“Detroit is the next Berlin”

I have heard this statement enough times I wanted to see for myself. I imagined that travelling to a post-industrial city with a similar character might help me to understand my city better. What I discovered was this statement plus my own caveat – “Detroit is the next Berlin if Detroit’s government and people were to support and encourage a creative renaissance.” This concept was not new to me. It was however, a reinforcement of mindset.

“The Netherlands governments supports its artists”

Well, it did. They used to have a program that offered graduating artists four years of support so that they could start their practices, businesses, etc. This funding was pulled the year before I arrived. The other support system for artists was liberal squatters rights. According to squatters I talked to – as a citizen you had more rights to live in a building than the building owner had to kick you out. This also had changed the year before I arrived.

I arrived in Berlin on May 23rd. I stayed the first week with Jaime, an artist friend of one of my city planning friends from Detroit. Jaime introduced me to Berlin. My first week was spent biking around to check out the East side neighborhoods and canal systems. I was struck by how much nature was threaded through this massive city.

Creative uses of the canal spaces included docked ships turned into party boats for late night gatherings, a swimming pool and beach installation, and a hipster trailer park. The city sometimes seemed like a 24 hour 7 day a week amusement park a virtual playground for artists, musicians, and free spirits.
Berlin is notoriously cheap. The opportunities for artists and musicians are abundant because they do not have to scramble to make rent and bills. Many people I met were living off of 2-3 days of work that afforded them all of their needs. The city is extremely bike friendly. Most artists I met did not own a car. I would also argue that a casual “anything goes” overtone also contributes to the affordability. Fashion is casual and for the most part not following current mainstream trends among the artist crowd. I thought about the similar microclimate in my own city of Detroit. Many artists are living under a similar system of it is more important what you create than what you own. In both cities artists seem to value their creative work more than their living conditions.

I also noted that the city was also bulging with new babies. I think this is a product of this alternative high quality of life that the city provides. It made me rethink the concept of “wealth”. **Wealth** is the abundance of valuable resources or material possessions ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wealth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wealth)). Money started to have very little to do with wealth when I started looking at the quality of life compared to income amongst these Berliners I met.

Art!? Yes, art was everywhere. On my epic bike trips I often stumbled upon murals that I have dug and drooled over online. To be honest, I started to feel a bit spoiled and overwhelmed with the abundance of creative activity. When I thought about how this will change my approach to Detroit, I was unsure of the outcome. Would I be more inspired? Would I see the movement as gentrification? Would I have a firmer resolve with my approach? I am still figuring that out.
Beer culture! I would be doing a great disservice to Berlin culture if I failed to mention the impact of beer on this place. First of all beer can be consumed on the street. Many people will spend $1.50 on a beer from a “night shop” and proceed to walk and bike around to parks, music events, and art openings as their evening out. I think this is a huge contributor to the street culture. One amazing public gathering is the Mauer Platz Market, the largest flee market in Berlin. Every Sunday people gather to sell vintage and homemade goods as well as throw down for open karaoke and other live performances. I have seen some wild karaoke scenes in my day but nothing compares to this one. 2,000 people on average witness the rise and fall of the armature crooners in full Sunday sun.

The organizer of this event carts his speakers, generator, microphone, and children to the event every Sunday. I imagined him starting off at this place with much the same operation as he still uses. A small huddle of people grew into a massive sing-song-along crowd. For income, the gentleman walks around with a cap to collect donations. Perhaps he lives off of this money alone. Small inventive economic systems such as these were inspiring to see in action.
Tacheles is an art center that has been squatted for years. It has survived many threats of demolition. The artists applied for historic accreditation (which they won). The building contains ateliers, workshops, a nightclub, and a cinema. On April 4th 2011 the owner scheduled an eviction that was bypassed by a 1 Million Euro payoff from an anonymous source. It was with this 1 Million that persuaded the original group of artists to vacate the premise. Many artists still remain however the future concept for the building remains undecided. The artists who left said that the money would go towards starting a new artist collective somewhere else.
Utopia!? Gentrification?! These words were pressing on my mind as I searched for the quick-fix creative solutions I could bring back with me to Detroit. Gentrification is evident in Berlin. Many artists move year after year looking for cheaper rent even though they are instrumental in bringing about the positive changes that make these neighborhoods more desirable and in turn, less affordable.

