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'What time is it?': How Detroit's Heidelberg Project continues to transform over time

by Ron Hilliard

DETROIT, Mich. - Whether it is an angel with a face mask or a tribute to the auto industry, The Heidelberg Project is a social commentary of life.

The polka dots represent the circle of life and the interconnectedness of all things. The clocks pose the question: what time is it? One of the answers is "It's time for change."

The art project, which is named after the Detroit street where the founder and artist Tyree Guyton grew up, is also experiencing change.

"If you do it out of love, it becomes a butterfly," he said.

Jenenne Whitfield, president and CEO of The Heidelberg Project, called the project "a powerful experiment. A game-changing invention in the 21st century."

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The Heidelberg Project has partnered with 10 schools, and it has transformed the neighborhood that had become home to blight and crime.

“[Guyton] began to clean it up. He boarded up the house himself; and then he said the house began to speak to him, and he began to transform that house known as Funhouse into a gigantic work of art,” said Whitfield.

She said drug dealers wanted nothing to do with something that had become a “spectacle.” Over the course of more than 30 years, one house became over 30 houses turned into works of art.

But times have changed. After a couple of demolitions and a series of suspected arsons, only two still stand.

“It has this resilience. It has this staying power, and each time it was destroyed or attacked it came back stronger,” said Whitfield as she described the project as a microcosm of Detroit’s journey.

The Heidelberg Project has been recognized around the world and regularly attracts international visitors. It continues to be evidence “that art and creativity can serve as an economic engine for its community,” said Whitfield.

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It is also helping us to find purpose in the moment.

“The question is ‘what time is it?’” said Whitfield. “And the answer is ‘now.’”

The outdoor art environment is centered in the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street in Detroit. The organization’s office is located at 3442 McDougall St.

Learn more about [The Heidelberg Project here.](#)



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Detroit's Heidelberg Project is a transformative outdoor art installation, which artist Tyree Guyton created in response to blight and crime more than 30 years ago. Pictured Aug. 10, 2020. (Photo credit: Ron Hilliard/Mid-Michigan NOW)