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The Return of Detroit



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Monday, January 21, 2013 By [Michael Hart](#)



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One thing I learned last week: Downtown Detroit, [Cobo Center](#) and the [North American International Auto Show](#) are all back. On Friday night, I attended the black-tie charity preview traditionally held the night before the public portion of the annual car show opens.

At the same time, I had the chance to get around the central part of Detroit to see what has been going on since the last time I was there five or six years ago.

First, about the show: There were concerns a few years ago that the event—essentially the first among many hyper-competitive auto shows in the largest cities in the world—might either move out of Detroit all together or see its scope reduced to the point where it was simply a dealer event, the kind that's often held in smaller cities.



Instead, the show “doubled down,” as its executive director Rod Alberts told me, and invested substantial resources in itself. As a result, this year the various auto companies all had displays (which each averaged about 60,000 square feet) that were bigger and more spectacular than they were on my last visit. The aisles of the charity preview were crowded with many more tuxedoed men and elaborately gowned women than I remembered.

More importantly, perhaps, Cobo Center itself is looking a lot better than it ever has. Much of that is thanks to the \$300 million being spent on improvements. And that happened because the city of Detroit finally ceded control of the facility, passing it on to the state of Michigan. Michigan then put Larry Alexander, the long-time CEO of the [Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau](#), in charge. Alexander appears to be the right person at the right time to exercise the kind of leadership necessary to guide the center out of what had been a tough place.

He is helped, of course, by Thom Connors, a veteran venue executive who has been in charge at Cobo ever since [SMG](#) took over management two years ago.

But moving even beyond the center, downtown Detroit has never looked as good. Sure, there are still plenty of worn-down buildings, but there are plenty of newly refurbished ones with more restaurants and stores than I ever remember seeing there.

As an example, I stayed at the Westin Book Cadillac, an iconic hotel that was boarded up the last time I was in Detroit. The streets are filled, not just with car show visitors, but plenty of people who live in the area.

The hope for that part of Detroit, apparently, is to take up some of the slack that is being experienced in other parts of town. Detroit is a city that had a population of around 2 million in 1960 and was undoubtedly one of America's great cities of that era. Today, it might have 600,000 residents (a 70-percent decline in population in a little over 50 years).

A tour guide I spoke to said people ask her to take them on “ruins porn” trips so they can look at the vast portions of the city where hardly any human beings live anymore. Serious urban visionaries talk about returning parts of the old Detroit to wilderness or devoting it to agriculture. In other words, they want to shrink it to a more realistic size, with the downtown area being the core of a new, albeit smaller, urban entity.

That latter part is being helped along by what many people call the “cultural class” that is moving downtown. Fueled by the event business, they are counting on Alexander and a rejuvenated Cobo Center.

You have to wonder, though, about that non-cultural class in Detroit who are still left in those parts of the city that qualify as "ruins porn." The people who have been the heart and soul of Detroit for generations but did not have the wherewithal to get out when the others did.

What will their place be in the new, improved Detroit?

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