The New York Times Style Magazine

May 19, 2022

A Fashion Designer's First Home Collection Pays Homage to Haiti and New York

Plus: an art installation in Chinatown, a new restaurant in Toronto and more recommendations from T Magazine.

VISIT THIS

An Eclectic Installation in Chinatown

By M. H. Miller

A view of Tyree Guyton's installation "The Heidelberg Project, New York City" (2022), presented by Martos After Dark. Photo: Charles Benton. Courtesy of the artist, the Heidelberg Project, Detroit, and Martos Gallery, New York

Walking south on Elizabeth Street, just above Canal, you'll find spot an inconspicuous message on a brick wall that reads 2+2=8. A painting by the Detroit-based Tyree Guyton, it is an introduction of sorts to an installation next door: Inside a small, windowed storefront operated by Martos Gallery, Guyton's dealer, the white walls are painted with clocks (one of the artist's recurring symbols), and at a table covered in detritus like an old TV, a tea set and a piece of rusted metal, a group of dirty mannequins sit as if they are a family scarfing down dinner in full view of the traffic coming off the nearby Manhattan Bridge. For much of his career, which began in the 1980s, Guyton has shown his work on a stretch of Detroit's Heidelberg Street, where he grew up. As manufacturing work declined, and the neighborhood fell into disrepair, Guyton began an unorthodox act of preservation, turning the area into a popular open-air museum by filling vacant lots with sculptures and paintings made from discarded relics: stuffed animals, busted sneakers, car hoods, broken vacuum cleaners. This tiny New York show reveals Guyton both transcending and perpetuating the legend of Heidelberg, and solidifying 2+2=8 as an artistic treatise. If you look close enough, anything — be it the block you grew up on or a busy New York street corner — can be a place of beauty and reflection. *"The Heidelberg Project, New York City" is on view 24 hours a day, indefinitely, at Martos After Dark, 167 Canal Street, martosgallery.com.*

The New York Times
May 12, 2022

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start in Union Square with Al-An deSouza's digital paintings of his father's belongs. Then head to Chelsea for Robyn O'Neil's graphite drawings. And don't miss Tyree Guyton's reincarnation of his Detroit-based "Heidelberg Project" in Chinatown.

CHINATOWN

Tyree Guyton: 'The Heidelberg Project, New York'

On view indefinitely. Martos After Dark, 167 Canal Street, Manhattan; 212-260-0670; martosgallery.com.

Installation view of "Tyree Guyton, The Heidelberg Project, New York City, Martos After Dark," 2022. Tyree Guyton, The Heidelberg Project, Detroit, and Martos Gallery, New York; Charles Benton

Tyree Guyton came home to Detroit's McDougall-Hunt in 1986. The neighborhood — like many in the city's inner ring — has been gutted by decades of white flight and pointed neglect. Guyton cleaned up a string of fallow lots, then assembled the junk into bitter monuments of resilience. The resulting Heidelberg Project lines a long block with bleached mountains of shoes, harlequin tableaus of rusty cars and an acrobatic stack of shopping carts. Guyton's topsy-turvy paintings of clocks, some turned around or without numbers, dot the view like roadside Bible verses. "Time is running out," they seem to say: "Repent!" Bold designs cover nearby houses — some abandoned, but a few in solidarity with their residents against attacks from NIMBY arsonists and philistine politicians.

Gradually, the winds changed. Detroit's ruling class now see the value that public art and selfie-hunting tourists bring to real estate — or, less cynically, see art Guyton's way: as part of the blighted city's spiritual recovery. Today, Heidelberg Project enjoys official status. And Guyton is franchising: A corner storefront on Canal Street in Chinatown contains a slice of Heidelberg. Through the glass, blotchy, costumed mannequins sit around a cluttered table and a TV painted with the words "World New." A vacuum inhales an American flag. Clocks cover the walls. The domestic scene feels incongruous and vivisected at street level. Is this the neighborhood's past? Its future? Detroit? New York? The display advertises the larger project. It also invokes the specter of urban renewal in downtown Manhattan. Time, time, time … *TRAVIS DIEHL*

Detroit Free Press
April 12, 2022

ARTS

Detroit presents medals to longtime arts figures in inaugural awards ceremony

Duante Beddingfield

Detroit rang in a new tradition Tuesday when it paid tribute to a formidable slate of local arts figures during the city's first ACE Honors ceremony.

Spearheaded by the City's Department of Arts, Culture and Entrepreneurship (ACE), the event was devised by ACE Director Rochelle Riley as a way to celebrate artists and arts patrons who have contributed 25 or more years of exceptional service to the region.

"It's interesting, around the country and around the world, the recognition that's given to the creative talent coming out of the city," said Mayor Mike Duggan. "We have not always celebrated it as thoroughly as we should have."

Riley said the award recipients are people "who have given lifetimes to the creative genius that has made Detroit what it is to people around the world."

In future years, there will be five annual honorees, but the inaugural event saw 16 Detroit ACE Honors medals distributed for arts figures both living and deceased.

- **Tyree Guyton**, neo-expressionist artist, 2009 Kresge Artist Fellow and creator of the internationally renowned Heidelberg Project. Guyton studied at the College for Creative Studies and was awarded an honorary doctorate of fine art. He has been featured at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Studio Museum of Harlem as well as in the Emmy Award-winning documentary "Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton."

Tyree Guyton poses in the middle of Heidelberg street as a symbolic gesture of taking his project back to it's infancy in August 2016. *Jessica J. Trevino, Detroit Free Press*

FRIEZE
19 APR 21

How Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project Helped Revitalize Detroit

Jenenne Whitfield, the artist's wife and president of the Heidelberg Project, reflects on the history and legacy of Guyton's magnum opus: an outdoor sculpture in Detroit's east side

BY **JENENNE WHITFIELD** IN **THEMATIC ESSAYS**

Dotty Wotty House at Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project. Courtesy: the artist and the Heidelberg Project, Detroit

In 1986, Tyree Guyton started work on the Heidelberg Project – an outdoor sculpture in an urban community on Detroit's east side – with the help of his grandfather, Sam Mackey, an artist in his own right. Guyton knew he wanted to be an artist at the age of nine, when his grandfather first placed a paintbrush in his hand. 'It was like my hand was on fire,' he tells me.

Transforming and weaving discarded materials and society's waste into the landscape of his neighbourhood, the artist cast a spotlight on the high levels of poverty and neglect in the area, evoking a flurry of emotions and reactions from people from all walks of life. Fittingly, a welcome sign describing the installation on Heidelberg Street reads: 'SAYING, SEEING AND FEELING ALL THINGS.'

Guyton maintained that his artwork could be an engine for revitalization and change. Growing up impoverished, against a backdrop of drugs and crime, angered him: 'Sometimes, I would look around at my community and see how people were living, and I'd want to explode.' Channelling his own feelings of despair into more than just an open-air art museum, the Heidelberg Project serves as a street ministry for his community.

Art enthusiasts, naysayers and the simply curious came from all over the world to see Guyton's 'Ghetto Guggenheim' – a term I coined that has been repeatedly used to describe the work – often leaving with more than just a visual experience. If you were lucky, you might catch Guyton working on a new assemblage and would likely be given a philosophical lesson in the artist's own form of numerology, in which 2 + 2 = 8. When I first visited the Heidelberg Project in 1993, I asked Guyton: 'What in the hell is all of this?' He invited me to get out of my car and check it out. We talked for about an hour, and my soul was stirred;
I returned the next day and stayed.

Tyree Guyton, *Noah's Arc*, 2001. Courtesy: the artist and the Heidelberg Project, Detroit

Prior to COVID-19, according to guestbook records, the Heidelberg Project received more than 150,000 visitors annually, from 144 countries, making it the third-most-visited cultural attraction in Detroit, while a 2017 Williams College economic-impact study calculated that it generated more than US$7 million in revenue for the Wayne County region. Having been featured in countless national and international news publications over the years, in March 2020, the Heidelberg Project received the award for Best Cultural Activation from Leading Culture Destinations – an organization dubbed by *The New York Times* 'the Oscars of the museum world'.

In 2016, on the project's 30th anniversary, Guyton publicly announced that he would dismantle his work to make way for a new vision that he called Heidelberg 3.0. 'I took the elevator up 30 floors and now I'm coming down. I want to see it from both sides,' he said. In 2019, with the project still not

fully disassembled, Guyton was asked by a member of his community what was taking him so long. 'It took me 30 years to create this work,' he replied. 'As I come down this elevator, I am stopping on every floor.' For Guyton, the act of dismantling the work is just as significant a part of the artistic process as creating it.

Motor City Lot at Tyree Guyton's Heildelberg Project. Courtesy: the artist and the Heidelberg Project, Detroit

For 35 years, the Heidelberg Project has brought diverse people together, serving as inspiration for generations of innovators in Detroit and across the world. Guyton concedes that the ramifications of his work are much bigger than the man who created it. The Heidelberg Project deserves a deeper dive and investment to test Guyton's theories or, at the very least, a review of its achievements. We can only hope that Detroit will eventually catch up to Guyton who, at 65, is never standing still.

This essay is part of a series on public art that will appear in the May issue of frieze.

Roadtrippers
Mar 2nd 2021

How a Detroit artist turned a crumbling city block into a sprawling public art project

The Heidelberg Project was started in 1986 by Tyree Guyton, who grew up in what is now known as the Dotty Wotty House

By Sarah Bence

McDougall-Hunt is a residential neighborhood on Detroit's east side; it's dotted with burned-out husks of houses that have succumbed to fire either by arson or accident. But the area, specifically the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street, is increasingly on both tourists' and local community members' itineraries.

The block is overcome with found art, collected and designed by Tyree Guyton. Guyton, who grew up in what is now known as the Dotty Wotty House, started the Heidelberg Project in 1986, when he returned home and was shocked at the desecration, racism, and violence he witnessed in his hometown.

Alongside his Grandpa Mackey, Guyton began rearranging Heidelberg Street with found objects, like abandoned teddy bears, old TVs, and broken-down cars, creating beauty from wreckage. Guyton wanted to make a statement. He wanted to reclaim his neighborhood, and make it a safe space for kids and families to gather.

In the more than three decades since its birth, the Heidelberg Project has had a tumultuous history—and as I park my car on Heidelberg Street, I'm curious to see how the project has changed over the years.

An angel wears a face covering. | Photo: Sarah Bence

The Heidelberg Project is full of found objects, like abandoned teddy bears, old TVs, and broken-down cars. | Photo: Sarah Bence

A boat piled with stuffed animals. | Photo: Sarah Bence

The project itself has been controversial in Detroit since its inception. | Photo: Sarah Bence

Constantly evolving

The Heidelberg Project has been controversial in Detroit since its inception. It was dismantled twice in the 1990s by people serving in the Detroit government, who thought the project drew attention to the city's struggles with urban blight. In 2013, 2014, and even as recently as 2019, the project and its surrounding buildings have been victim to more than a dozen arson attacks.

But in the last decade, the local community—and more recently, the local government—has banded together to support the Heidelberg Project. Not only has Guyton been recognized nationally and internationally as the founder of one of the world's greatest contributions to public art, but the modest project infuses Detroit proper with approximately $2.4 million in tourist revenue per year.

In the face of arson, demolition, and see-sawing Detroit politics, the Heidelberg Project has continued on, constantly evolving, and it often incorporates these obstacles into its artistic story.

A fence lined with shoes. | Photo: Sarah Bence

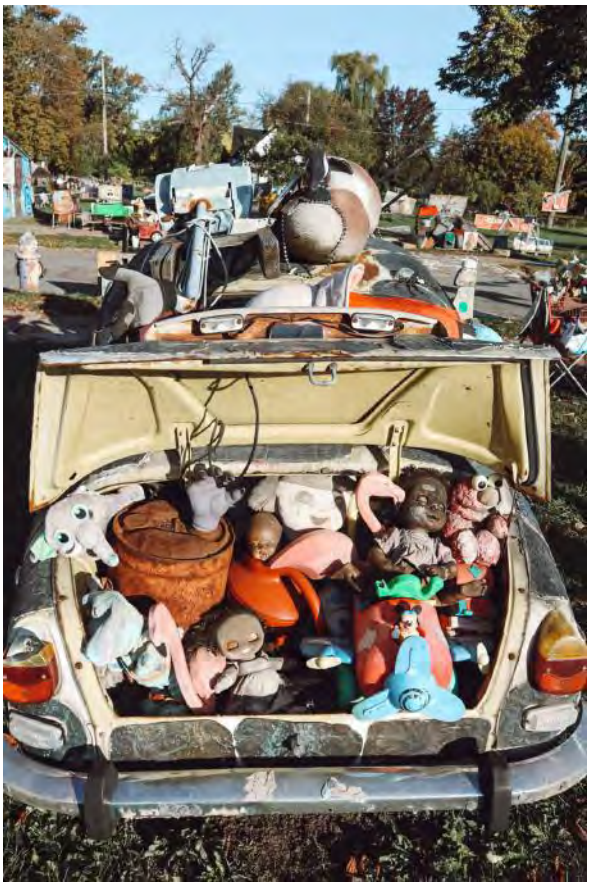
Public art in a pandemic

When I visit, it's a cold morning in late 2020, a year during which I faced unemployment, family death due to COVID-19, and separation from loved ones. Earlier in the year, Detroit's streets—like so many others in the country—were filled with Black Lives Matter protests. I walk the Heidelberg Street sidewalks and wonder what I can learn from their constant evolution.

This is my fourth visit to the Heidelberg Project over as many years. The last time I was here was a blustery October weekend in 2019. Guyton's sister, Melody Guyton, was volunteering as a docent on the street across from the Dotty Wotty House, where she grew up and currently lives.

