

Silver Medal Winner  
**The Heidelberg Project**  
Detroit, Michigan





## Heidelberg Project At A Glance

### What is the Heidelberg Project?

- A series of art installations located in a two block area on the east side of Detroit.
- Art education programs including “Art in Da Hood,” and programs at the Bunche Elementary School and the Childrens’ Home of Detroit.
- The third largest tourist destination in Detroit.

### Project Goals

- To create beauty in a blighted neighborhood.
- To use society’s refuse in the creation of public art that transforms an urban community.
- To build bridges and foster dialogue among diverse groups of people.
- To heal individuals and neighborhoods through engagement in the creative process.

## Project Chronology

**1986** Artist Tyree Guyton, a Heidelberg Street resident, begins work on transforming an abandoned crack house on his street into a work of art.

**1986-1990** Guyton continues with the transformation of three additional abandoned drug-infested houses, and creates several sculptures.

**1990** Tyree Guyton is featured on Oprah Winfrey as a creator of “neighborhood nuisance.”

**1991** Mayor Coleman Young demolishes four Heidelberg houses and related installations.

**1992** Tyree Guyton receives the Michigan Governor’s Arts Award.

**1993** Jenenne Whitfield joins the project as Executive Director.

**1990-1995** Tyree Guyton struggles to rebuild the Heidelberg Project.

**1996** Tyree Guyton takes on projects in Germany and Minnesota; a photo exhibition of the Heidelberg Project travels Europe.

**1997** The Heidelberg Project gets a grant of \$47,500 from the City of Detroit to create a welcoming center at the project. In response to neighborhood opposition, two prominent City Councilors wage a campaign against the Heidelberg Project.

**1986**

Artist Tyree Guyton begins work on transforming an abandoned crack house into art.

**1991**

Mayor Coleman Young demolishes four Heidelberg houses.

**1990-1993**

Tyree Guyton struggles to rebuild Heidelberg Project.

**1999**

City demolishes art and structures for the second time.

**2002**

Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick elected.

**1986-1990**

Guyton transforms three additional abandoned houses.

**1993**

Jenenne Whitfield joins the project as Executive Director.

**1998**

Heidelberg Project recognized as third most visited destination in Detroit.

**1999-Present**

Guyton rebuilds and expands Heidelberg Project.

**2002-2005**

Heidelberg Project reaches agreement to acquire City land and expand project; City recognizes importance of project to Detroit.

**1998** The Heidelberg Project recognized as the third most visited site in Detroit. The City suggests relocating project. Guyton gets a temporary restraining order to prevent another demolition.

**1999** The Heidelberg Project loses a court battle to remain on site; the City demolishes all art on city property and Guyton's (privately owned) studio containing stored art work. The Heidelberg Project files a lawsuit against the City for demolition of private property, and loses lawsuit. A documentary on the Heidelberg Project licensed by HBO for one year, and wins Honorable Mention at Sundance Film Festival.

**2000** Whitfield and Guyton take the Heidelberg Project to Harvard University, Pittsburgh, and Ecuador. Documentary about the Heidelberg Project, entitled *Come Unto Me*, wins an Emmy.

**2001** Guyton travels to Ecuador and Brazil lecturing on his work and on the project, and is invited to participate in show at Detroit Institute of Art.

**2002** Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick is elected.

**2003** The Heidelberg Project works cooperatively with Guyton's alma mater, Bunche Elementary School, to provide visiting artists to work with children.

**2002-2005** Guyton has a show on the Heidelberg Project at the Harvard Design School and does Heidelberg-based park project in Red Fern area in Sydney, Australia. A new Board of Directors is formed. Detroit Collaborative Design Center assists with site plan and architectural plans of House That Makes Cents; fund raiser for House that Makes Cents held in March. The Heidelberg Project is given space for project office in the Franklin Wright Settlement House.

## KEY PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

JENENNE WHITFIELD, *Executive Director of Heidelberg Project*

TYREE GUYTON, *Artist and founder of the Heidelberg Project*

HANSEN CLARKE, *Michigan State Senator from Heidelberg district*

TERRENCE H. GERMAN, *Architect/Heidelberg Project  
Board of Directors*

MONIQUE MARKS, *Franklin Wright Settlements Director*

HENRY HAGOOD, *Director of Planning and Development,  
City of Detroit*

MARILYN WHEATON, *Wheaton & Associates*

MAME JACKSON, *Wayne State University*

DAN PITERA, *Detroit Collaborative Design Center*

Project Description

## Urban Context & History

Detroit's early history dates back to 1701, when it was founded by the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac as part of the French effort to establish forts at strategic locations in North America to try and keep the British from moving west out of New England. Originally established as Fort Ponchartrain, it was later named Ville D'Etroit (city of the Strait) due to its location on the Detroit River, a narrow body of water connecting Lake Erie with Lake St. Clair. It later became a British territory which it remained until the American Revolution, when it was taken over by American forces under the command of General George Washington in 1796.<sup>1</sup>

Detroit was incorporated as a city and held its first election in 1805, and in 1837 Michigan was admitted to the Union as the 26th state. In its early years as an American city, Detroit was an important station along the Underground Railroad for slaves escaping from the South into Canada. After the Civil War, Detroit was a major destination for freed slaves leaving the South, who came in search of jobs in the automobile industry.

As a result of its importance as a destination for freed slaves, Detroit has a rich cultural tradition. It has long been associated with the American musical scene. Former slaves relocating to Detroit brought with them musical traditions that developed over the years into a vibrant jazz and blues movement. Mississippi transplant John Lee Hooker recorded his first blues hits in Detroit in the 1940s. Later, as



*Houses near downtown Detroit*

<sup>1</sup> This history is derived from Tina Granzo's article at <http://www.detroithistory.com>, as well as <http://www.visitdetroit.com>.

the city grew and developed into the nexus of the American automobile industry, the Motown sound became synonymous with Detroit.

Much of the city's history has been shaped by its close identification with the automobile. In 1903 Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, and in 1913 introduced the country's first assembly line. This period began Detroit's long ascendancy to the center of the American automobile industry. In its heyday as a thriving city of two million, the "Motor City" was known around the world as the hub of this robust American industry, with Ford, General Motors and Chrysler all headquartered in or near Detroit.

