

Change or die: could adland be the new Detroit?

The city's decline shows what can happen when industry fails to respond to change, Amelia Torode and Tracey Follows warn

There's a heartbreakingly beautiful set of photographs of downtown Detroit taken by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre. Most people don't think of Detroit as beautiful but, looking at its art deco ballrooms, city hall, grand station and museums, this was an extraordinary city.

It's a shell today. Once the frontier city powering the American dream, buildings now lie rotting. Freeways are quiet, offices are abandoned.

Detroit was a city set up to service one specific industry – automotive. One industry with one work approach – linear production lines, bigger and bigger car plants, cheaper and cheaper cars. As the world changed with the globalisation of markets, the transformative power of digital technologies and a shift in consumer demand, the automotive industry and the city of Detroit did not. At a fundamental level, nothing changed. Detroit failed to adapt, failed to evolve.

We have started to ask ourselves: is adland the new Detroit? Beautiful, massive and doomed. If the event at the IPA 44 Club last month is anything to go by, it could well be. Billed as a debate on the future of agencies and following Danielle Sacks' scarily provocative *Fast Company* article "Mayhem on Madison Avenue", expectations were high as to how UK agencies were facing up to seismic shifts in the communications landscape.

Instead of passionate articulations of new approaches and working ambitions, the answer to "what's the future of advertising" seemed to be: make sure the digital team don't sit in the basement.

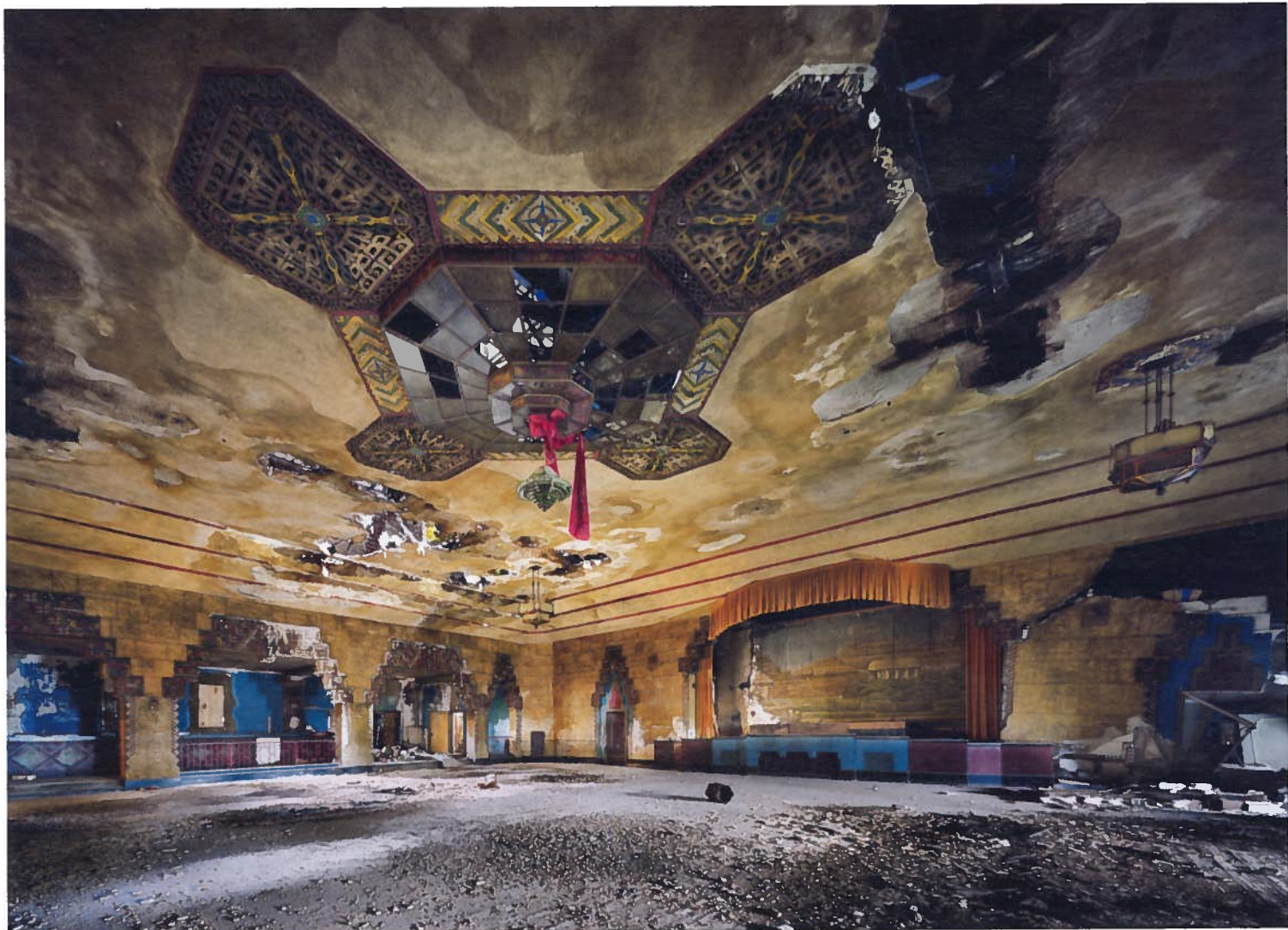
Given everything that's rocking our businesses, that's the panacea? It feels more like rearranging the chairs in downtown Detroit's Vanity Ballroom. Where are the serious and practical conversations about what we need to do in order to survive and thrive in this new world?