I remember her friendly, mask-less face and how we walked through the installations together, without a thought to the trajectory of airborne particles leaving each other's mouths.

Giraffe toys. | Photo: Sarah Bence



A trunk filled with toys. | Photo: Sarah Bence

This morning, I have a mask in my pocket just in case I cross paths with another person, even though the project is entirely outdoors. In-person tours of the Heidelberg Project were canceled in March, 2020, but I've taken the advice on the project's website and downloaded an app to help guide my pandemic-era exploration. The app was designed in 2018 and won a MediaPost Appy Award, according to Heidelberg Project Program Director Margaret Grace.

"We have experienced more visitors than expected since the beginning of the pandemic," Grace says in an email. "The art environment has served as a destination for those who are looking for something fun and safe to do outdoors."

Outdoor art through an app

Using the GPS-based app to guide me, I weave through the various installations: A hot pink hummer peeps out from the grass where it's half buried. Shoes, which symbolize souls ("soles"), are strung along fences and trees. Abandoned cars are bursting with found dolls.

The Dotty Wotty House. | Photo: Sarah Bence

Three TVs. | Photo: Sarah Bence

A sunken car frame. | Photo: Sarah Bence

Discarded soles. | Photo: Sarah Bence

According to the app, one installation—a pile of shoes topped with a plastic angel—is called *Haiti*. To Guyton, the shoes represented all those who died in Haiti's 2010 earthquake. New in 2020 is a disposable white mask covering the angel's face.

Clocks, and specific times, are another motif scattered throughout the Heidelberg Project. The asphalt street and sidewalks are painted with clocks and timestamps. I weave through trees nailed with more clocks, and signs that ask, "What time is it?"

According to the app, the clock motif became more prominent after the 2013 arson attacks and "reflect that it is time for change." Grace says, "The clocks are in reference to our perception of time. What you take from that is up to you to decide."

If you go

The Heidelberg Project is free and open to the public from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. You can park along the street, but remember it is a residential area so be respectful, and do not photograph residents. The Heidelberg Project App can be downloaded via the App Store or Google Play. In-person tours for spring/summer 2021 can also now be scheduled here.

Condé Nast Traveler
October 22, 2020

Julien Capmeil

NEWS & ADVICE

Inside Detroit's Continued Evolution, and the Creatives Fueling It

After decades of turmoil and change, Detroit remains driven by art and community.

BY LESLIE PARISEAU

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIEN CAPMEIL

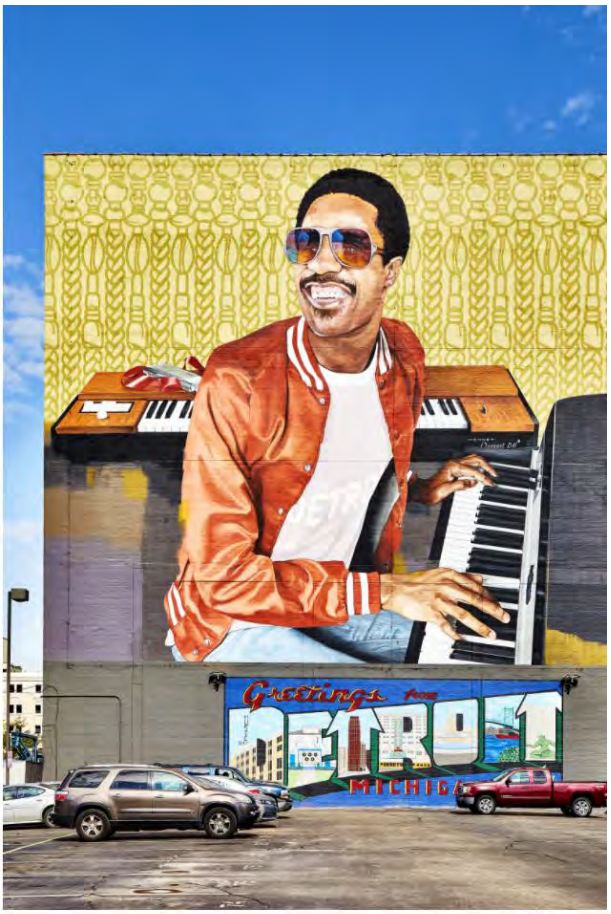
There's a four-block stretch of art in the McDougall-Hunt district, on the east side of Detroit, formed from the detritus of a century's worth of homes. Visitors find a chain-link fence strung up with

crumbling shoes; an entire house studded with floppy, oversize stuffed animals; a field full of boards painted in a rainbow of colors to resemble clocks; a lone brick chimney crowned with a satellite dish, like an angel atop a Christmas tree. There are so many hills and piles and mountains shaped into sculptures from so many forgotten things that the sheer negative space feels like a silent ghost chorus. Here, in 1986, the artist Tyree Guyton began stitching together what he called the Heidelberg Project from the leftovers of an abandoned neighborhood—a protest against the city forsaking his people and his home.

The Heidelberg Project not only confronts the conditions of a city interrupted—by white flight, by bankruptcy, by mismanagement—but also insists that you acknowledge the spirit of a community unwilling to sit back and take it. In 2016, Guyton decided to dismantle sections of the project so that it could be displayed around the world. The choice is particularly symbolic of the moment Detroit finds itself in now—turning outward yet remaining fiercely local, focused on the blocks that must be rebuilt.

One of America's wealthiest cities before a sharp decline starting around 60 years ago, Detroit has been experimenting with urban regeneration for decades. After the city declared bankruptcy in 2013, a host of benefactors, entrepreneurs, and documentarians rushed to its aid, including JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Bedrock, a real estate firm dedicated to redeveloping downtown Detroit. Founded by billionaire Dan Gilbert, who made his fortune through the mortgage lender Quicken Loans, Bedrock has committed $5.6

The Heidelberg Project Julien Capmeil



A mural of Motown legend Stevie Wonder Julien Capmeil

billion to the inner city for projects including the restoration of the landmarked 1500 Woodward building, now home to the year-old Shinola Hotel, the first hospitality project from the influential local champions of stylish American design.

Even with the high-profile investments, the city's cultural landscape, from food to music, has a grassroots flavor, and that's especially true of the Detroit art scene. Galleries and studios are owned by natives, populated with work by Detroiters, and focused on uplifting the city as a whole. Following the emergence of Black

Lives Matter and later the onset of COVID-19, arts leaders have doubled down on supporting the city.

Home in historic Brush Park Julien Capmeil

The lounge at the Shinola Hotel Julien Capmeil

In many ways, Detroit's decline over the last half-century created opportunities for this community to blossom, with artists seeking affordable space and opportunity turning the former one-industry town into their canvas. The old neighborhoods, warehouses, and factories have served as a natural incubator for creativity, with a stream of projects in the same spirit as Heidelberg. In the 1970s a series of geometric murals painted by figures like Charles McGee spruced up façades around town. The G.R. N'namdi Gallery,

sprawling complex offering programming and lectures.

In 2004, 555 Arts moved here from Ann Arbor as a way to "support the arts and provide space and resources to the community," says founder Carl Goines. The collective, which runs workshops and hosts exhibitions, is in the process of transforming a 30,000-square-foot, five-level space inside a former tobacco warehouse in Poletown, outside downtown Detroit, into a hub of artist residencies, housing, and studio and exhibition space. When COVID-19 hit in March, much of the programming was paused, but over the summer, Goines and his team of roughly 20 other artists restarted their workshops, arranging art classes and art therapy for the public around the Black Lives Matter movement. "If nothing else, we have offered a way for people in the community to get back out and do something," says Goines.

Currently, the heart of the public art scene lies in The Belt, a street-art alleyway downtown launched in 2014 by Anthony and JJ Curis, who own the Library Street Collective, a gallery named after the once-vacant corridor. "The Detroit arts community is built on a foundation of creative thinkers looking to positively improve their neighborhoods through their own artists' practices and abilities," says Anthony. Funded in part by Bedrock, The Belt, which is anchored by two cocktail bars and an underground club, has become a center for trailblazing artists.

Anthony and JJ Curis, owners of the downtown exhibition space The Belt Julien Capmeil

Downtown Detroit Julien Capmeil

In past summers The Belt would have been overrun by art lovers sipping margaritas and taking in a constantly changing selection of large-scale murals curated by the Curises. But this summer, partly in response to the current crisis, the pair shifted their focus. In August they partnered with the renowned photographer Carrie Mae Weems on her *Resist Covid/Take 6* initiative, designed to remind the public about social distancing; that same month they launched their affiliate Louis Buhl & Co. gallery downtown. And in June, Library Street Collective presented Jammie Holmes's *They're Going to Kill Me* project, for which planes flew over five U.S. cities displaying

George Floyd's final words. (Images of that interactive piece are now displayed in The Belt.) It plans to open a second Library Street Collective, in a soaring abandoned church on the east side.

Detroit's restaurant community has a lot in common with its arts scene in the way that it celebrates and supports its community from the inside out. Michigan's culinary history has profited greatly from the waves of newcomers that have settled here, from Alabaman sharecroppers to Palestinian exiles; at points during the last century, the nonstop flow of immigrants made Detroit the fourth largest city in the United States. Alongside the many modern American restaurants there is a host of new establishments showcasing flavors from around the world.

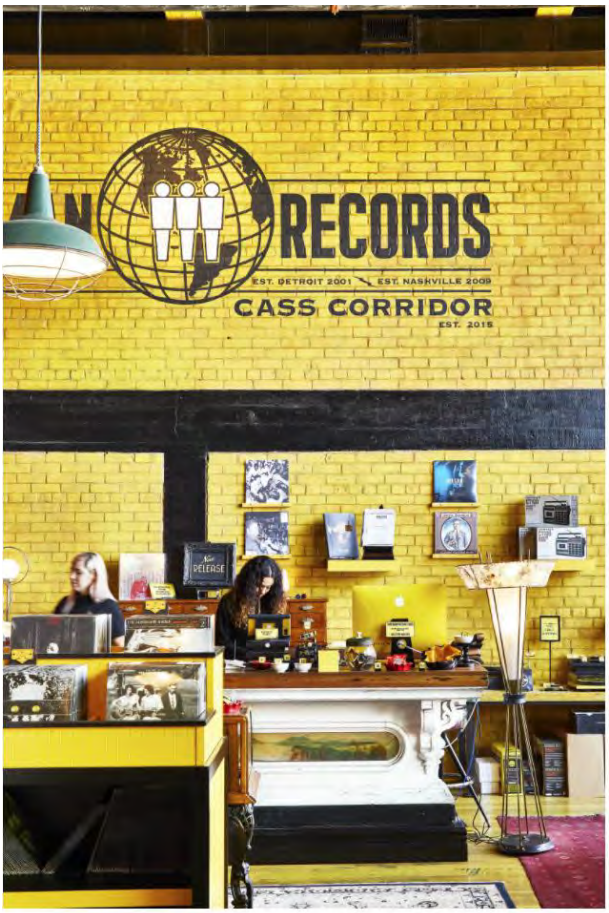
A shrimp appetizer at the Irish bistro Lady of the House Julien Capmeil

The Mexican restaurant Peso Julien Capmeil

A bartender at cocktail spot the Sugar House Julien Capmeil

In a pink dress and pink suede heels, Vera Bailey spins around in the neon glow of Flowers of Vietnam, calling everybody “baby.” Here, in a low-key former midcentury diner, Bailey is the gatekeeper to Palestinian-American chef George Azar's fierce Southeast Asian cooking, which includes dishes like Korean fried-caramel chicken wings with skin that shatters like glass, bone-warming Chinese silkie black chicken, and Vietnamese shaky beef. The dizzying mash-up of influences—which also include Greece, Palestine, and Mexico—has gained Azar a cult following. It's a neat representation of the new-wave Detroit food scene that embraces the city's multiethnic makeup. “I think the city is a true amalgam of Americana at its finest,” says Azar. “Because so many cultures have been here working side by side, mostly blue-collar, it feels like metro Detroit has forged its own culture.”

Azar's friend Tony Lopez owns Peso, a Mexican restaurant behind the old Grand Central Station that is a modern interpretation of the traditional cantina, with a lively menu of margaritas and classic plates. To find a group of chefs from around the world working together, go to the Detroit Shipping Company, a gathering of freight containers turned food hall, in Midtown. There, Laotian chef Genevieve Vang combines Southeast Asian influences at her restaurant, Bangkok 96 Street Food. And scattered around the outskirts of town are excellent examples of Lebanese (Al Ameer Restaurant, Phoenicia), Yemeni (Yemen Café), and, of course, soul food (Baker's Keyboard Lounge).



Musician Jack White's Third Man Records Julien Capmeil

A street performer in Detroit's Eastern Market neighborhood Julien Capmeil

Detroit's music scene has also benefited from all the fresh blood. Since the days of Black Bottom jazz, Detroit blues, and Motown, the city has always made space for musicians. Hardcore punk, R&B, rock and roll, hip-hop, and techno all took shape here, and of course Detroit birthed stars like Aretha Franklin, John Lee Hooker, the White Stripes, and Eminem. Venues around town honor the city's roots while welcoming new talent. The impeccably preserved '30s-era Cliff Bell's club hosts experimental jazz trios on Tuesdays. The walls of Raven Lounge in Poletown shake with Delta blues. Harmonica Shah, a man in overalls and a tool belt kitted out with

six harmonicas, brings down the house before stowing his instruments away in a red metal box and ceding the floor to Ben Moore & the Blues Express. Further east, singer-rapper Tunde Olaniran and violinist Roberto González-Monjas perform beneath the lofty nave of an old Catholic church.

