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HISTORY LESSON: Telling Detroit's immigrant story through its architecture

Today, as immigrants are being vilified, scapegoated and pulled off the streets by masked agents, it's important for us to remember that the Detroit that so many are nostalgic for was designed and built by immigrants.

BY JACOB JONES • GENERAL • JUNE 24, 2025

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Wikimedia Commons – Albert Kahn Building

Welcome to History Lesson, a new recurring feature in Model D led by local historian Jacob Jones, in which we delve deep into the annals of Detroit history and nerd out over a different topic each time. This month, we're talking about the intersection of Detroit's architectural and immigration histories.

It's easy to mythologize Detroit's architectural history. The Golden Tower of the Fisher Building, the sprawling automotive plants, the stone carvings that adorn our skyscrapers – all are from a bygone era of this country. This era often seems even further away in Detroit, a city which missed out on skyscraper boom of the late 20th century. The history ginned up by our grand architecture can inspire a nostalgia for sepia-toned memories of a city that once was great, and for some, a nostalgia for a Detroit that was *great*. A city built by and for a lily-white, All-American ideal. In short, a Detroit that never existed.

Today, as immigrants are being vilified, scapegoated and pulled off the streets by masked agents, it's important for us to remember that the Detroit that so many are

nostalgic for was designed and built by immigrants. If we're going to talk about what made America, or more specifically Detroit, great we should probably start with the people we're currently trying to kick out.

Albert Kahn was an immigrant. *The Architect of Detroit* and perhaps the most important architect of the American 20th Century moved as a child from what is now Germany to Detroit. The son of a rabbi, Kahn, would drop out of school early and instead find his vocation in the drafting room of Detroit's then-premier architecture firm, Mason and Rice.

Kahn's claim to fame was a revolutionary innovation in steel reinforced concrete that allowed for taller factories with larger floorplans and massive windows. These factories dotted America's industrial landscape and attracted tens of thousands of – wait for it – immigrants to participate in America's industrial boom. And Kahn's skyscrapers – namely the Fisher Building, considered by many one of the finest skyscrapers on the planet – not only redefined American Art Deco architecture, but was adorned with work from immigrant artists.

One of those artists was Corrado Parducci. A quintessential story of immigrant dislocation and reinvention. Parducci was born in a small Tuscan village and was brought to New York by his father at age four, leaving his mother and siblings behind. Unable to care for him, his father placed him in a Catholic asylum for nearly two years, long enough for young Corrado to forget his native language and lose all memory of his family. After settling into a working-class district of Manhattan, which also housed the studios of sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French, Parducci fell in love with the arts. A philanthropist discovered the young artist and enrolled him in a tenement school where he was educated by another immigrant, Albin Polasek.

Early in his career, Parducci was sent to Detroit on a commission, never intending to stay. But like so many other immigrants the opportunity kept him here. Instead

of returning to New York, he set up shop in what is now Midtown, initially taking work under his employer, Anthony DiLorenzo. Before long, Parducci bought him out for $5,500 and began carving out a legacy of his own. As Detroit's industrial boom surged, so did demand for ornamentation, and Parducci's sculptural flair became a signature of the era. His work graces dozens of landmark buildings: the Fisher Building, the Buhl Building, the Guardian, the Masonic Temple. The next time you approach one of Detroit's architectural icons, know that the hands of an Italian immigrant shaped the figures looking back at you.

But for every Kahn and Parducci, there are hundreds of laborers who brought their visions to life.

Detroit's immigrant labor history reads like a census of the determined.By 1920, nearly one in three Detroiters was foreign-born. A higher percentage than New York or Chicago, Detroit attracted Irish, Canadians, Germans, Poles, and Russians. If they didn't find work for the Dodge Brothers in Hamtramck or for Fisher Body in Poletown they may have found work at the immigrant owned Christman Construction building skyscrapers and mansions for the city's elite. Arab Americans arrived in significant numbers at the turn of the century attracted to the promise of opportunity at the Ford Motor Company. Latino laborers originally drawn to seasonal agricultural work migrated into Detroit's industrial economy.

Along the way these immigrant groups built communities, factories, shops, and skyscrapers. They built for themselves, they built for the elite, and they built for history. Detroit's built environment is not just a testament to the wealth that its elite once held but to the wealth of opportunity it afforded to immigrants.

In a time when immigrants are being framed as threats or burdens by some nostalgia-pilled person dreaming of days gone by, remind them that the world

they're pining for wasn't built by descendents of the Mayflower but by first and second generation Americans building a new home.

Their legacy can be seen on The Fisher Building's grand ceiling and the Rouge Plants sprawling smokestacks. The people we now try to exclude were indispensable to the city we built and to the city we are today. For those longing for a Detroit of the past and a Detroit that was great, make sure to remember who made it that way.

