

Headline: “Border crossing – the long, fraught history of the Detroit-Grosse Pointe divide”

Source: Bridge Magazine, October 23, 2014

What: This is a four-page excerpt from an 11-page story. I wrote it and did all the reporting.

Context: This story about the city-suburb border ran at a time when Grosse Pointe Park officials had recently erected a barrier at Alter Road and Kercheval to restrict traffic crossing between mostly white Grosse Pointe and predominantly black Detroit.

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Four pages

By BILL McGraw

When Grosse Pointe Park officials surprised even their own residents this summer by placing three farmers-market sheds in the middle of Kercheval Avenue, blocking access to Detroit, they said the structures were designed to develop a growing dining and entertainment district in that part of their city.

That explanation was greeted with skepticism by Detroiters – and many Park residents – who noted that, over the years, the Park had blocked nearly a quarter of its residential streets that connect with Detroit as the neighborhoods on the city side were becoming majority African American.

At a public meeting of the Grosse Pointe Park city planning commission in September, Mary Anne Barnett, a Park resident who is white, told commission members: “The sheds are a blazing symbol of what Grosse Pointe Park used to represent, that you say isn’t true now.”

“The history of the Grosse Pointes is one of segregation,” Barnett told Bridge after the meeting. “Everybody knows this. Grosse Pointe Park likes to claim that we have the most diverse population of any of the Pointes. But on the other hand, they don’t really mean it because they continue to do things that would indicate that they’re not really welcoming, especially to African Americans.”

One border, two worlds

The border between Detroit and four of the five communities of the Grosse Pointes is six miles long. The stretch between Detroit and Grosse Pointe Park makes up about half of it.

It begins along the water, where Lake St. Clair pours into the Detroit River near the foot of Alter Road. Metal fences and a moat-like canal separate Detroit and the Park.

Wending northward, beyond seven barricaded street corners, the line between mostly black and poor Detroit and the largely white and wealthy Grosse Pointes is invisible, but always present. And it is unique. Virtually every other wealthy suburb in the metro area is several miles distant from Detroit. By contrast, the Detroit-Grosse Pointes border provides an in-your-face contrast that is impossible to ignore; a laid-bare primer on race and class in America.

The sheds fiasco arrived as the Grosse Pointes are undergoing significant racial change and Grosse Pointe Park is attempting to rebrand Kercheval as a regional destination. In the months since, the episode has spawned debate that is taking place in city hall meetings, letters to the editor and demonstrations in both Detroit and the Park about the nature (and limits) of city-suburban relations.

Grosse Pointe Park's city hall is only six miles from Detroit's, and many Park residents work and play in Detroit. Dick Olson, who has lived in Grosse Pointe Park more than 30 years, told members of the Park planning commission that he and his wife "love Detroit" and are heavily involved in its cultural attractions. "We do not want to live in a walled-off city," Olson said.

Hans Barbe, a 30-year-old music teacher, told commissioners that the Kercheval entertainment district should be extended across the border into Detroit. "What's good for our side would be good for their side as well," he said.

As they currently stand, the sheds open up to the public on the Grosse Pointe Park side only. Detroit residents have an unenviable view of the back of the structures. Completing the look from the Detroit side is a series of concrete blocks, like the barriers placed around federal office buildings after 9/11.

"The city-suburb divide is very palpable," Barbe said. "Those walls, in their physical form, represent something inside of us that hasn't been resolved yet in society."

Peeking over the fence

The five Grosse Pointe communities of Grosse Pointe Park, City, Farms, Woods and Shores extend eastward from Detroit along Lake St. Clair in a tree-covered swath of suburbia that, while generally prosperous and frequently wealthy, contains more economic and housing diversity than is generally known.

The Park streets near its western border with Detroit are filled with 1920s-era flats, bungalows and small apartment buildings that house numerous renters in a

densely packed neighborhood known as the Cabbage Patch. Further in, Balfour marks the beginning of a district of sweeping lawns and baronial homes.

Collectively, the five Pointes have six lakefront parks open to residents only; mansion-filled Lake Shore Road, high-achieving schools, two country clubs, three yacht clubs and a total of 45,598 residents, 23 percent less than in 1970.

On a warm evening in September, people ate oysters under a large white tent at a church benefit at Kercheval and Lakepointe in Grosse Pointe Park. Beer drinkers talked at a brewpub in a former church next door, and down the street, diners ate deboned chicken and drank wine at sidewalk tables. Expensive cars and high-end bicycles passed under the twinkling lights strung across the roadway.

Crossing over to the Detroit side, the devastated landscape has an isolated, almost rural look in the area west of Alter Road, but the border also runs along East English Village, one of Detroit's most cohesive middle-class neighborhoods.

On the same night that people were slurping oysters in Grosse Pointe Park, the streets were quiet on the Detroit side of the sheds. There are two bars, an old apartment building, a church and gutted storefronts. The streetlights weren't working. A man rode by on a rickety bike, heading west on Kercheval, past empty lots and into a neighborhood that has more unruly green lots than homes.

The disparity between next-door neighbors is rare – not only in metro Detroit, but across the nation as well.

More than 30 years ago, Columbia University historian Kenneth T. Jackson, in [“Crabgrass Frontier,”](#) his celebrated history of suburbia, called the Alter Road

boundary that separates Detroit from the Pointes “the most conspicuous city-suburban contrast in the United States.” The disparity has only grown since then.