

On Blight (and curcubit downey mildew)

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Charles lived on Oakland Avenue in the North End neighborhood of Detroit. Charles had a job at Rent-a-Center and his paychecks came postmarked from Texas. Charles attended meetings at ‘Second Chance’, ‘Learning to Recover’, and ‘Chance for hope’. The house that Charles lived in is not merely a pile of broken shelves and plates; plastics, paint chips and disintegrating cardboard, though the entryway is covered in shards of glass and the trail of debris and dirt lining the stairwell is so thick we must be careful with the placement of each foot. We must be careful up the narrow, carpeted stairs, careful stepping in and around the large faded green couch. We note the plastic candlesticks strewn about, the broken printer, and the large swath of gold fabric. The wall of the bathroom is half exposed and bare, the overgrown lot behind it visible. Several white dressers jut out at odd angles, their drawers pulled open, the contents strewn about. The pay stubs are in the top drawer. Ray and I are here to scavenge mirrors. Our show is in less than two weeks at Post- Hab, the new indoor exhibit space which is part of The Heidelberg Project, a public art project in existence since 1986 on the East Side of Detroit. Tyree Guyton grew frustrated and disillusioned watching the homes in his neighborhood continue to be burned down and deteriorate after the 1967 uprising so he painted bright dots on a series of homes along the street, and now it stretches to include houses covered in found or discarded items such as children’s shoes, records and

plush stuffed animals. I stand to the side as Ray pries the reflective mirror panes off their wooden backs. I'm sorry Charles. I'm sorry we are here moving about your things. This is where Charles lived.



The term “blight” was originally used to describe plant diseases. This includes cucurbit downey mildew, tuber rot and tomato pith necrosis. A blighted area is not capable of sustaining life. A blight is an infection. Blight seeps in at the edges, overtakes from the sides, finds its way in and under sidewalk edges, around slabs of concrete. To be blighted is to be possible of decay, to be infected by a fungus, to watch your stems break down, to see your petals soften and rot.



The tree canopy of Detroit hasn't recovered from a blighting of Dutch Elm Disease in the 1960's and 70s. The disease is caused by a member of the sac fungi and is spread by the elm bark beetle. It is believed to have originated in Asia, though it has since spread to America, Europe and New Zealand. The disease was identified by Dutch phytopathologists, Bea Schwartz and Christine Buisman. It is not specific to the Dutch Elm hybrid.



There is an overgrown lot on King Street, behind Ray's house, between Cameron and Oakland Avenue. Branches line the back alleyway alongside the styrofoam cups, the greasy candy bar wrappers, and the dingy napkins. At the edge of the overgrown lot is an empty building painted bright orange. Beams hang down while light filters through the holes in the ceiling, illuminating the detritus. Three blocks further along Oakland Avenue is the club that George Clinton and the Parliament-Funkadelic played early shows at. The building stands in disrepair and a rusted marquee floats over the sidewalk, wires splayed out over the concrete.



In the 1920s urban renewal advocates used the term “blight” as a rhetorical device, which enabled them to reorganize property ownership by declaring certain real estate ‘dangerous to the future of the city’. Blight was elevated into a disease that could destroy the city. Renewal advocates broadened the application of the public use clause, and ‘blighted’ properties became less worthy of the full bundle of rights that governed private property. In a ruling in 1923 the Supreme Court stated that it was, “not essential that the entire community, nor even any considerable portion, should directly enjoy or participate in order to constitute a public use.” The concept of ‘blight’ worked to alarm citizens, kept them on guard of potential ‘catastrophes’ in their cities, while the legal power enacted by the government now afforded ‘blight’ the ability to remove any and all neighborhoods or houses deemed unsightly, a vague and subjective set of standards used to systematize classist, racist ideologies, and all tucked away under the guise of legalese jargon. No one ever asked who the cities were being made safer for.



