



My Own Private Detroit

By MUNA MIRE AND MESSIAH RHODES | OCTOBER 12, 2015



Private policing in the Motor City

In 2012, Detroit accounted for half of Michigan's 682 murders. According to the FBI, for two decades up until 2012, Detroit's murder rate trended steadily upward. Calling 911 was a waste of time, you would be told, because no one

would show up. Now these services are slowly returning—but only to affluent neighborhoods able to find private solutions. When it comes to public policing and security, Detroit operates using a modified template from America’s nefarious robber-baron past: It is a postindustrial city brazenly flouting decency for profit.

Patrick Kilda is a forward-facing young man. He has an understanding of history, he says, but like many who relocated to Detroit after Quicken Loans chairman Dan Gilbert moved the company’s headquarters there, he doesn’t mind the boom of new development. A Wayne State law student originally from East Lansing, Kilda volunteers to give us a guided driving tour of his neighborhood. We sit in his sleek, silver BMW sedan. In one movement, and with one hand on the wheel, Kilda adjusts the car’s sun visor and smooths back his blonde hair. His suit jacket rests on the back seat, hinting that he either came from court or would be headed there later.

“Since I’ve been here, it’s been gentrified a lot. Rents have definitely increased at a faster rate than inflation. There’s lots of development,” he says, citing an almost textbook definition of gentrification. “Most of this is [Wayne State] students or hipsters—I’d say very few people who have grown up and spent their whole life here.”

When Gilbert moved Quicken Loans (the second biggest retail lender in the country)—along with the headquarters for his holding company Rock Ventures—to downtown Detroit in 2010, it coincided with the beginning of an extreme polarization of the city. Detroit would be further bifurcated, crudely, along the axis of poverty.

While the gentrified Midtown is hailed as “the next Bushwick” and rents continue to rise, the rest of the city remains a shell of its former self, choked by poverty and suffering from a lack of services. Most visibly, for the past three years many in Detroit have had their access to water restricted as result of being unable to pay water bills, prompting United Nations rapporteurs to investigate human rights violations. Meanwhile, commercial accounts like

those the city has with Chrysler, General Motors, and professional sports arenas are able to stay in operation despite overdue debts in the thousands of dollars. This is the Gilded Age calculus of the new Detroit: the burdened public carrying the privilege of a private few.

When Kilda is asked about Detroit's previous image, before downtown began to change, he pauses to consider what he is about to say. Half shrugging, half cringing, he recalls how he and his family thought of the city before the Gilbert-led gentrification effort. It was a commonly held perception: the city as poor, dangerous, and blighted. "[During] my childhood, if you were from the suburbs, the only reason you came down to Detroit was to go to a sporting event," says Kilda. "People in my parent's generation, they all thought I was nuts for moving to Detroit. But now it's the hip, trendy thing to do. It was the hip, trendy thing to do in 2010, but even more so now."

Kilda turns on to Warren, past the Detroit Institute of Art, which cuts an imposing figure against the sky with its classical facade. The art inside is perpetually at risk of being sold to refill the city's empty coffers. As we drive toward his Midtown apartment, Kilda notes, "these were all historically black neighborhoods, and that's all changed." What he doesn't say hangs in the air: *That's all changed because the city gives people like Dan Gilbert tax incentives, and because strategic disinvestment is racist.*

Led by Gilbert, the current wave of private investment bankrolls public services the city could not afford on its own: installing new train routes, relighting neighborhoods, and renovating hospitals. The new M-1 light-rail line, to which Gilbert has won naming rights, will run along Woodward Avenue from downtown to Midtown and through neighborhoods expected to increase dramatically in value. Developers like Mike Ilitch, owner of the Detroit Tigers, have bought large parcels of cheap land along the proposed route, to catch overflow when people begin to be priced out of Midtown, as is widely anticipated. Like a shadowy fourth branch of government, developers work in tandem with the city to attract wealthy denizens and restructure public space for private use. There are few limitations to Gilbert's influence:

When under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice for mortgage fraud earlier this year, Quicken Loans preemptively filed suit against the agency to bring the case before a more favorable judge in Detroit. The judge, Mark A. Goldsmith, is a former partner at the law firm of Honigman Miller Schwartz & Cohn, which represented Quicken Loans in a merger back when it was called Rock Financial Corporation.

