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'Cool' outpost portends strife in divided Detroit



Rising inequality: downtown Detroit overlooks a vacant, boarded-up house

From Mr Daniel J. Aronoff.

Sir, Richard Florida strains credulity in his attempt to cast Detroit as a nascent “cool city”, ripe for transformation into an artsy-techie nirvana that youth-obsessed hip intellectuals dream about (“Detroit shows the way to beat inner city blues”, Comment, April 10).

Mr Florida finds hope in the revitalisation that has taken place in the city centre, anchored by sports, gaming, educational establishments and the relocation of some high-profile corporations. But this gentrification is not rooted in a strong underlying economic base that requires face-to-face communication, in the way that financial services, tourism and media dominate Manhattan’s economy. The accent on high technology is appealing, but the most successful high-tech cluster in the world is located in a suburb of San Francisco next to a world-class university. This suggests nearby Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, is the more likely regional high-tech hub.

Mr Florida cites the low cost of real estate as an attractor for new ventures, but prices are cheap for a reason; the city is poor, mostly black, uneducated, crime-ridden and broke. Its residents are an underclass that globalisation has made unemployable. The "cool city" is an outpost of a middle-class, mostly white community that will be protected from the squalor of its surroundings by a well-armed gendarmerie. Mr Florida mentions that local businesses are purchasing 100 new police cars.

The recent appointment of an emergency manager, who will assume all power previously vested in the city's democratically elected leaders, is viewed optimistically by the region's business community. They believe the new manager, by standing above the squalor of an unruly local electorate, will root out corruption, renegotiate onerous union contracts, slash pension obligations and force relocation of many residents into a compact area more economically served by public utilities. Steps that must be taken for the city to function at all.

But the appointment of an emergency manager strips Detroit's residents of self-government and hands power to an economic and political elite whom they view with fear and hostility. Rightly or wrongly, they will see no benefit for themselves arising from the usurpation; but they may see benefits for the businesses and middle-class neo-urbanites moving in.

Contra Mr Florida, Detroit is a bellwether of tensions arising from widening disparities between the elite and the underclass in the US, and it portends social strife.

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