

Creative Reconstruction in the City:
An Analysis of Art, Shrinking,
and the Story of the American Dream in Detroit, MI

by

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ABSTRACT

A right to the city is a human right that is overlooked in American cities. Cities reflect humanity in collective form, but are manipulated by the powerful at the expense of the powerless. Landscapes of cities tell the city's stories, as historical inequalities become imprinted on the city's physical and symbolic landscapes. In Detroit, Michigan, over forty square miles of the city are vacant, unemployment might be as high as fifty percent, and the city has lost about sixty percent of its population since the mid-1950s. Detroit must now solve its spatial problems in the context of depopulation; the city's planners, nonprofits, and scholars are now debating "planned shrinking" or "right-sizing". Simultaneously, a blooming arts scene is also slowly revitalizing parts of the city. This thesis will critically examine the possibilities of planned shrinking and the arts movement in Detroit, as well as suggest theoretical explanations for the city's dilemmas. Detroit has been the subject of a myopic popular narrative, one that isolates the city from modern America rather than critically examines its place in modern America. Redefining regional healing through honest discourse and developing a more appropriate narrative for Detroit are among the solutions proposed. Finally, the importance of establishing a human right for the city is discussed.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the people of Detroit, Michigan. May a proper story of your city be understood by all.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: HOW A CITY'S STORY IS TOLD

“Grow up in Detroit and you understand the way of all things. Early on, you are put on close relations with entropy. As we rose out of the highway trough, we could see the condemned houses, many burned, as well as the stark beauty of all the vacant lots, gray and frozen. Once-elegant apartment buildings stood next to scrapyards, and where there had been furriers and movie palaces there were now blood banks and methadone clinics and Mother Waddles Perpetual Mission. Returning to Detroit...usually depressed me. But now I welcomed it.” (Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*)

In 1977, right in the heart of downtown Detroit, construction began on the 73-story Renaissance Center that would house the world headquarters of General Motors. This massive project, sitting on the Detroit River and overlooking Canada, was to be the symbol of a new Detroit. Completed in 1981, the Renaissance Center grew into a five building complex consisting of four smaller 39-story buildings and a 750-foot hotel in the center of the complex. This winter I visited Detroit while researching this thesis. I had been staying in a different downtown Detroit hotel for a few days before a local friend pointed out that the Renaissance Center resembles the gesture of a giant middle finger, defiantly telling the world where to go. It is ironic, to say the least, that the structure meant to revitalize downtown Detroit resembles an obscene gesture, but it fits – any Detroiter will admit that the city is comprised of a stubborn but hard-working breed of people who will defend their city proportionally to the amount of negativity that outsiders heap on. It is unmistakably appropriate for Detroit to construct a building, ostensibly meant to represent the city's rebirth, instead as an effigy to what the city really thinks of the outside world.

My friend and I discussed it as we sped into the city along Interstate 96, which eventually crested a small hill to reveal the city's skyline, complete with its obscene gesture and mired in low and grey clouds. As we exited the freeway, I could see the Detroit that I remembered – I had lived in Detroit for ten years before I left in 2002. Heading up the exit ramp revealed the giant and abandoned Fischer body plant to my left, the sky was low and sleeting, the snowy streets unplowed and bellowing steam from every manhole. The streets near the Midtown neighborhood were rather full of people, considering the cold and dreary weather. There was a good diversity of people on the street: students from Wayne State University, employees from local coffee shops, hipsters, beggars, white, black, and many colors in between. In the background, Detroit's puzzles beckoned. At all times, even in (arguably) the hippest neighborhood in Detroit, always visible, too, were smokestacks, fire damaged structures, and destroyed houses and apartment buildings.

As we left Midtown, driving down Mack Avenue, the scope of Detroit's crisis became clearer. The neighborhoods on the near east side had become spread out from house to house, and in some places only a few houses were left. I found myself falling into "shocked outsider" mode, even though I had spent many years living near Detroit. If I had looked over my right shoulder, I would have seen the giant middle finger telling me what it thought of my shock.

Further along, we passed beautiful boarded-up churches, epic abandoned factories and warehouses, and historic mansions missing half their facades. We circled the infamous abandoned and massive train station and ate at the popular

Detroit restaurant Slow's Bar-B-Q, which sits directly across Michigan Avenue. We braved the sleet and hiked the Dequindre Cut, a converted train line still decorated with decades worth of urban street art. We toured exquisitely maintained Victorian neighborhoods that stood mere feet from damaged theaters, vacant lots, and half-destroyed houses. Most of the city, outside the few vibrant areas and off the major "spoke"¹ streets, was almost free of traffic. This is what Detroit now looks like: a set of confusing, paradoxical landscapes that well represent the various calamities that the city has weathered through the years.

The current crisis in Detroit is as unique an urban crisis as there is the world over. Parts of the city now stand almost completely devoid of any signs of life. But while "Detroit may be emptied out," says Wayne State University's Jerry Herron, "it is hardly over, nor will it be any time soon."

Sitting around the campfire...

Of course, it is true that Detroit is far from being a perfect city with the happiest people. For many people around the country the city's name is synonymous with misery. The mention of Detroit summons ugliness even for people who have never been there. Connotations of few city names are harsher than that of Detroit. As a word, Detroit has become a neat metaphor for urban hopelessness, a pejorative, a warning for what is lurking at the bottom of the "slippery slope" that politicians love to evoke. Examples of the public production

¹ The "spoke" streets are Detroit's major thoroughfares, called spokes because they all originate in the center of the city and cut across the city as spokes do across a bicycle tire; the spokes streets are Woodward Ave, Gratiot Ave, Michigan Ave, Grand River Blvd

of Detroit's stereotypes abound: Meg Whitman, former California gubernatorial candidate called Detroit "awful" in a reference to its appearance ("Low Blow?", 2010); In 2009, former New York City mayor Rudy Guiliani warned that New York could turn into a modern day Detroit if current mayor Michael Bloomberg wasn't re-elected (Oosting, 2009); In Oregon, a sleepy village town of 300 people – also named Detroit² – recently held a vote on whether or not to shed the name that it shared with the struggling Midwestern city. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the "unsavory image" that the moniker of Detroit bears was too much for some Oregon residents³ ("Oregon Tourist Town", 2010).

Detroit has not gotten much of a break from the media, either. Popular conservative commentator Glenn Beck recently compared Detroit to post-World War II Hiroshima in a misguided plug for free-market fundamentals.⁴ *The Guardian*, a London-based newspaper, has taken a few potshots at Detroit over the years. In 1987, the *The Guardian* called Detroit "the city of the sixteen year old with a machine gun" (Neill, 2001). Twenty-three years later, in an article titled "Detroit: the Last Days" a writer for *The Guardian* referred to Detroit as a zombie-filled dystopia and a city in "terminal decline" (Temple, 2010). Thomas Sugrue, in his eloquent *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, points out that over 30 years ago Detroit's own Ze'ev Chafets called Detroit "America's first major Third

² Ironically, the town was named Detroit due to the large number of Michigan natives in the area.

³ The vote subsequently failed 47-37; see: "Ashamed to be Detroit?" run by the Associated Press on Yahoo! News 11/3/2010 for a conflicting report of AP's story published one week earlier in the Los Angeles Times

⁴ This happened while I was in Detroit, and was not exactly well received by the locals

World city” in the *New York Times* (Sugrue, 1996). In a recent issue of *Foreign Policy*, authors created a category of global city called “the World’s Detroits”, which it depicted as “carcasses of once-great cities” that could not (or would not) deal with the forces of globalization; later in the paragraph authors claim that Detroit “might never succeed at...reinvention” (Global Cities Index, 2010). *The Onion*, a slapstick tabloid based in New York, proclaimed in 2006 that the entire city had been sold for scrap to a materials recycler for a measly \$4,000. A quote from the article reads: “Detroiters can finally say goodbye to an eyesore that’s blighted them for generations” (“Detroit Sold for”, 2006). Another article from *The Onion* celebrates the current Mayor of Detroit’s (Dave Bing) dedication of a new slum called Baneberry Heights. The anonymous author describes the aesthetics of the new slum:

“Lined with flickering streetlamps, and conveniently located within walking distance of several abandoned Chevrolet plants, the new slum reportedly offers residents the latest in high-risk, hopelessly impoverished housing options...each one-bedroom apartment can accommodate desperate families of six or more (“Detroit Mayor Throws,” 2009).

Nor is popular culture devoid of references to the tarnished city. In 1980, in the movie *Airplane*, the narrator claims that a bar where carnage and crime run rampant is “worse than Detroit.” Also during the 1980s, the RoboCop⁵ series was set and filmed in Detroit; the movie’s success was dependent on the idea that Detroit’s crime problem had gotten so bad that the city needed to be relocated

⁵ A recent polarizing debate actually involves a statue of RoboCop being erected by a Detroit nonprofit across from the infamous Michigan Central Depot, an abandoned 30-story train station.

(Neill, 2001). Hollywood still uses Detroit as a backdrop for its most post-apocalyptic films.⁶

William J.V. Neill, an urban studies scholar from Queen's University in Belfast, UK, writes of some of the problems cities such as Detroit have when they try to market themselves to tourists, convention planners, and businesses. Neill points to the "Murder Capital USA" stigma that Detroit has been unable to separate itself from. He describes the "hopeless desolation of Detroit's East Side" as "belong(ing) to another universe" (Neill, 2001, pg. 818). Borrowing a quote from Gallagher (1999), Neill calls Detroit "one of the most blighted urban landscapes in America" (*ibid*, pg. 819). While Neill's point is to describe the tactics involved in the marketing of the urban experience in cities that people generally fear, his examples show how Detroit is perceived. Whether this perception is deserved, or even true – Neill eventually describes Detroit's central business district as being one of the safest in America – are matters for further debate.

Fear is undeniably a part of American culture. We value our freedom, but ultimately it is fear that governs our freedoms. Mike Davis, an urban theorist, says that after 9/11, "Fear Studies" and "Sociophobics" became hot new subjects in social and cultural sciences;⁷ literature from these fields of study boast such phrases as "... 'the mainstreaming of the conspiracy culture,' the arrival of 'risk

⁶ Most recently Red Dawn Part 2 was filmed here; Parts of all of the Transformers series were also filmed here. A tax incentive has actually recently been granted to Hollywood studios filming in Detroit, which has translated into a variety of films being shot on location in Detroit.

⁷ Davis made this claim in the 2002 book *Dead Cities*

society,' the 'hermeneutic of suspicion,' 'the plague of paranoia,' 'the mean world syndrome'" and so forth (Davis, 2002, pg. 4). Davis, however, is not singling out academia here. He points out that the American private sector spends as much as \$150 billion per year on security-related consumption – four times the budget of the Department for Homeland Security. Davis argues that security "will become a full-fledged urban utility like water, electric power, and telecommunications" (*ibid*, pg. 13). Maybe fear is what separates adults and children. Is it possible that fear is the empty canvas where what's left of our childhood imaginations run wild, where daydreams become worst-case scenarios, where excitement becomes anxiety?

While much of the academic interest in so-called "fear studies" (and its more sophisticated kin, surveillance and security studies) is based in the dynamics of globalization, terrorism, and hegemony, my point here is that Detroit's "scary" reputation precedes it; this reputation helps to shape and maintain the isolation, the "urban anomie" (Harvey, 1990), and the negative relationship with postmodernity that Detroit must contend with in order shed the harmful and exploitative monikers associated with the city. The end result is cyclical: stereotypes about Detroit feed into the fear of the city, which exploits the city and inhibits its ability to develop, which leads to a general ignorance of the conditions (particularly poverty and racism) that create instability and fear. Detroit's story, at least for the past twenty-five years, has been a scary story told by the ghostly light of distant campfires. I argue here that Detroit's story needs to be retold.

Will the real Detroit please stand up?

In this thesis, I intend to examine Detroit as a vessel of redevelopment on its own terms. Because of its place in globalized (post)modernity, Detroit has a unique set of circumstances that I believe have been determined by its history and its relationships with outside cultural and economic forces. I believe that the outcomes, which have manifested in Detroit's economy, racial politics, and blighted landscapes, should dictate the methods of revitalization that are utilized in the city. These outcomes, at a glance, make for a bleak outlook. The city has lost about 60% of its peak population and suffers from a severe vacancy problem that is complicated by extreme racial divisions and very high poverty rates. These realities point to the need for a radical shift in thinking and practice. Momentum in Detroit at present time is carrying the city toward planned shrinking, a relatively new reality for any city. The planned shrinking theory for deindustrialized cities is meant to be a solution for coping with extreme depopulation. But depopulation is only a part of the story of deindustrialization. Racism, new modes of culture and capitalism, and new forms of mobility have served to widen many gaps in social structures over the past forty to sixty years. I suggest that Detroit's is not a question of whether or not to shrink or to implement more "new urbanism" ideas; Detroit's agents of redevelopment – city planners, artists, nonprofits, government officials, and residents alike – most often plan for physical changes that they hope will have positive psychological effects. I argue that this thinking might be inverted; instead, these agents should first focus on the

psychological changes that need to be made with the intention that they will induce positive physical changes on the city's landscape.

Redevelopment, especially in a place as historically significant as Detroit, can be unpacked to great theoretical depths. I suggest that the most relevant aspects of abstract theory manifest in Detroit's segregation of races and capital – the two most powerful thresholds visible in Detroit seem to dance around each other, separate but related in ever more obvious ways. Following urban studies scholar Thomas Sugrue and urban sociologist Sharon Zukin, I argue that the effects of racism and capitalism have been central in the city's decline, and need to be understood as shifting projections on Detroit's landscape. This shifting can be explained using Joseph Schumpeter's creative destruction thesis. Capital and race, I theorize, have been braided together throughout Detroit's industrial history in a way that the inequalities generated by the two have become interchangeable.

Furthermore, understanding the city cannot be done in isolation. Although pundits do not acknowledge it, the forces of distant, ideological assumptions have shaped Detroit as much as have forces esoteric to the city. Detroit occupies a place in theoretical modernity that no other place does, and it exemplifies the social shortcomings of modernity's reliance on technological improvement guided by mysterious invisible hands. Theoretical context in Detroit serves to update the American Dream; this context falsifies narrations of a static version of the American Dream by means of an economy that is constantly and in increasingly greater degrees of flux. In other words, the full spectrum of the American Dream is on trial in Detroit. Using these ideas, I argue that in order to renew or

redevelop a city, one must read the entire story of the city, and then locate that story's economic, social, and political reflections on the landscape that is to be redeveloped. The story is written in epistemic chapters, continuously translated by future generations. My fear is that today's planners are reading the wrong version of Detroit's story.

Finally, I propose that revitalizing Detroit will not be possible without the evolution of a newly invigorated *regional* discourse that addresses the deep wounds of Detroit's past, a past that played no small part in the production and reproduction of Detroit's social and economic ills. I also suggest that metropolitan Detroit's nascent art community, which is braving a substantial media barrage and regional criticism, might be uniquely positioned to begin this discourse. Some of these artists have already taken on projects that might accomplish the goals I lay out here.

In chapters two and three I will expand on the scope of the problems facing Detroit, a short history of the social conditions that led to its current state, some statistics and demographics about the city, descriptions of the city's current physical landscapes, and Detroit's place in the conversation of shrinking cities. One of the things the media has done in the wake of the recession is draw attention to the city, for better or worse. Time Magazine has devoted a year of reporting on Detroit with special issues and a dedicated web space; the *New York Times* has run numerous articles on the state of development in the city; the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) has run news segments on Canadian TV detailing the economic woes of the city; photo blogs and YouTube videos with

titles like “Ghetto Tours” have recently appeared, giving the vicarious viewer a chance to make superficial and lamenting judgments about Detroit’s extreme landscapes. Detroit’s city government has struggled for generations with what to do with so much abandonment and blight. Mayor Dave Bing and the current Detroit government have taken steps to begin a discussion with city residents about “right-sizing”, which is a politically correct term for planned shrinking. Shrinking cities are common in the rustbelt, but planning for shrinking is a relatively new concept.

Chapter four of this thesis will take an in-depth look at the creative movement in Detroit. This movement has been cooking for a while, but now an inflow and emergence of artists, creative entrepreneurs, and interested local residents have put together the first steps of an arts-based redevelopment movement. This process has a good deal in common with the revitalization of the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. In this section, I compare the “Williamsburg Paradigm” to Detroit in this section. I also describe in detail some of the redevelopment agents and their ideas. The organizational structure inhabited by these agents, which consist of nonprofit organizations, independent artists, and a new breed of entrepreneurs, has a do-it-yourself mentality and a unique way of “wiki-financing” (Ryzik, 2010) their own creative efforts, although it remains to be seen how collaborative and/or cooperative this movement will become over time. I discuss and analyze specific projects as well as the impetus for these organizations and individuals to contribute to redevelopment efforts in Detroit.

Chapters five and six will address theoretical details relevant to the city's revitalization. Detroit has many problems that seem unique because of the scale on which they are reproduced. However, the belief that Detroit's problems can be separated from those of America, and even of the world, is myopic and serves to further isolate the city. Regionally, these same beliefs, which are borne of national political ideologies but shaped by global forces such as capitalism and racism, concentrate that isolation onto the city's poor and vulnerable, and in most cases, African American. I suggest that these factors have obfuscated a proper, more hopeful narrative for Detroit. Of further interest is the way that planners and other agents in Detroit view the city's landscapes as well as the visible and invisible borders that exist there. I argue that revitalizing Detroit requires a reimagining of the city that acknowledges the projections of social and economic inequalities on the city's landscape and detects the city's socially constructed borders. Understanding these borders and landscapes, as well as the factors that shape them, will ideally lead to a deeper regional discourse that applies the bedrock notions of social justice and human rights to Detroit's future.

