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Summer in the City

Detroit and Newark are still recovering from the violence that erupted 40 years ago

By Will Sullivan

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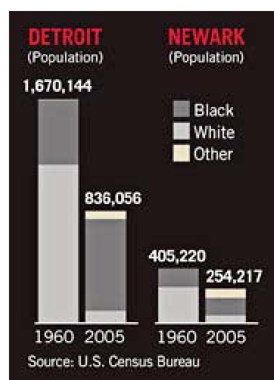
As the charred house behind him crumbles under a backhoe, William Donner yells above the din. It was over there, he gestures, that Detroit police pumped bullets into a house from which they claimed they were taking fire. A few blocks down Rosa Parks Boulevard, two bodies were found inside a drugstore that had been set ablaze. Donner points down Euclid Street toward the home he fled when he feared the whole neighborhood was going to burn.



(USN&WR)

Once a truck driver for Ford Motor Co., Donner, 67, now hauls ruined wood and broken brick away from Detroit's many condemned houses—structures that survived the deadly riots of the summer of 1967, but not the grim aftermath. "It's kind of sad to see this torn down," Donner says of the modest mid-century home. "It takes away memories of when things were good around here."

That would have been a very long time ago. Things were far from good even before the violent summer 40 years ago this month, when Detroit and Newark, N.J., were roiled with some of the worst upheavals of the tempestuous 1960s, bringing national exposure to the plight of urban blacks. But in the years that followed, the two cities steadily collapsed, hemorrhaging residents, tax bases, and jobs. Today, leaders in both places are touting sports stadiums, new housing, and other signs that their cities are livable again. But away from the newly polished downtowns, many of the neighborhoods feature the same dangerous mix of poverty and powerlessness that brought frustrations to the boiling point four decades ago.

In Newark, the catalyst for violence was a simple traffic stop. On July 12, a black cab driver who had illegally passed a police car was badly injured by police—they claimed he resisted arrest—and was brought to the 4th Police Precinct, where false rumors quickly spread that he had died. An angry crowd gathered, and residents of a nearby 13-story housing project hurled bottles and trash at the police station. The situation escalated the next night after a rally got out of hand, leaving many of the shops along Springfield Avenue looted and burned. Six days later, 26 people lay dead—most killed by the police or National Guard—725 were injured, and nearly

1,500 had been arrested.

Moise Abraham, 16 at the time, recalls that his mother had ordered him to stay inside during the violence. But on the night of July 14, she found him outside on Blum Street and sent him home while she went to talk to a friend. A few moments later, Abraham heard gunfire. "She was running; it was a slow run," he recalls, "and then she started to limp and that's when I knew something was wrong." The family rushed her to the hospital, but Rosa Lee Abraham bled to death—shot, her son believes, by the Newark police.

Blind pig. Not a week after Newark quieted, Detroit exploded. As with Newark, the Motor City's racial tensions were fueled in part by a police force with few black officers, unemployment, and urban development programs that paved over predominantly black neighborhoods. On July 23, city police raided a "blind pig"—an illegal, after-hours club—that happened to be holding a celebration for two returning Vietnam veterans. Following the arrest of the partygoers, angry black Detroiters took their frustrations out on nearby stores, setting off six days of looting and vandalism that ended with 43 dead, over 2,000 injured, and about 7,000 arrested. As with Newark, black residents bore the brunt of the casualties, and most of them fell to police or National Guard bullets.

Views on the riots run the gamut: While some see the work of simple criminals, activists describe the disturbances as empowering, as a turning point for African-American clout. In 1970, Newark became the first major northeastern city to elect a black mayor; Detroit followed suit in 1974, and African-Americans have held City Hall in both cities ever since. In Detroit, leaders organized New Detroit Inc., an organization that still works with the business and black communities to soothe racial tensions in the city. In Newark, black leaders negotiated with the city to dramatically limit the size of a medical school that threatened to displace city residents. "When we sat down to negotiate, we had that nameless and faceless brother with the brick standing with us," recalls Junius Williams, then an organizer in the black community and now head of the Abbott Leadership Institute at Rutgers-Newark.

But many white residents took a different message from the "nameless brother"—get out. The year before the riots, 22,000 residents, predominantly whites, left Detroit. By 1968, it reached 80,000. Both majority white in 1960, Newark's white population now stands at 22 percent and Detroit's at 11 percent.

Ghetto palms. The riots also made suburbanites wary of traveling downtown, crippling businesses. In Newark, 13 percent of the stores in the riot area closed immediately, and an additional 19 percent within a year. Coupled with the decline of manufacturing jobs and the surge of gang violence in the following decades, both cities increasingly became synonymous with urban decay.

