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Send a Show to Detroit

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I wish Charles Dickens hadn't already called a story "A Tale of Two Cities," because I'd love to describe current-day Detroit that way.

Tuesday, July 23, 2013 By [Michael Hart](#)

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I wish Charles Dickens hadn't already called a story "A Tale of Two Cities," because I'd love to describe current-day Detroit that way. (But don't worry; I'm sure somebody else already has.)

Only you might not know that's the case if you hadn't been there in the last few months (as I have been) and, even then, if you carefully organize your itinerary you still might not know it.

Even now, how you perceive the story of Detroit's bankruptcy filing last week depends a lot on which publications you read and web sites you scan. If you [read Expo](#) or any of the other event-related news media, we're all full of comments from Larry Alexander at Visit Detroit and Rod Alberts at the North American International Auto Show explaining that business is as usual at Cobo Center, next January's car show will be a wonderful event (and it probably will be) and, if you visit downtown Detroit today, you'll see a community on its way back—all of which is mostly true.

Then, if you read the mainstream media—say the New York or Los Angeles Times—or watch CNN, you get a different picture. That's where you see what one tour guide I know in Detroit described to me as "ruins porn," the miles and miles of abandoned houses, businesses, factories and stores. That's where you'll read the stories of elderly retired city workers living on pensions that give them

barely enough to get by on as it is, and now they're worried that even that will be cut—all of which is mostly true.

So, those of us who feel like we live in cities that are more efficiently organized ask ourselves: How can both scenarios be accurate? I've been to Detroit more than once or twice and I know both are accurate.

There is no denying that Cobo Center is close to wrapping up a \$300-million expansion and renovation that will make it one of the nicest places to hold a tradeshow or convention in the Midwest, if not the whole country. It is true that on one of my recent trips I stayed at the Westin Book Cadillac, one of the nation's most historic hotels that had been boarded up for years and is now



a modern luxury hotel.

It is accurate to say that downtown Detroit is full of restaurants and shops and young artists, writers and musicians who are flocking there all of a sudden. And it is absolutely correct that the future of the automobile industry is rebuilding itself in the rejuvenated, renovated, retrofitted buildings of downtown Detroit.

It is also true that there are still more than half a million people virtually stuck in every other part of Detroit because they didn't have the resources or the foresight to get out while the getting was good. Over the years, plenty of people saw the writing on the wall and well over 1 million left. The ones who couldn't afford to go, who didn't understand what was happening, who were too sick to leave, who didn't have anywhere else to go—they're still there. They're the ones you read about who are trapped in the "ruins porn."

How can there be these two competing pictures? For one, the state of Michigan took action early when it saw a way to save its signature automotive industry. One of many steps it took was to take over ownership of Cobo Center, create an authority to run it, turn it over to private management and arrange for \$300 million worth of renovations.

It provided incentives, with the help of some bright, forward-thinking entrepreneurs, which turned around what is still a fairly small corner of central Detroit and the area around Wayne State University. The hope is that this will be where the rebirth of Detroit finally begins. The dream is that all the economic activity that is happening around Cobo will spread throughout the city.

But there is such a gap between the two Detroits! Perhaps those with greater vision can see a Detroit the rest of us are still

blind to, but, if so, there's a long way to go.

Meanwhile, for what it's worth, I'm glad the tradeshow and events industry can help out a little bit by occasionally sending a show or two its way.

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