Jacob Jones is a historian and storyteller who has spent a decade leading tours of the city's iconic landmarks. His tours of the Fisher Building, Guardian Building, and Packard Plant have attracted tens of thousands of guests from around the world and have been praised by the Detroit Free Press, the BBC, and the New York Times. When he's not sharing history you can find him in a good local bar, perusing the stacks at the Detroit Public Library, and cheering on his beloved Detroit Lions.

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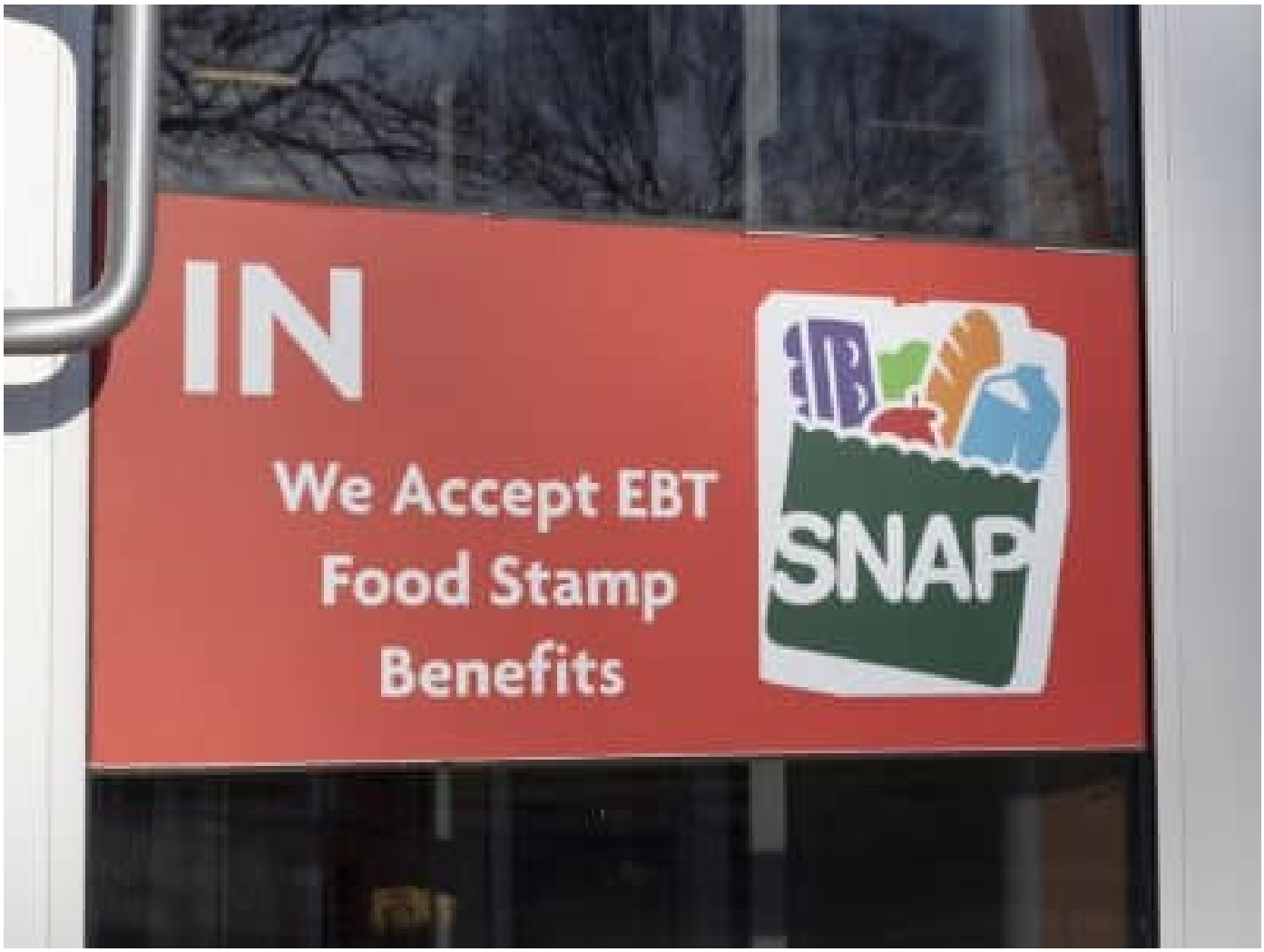

