

## **BuzzFeed—Why I Bought A House In Detroit For \$500**

*After college, as my friends left Michigan for better opportunities, I was determined to help fix this broken, chaotic city by building my own home in the middle of it. I was 23 years old.*

My first job out of college was working for a construction company in Detroit.

“We’re an all-black company and I need a clean-cut white boy,” my boss told me over drinks in a downtown bar when he hired me. “Customers in the suburbs don’t want to hire a black man.”

When a service call would come in, we would ask, “Does he sound white or black?” If it was the former, I would bid the job. If the latter, my boss would. Detroit is one of the most segregated metro areas in the nation, and for the first time I was getting what it felt like to be on the other side of that line. In contrast to the abstract verbal yoga students at the University of Michigan would perform when speaking about race, this was refreshing. And terrifying. I couldn’t hide behind fancy words any longer.

I grew up in rural Michigan, 45 minutes away from any freeway. I’m the first male member of my family in three generations never to have worked in front of a lathe, and aside from one uncle, I’m the oldest with all of my fingers intact. The university had given me some grandiose ideas like “true solidarity with the oppressed,” and I figured “the oppressed” lived in Detroit, never mind the patrimony. I thought I was making a sacrifice. I thought moving here was staying home when everyone else was leaving the state. I thought I was going to change the world and had some vague notions of starting a school. I cringe at how naive I was. I first rented an apartment in the city, sight unseen, that didn’t have a kitchen sink, so I did my dishes in the bathtub.

Aside from bidding jobs, I spent my days like everyone else: sanding floors in cheap rentals for \$8.50 an hour, which got me thinking: *I could buy a house and fix it up myself*. Not that I was sure how to go about buying, let alone renovating a house. It

was just an inexplicit dream, some trick that would keep me from leaving like everyone else, make me a true Detroiter.

Not long after, I went to a Halloween party dressed as an organ grinder. At one point I set my cardboard organ down in a corner to dance, and when I went back to get a beer I'd hidden inside it, sitting next to the organ, all knotted up and looking out of place, was a guy named Will dressed as an organ grinder's monkey. Between his fingers he held a hand-rolled cigarette.

“You want to go outside and have a smoke?”

After the usual pleasantries, him looking nervous and fidgety, me overeager to make friends, I told him I wanted to buy a house on the city's east side.

He answered, “I just did.”

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Will told me that the best way to buy a house here is to find one you like and then figure out who owns it. He had lived in Detroit a decade before, but moved out to travel the country. This was his homecoming. He purchased the house for \$3,000 from the son of a woman who had died. It had been abandoned for years, but there was an upstairs room full of her possessions — steamer trunks, furniture, family pictures. Some of her photographs still hung on the walls, including a portrait of the first black mayor of Detroit, Coleman Young, and a painting of a white Jesus Christ. She had them arranged so the Christ appeared to be praying to Young. Only half the rooms in the house had electricity; he lit the rest with oil lamps. He let me live with him that summer.

There were almost no other homes around Will's, just scrubland and a few scraggly houses standing against the odds. Once they were packed in together like cardboard matches; only a five-minute bike ride from downtown, it was now the country in the city. The only other house nearby was a hideous cinderblock project house built by an architecture student from Cranbrook, the private school Mitt Romney attended as a teenager. It was abandoned, the frozen pipes burst from the cold.

Behind Will's house was a paradise of wretched forestland. Any homes or buildings had been torn or fallen down, nature reclaiming what it had lost more than a century ago. Full-grown trees stood between dumped boats and hot tubs and railroad ties and piles of rubble, smack-dab on top of where houses used to be. A sextuplet of abandoned grain silos towered over the neighborhood. Scrappers would burn the insulation off copper wire at the bottom, and a rather congenial gentleman, since killed in a fistfight, lived in one of the boats. Occasionally Will and I would climb the towers and look out over the city, smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap beer. I'd try not to fall through the crumbling roof, and we'd point out landmarks, churches, schools, empty factories, trying to figure our place in it all.

