

In this exemplar of a distant place study you will find out about:

- ◆ the factors that have helped to create Detroit's social and economic geography
- ◆ the wide variety of available sources that may be used to investigate a distant place

Place study

'From the advent of the automotive assembly line to the Motown sound, modern techno and rock music, Detroit continues to shape both American and global culture. The city has seen many of its historic buildings renovated, and is bustling with new developments and attractions that complement its world-class museums and theatres. The city offers a myriad of things to see and do. Detroit is an exciting travel destination filled with technological advances and historic charm.'

(Extract from a visitor guide to Detroit)



▲ **Figure 1** The Renaissance Center (left), Detroit, head office of General Motors (2014)

## Detroit's location and early development

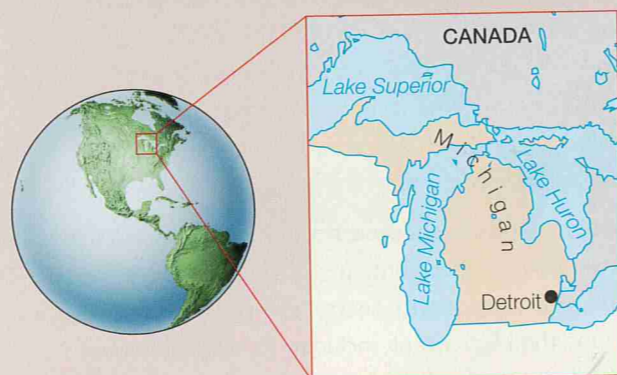
### The city's colonial history

Detroit is situated on the Detroit River, which links Lake Huron and Lake Erie (Figure 2), two of North America's Great Lakes that connect to the Atlantic Ocean via the Saint Lawrence River. French colonialists founded Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit in 1701, which subsequently became Detroit, finding its physical geography to be of great advantage. The different countries that have controlled Detroit across its history are represented on the city's flag (Figure 3).

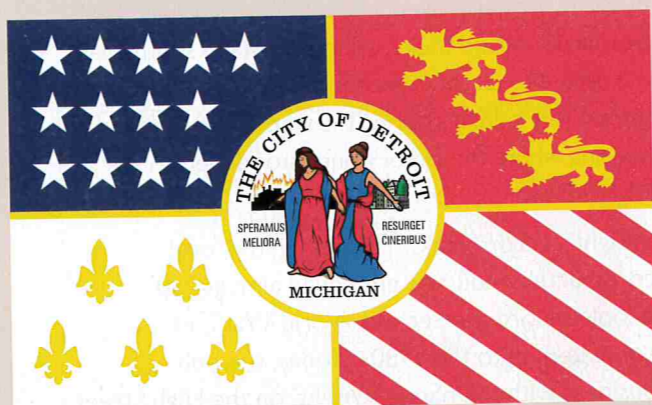
- ◆ The bottom right and top left quarters both have 13 features (stripes or stars) to represent the first colonies of the USA.
- ◆ The five fleur-de-lis represent the French Standard.
- ◆ Britain, another colonial master of the city in the late eighteenth century, is shown by the three lions.

### A transport hub

In the nineteenth century, shipping and shipbuilding brought wealth to the city. The so-called Gilded Age mansions that were built to the east and west of Detroit's downtown area demonstrated the economic rewards available in this emerging transport hub of the north-east.



▲ **Figure 2** Location of Detroit, USA



▲ **Figure 3** Flag of the city of Detroit

## Economic success and expansion

### The Steel Belt boom

Detroit saw significant population growth in the nineteenth century, but it was not until the twentieth century that its expansion (both in terms of population and land area) finally took off. Home-grown companies manufactured new standardised consumer products for customers across the USA and, eventually, for export around the world. For example, Ford and General Motors used innovative production processes such as the assembly line that were replicated worldwide (Figures 4 and 5).

Southern Michigan was part of a larger region within the USA known as the Steel Belt, where established waterways and canals, roads and railroads helped to connect iron ore mines with coal resources from the Appalachian Mountains. With the economic decline of the late twentieth century, this area became known as the **Rust Belt** (Figure 9).