Finally, this thesis is concerned with establishing, through a new discourse, a right to the city for Detroiters. This right is a human right, one that must be equally available to all city residents. Cities, according to Chicago school sociologist Robert Park, are a reflection of humanity. This is consistent with my suggestion, following Sharon Zukin, that landscapes are made up of projections of the inequalities generated by capital and race dynamics. These inequalities are reflections of the systems that humanity has produced and

continues to institutionally reinforce. Cities absorb these systems and host the most influential institutions, and therefore reflect humanity at its best and its worst under the influence of our current social structures. If the city is a reflection of us, it logically follows that when we change the city, we change ourselves. Without a right to the city, the people of cities are vulnerable to the whims of the powerful. Social justice is necessary where inequalities create conditions that reproduce those same inequalities; in Detroit, and perhaps in all cities, this has been the case. I argue that Detroit, and all cities, would be better places if a right to the city – one that balances individualism with collectivism – were established. Without justice for the marginalized in Detroit, the healing that is so badly needed cannot take place. I do not believe that I am in a position to decide what exactly the right to the city for Detroit should be – Detroiters should determine that. But I do believe that an honest regional discourse would lead to a larger and more positive narrative for Detroit.

I do not mean to suggest here that Detroit is actually a safe and beautiful city, and that the fearful stories of the city are completely conjured up out of some imaginary reality. But a narrative that induces fear of the city and its people only exploits the negative aspects. Detroit is not a simple city to digest; it represents so much about American and regional histories, identities, economics, and politics. At the same time, I cannot claim here to offer a complete analysis, fully able to tease apart the roots of the massive inequalities that have plagued the city – and the country – for the past 60 years. However, it is not my intention in this thesis to solve the gamut of social issues in the city. Yet, it *is* my intention to contribute

to a bigger and hopefully more productive and progressive narrative. The opportunities to be self-aware and critical in this analysis are many. A particular awareness is taking care not to create self-fulfilling prophecies through the reliance on stereotypes that exploit the underprivileged in the city. On the other side of that awareness is the danger of glossing over structural inequalities with idealism.

Detroit is a place where the most invisible of superpowers – time – is hard at work. Time, however, is not an easy concept to understand. Sharon Zukin discusses the use of the Greek term *kairos* in her book *Naked City* to describe “a sense of the past that intrudes into and challenges the present” (pg. 101). This term operates, according to Zukin, in juxtaposition to the Greek term *chronos*, which refers to literal, sequential time. Each concept has a place in Detroit. *Chrono*-logically, the city of Detroit is defined by 300 years of age, 50 years of extreme economic power, and another 50 years of extreme decline. But *kairo*-logically, the city is the most amazing place in the world, because nowhere else can one see the past in such a condition. Factory floors where thousands of shoe soles pounded daily now lie exposed from the outside, so that we can wander with the ghosts of yesterday. Armed with the knowledge that so many people have been in these exact places at different times in history, there is a feeling of incredible loneliness being in the sites of the city that are so deserted now. Considering time as a multidimensional factor makes redeveloping Detroit a tentative project. The importance of history is in conflict with the importance of

the future; we learn from the former to prepare for the latter. And there is no time to spare.

Chapter 2

HOW TO DESTROY A CITY

“...no amount of media magic or creative television scripting can ever disguise the seriousness of the problems facing our city”

-- a 1987 Detroit city image task force,
quoted in (Neill, pg 820) regarding the possibility of
marketing Detroit to tourists

The term *frisson* is used to describe a moment of sudden excitement, or a shudder that produces goose bumps. I came across the term reading William Neill’s article about how cities market in the face of negative perceptions. Detroit, as mentioned, is full of such caricatures. In this context, *frisson* refers to the thrill of being in a place that produces fear, as may happen when one visits a haunted house. Furthermore, the definition of *frisson* could be extended to the experience of an outsider who first lays eyes on some of the more pronounced features of Detroit’s industrial decline: mile-long ruins of once-buzzing automotive plants, out-of-place and expansive urban prairies, abandoned 400-foot tall skyscrapers that now function as communications towers, the hundreds of large and once-magnificent mansions that now stand either burned out, boarded up, or reclaimed by nature. These things are totally alien to most Americans, thus producing *frisson*.

Shuddering at the sight of urban decay does not complete the process that begins with *frisson*. The initial sight lodges into our brains, and we become investigators, feeling compelled to figure out *what happened here*. Most often, our conclusions are far too simple. It is similar to seeing a serious car accident; the first reaction is to be stunned, then that turns to hope for those involved to be

alright, but probably few people pull past the scene before taking mental notes as to try to piece together what happened based on the visible evidence. Finding an explanation for that which produces frisson is as human as walking upright. Attempting to contextualize Detroit's history, however, can lay fertile ground for the creation of unproductive polemics. It is important not to create false justifications. To make a worthy, and fair, analysis of Detroit's trajectory, going either forward or backward, we must interpret a holistic set of relationships, practices, institutions, and politics relative to the times in question. The changing modes of capitalism, the production and reproduction of urban poverty, the isolation of the poor, the evolution of race politics, the dynamics of mobility, physical geographical representations, and the relationships between all of the above have played large roles both in Detroit's history – and will do so in the future.

The American Dream...

While so much of Detroit's history is contested and debated, a few events and circumstances have certainly shaped the city's recent arc. For example, Detroit's nicknames before the 1950s made the city seem like it was the full realization of the "American Dream": it was called "Motor City", "The City of Homeowners" (Okrent, 2009), "Detroit the Dynamic", and most notably "The Arsenal of Democracy" (Sugrue, 1996). Detroit was the birthplace of Fordism (mass production/consumption), one of modernity's most poignant economic

epistememes. The 1920s in Detroit was a golden age; Jeffrey Eugenides, in his novel *Middlesex*, imagines the setting:

Skyscrapers were going up everywhere, and movie palaces and hotels. The twenties saw the construction of nearly all of Detroit's great buildings, the Penobscot Building and the second Buhl Building colored like an Indian belt, the New Union Trust Building, the Cadillac Tower, the Fisher Building with its gilded roof.

The American Dream was produced side by side with the auto industry in Detroit. Eugenides continues, describing through the voice of his character the externalities of the American Dream:

To my grandparents Detroit was like one big Koza Han during cocoon season. What they didn't see were the workers sleeping on the streets because of the housing shortage, and the ghetto just to the east, a thirty-square block area bounded by Leland, Macomb, Hastings, and Brush streets, teeming with the city's African Americans, who weren't allowed to live anywhere else. They didn't see, in short, the seeds of the city's destruction – its second destruction – because they were a part of it, too, all these people coming from everywhere to cash in on Henry Ford's five-dollar-a-day promise (Eugenides, 2002)

During the 1930s, a good deal of credit was given to Detroit for producing the way out of the Great Depression. Although the city suffered a small decline in the late 1930s, Detroit was a major boomtown again during World War II when automaker Ford led a conversion of many automobile factories into wartime assembly lines, producing planes and tanks for the military. Unemployment in the city during the 1940s was virtually nonexistent (Sugrue, 1996). At the height of Detroit's ascent, shortly after World War II, almost two million people called

Detroit home, making it the fourth largest city in the U.S. (Okrent, 2009). An article from *Fortune* magazine in 1956 captured America's love affair with Detroit:

The community's great \$4.5-billion auto industry makes and sells a product that every American loves; the industry's 400,000 workers are among the highest paid in the world; and all in all, U.S. capitalism seems to stand out in its finest colors and in its greatest genius in the manufacturing area around Detroit (quoted from Herron, 2010)

Detroit was an exemplar of the American Dream. The city was proof that American capitalism was the best and most progressive economic delivery system the world had ever seen. By 1956, when the above quote was written, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were becoming embroiled in an economic competition between capitalism and authoritarian communism. It is more than a bit ironic that both Detroit and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed.

During its heyday, Detroit was truly industrial. Its skyline was low-rise and littered with smokestacks and brick. Train lines spider-webbed throughout the city, connecting specialized factories, parts suppliers, and warehouses with one another. Finished products and parts alike were paraded relentlessly down the Detroit River, which connects to the Great Lakes system and is a vital shipping route still to this day. In the shadows of the city's industrial core were living quarters for the millions of people who relied on the factory system for work. On Detroit's east and west sides were immense and sprawling and fully inhabited tree-lined neighborhoods; in juxtaposition to the cities along the east coast in which land was expensive and in short supply, Detroit featured a

workforce that was comprised almost totally of homeowners. Indeed, apartments and rental properties made up only 1.3 percent of all residences in 1950. While Detroit certainly had its fair share of upscale neighborhoods comprised of mansions in which the dignitaries of the auto industry lived (Boston Edison, for example), most of the city's laborers' houses were "cheaply built" and "strictly utilitarian" in construction (Sugrue, 1996).

Rapid economic growth along with the promise of freedom attracted many opportunity-seeking black migrants from the south during the early 1900s. In 1910, Detroit had roughly 5,700 black residents, or 1.2 percent of the population; by 1970, those numbers had increased to 660,000 and 45 percent respectively. Urban scholar Thomas Sugrue describes the "Great Migration" into Detroit during the mid-20th Century:

Migrants came with the hope that the booming northern city would be free of the harsh segregation that had perpetuated Jim Crow on the docks, in the mines, and in the warehouses of the south. Some observers called Detroit "the northernmost southern city" or "the largest southern city in the United States," but it was, after all, a place where blacks could vote, ride side by side with whites on streetcars and buses, and share the same drinking fountains and bathrooms (Sugrue, 1996, pg. 23).

But Detroit was no exception to racism or segregation; both were endemic (one might say essential) to Detroit's development. Most black migrants were confined to a ghetto called "Paradise Valley" on the east side of the city. Whites generally did not take to sharing their American Dream with blacks; according to a *Time Magazine* article, one builder constructed a "six-foot high concrete wall,

nearly half a mile long, to separate his development from an adjacent black neighborhood” (Okrent, 2009).

When housing became scarce and blacks began searching for homes outside of the ghettos, whites resisted. Contested neighborhoods and housing projects were the sites of numerous brawls and protests between whites and blacks. Increasingly angry black protests across the country were demanding inclusion in workplaces, which also contributed to black/white tensions in Detroit. Wartime production in the city was interrupted more than a few times by striking white workers angry about the hiring of blacks to positions that only whites had previously worked. In 1943, these tensions culminated in a three-day riot. Blacks, angry about their inferior designations in housing and labor markets, organized on Belle Isle by the thousands. After fights broke out and rumors began circulating in both camps, blacks began to loot white-owned shops. In response, whites ransacked the black neighborhood of Paradise Valley. The mostly-white Detroit police, who were openly sympathetic to whites and “were especially brutal to blacks” (Sugrue, 1996), exacerbated the carnage; Detroit police shot 17 black rioters to death without killing a single white rioter. In total, 34 people were killed, 75 percent of them black; another 675 people were injured and almost 2,000 arrests were made before the National Guard quelled the riots (*ibid*).

As the city attempted equilibrium, housing continued to be the preferred institutional method for isolating poor black communities. Many blacks were forced to live in squalid conditions upon arrival in Detroit, although many were

also convinced that their living conditions would improve. However, as in other Midwestern cities such as Chicago practicing “American apartheid” (see Massey and Denton 1998), blacks in Detroit were routinely subjected to steep interest rates, excessively large down payments, difficulties in procuring mortgage loans, and problems obtaining land contracts from the city. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) had developed the Residential Security Maps and Surveys apparatus around that time with the intention of assisting mortgage and loan companies in determining a person’s eligibility for securing loans. These maps essentially designated black neighborhoods – even neighborhoods that had a very small black population – with a “D” (red) rating, which meant that no one from that neighborhood could possibly qualify for a loan. These neighborhoods were all colored in red on the maps, which gave birth to the term “redlining” (*ibid*).

Eventually the Paradise Valley neighborhood was leveled to accommodate the construction of I-75 into the downtown business district (“Paradise Valley”, 2010). Under the guise of urban renewal, which for Detroit consisted primarily of freeway construction during the 1950s, many of Detroit’s poor black neighborhoods were razed. Factories and plants where many blacks worked, business districts near black-majority neighborhoods, and many homes were all condemned to create the necessary land for freeway construction. The Detroit city government believed that with the arrival of the freeway system and the clearance of slums and “blighted areas”, the city’s economy (which had entered into the era of deindustrialization) would improve (Sugrue, 1996). Detroit’s

blacks were left to wonder what this meant for them, although they surely knew the answer by then.

A decade of deindustrialization in which the city lost hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs followed. Companies were following new, more flexible and decentralized strategies (which were backed and encouraged by Federal policies) and mobilizing their capital accordingly. Much of Detroit's smaller manufacturing and parts economy relocated to the suburbs due to ease of using the freeways, locating themselves out of reach from black laborers who lacked access to transportation. Consequently, a hefty chunk of Detroit's urban industrial core was left to rot; the predominantly white workforce, which had begun moving to the suburbs (i.e. "white flight"), could cruise right by the destroyed inner city on the newly constructed freeways (Sugrue, 1996). Black Detroiters were not exactly welcomed in the suburbs; one suburban mayor was quoted as saying, "Every time we hear of a Negro moving in...we respond quicker than you do to a fire" (Okrent, 2009). Residents in black neighborhoods became ever more isolated, creating a new type of poverty previously unknown in the United States.

Hope or anger?

Thomas Sugrue, whose account of post-war Detroit is perhaps the sociological equivalent of the Bible in terms of explaining urban crises during the mid- to late-twentieth century, stresses the consequences of this form of isolated poverty on the city. Sugrue argues that the

economic transformation of the city launched a process of deproletarianization, as growing numbers of African Americans, especially young men, joined the ranks of those who gave up on work. By 1980, nearly half the adult male population had only tenuous connections to the city's formal labor market. The deproletarianization of the city's black population had far reaching consequences: it shaped a pattern of poverty in the postwar city that was disturbingly new. Whereas in the past, most poor people had had some connection to the mainstream labor market, in the latter part of the 20th Century the urban poor found themselves on the economic margins (Sugrue, 1996, pg. 262)

Many of the city's young, black men became "wholly unattached from the labor market" (*ibid*), a condition called *deproletarianization* by Sugrue. The conditions of isolation, poverty, lack of mobility, and seemingly endless political and economic inequalities all concentrated on Detroit's urban black population gave birth to an emotional fork in the road – in one direction was hope, and in the other was anger.

By the mid-1960s, most forms of hope had become anger. The simmering rage became violence in the summer of 1967 when five days of riots in the city's neighborhoods killed 43 people, 30 of whom were killed by either city police or National Guardsmen (Sugrue, 1996). According to an NPR article about the riots, 350 people were injured, 2500 buildings were destroyed or damaged, and 7000 people were arrested during the five-day ordeal. The riots, which began after Detroit police arrested over 80 African-Americans at an illegal afterhours bar, was perhaps the climactic display of the frustration and anger of the inner city Detroit

black population (Headlee, 2007). In the two decades after the riots, the white exodus to the suburbs accelerated, Detroit's poorest neighborhoods became even poorer, and the auto industry continued to abandon the inner city. To add insult, the Reagan administration drastically reduced urban spending during the 1980s (Sugrue, 1996). The nicknames mentioned in the introduction to this paper, such as "Murder City USA", began to embed themselves into the minds of Americans, normalizing fear of the city and further scaring away business and tourism.

These historically generated inequalities manifest in Detroit, and many other cities, constantly to this day. Detroit was becoming not just a ghost town, but the bogeyman itself.

History's projections on today's Detroit

According to the 2000 Census, the city of Detroit was at the time 81 percent African American in a state (Michigan) that is 80 percent white. Maybe the most salient reflection of Detroit's multi-faceted decline is its plummeting population. According to Time Magazine, Detroit has lost about 50% of its 1950 population. In 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated Detroit's population at 871,121, reflecting an eight percent drop from 2000 (roughly 80,000 people). Of the city's population in 2000, over a quarter were classified as poor by the Census at that time ("State and County Quickfacts", 2009). On March 22, 2011, the Detroit Free Press reported that it

had obtained 2010's Census numbers from an anonymous source.⁸ The 2010 Census revealed a dramatic, and heartbreaking, figure for Detroit – a population of 713, 777, which is a decline of almost 20% in four years and Detroit's lowest population in a century. According to these figures, Detroit lost “one resident every 22 minutes between 2001 and 2010” (Wisely and Spangler, 2010). By 2005, Detroit was officially the nation's poorest city⁹ with a poverty rate of over 33%.¹⁰ According to the Detroit Free Press, over 75,000 new poor were created in Detroit between 2002 and 2005,¹¹ a time when the nation as a whole was enjoying an economic upswing. In 2005, two years before the national recession began, almost half (48.5%) of Detroit's children lived in poverty (Montemurri et al, 2005).

The housing market, perhaps Detroit's Achilles heel over the past 70 years or so, is teetering on the verge of complete collapse. Land banking, a process that acts like clearing houses for city-owned properties in urban areas, is thought to be impossible in Detroit due to a lack of buyers and a stubborn city council that refuses to cede power.¹² The city owns in total about 40,000 tax-foreclosed houses, lots, and industrial spaces (Gallagher, 2010). Hundreds of houses are currently being auctioned in Detroit for less than the cost of a cheeseburger from

⁸ At the time that this thesis is being written, the results of the 2010 Census are not officially available

⁹ The article cites data from the U.S. Census Bureau

¹⁰ The U.S. Census Bureau measures poverty at \$11,344 for an individual in 2010. A family of four would be considered poor if their total income was below \$22,314.

¹¹ This article is not available online. Find the text at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~gmarkus/montemurri.htm>

¹² The Detroit City Council actually reviews the sale of every city-owned piece of land, even the most derelict of properties

McDonalds. The median home price in Detroit is currently between \$6,000 and \$8,000 depending on the report,¹³ but many homes are abandoned or in foreclosure and available at auctions for as little as \$1.

