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

By Monica Davey

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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 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.

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.”

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.”

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