

## People just love Detroit: Attitudes -- and the city itself -- are changing

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Detroit is hell.

Yeah, yeah. Isn't that what you're used to hearing?

*Murder City. Struggling auto industry. Failing schools. Foreclosure crisis. Sky-high unemployment. Neighborhoods where you can't even light the streets. A former mayor led off in handcuffs.*

We've been beaten up -- and sometimes we deserved it.

But take a listen now. Or a read, if you will. There is applause for Detroit, coming from the same sources, the out-of-town news media.

"Detroit's Engine Roars on Signs of Turnaround" -- Wall Street Journal.

"Detroit Rising" -- USA TODAY.

"The Art of Coming Back from Tough Times" --

International Business News.

Even comments on Twitter last week were overwhelmingly positive about Detroit.

And what sparked this latest wave of affection from afar? Growing signs of a rebound. And the same thing that so often draws the national spotlight: our sports teams. With an almost perfect storm of success, the undefeated Lions, the Yankee-killing Tigers and winning seasons for our two big college football teams are once again driving the deconstruction, reconstruction, explanations and excuses of an underdog town.

But this isn't the same clichéd coverage. ("Red Wings cheer depressed town.") The pieces carry a new tone that carries beyond sports. This time, writers and broadcasters say they detect a pulse inside the decrepit old patient. This time, they say, Detroit is on the mend, that this isn't merely a fleeting morale boost.

Yahoo's Dan Wetzel penned a column recently on the Lions and Ford Field that was really an homage to the city.

He captured Detroit's ubiquitous ambassador, musician Kid Rock, in the Lions locker room after they beat the Chicago Bears on "Monday Night Football" -- the first visit here from that show in a decade, by the way -- to remain undefeated.

"I love everything about our city," Rock told Wetzel while nursing a can of Badass Beer. (Seriously. Badass Beer.)

"But the truth is," Rock said, "there are some bad things about our spot."

"He shrugged his shoulders, unsure what to say," Wetzel wrote. "And that actually said it all. ...

"What Kid Rock represents, what Detroit's upstart football team strives to follow and what the wild scene that played out downtown Monday seemed to signify is a new attitude for this oft-maligned city."

Detroit, Wetzel declared, is "done apologizing for itself."

Are we? Really?

That would be a sea change. This has been a city that -- for a large-scale metropolis -- has tended to be small-town sensitive.

In 1990, Pontiac-born author Zev Chafets was vilified and picketed after the release of his book "Devil's Night and Other True Tales of Detroit" that chronicled the city's crime culture. The following year, city leaders actually changed the name of the night before Halloween to Angels' Night.

In the years since, city elders wince over documentaries on the Motor City's stunning ruins -- there's that train station again. And any time the national news shines unflattering light on old Motown, you can count on a backlash from city leaders.

But now look at us. Grumpy? Sometimes. But perhaps more comfortable in our own skin. And you're not getting an apology from any of us.

Tigers manager Jim Leyland is a gruff old guy who coaches baseball with a confidence some fans find maddening, but he also projects "this is the way things are going to be; deal with it." And after six years of tumult and controversy under former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, Detroit now has a mayor in Dave Bing who, whatever you think of his job performance, issues honest assessments of his city's challenges.

And did you see our diva, the Queen of Soul, on national television the other night? Aretha Franklin belted out the national anthem before a Tigers game while wearing jeans, a sweat jacket and a ball cap. It was almost like she was saying, "Guess what, America? This ain't Hollywood. But can you hear me *singing*?"

It may be trite to credit an advertisement for a whole new attitude. But there's no denying the impact of last winter's Super Bowl commercial from Chrysler, two minutes of moody video and music more about a city than a car.

The piece depicted a stark, dank Detroit: smokestacks, gray streets and skies, and shots of two dozen or more Detroiters, not a single one smiling. The message, set to the driving strum of Eminem's "Lose Yourself," was not that we're mean or standoffish or even depressed. The message was Detroit knows exactly who it is, what it is, and we're all totally cool with it.

"This is the Motor City. And this is what we do," says hometown boy Eminem, pointing to the camera with an index finger. He might as well have flown the bird.

### **Real, honest change**

The changing perceptions of Detroit are not all marketing driven. There are positive things happening. In their overviews, the Wall Street Journal and USA TODAY acknowledged signs Detroit may be getting *some* of its mojo back. Our state unemployment rate still is high, at 11%, but it's down from 14% in 2009, a higher percentage drop than all but three states. Housing prices have finally inched up, and some credit younger buyers for snapping up bargains.

The Detroit Three automakers are healthier, back from the virtual dead and promising more jobs in negotiations with unions. Quicken Loans, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and DTE Energy have been moving workers downtown.

