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Destination of the Week: Detroit

Motown may be broken down, but locals have the rare chance to reinvent their city from the ground up. Can Detroit become a city known for its bikes, trains and farms?

Sat, Aug 08 2009 at 8:51 AM EST

By Leah Koenig

Read more: [DESTINATION OF THE WEEK](#), [GREEN CITY LIVING](#), [GREEN TRAVEL](#)



Photo: [Dave Hogg/Flickr](#)












There are [lots](#) of "Top 10 Green Cities" lists floating around on the Internet these days. San Francisco and Portland tend to hover near first place and New York — the unlikely green metropolis — also usually ranks. Detroit, however, does not make the cut.

Bound to its own legacy as the (now failing) "Motor City," Detroit's city limits span an unbelievable 138 square miles, with suburbs that sprawl out even farther. And while it has been nearly three decades since American cities began adopting curbside recycling programs, [Detroit just](#) (as in this year) decided to join the party.



Today's mo

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Still, before completely writing off Detroit as an environmental wasteland, take another look. The buzzword in the city these days is revitalization as urban planners and residents look for ways to breathe life back into [crumbling buildings](#) and [re-imagine](#) the urban grid. By being more of a blank canvas than other cities, Detroit may actually have a much greater potential to go green. Here are some early glimpses of that change.

Travel green

With the "Big Three" American car companies (General Motors, Ford and Chrysler) in crisis and [bailout](#) mode, there has been a lot of lip service about the Motor City [finally embracing](#) the fuel-efficient trend. But the most exciting sustainable transportation news is happening off the highway.

A public [light rail](#) is in the works, and the long-awaited [Dequindre Cut](#) — an urban biking and running trail — recently opened. The trail is one part of a larger effort to beautify [Detroit's riverfront](#) and attract pedestrians back downtown. And speaking of biking, the *New York Times* published an [op-ed](#) last month chronicling the cycling culture that has sprung up among the "ruins," and imagines a city rebuilt on a "two-wheeled economy."

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Grow green

With acres of abandoned buildings and property lots, Detroit is a hotbed for community gardens and even large-scale urban agriculture. According to [GreenBiz.com](#), the Hantz Group (a Michigan-based financial company) recently announced a plan to develop 10,000 acres of "underutilized and vacant" land in downtown Detroit into a mixture of cash crops, ornamental gardens and riding trails.

Nearby, [Earth Works Urban Farm](#), a project of the [Capuchin Soup Kitchen](#), promotes sustainable agriculture within the city and increases Detroiters' access to healthy, nourishing produce. The farm hosts a [30-hive apiary](#), runs gardening and nutrition programs for kids and teens, and runs an active farm market. EWUF also partnered with the [Detroit Agricultural Network](#), the [Greening of Detroit](#) and other institutions to create an online community gardening guide called the [Garden Resource Program Collaborative](#).

Eat green

Committed to socially and environmentally responsible business practices, strengthening local community, and, above all, making incredibly delicious breads, muffins and other baked goods, the [Avalon International Bakery](#) has emerged as a beacon of deliciousness in downtown Detroit. The bakery opened in 1997 in Cass Corridor, which at the time was notorious as Detroit's skid row. These days, the restaurant is a neighborhood fixture, serving more than 500 customers daily.

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Avalon is joined by the neighboring Cass Corridor microbrewery, [Motor City Brew Works](#), as well as other sustainable restaurants and food organizations, including the [Golden Gate Cafe](#) and [Slow Food Detroit](#).

Local and organic produce seekers can head to the [Wayne State](#) or [Clarkston](#) farmers' markets, or make a pilgrimage to the famous [Detroit Eastern Market](#), the largest historic public market district in the United States. Founded in 1891, the market hosts 150 farmers and vendors from Michigan, Ohio and Canada. Shoppers can find everything from fruits and vegetables to cider, cheeses and baked goods.

Live green

For the [last three years](#), Detroit's City Hall has been awarded the federal Energy Star label for its energy-efficiency improvements like improved thermostat controls, upgraded lighting, and upgraded heating and cooling systems. (Not bad for a city known more for its [crumbling historical buildings](#) than green building innovation.) Residents can follow City Hall's lead by making their homes more energy-efficient with the help of the [WARM Training Center](#).

Last December, Detroit's then-interim mayor, Kenneth Cockrel Jr. (who took office in late 2008 after Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick [stepped down](#) amid scandal) announced plans to create an [Office of Energy and Sustainability](#). It's too early to tell if Dave Bing, who won the city's mayoral election in May, will build upon Cockrel's green momentum. If he does, Bing may find himself on a [top 10 list](#) of his own.

Learn green

The annual [Bioneers](#) conference in California has become one of the largest sustainability and community-empowerment-focused gatherings in the country. It has grown so big, in fact, that satellite conferences have sprouted up in other cities. [Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit](#) joined the national community in 2005, and has established itself as an important annual meeting place for Detroit individuals and organizations working toward creating a greener and more just future.

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● Posted By Brian Rebain - Thu, Aug 06 2009 at 5:04 PM EST

Is 138 sq. mi. really 'unbelievable'?

The typical meme outlining Detroit's vast, unimaginable size is largely uninformed, and rarely looks at the area of comparably sized cities. Sure, in comparison to Boston, San Francisco, or Manhattan, Detroit will always appear to be ungainly and sprawling, but a quick look at other cities of similar population reveals that Detroit is surprisingly dense by comparison. Dallas? - 342 sq. mi. San Diego? - 324 sq. mi. San Jose? - 175 sq. mi. Jacksonville? - 767 sq. mi.!!! Now that's unbelievable. One may counter that those are all southern and western towns that developed at a different times. A quick look at



midwestern cities reveals similar findings. Columbus, OH - 210 sq. mi. Indianapolis - 365 sq. mi. Cities like Cleveland and Milwaukee are indeed smaller than Detroit, but when population density is considered, one realizes that Detroit is slightly denser than both. (5600/sq. mi. and 6300/sq. mi. respectively vs. 6600/sq. mi. for Detroit)

I say all this not to discredit the article, but to remind everybody that life in Detroit, much like this article claims, is much different than the popular mythlogy of crumbling industry, rampant crime, abandoned buildings, and unchecked sprawl would like it to be. The city is actually a very cozy place, once you make it your own, and is marked by friendly neighbors, beautiful parks, gorgeous (affordable) architecture, and many many surprises.

Detroit is a complex and fascinating place. My suggestion to all interested parties reading this article is to shutdown the computer and make a visit to our fair city. Only then will you know the real Detroit.

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