

Ford Picquette Avenue Plant a building
that changed the world

DETROIT:

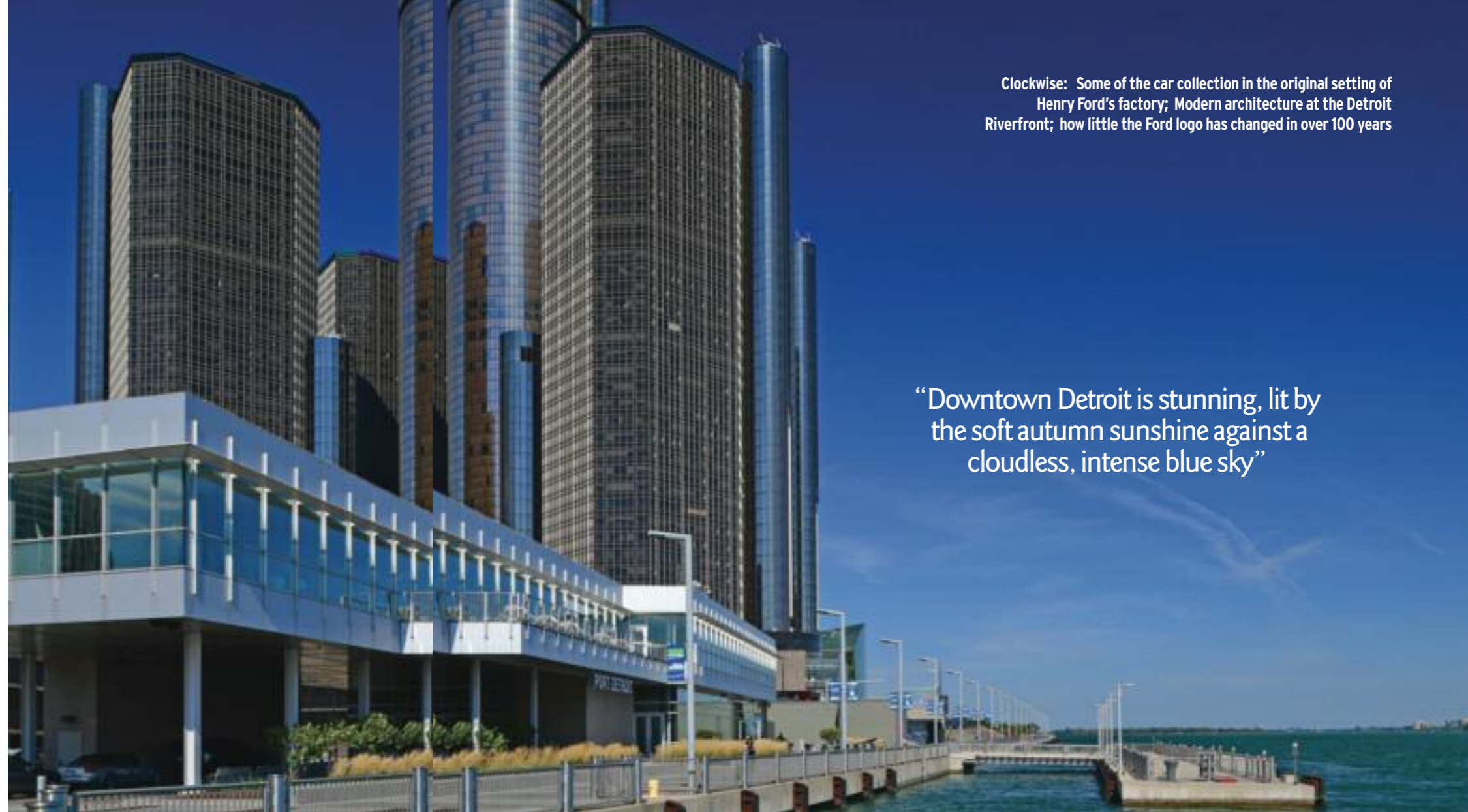
DANCING IN THE STREETS AGAIN

The first big US city to go bankrupt, once-depressed Detroit is now motoring sweetly again. **Norman Wright** tours the birthplace of the modern motor industry – and Motown music

