Planning the Motor City:  
The Influence of the Big Three on the Development of Detroit’s Social and Physical Landscape  

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Once the emblem of American industry, Detroit now stands as a specter of its former self. Its status as the symbol of urban decay is rooted in a history of poor planning decisions and ineffective governance. My Honors project seeks to understand how the “Big Three” automotive companies (Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors) influenced the buildings and infrastructure that comprises Detroit’s built environment. My research thus far points me to the idea that the auto boom during the 1910’s and 1920’s accelerated Detroit’s development to such an extent that the city bypassed the building of important government institutions and planning procedures, such as zoning. Thus the city’s reliance on the automotive industry not only set the city up for an unhealthy dependence on a single industry, it also helped Detroit develop an unsustainable and poorly planned landscape of low density, sprawled development, that contributed to the city’s downfall in the second half of the 20th century. Looking into these processes of development in Detroit points to larger questions about how cities function, and the ways in which private corporations exercise power over the public.

The purpose of my research trip was to gather primary source materials that could better inform my Honors project and contribute to an understanding of how the Big Three interacted with officials from the City of Detroit and how the city responded to the dramatic rise and fall of the auto industry. To examine these issues, I traveled to Detroit and Ann Arbor, MI, spending ten days visiting various archives and libraries, including the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, the National Automotive History Collection at the Detroit Public Library, the Burton Historical Archives at Wayne State University, and the Benson Ford Research Center. These visits completed research I have already done at Bowdoin and at the Loeb Graduate Design Library at Harvard University.

Important results of my research indicated that Detroit planners identified development issues early in the 20th century, but their voices were drowned out by the enthusiastic cheers for the booming auto industry. Specific documents include speeches by architect Albert Kahn regarding the city’s planning progress, correspondences between the auto executives and the mayors of Detroit, and corporate publications. Finding specific documents, such as the Mayor of Detroit asking Henry Ford for a city bailout during the Great Depression, are invaluable historical documents that will greatly add to the quality of my Honors project.

In addition to providing these valuable resources, the experience that I had researching exposed me to the life of an academic. Meticulously reviewing archival material is a painstakingly slow and lonely process, but one that can be incredibly rewarding. Spending ten days solely working on my project without the distraction of normal college life also greatly helped me to advance my own ideas and inspired me to achieve a meaningful final product. I have become greatly interested in Detroit after I went on a traveling urban studies program that started in the Motor City before traveling to Brazil, South Africa and Vietnam. I returned last summer to Detroit, where I worked making GIS maps of the city for a nonprofit data management firm called Data Driven Detroit. To sum up my experience, while most of my friends were shocked that I willingly traveled alone to Detroit in January, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity made possible by the Grua/ O’Connell Award.

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