Other national trends have also shaped this city, most notably the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The fight for racial equality ignited the notorious 1967 race riots in Detroit. These riots are almost universally seen as a turning point for the city. With the city ablaze and racial tensions high, whites began to flee the city in droves. In fact, it has been said that "anyone who could afford to leave the city did" (Whitfield 2000-2001). Detroit lost nearly a million residents from the 1950s to the 1980s. Detroit thus became synonymous with racial dissent, poverty and social injustice. In 1974, Coleman Young, with a deep background in the Civil Rights Movement, took over this beleaguered city as its mayor. Mayor Young was deeply interested in empowering black leaders and entrepreneurs in his city.

Despite the efforts of Mayor Young and his successors, over thirty years later Detroit's population decline is well known, and continues at a rate of about 10,000 people per year. To add to the city's difficulties, Detroit has lost 15,168 businesses since 1972. Within the context of these staggering statistics, flight from Detroit's public schools has been even more extreme – the city has lost 33,000 students since the 1998/1999 school year. According to the school department, those left are the hardest and most expensive to educate. At a current population of 951,270, Detroit's citizens are eighty-two percent African-American and twelve percent Caucasian. With the recent downturn in the American automobile industry, unemployment numbers in Detroit have far exceeded those in other parts of the country (currently fourteen percent compared with five and four-tenths percent nationally). With a projected \$389 million shortfall over three years, in 2005 Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (elected in 2002) announced a layoff of 686 people in city government, as well as the elimination of 237 vacant jobs. He was also forced to cut salaries ten percent across the board, end late night bus service and close the Belle Isle, the oldest aquarium in the United States. Even with more cuts and new taxes being considered, the city faces the threat of receivership.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Wilgoren, Jodi, "Shrinking Detroit Faces Fiscal Nightmare" *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 2005

The precipitous decline in Detroit's population has resulted in vast tracts of abandoned and derelict land virtually adjacent to the downtown. For urban pioneers and those seeking to assist in the turnaround of the downtown, development opportunities abound. Detroit residents who have remained in the city are credited with an enterprising and pioneering spirit, and Detroit's young mayor is determined to fight the odds and to take his city back from the brink of disaster.

## DETROIT TODAY

Modern Detroit is in many ways a city of contradictions. With a land area of 142 square miles, Detroit is one of the largest cities in the country – bigger than Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston combined. It maintains its historic role as the center of the automobile industry,



*Abandoned building near downtown.*

with the world headquarters of General Motors in downtown Detroit and Daimler/Chrysler located in nearby Auburn Hills. Much of the city's employment continues to depend upon the automobile industry. In the same vein, despite many indices of cultural and economic decline, Detroit has continued to be a center of musical innovation, from Motown to today's Techno craze which is based there.

Much of the physical form of Detroit relates to its history as a center of the American automobile industry. The basic plan of the city is radial, with four major streets emanating from the "hub" of the downtown. Even today, Renaissance Center, the world headquarters of General Motors, is a major focal point of the downtown and is at the hub of the radial plan. Much of the city was developed by Henry Ford and other automobile magnates as they built housing for their workers. As a result, Detroit has an unusually high number of single family homes. Also due to Detroit's history as the Motor City, it was the first city to have a paved road, a traffic light, and an urban freeway. The historic dominance of the automobile has diminished with the Detroit economy, and an estimated one third of Detroiters do not have cars.<sup>3</sup> This fact notwithstanding, the city's financial crisis may well result in additional cuts in bus service.

Mayor Kilpatrick is nonetheless ambitious for the economic future of his city, and is working to diversify Detroit's economy and to position

<sup>3</sup> *Wilgoren, op.cit*



it as a player in world markets. Born after the 1967 riots, this mayor embraces technology and has been active in recruiting such companies as CompuWare which, along with Vistion, EDS and Price Coopers Waterhouse, now have headquarters in downtown Detroit and have added 6,000 jobs to the downtown economy. Twenty-two new restaurants have opened in the downtown in the past two years (Wilgoren 2005) and Super Bowl 2006 will be in Detroit as well. Detroit has also recently added a major new baseball stadium, Comerica Park, adjacent to which is an indoor professional football venue, both within the downtown area.

The Department of Planning and Development for Detroit attests to other signs of an improving economy. With over 7,000 new units of housing "in the pipeline," Detroit currently ranks number two in Michigan in building permits. According to the Director of Planning,



the price of units to be built ranges from million dollar homes to affordable units. Consistent with the goals of the Planning and Development Department, many of those moving into the downtown are either young professionals, working for the new companies, or empty nesters who want to move back into town. Detroit is eager to keep young professionals in the city, as they are crucial to the economic and intellectual well being of the city. These two populations have created a demand for new loft housing, restaurants, services, and entertainment, and are beginning to bring life back into the downtown



*Left: Building being renovated for housing  
Right: New housing near downtown*

in the evening hours. This demand is consistent with the City's goal of creating infill development to "build back in" and try and re-connect neighborhoods and districts which have been separated by large tracts of blighted land.

The City is also working hard on its public infrastructure, and making efforts to take advantage of its Detroit River edge. It is in the process of developing a five-mile river bike/walk path which will extend between the two major bridges in the downtown, and connect major recreational and cultural venues which already exist along the river's edge.

Those who know and appreciate Detroit and its history feel that those who have remained in the city, either by choice or circumstance, are

"urban survivors" with a deep pride in their city. This self-reliant pioneering spirit is cited again and again in describing the Detroit character, and is an important part of the story connected with the Heidelberg Project. In her own written history of the Heidelberg Project, published in *The Southern Quarterly* (2000-2001), Jenenne Whitfield states that "[Detroit] is a city of originality. Traditionally, Detroit has been an innovator, spearheading global ideas that enact global change. The city's rich legacy of music, architecture, automobiles, civil rights, and a diversity of people combine fruitful elements that should make a city thrive."

Although Detroit is notorious as America's fastest shrinking city, it is also at the nexus of some of the country's most creative thinking about the urban built environment. This urban landscape offers immense challenges, but also an unprecedented moment in which to think creatively about the kinds of opportunities presented by this confluence of social, economic and geographic factors. How does one redefine a city that has half the population it once had? What are the opportunities and challenges associated with the availability of large tracts of vacant land in or near the downtown? What does it mean when the "gaps" become the dominant urban form, outnumbering structures?



