

A Tale of Two [Gentrified] Cities

Detroit and Brixton

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ABSTRACT

On what basis are places compared to one another? Population? Geographic location? Historical background? Size? Detroit, a city often associated with decay, has been categorized as a 'dead,' 'empty,' and 'miserable' city comparable to New Orleans, St. Louis, or Cleveland.¹ On the other hand, there are places whose reputations have never been tarnished with such stark criticism. Brixton, a district in London, U.K., has had a similar trajectory as Detroit, yet it has never been considered 'dead,' but rather seen as an opportunity. While Detroit and Brixton both hold similar histories, their present conditions are quite different. This, I argue, is due to their geographic and population sizes. The sizes of Brixton, a district of 3.8 square miles, and Detroit, a city of 139 square miles, affect the ways in which their residents could both resist and embrace the perceptions and realities of their space.

I have decided to capitalize the word 'Black' throughout this piece when referring to Black communities because the narrative is about Black space and the experiences that Black folks have had in them. These stories are the result of their Blackness and the discrimination that they faced because of it.

DETROIT: THE MOTOR CITY RUNS OUT OF GAS

The imagery of dereliction and blight produced by deindustrialization and urban decline is constantly and unforgivingly associated with the City of Detroit. Detroit became synonymous with 'ruin porn': abandoned factories, deserted houses, boarded-up schools and empty, vacant blocks for miles. How did Detroit, once the fourth-largest city in the nation at nearly two million inhabitants, known as the automobile capital of the world, become closely linked with downfall and decline?

There is a misconception that the decline of Detroit began with the 1967 rebellion. It is more accurate to say that Detroit rose and fell with the automobile industry.² When the Ford Motor Company was founded in 1903, Detroit was the 13th-largest city in the nation at 285,704 residents.³ Ford and other automobile companies quickly dominated the city – hence the nickname: The Motor City. By 1930, there were 1.5 million people living in Detroit.⁴

Once the U.S. entered World War II (WWII), the auto industry quickly converted to assist with wartime efforts, creating another population influx that led to the city's decentralization.³ In 1933, the New Deal housing mortgage program led people to buy homes instead of renting apartments. The Black population was excluded from this program; they were viewed as risky investments and a threat to property values.⁴ As a result of this and redlining, African Americans had significantly fewer housing options, which led to the creation of Black Bottom, a self-sufficient Black neighborhood. Additionally, Black residents

frequented Paradise Valley, the business and entertainment center.

These areas of Detroit served as 'mini-cities' for the Black population – where every business or service imaginable was owned by Black Detroiters.⁷ Although there was a strong sense of community in Black Bottom, residents were cramped and the housing was subpar. Without alternate options, residents were forced to stay.

Despite severe housing shortages, high-paying manufacturing jobs brought tens of thousands of people into the city, resulting in increased racial tension during WWII. The daily injustices faced by Black people, such as malicious racism in the factories or informal segregation in housing, prompted the race riot of 1943. According to the Detroit Historical Society, 9 whites and 25 African Americans were killed in the riots. No whites were killed by police. There was about 2 million dollars in damages, most of which occurred in Black Bottom.

After the war, Detroit lost nearly 150,000 jobs to its surrounding suburbs. In the early 1960s, the construction of the Chrysler Freeway allowed whites to follow manufacturing jobs to the suburbs. In contrast, Black people were immobile due to discriminatory housing policies, but they were quickly being relocated because of urban renewal projects. While many Black Bottom residents were forced into overcrowded public housing projects, whites moved to new, spacious homes in the suburbs.

