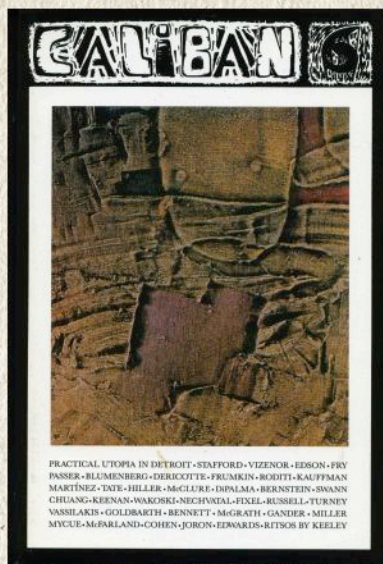


THE PRACTICAL UTOPIA IN DETROIT REVISITED

What could be more exciting than a complete re-imagining of an American city? Twenty-five years ago the print *Caliban* #6 was devoted to a project called "The Practical Utopia in Detroit." An amazing group of writers, artists, architects, and theorists went to work, envisioning the possibilities for remaking a rust belt city that had fallen into terrible decay. The theme of the Kassel Documenta art show in 1988, "return to the Modernist project," was in the air. Edward F. Fry, a curator of the show, was one of our contributors. We wanted to break the urban grid by running canals off the Detroit River and winding them through the city. There would be oneiric one-of-a-kind bridges, kinetic plazas, and parks everywhere, not just in one central location. Our idea was that these innovations would stimulate the imagination of Detroiters and would lead to further mind-expanding development. We also wanted to mix agricultural areas with some of these urban features, something that is already happening in reclaimed areas of Detroit and other cities.

Detroit, unlike other big American cities that had terrible upheavals in the sixties (I hesitate to call them riots because that minimizes the provocations that ignited them), was never rebuilt. And the trouble didn't start in 1967. White flight began in Detroit in the early 50s, when the American automotive industry still dominated the world economy. That of course led to a loss of the tax base and a gradual loss of public



services in all but the most affluent areas, like Grosse Pointe. But this was long before outsourcing and the decline of American manufacturing. The cause of the decline was racism, pure and simple. White people did not want to live side by side with black people.

Now we hear about Detroit contemplating bankruptcy, or at least we heard about it every day until people got tired of the story. The same people who said we should let the American auto industry die a few years ago are saying we should let the city of Detroit die. They are also the same people who asked if it made sense to rebuild New Orleans after Katrina. As far as I know, no civilization, ancient or modern, has survived the abandonment of its major cities. Miss Havesham in Dickens' *Great Expectations* had, like many modern American cities, shut all the rooms in her mansion except one. But that was no longer a mansion, despite the pretense; it was a graveyard. White flight is unique to the American experience. In Europe, despite

conflicts arising from the influx of immigrants from all over the world, the centers of the cities are still the most valuable property. Nothing is inevitable about the decay of America's great cities. The corrosion that racism has produced can still be reversed, but it will take a collective effort to reject the latest orgy of racial hate speech and to turn the realization of common cause into a great rebuilding effort.

This is the moment for the Buffetts, the Gates, and the Bloombergs (and all who choose to emulate them) to step forward and say they realize the re-imagining and restoration of Detroit is worth an investment of billions from them, to be matched by federal grants and programs. Much of the population of Detroit, men and women, could be employed in the years of demolition and construction that would be necessary. This is not a foolish dream. Something similar actually happened during World War II. Thousands of southerners, both black and white, came to Detroit to work in the car plants that had been converted to the greatest wartime manufacturing machine in history, making tanks, jeeps, personnel carriers, and bombers instead of cars. Those people were untrained and largely uneducated, but in months they became a highly skilled work force. Why can't we do this again, when the challenge is internal rather than foreign invaders?

The same people who argue that the great cities should be allowed to die, their thinking a mixture of racism and social Darwinism, would argue that this great project of

rebuilding Detroit would be just another version of a government boondoggle. They would claim that it is doomed because of the very corruption and ineptitude that led to the bankruptcy in the first place. My response is that corruption exists in the governments of every city, town and village in this country. Certainly there was some in Detroit, but that was hardly the only cause of these difficulties. How could that corruption compare to the banking fiasco and the subsequent bailout, restoring the masters of the universe to their glory, or exalting them to a much more powerful and dangerous position? Or the billions of dollars in cash that “disappeared” into Iraq? Or the billions of dollars of no-bid contracts awarded to Halliburton in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the building of showers that electrocuted some of the GIs that used them? If Buffett, Gates, and Bloomberg invest, I guarantee that they will watch how their money is spent. Maybe that will shame the feds into doing a better job of oversight themselves. Much of Detroit has already been abandoned, so the use of eminent domain would be minimal. Some mixture of locally owned farms and light industry of various sorts would make Detroit far more attractive than most of the big

cities whose designs were based on an economy that no longer exists.

Recently Harry Smith interviewed Karen Freeman-Wilson for NBC-News. After earning a Harvard law degree she became the attorney general of Indiana and is now the mayor of Gary, another devastated rust belt city. Smith asked her what she thought was her biggest challenge. He might have been thinking of something along the lines of “violent crime,” but Freeman-Wilson answered “Getting people to believe again.” That is not just a problem for the citizens of Gary. In this era of political lockdown, it seems that all of us have forgotten what this country can be and can do. A group of radical right-wingers in congress, representing a distinct minority of American citizens, have brought us to the point where we worry about keeping the government functioning from year to year rather than doing the normal business of serving the people’s needs. Whether they call themselves Tea Partyers or neo-Confederates, they have the same goal: crippling the federal government so the states will have the power to nullify federal law. If that were to happen, the Civil Rights Act would be the first to go. These are not conservatives, unless you want to call

the KKK and the Aryan Nation conservatives. And their talk about deficits is a smoke screen. The mainstream media, that has treated the frightening agenda of these right-wing radicals as a rational position, shoulders much of the blame for the stalemate in which we find ourselves.

Thanks to the Republican Party, we have wasted the substantial skills of one of our best presidents in recent history. Chris Matthews, of MSNBC, has called it the “42 effect,” the attempt by the Republicans to de-legitimize President Obama the same way bigoted sports fans tried to de-legitimize Jackie Robinson. The press, both left and right, has reinforced this 42 effect by chasing scandals (most of them imagined) instead of concentrating on the actual needs and issues of the country. Barack Obama has repeatedly reminded us that rebuilding the country, including our cities, is the most compelling issue of our times. Let us listen to him for a change. Let us make the crisis in Detroit an opportunity to rethink American cities and to put those transformative ideas into action, creating a template for the redemption of urban decay across the country.