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLIVE NICHOLLS

FORD PIQUETTE PLANT

Piquette Seaubien



Clockwise: Some of the car collection in the original setting of Henry Ford's factory; Modern architecture at the Detroit Riverfront; how little the Ford logo has changed in over 100 years

“Downtown Detroit is stunning, lit by the soft autumn sunshine against a cloudless, intense blue sky”

PLANK FLOORS, peeling paint ceilings and an ancient lift big enough to take a car – this building is preserved just the way it was when it changed the world and brought liberation to succeeding generations of ordinary men and women.

The fabric of the Ford Piquette Avenue Plant may have been modest, especially by today's standards, but the creativity, engineering genius and vision it spawned exploded spectacularly into a social revolution and economic goldmine that is still a major part of our lives more than 100 years later.

Among the old timbers, walking the solid planking, you can feel the presence of history and greatness in the place where the Model T, the world's first mass-produced affordable motor car, was

conceived, designed and manufactured. Henry Ford's first factory isn't the only modest but authentic building in Detroit, Michigan, that bears the mark of history and stirs the hairs on the back of your neck.

The second special moment came as I stood in the converted garage recording studio, as a guide with a voice that could have graced the Supremes led our tour group in a chorus of My Guy, one of the most famous of the hundreds of hit records produced at Hitsville USA, home of Motown Records.

The Temptations performed and recorded My Guy in that cramped studio, still completely unaltered, guided by the engineer and producer in the control room that was formerly the kitchen of the timber house at 2648 West Grand Boulevard. Detroit was

dubbed Motor City after the early 20th century as car makers like Ford, Walter Chrysler, the Dodge brothers and Ransom Olds made it the centre of the US (and world) car industry. Some 125 car makers were at one time based in and around Detroit.

Berry Gordy turned it into Motown when he created the record label in 1959. As much a business genius as songwriter and musical innovator, Gordy really put Detroit on the world stage.

Music and cars made Sixties Detroit a centre of glamour and prosperity but it was short-lived. Gordy moved his operation to Los Angeles in 1972 for business reasons. The car industry faced huge challenges in the last quarter of the century from Japanese and European competition, environmental pressures and oil prices.

The industry contracted and modernised,

costing jobs, and the effect on the local economy was huge. Unemployment led to poverty, crime and personal debt that couldn't be honoured. The financial bubble all over the world burst in 2008 and Detroit suffered as much as anywhere, more than most. The population had reduced by something like 60 per cent from a peak in 1980. The government had to rescue Chrysler and by 2013 it had become the first major city in the USA to go bankrupt.

Although it came out of bankruptcy in 2014, I wondered just what to expect. Well, it was a city bouncing back.

With the car industry more stable but susceptible to global economy and environmental trends, Detroit is diversifying, attracting investment in newer industries.

Earlier the world was shown images of

abandoned factories and housing estates like one of those western films with tumbleweeds blowing through an old frontier town. Now, there's a programme of renewal. One 10,000-home empty estate is being bulldozed for redevelopment.

Some areas still look shabby but others are prospering.

Downtown Detroit is stunning, lit by the soft autumn sunshine against a cloudless, intense blue sky. The mixture of art deco skyscrapers, the sort that King Kong would love to climb, and modern versions in glass and curves makes it look up to the minute without hiding the history.

The Guardian Building and Penobscot Building, dating from 1928, contrast with the Ally Detroit Centre (1993) and the group of Seventies and Eighties

structures in the Renaissance Centre on the riverfront. You can take a walking tour of the downtown architecture. The tourist information centre at 800 Woodward Avenue has self-guided leaflets or you can take a guided tour. Check with them for times. Take a stroll along the newly developed riverfront walk and you get a different perspective of the skyline as you walk in the shadow of the mighty Renaissance towers.

The Detroit River forms part of the US/Canadian border. Look across the water and you see the skyline of Windsor, Ontario, directly opposite.