New loft project near downtown.



Dan Pitera of University of Detroit Collaborative Design Center is a vocal advocate for Detroit and the opportunities it presents. He points out that the urban context offered by Detroit calls for a new way of thinking about urban density and environment, embracing perhaps a new concept of urban wilderness and a reconsideration of the implications of urban density. With its large supply of single family houses, many of which were very well built and remain in good condition, many beautiful neighborhoods remain, often housing people of very different economic means side by side. Solutions to Detroit's situation are beginning to emerge in the form of urban farming, urban wilderness reclamation projects, and the Heidelberg Project. With its many challenges, Detroit provides a fertile ground for re-thinking traditional approaches to urbanism, and building on an indomitable spirit of urban pioneering. In many ways Detroit provides the perfect context for the Heidelberg Project, which calls for a reconsideration of the very nature of urban art.

*Abandoned houses next to occupied houses on a single block.*

## The Heidelberg Project

### THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Heidelberg Project is located in the Gratiot McDougall Hunt neighborhood on the lower east side of Detroit, which is fast coming to be known as the Heidelberg neighborhood. The area is roughly triangular, bounded by Gratiot Street (one of the principal streets radiating from the downtown), Mt. Elliot Street and Verner Street. It is home to 2,200 people in about 300 houses, both single family and now multiple unit structures. According to the Monique Marks, director of the Franklin Wright Settlement House (the local service agency), the population of the neighborhood is ninety-seven percent African-American and includes many seniors and children (many of whom are in foster care), and many single parent households. Twenty-eight percent of the population is under eighteen years old, and fourteen percent is over sixty-five. She notes that many local residents are transient, and that there are many homeless people living in the neighborhood, sleeping in cars or trucks and in vacant lots. Although pockets of the neighborhood are in reasonable condition, especially near the Franklin Wright Settlement House, much of it is characterized by extreme urban blight. Abandoned houses burn down in the neighborhood at an estimated rate of eight to ten per month, with their charred remains left standing as a grim reminder of urban decay,

drugs, homelessness, and poverty. In 2002, over 300 serious crimes occurred in this census tract, thirty-three percent of which were violent in nature.<sup>4</sup>

The Franklin Wright Settlement House, located on the edge of the neighborhood, is the oldest settlement house in Michigan. Serving about 200 children and seniors per month, Franklin Wright has a unique understanding of the neighborhood. Their services include after-school care, health care, hot meals, and a wide variety of support services. The director estimates the average income in the area at less than \$11,000. Most of the houses that are owner-occupied are second or third generation occupants, many of whom cannot afford to maintain the houses they have inherited.

According to the Heidelberg Historical Research Team (2004), Heidelberg neighborhood is one of the oldest African-American



<sup>4</sup> Heidelberg Historical Research Team, 2004



neighborhoods in Detroit. In the early 1900s, the neighborhood was known as “Black Bottom,” named for its rich, dark soil. It was one of the few areas in town where blacks could own property, and was therefore at the center of the black migration from the south. Many freed slaves settled in the neighborhood and secured jobs in the automobile industry. During its glory days, African-Americans in what was also known as “Paradise Valley” owned over 300 businesses and local music clubs and entertainment venues were a popular destination in Detroit’s lively night life scene.

The first blow to the area came with Detroit’s first race riots in 1943, followed several decades later by the location of a highway right-of-way for I-75 which went directly through Paradise Valley. By the 1950s, changing social and economic times forced additional local businesses to close, culminating in the 1967 riots. Prior to the 1967 riots, Tyree Guyton, then a resident, remembers Black Bottom as a thriving center of jazz and music, a beautiful neighborhood and great place to live. Many feel the neighborhood never recovered from the riots, and its more recent history has been consistently troubled.

Michigan Senator Hansen Clarke, who represents the 275,000 person district of which Gratiot McDougall is a part, supports that point of view. He grew up in the area, and states that it has long been a tough neighborhood. Tragically, he states that most of the neighborhood

**Left:** Wright settlement house neighborhood  
**Above:** Outer edge of Heidelberg Project

friends with whom he grew up are now dead or disabled from street related crime. (There is a fifty-five percent mortality rate in the neighborhood for African-American males under twenty-one.) Into this setting of extreme urban blight comes the Heidelberg Project, which Clarke sees as a seminal event in his neighborhood, and at the crux of a movement toward revitalization.

### HEIDELBERG PROJECT HISTORY

The Heidelberg Project began in 1986 when neighborhood resident and artist Tyree Guyton returned home from art school and a stint in the military. As he recalls, he stepped out his door one day and “heard the neighborhood speaking to him.” He knew he had to do something about what was going on in his community. With that he took up a paint brush, and began by decorating an abandoned crack house with paint, color, and with the debris from streets and alleys,



Left: Founder Tyree Guyton  
Right: “Souls of The Most High”

turning the house into a canvas. In Guyton’s mind he was taking what had been discarded by society and turning it into something of beauty. To his surprise, as he decorated the crack houses and turned them into sculptures, people became interested and started visiting the site to see what was going on. One house was covered with baby dolls, some of them disfigured and dismembered. One journalist wrote about that house, “If the house had a voice it would have wept and squalled, ‘this is what we have done to our children’” (Noriyuki 1996). Another house, called the *Fun House*, was covered with artifacts of all kinds, flowing from the roof down the sides of the house, including shoes, dolls, and other castaway remnants of urban life. As the house sculptures grew, more people started coming into the neighborhood. As care and attention were focused on these structures, drugs and prostitution declined.

Tyree Guyton began to expand his work, creating a series of sculptures on the vacant and abandoned lots. Like the houses, these sculptures also dramatized political and social issues of concern to his community. On the tree sculpture, *Souls of the Most High*, Guyton hung multiple pairs of discarded shoes from the branches. This powerful piece harkens back to his grandfather’s stories of lynchings in the South. As the work continued to grow, so too did visitor and outside interest, culminating at first in 1990 when Guyton was given a show along with two other artists at the prestigious Detroit Institute of Art.

While visitors looked at the project with awe, there was a small but vocal group of neighborhood residents who felt very differently about it, stating that Guyton’s work was junk, not art, and was creating an eyesore in the neighborhood. During that time Guyton was invited onto the Oprah Winfrey show, not realizing that he was being presented there as a neighborhood nuisance. Shortly after his appearance on that show, Mayor Coleman Young brought in the bulldozers, destroying four art houses and the bulk of Guyton’s work.

