

Detroit: then and now

A message from Life co-author, Helen Stephenson

The American city of Detroit has an interesting history. It reminds me of the rise and fall of ancient empires that we studied in history classes at school. I remember reading about its decline, so I was pleasantly surprised to read that it's becoming a 'good news' story now.

The city of Detroit, in the USA, was once compared to Paris. It had a broad river, smart streets and historically important architecture. Then, in the 20th century, it became 'Motor City'. For a time, most of the world's cars were made here. There was regular work and a good salary in the motor industry. A worker at one of the car factories could own a home, plus a boat, maybe even a holiday cottage. Some say America's middle class was born in Detroit – new highways certainly made it easy for workers to move from the city centre to the suburbs in the 1950s. But in the early years of the 21st century, Detroit became America's poorest big city.

In less than five decades the once lively Motor City lost more than half its population. It became known as a city that was failing, full of ruined buildings, extensive poverty and crime. Newspapers and magazines told stories of derelict homes and empty streets. Photographers went to Detroit to record the strange beauty of buildings and city blocks where nature was taking over again. What went wrong in Detroit?

The city is now 69th among US cities for the number of people per square mile. The population fell for several reasons. Partly, it was because people moved to the suburbs in the 1950s. Then there were the shocking riots in 1967, which scared more people away from the city. Then there was the dramatic fall in car manufacture as companies like General Motors and Chrysler faced huge difficulties. And finally, in 2008, came the global financial crisis. Many of Detroit's people are poor – half of the city's families live on less than 25,000 dollars a year.

In 2013, the city did something unusual: it declared itself bankrupt. It was the largest city bankruptcy in US history, at approximately 18-20 billion dollars. Now that the city is free of debt, it has money to do some of what needs to be done. It has replaced about 40,000 streetlights so that places feel safer. The police arrive in answer to calls in less than 20 minutes now, instead of the hour it used to take. And about a hundred empty houses are demolished each week to make space for new buildings. With the nation's biggest city bankruptcy behind it, Detroit is also attracting investors and young adventurers. The New Economy Initiative gave grants of 10,000 dollars to each of 30 new small businesses. It seems that every week a new business opens in Detroit – grocery stores, juice bars, coffee shops, even bicycle makers. Finally, the city is working again.

Glossary

derelict (adj) in ruins because of lack of care

riot (n) violent actions by a group of angry people

bankrupt (adj) unable to continue to function because you cannot pay the money that you owe