Chapter One

The New American Frontier: Detroit, Michigan

At sunrise on the first Friday in December, a film crew from a European television network blocks the oak-paneled entry hall at the Inn on Ferry Street in Detroit with a pile of black equipment bags that hold tripods, lights, and boom microphones. While somewhat annoyed fellow guests squeeze around them to reach their morning coffee, which waits in the parlor of the elegantly restored Victorian house, the TV folks talk excitedly about the great images they shot and the powerful interviews they conducted.

After a week in pursuit of "America in decline," as one of the crew describes their mission, they had captured the "shocking" story of Detroit circa 2010 and were heading home like big game hunters with their trophies. (Were there actually antelope heads in those bags?) "No one would believe this was the story of the Motor City," he says, "but it's a disaster and we have the pictures."

Outside, a horn announces the arrival of the van that will take the crew, just the latest of many who have come to chronicle the city's demise, to the airport. As one of the technicians struggles to get the bulky equipment bags outside, he complains about the chill—a cold front had swept through overnight—but smiles to signal that he was happy to be leaving with his mission accomplished.

The story that the film crew bagged was the easiest "economy in crisis" piece any journalist could pursue in 2009. Long in economic retreat, Detroit had been further savaged by the Great Recession that started at the end of 2007. The median home price had dropped from an already low $60,000 in August 2005 to below $8,000.[1] Commercial real estate had seen an even more precipitous decline, as evidenced by the recent sale of the 80,000-seat Silverdome stadium in nearby Pontiac for $583,000—roughly the equivalent of a studio apartment in Manhattan.[2] Local unemployment, thanks mainly to the troubles of the automakers, was estimated at 28.9 percent (not counting those who had given up looking) compared with 10.2 percent nationwide.[3] Desperate for work, many Detroiters had fled; the city's population, which had peaked at 1.8 million in 1950, was estimated to be less than 900,000.[4]

Far more compelling than the statistics was the city's landscape: abandoned factories, vacant commercial buildings, and neighborhoods where three-quarters of the homes have been boarded, burned, or bulldozed. In the most desolate residential areas you could drive for blocks and see few signs of life except for stray dogs and, occasionally, a coyote. Some of the houses had been abandoned for so long that small trees and vines have grown to cover entire walls.

Detroit's poignant decay has become a favorite subject of photographers who always seem to make special note of decrepit landmarks: the Michigan Theater building, where cars now park beneath the ornate lobby arches, and the hollowed-out Michigan Central Railroad Depot. Once one of the great railroad stations in the country, the eighteen-story story building is now gutted and barricaded behind a security fence that couldn't keep thieves from tearing the copper wire, pipes, and anything else of value out of the building. It looms over the west side like some science fiction monster.

Given the apocalyptic panorama, any first-time visitor who landed in Detroit in late 2009 and drove around the city for the

first time would half expect to see marauding Mad Max figures come roaring down the street on handmade battlewagons powered by Allison diesel engines. The decay and loss were writ large across the city, and you didn't need a TV cameraman's eye to see it. But if you looked more closely, you could find something that most outsiders miss: a Detroit that is vibrant, creative, and optimistic.

On the same morning when the foreign journalists were departing from the Inn on Ferry Street (more about the inn later), a bunch of regulars were crowding into a café that serves as a little oasis of comfort just a few miles away, in the heart of the crumbling city. This is the part of the Detroit story most visiting journalists never see—or acknowledge. It is a thriving business in a place that others consider a wasteland, and it represents an indestructible human spirit that arose in the very depths of the Great Recession in the place that was hit hardest of all. It was also the first stop in a remarkable adventure that revealed that a hard-luck city could also be a modern frontier of opportunity.

Le Petit Zinc occupies a small lot on the corner of Trumbull and Howard Streets in a downtown neighborhood dominated by machine shops, a drug rehabilitation center, halfway houses, and riverfront warehouses. The building itself is a nondescript, single-story rectangle faced in the kind of dusty yellow brick that was used to build countless elementary schools in the 1950s. In fact, it was last used as a preschool and day-care center, and proprietor Charles Sorel has made good use of the chain link fence that once surrounded the playground. He has created a secure parking lot, which is great for business in a place where the center city has emptied out and walking is no longer practical. In the sheltered yard near the door he installed an herb and vegetable garden complete with a bubbling fountain and outdoor seating. An artist as well as an entrepreneur, Sorel painted the sign out front, which features the jaunty rooster that is a symbol of the French

spirit. He also designed the café's interior, which welcomes customers with warm yellows and bright blues that echo the Cote d'Azur.

On this windswept Friday, Sorel arose before five o'clock so he could enjoy a shower and a cup of tea before getting to his shop at six. There he was joined by a cook named Molly Motor (her real name) and server named Rachel Harkai. Within minutes the hot stove and coffee machines filled the place with the aromas of breakfast and coated the cold windows with condensation. Sorel's first patron was a local judge who enjoys the quiet and the quality of the croissants, baguettes, and espresso. By eight o'clock Le Petit Zinc (French slang for "the local bar") bustles with a crowd of regulars and a handful of first-timers. Thanks to word-of-mouth and a few good reviews, the bistro now draws travelers and explorers from the suburbs.

