

# In Youngstown, Ohio, Deindustrialization Erodes the Old City, but Palimpsests of Place Yield Insights for Workers, Artists, and Activists, Including Me

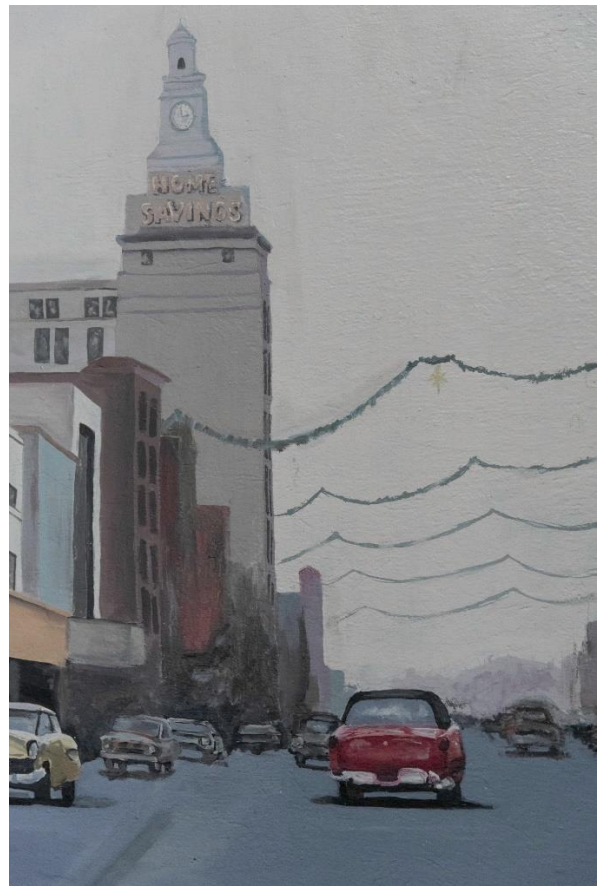
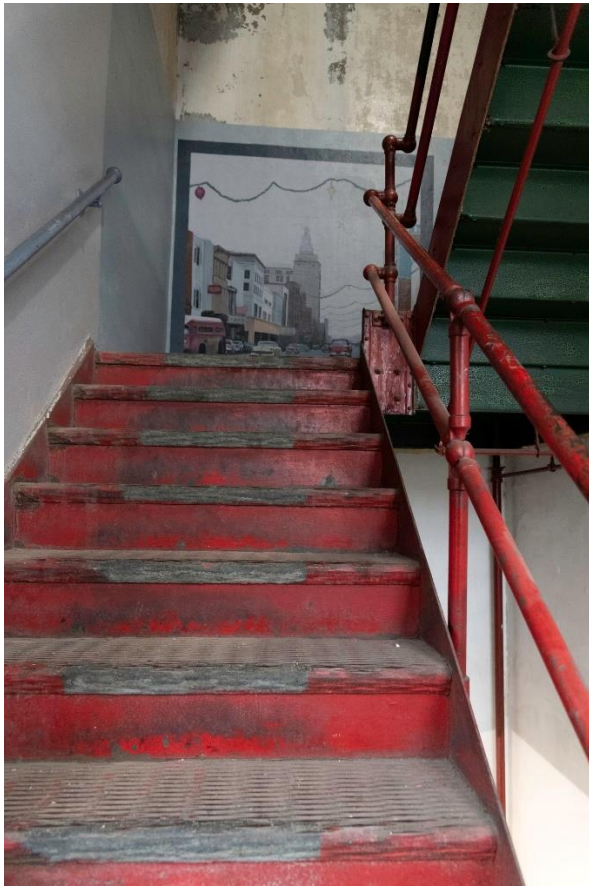
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## Abstract

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Jasper Bernes says that artists, workers, and countercultural activists began to demand changes in the conditions of life and work in the 1970s, sometimes through participatory movements. He concurs with Andrew Ross who writes in *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* that these participatory movements didn't do as much to improve working conditions as workers and artists might have hoped. As a consequence, today there is a "generalization of the 'mentality' of artists' work across the entire economy, not just among creatives." This becomes easier to see as more workers enter the gig economy and are forced to be as flexible, adaptable and without job security as artists have long been. In this creative essay, I use a visit to Albert Street in Youngstown, Ohio, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my time as editor of an alternative magazine, as an occasion to compare the 1970s, a time when Youngstown was a steel center with thousands of good jobs and I was involved in a countercultural project there, to the 2020s when Youngstown is a deindustrializing city and I work as a freelancer. The essay includes photos which record palimpsests of place, showing how much of the past still can be viewed in the present and the insight these contrasts provide.

