

Race, Regionalism and Reconciliation

Detroit Planning Fails the Three Rs

Peter J. Hammer

IF, LOOKING FROM OUTER SPACE AT Southeast Michigan, you could observe only the presence or absence of opportunity – the quality of schools, housing and employment – the geopolitical boundaries of Pontiac would appear to be an opportunity desert, as would the geopolitical boundaries of Detroit. These opportunity deserts exist within a rich sea of opportunity that defines the majority of the region (Figure 1, right). These are the lessons of the opportunity mapping of Jason Reece and Christy Roger from the Kirwan Institute in *Opportunity for All: Inequality, Linked Fate and Social Justice in Detroit and Michigan*. If one maps the demographics of race over opportunity, one finds the near complete segregation of race, wealth and opportunity in Southeast Michigan, defining the terrains of

contemporary spatial racism in the region (Figure 2, page 6).

Race, Regionalism and Reconciliation

What does this mean for planning? Any effort to effectively plan in Detroit must be grounded in the reality of the “Three Rs” of race, regionalism and reconciliation. Expressly considering *race* not only ensures that the planning question is situated in the proper social and historical context of spatial racism, but that the significance of structural racism is not neglected in the analysis. A consideration of *regionalism* acknowledges that the appropriate unit of economic and policy analysis is not the city of Detroit, nor any of the other fractured geopolitical units that comprise Southeast Michigan, but the region itself. Finally, a consideration of *reconciliation* establishes the aspirational goal of building a more cohesive community that can heal historic wounds and lay the foundation for a healthier and more prosperous social and economic future.

Unfortunately, contemporary planning efforts fail the test of the

Three Rs. The failure is evident in the three documents most critical for defining Detroit’s future: *Detroit Future City: 2012 Detroit Strategic Framework Plan*; *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Report: Every Neighborhood has a Future . . . and it Doesn’t Include Blight*; and the *Detroit Bankruptcy Plan of Adjustment* that we will examine in light of Martha E. M. Kopacz’ expert report: *Regarding the Feasibility of the City of Detroit Plan of Adjustment*. Each one of these documents can be graded in terms of the Three Rs.

Detroit Future City

The Detroit Future City outlines a framework to guide the City’s transition over the next 50 years, based on the assumption that the City’s population will continue to decline. This is not a traditional public planning process, but rather an initiative led by the private foundation and business community. Reports like Detroit Future City can be approached as artifacts. These artifacts embody the dominant belief systems of the planners and society that produce it. In this manner, their contents provide a window into



