

A day in life

A bus ride in Detroit in September 2019

My friend Julek and I had already been in Detroit for three days when, over a small breakfast in the Fisher building, we made plans for how we would spend the day.



1 Inside the Fisher building

At our previous destination, Chicago, we recognized that buildings look impressive on the outside, but they are truly breathtaking on the inside: interiors with marble, brass and bronze, often accompanied by amazingly painted ceilings. Completed in 1928, the Fisher building is a 30-story Art Deco building built according to plans by Albert Kahn. It houses a theatre, a radio station, retail and office space – mostly for the administration of Detroit Public Schools. However, most of the space is currently not utilized.

We ordered coffee at the Fisher Bakery, a beautiful place where someone has put a lot of thought into making it fit perfectly into the historic building, but still giving it a modern touch. Since the building is not exactly located *downtown* – which is a topic of its own in Detroit due to its large area and low density –, there was only one other customer and two staff members besides us. While sipping coffee, we decided to text our new friend Alec, if he'd have some time to show us around that day. Alec is a self-employed lawyer, 50something, born and raised in Detroit and as such, willing to proudly present us *his* city. We got to know him by accident – and in that case, accident has a double meaning.

We took the "Wolverine" train from Chicago to Detroit. As trains are not the most popular means of transportation in the USA, it came as no surprise that our wagon was almost empty and therefore quiet. Very slowly the ever-same landscape drifted past us, 450 km (281 miles) were to be completed. According to the timetable, the journey should have taken 5.5 hours. For us, it took 11 hours.

We were just to arrive at the second last station of our trip, Dearborn. Passengers were already about to collect their luggage when the train stopped abruptly. I looked out of the window and next to me I saw a woman and a man bending strangely to look under the train, trying to figure something out. Then the conductor showed up, asked everybody to move to another wagon and told us "something" happened. Yet he didn't give us any details. All passengers stayed pleasantly calm and no one gawked or photographed whatever there was.

We started investigating on our own, using the internet. On the facebook page of the local news the incident was immediately reported. constantly reading through the comments, we found out that a man in his 50s, local and occasionally crossing the tracks, did so today, got hit by the train and eventually died. Meanwhile some passengers in the next wagon got upset about not being allowed to leave the train. 4.5 hours passed until we could do so. However, for some reason we were not

Detroit

allowed to continue the travel by train, so Amtrak organised taxis to get everybody to their destinations. Well, "taxi" is a big word for what it was: a car with two rear seat rows, wherefrom the front rear seat could not be folded back, a defect safety belt,

every single warning light on the dashboard was lit.

Somehow, through serpentine movements, we managed to get in the back seat and with five people on the car it was fully packed. A

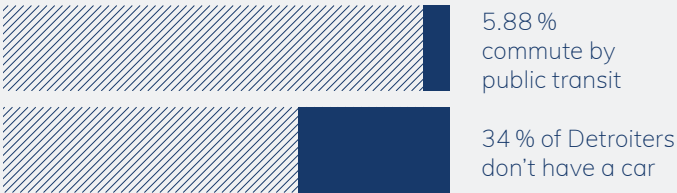
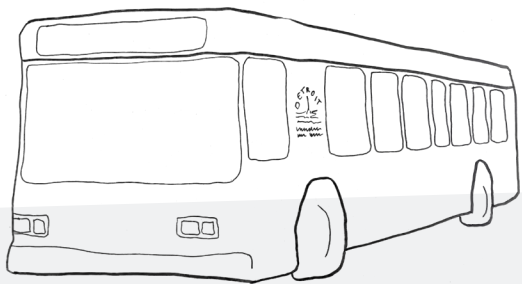


2 Dashboard disco

guy called Alec was sitting in front of us.