"It's like the pilgrims," he told me, looking out over the city. "They came to America for religious freedom and got along with the Native Americans pretty well. It wasn't perfect, but they ate Thanksgiving together, you know. It was the people who came after. They said, 'I can make money from this.' They were the ones with the smallpox blankets, not the pilgrims."

"That sounds like a total bastardization of history."

"It may be. But it rings true."

Abutting the silos was the Dequindre Cut, a railroad trench dug from the earth during Detroit's manufacturing days. It had long since ceased to be a functional railroad and was teeming with flora and fauna: pheasants big as chickens, rabbits, the odd sapling, little red foxes, tawny waist-high grass. It was beautiful. Will swears he saw a deer down there once — five minutes from downtown — staring at him with glistening eyes before bounding off. After we cooked dinner from what we grew in his garden — lettuce, tomatoes, radishes, peas, beans, cabbage — we would take walks with his dog during that time on summer evenings when the sun rakes across the earth just right. We could walk for hours and not see a soul.

We would ride our bikes around the city ducking into wide-open shells, houses with hanging porches and forgotten rose bushes, naked and ragged and proud, trash

seeping from the orifices where windows used to be. We could walk right in, not even plywood covering the doors, stepping on glass and broken tile and abandoned dreams. I also looked into some move-in-ready foreclosures, pert brick homes in Detroit's stable and well-populated areas. I could have purchased many of these for less than the price of a 20-year-old car. I just couldn't bring myself to profit off of someone else's misery. All I could think of were the families once living in these homes and the day the banks and sheriff put them on the street.

I wanted something nobody wanted, something that was impossible. The city is filled with these structures, houses whose yellowy eyes seem to follow you. It would be only one house out of thousands, but I wanted to prove it could be done, prove that this American vision of torment could be built back into a home. I also decided I would do it the old-fashioned way, without grants or loans or the foundation money pouring into the city. I would work for everything that went into the house, because not everyone has access to those resources. I also wanted to prove to myself and my family I was a man. While they were building things, I had been writing poems.

One day Will and I rode past a white Queen Anne in Poletown on a quiet corner. Next to it sat two empty lots, plenty of space for a dog and a garden, a shed and a pond. The neighbors were friendly and kept their homes well-maintained, but there were four other abandoned houses on the block. The neighbors said the Queen Anne had been abandoned for a decade, simply left behind by the previous owner like a shredded tire on the highway, anything of value stolen long ago. It had a mangy wraparound porch and a big kitchen, but no chimney — I could build one of those — and the first time I cautiously walked inside, I knew it would be my home.

When I told the neighbors I wanted to buy it, they looked at me like I was insane. A young white kid stuck out like a snowball in Texas, and I was self-conscious and very aware of my color, stumbling over my replies for the first time in my life. When I was moving in, most other people, white and black, were moving out.

“Just looking at it, it’s a lot of work,” the neighbor across the street said, figuring I would give up after a month or two. There were no doors or windows, plumbing or electricity, nothing. There was a pornographic hole in the roof. It was just a clapboard shell filled with trash on a crumbling foundation. I’m talking chest-high piles of clothing, yard waste, empty tin cans, toys, diapers, those white Styrofoam trays that raw meat comes in, used auto parts, construction debris, liquor store plastic bags and bottles, rolls of old carpeting, broken furniture and glass, literal piles of human shit, uncapped needles. When I was clearing the house — which took me three months, with a pitchfork and a snow shovel — I also found the better part of a Dodge Caravan inside, cut into chunks with a reciprocating saw. From what folks who grew up around here told me, it was an “insurance job.” Someone had needed the money, so they reported the van stolen and paid a couple of guys to cut it apart and deposit it around the city. The backyard was a jungle of invasive plants and more trash, trash so old it had turned to dirt.

I purchased the house in October 2009 at a live county auction for \$500 cash. I was 23 years old.