There is a great deal of speculation associated with Young’s actions, and in the end Young’s decision is not well understood. One theory is that Young, himself a strong fighter for civil rights in the African-American community, felt that the outside interest in the community was mostly from whites who were not connected to the African-American plight, or to his political agenda of empowering the black community. Others theorize that he felt humiliated by Guyton’s appearance on *Oprah*, and by the way in which the Heidelberg Project highlighted blight in Detroit. Although the real reasons will probably never be known, it had a devastating effect on the project, as four city-owned sculpture houses and some vacant lots were cleared of Guyton’s work.

At the same time, however, proponents of the project recognized that something special was happening on Heidelberg Street and were prepared to fight for it. They realized that when a house was decorated,

crack users and prostitutes would abandon it. When Guyton “marked” a house with his art, the community began to protect it – to this day not one of Guyton’s works has ever been vandalized. The number of visitors from outside the neighborhood also continued to grow. In 1998, an attorney documented that the Heidelberg Project had then had visitors from eighty-five different countries, all fifty states, and virtually all of the major cities in Michigan.<sup>5</sup>

With support from his friends and admirers, Tyree Guyton began to rebuild the Heidelberg Project. Working mainly on his own, with the help of friends, family, and neighborhood children, Guyton began work on other abandoned houses, on his own house which quickly became the *Polka Dot House* (or *Dotty Wotty House*), and on additional



*Dotty Wotty House, with details of the porch and “Faces in the Hood”*

<sup>5</sup> Wilgoren, *op.cit.*

sculptures. This time Guyton obtained permission from owners of abandoned lots and houses to use their properties. Car hoods became the palette for large paintings of *Faces of the Hood*, and the individual *Faces of God* portraits were placed strategically at the entry to the two block area. It was during this period that the *OJ (Obstruction of Justice) House* first came into being.

This second cycle of effort also met with strong city opposition. Then Mayor Dennis Archer had paid lip service to his support of the project, and had publicly hailed Guyton's achievement. In addition the Project had by then documented 275,000 visitors annually. Nonetheless, a small group of opponents, armed with arguments that stated the project was a nuisance, was attracting vermin and needed to be stopped, convinced two City Counselors to oppose the project, and ultimately were victorious when Mayor Archer again bulldozed much of the project. It is interesting to note that several of the people we interviewed felt that a deeper source of opposition was a sense of shame on the part of residents that so many outside visitors were being made aware of the desperate circumstances of their neighborhood.

A critical difference in this public action was that in addition to the demolition of city-owned property in the project area, they also demolished a privately owned building which contained much of Guyton's stored art work. This act led to a lawsuit filed by Guyton

against the city. He was at first victorious, receiving a damages award of \$500,000, but the case ended in a jury trial in which the Heidelberg Project was ultimately defeated, receiving little or no compensation for the damage done to project property.

### HEIDELBERG PROJECT TODAY

Although it seems impossible in the face of such a troubled history, the Heidelberg Project is in many ways stronger today than it has



*OJ or "Obstruction of Justice" House*

ever been. After a hiatus of traveling internationally to discuss his work, and a time of healing after the death of his grandfather and subsequent divorce, Guyton returned to the Heidelberg Project and rebuilt it in what is perhaps its most robust form to date. It is one of the top three visitor destinations in Detroit, second only to the Detroit Institute of Art and the Charles Wright Museum of African History. In reflecting upon the history of his project, Guyton states that he would not change anything about his project's history, noting that the notoriety and impassioned dialogue have engaged the people with his project in ways that would not otherwise have happened.

Perhaps the most significant barometer of the change in the status of the Heidelberg Project is that the City of Detroit, under Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, has become a staunch supporter. The City is in fact in the process of selling four city-owned lots to the Heidelberg Project at a very reasonable cost. This will add to the existing project ownership of four art houses and six lots, giving the project significant control over their two block campus. Even those who may have been opposed to the Heidelberg Project in the past now confirm that it has become one of Detroit's main cultural attractions. Members of the city council have referred to Tyree Guyton as a "prophet in the city," ridding the neighborhood of drugs and prostitution. Henry Hagood, the Director of Planning and Development for Detroit, sees the Heidelberg Project as a kind of community museum, reflecting the

artist's view of the world. In Hagood's view, the City needs to embrace diverse events and places if it is to take its place as a major city. As he points out, in a city of 142 square miles, Detroit can certainly accommodate a two block project that brings the city such renowned artistic innovation.

### THE EXPERIENCE

Approaching the Heidelberg Project from the downtown, one drives east along Gratiot Street through expanses of vacant land, low density retail and light industrial sites, turning right into the Heidelberg neighborhood. The residential neighborhood is characterized by two story houses, mainly wood frame, in varying degrees of repair. Most blocks have as many vacant lots as houses, and in most cases these lots are littered with urban debris. It is noticeable, therefore, when one reaches the outer edge of the Heidelberg Project, where the vacant lots on either end of the two block site are clean, free of debris, and planted with grass. Large plywood paintings are interspersed around the lots, depicting the *Faces of God* images which reappear throughout Tyree Guyton's work.

On the first block lies the original *Dotty Wotty House*, begun by Guyton with his mentor and grandfather, Sam Mackey. Still occupied by Mrs. Guyton, the house is decorated with the signature polka dot theme, which is connected to his grandfather's love of jelly beans.





Top left: "Faces of God" (detail)  
 Top right: Vacuum Installation  
 Bottom: OJ House

Bright colors, large circular shapes, and a variety of urban debris cover the house, making it bright and attracting the attention of visitors entering the site. Next to the *Polka Dot House* is a yard space covered with a field of painted upright vacuum cleaners, each with discarded gloves on the handle. Executive Director Jenenne Whitfield remarks sardonically that the vacuum installation is dedicated to the city.

In front of the *Polka Dot House* is the famous shoe tree, entitled *Souls of the Most High*. This work consists of a large tree festooned with painted and tied together pairs of discarded shoes. The imagery and references for this tree are related to Sam Mackey's stories to his grandson about lynchings in the South – how as a child, witnessing lynchings, he would look up and see only the soles of the peoples' shoes as they hung lifeless from the trees. This is one of Guyton's earliest pieces, and remains particularly powerful.