Ray and I spend our afternoons and evenings for five straight days at the Number House of the Heidelberg Project while we install our show. On a muggy Thursday afternoon in early August, the sky greys and blackens and rain pours down in heavy sheets for twenty minutes. The Number House is stifling, we open the back door to let more air flow in while a small fan rotates in the corner of the front room. Ray hangs the mirrors and I paint plywood cutouts white. Despite The Heidelberg Project bringing hundreds of international tourists each year, beyond the perimeter of the project the neighborhood is still considered one of the roughest in the city. As we head out for the day, I smile at the neighbor who sits on her porch every night but who has yet to ever smile back. The small sign propped on her lawn notes, “Please don’t stare. People live here.” I smile anyways because what else is there to do?

Several hours later we hop on our bikes and ride through the city as the sun sets. We don't wear helmets and the desolate streets feel post-apocalyptic, survivors of a catastrophe we weren't here to witness. We float along empty roads, avoiding potholes and glass shards.



On a stifling day in July, 30,000 Lutheran teens infiltrate Metro Detroit armed with bright orange t-shirts and lawnmowers. They have come to cut the grass. They begin early in the morning and move across lots and lawns from the North End to Corktown. Fallen tree limbs are removed and some of the city's 70,000 vacant buildings, 98% of which are neighborhood structures, are boarded up. 30,000 able bodies move around the city opting to mow lawns. They are uncertain about a lot at the edge of King Street, and when questioned by a local resident as to whether the owner had been consulted, they grow nervous and move along. Ray hates that they mowed the lawn next to his house, he prefers the wildness of overgrown grass. The teens leave half of the lot un-mowed, and the grass begins its slow climb again the next day.



According to 1930's urban renewal expert Mabel Walker, slums, a term used with and in exchange for blight, are "a district that has an excess of buildings that either because of dilapidation, obsolescence, overcrowding, poor arrangement or design, lack of ventilation, light or sanitary facilities, or a combination of these factors, are detrimental to the safety, health, morals and comfort of the inhabitants thereof." It is unclear what experts such as Walker thought about the demolition of Paradise Valley, a vibrant black neighborhood in Detroit, in order to make room for a highway.



Ray and I go for runs around the neighborhood in the mornings,

wave to the three old men down the block that sip coffee and chat on their porch. I race him down Brush Street. I sprint between lamp posts and try not to collapse between others. I wonder who used to live in the robin's egg brick house with the wrap around porch and if the house is for sale and how much work it might take to repair, and will it be standing in two years? We make breakfast together, I chop the kale and grate the zucchini and slice the peaches while Ray pulls fresh basil from the pot on the front porch. Some days I fry the eggs, others I make omelets, and somehow we are always running low on avocados.



The mission of the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force states that they aim to, “develop a straightforward and detailed implementation plan to remove every ‘blighted’ residential structure, commercial structure and public building, and clear away every blighted vacant lot in the city of Detroit as quickly as possible using an environmentally- conscious approach.” The Task Force plans to focus on removal and mechanical demolition of blighted structures. A three person crew can typically remove a structure within three hours.



The day of our show Ray asks me how I am. “I’ve been really drawn to pink these days.” I don’t want to wear it, but I want to be surrounded by the glow of it. I want folders and pens and thick velvet curtains and a downy velour chair to sip rose hips tea in. We stop off for bagels and coffee, arrive at the Number House before the curator. One of the alley cats has given birth to a litter of tiny golden kittens. Farmer John wanders over from across the street to say hi and tell us about the house on the other end of the street that burned down last night. We see the charred rooftop peeking out behind tree leaves. He thinks it was some teens, but no one is ever sure and the houses continue to burn.



“Obsolescence,” wrote Henry Ford II in response to critics of plant closings, “is the very hallmark of progress.” Is that why my bike rides home at 11 pm are made in darkness along Brush Street? Is that why there’s a plot of land in the Amazon of Brazil with an abandoned town called Fordlandia? The town Ford had grand visions to turn into his own rubber-centric production facility. Is that why all of the rubber plants died? Were the rubber plants blighted?



They’re removing traffic lights throughout the North End. All of the traffic lights are under surveillance for possible removal and soon there will no longer be green and yellow and red. We take caution biking along Cameron, we take caution biking along Oakland where the road buckles and cracks. We take caution along Oakland where Charles lived, (this is where Charles lived), in the pitch black of night with only a flashing yellow streetlight to guide us home.