We texted Alec to align on plans and he offered to pick us up. His home was next to a bus route, so we decided to use public transport instead. Up to that point we didn't have the slightest feeling that using public transport in a city that is being called *Motor City* for a reason could



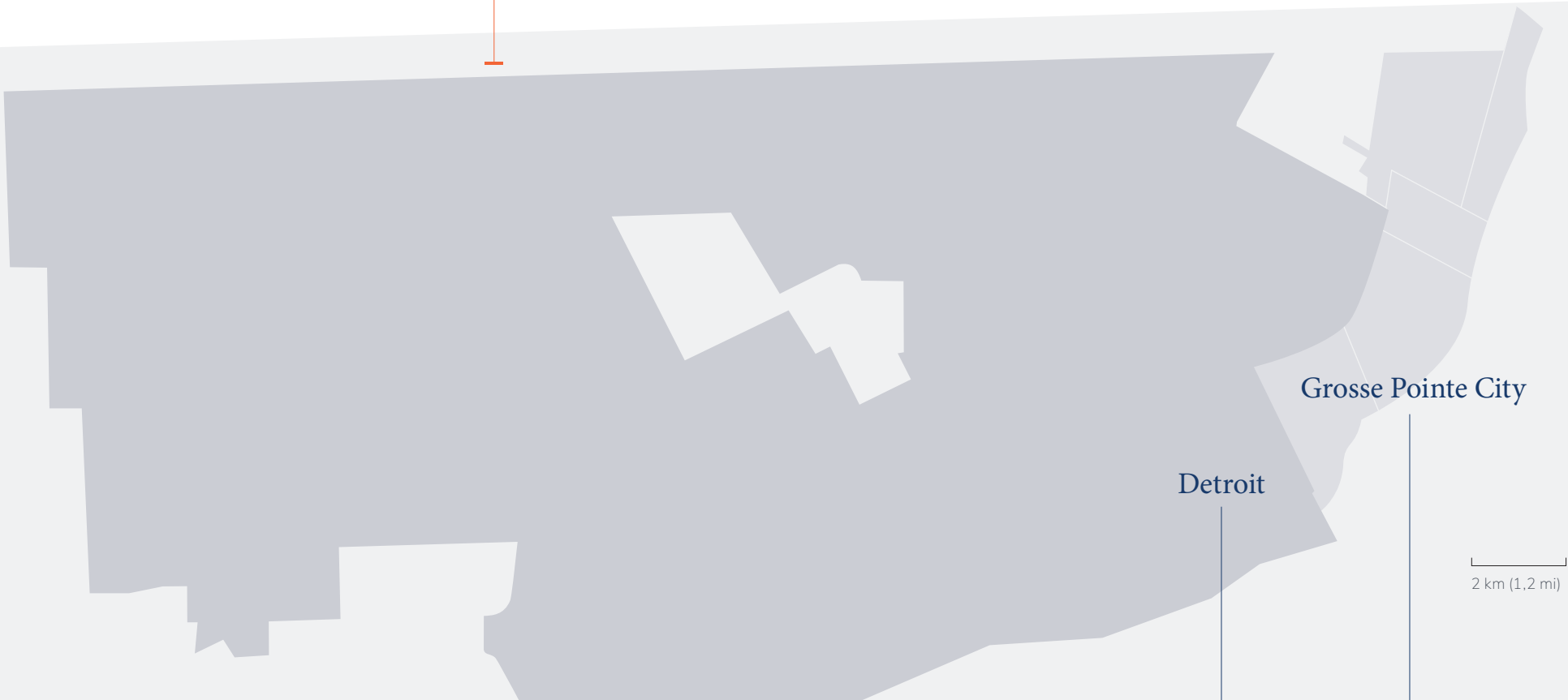
3 Mobility facts

be an adventure in itself. In naive manner we asked one of the two staff members how you're supposed to pay in a bus in the D. He asked: "Where do you want to go?" – "Grosse Pointe", a city adjacent to Detroit, quite wealthy. He assumed we were looking for a mall, turned

to his colleague and asked her if she knew more about riding a bus, but she shrugged.

