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Detroit evolving into a haven for artists

Andrew Bender, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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A pianist tickles the ivories at Café D'Mongo's, a speak-easy that has reopened thanks to downtown Detroit's growing revitalization. (Wally Skali/Los Angeles Times)

"Where you headed?" asked the cheerful driver of the rental-car shuttle at the Detroit airport.

"Detroit!" I answered, equally cheerfully.

"Southfield, Birmingham or Rochester?" he asked, referring to well-to-do northern suburbs.

"No, Detroit," I responded.

Silence, then a shrug as if to say, "Suit yourself."

Many Americans — even many Michiganders — see Detroit as a place to be feared: impoverished, decimated and down-and-out depressing. Sure enough, my drive into the city center took me past what a friend calls "desolation porn": eerie shells of onetime factories, warehouses, shops and office buildings, and block after block of overgrown lots that used to be comfortable working-class neighborhoods. During my visit, the local newspaper reported coyote sightings in the city.

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FOR THE RECORD:

Detroit arts: An article about Detroit's arts scene in the Nov. 13 Travel section misspelled the last name of artist and gallery director Simone DeSousa as DeSouza. —

Yet Detroit is evolving, not unlike late 1990s downtown Los Angeles. Cheap rents and an urban pioneering spirit are attracting young artists, and new restaurants, nightspots and even urban farms are serving this growing community and its hipster fans. It's still the early days, but change is palpable, even to the casual visitor.

"I tell my colleagues, 'Have your portfolio ready! There's a big spotlight on Detroit!' " said Gilda Snowden, an ebullient painter and professor of fine arts at the city's College for Creative Studies (one of the region's arts incubators, along with Wayne State University and the suburban Cranbrook Academy of Art). She pays \$800 a month for a 2,500-square-foot studio with a kitchen and Jacuzzi.

There's plenty of inspiration in the designated Cultural Corridor, in the Midtown neighborhood just north of downtown Detroit. I stayed at the Inn on Ferry Street, a bed-and-breakfast in a cluster of Victorian homes off Woodward Avenue. It's just a couple of blocks to the Detroit Institute of Arts, by my reckoning America's most overlooked major museum: 658,000 square feet (more than 11/2 football fields) founded in 1885 and reopened in 2010 after a five-year renovation. I could have spent an hour ogling Mexican painter [Diego Rivera's](#) "Detroit Industry" frescoes (1932-33), but I was glad I made time for the collections of contemporary and African American art, and masterworks such as Pieter Brueghel's "The Wedding Dance" (circa 1566).

Within a few blocks' walk, the College for Creative Studies' student galleries exhibit skillful works of illustration, product and transportation design, photography and more. The campus sculpture park boasts pieces by [Richard Serra](#), [Alexander Calder](#) and other 20th century luminaries. The nearby Scarab Club was founded in 1907, dedicated to artistic pursuits. [Rivera](#), [Marcel Duchamp](#) and [Norman Rockwell](#) visited its Renaissance Revival building (1928); on my visit, the exhibition "Family Ties" featured intergenerational works by Detroit artist families.

The problem for these artists, said Simone DeSousa, is that "Michigan artists don't sell to Michiganders." Local collectors might visit New York or Los Angeles to buy work made in Detroit. Aiming to change that, DeSousa opened Re:View Contemporary Gallery in 2008 in a loft-style building that could be at home on either coast.

George N'Namdi, a long-standing downtown gallerist, exhibits artists of local and national prominence in a former auto collision repair and body shop. Across Woodward Avenue, the storefront Detroit Artists Market produces themed shows, such as "Smaller Pieces at Smaller Prices," by Michigan artists.

A map by Art Detroit Now (<http://www.artdetroitnow.com>) highlights dozens of farther-flung art sites. One is the Russell Industrial Center, which at first glance looks like yet another abandoned factory. At its height in the 1940s, the 20-acre, 2.2-million-square-foot site accommodated 13,000 workers building Ford auto bodies and [World War II](#) airplane parts.