Olayami Dabls, founder of the Dabls Mbad African Bead Museum Julien Capmeil

Eastern Market Julien Capmeil

Not far from the original Motown studios lies another bastion of regeneration. Seventy-two-year-old Olayami Dabls, who created his Dabls Mbad African Bead Museum from derelict homes occupying almost an entire city block, is a self-proclaimed visual storyteller

who has embarked on an act of sculptural creation to rival Heidelberg. He can usually be found standing in front of the many buildings he's taken charge of, plastering mirrors and tiles to their faded façades. Behind his bead museum, a shop filled with pigmented baubles from all over Africa unfurls a rogue campus of structures sheathed in shimmering surfaces. These installations, with names like The Middle Passage Fence, are meant to empower the Black community while representing the relationship of Africa with Europe and the U.S. As you wander through this maze, it's possible to glimpse reflections in the mosaics—first prairie grasses and wildflowers growing in the vacant lots, and then the city center, its gleaming skyscrapers rising up and up and up.

September 10th 2020

'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.”

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.

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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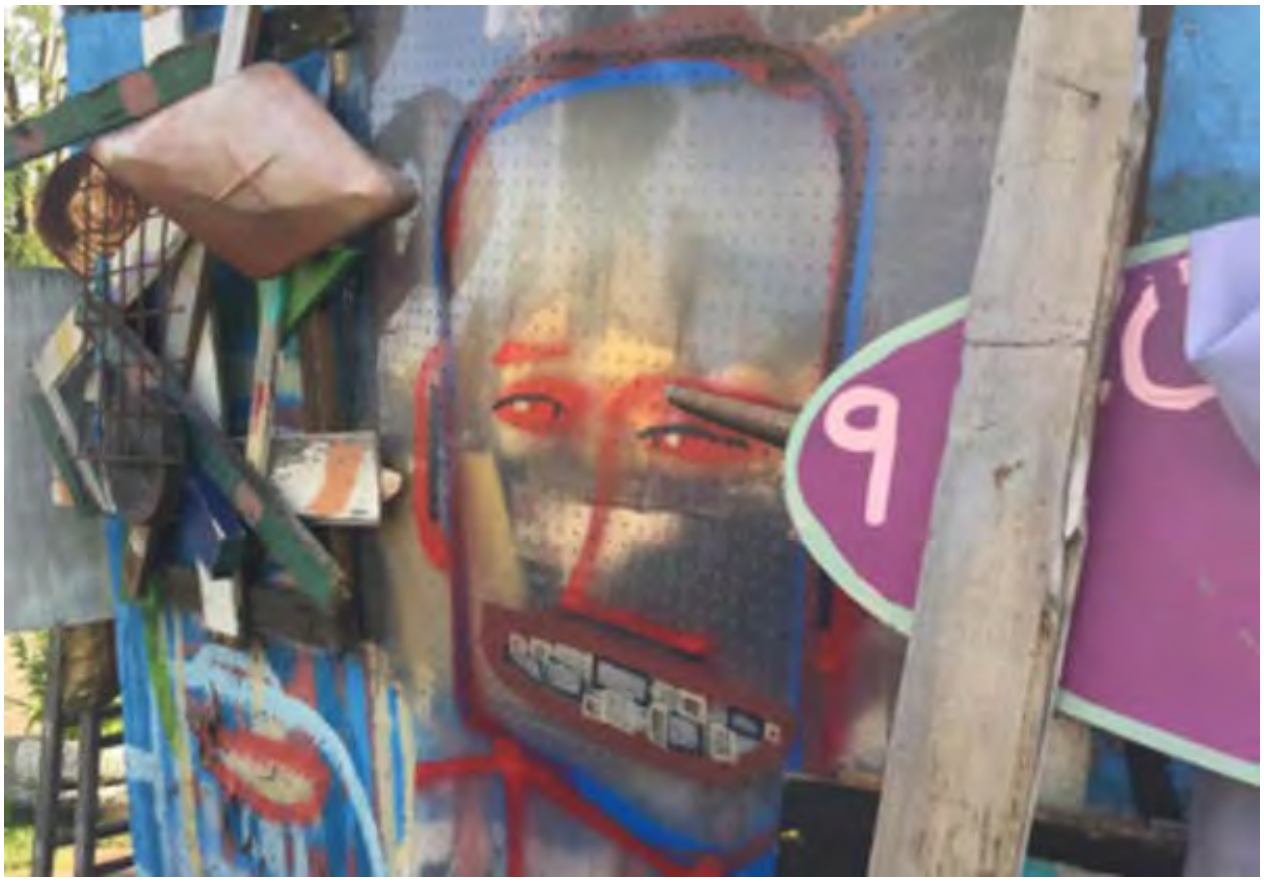



TAXI
TAXI


DIA


NBC
NEWS


DIA
YES

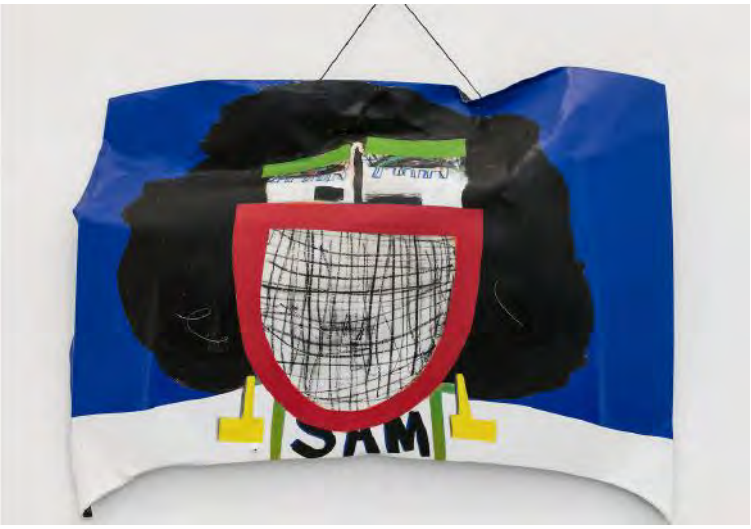
Detroit's Heidelberg Project is a transformative outdoor art installation, which artist Tyree Guyton created in response to blight and crime more than 30 years ago. Pictured Aug. 10, 2020. (Photo credit: Ron Hilliard/Mid-Michigan NOW)

Time Out

November 22 2019

"Tyree Guyton: Love, Sam"

Art, Contemporary art ★★★★☆ **Recommended**



Photograph: Charles Benton, courtesy Martos Gallery

Time Out says

★★★★☆

Of all the Rust Belt cities that spiraled into decline over the past several decades, few have done so as precipitously as Detroit, which declared bankruptcy in 2013 as whole neighborhoods were reduced to vacant lots.

Still, bright spots persisted, especially on Heidelberg Street in the McDougall-Hunt section of town. There, Tyree Guyton, a former firefighter and autoworker, transformed the block fronting his house into an outdoor showcase for his funky found-object installations. Begun in 1986, the Heidelberg Project, as he called it, attracted national attention for the indomitable spirit it came to symbolize after Detroit went bust. Art world interest followed, resulting in his first NYC show.

Though he attended art school, Guyton is often mistaken for an outsider artist, and it's easy to see why: He combines detritus (sneakers, vacuum cleaners, lawn chairs) with primitivistic paintings that recall those of Jean-Michel Basquiats. But Guyton's engagement with the battered past and future hopes of Detroit stands in sharp contrast to Basquiat's self-mythologizing.

Here, totemic portrait heads stare from dented car hoods and wood panels, flashing toothy smiles that resemble Cadillac grills. In Extinction, a nervously grinning couple is depicted under the legend 1967 + sam, invoking the devasting riots of that year. The middle of the floor, meanwhile, is taken up by an ebullient constructivist arrangement of salvaged doors painted in clashing colors.

Recently, Guyton disassembled the Heidelberg Project, and Detroit has since rebounded from its nadir: Like the city he loves, Guyton is putting hard times in the rearview mirror to focus on the road ahead.

The New York Times

Nov. 14, 2019

ART REVIEWS

New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

A survey of Hannah Wilke's career; Tyree Guyton's "Faces of God" series; and Tiona Nekkia McClodden's tough and tender sculptural objects.

Tyree Guyton

Through Dec. 22. Martos Gallery, 41 Elizabeth Street, Manhattan; 212-560-0670, martosgallery.com.

Tyree Guyton is best known for the Heidelberg Project, an arts-based community revitalization effort on the East Side of Detroit that includes a permanent outdoor display of hundreds of sculptures he's made of found objects. His New York solo debut at Martos Gallery, by contrast, aside from one buoyant installation of colorful doors, is minimally hung. There are paintings on two more wooden doors, and a car hood, titled "Extinction," marked with two graphic faces; some exuberant drawings by the artist's grandfather, Sam Mackey, who gave him his first paintbrush; and several paintings from Mr. Guyton's "Faces of God" series, in which heavily simplified faces are painted against bright monochrome backgrounds.

The faces' thick outlines are easily parsed, but their colors and textures are often intensely worked, and the stylistic contrast is jarring. Equally jarring is the confident ease with which Mr. Guyton slices objects like doors and car parts out of their ordinary contexts and subjects them to his own creative purposes. It amounts to a kind of conceptual syncopation — the making of an art work that is simultaneously a performance of being an artist — and it kept me thoroughly off balance. One three-quarters view of a black man's head in particular stayed with me: Marked with a sticker reading "SALE," the piece is titled "I'm not for sale."

WILL HEINRICH

The New York Times

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FEATURE

Tyree Guyton Turned a Detroit Street Into a Museum. Why Is He Taking It Down?

The artist gained international acclaim making sculptures out of the wreckage in his neighborhood. Now he must effectively destroy his work in order to save it.

By M.H. Miller

McDougall-Hunt, a small neighborhood of single-family homes on the East Side of Detroit, once represented the best America had to offer working people. In the years leading up to and directly following World War II, it became a predominantly black neighborhood of mostly automobile and manufacturing workers, many of them employed at the nearby Packard automotive plant, which was once among the largest luxury-car manufacturers in the world. Today, the neighborhood, full of vacant lots and crumbling houses, looks like a sentence that has been sloppily erased. If you didn't live in McDougall-Hunt, there wouldn't be much reason to be here — if not for a four-block-long street called Heidelberg.

At first glance, Heidelberg appears much like the streets that surround it, pockmarked and mostly empty, but it transforms about halfway down its length, becoming what looks from a distance like a junkyard but on closer inspection is a bizarre open-air museum that occupies two whole blocks. One vacant lot has sculptures strewn about like children's toys on the lawn of a happy home. Nearby sits an old car chassis, painted pink, the grass from what used to be someone's yard growing around and through it; attached to a tree hangs a piece of wood painted like a clock, while a coil of dirty stuffed animals snakes up the trunk of another; the sidewalks and the street are painted with fading, multicolored polka dots, leading the eye to another lot across the way, with more clocks attached to trees and telephone poles and, near the back, the wooden frame of a house that has been built out into a makeshift chapel, affixed with a pink cross and covered in street signs, vinyl records and a placard that announces: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

The installation "Holy Place" at the Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

On a bright morning last fall, the creator, custodian and de facto mayor of Heidelberg, Tyree Guyton, stood in the middle of the street, talking to a neighbor. Inconspicuous in a dark blue hoodie and paint-smeared jeans, he was stationed in front of an old white house, covered in polka dots, one of the few still standing on the block. This was the Guyton family home, originally purchased by the artist's great-grandparents in 1947. Guyton no longer lives in the house, but he returns to it more or less every day, as he has for most of his life. He is the lone constant on a stretch of urban landscape that has changed endlessly for most of its existence.

Bald and bearded, he dresses so unassumingly that he seems to be hiding in plain sight. When I first met him the day before, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, where he had a solo show, he was clearly suspicious — he started out asking me the questions and not the other way around. But he warmed up when I described to him how, earlier that day, after having flown in from New York, I drove past my own childhood home in the Detroit suburbs. A dreamy smile stretched across his face. "So you're telling me that when you come back, you let yourself go back into the past, and you remember?" he asked. "And you can see yourself, in your mind, playing in that house?" This was how he felt about Heidelberg. "It's a special street," he said. "It's a special place that — that I can't leave. I can hear it talking to me."

[Should art be a battleground for social justice?]

Even as Detroit emptied out over the decades, Guyton stayed put, returning to the scene of his childhood with a compulsory repetition. He was unwilling to watch the street he loved so much crumble into nothing. As more and more families left, he took what remained, the odd leftovers, the detritus of neglect, and reconfigured all of it into his sculptures and paintings and

installations, holding up a kind of cracked mirror to the street and everything that had been lost there. Taken as a whole, the project is a reverse memento mori — an assertion of life, a work that announces "I'm still here," even as everyone else seemed to look away.

The artist Tyree Guyton amid his installation "Open House." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

At various points in the last three decades, the Heidelberg Project, as it has come to be known, has been dismissed by neighbors as the junk of a crazy hoarder and hailed by critics as one of the great American artworks of the last 50 years. Despite some local ambivalence about Guyton's artistic merit, his bona fides have been more readily accepted elsewhere in the country and, especially, in Europe. As a Times review put it in 1999, "The farther people lived from the Heidelberg Project, the more they seemed to like it." The Heidelberg Project has become, in recent years, one of the most visited sites in Detroit, attracting 200,000 visitors annually.

