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Art's new dawn in Detroit

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Scott Hocking's Garden of the Gods plops TVs atop the pillars that once stood under the roof of the Detroit's Packard Plant.



By [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts

DETROIT—Inside Fisher Auto Body, a hulking ruin of crumbled concrete and lead-paned window grids in Detroit's old industrial core, collapsed cement-floor plates create vast fields of rubble that evoke nothing so much as wartime destruction. Rows of towering columns disappear into darkness, light streaming through shattered glass in eerily crisp, narrow shafts.

Once a hub of this city's bustling automotive economy, Fisher is broken, abandoned, left for dead. Scott Hocking, though, takes another view. "That building is my second home," he says. "Certain places, they're a solace to me, like a walk in the woods, or the same kind of quietude you'd experience in a temple.

"It's like a threshold, I guess: In Detroit, we're in this transformation, from what we were into an unknown future, and there's something beautiful in that transformation."

Detroit, of course, has been slowly transforming for decades. It has rarely, though, been described as beautiful. The city's litany of ills has rendered it as much a metaphor than actual place: A ruined industrial empire, as monumental, and as dead, as Rome's ever could have been.

In the long unraveling of the city's tragedy, though, there are, finally, signs of life. Hocking, 35, a lifelong Detroit, is living proof: An artist, he's part of a close-knit, growing community that has started to see opportunity in the ruins.

The potential is both creative and practical. For Hocking, buildings like Fisher, or the vast old Packard plant, become vast artistic tableaux: Inside the tumbledown sites, he builds installations with whatever leftovers he finds there (in Fisher, he built a pyramid of ragged wooden blocks bathed in an spectral green glow of the sun strained through its windows; in his most recent work, *Garden of the Gods*, Hocking placed shattered TV sets atop the still-standing concrete columns of the Packard Plant's top level; the floor they once supported crumbled to their feet, the columns now reach into the cold, grey sky).

But in the eyes of a growing art community, Detroit is more than just ruins. It's an opportunity for renewal, from the grassroots on up. Hollowed out by decades of suburban flight, last year's foreclosure crisis dragged Detroit's already-sagging property market into deep crisis proportions. Thousands of property owners defaulted on mortgages, transferring ownership first to banks, and often the county, which would then auction them off. Starting price: \$500.

Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, an artist wedded to an architect, bought six houses that way, at the minimum price ("If no one bids against you, that's what you pay," Reichert says). All together, through their community-based non-profit organization Powerhouse Productions, they own a dozen or so houses in their Detroit neighborhood.

On a bone-chilling December day, Reichert offered a tour, power drill in hand, of her neighborhood empire, to remove, and then refit, the plywood barriers she and Cope affixed to each house's entrance. "When we bought them, we didn't know exactly what we were going to do with them," she says. "But we knew what would happen if we didn't buy them." Crackheads, squatters, looters — all had done their time inside. Reichert and Cope took ownership in the most extraordinary ways.

At the back of one house charred by a deliberate fire — likely for insurance reasons, Reichert speculates — artist Ben Wolf had built an ungainly stack of ramshackle dormers he salvaged from various abandoned houses in the city.

Across the street, Monica Canilao's "Treasure Nest" turns the battered façade of a solid two-storey house into a chaotic composition of salvaged debris. Inside and upstairs, a huge chandelier dangles floor to ceiling. Cobbled from old chairs, light fixtures, a table, bedposts, beads, wire and string, it seemed to suggest what's come to be a given in the Detroit Hocking envisions: In the city's evolving future, creative reuse of everything — including the buildings themselves — plays a crucial part.

Four of the houses went through their intensive re-use session this summer, after *Juxtapoz* magazine raised \$180,000 to help Cope and Reichert establish their non-profit. Powerhouse and *Juxtapoz* selected six artists, Wolf and Canilao among them, to re-imagine the houses as public art projects.

It effectively put Cope and Reichert's neighborhood efforts on the international art world map. But a simple transformation, from ruin to public art, is far from Cope and Reichert's endgame. "It was sort of quick in-and-out," Reichert shrugs. "Our goal has always been slow, long-term commitment."

