



Riding out of the ashes

Words Peter Suci and Jamie Wilkins

Detroit has suffered a shocking decline spanning four decades, caused largely by the auto industry that was once the city's beating heart. Now the talk is of a comeback, led by the city's vibrant new cycling culture. Can the bicycle save Motor City?





Images: Adrian Platt

Detroit has a big arson problem in disused buildings, further hurting potential for redevelopment



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Detroit was once known as the Paris of the Midwest; a city with tree-lined streets, a cosmopolitan and vibrant mix of cultures and a city of innovators and risk takers. That was then.

Today the city is a shell of its former self. Vast areas of housing have been abandoned, social problems are rife. The auto industry's decline left sprawling factories to be looted for scrap metal until they collapsed. Yet the innovative spirit remains and the city once known for the automobile could be making a comeback as a bicycle friendly locale.

CYCLING AND THE COMMUNITY

It's hard to imagine that the city famous for its automobiles, and infamous for its urban decay,

would have much of a bike scene, let alone a vibrant one. But that's exactly what is happening in Detroit. Some of the city's avid riders even believe that the spinning bicycle wheel will turn their town around. They'll also tell you that a bike ride is among the best ways to see Detroit in transition.

"The biggest thing the city has to overcome is its infrastructure," says Karen Cage, co-owner of the Wheelhouse, a bike shop located near the heart of downtown Detroit. "The city was built for over two million people but we have under a million people right now." The result is that huge sections of the city are vacant and crumbling.

The Wheelhouse, located in the International Waterfront on the Detroit River offers riding tours that highlight the city's cultural gems and call out future possibilities.

"It is an easy city to ride and cycling is a fun way to get around, especially in the downtown, midtown, Eastern Market and Corktown areas," says Gage. Among the highlights are the city's public art installations and the Heidelberg Project, an inner city venture that is intended to inspire people to use and appreciate the once fine houses that stand empty.

The project began in 1986 when artist Tyree Guyton attempted to save many of the houses in his decaying neighborhood by painting them with bright colored dots. Since that time, the style has grown to be recognised around the world as an inspiration for a better future with tenants that include recycling and reuse.

"Our tours highlight the result of auto industry and culture," says Gage, adding that the tours pass through neighborhoods that were built when the

Below The decline of Detroit spanned decades and recovery could take just as long but it is happening



The huge population drop means the city streets are quiet, ideal for getting more people cycling



THE LOST VELODROME



In Dorais Park, near the infamous 8 Mile corridor, is a reminder of the city's former days - a velodrome.

While never officially buried or entirely lost beyond sight, the concrete track became overgrown, like many of the city's parks that are now all but forgotten. It was rediscovered last year by

Tom Nardone, a businessman who runs the Mower Gang in his spare time, cleaning up public spaces with friends.

The Dorais Park Velodrome was built in 1969 and used throughout the 1970s even as the city saw a decline. In the 1980s racing ended at the velodrome and it fell into disrepair. Illegal car races

damaged the banking and it became a dumping ground. After finding it, Nardone was determined to do what he could to bring it back. Initially there wasn't even a complete path all the way around, yet Nardone believed a couple of weekends and 10 volunteers could complete the task.

In reality, it took nearly a whole summer of weekends with 10 full days taken just to clear it. The final results are rough and track bikes are unlikely to return but Dorais Park has become home to another type of racing. The Thunderdrome is a series of events in which competitors race mountain bikes and mini-motorcycles around the reclaimed track.

Image: Tom Nardone

Below Many beautiful old houses are derelict. Thousands more have been torn down, whole blocks flattened



city was a boomtown. "We show how these structures are part of the city in transition. Some are becoming technology incubator spaces, while artists are moving in and forming communities, and vacant lots are becoming small green spaces and even private farms."

The city's vacant factories and light industrial shops are also coming back as chic loft spaces, where residents can easily bike to work. And, says Gage, this new downtown community rides their bikes to work.

"It's been overstated," cautions Zakary Pashak, founder of the start-up Detroit Bikes brand, "but there is something happening. I think it's the types of people who are moving back into cities and looking for cheap houses and have a sense of adventure, looking at a city that still has a lot of issues and challenges. Corktown sparked people's imagination. That neighbourhood is the centrepiece and was the first to get bike lanes."

"Even in the two years I've been here I see the city changing every day. There are still tons of people in really difficult situations but there are also a lot of positive people trying to figure it out."

