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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

For Sale: The \$100 House

By TOBY BARLOW

Detroit

RECENTLY, at a dinner party, a friend mentioned that he'd never seen so many outsiders moving into town. This struck me as a highly suspect statement. After all, we were talking about Detroit, home of corrupt former mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, beleaguered General Motors and the 0-16 Lions. Compared with other cities' buzzing, glittering skylines, ours sits largely abandoned, like some hulking beehive devastated by colony collapse. Who on earth would move here?

Then again, I myself had moved to Detroit, from Brooklyn. For \$100,000, I bought a town house that sits downtown in the largest and arguably the most beautiful Mies van der Rohe development ever built, an island of perfect modernism forgotten by the rest of the world.

Two other guests that night, a couple in from Chicago, had also just invested in some Detroit real estate. That weekend Jon and Sara Brumit bought a house for \$100.

Ah, the mythical \$100 home. We hear about these low-priced "opportunities" in down-on-their-luck cities like Detroit, Baltimore and Cleveland, but we never meet anyone who has taken the plunge. Understandable really, for if they were actually worth anything then they would cost real money, right? Who would do such a preposterous thing?

A local couple, Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, started the ball rolling. An artist and an architect, they recently became the proud owners of a one-bedroom house in East Detroit for just \$1,900. Buying it wasn't the craziest idea. The neighborhood is almost, sort of, half-decent. Yes, the occasional crack addict still commutes in from the suburbs but a large, stable Bangladeshi community has also been moving in.

So what did \$1,900 buy? The run-down bungalow had already been stripped of its appliances and wiring by the city's voracious scrappers. But for Mitch that only added to its appeal, because he now had the opportunity to renovate it with solar heating, solar electricity and low-cost, high-efficiency appliances.

Buying that first house had a snowball effect. Almost immediately, Mitch and Gina bought two adjacent lots for even less and, with the help of friends and local youngsters, dug in a garden. Then they bought the house next door for \$500, reselling it to a pair of local artists for a \$50 profit. When they heard about the \$100 place down the street, they called their friends Jon and Sarah.

Admittedly, the \$100 home needed some work, a hole patched, some windows replaced. But Mitch plans to connect their home to his mini-green grid and a neighborhood is slowly coming together.

Now, three homes and a garden may not sound like much, but others have been quick to see the potential. A group of architects and city planners in Amsterdam started a project called the "Detroit Unreal Estate Agency" and, with Mitch's help, found a property around the corner. The director of a Dutch museum, Van Abbemuseum, has called it "a new way of shaping the urban environment." He's particularly intrigued by the luxury of artists having little to no housing costs. Like the unemployed Chinese factory workers flowing en

masse back to their villages, artists in today's economy need somewhere to flee.

But the city offers a much greater attraction for artists than \$100 houses. Detroit right now is just this vast, enormous canvas where anything imaginable can be accomplished. From Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project (think of a neighborhood covered in shoes and stuffed animals and you're close) to Matthew Barney's "Ancient Evenings" project (think Egyptian gods reincarnated as Ford Mustangs and you're kind of close), local and international artists are already leveraging Detroit's complex textures and landscapes to their own surreal ends.

In a way, a strange, new American dream can be found here, amid the crumbling, semi-majestic ruins of a half-century's industrial decline. The good news is that, almost magically, dreamers are already showing up. Mitch and Gina have already been approached by some Germans who want to build a giant two-story-tall beehive. Mitch thinks he knows just the spot for it.

Toby Barlow is the author of "Sharp Teeth."

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