Time Magazine lists Detroit's unemployment rate at 28.9 percent, which is already a staggering number. However, many sources question unemployment statistics in cities like Detroit due to the fact that so many people have given up on finding employment or have more or less grown up around informal (and un-measurable) economies. The *Detroit News* reported¹⁴ in 2009 that when accounting for Detroit's underemployed and completely discouraged jobseekers, the unemployment rate is closer to *fifty percent (50%)* ("Detroit's Unemployment Rate...", 2009). Detroit Mayor Dave Bing used the fifty percent figure during a visit to Washington, D.C., in 2009, saying "what many already suspected: that the city's official unemployment rate was as believable as Santa Claus"¹⁵ (Gray, 2009). In other words, the nearly thirty percent unemployment rate – although three times higher than the national average – is a fantasy. The more likely truth is that *half of the potential labor force of Detroit is unemployed*.

While I am reluctant to include statistics on crime in Detroit (so as not to perpetuate the "murder city" stereotype), it is important to provide a holistic look

¹³ \$1 homes in Detroit are not urban legend; they are both real and abundant. A simple search on the web would bring up hundreds of examples. For citation purposes, see: (McGreal, 2010)

¹⁴ This article is no longer available online. Instead see a report on the article at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/16/detroits-unemployment-rat_n_394559.html

¹⁵ This was initially reported by the *Detroit News* and *Free Press*, but the article is no longer available online. See <http://detroit.blogs.time.com/2009/12/16/in-detroit-nearly-50-unemployment-rate/>

at the city. Various claims have been made about Detroit in this context, many of which contribute to the reputation associated with the city. Detroit has routinely been called “the nation’s most dangerous city”¹⁶ despite pleas from FBI researchers and Detroit politicians to stop comparing Detroit’s crime data with other cities’ crime data – there are simply too many uncontrollable factors to make such comparisons (“Detroit named...”, 2009). While Detroit is certainly a dangerous city by most metrics, its reputation and aesthetic appearance certainly bloat the truth about crime in the city. According to a Wayne State University publication in 2005, crime in the city has in fact fallen almost totally across the board. Between 2000 and 2004, total crime for the city dropped about twenty-three percent; the biggest drops were in the robbery, larceny, and aggravated assault categories. The report insinuated that incidences of theft and robbery might soon go up in accord with the poverty rate, but hadn’t been measured at that time due to a typical two-year lag in the relationship. Although *Time Magazine* claims that the murder rate in Detroit is “soaring”, I could not find any statistical evidence to support claims of a drastic change in homicide rate. The homicide rate has fluctuated slightly over the past decade; in 2000, there were 42 homicides for every 100,000 residents, and in 2004, there were 43 homicides for every 100,000 residents (“Detroit Crime Barometer”, 2005). FBI statistics from 2009 show that there were 365 murders for an estimated 908,441¹⁷ people, which

¹⁶ This reference is from a 2007 CQ Press report. See: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21870766/>

¹⁷ This number is contested. Official population numbers for 2009 are estimates, however this is the number that the FBI used to calculate crime rates in Detroit for 2009.

equates to a rate of about 41 homicides for every 100,000 (“Crime in the United States”, 2010). This rate is inarguably high – for example, about four-and-a-half times the homicide rate of Phoenix.¹⁸ It may not be a comfort to Detroiters to know that the murder rate is not soaring when the baseline is so high. What is perhaps more alarming, however, is that an estimated 70% of all homicides are unsolved, meaning that seven out of ten murderers remain on the street in Detroit (Okrent, 2009).

As a result of statistics such as these, the website Neighborhood Scout, which researches neighborhoods for people looking to move, ranks Detroit as a 4 out of 100 in safety, with 100 being the most safe and 0 being the least safe. The only other major cities ranked as more dangerous than Detroit by Neighborhood Scout are Memphis, St. Louis, Oakland, and Las Vegas. According to the group’s statistics, one’s chance of becoming a victim of violent crime in Detroit is 1 in 60; the same measurement in the state of Michigan as a whole is 1 in 177. One’s chances of becoming a victim of a property crime in Detroit were listed as 1 in 16; Michigan as a whole was listed as 1 in 31.

Ruin porn: A voyeur’s view...

By any account, Detroit is a city like no other. One of the most astonishing physical characteristics is the amount of decay and the proliferations of ruins in the city. The idea of “ruin porn” has recently surfaced in reference to the almost erotic draw of such calamity as there is in parts of Detroit.

¹⁸ Based on the same 2009 FBI statistics

Photographing the ruins of Detroit has been in vogue for quite some time, from Camilo Vergara's epic *New American Ghetto* (1995) project to the practice of "drive-by shooting" by photography students at midtown Detroit's College of Creative Studies to Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's new "The Ruins of Detroit" museum photo exhibit. Now, thanks to technology and the Internet, it is not necessary to go to Detroit to see for oneself how abandoned the city is. Detroit's most fantastic ruins are available to tour by way of Google Maps (overhead satellite view and the very useful street view feature), YouTube, photo blogs galore, and websites such as DetroitYes!¹⁹ that have dedicated tours of the ruins of Detroit.

Since I could not spend a huge amount of time in Detroit researching this project, I found Google Maps especially helpful. The bird's eye view of the city really tells a different story than what is visible from the street. Almost every neighborhood has empty lots, and some look like prairies from overhead. Take, for example, the intersection of Carrie and Marcus Streets just east of Hamtramck, where many eastern Europeans settled during the 1800s. Where there used to be neighborhoods full of houses, there is now simply nothing but fields and piles of rubble. The streets are unpainted and cracked, barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other, although the chances of two cars being on these streets at the same time are rather low. Block after block in this area is deserted, and yet it is no more than three miles northeast of the downtown central business district. Southwest of there, one can drive (or scroll along with Google Maps...) along

¹⁹ See: http://www.detroityes.com/0tourdetroit.htm#The_Fabulous_Ruins

Chene Street through the fringes of the “Poletown” neighborhood and see almost nothing but fields, some mowed and many not. There is still a smattering of small businesses and evidence of community organization – TV repair shops, local taverns, and churches, all of which have bars in the windows – but a majority of the buildings are boarded up or burned beyond repair, all of them brick and cement, so characteristically from an era that many of us do not recognize. These descriptions are not unusual in Detroit.

On YouTube, there are a handful of “Detroit ghetto tour” videos that showcase some of the worst examples of Detroit’s neighborhoods that have been left behind. Many parts of the “ghetto tour” videos dwell on houses and industrial sites that are so decimated that one would assume that they were looking at video of the aftermath of an F5 tornado. House after house is either half-demolished or boarded up, roofs are missing, trees are growing through the insides of some houses, trash piles are strewn everywhere including in the middle of the street, boats are seen stuck in forests of dead trees, bathtubs are sitting on the side of the road, cars that haven’t run in decades are abandoned in overgrown driveways, and almost everything seems to be singed. Most of the storefronts, houses, apartments, and industrial sites shown in the videos look like they have a great deal of fire damage. Many building foundations are shown with 15-foot high piles of burnt rubble sitting on top of them. Homeless people skulk in between rubble piles with their shopping carts, probably hoping to forage something of value (“A Tour of”, 2006). If I hadn’t seen these things with my own eyes, I

would assume that these videos were actually from a war zone pretending to be Detroit.

Of interest are also the many news reports found on YouTube. One particular report produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) questions how bad things are in Detroit. Regarding the result of the report, the news anchor says, “Well, we’ve never seen anything like it before.”²⁰ The report documents such oddities as a man who survives by hunting raccoons and freezing (and selling) the meat, real estate agents specializing in \$1 houses, and wild animals such as coyotes, pheasants, and beavers living amongst the urban prairies and abandoned factories. At one point in the video, the reporter is standing in the middle of the aforementioned Poletown neighborhood, less than three miles from the city’s core, surrounded by nothing but fields and a handful of charred houses (“Detroit: A Dying...”, 2009).

If there is really such a thing as “ruin porn”, then Detroit is the Playboy Mansion. Some of the icons of Detroit’s industrial past now exist in brazen displays of abandonment and ruin. Seeing them up close, or even viewing pictures of some of them, elicits the feeling of being in some sort of museum, except for the accompanying discomfort and pathos. The Packard Plant, designed by famous industrial architect Albert Kahn in 1903, at its height of production consisted of 74 buildings spread over 80 acres. Now the site, which closed for good in 1958, has been informally converted to an underground techno-party site and a graffiti canvas, stretching on for a full mile between I-94 and Warren

²⁰ watch the CBC report at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL_YdRxBhZI

Avenue (Wright, 2000). A ghostly 20-story train station named The Michigan Central Depot, designed by the same firm that designed Grand Central Station in Manhattan, is another of Detroit's most iconic ruins. Built in 1913, it was purposefully separated from the commerce of Michigan Avenue and surrounded by parklands to highlight its grandiose design; it is now ruined, empty²¹ for over thirty years. At the head of Roosevelt Park near the Corktown neighborhood, the depot is a 250-foot tall beaux-arts relic complete with marble walls and Roman-styled columns. The list of ruined facilities that were built for an economy that no longer exists is endless: the Henry Ford Model T Automobile Plant, the Piquette Avenue buildings, the Book Tower, the Cadillac Hotel, and so on. Some of these places are slated for demolition, some have already been demolished, and some (most notably the train depot) are hopefully being saved and preserved.²²

All of this abandonment and ruin leads to one big question: What do we do with the space? This is the hottest question in Detroit right now, as fundamentally different thinking is beginning to take hold of the city. A key element lies within the politics of the city, and Detroit has had a troubled political past. Housing policies of white city mayors during the 1940s and early 1950s, particularly Albert Cobo, played vital roles in the segregation of urban blacks (Sugrue, 1996, pg 82-86). Coleman Young, Detroit's first black mayor, has been accused by many of playing what Time Magazine called "the politics of retribution" (itself a racialized term...) at the cost of the city's further alienation (Okrent, 2009). Recent former mayor Kwame Kilpatrick (2002-2008) ran a

²¹ Empty except for the homeless and the animals that live there

²² see the website <http://savemichigancentral.com/>

scandal-filled administration that ended with Kilpatrick serving as many as five years in jail²³ (Bunkley, 2010).

Now the city is under the auspices of Dave Bing, a former Detroit Pistons basketball player and a businessman. Bing has been described as frank, shrewd, and uninterested in the politics of getting re-elected. A deft and successful businessman, business leaders in the metro Detroit area had placed him at the top of their list for mayor of the city. He inherited a city government that is bloated and rather dysfunctional, a budget deficit of almost \$300 million, and all of the other problems of Detroit (Gray, 2009). He has already implemented a swath of changes in rhetoric and planning, some of which are totally new in Detroit's politics. The Detroit Works Project,²⁴ a "roadmap" project that combines public and private urban planning, neighborhood collaboration, and a grassroots vibe, seeks to define the immediate future of the city – something that is about 40 years overdue. One of the new ideas that Bing has been embracing over the past few years is the idea of "right-sizing". Right-sizing is a politically correct term for planned shrinking; in other words, Bing – and almost everyone else that knows anything about Detroit's current situation – believes that Detroit is too big for its own geography. Detroit, according to them, must shrink in order to survive.

²³ The actual sentence is for Kilpatrick to serve between eighteen months and five years in jail

²⁴ see: <http://detroitworksproject.com/>

Chapter 3

HOW TO SHRINK A CITY

“If we don’t confront the question of what we have already lost, how we lost it, and what alternative forms of ownership might keep them in place, we risk destroying the authentic urban places that remain.”

-- Sharon Zukin in *Naked City* (pg 27)

Detroit, like many cities in large Midwestern states, grew spatially as quickly as it did economically and demographically. Between 1900 and 1925, Detroit grew from 28 square miles to 139 square miles to accommodate its burgeoning industrial and workforce demands (“History of Boston Edison”, 2007). During its industrial heyday, the city was home to almost two million people, many of whom owned homes. Neighborhoods on the east and west sides of Detroit stretched on as far as the eye could see. Detroit was never as densely populated as the cities of the northeast, but what it lacked in density it made up for in sheer footprint – within the boundaries of the city is more land than the combined footprints of Boston, San Francisco, and Manhattan (“Thinking About Shrinking”, 2010). Now, the city has only about 45% of the population that it was eventually built for, but with the same 139 square mile footprint – that is, as the population shrunk, the geography did not.

According to a Bloomberg News article, it was Detroit’s Recreation Department that first acknowledged the need for the city to shrink. The report from the city government, released in 2006, called for reducing the scope but improving the quality of its facilities. The Bloomberg article that cites the report

was written in 2008 as the “Big Three”²⁵ automakers were soliciting the Federal government for bailout money. The article’s title – “GM’s Bust Turns Detroit Into Urban Prairie of Vacant-Lot Farms” – rightly insinuates that the automakers’ historical retreat from inner-city Detroit to the suburbs essentially killed large swaths of Detroit, which is made more egregious by the fact that the automakers were asking for Federal bailouts the size of which we can rest assured the city of Detroit will never see. These “dead” parts of Detroit, the aforementioned desolate urban prairies of the city, stoke the argument for right-sizing (McKee and Ortolani, 2008).

The production of the urban prairies of Detroit has had many side effects. Pheasants, raccoons, rabbits, and other wild animals have moved back into the city to live amongst the tall grasses and expansive lots where neighborhoods once were. City services in these areas are almost nonexistent; traffic lights don’t work, streets don’t get plowed after snow falls, and police generally don’t patrol here anymore (Okrent and Gray, 2010). In total, Detroit has about 40 square miles of abandoned space – for the purpose of scope, the city of Miami is about 36 square miles (land only), while San Francisco and Boston are both just over 45 square miles total. Detroit planners and government officials have now begun to grapple with the fact that the city needs to think radically about what to do with all of its vacant land. Despite the common rhetoric surrounding the development of cities typically being centered on the concept of growth, shrinking seems to be

²⁵ The “Big Three” is the moniker for General Motors, Chrysler, Ford

the logical answer. This concept, as previously mentioned, has been framed as “right-sizing”, which insinuates Detroit is no longer sized correctly.

Shrinking a city is a concept mired in very difficult decisions. At the core of the concept is bringing the geographical realities of the city in line with its fiscal realities. In 2005, Youngtown, Ohio, implemented a plan to shrink itself, called “Youngtown 2010”. That city, which at its peak had 170,000 people but now has only 70,000, collaborated with local community development organizations (CDOs) and Youngstown State University to design the plan which is supposed to make the city “more nimble”. Included in the plan is a broad rhetorical change that links shrinking with progress. The idea is to get residents on board with the plan to shrink by showing them how it can benefit them. Projects undertaken by the city include creating urban gardens in blighted lots, clearing abandoned structures, rethinking where new structures are built, concentrating on downtown aesthetic improvement, and sponsoring farmers markets. Youngstown 2010 was designed “to breathe”, as Youngstown mayor Jay Williams put it, which means that it will be amended and adjusted to fit the current needs of the city every ten years; the city charter has even been amended to accommodate Mayor Williams’ vision. The plan’s architects emphatically describe the plan as diametric to classic “urban renewal”, says Williams (Parris, 2010). But residents have such fears, and they are understandable.

A fear of urban renewal is understandable because of what “shrinking” requires. Providing city services such as education, trash collection, fire and police, and sewer is increasingly difficult with shrinking tax bases and

pockmarked neighborhoods. Therefore, if a city is to shrink, it has to decide which neighborhoods it wants to save. In an online *Time Magazine* article (*Time* reporters spent an entire year living in Detroit documenting the city's woes), Daniel Okrent and Steven Gray summarize the shrinking conundrum rather well, saying, "Detroit has to employ a form of triage that could imperil the political future of even the boldest elected officials: a choice to abandon failed neighborhoods so still-functioning neighborhoods can thrive" (Okrent and Gray, 2010). This is of course very problematic to residents in neighborhoods that are slated as unworthy of saving. According to some accounts, people isolated in failing neighborhoods would move tomorrow if provided the opportunity. On the other hand, many residents grew up in and raised their own children in these houses and are unwilling to leave. In Youngstown, those that refused to leave were not forced to and still received services. But Detroit is not Youngstown – Detroit is much larger, and it remains to be seen whether or not people will be forced to leave their homes in abandoned areas.

How 'Shrinking' might reshape Detroit

In studying a variety of proposals, city government websites, and articles quoting Detroit politicians and planners, I could not find the word "shrinking" anywhere. The rhetoric is all about "vision" and "smart planning" and diversity in residential offerings as well as landscapes. What the picture ends up looking like is a series of neighborhood and small business nodes, all connected by some sort of public transportation (such as the planned M1 light rail), with the

abandoned spaces in between being developed as greenways, urban gardens, parks, and even farms. The idea, according to a Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD) report²⁶, is to create “a unique array of choices in residential living” along with “an abundance of natural green space (“Community Development Futures...”, 2010).

The same CDAD report sees eleven unique spatial and/or zoning classifications as directions that Detroit’s government should pursue. Of these eleven classifications, three of them have either the word “nature” or “green” in them, a surprising development in an industrial city like Detroit. The other eight zoning categories consist of three varieties of residential (traditional, spacious, and urban homestead), industrial zones, downtown, and three types of “hubs” – shopping, village (low density), and city (high density). Impacts are described in short-, medium-, and long-term intervals:

- Short-term (1-3 years) impacts are demolitions, debris clearing, zoning changes, environmental remediation, land banking, and conservation. The most interesting short-term impact is “relocation assistance”, which means relocating residents in zoned

²⁶ CDAD is a collective of representatives from many different Detroit interests, including private developers and public employees, but mainly of community development corporations (CDCs) and neighborhood organizations. Cooperation between CDCs, city government, and private sector actors is almost unusual due to the fact that often these individual constituents act in their own self-interest. The fact that the members of CDAD came together to create this report is a sign, in my opinion, that Detroit is ready for deep structural change. The report can be accessed at http://detroitcommunitydevelopment.org/CDAD_Revitalization_Framework_2010.pdf

“green” areas, an impact that will be worth watching to see how it unfolds.

- Medium-term (3-5 years) impacts are recruiting businesses, dealing with mass transit issues, zoning adjustments, and “gravel road services.”²⁷
- Long-term (more than 5 years) impacts include gentrification prevention strategies, the “daylighting” of many of the city’s long-buried streams and rivers, and implanting a smart-grid utility system (“Community Development Futures...”, 2010).

