

The Seventh Generation

“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”

—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Development in Detroit

We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes

Lisa Berglund

REACHING ITS PEAK population of 1.8 million in 1950, today just under 700,000 residents live in Detroit. The city has experienced a steady decline in population following the migration of the auto-industry to the suburbs, other areas of the country and around the world in search of lower production costs. Like many American cities, decades of worsening racial tensions brought on by police brutality and racist land use policies promoting segregation came to a head in a series of uprisings. Inaccurate from the standpoint of population loss, today historic

accounts frequently scapegoat the uprisings as being central to the city’s economic decline, shifting blame from the workings of capitalism and xenophobia to low-income people of color residing in the inner city. Today, the future of this former manufacturing capital – now one quarter vacant, with one third of residents living in poverty – remains questionable. Racism continues to be a driving factor in locating new developments and further advancing spatial injustice.

Detroit’s image has become tarnished through years of political scandal and corruption on the part of municipal government officials and a staggeringly high crime rate. Starting in the 50s, the population of Detroit dropped as many predominantly white and middle class families moved to the suburbs. Racially restrictive covenants set forth by homeowners’ associations often kept Black families from moving into new suburban neighborhoods. The remaining mostly Black urban core has been continually displaced by large scale, state sanctioned urban renewal projects that fragmented and destabilized historic neighborhoods. Additionally, mortgage redlining in the inner city stifled homeownership rates. Though historical accounts describe these racialized policies, they often ignore the powerful sense of agency held by Black and working class Detroiters that has made way for some of the most important social movements in American history. The Detroiters that helped forge some of the strongest unions in the world, and guided the Black power movement, were anything but complacent in their political exclusion and denial of basic civil rights.



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NOTE: As guest editor of the Detroit section of this issue of *Progressive Planning*, I recognize that the leadership and forces of resistance and community development in Detroit are strongly rooted in African American communities that are not represented in the issue. The Editors and I hoped to include a diverse set of voices among the authors, but were not able to do so. As a result, here Black community views are filtered through the words of a group of white allies. The authors are activists, Detroit residents, and scholars deeply committed to understanding the gravity of racism in the city, and they offer insights that are valuable and informative, if limited in the diversity of voices.

continued on page 10



7th Generation: Development in Detroit

By Lisa Berglund

continued from page 2

The city and its 85% Black communities are often described using denigrating terms like decaying, dying and dormant, downplaying their sense of agency and dismissing the strong culture of community coalitions and activism in the city. In recent years, there has been an influx of mostly white, educated entrepreneurs and members of the creative class, lauded by media outlets and politicians as a force of renewal and regeneration. Simultaneously, large-scale demolitions of so-called blighted properties outside of the downtown core take funding priority. During a wave of unprecedented private redevelopment dubbed the “renaissance” of the city, today’s spatial injustices continue to unfold, excluding the majority of Detroiters from new jobs and new amenities.

With this alleged rebirth comes the worsening of socioeconomic disparities. The racism that initially separated the city from the suburbs in the mid-century has resurfaced in the form of alienation of neighborhoods in favor of private downtown development. For developers able to take advantage of low property values and members of the creative class, Detroit has been celebrated as a place where anything can happen and experimentation is encouraged. This perspective represents a stark contrast to that of long time residents of this largely Black and significantly impoverished city. The majority of Detroiters continue to experience the city as a place of political exclusion where an honest attempt at improving basic quality

of life standards remains to be seen. Despite what media accounts focusing on development boosterism might convey, Detroiters outside of formal development conversations remain vigilant and active, mobilizing campaigns against myriad civil rights infractions from mass water shut offs to post-bankruptcy pension cuts. Detroit communities continue to fight for their dignity and quality of life, just as they have always done

Detroit After Bankruptcy

Emerging from the first bankruptcy of a city of its size, Detroit government is now operating on lean funds. Post-bankruptcy Court-ordered austerity measures have left the municipality with few resources to assist in social programming or infrastructure enhancements in many high need areas of the city. Simultaneously, municipal relationships with private developers have continued to aid business interests through tax credits and development subsidies like a bond measure that matched private funds to build a new hockey arena downtown. Additionally, billionaire Dan Gilbert, CEO of Quicken Loans and its subsidiaries, has purchased over 70 properties in the downtown area. This land grab has nearly single-handedly created an oasis of jobs and amenities meant to attract, in no uncertain terms, a white, young educated group of professionals. With large-scale development overwhelmingly favoring downtown, the rest of the city continues to

look towards an uncertain future. Lack of resources to manage development or make meaningful improvements to city services for the majority of Detroiters has coincided with private developers taking advantage of low property values and docile government leadership. When Detroit shed its debt through bankruptcy and enhanced austerity, the city continued its open season for private development.