After all, it was 2019 and the internet can be such a helpful tool if available. We checked online for bus

connections and the nearest stop and set off. Since we didn't know what to expect and wanted to be on the safe side we picked up some cash from an ATM in the building – for the first time since we came to the US 1.5 weeks ago.



		Detroit		Grosse Pointe City	
USA	Michigan				
3,531,905.43	56,538.90	Land area in sqm, 2010	138.75	1.06	
87.4	174.8	Population per square mile, 2010	5,144.3	5,199.0	
328,239,523	9,986,857	Population estimates July 1, 2019	670,031	5,154	
6.3 % ↗	1.0 % ↗	Population change Apr 1, 2010 - Jul 1, 2019	-6.1 % ↘	-4,9 % ↘	
\$ 60,293	\$ 54,938	Annual household income (median, 2018)	\$ 29,481	\$ 108,083	
11,8 %	14,1 %	Poverty rate	36,4 %	2,9 %	

4 Comparing values between country, state, cities.

We went across the street to one of the many MoGo bike sharing stations and got ourselves a bike. 3,3 km or 2 miles later our physical location merged with the pin of our digital destination.

We assumed, we were at the right spot, but we couldn't see any indication of a bus stop. Some bus stops blend in very well with the urban landscape. Or to put it in other words: You can hardly see them.

After a few spins around ourselves we noticed a pole that looked like it came straight from the hardware store.

At the end of it was a tiny green and yellow sign with an equally tiny BUS STOP written on it.

5 A nonprofit bike share system all across downtown, 480 bikes at 44 stations. They even have e-bikes, called MoGo Boost.



Picture puzzle. I admit, it's written on the street, but in real life, you have a wider focus. We both oversaw that detail.



It's easier to recognize coming from this side.

We stood there, we stretched the neck looking down the road – no bus in sight! We found out, that the intervals for a bus to arrive can be once an hour, or, if you're lucky, twice. We texted Alec about a delay.



6 Average on-time performance on a weekday in August 2019: 73 %

Meanwhile, we got company. An elderly guy joined us, also waiting for a bus. He sipped at his brown bag and we started the usual “how are you, where’re you from” talk. He told us, that he’s a veteran and immediately got into details: Back then he was stationed in California, where they “played war” which “was fun”. He then asked us about our profession, and we told him that it has more or less something to do with the social aspects of urban development. We also mentioned that we had studied Urban Design together back then. He listened to our cumbersome explanation of the term. When we finished he challengingly looked at us with a slightly contemptuous smile and asked: “So you design neighborhoods?” – “We try to understand what people of a certain area want and need and help them to succeed”. Our answer seemed to comfort him, he wrapped-up our answer in his own words and gave some examples of our professional activities. We were deeply impressed, staring at him and each other with big eyes: Never have we heard a more accurate explanation from anyone outside this profession. Frankly, even we have trouble getting the point across most of the time. But we wanted to know more about his story so we asked: “How did you end up on the streets?” and he told us, that he came to Detroit because of a woman. Eventually he got screwed and ended up in jail. Now he’s drinking, smoking one cigarette a week and trying to get along, somehow.

Clearly, Detroit is full of neighborhood projects and full of people, who are active in this field – for various reasons. One of them is that they have no choice but to become active themselves if they want things to change.

When the next bus arrived (not ours, of course), he entered but got off right away: the voucher that should have enabled him to ride the bus for free expired an hour ago. He got slightly upset and stated, that “Veterans are allowed to ride for free. The driver should have taken me with him, either way.”

We continued talking until another bus came along. The same was about to repeat, so this time I followed him into the bus, asking the driver

“How much is a ticket?” , ready to pay.

“One fifty”

Coins? Really?!

I offered her one of my two \$10 bills.

“No change” , she replied unimpressed. Trying to show good will I asked:

“Credit card?” No reaction. I obviously had a run here.

