

## A CRITICAL LOOK AT DETROIT: 2 filmmakers team up to scrutinize the city block by block

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In the latest attempt to decipher what has happened to Detroit during the past 50 years, some of the most thoughtful observations come from a European professor who is visiting the city for the first time.

"Where is the rebirth?" French sociology professor Loci Woiquart asks as a University of Michigan professor drives him past blocks of abandoned buildings in a documentary film that is scheduled to premiere Friday in Ann Arbor and be shown in other cities worldwide in the coming months.

As they approach the Michigan Central depot, Woiquart appears stunned at both its beauty and decay.

He calls it a "monument to political impotence."

The professor is one of several people -- most of them metro Detroiters -- featured in the 92-minute film "Detroit: Ruin of a City."

The documentary is a critical examination of how Detroit has gone from one of the world's greatest industrial centers to a city increasingly known around the world -- especially in academia -- as perhaps the best case study of urban decline.

The film uses rarely seen archival footage to depict the dynamic Detroit of Henry Ford and his awesome Rouge plant. Much of the footage, in fact, was made by Ford Motor Co. cameramen.

The documentary also uses interviews and professorial commentary to describe the Detroit of today.

Despite its title, and the fact that the two directors have never lived in the city, they are quick to note their intent was not to bash Detroit. Indeed, they say they love Detroit.



J. KYLE KEENER/DFP

Documentary filmmakers George Steinmetz, left, 47, of Ann Arbor, and Michael Chanan, 57, of Bristol, England, stand amid the debris at the abandoned Carter Color plant on Piquette Avenue in Detroit on Tuesday. They collaborated on the film "Detroit: Ruin of a City."

"To look away from it is a distortion," said director George Steinmetz, a sociology and German cultural studies professor at U-M.

His collaborator is Michael Chanan, a filmmaker and professor of cultural studies at the University of the West of England in Bristol, England.

Chanan said he and Steinmetz met through a mutual friend and quickly discovered their fascination with the evolving sociology of cities.

Steinmetz said they decided to focus on Detroit two years ago because the city represents extremes -- the flight to the suburbs, the segregation of the metropolitan area and the city's relationship with the automotive industry.

The filmmakers try to not offer answers, they said, but spark questions.

"We don't think we have a monopoly on the truth," Chanan said.

Their film targets suburban flight and racism. And it tackles the complex and controversial question of how the automotive industry both built and abandoned the city.

Early in the film, viewers see Ford's Piquette Avenue plant in Detroit, where Henry Ford started experimenting with the assembly line. Minutes later, the film shows Ford Motor's Rouge plant in Dearborn, where police and Ford security forces once killed demonstrators on Miller Road.

The film's music is bleak, and set to the repetitive sounds of an assembly line.

One of the stars of the film is Lowell Boileau, an artist who operates the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit Web site. He takes the filmmakers on an extended tour of the city, pointing out the good and the bad. Another interview subject compares the little-known 1943 Detroit riot with a crazy aunt living in the attic that no one acknowledges.

Tyree Guyton, Detroit's internationally known artist of urban despair, said he returned to Detroit after fighting in Vietnam feeling like he was returning to another war -- one for survival.

## THERE'S MORE ABOUT DETROIT

Want to know more about Detroit's decline? These books and Web site are some of the best places to start.

- "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit," by Thomas J. Sugrue: A critically acclaimed 1996 book that traces Detroit's decline to the early 1950s.
- "Afterculture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History," by Jerry Herron: An academic-flavored look at Detroit's place in history in the early 1990s by a Wayne State University professor.
- "Stalking Detroit," edited by Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young: A collection of essays and photographs that dissect the city at the turn of the 21st Century.
- The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit: An intelligent, in-depth and even reverential Web site (<http://www.detroityes.com/>) that covers many aspects of the city's architectural and industrial heritage. The site includes a discussion forum frequented by well-informed participants.

As the film makes its way to the present, the filmmakers inject themselves as they take Woiquart on a driving tour of the city. They let him make observations -- interjected with academic theory -- as he scrutinized the city block by block.

When they reach the central business district, the filmmakers must point out to Woiquart that he is actually downtown. He can't believe it.

"Right here? Downtown?" he asks. "C'mon! Clean it up!"

Woiquart concludes that what had happened to Detroit is "not a natural process." Various level of government allowed the city's decay to take place over the years, he said, adding that if Detroit had remained majority white, such abandonment would have been addressed.

Woiquart seems thrilled when he finds a traffic jam downtown. He calls it the first sign of life.

The film is not designed for mainstream appeal. Indeed, its debut will be at an academic conference titled the "Ruins of Modernity" in Ann Arbor on Friday.

But it is intended to appeal to an international audience. Chanan said Woiquart often represented his voice, particularly when he saw the city for the first time.

The film will play April 7 at U-M in Dearborn. It will also play in London that month.

But the filmmakers have not yet found a theater to show it in Detroit. They note there is just one major movie theater in the city.

*The film will be shown at 8:30 p.m. Friday at the Rackham Amphitheater on the U-M campus in Ann Arbor. It is free and open to the public.*

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