The report is comprehensive and every detail seems to be accounted for across its rather brief 20 pages. Nowhere does the report say anything about shrinking, although the nonprofit conglomerate’s website does mention “right-sizing” a few times. Tom Goddeeris, a member of CDAD was quoted in *Crain’s Business Detroit* as saying, “...we need a different looking city. The goal is not to re-create Detroit 1950” (Kaffer, 2010). And a different city is certainly what the report envisions. At one point, it lists “country living in the city” as its vision for the urban homestead sector, envisioning small farms powered by alternative energy (not provided by the city). Who could have conceptually predicted a statement like this? Other interesting visions include “collective ownership of vacant lots” and “green and blue” industrial areas that house such things as “fish hatcheries, hydroponic and aquaculture centers and newly rehabbed warehouses” that store things such as harvested trees (“Community Development Futures...”,

²⁷ “Gravel road services” include dealing with such conundrums as how to deliver mail to people living in designated relocation zones

2010). Again, twenty years ago – even ten years ago – one would have been hard pressed to find anyone who thought these strategies would be viable in Detroit. But now, nothing is shocking. Detroit is a city in a state of emergency, or in “triage” as many refer to it. Right-sizing is, for now, where the developmental trajectory in Detroit seems to be heading.

According to Detroit-area planner Brian Connolly, the city of Detroit needs to implement four planning components. First, the plan to shrink must be done comprehensively, engaging a variety of stakeholders in developing an asset inventory. Second, infrastructure all over the city needs to be downsized, even in the vibrant areas such as Midtown, where Wayne State University and the infamous “Cass Corridor” are. For instance, many streets are too wide, which discourages foot traffic. Third, growth and investment need to be focused on logical and collaborative projects. Finally, the suburbs need to be engaged – this is what Connolly rightly calls a “long-overdue” dialogue (Connolly, 2010). Engaging the suburbs would help to de-isolate Detroit from the suburbs, which has two effects. First, it would work to help the city and the suburbs realize that they are dependent on each other. Second, it would help re-integrate the city and the suburbs; as it is now, the two geographies are bitterly divided along racial lines. Actually, over the past few years, Detroit’s white population has increased to 13.3%, although this might be partly due to more blacks leaving the city. But with a growing and somewhat bohemian creative scene (which is the subject of

the next section), a certain “return flight”²⁸ of (young) suburban whites into the city is capturing considerable attention (Okrent and Gray, 2010).

Critical Shrinkage, or Cold Water Theory...

Almost everyone who has written an article about Detroit agrees that shrinking is necessary in some capacity or another. But the details about how the city plans its shrinking are important, because having 800,000 people in a 140 square-mile city is not an uncommon situation. Portland, Oregon, for example, is about 145 square miles and has a population of about 580,000. At over 6,000 residents per square mile, Detroit has a higher population density than Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Phoenix. Of course, the problem is that Detroit used to have a density of about 14,000 residents per square mile, and the infrastructure to support that density is still in place (although that infrastructure is dilapidated and stretched).

There are numerous questions about how shrinking a city like Detroit would work; one of the biggest is in terms of Detroit’s disappearing population. Detroit has *already* shrunk; but where are all the people? I started to wonder whether or not the overall population of the metropolitan Detroit area had shrunk at all. So I researched some population statistics²⁹ and set up a chart. I was trying

²⁸ This “return flight” idea is lifted from the following quote found on Time Magazine’s Detroit blog from Greg Thrasher: “I hate to admit it, but I am fully aware that the presence of white folks in America increases the quality of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for nonwhites. It is a reality I have confronted all my life as a black activist, yet I do hope the return flight is full.”

²⁹ Much of the data came from a presentation at this website:
<http://www.somacn.com/p469.php>

to uncover whether or not Detroit necessarily *had* to do more to shrink. The table below shows how the population of metropolitan Detroit has *increased* while the overall population of Detroit has *decreased*.

| Year | Population of Metropolitan Detroit | Population of City of Detroit | Percentage of total Population Living in City |
|-------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1910 | 761,481 | 465,766 | 61 |
| 1940 | 2,613,844 | 1,623,452 | 62 |
| 1960 | 4, 181,354 | 1,670,144 | 39 |
| 1980 | 4, 682,726 | 1,203,368 | 26 |
| 2000 | 4,833,493 | 951,270 | 20 |

Notice that the overall population of metro Detroit never actually shrinks. But as of 2000, only *twenty percent* of metro Detroit’s residents actually lived in the city. I am assuming this means that as Detroiters left the city, they probably went to the suburbs as opposed to outside the state; therefore, the right-sizing debate must then be considering just the city of Detroit, not the whole metropolitan area. I suggest, then, that it might be potentially very flawed thinking not to consider *regional* actions in any long term planning. That is, a city plan should include potential consequences involving the suburbs of the city. The fact that eighty percent of metro Detroit’s population lives outside the city raises many questions in the shrinking context:

1. What happens if the city spends its resources on shrinking and suddenly there is a trend of suburbanites returning into the city? Would new housing and workforce demands dismantle the carefully planned urban

farms, green zones, and aquaculture centers? What's the embedded strategy for dealing with Detroit's population if it hits 2 million again?

2. If infrastructure were taken out or turned off and left to rot due to "right-sizing", would it have to be replaced when Detroit is beautiful and desirable to live in again?
3. If Detroit successfully "right-sizes", thus relocating families living in neighborhoods targeted for shut down, would those same families be satisfactorily compensated when their former property regains value? What would be their fate if the city gentrifies?
4. Oakland County, just north of the city, is one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. It seems obvious that any plan for Detroit's future must be a regional plan that creates a more proficient relationship between the city and its suburbs. How does planned shrinking address the dialogue gap between Detroit and the suburbs?

Roberta Brandes Gratz, a famous urban critic, shares some of my concerns. Gratz insists that the shrinking cities theory is just a theory, and an unproven one at that. In her essay for website Planetizen, she claims that there has not been one clear example of a successfully shrunken city, although efforts to shrink have been fought in the past (she cites the South Bronx). She also says that demolishing things is easy (and usually subsidized in some fashion by the Federal government) while renovating is hard (and usually penalized or bureaucratized). Says Gratz:

Cities, even the so-called shrinking ones, don't seem to have a problem spending public money for demolition and then giving tax breaks to developers to build new. Why not first give incentives and tax breaks to individuals willing to

reclaim vacant buildings and commit to occupancy for a minimum number of years?

Gratz's cites numerous examples of successful rehabilitated neighborhoods that were not cleared, but instead were renovated and people returned. She rests her case on the fact that urban redevelopment should build on existing assets instead of clearing them (Gratz, 2010).

It is highly doubtful that Gratz's argument would ever be realized in praxis in Detroit; Gratz appears to vastly underestimate the size of Detroit's vacancy problem. It would not be logical to compare SoHo (which is about 15 x 5 city blocks³⁰) in New York City to the patchwork 40+ square miles of vacant land in Detroit. What is bothersome, however, is that all aspects of the shrinking discussion (as well as Gratz's criticism of it) miss what I believe to be the most obvious truth: many of Detroit's current dilemmas have stemmed from deep structural inequalities. Why are the social inequalities that *generated many of Detroit's current urban crises* not the absolute fulcrum of this method of redevelopment (shrinking)? Is it not logical to think that if these problems were addressed that revitalization might begin to take shape naturally? While planning for shrinking might be a reality that Detroit can no longer hide from, and I am not here advocating against it, the "harsh realities" that journalists, politicians, and planners seem so keen on talking up should not be about which neighborhoods to shut down. Instead they should be about how to begin the conversation about closing the city's deep racial and economic lacerations. They will not close themselves just by allowing enough time to go by; the more time that is allowed

³⁰ See: <http://nabewise.com/nyc/soho/map>

to pass will actually probably serve to deep and further internalize them. If these conversations do not take place, at least in conjunction with the “right-sizing” plans, communities – especially black and white – will forever have a difficult time working together.

My critique here is that Detroit’s elected officials, nonprofits, academic leaders, and other interested actors need to prioritize. Shrinking from a population standpoint is a reality that Detroit has been facing for half a century; planning for it will need to happen, surely, but it can wait. Before the city does any planning on how to move neighborhoods around or which buildings to tear down, it must find a way to begin a dialogue regarding the racial and economic inequalities that were the root of its decline. This should be a regional project in collaboration with the mostly white suburbs, particularly Oakland County. Indeed, while Detroit has suffered, in part due to the well-documented phenomenon of “white flight”, Oakland County has become one of the most affluent suburban counties in the country. Oakland County itself has a population over one million people. Daniel Okrent, *Time Magazine* writer and former Detroiter, recognizes this, saying that in the past, “[t]he black city didn’t want white suburbanites telling it what to do, and white suburbanites had no interest in assuming the burden of a black city” (Okrent, 2009).

Planning in Detroit, including all of the planned shrinking discourse, has focused on what can be done *physically*, and how that can translate into *psychological* benefits for Detroit’s people. There is nothing wrong with this, but the strategy is incomplete. There should be a complementary planning process

about what can be done *psychologically*, and how that can translate into *physical* benefits. A strong example of this would be a regional plan involving education. Detroit's education system is in serious turmoil, more than partially due to its declining (or "shrinking") tax base. What if Oakland County agreed to a small tax increase or some sort of revenue sharing that would directly benefit Detroit's education system? What would be the psychological effect if even one of Oakland's 62 cities, towns, and villages made such an offer? I would argue that in order for this to be sufficiently meaningful, it would have to come from the people of Oakland County rather than any form of mandate.

As we will see in the next section, an art collective from Windsor, Ontario is reaching out to Detroit. Only time will tell if they are the only ones that do.

Chapter 4

HOW TO REBUILD A CITY

“So, your city is destroyed...”

The above quote is the opening line from a book created by a collective of contributors from New Orleans that includes academic professionals, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, church groups, and rebuilders of all shapes and sizes. The book is a fantastic informal resource, full of personal stories, creative advice, and an optimism that measures and accepts the tragedies that the city has faced without letting go of resilience or humor. The aesthetic of the book is both playful and cathartic, reminiscent of the moment a child recovers after sobbing uncontrollably, realizing that they don't feel better yet but soon will. The opening line of this book is the literary translation of that confusing mixture of pain and optimism, written casually and matter-of-fact, as if cities are destroyed often enough to require a how-to manual on rebuilding them.

We all know that New Orleans was destroyed; Hurricane Katrina ostensibly did the destroying in 2005, although racial inequality and poverty had already laid the groundwork. Last November, I visited the New Orleans. There is a flurry of nonprofit activity working to reconstruct parts of the city in the most devastated areas, nonprofits and universities have a healthy and active relationship, and there is a thriving bustle about the tourist sections of the city. Even Brad Pitt has set up shop in the Lower Ninth Ward, financing and building strangely futuristic eco-houses where modest low-income shotgun-style homes

stood before the floods from Katrina. We drove the entire city, every neighborhood, and the amount of abandonment there would not even register as a fraction when compared to Detroit. As a macro-observation about New Orleans, I have never seen a city so under construction. We toured Army Corps of Engineers sites where new indestructible levees were being built. We met people from all over the U.S. who had come to New Orleans to help rebuild – I met one young man who had recently graduated with a degree in architecture who chose to apply his skills to the rebuilding effort in New Orleans rather than take a paying job in the private sector. While it is hard to question the intentions of a person like this, I am curious as to why he went to New Orleans instead of a place like Detroit. Where are Detroit’s rescuers? Why did Brad Pitt not go to Detroit to “make it right”?³¹

Perhaps Detroit will be rescued by serendipity. Artists, whose intentions are not to rescue cities but rather to find areas with low living costs and abundant open space, have proven to be effective as agents of urban revitalization. One recent case of this style of redevelopment is from Brooklyn, NY, where a massive cycle of renewal is underway.

The Williamsburg Paradigm

Detroit is unique in many ways, but not all ways. It is certainly not exempt from the same forces that reshape cities all over America. During the course of my research, I noticed a bevy of likeness between the re-creation story

³¹ Pitt’s redevelopment nonprofit in New Orleans is called “Make it Right”

of Brooklyn (New York) and the potential re-creation story of Detroit. Both are gritty cities dealing with significant blight, and are in one phase or another of post-industrial rediscovery. The two cities used to be fairly similar, but now Brooklyn has become “cool” while Detroit is still gritty and dangerous. During an email interview, one ex-Detroiter now living in Brooklyn told me:

I think that Brooklyn & Detroit used to have a lot more similarities than they do now. Detroit & Brooklyn were both fairly gritty, mainly low-income areas. The low rents certainly attract artists. There is also something to be said about both cities having a lot of “street cred.” Like, it’s cool to be from Brooklyn and it’s certainly cool to be from Detroit. Many artists pull inspiration from their surroundings, and both areas offer quite a bit of culture and inspiration. The difference between the two is that Brooklyn is certainly more “livable.” With Detroit, you have a lot of that dark beauty to draw upon for inspiration, but safety becomes an issue. In Brooklyn, people can have the experience of living in a funky city environment, but can still experience a safe walk to the bar and trendy eateries (interview via email, 2011).

Sharon Zukin describes the story of “how Brooklyn became cool” in her latest book *Naked City*. She begins by saying that Brooklyn’s “new image would not have worked...if new creative people had not moved into Brooklyn, reversing decades of flight” (Zukin, 2010, pg. 38). In Detroit, a new inflow of creative people into the city has begun over the past decade or so. Some of these creative people are coming from the suburbs, but many others are from New York, San Francisco, Portland (OR), and even Montana (Ryzik, 2010). Reflecting Zukin’s statement, this trend is in juxtaposition to sixty years of flight from inner city

Detroit. If Brooklyn can become “cool”, why can’t Detroit? To answer this question, I focus on what happened in Brooklyn, especially in a neighborhood called Williamsburg, during the last twenty years or so.

Brooklyn’s proximity to Manhattan has often relegated the city to second-rate status, a “dormitory for workers in Manhattan’s corporate headquarters” (Zukin, 2010, pg. 42). During the 1940s, Brooklyn was home to newly arriving immigrants, blacks who had migrated from the south, blue-collar factory workers, and a handful of writers who had left Manhattan to escape the “high rents and frenzied competition of Manhattan” (*ibid*, pg. 39). Crime and grittiness were standard there; Zukin documents accounts of gangsters shooting each other in broad daylight while drinking sodas on the street. As troubled as Brooklyn already was, New York’s fiscal crises during the 1970s led to deep public spending cuts, seriously interrupting many services such as road maintenance, trash collection, and police and fire services. By the 1980s, the neighborhood of Williamsburg “suffered from what looked like terminal decline” (*ibid*, pg. 42).

While Brooklyn’s population was shrinking and infrastructure rotting, artists from Manhattan were moving in. Brooklyn offered low rents, a slower pace, and wide open abandoned and unclaimed spaces, which attracted many creative people from Manhattan throughout the 1990s; this inflow of artists and other creative people concentrated in the neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Park Slope, and DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), reclaiming (post)-industrial spaces where small manufacturing companies and metal shops had been located. By the end of the 1990s, twenty percent of the residents of

these three neighborhoods worked in creative fields, from new media to woodworking to graphic design. Zukin describes these residents as young, creative, and “connected” by new forms of media (social networking sites, blogs, etc.).

With Williamsburg at the epicenter of this rebirth, Brooklyn was getting noticed by big media outlets, which sent reporters to document the cool, new, un-gentrified Brooklyn (*ibid*); eventually Brooklyn’s secret was out. Dubbed the “New Bohemia” for its eclectic diversity, Williamsburg’s reinvention drew the attention of an art professor from the University of Illinois, Jonathan Fineberg, who claimed to have discovered “the Williamsburg Paradigm.”³² The Williamsburg Paradigm was an informal, if not somewhat serendipitous, method of community-building that artists in Brooklyn were creating for the most part by accident. When Brooklyn’s new population arrived and couldn’t find the stores they were looking for, they opened them. They opened cafes and lounges and boutiques, but with the general intention of providing the things that they wanted each other to have – the idea was never to make too much money. Free concerts and art exhibitions took place in spaces that previous generations had abandoned (or had been forced to abandon), such as old mayonnaise factories and graffiti-covered and long-empty city swimming pools. Events such as “Organism” and the annual “Rubulad”, both held in vacant factories or garages, helped to define and proliferate the communal sense of creation in Williamsburg. Even the Old Dutch Mustard Factory, a hulking vacant industrial space on Brooklyn’s

³² This was actually a part of an art exhibit in 1992.

waterfront, was used for rave parties and tech-art based “post-raves”. Fineberg, back in 1992, had realized that what was going on in Williamsburg was perhaps a recognizable model, for better or worse:

Jonathan Fineberg... credited the paradigm to a synergy built up by different kinds of bohemian artists who like their earlier counterparts in nineteenth century Paris and 1980s-era Lower Manhattan, organized unusual events that created a sense of community. Though Fineberg praised Williamsburg’s artists for their lack of slickness, he could have praised them for their entrepreneurial energy, for the ephemeral clubs and gathering that they initiated laid the groundwork for a dynamic cultural economy. In this sense Williamsburg operated very much like any other arts-based “industrial district”... In each place cultural producers build overlapping networks around the nodes of temporary events, which creates the social capital and media feedback for continued innovation (Zukin, 2010, pg. 46).

This “entrepreneurial energy” is what makes this paradigm so unique. This is especially true because the Williamsburg Paradigm flies in the face of traditional economics. It was not the presence of new streams of investment capital, but instead the *absence* of investment along with the re-appropriation and recycling of existing capital that played the key role in Williamsburg and Brooklyn’s new creation story (*ibid*, pg. 37). Furthermore, this creation story involved a conglomerate of creative entrepreneurs armed not so much with new ideas – their products were clothes, food, beer, etc. – but with a marketable success story they had cultivated themselves. Brooklyn is cool because its new narrative is “a romantic story of indie artists and culture jams, of participation and creativity; it’s

an anticorporate, anti-Manhattan rant”; the ingredients are “one part abandoned factories and two parts artistic innovation” (*ibid*, pg. 50).

