

Aug. 14, 2016

ARTS

The end, and a new beginning, for Detroit's iconic Heidelberg Project

Mark Stryker

Tyree Guyton says he's ready to shake things up. And if there's one thing Detroiters have learned about the 60-year-old artist, it's that when Guyton decides to shake things up, it's best to put on a seat belt.



Tyree Guyton with a stuffed Mickey Mouse behind a make-shift TV screen at the Heidelberg art project in Detroit on Friday, August 12, 2016. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

After 30 years, the iconic Heidelberg Project — Guyton's internationally acclaimed outdoor wonderland of wit and whimsy, painted abandoned homes and repurposed urban debris on Detroit's east side — is being dismantled.

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No, it's not going to happen right away. No, hostile city officials are not dispatching bulldozers to knock it down as they did in 1991 and 1999. No, Guyton is not abandoning his life's work or waving a white flag in the face of 12 arson-fueled fires that have destroyed six houses since 2013. During the next few years, the Heidelberg Project, which draws an estimated 200,000 visitors a year from all over the globe, will morph into something the organization is calling Heidelberg 3.0 — an "arts-infused community" rather than an installation driven by one man.

What exactly that will look like remains an open question. But make no mistake: The Heidelberg Project as the world has known it for decades is coming to an end.

"After 30 years, I've decided to take it apart piece-by-piece in a very methodical way, creating new realities as it comes apart," Guyton said Friday afternoon. "I gotta go in a new direction. I gotta do something I have not done before."



Tyree Guyton talks about the next phase of the Heidelberg art project, the evolving art installation on Heidelberg street in Detroit. Guyton has nurtured the street art installation for the last 30 years. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

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A confluence of factors have pushed Guyton to change course: an increasing awareness of his own mortality as he reached 60, the toll that the fires have taken on his psyche, the increasing number of project commissions that are pouring in from across the country and across the globe and the Sisyphean burden of keeping the Heidelberg Project going for literally half his life. Guyton, who likes to speak in arcs of allegory and metaphor, put it this way:

"I'm on an elevator, and I've taken it from the ground floor up to the very top 30 years later. Now I'm reversing that process, and I'm going to take this elevator down. I'm gonna stop on every floor to look around and see the beauty of taking it apart, and do it in a methodical way, where it becomes a new form of art."

By next summer, visitors to the two-block stretch of Heidelberg Street — where Guyton started his project in 1986 as a response to the rampant blight in the neighborhood of his youth — will notice familiar sights slowly disappearing. In two years, all of the magically transformed found objects that crowd the empty lots between houses are expected to be gone: broken dolls, shopping carts, TVs, shoes, telephones, a Noah's ark of stuffed animals piled high as an elephant's eye, the debris splashed with optimism and painted polka dots and dozens of Guyton's paintings of clocks and primitive portraits.

Guyton's plan to disassemble the Heidelberg Project marks a dramatic turning point in the history of a seminal public art adventure that for many has come to represent the soul of contemporary Detroit. It also poses challenges for an organization whose entire identity has always been inseparable from Guyton's charismatic personality and the ever-changing landscape of Heidelberg Street: What happens to public perception and the crowds once the art starts to go away?



Jenenne Whitfield is the Executive Director of the Heidelberg Project and wife of Detroit artist Tyree Guyton. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

The four remaining houses that are part of the project will remain, and there are nascent plans to transform the polka-dot-covered Dotty Wotty House into a museum, said Jenenne Whitfield, executive director of the Heidelberg Project, which was incorporated as a nonprofit cultural organization in 1988. Parts of the project will be donated to various museums. Heidelberg leaders have begun speaking to officials at places like the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and are hoping to open discussions shortly with the Detroit Institute of Arts. Some objects also will likely be sold to finance new ventures.

Whitfield, who is also married to Guyton, said the board is preparing to launch a million-dollar fund-raising campaign to secure the legacy of his masterpiece and support the transition into a broader cultural village. Some money will also help create a retirement fund for Guyton, who has always poured

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his own resources into the project while receiving little financial compensation from the project. This year he is receiving a stipend for the first time: \$24,000.

Whitfield speaks of nurturing new partnerships. One already under way is with Shinola, the high-end Detroit-based watch company, which will soon install on Heidelberg Street a grandfather clock whose face Guyton will redecorate in his own inimitable fashion. On another front, Heidelberg leaders are meeting with residents and business owners in the McDougall Hunt neighborhood that surrounds the project about ways to address blight and economic conditions. One possibility would be a neighborhood café; another would be artist-driven projects of various kinds.

Fundamentally, the project's goals remain the same: improving the lives of people and neighborhoods through art. "We're cultivating the community to prepare them for this arts community," said Whitfield. "That's our work over the next two years."