In Detroit, seemingly the only thing that has flourished in recent decades are the so-called ghetto

palms that sprout from the rooftops of abandoned office towers. And with the further predicted erosion of auto industry jobs, the economy is expected to get even bleaker over the next decade. Yet Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick insists that Motown is throwing off its malaise. The burly son of Michigan U.S. Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, he talks up brisk sales of pricey lofts converted from vacant industrial and office space, the crowds at the Tigers' glitzy Comerica Park, and the newly opened RiverWalk. "I think that a lot of our problem is also spiritual," Kilpatrick says. "We've got to get off our asses and stop being so woe-is-me."

But cause for optimism is hard to find near Rosa Parks and Clairmount Street, the once vibrant district where the riots began, and where the view now offers little but blight. Retail is virtually nonexistent, many of the homes are abandoned, and at least a third of the nearby land is empty-hardly unusual in a city that owns about 28,000 vacant lots.

Such landscapes have prompted charges that downtown Detroit is being propped up while the rest of the city rots. Addressing critics, Kilpatrick has just detailed a five-year plan to target six neighborhoods for redevelopment and beautification. But that leaves over 90 percent of city neighborhoods *not* covered by the first phase of the initiative, including the area where the riots were focused. To which mayoral spokesman Matt Allen urges patience. "Is an Applebee's going to be built on Clairmount and Rosa Parks today or tomorrow or in five years or in 10 years?" he says. "Probably not."

In contrast, the epicenter of Newark's violence shows noticeable progress. The city has seen a surge in middle-class townhouses—aided by the cut-rate sale of city land that contributed to a fraud indictment for former Mayor Sharpe James last week. The towering housing project across from the 4th Precinct has been replaced with cozier homes, and business is returning as well. Morris Spielberg, who had to be secreted out of his furniture store by his black employees during the riots, reopened and stayed until the city bought him out for redevelopment that now includes, appropriately, an Applebee's. "If you went through the riots there, you would never believe that it would turn out that way," he says.

Gaining ground. There are other signs that Newark, however troubled it remains, has left Detroit behind. While the percent of Newark's population below the poverty line has dropped since 2000, the Motor City's has increased. Newark's unemployment is still nearly double the national rate, but it pales in comparison to Detroit's jobless rate of 13.7 percent. "Each of these two cities has been the poster child for urban problems in the second half of the 20th century," says Kenneth T. Jackson, a history professor at Columbia University. "Newark no longer is. Detroit probably still is."

As they did in 1967, residents of both cities continue to register their views with their feet. Bucking decades of population loss, Newark actually *grew* by 3.3 percent between 2000 and 2006, enough in the anemic northeast to make it the region's fastest-growing major city. Detroit, by contrast, just posted the fifth-highest population loss in the country.

"We weren't the only city that exploded in riots in the 1960s," says Newark's Mayor Cory Booker, a former Rhodes scholar whose election in 2006 brought a wave of optimism. "But you can darn well be sure that in the next five to 10 years, Newark is going to show a way out of the dark cloud that still hangs over this nation's dream."

But progress is relative. On the street, evidence of the city's perennial struggles, especially its 25 percent poverty rate, is hard to ignore. The construction of the Prudential Center, new home of the New Jersey Devils hockey team, is promising. But like the much-touted New Jersey Performing Arts Center, it will be an outlier in an area still dominated by nail salons and pawnshops. Booker recently warned that the city's grim budget situation could cost it up to a fifth of its workforce. And in 2006, the city recorded its highest number of homicides—106—in a decade. It's perhaps no wonder that 48 percent of residents polled by the Newark *Star-Ledger* said they would leave the city if they could.

"We hope for better things. It shall rise from its ashes," proclaims Detroit's motto, evoking the mythical phoenix in referring to an 1805 fire that destroyed the then fledging settlement. That time, the city did recover, becoming a global center that churned out middle-class residents as systematically as it did Model T's.

Detroit may again rise from the ashes, and Newark seems on its way. But both cities are more likely to limp forward than fly. For residents who doggedly stuck with their cities through their crushing declines, the "hope for better things" is now tempered with four decades of reality.

Stephen Vogel was a student at what is now the University of Detroit Mercy when he watched National Guard tanks roll by his window. He is now dean of the university's school of architecture and has lived with his wife in the same neighborhood for 30 years. "I don't like my wife to be sitting at home afraid," he says. "Things are looking up, but I have to say, I'm getting a little old for it."

With Jennifer L. Jack

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