“Apple pay?” She shook her head.

Since I was focused on negotiating, I didn’t notice that the driver and the veteran had apparently reached a non-verbal-agreement behind my back and he was on his way to a seat. Be that as it may, the mission was accomplished.

I got off the bus and realized that we needed some change if we didn’t want to spend \$10 on every bus ride. We walked into the tattoo studio across the street where the female artist just gave us what we needed to start our journey.

Some minutes later, the bus of line 31 finally arrived. Of all the three that stopped there so far, this one was the oldest. It had its best times long behind it. When we got on board, people were taking more or less curiously note of us. We sat down. It was already noon when I texted Alec again to let him know that finally we were soon to arrive.

We’re on the way now. 🚌

Ok!

With each stop young people in school uniforms and workers obviously coming from their shifts joined. In the meantime, there were no seats left and people stood crowded together while the noise level rose.

The street was all straight, a typical American urban grid, lined with an irregular arrangement of functional buildings, vacant lots and abandoned houses.

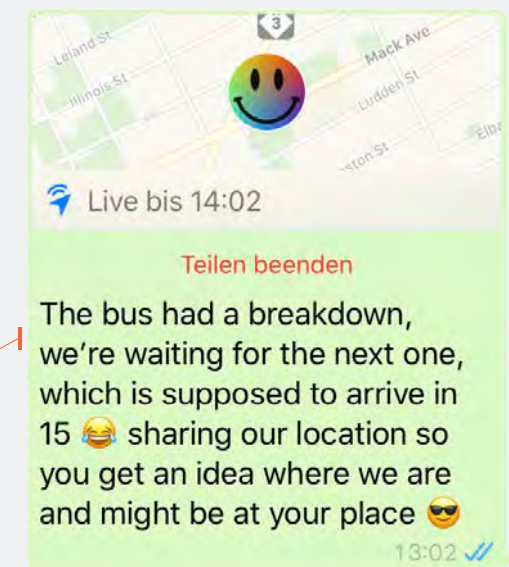


Suddenly, after about 3,2 km (2 miles) – a quick
accompanied by a loud

b u m p
n o i s e

POFF!

All chats abruptly stopped on our bus. Something seemed to be broken, we all had to get off. Someone was complaining, that “there were too many on the bus” and it’s “no wonder what happened”. Standing outside I looked at the front tire and if it looked burst, but it seemed intact. While we were still observing the scene and trying to understand what happened, some students and elderly people with crutches decided to start walking. Others, including us, got back on the bus, puzzled and waiting for instructions. Another bus was soon to come, the driver announced. We texted Alec.



He instantly replied he’d come and get us, “Oh, my! Stand by. I’ll be there soon“. But we didn’t want to just sit and wait, so we decided to walk towards his direction. We sent our live location, in return he sent us his.



7 Front view



Urban development in the 20th century in the USA supported the idea of settling in suburbs: This was intended to counteract the dark sides of life in cities with pollution, high density and traffic congestion (Perry 1929, 25ff). This concept has some shortcomings, such as dependence on vehicles and no incentives to walk in these areas.

It felt strange that there were no people around, at least no pedestrians. Instead, the motorists were staring at us as they drove by. Then, an older woman appeared right in front of us. She was walking towards us and talked to us as we passed by. Actually she started talking even before we were at her height: “fe wmn oppst saide [further mumbling]”. It seemed she had about three teeth left in her mouth. “Pardon me?” I replied. She repeated. I deciphered parts of her mumbling with “the woman opposite side” and on the second part I still wonder what it was about.

Our heads turned to the other side of the street: At a distance, indeed, a woman was standing there; lightly dressed. But what was the deal? While we were passing by trying to understand the situation, the toothless woman was already gone. Well, now? We were too busy being confused to perceive anything else around us. We further figured out via live location that Alec had to be in front of us at the traffic light – yet still out of sight.