There is a long tradition of so-called outsider art that has skirted the periphery of mainstream acceptance, and that Guyton, despite having attended art school at Detroit's Center for Creative Studies, has often been slotted into by critics. The word, which art-historically implies a nonacademic, untrained approach to art-making, is an increasingly odd one to apply to Guyton, who as of last year has representation in New York through Martos Gallery, which is planning a solo exhibition in November. But by the '90s, and especially in the last decade, the art world would start to catch up with Guyton by celebrating works like Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, in which artists rehabbed derelict properties in the city's Third Ward, or Theaster Gates's more recent restoration of abandoned buildings on Chicago's South Side. Still, Guyton was one of the first artists anywhere to try to use art to materially improve a community, long before this became a contemporary cliché.

The "Party Animal House," which was destroyed by fire in 2014. Julie Dermansky/Corbis, via Getty Images

And yet, in 2016, after surviving six occasionally hostile mayoral administrations and a series of arson fires, Guyton announced, suddenly and to the confusion of his admirers, that he'd be dismantling the project piece by piece — an undertaking that is still in progress. He presented this decision as a means of allowing his work to travel and be shown in institutions, of finally having a more conventional artistic career, but it was tempting to see larger forces at work. In 2013, Detroit became the largest municipality to ever file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, setting the stage for a mass reorganization of the city's assets and an ongoing, lumbering economic revival. Slowly, developers and the city itself are buying up the empty lots and condemned houses: The Detroit Land Bank Authority, a quasi-governmental agency that was designed to address the high volume of abandoned homes, has worked closely with the city's various departments to become Detroit's largest landowner. It now has in its portfolio just over 50 percent of the city's vacant houses.

McDougall-Hunt is hardly on the brink of gentrification, but it has shifted from an impoverished pocket into a potential opportunity. This has endangered the Heidelberg Project, but it is also a testament to the strange paradox at the heart of Guyton's career: If an artwork's aim is to improve a neighborhood, then the happiest conclusion would be for that artwork to be made obsolete. And yet McDougall-Hunt has now been defined by the Heidelberg Project for longer than it was defined by anything else. Guyton's art arose out of decline, and it has, for most of its history, required decrepitude in order to exist. After years of fighting off destruction from vandals, from elected officials, from arsonists and police, Guyton must now effectively destroy his work in order to save it.

The “You House” at the Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

The Detroit riot of 1967 was a formative moment of Guyton’s childhood. The scale and scope of the violence that broke out over five days in July of that year were unprecedented for a thriving American city. Mt. Elliott, the main thoroughfare of McDougall-Hunt, became a command headquarters for the Army, which had been sent to Michigan by President Lyndon B. Johnson to contain the situation. Tanks and troops amassed in the neighborhood. “I thought the world was coming to an end,” Guyton recalls. It was at least the beginning of the end of McDougall-Hunt.

Guyton enlisted in the Army in the late ’70s, when Detroit’s unemployment rate was soaring. When he returned to Heidelberg at the end of that decade, he found a street that was largely unrecognizable. Speaking about this time in Detroit, of the allure of the drug trade and the violence that came with it, Guyton referenced Frederick Douglass and his belief in the importance of agitation — that improvement is impossible without struggle.

Detroit had changed because the world had changed, and if Heidelberg Street was going to continue to exist, someone had to fight for it.

A Heidelberg sign expressing Guyton's artistic philosophy: that something can be wrought from nothing. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

The way he tells it, the idea of creating a huge installation with the remnants of the old neighborhood struck him like an epiphany one Saturday afternoon in April 1986. He looked out at the street from his grandfather's house and could see the project taking form in his head. Over time, as his work expanded on Heidelberg Street, he developed his own philosophy about it, which he calls "2 + 2 = 8," or just Heidelbergology: "What does that mean?" Guyton asked me. "You make it up": Something can be wrought from nothing.

Guyton's solo exhibition at Mocad provided a rare glimpse of his art taken out of its usual context. On one side of the gallery sat a yellow cab bearing a creepy advertisement for something called

"Tippytoes the Clown"; Guyton had painted multihued faces on the car's windows. A tree had been set up in the center of the main exhibition space, and colorful shoes hung from its branches. Old vacuum cleaners were lined up in a neat row. Divorced from its context on Heidelberg, Guyton's work became more lighthearted, a kind of lampooning of grotesque materialism — of all the things we thoughtlessly discard — it was apparent how meticulously Guyton plans out the seemingly random gesture. Jova Lynne, the show's curator, explained how the exhibition addresses a major misconception about Guyton, that his assemblages are thrown together carelessly. She described going through his archives and discovering thousands of drawings and plans that prefigured his installations. "Tyree does sketches for every single piece he makes," she said.

"Noah's Ark." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

When Guyton was 9, his grandfather Sam Mackey, a house painter, gave him one of his brushes and encouraged him to start painting.

The rest of his family was not as receptive to his creative impulses. "They felt that art was for white people," he told me. "And crazy people. Homosexuals and folks who smoke dope. And I said, 'I want to hang out with *those* people.' " Once Guyton began work on Heidelberg, Grandpa Mackey became his artistic partner, working quietly away with him every day. As the project grew in size, it transformed into an act of Proustian reclamation, as if Guyton were creating a new neighborhood out of the one he'd lost, embellishing his and Grandpa Mackey's memories out of the wreckage that surrounded them. His grandfather would tell stories about having witnessed the aftermath of lynchings growing up in the South, and how he, as a small child, believed he could see the victims' souls. Guyton would gather up shoes and place them in the branches of a neighborhood tree, calling the piece "Soles of the Most High."

[Can an art collective become the Disney of the experience economy?]

It wasn't long before Guyton started to receive attention, first from the local press and eventually from Oprah Winfrey, who invited Guyton and the woman who was then his wife on her show in 1991. Guyton was under the impression he'd be part of a segment on neighborhood attractions. The segment was actually about neighborhood nuisances, and when Guyton walked out onstage, he found, to his surprise, one of the disgruntled residents sitting there, who accused Guyton of vandalizing a neighborhood he no longer lived in. (He and his wife had moved out, though much of his family still lived on Heidelberg Street.) Guyton tried to defend himself as his neighbor and, later, Winfrey's mostly white audience berated him, dismissing his work as "garbage."

The Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

Visitors to the project skyrocketed, of course, and several weeks after the show aired, Detroit's mayor at the time, Coleman Young, came by to meet Guyton. They exchanged what seemed to Guyton like friendly words, but shortly after, the city arrived with bulldozers, police and a helicopter, in a scene that called to mind the riot of 1967. They destroyed years' worth of Guyton's work in under an hour — all of the houses that weren't paid up on their taxes, which unintentionally left various nearby crack houses intact. Young explained his actions to Guyton by saying he was "trying to make the people happy," the artist told me. "But in making the people happy, he was giving the people exactly what they were already living with: nothing." Not long after, Grandpa Mackey died, and Guyton's first wife left him.

Almost immediately, Guyton started to rebuild, and as the narrative of Detroit's downfall took off in the national imagination, Heidelberg was both a rebuttal and, in its front-loading of all the

things that people no longer value, a kaleidoscopic vision of decline itself. Guyton had not solved all of the neighborhood's problems, but by the '90s he had accomplished something few others in Detroit had. He had gotten people to come back to a semiabandoned neighborhood — thousands of them, sometimes in a single day. Guyton was usually there, sitting on the curb.

"Pink Hummer." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

Jenenne Whitfield, a former banker, took a wrong turn on her way to work one morning in 1993 and ended up on Heidelberg, where she found Guyton on the curb and had a reaction similar to the one that many people have upon first encountering his work: "What in the hell is all this?" She quit her job soon after and started working with Guyton, becoming his mouthpiece and main supporter and helping to navigate a rocky relationship with the local government. They married in 2001.

The morning I visited Heidelberg last fall, Whitfield came and

picked me up in her car. Looking out the window as we drove through McDougall-Hunt, most of the neighborhood had fallen into such disrepair that parts had simply converted back into wilderness — overgrown fields and patches of dead grass. Circling back to Heidelberg, however, we saw people everywhere. We drove past Guyton's resident handyman, who was sweeping the streets. A docent was leading a tour group around the grounds. Construction workers were rehabbing the Numbers House, one of the Heidelberg Project's few remaining original structures, a sagging white frame house that Guyton had covered in a strange numerical code. There were people out in the streets, smiling and conversing, not unlike how Guyton described Heidelberg in its heyday. Maybe two plus two really did equal eight.

'It's a special street,' he said. 'It's a special place that — that I can't leave. I can hear it talking to me.'

By taking apart his life's work, by effectively bringing Heidelberg up to code, Guyton and Whitfield hope to partner with the Detroit Land Bank, which would allow them to buy up empty lots in McDougall-Hunt by the bundle. While preserving some of Guyton's major works in place, their dream is to gradually transform the buildings that still stand into a series of cultural and educational centers dedicated to the arts, and then build housing and work spaces marketed for artists out of this central core. They hope that McDougall-Hunt will be supported by the arts in the same way it was once supported by the auto industry.

The land bank has twice rejected Heidelberg's application to become a "community partner," but Guyton and Whitfield are now working with Maurice Cox, the city's director of planning and

development, on addressing the questions that Heidelberg has historically avoided. “It’s about: Where do we shop? Where do our kids play? Where do they go to school?” Cox told me. He is an open supporter of Guyton and the project, and is working with him to prove to the city that an artist can answer these questions.

Before leaving Detroit, I went back down Heidelberg Street to say goodbye to Guyton. He stood in roughly the same spot as when I first met him there, though he now faced a half-circle of students from Grand Valley State University, about two and a half hours west of Detroit. He grilled them about their studies, then insisted they ask him questions. What did they want to know?

One of the students made a sweeping gesture and asked, “What does all this mean to you?”

Tyree Guyton in front of the “New White House,” his childhood home on Heidelberg street. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

It wasn’t a bad question, but I wondered whether it missed the

point. The very fact that someone was standing on Heidelberg Street in the middle of the afternoon at all, having a conversation with someone who grew up here, got directly to the heart of the project. Soon, the crowds of people would depart Heidelberg for wherever it was that they came from, but Guyton would still be here. Maybe he really would dismantle his work and build a new neighborhood in its place. Or maybe the city or someone else would once again raze it to the ground. But it was difficult to imagine a scenario in which Guyton would not still be here, listening while the street talked to him.

What did all this mean to him? Guyton didn't hesitate.

"Everything," he said.

Heidelberg Street. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

MARTOS GALLERY

VULTURE

ART FAIRS | DEC. 5, 2018

Detroit's Famous Heidelberg Project Goes to the Beach

By Carl Swanson, New York Magazine's editor-at-large

Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project in Detroit. Photo: HP archives

Tyree Guyton, famous for his whimsically apocalyptic Heidelberg Project in Detroit, has often been categorized more as an "outsider" than as an "artist," but now he's moving inside. Literally: There is an elegantly and pristinely curated show of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). But also inside the art world: He's joined the Martos Gallery in New York, which will do a show with him next fall, and in the meantime, they've brought his work at the NADA fair in Miami.

The Heidelberg Project, the polka-dotted, complicatedly metaphorical outdoor art installation that he created over the last 32 years out of accumulated, painted, and arranged consumer-culture distaff over several blocks of mostly abandoned houses in the neighborhood that he grew up in, became a symbol of postindustrial Detroit. What it symbolized, exactly, was up for debate. Some Detroiters found it an oppressively self-indulgent wallow in the city as garbage dump, and in response, the city government repeatedly ordered him to clean it up, and bulldozed several of the empty houses that he'd festooned with detritus. Others saw in it something like hope, an insistent, obsessive, and miraculous conjuring of something magical out of a great deal of not very much at all. Guyton saw it that way, too, which is why his slogan for it has long been "2+2=8."

As its fame spread — articles, books, documentaries — it became something else entirely: a kind of mystical tourist attraction, a holy site of Detroit's DIY ingenuity, attracting people from around the world to this quirky and sweepingly earnest man's gnomic creation, and in that creating a new idea for an old city.

But Guyton always considered the work "medicine." For him, and for the community. Maybe for humanity as a whole. As he put it in the catalogue for the show at MOCAD, "We live in a world today where we are very wasteful. We throw away things and we throw away people." His examples of reuse salves that psychic and ecological wound.

The question today is how to keep the Heidelberg Project from the ash heap of history. When he started the project, the once-tidy working-class neighborhood he grew up in had lost its good factory jobs — the ones that attracted so many African-Americans looking to better their lives, who came north as part of the Great Migration — and, like the city as a whole, never quite recovered from the 1967 riots, themselves a rebellion set off by the racial oppression of the local police and political system. Guyton has said, "The Heidelberg Project is located in an area that is broken."

But what happens when it gets fixed up? Investment is pouring into Detroit right now and the question becomes whether the inclusive spirit of his project can survive this transformation.

In no small part because of his work, and the thousands of visitors who came to marvel at it every year, Detroit gained a reputation for a place where you could make something creative happen. People with money who grew up there but fled to the suburbs began investing in the city again, attracting out-of-town real-estate speculators and, yes, ruin-porn enthusiasts, not to mention people who think that Detroit might be a well-sited refuge in the era climate change. As the urban context for the Heidelberg Project has changed, Guyton is changing with it.

After arson burned down several of the houses in 2013 and 2014, Guyton switched tracks and decided to disassemble the project, store it, sell parts of it as art, and exhibit other parts of it. (Not incidentally, Guyton is 63 and, after doing this work for free for decades, needs to save some money.) Meanwhile, the neighborhood that spawned Heidelberg Project is starting to gentrify. Even as his artworks are being catalogued and warehoused, he and his wife, Jenenne Whitfield, who is also the executive director of the Heidelberg Project, have plans for those blocks where he worked among the abandoned houses.