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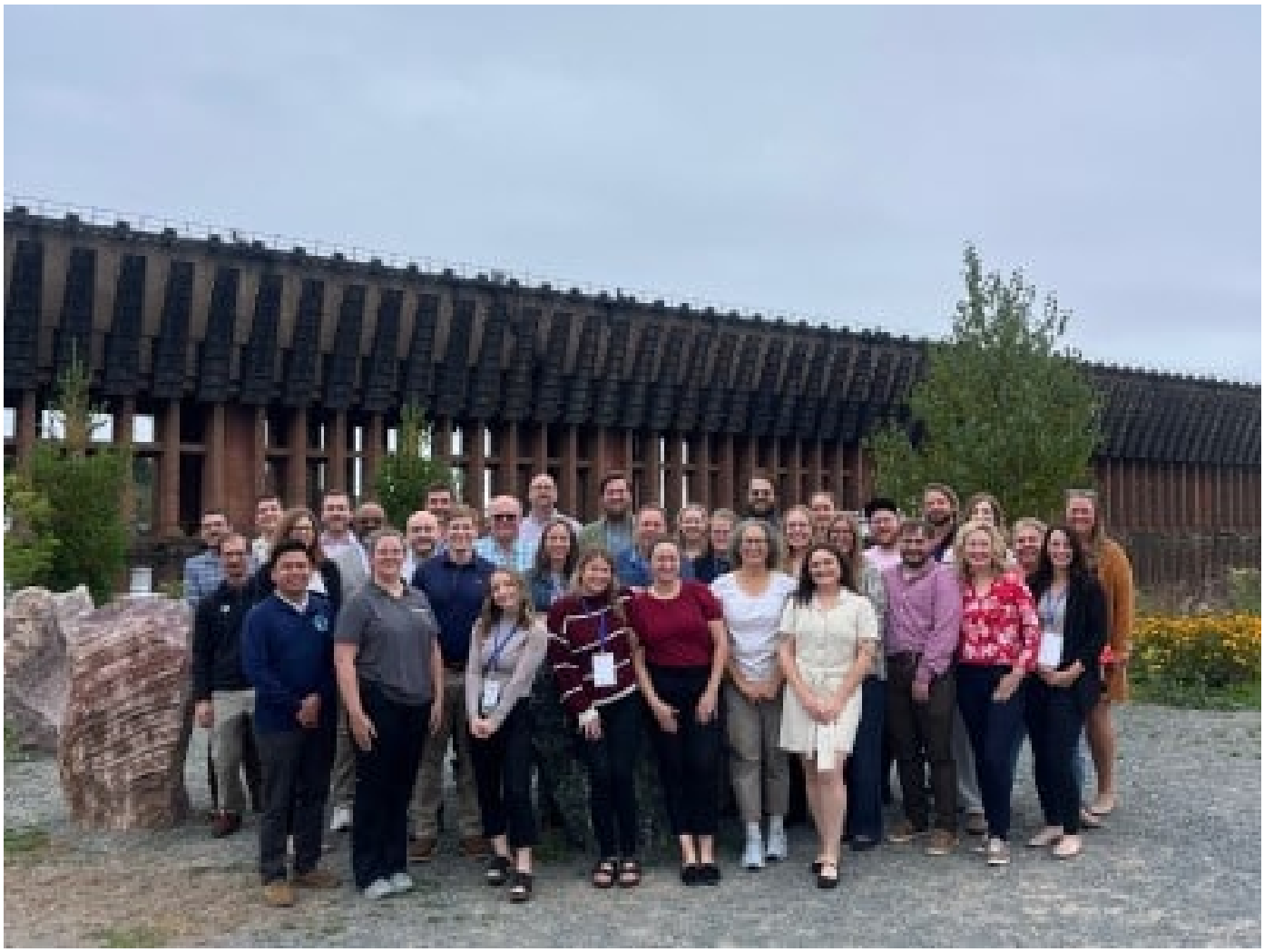

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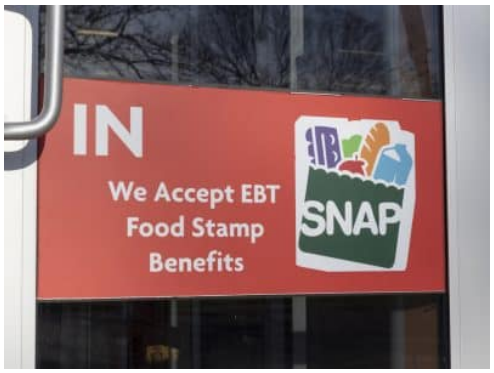

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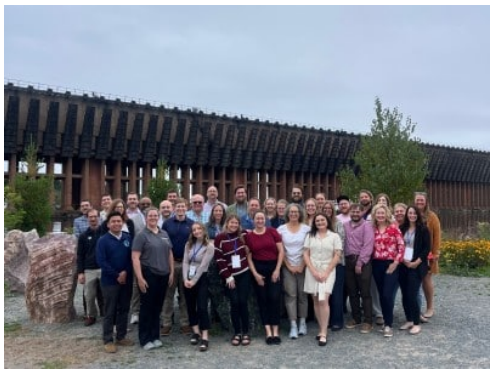

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