From 1950 to 1960, Detroit lost nearly 10 percent of its population while the rest of the Metro Detroit region gained 25 percent.⁸ Detroit witnessed regular conflicts between

the predominately white police force and the Black population, which is what led to the five-day 1967 rebellion. The 1967 rebellion came at a time when institutional racism and segregation were at a peak: deindustrialization continued and more people were deserting the city to live the 'American Dream' elsewhere. By the end of the five-day rebellion, 43 people were dead (33 of whom were Black), thousands were arrested, and more than 2,500 buildings were destroyed.⁹ After the rebellion, 40,000 whites left Detroit, and the number doubled the next year. Figures 1-3 display the drastic population changes that took place from mid-century until 2010. Today, the 1967 uprising is considered to be the third-worst riot in American history, just behind the New York draft riots in 1863 and the Los Angeles riots in 1992.¹⁰

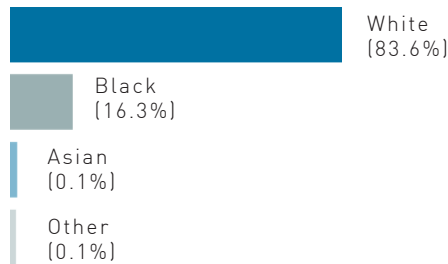


Figure 1. Detroit Population by Race, 1950 U.S. Census.

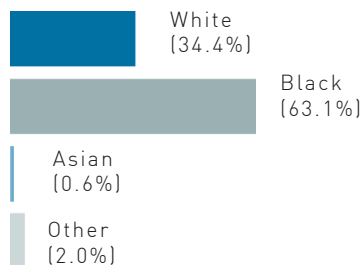


Figure 2. Detroit Population by Race, 1980 U.S. Census.

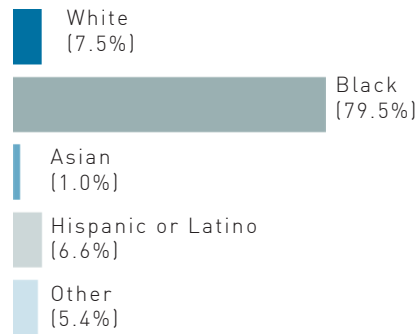


Figure 3. Detroit Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2010 U.S. Census.

In 2010, the city was still majority Black. White flight from the city to the suburbs left those who stayed with a suffering city, a deficient tax base, an insufficient number of jobs, and depleted resources.

Over the next 20 years after the rebellion, there was a large focus on creating a new image for the city, specifically the downtown area, but for whom is the question. Many big-ticket projects, intended to positively affect the perception of Detroit, took shape. These included the Renaissance Center, the People Mover, Joe Louis Arena, three new department stores, a new hotel, Riverwalk Condominiums, and the restoration of the Fox Theater, among many other projects. While the elaborate developments grew, the population continued to shrink. Detroit's image-led development didn't solve core problems that the city faced like poverty, crime, and loss of industrial jobs.

From the mid-1980s onward, Detroit's image and identity revolved around it being a Black city surrounded by hostile white suburbs, a city that was considered to be "the leading symbol of social and economic failure in America."¹¹

Detroit's nickname of 'Motor Capital of the World' had been traded in for 'Murder Capital of America.' Crime rates in Detroit reached

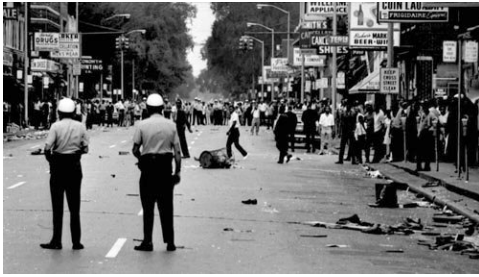


Figure 4: [Detroit Free Press, 1967].

the highest point in 1991, at more than 12,400 crimes per 100,000 people.¹² In the final years of Coleman Young's administration, the 'Detroit vs. Everybody' mentality made itself apparent as the city settled into its identity as a Black city. The demographic shift that the city was experiencing carried over into Detroit's leadership and authority. By 1990, Detroit had the most integrated police force in any major U.S. city.¹³

In November of 1990, ABC's *Primetime Live* further perpetuated the negative image of Detroit in a special about the city called "Detroit's Agony." In this 20-minute segment, the reporter overly emphasizes Devil's Night, drugs, and violence and villainizes Mayor Coleman Young, all the while undermining and lightheartedly discussing the role that blatant racism had on the city:

*In fact, Detroit which at its peak in the 50's was home to 2 million and 80 percent white, today has less than 1 million and about 70 percent of them Black. So now, when it's hammer time in the city, it's tea time in the suburbs. This is where whites went.*¹⁴

Dennis Archer became the second black mayor of Detroit in 1994, succeeding Coleman Young. Similar to Young, Mayor Archer was concerned with growth and development, but he was more focused on reviving the entertainment district. Under the Archer administration, Detroit saw the revamping of the Fox Theater and the surrounding area, the additions of Ford Field

and Comerica Park, and the construction of three casinos, among other developments. Again, while there was much growth and optimism about the future of the city, the growth did not reach average Detroiters in their neighborhoods.