It's something they call "Heidelberg Project 3.0" and it's a shifting away from being one man's massive sprawling vision into developing a creative community, with artists in residence and housing and businesses for a mix of people. "What it means is that we're moving from an institution created by one person to something for the community," Whitfield says. She adds, dryly, "It's a gift to the city, which hasn't always appreciated it."

Detroit can be a tough town, but, one realizes quickly from talking to her, that Whitfield is a tough woman. "The very plan we have to put on the table for the city is the exact same plan we had in 1994," she says. "Nothing's changed. They just weren't ready for what we were offering them."

Part of that, she felt was that many people — including, paradoxically, some members of her own community— "thought that only great ideas that impact society and impact our world had to come from white men" and "didn't understand the fascination people had with this ghetto gem."

But the world is catching up. "We've had museums study our forms of engagement," she notes.

Photo: Carl Swanson

Now, they have something of the opposite problem: People who see it as something to co-opt. "When people are offering to help us, and they are, you have to ask what their motive is," she notes.

Their goals for what is next for Heidelberg, the community project, as distinguished from what is next for Guyton, the artist, is governed by the principles of "art, equity, and diversity," she says. "There are all kinds of layers and complications," including the desire to have people from different backgrounds living side by side there. "What has remained constant is our vision. And if you get onboard with it, you're welcome to the table."

The MOCAD show is part of this pivot, of allowing Guyton to be known for his art, separate from his work as a community activist. Although it's admittedly slightly surreal to see his work removed from its storied neighborhood context. It makes you wonder how much of the meaning is lost when it is moved inside, spotlit and sterile. But Whitfield notes that, in addition to preserving it, it's also a way to see Guyton's work anew, as well as display his studio work which was not a part of the Heidelberg project, including a wonderful series of hermaphroditic portraits inspired by his formidable mother, a single parent, who had to be "both matriarch and father figure for her children," as the museum puts it.

Ebony Haynes, director of the Martos Gallery, admits to being "such a fangirl for the work."

"People often make the mistake of calling him an outsider artist, but he is trained," she says. "Maybe his aesthetic leads you to think so." She references both Joseph Cornell and William Pope.L as better comparisons.

"People don't really know him as well as they think they do," says Whitfield. In the museum, "he wanted the works to breathe. And he was always cautious to not re-create Heidelberg."

"It is interesting to see the work in the context of a museum," Haynes says. "But Tyree always talks about art changing the world," and this new context makes the art accessible in a different way, and to different people, than it was on that street. Now, "people talk about it in a different way. It's infiltrating the art world." The Pérez Art Museum Miami already has some of his works in its collection.

"He has never shown at the Miami fairs before," she notes. They have a large booth devoted to Guyton at NADA, showing "works old and new," she says. "Some from his clock series, his faces series, some of the car hoods." (But, in a nod to the preservation issues inherent in works created out of trash: "No stuffed animals, no.") They are also installing one of his shoe-hung trees (there is one planted in the middle of MOCAD), in the fair's outdoor section.

This fall, “I’m hoping to do something really great here in the gallery,” she says, “to shine light on him as the artist.”

“Tyree had the question: Can the work work in an indoor setting with white walls?” Whitfield says. “His answer was, ‘It will work anywhere I put it.’ Things don’t have to stay the same. He wants to get lost in order to be found. We’re building a legacy.”

DETROIT METRO TIMES

Tyree Guyton's polka-dotted Heidelberg Project career enters its next phase

By Lee DeVito

Sep 5, 2018 at 1:00 am

Noah Elliott Morrison

Artist Tyree Guyton directs the installation of *2+2=8 Tyree Guyton: Thirty Years of Heidelberg* at Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

In the case of Tyree Guyton, one gets the sense that the artist might see time as a flat circle. At the very least, he certainly believes in the power of a flat circle.

Guyton's career started in 1986, when he began painting pastel polka dots on his grandfather's house on Heidelberg Street in Detroit's deteriorating McDougall-Hunt neighborhood. That was the beginning of what would become known as the Heidelberg Project, a neighborhood-wide installation with Guyton using reclaimed materials — furniture, appliances, toys, and more — to transform the abandoned and decaying houses into a sort of post-apocalyptic wonderland, sparking plenty of art-or-eyesore debates along the way.

There are plenty of reasons to believe Guyton won the debate. We meet Guyton at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, where the artist is directing the installation of his upcoming exhibition, *2+2=8 Tyree Guyton: Thirty Years of Heidelberg*, which opens at the museum on Friday.

Time is obviously on Guyton's mind, with the Heidelberg Project celebrating 30 years in 2016. The exhibition is broken up into sections offering a trip through Guyton's various styles and bodies of work, painted in his signature childlike manner. One section has car hoods painted with bright, smiling faces. Another features clock faces painted on boards, some with more than two hands. A large lavender polka dot is painted on the white walls of MOCAD's otherwise stark white gallery wall. On Guyton's right forearm is a faded polka dot tattoo.

"We have a way of growing up through time," he says as he guides us through the exhibition. "And so I'm going to say I'm a little more experienced. I'm a little more courageous. What is art? To me, I've proven it can be anything. I know a little bit more."

But when asked if this show would be categorized as a retrospective, Guyton brushes the question off. "I'm talking about this damn journey," he says. "It's been fun. It's been exciting." He gestures at the faces. "It's been that period," he says. "It's been this period," he gestures at the clocks. "It's been that time, it's been now. So that's what you see here."

One helper places white rocks around the base of a large tree, which has somehow been transported from the Heidelberg Project and installed in the middle of the gallery. Meanwhile, Guyton adjusts shoes hung from its branches by their laces. He calls the piece "Soul Tree."

"The tree concept started from my grandfather," Guyton says. "My grandfather said he would see people hanging from trees when he was a kid. So I want to talk about that."

Guyton hangs more shoes from the tree. One is a boot he says is from Desert Storm. There's also a pair that he says belonged to his mother.

"My mom passed last year," he says, looking at the shoes. "I can see her in these." He picks up a patent leather shoe. "I believe it would be safe to say this was a pimp shoe," he says.

He pauses, looking at the tree. "There are many ways to hang people today," he laughs. "Lots of ways now."

Noah Elliott Morrison

Guyton would know a thing a or two about persecution. In the '90s, the city twice ordered parts of the Heidelberg Project demolished. In 2013 and 2014, a suspected arsonist or group of arsonists destroyed parts of the project in a total of 12 fires.

But even as he has been persecuted, Guyton's star as an artist has also risen, getting invited to exhibit his work in places like Shenzhen, China and Basel, Switzerland throughout the years. And as Guyton's career has ascended, so has Detroit — or parts of it, anyway.

Last year, Guyton was forced to move out of his Midtown office and studio where he lived and worked for nearly a decade after the building was sold for $1.2 million. In his time there, Guyton covered the boarded-up abandoned building next door with paintings of shoes, where they sat for years. When he moved, he sold off dozens of the paintings, fetching as much as $2,500 for one of them. Now, his former studio is Second Best, a hipster faux-dive bar that sells a $10 40-ounce Miller High Life, served in Champagne glasses. Guyton has since found a new studio, located closer to the Heidelberg Project.

What's up with the shoes? "Here we are in this beautiful, complex world, and everyone's going somewhere in time," he says. "So you have big shoe, little shoe, red shoe, green shoe. Everything's moving."

‘Nothing is just thrown together. Every single thing is thought about. Every material goes through a process where he goes, “Does this make sense?”’

The Heidelberg Project has been a story of continuous birth and rebirth. When the city bulldozed his houses, Guyton kept building. After the fires warped and charred car hoods he had previously painted on, Guyton just painted new faces on them and put them in a show at Detroit's Inner State Gallery — repurposing his own art much like the way he repurposed the houses and other found objects in the McDougall-Hunt neighborhood.

On one of MOCAD's walls, Guyton has painted a large, crude mural depicting a burning house. Next to it, he has scrawled the words "the conspiracy."

When asked about the fires, Guyton turns serious. "I'm going to keep moving on," he says. "All I have to say to my enemy is don't fuck with me. Just like that. Because I'm an artist, and I have a lot of tricks up my sleeve."

Guyton points to a polka-dotted phone booth on the gallery floor. He says he retrieved it from the 1991 demolition. "Heidelberg is here," he says. "I thought, I'm going to save it, because one day I'm going to be able to put it in a museum on display. So this is Heidelberg." He gestures around the gallery. "It's all Heidelberg."

Guyton calls it "Heidelbergology." He has another phrase for it, too.

"I'm like a mad scientist, working on two plus two equals eight," he says.

Noah Elliott Morrison

Show curator Jova Lynne elaborates. "When I first met Tyree, I was like, 'What's two plus two equals eight?'" she says. "He said, 'It's anything you want it to be. It's making something out of nothing.'"

Lynne says the goal of the exhibition was not to re-create the Heidelberg Project inside of MOCAD, but rather "to celebrate it and its 30-year legacy, and to give people a new way of looking at it."

Aside from "Soul Tree," the other centerpiece of the show floor is an actual taxi cab, painted with Guyton's colorful grinning faces. It's Guyton's signature mix of beauty and decay: The colors are bright, but the windshield is smashed. In the backseat is a painting of Jesus, a hula hoop, and the brick that was thrown through the window.

"I was working on it and someone threw a brick," he says. "And I said, 'Damn, you did me a favor.'" Guyton says the piece is titled, "Why Do You Hate Me?" "Because we hated Jesus," he laughs. "We killed him."

Nearby are stylized taxi cabs painted on boards. "Where you want to go?" he responds when asked about the motif. "Can I go to a place where there's no war, a place where there's no poverty or homelessness? Do I have to die to go there? Or can I take a taxi?"

Guyton may appear at times to be making shit up as he goes, but there is a method to his madness. To prove it, he asks a helper to retrieve a sketchbook from his car. Inside is a two-page spread doodle, showing the room we are standing in as it is now, drawn in perspective.

"Nothing is just thrown together," Lynne says. "It's so intense. Every single thing is thought about. Every material goes through a process where he goes, 'Does this make sense?' To see and hold these things, it's a spiritual practice in a way."

Guyton's naive style sometimes gets his work lumped in with "outsider art." But as MOCAD executive director Elysia Borowy-Reeder points out, an outsider artist is someone who is self-taught. Before the Heidelberg Project, Guyton attended the then-Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, and was awarded an honorary doctorate in fine art from the College for Creative Studies in 2009.

Noah Elliott Morrison

"He is sophisticated, but somewhere along the lines his method of working was viewed from the lens of a populist art form," she says. "I always thought no, this person has been trained as a fine artist. You can see that in the way he moves his brush, and the way he uses his environment." A second exhibition of Guyton's work, titled *Process*, will open at MOCAD on Saturday, Oct. 13, showcasing the artist's fine art side, including portraits, sketches, and photographs.

"*Process* is really about his solo practice works that hint at Heidelberg, but aren't actually at Heidelberg," Lynne says. "Although Heidelberg is a key part of his story, I think there's a lot about his practice that people haven't seen and don't know about."

Beyond that, Rachel Adams — a curator for the UB Art Galleries in Buffalo, who did her master's work studying the Heidelberg Project — sees Guyton's work not just as a body of artwork but as an act of resistance or civil disobedience.

"He was just one person, and he really made an immediate difference in the lives of everyday people," she says. "And he continued to do that even after the city tore down his projects. I think it's hard to imagine how upsetting that could be. There are only certain people who I think could do that. Like, 'That was the worst day of my life, and I have to go outside and do it again.' And it could happen again." Adams will give a talk at MOCAD titled "The History of Heidelberg as Rebellion" at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 8.

‘The main reason why I saw the need to do something is because I was kind of tired of waiting on government. But those days are over now.’

But Guyton's battle with the city could be over. "The main reason why I saw the need to do something is because I was kind of tired of waiting on government," Guyton says of the Heidelberg Project. "But those days are over now. I've proven my point. The city has also proven their point. All I'm saying is, what can we do together? I have a new way of looking at government, and hopefully they have a new way of looking at the Heidelberg Project. We've been around for a long time, and we have proven so many points. It's a magnet and it brings people there to the city, and it brings people to the neighborhood. If it wasn't there they wouldn't come."

On that point, Guyton offers a John F. Kennedy quote. "It's not what the government can do for you, but what can you do for government," he says. "I'm just doing my little part."

Jenenne Whitfield, Guyton's wife and also the Heidelberg Project's chief executive officer, says the studio move is partially what has helped guide the next phase of the Project, which they have dubbed Heidelberg 3.0. Part of that involves dismantling parts of the project, bringing them into gallery settings and consolidating the existing Project into a more permanent location. In October, several pieces will appear across the state as part of Grand Rapids' ArtPrize competition.

"What happened in this last year is pretty much a Heidelberg explosion," Whitfield says. "So you are seeing Heidelberg being removed from the site and going to various places."

Noah Elliott Morrison

But another part of Heidelberg 3.0, Whitfield says, is fighting against the forces that forced Guyton to move from Midtown. From Oct. 11-14, the Heidelberg Project will host "360° of Heidelberg," a conference featuring arts experts, community leaders, and more, to be held at various venues around the city. "The concept is that there are some things to be learned from what we've experienced," she says. "There are many artists that have experienced some aspect of what we have experienced in these 32 years. So we're using Heidelberg as a case study to explore the need for a more sustainable arts community in Detroit. We're taking on a much bigger responsibility than iust our own."

The way Whitfield sees it, artists are driving Detroit's rebirth. "The thing about it is what's making the city of Detroit so lively and attractive and interesting for younger people is the energy of the city," she says. "The energy of the city is promoted by the artists. It is a fact and we are helping to define Detroit's future, and our place in its future is important."