Politicians no longer point to an ever-shrinking and barely existent municipal tax base to explain the lack of public services in Detroit. Instead they strategically woo developers as the solution to municipal revenue, focusing on “revitalization” and the private amenities available as part of that process. But much of Detroit has been left behind. In poor neighborhoods, streetlights are still out, and entire city blocks are left in the dark. Roads are still in disrepair, decorated with constellations of potholes. And the police often still don’t come to help—not that when they do come, it’s always a help. When it comes to poor, black residents in Detroit, police systematically profile, harass, and inflict violence on those that, in theory, they should protect and serve. Still, Detroit residents—not unlike New York City residents during Bratton’s police “slowdown”—perceive the withdrawal of police services negatively.

While Detroit maintains a staggeringly high violent crime rate, a 19-year-long trend began to turn around in 2012, and crime rates dropped slightly. This drop is often cited as a positive side effect of the development pushed by Gilbert, who has engineered a security apparatus of his own design to protect his investments in the city. In the approximately eight-square-mile stretch of downtown surrounding his company’s headquarters, Gilbert has erected 500 telescopic, high-powered cameras, monitoring the streets and cross-coordinating with Detroit’s police databases, many of which are accessible to private security. Staffed by contractors from Securitas, Gilbert’s personal panopticon has come under criticism for encroaching on the privacy of the city’s residents. Kilda’s description of his first and only brush with the Gilbert private security force makes clear this apparatus’s alarming capacity:

Last July, I get a call from my Mom at 4:45 in the

morning. She's like, "Hey I just got this call from someone that your car had been broken into, so I gave them your number." They called me 90 seconds after, even though it was five in the morning. They told me, "We just watched your car get broken into. We called the police and they didn't show up. There's not really much we can do." They asked if I was a Quicken Loans employee. I thought it was really weird that they figured out that the car was registered to my Mom and found her phone number to get to me, all within minutes.

While Gilbert is managing to keep tabs on residents through video surveillance and access to personal information, it's not apparent how his private security empire functions to stop crime. Kilda worked out that the private security must have seen someone throw a rock through his car window through their cameras, but they did not stop the theft. Kilda was advised to file a police report. The Detroit Police have so few actual precincts up and running at this point that he had to call in to a "remote police station."

In Detroit, several private entities are endowed with police power, but Gilbert's apparatus isn't one of them. Wayne State's campus police force is. Wayne State police carry guns, drive patrol cars, and have the power to arrest you. They are private employees, neither paid by nor liable to the city.

For downtown residents like Kilda, private security functions as an omniscient, crime deterring force. For others, private security is no improvement upon a system already racist and lethal. In 2014, Wayne State police were sued for brutally beating Mario Simmons, a disabled man whose spine fused together in three different places as a result of his injuries, a case reminiscent of Freddie Gray's.

Back at Kilda's apartment, he takes us up to the roof to survey the cityscape. We have a bird's-eye view of everything happening on the streets below. He

paces back and forth, hands clasped behind him. “I went on a tour of [Gilbert’s] security center,” he says suddenly. “It’s in the basement of the Chase Bank building. You walk in and it’s like the border patrol, you know? There’s like 50 HD TVs on the wall that can zoom in all the way to Canada.”

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Local restaurant Nicky D’s boasts an all-day breakfast and the color scheme is a bald grab at off-brand McDonald’s. We are waiting to meet Tijuana Morris. Slightly late but unharried, she walks in and seats herself opposite. A black woman who looks to be in her fifties, Morris wears a bright red blazer with a blue “Godfrey Dillard for Michigan Secretary” sticker on the lapel. In between political rallies and fundraising dinners, she found time to sit down with us over coffee.

