

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

By *Ella Morton*



Photo: Paula Soler-Moya

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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.

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Photo: Patricia Drury



Photo: Randy Wade

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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

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Photo: Tocqueville 2012



Photo: Patricia Drury