



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.

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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

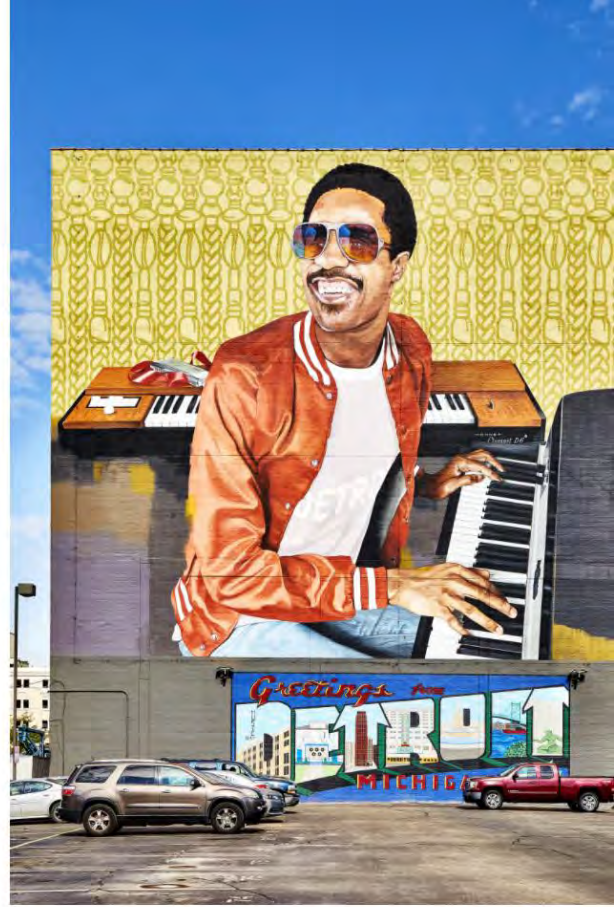
crumbling shoes; an entire house studded with floppy, oversize stuffed animals; a field full of boards painted in a rainbow of colors to resemble clocks; a lone brick chimney crowned with a satellite dish, like an angel atop a Christmas tree. There are so many hills and piles and mountains shaped into 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
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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.

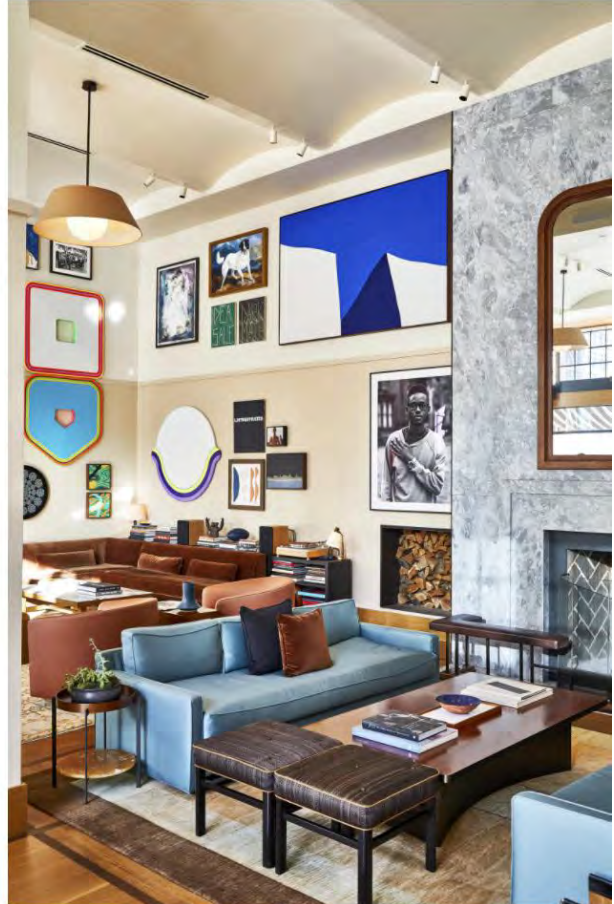
Even with the high-profile investments, the city's cultural landscape, from food to music, has a grassroots flavor, and that's especially true of the **Detroit art scene**. Galleries and studios are owned by natives, populated with work by Detroiters, and focused on uplifting the city as a whole. Following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

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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

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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



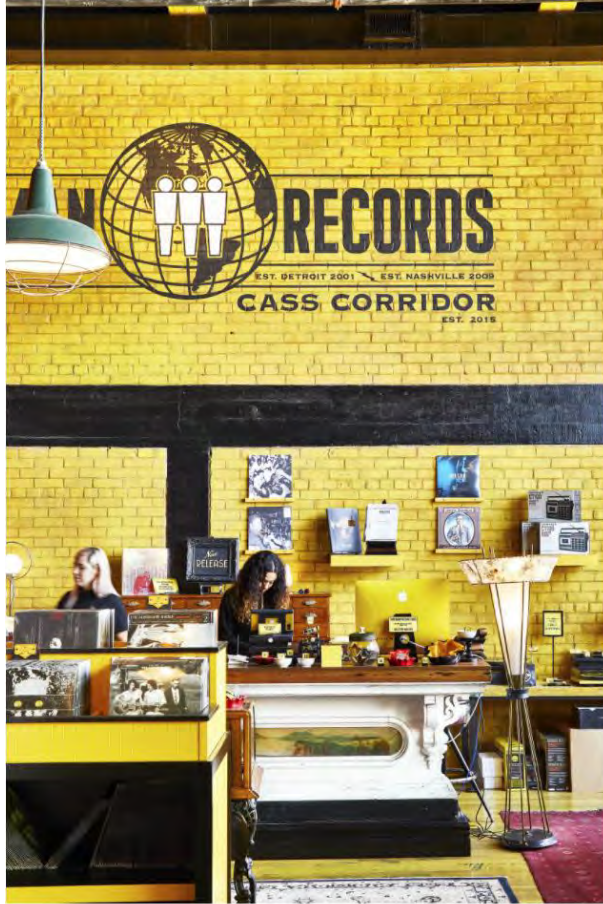
The Mexican restaurant Peso Julien Capmeil



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

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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

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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.