

## Shiny Things

According to folklore, magpies, birds of the crow family, will often collect—and even steal—shiny things to weave into their nests. Some other birds and animals do this as a way to attract mates. But magpies mate for life. And they'll still collect shiny things even after they've attracted a mate. Nobody knows why magpies are attracted to shiny things. They are also the only non-mammal able to recognize itself in mirrors.

What other creature loves shiny things and looking at itself in mirrors<sup>1</sup>?

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On May 12, 2017, the Q-Line<sup>2</sup>, Detroit's first significant investment in public transportation in almost a century<sup>3</sup>, is scheduled to make its maiden voyage down the main artery of The Motor City. It makes a nice symbol that the city that lived and died with the auto industry is diversifying, even a little. Never mind that it was corporations—the auto industry—that bought out and closed the streetcars in the 1950s so that they could maintain a stranglehold on the city's transport. Never mind that it's corporations that are bringing them back now only to take advantage of the vacuum of transportation amidst an influx of yuppies into the city, who themselves are taking advantage of the wealth of affordable real estate, which came about because the auto industry dragged the city down along with it. It's a vicious cycle; it was a tight stranglehold.

The Q-Line (hereafter referred to by its original project name, the M-1 Rail—let's not indulge Dan Gilbert's encroaching fiefdom, if even symbolically) will not help most

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<sup>1</sup> It's us. It's humans. The answer is humans.

<sup>2</sup> This is named after the rail's corporate sponsor, QuickenLoans, and it's a stupid fucking name.

<sup>3</sup> The People Mover is an objectively useless system only used to shuttle suburbanites from the casino to Cobo Hall and back, never having to step foot amongst the citizens. The Q-Line will be only marginally more useful than this.

Detroiters. It won't hurt—at least not directly, not in ways that we can see yet—and it *will* probably help some, sure.

But the people who will take the M-1 Rail downtown to shop at John Varvatos and Shinola<sup>4</sup> are not the ones who *need* public transportation. Being able to ride from New Center's new "[artisanal bakery](#)" downtown to the Nike store doesn't help most Detroiters.

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Development itself is not bad<sup>5</sup>. Even development of properties designed for the affluent isn't itself inherently bad. But development of properties accessible *only* to the affluent is bad. Development that pushes out the disadvantaged to make way for the playthings of the affluent is bad. Development that comes at the cost of improving basic things like roads and schools is bad.

The problem is, this is pretty much the only kind of development there is.

There are no [starchitects](#) who build low-income housing. There are no high-gloss renderings depicting newly-patched roofs on dilapidated schools. There are no splashy media campaigns for fixing potholes in the outer neighborhoods that have the geographical misfortune of existing far away from the investment orgy that is downtown.

These are not the type of projects that get outside funding. These things—the maintenance of infrastructure and the upkeep of public buildings—are fixed solely on tax dollars, and, [all too often](#), those tax dollars are siphoned off and away from the public good and given to those developments for the affluent; developments that come at the cost of the

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<sup>4</sup> the "Detroit as comeback city" story has been so good that companies like Shinola—[which is not a Detroit company](#), despite their claim as one—are using the city and their "commitment" to it as a marketing angle.

<sup>5</sup> This is debatable, but several hundred years of capitalism has ingrained in us that forward progress is necessary and good, so let's roll with it.

greater public good<sup>6</sup>, developments that have the [brand-name backing](#) of starchitects with [high-gloss renderings](#) and [splashy media campaigns](#).

*This is bad development. This is called gentrification.*

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Just six days after Detroit declared bankruptcy—the largest municipality [ever](#) to do so in the US—the city pledged to chip in [\\$284.5 million](#) towards the construction of a new stadium for the Detroit Red Wings<sup>7</sup>, even though there was nothing structurally wrong with their old stadium, the Joe Louis Arena (“JLA”). The owner of the Red Wings, [Mike Illitch](#)—who was [worth](#) \$6.1 billion dollars as of his death—chose to emblazon the new arena with the name and logo of his company, Little Caesars<sup>8</sup>, which had \$3.1 billion of revenue in 2013. The city and, by extension, the citizens will be covering almost 60% of the stadium cost. The Illitches will be [keeping](#) 100% of the profit.

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Between March 25 and June 14, 2014, 12,500 Detroit residents had their water shut off. The city targeted residents who were more than 60 days late and owed more than \$150. In April of that same year the JLA [owed](#) almost \$83,000 in unpaid water bills. As of 2012, Olympia Entertainment—the Illitch company that runs the JLA and Cobo Hall, among others—[owed](#) the city almost \$2.1 million in unpaid property taxes.

In 2015 Detroit [averaged](#) 2,000 residential water shutoffs per week.

Cobo Hall and the JLA remained open.

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<sup>6</sup> *greater* being the key word here.

<sup>7</sup> a professional hockey team whose well-being helps absolutely [no one](#) except for the Illitch family

<sup>8</sup> The “Little Caesars Coliseum” which, Jesus fucking Christ, what is it with these godawful names?

Gentrification often hides behind trendy words like “revitalization.” Gentrification is often preempted by talk of “comebacks” and “rebirth.” Which, in the case of Detroit, is true—but it’s only a comeback for a select few.

Gentrification, in the [words](#) of Peter Moskowitz, “dismantles and displaces existing neighborhoods and communities in order to make way for new residents who are mostly whiter, and always richer, than those who predate them.”

The rebirth of Detroit has only been a rebirth for those well-off enough to work and live in the increasingly-costly downtown and midtown areas<sup>9</sup>. These areas have seen rapid change—and, again, development and change isn’t inherently bad—but the rest of Detroit has not.

It’s led to, in essence, two Detroits: the revitalized, rebirthed, comeback kid Downtown—the one with the new storefronts and working streetlights and Dan Gilbert’s own private police force—and the rest of the city: the untouched, forgotten outskirts.

“It is possible to live in this new Detroit and essentially never set foot in the old one.”

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Mike Illitch didn’t give a fuck about you. Dan Gilbert doesn’t give a fuck about you. Matty Mouton and Tom Gores and the Fords don’t give a fuck about you. Corporations don’t give a fuck about you.

Sure, some of these very rich white men did some good things for the city of Detroit. This does not mean they are good people. This doesn’t mean they have good intentions. They didn’t do these things out of the kindness of their hearts. They did them for the tax

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<sup>9</sup> John motherfucking Varvatos. Their t-shirts cost more than the laptop I’m typing this on.

break and the ego trip and the opportunity to own an entire city and treat it as their personal playground and fiefdom. Incidentally some of these things may have happened to help the city and the people.

But would they have done these things if there wasn't the possibility of making metric shit tons of money off it? Would they have done these things if there wasn't the promise of the media declaring them the saviors of Detroit?

Out in the neglected neighborhoods of Detroit there are none of those things. And where are those billionaire philanthropists now?

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It turns out that magpies actually [don't](#) steal shiny things. Turns out they're actually [terrified](#) of them. Turns out that "the folklore surrounding [that perception] is a result of cultural generalization and anecdotes."

Huh.

*//I would consider this as a complete article, but there's also more specifics that I want to touch on in here—more on just how much the Illitches own of the city, and some on Dan Gilbert (and his private QuickenLoans police force patrolling downtown) and Matty Mouran, too, among other things, like where money is being spent re: public development—but that'd be outside this class. Plus I want some feedback on the general topic and tone before I put a lot more time into this. So, basically, just view (and critique) this as a complete entity, but I'd like to expand it later.*