

Film review: *We Are Not Ghosts!*

The image most outsiders have of Detroit is of sprawling devastation left by the declining auto industry, along with high unemployment, poverty, violence, and crime. *We Are Not Ghosts!* introduces viewers to a very different Detroit, where an economic and cultural revolution is underway to create a very different kind of city.

In this hour-long documentary, veteran filmmakers Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young deftly weave together interviews with urban gardeners, spoken word artists, schoolteachers, and members of block clubs and neighborhood groups. Workers at Avalon Bakery talk about this thriving business that uses locally grown organic ingredients and employs 45 people. Members of the collectively owned and operated bike co-op, Hub of Detroit, emphasize youth development, sustainable practices, and community access. These are a few of the many efforts to "rebuild, recreate, respire the city from the ground up" – the tag line of Detroit Summer, a multicultural intergenerational program from the 1990s, which served as catalyst and inspiration for several of the projects in the film.

As participants talk about their art, their gardens, and the importance of neighborly relationships, we also hear in their voices the pride and satisfaction of doing something worthwhile, learning relevant skills, building self-confidence, and the sense of freedom that comes with self-reliance. Their visions and actions are the seeds of a new economy arising from the dereliction, waste, and bankruptcy of post-industrialism. These projects foster young people's skills and create relationships of care, where young people are needed, and gain respect for themselves and each other through meaningful work and by opportunities to share in decision-making. They offer a profound challenge to consumerism, and involve a much broader idea of wealth which includes health, physical energy and strength, safety and security, time, skills, talents, creativity, love, community support, a connection to one's history and cultural heritage, a sense of belonging.

Historical footage shows an earlier Detroit, the vibrant Motor City that drew workers northwards as part of the great migration from southern states to well-paid jobs in the auto plants. Towering over a bustling Woodward Avenue, the General Motors building symbolized an era of affluence before the outsourcing of the auto industry and the de-industrialization of many U.S. cities. In Detroit, as elsewhere, high unemployment (especially among African Americans), police harassment of youth, riots, and white flight to the surrounding suburbs all followed.

In *The New Jim Crow*, law professor Michelle Alexander identified a crossroads for policy-makers with the economic collapse of inner-city communities as capital abandoned them. The nation could have responded in several ways: a new War on Poverty, economic stimulus packages, resources for education, job training, public transportation, and relocation assistance to help people access jobs in other areas. Such interventions would have helped all blue-collar workers, not only African Americans. Instead, cities invested in convention centers, sports arenas, and casinos, supposedly as "magnets" for jobs, while the federal government pursued policies of mass incarceration, driven by the war on drugs.

Cities like Detroit, which lurched from boom to bust in a few decades, faced a dramatic turning point. Established ideas about urban development—which relied on corporate investments—

were totally inadequate to the new situation. Many people left. Those who remained gradually saw in the debris and vacant lots “not blight but promise,” in the words of Grace Lee Boggs, an activist for over 60 years. People began to envision a different kind of city, based not on the capricious investment decisions of corporations, but on caring relationships among people, and between people and the earth.

Gregg Willerer and Paul Weertz, both former teachers featured in the film, now grow food on abandoned lots. In a riveting image, Weertz drives a tractor within sight of the downtown Renaissance Center. Malik Yakini talks of “the massive amounts of food” that can be grown in the city, and stresses the importance of rethinking agricultural work as a way of developing self-determination for African American communities, not something done to enrich others as with slavery and sharecropping. Charity Hicks of D-Town Farm—among 1,300 urban gardens in the city—emphasizes leadership skills, food literacy, and the importance of connecting with the soil.

Urban crisis has been made to seem inevitable in this country. What is the future of formerly industrial cities and the millions of people who live there, aside from being systematically impoverished, walled off, and kept under surveillance? How will they thrive, not just survive? *We Are Not Ghosts!* has some refreshing and inspiring answers to these questions by people committed to improving the lives of their communities, and beyond that, redefining what a city can be. Myrtle Thompson of Manistique Community Garden is adamant: “We don’t need another free cheese line.” Julia Pointer, a teacher who is developing a model for place-based schools, notes that without the auto industry to rely on “We have to create community.”

This film deserves a wide audience. It will generate stimulating discussions among high school and college students, community groups, labor unions, environmental groups, and faith-based organizations. The interviews and projects will resonate with people in Akron, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Newark, Oakland, Pittsburgh, and many other cities faced with the devastation and challenge of de-industrialization. But the enormous scale of Detroit—140 square miles—makes the efforts showcased here as monumental as the city itself.

The vast amount of vacant land and low land and property prices in inner-city Detroit makes for possibilities that may not exist elsewhere. But the thinking, vision, passion, and commitment to change featured in this film can be applied everywhere. Malik Yakini talks about the way this work multiplies: each project teaches a few, they teach others, the others teach other others... As performer Jessica Care Moore says in her poem: “We are not ghosts! We are in this city and we are alive!”

Gwyn Kirk lives and gardens in Oakland, CA. She is a member of Women for Genuine Security ([www.genuinesecurity.org](http://www.genuinesecurity.org)), co-author of *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* (McGraw-Hill, sixth edition forthcoming), and cooked for Detroit Summer in 1993.

July 15, 2012