In many ways, as pundits are noting, Detroit is starting to become a feel-good symbol for a weary nation. The auto companies reinvented themselves -- yes, General Motors and Chrysler partly did so with government help -- with innovative products like the electric Chevy Volt.

Some developments surprised us, including the reopening -- after so many false starts -- of the Book-Cadillac Hotel downtown, or the cleanup of the contaminated Uniroyal site on the Detroit River.

Do you remember downtown before Compuware, Ford Field and Comerica Park? It was vacant lots, the abandoned Hudson's department store and at least one brothel.

And Detroit continues to draw an international crowd of artists and urban explorers. In the last few months, French filmmakers, German urban planners, Japanese professors, Dutch students and others have turned up to study the city. Key Detroiters like Sue Mosey, head of the nonprofit civic group Midtown Detroit Inc. -- and known informally as the "mayor of Midtown" -- gets inundated with requests for interviews about her work. On a recent weekend at the flourishing D-Town Farm on the west side, two separate film crews, one French and one American, were filming documentaries about urban agriculture and efforts to reinvent Detroit.

The city's core -- downtown and Midtown (which through another bit of marketing no longer goes by the notorious moniker "Cass Corridor") -- has made strides from just a decade or so

ago. Probably 10,000 more people work downtown today. Cheap, available real estate and a willing work force, not to mention an excess of engineering talent, drew the high-tech firm GalaxE Solutions, which has about 130 workers downtown and is hiring another 200 or so. GalaxE embodies one of the newest slogans bandied about business enclaves these days: "Outsource to Detroit."

When Dan Gilbert of Quicken Loans welcomed 1,500 more suburban workers downtown last week, he told them: "Don't just think about it as a job. Think about it as a journey and a mission, and a way to affect your hometown and make it the greatest city on the planet."

### **Real, honest problems**

No matter how you frame it, however, there is no getting away from the huge problems that still plague Detroit, including a high murder rate, break-ins and other crimes that make daily life a challenge.

The city continues to bleed population. An influx of young creative types in Midtown and Hispanic immigrants in southwest Detroit hasn't overcome the outflow of residents.

Detroit still lacks a rational policy for dealing with what is perhaps one-third of the city that is open land, forgotten neighborhoods overgrown with weeds and discarded tires, populated not with people, but pheasants, deer and feral cats.

The abandonment is stunning, even if you have watched its creep for decades, scenes from what should be some other world. On Chalmers, north of Jefferson on the east side, a three-story brick apartment building stands wide open, burned out, overgrown with trees and vines. There are thousands like it. Next door, as you see block after block in some neighborhoods: furniture dragged to the street, moldy wet mattresses tossed on top, pile after pile of clothing. These are lives turned inside out, some through eviction, foreclosure or a police raid. Don't expect a cleanup. Bulk trash pickup is just four times a year.

The neighborhoods have yet to find a savior.

### **Cleaning up corruption**

But a long culture of corruption is under attack.

When Robert Bobb arrived in 2009 to be the state-appointed emergency financial manager for Detroit Public Schools, the district was suffering historic problems: decreasing enrollment, record low test scores and a crippling deficit.

Those problems remain, but Bobb understood the importance of telling the public what he was doing to try to turn around the embattled school district. Perhaps most notably, he publicized the investigations and convictions of thieves who stole school laptops, cafeteria money and other resources.

He built a reputation for being tough on crooks and serious about fixing the district. His successor, Roy Roberts, has shown the same blunt, straight-ahead approach.

Federal law enforcement authorities, likewise, continue pulling at the roots of government corruption, even though Kilpatrick is gone from power.

Andrew Arena, the agent in charge of the FBI in Michigan, grew up Downriver. He made his name rooting out organized crime in Youngstown, Ohio, and he says he returned to do the same for his hometown.

Some media types snickered when Arena stood up at a news conference a couple of years ago and warned people that the FBI was watching, maybe even from their closets.

But the agency's ongoing string of indictments has proved he was serious about taking out corruption like dominoes, knocking over one bad guy and then another.

"I've said many times, it's a real honor and privilege to be the agent in charge of the FBI anywhere," Arena said Friday. "I'm not going to lie and say it doesn't mean a little bit more doing it here."

Yes, Detroit is far from Nirvana. But the insults aren't the only thing you hear these days. Sometimes there are even kudos, or at least encouragement from afar.

And maybe the best part is that our need to hear it has lessened.

"We're a tough town," said Emmett Moten, a partner in the redeveloped Doubletree Fort Shelby hotel and former development czar for then-Mayor Coleman Young. "If you look back where we were in the '60s and where we are today, there were a lot of, not bumps in the road, but major, major catastrophes. But because the town was strong, they've been able to overcome that. ...

"It's picking up," he said. "We have our problems, but we're willing to fight."

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