After the morning rush, forty-eight-year-old Sorel takes a break at one of his handmade tables. Born in Martinique but raised in France, he's a lanky fellow who traces his ancestors to both Europe and Africa, and he speaks somewhat fractured English in a lilting accent. His curly black hair is flecked with silver and not completely tamed. The wild style gives him the look of an excited, energetic man on the move, which is exactly what he is. Resourceful, unflagging, and relentlessly optimistic, he is the kind of immigrant who has always helped fuel the American economy with energy and a zest for life.

The death of Sorel's father-in-law (his wife Karima is from Detroit) brought him to the city where, like most newcomers, he was taken aback by the conditions. But he had succeeded once with a café in Brooklyn (his first home when he came to America in 1989) and decided to stay and try again. "We have to live," he said in a puzzled reply to a question about why he might open a French bistro in a neighborhood where it's hard to find even a good hamburger. "I have to feed my family, and I had no other qualifications here."

In fact a welcoming little eatery—something like a family kitchen where the coffeepot is always on—makes for the perfect start-up business in any community, especially one that is short of comforts. The ultimate social animals, human beings naturally seek each other, and from farm communities in the west to big-city neighborhoods, cafés serve as gathering spots. Sorel recalled the places in Paris that made him feel good and set about creating one. He started by focusing on the food. Detroit didn't have a nice French-style bistro with real Parisian coffee and authentic cuisine, he says, adding, "People like quality." Then he mentions the staff. In a depressed employment market he was able to hire what may be the most motivated, educated, and experienced café staff anywhere. Every person on the team is devoted to making both the cuisine they serve and their service "so professional."

Unsatisfied with his own answers, Sorel pauses and looks around at the crowded tables. He cocks his ear to hear the warm din of conversation punctuated by the clatter of dishes and silverware. A smile comes over his face as he realizes that the secret of his success is even more basic than good food and service. To succeed, he says, "You need to cheer people up."

Good cheer—"We have optimism all the time"—is at the emotional heart of Sorel's business, but it is not the only inspirational element of his business plan. From the moment he began to plan the café he set down some operating principles that would communicate certain values to his staff and his customers. First, the books would be completely open to everyone who works at the bistro, so they could see how the business was doing, month-to-month. Second, work would not be rigidly assigned. At any moment you might wait tables, wash dishes, or prepare food or drinks, which meant work was never boring. Third, all the workers, including the founder, would draw the same pay. This policy means that everyone had good reason to provide the highest quality at the lowest price in order to build the business. It also means that they must find some satisfaction in rewards beyond cash.

Passing behind the boss (not a term actually employed at Le Petit Zinc), server Rachel Harkai balances a tray loaded with coffee, croissants, and *salade de fruit frais* and tosses off a comment on the way to a table. "Obviously we're not here to make money," she quips.

After delivering the order, Harkai, who is tall with curly blonde hair, stands for a moment to explain that "here" refers not only to the café but also to the city she adopted after graduating from the honors program at the University of Michigan in 2007.

"I'm twenty-four, and I'm coming of age at a time when the economic boom is over and we were faced with hardship, but that changed what we valued." Trained in creative writing, Harkai had imagined herself as an independent writer and teacher, and in Detroit she didn't have the wait to reach her goal. For $440 per month, including utilities, she was able to rent a huge space with an office, an art studio, and a vegetable garden in the empty lot next door. Soon she was doing readings at the Detroit Artists Market, a gallery that was founded during the Great Depression and is now one of the most prestigious art venues in the Midwest. A local literacy program made her a writer-in-residence in the Detroit schools and she began contributing to *Model D*, a local online culture magazine. Work at the café supplemented the income she made from writing and teaching. It also connected her to the local community.

For a young person starting life, adds Harkai, Detroit was a low-cost alternative to Chicago or cities on the coast where it's easy to get lost in the crowd of people trying to make it. Here, whether it's business, art, or education, the cost of taking a chance is extremely low; almost anyone is welcome to try; and failure just brings another opportunity. Of course, few Detroiters spend much time contemplating what Harkai called the macro-level economic factors that have made the city a kind of urban frontier. They are too busy with the struggle. "Sometimes I feel like it can be hard

to live here," she adds. "But sometimes I feel like we're the smartest people in America to be living here."

If Harkai and her peers are smart, it's a kind of smart that is focused on making life about more than earning and spending money. Like other employees at the café she has made a commitment to the community by promising to live in the city proper and not move to the suburbs. The idea is for people to earn and spend their money locally and to stand against the fear that has been driving others away. This is not so much a tactic as an attitude, an expression of hope that in the long run, individuals who choose to remain in the central city may one day see its revival.

This impulse is consistent with a trend that began before the Great Recession and then accelerated—deglobalization. Marked by declining exports—they dropped 12 percent in 2009—and sharp reductions in currency trading, this process is driven by the realization that many local economies, if not entire countries, have suffered in the face of international competition and need time to rebuild.[5] Without knowing it, Detroiters are much like the people in poor countries around the globe who are more concerned about their neighbors and fellow citizens than winning at the game of foreign trade. They want to create businesses that serve local citizens and make neighborhoods bustle with life.

"My dream," says Charles Sorel, "is to bump into someone on the street in Detroit."

