

# H-Net Reviews

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*The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit.* Lowell Boileau.

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For an optimist, it is a good time to be in Motown. The mad rush to leave the city has abated and it appears that Detroit may have entered an era of economic resurgence and structural redevelopment. Detroit's physical structure is indeed being reshaped. There are new single family home developments in the city—the first in forty years. General Motors moved its headquarters into the centerpiece of city's skyline, the Renaissance Center, and vowed to develop the nearby riverfront. Business system giant Compuware recently announced plans to move its international headquarters into a new office complex it will build on the former site of Hudson's legendary downtown department store. Two major sports stadiums are being built adjacent to the city's revived theater district, and within a few years, Las Vegas-style gambling casinos will be landmarks near the Detroit River. Artist/photographer Lowell Boileau's fascinating web site, *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, however, reminds us that, in the midst of redevelopment, Detroit is also a city with large expanses of deteriorating structures. Once elegant homes and churches as well as world-famous factories and former city landmarks lay in ruins; others have already been demolished. Moreover, Boileau suggests that we should explore and ponder these contemporary remains of a modern urban civilization with the same zeal as we might approach the ancient ruins of Athens, Rome or Ephesus. To this end—and to show his art—Boileau created *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, a visually stunning portrait of the decaying superstructure of Detroit that displays over two hundred of author's recent photographs as well as a few of his paintings of the city's modern landscape. Boileau's visual work is outstanding. The photographs are superb: they are crisp, evocative images from a wide-range of territory within Detroit's city limits. The web site begins with an action photo of Hudson's famous downtown department store mid-

way through the implosion that transformed it into a giant heap of rubble. Thereafter, Boileau neatly locates his photographs within subject areas. "Industrial Ruins," for example, documents historic abandoned automotive factories such as Henry Ford's Highland Park and Piquette Avenue assembly plants, as well as those of Studebaker, Fisher Body and Uniroyal. Buildings that were once impressive icons in a bustling downtown such as the Cadillac Hotel and Michigan Central Railroad Station are shown in their current decrepit state, long-past any hope of renovation and reuse, in "Downtown Ruins." A few of the many abandoned, once-elegant homes, apartment buildings and schools, along with the demise of the infamous Jeffries Projects, are presented in "Neighborhood Ruins." In "The City Rises," Boileau lets the viewer know that all is not lost in the Motor City; that a few buildings such as Orchestra Hall, home of the Detroit Symphony, and the former home of nineteenth lumber baron David Whitney, now a four-star restaurant, have been preserved and are thriving. Boileau's narrative tells a story of physical decay and human neglect. His labels and narrative provide a very brief history of each site photographed. Boileau also devotes a few words to the causes of Detroit's present situation, suggesting that the city's decline can be largely traced to the dispersal of its population resulting in loss of revenue. More important, however, he reasons that "an accumulated lack of basic aesthetic sensibility" and a "spirit in Detroit that may be quintessentially American. [...] a spirit that looks blindly forward and even more blindly backward—like the restless frontier folk of the nation's past, always moving west in search of more 'elbow room'" may underlay Detroiters' overwhelming lack of concern over the demise of their physical history. This web site is an outstanding exhibition on several levels. First and foremost, it is a visual treat. The images are excellent, and they load easily and quickly. The design does limit the viewer

to a linear progression through much of the site, but it also allows for easy maneuvering. Furthermore, generally accurate, essential facts accompany each photograph or painting. Boileau also provides useful links to other related web sites, to his e-mail address, and to further exhibitions of his art. For the casual viewer, preservationist, urbanist or architect, it is a visual feast and an informative tour of one aspect of Detroit's cultural heritage. It is easy to see why Yahoo chose the site for its 1998 "Pick of the Year." <p> Urban historians, especially those who study Detroit, will find Boileau's site interesting and informative, but at times, a bit maddening. To be fair, the author's mission was not to present a comprehensive history of Detroit, and this site should not be judged in the same manner as a historical monograph; nevertheless, Boileau does convey a historical message. Scholars will

find that the author's historical theories are often simplistic and incomplete. For example, Boileau states that: "A lack of free parking and the easy access provided to suburban shopping malls by new expressways in the post World War II era led to its [Detroit's] decline." The story is, of course, much more complex than his conclusions suggest. Moreover, Boileau addresses such issues as the effects of race relations, governmental policies, deindustrialization, and/or urban planning in only the most cursory manner, if at all. In short, this web site is largely a critical exhibition: it is not a work of historiography. <p> Boileau, however, deserves credit for what he has created. <cite>The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit</cite> is a compelling, provocative web site that allows viewers from around the world to explore and reflect upon Detroit's neglected physical past. <p>

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