



Spatial Economics Research Centre

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Requiem for Detroit

[Posted by Prof Henry G. Overman]

BBC4 was showing [Requiem for Detroit](#) last night and I caught most of it (for the first time). As always with Detroit, the scenes of urban decay were incredible ([Daniel Knowles](#) referred to it as 'ruin porn' - which sort of captures it). Also, the stories about individual impacts were an interesting mixture of the very depressing and the truly inspiring.

Such images and stories encourage strong emotions. I sometimes wonder whether this tends to generate an in-built bias when thinking about urban decline and the appropriate policy response. Specifically comparing Detroit now to Detroit at the peak of its boom encourages us to think that policy could have and should have stopped the massive population decline that led to so much urban decay. But what if this wasn't possible? What if pouring billions of dollars in to Detroit couldn't have stopped that decay? Then the appropriate comparison is not to Detroit at the peak of its boom but to a Detroit with a larger population but still precious few jobs. Would this be better?

Another way of looking at this is to note that such documentaries hardly ever follow the fortunes of the hundreds of thousands of families who move away from the declining city. What happened to them? Did their lives end up better or worse than they would have if they stayed put? Of course, it's always hard to know. But focusing only on those left behind presents a very one sided view of the full impact of the decline of a once great city on *all* its residents past and present.

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