In 2006, Detroit hosted Super Bowl XL, which brought 100,000 people and plenty of revenue to the city. Some consider the hosting of the Super Bowl to have served as a catalyst for redevelopment.¹⁵ The year leading up to the Super Bowl revolved around Detroit being built, rebuilt, and beautified – a pattern that is prevalent today.

BRIXTON: "ONLY GO THERE IF YOU LIVE THERE"

The average Detroiters has never heard of Brixton, possibly due to the district's small size; however, most Brixtonites know of Detroit because of its portrayal in the media. Unlike Detroit, Brixton has not been bogged down with a negative reputation of crime, poverty, and negligence. Brixton, a district of South London, is now known for being a trendy, welcoming, multicultural area. On the surface, it seems as though Brixton reaped all of the benefits of gentrification without experiencing the complex and often challenging history that Detroit is known for. Until the 19th century, the land that Brixton sits on was undeveloped and mostly used for agriculture. During the 1860s, Brixton became a popular area because of the introduction and eventually popularity of the railways and the Vauxhall Bridge, which made getting to and from the city center of London more convenient.¹⁶

Brixton quickly transformed into a suburbanized middle-class area due to its proximity to public transportation and easy access to services. By the mid 1900s, Brixton was South London's biggest and most popular shopping center, as well as

a successful entertainment district with theatres and pubs. During this time, the district experienced a significant influx of settlers.¹⁷

As Detroit was shifting from manufacturing cars to building tanks to assist with WWII efforts, Brixton was bombed. The resulting damage led to a terrible housing crisis that contributed to urban decay. Shortly thereafter, there was an aggressive push for urban renewal; however, instead of housing for the middle and upper classes, public housing was built. In the 1940s and 1950s, many immigrants, particularly from the West Indies, established roots in Brixton, mostly because it was one of the only areas in which Black people were welcome. Many other districts in London rejected the incoming immigrant population with discriminatory signage: "No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs."¹⁸

In the following decades, Brixton would continue to deindustrialize, diversify, and grow. By the 1980s, Brixton had become a predominantly Afro-Caribbean area plagued with high levels of unemployment, poverty, and crime, along with poor housing options and growing tensions between the police and residents. In an attempt to reduce street crime, the Metropolitan Police began Operation Swamp 81, which allowed police officers to stop, search and potentially arrest any individual who seemed suspicious.¹⁹ Plain clothed and uniformed police officers were on duty more frequently and in higher numbers in Brixton than anywhere else in London, and in a five-day period, more than

1,000 people were targeted under this law (943 stops, 118 arrests, and 75 charges). The vast majority of those stopped by the police were young black men.

As a result of Operation Swamp 81, Brixton was made notorious for a three-day long uprising in 1981 that was ignited by the consistent mistreatment that the community faced. Five thousand people were involved in the uprising, residents and police officers sustained injuries, and almost 150 buildings were damaged. There were 82 arrests.²⁰

The U.K. government commissioned the Scarman Report: *The Brixton Disorders*. The report was released in November 1981 "to inquire urgently into the serious disorder in Brixton... and to report, with the power to make recommendations."²¹ The Report found that there were indeed problems of racial disadvantage or discrimination and urban decline, and it advised urgent action to prevent discrimination from causing societal tension. Scarman recommended changes in police training and law enforcement, an increase in the number of minorities in the police force, and increased community involvement in policing. Scarman stressed the importance of the ethnic groups to have a strong sense of place and the need for people to feel a sense of responsibility for their own spaces. The public generally agreed with the content of the Scarman Report; therefore, some of these recommendations were implemented.

