

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is! I'm June Simms in Washington.

Detroit, Michigan is often called the "Motor City." The name came from all the new vehicles being produced in its factories. But today Detroit is better known for its now-empty factories than its cars. On our program, we report on the changes in the city, and how those changes have given rise to a new kind of business: blight tourism. We also tell about an effort to help city planners clean up Detroit.

Blight Tourism in Detroit Grows in Popularity

Detroit's Eastown Theater was once a successful business. Its big name performers included rock stars such as Bob Seger, Ted Nugent and Alice Cooper. Today, the sidewalk in front of the theater serves as a bed for homeless people.

Inside the building, the floor where musicians once performed is filled with holes. Some critics say the theater looks like a place where a bomb exploded. But it is actually an example of Detroit's blight. Hard economic times caused the break-down of the Eastown Theater and other buildings.

Saint Agnes Catholic Church is also in need of repair. The once beautiful church has graffiti covering its walls and many broken windows. Columns that support the structure are starting to collapse.

Inside a school next to the church, a visitor can find forgotten shoes, old books and other unwanted things.

Kevyn Orr is Detroit's emergency manager. He estimates the city has 78,000 buildings that suffer from blight. He says these buildings can become targets of vandal attacks and fire.

Jesse Welter is a photographer. He uses his pictures to tell a story. He sees art in the blight.

"I can see the beauty in it, and the architecture. I think they kind of tell you the history, you know, the past, what, you know, what it is, what it's become."

In 2011, Jesse Welter began inviting other photographers on his drives through the city.

“Basically, I was kind of doing this on my own, and I thought, you know, why not take people with me and give people an opportunity to do what I do.”

Now, people pay him between \$40 and \$100 to show them Detroit neighborhoods.

“My van, I can take up to 10 people, and they’re usually full. I’ve been doing this since 2011, and I’ve been to, probably, over 180 different buildings, and the tours I’ve probably done probably about 300 tours.”

One of the largest buildings they visit is the former Packard Automobile factory. It is one of the most popular stops on the tour. The former factory has a new owner who is interested in improving the building. One day, the Packard Automobile plant might become someone’s home.

In the second half of our show, we look at how Detroit plans to repair and replace blighted buildings around the city. You are listening to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I’m June Simms.

Motor City Mapping Project Takes Aim at Detroit Blight

The blighted neighborhoods in Detroit have changed the way people look at the city. But a new group of city planners aim to repair or replace the damaged buildings. Steve Ember reports.

Tia Ciara Bonner is one of three people working on what is called the Motor City Mapping project. It seeks to map all the troubled properties in Detroit.

Ms. Bonner uses an electronic tablet to keep a record on the condition of each property she examines.

“As a Detroiter, I want to feel safe. And I need these abandoned homes knocked down.”

She is not happy at what she sees.

“I have saw (sic) more burnt up homes and more empty lots than the houses that are standing.”

The information she and her team gather is stored on computers at Motor City Mapping headquarters. There, other people examine the information, a process they call “blexting.” It combines the words blight and texting.

Jerry Paffendorf is Chief Executive Officer of Loveland Technologies. His company designed the blexting software programs.

“As properties are surveyed, they are stored in a database and immediately visualized on a map. And everything comes in real time, kind of like Twitter.”

Glenda Price is co-chair of the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force. Her group is supervising the Motor City Mapping Project. She says the group is bringing local, state, and federal agencies together to help solve the city’s blight. The goal is to improve the physical appearance of Detroit.

“One of the biggest obstacles to achieving that goal is going to be money, because it is going to be costly to do this. And so that is why we recognize it will take probably three years, is what we are projecting.”

Jerry Paffendorf says the software program currently has a list of about 180,000 properties. The cost to clean up each blighted property is between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

The Motor City Mapping Project is expected to complete its work this month. The Detroit Blight Removal Task Force will have a better idea of the final cost of the clean-up once the project ends.



I'm Steve Ember.

And that's our program for today. It was based on reports from VOA's Kane Farabaugh in Detroit. This show was written by Jonathan Evans. Thank you for spending time with us today.

Every day on As It Is we report on issues we believe are of interest to you. You can tell us what you want to hear on a future show. E-mail us at learningenglish.voanews.com.

I'm June Simms. Join us again tomorrow at this time for another As It Is from the Voice of America!