I attended a show in Weimar that addressed the concept of “Utopia”. The approached this theme with optimism, cynicism, and humor. Most of the work had a DIY aesthetic often blending art and architecture. I actually ended up revisiting it two more times after my initial visit. One of the women who worked there turned me on to an artist Martina Florians. I met up with her in Rotterdam.
My initial plan was to spend a few days in Rotterdam before moving on to Amsterdam as well as other small towns in the Netherlands. When I arrived in Rotterdam I quickly changed my mind. As with Berlin, Rotterdam had suffered many blows during the war and has gone through a transformation facilitated by the arts. The similarities to Detroit were immediately evident. A large river flows through Rotterdam. It is in fact, like Detroit, a port city. I found the people to be very welcoming, especially to an artist from Detroit. In these cities I noticed this respectful nod and quiet commentary when I told people what city I was from. They seemed to understand that we share a fairly common experience. It was easy for me to connect with the artists there.

While in Rotterdam I volunteered with 2012 Architects. The firm uses almost entirely recycled materials in their projects. In a time of surplus waste and limited resources it was nice to see an architecture office that focused on reuse. Their work consisted of commercial renovations, residential housing, playgrounds, and public art projects.

There is a design store in Rotterdam called “Studio Hergebruik.” They feature designers and artists working with recycled materials. The effect that this kind of exposure had on me profound. It was
encouraging to see a market for this type of design had survived the initial trend spike of crafts and goods made from recycled material.

Martina Florians is an artist living and working in Rotterdam. Her work is sculptural, interactive, and ecologically motivated. She built a greenhouse in honor of native plants that were being eradicated due to new developments cropping up in a previously protected area of Rotterdam. Instead of live plants, the plants were pressed and archived with descriptions that honored their death. Martina and I have remained in contact since my visit.
I took a two-day trip to Amsterdam to visit Marjorie Vogelzang at her concept restaurant called “Proef”. Marjorie was a speaker for the “Penny Stamps” lecture series. In Dutch the word Proef means tasting and testing. The food that they serve all comes from their small local farm. Most dishes are simply prepared highlighting their natural state. I thought how great it would be to have something like Proef in Detroit as a place to congregate and communicate about urban agriculture. Urban farming is one way in which citizens are looking to create stronger communities, improve nutrition, and make positive use of vacant land.

Erik Jutten was my contact for the Netherlands. He introduced me to artists and workshops in Rotterdam and The Hague. I volunteered my time for a couple of days working with some local artists. Sadly, many artists were in transition after losing a very important funding program from the government just the year before I arrived. Many people were in the process of leaving their studios behind.

Artists in the Netherlands have a long history of relying on squatted spaces for their studios as well as living units. With new laws being passed to make squatting more difficult, there was much activity around something called “Anti-Squat”. This program is a way for building owners to get tenants to live in abandoned spaces for reduced rent in exchange for the protection of having people in the spaces to protect against vandalism and theft.
Trailers everywhere! Mobile festivals, office space, anarchy living – trailer concept and culture were going strong in Berlin and Rotterdam. I believe there is a connection between the pressing financial pressure of real estate and the explosion of mobile units. People seem to be looking for creative solutions around problems. A floating hotel and a mobile surf park were two successful business that were built from mobile/temporary units.
Atlier Van Leishout is a multidisciplinary company that operates in the field of contemporary art, design, and architecture. They use fiberglass, shipping containers, and plan drawings to create mostly large sculpture. I got a chance to see some of this work in person as well as meet some of its former members. Some of them used the techniques they learned to do some great shower designs for their own homes.

Is Detroit the next Berlin? I have no idea. I actually think that any city that will experience a renaissance from a creative class in today’s age will not resemble the cities of the past. How could they? There are too many variables. What I discovered on this trip was more personal than that. I discovered that in order to be a professional artist all it requires is a commitment to “do art” as your profession.