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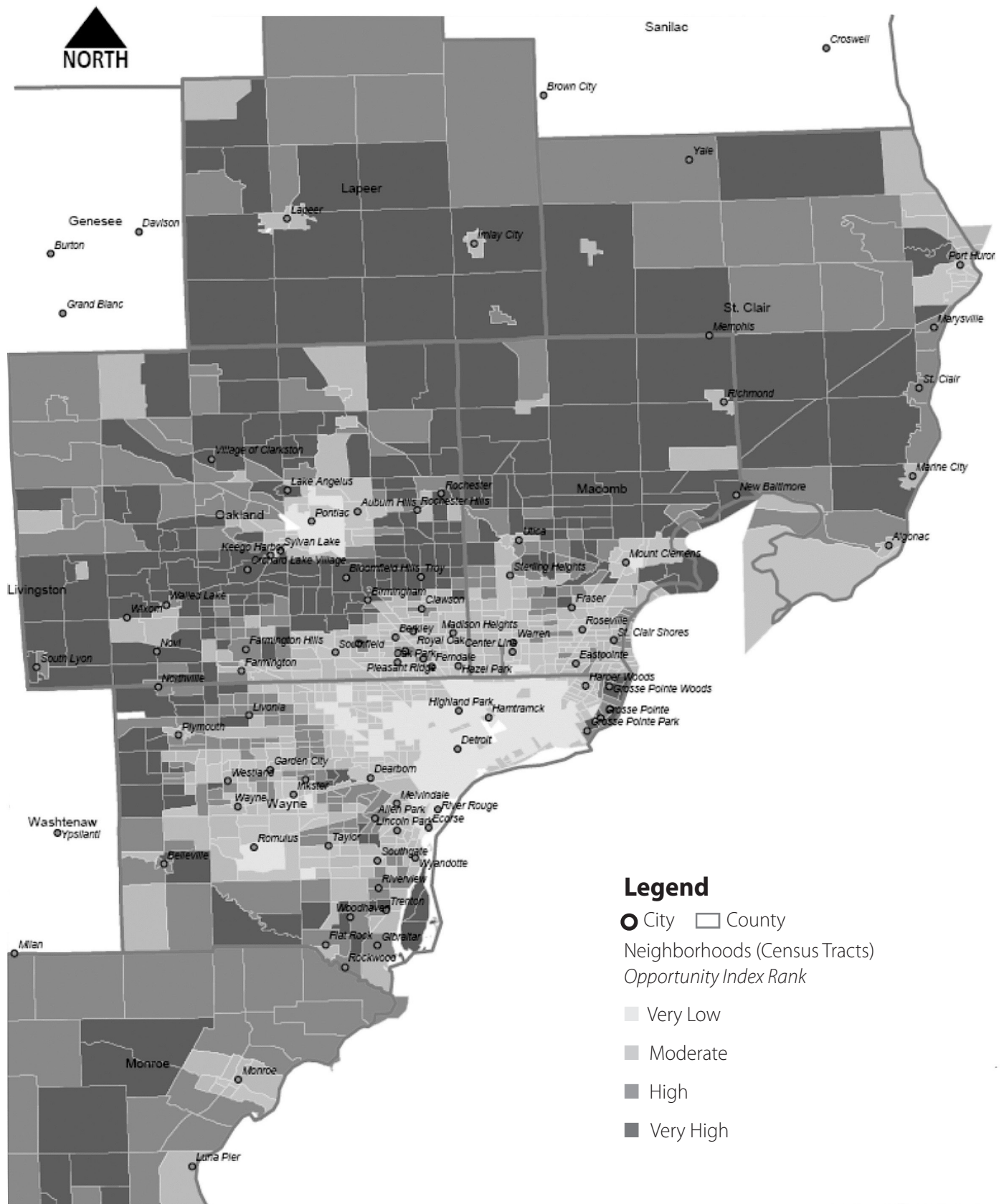


Figure 1. Neighborhood Opportunity Map for the Detroit Metro Region

Source: Neighborhood Opportunity Analysis by the Kirwan Institute and the U.S. Census Bureau. Author: The Kirwan Institute, Ohio State University, July 16, 2008.