The city's master plan for non-motorised vehicles currently calls for 400 miles of new bike lanes, mainly through road diets to reallocate lanes from cars to bicycles. That's easier than you might expect in Motor City - the population exodus means the road network has considerable spare capacity. This plan began in the summer of 2010 and is being developed in conjunction with the Detroit Green Network, which calls for the creation of 70 additional miles of greenways for on-road connections.

The biggest hurdle for Detroit commuters remains its vastness. The city sprawls out for miles from downtown and the suburbs then add to the expanse. Hurdles are there to be overcome, though, and residents of the upscale Grosse Pointe neighbourhoods just north of the city regularly commute some 15 miles to work on Jefferson Avenue, which runs along the still picturesque waterfront.

"A lot of people commute in these days," says Gage. "You just need to plan ahead and always have tools on you."

Even those who don't regularly plan to commute can take a ride on Detroit's sometime 'mean streets' in the Tour De Troit mass participation event, now on its 12th edition.

Over 4,000 riders take part every year in the well-organised, non-profit 40-mile ride, which includes a police escort through the city's historical areas. For more serious cyclists, there is also a 62-mile 'Metric Century' (100km) that includes a jaunt through Motown.

The wheels are again turning in Detroit but instead of four wheels and a V8 engine, it's now two wheels and a lot of heart. ☺



Below Detroit Bicycle Co bikes are named after Detroit roads. This is the copper plated Madison Street

Right Despite the population flight from Detroit, there remains a large base of skilled workers to draw on



Images: Adrian Platts

Made in Detroit

DETROIT CARGO COMPANY



When considering where to get product made for his new brand of leather handlebar and saddle bags, Marc Bay decided to invest in his hometown.

Bay, a 20-year veteran of the motorcycle industry and a life-long bicycle enthusiast, started the business with a friend from the apparel industry.

"Apparel remains so import based, so I wanted to do something different," says Bay. "One day over lunch we discussed the strengths of our home city, Detroit. We noted the skill and resilience of the workers in Detroit. We decided that it was time to give 'made in the USA' the shot it deserves."
www.detroitcargo.com



THE BIKE BUSINESS

Not even the most blindly optimistic of the city's supporters would suggest that the cycling industry could step up and fill the multi-billion dollar void left by the car makers. However, this is a manufacturing city and it certainly seems that Detroit and bicycle manufacturers are in a position to help each other.

"This town has a lot of advantages," says Marc Bay, co-founder of the Detroit Cargo Company, which makes leather bike bags. "There is really a culture of cycling growing in the city and outstanding stuff is happening in the bicycle industry here."

It's clear that the auto industry's legacy of skilled workers, tooling manufacturers and raw material suppliers can be of great value to the cycle industry.

"In the last three to five years, a number of bicycle start-ups have emerged in Detroit, most recently, Shinola, a manufacturer of higher-end bicycles and watches, with stores here and in New York City," says Paul Humphreys, the bicycle and motorcycle marketing manager at Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics Corp. "Detroit Bicycle Company are making small-volume urban bikes, and Detroit Bikes are [setting up to mass-produce] town bikes. AutoBike is developing an automatic bicycle transmission."

Those companies acknowledge that Detroit's auto history is a fundamental element of its appeal to them as a base.



Left Luxury brand Shinola decided to assemble its bikes in Detroit because of the city's reputation

Above Conceived by Henry Ford II, the Renaissance Centre was built in the 70s to boost the economy

While Bay's Detroit Cargo Company was entirely homegrown, along with Detroit Bicycle Company, which makes custom hand-crafted frames in Detroit, some companies are looking to Detroit for the innovative spirit that the city still offers.

One such company is Shinola, which was conceived in 2011. The luxury brand, which is owned by Fossil watches, moved to Detroit because of its manufacturing legacy. Shinola was looking for a place to set up shop where there were skilled workers and craftsmen. Detroit fits the bill as it had - thanks to the auto industry - a strong tool and die community.

"We initially came to Michigan because we were attracted by its manufacturing expertise and long legacy of industrial innovation," says Heath Carr, chief operating officer at Shinola. "When we came to visit, everyone we met kept asking us how they could help out."

"It seemed like the people here sincerely wanted us to be successful and were willing to do whatever they could to make sure that happened," says Carr. "There is an absolutely incredible community here and ultimately it was the community that really inspired us to move here."

