

CS: How long have you lived in Detroit?

AK: I have lived in Detroit proper since I got my first place of my own at 19. That makes it about half my life ago. I also spent my first 10 years in the city of Detroit. I had about 10 years in the near suburb of Royal Oak. I lived in the first house of my own for the past 15 years and have just moved into my second house/project.

CS: Describe your living situation.

AK: I live in the house of my dreams with the woman of my dreams with the children of my dreams. We live in a house that went from crack-house to abandoned house to hay barn to abandoned house. My wife, Kinga, and I stepped in 5 years ago at the invitation of the neighborhood farmer and his partner who owned the house and replaced the crack den with bales of locally cut hay. It took us 5 years to rehab the house and bring life back into it. We live here now on about an acre of land that we have helped to make useful again. We have a large organic garden and small orchard. We keep bees and generally try to grow into sustainable living.

CS: You live on a particularly densely populated block for East Detroit. Can you explain how this came to be? You may first want to explain how it is that much of East Detroit has become so sparsely populated?

AK: Detroit experienced unprecedented dis-investment after the race rebellions of the late 1960's. Many Detroiters just left their houses and moved to the suburbs. The tracks were greased by the freeways built to take them and the jobs North. So, houses sat and rotted. Half the population left. Guess who, the white half. Racial division runs deep in Detroit now. However, a few of us in the post "white flight" generation have gravitated to the magic of Detroit. For some of us it is a homecoming, for some it is pioneering and a divorce from suburban template and culture. Living in Detroit has never really been easy but it beats suburban living hands down.

I give this background only to introduce the opportunity Detroit offers to certain spirited people. Detroit is probably the most spacious of urban environments. The abandoned neighborhoods offer meadows, open space, and often very cheap real-estate in need of much love. Where else could a twenty-something kid buy a historic house for the \$10,000 he saved up at the record store? That's how I got my first house in Southwest. The Farnsworth neighborhood is a great example of this. About 20 years ago my friend Paul Weertz recognized this and when his pauper's mansion up on Mack burned down he realized why put all his eggs in one basket, so to speak. Why invest his energy and capital into a single house when one can have several. Basically, he bought up a small street, fixed up a the houses for his family and for some rentals, and started farming the vacant land, whether he "owned" it or not. As time passed his kids grew up and he gave them houses for graduation presents so they could fix them and manage them after high school and college. Paul, his family, and a succession of enthusiastic renters have saved the block from decay, or worse. Now Detroit has a neighborhood with lots of community and a reputation for farming.

Okay, that's a lot of histo-commentary but its where we've come from and where we are going. We are modeling extreme farming in the face of Detroit's greatest vacancy and greatest environmental hazard (maybe), the trash incinerator. We remediate the soil and the city. A side note, that would take longer to really explore is that this community is one of the few in this city which is racially integrated.

CS: Can you discuss the trash incinerator further? This may be an unfamiliar phenomenon for those reading along.

AK: The Detroit Trash Incinerator is a rather primitive experiment in, I guess, saving landfill space? Making lots of money for a private corporation in which city government officials have holdings? Environmental racism and classism? All of these? It is officially a "waste to energy" facility. This means that some steam heat is generated from the burning of almost 100% of Detroit's trash and recyclables. The facility has been burning for 20 years in the face of much protest. Our house and gardens are in the path of its exhausts. There has been much movement this year around the issue because the city contract is up. The city of Detroit pays around \$170 a ton to burn whereas to landfill costs around \$12. We have been paying this rate for 20 years. No wonder there is no money left. If the incinerator's parent company can't compete with the landfill rates by next year the city will not renew the contract. Of course if anyone is interested they can surely find lots about it. We are moving beyond this and into recycling. I have faith that we will make it happen at this time.

CS: Are you concerned with the potential health hazards for yourself or your family associated with Detroit's industry?

AK: For me, facing it head on, rather than running from it seems to be the answer right now. It seems fitting to me that our little neighborhood be a model for remediation. I mean that literally as in phytoremediation of the soil, but also in the metaphoric sense of community and spirit. I would love to garden in Northern California and pretend its all good. I can't. Somehow, that seems not as productive or personally rewarding. We are a microcosmic demonstration of what the world is up against. We need to reforest and grow local. Give the planet some of its goddamned shade back.