A Brooklyn grows in Detroit?

When I left Detroit in 2002 I was convinced that the arts scene in greater Detroit was dying. Many young people were leaving the city for either Brooklyn or California, finally giving in to the pressures of Detroit’s dangers. Detroit wasn’t just a gritty, low-rent haven for artists; many of the artists that I knew while I lived there considered the city *too* dangerous. One ex-Detroiter recently told me that

Living in Detroit and believing in the revitalization of the city was great – for a few years. Our cars were constantly being broken into, friends were being mugged at gunpoint and occasionally being car jacked. I started seeing my friends move out to the surrounding areas of Detroit... Being a part of bringing Detroit back to its full glory is a wonderful thought – but it was just way too dangerous. It gets to that point for most people when you realize your life is more important than an idea (interview via email, 2011).

Detroit has always been a deeply artistic city, producing many artists (mostly musicians). R&B artists such as Diana Ross, Marvin Gaye, Aretha Franklin, and Stevie Wonder are from Detroit. Hip-hop artists such as Slum Village, Eminem, and D12, and rock and roll artists such as the White Stripes, Bob Seger, and Alice Cooper are from Detroit. Techno, a popular style of electronic music, was invented in Detroit. Madonna is from the Detroit area. Hollywood actors and actresses such as David Spade, Robin Williams, Lilly Tomlin, James Earl Jones,

and Lucille Ball are from the Detroit area. Detroit has never lacked artists, but it is a city that artists come from, not go to.

A magical artistic revitalization has always seemed too elusive for Detroit, like it would never come. It wasn't until two or three years ago that I came across an article in the British magazine *The Economist*³³ that mentioned a project called "Object Orange" in Detroit. A group of anonymous artists had begun to paint destroyed houses bright orange sometime in 2005. They purposefully use the color "Tigeriffic Orange"³⁴. This brand of bright orange paint is significant because it is the same color as the orange in the uniforms of the Detroit Tigers baseball team, but more so because it draws attention. Four of the first eleven houses that Object Orange painted were destroyed by the city almost right away. Most of the houses that have been painted orange are done so next to the freeways that suburbanites use to drive downtown or through the city, so that they take notice as they drive by. The idea is to reverse people's blindness to the blighted city, to make them notice the decaying structures and open a dialogue that might lead to action ("Bright Orange", 2006).

At the time, the concept was new to me. According to an anonymous email sent to thedetroiter.com on behalf of Object Orange³⁵, "...Detroit has had more than its fair share of artists who have taken notice of this situation and done something about it" ("Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland", 2005). The email states

³³ Find the article at <http://www.economist.com/node/15108683>

³⁴ Tigeriffic Orange is a color of paint produced by Disney. It is available at Home Depot.

³⁵ At that time the project was called "Detroit.Demolition.Disneyland." or the DDD project. Read the email at <http://www.thedetroiter.com/nov05/disneydemolition.php>

that those involved with the guerilla project only paint houses marked with a circled “D”, which is the mark that the city uses to denote condemnation and impending demolition (this is especially ironic when considering most young people in Detroit refer to the city as “the D”). The anonymous email continues on to ask some provoking questions about why they are doing this, and furthermore, why the city has been so quick to demolish the painted houses:

...what will be the social ramifications of these actions? Each of these houses serves within the greater visual and social landscape of the city. If the city doesn't rebuild, will it be better to have nothing there rather than an abandoned house? In addition, each of these houses served as a shelter for the homeless at some point in time. Now there are, at least, two less houses for them. Why didn't the city simply choose to renovate? Everything affects not only our experience now, but also that of the next generation (*ibid*).

These points are all salient; some of them touch upon the issues raised in the context of the planned shrinking in Detroit, as discussed above. The author of this email asks whether or not renovation is a valid solution, as if demolition (a major aspect of Detroit's efforts to right-size) is now the only answer due to the fact that nothing was done for so long. Furthermore, the author connects the visual landscape to the city's history of deep structural social inequalities; this is indeed a major connection. I had heard about artists using Detroit's abandoned spaces for art's sake, but this was the first time I had heard of art that was directly meant to create discussion about Detroit's social problems, and I was smitten with the possibilities. The Object Orange project took issues that had potentially become

internalized and accepted by metro Detroit's residents and started a conversation, for better or worse.

Throughout my research, I have been developing a notion of artists and creative people as our collective cultural entrepreneurs. The presence of artists in a neighborhood can help to break up the monotony of the strip mall and minivan culture of the suburbs and the corporate sterility of the central business district (Zukin, 2010, pg 16). The conditions that typically attract artists are those that repel the rest of us; many artists use the things that disgust or scare people as sources of inspiration for their work. Grittiness, "grubby glamour" (*ibid*, 19), slums, dilapidated structures, and the low rents and open spaces that come with these things are what artists seek. Thus, artists and other bohemians bring neighborhoods back to life by reusing and recycling the spaces that many people internalize as eternally derelict. Artists are the worker ants of urban culture, cleaning messes and re-establishing communities where others don't dare to venture, and doing these things with a panache that makes places interesting. Therefore, the presence of an inflow of artists could signal the birthing throes of revitalization. "To the use-values of long-time residents and the exchange-values of real estate developers," says Zukin, "bohemians and gentrifiers add aesthetic values" (*ibid*, pg. 23).

Further research turned up examples in which politicians were targeting artists as tools of redevelopment; in Boston, Mayor Thomas Menino issued Requests for Proposals (RFPs) through the Boston Redevelopment Authority hoping to create artist communities in the South End neighborhood. The RFPs

are hoping to fill an old and defunct school building with artist live/work spaces (Baumann, 2003). The government of Durham, NC did a similar thing with an old textile factory that had been sitting abandoned and boarded up for almost a decade. After buying the factory for only \$1, the factory has now been renovated with the hope of attracting artists (Canavan, 2007). In Paducah, KY, nonprofits offer artists \$2500 to move into the vacancies left by a shrinking population. Similarly, a nonprofit called Near West Side Initiative in Syracuse, NY, offers houses to artists for \$1 provided they stay there for three years and make improvements to the house (Nelson, 2009). Urban critic Roberta Brandes Gratz points to the many neighborhoods that have been effectively remodeled from industrial spaces to creative spaces using a do-it-yourself methodology – SoHo in New York City, Lower Downtown (LoDo) in Denver, and South of Downtown in Seattle (SoDo) (Gratz, 2010).

It was originally Jane Jacobs, in her epic tome *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), who said that old buildings provide the building blocks of rebirth. The “economics of time”, as she calls it, makes “the space efficiencies of one generation the space luxuries of another” (Jacobs, 1961). “One century’s building commonplace is another century’s useful aberration” (*ibid*), Jacobs continued. She referred to the changing uses of buildings, how they are re-interpreted by new generations after they are finished being used in the capacities for which they were built. Empty warehouses, abandoned factories, old and forgotten train stations and garages, all become something in the modern city – lofts, apartments, art studios, shops, restaurants. “Old ideas can sometimes use

new buildings,” says Jacobs, “New ideas must use old buildings” (*ibid*). We saw this in Williamsburg, as artists moved into the neighborhood and took over derelict factories and warehouses to use as living spaces, storefronts, art spaces, and concert venues. Detroit, on the other hand, might be the most abandoned city in the world. This means two things: first, the potential for Detroit’s abandoned and derelict spaces to be reused are endless; second, the potential for an inflow of creative people to use Detroit’s abandoned spaces is real.

The battle for perception

Detroit’s woes and negative perceptions have already been discussed in this thesis; many of these perceptions have been fueled by what one CNN reporter called an “all-you-can-click pageview buffet that is ‘misery porn’ of the decaying Motor City” (Mavros, 2010). After the economic decline hammered Detroit, reporters descended on Detroit by the hundreds to document the desolation there. Many of them have been accused of becoming infatuated with Detroit’s abandoned and derelict structures, the aforementioned “ruin porn”, as Detroiters call it. “When you look at a 10-page photo spread of what looks like the aftermath of a war torn city, it can get you down,” one artist told me. “There has been so much recent focus on the city in the media – mainly the images of destruction and despair. There is so much more to Detroit than that” (interview via email, 2011). What has so far come out of this plethora of journalist visits has been what Detroiters feel is a series of lazy, incomplete, and misleading stories (Morton, 2009). These reports have had the proverbial effect of a “kick to the

hornet's nest", waking up many creative people – both from the suburbs but also in large part from around the country – and inspiring them to move into the city and defend it by taking action.

An online film, hosted by Johnny Knoxville and entitled "Detroit Lives", appeared last year with the goal of discarding some of these negative perceptions that "ruin porn" and "pick-and-choose" journalism has leveled on the city. The infuriating thing for many Detroit residents is the over-photographed ruins of the Michigan Central Depot and the Packard Plant, photos of the old Cass Tech High School that don't show the brand new (and beautiful) Cass Tech right next door, or the photos of Detroit's urban prairie that selectively leave nearby bustling business parks out of frame (Morton, 2009). The creative people that have settled in Detroit do not necessarily look at Detroit as a wasteland. The website that hosts the "Detroit Lives" movie says that "the young people of the Motor City are making it their own DIY paradise where rules are second to passion and creativity."³⁶ These young people use words like "malleable" and "empowering" and "compelling" to describe Detroit (Yablonsky, 2010). They play soccer in the vacant lots on Farnsworth Street on the east side; they organize urban gardens; they stage community theater performances at the communal Yes Farm (Ryzik, 2010).

As with all opportunity, there are tradeoffs. While some see Detroit as a *tabula rasa*, many don't. One Dutch artist who recently moved to Detroit, quoted in the New York Times, says, "people think it's a blank canvas; it's not" (Ryzik,

³⁶ Quoted on: <http://www.palladiumboots.com/exploration/detroit>

2010). The city is ruined in many places, which means a large amount of free space to play with. But it is still a dangerous city. For example, a Dutch film crew was robbed of thousands of dollars of equipment promptly upon their arrival (Morton, 2009). One cyber-artist, a New York native, pointed to a scar on his face from an attempted robbery to verify his claim that Detroit is an “extreme city” (Ryzik, 2010). But while Detroit is a beat-up and weary city, it is also a place where artists can find cheap living and working spaces; as mentioned above, houses can be bought for as little as one dollar. With real estate so cheap, newer creative entrepreneurs have been moving into the city and buying property not just to live in, but for the sole purpose of redevelopment with an artistic bent. Furthermore, these creative people, as a collective, have found new and intriguing ways to “wiki-finance” their arts. Below I examine a few of the most poignant examples of Detroit’s recent phase of creative reconstruction.

Wiki-financing the return flight

“In a way, a strange, new American dream can be found here, amid the crumbling, semi-majestic ruins of a half-century’s industrial decline. The good news is that, almost magically, dreamers are already showing up.”

- Toby Barlow, from the *New York Times* (3/7/09)

Above, we saw evidence that Williamsburg and Brooklyn in general was transformed by an inflow of creative people into the city, reversing many years of flight out of the city by those with the means to leave. Something of a “return flight” might also be beginning to happen in Detroit, although it is getting so much media attention that the actual extent of this phenomena might be difficult

to quantify as of yet. Furthermore, as we saw above, the city is losing people so fast that a return flight might not lead to a critical mass as it did in Brooklyn. Detroit is a city where everything seems contested, including the extent and potential effectiveness of this “return flight”, which makes the city a difficult place to be in the spotlight. Currently, there might not be anyone more in the spotlight than Jerry Paffendorf, the entrepreneur/cyber-artist/social innovator behind a throng of projects. Upon arrival in Detroit almost three years ago, Paffendorf developed Loveland³⁷, an unusual start-up that combines redevelopment and social entrepreneurship with a childlike imagination. As the tech magazine Xconomy describes the company, “it’s part artists’ collective, part consulting firm, part neogeography experiment, and part non-profit foundation” (Roush, 2010). Paffendorf moved to Detroit almost three years ago to try out new ideas in virtual innovation and micro real estate, and in a very short time, Loveland has morphed into a very intriguing and imaginative concept.

Paffendorf describes Loveland’s imagination as Disney-sized (Roush, 2010), which could either mean that they think really big (as in Disney’s epic cartoon features), or really small (as in Disney’s audiences – children). Most likely both are true, because what Loveland does is truly unique. Loveland sells inches of Detroit, literally, online to anybody anywhere in the world³⁸, an idea that might redefine the societal norms of ownership in a place like Detroit. Two years ago Paffendorf bought a plot of land on the east side of the city for \$500,

³⁷ website for Loveland: <http://makeloveland.com>

³⁸ As a matter of fact, I own 25 inches of Detroit through Loveland’s apparatus; my “microhood” address is 89 Orange St.

which he then broke up into inches and put up for sale on the Internet for \$1 apiece (Ryzik, 2010). Those who buy the inches are called “inchvestors”, and the plots are called “microhoods”. The first two neighborhoods, according to Loveland’s website, are being called Plymouth and Hello World; inchvestors can interact with the plot they purchase in their microhood at Loveland’s website, an aesthetically unique virtual experience that elicits the conglomerate sensation of playing with Legos, surfing Facebook, and hunting for a new house. There is a video game-like feel to the interface; it is quite childish, but not in a pejorative sense. When considering Detroit’s seriousness and grit, it is both out-of-place and refreshing at the same time.

While income is necessary to help facilitate and grow the experimental project, a good deal of the money raised has been redistributed to other creative neighborhood projects. Some examples are: the “Monumental Kitty” project, a statue-like cat made from bricks and erected near the Cochrane Street Pedestrian Overpass in the Corktown neighborhood; \$2000 toward the rehabilitation of the infamous Spaulding Court³⁹ apartment complex (“Do Good...”, 2011); and \$5000 toward the construction of a giant neon-lit art piece called “No Vacancy” that is fashioned in the shape of a billboard (an artistic statement that its creators, an artist duo and couple that calls themselves the Hygienic Dress League, call “artwork posing as advertising” instead of the other way around) (Terek, 2010). Active grant-making projects for which Loveland is selling inches of Detroit for

³⁹ Just a few years ago, Spaulding Court was known as one of the most dangerous places in Detroit.

include support for the Georgia Street Community Collective⁴⁰, the Yes Farm⁴¹, the Motor City Blight Busters⁴², and the Detroit Lives!⁴³ projects. But Paffendorf and company have not stopped at inches: they also sell \$1 frames to raise money for the film “Lemonade”, which is currently being produced about Detroit; and they sell \$1 watts to help finance their endeavors at Imagination Station – which might be Loveland’s most ambitious project⁴⁴.

Founded by Paffendorf, his partner Mary Lorene Carter, and a Corktown (Detroit) neighborhood association, Imagination Station began when the group bought two abandoned houses across from the abandoned Michigan Central Depot and Roosevelt Park. One house is in the process of being renovated while the other, which has been severely damaged by fire and neglect will be demolished⁴⁵. The vision for the space – which also includes three adjacent vacant lots – is grand. Paffendorf et al plan on transforming the blighted houses and lots into what the project’s website describes as a “creative campus” that will host a media center accessible to the community’s artists and entrepreneurs; living quarters for two “Technologists in Residence”; a public art gallery that will host neighborhood exhibitions; and a public space for general cultural events. The goal, according to Imagination Station’s website, is to create a “replicable model

⁴⁰ See: <http://www.georgiastreetcc.com/>

⁴¹ See: <http://www.theyesfarm.blogspot.com/>

⁴² See: <http://www.blightbusters.org/>

⁴³ See: <http://detroitlives.org/about/>

⁴⁴ Visit the project’s website at <http://facethestation.com>

⁴⁵ Some excellent videos of the project are available both on the project’s website as well as at <http://detroitlives.org/tag/imagination-station/>

of redevelopment”⁴⁶ by combining uncommon virtual elements with more traditional practices such as volunteerism, storytelling, and fundraising. Additionally, and perhaps most astonishingly, the crew at Imagination Station has built a one-of-a-kind interactive Internet-based map of the Corktown neighborhood called “Living in the Map: Corkstarter”. This online map allows browsers to visit a dedicated virtual space for every property in Corktown and to see the address, who owns it, what condition it is in, what type of house or dwelling it is (or if there is still a house standing), the exact acreage of the lot (to the 13th decimal place), and the depth of the lot. The map also lets browsers roll over properties to get informational snapshots. Virtual tools like this are totally unique in the urban redevelopment landscape, especially in a city like Detroit.

What is also unique is the method of financing that Loveland and Imagination Station use. The use of social media and Internet-based technologies to facilitate the sale of “inches”, “frames”, or “watts”, gives the world outside Detroit a chance to chip in on Detroit’s recovery efforts. For locals, participating in the “wiki-financing”⁴⁷, or the do-it-yourself fundraising, of Detroit’s creative movement is possible through organizations such as SOUP⁴⁸. SOUP is a monthly dinner in which participants pay \$5 for a soup dinner, and while they eat they listen to proposals from local artists. At the end of the dinner, the diners vote on which project they liked the best, and the winner receives the collected amount of money that each diner paid for their soup dinner. This type of atmosphere is

⁴⁶ see: <http://www.makeloveland.com/spaces/4130>

⁴⁷ the term “wiki-finance” is originally from Melena Ryzik of the New York Times

⁴⁸ see: <http://www.detroit soup.com/>

where artists can network, discuss and build on ideas, participate in a “democratic experiment in micro-funding”, and be (respectfully) critical. Melena Ryzik, a writer from the *New York Times*, said that things like “a pocket park” and an artists’ directory were among the projects being pitched the month that she attended the dinner (Ryzik, 2010). The idea is catching on elsewhere in Detroit; for example, the aforementioned Spaulding Court’s development group has a soup dinner to help raise funds. SOUP’s website acknowledges and encourages replication of its model.

Credit where credit is due...

