

The Death of Detroit

A Talk by Michael F. Malinowski, AIA
September 17, 1995 at Port of Sacramento

Welcome. Does anyone here watch TV? Good, good. Anyone see the series recently on Lost Civilizations? Wasn't that great? I thought it was just fascinating. We got to follow the discovery of a number of fabulous lost civilizations in the distant past. Almost all of them are long gone. There were great cities too, most of which have also disappeared. They're dead. How long does it take a city to die? Well one of the shows was on Pompeii; that city died in hours, maybe minutes as Mt. Vesuvius erupted. You got to see the casts made from voids in the ash - casts that captured the residents of Pompeii crouched down in terror as their deaths occurred over a thousand years ago. Boom, and it was gone.

But most of these great cities didn't die with that kind of dramatic explosion. One of the other stories was about the Mayan civilization in South America. Imagine, you are an explorer in the jungle, picking your way through dark, dense undergrowth. All of a sudden you come upon the remains of a fabulous city that's been swallowed back by the jungle. As the story unfolds the mystery remains. The city, and others of the Mayans, were abandoned, left by it's over two million inhabitants. Why? - its a mystery. Wouldn't it be something if you could go back in time and walk the streets of the ancient city of PAYENGUE; talk to the people and be there to find out what happened. How did that city die? Archeologists really can't do anything but pick over the remains, looking for clues of what happened. How do great cities die?

My name is Mike Malinowski. I live here in Sacramento, and I'm an architect, a member of the AIA, which is why I'm here as chair of the Central Valley Chapter speaker's bureau. As an Architect, most of what I do is work with ordinary people - just like you - helping them adapt their home to growing families, changing needs. Like a lot of you, I can't trace my roots in Sacramento back to birth, although I've been here 20 years. I was born and raised on the other side of the country, in a great city called Detroit. When I was growing up in Detroit, they called the Motor City. It was known as the auto capitol of the world. It is probably known better today as the murder capitol of the country. This summer I went back, back to Detroit, and what I saw sent chills down my spine. I saw a dead city. I did some urban archeology, exploring some of the ruins of Detroit. I want to share with you just a bit of what I saw.

We arrived at Suburban Metro Airport, my wife Kris, and my 8 and 9 year old daughters Kimberly and Tessa. We rented a car, and drove on highway 94, across the city toward my brother's house in suburban Grosse Pointe. As we drove across Detroit, through residential neighborhoods, my daughter Kimberly said, "Dad, Why do the houses look so bad?" Looming over the sunken freeway on either side were big, older homes, 2&3 stories. In their heyday they were nice, in nice neighborhoods - large family homes. Today, the majority of them have broken out windows; some are burned; few looked inhabited or habitable. As we neared the East Side, I had an urge to see the old neighborhood and the house I grew up in. My wife looked at my with real concern - actually she had fear in her eyes. It was 2 in the afternoon on a Saturday but I admit it, I was afraid too to get off the freeway. We passed a sign that Conner Ave was 1/2 mile away. There, as a teenager, we road our bicycles, played baseball, got into the kind of trouble that kids used to get into. As the exit drew near, I decided - what the heck, and got off the freeway. The off ramp had pot holes big enough to swallow

a tire whole. As I dodged them, right up ahead of me loomed a burnt-out hulk of a car left abandoned right in the middle of street. As I quickly changed lanes, I thought about the last time we were in Detroit eight years ago when my Mom died. My 2 brothers and sister and I decided to drive by the house we had grown up in on Olga street just off Conner Avenue. There was shock as we drove down the street I remember from my boyhood. The canopy of trees had all been lost to Dutch Elm disease. What had been a charming tunnel of vegetation was now litter strewn. The houses were forlorn, some were abandoned, a few were missing and one or two were burned out shells, not yet demolished. Our house looked distressed, but occupied. It was across the street from a golf course, a particularly nice neighborhood when we were growing up. My mom was one the last to leave actually.

When I was in grade school, the block busting efforts of realtors had already started. I remember watching TV, sitting on the living room floor and overhearing frequent telephone calls from realtors urging my parents to sell - "You better get out now while you can! The prices are going down!" Our neighbors sold and moved on, one by one. Perhaps my dad and mom were not as afraid as the families leaving; or maybe the prospect of starting over from the house they had built literally from the ground up was too sad and daunting. Some neighbors were resolute about making a stand. But what started as trickle of an exodus ended as a wave, and in the end almost all of the families that I knew growing up were gone. They were replaced by strangers of less economic means, who in turn were no doubt fleeing neighborhoods in even more advanced states of decay, leaving their houses to even more desperate souls, and so on. The realtors who made the profits on the transactions, even as the prices continued to drop, were not at all popular, as you can imagine. In fact, one that seemed most associated with the blockbusting in our area was murdered several years after his efforts started. It was business as usual; hey - it's just buyers and sellers right? Who can say where the fear came from that fueled the exodus, a scene which was being repeated all over the City, and had played out in areas closer in years before.