By this he means that he hopes for a day when sidewalks and parks are crowded and the business district pulses with life. For the time being, however, Sorel tries to give the city a pulse by opening the café to community events. The most successful so far were 2008 "Debate Nights," when he kept the café open late so that viewers could watch the Republicans and Democrats who sought the White House square off on the issues.

Politics matters deeply to Sorel, as it does to every other person who has staked a claim to Detroit's future. In his case, the idea of

America as a place of opportunity looms large in his sense of what the country should be. Here he has found that despite his broken English and inexperience, people have been willing to support him because of his work ethic and enthusiasm. He loves the culture of acceptance, and this love makes him worry about preserving it.

"We have optimism, all the time," adds Charles Sorel. "But we also have anger." His main concern is the school system, which needs to be repaired so that young people can be prepared to build Detroit's future. "That is America, a place where everyone, the middle class and everyone, gets a chance." Ideally, elected officials would lead the way to better schools and a renaissance of Detroit, but Sorel says the spectacle of the city's broken local government makes him fear the politicians are all liars. Unwilling to wait, he and pioneers on the Detroit frontier are determined to make the community better all by themselves.

Doing his part, Sorel has created a business that supports five employees and their dependents. By Sorel's hiring policy, those five employees also must live in Detroit and thereby support the city with their dollars and their presence. In recent months he has seen that others appreciate the energy and opportunity in a place that is still the eleventh-largest city in the country (bigger than Boston, Seattle, or Denver). One group of investors came and bought twenty houses. Another group purchased thirty buildings and lots. These people are betting on the long-term future of Detroit. Even more inspiring are the young entrepreneurs who believe so strongly in the place that they are willing to pour their lives into it.

"It inspires me," says Sorel, "to see that I am not the only one."

Today's Detroit seems to Sorel like an urban frontier of opportunity. Like other frontier regions it is a challenging environment that lacks many of the supports you might find in places with more stable infrastructure and institutions. Here, city services like fire, police, public works, and education are minimal, and the supports a business might hope to find from investors or banks just don't

exist. On the other hand, real estate is so cheap and labor is so plentiful that almost anyone with energy and an idea can get a start. And when it comes to community spirit, there may be no better spot in America for a hardy entrepreneur.

"Because there is so much hunger for hope, everyone here wants you to succeed," says Sorel, "even the people who are supposed to be your competition."

Indeed, when Sorel began renovating the space for his café, he attracted other restaurateurs who actually wanted to help him get established. The owners of Slow's, a famous local barbeque spot, advised Sorel on the city permit process and donated their time and energy to build tables for Le Petit Zinc. The proprietor of a cross-town coffee shop helped him find a source for high-quality beans, and Dave Mancini of Supino Pizza got him a supply of paper slips for his credit card machine. Most remarkable of all was the aid that came from Torya Blanchard, who owned a tiny crepe stand—Good Girls Go to Paris—that was Sorel's only direct competition in the city. Instead of getting defensive, she visited Sorel and helped him refine his crepe recipe. It was an act of generosity consistent with the mind-set of her generation and the spirit of her city.

"Detroit needs all of us," explains Blanchard during a brief break in her workday at her shop. A thirty-one-year-old African American woman, she wears fashionably clunky eyeglasses and proudly dons a hairnet whenever she's in the kitchen. She says her parents taught her by example to work hard and seek challenges. "The people who have stayed here when so many others moved out are committed," she says. "They love the city—I mean I love the city—and there are still enough of us around that there is enough business for everyone who wants to try something. In fact there's a little bit of a captive audience because while there are thousands of people who still work downtown every day, there aren't many places for them to eat, or shop."

In many ways Blanchard is more typical of Detroit's new-spirited entrepreneurs than Sorel. She's a Detroit native, she's young, and unlike Sorel she had absolutely no previous experience in business. Her first passion is not the bottom line but all things French, from the language to the history to the delicate, wafer-thin pancakes dusted with powdered sugar that she devoured on her first trip to Paris at age sixteen. That trip inspired her to spend a year working in France as an au pair and then become a French teacher in the Detroit city school system, which was the job she left to go into business. It also gave her the name for the little take-away shop she opened in a space once occupied by a hot dog stand. "Only good girls go to Paris," was the admonition she heard from her mother when she got caught shoplifting on the eve of a planned trip to France.

"I was a total kleptomaniac," laughs Blanchard, recalling her youthful indiscretion. "My mother came to get me at the police station and made sure I understood what was expected of me." Fortunately for Blanchard—and for Detroiters who love French-style fast food—she was basically a good girl, and her parents let her take the trip. Fifteen years later, when she was a little bored and felt she had nothing to lose, Blanchard cashed in her retirement fund, called the landlord who owned a downtown space that had been occupied by the Motor City Pit Stop hot dog stand, and got to work on renovations.

"That was my *Fight Club* moment," says Blanchard, recalling a movie that inspired her to give her all to the demanding challenge of opening a business in Detroit. She refurbished the kitchen, installed a neon sign above the window that said simply "Crepes," and opened for business in the summer of 2008, as the Great Recession raged. Within a few weeks she could count on a line forming on the sidewalk at lunchtime every day.