But time and again, the same cycle repeats: artists make a neglected neighborhood hip and attractive, and are then pushed out to make way for developments like luxury apartments. Whitfield wants to change that.

"What I'm saying is let's build an artist community where not only do the artists work, but they also have ownership," she says. "They are never to be pushed out again. They own the space, they activate the space. If artists are actually given the opportunity for artists to own and to live in an area, that has a reverberating effect."

Whitfield says that even though Mayor Mike Duggan's administration has been friendlier to the Heidelberg Project than previous administrations, she still sees room for improvement.

"I've never met Mike Duggan, and neither has Tyree. That's interesting," she says. "However, we are working with people within the city that are attempting to address this in a way that the mayor can swallow it."

She says she understands Duggan "is not an arts person" — a reference to the mayor's crackdown on graffiti and other unauthorized street art, as well as the fact that the city has not had a Department of Cultural Affairs since the Dennis Archer administration. "But I certainly think if he looked at the economic benefit behind the arts community, he could change his tune," she says.

"This is an artistic revolution," she says. "That's what we're after. We got nothing to lose. Heidelberg's been through it all."

As for what Heidelberg 3.0 will look like, Lynne can only surmise. "I think [Guyton's] thinking about what the next 30 years look like," she says. "And maybe it doesn't need to be just him. It's him and it's his, but it's also not anymore. It belongs to all of us. It belongs to the city of Detroit. So I think he's being really intentional about how that transition happens."

On that matter, Guyton, who turned 63 this year, is hard to pin down. "I don't know, but I am very optimistic, I know that," he says. "I'm just taking it one day at a time. Today I'm down here at MOCAD, and I'm going to give this show my very best. And tomorrow will take care of itself."

He laughs. "I have free time now. I might die tomorrow."

TYREE GUYTON WINS 2018 WHITE COLUMNS / SHOOT THE LOBSTER AWARD

By News Desk
February 2, 2018 9:04 am

White Columns and Shoot the Lobster have announced that Tyree Guyton, a Detroit-based artist and the creator of the Heidelberg Project, is the recipient of the annual White Columns / Shoot the Lobster Award, granted to individuals who create opportunities for both artists and audiences. He will receive a $5,000 cash prize and a commissioned artwork by Scott Reeder, which will be presented to him at a ceremony hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit later this month.

"I want to thank White Columns and Shoot The Lobster for recognizing and supporting what we've created," said Guyton. "When you come to the Heidelberg Project, I want you to think—really think! My art is a medicine for the community. You can't heal the land until you heal the minds of the people."

Guyton's career as an artist, educator, and community activist spans at least three decades. He is best known for his work on the Heidelberg Project, an ever-changing outdoor art installation on Guyton's childhood street in Detroit. Initiated in 1986, the project began as a response to the deterioration of his neighborhood, and many others, after the 1967 riot. The installation now encompasses two city blocks, incorporating found objects, houses, vacant lots, and cars. The Heidelberg Project attracts more than 275,000 visitors annually and serves as a community space.

In 2016, Guyton announced that the Heidelberg Project's focus would shift from a lone artist's installation to a site for an "arts-infused community." "After thirty years, I've decided to take it apart piece by piece in a very methodical way, creating new realities as it comes apart . . . I gotta go in a new direction. I gotta do something I have not done before." Four of the project's houses will remain in place. They will eventually house a community center, gallery, and an artists' residency.

ARTFORUM
August 22, 2017

INTERVIEWS

TYREE GUYTON

Tyree Guyton discusses his monument *The Times* in Philadelphia

Tyree Guyton, *The Times*, 2017, Philadelphia. Rendering.

What is a monument? The Detroit-based artist Tyree Guyton has long asked this question, beginning with his ongoing site-specific installation The Heidelberg Project, *1986–, which has entailed transforming his childhood neighborhood into a living museum. Now, for Philadelphia's citywide public art and history project Monument Lab, Guyton is creating* The Times*, 2017, a massive mural of caricature-styled timepieces on a former factory in the city's Kensington neighborhood. The work will be on view at the Impact Services building on A Street and East Indiana Avenue from September 16 through November 19, 2017.*

THROUGHOUT MY CAREER, I have explored the concept of time from a visual perspective by playing with clocks. As caricatures, these clocks often have no hands, or the numbers are traveling backwards, or are mixed up, or the clocks have no numbers at all. My goal is to help people explore how time factors into our lives and how it sometimes hinders our ability to progress, or accelerates our anxiety about not being productive at all. Both are centered on the illusion of time, to do and not do.

Plato said, "Time is the moving image of reality." What this means to me is that everything we do revolves around time and yet the only time that we ever really have is the very moment we are in. My challenge with this project is to help people to appreciate the present time as a time to act, think, be, and do, here and now. Yesterday lives only in our minds, and tomorrow is not promised. I believe that we must make the most of time, and the time to do that is now.

In response to the question of what an appropriate monument for the city of Philadelphia would be, I proposed broadening that question to ask, What is an appropriate monument for our country and our world? I'm offering *The Times*, a project designed to explore the concept of time in our lives. Now is the time to move towards positive change. Often we hear these familiar clichés: I don't have enough time; time is running out; I don't have time; I need more time; time is on our side; I wish I could go back in time; etc. Through this work, I'm challenging us to think consciously about what we're saying.

People publicly claim to be offended by certain monuments that stand today, but I'm not so sure that this is the case. Social media is a vehicle where people can hide their true feelings while presenting another face to the public. Our current political climate feels like we are living in a pre–civil rights era. What I am asking with this particular work is, What time is it? Kensington, the community where I am working in Philadelphia, has one of the worst drug epidemics in the country, but it's just one of many distractions. What about being drunk or high on artificial enhancements, prescription medication—or hate, greed, or power? So the question I am asking is not only to the folks in this community, but also to all people. It's time to challenge the norm. To create a spectacle that is so striking and offbeat that it forces you to look, see, and think.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Detroit Free Press
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 inDetroit 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.

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*

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

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

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

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

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,

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

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."

Contact Mark Stryker: 313-222-6459. mstryker@freepress.com

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-G p.m. Wed.-Fri.; 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Sat.

The New York Times

April 3, 2014

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

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?”

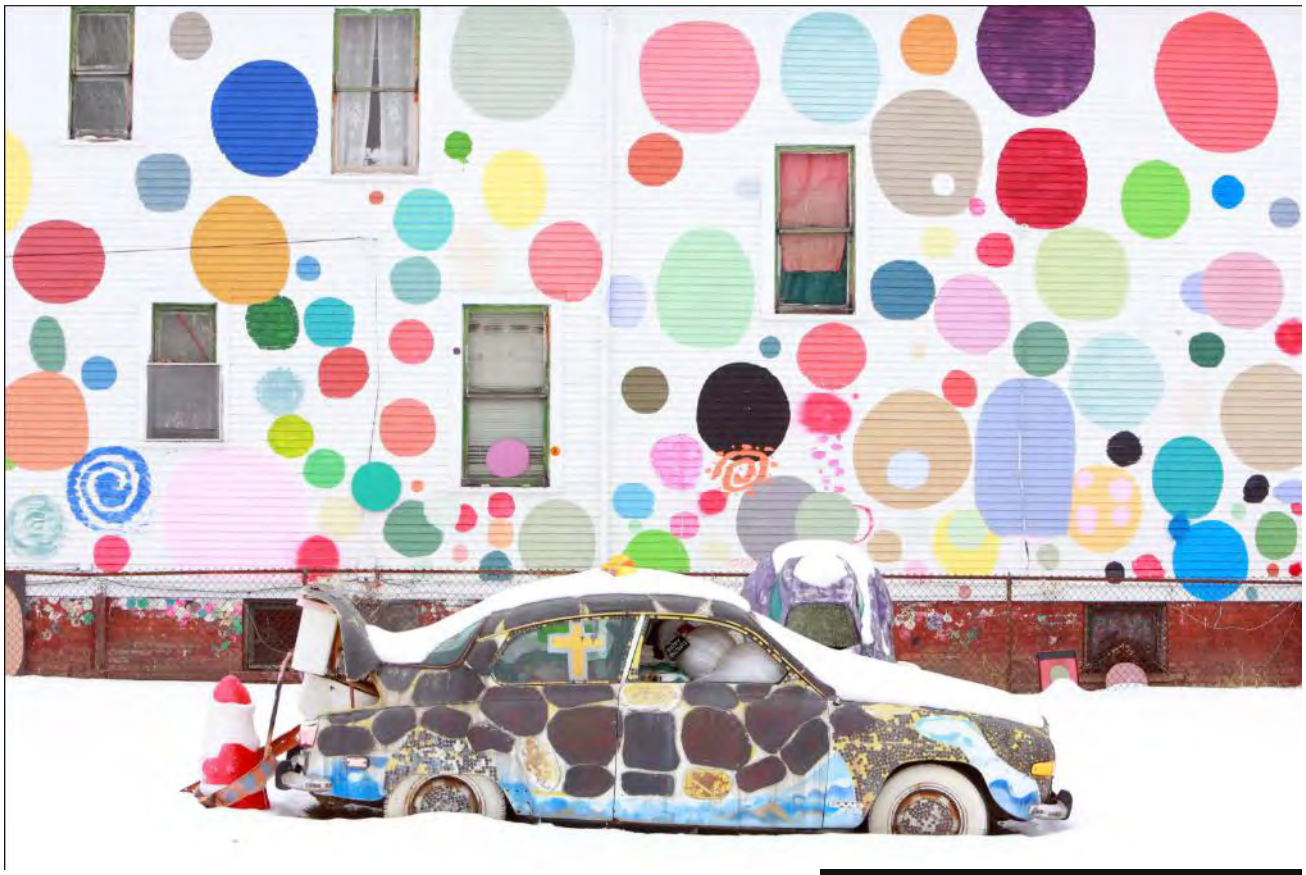
Along the slushy street here, cars regularly pull up, as do buses from time to time. Visitors emerge from faraway cities, clutching cameras, and wander a street they would surely never see if not for Mr. Guyton’s creations. The operation has grown enormously since its start: a staff, including interns, 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."



Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

The Detroit News

Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project through the years

Published 10:45 p.m. ET Oct. 14, 2014 | **Updated 5:46 p.m. ET Aug. 15, 2016**

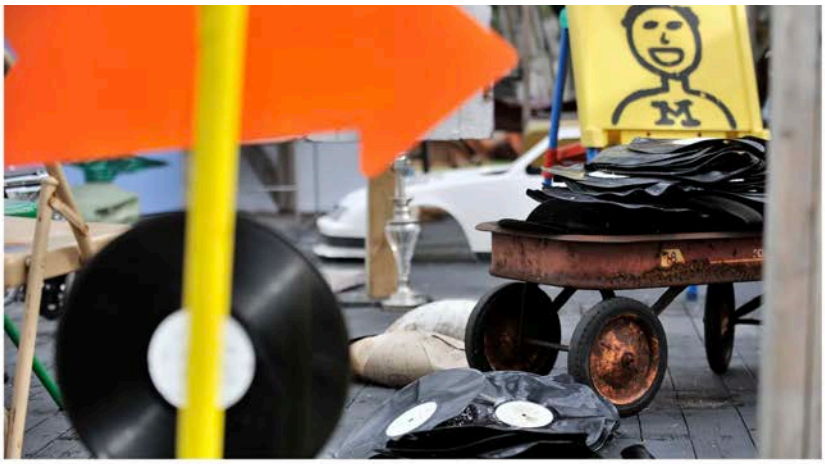
Visitors check out the Heidelberg Project in Detroit on Aug. 14, 2016. Tyree Guyton is reportedly planning to dismantle his project over the next two years.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Cassandra Dickerson of Memphis, Tenn. walks through the Heidelberg Project with, behind her, her granddaughter, Brittany Simmons, right, of Ann Arbor, and Aaron Baker, left, of Detroit.

Robin Buckson, Detroit News



Some of the melted records, presumably from one of the fires that took place, now part of the installation at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, Detroit News

Steve and Diane Budaj of West Bloomfield take their own photo using the self timer on their camera during their first visit to the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Signs, dolls and records make up part of the installation at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, Detroit News

People walk through and look at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Some of the many dolls, furniture and toys installed at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

Part of the Heidelberg Project in Detroit.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Visitors walk through the many installations at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

A visitor walks through installations at the Heidelberg Project.

Robin Buckson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Eight blighted Detroit houses that artist Tyree Guyton transformed into art pieces known as the Heideberg Project have been ravaged by intentional fires, according to investigators, gaining worldwide media attention.

Elizabeth Conley,The Detroit News

Tyree Guyton, 59, has been working on his neighborhood full of found object sculptures and paintings since 1986. He grew up on the main block of the project on Heidelberg Street and began making art with his grandfather, Sam Mackey, who also was an artist. Guyton, photographed Oct. 5, 2014, has been rebuilding after a string of arson fires destroyed much of his work.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

A screen capture shows an arson suspect, far right, caught on video as the Taxi House is set on fire on Nov. 23, 2014. Arson officials admit they are not close to an arrest. If anything, the Heidelberg cases show how tough arson is to solve.

Handout Image

Tyree Guyton puts finishing touches on a piece from his Faces of God series. Guyton has painted faces on car hoods throughout his career, but these particular hoods are meaningful to him because they were stored inside one of the houses that burned in a string of 10 arson fires at the Heidelberg Project. The hoods are charred and rusted from the water used to douse the flames.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Guyton puts finishing touches on a piece from his "Faces of God" series.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

In a recent interview, Guyton said he began the Heidelberg Project in 1986 after an "epiphany from God." ..."I took the street, Heidelberg Street, and transformed it into something whimsical ... something magical," he said.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Tyree Guyton in front of the Heidelberg Project in 1988.

