



John H. Hartig. *Waterfront Porch: Reclaiming Detroit's Industrial Waterfront as a Gathering Place for All.* East Lansing: Greenstone Books, 2019. 208 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-948314-02-2.

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In *Waterfront Porch*, John H. Hartig describes the creation and evolution of the Detroit RiverWalk, specifically showcasing the RiverWalk development as an agent of change and revitalization not just of the river but Detroit itself. Hartig has been a long-time advocate of the Detroit River, having served for fourteen years as the refuge manager of the Detroit International Wildlife Refuge and is currently a visiting scholar at the Great Lakes Institute for Environmental Research at the University of Windsor.[1] Hartig has authored and edited a number of books and articles on the Detroit River, most notable of which is *Honoring Our Detroit River: Caring for Our Home* (2003), a collection of essays on the history and ecology of the Detroit River.[2]

In *Waterfront Porch*, Hartig takes his work on the Detroit River further, telling a story of “how Detroit is turning to the Detroit River and embracing it through a new waterfront porch to help revitalize the city and region, and to help foster a more sustainable future” (p. 6). Thematically, the book is divided into four sections. The first section is primarily historical, giving the reader an overview of riverfront development in the last four centuries. It is in this section that Hartig lays out the five paradigm shifts (drawing on Thomas Kuhn) in the development: the fur trade, shipbuilding, automobile manufacturing, arsenal of democracy, and sus-

tainability. Metropolitan Detroit, according to Hartig adapted “well to paradigm shifts and meeting the needs of the region and the world” (p. 10). Each of these paradigm shifts inevitably affected the riverfront, defining use and abuse.

According to Hartig, the most recent paradigm shift, sustainability, can be a game-changer for Detroit “through urban agriculture, urban food distribution, green infrastructure, green architecture, brownfield cleanup and redevelopment, greenways, automobile technology, affordable housing, and innovative and alternative energy” (p. 28). In the chapter “Detroit River Revival,” Hartig chronicles the revival of various nonhumans, such as bald eagles, peregrine falcons, osprey, lake whitefish, and lake sturgeon—all of which were severely affected by changes to the river and the riverfront, including dredging and river pollution. The most direct “result of this ecological recovery” is that “the public perception of the Detroit River is changing.” No “longer perceived as a working river in the Rust Belt,” today it is “the only river system in North America to receive both Canadian Heritage and American Heritage River designations, and the Detroit River and western Lake Erie are now the only international wildlife refuge in North America (i.e., the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge)” (p. 74). In the chapter “Forging the Detroit RiverWalk,” Hartig traces the evolution

of riverfront development, paying special attention to the various parks that now dot the riverfront on the American side. In the chapter and the book at large, one of the key highlights is the role of the public-private partnership in forging a sustainable riverfront. Hartig discusses place-making, which according to him “is an inclusive process that involves local people in creating quality places for them” (p. 120). In the case of Detroit and the riverfront, he argues that place-making “along the Detroit RiverWalk must become part of a larger network of community places.” Such an approach could mean that “Detroit has a better chance of redefining itself as a comeback city and model of sustainable redevelopment” (p. 138). According to Hartig, one of the challenges for the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy is “to become more relevant to its citizens who have many competing priorities and few outdoor experiences” (p. 142). One of the ways to address this challenge is to integrate the riverfront into extant and developing greenways, blueways, and flyways. Doing so would mean completing connections between greenways and the RiverWalk, “expanding paddling opportunities for all” in addition to “birding and other outdoor conservation experiences for all to help reestablish a connection to the Detroit River,” which in turn could “help create a sense of place and help lead to the development of a stewardship ethic” (p. 158). Hartig substantiates the need for synergistic development of the Detroit RiverWalk by listing the various economic benefits of a recovering ecosystem. Detroit’s revitalization is at the heart of the American dream according to Hartig, until the renaissance of the city remains incomplete, so will the American dream. He ends the book by reemphasizing the need for greater financial participation from the private sector to achieve sustainable development. Developing the Detroit RiverWalk as “a gathering place for all with benefits to all” is imperative if Detroit is to have a bright future (p. 158).

Hartig makes a compelling case for the Detroit RiverWalk, especially as a distinctly American ex-

perience and creation. Yet one wonders what and how he might reconcile immigrants chasing the American dream, for they do not really make an appearance through the book. Metro Detroit is home to thousands of immigrants from the world over, who remain outside the framework of the book. *Waterfront Porch* is a valuable contribution on Detroit that stands out for analytical and historical depth it offers. Unlike other recent work on Detroit’s resurgence that has not always engaged with the river, Hartig’s study shows how the resurgence of the Detroit River and the city are inextricably linked.

Notes

[1]. John Hartig, “About John,” personal website, <https://www.johnhartig.com/bio> (accessed June 17, 2020).

[2]. Hartig’s other work centers on urban pollution and the river. John H. Hartig, *Burning Rivers: Revival of Four Urban-Industrial Rivers That Caught on Fire* (Brentwood, UK: Multi-Science Publishing, 2010).

accessed June 17, 2020,

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