

Detroit: then and now

A message from Life co-author, Helen Stephenson

I've found the story of Detroit to be fascinating. It's like the rise of fall of the ancient empires we studied as schoolchildren. It's hard to imagine that places can 'fail' on such a huge scale. Now, it seems to have turned a corner, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, and it's the kind of story that restores your faith in people.

The city of Detroit, in the USA, was once compared to Paris. It had a broad river, grand boulevards and historically significant architecture. Then, in the 20th century, it became 'Motor City'. For a time, most of the world's cars were made here. There was steady work and a good salary in the motor industry. An autoworker 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 vibrant Motor City lost more than half its population. It gained a reputation as a failed city, full of abandoned buildings, widespread poverty and crime. Newspapers and magazines told stories of derelict homes and deserted streets. Photographers even went especially 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 in population density (people per square mile) among US cities. Detroit's population fell for several reasons. Partly it was because people moved to the suburbs in the 1950s. Then there were devastating race riots in 1967, which scared even more people away from the city. Then there was the dramatic decline in car manufacture as companies like General Motors and Chrysler struggled to survive. And finally, in 2008, came the global financial crisis. The problem of Detroit was basic but hard to solve. Many of Detroit's people are poor: half of the city's households live on less than 25,000 dollars a year. They are spread across different neighbourhoods of this huge city (it's big enough to fit in Manhattan, Boston and San Francisco).

In 2013, the city did something unusual: it declared itself bankrupt. It was the largest city bankruptcy in US history, estimated at 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. Police response time has shrunk from almost an hour to less than 20 minutes. And roughly a hundred empty houses are demolished each week to make space for new buildings. With the nation's biggest urban bankruptcy behind it, Detroit is also attracting investors, innovators and young adventurers. New businesses have been encouraged with the New Economy Initiative. This gave grants of 10,000 dollars to each of 30 winners with ideas for 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

boulevard (n) a wide street, usually with trees along the sides

derelict (adj) completely in ruins

race riot (n) violent public actions between groups of people with different racial identities

bankrupt (adj) unable to stay in business because of debts