

Detroit's Homemade Makeover

With Culture Lab Detroit, Jane Schulak has sparked a dialogue between visiting luminaries and local talents in search of creative ways to revitalize the urban environment

By

Sarah Medford

Oct. 7, 2015 10:34 a.m. ET

ON A SLUSHY SPRING morning, Jane Schulak drove through the streets of Detroit in her black Ford SUV, the renowned French botanist **Patrick Blanc** in the passenger seat. Schulak, 55 and the founder of a design-advocacy group called Culture Lab Detroit, was giving her visitor an inside look at the city, from the ruins of the 3.5 million-square-foot Packard plant to Belle Isle Park (home to an abandoned satellite of the Detroit Zoo) and the Dequindre Cut (a reclaimed railroad track near the downtown waterfront that's been converted into a greenway). "Patrick went crazy for the Cut," Schulak says. "He was studying the street murals and stuffing native plants into his pockets."

Though not what most people might take away from a first visit to Motor City, the botanical keepsakes were emblematic of the intimate connection Schulak brokers between Detroit and her constant stream of guests, an international talent pool that's included [chef and food activist Alice Waters](#), artist Theaster Gates, [architect David Adjaye](#) and designers Humberto and Fernando Campana. Schulak has lured them all to participate in her homegrown nonprofit, which has established itself as a crucible for positive change in a city that's waited too long for a taste of it.

Culture Lab Detroit, now in its third year, is a free public platform for discussion between local designers, entrepreneurs and city officials and Schulak's handpicked recruits, all in service of finding ways that visual culture can kick-start collaboration and regeneration across the urban landscape. Organized around an annual conference, Culture Lab Detroit has grown to include public art projects, tours, dinners, exhibitions and, new this year, a pop-up shop for specially commissioned made-in-Detroit objects, launching October 29 in collaboration with Nora, a local design shop in the Midtown district. Along with a handful of other local arts groups, the start-up is learning from what artist-activists have been doing in the city for decades—and, by taking it a few steps further, spurring innovative solutions to problems often labeled intractable.

In September, Blanc was invited back to Detroit to join Waters, [Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto](#), urban-farming pioneer Will Allen and landscape designer Walter Hood at Culture

Lab's third public symposium, titled "Green Space"—a topic of vital interest in a city whose population has tumbled nearly 60 percent since the mid-1950s (the 2014 census counted 680,250 residents). With the clearing of abandoned commercial lots and burned-out houses, parts of Detroit resemble backcountry Michigan more than they do an urban center in distress. But a lack of viable public transportation has turned green spaces into no man's lands; swaths of the 139-square-mile city have been cut off from basic services. Panelists debated how the patchwork landscape might be repurposed, in part by building on community efforts already underway in Brightmoor and other formerly blighted neighborhoods, where cooperative gardens have sprung up to help feed local families.

"There is so much to be learned about how to design a city so that nature is predominant and accessible," Waters says. "Parks can become edible landscapes. A lot of this comes from city planning with a big mission. It puts everything else into perspective, and I think that's what Detroit is attempting to do." Waters knows Detroit well—her sister lived here for many years—and when Schulak contacted her she was eager to return. "I love projects that bring people together from different disciplines—people who have been thinking about the same thing in unconventional ways," she says. "Things are very bad, but that isn't a bad place to start real change. I'm most creative when I don't have anything around to cook with. That's when I become ingenious. And thrifty."

During last month's event, Schulak spent time with Waters and other participants in Brightmoor, introducing them to local organizers, part of the investment she makes to ensure that outsiders learn from Detroit as much as they're teaching. When the ideas go both ways, she's found, connections lead to tangible results. Chicago artist Theaster Gates, whose projects in gutted urban areas cross over into community activism, is hatching a Detroit initiative after his appearance at Culture Lab's 2014 symposium. And Brazilian designers Humberto and Fernando Campana, who shared the stage with Gates last year, have been commissioned by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy to design a solar-powered light sculpture for the waterfront park and Dequindre Cut, set to debut in 2016.

"The streetlight idea was first to help people feel safe and secure," says Humberto Campana, whose São Paulo studio views design as social practice. "Then it became our way to help people connect. Each lamp is attached to a circular bench, to encourage people to be in the city, to use the city. The communities have already joined themselves to reconstruct Detroit, without the government coming in. We are learning from this. It could happen in São Paulo, too."

"The Campana brothers didn't want to make the trip here at first, but they came," says Schulak, who spends months researching potential participants before making invitations. "And after their first day, Humberto said to me, 'I don't want to be anywhere but here.' They are full of ideas for Detroit."

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—Alice Waters

Schulak is an unlikely activist. A Detroit native and a committed arts patron, she has a background as a design curator, including a longtime association with the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where she puts together shows from the museum's historic collection. In

Detroit she saw an opportunity to approach the city as another piece of history in need of rethinking. Her first ideas were “very TED-like,” she says—“that’s what I knew.” But local contacts challenged her to go deeper, and Schulak spent a year getting to know the city, its grass-roots organizers and creative pioneers. After developing her ideas with the Kresge Foundation and other potential supporters, in 2013, in partnership with Detroit’s College for Creative Studies and the Detroit Creative Corridor Center, she launched Culture Lab. A national grant from the Knight Foundation has given her latitude to expand.

Community engagement tops her list of priorities, thanks in large part to Gates, she says. “Theaster showed me how he accomplishes what he does—having a program feel like it belongs in the place, and to the people who are living there, within the neighborhoods,” she says. “That’s essential for Detroit.”

Playing matchmaker between Detroit and the rest of the world is a heady concept (designers Paola Navone, David Stark, Kelly Behun, Sebastian Errazuriz and the Campana brothers have all been asked to collaborate with local makers on products for the pop-up venture), but Schulak sees it more as channeling an unstoppable flow of local talent. Not that she’s thinking small: Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford has already R.S.V.P.’d for the 2016 symposium, and Schulak is working on new public-private partnerships. “There is a remarkable legacy of making in this town,” she says. “It used to happen in a grand building or on a production line, and now it’s happening in the corner of an old warehouse. But the quality is the same. Detroit has always been a town of quality.”