"The space was forty-six square feet, which gives you some idea of how low my overhead was," adds Blanchard. In fact, expenses were so low at the Good Girls store that she was able to support

herself on the income almost immediately. Like Charles Sorel, she stressed quality food at a low price and began to draw customers from beyond town. Soon customers were suggesting she either expand or open a second shop where they could get table service. In the summer of 2009 she opened Good Girls Go to Paris in the Park Shelton building in the city's Midtown district.

Opened in 1926 as a hotel and apartment block, the Park Shelton is a historic landmark where Diego Rivera lived while he painted his world-famous mural Detroit Industry—an ode to the automobile era—at the nearby Detroit Institute of Arts. The fifth-largest fine arts museum in the country, the DIA is one of several institutions (including Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center) that bring tens of thousands of workers and visitors to Midtown every day. This traffic is so good for business that Good Girls Go to Paris grew to a staff of twelve. That's a dozen jobs Detroit needed.

Although Blanchard is too modest to declare herself a success, she will admit that she's discovered some of the ingredients that go into making a business work in hard times. She followed her passion, avoided debt, delivered high quality, and poured huge amounts of time and energy into her enterprise. She also credits her youth and the edgy atmosphere in the city, which seems to encourage risk taking and innovation. "I guess there is something about my age and this place," she says. "I'm just not afraid to try this."

Torya Blanchard is also unafraid of the future. She believes in the people she grew up with and in the advantages of urban living, especially in a future when high-cost energy makes a lifestyle built around the automobile too expensive and environmentally unsound. But as a young adult who never knew the thriving industrial Detroit, she's unsentimental about the past. Her vision for the city calls for consolidating homes and businesses to create a few vibrant neighborhoods, and turning bulldozers loose on blighted areas. Right now, she says, "Detroit is too big for its own good."

No one's self-image involves being a statistic or a data point in a survey, but Torya Blanchard represents several important trends that defy the negative assumption many experts share about Detroit and the future of the American economy. During the recession, 60 percent of the people we surveyed said they thought they were capable of starting their own business. This figure is higher than the number we saw before the recession.

This confidence also turned up when we asked people how they felt about the prospects of business competition: 49 percent of people in our survey agreed with the statement, "There is greater opportunity for individual business owners to compete with large companies now than there used to be." As shown in Figure 1.1, young people were more confident than others on this point, perhaps because they grasp the power of networking technologies that can give individuals and small groups access to big markets.

These responses suggest an optimism that doesn't appear in large-scale surveys of consumer confidence, which was very weak during the time when our BrandAsset Valuator surveys were being done. However it does appear in unexpected places where people who take a very pragmatic view of life are eager to try almost anything and will exploit whatever resources are available. In Detroit, the most obvious resource is space. In area, Detroit is 20

"There is greater opportunity for individual business owners to compete with large companies more now than there used to be"

Spend Shifters Age Group	Percent Agree
22–28	53%
29–49	49%
50–67	48%
68+	37%

Figure 1.1. Optimism for Entrepreneurship

percent bigger than Boston, San Francisco, and Manhattan put together. With roughly one-third the population, it's easy to understand why the Motor City has so many empty buildings and lots that seem to be turning into urban prairie.

In the short term, and in the eyes of most visitors, Detroit's vacant lots and emptied-out buildings—estimated at roughly forty thousand properties—represent a kind of ending. This assessment isn't wrong. Detroit's reign as an industrial powerhouse and center of the world's automotive business is long gone. The city will also continue to shrink in population. By some demographers' estimates, there will be about 600,000 Detroiters when the exodus finally stops.[6] Shocking as this figure may be to those who recall when its population approached two million in the 1950s, it would still leave Detroit with about as many residents as Milwaukee, Denver, or Washington, D.C. It's a solid base for a new kind of settlement that, with a little planning, might make Detroit a magnet for people who seek an urban lifestyle—with all the culture and connection that implies—at an extraordinarily low cost.

This is precisely the model imagined by the American Institute of Architects when it conducted a special study of the city. As the Great Recession struck in early 2008, the AIA sent a team of experts in planning, design, technology, and development to survey the region and meet with local citizens. With no attachment to the old Detroit, they could see that municipal government was trapped in a cycle of trying to maintain the old-style city services with ever-declining tax revenues. Better to recognize that the old industrial city was truly gone, the experts reasoned, and embrace a new, more sustainable model by going with the natural flow of things but steering the city to a better destination.

The better destination, which the AIA offered in a sixty-page plan, calls for an interconnected group of nine "urban villages" surrounding a core downtown district where jobs, commerce, and public spaces like parks, theaters, museums, and sports venues would be concentrated. The villages would be less densely

populated than the core, but not as loosely developed as a typical suburb. Imagine places where people can easily walk to shop, dine, attend church or school, and hop on mass transit to get to anything else. On these short trips they would pass through parks and restored open spaces (instead of blighted neighborhoods) that would await future development.

The AIA concept might sound like the kind of starry-eyed vision consultants have offered to cities in the past. (Did you ever see the "monorail" episode of *The Simpsons* TV show?) And anyone afraid of top-down social engineering would have doubts about master planning. But on close examination the proposal is not an attempt to impose a rigid blueprint on the city but instead a document that describes a way to leverage resources and initiatives already present. While many residents and businesses departed in recent decades, well-funded museums, medical centers, and universities remain. New stadiums have been built downtown for the Tigers baseball team and the Lions of the National Football League. And even General Motors' much-criticized Renaissance Center, a towering office complex, remains a substantial economic engine. Nearly five thousand people work at the "Ren Cen" every day, and as both Torya Blanchard and Charles Sorel know, they bring their lunch money with them.