In their namesake property, The Powerhouse, an unassuming, ramshackle two-storey with multicolored siding, Reichert offers a walk-through. "Eventually, this will be a community gathering space," says Reichert, passing through a front sitting room stripped of plaster down to wooden wall studs, with sawhorses and power tools nearby. "Back here, this room will be a gallery, or work space." On the upper floor, an artist-in-residence studio is under construction. Solar panels and a wind turbine will provide power; a rooftop cistern will collect rainwater.

The Powerhouse project is a beacon of creative reuse — a de facto community centre for a community that lost virtually all of those resources in the long, slow, spiral downward, years before. Hamtramck, like so much of metro Detroit, was a working class area of modest homes, wedged between factories for easy access to work. When the jobs flooded out, original residents fled and basic community services evaporated. But new residents, with the same social needs, came in. Here, a strong, and growing, Bengali community makes up the majority of the population.

"We've had requests from some neighbors to host kids' classes here, or English as a second language classes," Reichert says. "There's all this sort of cultural or civic work that they've had to do in their homes, because there's been no other option. That's the kind of thing we want to pull out a little, and give the community the chance to interact with each other."

The artist-repurposed houses, meanwhile, are a work in progress. "A bunch of them, it wouldn't take much to make them habitable again," Reichert says. She and Cope, along with friends and neighbors, are in the process of reworking them to sell, at cost, to artists or locals who want to join the cause.

"We don't want to own all these houses," Reichert says. "Our whole thing is that we think artists can bring new ideas, and creative ideas, about what to do with neighborhoods and housing stock. Neighborhoods like this need more than just residents. We need to start thinking about how to pull people out of their houses and function like a community."

All of this may not sound much like art, and maybe that's the point. Across the river in Windsor, Justin Langlois heads a small artist collective called Broken City Lab. For the past two years, they've been scratching at the same post-industrial scorched earth on their side of the border: Installing day-glo signs in abandoned lots that exhort things like "MAKE THIS BETTER." Earlier this year, Broken City Lab broadcast its kinship with Detroit's post-industrial decay for all to see, projecting a slogan several stories high on a building visible across the river: "WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER." ("I know what we do seems simple and positive," he says, "but part of what we've realized is that just being positive here is a radical position.")

Nominally, he says, what they do falls under the rubric "social practice," a term that has been gaining momentum in academic circles in recent years. Portland State University offers a Master's of Fine Arts in the discipline ("Social practice might appear to be more like sociology, anthropology, social work, journalism, or environmentalism than art," its site reads, almost apologetically).

“At some point, it starts to blur: Is it a community incubator, social services, or is it an art project?” Langlois says.

“For me, framing it as art takes you away from the limits of being a citizen taking on an issue, it takes you away from being community services organization. It frees you from those limitations, to think creatively, take ownership and actually do something.”

Still, some chafe at the label. On the other side of the border, Jon Brumit and his wife, Sarah Wagner, bought a house one block from Cope and Reichert's for \$100 last year. Outside, the façade is speckled with bright corrugated plastic shakes — white, black and orange. Inside, a major reconstruction is taking place: Walls stripped to the studs, ceiling and attic torn out to reveal the skeleton of the roof.

Living here “is almost social practice by default,” Brumit says, a verbal shrug. “But it all seems so controlled, or prescribed. For me, it's just really interesting to be here in this mix of people and spaces.” Recently, he and Wagner bought the vacant lot across the street, which he hopes to remake into “part greenhouse, part weird playground,” open to the public, and neighborhood kids.

“When we first started, I met a couple dozen of my neighbors in a week,” he says. “I have no idea what this will do to my work, but I can't be concerned about that. It's not about an artists' community — it's about finding yourself in a community of people. We feel like the most constructive thing we can do is show up and pay attention.”