Beyond the art installation itself, the Heidelberg Project also includes arts education programs, an indoor gallery, artist residencies and more. Whitfield said the organization's annual budget is about \$600,000, with 65% coming from foundations and 35% from individual giving. The Heidelberg Project has always been a shoestring operation. The most recently available tax forms suggest feast or famine cycles between 2011-14, with annual deficits of about \$135,000 alternating with a \$214,000 surplus in 2011 and a balanced budget in 2013. There have been recent disputes with the city over back taxes. However, according to Wayne County Treasurer records, the Heidelberg Project is up to date on all taxes except for a minor \$419 delinquency on one of eight properties it owns.

The Heidelberg Project also exists on 27 parcels of land still owned by the city. Craig Fahle of the Detroit Land Bank confirmed that Heidelberg leaders have had conversations with Land Bank officials about becoming community partners, which could allow them to acquire those parcels. (Some of the money raised in the upcoming campaign could be used to buy lots.) The Heidelberg Project is also

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looking for a new home for its business offices, after the landlord of the building in which it was renting space on Watson Street in south Midtown decided to sell amid escalating prices. The organization will have to move by the first of the year.

A model influence



Joshua L. Dalton of Ecorse takes photos and video on his first visit to the Heidelberg art project, the ever evolving art installation on Heidelberg street in Detroit by artist Tyree Guyton. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

It's hard to overstate the significance of the Heidelberg Project. It's a Detroit landmark, a signature public art project and one of the city's most popular tourist attractions, celebrated in countless guidebooks and media stories. But it has also morphed into a potent symbol of Detroit's vital artistic community, the city's resilience in the face of horrific decay and the power of art — and individual artists — to effect social change.

The Heidelberg Project has been an influential cornerstone of Detroit's cultural

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renaissance. It has provided a model for other outdoor art installations like Olayami Dabls' African Bead Museum on Grand River, and also set the tone for others working at the intersection of art, community building and social justice — what these days is often labeled as "creative placemaking." One example is Power House Productions, created by artist Mitch Cope and architect Gina Reichert, which is breathing new life into the Banglatown area near the border of Hamtramck.

Guyton's influence has even transcended art. Entrepreneur Phil Cooley, who has spearheaded restaurants like Slows Bar BQ and Gold Cash Gold and the small business and artistic incubator Ponyride, said the Heidelberg Project was a crucial influence in his decision to relocate to Detroit from Europe in 2001.

"It was something that inspired me as a designer and as a business owner in terms of how to embrace community and how to think creatively," said Cooley, 38, who grew up in Marysville, near Port Huron. "It was definitely more than an object in my mind. Tyree's work changed my perception of work and how to be a human being. I moved here looking for those same kind of things — culture, diversity and to be a part of a community."

As the Heidelberg Project has evolved from outsider status to more of a mainstream institution, it's easy to forget just how controversial it was in its early years, how neighborhood residents were split between supporters and opponents, how fans called it art and critics called it junk and how strong a political statement Guyton was making by using homegrown art to highlight and combat blight. Mayors Coleman Young and Dennis Archer both had parts of the project knocked down in the 1990s.

Bradley Taylor, associate director of museum studies at the University of Michigan and a member of the Heidelberg Project board, said Guyton's installation was a community-focused museum with historic roots dating to the late-19th Century and museum pioneer John Cotton Dana, who championed his Newark Museum in

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New Jersey as a public library-like institution that valued community over collection building.

"In the case of the Heidelberg Project, this has shown itself both in the selection of the very materials used in the creation of the artwork on the street and in Guyton's advocacy for social change," said Taylor. He noted that Guyton took city government and the local church community to task for their shortcomings in addressing the needs of Detroit's poorest citizens.

Still drawing crowds



A group from Community Action Networks, a YouthWorks program from Ann Arbor, take a lunch break while visiting the Heidelberg art project on Friday, August 12, 2016. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

Back at the Heidelberg Project on Friday afternoon, a steady stream of visitors walked the grounds and drove down the main drag. They came from as close as Royal Oak and from as far away as Germany. All wore ear-to-ear grins. Guyton talked about the future while sitting at a little table on the sidewalk,

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but he was constantly interrupted by fans, newcomers and repeat visitors alike who wanted to shake his hand or just tell him how much the project meant to them.

One of the charms of going to the Heidelberg Project has always been that Guyton, an athletically built man with a bald pate, salt-and-pepper goatee and a welcoming face that invites conversation, is usually on the grounds, tweaking an installation, tending to business, greeting the public, talking up Detroit.

"This is so awesome!" Janet Reisenwitz of Atlanta said as she approached the artist. She was with her sisters and a niece. "This is my second visit. I love it."

"Every time you come back we love seeing you," Guyton said.

"The more you come, the more you see," Reisenwitz said excitedly. The conversation ended with a bear hug, and Guyton beamed as she walked away, talking about the human connection that has been the driving force behind his art since the Heidelberg Project began.