Across the adjacent vacant lot is the *OJ (Obstruction of Justice) House*, the most recent Heidelberg project. This house was originally decorated with a variety of discarded and broken dolls. Graphics on the outside of the house refer also to the 1967 riots. In its original identity, this house referenced both the "obstruction of justice" which Guyton associated with the O.J. Simpson trial, and also the effects of the 1967 riots, with the dolls representing broken lives in the community.

Project plans call for this house to be covered with pennies and redeveloped for artist studios and a children's gallery, and will be known as the *House that Makes Cents*.

The two centerpieces of the central lot are *Faces in the Hood*, an installation of car hoods grouped together and painted by Guyton with faces, forming a kind of bulwark at the center of the space, and *Noah's Ark*, a reclaimed fiberglass boat, painted with polka dots and filled to overflowing with discarded stuffed animals of all descriptions. Also on the lot are a picnic table, another highly decorated tree, the



Visitor Information booth

Heidelberg Project's information booth, and several individual paintings and sculptures. At different time, this space has also been the location of the *Rosa Parks Bus* – a 1955 passenger bus that was donated to the Heidelberg Project – covered in polka dots and other painting. Originally entitled *Move to the Rear*, the bus has a colorful history, having been threatened with towing by the city, hidden in an ice rink, stolen, and recovered, and is currently on display at a different location. The bus is slated to be returned to the project in the coming months.

Other less prominent works lie at the outer edge of the site. A large green house, decorated with stuffed animals and called the *Party Animal House*, is at the edge of the project. Already owned by the Heidelberg Project, this house will eventually become an art gallery and shared office space. Down the street is a modest playground structure placed by the Project and used by neighborhood children. Several additional structures are located on this street frontage – several are privately owned, and in reasonable condition, while two others are abandoned. One of these is owned by the Project, and the other slated to be partially demolished and to become a part of an outdoor performance space.

In 2002, Guyton also initiated his own "war on blight," in which he painted large circular polka dots on abandoned houses throughout the city, thus drawing attention to those houses, and also creating a

connection between urban abandonment and his work. He reasoned that “if the city could move so quickly to demolish the Heidelberg Project...perhaps they could move just as quickly to rid the city of the thousands of burned out abandoned structures throughout the city.” With this project, Guyton is attempting to, as he puts it, “polka dot the city.”

Several ongoing education programs are associated with the Heidelberg Project. In 1995 Guyton “adopted” nearby Bunche Elementary school, where he had once been a student. Due to cuts in the art budget, Guyton volunteered to work with fourth and fifth grade students once a week, or to arrange for visiting artists to work with the children. This process has been well accepted and is ongoing. “Art in Da Hood” refers to the ongoing and less formal on-site participation of neighborhood kids with the Heidelberg Project. Children who come to the site are given art materials with which to work as they create or touch up art projects. They also run the information booth, guide tours of the site, and sell Heidelberg products to tourists and visitors. Finally, Guyton works with children at the Children’s’ Home of Detroit, providing art instruction and mentoring on a regular basis.



Top: *Noah's Ark*  
 Center: *Party Animal House*  
 Bottom: *Faces in the Hood*

## ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

The Heidelberg Project is virtually synonymous with Tyree Guyton. He invented it, he built it, and he rebuilt it in the face of two cycles of demolition. Guyton continues to create and nurture it on a day-to-day basis. His commitment to the project is based upon his personal belief that art saves lives. Like all of Guyton's work, that belief and statement has several levels of meaning.

On the most obvious level, he sees his work as taking what is there, what exists in the lives of neighborhood residents, and reconfiguring the pieces to create an experience of joy and beauty. At the same time, the process of creating the art attracts the interest and participation of many people, especially neighborhood children. They work alongside Guyton, learning from him about art, about the value of creating community, about commitment, and about alternatives to life on the street. And then, there is a more literal interpretation – Guyton points out that many times homeless people have taken shelter beneath the art works to protect themselves from weather, danger, or other threats. As he says “You see, art saves lives.”

Guyton's message, embodied in his work, reaches deep into the social ills and social norms that surround us. As he points out, “In our society, we throw people away.” The urban debris he uses in his work

is a metaphor for the community; in Guyton's work he takes what has literally been discarded and calls attention to its potential for positive transformation. In his own words, Guyton set out to “make the neighborhood into something so beautiful the whole world will want to see it.” Tyree Guyton states his philosophy as follows:

*I believe that my job as an artist is to help people to see! I wanted to use my talents to bring about positive change in my community. I did not set out to create controversy but then you can't bring about real change without controversy. ...I use art as a catalyst for social change. I chose to start right here in my own neighborhood and yet I realized that the first change had to start with me. Changing my mind and seeing with my eye of understanding helped to eradicate my fears and limitations. Social change must start with self and then you can change the entire world around you.<sup>6</sup>*

Tyree Guyton's daily rituals on the site reinforce that goal. Each morning he arrives at the project and spends the first hours sweeping, weeding, touching up art work damaged by weather and time, and making sure that things are in order. From there he moves to the more creative part of his day, creating new work and adding on to work already there. He is constantly interrupted by visitors wanting to know about the work, its meaning, its significance. He greets each

<sup>6</sup> Whitfield, Jenenne, “Thoughts on Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project”, *Southern Quarterly*, 2000-2001

visitor who approaches him with warmth, interest and courtesy, patiently explaining the work to them. In this way his work is building bridges among diverse groups of people, maintaining dialogue, and creating community united around an appreciation of this unique art form. As Mame Jackson, an art historian from Wayne State University, points out, despite his world travels and growing reputation, “Tyree would rather be on Heidelberg Street than any place on the planet.”

It is interesting to note that although the two block project is located in the midst of a center of crack, heroin, and homelessness, it does not get bothered or damaged in any way. Guyton feels that the community, including the criminal element, actually protect the project, and feel a sense of ownership. In this way the fact that the Heidelberg Project continues to exist is seen as a victory in a setting where it could easily have been destroyed.



