

Hello and welcome back to a special program of As It Is ...a way for you to learn and improve your American English. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we take you to Detroit, Michigan, and visit what was once a large part of America's industrial strength.

The Packard Plant was once the most modern automobile production center in the world. Now, the former factory buildings are in disrepair. And police and fire officials in Detroit say the factory grounds are a danger to the community.

Detroit is known as the 'Motor City.' It is home to car makers Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. Before these businesses became world famous, the Packard Motor Car Company was the best known car maker in Detroit.

The Packard plant was known for its big, strong buildings. These structures were famous for their open spaces and use of sunlight. The Packard Plant influenced the design of factories around the world. But by 2012, the Detroit Free Press was describing the Packard Plant as, big, ugly and dangerous.

Today visitors are not permitted inside the old buildings. Some structures are collapsing. Roads within the 18 hectare property are damaged. Industrial wreckage and waste cover the grounds. But after the city of Detroit seized the property many people wanted to buy the old Packard Plant. The city took control of the land because the owner had failed to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxes.

The Detroit city government first attempted to sell the Packard Plant in October of 2012. A Spanish-born businessman, Fernando Palazuelo, was the third person to make an offer at a government auction. The first person offered six million dollars, but failed to make the full payment.

A man who had offered two million dollars for the property also failed to pay. Finally, in 2013, the city accepted Mr. Palazuelo's offer. He reportedly paid only \$405,000 for the Packard Plant.

The story of the Packard Plant begins in 1903 with two American brothers and a German immigrant. The brothers, William and James Ward Packard, thought they could build a better car. The immigrant, architect Albert Kahn, thought he could design a better factory.

The Packard brothers moved some of their business operations to Detroit in 1903. They asked Kahn to design new factory buildings for the Packard Motor Car Company. His design included tall windows that gave factory workers plenty of light and fresh air. Kahn made the "daylight factory" popular. He used wood, brick and other traditional building materials in the first eight buildings. Then the architect began using reinforced concrete. This material helped protect buildings from being destroyed by fire. It is for this reason that the Packard plant has survived longer than the company that built it.

Packard cars were the favorite cars of the rich in the early 20th century. In 1921, Warren G. Harding was the first American president to drive to his swearing-in ceremony. President Harding declared that America was in the age of what he called “the motor car.”

In 1932, Americans elected Franklin Roosevelt as president. Roosevelt set up programs to keep people working during the Great Depression. In 1935, radio listeners could hear a Packard advertisement with the words, “Give A Man A Job. Buy A New Car.”

Packard stopped making cars during World War II to build engines for military airplanes and ships. One day in 1943, production at the plant came to a halt. About 25,000 people walked off the job. White factory workers were protesting the naming of three African-Americans to new positions. Their appointments meant that the white workers would be working directly with African-Americans. The strike lasted three days. Later that summer, there were deadly race riots across Detroit. The unrest stopped war production for two weeks.

After the war, the Packard Company began to lose business. The company was losing out to other companies. By 1959, production stopped and the Packard Plant was officially closed.

Ownership of the Packard Plant has changed over the years. Since the early 1990s, the plant has been almost unoccupied. People continue to steal anything from the property that can be sold.

Many musicians and visual artists have seen beauty and meaning in the wreckage of the Packard Plant. The British graffiti artist Banksy left two versions of his work on Packard Plant buildings in 2010. Detroit rapper Eminem has used the plant as a setting. The music video for his song 'Beautiful' shows him walking through the grounds.

The new owner of the Packard plant has employed a security company to protect the property. Fernando Palazuelo plans to build a stronger fence to stop criminals and other individuals.

Then he will begin the huge job of removing collapsed buildings and small mountains of old car tires.

Mr. Palazuelo started his property development business in Spain. He sold and bought houses. Then, during the international economic crisis of 2008, he lost everything. He moved to Lima, Peru. The businessman bought old structures in the historic center of the Peruvian capital. He redeveloped the buildings and persuaded people to live and work in them. He says his experience in Lima will help him in Detroit.

Mr. Palazuelo believes it will cost around \$350 million dollars to save some of the old buildings and develop new structures. He wants to create space for new factories, offices, and homes. He also plans to include performance and art spaces. He estimates it will take between 10 and 15 years to redevelop the Packard Plant.

This has been a special As It Is program about a part of America that was once called “the industrial heartland.” It was a manufacturing center like no other. The people of Detroit, Michigan, are proud of their history, and dream of a day when all of their hometown will once again help drive America forward.

Thank you for listening. There are more Learning English programs coming your way in less than a minute. And there is world news at the beginning of the hour on VOA. I’m Jim Tedder in Washington.