In 1993, the racially charged killing of an 18-year-old black man, Stephen Lawrence, by white teenagers led to the 1999 Macpherson Report, which revealed that the police force failed this case and the community. It was found that the police had further contributed to institutionalized racism in Brixton and broader. This murder, considered the highest-profile racial killing in U.K. history, raised awareness and brought profound cultural shifts in the public's opinions and beliefs on racism and the police.



Figure 5: (BBC News, 1981).

The most recent riot in Brixton history took place two years later, in 1995, after the killing of another black man, Wayne Douglas, while in police custody. This death led to a march down Brixton Road. With several hundred people involved, the riot resulted in damage to property and vehicles in the area.

There seemed to be promising changes in Brixton through in-depth reports, policy changes, and new initiatives; however, it is clear that the Black community continued to be the target of police violence. In response, the community organized riots, rebellions, and demonstrations. Over the decades, members of the minority population have done their part in maintaining their roots and fighting for justice in their communities, but what happens when that history gets wiped away or bulldozed over to make way for something new?

DETROIT'S "RISING FROM THE ASHES"

While participating in Semester in Detroit, I worked in the Block Building at Cass Park. Every day on my commute to work, I saw the construction of the new Little Caesars Arena; I watched it go from a lot surrounded by modest homes to a complete construction site with not a house in sight. After living in the Cass Corridor, now popularly known as Midtown, for only three months, I could tell that it was a neighborhood intended to appeal to young, college-educated professionals, with its bars, trendy tapas restaurants, coffee shops, dog parks, lofts, and condos. And it was working.

Since the early 1900s, Detroit's dominant image has been firmly cast as entrepreneurial. The success that the automobile industry brought to Detroit made the city dynamic and robust. In 1951, *Time Magazine* published an article celebrating the city's 250th birthday and claiming that the city

best represented the spirit of modernism in America.²³ Today, the city is experiencing a similar phenomenon. Detroit has once again become a magnet.

However, gentrification involves not only physically moving others out, but also emotionally taking up space. In more recent years, the Cass Corridor has been rebranded as Midtown, which for many long-time residents strips the original meanings and purposes of these spaces that are significant to the community. Instead of newcomers moving into these areas and embracing the existing culture, these spaces are being altered and redesigned to fit the 'new and improved' image of the city.

Detroit is experiencing great improvement, but who are these developments intended to benefit? Inequalities have deepened in the city because of the influx of resources and opportunities in the downtown and Midtown areas, and hardly anything outside of that 7.2 square mile radius. As of 2010, 20 square miles of the city were vacant, filled with large empty fields, rundown buildings, and condemned houses. Comparatively, there are pockets of populated areas scattered throughout the city that are all experiencing different levels of opulence (or lack thereof). Depending on whom you talk to, the city is a place that either is full of opportunity or has none at all. Relatively few Detroiters believe that investments in Midtown and Downtown benefit long-time residents. The city has become a magnet for entrepreneurs, authors, hipsters, artists, techies, and more – for those who can afford it; for those who cannot, it is still full of opportunities, most of which they cannot access.

When people say that Detroit is 'bouncing back,' typically they are referring to the flourishing downtown area: Campus Martius, the Riverfront, and new shops and restaurants lining Woodward Avenue, all of which have the 'urban vibe' that everyone loves; that is, until it becomes 'too urban.' When people say "Detroit Hustles Harder,"

they are referring to the rest of the city beyond downtown. The motto itself is positive and serves as a source of pride; however, the meaning stems from the hard-working residents who have continuously had to hustle to make ends meet. While downtown Detroit has been on the rise, the rest of Detroit has been dealing with water shutoffs, tax foreclosures, a crumbling education system, unreliable public transit, and less-than-ideal public services.

