

# PIN-UP

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## DETROIT, UNESCO CITY OF DESIGN, TEN YEARS LATER



The exterior of the Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum in Detroit. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit.

In Detroit, gallerists, designers, artists, students, curators, developers, even baristas, speak with a unique note of pride about their hometown, the kind that teeters between optimism and sales pitch. After overcoming seemingly impossible economic odds — the 2008 collapse of the auto industry that nearly took the city down with it — Detroit stands as a glimmering example of how a place can get back on track, though not without contradiction.

It's been ten years since Detroit defied expectations by becoming the first, and still the only, U.S. metropolis to receive [UNESCO City of Design](#) status. The designation, conferred by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, honors cities where design not only functions as an essential civic practice, but a catalyst for social progress. Only 40 cities worldwide, including Cape Town, South Africa, Bangkok, Thailand, and Istanbul, Turkey, hold the title, chosen for their design economies, built landscapes, and living networks of schools, studios, and thinkers who treat design as a shared essential language.

In 2015, the year Detroit received its UNESCO title, the city was still reeling from overlapping crises that had left entire neighborhoods hollowed out. Downtown felt like a post-apocalyptic animation: baroque skyscrapers abandoned, windows shattered, industrial-age grandeur fading away. UNESCO status didn't erase these realities overnight, but it did galvanize investment, international attention, and the belief that Detroit's creative inheritance could also be its antidote. The prestigious title recognized not only the city's legacy as the birthplace of the automobile and midcentury Modernism, reflected in its remarkable early 20th architecture, but also the enduring vitality of its creative community.

By then, the “artists-as-pioneers” gentrification narrative had already hardened into cliché, a familiar, sometimes cynical strategy developers employed to convert imagination into equity. But in Detroit, the

exceptionally low cost of space made real experimentation possible, from the shared studios of [Ponyride](#) and the affordable live-work lofts of [Artspace](#) to the tuition-free animation training at [Gunner School](#), and the innovative residential projects and restaurants developed by [Prince Concepts](#) (including [The Caterpillar](#), an eight-unit arched metal bunker, and popular new destinations like [KATOI](#) and [BARDA](#)). [LANTERN](#), [OMA](#)'s adaptive-reuse complex, extends that spirit, housing the [Progressive Art Studio Collective](#) for artists with developmental disabilities and [Signal Return](#), a nonprofit letterpress and printmaking workshop. A handful of young design galleries have also emerged, fostering local, often [Cranbrook](#)-educated talent, including [I.M. Weiss Gallery](#) and [Matéria](#). The artists represented by these galleries have stayed in Detroit, sustained by the affordability of space that let them commit entirely to their practice, something that's become nearly impossible in other cities in the U.S.

Today, downtown Detroit feels like a movie-set version of itself: façades restored, lobbies lively with activity. Developers, rushing in for better or worse, have revived much of the historic core of the city, bringing New York City prices with them. I stayed at the [Siren Hotel](#), a lavish restoration of the 1926 [Wurlitzer Building](#) developed by [ASH NYC](#) in collaboration with [Quinn Evans Architects](#). Together, the duo restored the building beyond its original splendor. In the campy, opulent, all-pink [Candy Bar](#) downstairs, an Old Fashioned costs 18 dollars. The drink perfectly captures the paradox of Detroit's resurrection: a luxury revival priced beyond the reach of many of the locals who never gave up on their hometown.

Invited by [Design Core Detroit](#), a nonprofit dedicated to fostering a vibrant design economy, I spent three days in Motown taking in the city's ongoing creative resurgence. Dozens of sites made an impression, but these few distilled what felt essential about the city's design spirit: a sense of reinvention rooted in the past yet tuned to the future.

## **MBAD AFRICAN BEAD MUSEUM**



Portrait of Olayami Dabls at the Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum. Photo by Patrick Barber. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit.

From the street, the [Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum](#) looks less built than encrusted, its walls flashing back the city's light in shards of mirror and clay. For years I'd only seen the place in passing, framed by a car window. On this bright morning, I finally stop. Waiting out front are two Associate Curators from the [Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit](#). [Abel González](#) and [Isabella Nimmo](#) are flushed with excitement. They speak reverently about [Olayami Dabls](#)'s forthcoming [retrospective](#). After years of renovation, the Detroit icon's institutional debut, will reopen the museum this spring marking its 20th anniversary. An elegant Black man joins us. They continue, their admiration so complete that they forget to introduce the newcomer. For a moment I wonder who he is.

The mystery resolves when he turns toward me and says, “Lean in.” His voice is low and deliberate. I do as he says. Dabls begins walking, and we follow him through the sculpture park: mirrored totems, rusted metal, clay figures, and decommissioned cars transformed into art. We stop at an out-of-commission 1980s Craftsman tractor surrounded by a loose circle of old metal chairs. The seats are occupied by slabs of concrete embossed with the outlines of heads, each with hair in dreadlocks. “This one’s called [Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust](#),” Dabls says, explaining that in African cosmology, iron and rock are spiritual opposites: one changes, the other endures. “It’s a lesson,” he says. “Even the strongest things can learn from time.”



Olayami Dabls, *Normal Nudity*; watercolors. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit.

After touring us through each piece, we arrive at the second building that bookends the property. One of Detroit’s old two-story wooden homes, the structure’s siding has been swallowed by layers of paint, glass, bottle caps, and broken tile. On one side, a two-story fish ripples in mosaicked scales; on the other, a striped peacock stands elegantly, feathers at half-mast. Dabls calls the decommissioned home a “decorative vessel.” Each vessel, he explains, is composed of four elements: iron, rock, wood, and mirror, and can be asked to do three things. “I asked that vessel to keep the vandals away, to keep the graffiti off, and to keep the city from seeing it.” The request is practical, although its logic is spiritual: decoration as protection.

At that point, Dabls drops a curveball, pulling us out of the magic of his creations: billionaire developer [Dan Gilbert](#) offered to restore this vessel and “transform it into an Airbnb,” he says. An outsider artist who built his own world on the city’s margins is now courted by the very systems he once stood apart from. Dabls embraces both museum and developer as collaborators in the circulation of his ideas; the latter partnership embodies the paradoxes that build today’s Detroit.



L: Olayami Dabls, *Grand River* mural. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit; R: Olayami Dabls, *African Language Wall*, exterior of the Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit.

Before leaving, we step inside the museum to buy beads, a small token of this encounter to carry home. From thousands of options, I choose a bundle of Howlite skull beads, brightly hued in red, yellow, green, and violet. Dabls himself rings me up, threading the skulls onto a length of yellow cord. The exchange feels like an extension of everything we learned outside: his belief that for him art, labor, and even commerce can be equal forms of communication.



Portrait of Olayami Dabls at the Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum. Photo by Patrick Barber. Courtesy of Kresge Arts in Detroit.