Detroit in ruins

Downtown Detroit: An American Acropolis

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The central districts of many large American cities have entered into advanced stages of decay. This presents distinct problems for the artist concerned with the fate of these urban areas and their inhabitants. How should the photographer, for instance, respond to this state of affairs?

Chilean-born photographer Camilo José Vergara's 19-panel installation *Downtown Detroit: An American Acropolis*, currently on display at the Center Galleries in Detroit, is an effort to grapple with this problem. The photos, organized in an inverted pyramid, are matter-of-fact documents of Detroit's city center, with no attempt to sentimentalize or editorialize. In some cases, two or more photographs have been taken of the same location, to capture it in different seasons ("View south along Park Avenue from Sibley Street") or record further dilapidation ("Metropolitan Building at Farmer and John R."). The sky in "Fireworks—View south along Park Avenue from Sibley Street" forms the red, glowing heart of the piece. Only one human being makes an appearance, a caretaker in "Mr. Broderick's apartment, David Broderick Building, 35th floor."

Vergara, born in 1944 and a resident of the US since 1965, has been recording the state of American cities for two decades. He has noted, "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many photographers were paid to photograph the phenomenal growth of cities. Today, there are very few photographers documenting their demise." He has recorded changes in poverty-stricken neighborhoods in New York City; Newark and Camden, New Jersey; Chicago; Gary, Indiana; Detroit and Los Angeles.

Vergara's most recent published work, a collection of photographs and writings, is *The New American Ghetto* (Rutgers University Press, 1995). In the preface he writes: "Ghetto cityscapes, with their dramatic change of function, their starkness and sheer size, challenge us to reject the human misery they represent."

The current display in Detroit is a return to an issue Vergara first raised in two magazine articles in 1995. At the time he created something of a scandal with his proposal that 12 square blocks of downtown Detroit be preserved as a "skyscraper ruins park," an "American Acropolis."

The photographer maintains that the city has a downtown unlike any other. He notes that Detroit has one of the largest collections of pre-Depression skyscrapers in the world and that in no other comparable urban area has the process of decay and abandonment advanced as far. One in five buildings in the downtown area is empty or thinly occupied, and most of the skyscrapers are "nearly empty and several in advanced states of ruin.... The place that invented planned obsolescence has itself become obsolescent" (*Planning*, August 1995).

In *Metropolis* (April 1995) Vergara commented: "In a late-twentieth-century version of the decline of the empire, down-and-outers—the elderly, homeless, alcoholics, drug addicts, and the insane—loiter in the shadows of vacant skyscrapers."

In a telephone conversation, Vergara insisted that there was not a trace of irony in his proposal for a ruins park. He is a serious individual and a serious artist, so one wants to take him at his word. Although not quite as radical as the Surrealist proposal in the 1930s that the Arc de Triomphe in Paris—symbol of French nationalism and militarism—be buried in a mountain of manure and then blown up, there is an original and intriguing element to Vergara's project.

After noting in the *Metropolis* article that most of Detroit's city center had been "saved" due to the cost of razing it to the ground, Vergara introduced his idea: "We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national historic park of play and wonder, an urban Monument Valley.... Midwestern prairie would be allowed to invade from the north. Trees, vines, and wildflowers would grow on roofs and out of windows; goats and wild animals—squirrels, possum, bats, owls, ravens, snakes and insects—would live in the empty behemoths, adding their calls, hoots and screeches to the smell of rotten leaves and animal droppings."

City authorities huffed and puffed at the suggestion: 'outrageous,' 'an affront to Detroiters,' etc. His proposal did not jibe with the official boosterism, according to which 'Detroit is back!' (An official blurb reads: "The Mayor of Detroit, Dennis W. Archer, is overseeing an economic turnabout for the city through city rejuvenation efforts in cooperation with citizens, community organizations, and businesses...") John Slater, chairman of the Detroit Planning Commission, told the press, "It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.... For him to suggest that this is an empty ghost town is bizarre." The *Detroit Free Press*, in an editorial titled "Blight World?," sniffed: "That certainly isn't the face we want Detroit to show the world."

A letter writer to *Planning* magazine observed: "The author says that the skyscraper ruins park would be a place where one could go to 'escape capitalism and to experience silence.' How can one escape capitalism in a market economy and what would prompt

one to do so?"