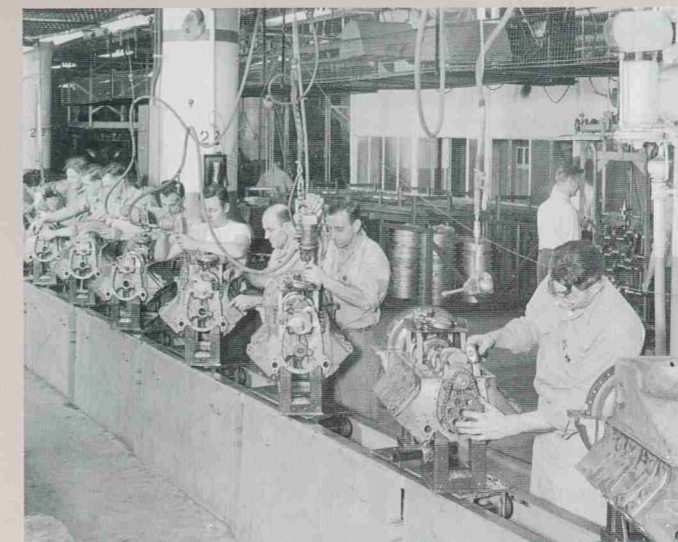
### New workers needed

During the twentieth century, millions of African Americans travelled from the rural southern states to the urban north-east and Midwest to apply for the new jobs created in the automotive industry – this was known as the 'Great Migration'. It was driven, in part, by the racism that African Americans experienced in the southern states at this time. The Ku Klux Klan, white supremacist group, had a great deal of support in the region but the authorities also officially favoured whites. African American workers felt pushed out by the lack of economic opportunities apart from labouring on plantations.

### Growth of the city and the suburbs

Detroit welcomed many African Americans into the city alongside southern and eastern Europeans. Figure 6 shows the growth in population that took place during the twentieth century and how the city's African American and white populations changed.

In the post-war period the total population of Detroit's wider **metropolitan** area grew as life became increasingly dependent upon the car, and urban areas sprawled in the original *Motor City*.

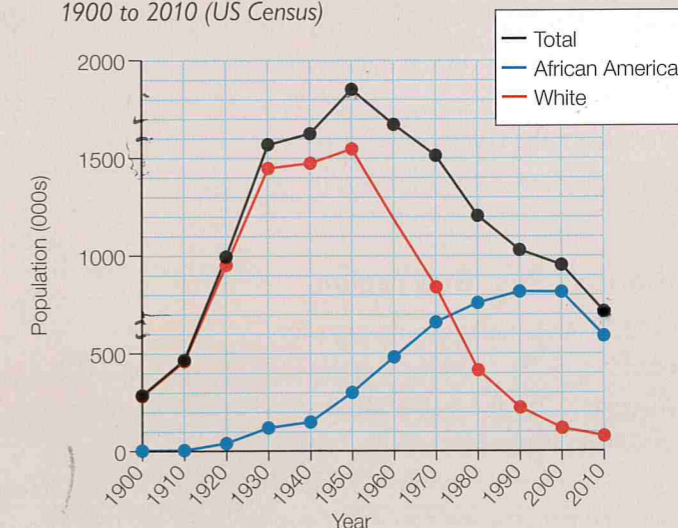


▲ **Figure 4** Fordism at work: the Cadillac assembly line in General Motors' Detroit car plant (1954)



▲ **Figure 5** Worker on the assembly line at Chrysler's Jefferson North Assembly Plant, Detroit (2011)

▼ **Figure 6** Graph of the city of Detroit's population from 1900 to 2010 (US Census)



### Changing world, changing fortunes Competition and fuel insecurity

From the 1970s onwards, the economic tide was turning as international oil crises prompted drivers to buy vehicles with greater fuel economy. Competitors from Asia such as Honda, Datsun (Nissan) and Toyota produced more desirable models, causing Detroit's big employers to suffer a decline in sales and profits. Ford, General Motors and other employers linked to the automotive industry responded by cutting jobs and shutting down less efficient plants. With rising numbers of unemployed, Detroit saw a fall in taxes raised by the city authorities who, in turn, had less to invest in public services.

### Forces of change or more of the same?

Despite this change in the economic climate, Detroit still backed the auto industry. Controversially, the mayor sanctioned the compulsory purchase of land to enable new hi-tech car plants to be built in the city – the General Motors Hamtramck Assembly Plant was built in an area formerly known as Poletown, so-named because of the high number of Polish people in the local community. The proposals saw not only protests against the development, but also some support from the locals.

The first model to roll off the production line at Hamtramck in 1985 was perhaps optimistically named the Cadillac Eldorado (after a mythical city of gold). But the city that had enjoyed great growth and wealth earlier in the century struggled to reinvigorate itself. The Ford-financed Renaissance Center (Figure 1), completed in 1977, was an exercise in place-making: urban rebranding. It was planned as an iconic development that would attract business back into the rundown downtown district. However, it has been widely criticised for creating office and retail space that was physically disconnected and protected from the rest of the city centre (its design protected visitors from the rising tide of crime). The Renaissance Center is now the headquarters General Motors.