Privatization of Public Works

Like many cities, Detroit has seen the rise of privatization of city services. In the last year, mass water shutoffs have made the press, prompting outrage and the likely privatization of water and sewer services. Other examples include increasingly privately owned and heavily surveilled public spaces downtown along with privately initiated public amenities like light rail and fiber optic internet. Conflating philanthropy with the desire for capitalists to protect downtown investments through additional improvements, the local and national media, along with politicians, have created something of a cult of personality surrounding redevelopers in the city. Rhetoric supporting the image of developers like Dan Gilbert and the Illitch family as saviors of the city demonstrates an exceptional degree of privatization, and municipal collusion with business interests.

The power of private development and the agendas of private foundations such as Kresge, Kellogg and

Ford has landed them at the forefront of planning decisions in the city, not least its master plan. The weakened state of municipal planning resources prompted private enterprises to invest in a strategic framework called Detroit Future City. Though initially conceived as a privately funded project, due to lack of municipal capacity, this document is now being used to shape the reboot of the city's master plan that will be released sometime next year. This document contains a strategy where some areas will undergo large-scale development and others of low property value and high vacancy are slated for agricultural uses and non-programmed green space. The release of the plan in 2012 stirred panic and controversy among residents seeing that their home had been virtually wiped off the map through planned obsolescence. Though not adopted as master plan verbatim as of now, Detroit Future City as a highly influential framework has planted the seed for speculators hoping to capitalize on Detroit's decline.

Largely centered in the downtown area, private investment in public works in Detroit leaves the future of a majority of neighborhoods neglected. Newly burgeoning private developments in Detroit have preyed on low land values that many communities have paid for in poverty and racism for decades. The task of distributing benefits of these developments to communities relegated to the margins of formal planning decision making remains a formidable challenge for community advocates. Instances of piecemeal community benefits agreements are on the rise. A community benefits

ordinance making spatial justice an obligation instead of an option continues to garner community support, but has been largely forced into stagnation amid strong private opposition.

Community Based Planning

Municipal neglect of many areas has created a rich culture of grassroots urban planning efforts from within communities that has persisted for decades. Often downplayed in the grim media accounts of Detroit, block clubs and other community groups are a strong institution in the city, and born from historical exclusion from formal planning processes. Beginning before the Detroit Future City framework, Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD), a coalition of community groups in the city, mobilized to engage with communities and provide their own plans for several neighborhoods, independent of the city's master plan that was not inclusive of community engagement. Through political tenacity, these plans and their aspirations have commanded the attention of municipal planners, forcing their demands into planning debates in the city.

On a smaller scale, in the absence of municipal resources and priority, resilient communities of Detroit, seen as existing outside of the investment strategy, have mobilized planning solutions on their own terms to address the lack of urban amenities. Communities like Brightmoor have countered the messages sent to youth through countless school closures with after-school programming, community gardening and safe routes to school.

Groups in Southwest Detroit have mobilized against illegal dumping in their neighborhoods and made demands for community benefits. In the North End neighborhood, residents have organized workforce development and financial literacy workshops to prevent foreclosures. Across the city, informal ridesharing, vacant lot clean ups and snow plowing services are examples of this landscape of locally driven and conceived planning interventions directly addressing the everyday challenges of Detroit communities.

Though the scale of Detroit's decline and the voracity with which private funding has driven traditionally state sanctioned planning initiatives are anomalous, this privatization is emblematic of trends taking place in cities around the world. As planners in cities where private development increasingly provides amenities for profit, and shirks social responsibility, we face the obligation to think more critically about these corporate models of planning. Planners, as potential agents of change, should look to those excluded from economically motivated development to visualize alternatives. Throughout Detroit's history, with the present set of challenges being no exception, politically marginalized Detroiters have found ways to resist various oppressive, capitalist regimes leading development in the city and mobilize against them. As a sentiment baring striking resemblance to the continued vigor of the resilient spirit of Detroit communities resisting their exclusion, the city motto written after the fire of 1805 reads:

We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes.

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