Detroit is the city of the automobile and there are plenty on the freeways and major roads that whizz you around the area. In downtown there's cheap on-street parking but beware: traffic wardens are the same



Left to right: The magnificent Diego Rivera frescos that continue around the other walls of this gallery; Beautiful presentation at the Institute of Arts; Van Gogh's Portrait of a Postman at the Institute of Arts; Famous painting of George Washington at the Institute of Arts

all over the world. We were busy eating lunch in a downtown restaurant, praising the city that allowed you to park around the corner for two hours for just \$2, only to find we had been given a ticket as we had made a mistake on entering our registration number. We had to cough up

\$45 on a technicality, even though we had paid our parking fee.

Public transport is also improving. A new streetcar tram system is now ready for trials to open next spring. Ideal for tourists as well as city-centre businesses, it will run on a 3.3 mile loop along Woodward Avenue connecting downtown with many of the city's museums and galleries including the Ford Picquette Factory. Circling the downtown area is the People Mover monorail network with trains every four minutes.

For sports fans three major arenas are close by – Red Wings ice hockey, Detroit Tigers baseball and Detroit Lions

American Football. The city also has a major basketball team with a stadium in the suburbs at Auburn Hills.

Heading out of the centre on Woodward Avenue, we visited the Detroit Institute of Arts, perhaps the pick of the cultural attractions of Detroit. It is simply wonderful. There are more than 100 galleries in 658,000 square feet of space with a collection spanning pre-history to the 21st century.

European paintings and sculpture include Van Gogh's self-portrait. There are evocative American works highlighting its breadth of landscape.

The most impressive, however, is the

giant hall covered by a series of frescos by Mexican artist Diego Rivera – the Detroit Industry Cycle. Clive's picture will show the scale and impact of the work.

Ford's foresight

When Henry Ford started making cars at his Picquette Avenue plant just after the turn of the 20th century he was, as it turned out, lighting the touch paper of the heavy industrial explosion in and around Detroit that provided the material for Rivera's incredible work.

Ford's factory was one of many small-scale manufacturers in the area

making vehicles based on coach-building techniques from the horse-drawn era still dominating local transport. This made cars costly to build, heavy and appealed only to the very well-off.

From the moment in 1907 that Ford told his chief engineer to make sure there was a good lock on their experimental room door, the world was destined to change dramatically. For the idea in Ford's head was for a car that would be cheap to build and run, easy to maintain, something that ordinary families could own. It was the Model T.

The prototype was developed and built

in that room – which the museum is busy recreating for the 2017 season. The first 12,000 Model Ts were built in the Picquette premises, each new one taken down in the lift and road-tested in the streets around Picquette Avenue.

Ford then developed his idea of a production line to speed up manufacturer and make the process even cheaper. He moved production after only 15 months to a new factory in Highland Park.

The building was sold to Studebaker which continued car production there until 1933. When it was under threat of demolition, a preservation group was

“The Temptations performed and recorded *My Guy* in that cramped studio, still completely unaltered, guided by the engineer and producer in the control room that was formerly the kitchen of the timber house”



Left to right: Hitsville USA the modest building that is now the Motown Museum; Presidential limousines at The Henry Ford; America's golden age of the automobile at The Henry Ford

formed to save the building and create the museum. There's a collection of earlier Ford models as well as Model Ts and other local manufacturers' vehicles from the time, but the best part of a visit is just being able to see the place that caused such global economic and social change.

Henry Ford's vision continued in the Dearborn suburb and the wealth he created went to fund a worldwide operation and

philanthropic projects including The Henry Ford, a museum of Innovation and Americana that takes your breath away. More than 80 years ago, The Henry Ford was formally dedicated by its founder and his friend and mentor, Thomas Edison. The institution opened in 1929 as a school and was driven by Ford's belief that the genius of the American people was not being taught in textbooks.

Today, The Henry Ford is an internationally recognised history destination that brings the past forward by immersing visitors in the stories of ingenuity, resourcefulness and innovation that helped shape America.

