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Motoring On: Detroit, a Phoenix Rising From the Ashes

Why do monuments often act like magnets, drawing attention and attracting visitors wherever they stand? Some monuments have a religious purpose. For example, while mosques operate as Islamic places of worship, several also attract non-believers for non-religious reasons. Somehow, they have been transformed into tourist attractions. One prime example is the Sheikh Zayed Mosque. Standing in heavily populated Abu Dhabi, the Emirates' capital city, the mosque easily draws believers as "the religious [center] of the city" (Rizvi 14). Unexpectedly, it also attracts tourists who may not follow Islam and thus may not be inclined to visit an Islamic place of worship. How does it do so? In this example, the mosque draws attention by highlighting and utilizing its city's defining feature: extravagance.

Other monuments may pay tribute to, and even revere, historical figures whose values may no longer agree with (or exist alongside) the values of today. As sources of controversy, some are destroyed. For example, Amherst College removed their mascot "Lord Jeff" after the initial praises of his victories faded away and he became "a symbol of white oppression" (Bidgood). Still, other monuments may emphasize the city or country's focus on an inspirational future. The layout of Brasilia, for example, served to establish the city as the "center of the imagined global sphere of modernization" (Denicke).

These attention-grabbing monuments often stand in historically important or densely populated cities. If one turns to the United States of America, one sees many monuments inspired by people or events instrumental to the country's past; such monuments include the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and the Statue of Liberty in New York City. However, there remains one forgotten city that has nonetheless contributed significantly to the commercial development of its country. Though a booming city in its prime, Detroit has since faded into unimportance. Other, more pressing topics often overshadow its rise from bankruptcy; in turn, inaccurate yet provocative images of the city keep tourists and potential citizens at bay. Though Detroit can now be seen as a phoenix rising from the ashes, the media's attention has been consistently diverted. As such, the city's great potential to grow may have even been stifled. Shouldn't we right a wrong? To honor this city's history, contributions, and hopeful future, I propose a new monument in Detroit, Michigan.

Once "the automobile capital of the world," Detroit began to financially and socially suffer as racial tension and "white flight" ("the departure of whites from Detroit") emerged in the mid-20th century ("Detroit - History"). Many politicians tried but failed to resuscitate the city drowning in debt. As time passed, a few governors' scandals solidified the new yet seemingly unshakable image of crime and corruption. Finally, in 2013, the formerly prosperous "Motor City" declared bankruptcy, making headlines across the nation. Seven years have passed since then; Detroit has been slowly and steadily rebuilding its economy, brick by brick. Even though "much of the media coverage is still focused on abandoned factories and neighborhoods filled with vacant homes," a few pop culture media outlets have begun raising awareness of the new Detroit (Lew). According to one such website, Mother Nature Network, tourists are now

“intrigued by the ruins of the past,” visiting Detroit to explore “abandoned factories and century-old buildings.” Even “big businesses” interests are piqued. For example, automotive company Ford bought the ancient Michigan Central Station with “plans to renovate it and turn it into an office building.” Evidently, Detroit’s new and hopeful beginning is quite connected to its history. In fact, part of its mainstream appeal still lies in its automotive history. Additionally, as shown by Ford’s purchase of Michigan Central Station, a love for Detroit’s past still permeates throughout the city’s streets. As Detroit continues to strive towards a brighter future while keeping in touch with its past, the city and its inhabitants can be said to be “motoring on.” What better name exists for this proposed monument?

Home to this new monument, the “Motor City” of America owes a large part of its prosperous beginning to the automotive industry. Therefore, in conjunction with its name and the city’s one-of-a-kind origins, the “Motoring On” monument will be built using simple shapes. It will consist of a large building, almost cubic in morphology. More specifically, it will be slightly longer than it is wide. Its colors will be neutral, such as dark grey or black. With its colors and cubic shape, the monument will mimic the monotone automobiles which first hit the road in Detroit. These characteristics will call back to Detroit's great past.

Moreover, the usage of the international style (employing “simple, inexpensive materials and little decoration”) will evoke reminders of Detroit’s industrial beginnings while abiding by the city’s general lack of extravagance (Carey, “Monument Production in the UAE”).