In his *Metropolis* piece Vergara reported the reaction of Michael Goodin of *Crain's Detroit Business*: "'For a city to set itself as the world's symbolic ruin—that is not going to attract tourists from Peoria, Illinois.... You are not going to attract first- and second-tier suppliers to downtown Detroit or health field corporations or other automotive entities to a downtown that is composed of permanent ruins.... The Romans, that is a dead civilization. Americans are not a dead civilization.'"

Vergara has obviously struck a nerve. The city authorities have good reason to respond with hostility. The disastrous condition of Detroit's city center (as well, of course, as many of its residential neighborhoods), of which Vergara's proposal is a pointed reminder, is not merely an embarrassment and a disincentive to investment and tourism, it is an expression of profound social failure.

Detroit's rise and subsequent decline was rapid. On the eve of the Civil War the city had 45,000 thousand residents; over the next half-century the population increased tenfold. The most extraordinary growth of all—not surprising, when one takes into account the evolution of the automobile industry—took place between 1910 and 1930. Detroit's population doubled between 1910 and 1920, and rose by another 600,000 by 1930, to 1.5 million. The value of industrial production in the city rose from $600 million to $900 million in the course of one year alone—from 1915 to 1916. From 1865 to 1950 Detroit climbed from forty-second to fifth-largest city in the US.

The construction of Detroit's skyscrapers began after World War I. Hudson's department store, the tallest in the world, was completed in 1924, the same year as the 29-story Book-Cadillac Hotel, the city's most exclusive and then the world's tallest hotel. The Buhl Building was completed in 1925; the Penobscot—the city's tallest building for half a century—followed in 1928; the Guardian Building opened for business, along with the David Stott Building, in 1929.

In 1919 Henry Ford declared history to be "more or less bunk." A decade later *Outlook* magazine proclaimed Detroit to be "the most modern city in the world, the city of tomorrow. There is no past, there is no history." Derided and dismissed, historical laws have nonetheless had their say.

No doubt a number of specific factors contributed to the degeneration of Detroit's urban core, so precipitous in recent decades. But how can one reject the conclusion that more than anything else it mirrored the decline in the relative world position and self-confidence of US capitalism, and, specifically, of its automotive industry? One must add that Detroit's decomposition demonstrates the inadequacy of the market as an instrument of social planning, the particularly anarchic character of economic life in this country and the general shortsightedness of the American ruling class.

Vergara insists that his proposal has a purely aesthetic character; he is neither "fighting City Hall" nor "making a new revolution." "Ruins are powerful," he says. "Poets have always been fascinated with ruins." They are as impressive as mountains, "they both catch the light in a certain way." I pointed out that skyscrapers had different histories than mountains. "You can appreciate them without history," he responded. No doubt this is all true, but it seems to evade an important issue.

The serious contemplation of Roman ruins did not begin until nearly a thousand years after the collapse of that empire, and, moreover, they were not then viewed as *natural* objects. As British art historian Francis Haskell writes, "The past evoked by ruins is a generalised one, deeply imbued with meditations on the transitoriness of earthly powers and *the fragility of human achievements*" (*History and Its Images* —Emphasis added.) A considerable number of Detroit's current residents, however, were alive at the time that the "ruins" Vergara is proposing to preserve were constructed. The society that put them up continues to exist and indeed claims to be thriving. Inevitably a proposal to organize a memorial to its decay will both offend the authorities and itself become a social issue.

One cannot accuse Vergara of adopting an indifferent attitude toward the misery bound up with Detroit's decline. He writes eloquently of "the disrupted lives, the lack of future, the city's destruction." He asks: "Why are we surrounded by so much decay and death? How much longer will it go on?"

Why then is he so reluctant to draw out the social dimensions of his project? The retrograde intellectual climate must play a role in this. Artists and intellectuals weren't always so shamefaced about advocating revolt. Isn't it possible furthermore that the prevailing skepticism about the possibility of radical social change encourages the artist, desperate to find beauty, to detect too much of redeeming aesthetic value in what exists or even the decay of what exists? Every object and location is picturesque if we choose to make it so.

In any event, we will continue to place the best possible interpretation on Vergara's "skyscraper ruins park"—that it is not seriously intended as an appeal to the hearts and minds of the clique that operates Detroit in the interests of profit, but rather a challenge, a provocation, a slap in the face of official public opinion.

In the end one can only thank the photographer for contributing the fantastic image of squirrels, possum and ravens leaving their droppings in the "cathedrals and castles of commerce, erected for the advancement and glory of industrial capitalism and its champions."