wander around like it's another day at the ball park. Nothing against the folks shown at this cafeteria table, but do you really think the five-year-old slobbering Doritos over his fingers appreciates the significance of 19th-century American landscape painters?

But even with multiple munchkins on the loose, the DIA is a special space in the universe, some areas—such as the continuing exhibit of sketches and engravings—truly magical. We walk around the public areas on all three floors, briefly, but with time to see what a treasure trove we have here. In addition to the exhibits, the open areas are well-scaled and inviting. If I'm a student of art or literature or anything else at Wayne State across the street, I can't imagine a pleasanter spot for plopping down to read a book researching the poetry of Robert Frost... or the voluminous craft of Norman Rockwell.

Another critique bearing on the more recent deterioration of culture: Back in the day, you could walk into the DIA, browse around, locate a crumpled elderly person with a badge, ask a question like, "Did Rembrandt hang out with loose women?" or "How much does that 2000 square-foot painting of 'Jesus with the Moneychangers' actually weigh?," and he or she would give you an answer or get your phone number and call you when they had researched it. Today, on a couple of occasions, I approach with queries the (probably) high-school-educated girls (political appointees?) who seem to be docents. They were dead-on-the-money for the location of the men's room but a little shaky on where the Cheyenne Indian artifacts had been excavated.

Collectivism vs. Individualism ...

Not picking on anyone here. Yes, the young pretend-docents were black, but that's not important: I feel we're going downhill because the vision of "the American city"—now predominantly African-American because, as Jane Jacob states, the city planners mercilessly killed the living human neighborhoods and expelled the whites—is drawn from the "collective guilt" advocacies of Rev. Al Sharpton as opposed to the "individual ability" ideals of Dr. Shelby Steele. Each of these models of society rests on different premises: Sharpton => collectivism, Steele => individualism.

Collectivism vs. individualism is the age-old political conflict facing humankind. All right, sorry Mama. I knew I would be unable to write an entire column without some reference to the importance to human society of political freedom and the rapid spread of the nonaggression principle. Since penning the Sacred Nonaggression Principle, the seeming chaos practical world has become entirely comprehensible to me... like when play literally goes into slow motion for an NFL quarterback as he finally "gets it."

Hope and Vision...

I'll state my hope and vision for Detroit as succinctly as possible.

The city of Detroit today—its wholly corrupt government, school system, public services, transportation system (or lack thereof), and corporate-state 'benefactors'—is a rotted hulk held together with paper clips and bailing wire. The Wayne State/DIA/DMC "Midtown Oasis" is like the Green Zone in Iraq; and there are a handful of other such Detroit oases for normal hopeful human activity: a) the sports franchises, b) a small portion of riverfront, c) General Motors and Henry Ford Hospital, d) Greektown, e) a couple of manufacturing plants and businesses that the city income tax hasn't catapulted across Eight-Mile Road, f) a couple of corporate/bank high rises, g) Mexican Village, Corktown, and other lively ethnic community holdouts, h) the seats of government, and a few others that don't come to mind immediately.

The rest is a wasteland decimated by systems of legal aggression... especially the drug prohibition system, which once made Detroit the murder capital of the US. (It's certainly still right up there in the top 10.)

In a phrase: Detroit will rise again when 'the way of the gun' is extinguished. (And immediately after ending prohibition I would restore the free-market, competitive streetcar transportation system that was literally uprooted by Big-Auto corporatism in the middle of the 20th century.) So much potential exists for Motown. Let freedom ring from every corner—from educational liberty, to community and neighborhood resurgence, elimination of the coercive tax burden, opening up the riverfront in natural ways, even cultivation of agricultural hemp (you knew this was coming, didn't you) and its offshoot businesses, building-restoration movements, etc.—and the people will do the rest.

Detroit truly deserves to become, once again, a great American city. It still means a lot to me—and to Mom who grew up in Greenville, Michigan. I look forward to the day in 2015 when I can walk in the front door of the DIA and spend an afternoon of leisurely culture-imbibing for free... with minimal munchkins and maximal docent knowledge.

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[1] Apparently the Apollo 11 moon-landing hoax theories are getting stronger on the Web, but I don't have time for this one. Let's just say, after gaining what I feel is a solid understanding of the overwhelmingly likely culpability of the government for 9/11, I would put no crime or coverup beyond the realm of government intention. I simply don't think they had the capability.

[2] Objectivism is the philosophy of Ayn Rand, author of *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*.

[3] Schroeder is the character in *Peanuts* whose always playing the piano and is a complete fanatic for the works of Ludwig von Beethoven. Lucy pines for him, and sits at the piano trying to get his attention, but to no avail. He's the epitome of the single-minded idealist.

[4] Snoopy is the *Peanuts* character, a dog, who has this alter ego the Red Baron, the legendary German flying ace of WW1. The Red Baron has a red scarf that dashingly trails behind him as he's performing his feats. The Red Baron's aircraft is the Sopwith Camel.

[5] It's been a while, and I shall read Jane Jacobs again—she died in 2006, a passionate advocate of people and neighborhoods to the end—but her main thrust is that by forcing people (thru eminent domain, the bulldozing of neighborhoods, replacing natural public spaces with expressways and parking lots, eliminating trolleys, jitneys, and other free market transportation alternatives, "urban renewal" projects) to live in conformance to a Platonic ideal you destroy the only way people can successfully live in cities. Basically, the cities were killed by government aggression.

[6] very few whites

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