Detroit also has leaders who have already begun to bypass the broken city government to support community renewal in specific neighborhoods. The most effective, a coalition of businesses and nonprofit organizations called the University Cultural Center Association, has used its financial and technical expertise to spark hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of activity in Midtown. The UCCA helps businesses and those who want to rehabilitate housing stock obtain grants, loans, tax credits, abatements, and all sorts of technical assistance. The small staff, which will cut through bureaucratic red tape for people who want to bring their ideas and energy to the ailing city, is led by a no-nonsense Detroit native named Sue Mosey, who is so low-profile that her name doesn't

appear on the UCCA . People in the know, however, call her the mayor of Midtown.

"Okay, it's true, if you really want to get things done around here I'm the one you can call," says Mosey, who is fifty-five years old. She then adds a bunch of humble caveats. She's a Detroit native who is so in love with the place that she has spent most of her adult life working overtime to make it better, she says. Anyone who has put in so much time would naturally develop the skills and the contacts to get things done. Besides, she was raised in a family with nine kids and educated by Roman Catholic nuns. People with this kind of background are natural pragmatists who see what needs to be done and then get to work.

"The bottom line in Detroit is nothing new," adds Mosey. "However great the culture was when it grew, in its heyday, that culture stayed around way too long." As successive mayors and city councils failed to adapt to the decline in the auto industry and in high-paying jobs, the middle class departed, leaving behind mainly poor people who needed expensive services. With demand for help high and tax revenues sliding, the slow decline of the city became a fast-moving avalanche. But in the chaos groups like the UCCA could act on the neighborhood level, using the power of institutions like Wayne State University, with its thirty-two thousand students, to fight the trend. Like an army defending a country against rebel insurgents, Mosey and her organization can support new businesses that become little safe zones where neighbors can gather, shop, and see a semblance of normal life. Sometimes merely keeping the lights on at a café or the door open at a grocery store can provide enough hope to stabilize a city block.

The work is demanding, and the progress is incremental. "You have to like to live every day in a challenging environment," she admits, "but there are people who thrive in that. Those are the people who are here." These people, who are determined,

imaginative, and relentlessly optimistic, inspire Mosey to keep going every day, no matter what the headlines say about layoffs and plant closings.

On the day that the European news crew departed the Inn on Ferry Street, Mosey commandeered a big oak table in the hotel lounge for a long chat about Detroit and its future. She was instrumental in the $8.5 million development of the inn, which was begun in 2000 with the renovation of six historic buildings. It was one of the first big projects Mosey helped direct for UCCA. The inn brought much-needed hotel space to Midtown—and twenty-five jobs. And Mosey doesn't mind playing host to journalists who intended to tell the story of Detroit as an urban wasteland. She has no illusions about conditions in the city and no interest in denying them. But she can also hope that visiting reporters will recognize that successful projects like the inn represent a brighter future.

Mosey is enthusiastic about what she calls "really small, credible efforts" that combine imagination and energy to fill a particular need in the community—whether it's a bookstore, a laundry, or a bakery. "Someone comes to us with an idea that will create maybe three or four jobs and we help them the way someone's mother-in-law might help," she says. The backing comes from UCCA's member organizations and government programs. "The idea is to have organic redevelopment from the bottom up rather than the top down. That way we call the shots ourselves in the local community."

A typical UCCA project is a small company called City Bird, which began as an online retailer for goods, mostly artistic and craft items, made by artisans in Detroit and the Midwest. Founded by siblings Emily and Andrew Linn (she's thirty-two, he's twenty-six), the company did well enough with sales on the Internet to expand to a retail shop. With about $8,000 in cash for stock and marketing help from Mosey they were able to renovate a storefront in an old brick building on Canfield Street next to a bustling brewpub. The space is big enough to provide for retail displays, an

art studio, and a stock room and shipping operation. In the first few months of operation, City Bird's sales of jewelry, housewares, and art were already strong enough to pay the rent and create one part-time job. The founders, who grew up in the city, recognize their business success but take more satisfaction from being able to return to Detroit after college to make a contribution to the city's renewal.

"I'm not sure why I feel so tied to Detroit, but I do," confesses Emily Linn. "Being a part of it, having a stake in what happens, matters to me." And while others might see a depressing landscape, she sees opportunity for all sorts of creative projects. One of her favorites is an ongoing art project called The Lot on Cochrane Street. An empty space commandeered in the summer of 2009 by artist Kathy Liesen, it became a site for concerts, dance, displays of all types of art, and community celebration. Like the city's museums and City Bird, The Lot represents a kind of cultural capital that Detroit has in abundance as the low cost of living and welcoming atmosphere draws performers and artists of all types.

