

Between urban wasteland and post-industrial ruinscape: tourism as post-crisis economic progress in the infamous shrinking city Detroit

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Detroit has been presented in most recent real-estate imagery as if it was a tourism brochure. Or rather, tourism imagery of Detroit looks a lot like reading a real-estate advertisement. The decaying city that has amongst the highest poverty and crime rate in the US is suddenly appearing in a new look. On the one hand, this seems logical in a capitalist system that turned cities not only into sites for life-style production, but in life style products themselves. The city that needs to be sold as a product, appears in an aesthetic of advertisement: shiny, glitzy, perfect pixel clarity in a hyper-real sort of way. But, on the other hand: what are the entanglements between tourism, the city and capitalism crises that we can read in the shiny imagery of a decaying place like Detroit? In analyzing visual importance for tourism as successful service industry and cultural practice, it becomes clear that both the image of the built city as well as its visual representation in pictures is of high relevance. In the case of Detroit, the city is most famous for its negative image: Jerry Herron stated in 2003 that negative branding in all different kind of media have made the city infamous beyond national fame. The built environment has been decaying or demolished since decades. Only recently have suggestions been accepted by broader public discourse and city officials to consider this shrinking city as a heritage site that can be a successful and promising tourism destination of elevated cultural and historical significance. As everyday urban environment filled with derelicts of a long-gone “American” industrialization that brought democracy and prosperity to many, the city’s remaining architecture of apartment and office buildings, theatres, hotels but also (toxic) abandoned factories of car production sites are now reconsidered as architectural treasures of elevated cultural value that document the city’s and part of the nation’s past that can be remembered through visiting Detroit. That means on the one hand, informal tourism in unplanned pairing with official tourism attempt supported by local government have placed the well-known reality of the city’s failure into a new narrative: the city has changed—on an imagery and imaginary level—from a site of danger and threat (as a result of White flight in the 1950s and economic deindustrialization in the 1970s) towards a sight of touristic interest as “America’s Great Comeback city.” This

traditional US resurrection narrative told in a set of shiny imagery presents the city as now successful and promising place. Curiously, the real-estate market is somewhere linked to the tourism developments in Detroit in the beginning of the 21st century. I would like to say that I have asked the following questions at a conference in Rimini, but I would like to pose them in this meeting once more, because I understand your call for presentations to fit my most alarming (and hopeful) concerns fit with what you propose to debate. Hence, I would like to take this conference as opportunity to present and debate the potential but also the pitfalls of embracing the destination Detroit case as model for other similarly undesired places throughout the world. Can it make sense to reevaluate and re-define (urban) tourism in the moment of financial crises of the decaying capitalist system on a global scale? What potential can tourism offer to a city and vice versa? But also more urgently: what needs to be re-conceptualized for the future of urban tourism and cities in order not to murder a city (and ultimately tourism) by making it a destination?