“I am a retired police officer from the 12th precinct, and I did quite a bit. I was a patrol officer.” she says by way of introduction. Morris is now firmly on the other side of the blue wall of silence as a member of the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality. She cites use of force—taser use in particular—as the primary issue her coalition is tackling. Their goal is to hold the Detroit Police accountable, she says, and to support victims of brutality, like the family of Tazzy Mitchell, a local teen who died after police tasered him. But Morris and the Coalition Against Police Brutality have also advocated against private security. Specifically, she says her group shut down an unlicensed private security outfit called the Men in Black that was assaulting the homeless downtown. “They were not licensed to do this type of work. There were some lawsuits, and since then that group is no longer in operation there,” Morris explains.

The Men in Black no longer reign over public space in Detroit. But in the short time we’ve been in the city, we captured Gilbert’s Securitas private security guards on camera escorting a homeless woman from a public sidewalk to a less-visible side street nearby.

Filming the police has helped the push for accountability, but who are private guards accountable to when something goes wrong? A recent violent altercation in Oakland, California, between a black man and an armed security guard in a Whole Foods supermarket was also caught on film. The police arrive to deal with the aftermath, but whether violence on the part of private security is sanctioned or condemned and what will happen as a result is up to Whole Foods, a private entity. How does Whole Foods want to be perceived by the public? If private security operates outside the mandate of the public good, will corporate interest dictate police culture?

Morris worries about this uncharted relationship between private security companies, their clients, and public police departments. “In the communities that don’t have [access to] paid security, yes, there’s a higher risk of crime. The police department—and I frown on this—has seven or eight different entities that it endows with police power.” Like the Pinkerton Agency of the 19th century, private companies are quietly being deputized with more regularity.

Law enforcement agencies now share vast databases of intelligence on the public with private security enterprises, as Kilda’s experience with a break-in demonstrates. “They have [access to] the MDT [Mobile Data Terminal] system that has everybody’s information, the NCIC [National Crime Information Center], which has international information to do checks on people,” Morris says. “I think a controlled authority should have that right; I don’t think other entities should.” She is concerned about the lack oversight involved. “What if someone has a problem with someone and looks up their address?” she asks us.

Dan Gilbert’s downtown panopticon has already come under fire by the ACLU for banning activists from Campus Martius Park. The ACLU’s lawsuit claims that activists’ social-media accounts were being monitored and that data was shared between the surveillance center, security guards on the ground, and potentially with the Detroit Police in order to infringe on the activists’ right to free speech.

The current state of public policing is characterized by violence wielded against the poor and black of this country—and in a postindustrial milieu, as private security returns as a more acceptable social infrastructure, it may prove to be even less accountable to those on the margins.

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In Detroit's suburban neighborhoods, security is typically contracted through and tied directly to neighborhood homeowners' associations. These are small semi-affluent towns with bucolic names, as if they were manorial holdings rather than barnacles on the skeleton of a postindustrial city: East English Village, Sherwood Forest. In these towns, if you don't own a home, you don't enjoy police protection. If you are poor enough, it is of no consequence that you are a victim of a crime.

In East English Village, Andrew Cox couldn't keep his dog quiet—guests were rare in his dilapidated home. These days, East English Village doesn't have many dilapidated homes. The neighborhood now sends out a monthly newsletter to each resident, holds semi-regular landscaping contests, and boasts a pet registry in the event a furry loved one goes missing. Joe Biden visited the neighborhood for Labor Day in 2014. It's a place that politicians make time for, eager as they are to make such areas the new face of Detroit.

But Cox and his family aren't part of that vision. He says his family's year and a half occupying a vacant house had been regarded with animosity and cynicism by neighbors. East English Village is a tight knit neighborhood, well patrolled by private security. Recently recovered as part of the wider gentrification of Detroit, the neighborhood is growing in prestige while still coping with the racial and class tensions between newcomers and the locals trying to get by.

Squatters, in the popular imaginary, are often drug addicts, sex workers, or criminals. Cox, who paid into escrow accounts to show his financial capability and made utility payments, doesn't fit that stereotype. He shows us a large

King James Bible passed on to him from his great grandparents. Its pages are filled with genealogical diagrams—he tells us it’s at least a hundred years old. “My mother and my father came from Mississippi because back then in the sixties, living in Detroit was good. My mother was a nurse and my father got a job working at Ford. So it was real good: living, food cost and everything was beautiful back then.”