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Detroit is the true 20th-century boomtown, the most American of stories. In 100 years, we went from a backwater hamlet to one of the richest cities in the United States. Referred to as the “Paris of the Midwest,” it was the city with the most theater seats in the U.S. outside of Broadway, the silicon valley of the ’60s, the highest rate of homeownership in the nation. We boomed and we busted, hard and early, and like an alcoholic drunk on 20th-century capitalism, we hit rock bottom first and hardest. My neighborhood is representative.

Poletown was originally settled in the 1860s and ’70s by Polish immigrants, and it grew steadily through the 1940s thanks to the immigration of more Poles, Italians, Jews, and blacks looking for jobs in the factories, slaughterhouses, and auto plants. It was a hardworking and faithful community, the kind of place where people would take out second mortgages on their homes to build the half-dozen massive churches of stone, marble, and gold leaf that were built to rival cathedrals in Europe.

In the '50s the neighborhood was bisected, north and south, by Interstate 94. In the '60s, Interstate 75 cut through the neighborhood. It was run straight through Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, two of the most economically and culturally important black neighborhoods in the United States, both of which bled into Poletown. What was left was replaced with a model community, and the rest of the people moved to towering projects, the Jefferies and the Brewster-Douglass, where Diana Ross grew up.

In the early '80s, the entire north half of the neighborhood was demolished to make way for a 362-acre auto plant, heavily subsidized by the city, state, and federal governments. More than 4,000 residents were eminent-domained from their property; 1,400 homes, several churches, and 140 businesses were razed to make way for the promise of three shifts of work a day. (A Jewish cemetery is located inside the plant's grounds, as it was illegal to move it. If relatives wish to visit their ancestors, they can do so on two days a year.) The Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant, as it's officially known, sits just down the street from the massive abandoned Packard Automotive Plant, a 40-acre trash heap designed by Albert Kahn and the largest abandoned factory in the world. It's often on fire, and people mention it like it's the weather. Trees grow from the roof, and tourists come from all over the world to take photographs. Aside from the 18-story abandoned train station, it's the best ruin porn in the city.

Approximately 6,500 jobs were promised at the Poletown plant in exchange for demolishing half the neighborhood. At its peak employment, roughly 3,500 people worked there, less than the number of people kicked out of their homes to build it. It was the death rattle of American manufacturing, the last attempt at making cars in Detroit for anything more than lip service or sentiment. Fewer than 1,500 people work there today, manufacturing the Chevy Volt, among other vehicles.

The churches are almost all closed. The Catholic archdiocese agreed to sell two of them to General Motors to make way for the Poletown plant, and the rest are left unsupported by the church so the tithing of the faithful can be used elsewhere, the towering monuments to God falling into disrepair like the rest of the neighborhood. St.

Stanislaus gave up the ghost in 1989, St. Albertus in 1990. Both are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The projects are being demolished. It's costing the city \$8 million — not because they are unsafe, but because they look bad to investors driving along the same freeway that helped create them in the first place. I-75 continues to facilitate corpulent suburban sprawl. The Packard plant is a toxic landfill. Most of the people who once lived in Poletown are gone, left for the suburbs.

When people speak about “bringing Detroit back,” is this what we want to go back to?

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There was no way I could live in the house when I first bought it, so I moved out of Will's to Forestdale, a verdant block in Poletown that was walking distance from my new home. Twenty-five years ago, a wild and virtuous teacher named Paul Weertz bought a house on Forestdale after his downtown home burned down. Through the years, he's transformed the block into an arcadian oasis on Detroit's east side, where old Poles and young white artists live next to black doctors and immigrant mothers from Hungary or Mexico. He raised his now-grown children there, convinced friends and colleagues to move in, and saved the block from crack houses, fire, and neglect. Nearly all the homes still stand, a rather incredible accomplishment considering much of the rest of the neighborhood looks like a mouth full of broken teeth.