## Keywords

Deindustrialization, palimpsest of place, Youngstown, participatory art, worker participation



Photos by Diane Beatty, used by permission; the mural pictured is by Youngstown artist Hector Gonzalez

Look at the image of a shabby red stairway (above, left) with treads that have been eroded by years of steady foot traffic. Notice that there's a city street scene painted at the top of the stairs; to the right you can see a detail of that street scene. Strictly speaking, that painting is a mural since it was applied directly onto a wall, and if I could have gone to the Ward Bakery Building when I was in Youngstown in the summer of 2024, I would have gone to see that mural at the top of the stairs. Sadly, by the time I arrived, the building had been [bought by U-Haul Storage of Youngstown](#). It was no longer open to the public, and the artists who had studios there had already been evicted. Of course, I can still see the photos Diane Beatty took on the day the artists were forced to leave their studios (June 10, 2024), which is how I learned about the mural in the first place. Beatty posted the images on Facebook in an album she called "[End of an Era, Ward Bakery](#)." The album includes pictures of a forlorn chair with a ripped seat; various hallways, stairways, doorways, signs and mailboxes; and some artwork, including what had been painted on the walls, though no images of the artists themselves.

Beatty is an outstanding photographer who excels at creating sometimes wistful and sometimes stark portrayals of things that have outlived their usefulness and of buildings that have deteriorated over time or are being demolished. She is **not** a purveyor of images that fixate on extreme devastation, what some people call "ruin porn." She does, however, like to show the details of objects and structures that have seen better days, both in Youngstown's deindustrializing environment and elsewhere. In the case of the Ward Bakery Building, the structure isn't by any

stretch of the imagination in ruins but is simply worn and tarnished. [U-Haul has promised to preserve and restore it](#), though the hundreds of storage units they plan to install will leave no room for artists' studios.

The wear and tear that can be seen on the stairway in Beatty's photo make it obvious that the building is aging – it's been more than a hundred years since bakery workers first started making bread there. The pipelike handrails are scratched and worn, and they direct the eye to the top of the stairs and the small cityscape mural. Signed "Hector 2017," the mural shows Federal Street in downtown Youngstown decorated for the holidays at a time [when the landmark tower was still the Home Savings building](#).<sup>1</sup> Judging from the looks of those sedans, it's supposed to be sometime in the 1950s, when Youngstown was thriving for the most part. But by the time that cityscape mural was painted in 2017, Youngstown was part of the Rust Belt, and the artists who worked in studios and held markets at the Ward Bakery Building were manifesting what some call [Rust Belt chic](#).



Photo by Diane Beatty, used by permission

The above photo was also taken by Beatty on the day the artists were evicted. Old paint shows through a scrawled attempt to communicate the urgency of the situation, and the message "EVERYTHING IS FOR SALE" draws attention to the tile-sized artworks lined up as last-ditch offerings along a ledge on the blotchy wall. This image appeals to my own sense that, though Youngstown is full of creative people who never stop trying to solve the problems arrayed against them, the Mahoning Valley can never quite recover from the unnatural disaster that is

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<sup>1</sup> Hector is Youngstown artist Hector Gonzalez whose recent work was on exhibit at the Havana House in Niles, Ohio, in April 2024. See <https://www.facebook.com/events/304341656017418>

deindustrialization. And when artists at the Ward Bakery Building are evicted from a single valued workspace, their experience is yet another evocation of what has been lost since the steel mills closed down.