**Left:** *Founder Tyree Guyton*

**Right:** *Tyree Guyton greeting visitors*

For Tyree Guyton, his art is a medicine, healing the community as it has healed him through difficult times. As he points out, “One can’t heal the land without healing the people first,” and through his participatory process, his steady presence in the neighborhood, and patient explanations to visitors of all kinds, he sees himself as a healer, dealing with rifts in the community, in the city, and even in the world. Despite a very difficult history, the project now seems more stable than ever before. One wonders how Guyton has maintained his commitment in the face of ongoing financial challenges, the city’s bulldozers, or other detractors. But as he states, “I wouldn’t change a thing that has happened. Everything that has happened has made me who I am today.”

The Heidelberg Project now has a twenty year history. Traditionally it has had little formal structure, either financially or administratively. A turning point came in 1993 when Jenenne Whitfield became involved, quitting her corporate banking job to become Executive Director. With Jenenne Whitfield as Executive Director, the Heidelberg Project is now a 501-C3 corporation, and is building the structure it needs to ensure its future. A new local Board of Directors is now in place, and the advisory board includes representatives from the Cranbrook Museum, the Museum of African American History, the Batista Gallery, Deloitte and Touche, General Motors, Wayne State University, ASG Renaissance, the Detroit Institute of Art, the

Detroit City Council, the City of Detroit Department of Cultural Affairs, and others. A national advisory board includes such prominent figures as Richard Florida, Mame Jackson of Wayne State University, and John Beardsley of the Harvard Design School, all of whom are willing to lend their names and support to the Heidelberg Project. In addition to the Board, several local entrepreneurs and business people have lent their skills to the project in an ongoing basis, including the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit Mercy, which has assisted the project in developing a long-term site plan and in developing architectural plans for its current project, the House that Makes Cents.

The Board Development Committee has established three major goals for the project: to establish a stable an ongoing relationship with the City of Detroit; to “get the word out” about the project through a series of high-profile fund raisers; and to get Jenenne Whitfield and Tyree Guyton maximum exposure as speakers and lecturers around Detroit and the country.

### IS IT ART?

The notoriety and fame of the Heidelberg Project is inextricably tied to the ongoing debate, “Is It Art?” This is a fascinating discussion that has gone on at the neighborhood level, among visitors to the site, at

the city level, in academia, and even across nations. Mame Jackson, Professor of Art History at Wayne State University, is a long term supporter of the project and a member of the advisory board. In her view, the Heidelberg Project is at the nexus of the current discussion about the very nature of urban art. She points out that the national dialogue on this subject asserts that the traditional “curatorial” definitions of art as precious objects locked away in museums is unrelated to much of the most important work going on today.

Today’s art, Jackson states, is contextual, political, and provocative, raising important social and existential issues. The dialogic function of art itself has become an important component of modern urban art, and in this way the Heidelberg Project is on the cutting edge. On the other hand, she also feels that because of his art training and talent as an artist, Guyton’s work has a “foot in the traditional art camp.” She points out that it can stand on its own with its form, massing and line quality, and that this fact gives it sufficient credibility to sustain the dialogue. Jenenne Whitfield writes in *The Southern Quarterly* (2000-2001) that Guyton “chose to abandon the ‘Fine Art’ form in exchange for a style that came from the depth of his soul, even though his early work demonstrates all the attributes of a fine artist.”



On the Heidelberg Project website, Jackson characterizes Tyree Guyton's art in the following way:

*A dismembered doll reminds us of a crucifixion... a boat, of an aborted escape...a fragment of quilt, of a comforting childhood hug. In worn out shoes that seem to climb neighborhood trees there is a playful irony between the melancholy of discarded usefulness and the unexpected independence of the objects as they themselves take on a new life.*

On a less intellectual level, it is instructive to watch visitors to the Project. Many different kinds of people are drawn to it. On one Saturday site visit, there were a visiting group of graduate students, led by the Dean of the Architecture School at University of Detroit Mercy; a family with several teenage children from the Midwest; a school group; and a group of tough neighborhood kids, all talking to Tyree about his work and what it represented. Guyton views this ongoing dialogue as bridge-building between his community and people from other walks of life, and it is central to his view of the role of his work. In his view, what is most important at the Project is the dialogue.

Right: Tyree Guyton greeting visitors

The EDRA Places Award of 2004 recognized the Heidelberg Project in the design category. In *Places* (Vol. 16), the project is described in terms of its social import. "Clearly this work is not only about what you see. It's about the dialogue it engenders. ...The Heidelberg Project offers an alternative vision to young children in one of America's most blighted urban areas; it broadens community awareness of the power of art; and it brings a new sense of important social realities to the consciousness of visitors".

In the view of some, Tyree Guyton is the most important art object there. His presence adds a "profound sense of reality" to the work, and brings it to the human level, making it more special. To others Tyree represents the energy and pioneering spirit of the Detroit residents who remain committed to their city. In many ways the Heidelberg Project and Tyree's work is an ongoing metaphor for Detroit's evolution – picking up the pieces and reconfiguring them into something of beauty and meaning. Guyton himself sees his art in the following way: "...In transforming the environment I aim to transform people. Only then can healing, health and hope begin."

## HEIDELBERG PROJECT INCOME AND EXPENSES 2004

| INCOME                    |                 | EXPENSES                         |                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Fund Raising Gross Income | \$13,816        | Fund raising events              | \$1,397         |
| Corporate contributions   | \$15,178        | Contract labor and services      | \$2,322         |
| Foundation contributions  | \$8,000         | Program expenses                 | \$2,832         |
| Individual contributions  | \$7,536         | Repairs and Maintenance          | \$3,675         |
| Grants                    | \$900           | Professional fees                | \$855           |
| Restricted Donation       | \$1,880         | Australia project                | \$14,774        |
| Earned income             | \$1,700         | Sales, marketing and advertising | \$4,542         |
| Other income              | \$2,086         | Taxes                            | \$5,901         |
| Sale of goods             | \$7,297         | General operating expenses       | \$8,316         |
| Credit Adjustment         | \$2,230         | Site development                 | \$5,954         |
| Misc.                     | \$600           | Other/Misc.                      | \$2,761         |
|                           |                 | Debt                             | \$1,431         |
| <b>Total Income</b>       | <b>\$61,223</b> | <b>Total Expenses</b>            | <b>\$54,760</b> |

*Not included in the above table are in-kind services and donations, such as a donation of IBM computers and software (\$4,733), the services of Jenenne Whitfield in 2004 (\$62,500), Guyton's site maintenance (\$8,000), and a marketing strategy report from the University of Michigan (\$235,000).*



## FINANCES

During its twenty year history, the Heidelberg Project has operated on a “shoe string.” To this day, only the Executive Director draws a salary, there is no significant cash flow, and property that has been acquired to date has come through one-time donations or gifts. The new Board of Directors and the Executive Director are, however, poised to change this situation by raising the profile and fund raising capacity of the project.