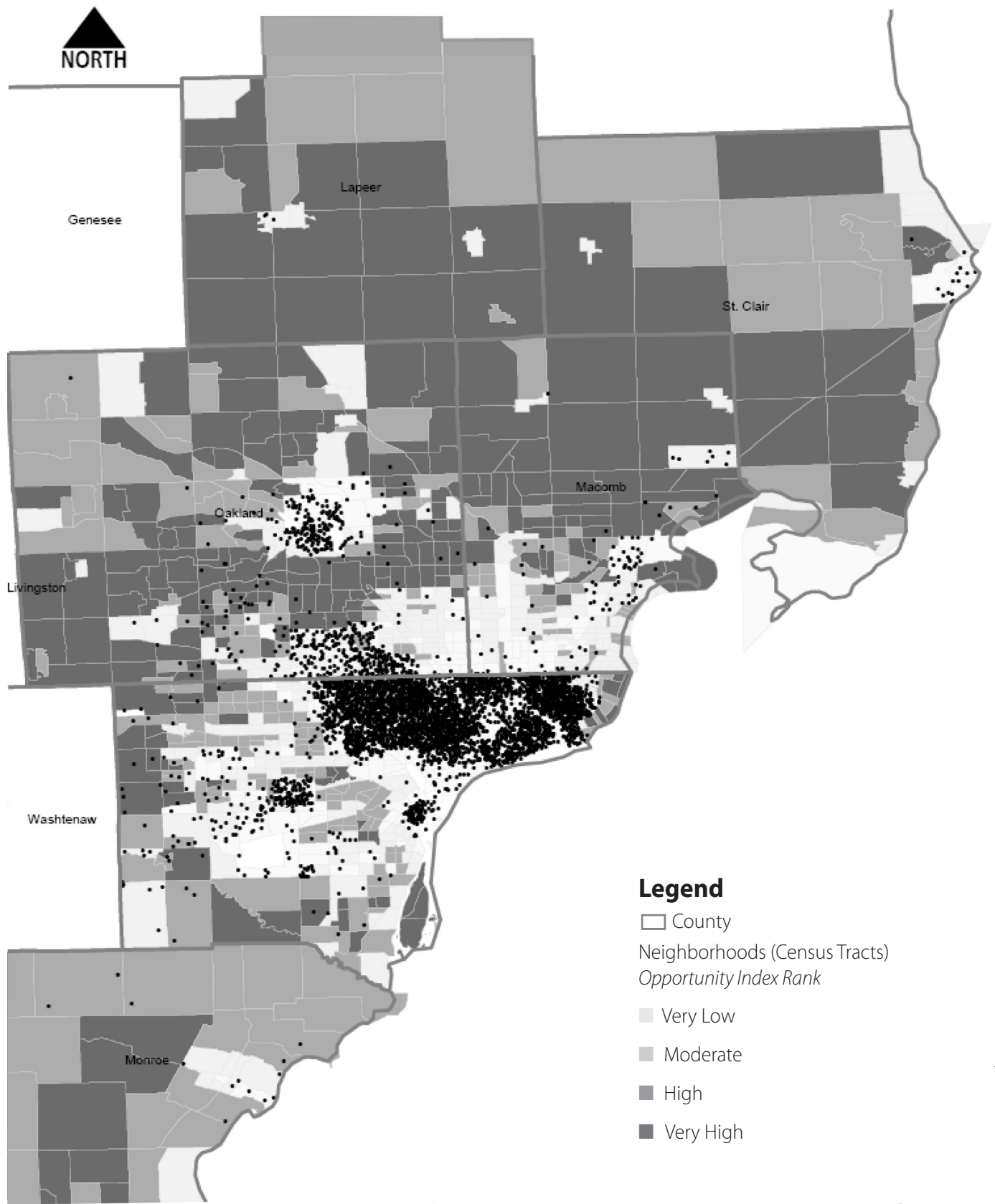


Figure 2. Neighborhood Opportunity Map and 2000 Distribution of African American Population (1 Dot = 200 African American Residents)

Source: Neighborhood Opportunity Analysis by the Kirwan Institute and the U.S. Census Bureau. Author: The Kirwan Institute, Ohio State University, July 16, 2008.

Note: Opportunity Analysis based on assessment of 15 neighborhoods based on indicators of opportunity. Please review report for full list of indicators.

the often invisible psychology defining the planner's and the community's broader worldview.

What does this report teach us? Maps, like pictures, are worth a thousand words. Almost every map in the entire 360-page Detroit Future City report depicts Detroit as isolated from the rest of Southeast Michigan, violating the "R" of regionalism. These maps unquestionably accept Detroit's separate and unequal status in an era of spatial racism as the "norm" for future political decision making. A lesson we emphasize when training future lawyers is that "if you can control the frame, you can control the outcome." The psychology embodied in the dominant belief system defines the frame for analysis, which then dictates future policy outcomes.