Guyton turned his attention back to the evolution of the project and his career. In the last 30 years, his onetime reputation as a gadfly has dissolved as he has become a local hero and an art world star, and the Heidelberg Project seems to have settled into a détente with city hall and those neighbors who still dislike its presence.

Last year, Guyton was selected to represent the U.S. at the Senzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism in China, where he built a Heidelberg-like house he called "Power to the People." He has projects brewing in Philadelphia and Los Angeles and, back home, he's creating an installation at Eastern Market for the Murals in the Market festival of street art in September. Meanwhile, his latest gallery exhibition opened Saturday at Inner State Gallery (also in Eastern Market).

In recent years, the dominant visual motif at the Heidelberg Project has slowly become clocks of all sizes and shapes. Guyton began painting them about three or four years ago. He started around the same time as the rash of fires that threatened to destroy the witty and roughhewn beauty that he had wrought from the neglect

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and abandonment on the street where he grew up. It doesn't take a psychiatrist to read the clocks as the march of time.

"It was time to put the clocks out here in such a way that I could see them every day, and you become what you see, what you talk about, what you do," Guyton said. "And a chance to share with the world that I'm exploring and playing with time. If I die tomorrow, I've fulfilled my purpose."

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Guyton's work

The Heidelberg Project is located along Heidelberg St., between Mt. Elliott and Ellery, Detroit. GPS: 3600 Heidelberg St. www.heidelberg.org. Free admission. Daylight hours

Tyree Guyton's latest gallery show, "Face-ology," is on view through Sept. 10, at Inner State Gallery, 1410 Gratiot, Detroit. 313-744-6505. www.innerstategallery.com. Noon-6 p.m. Wed.-Fri.; 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Sat.

Fires in Detroit Destroy an Artist's Canvas: Vacant Houses

By Monica Davey

DETROIT — A faint stream of smoke was still rising in the frigid air here the other morning, though all that remained of the building itself was a charred foundation, now framed in yellow police tape. Detroit's seemingly endless stock of abandoned buildings has been a target for arson for all too long, but this house was different.

It had been covered in stuffed animals. Dozens of fluffy faded creatures were affixed to its outer walls. A panda dangled near the roof while Mickey Mouse looked on from a window.

For Tyree Guyton, an artist who grew up along the streets here on the city's east side, the vacant house was a canvas. So was the whole emptying-out neighborhood. For almost three decades, Mr. Guyton had been turning mostly empty homes and lots near [Heidelberg Street](#) into what he sees as an art installation of houses covered in dots or numbers, faces painted on sidewalks and all the evidence of life left behind: discarded baby dolls, televisions, rusty bicycles, records, cars, shoes stuck in a fence, a tree filled with clocks.

But what began long ago as one man's answer to urban decay now

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finds itself victim to the same forces — one more gloomy expression, it seems, of a bankrupt city.

Since May, nine fires have burned through portions of Mr. Guyton's works, known as [the Heidelberg Project](#), that most recent one [gutting the "Party Animal House"](#) on March 7. In all, six of 10 houses have been destroyed. Fire officials suspect arson. Rewards and security plans have been announced, but no arrests have come.

"Why it happened, who knows?" said Donald Dawkins, of the Detroit office of the federal Bureau of [Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives](#). "It's a mystery we're really anxious to solve."

The Heidelberg Project, which Mr. Guyton began in 1986, has always drawn intense, clashing opinions. Some people embraced the works, which emerge jarringly with flashes of cheery color and a feel of Pop Art, as significant. Others dismissed them as uninvited piles of junk, further cluttering the streets and making it impossible for the struggling neighborhood to improve in a more ordinary way, if ever it could.

Twice, in 1991 and again in 1999, portions of the installation were demolished by city officials. Each time, Mr. Guyton started over.

"I had an epiphany," Mr. Guyton said of the early days. "I saw this."

As he watched the community struggle, crime rise and homes clear out, he also saw a rare chance to make a statement about a place he felt was being discarded. "I went out there and started to clean, and I was saying to use what's in front of you," he said.

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A house covered in colorful dots, the “New White House,” is his way of showing that everything in the universe is connected, he said. The “Party Animal House” recalled an old acquaintance of Mr. Guyton’s from the neighborhood, and a question that had lingered, “When do we stop partying and get down to business?”

Along the slushy street here, cars regularly pull up, as do buses from time to time. Visitors emerge from faraway cities, clutching cameras, and wander a street they would surely never see if not for Mr. Guyton’s creations. The operation has grown enormously since its start: a staff, including interns, works in an office for a nonprofit Heidelberg Project organization, which says it now owns many, though not all, of the houses and lots that are part of the work. The project is funded by grants and donations. It says that 275,000 people come to see the project each year, putting it, organizers say, among the city’s leading tourist attractions.