We're not here to make predictions – Publicis' Tom Morton once said "there's no point in trying to predict the future, you'll only look like a tit when you're wrong" – but it's a subject we've been thinking about for a while, and we feel it comes down to five things.

1. Structure: smaller, looser units

As channels proliferate and skill-sets deepen and diverge, it's going to be impossible for one agency to "own" all the skills that they will need. Given that, how do we start to build a loose network of partners, developers and producers who can work alongside a core agency hub?

Rather than having "sister agencies", in the same network, it's now a "...and friends" model, based on the observation that you choose your friends and not your family. The work that Guided Collective is doing is fascinating – creative teams get put together on a project



Detroit's Vanity Ballroom... the abandoned art deco building serves as a reminder of the Motor City's boom years

basis drawn from a collective of like-minded individuals, so the creative team on one project could be a fashion guru, a social media community activist, a technologist and a strategist but be completely different on another.

Maybe we should stop using the word "agency"? Look at its etymology – it comes from "active operation". No wonder the word was so readily adopted in the 50s, given the industrialisation of advertising which came out of the industrialisation of mass-material goods.

But we're no longer in the industrialised era; we're in the information era. We need more of a collective approach, which implies a looser set of connections that makes more sense of an era marked by fluidity, mobility and possibility.

2. People: madder people working their own way

Not mad as in "I'm so wacky, I own ironic T-shirts", but mad in the geeky sense of the word – people who opened up their ZX Spectrum when they were kids and rebuilt them from scratch. Obsessives. People who truly and madly love something unusual – think Gilbert & George, who believe: "We are weird and normal at the same time." Only by including weirdness among the convenience of "normal" will breakthrough ideas emerge.

But the mad geniuses that we

know don't want to work for large corporations; many don't even want to work for small agencies.

They're not necessarily great "people people" – they don't want to commute every day or indulge in office chit-chat, they just want to cherry-pick interesting projects. We're not sure that agencies are set up currently to deal with these types but, as an industry, we need to get our mad characters back to avoid sinking into a sea of bland.

3. Data: find stories in numbers

It's time to reimagine our role. We're no longer solving problems but investigating mysteries; no longer taking a brief, rather taking on a case. Like a detective, we start with behaviour, looking for patterns and anomalies. We assume that what we're being told is not entirely the "truth" so search for information that is given from various perspectives and tend to believe our eyes more than our ears.

Imagine the implications for how we approach data. Seen through the lens of "mystery", we're not simply seeing data as a stream of numbers but as a snapshot of behaviour and an insight into human nature. What we do with data is the same thing we do when we sit on a park bench or at a pavement café – people-watching, albeit from desk-

tops. It's human stories hidden within numbers, and it takes away the fear that surrounds "big data".

4. Payment: life after timesheets

We need to find smarter ways for charging than reported hours. A big hat-raise goes out to Paul Graham and Anomaly for finding another way and never having timesheets. It seems on the whole, though, that it is clients pushing change rather than agencies – Coca-Cola and Procter & Gamble especially.

A reliance on an hourly monitored model commoditises our end product and leads to bigger teams taking longer with briefs, but an always-on campaign requires always-on attention which doesn't come cheap, so how do we balance that?

5. Attitude: think 'triple bottom line'

Let's rethink the exchange that is taking place when our products or services are consumed. We need to address the three pillars of people, planet and profit. Instead of pure consumption, there is a moral requirement to contribute something to the world rather than just rob it. It has to be about more than selling more stuff that the world doesn't need. Can business afford to do this? Cliché, but can we afford not

to ensure that sustainability is "baked-in"? Anyone in any doubt about the creative places this attitude can take you should visit Rob Walker's Unconsumption Project.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that we're depressed by the semi-myopia that surrounds us but you'd be wrong. We think there's never been a better time to be in our industry, provided that innovation is put at the heart of business models.

Detroit may hold an answer. The Huffington Post recently wrote: "The city... needs a vision of how it can turn itself into a revitalised 21st century city, attractive to talent and with a critical mass of R&D. Only a fresh rethinking of the strategy... and the willingness to make the investment of time, treasury and effort will see the city through."

And, interestingly, that's what seems to be starting to happen. Detroit has reimagined itself as a city of innovation offering businesses the chance to launch cheaply, creating bright solutions such as Start Up Weekend Detroit and sustainable urban farming initiatives staffed entirely by strong networks of young activists. If a city can do it, so surely can an industry.

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