Gentrification is not an inevitable phenomenon; Detroit is experiencing a prioritization of certain demographics of people. Those who are 'wanted' in the city are being rewarded with housing and employment incentives, tax breaks, and many other perks, while the rest are being pushed to the side. Some newcomers are receiving significantly more benefits than those who have spent their entire lives in the city, even after most abandoned it. If you work for certain companies like Quicken Loans and DTE Energy, there are a number of benefits:²⁴

- New homeowners receive up to a \$20,000 forgivable loan toward the purchase of their primary residence.
- New renters receive a \$2,500 allowance of funding toward the cost of their apartment in the first year following the second year.
- Existing renters receive a \$1,000 allowance of funding for renewing a lease.
- Existing homeowners receive matching funds of up to \$5,000 for exterior improvements for projects of \$10,000 or more.

Stipends such as these make housing much more affordable and accessible. Unfortunately, the average Detroiter does not work at Quicken Loans or DTE Energy. All the while, long-time Detroiters are instead facing climbing rents and low-paying employment. A study done on the city's housing market found that 59 percent of Detroiters in 2014

were rent burdened; they are spending nearly one-third of their household income on housing.²⁵

Is there enough room to welcome sustainable development while simultaneously maintaining the long-time resident population?

“BRIXTON MEANS CULTURE.... BRIXTON MEANS COLOR”

First known as the shopping district of London, then characterized as the hub of immigrants, then notorious for riots, Brixton is now known as one of the trendiest places to live in London. Is this gentrification or resurgence?

In London, it is fairly common for drastic social disparities to occur within small geographic locations, like Brixton's 3.8 square-mile frame. One justification of gentrification is that every resident's quality of life will improve, but instead, it typically leads to the promotion of certain lifestyles at the expense of others and the separation of various groups.

One of the unique components of gentrification in Brixton is the way in which the area has been able to attract newcomers while still maintaining some original Brixtonites (and displacing others). While this contemporaneous cycle of accommodation and eviction welcomes some while resisting others, a new well-off Brixton has sprung up.

As one walks around Brixton, the mix is apparent: Electric Avenue — a street lined with traditional food markets, Black beauty supply stores, and old record shops — is just a few blocks away from Pop Brixton, a complex of shipping containers packed with trendy shops and mini-restaurants. Brixton is a place where two different local communities (Black and white, affluent and



Figure 6: "Old" Brixton, Electric Avenue
(Urban75, 2003).



Figure 7: "New" Brixton, Pop Brixton
(Pop Brixton, 2017).

working-class, locals and gentrifiers) exist. Even from just a glance at the two photos below, it is clear that each of these spaces attracts different demographics and seems as though it was designed to do so. Newcomers are not only attracted to Brixton's celebrated multiculturalism but also drawn to the whole array of local diversity including race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, age, etc. As in Detroit, gentrifiers are drawn to the culture while being completely separated from it in neighborhoods with rising rents.

The housing market in Brixton is the leading driver for gentrification in the district. Just a few years ago, hardly anyone would move there, much less visit Brixton, because of its reputation for riots, poverty, and crime. Now Brixton is the 'newest' up-and-coming, high-potential neighborhood – after being invested in and built up by the Black community for

decades. The average rental unit costs £438 per week (US \$588).²⁶ Affordable housing in Brixton is essentially non-existent. Similar to current-day Detroit, as well as post-Black Bottom, the people who endured the area's toughest times and stayed when those who could afford to abandon it are the first to be pushed out when there is a sliver of interest in development.

In Brixton, prices are skyrocketing not only in residential areas but also in commercial spaces. An integral component of Brixton's character and intertwined with the district's cultural and social history is the railway arches that line Brixton Station Road and Atlantic Road. In 2015, the landlord of the arches, Network Rails, evicted more than 30 of the independent businesses and shops that were housed there to redevelop the arches. Once they reopen, there is expected to be a 300 percent increase in rent, which will likely outprice the previous tenants.²⁷ The Save Brixton Arches movements organized and protested for three years to prevent these evictions; however, in 2018 Network Rails succeeded. The movement's final statement emphasized that "Tenants and traders had never at any stage resisted this redevelopment; they asked only to be a meaningful part of the process and have a place in the final outcome. Tragically, this was never granted to them." Even though the war was lost, the movement won some battles: (1) As expected, Network Rails will increase the rent by 300 percent; however, it will slowly increase over a seven-year period. (2) Initially, none of the 39 tenants had the right to return; now, 9 will. (3) Tenants were able to lengthen their stay and continue doing business beyond the intended few months they were given in February 2015. (4) Lastly, tenants who were initially only offered statutory compensation eventually were given discretionary compensation as well.²⁸ Less than a five-minute walk from the location of the unjust evictions from the Arches is Pop Brixton, an attempt at 'positive gentrification.' Pop Brixton is a community initiative that transformed 'disused space'

into a popular destination that supports local innovation and business by providing physical space and support for these enterprises to thrive. Pop Brixton's website states,