The same vibe that makes an artist feel at home transforming a lot into a public art space inspires one of the more creative business options being considered for Detroit: farming within the city limits. More than an oxymoron, urban farming is a way to convert ugly, dispiriting abandoned properties to a productive purpose. Because the crops are raised close to residential areas, practitioners must use the most ecologically advanced techniques for feeding, watering, and waste management. However, urban growers have the advantage of being located smack in the middle of their marketplace, so they do not have to pay for expensive transportation of their produce. They can also use greenhouses to extend their growing season.

So far just a handful of Detroit's empty lots have been transformed into gardens, but they are producing enough to supply local restaurants and other customers who want fresh produce that is organically grown but sold at a competitive price. The growers,

some of whom actually scratch out a profit, sell much of their squash, lettuce, and other vegetables at the city's sprawling Eastern Market, as well as at public sales sponsored by Earthworks, a program sponsored by local Capuchin monks. Devoted to meeting basic community needs, the order operated a soup kitchen in Detroit since 1929, and during the Great Recession served as many as two thousand meals per day. Earthworks is an extension of this mission, an attempt to promote new uses for the land that would feed people, change the character of devastated neighborhoods, and raise employment.

"Food is a basic need in any community, and what we are trying to do is bring the producer and the consumer closer together," explains Patrick Crouch, manager of Earthworks. Crouch has a nearly foot-long reddish-brown beard, which covers a green sweater torn in places and patched over in others. He is Detroit's version of a Tennessee Mountain Man. On a cold winter morning Crouch's market has only a few fresh vegetables to offer in addition to locally made preserves and honey, but in warmer months the harvest from local gardens includes everything from asparagus to zucchini and the demand is greater than the supply. Through trial and error Crouch has helped city farmers learn which crops yield the greatest profit—and it's not always high-priced heirloom tomatoes.

"Kale, believe it or not, is a very valuable crop because the cost of labor is minuscule," he notes. Local farmers can also profit by planting unusual varieties that chefs might like to try. One recent hit was a type of turnip so sweet it could be eaten raw, straight out of the ground. Garlic and scallions can be profitable city crops, along with carrots, "but you have to be careful," he adds, "because they can be labor intensive."

Earthworks provides advice and marketing help free to the urban farmers, but Crouch imagines that the handful of properties now under cultivation will soon be profitable without any assistance. He is not alone in his optimism about urban farming. In the winter of 2009–2010 Crouch hosted a number of visitors from

other cities who planned to start similar programs. Most prominent is Majora Carter, the dynamic founder of an environmental justice movement in the South Bronx. Carter is working on a national urban farming initiative called American City Farms that would deliver high-quality local produce at a profit. "By organizing local community growers into a worker-owned cooperative, we can help the poor while creating low-impact green jobs. There's tremendous passion among the community farmers here and an abundance of land, making urban agriculture a viable business model in Detroit."

After seven years of experience in Detroit, Crouch estimates that a three-quarter-acre plot could earn a grower $20,000 per year. This analysis lines up with a more hard-nosed assessment of urban agriculture by John Hantz, an investor and entrepreneur who intends to invest up to $30 million of his own money in Detroit to plant orchards and build truck gardens with greenhouses that can produce organic salad veggies eleven months a year.

Hantz, a money manager who oversees $1.3 billion in funds, has already made a personal investment in Detroit's future through the purchase and restoration of nine homes in the historic Indian Village community. He jokingly says he's part of the "I Live Here Movement," which means he is rooted in the city and believes that devotion and hard work will shape a bright future for its people. Hantz Farms would rely on the city to help put together enough land to make the world's largest urban farm. It would be set on a collection of sites, not one large swath of land, and it would be a for-profit, tax-paying enterprise. Agriculture experts at Michigan State University are advising Hantz on environmental issues—some urban plots are too contaminated for farming—and he's hired an international authority in food production to make his idea a reality—Michael Score, a soil scientist and sociologist, whose last project was in the developing nation of Zaire. John Hantz is expecting Score to use the same skills that made farms work in Africa to build a big enough operation in Detroit to supply not just the city but also the surrounding region.

Fanciful as it might sound—growing fruits and vegetables where assembly lines once turned steel into cars—the Hantz Farm proposal quickly gained traction after it was first aired in 2008. Recently elected mayor Dave Bing has taken an active interest, and business leaders who have at last accepted that old-fashioned heavy industry is gone actually see hope in the farm initiative. At the end of 2009 Doug Rothwell of Business Leaders for Michigan asked, "What do you do with a population of 700,000 in a geography that can accommodate three times that much?" In a time of crisis, growing food seems like a remarkably workable concept.

Crisis also makes people think in extraordinary and dramatic ways. Evidence of this arose in early 2010 when roughly a dozen young Detroiters drafted a pledge—"The Detroit Declaration"—that made public their long-term commitment to the city and outlined principles that should guide citizens, businesspeople, and political leaders who hope to shape the city's future. Beginning with the simple statement, "Cities are the greatest expression of civilization," the declaration calls for a "greater, healthier, more vibrant, urban and livable Detroit." The values and priorities set by the signers, among them City Bird founders Emily and Andrew Linn, include

Be welcoming and embrace our diversity. Move beyond mere tolerance of our differences to a true commitment to openness, understanding and cooperation, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives both in our neighborhoods and at the highest decision-making realms.

Preserve our authenticity. Celebrate and elevate that which makes Detroit unique—local art, music, food, design, architecture, culture—to build a stronger local economy.