### America's Rust Belt region

By 2008 Toyota had become not only the leading global producers in the auto industry but also the leader in global sales, overtaking General Motors. In contrast, Detroit (twinned with the city of Toyota, Japan) had become the confirmed capital of the Rust Belt (Figure 9).

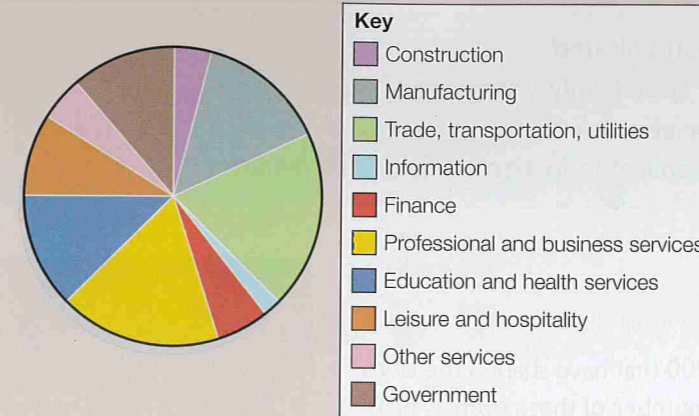


**Figure 7** A four-storey-high Uniroyal Tire advertises this auto-industry product made in Detroit. Built in 1964 and originally a Ferris wheel, the giant tyre is still an iconic Detroit landmark.



**Figure 8** 'If you come here at night it glows.' The Uniroyal tire plant closed in the 1980s, forming part of the **drosscape** of Detroit. In 2012, the first step in revitalising Detroit's waterfront began, including the excavation of this site to a depth of nine metres.

**Figure 9** The USA's successful Steel Belt became its Rust Belt in the late twentieth century



**Figure 10** Employment in Detroit by sector (2013)

Rank	Company/organisation	No. of Employees
1	Detroit Medical Center	11 497
2	City of Detroit	9 591
3	Quicken Loans	9 192
4	Henry Ford Health System	8 807
5	Detroit Public Schools	6 586
6	US Government	6 308
7	Wayne State University	6 023
8	Chrysler	5 426
9	Blue Cross Blue Shield	5 415
10	General Motors	4 327

**Figure 11** Top 10 employers in the cities of Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park (2013)

**Detroit to revive: one neighbourhood at a time [2003]**

**Razing the city to save the city**

There have been 3000 derelict homes razed to the ground already this year... [2010]

Sixty Detroit postal workers attacked by stray dogs say... [2013]

**Motor City population declines 25% [2011]**

**Homes still selling for \$1 dollar in Detroit [2012]**

**How Detroit became the world capital of abandoned buildings [2012]**

**Detroit in US largest-ever city bankruptcy [2013]**

**Half of Detroit property owners don't pay tax [2013]**

Detroit Residents plant 15 000 trees in a day [2014]

### ACTIVITIES

- Compare the opening quote about Detroit with Figure 1. Who do you think created each image of this place and for what purpose?
- Study Figure 6.
  - Describe the growth of the population of Detroit from 1900 onwards.
  - Compare the growth of the number of African American people resident in the city to the growth of the total population.
  - Using the information from this section describe the contribution of two endogenous and two exogenous factors (see 2.4) to Detroit's economic and demographic boom in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Look at Figure 10. What were the top three employment sectors in Detroit in 2013? List them in order.
- Study Figure 11. In 2013, how many of Detroit's top city employers were part of the car industry? Name them.
- Read the news headlines in Figure 12.
  - Sort the headlines into positive and negative stories about the city.
  - Choose one headline and try to write the first paragraph of a news story using what you know about Detroit.
- It is hoped that tourism may give Detroit an economic boost in years to come. Using the information in this section explain why tourists may or may not wish to visit Detroit.

**Figure 12** Detroit news headlines

### STRETCH YOURSELF

Detroit is twinned with seven cities:

- Chongqing, China
- Dubai, UAE
- Kitwe, Zambia
- Minsk, Belarus
- Nassau, Bahamas
- Toyota, Japan
- Turin, Italy

Choose one city and find out more about it. Can you explain why city authorities made this international link and how it might have benefited Detroit in the past or will in future?