

Dan Gilbert's "New Detroit"

# Billionaire land speculator witch-hunts teens for graffiti near his property

By Zac Corrigan  
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"Unfortunately, once in a great while, degenerates who don't 'get it' crawl out of their deep dark holes and try to ruin it for the rest of us," wrote Dan Gilbert, Detroit's richest man, in an email to his 12,500 downtown employees. Attached were images and a video of three young women, recorded June 22 by Gilbert's private network of surveillance cameras.

The low-resolution video shows the three teenagers in a back alley, spray-painting a building adjacent to one of the dozens of downtown buildings Gilbert owns. He enlisted his employees to "post the pictures and video on any of your social media accounts such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc", and offered "the entire cost to paint your home" as a reward for information leading to an arrest.

Mackenzie Snitgen and Mary Harder, age 17, and Isabella Mary Meteer, 18, were identified as suspects in a matter of hours. At their arraignment July 14 all three pleaded not guilty to charges of "malicious destruction of a building [valued at] \$1,000 to \$20,000"—a felony with a maximum prison sentence of five years. They were each released on \$5,000 bail. The three attended a pre-trial hearing July 22, and are scheduled to reappear in court August 9.

Gilbert's email refers to the young women as "degenerates," "clowns," and "fancy 'ladies.'" After their arrest, Larry Mongo, a black business owner downtown, mocked the young women in an interview on Action 7 News, thanked Gilbert for hunting them down, and said he hoped the three, who are white and come from the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Woods, would be treated the same as "ghetto kids."

The three young women are the immediate targets. But the "degenerates" Gilbert wants to keep out of downtown, above all, are the masses of poor workers

from Detroit's neighborhoods. Gilbert has been at the forefront of efforts by the elite to "revitalize" a small enclave for the wealthy and upper-middle class in the downtown area (see: "Detroit's downtown 'development' plan") that will essentially be off-limits to the majority of the city's population. This has been accompanied by the forced eviction of hundreds of poor and elderly residents, as well as dozens of artists, from the area. With investments worth tens of millions, Gilbert wants to make sure any "riff-raff" that don't fit in with the sparkling, upscale designs of the "New Detroit" are kept out.

Gilbert, who holds no elected office, has emerged as the de facto king of Detroit. He wields enormous power over economic and political decisions, enjoys non-stop promotion by a fawning media in Detroit and nationally, and owns a private army to protect his property.

In addition to his hundreds of surveillance cameras, his Rock Security agents patrol the area 24 hours a day. He owns 60 buildings throughout downtown, many acquired from the city at rock-bottom prices through what he himself has referred to as a "skyscraper sale." For some buildings he paid as little as \$8 per square foot. Downtown rents are now approaching \$2 per square foot every month—which means after four months the cost of his "investment" will be fully covered and he will make pure profit from then on.

Gilbert's Quicken Loans mortgage lending companies, and his network of other companies under the "Rock" moniker (Rock Ventures, Rock Gaming, Bedrock, etc), make him the largest employer in downtown Detroit. He owns approximately nine million square feet of downtown real estate, including offices, apartments, the Greektown casino and hotel, as well as shopping, parking structures, and recently the building housing both of

Detroit's daily newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* (the papers plan to relocate). Residents therefore work for his companies, pay him rent on their homes, gamble at his casino, shop at his stores, are spied on by his cameras and policed by his hired agents.

The situation harkens back to the "company towns" of the 19th and early 20th century, when coal companies or the auto giants controlled virtually every aspect of life. Gilbert's operation in particular recalls Henry Ford's infamous "Service Department"—the hired thugs and spies who policed his workforce, visiting their homes to make sure they were going to church, were not drinking, were not cohabitating prior to marriage, and especially were not attempting to unionize or promote socialist politics. If workers were found to be violating Ford's moral code, they were thrown out of their jobs and blacklisted.

The extreme charge of "malicious destruction of a building" is being handed down for what amounts to a teenage prank, while Gilbert is engaged in the most destructive and parasitic activity, for which he is not only not being punished, but on the contrary, being lauded and showered with public subsidies. Gilbert has been appointed to the Obama-created Detroit Blight Removal Task Force, which has a budget of \$150 million to demolish tens of thousands of houses across the city's 139 square miles.

This will provide even more profit opportunities for Gilbert and other aspiring "entrepreneurs," while wide swaths of the city—deemed too poor for investment—will be "decommissioned" and their residents driven out by shutting down water, electricity, fire protection and other vital services. As Gilbert once boasted, "For probably the first time in Western civilization, large parcels of vacant, pristine land that have paved streets, utilities of all sorts, cable, phone, water, sewer" were available for the taking, with "everything at affordable prices."

In 1960, Detroit had the highest standard of living of any major American city. After decades of de-industrialization, during which the automakers moved hundreds of thousands of jobs to low-wage areas throughout the US and overseas, it now perennially tops lists of "poorest," "most dangerous" and "most miserable" big cities in the country. Detroit's child poverty rate is near 60 percent.

The city is currently undergoing the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, and corporate vandals are looting it of anything they can get their hands on, including constitutionally protected city worker pensions, a publicly-owned (and world renowned) art collection,

and one of the nation's largest municipally owned water and sewerage systems. Thousands of its poorest residents are being shut off from water service each week.

The Obama administration has backed this attack in order to use Detroit as a model to attack public sector workers throughout the country, destroy public services and carry out the wholesale privatization of urban areas.

What is happening in Detroit is a massive transfer of wealth to the super-rich that is part of a national and international process. The fortunes of the very rich in the US have seen an historic increase nationwide, with 95 percent of income gains from 2009-2012 going to the top one percent of earners. Gilbert has virtually quadrupled his own wealth to \$3.8 billion since the crash of 2008.

Gilbert is not the only oligarch in town. Fellow billionaire Mike Ilitch—owner of Little Caesar's Pizza, the Detroit Tigers and Red Wings sports teams, the Motor City Casino, and much more—recently acquired a 45-block area of downtown for \$1, and was given hundreds of millions in public money to finance the building of a new hockey arena and surrounding entertainment and shopping district.

Detroit's unelected Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, who is overseeing the bankruptcy and officially rules over Detroit as an unchallengeable dictator, has favorably compared Gilbert and Ilitch to bygone tycoons Carnegie and Rockefeller, saying "every great city needs its patrons."

As ruthless as these robber barons were, they at least built vast industries and infrastructure. Gilbert embodies the decline and decay of American capitalism and the rise of financial parasites who make their money essentially by looting the already existing wealth of the population.

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