What does it mean to frame the future of Detroit in isolation of the future of the region? Figures 1 and 2 document the extreme segregation of race and wealth in Southeast Michigan. By focusing on the geopolitical boundaries of Detroit, an area of relatively low wealth and opportunity, rather than the relatively high wealth and opportunity of the entire region, the frame dictates a policy logic of social triage. Standing separate and alone, Detroit has limited resources and a declining tax base. In the frame reinforced by *Detroit Future City*, there will be no external infusion of

resources. The only possible logic is therefore one of triage. In a world where everyone cannot be saved, the weak must be sacrificed for the strong. As such, limited resources must be directed to relatively well-off neighborhoods at the expense of relatively less viable and less well-off neighborhoods. By implication, the already "separate and unequal" geopolitical space of Detroit is now "planned" to be more separate and more unequal than the rest of the region in the future. There are predictable winners and losers in this scenario. The most vulnerable residents of the City will be subject to triage-driven deprivations of resources and services that would be viewed as entirely unacceptable anywhere else in the region.

There are additional reflections of the dominant belief system in Detroit Future City. The words "race" or "racial" appear in only eight scattered places in the lengthy document. The Report contains no meaningful discussion of race or the historical forces that produced the extreme segregation of race and wealth that defines Southeast Michigan. Rather, Detroit Future City is planning for the future with very little respect for or understanding of the past. This is not innocent. Eliminating considerations of race not only eliminates history and social context, it eliminates the insights that a more thoughtful consideration of structural racism would provide.

The underlying reality of the causes of the problems facing the City and the region are obscured.

Blight Removal Task Force Report

The analysis of Blight Removal Task Force Report is even more disappointing on this front. Like Detroit Future City, the Blight Removal Task Force Report is another example of outsourcing public planning to private actors, this time a committee chaired by Detroit real estate billionaire Dan Gilbert. Furthermore, like Detroit Future City, the report violates the "R" of regionalism, by examining Detroit in isolation of the region. The Report's treatment of race is even more revealing of the blinders guiding dominant belief systems and policymaking in Southeast Michigan.

The story of racism in Southeast Michigan can be most vividly told in the story of housing. The structural causes of blight in Detroit are derivative of a history of racism, discrimination, white flight and subsidized suburbanization. This reality is completely obscured in the Report. Nowhere, not once, does the Report mention the words "race," "racism," "discrimination," "segregation," "Black," "white," or "white flight." There is no mention of "redlining" or "reverse redlining" in a report examining the collapse of the housing market. Equally

shocking, in the entire discussion of sweeping tax foreclosures there is no mention of the word “poverty,” nor any analysis of the implications for the future of the housing market (and blight) or the fact that more than 40% of city residents survive on incomes below the federal poverty level.

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Missing from the The Kopacz Expert Report is any discussion of the “R” of race: the words “race,” “racism,” “discrimination” and “segregation” do not appear in the report. While the phrase “white paper” appears twice, the phrase “white flight” does not appear at all.

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Nevertheless, without understanding the social context of the people living in the City and without appreciation of the separate and unequal status of the region, the Report confidently asserts what the City needs. The Report recommends spending nearly a billion dollars, not to invest in people through education, head start, job training, transportation or foreclosure relief to keep families in their homes, but for bulldozers to clear nearly every abandoned residential property. These recommendations are derivative of a belief

system centered on investments in property and not people. The Report shows no meaningful appreciation of the teaching of structural racism or an understanding of the causes or remedies of racial inequity. Where will the billion dollars come from? While it never came to fruition, this money was recommended to come, in part, from “exit financing” in bankruptcy through the City’s Plan of Adjustment.

Detroit Future City, the Blight Removal Task Force Report and the Bankruptcy Plan of Adjustment often function as a self-referential echo chamber, obscuring the fundamentals of race, regionalism and reconciliation. These documents define a policy template that will likely accentuate the city’s separate and unequal status.