A recent March 2005 fund raiser for the *House that Makes Cents* cleared \$80,000, which was at a scale virtually unprecedented by previous fund raising efforts. The ultimate goal is to raise \$295,000 to complete the *House that Makes Cents*, as well as to raise funds needed to acquire the remaining city-owned lots. There is a definite feeling in the project that it has turned a corner, having improved and stabilized its relationship with the city, and engaged people with the necessary skills and connections to help them attain financial and legal independence.

## IMPACTS

How does one measure the impacts of the Heidelberg Project? On the most elementary level one cannot yet make the case that the project has transformed the surrounding neighborhood in any major way. However, although there has been no new private development in the neighborhood in many years, developers Madison and Madison are in the process of acquiring land from the city to build approximately 60 energy efficient artist live/work units in the area at the edge of the neighborhood. A spokesperson from Madison and Madison said they were looking to build upon the energy and synergy created by the Heidelberg Project. In addition, Gratiot McDougal United Development Corporation (GMUDC) and McDougal Hunt Citizens District Council, two non-profits operating in nearby neighborhoods, have plans to build new affordable units in the area. In speaking with these developers, they could not confirm a direct relationship to the Heidelberg Project.

Another impact is the estimated 275,000 people from ninety countries who are reported to visit the project annually. Certainly they carry away with them a different impression of an inner-city neighborhood when they experience the art, talk with Tyree, or spend time talking to other visitors. Some surely understand it as a ray of light amidst a forgotten area; others, no doubt, walk away with a less positive

impression. Conversely, as visitation occurs, neighborhood residents come into contact with people from other parts of Detroit, from other cities and from other cultures. The art is a natural mechanism for building bridges among these people. Whatever their background or perspective, many thousands of people are at least considering the questions raised by the art as they visit the project. Their presence on the site and increased automobile traffic driving through the neighborhood is reported to have reduced crime in the immediate area.

A more anecdotal impact has to do with the effect of the project on neighborhood children, or others who come to be involved with it on a longer-term basis. For example, one young child, who lived in a home of drug abusers, became attached to Guyton and his work, and came there most days after school. His teachers at school saw his work improving and were puzzled, knowing he had little support at home. Eventually Guyton and Whitfield met with teachers and explained his connection to the project.

There are many other stories of young people, and homeless people, who came to be attached to the Heidelberg Project. One homeless individual who was hired by Guyton as a street sweeper for \$5 an hour eventually becoming emboldened to find steady work and

“graduate” from the Project. There are stories of other children who grew up and left the neighborhood, but still return to check in with Guyton and Whitfield. Guyton’s impact as a role model for these children, and his support for their “becoming themselves,” is difficult if not impossible to measure.

State Senator Hansen Clarke goes farther in his estimation of the impact of the Heidelberg Project. In his estimation, the Heidelberg Project has “done more for urban revitalization [in Detroit] than the Renaissance Center, casinos and Super Bowl put together.” As an artist himself, Clarke quotes art historian Clement Greenberg in saying that “Every truly original work of art first appears ugly.” Hansen thinks Tyree Guyton will prove to be one of the greatest artists of our time, and that the Heidelberg Project will have huge historical significance. He also underscores its importance as an intersection between a “bricks and mortar” approach to community revitalization, and one that addresses peoples’ spirits as well as buildings. Clarke feels the Heidelberg Project is transformative by “glorifying what is actually happening,” and that it gives hope to residents by pointing out that “who they are, as they are, is extraordinary.”

*In his estimation, the Heidelberg Project has “done more for urban revitalization [in Detroit] than the Renaissance Center, casinos and Super Bowl put together.”*

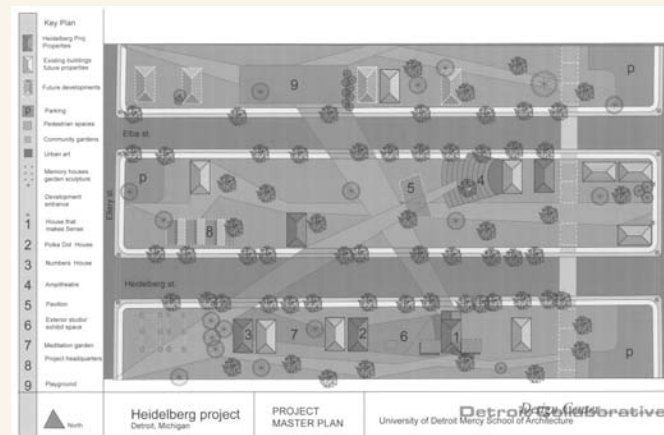
## FUTURE PLANS

The Heidelberg Project has ambitious plans for the future. The long-term goal is to create a cultural village, which will be marked with an archway entrance to the project and will also include community gardens, a children’s playground, a meditation garden, an outdoor pavilion, a visual arts gallery, space for children’s programming, visiting artist-in-residence houses, offices, and a library. The more immediate goal is to acquire all of the remaining thirty-eight lots in the two block area that are not already owned by the project. The sale of five of those lots is for a sum of \$7,300 is currently pending with the city.

The second most immediate goal is to acquire the remaining \$215,000 for the *House that Makes Sense* to house a visiting artist studio, a studio for Guyton, a children’s gallery, and a library. The

plan for constructing this house involves working with Youth Build Detroit as the general contractor, thereby offering the opportunity for young people to gain contracting skills in building the project. The completion of the house will provide support for the three ongoing children’s education programs (“Art in Da Hood,” “Connecting the Dots” and Bunche Elementary School), as well as exhibition space for their work.