11925 Olga, the two story brick dream house my parents had built, in which six lives were played out over almost 30 years was still there. It had fared better than some of it's neighbors, which were vacant lots. Others were burnt-out hulks not yet demolished. The streets had few operable cars, and every block had one or two burnt out remains - and giant piles of trash everywhere. It was surreal, as I remembered walking and playing on those streets, remembered sitting on the neighbor's porches, remembered feeling at home. Now it was a wasteland, frightening, foreign. It felt too unsafe to explore further. I decided to come back later myself and my brother without the added burden of concern for my daughters and wife. I remembered our last visit when we innocently drove past our house and then down the alley to see what remained of our former backyard and the artifacts my parents virtually abandoned, when my mom sold finally - a travel trailer, a boat and an above-ground swimming pool. As we slowed to a stop behind the house, suddenly two cars blockaded us in, pulling close to our bumpers in the one lane alley. A group of mean looking men jumped out, threatening us with drawn guns, demanding we step out of our car. We were panic stricken, but complied, since we were trapped. We were terrified, but after a minute realized they were terrified too. They were, I suppose, the 'good guys' protecting the neighborhood, afraid of further incursions onto their property by the ever-threatening dark forces. They let us go, within minutes, but it left an indelible memory of our home under siege.

The next day my brother Joe and I set out to drive some of the streets we remembered growing up, to assess the changes, literally the death of Detroit as we had known it. From the safe and secure suburb where we had spent the night at my brother's house, we drove back into the heart of the city. Our family's home was directly across from Chadler Park Golf Course, a once spiffy and neat little pocket of a neighborhood, although not luxurious, a cut above the surroundings. It was a little pocket

notched out of the corner of golf course. As we drove up and down the streets, most of the houses were vacant. About half the houses were actually gone; another quarter were burnt-out hulks waiting for demolition. We saw only a few people, none of whom looked happy or friendly. Driving past the alleys in which we, as kids, with great delight, used to traverse looking for treasures, we peered into an impenetrable thickets of weed; the jungle, the forest returning to claim it's own. The side of the street that the golf course was on when we were growing up was a 20 foot swath of grass extending 4 blocks down and 4 blocks up. The L that defined the edge of our former neighborhood was now a threatening waste-high swath of weeds with the barbed wire topped fence around the golf course barely visible behind. As we drove the path that as kids we walked to school, where we, as little kids had walked carefree, unafraid, for about a mile - now it was a path litter-strewn, threatening. Every few blocks there was a beat-up and graffiti-marked sign. A valiant stand-by neighborhood groups, one announcing the Elm Street Crusaders, another the Barrett Street Buccaneers, stands by remaining residents against the dark forces. The Catholic Church that we had patronized as a family, 20 years earlier was now operated as some kind of social service facility. And the school across the street that we had attended appeared shattered and empty.

We continued on through Chandler Park which was part of our stomping grounds as kids. Boy Scout troops had events in the park. We walked there in the winter to the city skating rink and rode our bikes there in the summer to let off steam. Now it was mostly weed strewn, with some sections literal jungles of undergrowth 10-15 feet high, impenetrable. Amid broken picnic benches and piles of trash and debris, I saw a broken water lines gushing water. The only people in sight - one picking through the trash, another polishing a car parked near the gushing water, paid no heed. Where the former skating rink facility had been were littered remains of a partially finished demolition. The 3 story housing project overlooking the park along one edge, that when we grew up was definitely scary and off limits to us, was now an abandoned hulk without even boarding, most of the windows broken out. You could see inside rooms through to the sky through gaping holes in the roof; rooms which were probably still occupied by fringe characters. From there we went toward Mount Olivett Cemetery where parents both are buried. We drove down a 3 mile stretch of Van Dyke which in it's heyday was a thriving commercial strip lined on each side nonstop with 2 & 3 story buildings, commerce and industry combined. Now there was block after block after block of empty shells, abandoned buildings, litter strewn vacant lots, burnt-cars, no sign of healthy business or economic vitality.

Downtown, we saw high rise buildings similarly abandoned, among them the J LHudson Dept Store. I remembered when were kids visiting it each Christmas with great delight to see 15 story high Christmas tree of lights on the facade. Now it was dark, shuttered, empty. along with buildings all along Woodward, akin to Main Street. There were virtually no people on the streets. It was empty, a ghost land, dead. We decided to follow Jefferson Boulevard back to the suburbs, as it runs alongside the Detroit River for many miles. leaving the City eventually to lead into some of the most exclusive and secure suburbs, among them Grosse Point..

Nearing the City limits, I saw an astounding site. Literally one block was decrepit and decayed within the city, and a mere hundred feet away, within the boundary of Grosse Point Woods, were manicured lawns, large well maintained homes, and thriving retail businesses. The contrast was unbelievably sharp, so dramatic as to be surreal. How, I remember thinking, have they trained the ruffians to respect the imaginary boundary line of the City?