In her book *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization*, Sherry Lee Linkon tells us that deindustrialization doesn't occur all at once. Instead, "the struggle with loss and change" persists in the environment and continues to have harmful effects over time, the way a dangerous radioactive isotope does. (Linkon 2018, 5-6) As the book's subtitle indicates, Linkon uses "working-class writing about economic restructuring" as a kind of Geiger counter with which she measures the changes that are taking place. She says, "...deindustrialization literature provides insight that neither journalism nor social science can offer because it tells stories not merely about but also from the perspective of working-class people." (Linkon 2018, xvii)

One of the stories Linkon cites, which is set in Detroit, shows the strong influence of what remains of the industrial past, even on people who never worked in factories or mills. Michael Zadoorian's "Spelunkers" is about a young urban explorer who is also a freelance photographer, a working artist of the Rust Belt. He visits abandoned buildings and photographs them, then posts his photos on his website. He says he doesn't like the idea that the "past has become cool," though Linkon suggests that his "attachment to the past and his ambivalence about his uses of it reflect the contingency of his own experience as a freelance graphic designer." (Linkon 2018, 100)

At the end of the story, he gives up his urban spelunking but decides to go on one last trip to the Fine Arts Building, which will soon be torn down. From its roof, he looks out over the city and thinks about "the darkened carcasses of the empty buildings [he] had explored -- all that history soon to be gone." He then focuses on new buildings going up, which will have to surmount this history, effacing it and making the place he calls home less recognizable, and he says, "I saw that the old city was going away." (Linkon 2018, 101) Though the reader might be tempted to see the description of new building and growth as optimistic, Zadoorian suggests that the city's future remains uncertain, while the constant erosion of the past is the one sure thing.

In the chapter on deindustrialized landscapes, Linkon explores the terminology geographers use to describe the difference between landscape and place, and then she introduces the ideas of French scholar Michel de Certeau who says place can be a palimpsest<sup>2</sup> in which "fragmentary and inward-turning histories" may be discovered beneath what remains (Linkon 2018, 113), and the place itself can certainly be a building or other built environment. Such an experience is implied in Zadoorian's story. It can also be seen in the photos of the Ward Bakery Building where all those layered meanings reveal fragmentary histories that will be further fractured by the changes that will take

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<sup>2</sup> "...a palimpsest reveals a condition where layers of previous work can be seen, creating rediscovery and reinterpretation. A palimpsest can also serve as an artefact that embodies a history and memory, reminding us that we are constantly building on the past.

"The metaphor allows architects, urban planners, and designers to analyse the layers of history embedded within a site to understand not only what came before but also how to move forward to create a sense of place." Tran, Ke Leng (2011). *Architecture as palimpsest : a strategy of intermediacy*. Toronto Metropolitan University. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14656560.v1>, pages 7-8.

place when the building's interior becomes storage units. But of course, change is relentlessly being wrought in every city in the world, so what is the significance of artists being forced to vacate a building in a city like Youngstown in which tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs as industry disappeared?

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, Jasper Bernes states that “the *work of art* and *work in general* share a common destiny” (Bernes 2017, 1), and he argues that art and literature have not only depicted the changes that have taken place in the world of work in the post-World War II period but may have made a significant contribution to these changes as well. Like Linkon, he also uses examples of creative writing to support his argument, but before he begins to cite any literature, Bernes gives some relevant analysis of the post-1945 period. He starts by reminding us that in the 1950s there was great prosperity in the United States, and a compromise was reached between management and labor to assure that workers would get higher wages without undermining company profits. The introduction of Taylorism or “scientific management” and a continuation of Fordist automation of production were the techniques that were used to make labor more productive. (Bernes 2017, 4) As a result, the owners' profits increased and the workers got a larger share of the wealth – in return for less control over their working conditions.

This compromise began to break down in the 1960s. As speedup and deskilling affected industrial workers and as white-collar jobs such as keypunch operator and production typist began to resemble factory work, alienation increased among both blue- and white-collar workers. The breakdown was hastened by the rise of anti-authoritarianism among students, artists, and workers. In the case of artists and students much of this sentiment grew out of protesting the War in Vietnam, though as Jefferson Cowie says, the anti-authority mood among the working class was more likely to be a result of having served in the war. (Bernes 2017, 8)

As students made demands for more relevant curricula and artists turned against the elitism of the galleries and museums, manufacturing and industrial workers expressed their revolt against “routinized work, against the new forms of technocratic management and control” through increased absenteeism, job turnover, sabotage and waves of strikes. In 1970 in the U.S. alone there were 5,000 stoppages. And such resistance took place in Europe, too, as in France after the events of May-June 1968. In the United States, there was alarm about this dissatisfaction which “seemed to threaten that the revolt among students would spill into the organized working class, as had happened in Europe...” (Bernes 2017, 7)