The neighborhood knows his family has been occupying a vacant house—the homeowners attend community meetings together, gossip and discuss dessert recipes. But Cox and his family don’t participate in those activities because he doesn’t pay neighborhood fees—a fact known to the homeowners. “We did have a garbage can, but our neighbor took our garbage can. He said it’s his. So now he has two garbage cans,” Cox says.

Because Cox was also unable to pay fees for snow removal and security, the neighborhood association ignored Cox’s concerns. Ever since a subsequent break-in and ransacking of the house he was occupying with his family, Cox has feared for the safety of his two children.

Dressed in a blue flannel work shirt and jeans, Cox leads us into the darkened home. (Light fixtures have been stolen and wires removed). A home that once was on its way to being full of life is now marked by mold and disrepair. He turns on a single lightbulb to reveal a bare room. “It was a kitchen in here—there [were] cabinets and everything.” He gestures to a wall stripped of cabinets and shelving, with a sink leaning haphazardly against one wall. “Well, one day we left,” he continues. “After we left, somebody came in and stripped it.” Cox shows us the back door—which has been kicked off its hinges—and now features two boards of wood, nailed across the frame to prevent the same thing happening again.

In the time since we visited him in East English Village, Cox has relocated his family to his wife’s mother’s home. New laws making occupying vacant homes a felony also contributed to his decision to take his slim savings in escrow and seek refuge elsewhere.

Maurice Telesford, current president of the Sherwood Forest Neighborhood Association, asks to meet not at his home but at the home of his neighbor and predecessor, Gail Rodwan. Rodwan, who held the post for more than four decades, only recently retired but is still very much involved in the day-to-day running of her neighborhood. When we arrive, she ushers us through a wood-paneled foyer into a room made bright by ceiling-to-floor Georgian windows. As we settle ourselves, Rodwan seats herself next to Telesford, intently observant.

“There’s a saying: once a crime takes place in your neighborhood, the damage has already been done, whether the criminal has been apprehended or not. [Deterrence] is our primary vehicle for dealing with crime,” Telesford says when asked about his philosophy of security. Apparently, deterrence—and it is unclear what he means by that in terms of security patrols—works for his neighborhood. In the five years he has lived in Sherwood Forest, Telesford has never had any sort of security incident at his home. “I have a fence in my backyard. You can’t just walk through my yard to my home,” he explains.

Detroit has the highest murder rate in the country. But in the suburbs, the primary concern for private security is property crime: squatters and theft. Even in relatively wealthy neighborhoods like Sherwood Forest, the problem of vacant or abandoned homes is ubiquitous. “Some of the concerns have included people entering into vacant homes,” Telesford says. “We have the patrol monitor the vacant homes, but that’s a challenge because we have to cover the cost as an association since there is no homeowner...The patrol around our neighborhood is paid for by our residents.” He says everyone benefits from the coverage they provide to the neighborhood—“everyone” meaning everyone in the neighborhood who can afford to pay the neighborhood-association fee. Private neighborhood security in neighborhoods like Sherwood Forest depends on a law and order philosophy of policing that perpetuates class discrimination and dictates evicting squatters is primarily what it takes to keep the neighborhood safe.

One of the major projects Telesford and Rodwan are working on involves restoring the public lighting fixtures throughout Sherwood Forest. With the city recovering from bankruptcy, many other neighborhoods around Detroit are doing the same. But Sherwood Forest, an area with many historic houses, has successfully lobbied the city of Detroit for historic poles for their light fixtures to match the “character of their homes.” Sherwood Forest is a neighborhood with ties to city government—the city’s chief operating officer lives there. Unfortunately, Telesford and Rodwan were told that the special lighting would run \$60,000 over the allotted budget. “The city said it couldn’t afford to pay the difference—it cost more to put historic poles in the neighborhood, so we went on a fundraising campaign and we raised over \$60,000 to help offset the cost of installing the lights,” Telesford says with a smile. Rodwan looks on approvingly. We turn to her, for her assessment of their neighborhood, given her veteran status as a community member.