In Detroit's nascent , unexpected art boom, a sensitivity is emerging. “There's that idea — ‘I can come here and do my art on your city,’ ” says Kate Daughdrill, 26 who, with Jessica Hernandez, 23, founded Soup, a monthly community dinner, earlier this year. “We need a space to hash those things out and work together.”

Tonight, in the space above Hernandez's family's bakery in Detroit's Mexicantown, a lively Hispanic neighborhood in the inner city, Soup is holding its first meal of the new year. It has a simple set of rules. Dinner is \$5. Inside, you'll listen to four or five pitches for grassroots creative projects, and at the end of the meal, you vote. The winner takes home the kitty — sometimes as much as \$1,000 — to realize their goal.

They call it microfunding, and it's been so successful that it's starting to spread, popping up in several of Detroit's communities. “And that's the point!” says Daughdrill. “It's not about the franchise, it's the relationship that people can have with their neighbors. Part of the reason Soup thrives is that we're all yearning for points of connection.”

Hernandez grew up in Detroit, and left, many times; Daughdrill came from New Orleans for art school, and stayed.

“Sometimes, it's easier to run away from things here,” Hernandez says. “But now, to be in a community where there are so many people so focused on what everyone's doing, there's an accountability that a lot of places don't have. It took me meeting someone from somewhere else to open my eyes to the things that were going on here.”

It's been a long time since Detroit saw any newcomers, and with them has come a view to Detroit's future potential, not its blighted past. “Finally, I think what's happened is it's finally been whittled down, from the

gawkers perpetuating that sadness to people interested in doing,” says Catie Newell, an artist and architecture professor at the University of Michigan who grew up in metro Detroit.

“I used to drive around to look at the ruins, and just be amazed,” she says. “Now, I see it as an opportunity — ‘how can I reuse those materials, or reinterpret that space?’ ”

Newell built one installation in an abandoned garage behind one of Cope and Reichert's houses, shafts of clear tubing through the walls and ceiling that penetrate the darkness with cylinders of light. Her most recent work, a thick cluster of charred wood installed in the house from which it was salvaged, took place at the Imagination Station, the optimistic name for two abandoned houses sitting next to Detroit's weightiest symbol of decay, the grand old train station, long since abandoned to the elements.

“Quite a view, huh?” says Jeff DeBruyn, standing in the burnt-out second floor of one of the houses, facing the station. DeBruyn, with Jerry Paffendorf, bought the houses out of auction for less than \$1,000. Their plan is to keep one (too badly damaged by fire to be restored) for rotating public installations like Newell's. The other, DeBruyn says, will be restored to house a community media centre.

DeBruyn is no artist. He works in a local soup kitchen, and helps manage a shelter for women and children, where he lives. He's also the head of the Corktown Resident's Council in the inner-city neighborhood where the Imagination Station sits. It is, by most accounts, both among the worst-hit patches of Detroit, and the one with the most potential: In front of the station, Roosevelt Park has been slated for a grand overhaul. Around the corner on Michigan Avenue, a modest commercial renaissance is taking seed, lead by the popular barbecue restaurant Slow's.

DeBruyn has heard all the talk of cultural renewal — “the hip artists are going to come and save the city!” he scoffs. He's been here too long to buy it. “The intention here is not to put art in the community — it's to engage them,” he says. “Instantly, putting this here changes the energy from darkness to light.”

Back near Fisher Auto Body, Hocking surveys his studio, filled with industrial debris of 15 years' worth of salvaging. “There's this new energy here,” he says. “It's like that magic hour, dusk or dawn. I grew up here. I know the difference. And I don't want to leave.”

Over at *Garden of the Gods*, only one of the TV sets remains, toppled by weather, earnest scrap collectors, or both. “I like the temporary quality,” he says. “Besides,” he says, smiling, “nothing should last forever anyway.”

This month's Soup is tonight above the Mexicantown Bakery, 4300 W. Vernor Highway, Detroit; Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert will be conducting tours of their neighborhood the first Saturday of every month beginning Feb. 5 at 11 am, starting at 12644 Moran Street.