In a chapter on the feminization of speedup, Bernes reminds us that, beginning in the 1960s, the economy of the United States began to be based more on services and information technology and less on the production of manufactured goods; by the late 1970s this trend had become more obvious as deindustrialization proceeded apace. And there was also a kind of “feminization of labor,” both as more women entered the workforce and as the nature of work changed. (Bernes 2017, 122) (As Donna Haraway puts it, “To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited workday.” (Bernes 2017, 212 note 6)) During this period, many of the women who entered the workforce continued to shoulder the major burden of household tasks. As a result, the possibility of “flexible labor” suited women workers who still had many domestic responsibilities.

Bernes says, “Workers are flexible when they are not defined by a permanent assignment but constantly adapting, taking on different roles, attributes, skills, and qualities depending on the task or *project* at hand.” (Bernes 2017, 130-131) He notes that this sort of flexible, project-oriented work means that workers won’t be alienated by any single task, but it asks them to perform several alienated tasks at once, leading to the familiar concept of multitasking.

This chapter focuses on avant-garde writer Bernadette Mayer’s 1970 project *Memory* for which she photographed and wrote down everything possible about her own life for a month and then turned her archival process into poetry. She recorded domestic tasks that she had to perform as a woman responsible for chores and dishes, as well as the other tasks she needed to accomplish to create her art. *Memory* was published in book form in 1975 and appeared as an installation piece in various galleries [as recently as 2017](#). There the photographs were presented in a large grid on the wall and audio recordings of Mayer reading her daily journal could be heard. Bernes describes the text that makes up *Memory* as “one of the most vivid literary descriptions of multitasking and the frenetic harried subject it entails” and says that in this case multitasking may mean “...engaging with multiple media and multiple mechanical apparatuses: mimeographs, typewriters, cameras, tape recorders, slide projectors, automobiles.” (Bernes 2017, 133)

This description reminds me in retrospect, in ways that surprise me, of a project I worked on in 1974 when I was part of a small collective of people who produced three issues of *Grassroots Magazine* in Youngstown.<sup>3</sup> Bernes makes reference to the work of Boltanski and Chiapello, who say that “...anything can attain the status of a project, including ventures hostile to capitalism,” (Bernes 2017, 131) and such was the case with our magazine. Multitasking was central to our project because we typeset and printed the magazine ourselves after we wrote large portions of it. But in the case of *Grassroots*, we were trying to record what was happening to poor and working people in a variety of situations in the Youngstown area and not only what was going on in our own lives.

When I knew that I would be visiting Youngstown in 2024, the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the magazine, my notion of a commemoration was to arrange to meet with the one *Grassroots* writer I still have contact with, Jim Saulino, and later to make a visit to 1019 Albert Street where the office had been located fifty years before. *Grassroots Magazine*, in that it was an attempt to make up for the shortcomings of mainstream media coverage, was also influenced by that spirit of anti-authoritarianism that characterized the 1970s, by the desire to participate in reporting the news instead of simply consuming it. We hoped to describe and make known events that took place in the lives of those whose struggles were under-reported and under-represented, including women and African-Americans. We rented space on Albert Street and bought two used offset presses because in those days no local printer would print countercultural or so-called underground publications. The magazine, though it accepted no advertising and never sold enough copies at 75 cents apiece to make any money, really was a project that required great flexibility from the members of our collective.

We took courses at the Mahoning County Joint Vocational School where we learned about everything from typesetting to running an offset press. And then, with the assistance of a helpful

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<sup>3</sup> The magazine, though short-lived, can still be found in a variety of archives, including [the Staughton and Alice Lynd Collection at Kent State University](#) (Box 34).

member of a printing collective in Oberlin, Ohio, we honed our skills some more until we were ready to paste up the pages and print the magazine. We called that part of our operation Progressive Printers and joined the IWW so we would have a union affiliation, then did some printing jobs to make money to pay the rent and the paper bills. All this was, of course, after we had written many of the articles that appeared in the magazine. A few local African-American writers joined us to cover events they brought to our attention, and we received some submissions from local photographers, though we also took a lot of pictures, processed film ourselves and had a working darkroom. For reasons I no longer remember, my photo of the trainyard at the Brier Hill Works of Youngstown Sheet & Tube was on the front cover of the first issue (see below).