The exterior walls will consist of both square glass windows and steel. The front of the building will have a lower ceiling than that of the rear, much like how an automobile is not simply a cubic shape. On both ends of the longer sides of the monument, there will be two short entryways

jutting out from the walls. The doors on these entryways will be surrounded by disk-like steel walls. Straight lines, as long as the diameter of the disk-like walls, will cut portions of the walls into triangle-like shapes; when viewed from afar, these walls will resemble the tires of an automobile. The doors will act as the center of the “tire,” while the walls will look like the hubcap. As Detroit continually strives to rise out of bankruptcy, the simple morphology and usage of the international style will make building and maintaining the new monument cost-efficient; this puts as little stress on the government’s resources as possible.

In addition to the automobile, the proposed monument’s appearance has a secondary source of inspiration: the Eiffel Tower. This pre-existing monument has “little decoration” and consists of simple materials, such as steel and wrought-iron (Carey, “The Modern Eiffel Tower”). Its morphology is “geometric, with easy-to-see lines” and utilizes symmetry to create one of the “basic” structures (a category often consisting of spheres, pyramids, and cubes). So, too, will the proposed monument consist of “little decoration,” simple materials, “easy-to-see lines,” and symmetry. Though the proposed monument will use these same characteristics to create a different structure, the effect will be similar. With its quick construction time and soaring height, the Eiffel Tower became a symbol for the new era of engineering and architecture (“Eiffel Tower”). Likewise, the “Motoring On” monument will become a symbol of Detroit’s prospering industrial age.

In addition, the Eiffel Tower also served as inspiration for one of the proposed monument’s purposes: refocusing the lens of history. Before the Eiffel Tower was constructed, those who thought of France automatically traced its past back to Versailles; images of “the old regime” continued to stain the country’s history, thus casting France in a negative light (Carey,

“The Modern Eiffel Tower”). However, 100 years had already passed since “the old regime” began to crumble and fall. The France of 1889, along with its values, technology, and ways of life, stood in stark contrast to the France of 1789. As such, the Eiffel Tower was built to commemorate an event that better defined the current France: the French Revolution.

Similarly, the lens of history currently focuses on Detroit’s past. This period, littered with headlines of bankruptcy, crime, and corruption, no longer represents the Detroit of today. (Indeed, crime and corruption still linger in a few shadowy corners of the city; however, this image of Detroit remains narrow and does not paint the whole picture.) Though more distant, the past of automobiles, novel assembly lines, and a city on the rise better represents the Detroit that exists in 2020. In order to refocus the lens of history, the proposed monument’s morphology and materials will refer back to the object that started this iconic past: the automobile. As “familiar and extraordinary” as the Eiffel Tower, the “Motoring On” monument will take and up-scale the everyday automobile into a monument that harkens back to Detroit’s beginnings while pointing and “motoring on” towards the future ahead (Carey, “Monumental Mosques”).

By refocusing the lens of history, the monument will paint the city in a more attractive and accurate light, thus attracting tourists and potential citizens. In this way, the intended audience consists of two parties: the local citizens and the visiting travellers. For the local citizens, this monument will serve as a reminder of their city’s origins; similar to Augustus Saint Gauden’s “The Puritan,” this monument will “[function] as foundational national biography” (Doss). However, unlike “The Puritan,” it will not uphold excluding or controversial values. This monument will simply focus on the automobile, an ordinary object untied to controversial values in the public eye. In addition, the monument will serve as a beacon of hope for the

community--the building (both physically and metaphorically) of a great city has been done again, and it can certainly be done once more.

On the other hand, the monument will also operate as a source of “positive press” for the visiting travelers. By painting over the now inaccurate stereotypes that nevertheless still cling to the city, the “Motoring On” monument will cast Detroit in a positive and intriguing light. Quite unlike monumental mosques, this monument will not rely on extravagance to attract tourists; instead, the focus on its unique structure and the city’s iconic past will be its key features. Most importantly, the proposed monument will pay homage to an industry that has been instrumental in the development of Detroit. Its simple morphology and inexpensive materials serve to emphasize the values of Detroit; indeed, it isn’t extravagance that defines this city and its inhabitants, but plain, quiet resilience and hard work.

In conclusion, the proposed monument, named “Motoring On,” will honor an oftentimes forgotten city, Detroit. Corresponding with the city’s automotive past and current economy, it will use the international style of architecture; with the Eiffel Tower as inspiration, the monument will also utilize simple shapes, geometry, and symmetry. By paying tribute to Detroit, inspiring Detroit’s citizens by evoking the prosperous past, and refocusing the lens of history to attract tourists and potential citizens, the monument will fill a hole left by monuments already in existence. With Detroit on the mend, this monument may even mark the start of a new era for America’s rising phoenix.

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