But not everyone is buying Shinola's spin. Detroit Bikes' Pashak told us: "There are brands

"It's all the things connected to the auto industry," says Steven Bock of the Detroit Bicycle Company. "Here we have access to any type of machining, painting and plating. It's all here."

Detroit Bikes' Pashak agrees: "There's a wealth of expertise here that isn't being used. Right now, our head mechanical engineer, Ed Summers, is flat out setting up our 50,000sq ft shop floor. He's brilliant - his background is in the car industry here but he was made redundant. I was really fortunate to be able to hire a guy like Ed.

"There's all the tooling here and it isn't hard to find a steel supplier," Pashak continues. "For manufacturing, Detroit is one of the best bets. Also people are talking about Detroit, there are eyes on Detroit, and that got a big boost from Chrysler's 'Imported From Detroit' TV ad. People want to know how the city will come out of this.



Above The Shinola Runwell has just gone on sale for \$2,950 with an 11-speed Shimano hub and disc brakes



Image: Fishcoes 2000



Above "I wanted to make a bike for people, not for cyclists. That's what Detroit Bikes is about," says Pashak

that are slapping on a 'Made in Detroit' logo but they aren't made here, the offices aren't here, they just assemble the bikes here. Shinola realised that there's currently an affection and support for Detroit that means they can sell their bikes for more and they're cashing in on that. It's all kind of exploitative. It isn't helping the city and a \$3,000 bike won't help urban transport."

If that sounds excessively cynical, an article by *crainsdetroit.com* from May 2012 suggests otherwise. Shinola's parent company, Fossil Watches, had then just completed a deal on premises in Detroit and an employee, who asked not to be named, told *Crain's* that, "The impetus for coming to Detroit is the Detroit name." The employee explained that Fossil Watches founder Tom Kartotis had commissioned a study of pens in which subjects were asked if they prefer pens made in China, the USA or Detroit at \$5, \$10 and \$15 respectively. "People picked the Chinese pen over the USA pen because it was cheaper. But when offered the Detroit pen they were willing to pay the higher price."

While that will certainly sound distasteful and exploitative to many people, it would be naïve to

hope that every business setting up in the city is doing so out of altruism, and you could argue that Shinola's strategy isn't so different from that of the small brands making the most of the city's economic standing.

"Labor is cheap, the cost of doing business is cheap," says Bay. "The Detroit name has worldwide recognition as a manufacturing hub," adds Bock. "For me it is a great thing. I get a ton of overseas business. I'm shipping bikes to London and Hong Kong. It is definitely a positive thing. There are enough people that aren't working that

Left Detroit Bikes' one model is made of local steel and costs \$550. They aim to make 100 bikes per day

Above The annual Tour De Troit ride begins in front of the vast, disused Michigan Central Train Station

could come in at a certain wage. It could be economical for a larger company to come to town. Hopefully things keep picking up and we'll get a couple more builders coming here."

Far from being a negative, this is just business and having more business in Detroit can only be a good thing. And at the same time, perhaps Detroit's core industries should be looking at how cycling could help not just Motown but the rest of the country and beyond.

"Personally, I feel that if they are going to prosper, the auto manufacturers need to consider being 'transportation providers,' rather than car-makers," adds Humphreys. "Bikes could fit into a future strategy along those lines."

Pashak agrees: "All the good things from the auto industry, especially the influence over government regarding infrastructure, it would be nice to mimic that with the bike industry. I've done a lot of research into urban transport and community. Street activity, cycling, is a big part of that and I really believe it makes people happier."

Maybe the bike industry alone isn't enough to turn Detroit around but perhaps Pashak, Bay and Bock can help to deliver some happiness. We think everyone involved would settle for that.

Made in Detroit

CHRYSLER'S FAMOUS TV ADS



During the 2011 Superbowl final, to an audience of nearly 100m, Chrysler ran a two-minute TV ad featuring rapper Eminem, a rousing monologue and the now famous line 'Imported From Detroit'. It caused a national swell of support and affection for the city and gave the people of Detroit a real boost. It did Chrysler no harm, either.

In 2012 Chrysler ran another long ad during the Superbowl, in which Clint Eastwood talks up Detroit as an example of how the US can rebound from its wider economic crisis.

2011 <http://bit.ly/WOCWAC>
2012 <http://bit.ly/16dfjyW>