

# Detroit—High Tech and the Widening Gyre

Living in a city already bombed

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For us, here in inner-city Detroit, the crumbling of a “progress” oriented society is very real and present. Its tangible effects are concentrated here. Its evidence—ragged empty shells of concrete, lining streets leading to their untimely ends, amputated by expressways or isolated corporate megaliths, the occasional pathetic charades of well-being, the razed and desolate spaces—pervades everything we do, even attempts to distract ourselves from the ruin. Everyone living here is profoundly aware of the failure. It is bred in our bones, as during our lives we’ve witnessed, not just this city’s demise, but the cumulative result of misdeeds performed through history by an increasingly urban society impelled by a limitless want of power brought to self-destruction.

Visually and psychologically, this is a city already bombed. Any sense of place or community it had or has to offer has been and is being destroyed on a continuing basis. The arbitrary imposition of expressways and huge commercial complexes, like the new G.M. plant that was once Poletown, fragment or wipe out entire neighborhoods and their long pasts (and this, always under the aegis of benevolent motives for residents, but ultimately to benefit those who finance the plans, and whose life’s experience is not invested here) leaving those who remain wandering, disoriented, in an absurd and foreign landscape, always breathing the dust of demolition. Maybe this is why when recently during tornado sightings, for the first time in decades, air raid sirens sounded through downtown Detroit, it was observed (granted, with no surprise) that no one responded. A sense of personal identification with a place instills a feeling of care and responsibility for its continuation and well-being. A loss or lack of identification not only annuls this responsibility for place, but also profoundly undercuts our feeling of personal strength and protective influence over our environment and the lives of those that inhabit it. Ourselves, our lives.

## The Antithesis of Human Interaction

This is not to defend Urbanism as manifested in the U.S. and many western countries—cities built out of the lifeless impetus of endless profit, the antithesis of human interaction and interdependence which would unify a healthy urban center. The communities that grew in Detroit did so despite the nature of its development and expansion, not because of it. But the fact that the destruction we are seeing is something akin to Error eating her children only makes the process more horrible.

Those most liable for this latest condition of collapse, the corporate and technological elite (though their control over the outcome of things is illusionary, at best) find more benign and reassuring names for it. “Transitional period” it is often called. And so by redefining, by remote control of microphones and TV sets, the reality we experience daily, they pave the way for a whole new technological dimension of exploitation, waste, and irrevocable loss.

Thus there has recently come to dim light in Detroit (via a local investigative TV newscast and a couple of articles in Wayne State University’s newspaper) a little known plan to establish an expansive complex of technological

investigation and promotion to be called the “Hi-Tech Crescent”, of which nothing in particular is known, except that its imposition would entail the wholesale leveling of what is left around the central core of downtown Detroit. This includes many old homes and buildings housing the old and poor as well as long-time residents, for years resisting dispersal to retain continuity in their lives. The reason, of course, for the secretive nature of the plan is to avoid political opposition to such a thing. As it stands now though, it seems they needn’t go to great lengths of concealment. Despite the one newscast and small reports, neither of the major local papers has carried any information of the plans, the result being that, as with the air raid sirens, it has been observed that among the general populace, no one has responded.

## **The Scientific Myth**

There is reason for this passivity and/or acceptance besides the general sense of groundlessness and defeat among what’s left of the population; one perhaps more significant and dangerous. That is in the nature of what’s in the works. Science and technological research have through pervasive corporate media propaganda, taken on the mythic dimensions of divine omnipotence and ultimate salvation from what is popularly misunderstood to be merely the country’s economic woes rather than the historic legacy of a culture long prompted by the accumulation of power, the very motive which underlies this latest mode of deliverance and all its sacrificial offerings. The *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* now regularly carry special science sections with much space devoted to celebrating new “advances” in the realm of computers and “robotics” (of which, it is lately publicized, Detroit will soon be the productive Mecca) in contract with business and new industry. David Adamany, new president of Detroit’s Wayne State University, is actively promoting a symbiotic union between the school’s science department and big business and industry. In a recent address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, whose convention was held here in May, quoted by the *Detroit News*, he outlines the prospective “benefits”:

“Not only will university activities move to business sites, but it is my belief that business will involve itself with universities in vastly more elaborate research contracts arrangements. Where companies are located side by side with major business enterprises, as occurs in our urban centers, it will not be surprising for business to become virtually the sponsors of academic departments.”

The aim is the production of minds that produce for the sake of production; the consequence is the increased stultification of individual creativity that could be the real means of a city’s salvation. We know where such propositions lead us—around and around, circling ever further away from the source of our individual strength and understanding into the absurd and debilitated realms of totalitarian and remote control. But in a frantic search for fast answers to our urban “economic” plight, many will listen and submit to the simplest and most familiar direction from the most dominating and powerful voices. Thereby we commit the same mistake superimposed over and over through history that, as with the eventual effect of a technologically controlled world, Lewis Mumford, in his penetrating study, *The City in History*, says, “will bring with it a progressive loss of feeling, emotion, creative audacity, and finally, consciousness.” He describes our urban condition:

“We live in fact in an expanding universe of mechanical and electronic invention, whose parts are moving at a rapid pace ever further, and further away from their human center, and from any rational, autonomous human purposes. This technological explosion has produced a similar explosion of the city itself: the city has burst open and scattered its complex organs over the entire landscape...it has also been largely demagnetized, with the result that we are witnessing a sort of devolution of urban power into a state of randomness and unpredictability. In short, our civilization is running out of control...”

## **Culture of Domination and Violence**

High technology (along with its counterpart, nuclear war) is the latest, most extreme expression of the urban compulsion to dominate that leads to self-destruction. Even those who listen to the wisdom remnant in their bones that says technological development is not unconditionally good are often victim to a more insidious aspect of its

propaganda: that it is inevitable and unstoppable, and we are helpless in its advance. It is not and we are not. In this “transitional period” as the rug is pulled from under our feet, we have the chance to see ground. As shaky, confused businesses vie for the coming market; now is the time for the rest of us to re-establish respect for the earth we build on, ourselves and each other, and perhaps to regain personal and shared autonomy in the process. When the cracks belie the illusion and things get this bad for this many people, more are brought to look, think and make an active responsible choice about the future.

There is hope in this because it cannot help but result in increasing the proportion of those who choose to regain a life-valuing culture over one of domination and violence. This is what Mumford means when he says:

“we shall find that urban society has come to a parting of the ways. Here, with a heightened consciousness of our past and a clearer insight into the decisions made long ago, which often still control us, we shall be able to face the immediate decision that now confronts man and will one way or another, ultimately transform him: namely whether he shall devote himself to the development of his own deepest humanity, or whether he shall surrender himself to the now almost automatic forces he has set in motion...”

I believe that urban and rural environments, as they remain separate but thriving and interactive, reflect dual complimentary aspects of the human personality in balance. The slow mushroom cloud destruction of a city like Detroit mirrors our cultural insanity. And as long as the impelling center is one of accumulating profit and power, no matter how well disguised, the consumptive process will go on and on. After all that voracious urban mentality does not end even with the encroaching limits of the city. It requires individual awareness and conviction translated into a turning away from participation in the subtle and pervasive demands of “progress,” complemented by the strengthening of our personal relationships and an exercising of creativity in this “transitional city,” and all cities, for the healing, restorative solution to become more than abstract.

# fifth Estate

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