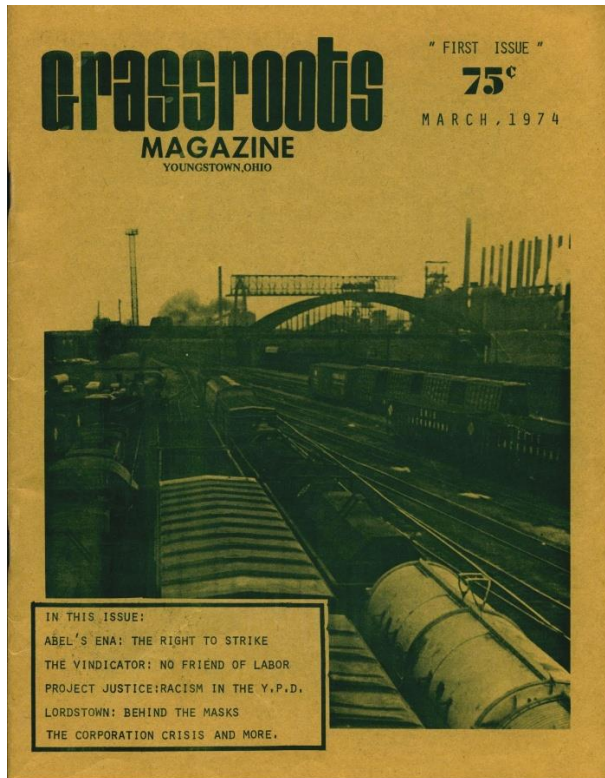


Image courtesy of the author

And so, as well as being citizen journalists, we became production workers of a sort, just a few blocks away from the machines at Aeroquip Rubber that I imagined I could hear thundering like a giant's heart as I walked across the McGuffey Bridge with a fellow *Grassroots* staffer. We never covered any events at Aeroquip, though we sometimes ate lunch at a café just north on Albert Street where Aeroquip workers cashed their paychecks. And now when I pull out my copies of *Grassroots Magazine* and leaf through them, they jog my memory of what life was like then, just as surely as Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* project must have done for her.

In the first issue of the magazine, Jim Saulino's article, "Lordstown GM | Behind the Masks: 10,000 Grievances" explored the reasons for an action that had recently taken place at the nearby Lordstown General Motors plant. In October of 1973, four hooded picketers were arrested for protesting the firing of six union officials, and the story was briefly covered in the local press but then not much more was heard about it. "There seemed to be some kind of mystery about the incident," Jim wrote, "that the media failed to probe into by choice or chance. The media never

asked why the picketers wore hoods or whether they wore hoods at all.” But this story was just the kind of thing *Grassroots* was looking for, both because it wasn’t being covered elsewhere and because of the militancy of the autoworkers’ actions. We were aware that, as Jasper Bernes notes, “[w]hereas earlier analysts would speak of the auto industry as the central example of the so-called compromise between capital and labor, now it was ‘the *locus classicus* of dissatisfying work; the assembly-line, its quintessential embodiment.’” (Bernes 2017, 7)

It’s important to remember that a wildcat strike at Lordstown in March of 1972 had received national media attention, even from the *New York Times*. According to Andrew Ross in *No Collar*, during this strike workers “exhibited attitudes (‘irreverent of all decision makers,’ according to *Time*) previously associated with the middle-class students and other refuseniks who had made their mark on the mores of the 1960s.” He adds that the strikers were protesting against the quality of work, though they were certainly also reacting to the brutal pace of work – at 101.6 cars per hour or one vehicle every 36 seconds, the line at Lordstown was the fastest in the world. But this 1972 strike was also “widely perceived as evidence that the ethos of Woodstock--with its protest against the authoritarian suppression of pleasure and its demand for creative expression in everyday things--was being embraced by working-class people.” (Ross 2003, 5-6)

Bernes says, “In the United States, toward the end of the 1960s, the mainstream press featured article upon article about the new ‘blue-collar blues’ and the ‘new resistance to certain forms of work.’” (Bernes 2017, 7) Yet Youngstown’s only newspaper, [the Youngstown Vindicator, was an exception to this](#), which is why *Grassroots* also included an article called “The *Vindicator*: No Friend of Labor” in its first issue.