Hmm, what does that mean for me and my family? Yes, we smell the putrid gases often and its clear that this must have physiological impact. We do have among the highest asthma rates in the U.S. It's complicated to figure out why I would sacrifice something as valuable as our health. Maybe its because I know that there are people suffering all over the planet in this way, something to do with the chain of sympathy, empathy, compassion, and action. By facing it and understanding it I am driven to action. It's like just being vegetarian and visiting a feed lot, a slaughterhouse, eviscerating a cow, imbibing the meat once every few years to understand, and making conviction more than abstraction. The asthma, the foul air, the inert dirt, the suffering landscape, and desolation are not abstract to me. Why do I want this? I know that it must be done and I have able hands. Okay, I could never afford land in Northern California either. It is part making do with what you've got, and part grow where you're planted.

CS: Keeping bees does not seem to be a typical hobby for a city-dweller, though I have heard that the bee population is booming in Detroit. How did you get involved in beekeeping? And how is it that the bees are doing so well?

AK: The Bees. Detroit is getting quite a reputation for its bees and its honey. Detroit has so much wild land that, of course, there are more flowers than the average city. That's probably the biggest thing. Also, because we are so into our agriculture it is logical that we keep bees for pollination. That's the second thing. I mean, we are extras motivated here because there are multiple benefits to us. We are freeing ourselves from the global economy in so many ways. Sugar has always been a "sticking" point for those of us trying to eat local. This is the answer. We're keeping some bees, tapping some trees, mapping the greed of sugar over the seas.

CS: Just one last question if you don't mind. The term "revitalization" seems to come up frequently when discussing Detroit. What changes would be necessary for you to consider Detroit revitalized? How long do you expect this process to take?

AK: Revitalization. This is an odd word. Implies dead. Becoming vital again and to whom? Yes, the when the city becomes vital to others, those who do not live here, this word will be substantiated. Of course, I think the city is full of life and vital as hell to the world. But to most people, it is a playground for weekend entertainment, a Chinatown. It's off the grid, off the mom's radar, it's so daring and dangerous. I guess this is changing too. The more we become that suburban playground the more economic "revitalization" occurs. It's touchy for me because so much of the development we see is catering to the visitor. I can say about this that one could not even get a cup of coffee 15 years ago. Restaurants were few, and groceries really had to be bought outside of the city. The waterfront was full of parking spaces just 8 years ago, and now its a riverfront walk. So yes, things are happening for real, and so many little dreams are coming true. The neighborhood that was severed in the late 60's by I-75 is now being reconnected by a pedestrian overpass that promises to be the first of its kind. It will be the only suspension bridge overpass in the country. I guess we "revitalized" that house that had been sitting for 10 years with no life in it. The first time we hooked up our wood stove and brought warmth to that dying chimney was revitalization. The dozens of pounds of fresh food we produce on land that was until 4 years ago just walked over and mowed by the city are revitalization. All the bikes rolling over these beaten streets is revitalization. For the first time ever our Saturday farmers market is being opened up at night and on non-saturdays for various uses. This stuff is amazing really. Thanks for asking.

Post Script: A piece of poetry by Andrew Kemp (aka cheapplasticcrap) inspired by his situation in Detroit.

Its bad enough these landfills we stoke fast but Detroit wants to roll up and smoke fast
we're smoking no brand, our air is boxed and so canned, time to get this smoke banned
save Detroit I'm liking my land, but only we who down here can understand that you gotta be a stunt man,
gotta have a good sun tan, run fast, kick wild dogs back, spit blunt raps, log jam the lodge ramp and take
these streets back right fast.

You can't murder me! we gotta do some incinerator surgery.

I need you all to run with me, we don't shoot guns you see we shoot our gums and believe
that it doesn't take the sun to see that the mayor's blind to the air we breath and yes from our lungs we
bleed

that's why I put my lungs up in these lovely trees, I smell pine and they're loving me like I'm some Johnny
Appleseed, well I am and we are all amputees cut off from the air we need, that's why city planning is
amping me.

I see my southwest side just severed by seventy five, that's how fast they drive so nobody can walk by
nobody can bike but ask why, how do we live undid by a bridge, with nothing spanning that trash,
midnight fires smashed those houses back, we don't want those houses back, we don't even want cash,
all we need now is a bike path so we can bike past all this shit that's such a pain in my ass, for now we'll
float over that, our wheels have spoken you got that.

of course I'm giving them shit because in this city all we're givin is shit. Its getting under our skin and we

live in it, not forgiving it, we're a little pissed and looking for some different shit, we're not having it
stacks are spewing their clouds are out, we got space but shit the air is crowded, we're gonna change this
shit don't doubt it. my lungs, the sun are lost in these clouds, black and white our lungs are brown we
gotta hound 'em that's why we're making these sounds cuz heavy metals don't bounce
they settle just keeping us down.
and from this spit you can see that we live and we live loud because the problem is big!