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Wringing Art Out of the Rubble in Detroit

Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

An installation at the derelict Packard auto plant in Detroit by Scott Hocking.

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DETROIT — The latest must-go event in this gritty, left-behind city — where D.J.'s flourish among ruins, trespassing in tumbledown buildings is part of a night out, and even garage rock is bare-bones — centers on soup.

Soup, as it's known, is a monthly gathering, held above the MexicanTown Bakery in southwestern Detroit, where guests pay $5 for a homemade bowlful, salad (locally grown, to be sure) and dessert, and sit at tables made of doors laid over milk crates, listening as compatriots propose projects. Creating a pocket park, organizing an artists directory and devising a surveillance-

camera video montage were all on this month's agenda. The guests vote, and the idea deemed most deserving gets the Soup dollars — a neat little way to wiki-finance creativity. Soup, which started seven months ago, has been growing steadily. The last one, on Sunday, was the largest yet. "It was so big that we were running around collecting doors" before the meal, Kate Daughdrill, a founder, said. Ms. Daughdrill, 25, an artist, graduate student and waitress, built the voting booth for Soup; she and her co-founder, Jessica Hernandez, whose family owns the bakery, hope to make the loft where it's held into a permanent creative space. Building a community around Soup, Ms. Daughdrill said, is "part of my art."

Detroit is plagued by all the urban problems that make it fodder for big-picture editorializing and cop shows. Its long-dwindling population and landscape of abandoned buildings have made it a singular — or perhaps prophetic — case study in Rust Belt decline. But its particular brand of civic and economic decay has also drawn something unexpected: a small but well-publicized movement of artists and other creative types trying to wring something out of the rubble.

Maker Faire, the California festival for tinkerers and conceptualists, made its Detroit debut — albeit in nearby Dearborn — last weekend; TEDx, a brainstorming conference will arrive in September; and Matthew Barney will perform after that. Banksy has already been. Two weeks ago Detroit hired a film, culture and special-events liaison to occupy a new position in the office of Mayor Dave Bing. The city that birthed the assembly-line age is now cultivating a slew of handmade salvagers, and it has not gone unnoticed.

"There's an excitement here," said Dale Dougherty, editor and publisher of Make magazine, which spawned Maker Faire. "There's a sense that it's a frontier again, that it's open, that you can do things without a lot of people telling you, 'No, you can't do that.' " Maker Faire follows that ethos; it drew over 22,000 people for demonstrations of wind-powered cars and fire-spewing bicycles to the parking lot of the Henry Ford Museum.

Detroit hardly needs encouragement to do-it-yourself; it has a lineage of makers.

Scott Hocking, an artist who creates works out of materials salvaged from the many abandoned buildings here, said that the D.I.Y. culture is "in our DNA."

His latest piece, "Garden of the Gods," is illegally installed on the roof of the massive, and massively derelict, Packard auto plant, which also recently housed a Banksy image.

"I'm really interested in the idea of our relics," Mr. Hocking said. He has collected supplies from a forsaken school warehouse, binders and toys twisted by a fire, and used televisions found in the Packard plant to create a vista that resembles modern Roman ruins. Symbolism is a large part of what the new Detroit runs on.

Symbolism and connection: Mr. Hocking, 35, a longtime Detroiter, has attended Soup, as has Jerry Paffendorf, a newly arrived resident who quickly built himself a niche. Mr. Paffendorf, 28, moved to Detroit from San Francisco by way of Brooklyn last spring, with an expertise in software

design and a side of techno-savvy wit. He is behind a project called Loveland, a “micro real estate” enterprise that sells parcels of Detroit that he owns by the square inch for $1 a piece. Mr. Paffendorf bought 3,150 square feet of land for $500 when he arrived; “inchvestors” get a plot in a part of town that might not be well trod otherwise. Proceeds go to organizations that address Detroit’s many problems.

“The inches become like little shares in the city,” Mr. Paffendorf said. “Even such a lightweight form of ownership has a really cool psychological effect. Even if they bought the inches on a whim, it would bring people into the city a little bit more.”

That invitation to appreciate the city, instead of bemoan it, is also behind some of Detroit’s best-known renewals, like the Heidelberg Project, which turns houses into found-object sculptures, and the neighborhood collaboration of Mitch and Gina, as the artist Mitch Cope and the architect Gina Reichert are known around town. They were among the first to get attention for their creative development, buying up houses for art and gardens.

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Objects used by Mr. Hocking, who turns detritus into art.

Even during a few days spent here, it is obvious how tight and welcoming the community is. A guy like Kevin Putalik can arrive alone from Montana with an interest in urban agriculture — a booming part of life in Detroit, where grocery stores are scarce — and within three weeks find himself making sausage at a party in someone’s home. “It’s the land of opportunity,” said Mr. Putalik, 28, who described himself as “funemployed,” as he rinsed casings at the sink.

The party's host, Brian Merkel, 25, is an arriviste from Portland, Ore.; he's been here since October. "I moved here blindly," Mr. Merkel said. "I was an artist in Portland and I became more interested in food. I decided that when I moved here I would be a butcher. Within the first two weeks we had a charcuterie club." People move to Detroit, he said, "because they have a sense of purpose."

That is true on a stretch of Farnsworth Street that has been reclaimed by artists and activists, a leafy block in eastern Detroit surrounded by severe blight. The Yes Farm, a communal building with a stage and a studio, beckons on a corner, even if it doesn't always have lights inside. Pickup soccer games happen on the empty lots at dusk. On a weekday evening Dutch artists in the middle of a two-month residency offered a talk on the sidewalk along with homemade fruit tarts.

But Detroit is far from idyllic. Jeff Sturges, who lives on Farnsworth Street and helps run the Fab Lab, a design shop in a trailer, pointed to a scar near his mouth, from an attempted holdup. "It's an extreme city," said Mr. Sturges, 33, an architect by training who moved here in September from the South Bronx. "There are some days where I get up and say, 'What am I doing to myself?' " But, he quickly added, mostly he is pleased to be here. He recently started a hacker space, a collective for technology and art projects, one of a handful to open around Detroit within the last year.

Still, the number of people who have this creative do-gooder verve is small. The largest Soup only had 120 guests. "You can't change a city of 800,000 with 200 people," said Phil Cooley, an owner of the popular Slows Bar BQ in Detroit. "There's so much work to do."

That includes diversifying: a largely white creative class stands out in a largely black city; integration remains rare. Some worried about the image of the city. "People think it's a blank canvas; it's not," said Corine Vermeulen, 33, a Dutch artist who has documented Detroit's community farms.

Work, though, is what this D.I.Y. city has not shied away from. In June a group including Mr. Paffendorf of Loveland spent $1,000 for two abandoned houses across from the vacant Michigan Central Station, a symbol of Detroit's decline, and, along with the Packard plant, a must-stop on any hardscrabble tour. They renamed the buildings — shells filled with debris and a few squatters — Imagination Station and hope to transform them into an artists' enclave and green space. There wasn't much to see yet, but Mr. Paffendorf offered a tour. "Welcome home," he said, pushing open the battered door, with a hole where the lock should be.

The next day he and his girlfriend and partner, Mary Lorene Carter, were at Maker Faire, sitting behind a table covered in sod, publicizing Loveland. They sold 70 inches of Detroit.

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/arts/design/04maker.html