The site plan by the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture) lays out the long-term physical vision of the urban cultural village. In addition, the University of



Left: Tyree Guyton with visitors  
Right: Plan for future development

Michigan Business School has prepared a report for the Heidelberg Project, creating a five year approach for developing and implementing a complete strategic plan. This report includes a proposed organizational chart, job descriptions, and recommended next steps. Many recommendations from this plan have already being implemented, including the appointment of a more diverse and well-connected board, and the official hiring of Jenenne Whitfield as Executive Director.

Much of the future of the Heidelberg Project will depend upon the success of implementing strategic plan goals with respect to organization and fund raising, and the creation of a steady income stream. The Board's goals for fund raising and increased visibility around Detroit are already being implemented as new members have been recruited, and high profile fund raisers have been staged. Income remains a more difficult challenge; considerable effort will be required to develop a sustainable cash flow to protect the project from economic setbacks. In many respects, despite a 20 year history, the Heidelberg Project is in its infancy with respect to organizational structure and development. But the groundwork is well underway to ensure a more stable and viable future.

#### Assessing Project Success

## Success in Meeting Project Goals

→ *To create beauty in a blighted neighborhood.*

The Heidelberg Project has created an oasis in a troubled and deteriorated inner-city neighborhood. People who have experienced the project may disagree about whether it is beautiful, but there is no doubt that the Heidelberg Project space engenders awe and respect for what has been accomplished. It is impossible to visit it and not be overwhelmed by the creative energy of the art and the kind of messages it carries.

→ *To take what has been discarded by society and transform it into something beautiful.*

The Heidelberg Project has taken urban debris and reconfigured it in ways that communicate powerful visual and social messages. For example, the individual pieces that comprise *Faces in the Hood* have artistic integrity and as a group create a powerful presence; the whimsy and exuberance of *Noah's Ark* are unavoidable; and the humor and wisdom of the vacuum cleaner piece is also dramatic.

→ *To build bridges and create dialogue among diverse groups of people.*

This is perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the Heidelberg Project. People from Detroit, the U.S., and around the world visit and engage with the project. Some take photos from the safety of their cars, many others wander around the site, talking with Guyton or other visitors. Neighborhood residents use the open area as a common front yard, coming together for informal gatherings. In this way the Heidelberg Project brings people together in a series of ad hoc dialogues about mundane subjects, and about the meaning of this unique urban place.

→ *To heal communities through art.*

Although this is arguably the most elusive goal to measure, there is evidence of the healing impacts of the Heidelberg Project on the community. This healing has taken place on an individual level, including that of Tyree Guyton himself; and on a community level, in terms of the ultimate acceptance of the neighborhood, the pride of many working in the neighborhood, and the City's recent acknowledgement that the Heidelberg Project is now a major cultural destination. One can imagine this spirit growing and extending its reach as the project stabilizes and develops new financial resources.

## Selection Committee Discussion: What We Learned

Cities across the country can learn a great deal from the Heidelberg Project. In discussing the project, the Selection Committee noted several different and important themes.

### ***Beauty is Transformative***

The Heidelberg Project takes the discarded refuse of urban life and configures it into works of art that are provocative, soulful, and beautiful. Individually and as a collection, in their placement and relationship to each other, the pieces create a powerful place that makes a statement of hope and of joy in a setting that has suffered poverty and neglect. Like all great works of art, the project raises many questions and issues, both aesthetic and political; but it brings people together around shared interest to debate its merits, and certainly to celebrate the creation of a unique kind of urban place.

***Persistence is Powerful***

Artist Tyree Guyton, often working alone, has persisted in creating the project over a twenty year period, despite two cycles of destruction by the city. His beliefs in the importance of his work, his dedication to it, and his artistic ability have combined to create a place with its own unique power and magnetism. Much of the success of the Heidelberg Project can be attributed to Guyton's willingness to continue his work in the face of enormous obstacles. The Committee noted that in creating important urban places, one person can truly make a difference.

***Abandonment as Opportunity***

Although many urban ills have grown out of urban abandonment, for a few creative individuals across the country it has provided the opportunities to establish transformative projects. The Heidelberg Project, the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, and Project Row Houses in Houston, to name a few, have taken derelict spaces and used them to create places that make important statements about the power of art and creativity to transform lives. These kinds of projects can become models for so many other cities dealing with the same kinds of problems. While Detroit is dealing with the problem on a scale unprecedented in other American cities, many urban areas face challenges of this kind, and much can be learned from these projects that have turned problems into opportunities.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

See project website: <http://www.heidelberg.org>

For Detroit history, see [www.historydetroit.com](http://www.historydetroit.com) by Tina Granzo and [www.visitdetroit.com/visitorcenter/aboutdetroit](http://www.visitdetroit.com/visitorcenter/aboutdetroit)

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## RELATED RUDY BRUNER AWARD WINNERS:

Text taken from <http://libweb.lib.buffalo.edu/bruner>. See also [www.brunerfoundation.org](http://www.brunerfoundation.org).

### Village of Arts and Humanities, Philadelphia, PA; 2001 Gold Medal Winner

*The Village is a private, non-profit community-based organization dedicated to revitalizing its host neighborhood through the arts. Begun in 1986 as a summer project to engage neighborhood children in building a community park, the village has grown into a major provider of arts-inspired programs in education, land transformation, construction, and economic development. The organization serves over 10,000 low income, primarily African-American youth and families in North Philadelphia. It seeks to build community through innovative arts, educational, social, construction and economic development programs. In all of its activities, the Village seeks to do justice to the humanity and social conditions of people in North Philadelphia and in similar urban situations.*

### ARTScorpsLA, Los Angeles, CA; 1999 Silver Medal Winner

*Begun in 1992, ARTScorpsLA (ACLA) is a community based organization that transformed blighted and abandoned land into greenspace and community gathering places. Through ARTScorpsLA, multi-ethnic young people in the urban community designed and created a youth artpark, a community mural project, and gathering places on reclaimed land and in neglected buildings. The project has promoted community building through the arts on a variety of sites, transformed blighted neighborhoods, and contributed to community pride.*

### Project Row Houses, Houston, TX; 1999 Silver Medal Winner

*Project Row Houses has forged new connections among Houston communities through the rehabilitation of twenty-two historic "shotgun" style houses which now provide art gallery and installation space, showcasing the work of prominent African-American artists. In addition, Project Row Houses provides five houses and support services for single working mothers, and a variety of daycare and after school programs for neighborhood youth.*

