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SEPTEMBER 14, 2012 AT 9:52 AM

## 'Detropia' protagonist: City's future can be found in its past

Passionate about Detroit, film's star challenges people to invest in future

BY SEBASTIAN HOFER SPECIAL TO THE DETROIT NEWS 1 COMMENTS



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"You have to build an environment where people will want to raise a child," says Crystal Starr, 28, who appears in "Detropia." "That means education. That means transportation." (Clarence Tabb Jr. / The Detroit News)

*When it comes to questions, just ask Crystal Starr. "The single most important question to ask a native Detroiter is: Why are you still living here? Then, they will tell you what is really important about this city. And what would really be important for this city."*

Starr, 28, has asked this question, over and over again — and she is not hesitant to share the answers.

One of three protagonists of "Detropia," a documentary on the City of

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Detroit, Starr is billed as a "blogger," "but only because they needed to put a title on me," she says.

You could also call her a writer, a historian, an activist, even a barista. That's actually how she became part of the documentary.

"Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, the directors, were in town to research another film they were about to shoot. They came to 1515 Café (in 1515 Broadway), and while I was making their latte, they discussed a conversation they overheard at City Council about a request to blow up Michigan Station."

It didn't take Starr long to be part of this discussion: "I explained to them how outrageous it would be to destroy this landmark, and how important the station was and still is."

She ended up showing Ewing and Grady some of the 400 hours of video she has amassed over the years, filming in abandoned buildings, doing interviews with Detroiters, observing their daily workings. She says, they in turn ended up postponing the movie they were ready to shoot and doing "Detropia" instead.

So, now, nearly three years later, what does Starr think of the movie and the role she has in it?

"At the moment, it is exciting and nerve-wrecking," she says. "This is something I am very passionate about, so I want it to mean something — not just tomorrow, but also a year from now. I want it to be a source of inspiration. It's not about me becoming a movie star. I want people to get it. I want people to see my passion for the city."

Yet before its Detroit premiere, "Detropia" inspired mostly complaint.

"Detroiters hadn't seen the film yet, they had seen trailers. And many people felt it re-opened a wound. They tend to think the worst is over, and they want to believe that new investors will save us."

Starr doesn't fully share this belief. "They will definitely build a place where people will want to live and come to live, but will that actually help the greater good, the neighborhoods that really need help? When the young people that come to Detroit now reach an age where they want to have kids, are they going to stay in the city?"

"You have to build an environment where people will want to raise a child. That means education. That means transportation. That means all the basic services that have been shut down. What investors are investing in is not the future of Detroit, but their vision of Detroit's future. This city needs help, yes, but what it doesn't need is someone else's ideas of what it would need."

So where could these needs really be found? For Starr, the answer might be in the past.

"People have always come to Detroit to create a future for themselves, but please don't come with that Columbus state of mind that you are discovering something no one has ever seen before, and where nothing has happened prior to your arrival," she urges.

Starr's passion about Detroit and its natives has a lot to do with urban renewal. "I would love to see older people who have left the city years ago move back and bring back the history of Detroit. I have nothing against the changing of times, but in order to let the city prosper, there has to be an awareness of its history."

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The Detroit Zoo, Royal Oak

**Ballet Magnificat**  
Friday, Oct 12, 7:00 pm  
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To raise that awareness, Starr has been working on a theatrical script about Paradise Valley and Black Bottom and the people of those neighborhoods — about southerners coming to Detroit and creating their own history here.

"I dig through these documents and these stories, and I say, 'yeah, you have to be proud of Detroit, of these amazing buildings, of what we did for this country.'"

Somewhere, in these stories, Starr believes she will find the direction Detroit will have to take to be great again. Maybe all you've got to do is to ask a simple question: Why do you still live here?

Sebastian Hofer is an Austrian journalist visiting The Detroit News as a fellow of the International Center for Journalists.

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**Carla Gonzalez** · Director, CE at College for Creative Studies

Saw Detropia this weekend and think Starr's blog may be the way to get "something" new from the discussions about Detroit. Detropia didn't tell me anything new- it just laid both sides out flat. I keep thinking- this just reiterates where we already are--- where's the VISION? Oh right, that's part of the film's point.

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