

# ART IN DETROIT

## In End, and a New Beginning, for Detroit's Iconic Heidelberg Project

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By Mark Stryker

Tyree Guyton says he's ready to shake things up. And if there's one thing Detroiters have learned about the 60-year-old artist, it's that when Guyton decides to shake things up, it's best to put on a seat belt.

After 30 years, the iconic Heidelberg Project — Guyton's internationally acclaimed outdoor wonderland of wit and whimsy, painted abandoned homes and repurposed urban debris on Detroit's east side — is being dismantled.

No, it's not going to happen right away. No, hostile city officials are not dispatching bulldozers to knock it down as they did in 1991 and 1999. No, Guyton is not abandoning his life's work or waving a white flag in the face of 12 arson-fueled fires that have destroyed six houses since 2013. During the next few years, the Heidelberg

Project, which draws an estimated 200,000 visitors a year from all over the globe, will morph into something the organization is calling Heidelberg 3.0 — an "arts-infused community" rather than an installation driven by one man.

What exactly that will look like remains an open question. But make no mistake: The Heidelberg Project as the world has known it for decades is coming to an end. "After 30 years, I've decided to take it apart piece-by-piece in a very methodical way, creating new realities as it comes apart," Guyton said Friday afternoon. "I gotta go in a new direction. I gotta do something I have not done before."

A confluence of factors have pushed Guyton to change course: an increasing awareness of his own mortality as he reached 60, the toll that the fires have taken on his psyche, the increasing number of project commissions that are pouring in from across the country and across the globe and the Sisyphean burden of keeping the Heidelberg Project going for literally half his life. Guyton, who likes to speak in arcs of allegory and metaphor, put it this way:

"I'm on an elevator, and I've taken it from the ground floor up to the very top 30 years later. Now I'm reversing that process, and I'm going to take this elevator down. I'm gonna stop on every floor to look around and see the beauty of taking it apart, and do it in a methodical way, where it becomes a new form of art."

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By next summer, visitors to the two-block stretch of Heidelberg Street — where Guyton started his project in 1986 as a response to the rampant blight in the neighborhood of his youth — will notice familiar sights slowly disappearing. In two years, all of the magically transformed found objects that crowd the empty lots between houses are expected to be gone: broken dolls, shopping carts, TVs, shoes, telephones, a Noah's ark of stuffed animals piled high as an elephant's eye, the debris splashed with optimism and painted polka dots and dozens of Guyton's paintings of clocks and primitive portraits.

Guyton's plan to disassemble the Heidelberg Project marks a dramatic turning point in the history of a seminal public art adventure that for many has come to represent the soul of contemporary Detroit. It also poses challenges for an organization whose entire identity has always been inseparable from Guyton's charismatic personality and the ever-changing landscape of Heidelberg Street: What happens to public perception and the crowds once the art starts to go away?