

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



**September 21, 2009**

**THE MEDIA EQUATION**

## **Investment in a City of Struggles**

By [DAVID CARR](#)

DETROIT

When Leon Panetta, the director of the [C.I.A.](#), showed up in Dearborn, Mich., to build bridges and do some recruiting for the agency in a suburb of Detroit that has a huge population of Arab Americans, it was big news. Big enough that Bobby Ghosh, one of [Time](#) magazine's experienced correspondents, showed up at the traditional evening feast that breaks the fast every day of the month of Ramadan.

But instead of hot-footing it back to Washington with Mr. Panetta, Mr. Ghosh headed out for coffee with Fay Beydoun, the executive director of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce in Dearborn, and Baha Saad, an influential restaurateur in Detroit and Dearborn. He asked them not just about the evening's events but about Detroit, the nearby urban math problem no one seems to be able to solve. At the end of the conversation, Mr. Ghosh got up and said, "I'll be back soon."

After meeting with them, he didn't go to a hotel but to a house where Steven Gray, a correspondent for Time magazine and [Time.com](#), and Rick Tetzeli, a senior editorial executive at Time Inc., were chatting with Lisa Gibbs, a senior writer at Money magazine who ran a forum that night with local real estate agents about Detroit's huge number of foreclosures and freakishly depressed real estate market.

It is not an academic issue for Time Inc. As part of a companywide decision to spend a year in Detroit, Time Inc. bought the house where the forum was held and where its reporters will stay while they do stories here. The house is on a grand street flanked by huge trees in the West Village neighborhood, with six bedrooms and four bathrooms. In any other city in America, it would be worth well over half a million dollars. Mr. Tetzeli, the former managing editor at Entertainment Weekly who is leading the project, led the search, and Time Inc. bought the house for \$99,000, or more than \$85,000 over the current average home price in Detroit because most of the houses being sold have been foreclosed.

There are a few reasons for that. Detroit has room for two million people, but there are only about 900,000 left. Nature and entropy are having their way with vast stretches of Detroit, a city that has been punished by the implosion of the auto industry but that began failing in fundamental ways many years before that. Thousands of homes have fallen down and been hauled away, leaving behind a patchwork of empty lots.

The biggest vibe in many of these neighborhoods is not one of fear, but for a visitor, loneliness. Even in the downtown area, it's as if a directive has gone out to flee, and the ones who remain missed the memo. Big-city worries over congestion, parking and crowding seem very far away in Detroit.

Time Inc.'s editor in chief, John Huey, authorized the purchase of the house and asked the various editors of his magazines and Web sites to think about Detroit stories. For the next year, reporters from Time, Fortune, Money, Essence and Sports Illustrated, along with their Web sites and CNNmoney, will be doing stories out of this city as part of "Assignment Detroit."

A video that begins playing Monday on the CNNmoney site describes a city where people pay \$4 for a latte on one corner — if they can find it — and \$10 for a rock of cocaine on the other. An article in Sports Illustrated by Lee Jenkins describes the division-leading Tigers as a kind of a hopeful beacon amid the murk.

Given the economic challenges that Time Inc. and the rest of publishing face back in New York, the one-year project in Detroit seems all at once ambitious, oddly timed and ironic.

"It is all of those things, and more," said Mr. Huey, who went to the house last week for a welcome party that included not only David Bing, the mayor of Detroit, but also the Detroit rocker and rapper Kid Rock, who brought a keg of local beer and a big "D" to hang over the fireplace.

"If you are asking me whether, because of the stuff we are all going through in publishing, I might have a little more empathy toward the troubles of others, the answer is yes, but that's not really why we are there," Mr. Huey said.

"It sounds grandiose, but it is one of the great stories of our time," he said. "Detroit is like a prism on any story you want — social, economic, health care, race, education — it is all there. And it is all there in extremis."

According to a piece on CNNmoney, not a single national grocery store operates here within the city limits, and a year ago this month, the mayor, [Kwame M. Kilpatrick](#), resigned after pleading guilty to obstruction of justice. It has as many murders as cities more than four times its size, the majority of which go unsolved, and half of the people in the city are estimated to be functionally illiterate. Unemployment is above 25 percent, and the real number of people who are not working may be twice that. Torn asunder by riots in 1967, Detroit was never a pretty picture after that, but as a reporter, I haven't seen anything like modern Detroit since covering [Hurricane Katrina](#) in New Orleans.

"Yes, but Katrina happened over the course of a few days, and it's been going on in Detroit for 40 years," said Daniel Okrent, a Detroit native, a former editor and writer for Time Inc., and a former public editor for The New York Times. He is writing a cover article on the city for Time magazine that will be out later this week. But is a magazine company that has its own troubles merely changing the subject by putting on a safari helmet and buying a house in the most dysfunctional city in America?

"Whenever you show initiative and enterprise in journalism besides covering a press conference or other preordained events, what isn't a stunt?" Mr. Okrent said. "I think it's great that we are trying something big, something significant, when the rest of the business is pulling in its horns."

Mr. Gray is anchoring the coverage and the house in Detroit, blogging about the city for the next year and doing stories as they occur.

"I grew up in New Orleans, and I can tell you that the fight for very basic things like decent food is a daily battle," Mr. Gray said.

Mr. Ghosh described Detroit as a “cautionary tale for urban planners, for social workers, for the rest of us. Everything that is happening elsewhere because of the economy started here a long time ago. It’s like a petri dish of all the things that have gone wrong.”

But big stories have to have texture, and there has to be the possibility of uplift.

“There are individual efforts, amazing stories, and there is a feeling here that things might get better,” said Mr. Tetzeli, who once taught school in the city. “The mayor is a very serious person, the opposite of the one who came before him, and we are coming across people and stories all the time that suggest that things will get better here.”

Much of this story has already been told, and told well, by The Detroit Free Press and The Detroit News, daily newspapers that have reduced home delivery to three times a week, relying on the Web to deliver news the rest of the week.

“We’re not here to fill some gap in coverage,” Mr. Tetzeli said. “The Free Press and The Detroit News have done some great work under difficult circumstances, including winning a Pulitzer this year,” he said, sitting at Slows, a barbecue restaurant. “We are here because we think Detroit stories, about recovery and the failure to recover, have resonance nationally because of the recession.”

Mr. Huey said there were plenty of risks in the investment, including the possibility that people may not want to read a bunch of stories about a city on a big, long losing streak.

“How many games have the Detroit Lions lost in a row?” Nineteen, as of Sunday. “One of these days, the Lions are going to win a game. It’s going to happen,” he said. “And when they do, it’s going to be a pretty good day for us to be in Detroit.”

*E-mail: [carr@nytimes.com](mailto:carr@nytimes.com)*

*<http://twitter.com/carr2n>*

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---