Loveland and Imagination Station, projects with perhaps the widest scope, are actually late to the game all things considered. One of the original socially conscious artist movements focused on changing Detroit is the Heidelberg Project⁴⁹, founded by Tyree Guyton in the mid-1980s. The mission of the project, which has now grown into a nonprofit organization, is “to inspire people to appreciate and use artistic expression to enrich their lives and to improve the social and economic health of the greater community”. The neighborhood that hosts the Heidelberg Project, in east Detroit, is described by the organization’s website as one of the poorest in Detroit, with three-quarters of the residents unemployed and nine out of ten living under the national poverty level. Guyton, after losing family members to the violence that was so prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s, turned the debris lying around his neighborhood into found-art

⁴⁹ The Heidelberg Project has an excellent website at <http://www.heidelberg.org>

sculptures. Houses, trees, sidewalks, and even the street across three city blocks has been converted into a neighborhood-sized art experiment, “systematically rearrange[ing] the existing landscape on Heidelberg Street”. The empty lots around the neighborhood now have half-buried Hummers, giant canvases with painted faces, dead trees decorated with upside-down shopping carts and millions of stuffed animals, and various political statements campaigning against things like smoking and crime. The Heidelberg project has become a popular tourist destination, attracting over 275,000 visitors every year.

The Heidelberg Project might be Detroit’s first socially conscious art installment, but Toby Barlow, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, credits local couple Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert with beginning the art-as-redevelopment craze. The couple, an artist and an architect respectively, originally purchased a house near Hamtramck (a separate city that is totally surrounded by Detroit) for less than \$2000 and began renovating it. By March 2009, they owned three houses and two lots, then sold two of the houses to friends and built a garden on the lots. The plan is to build a “green grid” primarily by installing solar panels, renovate the houses using all “green” and sustainable methodology, and then connect the neighborhood to the green grid (Barlow, 2009). By September 2010, the couple owned or facilitated purchases of ten different houses in the area (Yablonsky, 2010). Now, the project has developed a name – Power House Productions – and has officially incorporated as a nonprofit organization. The mission of the organization is “Neighborhood stabilization and revitalization

through the arts and creative enterprises,” according to the project’s website.⁵⁰ Its strategy involves inviting resident artists from around the world to stay at their houses and develop art projects around the city of Detroit, and working with the neighborhood to remove blight and facilitate the sale of vacant properties and lots.

In addition to the original “power house,”⁵¹ Powerhouse runs five different projects/houses – the Juxtapoz X Detroit, which is a series of houses (purchased with assistance from urban magazine *Juxtapoz*) in which Powerhouse sponsors artist residencies; Dormer House; Jar House, which after renovation will become Powerhouse’s headquarters; Yellow House; and Five Fellows: *Full Scale*, which is a collaborative project with the University of Michigan’s Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning's Architecture Fellows program. The Powerhouse Project’s website lists its future ambitions, which are as big as Loveland’s: citywide tours, infrastructure rethinking workshops⁵², and the development of recreational areas such as skate parks and bike paths.

Powerhouse also wants to rethink how the city uses its alleyways, which it currently sees as incubators for crime instead of potential areas for children to play. A most interesting area of their website is the invitation to move to Detroit, headlined by the quote “Detroit: room for 2 million more”⁵³. This seems in stark

⁵⁰ see: <http://www.powerhouseproductions.org/>

⁵¹ see a picture of power house here:

<http://www.powerhouseproductions.org/index.php?/network/power-house/>

⁵² this does not necessarily mean the same thing as planned shrinking or right-sizing

⁵³ see: <http://www.powerhouseproductions.org/index.php?/updates/move-to-detroit/>

opposition to the idea of “right-sizing” or shrinking. Why invite people back into the city if the city is planning on shrinking its infrastructure?

Broken Cities and Unreal Estate

Detroit’s mass exodus in tandem with a generally volatile global economy has created bizarre market conditions in Detroit. Exchange-values⁵⁴ are unthinkably low (i.e. \$1 houses), but use-values, especially for artists, have relatively skyrocketed. Therefore, value as a measure of Detroit’s stock of material capital is contested and unresolved. The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency, a vague collective of Michigan and Dutch artists and scholars, is interested in documenting artifacts of the unique value system which has taken hold in Detroit by way of what is, in my interpretation of the agency’s mission, a chasm between exchange-values and use-values in the city. Artists are a focal point for the agency because for an artist, a house might be the most valuable when its market value (exchange-value) is the lowest. The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency defines “unreal estate” as “the remarkable, distinct, characteristic or subjectively significant sites of urban culture” that are collectively “creating a new value system in Detroit”⁵⁵. The agency looks for evidence of this emerging value system in Detroit’s architecture, institutions, art, relationships, and other social spaces, and then inventories them on a blog. Some examples of their inventory are: various articles written about Detroit’s exposure to the rest of the world, the

⁵⁴ I am using the term *exchange-value* in a quasi-Marxian sense, where it predominantly means a commodities price as determined by market forces.

⁵⁵ From the DUEA website: <http://detroitunrealestateagency.blogspot.com/>

projects of Powerhouse (Mitch and Gina), debating the stolen Banksy⁵⁶ piece, and the potential effects of the various terrible things that the British newspaper *The Guardian* has said about Detroit. What is so interesting about many of these items is not the issues, projects, or relics themselves, but the way the members of the agency read them. Contributors often raise provoking questions that could lead to necessary conversations.

Identifying places where use-values are high but exchange-values are low help us understand space where “imagination and the cultivation of other values” (Rodney, 2009) can occur. As uncommon as the ratio is between exchange- and use- values in Detroit, the creation of imaginative space does open the door for new forms of urbanism. These forms exist parallel to and are even embedded in capitalism instead of in some imaginary post-modern, post-capitalist system. The economics of capitalism, according to a founding member of the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency, creates fissures where economic value has been extracted, thus leaving space for creativity without the pressures of capital re-exerting itself. The cultural artifacts that come from these spaces are the “unreal estate” that the agency seeks to document. The artist movement in Detroit, with its apparent attraction to spaces and places that capital has abandoned, represents this idea well (Rodney, 2009).

⁵⁶ Banksy, a famous street artist from England, recently “tagged” Detroit; his pieces were almost immediately stolen, and debates about the ownership of the Banksy pieces have raged in art circles in Detroit. The DUEA asked some very provoking questions: “What is street art removed from the street? Can you move it like a painting on a wall without changing the meaning of the work or the act?”

Furthermore, the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency can also be thought of as an “important antidote to what might be called the Richard Florida effect”, says Lee Rodney, Assistant Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Windsor. Richard Florida, famous for his “creative class” thesis, has what Rodney considers a “specious” vision of what creativity is. For Rodney, the conditions alive in Detroit and inventoried by the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency undo Florida’s ideas because many creative people are being attracted to Detroit by either the absence of capital or other non-economic forces that contradict Florida’s bedrock notions of mobility. As it turns out, people and capital don’t necessarily flow together, and a range of realities exemplifies this fact. The most obvious one, in context with my argument, is that people have either chosen to stay in Detroit or have moved to Detroit *in spite of* its economic hardships.

Meanwhile, a mere 750 feet across the Detroit River lies Windsor, Ontario. The two downtowns – Detroit and Windsor, that is – are in plain view of each other. Windsor has not escaped many of the issues that have befallen Detroit, although the economic phantoms showed up there much later than they did in Detroit. Much of Windsor’s geography has been developed haphazardly and resembles something of a reactive and confused reflection of Detroit’s cyclical auto industry. The aforementioned scholar Lee Rodney describes Windsor as

...a very difficult place to comprehend within existing vocabularies of urbanism: much of it reads like a long-duration strip mall that spans 50 kilometers, emptying out at its point of origin while marching onward in a building fury of

stuccoed boutiques and Home Depots the size of football fields. In its wake one encounters dead malls and grey Wal-Mart's waiting for weed trees to pop up through the cracked pavement.

Rodney's geographical description lends weight to the argument that people are shaped by the places – and in this case, the non-places – that surround them. She continues:

No one really likes the state of things here, but then nobody seems to be able to account for what's happening either (Rodney, 2009).

This indictment of Windsor as banal and drab serves as Rodney's introduction to Broken City Labs⁵⁷, a Windsor-based art collective and research group that

seems to fulfill the kind of consciousness-raising mandate that is necessary for the introduction of spatial awareness and a sense of shared responsibility for the urban imprint (*ibid*).

Like the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency, Broken City Lab's (BCL) website documents the ways in which artists are injecting themselves into the economic cracks created by modern capitalism⁵⁸. But unlike the Detroit Unreal Estate Agency, BCL is visible and has their own projects, many of which are potentially revolutions in developmental urban art. BCL predominantly uses interruption as a method for communication with Windsor's residents. In other words, BCL seeks to awaken the people of Windsor and help them account for what's happening there, all while portraying an almost uncommon optimism. An example of this is

⁵⁷ see: <http://www.brokencitylab.org/>

⁵⁸ One very interesting recent blog post featured Candy Chang, a young woman from New Orleans that paints walls of abandoned buildings all-black and then writes the half-sentence "before I die I want to..." followed by many fill-in-the-blank spaces and a basket of chalk. See the "before I die..." project on her website: <http://candychang.com/>

BCL's publicly placed "Anger Release Machine" a faux-vending machine that dispenses pieces of china that smash at the bottom of the machine, thus aiding in the release of anger.

According to BCL's website, the collective has also done such things as projecting 100 of their best ideas about saving Windsor on a large building downtown, hosting "psychogeographic" walks through vacant and underused spaces and buildings in the city, and a storefront residency program that hosted 25 different artists charged with intervening and interacting with Windsor's cultural bleakness. There are many more projects, and all of them are truly original and inspiring. The one that led me to feature a Windsor-based art collective in this account of Detroit is the collective's "cross-border communication" project. In November 2009, BCL projected messages on the side of buildings in Windsor that were visible in downtown Detroit. Among the messages displayed was the phrase, "WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER"⁵⁹.

The power of BCL's statement should not be undervalued; an art collective from Windsor – across an international border – has sent a message to Detroit that Detroit's own wealthy suburbs never have.

The mirror test

As mentioned throughout this thesis, everything in Detroit is contested, and many times for good reason. Tyree Guyton (founder of the Heidelberg Project) might be famous in Detroit for his trademark multi-colored polka dots,

⁵⁹ see: <http://www.brokencitylab.org/tags/cross-border-communication/>

but not everyone agrees that everything he does is good for the neighborhood or the city. The city has twice attempted to tear parts of the Heidelberg project down⁶⁰. The project has also been the debate of a local “art vs. eyesore” debate. To exemplify that debate, an art student in Detroit shared an interesting experience she had while in the East Detroit neighborhood that hosts the Heidelberg Project (note: HP refers to Heidelberg Project):

While we were there, we saw many residents on the street looking at us through their windows and none of them looked happy to see us. One elderly woman actually did come out of her home and spoke with us for a few minutes. I asked her what she thought of her street. I don’t know why, but I expected her to tell me that she loved it. I was completely wrong. She admitted that the neighborhood had not been safe, but said that as long as she kept to herself she hadn’t been bothered much. She had bought the home a long time ago in a different economic environment and had raised her children there and that her and her husband had sunk their savings into the home... Although she was upset about the decline of the neighborhood, it was still hers. After the HP went up and gained attention, she felt as though she had trespassers in her neighborhood, like us, gawking and taking photos of the run down neighborhood that was her home. She felt as though she were being mocked and she was tired of people in nice cars coming down the street with their cameras, as if they were touring a zoo and she was something living in a cage. She also feared for the value of her home. Until this point, she had hoped that the neighborhood would rebound. She also felt that the HP had been forced upon her and that the sculptures created from

⁶⁰ see the Heidelberg timeline at:
http://heidelberg.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=60&Itemid=68

found objects created safety hazards. I remember the HP being controversial back then and that the residents of the neighborhood were not very happy. It also drew a lot of attention to the city's failure to tear down unsafe, vacant buildings (interview via email, 2011).

This story speaks to the contested nature of art in Detroit. Following her story, the art student asked some intriguing questions:

At one point [sic] does an artist make that decision, to compromise people's lives and homes for a project? And does this woman's opinion not matter because she lives in a low-income neighborhood? If that's the case, is the artist taking advantage of her economic situation, to "help" the neighborhood? (*ibid*)

Echoing the student's questions, the Heidelberg Project might be exploiting the residents of its neighborhood in order to create a discourse about the endemic poverty in Detroit. But is this acceptable?

Object Orange, the aforementioned collective that paints blighted houses orange, is essentially doing the same thing, only in neighborhoods in which they are not even living. Some people are resistant to the idea, saying that the group of artists, which is anonymous but thought to be from the suburbs, is exploiting extremely poor neighborhoods. This is especially true of Object Orange's projects in the city of Highland Park (which is totally within the city limits of Detroit), a highly impoverished city that has suffered from a depopulation rate of about 400% since the 1930s and was crippled by Chrysler's relocation to the suburbs in 1995. It is logical to deduce that since Highland Park has very little tax money to spend, they might struggle to immediately demolish some of the structures that are simply unsafe and attract illegal activity. Object Orange targets

some of these houses for their projects. A Detroit resident posted her sentiments about them in an online forum a few years ago:

As a resident of Detroit and one who knows who the artists are, I have a lot to be critical about it. The biggest thing is that there is a cluster of houses that were painted in Highland Park, which is a suburb of Detroit that is poorer than Detroit-it can't even afford its own police, really. The city literally cannot afford to knock down these buildings. So they are still sitting there, and now they just make an impoverished community more ashamed by the commuters who see it. This cluster of houses is right at the freeway, so that all the suburbanites who already think that Detroit is a pile of crap are just more attentive to it; it is thrown in their faces as they drive into the city to work. The project is more the product of a suburban graduate student collaboration than one of involved Detroit residents; for many of their projects, they never dealt with the area residents, not even asking for their input or permission. It is a project much more removed from the community than it really should be, especially considering how much the area is suffering already. They had good intentions, but the project is a failure in many senses, having brought attention to a blight that emphasizes tragedy and shame but does ignore the monetary problem. I just say this because a lot of other Detroiters feel the same way and since it has gained national fame, the locality (in its rawest sense) of this project has been dissolved. I only ask people to consider more than just the "artiness" of the project. There are a lot of issues going on in Detroit, and they cannot be forced or pressured into being magically solved with a radical paint job (So, 2008).

As for their Detroit targets, city officials do not see the orange paint as either art or constructive. In their view, the artists are “trespassers” that call attention to

Detroit's blight in such a way that only further blights the city (Bright Orange, 2006). Detroit, it seems, doesn't want its blight to stick out.

But shouldn't it stick out? Detroit's artists are beginning to realize that if they disturb the landscape, often at the risk of exploiting people in neighborhoods that desperately need the attention, they might jar some consciousness into the suburban commuters who can safely ignore the problems of the city from the freeway. "People become blind," says a member of Object Orange (*ibid*). Freeway networks that connect the central business district to bedroom communities in the suburbs, exurbs, and so-called "edge cities", all of which host the same box stores and chain restaurants, represent a national conglomerate of standardized places that are devoid of unique signifiers that might suggest a local specificity. Instead they suggest spatial ubiquity, which many artists fear can lead to complacency about the conditions surrounding them. These "non-places", as French anthropologist Marc Auge calls them, create abstract borders that divide the social problems of the city from the privileged comfort of the suburbs. The non-place suggests special challenges and opportunities for artists, especially artists focused on urban redevelopment. In a society of non-places and "non-cities" (Arefi, 1999) artists are forced to interpret and explain a society to itself that is so bombarded with images and information that the non-place actually creates comfort in its ubiquity and familiarity. "Perhaps today's artists are doomed to seek beauty in 'non-places,'" says the aforementioned Auge.

They may do this by highlighting the enigmatic character of objects, of things disconnected from any exegesis or practical use, by putting a spotlight on the

media that try to pass for mediators, by rejecting sham and mimicry (Auge, 1995).

One artist told me that her technique was the “activation of non-places” (interview via email, 2011). This “activation” is a process meant to disturb people’s taken for granted realities, especially when those realities are causing the reproduction of inequalities. When realities are challenged – as with Object Orange, the Heidelberg Project, and Broken City Labs – discussions occur.

These discussions, however, must survive the mirror test. Is embarrassing or exploiting the residents of low-income neighborhoods an acceptable price to pay for the sake of a much-needed discussion? And why is it up to these artists to make that decision? I want to emphasize that the conversation *is* the desired result, and it must happen. But even if this conversation could happen without negatively affecting local residents, there is still an opportunity to be critical. What would be the effects of this conversation if it became a national discussion? Would it work to further marginalize Detroit, or would other cities realize that this conversation is relevant to their city as well?

Chapter 5

HOW TO UNDERSTAND A CITY

“Maybe Detroit is the cost Americans pay for being who we are”

- Jerry Herron

Whither the city?

Detroit's rise and fall cannot be entirely explained by one set of factors or another, but I argue here that race and capital, collaboratively, have been central to the shaping and reshaping of the city. The influence of capital mobility has much to do with the way cities are organized as well as the way we perceive space, while race becomes very important in interpreting the current effects of past capital transfers. Later, I describe how these effects are projected upon the landscape of the city. If landscapes can be understood through the lenses of race and capital, perhaps we can develop a more holistic narrative for Detroit. My goal is to construct such a story, and my hope is that agents of redevelopment, including Detroit's artists, interpret their goals through such an analysis.

Detroit is a paragon of the effects of capital mobility, although it is important to recognize that the effects of capital investments and disinvestments are not limited to the private sector of the global economy. Thomas Sugrue is quick to point out that as early as the New Deal era (~1930s), the Federal government appropriated a “disproportionate amount of resources” to the U.S. south and western states that provided incentives for companies to relocate away from the northeast and Midwestern states (Sugrue, 1996). But in Detroit,

examples of the racial nature of modern capitalism abound. Urban renewal, another source of Federal capital inflows, produced the freeways that facilitated the capital flows associated with suburbanization, most notably the “white flight” phenomenon. Redlining, which was really a racialized Federal program that restricted access to capital for blacks, was widely practiced in Detroit during the mid-twentieth century. These shifts in investment helped to complicate an already tense racial situation in Detroit, and when Japanese and European automakers redefined the parameters of automotive production, Detroit’s industrial heart was punctured too severely to fully recover from. The city’s meteoric rise was counteracted by an equally meteoric decline. Whether through private or public agency, the forces of capitalism and racism were central to Detroit’s rise and fall.