The Henry Ford Archive of American Innovation holds some of the most significant objects and documents that further represent that can-do spirit, including Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Laboratory, the Wright Brothers' Home & Bicycle Shop, one of Steve Jobs's and Steve Wozniak's 1976 Apple-1 computers and Henry Ford's Quadricycle.

A collection of attractions at The Henry Ford captivates and inspires more than 1.6 million visitors annually.

In the seven-acre museum you can browse through the world's premier automotive collection and walk past an array of presidential limousines,

including the one in which John F Kennedy was assassinated. You can also see an unparalleled collection of artifacts representing powerful change, such as the bus on which Rosa Parks took a stand for civil rights, the camp bed George Washington used during his tour of Revolutionary War sites and the chair in which Abraham Lincoln was sitting the night he was shot.

You can visit Greenfield Village containing 83 authentic, historic structures, four living history farms, and historic rides such as Model Ts.

You can also take the Ford Rouge Factory Tour, a partnership between The

Henry Ford and Ford Motor Company, the birthplace of the Model A, the V-8, Mustang and the Thunderbird.

This must qualify as one of the most exciting museums in the world and could easily fill a couple of days. It has a great American-style restaurant, too, but avoid its signature sandwich, the Mac and Cheese bacon. We didn't think about the ingredients and were presented a with toasted sandwich containing macaroni cheese, more cheese and bacon – the sort that Elvis would have loved.

Hitsville USA

Ford's development of the assembly line

was in a roundabout way partly responsible for the music revolution that made Detroit Motown.

Motown creator Berry Gordy tried several careers including as a worker at the Lincoln-Mercury line. While there he came up with the idea of a production line for music where he said a kid could walk in one door, go through a process and walk out another door a star.

With an \$800 loan from his family fund, he launched what was to become Motown Records. He lived above the offices in the building he dubbed Hitsville USA and created a recording studio in the garage on the ground floor, producing the first



Main: Ford sponsored arctic mission aircraft at The Henry Ford
Inset: 1950s classroom at The Henry Ford

release in 1959. Berry could recognise and encourage talent but they all had to go through the 'assembly line' that included music theory, and lessons in deportment, acting and speaking with elegance, and appearance. The result was to promote international stars, mostly local, like Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Smokey Robinson, The Temptations and many more.

However, it also created a template for black capitalism, pride and self-expression as well as a model that reached across race barriers.

The story is brilliantly told at the Motown Museum in that original building. You will get a spot of singing some priceless memorabilia, a trip down your own memory lane and a spine-tingling chance to stand on the same spot as all those stars from our past. With only a couple of days in Detroit, we weren't able to sample many of the other attractions of this vibrant city. Forget the debt-town publicity: this is Motown with its engine tuned and running sweetly.

Passport to Detroit

Getting there

■ There's a wide choice of direct flights from the UK. We flew Virgin Atlantic from Heathrow. Flight time was less than eight hours out and less than seven coming back.

Where to stay

■ We stayed at the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel, Dearborn, not too far from the airport and handy for The Henry Ford museum and a 20-minute drive to downtown. Tel: 1 313 336 3340, website: (www.doubletree3.hilton.com).

Where to eat

■ Lunch was a superb made-on-the-premises burger at HopCat, 4265 Woodward Avenue. Website: (www.hopcat.com/Detroit)
■ In the evenings try the Northern Lights Lounge on a Tuesday when Dennis Coffey, one of the original members of the Motown house band the Funk

Brothers, usually performs. Website: (www.northernlightslounge.com).

Getting around

■ A car is essential but easy going with a sat-nav. We used Dollar Car Rental. Website: (www.dollar.co.uk), tel: 020 3468 7685 (Reservations)

■ The lead in price for the ECAR-Economy at Wayne County Airport, Michigan, is from £157.42 per week, fully Inclusive. Prices quoted are current and subject to change.

Find out more

■ Visitor information from the website: (www.michigan.org)
■ The Henry Ford website: (www.thehenryford.org)
■ Motown Museum website: (www.motownmuseum.org)
■ Detroit Institute of Arts website: (www.dia.org)
■ Ford Picquette Avenue Plant Museum website: (www.fordpicquetteavenueplant.org).