The Detroit News Archives

Guyton works with his grandfather, Sam Mackey, on Aug. 17, 1988. The two started affixing found objects to abandoned houses in 1986, giving birth to the Heidelberg Project.

The Detroit News Archives

Tyree Guyton looks at the demolition of his work on Oct. 24, 1991. Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, responding to neighborhood complaints, ordered three of his houses bulldozed.

The Detroit News Archives

MARTOS GALLERY

Guyton stands on the rubble of three of the houses that were ordered bulldozed by Mayor Coleman Young, on Nov. 24, 1991.

The Detroit News Archives

In 2002, Tyree Guyton works with a group of students from Ralph Bunche Elementary School on the sculpture "Doors of Opportunity" in the schoolyard at 2801 Ellery, Detroit. Guyton worked with the school's students for three months on the project from drawings to finished state.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Guyton paints shoes at the Heidelberg Project in Detroit in June 2004.

David Guralnick, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Tyree Guyton working on the Heidelberg Project in Detroit in June 2006.

David Guralnic / The Detroit News

Madison Guyton, 2, paints a polka dot on the sidewalk on Heidelberg Street. She is seen through the legs of Brittany Guyton, 9. Both girls are nieces of the artist and lived on Heidelberg Street in 2006, when this photo was taken.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Working on the Heidelberg Project in Detroit in June 2006.

David Guralnick / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

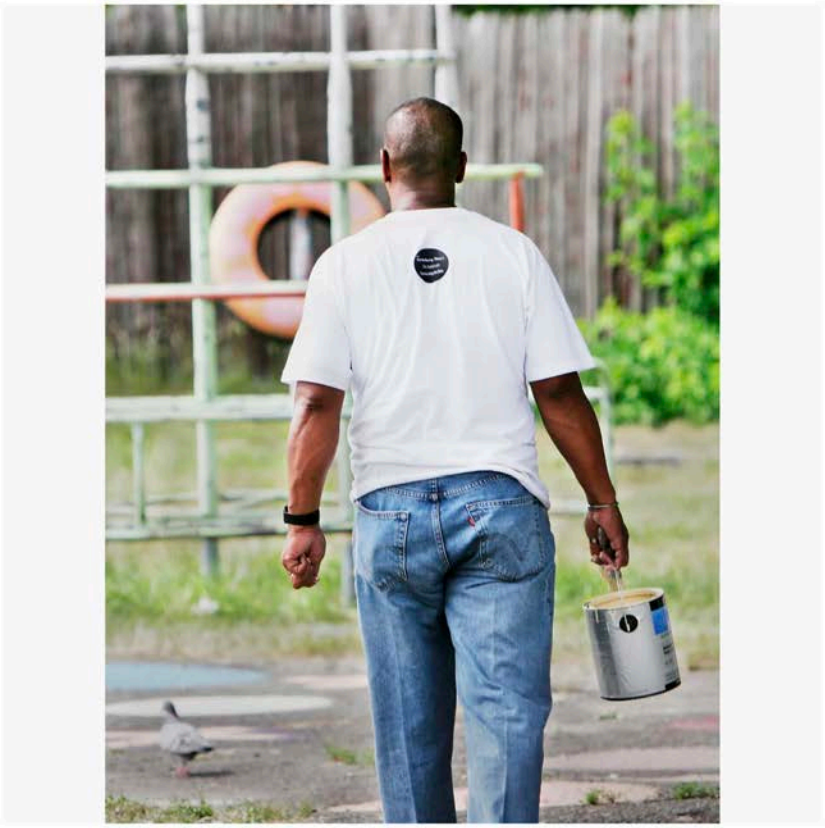
Guyton began turning Heidelberg, the street where he grew up, into a living art installation in 1988. "The End" is photographed here in 2006.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Tyree Guyton on Nov. 27, 2007.

John T. Greilick, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY



Guyton at work on Heidelberg Street in August 2006.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Will Frame, 6, reaches out to touch some art Aug. 18, 2006, during a festival to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Heidelberg Project.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

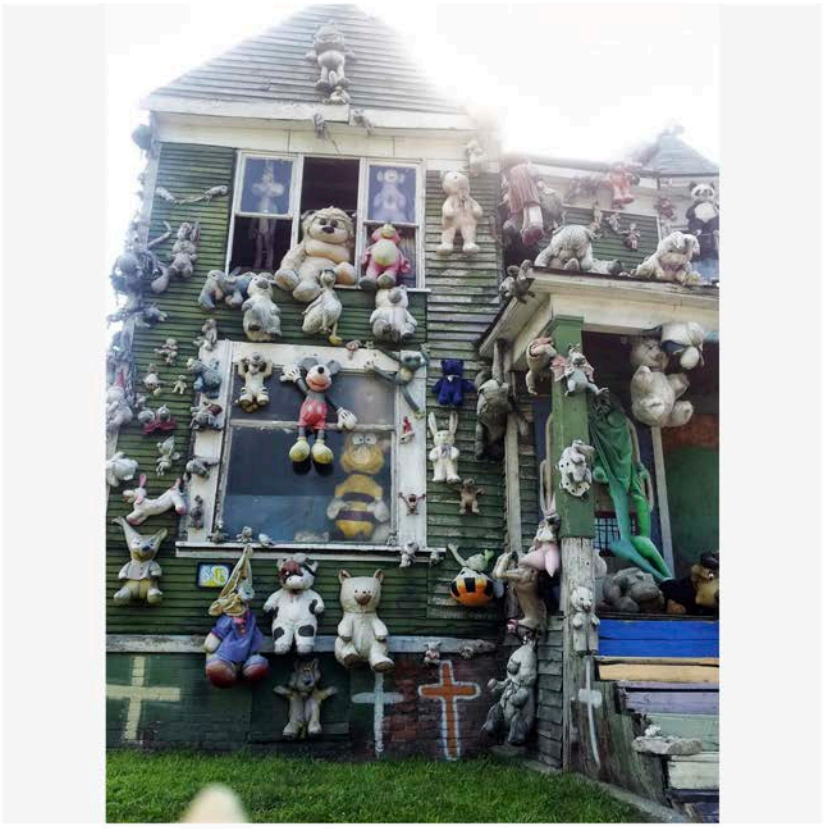
Tyree Guyton at work on his project in August 2006.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Guyton and Marian Nelson help third-grader Alicia Clifford, 8, donate her class pennies. Commerce Elementary School students presented thousands of pennies to Guyton on Nov. 8, 2006.

Velvet S. McNeil / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY



Stuffed animals of every size and species adorned the Party Animal House.

Jean Johnson, The Detroit News

The Penny House featured large representations of copper pennies.

Jean Johnson, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Tyree Guyton talks during a planning meeting for the Connect the Dots Festival in front of the information booth in August 2006.

Donna Terek / The Detroit News

The Polka Dot House is seen in 2009.

Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

Tyree Guyton's "God Noah" boat weathers the snow in December 2009.

Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Bethanie Borkowski, 19, of St. Clair Shores walks among an estimated 10,000 shoes displayed on Edmund at Woodward in Detroit. Artist Tyree Guyton sought to brings awareness to homelessness in an outdoor exhibit titled "Street Folk" as part of the 25th anniversary of the Heidelberg Project in 2011.

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Da' Mya Grimes, 9, holds the shoe she painted and donated along with another estimated 10,000 shoes displayed on Edmund Street at Woodward on May 12, 2011. Guyton's shoe display was designed to bring awareness to homelessness.

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The artist works in 2011, the year of the project's 25th anniversary.

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Commerce and religion come together in a cash register painted with "God."

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The Obstruction of Justice House at the Heidelberg Project, seen in 2011, was destroyed in 2013.

Charles V. Tines,The Detroit News

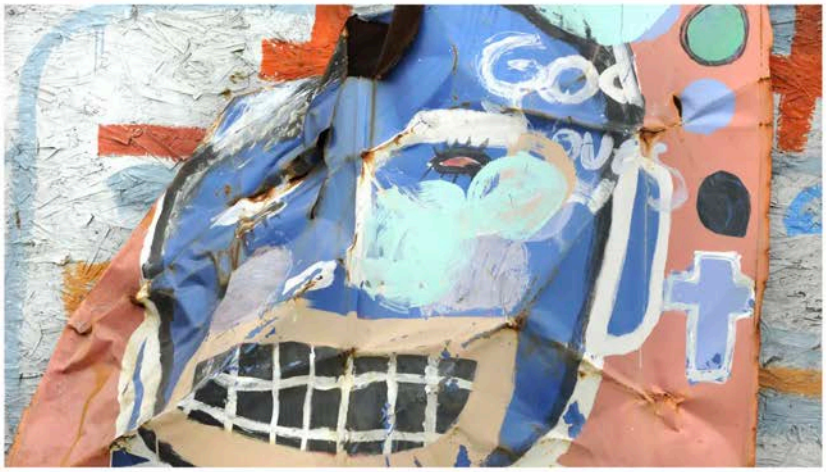
Tyree Guyton cleans up after a fire destroyed his Obstruction of Justice house on May 3, 2013. His studio was in the house.

Clarence Tabb, Jr., The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

A taxi sits in front of the Taxi House at the Heidelberg Project in May 2011.

Max Ortiz, The Detroit News



One of Tyree Guyton's faces of God is seen in 2011.

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

A taxi in the Heidelberg Project in 2011.

Charles V. Tines,The Detroit New, Charles V. Tines,The Detroit New

MARTOS GALLERY

Tyree Guyton sits on the steps of one of his houses in June 2011.

Charles V. Tines / The Detroit New, Charles V. Tines,The Detroit New

The artist works to cover the House of Soul with more than 2,000 records on April 17, 2013.

Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

The completed House of Soul.

Jean Johnson, The Detroit News

The aftermath of the fire at the House of Soul leaves a charred mess at the Heidelberg Project on Nov. 12, 2013.

David Coates, The Detroit News

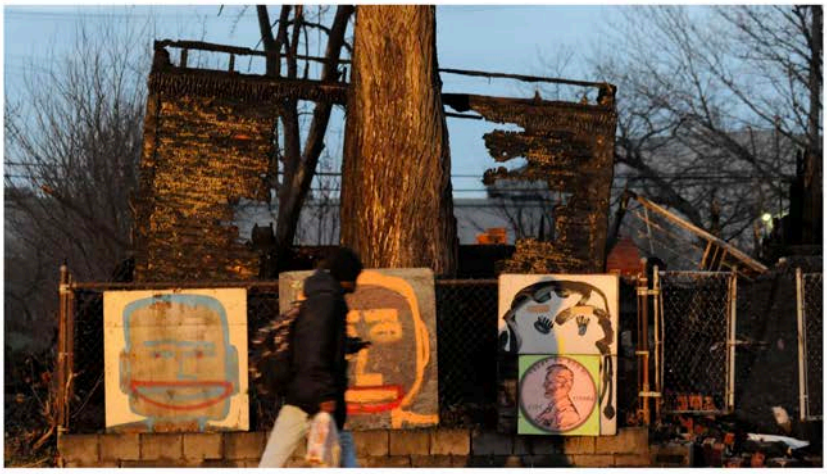
MARTOS GALLERY

A destroyed record lies in the remains of the House of Soul at the Heidelberg Project on Nov. 12, 2013.

David Coates / The Detroit News

Tyree Guyton sifts through the remains after a fire at the House of Soul, Nov. 12, 2013.

David Coates / The Detroit News



A man passes the Penny House, which was destroyed by fire on Nov. 21, 2013.

David Coates / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Guyton holds up a clock at the Clock House on Dec. 9, 2013, after the structure was destroyed by fire.

David Coates / The Detroit News

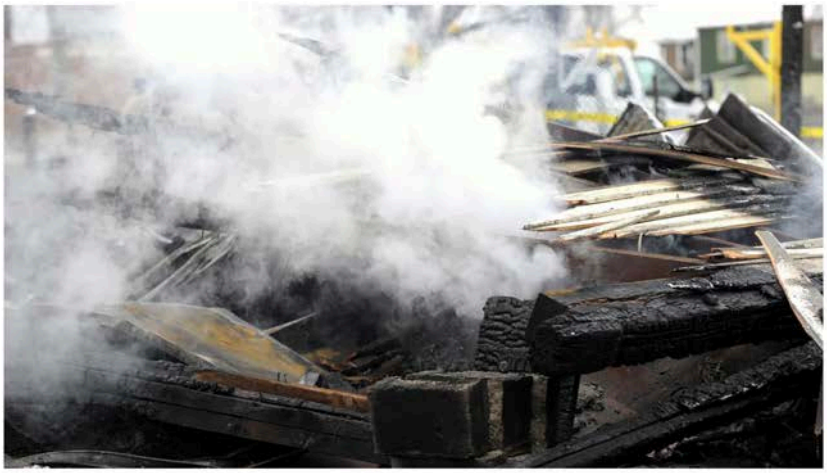
A partial wall is all that remains of the Clock House on Dec. 9, 2013. The roof collapsed, leaving only charred timbers from the foundation.

David Coates / The Detroit News

Heidelberg Project artist Tyree Guyton takes pictures of The War Room, another of his projects that was burned to the ground by a suspected arsonist, on Nov. 28, 2013.

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY



Wood smolders at a Heidelberg Project house burned to the ground on Nov. 28, 2013.

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

The Party Animal House, also known as the Doll House, burned to the ground on March 7, 2014.

Charles V. Tines, The Detroit News

Heidelberg Project creator Tyree Guyton, left, instructs Delshawna Jones, center, 8, and her sister, Chardelle Jones, 9, both of Detroit, how they can help as UAW Local 412 volunteers build the frame of new House of Soul on Sept. 27, 2014.