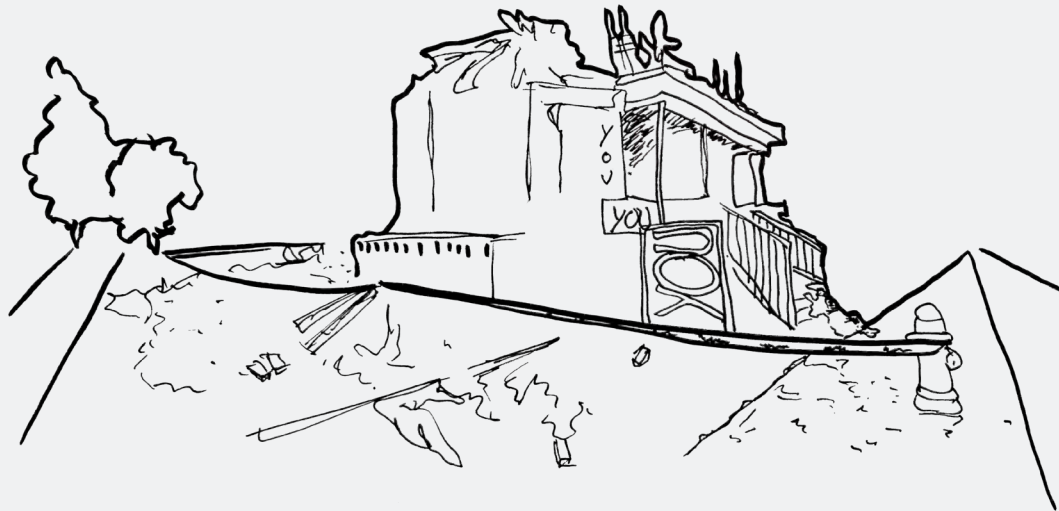


A house at Heidelberg Project.

When he saw us, we could recognize the relief on his face. He turned into the side street next to us and quickly opened the door. As soon as we sat he quickly drove away. “This is not a good area to walk around, girls”, he told us in a slightly reproachful tone. We looked at him with big eyes. What have we done wrong? We just walked down an unexciting street with no people.

While he briefly gave us an explanation on Mack Avenue, he took the direction towards the Heidelberg Project, which was around the corner. We saw, that the house, that we passed with our bikes 24h ago, had just burnt down.

8 A part of Mack Avenue was listed as the second dangerous neighborhood in Detroit in 2013.



The world was a little less damaged yesterday.

Source directory

Images and graphics

All images not credited were taken by me on that trip in 2019.

1

Dig Downtown Detroit / CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>).
Online: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisher_Building#/media/File:Fisher_Building_Lobby_\(4634810509\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisher_Building#/media/File:Fisher_Building_Lobby_(4634810509).jpg)

2

Photo taken by and with permission of Alec.

3

Own representation based on data of
(data above) Data USA. Online: https://datausa.io/profile/geo/detroit-mi/#mode_transport
(data below) Detroit Metropolitan Area Communities Study.
Online: <https://poverty.umich.edu/files/2018/05/W2-Transportation-F.pdf>, page 3

4

Own representation based on data of the United Staes Census Bureau.
Online: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US,MI,detroitcitymichigan,grossepointecitymichigan/>

5

MoGo Detroit Blog.
Online: <https://mogodetroit.org/blog/mogo-announces-station-locations-in-expansion-area/>

6

Own representation based on data of the City of Detroit, August 2019.
Online: <https://detroitmi.gov/departments/detroit-department-transportation/ddot-performance-dashboard>

7

Google Maps

8

Michigan Radio. Online: <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/6-most-dangerous-neighborhoods-michigan>

Literature

Perry, C. (1929) ‘The Neighbourhood Unit’, Reprinted Routledge/Thoemmes, London, 1998, p.25-44

♥

Thank you, Bas, Karsten and Doro for your valueable feedback.
Thank you, Julek, for the trip.