Cultivate creativity. Build an infrastructure to foster and promote emerging talent in one of Detroit's greatest strengths,

the arts: music, film, visual arts, design, and other creative industries.

Diversify our economy. Create a culture of opportunity and risk-taking, especially by investing in entrepreneurialism and small, micro-business.

Promote sustainability. Embrace the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental benefit by retooling our infrastructure with green technology, adapting vacant buildings and open spaces for new uses, and creating healthy, family-supporting jobs.

Enhance quality of place. Create a comprehensive vision for transit-linked, high-quality, walkable urban centers in Detroit.

Demand transportation alternatives. Invest in an integrated regional transportation system that links communities and provides citizens with access to the jobs, health care, and education they need.

Prioritize education, pre-K through 12 and beyond. Create a culture that values the wide, equitable educational attainment necessary to produce both economic opportunity and stronger citizens.

Elevate our universities and research institutions. Create world-class education, new technology, and medical centers to attract and retain students and faculty from around the world.

Enhance the value of city living. Demand public safety and services to improve the quality of life for residents.

Demand government accountability. Reward civic engagement with responsive, transparent, and ethical governmental decision-making.

Think regionally and leverage our geography. Maximize our position as an international border city and a midwestern hub

between Chicago and Toronto. Forge meaningful partnerships between Detroit and its suburbs to compete globally in the 21st century.

The Detroit Declaration may be a dreamers' document, but it also points to a path out of the economic wilderness. More than anything, imaginative ideas for sustainable communities and businesses will be the wave of the future American economy, and as they reflect on this reality the frontiersmen (and women) of Detroit believe they have competitive advantages over other places. Office and factory space cost half what they do on the coasts. Michigan is also a great place to find skilled workers of any type, from engineers to marketing people, who can be hired for less in part because they live in a place where the cost of living is low. They are also willing to devote themselves to projects that would seem like long-shot gambles in any other environment.

Two blocks off Woodward Avenue, inside an industrial building on Burroughs Street, a half-dozen engineers who work for Nextek Power Systems gather around a whiteboard where they have scrawled notes based on readouts from a computer screen. They are analyzing data on the performance of an innovative power system based on Thomas Edison's preferred form of electric supply—direct current.

Also called DC, direct current is the juice that comes out of batteries, fuel cells, solar panels, and other sustainable energy sources. Because it is difficult and expensive to transmit over great distances, Edison's DC lost out to alternating current—AC—when the electric age began. AC, promoted by George Westinghouse and Nikola Tesla, allowed for a single huge generating station to supply power for homes and businesses spread over hundreds if not thousands of square miles. To make use of this system, lights, appliances, and motors were all built to operate on AC, and it became the standard.

But the advantages inherent in this system came with some vulnerability. The huge and complex network can be brought down by an isolated incident—even a squirrel chewing through a wire—and big power plants are hugely expensive to build. Also, as much as half the power produced by generating stations is lost as electricity is sent to distant consumers.

As long as fuel prices were low and the grid didn't get overloaded with demand, the AC system worked well enough. Today, demand for power often surpasses the capacity of the big grid, and fluctuating fuel prices make it expensive. Add the problem of global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels, and you've got three big reasons to seek more efficient, renewable energy systems. Nextek Power Systems staff talk about their technology with the fervor of evangelists because they see how it can be applied to solve these challenges. DC power generated close to where it will be used is almost 100 percent efficient. When the sun or the wind produces it, the fuel cost and carbon emissions are both zero.

Think of it as "organic power or organic electricity," says Nextek CEO Paul Savage. By *organic*, Savage means the electricity is made close to where it's used and is not processed in a way that reduces its power. "You naturally become more efficient," he says, when you see the entire infrastructure for electricity sitting on your roof. Over Paul's shoulder, a sign above the whiteboard proclaims the company's motto: "Edison was Right."

In the past, DC entrepreneurs couldn't take advantage of their superior efficiency because almost everything that used electric power was made to run on AC. Nextek is solving this problem in two ways. First, its systems can work with both types of current. Second, the firm is partnering with firms like Philips, which makes lighting and other equipment. Savage's biggest breakthrough so far has been with Armstrong, which makes a billion ceiling tiles per year. The company's ceiling systems are installed on metal racks. These racks can actually transmit power to lights that operate at

low voltage. One big selling point for such a system, besides its efficiency, is safety. "The number one killer of electricians is working on lighting systems," notes Savage, adding, "This is lower current than what recharges your tooth brush."

As he conducts a tour of his lab and engineering shop, Savage speaks with the enthusiasm of an evangelist—and he has made converts of more than a few utility companies and industrial firms. More than a hundred corporations have agreed to participate in a Nextek pilot program to create a small DC power grid serving a one-square-mile section of Detroit, he reports. When completed, it will be the biggest DC network constructed since Edison's time. Just as important, it will put Detroit at the center of a potential revolution in electricity and the so-called green technology that is supposed to produce the jobs of the future. This development thrills Savage's wife and partner, Fay.

A native of the region, Fay Savage comes from a family that goes back four generations in Detroit, but she's not interested in resurrecting the industrial city of old. Instead she imagines a new community powered by imagination and creativity, which is less dependent on a few dominant industries.