But however it was viewed by the media, the 1972 strike at Lordstown was a legal activity, whereas the actions of the hooded picketers in 1973 were even more controversial because they were not sanctioned by law. Would they have seemed so radical if the truth were known? In his article in *Grassroots*, Jim Saulino wrote, “The public never learned what the issues were, nor did it learn the extent of the complaints... The information furnished by the media was unreliable if only because of its brevity.” So Jim interviewed all four of the hooded picketers to give them a chance to speak for themselves, and all of them agreed that it was the newly created managerial division called General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) that had led to greater worker-management conflict. One of the dismissed picketers told Jim that an immediate change had taken place in the attitudes of the foremen, one of whom said, “We’re going to take this plant away from you guys and show you how it should be run.” That’s when the grievances began to pile up.

Whereas in the early days of the plant, sixty cars per hour was considered to be impressive, under GMAD, the speedup to over 100 cars per hour led to absenteeism, which in turn led to disciplinary actions and more grievances. After a while, unsettled grievances neared “an unbelievable ten thousand.” And when union committeemen who were trying to represent the interests of workers were laid off or dismissed, the four hooded picketers acted. As a result, they not only lost their jobs but at their trials they received bigger fines and more jail time than an individual on trial at the same time for assault and battery. According to the men’s attorney, the picketers were tried under an old “Anti-Hood Statute,” which was passed when highwaymen and Ku Klux Klansmen were wearing hoods and terrorizing the populace. “Although the local media have been known to bring up instances of irrelevant old laws (such as the Sunday closing blue laws) when they are used

against businessmen,” Jim wrote, “the media just happened to be looking the other way when an antiquated law was used against labor.”

The 1972 strike at Lordstown and actions like those of the hooded picketers were part of a growing revolt against speed-up and technocratic management, and soon working people began to demand changes in their workplaces. These demands, according to Bernes, “...usually consisted of calls for a greater participation in decision making, for a democratization of the workplace, for more varied and creative work, for greater autonomy, and even for worker’s self-management.” (Bernes 2017, 8) And though there was no single connection that linked changes in workers’ demands with changes in the art world, Bernes says that the concept of participation is the most relevant to his notion that work and the work of art share a common destiny. During this time, the evolution of participatory art was also underway, which included the happenings of Allan Kaprow, the avant-garde performances of the Fluxus group, and other artistic trends in which the spectator becomes a participant. (Bernes 2017, 10-11) And not surprisingly, this was also a time when countercultural activists were calling for more participation as they looked for ways to create institutions that vied with the mainstream – everything from food co-ops to alternative publications – like *Grassroots Magazine*.

Were workers who were looking for ways to escape alienation on the job being influenced by countercultural and aesthetic trends? Bernes says, “Though it would be absurd to suggest that artists and writers precipitated such rebellions – this discontent had been brewing, somewhat quietly, since the 1950s – what is more plausible is my argument that they provided some of its key terms and coordinates.” As a result, workers who were criticizing the alienation they experienced on the job, at least in part used what Bernes calls “aesthetic categories, concepts, and ideologies.” (Bernes 2017, 9)

But though it would have been hard to predict at the time, the results of this rebellion weren’t always entirely positive for working people. The management response to the call for less intensification in the workplace was to institute a different kind of intensification in which the rigidity of the “Fordist system, with its ‘seemingly immovable force of deeply entrenched working-class power’” was replaced by “new ‘flexible arrangements’,” which led to more part-time, temporary, or sub-contracted jobs, less powerful unions, and cuts in pay and benefits. (Bernes 2017, 18-19)

Even in cases where the attempts at self-management were freely chosen and largely negotiated by the workers themselves, a positive outcome could be stymied by economic forces, as was the case at Aeroquip/Republic Rubber. *Grassroots Magazine* never published a story about Aeroquip/Republic Rubber, even though the plant was just north of us on Albert Street, but recently I read Sean Posey’s history of the plant in *Lost Youngstown* and was reminded that, in the late 70s as deindustrialization began to get seriously underway, the workers there took the participatory approach of buying their workplace and running it for a while. This occurred at a time when the steel mills were closing down in Youngstown, so saving jobs was of paramount importance.

