# The Ruins of Gary, Indiana [1]

October 30, 2017 History [2]
Journalism [3]
Truth-telling [4]

## Report by Joseph S. Pete

### An Architectural Survey of a Once-Thriving City




This May, en route to an inaugural downtown architecture tour, I pulled off the highway past a car wash with a mural promising “the best hand job in town.” Block after block of Broadway, the main commercial drag, was flanked with decayed vacant buildings and steel bars on the few remaining windows. A gash opened what used to be a three-story brick Christian Methodist Episcopal church a few blocks north, leaving the empty structure with a creepy vertical rictus atop a pile of bricks.

Generations of my family once lived in Gary, Indiana, a mill town U.S. Steel founded a century ago in 1906 and that’s now best known for murder, blight, and the kind of ruins you’d find in Rome.

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In the first half of the twentieth century, the city bustled with streetcars, department stores, Depression-era movie palaces, and fancy hotels that were serving roast duck when my Macedonian immigrant great-grandfather and grandfather lived there. After unions formed and won some bargaining victories, the mills paid well enough to lift steelworkers into the middle class, where they could afford modest ranch homes and boats for cruising around Lake Michigan. Gary's steel mills cranked out the beams that raised skyscrapers in neighboring Chicago and across the country.

But by the 1970s and 1980s, deindustrialization and an exodus to the suburbs gutted a hardscrabble town once heralded as the “City of the Century” and the “Magic City” by civic boosters. My father, uncles, and aunts were whisked out when they were still in high school. The city's rapid deterioration accelerated. In the early 1990s, when I was a kid, Gary had the second highest murder rate in the country—twice in three years—earning it the dubious title of “murder capital” of the United States. The city’s total population has now dwindled to under 80,000 people, more than 80 percent of whom are African American.

I returned home to the Region—as the heavily industrialized area along Lake Michigan’s South Shore is called—in 2013, after landing a newspaper job at the *Times of Northwest Indiana* (NWI). I briefly considered moving to Gary's artsy lakefront Miller neighborhood with its vibrant graffiti murals, acclaimed craft brewery, and an organic juice bar that serves avocado toast. But I ended up in an adjoining suburb. People don't move to Gary anymore; they move away.



Officials have pitched many ideas for revitalizing the city: a downtown convention center, a downtown ballpark with a Bennigan’s, blimp rides over Lake Michigan, the Michael Jackson Performing Arts and Cultural Center with a golf course (for whatever reason) that was inexplicably announced at a splashy press conference in October 2009 at a swanky Las Vegas casino. Most never panned out at all or fell far short of expectations.

Jackson grew up in Gary, but he’s been dead for going on eight years, and his much-ballyhooed promise to invest in the Steel City followed him to the grave. His estate never signed off on the museum, another pipe dream that ended up circling the drain of the heavily polluted Grand Calumet River. His childhood home is an international tourist attraction, but it’s a fenced-off house where visitors can do little more than snap selfies, and it only attracts a smattering of visitors on his birthday.

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Muhammad Ali once vowed to open a restaurant in Gary, but never did. In the mid-1990s, long before he was elected, President Donald Trump pledged to invest $10 million to renovate the downtown Sheraton Hotel tower after he was granted a lucrative riverboat casino license on Lake Michigan. He never did, and there's a vacant field where the Sheraton once stood.

Now, city officials are banking on architecture as an attraction that will draw visitors to a city that was once home to nearly 200,000 residents. George W. Maher's Bathing Beach Aquatorium, built in 1921, remains a draw at Miller Beach that's rented out for weddings because of its views of the lake. A preservationist group led by an Art Institute of Chicago professor is also trying to save Maher's 1926 Heat Light Water building. And Frank Lloyd Wright designed two houses in Gary. (Unfortunately, one burned to cinders; the other is flanked by boarded-up and burnt-out vacant shells.)

