

Protest turns back attempt to demolish Detroit art project

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23 September 1998

A large crowd of protesters Monday forced City of Detroit work crews to abandon an attempt to dismantle the Heidelberg Project, an art project created to highlight the problem of poverty and urban decay. Tuesday a Wayne County Circuit Court judge issued a temporary restraining order against the city administration of Democratic Mayor Dennis Archer who has ordered the art work removed, claiming it is an eyesore.

The creator of the project, Tyree Guyton, has won international recognition for his work. It takes its name from its location, Heidelberg Street, on the east side of Detroit. Starting in 1986 he began using discarded objects such as old shoes, hubcaps, car parts, household appliances and broken dolls to decorate the neighborhood. He intended his work as an expression of outrage at the social degradation and blight gripping Detroit, the poorest big city in the United States. It has since become the third most visited tourist attraction in Detroit.

The Heidelberg project survived an attempt by former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young to have it removed in 1991. Recently the project has drawn renewed ire from Detroit city officials. One of Guyton's most vociferous opponents, Democratic City Councilwoman Kay Everett, called the artwork 'glorified garbage.' She offered to bulldoze the project personally. Clearly the Archer administration and its allies find the implicit indictment of corporate America embodied in the project at odds with their attempt to promote Detroit as a 'business friendly' city.

When work crews arrived September 21 they found a large crowd of people blocking Heidelberg Street. Among those present were many residents of the impoverished east side neighborhood who had come to show their support for the artist and his message.

One protester, Johnny Brown, a homeless man who was befriended by Guyton, told the WSWs, 'They came this morning, but they were afraid. There were a couple hundred people. They had this cherry picker and these big trucks.

'I was willing to lay down in front of a bulldozer, whatever it takes to stop it. It is not just Tyree anymore, it's the people.

'The city workers came here and they just sat all morning. Then they gave Tyree a big hug and left. They didn't want to come here and move anything.

'There are abandoned buildings that need to be torn down all around. I am 45; half my life is gone. I don't know what it is like to have a car and own a home. All Archer and the politicians care about is getting the casinos and lining their own pockets. There are people out here who are homeless and in need. Not only is Tyree an artist, he cares about the people.'

Cheno Wicker, another east side resident, said, 'He has a definite message and there have been results. He speaks about blight, about bringing people together.

'This project has drawn support from around the world. There is a lot of community support too. The economy is doing good, some neighborhoods are doing good, but this neighborhood could use some help, first of all by tearing down all these abandoned homes. I believe a lot of people know what is happening, but are afraid to speak out. I believe if you are right, you should be bold.'

Supporters of the Heidelberg Project told the WSWs that the judge's temporary restraining order gives them up to October 2 to prepare a strong legal case against the city's destruction of the artwork.

See Also:

The last days of the Heidelberg Project
[20 August 1998]



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