Though Republic Rubber had been a significant part of the industrial life of the Youngstown area since the beginning of the twentieth century, it wasn’t until the 1960s that it came to be known as Aeroquip, which is what it remained during the time I spent on Albert Street. In April of 1978,

Aeroquip closed its doors, but months later, a group of Aeroquip employees decided to buy the plant and run it themselves. The situation for the workers at what became known as Republic Hose Manufacturing Corporation [was a mixed bag](#). Only 130 employees kept their jobs, and with union approval, workers' wages dropped to a flat \$5 from as much as \$6.50 per hour. There were also fewer salaried employees, and they took pay cuts, too. Paid holidays and vacation time decreased, along with the pension plan, though shareholder-employees could choose from improvements in insurance benefits, bonuses, and profit-sharing plans. Though Republic Hose Manufacturing Corp., which opened in 1979, did well in the early 80s, it had to look for more capital by 1985. Trelleborg AG of Sweden bought control in 1986 and laid off the remaining 55 workers by the end of 1989.<sup>4</sup>

Workers at Republic Hose Manufacturing were unable to participate in worker-ownership for long, and maybe because of this, I sensed an affinity between the participatory nature of worker ownership at Republic Rubber and the participatory project of *Grassroots Magazine*. So while I was in Youngstown in the summer of 2024, I wanted to see what Aeroquip/Republic Rubber looked like after standing idle for more than thirty years, just as I wanted to see what had become of the old Grassroots office, which wasn't far away. But first I met with Jim Saulino, and I talked with him about the brief but empowering successes of the magazine and its inability to continue operating because our collective reach exceeded our grasp. We agreed that, although there were more than enough stories that needed to be reported, trying to produce a fifty-page magazine every month was too difficult for our small collective, and the pressure made the project unworkable. Like worker-ownership at Republic Rubber, it was a valiant effort to fight against hegemonic institutions and against the odds, but all too soon it failed.

A few days after my meeting with Jim, my partner Greg and my friend Kathy accompanied me on a memory-focused walk. First, we went halfway across the McGuffey bridge (below, left) so that we could look down and see that Crab Creek, which was severely polluted by chemicals from the rubber plant and other businesses, [looks much healthier today](#) (below, middle). I was surprised at how well-kept the bridge looks because I remembered it as a worn structure, and then I saw the new plaque which showed that [the current bridge was dedicated in July of 2008](#). Albert Street itself could use some revitalization, which may happen as part of the new [Crab Creek Corridor redevelopment project](#). The space where 1019 once stood is an empty lot, though nicely maintained (below, right). There's another empty lot next door, and the nearest building that's still standing is, I think, the location of the café that once was a lunch spot for Aeroquip workers.

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<sup>4</sup>See Pecchia, Dan, "Plant Loses Battle: Republic Hose to end operations," *Youngstown Vindicator*, October 7, 1989



Photos by Kathy Wozniak, used by permission

My companions and I then went further north until we came to the former Aeroquip/Republic Rubber on the other side of Albert Street. There we spent some time exploring the site, mostly staying away from the buildings because it didn't seem wise to walk under the sagging ceilings and across the rotting floors. The scene was bleak, and we could tell that the wreckage of what had once been a productive workplace was now sometimes a shelter where unhoused people spent the night. More than thirty years after it closed, Republic Rubber is in a state of complete ruin, nothing but broken buildings and machines, a destination for urban adventurers and aficionados of industrial ruins (see below).



Photos by Kathy Wozniak, used by permission

Urban explorers often post videos online, so after our trip to Republic Rubber, I watched [Lyd Wetzel's video](#), posted in September of 2024. She went much deeper into the wilderness of those

ruins than my walking companions and I did. As a result, she captured an image of some street art on a broken wall that I didn't see (below). In the artwork, a woman with long pink hair is holding back a blue curtain as if to look through a doorway in a still-intact brick wall. Bits of graffiti surround her, but most notable is what the pink-haired woman is showing us, what the street artist is inviting us to look at. Greenery is growing in this abandoned building. We can see grass and shrubbery and another doorway beyond which there are young trees. This palimpsest image shows three fragments of history: a red brick wall that has existed since some time in the twentieth century; the picture of a woman with long pink hair who was added to the brick wall after the building had gone to ruin and through whose image the brick still faintly shows; and the natural world that was there before Republic Rubber was built and that is determined to return.