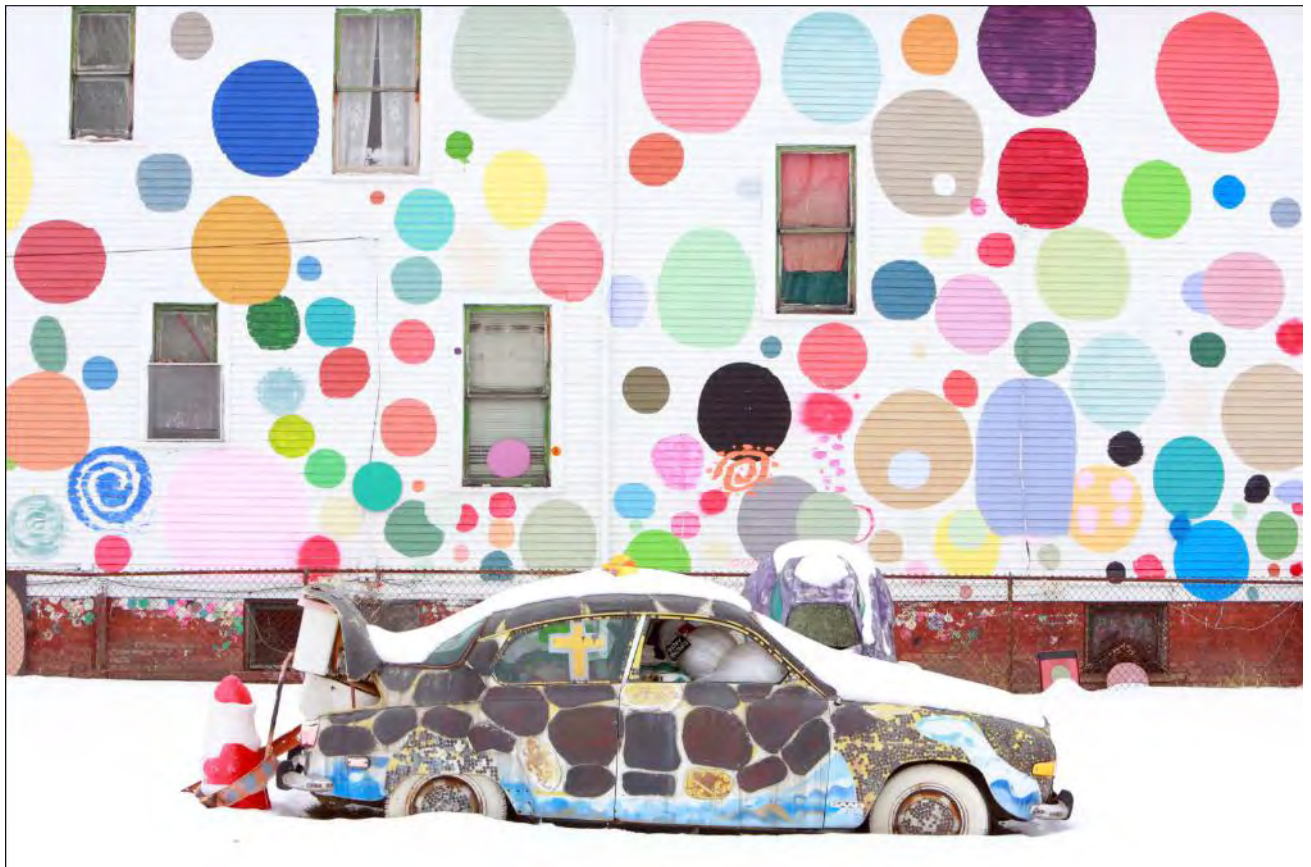
Tajauana Bell has lived in an ordinary house beside the installation for 27 years. And for many of those years, she objected to the whole thing. “To me, it was junk, and it had no place in the neighborhood,” Ms. Bell said, gazing out on old toys, dolls and china sets arranged on the remains of another of the houses, half-burned.

But Ms. Bell has come around. She still does not see art in all of it, she says, but she likes the visitors. She said she has met people from around the world, from cultures she never would have known. And she now allows people to sign the outside of her house for a dollar, gathering money she says she needs to restore portions of her home. “I guess I’ve realized it’s better to live with it,” she said of the Heidelberg Project, “since it’s not going anywhere.”

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In truth, the project's future is uncertain. The new administration at City Hall has not taken a public stand on Heidelberg. The fires have left ruins. Among many possibilities that Mr. Guyton's supporters say may be considered next: bringing old, abandoned buildings from elsewhere in this city to reuse as new canvases for Heidelberg Street.

"Heidelberg has always been an evolution," Mr. Guyton said. "I was always saying to use what's in front of you, discarded objects, and it's the same thing with those structures burning down. I'm going to use them to create something greater. I see that. I believe that."



Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

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