All but two of the houses on the block behind Forestdale are gone. Instead of letting it slowly fill up with trash and despair, Paul planted an orchard. In the summer peaches and pears and apples and plums grow on the trees, and vegetables of every make and model grow in the soil. Neighbors care for bees and collect honey in autumn. In the winter, Paul floods it to make a backyard ice rink. He's still tinkering with a homemade way to groom the ice, and recently I found him back there on his knees with a clothing iron plugged into an extension cord, trying to iron the ice smooth. That didn't work. He'll figure something out eventually.

Down the street from Forestdale, Paul seeded a hay field on a lot a school once stood. Twice a summer we bale hay for the animals to eat over winter — 400 bales each time in a good year, heaved into hay wagons and pickup trucks by the neighbors. Paul taught at the Catherine Ferguson Academy, a school for pregnant and nursing teenagers, which at one time had a graduation rate of over 90% (when the national average for pregnant teens is 40%). He started a farm at the school to help teach the young women about science and mothering by caring for crops and livestock. The hay fed these animals too. One day I visited him in class, and he stopped mid-sentence during a lecture. One of the baby chickens was hatching in a fish tank and he gathered his students around to watch the tiny beak protrude from the shell and the new life emerge. In 2011 his school was closed by the city, citing cost, and was purchased by a charter school. Paul lost his job and the school is now run for profit.

Children run the length of Forestdale playing tag, riding skateboards, cross-country skiing on snow-covered streets — all the while in Detroit's east side, which reporters describe as “bombed out” and like “Mogadishu”— even the police say it's “war-like... unsafe for visitors.” Which is the truth and it isn't. Because Forestdale is a special place, where people want to be left alone to live their lives and raise their children and tend the soil. Paul just wants to drive his tractor. They're people who value their privacy. (I've changed the name of the block.) On the whole, it's an incredible testament to the power of vision and community over anarchy.

The house I stayed in was on the corner and had been purchased from an old Polish family who had left for Florida. It had no running water, walls, or heat. I could stay there free in exchange for looking after the place and doing a bit of upkeep and repairs. I worked on my house as long into the autumn as I could, swapping plywood boards for windows, demolishing walls, hanging doors. I bought a chainsaw with a neighbor, and when the summer storms came and the city left the downed trees lying where they may, we cut the logs from the road and stacked them on the porch.

The place where I was staying had a wood-burning stove but no furnace, and it became the first of two Detroit winters I lived without any real heat. Which isn't unusual. People told me their stories about frozen toilets, burst pipes, and small fires started by space heaters. Dozens and dozens of people without heat: ministers, artists, the elderly. It's one of the first things to go, and January averages in the teens.

I could never get the fire in the stove to burn all night, and I could see my breath all day, even with the fire going. I slept in a wool cap and sometimes my coat, under so many blankets my father thought I might asphyxiate. One morning I sat on the toilet and an icicle the size of a carrot hung from my faucet. When my pens froze, I thawed them out in a pot of water on the stove. I didn't have hot water.

A neighbor down the street — I'll call her Sophie — would let me shower in her house. She's the kind of person who once found two baby pheasants abandoned by their mother and built an entire room on her first floor into a habitat for them. It was complete with tree branches and grass where they could grow and run free. She would leave her front door unlocked so I could go in and shower whenever I wanted. Most people have bars on their windows.

Her roommate was a musician with the voice of a towheaded angel. She would sometimes strum on her guitar and sing sad, soft songs while I let the steaming water wash away the cold and filth from my unwinding body. "You never know how good it feels to be clean," she sang as she smiled at me, "until you've been really dirty." Gunshots pierced the night, halting conversation with a shock. The talk resumed without comment, and nobody sitting around the fire ever thought to call the cops. Their average response time is about an hour. We would hear them two or three times a week at that point. It never stops being sickeningly, plainly, frightening...

*To read the rest of the story, including original layout, photos and inline links, etc., please visit: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/drewphilp/why-i-bought-a-house-in-detroit-for-500>*