The inaugural 2017 architecture tours omitted those off-the-beaten-path structures, instead focusing on the city's walkable downtown. In May, I went not as a reporter, but to learn more about buildings I'd long admired. My grandfather, an architectural draftsman, had helped erect iconic structures of Gary-forged steel, such as Chicago's John Hancock Center and the St. Louis Gateway Arch. He gave me, of his many grandchildren, his protractor and other drawing tools, which much to my chagrin I never put to use. Many years later in Gary's downtown, I might not have observed what I saw with professional distance, but I still recorded everything on my iPhone.

My tour group was made up of a few dozen people diverse in race and age, but including many stylish kids who'd clearly come down from Chicago and the Volvo-driving boomers you'd see at any farmer's market. Our earnest young guide, Sam, was with AmeriCorps. He had a shock of blond hair and wore a blue Oxford shirt.

Sam talked in detail about the history of the buildings, lauding the recent redevelopment of the Gary State Bank tower and lamenting that the storied Palace Theater might soon be razed. He took us to a four-story Jackson Five mural a graffiti artist had painted in 2016: "His name is Felix Maldonado," Sam said with infectious enthusiasm, as if revealing the name of the next Jean-Michel Basquiat. "He goes by Flex. He's from the Region. We've got a lot of artistic talent here."



Next, we went to the old post office, which was erected during the New Deal and designed by Howard Lovewell Cheney, the supervising architect for the Tribune Tower in Chicago. But the post office was abandoned in the 1970s, along with so much of Gary. Decades later, a woman on our tour with an NPR tote bag accidentally stepped on broken glass, crunching it underfoot.

All the windows were long gone. The roof had rotted through, creating ragged skylights that bathed the interior in spectral light. It looked as if a UFO were trying to lift up a prostrate abductee with a tractor beam. Teller windows gaped like blank eye sockets in a skull. Islands where customers once scribbled down return addresses on envelopes had deteriorated to the point where only rusty metal frames remained. Gang signs were spray-painted everywhere.

Grinning like a mattress-store salesman, Sam handed us all hardhats and protective eyeglasses. Yellow caution tape

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kept us from venturing too far amid the rubble and used hypodermic needles.

With grant money, the city had commissioned artists earlier this year to paint murals on the outside of the post office. These were generic and hopeful: an astronaut gazing through a helmet, all the planets in the solar system. A viewing station had been constructed to let people take pictures without putting themselves at risk. Huddling with the other smartphone snappers, I knew this well-intentioned idea was bound for failure. The station limited camera angles, and as I hunched over the wooden barrier, I imagined how easy it would be to hop over if no one else were around.

We made our way to what had been the grand Hotel Gary, once host to the likes of Frank Sinatra and Al Capone. It's now a surveillance-camera-saturated senior home called Genesis Towers. Then on a few more blocks to the "crown jewel," Sam said. City Methodist Church. It used to boast the largest Methodist congregation in the Midwest, but the majestic nine-story church is now so rundown it doubled as a backdrop for war-torn Europe in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*; it also showed up in the 2010 reboot of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.



Sam called the church "a microcosm" of Gary. It had been built in the 1920s, sparked by "a visionary"—Sam's phrase—named Pastor William Seaman. "The inner city had a lot of vice, a lot of crime and a lot of poverty," he told us, "but [Seaman] wanted to build this beautiful gothic structure right in the heart of the city." The idea was that "if you build a beautiful building," Sam added, "people will be attracted to it, maybe behave—so sort of as a control component."

Almost a hundred years later, the church attracted "urban explorers" who liked to photograph haunting vistas inside long-vacant buildings. Local photographers have told me that many European shutterbugs hit up Detroit and Gary on the same trip, apparently with no qualms about local trespassing laws. Sam also noted that the city had secured grant money to turn City Methodist Church into a "ruins garden" in the manner of some abandoned castles in Europe, where nature has been allowed to run wild so visitors can see the historic facades in a park-like setting.

I had to admit it was a compelling vision. Gary might never end up with another thriving metropolis taking root in its ruins as Rome has. But after so many people had given up on the city, fleeing to new subdivisions in far-flung towns, it was a relief to think anyone might appreciate these relics of grand architecture.

The tour ended at the long-vacant Union Station, which a collective of artists and activists known as the Decay Devils were turning into an "art and architecture park." Our group of middle-aged PBS viewers, hipster Chicagoans, curious Gary residents, and displaced Gary expats snapped pictures, while the young activists picked weeds, painted walls, and planted a garden.