Todd McInturf, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

UAW Local 412 volunteers raise the first wall of the House of Soul on Sept. 27, 2014. The volunteers helped rebuild the house that was destroyed by arson in 2013.

Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

The Birthday Cake House, seen here on Sept. 30, 2014, also was struck by an arsonist.

Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

The remains of the destroyed Clock House at the Heidelberg Project is seen on Feb. 11, 2015.

A stove that was inside the Heidelberg House of Soul sits outside the framework for a new house being built in the same location. The original House of Soul was torched in November 2013.

The foundation of the torched Party Animal House at Heidelberg now has a few new stuffed animals.

Elizabeth Conley, The Detroit News

MARTOS GALLERY

Artist Tyree Guyton works outside the Taxi House, which became the 12th of the Heidelberg Project structures to burn, on Nov. 23, 2014.

Lauren Abdel-Razzaq, The Detroit News

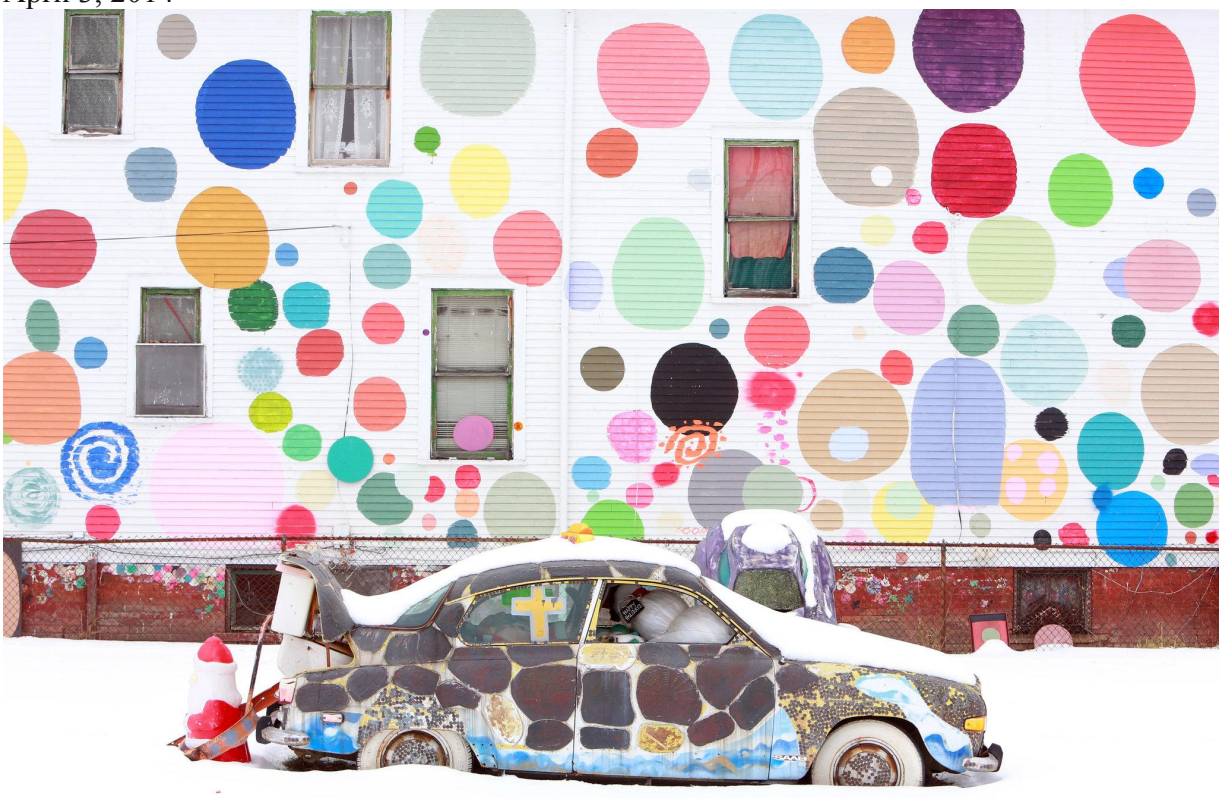
MARTOS GALLERY

Davey, Monica, “Fire in Detroit Destroys Canvas: Vacant Houses,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2014

The New York Times

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

By Monica Davey
April 3, 2014



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.”

A version of this article appears in print on April 4, 2014, on Page A13 of the New York edition with the headline: Fires in Detroit Destroy an Artist’s Canvas: Vacant Houses. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe

SLATE
NOV. 19 2013

The Heidelberg Project: Bringing Color, Art, and Controversy to a Decaying Part of Detroit

By Ella Morton

Photo: Paula Soler-Moya

Watching the deterioration of his impoverished, crime-ridden neighborhood of McDougall-Hall two decades after Detroit's 1967 race riots, artist Tyree Guyton felt the need to do something. So he picked up a paintbrush and painted pastel polka dots all over his grandfather's Heidelberg Street house.

Guyton's paint job was the first act toward what became the Heidelberg Project, an outdoor community art project aimed at breathing life back into his decaying district. Encouraged by his grandfather, and with the help of local kids, Guyton began decorating the abandoned homes beside the polka-dot house and installing art made from salvaged materials.

The project now spans two blocks and is constantly evolving, anchored by the altered houses. One ramshackle two-story home is covered in stuffed animals. Another is painted with numbers of wildly varying sizes and colors. Strewn across the yards are sculptures incorporating decorated cars, shopping carts, doors, shoes, and household appliances.

Photo: Patricia Drury

Photo: Randy Wade

Though the infusion of color and creativity has attracted a stream of appreciative visitors to McDougall-Hall, the Heidelberg Project has some vocal critics. Chief among them is the city of Detroit, which demolished parts of the community in 1991 and 1999.

Local detractors view the Heidelberg Project as an eyesore and health hazard, and resent the fact that it draws further attention to Detroit's urban blight. On November 12 of this year, the project's "House of Soul," an abandoned house decorated with hundreds of records, burned to the ground in a suspected arson attack. This followed a suspicious fire in May, in which an art-enhanced building called the "Obstruction of Justice House" was destroyed.

Undeterred, Guyton has responded to the destruction with relentless optimism and vowed to continue expanding his vibrant art community.

Photo: Jessica Reeder

Photo: Tocqueville 2012

Photo: Patricia Drury

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

A Detroit Artist's Whimsical Beautification Project Spurs Urban Renewal

By Lisa Chiu | DECEMBER 4, 2011

DEREK LIEU, FOR THE CHRONICLE

Tyree Guyton began to decorate houses on Detroit's poverty-stricken Heidelberg Street in 1986. His efforts helped create a local arts charity, the Heidelberg Project, and helped tame crime in the neighborhood.

Detroit

A shopping cart nestles high in the branches of a tree. Piles of mismatched shoes litter the ground. A weathered piano sits on a street corner. Such items are common along a section of Detroit's Heidelberg Street, in the heart of one of the nation's poorest ZIP codes. But none of it is junk.

It all belongs to a neighborhood-size art exhibit created by Tyree Guyton, who grew up on the once-dynamic street and has spent the past quarter century reviving it with his art. In 1986, frustrated with the crime, drugs, and poverty that had taken over his neighborhood, Mr. Guyton, who is now 56, decided to take action.

He started by painting a dot on the side of a three-story clapboard home. One dot became two, and soon the house was covered with a kaleidoscope of colorful circles. He then turned to the sidewalks, the lawns, and the surrounding homes, working until he filled one rectangular block with striking art that includes paintings, sculpture, and found objects.

His creation eventually inspired the Heidelberg Project, a nonprofit that works to bring 275,000 visitors a year to inner-city Detroit. The charity provides art programs for schoolchildren, publishes books, and runs a small art gallery in its administrative offices in downtown Detroit. In June, it plans to announce its first capital campaign, which seeks to raise $5-million to build a community arts center.

Not an Easy Sell

But while the Heidelberg Project is thriving today, it has faced a long road to acceptance.

Until 2009, the nonprofit had been able to attract only small grants. That all changed when the Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation, in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., gave the Heidelberg Project a two-year, $100,000 grant that allowed it to hire a development director.

Jenenne Whitfield, the Heidelberg Project's executive director, says the grant marked a turning point for an organization that had struggled for recognition. It helped that the foundation's vice president for programs, Jodee Raines, took time to learn about the project, Ms. Whitfield says.

"Rather than just sit in the office and flip through an application, Ms. Raines came down to see firsthand what we were doing," Ms. Whitfield says. "She was not necessarily an easy sell, but she was open and she asked lots of questions."

'Leap of Faith'

Those questions were important because it helped the foundation move past some stereotypes about Heidelberg, which had long been portrayed in Detroit as an eyesore, when it wanted to be seen as living art project that was renewing a struggling community.

Twice, in 1991 and 1999, the city of Detroit partially demolished the project after some neighbors complained that the installation was a blight.

“Originally Tyree was in the news because the city was knocking down these art installations,” says John Erb, the foundation’s president. “It almost seemed like it was just junk that was being demolished. But when you get down there—I can tell you that people I recommend to see it have had very emotional experiences.”

Heidelberg won the foundation’s support because it collaborated with local nonprofits and was able to show how its work was helping the community, Mr. Erb says.

The neighborhood, in fact, has seen no serious crimes since Mr. Guyton began his project. The nonprofit employs neighborhood residents for short-term work. It also holds arts education programs with local schoolchildren and gives internships to college students.

The organization had also completed its first financial audit and showed it was serious about managing its finances, Ms. Raines adds.

But even after months of trying to prove that it deserved the money, the foundation ultimately had to take a “leap of faith” when it wrote that first big check, Ms. Raines says, because Heidelberg had never received a big donation or shown its ability to handle a large cash infusion.

Thinking Bigger

The Heidelberg Project has used the Erb grant as a springboard. It has since received $300,000 from the Annenberg Foundation and $25,000 from the Kresge Foundation.

In 2010, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan also awarded the project a two-year, $50,000 grant. Heidelberg had unsuccessfully sought money from the fund in the past. But it was never organized enough to earn the foundation’s support, says Randy Ross, the foundation’s manager of philanthropic services.

“They got to a point where they had some institutional infrastructure in place and had engaged others in the process,” Mr. Ross says. “That really made it a big fit for us.”

“They got to a point where they had some institutional infrastructure in place and had engaged others in the process,” Mr. Ross says. “That really made it a big fit for us.”

Now that it has raised significant sums from grant makers, Heidelberg is thinking bigger. The $5-million capital drive is geared toward raising the money for an arts center that would sit on a corner of the installation. It hopes to begin construction in September.

Ms. Whitfield says the center could help attract investors and businesses to the neighborhood.

“With an art center in the community, you have a sense of permanency, and that’s what other small businesses will gravitate to,” Ms. Whitfield says. “People are going to be looking for a place to eat and a place to get gas. It would be great if the community members opened a café, or a soul-food restaurant.”

The Artists’ Drive

Even as the nonprofit blossoms, Mr. Guyton remains the Heidelberg Project’s most prominent caretaker—beginning every morning with a broom in his hands, sweeping the streets.

“It’s my ritual,” he says in front of the polka-dot house that started it all, as classical music plays from a worn-out stereo.

Heidelberg is always changing as Mr. Guyton finds new inspiration. His presence and creativity make the Heidelberg Project an experience in planned chaos. Hundreds of stuffed animals are nailed to the outside of one house, for example, an homage to the home’s former occupants—who routinely threw loud parties and were known as the party animals.

Paintings of taxis hang on the sides of homes and all over the street, showing destinations like Detroit and New York City. The artist says he hopes those images help visitors think about where they want to go in life.

One sign reads, “Meet me halfway.” “The War” is painted on the screen of an unplugged television. A woman’s picture is accompanied by a more recent event: “Fukushima global crime scene, somebody needs to go to jail.” A small wooden sign buried in the ground reads: “The Wizard of Oz Presents: There’s No Place Like Detroit.”

Some objects are loud, such as paintings of grinning faces on sidewalks and home fronts. And some are quiet, like a small album of family pictures that rests on a chair.

Mr. Guyton says that he built Heidelberg to show people that art exists everywhere.

“My neighbors have the notion that art is only for a certain class of people,” he says. “If I can’t get my neighbors to go to a show, how do you educate them? You take it to the people. And at the same time, you get people who wouldn’t come here to come.”

A Refreshing Difference

David Goldberg, an assistant professor of history at Wayne State University, frequently visits Heidelberg and says he feels an intimacy here that he doesn’t experience at other art museums. One reason, he says, is that the art and its messages were created by someone who grew up on the very street where the installation sits.

And in a city like Detroit, where “ruin porn” or visiting dilapidated and abandoned building has become a hip tourist attraction for affluent suburbanites, Mr. Guyton’s reflections on life and growth, as opposed to decay and decline, is refreshing, he says.

“This is different. This is creative. This isn’t something that was destroyed; it was something that was created. It’s not for decay but for rebirth,” Mr. Goldberg said on a recent visit.

And now that it has financial support, Heidelberg Street can thrive: Even its creator thinks it can operate without him.

In October, Mr. Guyton accepted a one-year fellowship in Basel, Switzerland, where he will write a series of short essays that will be part of a dissertation. He received an honorary doctorate from Detroit’s College for Creative Studies in 2009 but decided that he wanted to do the work to earn the degree.

His topic: What is art today?

Part of that answer will come from examining his last 25 years at Heidelberg.

“If they took it away tomorrow, it’s going to live on in the minds of millions of people. It’s going to do what it’s going to do,” Mr. Guyton says. “I’m not afraid to let go. Don’t be surprised if I polka-dot Switzerland.”