We aren't here to give high street brands another storefront... We're here to support the little guys with the big ideas.²⁹

Pop attempts to fight the negative aspects of gentrification by employing local people (70 percent of the tenants are from the area) and offering discounted rental rates for local, independent and first-time business owners (50 percent of the tenants are first-time entrepreneurs, all of them are independents).³⁰ However, it is important to consider where Pop Brixton is placed – the land on which it stands was not 'disused' as claimed on the website but instead was a car park where many Brixton residents and the market vendors kept their cars.

On the bright side, community members were involved in the creation of the plan of this new development; however, Pop Brixton is not what the public voted for, which left many residents feeling dismissed and disengaged. It seems as though for any development to be deemed successful, it must be supported by the community, which is a large downfall with Pop Brixton and the Brixton Arches. These two prime examples of development in Brixton in a way represent the "new" and the "old" Brixton.³¹

Brixtonites are heavily involved and engaged with their communities, which led to the creation of Reclaim: Brixton, a movement that happened because people were losing their homes due to rapidly rising rents and outpriced businesses were being forced out.

CONCLUSION

Detroit and Brixton are two sides of the same coin: both experienced growth and success in

the early 20th century, both dealt with decline (Brixton from World War II and Detroit from deindustrialization), and both experienced a number of rebellions due to racism, police violence, and lack of opportunity and upward mobility. While the timelines are a bit different, the trajectories are similar.

Detroit's gentrification is not the rebirth of an entire city, but instead concentrated development in one area. In Detroit, ample opportunity and development are being sold to people who can afford it, with hardly any options or positive outcomes for the rest of the population.

Brixton, a district where a gentrification process has been underway for two decades, provides an example of both the pitfalls of and potential solutions to gentrification through the many developments and the community responses that came with them. While the residents have been successful in their organizing efforts and in making their voices heard, the fight continues.

The sizes of Brixton and Detroit (78,536 residents vs. 704,135 in 2011), may make a difference in how much change residents are able to make and actually see in their communities. Brixton is a district within the Borough of Lambeth, which is a total of 10.4 square miles, while the entire City of Detroit is 139 square miles. Understandably, Detroiters will find it more difficult than Brixtonites to organize and implement the changes that they want to see on a city-wide scale.

The future of Detroit and Brixton relies heavily on the long-time residents, newcomers, developers, government officials and policymakers; they all will play a role in the transformations that will surely continue to occur in both places. To implement sustainable change, Detroiters and Brixtonites have to have a seat at the table and have an equal part in these conversations. Brixton's long-time residents have been unreserved in their organizing

efforts and have experienced success in sharing their stories and perspectives, raising awareness and at times slowing development. In practice, Brixton can serve as a model for smaller communities like neighborhood associations and block club groups within Detroit, but not for the city as a whole.

Both Detroit and Brixton have great historical significance regionally and internationally, and both have cultural institutions that uphold the journeys of their longstanding communities and residents whose stories have impacted the development of the identity of their city or district. There are many organizations and individuals who will continue to fight for the longevity of their communities, and even more who identify with some piece of these narratives. Brixtonites and Detroiters alike have faithfully stuck around when no one else would and certainly would not trade Brixton or Detroit for anywhere else. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittany Simmons is a first-year Master of Urban and Regional Planning student at the University of Michigan. She grew up in Belleville, Michigan and earned her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Michigan (2018). Her interest in urban centers and their relationship with gentrification stems from her experiences in two University of Michigan programs: Semester in Detroit and Contemporary London.

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