Capital City

“Can capitalism survive? No, I do not think it can.”

- Joseph Schumpeter

This is quite a provocative quote for a self-described conservative, but this is the quote that Joseph Schumpeter decided should open his discussion of capitalism in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942). Schumpeter, one of the twentieth century’s great economists, dedicated his academic and professional life to explaining capitalism. In Schumpeter’s estimation, Marx had properly defined many aspects of capitalism, but had done so without accounting for a few of capitalism’s most dynamic features, namely by neglecting to separate the

capitalist from the innovator. Marx's big failure, according to Schumpeter, was the fact that he adhered too closely to David Ricardo's antiquated views on labor roles and social class (Schumpeter's view was shared by another great twentieth century economist, Karl Polanyi). The end effect of Marx's oversimplified view is a lack of appreciation for what drives capitalism, what mutates capitalism, what dictates the changing modes of capitalism. Schumpeter identified a mechanism, a simple yet essential element in capitalism that Marx had missed, which he called creative destruction:

The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development of the craft shop and factory to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation – if I may use that biological term – that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism (Schumpeter, 1942, pg. 83, emphasis in original).

The implications of Schumpeter's declaration were huge. While creative destruction is most easily envisioned by simple acts of economic revolution – such as the mp3 replacing the CD as society's preferred audio format – there is no limit to the scope of the transformational power of creative destruction. Followed to its logical conclusion, Schumpeter determined that capitalism would eventually destroy itself; capitalism's collapse would lead to what he described as socialism.⁶¹ At the time that Schumpeter published his theory, this was a new way to look at capitalism. Most business analysts and economists had a view that

⁶¹ Schumpeter's view of socialism seems, to me, to be based on the flawed U.S.S.R. model of socialism, a model that Marx argued against.

capitalism was disciplined by its own structure. Schumpeter changed this by describing capitalism as a process that creates and destroys its own structural discipline. That is, capital writes the rules that it plays by, and these rules are often as destructive as they are creative (McGraw, 2007).

When applied to cities, creative destruction is an apt device. Cities are where the global economy and, increasingly, global cultures are best represented and either in harmony or at odds, depending on the part of the city. Cities are also somewhat self-contained political, economic, and social systems located at a singular geographical position, but bearing the forces of a more abstract sort via the globalized economy. These combined forces are constantly pushing and pulling the stationary city, reshaping, revitalizing, gentrifying, creating anew, and in some cases destroying the city. Capitalism is breathing in and out in arrhythmic patterns, creating affluence and slums on opposite sides of the same fence, or what Mike Davis calls “hermaphroditic landscapes” (Davis, 2007). “A great metropolis today absorbs and divides the world in all its diverseness and inequality” says anthropologist Marc Auge (Auge, 1995). In cities, it is capitalism that organizes these spaces.

It would be easy to credit Detroit’s white-flight phenomenon solely to race relations, but as Wayne State scholar Jerry Herron notes, “[t]he riot of 1967 was still almost two decades away when this ex-migration began, so that wasn’t the reason” (Herron, 2010). White-flight in Detroit was but an example – a particularly poignant one – of how (racialized) capitalism works to organize space. The Fordist era was defined by a centralized and relatively static mode of

production that depended on abundant labor and mass consumption. Detroit is the immaculate Fordist city, a systemic example for the era, for more than obvious reasons. After World War II, the global economy developed rapidly with advancements in technology. The trend began to shift towards a more flexible and decentralized economy, which caused huge swaths of Detroit to shut down almost overnight. Property values in Detroit's neighborhoods were decimated in short order; home values had been based primarily on the short commutes to the same factories that were shutting down throughout the 1950s. With the misguided Federal capital investments in freeways in 1956, white-flight accelerated (Sugrue, 1996). Of course, these are the seeds of the 1967 riots, which capitalism planted. The "essential fact" that is creative destruction played no small role.

Detroit represented a system, Fordism, which was a system with geographical claims to Detroit, but a system that was emulated the world over and that produced goods that were consumed the world over. It was a system that was adjusted and rewritten by the Europeans and the Japanese; it ended up mutating *from within*, per creative destruction, and had economic, social, and political consequences. Elements of creative destruction are apparent in many aspects of Detroit – and America – other than just the economy. Creative destruction was evident when the mp3 destroyed the CD, the factory destroyed the craft shop, and "flexibilization" destroyed Fordism, but, as Schumpeter well knew, capitalism is more than an economic delivery system; creative destruction can also characterize the increasing postmodern reliance on personalized consumption patterns, the

shift from anthropological places to globalized non-places, and the destruction of landscapes by capital mobility. These changes, levied in the abstract by creative destruction, bear down on the poor and make increasingly unjust demands on them. In the U.S., poverty is virtually synonymous with inner city minorities, particularly African Americans. It is a reality that scholars spend much time explaining, and although its causes might elude newer generations of white Americans, its effects are clear.

No Finish Line

In 1991, David Harvey (citing Charles Jencks, and originally in an architectural context) declared an exact time for the transition from modernity into postmodernity; it was July 15th, 1972 at 3:32pm. The occasion was the demolition of an inner city housing project that was closely followed by then-President Nixon declaring the urban crisis as over. Harvey describes 1972 as an interesting year, a symbolic year, which could easily be thought of as paradigmatically transitory in both economic and cultural senses. A radical economic geographer, Harvey said that new accumulation regimes attached to nascent patterns of individualized consumption worked to formulate a “cultural logic” that is now embedded in late capitalism.⁶²

If this new cultural logic was supposed to be imbued with a realization of a post-racial America, or at least to lay the groundwork for some form of racial

⁶² Note: It could be argued, although not in this paper, that the transition from modernity into postmodernity is a cultural example of Schumpeter’s creative destruction mechanism at work.

healing in America, then postmodernity has in this regard come up short. The modern era saw unspeakable racial discrimination, and the effects of that history not only still linger, they are in many ways *more pronounced*. As late as the mid-1990s, and with every possible socioeconomic and demographic factor controlled for, sociological research still showed that African Americans and Hispanics were more routinely denied access to loans or rental housing than whites (Rank, 2005). According to sociologist Mark Robert Rank, almost *eighty-two percent* (82%) of all African Americans have lived below the poverty line for at least one year by the time they reach the age of 60; for white Americans, this number is about forty-two percent (42%). “Black children at the age of one year,” says Rank, “have exceeded the risk of poverty that white children experience by the age of seventeen years” (*ibid*). Racial minorities are more likely to be environmentally discriminated against as well: for example, in 1987, a study showed that race was the strongest predictor for where waste incinerators are located around the U.S. (Bullard, 2005). Blacks and Hispanics are also much more likely to be victims of violence or serve time in prison than whites. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the incarceration rate for black men is about 4.6 per 1,000, meaning that for every 1,000 black men in the U.S., 4.6 of them are in prison. For white men, this number is 0.7 per 1,000. In other words, black men are *six times more likely* to be in prison than whites (Sabol and Couture, 2008). While the racialization of poverty, crime, and fear are true everywhere in America, Detroit offers some stunning facts. In Detroit,

...over 50% of black men are high-school dropouts. In 2004, 72% of those dropouts were jobless. By their mid-30s, 60% have done prison time. Among

black dropouts in their late 20s, according to a University of California, Berkeley, study, more are in prison (34%) than are working (30%)⁶³(Herron, 2010).

The so-called age of postmodernity has not brought about racial harmony; in fact, in most regards, racial disparities have become exacerbated. How can claims such as Fukuyama's "end of history"⁶⁴ thesis be made with such obvious racial discrimination still being so clearly evident?

What tends to be misunderstood is that race is a "lived social relation rather than...a truncated marker of social identity" (Kurtz, 2009). In other words, race is a social *identity*, not an *identifier*. People are not just black or white; they live the identities that are attached to their skin color, complete with the associated privilege or lack thereof. Race brings along with it many institutionally embedded relations. Racial discrimination, rather than being a blatant practice as it was before the civil rights movement, is now "threaded through capitalist relations" as well as other "myriad social relations" (*ibid*). It is now a hidden project that is so deeply institutionally embedded that newer generations have no conception of life without it. It's so well hidden that when we look and see the outcomes that are so obviously racist – the prison system, poverty, violence, etc. – there seems to be a built-in excuse for why.

⁶³ This quote is from Jerry Herron's essay, but it was originally quoted in a Wall Street Journal article that is not available online.

⁶⁴ Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal capitalism partnered with democracy was the final stage in man's cultural and economic evolution, famously using the phrase "the end of history", which implied that there was no possible better system.

I argue that Harvey is correct in connecting capitalism with a “cultural logic”, and I believe that cultural logic to be endemically and systematically racist. It is illogical to continue to claim political, economic, or cultural “enlightenment”, which seems to be the term attached to many views of both modernity and postmodernity, while racial outcomes include facts such as one race of people having a six-hundred percent (600%) greater chance of being in prison than another. Furthermore, it seems that there is ample evidence to argue that capitalism – in any mode of political or social design – is a system that will never be able to produce racial equality. Capitalism is a major factor in the institutionalization of racism, because it both relies on and creates economic inequalities that have already been rationalized away through the philosophies of liberalism and individualism. With these inequalities being generally accepted, racial and economic inequalities can be substituted for each other depending on situational convenience. For example, denial of credit to minorities could be rationalized via poverty instead of race. A counterargument might be that slavery was eradicated while capitalism ruled, but it was capitalism that required slavery in the first place. As a matter of fact, it might be true that capitalism, when considering the historically progressive stages that it has had to move through to get to today’s mode, might have never fully developed without slavery. But the essence of my argument here is that capitalism and racism are deeply connected, and the relational effects are clearly visible in our institutions and our cities. The social structures of race and capital might not be able to account for each other, but they seem to follow the same frameworks in the reproduction of inequality,

namely by allowing for the utilization of institutionalized power to maintain hegemony.

Any discussion of redeveloping Detroit is incomplete without locating issues of race in the debate. Detroit has, by a wide margin⁶⁵, the largest percentage (81%) of African-Americans in any major American city. The fact that so many urban revitalization ideas do not address issues of race is beyond disappointing. The right-sizing discussion in Detroit generally avoids racial issues altogether. How is it that city planners – be they from whatever race – miss the most obvious reality of their cities, which is that African Americans occupy a large percentage of the spaces that they are attempting to renew? The destructive connections between racism and capitalism are in plain view in Detroit:

Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality (Sugrue, 1996, pg. 5)

It is an ironic word, race, in that it describes culture and identity differences between groups of humans, but also describes a sort of contest or competition, as when used with sporting events or in the phrases “rat race” or “race to the top”. Even removed from conceptual definitions, race and capital are braided together.

Reimagining Detroit's Landscapes

⁶⁵ Only Baltimore (64%), Memphis (61%), Atlanta (55%), and Washington D.C. (55%) also have populations over 500,000 and over 50% African American. Detroit's African American population (81%) is far larger than any of these cities.

The combination of racism and capitalism projects intertwined outcomes on the land, causing changes in the physical geography, which in turn affects the “cultural logic” associated with capitalism. With racial disparities, creative destruction, and the power of capital mobility in mind, we can better analyze what the shifting landscapes of cities mean. Too often, landscapes are thought of very superficially, as in being the geographical point at which specific environments are located and manipulated. This conception of landscapes is certainly true, but it is incomplete. Certainly local environmental issues are a large part of what makes up landscapes, but even environmental challenges exist inside social structures that are dictated by capital distribution and race (and gender) politics. I take the position that landscape, especially in the urban context, means much more than a literal geographical position. I argue that interpreting landscapes can provide a unique perspective that should be a central part of redeveloping cities. Ignoring the social values attached to landscapes might explain why urban renewal in the U.S. has been so myopic.

For example, *Detroit Free Press* writer John Gallagher has a chapter devoted to “Healing [Detroit’s] Wounded Landscape” in his book *Reimagining Detroit*. This is a powerful statement; with a proper definition of landscape, this phrase could potentially be the title of the entirety of Detroit’s recovery efforts. However, Gallagher only defines this healing process geographically. Specifically, he advocates for the “daylighting” of streams that have been filled in, diverted, or otherwise removed from their natural flowing patterns. Detroit, while developing hastily during the early twentieth century, buried and diverted

many of the city's waterways to make room for more development. Daylighting these waterways is a necessary process, and Gallagher rightly defines it as an important developmental step with ancillary economic and social benefits – Gallagher finds many good examples of this from around the world. He argues that daylighting Detroit's lost waterways would work to heal the landscape, and this argument is certainly valid (Gallagher, 2010). But his use of the term landscape only applies to the physical geography of the city; in the case of Detroit, and perhaps all places, a more complete understanding of the landscape is in order.

Juxtaposing Gallagher's view of landscape is Sharon Zukin's deeper definition from her book *Landscapes of Power*. Zukin explodes the idea that landscape is solely the skin of the earth and can be manipulated without any consequential association to the social and economic paradigms of a specific phase of modernity. At the heart of Zukin's definition, as I interpret it, is the combination of the physical and material landscape with the symbolic landscape. The symbolic landscape is abstract and incorporates ideas of power, mobility, and cultural norms. These ideas become projected onto the physical landscape, which creates the built environment or the material landscape.

In a narrow sense, landscape represents the architecture of social class, gender, and race relations imposed by powerful institutions. In a broader sense, however, it connotes the entire panorama that we see: both the landscape of the powerful – cathedrals, factories, and skyscrapers – and the subordinate, resistant, or expressive vernacular of the powerless – village chapels, shantytowns, and tenements (Zukin, 1991).

Zukin introduces many ideas into the concept of landscape as a tool of both geographical and cultural analysis. She asserts that landscapes are the media by which economic and cultural power are projected onto our surroundings (*ibid*). Since interested powers are often in conflict according to their influence and goals, landscapes end up telling the story of a place's complete socioeconomic and cultural history. Of course, the story is located at a given point in time and space, continuously being constructed and yet continuously incomplete. In this sense, landscapes are the geographical and environmental representations of an endless array of cultural and economic expression, including race and gender politics, power dynamics, and the values attached to these considerations under the influence of time (*chronos* and *kairos*) and space.

At the root of our misunderstanding of the landscape – that is, why we neglect to see landscapes as socially constructed – is a lack of understanding about the connectedness of our physical geography to market forces and social relations. Land is treated as something totally separate from man. “What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s institutions,” wrote the great economist Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*. “We might as well imagine his being born without hands and feet,” says Polanyi, “as carrying on life without land” (Polanyi, 1944). A central facet of his larger argument was that the marketing of land has led to landscape development with serious social consequences. Polanyi believed that the process of forming markets associated with land manipulation (i.e. agriculture, real estate, construction – the markets that tend to create and shape landscapes) was central to the eventual subordination

of people and nature to the so-called “self-regulated” market. “To isolate [land] and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all undertakings of our ancestors,” said Polanyi (*ibid*). With this dislocation (man from land/nature) in mind, it is perhaps more understandable as to why we see analyses like Gallagher’s more often than we see analyses like Zukin’s. Over time, the psychic and supra-economic relationship between people and land has eroded even though landscapes continue to reflect our institutional priorities.

It was originally Zukin who pointed to creative destruction as an explanation for the nature of shifting landscapes. “A landscape mediates, both symbolically and materially, between the socio-spatial differentiation of capital implied by *market* and the socio-spatial homogeneity of labor suggested by *place* (Zukin, 1991, emphasis in original),” writes Zukin. Landscapes are pushed and pulled by the simultaneous demands of increasingly mobile capital and stationary communities. Landscapes, then, are an archaeology of still-life photographs, our collective memories in material form, palimpsests eternally being erased and rewritten. They are those entities that environmentalists and preservationists wish to protect, planners wish to utilize, and developers wish to exploit. Fluctuations in real estate markets leave landscapes in varying states of alteration, often subjected to the whims of the privileged. The powerful typically manipulate landscapes while the powerless are forced to adapt. Detroit’s landscape tells its stories and defines its residents’ sense of place both inside and outside of the global architecture of market culture.

Retelling Detroit's – and America's – story

With all of the above in mind, Detroit's story can be retold in a way that might be beneficial to the city. Recent stories about Detroit's travails have not been so kind. Exploited for its poverty, its majestic industrial scope, and the vacancy and abandonment that are unavoidable anywhere in the city, Detroit is a place that outsiders – be they journalists, explorers, or pundits of any type – can visit to provide the sensation of frisson, of excited adventure, of elegiac voyeurism. They can get the same urban experience in Midtown or downtown that we see anywhere else in the country, but that's not why they come to Detroit. They come to see the Packard Plant, the Michigan Central Depot, the urban prairie, and the general suffering. Then they can return to where they came from, and tell their sadly underdeveloped story of the city.

John Patrick Leary, a Wayne State University (in Detroit) scholar, critiques the exploitation of Detroit in his essay for *Guernica Magazine* entitled "Detroitism". Leary categorizes the three general tropes that tend to befall would-be biographers, photographers, and other storytellers of Detroit; these tropes are identified as "the metonym", "the lament", and "the utopia".

The metonym refers to the tendency to paint too broad a picture, as in referring to the American auto industry as "Detroit". Detroit is a popular metonym for things like racialized poverty, corporate welfare (i.e. the government bailout of the auto industry), destructive union behavior, and failed politics. As a metonym, Detroit tends to become an archetype for arguments about what might happen if the wrong decision is made, as ex-New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani

used it when he warned that New York could turn into Detroit if current Mayor Bloomberg was not re-elected (Oosting, 2009). Another example is from *Newsweek*, when the author of an article about Chicago juxtaposes that city to Detroit: “Think of Detroit as the catastrophe where the races shunned each other, killing the city” (Sokolov, 2011). As a metonym, Detroit becomes a specialized and convenient warning. This is deeply problematic in the sense that the city is much more complex than just the auto industry or a graveyard for Fordist-era buildings. Detroit as the metonym does nothing to diagnose the ills of the city; it simply exploits them (Leary, 2011).