“In 46 years we’ve had, I think, two bicycles stolen. This is a very secure neighborhood,” she says.

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When you do a ride-along with Commander Dale Brown, a stocky black man in a black vest, gray camouflage pants, and combat boots, you feel safe. He patrols an affluent neighborhood in his company Hummer most days. Brown tells us where we are going: “This is called Palmer Woods. This is Detroit’s premier community, judges and politicians live in this community. It’s multicultural.” Brown points out the lavish houses and serene greenery with pride. But if you ask, he admits the origins of his company were gritty and precarious. “I started with a rifle and a dog 20 years ago helping families on the Eastside in what they called crack alley.”

He gives us a tour of his private security outfit—Threat Management Center—located in the Rivertown Warehouse District along the Detroit River. The warehouse housing the company sits across the street from a burned-down building. “Threat Management is the training system, and Threat

Management Center is the school,” he explains. An Air Force veteran, Brown brands his company like a paramilitary group, but as he talks, his demeanor is more Chávez than Pinochet. “Somehow we got it twisted as a society just because people are poor, they deserve a lower quality of life,” he says. Threat Management Center not only provides services for Detroit’s elite but has been contracted by organizations like the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization and other community groups around the city fighting the water shut-offs and conditions of extreme poverty. Private security is complicated.

As other more resourceful security agencies have been endowed with powers to arrest, detain, and tap into immense databases, the Threat Management Center still depends on the Detroit Police Department for worst-case situations. “I’m totally against vigilantism. You don’t go looking for criminals that have already committed crimes. That’s what the police are for.” Brown feels the police are not necessary if his team members are doing their job right. “Get some information, give it to them. What we focus on is the prevention of conditions which lead to predatory outcomes. There should be no way predatory humans can hunt families and victimize individuals.” Brown sounds like Telesford in his “preventive” approach to neighborhood patrols. You get the feeling that if he or Telesford had Gilbert’s resources, they too would construct a localized panopticon to record and dispatch up-to-the-minute information if and when a crime occurs.

Movements against police brutality rely on the idea that police agencies are public entities that can be held accountable, but what happens when policing is a private service like cable television or flood insurance? How will the movement against police brutality adapt? Out of the ashes of deindustrialization and bankruptcy rises a private panopticon for and by elites. While one neighborhood organizes around historical light fixtures, another dances around abuse and even murder from criminals in and out of police uniforms.

Detroit has lived many lives. Today it recalls Fritz Lang’s 1927 classic *Metropolis*: the middle and upper classes live protected, sheltered in their

enclaves. The poor and struggling live underneath. It was their sweat and tears that built the shining city, which now serves only those who can afford it.

By openly sanctioning the idea that some people deserve police protection and others don't, Detroit is returning to its not too distant past. Many of the landmarks and buildings that developers see as centerpieces of their revitalization efforts were originally built during Detroit's Gilded Age: the Guardian building, the Institute of Art, Orchestra Hall, the Fox Theatre, and so on. Fittingly, private policing first emerged as an established practice in this era, when wealthy industrialists hired private security to protect their interests. As David A. Sklansky explained in an article on private police forces for the *UCLA Law Review*, the 19th century saw two kinds of private policing emerge: "The first of these was the 'company police': forces of guards and detectives hired and supervised by railroads and industrialists to protect their own property and empowered as police officers by the state. The second, of broader and more lasting importance, was the national private police agency, epitomized in the late 19th century by the Pinkerton agency."

The Pinkerton Agency was hired by robber barons of that era to bust unions and protect strikebreakers. Pinkerton's influence became so great that a federal law was passed to prevent employees from being contracted by the government. Pinkerton is now operated by Securitas, which Gilbert contracts with in Detroit.

The return to the past is opening an ideological fracture in the present: Will residents who see police as a public good rethink their views when the link between wealth and policing is made so nakedly plain?



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