Still from video by [Lyd Wetzel on YouTube](#), used by permission

After my trip to Albert Street, I visited downtown Youngstown and witnessed a small part of the demolition of the Realty Building at the corner of E. Federal Street and Wick Avenue. The hundred-year-old building had been damaged when a “[natural gas-fueled explosion](#)“ took place in its basement, and the City of Youngstown said the building had to be made safe or taken down. When the decision was made to demolish it, Diane Beatty took many pictures of the process. In the photo below, you can view urban decline through another unexpected portal. This time it's one of the openings in a three-part bicycle rack/sculpture, and through it you can see the old city vanishing from view. This image implies another palimpsest of place because it shows the demolition of a building which had stood there since 1924, seen in turn through the opening in a [sculpture which was installed](#) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to encourage both public art and bicycle riding. The artist who created this sculpture/bicycle rack, Tony Armeni, used to have a studio at Ward Bakery.



Photo by Diane Beatty, used by permission

Armeni was teaching 3-D Design and Sculpture at Youngstown State University in 2011 when this sculpture was installed. The [process of making these racks](#), which was undertaken at his Ward Bakery studio, involved metalwork and welding during which the artist used techniques that would be familiar to industrial workers. As Jasper Bernes says, "...wage labor and other types of unfree work provide the social and technical *means* for art work. Artists and writers draw from the methods and means and techniques available to them, many of which come from the workplace, and in doing so respond to the world of work..." (Bernes 2017, 1) [In 2023, Armeni said](#) that he was glad that the university, where he taught for 31 years, didn't renew his contract because it allowed him to do more work in his studio at the Ward Bakery Building, which he had used for 28 years. In 2024, however, he was one of the artists who was evicted when U-Haul Storage of Youngstown took over the building.

It's not really a surprise that Armeni's fate as a working university professor mirrored his fate as a working artist. In *No Collar*, Andrew Ross argues that the artist has become a role model for what is increasingly required of workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is because the artist accepts the need for flexibility, the idea of sacrificial labor, and is also inclined to value personal freedom over on-the-job security. (Ross 2003, 142-143) Elsewhere, Ross notes that today there is a "generalization of the 'mentality' of artists' work across the entire economy, not just among creatives," and this becomes easier to see as more workers are forced to participate in the gig economy. Furthermore, "[The] traditional profile of the artist as unattached and adaptable to circumstances is surely now coming into its own as the ideal definition of the postindustrial knowledge worker: comfortable in an ever-changing environment..." (Bernes 2017, 215, note 29)

As my visit to Youngstown came to an end last summer, I thought about all the ways that artists, workers, and activists are struggling to come to terms with an ever-changing environment. The artists of the Ward Bakery Building have founded a new group, [Loop Youngstown](#), and are looking for new studio space, showing their flexibility and their willingness to work hard to further their art. The workers who once had good-paying jobs in the steel industry and the auto industry and at Republic Rubber went on to find whatever kinds of work were available. Those who are still in the labor force may now be a part of the gig economy as I have been for a number of years. Though I did have a period during which I worked permanent jobs, you could say I went from being editor of *Grassroots Magazine* to being a freelance editor. I have been a member of the [National Writers Union](#) for over twenty years, which allows me to be a part of the labor movement and have a sense of community with other freelancers.

Every time I visit Youngstown, I feel a little more like the narrator in “Spelunkers,” who takes a good look at changes taking place and says, “I saw that the old city was going away.” Viewing the deindustrialized landscape as a palimpsest of place is one way for workers, artists, and activists to view glimpses of the past in the present and gain insights from the contrasts these provide.

### **Author Bio:**

**Alice Whittenburg** grew up in the Mahoning Valley when it was the Steel Valley, and her father worked at Republic Steel. She now lives in Tucson, Arizona, and co-edits the online magazine *The Cafe Irreal*. Her essays and fiction have appeared in the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, *3:AM Magazine*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Atlas & Alice*, and *Eclectica Magazine*, among others. She is a member of the National Writers Union Tucson Chapter and editor of the *Tucson Peace Calendar*.

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