"In Detroit the big systems failed," says Fay. By *big systems,* she means the auto industry, government, unions, and other institutions that failed to adapt. But in the wake of their failure, she adds, some "people see this place can be a great city but for new reasons. There's an opportunity here to reimagine and reenvision things." Detroit is the best place in America for anyone interested in bold ideas, she argues. Where else could you build a solar-powered DC system to supply energy at the lowest possible cost to an entire neighborhood? Where else would such an experiment even be possible?

You might say they are all dreamers. From Charles Sorel, who presides over a bit of Paris he planted on a blighted landscape, to

Paul and Fay Savage, who claim kinship with Thomas Edison, Detroit seems to be full of people who refuse to see what everyone else sees. In empty buildings and abandoned lots they see opportunity and hope. In the faces of Detroit's survivors they see a willingness to work, to experiment, to fail, and to succeed. They are not the only ones. An outsider who is open-minded (and open-hearted) cannot help but be inspired by the indestructible spirit of these Detroiters. Clear-eyed and realistic, they do not imagine their city as a renewed industrial powerhouse, but they do believe it can be a productive place where ideas are turned into innovations and communities can provide a graceful, interconnected, and humane quality of life.

Perhaps this is why a Gallup survey recently found that of all the respondents who answered questions about their well-being, farmers were the happiest and felt the most respected, even though they ranked last in pay.[7] This sense of satisfaction likely flows from the control they feel over their time and the sense of purpose they experience in their work. In our survey research, 77 percent of people agreed with the statement, "How I spend my time is more important than how much money I make," with the same number feeling they were "coping" or "living comfortably" on their present income. In Detroit, where people can see an asset's true value, they are not universally discouraged by the prospect of focusing on "needs" rather than mere "wants." Instead we found folks generally agreed with the 80 percent of Americans in our survey who said they were "more optimistic" now about their well-being than two years ago.

Fortunately, a few companies are already connecting to the Detroit ethos. We modeled an index of a basket of "indestructible spirit" firms, those top 10 percent of all brands in our U.S. study that score highest on being optimistic, innovative, progressive, and rugged. In this basket are companies and organizations such as Timberland, Google, General Electric, IBM, Sears/Craftsman, Levi's, Habitat for Humanity, and the U.S. Army.

And in 2010 their index performance outpaced all other brands on key metrics:

One of my favorite brands	+121 percent
Would recommend to a friend	+113 percent
Worth a premium price	+109 percent
Use regularly	+91 percent
Prefer most	+79 percent

In all, the organizations that show indestructible spirit seem to be tapping into today's mind-set, which says that despite hardship, optimism and strength are the only way forward: only 13 percent of Americans in our BrandAsset Valuator study believe that "looking ahead, my family and I will be worse off than now."

The optimism reflected in these numbers actually guides the choices made by entrepreneurs struggling to make it in places like Detroit. Typical is David Armin-Parcells, who recently opened a wine bar and retail shop over a downtown restaurant. With just $20,000 cash and a lease that promised his landlord a share of the profits, Armin-Parcells was able to get into business with little risk. He takes real delight in the fact that Motor City Wines, which also features live music, is in a former speakeasy that can only be reached by a secret stairway. It is flanked by abandoned buildings, which adds to the playful air of mystery customers feel as they enter the club.

On a cold but sunny day, Armin-Parcells stood near his business on the corner of Woodward and Congress. He couldn't say when he might turn a profit at Motor City Wines, but then, his overhead was so low he could afford to wait. "My parents were optimists and I am one too," says Armin-Parcells. "I love where I live and I already have a great life." Behind him, in the window of a vacant store, his attitude was echoed in bright orange letters placed there by a local artist. It was a simple message that read, "Everything Will Be All Right."

Exactly one month after the European film crew bustled out of the Inn on Ferry Street and flew off with the story of a down-and-out Detroit, a new mayor took the oath of office. Sixty-six-year-old Dave Bing is a different kind of leader. Considered one of the top fifty basketball players in history, Bing spent most of his pro years with the Detroit Pistons and built up such an enormous reservoir of goodwill that when the city needed a leader who wasn't beholden to any traditional power brokers, he was the obvious choice. Smart, strong, and independent, he seemed to understand both the depth of the city's crisis and its potential. He spoke of restoring trust and repairing the damage done by decades of neglect. But he envisioned this as a matter of human values, not capital investment. Indeed, his agenda did not include a single public works project or neighborhood rehabilitation scheme. Instead he called for three shifts in values:

- A tough new ethics policy
- Reduced crime in the city's neighborhoods
- A long-term, big-picture approach to government

As a basketball player, Dave Bing was almost indestructible through sixteen college and pro seasons. Indeed, after suffering a devastating eye injury that doctors thought would end his career, he played five more years with only partial vision. In retirement he overcame early business defeats to build a conglomerate of Detroit-based companies under the umbrella of the Bing Group. Can Dave Bing inspire Detroit to a bright future? Fortunately, he doesn't have to. The city is already filled with people driving toward a renewal. Bing's election is a reflection of their spirit, and if you'd like to join them, all you have to do is stake your claim and make your commitment. If you're lucky, they'll get you started with a good breakfast at Le Petit Zinc.