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Now, though, artists pay \$600 to \$700 a month for 1,000-plus square feet of studio space. "You name it, we have it," said Chris Mihailovich, Russell's manager: The 150 tenants include painters, sculptors, photographers, glass blowers, print makers, furniture builders, makers of custom concrete countertops and even a gym opened by a former SWAT officer. His rule for tenants: "Respect the other artists, and don't wreck the place." Some have decorated studios and hallways, such as Dale Teachout's colorful assemblages of found objects. Wander around and an artist may well invite you in.

Hipster hangouts

Besides galleries and studios, "People are discovering how food, culture and community intersect," said Monica Bowman, director of the Butcher's Daughter gallery just outside the city limits in Ferndale.

Friday and Saturday nights belong to Café D'Mongo's. Owner Larry Mongo mothballed this former downtown speak-easy in the 1990s when, he said, "not only did the homeless leave, the pigeons left." But about five years ago, a group of hipsters urged him to reopen, and a weekly tradition was born. Vintage '80s forest-green walls hung with saxophones offset jazz performers, cocktails such as the Detroit Brown (whiskey, bitters and Vernors, a spicy ginger ale) and barbecue dinners — ribs or chicken with sides (\$10.50).

I stopped for Saturday brunch at Russell St. Deli. Lines out the door led to communal tables of locals chomping on scrambles, omelets and quiches made with ingredients from urban farms and the Saturday farmers market at the landmark Eastern Market across the street. Be sure to get a side of cinnamon raisin bread, like a cinnamon bun minus the sticky topping.

Other hipster favorites include Slows Bar B Q — "not the place for a light meal," in the words of my impressively tattooed server. The triple-threat pork sandwich pairs applewood smoked bacon with North Carolina-style pulled pork and a slab of ham, which I sampled alongside bubbling macaroni and cheese and fried catfish in batter-like funnel cakes. Diners at Atlas Global Bistro might well mistake this nifty spot for L.A., with its tall ceilings, gigantic glass windows and eclectic cooking, such as truffled asparagus and Moroccan grilled quail.

I wouldn't have been surprised to see students making charcoal sketches of a model on a pedestal at Cass Café, across from Wayne State. White walls are hung with local art, as laptop-toters chow on lentil burgers and wild salmon BLTs.

Near the DIA, Good Girls Go to Paris serves a menu of Left Bank (savory) and Right Bank (sweet) crepes named for women — Butterfingers, ricotta cheese and chocolate for Alysha; peaches, cream cheese and brown sugar for Libby — with cups of hot Nutella.

And Motor City Brewing Works has Wednesday evening art shows and is popular nightly for brick-oven pizzas such as roasted pear and fig and the Mary Did Have (with lamb and Middle Eastern spices) washed down with house-brewed Ghattoblaster (English-style pale ale) or Nut Brown Ale. Around the corner, the Bronx Bar is so old it's new again with stained-glass chandeliers and Pabst Blue Ribbon, retro-priced (\$2.75) for Wayne State hipsters.

Neighborhood art

My last stop before the airport was the Heidelberg Project. Over 25 years, artist Tyree Guyton has transformed his childhood neighborhood of Heidelberg Street, nearly abandoned like so many others, into a blocklong art installation that attracts more than 300,000 visitors annually. Multicolored giant dots festoon a white house, another house is covered with stuffed animals, clocks hang on trees and repainted advertising posters line old fencing. When I asked his inspiration, Guyton responded with questions of his own: "What is art today?" "Does it have to be in a museum?" "How do you revitalize a neighborhood?" "How do you get people to come to Detroit despite what they've heard?"

One of Guyton's motifs is New York taxis, painted on plywood boards. "A lot of people think you have to go to New York to make it," he said. "I'm saying I can make it right here, and I will. Watch me. I'm just getting started."