

D'S HERE...

Anyone involved in development will tell you that if you want to change the perception of a place, the first thing you do is give it a new name. You say it enough times and soon memories fade, people accept and finally focus on something else. In this sense, both Cabrini-Green in Chicago and Cass Corridor in Detroit become the ubiquitous University Village.

Soon, it is as if it always has been.

And in case you haven't heard, what once was a private version of this metamorphosis in selected streets of the city has now found its way into the broader lexicon of the city proper.

Spend any amount of time outside Detroit and one may be surprised to find that Mo-Town is No-Town to the world around us. Has been for some time. It isn't that Mo-Town as a signifier of the city has been forgotten, it is simply that people now recognize it as simply that, an all-but-empty symbol of a time gone by; a time not to be captured again.

It is symbol of a past, not a present and certainly, not a future.

So, quietly, cautiously, the search for a new moniker began. If you listened closely, you would've heard it in conversations in various and sundry locations, sometimes tentatively, sometimes defiantly. And as with all moments of this sort, it was clearly rough and unofficial, which, of course with a city like this, is as it should be. Such is the source of its influence, its catalytic potential – both for the city and the symbol. However, should you not have been privy to this particular linguistic quest taking place in the bars, clubs, warehouses and studios that house the brave and (trail-) blazin', you might be surprised to learn that it didn't take long for the denizens of Detroit to settle on something that seems to represent this particular moment in time. Momentarily at least, one moniker seems to have the kids all abuzz: the D. Crisp and succinct, not wholly unexpected considering the text-nation from which it emerged.

CUN the D.

Still, while we all (imagined we) knew what it was like to live in Mo-Town – what, exactly, is signified when one claims to live in the D? It is often unclear to me from person to person, specifically what are Ds here? There are at least two that immediately come to mind, and believe me, unlike a typical encounter with the erstwhile pair, these double D's couldn't be more different.

For some people, the D is internalized as despair; that the debris of their existence, both imagined and real, is what orders their day. In this D, decay and disarray frames the fiction that they are destined to live where the physical, emotional and intellectual remnants of the hostilities of the early, the civil disturbances of the mid- and the indifference of the late 20th century come together to define their lives as environmentally predetermined. And while such a vision of the

world is debatable, it is certainly understandable. Yet...it is still no less disturbing. Perception can quickly become reality and in this version of the D, I often find myself distressed by the subsequent disinterest in self-determination demonstrated by those who would rather continue to perpetrate their destructive tendencies on the city...and on themselves.

But, this perspective is not limited only to those for whom these conditions are real; it is also a condition of those whom have either avoided or escaped the physical and symbolic boundaries of the city as well. These are the disinterested; those who primarily reside beyond the edges of the city's decay. I'm perhaps even more dismayed by this group, whom seem to bask dreamingly in denial and disassociate themselves from the physical, political and psychological damn-like fortifications erected at their borders; fortifications that have played a significant part in the city's current deterioration and the defeatist perspectives of the denizens within.

This is the D the world sees most often, displayed in film, photographs, TV, census tracts, crime statistics, newspapers and magazines. In this D, the very notion of change is discredited; there are too many dollars dependant on the status quo. Thus, the possibility of a different kind of life is denied and as a result, the residents of this D live their lives based on false realities; expectations and possibilities are stunted, deformed, and eventually die, stillborn. And for believers of this D, this is as expected, as it must be. What's rendered useless in the fabric of this D are dreams. This is the D that Dave came to save, the D where Bing would replace bling and a new day would dawn; the D that would demand that decades of doom and gloom depart and the D that's destined to fail.

Ahh, but that other D...that D of conversations both high and low about the city; that vision of the D reminds me of the nomadic Dogon, who live in much harsher conditions than Detroit, and yet delight in the design of the everyday, employing material others consider debris, creating desirable environments in which to dwell as they go.

This is the D of defiance, a D that demands to be considered, not by the framework of others, but on its own terms. This is a determined D, a dedicated D; committed to erasing dominant images of decay and the repositioning their urban environment as empowering. For the denizens of this D, self-determination is the key. This D needs no saving; it will save itself.

Derived from a need to be validated, this D is as much about the work as it is the product. Its sites necessitate it; its practitioners demand it; the materials require it; its designers compel it. Yet, due to the nature of such work, it is understandable that the product is often small, incremental and slow in manifesting itself. And as such, despite using and reusing people and places transformatively and creatively, making what was dispensable now indispensable, this is often the D that few – both inside and outside – ever discover.

This is the D of collaborative development; of demonstrative block clubs and determined community development corporations; the D of Heidelberg, MOCA and yes, even the Rock downtown. In this D, the uselessness is a decided lack of dreams, as that inevitably leads to despair.

Now, while this diatribe about the D reveals a rather problematic dichotomy, I do not mean to convey that these perspectives are mutually exclusive. In fact, it is perhaps closer to the truth that they are mutually dependant.

In addition, I do not mean to say that one perspective is correct or incorrect, good or bad. It is important to remember that these perspectives are the products of conditions that are in turn interpreted by the most constantly inconsistent variable of all, people. There are well meaning folks that dally in each world daily.

Finally, I do not mean to say that these two versions of the D are the only understandings of D life. Far from it. What I mean to do here is to highlight that, at best, uselessness is a highly conditional term. Useless to whom? In what manner? And to what purpose? That to engage in such a discussion requires that one first outline the criteria by which such labels are applied and second, acknowledge that this is not the only outline, but one of several possibilities. One person's disposable turntable is another person's indispensable instrument. One person's despair is another one's delight.

One person's small, is another person's BIG.

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