Back at my brother's safely in the suburbs, I sat quietly contemplating the enormous decay I had witnessed. I thought about those miles on Van Dyke we had traversed. Imagine focusing on just one of those hundreds and hundreds of properties. Play back a video over a hundred years, to watch that street as it was in it's heyday, hustle and bustle, prosperity. Take one parcel, and look with me at the

lives centered around creating a structure there. Then imagine being able to watch as the long slow slide of decay sets in. A family valiantly trying to hold on, operating their business while others collapse around them. A fortune lost finally, but another entrepreneur steps in and takes ownership, with hopes that the slide has ended. Within years, the reality sets in again as the new family finally finds themselves also lost in the sweeping, seemingly irrevocable slide down to decay - towards the death of Detroit.

I can picture a dozen more families whose personal fortunes are dissipated, turned to dust, blown away, like the trash littering the now-abandoned buildings. They stand, each one of the hundreds, thousands of them, silent testimony to broken dreams, stories untold that will never be told. A mystery for urban archeologists of the future.

This is not destruction of a natural kind, like the eruption of Vesuvius destroying Pompeii. This was a creeping, insidious destruction, like a cancer. It was seemingly unstoppable, consuming all who stood in its way. When my mom finally gave up, one of the last of the original families in our neighborhood left and only after my dad was violently assaulted within their very home during one of the burglaries they suffered, they got pennies on the dollar for their home and the big possessions that wouldn't fit their new location. Values had declined to a degree that a 2800 sq ft 2 story brick house on a double lot, across the street from a golf course, was worth just over \$20,000 twelve years ago. More modest neighboring houses went for \$8, 10 thousand or they were just abandoned, in essence valued at nothing. And things have gone downhill from there.

Where were the good forces that could counteract these dark forces? Where were the crews to trim the trees, to haul away the empty cars? Where were the developers to seize on the opportunity of the vacant lots and build new homes? Where were the families in search of affordable housing who would jump at the chance to have an ownership chance of their own?

Where are they today?

They are afraid, they see what I see, what you see, the decay and neglect, the crime, the lack of public services. They read about the tragedies, the assaults, the impact of being a citizen and calling for police, or fire protection, and being, essentially, alone. Every man, and woman, for themselves. Most of those who can, chose to go elsewhere. Most of those left, have no choice, since they do not have the resources that choice requires. With no business and land that's worthless there's no taxes, there's no income, no dollars to pay for the services. And so the downward spiral continues - more neglect is in store. Those that can, leave, leaving a huge infrastructure with costs. Imagine, it costs money to keep the water pipes working even when there is but one remaining house to serve; almost as much money as when the same pipes served dozens of homes. To maintain the fire hydrants, the streets, to provide police, to fight fires, and son on, even though surrounded by vacant lots and burnt-out hulks the costs go on, the services get less and less until finally ----- people give up too, and move on.

What can be done? Think about it as your problem, what would you do? What ideas do you have?

One idea: go in and fix things up, do rehab. I saw some evidence of that, it was tiny, lost amongst the sea of decay. Ah, you might say, let's get even more aggressive, spend more dollars. Bring the government to bear on the problem, go in and create blocks of new development. I saw that too, driving down Woodward which was the Main Street of Detroit, bisecting the city right down the middle. A brand-new shopping center in an area of intense deterioration, with new housing being built behind it. Recently completed and already starting to look a bit tarnished due to the litter and the broken up streets, the lack of street lights and the unpleasant characters hanging about. Would

you choose to live there? You who could afford to pay the taxes? Would you choose to move your family to that place? Who in the end is going to live there?

"Ah ha" you say, the answer may be to even go bigger. Not millions but tens of millions, maybe hundreds of millions. I saw that too. The Renaissance Center built in Detroit on the edge of downtown. It was isolated, in a way from the city by a huge cooling tower, necessary, in the eyes of the builders, to give it a sense of enclosure and security. It was supposed to be a catalyst. My brother's business had its' office there, up until recently. It hasn't been able to stem the tide, his company finally gave up, moved to the suburbs. While I was in Detroit, a friend in the film business lost a job - really, the City lost a job - because the producer's room at the Ren Cen was broken into and trashed. The producer decided on another town for the picture. The Ren Cen is starting the slide down too.

"Hmmm", you might say, let's go in and just level blocks and blocks and create raw land so that we can create the kind of suburban developments that seem so popular amongst these companies that are leaving. Big grassy set backs with bright lighting, security, plenty of parking in modern new buildings. I saw that too, at the foot of Conner, just a few miles from where I spent my childhood. It looked like a square mile of neighborhood was gone, replaced by grassy berms which functioned as walls. At the entrance was a formidable gate enclosure, and the factory buildings were so far back, so secure, they weren't even visible from the street. It could have been a prison for how it appeared, but what it was a giant Chrysler plant. Looking at it from the safety of our car, the street felt just as desolate, just as decayed, in fact perhaps more so, in contrast, to those big, grassy swaths..

There was an article I read recently that set out another idea of what to do. In a nutshell, it said consider the possibility that what makes more sense is to stop, stop throwing tens, hundreds of millions, billions have dollars, at Detroit. Perhaps it's a lost cause, perhaps Detroit's dead. Give up, let the jungle, let the forest reclaim. What do you think? Could it happen here? Is it happening here? Your comments, your ideas are welcome. Thank you.

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