The lament trope is one in which sad visceral descriptions of Detroit, particularly its physical features, are sensationalized and presented as the city’s primary facet. Ruin porn, or the melodramatic photographic representations of Detroit’s vast industrial ruins, fits this category. Ruin porn typically ignores the fact that over 700,000 people still live in this city; these people are almost never included in this type of picture. According to Leary, the lament lends itself to, but is not limited to, the visual media. As a matter of fact, one of the best examples is a written piece in the London newspaper *The Guardian*, also cited by Leary in his essay. *The Guardian* article’s author, Julian Temple, describes the Detroit he saw as:

...vast, rusting hulks of abandoned car plants, (some of the largest structures ever built and far too expensive to pull down), beached amid a shining sea of grass.

The blackened corpses of hundreds of burned-out houses, pulled back to earth by the green tentacles of nature. Only the drunken rows of telegraph poles marching

away across acres of wildflowers and prairie give any clue as to where teeming city streets might once have been (Temple, 2010).

Temple continues on to describe downtown Detroit's "derelict shell" featuring "full-grown trees sprouting from the tops of deserted skyscrapers⁶⁶", the residents of which skulk around with "the glazed eyes of the street zombies" (Temple, 2010). This is clearly a lamenting description of the city, meant to highlight the author's craft more than do something useful for Detroit. Lamenting descriptions of Detroit, again, do nothing to diagnose the ills of the city; they simply exploit them.

The utopian trope is, in its most basic form, an optimistic variety of pushback from the first two, and is ground zero for the redefinition of outsider perceptions of Detroit. This trope often plays into the view that Detroit is a "blank canvas", a reality that is not only contested but also perhaps a bit naïve. The utopian trope is problematic because Detroit is far from being utopian – the structural conditions for a socioeconomically transformative Detroit are simply not yet in place. Leary maintains that the utopian trope, and by extension the "blank canvas" idea, is subject to some the same critical analyses as the lament trope. Both see Detroit as a place uniquely crafted by forces esoteric to the city. However, it is far more apt to recognize that Detroit represents an elegant example of modernity's wayward assumptions about the social world (Leary, 2011).

⁶⁶ As I write this, I am sitting on the 24th floor of a downtown Detroit hotel. Although I can see a handful of deserted skyscrapers, I don't see any trees growing out of them...

All three tropes about the city are problematic in that they benefit the storyteller more than the subject, which defeats the (ostensible) purpose of telling the city's stories. True urban renewal in the city must bubble up from depths that simple economic stimulus cannot reach. Telling the story of such renewal requires a complex understanding of the historical, structural, and political connections necessary to address the depth of Detroit's inequalities.

But there is another salient point here. What people outside and removed from the city fail to recognize is that Detroit is the mirror that other cities should be looking into. In the end, Detroit is not a decadent, violent, impoverished exception to modern America, but instead an exemplar of modern America that has been constructed and reproduced by modern America. Says Leary:

Detroit figures as either a nightmare image of the American Dream, where equal opportunity and abundance came to die, or as an updated version of it, where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have the one-hundred-dollar house and community garden of their dreams... While unique in its scale, however, Detroit's entrenched infrastructural and economic problems are themselves as American as apple pie, reproduced on varying scales in Newark, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Camden. Detroit, then, isn't an exception to a general rule of class mobility and meritocracy, the pillars of the so-called "American Dream," as it's often seen. (Leary, 2011)

Leary paints a masterful picture in this quote, updating the American Dream with a Detroit bent. By burying equal opportunity and abundance, he is referring to Henry Ford's five-dollar-a-day promise and mass consumption, each being cornerstones of the Fordist epoch of modernity, and each falling victim to the

flexible and personalized paradigms of neoliberalism and so-called cultural postmodernity. Leary might have also mentioned modernity's reliance on technology to produce the conditions that were supposed to reproduce the American Dream for all who worked hard enough to be worthy of it. Of the great quotes that I have seen about Detroit and its place in modernity, one of the best is from the introduction of a 2001 landscape urbanism book called *Stalking Detroit*⁶⁷:

Detroit is the most thoroughly modern city in the world. Modern, not of course for its great works of architecture or its progressive social advancements, but modern in the sense that this city has exemplified the assumptions of enlightened modernity like no other. Among those assumptions was a tacit belief that technological advances stemming from empirical knowledge of the world could necessarily lead to social progress. From our perspective at the turn of the century, Detroit, rather than corroborating modernity's faith in progress through technology, affords an extraordinarily legible example of post-Fordist urbanism and its attendant forms of human subjectivity as shaped by the city's continuously and rapidly transforming economic, social, and operational conditions (quoted from [King, 2008]).

Enlightened modernity, as suggested in the above quote, was actually based on privileges and inequalities that inevitably stymied any hope of an equitable distribution of resources resulting from technological advancement. The more modern the city became, the more racially and economically divided it became;

⁶⁷ The book is very difficult to find; this quote is from an urban landscape and architecture blog. Read the whole article at <http://landscapeandurbanism.blogspot.com/2008/12/detroit-dilemma-ruminations.html>

the forces of urban renewal, slum clearance and freeway construction, the “ghettoization” (Harvey, 1990) and warehousing of Detroit’s poor African-American population, and, as Leary mentions, class mobility and meritocracy, served to create a new type of poverty in Detroit, one in which a major characteristic was isolation. This type of isolated poverty has been reproduced across the country, either in concurrence or as a consequence of modernity. Detroit, therefore, has been host to industrial mechanisms that produce both and automobiles as well as social inequalities, produced in tandem in order to prop up white America’s illusions of freedom, nationalism, and individualism.

In addition to the fact that Detroit is a lucid example of the assumptions of modernity, the city also exemplifies modernity’s associated political and socioeconomic restrictions on human agency. The foundation of modernity’s most potent political framework, liberalism, has been the belief that individual freedom, represented by free will and personal choice, will allow for the best allocation of resources in the most just fashion. It has been well documented in social science literature that the liberal creed defiantly ignores the role of privilege – such as being born into a wealthy or white family – throughout history. “Economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices,” says scholar Thomas Sugrue. We saw many examples in Detroit, from the practice of redlining to the clearance of the Paradise Valley neighborhood. Given these boundaries, “individuals and families resist, adapt, or succumb” to the pressures exerted by the limiters on their supposed set of choices (Sugrue, 1996, pg. 5). In effect, by being isolated, the ability of the poor to participate in the same reality

that those in the suburbs do is curbed, therefore along with their relative agency. Detroit has become home to this endemic, isolating version of racialized poverty that has crippled the city's ability to help itself on an individual as well as an institutional level; one need only examine the city's unemployment rates. By 1980, in Detroit's high poverty tracts, upwards of seventy percent (70%) of residents were not working (*ibid*, pg. 270). When considering the fact that very poor families were being increasingly segregated into neighborhoods with other very poor families, it is reasonable to understand how so many Detroiters have become so altogether dislocated from the labor market.

Maybe Detroit is the world's postmodern exemplar: postmodern in the sense that too much reliance on strict individualism has led to the marginalization of entire cities; postmodern in the sense that a "post-racial" society⁶⁸ can be declared at the same time that these same marginalized cities are 81% African American; postmodern in the sense that outcomes no longer hold a candle to ideologies. Detroit is postmodern in the same way that global warming is postmodern; it is an "inconvenient truth", to borrow a term, in that its problems were created by the same market system that can no longer account for them. It is what ideological architects surely would consider a concentration of systemic dysfunction, a fly in the ointment of globalization. I will not make the claim that the entire city of Detroit is a side effect or a negative outcome of late capitalism or western culture (this would be metonymic), but the complex problems associated with the city are nevertheless an outcome that have resulted from the same set of

⁶⁸ "post-racial" being a claim that was briefly popular after the election of Barack Obama

conditions that have created suburban sprawl and exurbs, strip malls, freeways, suburban business parks, and other ubiquitous anthropological non-places. It is an outcome that is both undesirable and inevitable at the same time, and an outcome that was determined as much outside the city as it was inside the city. “And here is a chilling possibility,” says Wayne State University’s Jerry Herron. “[T]hat Detroit is linked causally somehow to the rest of America, that this mix of rot and revival, violence and reinvigoration, is a condition inherent to ourselves that the city only exacerbates. *Maybe Detroit is the cost Americans pay for being who we are* (Herron, 2010, emphasis added).”

Which might be fine for the rest of America, but not for Detroit.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION: HOW TO HEAL A CITY

Imaginary borders and border discourse

Detroit is a border city, being a major crossing point between the U.S. and Canada. But as we examine the meaning of borders, or the socially constructed thresholds that define our existences, Detroit's borders become many. There are the obvious borders, such as the international border, the city and town borders, and zoning borders. But then there are also many other, more abstract or shadowy borders. There are the borders that define racial and economic identities, which in Detroit are viscerally geographic. There are the borders between past and present, as indicated by the decaying structures that once symbolized wealth in Detroit and now symbolize its poverty. There are the borders between places and non-places, perhaps symbolizing the gamut of differences between urban and suburban Detroit. There is the border between ideology and outcome, a border that now divides Detroit from the rest of America. There is the border between abandonment and occupation, which perhaps is most startling while standing in the middle of the expansive urban prairie that sits less than a mile from the city's architecturally magnificent and relatively vibrant downtown core. There is the border between understanding and acceptance, in that understanding how borders are represented might allow for permeability while simply accepting the city's borders might serve to deepen them (Herron, 2010).

Detroit's old story is one of borders, manipulated by myriad socioeconomic and political powers; these borders divide, separate, and in some

cases isolate black from white, poor from rich, and history from future. This border story is plainly visible in the landscapes of the city. A new story might tell much about the transcendence of these borders, or a redevelopment of the social landscape to accompany the redevelopment of the physical landscape. New projects require the discussions – on a regional level – that nobody seems to want to have. I want to insist here that Detroit’s creative movement is uniquely situated to begin a difficult dialogue that is long overdue. Truthfully, this dialogue will be resisted, especially by constructing the young and creative (and, as John Patrick Leary points out, mostly white) artists as naïve idealists. As mentioned above, some refer to the Heidelberg Project as an eyesore and out of place. Object Orange, some critics say, draw unfair attention to highly impoverished neighborhoods and embarrass residents left in those areas. Recently, Imagination Station has been embroiled in a (necessary) regional debate about whether the organization should erect a large statue of Robocop across from the Michigan Central Depot – a project that many claim plays into the perceptions of Detroit as a crime-ridden dystopia.⁶⁹ But what is lost in many of these criticisms is the fact that Detroit’s artists are not shying away from creating forums for public sphere debate – Imagination Station’s Facebook page has seen a deluge of both interest and criticism, and Paffendorf has been very visible (and thoughtful) in this debate. A Robocop statue in Roosevelt Park (the piece of land

⁶⁹ Many editorials and articles are available online about the subject. See: <http://theoaklandpress.com/articles/2011/03/08/opinion/doc4d76c7e1c5ba2941542869.txt?viewmode=fullstory>, <http://www.freep.com/article/20110217/OPINION05/102170401>, <http://www.freep.com/article/20110217/OPINION05/102170403>

between Imagination Station and the Michigan Central Depot) serves the same purpose as painting houses scheduled for demolition bright orange – it jars those Detroiters who have accepted and internalized Detroit’s borders into awareness about the factors that shape the city’s landscapes and the borders that contain (or fail to contain) them. If Detroiters could re-imagine these borders as fluid, permeable, and socially constructed, they might realize that they are in control of dictating their parameters, and in turn, in control of the spatial and emotional design of Detroit’s landscapes.

Broken City Lab in Windsor epitomizes the awareness needed to puncture these constrictive borders. In addition to challenging the international border by displaying its support for a regional healing process on the side of a Windsor skyscraper (recall the “we’re in this together” projection), those affiliated with BCL have also been wandering the streets of their own city telling strangers that “you are amazing” and erecting billboards meant to create an inclusive urban ethos while challenging the cardboard consumer culture that has worked to re-organize urban space at the expense of communities. Broken City Labs has recently been remapping the Detroit-Windsor region in an effort to rethink the international border, along with all of the social effects that the international border has attached to it. This project, dubbed by the collective as “How to Forget the Border Completely”, is part real, part imaginary, and all inspirational. It speaks to the need for cities to (re)develop with the entire region in mind, naked of all the false borders that many have accepted as impenetrable. In the case of

the socially constructed borders that divide people based on privilege and inequality, intra-regional recognition and dialogue has been a long time coming.

Furthermore, I cannot imagine a city planner projecting his or her ideas onto the side of an abandoned skyscraper or painting destroyed houses orange. I also cannot imagine the city council reviewing the sale of inches to people who might never set foot in Detroit. In Detroit, it is the domain of socially conscious artists and collaboratives such as Object Orange and the Heidelberg Project to stir up difficult conversations, so long as they can get enough exposure to generate interest. Generally, planning seems to avoid or neglect issues of inequality and privilege, which if not considered could spell further disaster in Detroit. City planning and economic development often seems to be one part physical geography, one part classical economics, and one part engineering, but it tends to lack the elements of critical studies that it would need to be fully effective. Detroit is a city that has been through more than most; healing will require an honest recount of what the city has lost. A regional discourse must evolve with the end result being a plan that will mend the wounds of the past and transcend the borders of the present. Compared to planners, the artists in Detroit are doing a far better, even if accidental or incomplete, job of incorporating social realities into redevelopment efforts. “Our part is starting conversations,” as a member of Object Orange says during an interview by *Good Magazine*. “Some people do outreach. We paint houses orange” (“Bright Orange”, 2006).

Social Justice, Human Rights, and Detroit

Capital mobility has undoubtedly organized urban space around the world. Increasingly globally connected, today's cities are being stretched. States are in the compromising position of having to facilitate capital mobility while protecting their citizens from its effects; small businesses are charged with innovating and competing against giant multinational corporations; people are finding themselves more and more separated from each other economically, racially, and spatially. The over-reliance on cars, and by extension endless networks of roads and freeways to accommodate them, has turned cities into consumption depots where even culture is produced as a commodity. City residents now find themselves struggling with identity crises based in confusion between citizen and consumer, many times identifying with consumption before even recognizing what they have lost or given up.

Those that cannot consume or have been rejected from the world of consumption (especially via historically racist processes involving credit) are relegated to the world of poverty and informal economies. Abandoned by many of our institutions, low-income and vulnerable populations must navigate life where crime and brutality are the default mode of regulation, both in a behavioral sense as well as an economic sense. Since competition rules the mode of production for such necessities as food, entire cities (such as Detroit) lack access to the most basic commodities as groceries – why would a grocery store build where people do not have the means to consume? Even the land underneath the feet of the poor is often contested. In the U.S., gentrification (read: market forces) often pushes the poor into ever shrinking corners of the city. In so-called “Third

World” cities, governments hungry for developers’ dollars are constantly razing slums when they become too valuable not to acquire (see: Davis, 2007, or the case of Dharavi in Mumbai).

As geographer David Harvey argues, progressivism in the postmodern era has generally succumbed to the power of the market, offering up solutions such as property rights for the poor as a means of generating equality in the city.

Concurring with Harvey, I do not believe that such solutions challenge the fundamental causes of poverty and inequality – the market cannot be expected to correct problems using the same mechanisms that it used to create them. The poor can be given property rights, but the fact that they are poor is in itself incentive enough to sell those property rights as a means of survival (Harvey, 2008). With many inequalities across the world widening, and globalization speeding the trajectory of urbanization, it will become ever more important to establish a *right to the city* for the world’s urban populations. As sociologist Robert Park said, “...indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself” (quoted from Harvey, 2008). David Harvey recently echoed this sentiment, arguing that when we change the city, we change ourselves (*ibid*). Harvey, who has reasserted Henri Lefebvre’s right to the city since the global financial crisis, broadens the concept:

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city (*ibid*).

So the real question is not about what kind of city we want, as many planners have framed it; the real question is: *who are we?*

The right to the city should be based on the variety of answers to this question; ideally, the city would be built accordingly. The right to the city is a human right. The World Charter on the Right to the City defines the right to the city as a collective right, the right for “all citizens...to participate in the planning, layout, control, management, rehabilitation and improvement of the cities” (“World Charter”, 2004). Democratic involvement and participatory urban reclamation are necessary and obvious methods of discovery here, but there is also a need to acknowledge a cooperative balance between individualism and collectivism. Without individualism, identities would be in crisis and creativity and cultural innovation would be less exciting. Without collectivism, the chances of a socially just society ever coming to fruition are nonexistent. I would also posit that the right to the city should transcend the socially constructed borders, the psychological borders, and in most cases the physical borders that inhibit regional cooperation. It is frustrating to think that although Detroit and Windsor are on the same economic rollercoaster, they can do little to mitigate its effects as a region. It is equally frustrating to think that one of the poorest cities in the U.S. (Detroit) is separated from one of the richest counties in the U.S. (Oakland) merely by the width of a street. And it is an injustice that the same street also separates black from white.

Detroit is a city that has been shaped by many factors, both internal and external to the city. Its stories are written in plain view for everyone to see,

although most people misinterpret them. If we are going to ask ourselves who we are relative to our own city, it wouldn't hurt to ask the same question relative to Detroit. It could be that Jerry Herron is right in saying, "maybe Detroit is the cost Americans pay for being who we are"; then again, maybe we are all Detroiters. That shouldn't scare us; we should all be active in cultivating a new story for Detroit, and for every city, by recognizing that the old stories might have been misinterpreted. Detroit, and every city, would be better off. At the same time, stories of cities can no longer be separated from larger regional, national, and global narratives. Maybe that is where the right to the city starts, with the realization that Detroit, and all cities, are metaphors and not exceptions. Then it wouldn't be so scary when we realize that, as Herron puts it, Detroit "is not over, nor will it be any time soon."

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