The next day, I went back on my own and joined the Decay Devils, clearing brush and laying brick as best I could. They told me they'd spelunked through many abandoned Gary buildings, complaining about the way the city "took" their architectural tour idea. They said that elected officials wouldn't grant them access to a legendary high school just

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east of downtown that was rotting away senselessly. There was no buyer, no market, no reason to keep them out.

As in the cynical coda about LA at the end of the movie *Chinatown*, I wanted to say, “Forget it, Jake, it's Gary.” The commercial district of my grandfather's Aetna neighborhood is so bombed-out not a single storefront remains open. These days, U.S. Steel seems to produce more pink slips than metal. Recently, I passed an abandoned high school where outdated textbooks moldered in the overgrown grass.

But that day, something stopped me from just writing off Gary again. I witnessed a flash of energy, a flicker of concern. I’d long subscribed to the idea that in giving up on Gary, we’d abandoned perfectly good houses, ceded corners to crack dealers, traded in a vibrant urban life where we could walk to our jobs for a suburban cocoon in which we never interacted with neighbors and drove endlessly—to work, to the supermarket, to the mall. That day, though, I witnessed people engaging with the past and acknowledging why it mattered. I saw that someone else actually cared—reason enough to grab a weed whacker and to try and make a difference.



**Publishing Information**

- “Gary Preservation Tour [5]” (City of Gary website; Department of Planning, Redevelopment, and Zoning).
- “Effort to Preserve Gary Architecture Gaining Momentum [6]” by AJ Latrace, *Curbed*, February 17, 2017.
- “Gary, Indiana [7]” (*CityTownInfo* website; also see latest estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau).
- “Michael Jackson Museum Advances Without Estate’s Permission [8]” by Daniel Kreps, *Rolling Stone*, June 3, 2010.
- “Trump on Verge of Default [9],” *NWI*, March 28, 2000.
- “In Gary, Memories of Donald Trump’s Casino Promises [10]” by James Briggs, *IndyStar*, April 24, 2016.

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- "Long-Awaited Demolition Begins on Downtown Gary Hotel Tower [11]" by Joseph S. Pete, *NWI*, July 26, 2014.
- "Gary Bathing Beach Aquatorium [12]" (Marquette Park, Gary, Indiana, website).
- "Heat Light Water Project: The History [13]" (Heat Light Water Project website).
- "Historic Structures of Gary, Indiana, Downtown Area [14]" (from the website preserveindiana.com).
- "Gary, Indiana: A Midwestern Steel Town Making a Slow Comeback [15]" by Patrick Sisson, *Curbed*, September 6, 2017.
- "Gary Set to Be Backdrop for Scenes in Freddy Krueger Remake [16]," *NWI*, May 21, 2009.
- "'Transformers 3' Films on Streets of Gary [17]" by Jon Seidel, *Indiana Economic Digest*, August 12, 2010.
- "God's Forsaken House: Gary Church Could Become Country's Largest Ruins Garden [18]" by Joseph S. Pete, *NWI*, December 5, 2014.
- Decay Devils website [19].

**Art Information**

- The following photographs were taken by Joseph Pete in May 2017 on a Gary architecture tour; all photographs © Joseph S. Pete; used with permission.

    1. "Graffiti in Gary's Old Post Office"
    2. "Jackson Five Mural by Felix Maldonado"
    3. "Inside Gary's Old Post Office"
    4. "City Methodist Church"
    5. "Decay Devils at Gary's Union Station"



Joseph S. Pete is an award-winning journalist, an Iraq War veteran, an Indiana University graduate, a book reviewer, and a frequent guest on Lakeshore Public Radio. He was named the 2016 poet laureate of Chicago Baconfest, a feat that Geoffrey Chaucer chump never accomplished. His literary work and photography have appeared or are forthcoming in *Stoneboat*, *The High Window*, *Synesthesia Literary Journal*, *Chicago Literati*, among many other publications. He once wrote an author bio that abruptly trailed off….

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