The Kopacz Expert Report

Judge Steven Rhode’s commissioned Martha Kopacz as his court-appointed expert to assess the feasibility of the City’s Plan of Adjustment. The Kopacz Expert Report’s economic analysis of the property and labor market looks at Detroit in isolation from the rest of the region, violating the “R” of regionalism. Similarly, missing from the Report is any discussion of the “R” of race: the words “race,” “racism,” “discrimination” and “segregation” do not appear in the report. While the phrase “white paper” appears twice, the phrase “white flight” does not appear at all. These are the root causes of Detroit’s current financial crisis and yet they are completely absent from the expert report. Rather than

examining the social, historical and economic context of the City’s municipal distress, the Expert Report states in an Orwellian manner that it is simply taking the City “as is.”

More troubling still is the legal significance of Judge Rhodes’ approval of the “feasibility” of the City’s Plan of Adjustment. Michelle Andersen documents the growing phenomena of “The New Minimal Cities” in an important article in the Yale Law Review. Through the bankruptcy process, Detroit has joined their ranks. Minimal cities, all poor by definition, are the new normal for cities undergoing bankruptcy and receivership. In this post-bankruptcy policy framework, these cities provide stripped down, second-class services, consisting almost exclusively of garbage, police and fire protection. Social services and investments in people in the form of human development are not part of the minimal package.

The substantive contrasts between Detroit’s Plan of Adjustment and the prescriptive components of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report are telling. The Kerner Commission was charged by President Johnson to assess the causes of and appropriate governmental responses to the urban unrest in cities like Detroit in the late 1960s. After warning that America was “moving toward two societies, one Black, one white – separate and unequal,” the 1968 Report outlined a program of massive investments in cities to reverse the trend. Instead, Judge Rhodes approved as “feasible” the City’s Plan of Adjustment, which essentially ratifies the “separate

and unequal” status of Detroit as the country’s latest “minimal city” and makes it clear that no new resources will be brought to bear to address the needs of its citizens. Poor, mostly minority, children unlucky enough to be born in these minimal cities must simply get used to their second-class status.

The Kerner Commission lamented how “discrimination and segregation . . . now threaten the future of every American” and how the “continuing polarization of the American community” will lead to “the destruction of basic democratic values.” These separate and unequal societies warned of in 1968 have become a reality in Southeast Michigan, first through the social, economic and political forces producing the reality of spatial racism and second through the Bankruptcy Plan of Adjustment that ratified its implications.

What does this mean for the foundations of American Democracy and the promise of the American Dream?

Sadly, no one even asks these questions any more. The truth is that “separate” makes it much easier to be “unequal.” We are now defined by a dominant social reality in Southeast Michigan where we no longer even “perceive” racial and economic inequality and therefore cannot “know” enough to care and act. As such, policies fundamentally grounded in notions of regional isolation and racial neglect are now shaping the future of Detroit for what will likely be generations to come.

The aspirational “R” of reconciliation is just as important as the other two. Martin Luther King’s vision of a “beloved community” is still a dream deferred. At least in 1968, it was a more commonly shared vision. Obtaining the dream will take a transformation of hearts as well as minds. The Kerner Commission noted: “From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will.” The Commission called for the country to “undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and

frustration that now dominates the ghetto and weakens our society.”

No such innovative programs are contained in present planning efforts in Detroit. Nevertheless, we know what is necessary to plan a more equitable future in Southeast Michigan. The lessons are embodied in the Three Rs of race, regionalism and reconciliation. Sadly, these elements are largely absent in the contemporary planning discourse. Consciously or unconsciously, we are planning for an even more segregated and unequal future in Detroit.

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Photo: PBS.org

GRACE LEE BOGGS 1915–2015

Grace Lee Boggs, writer and activist, will be remembered as an icon of the fight for racial justice in Detroit. She tirelessly led others to engage in the notable social movements of her 100 year life from Civil Rights to Black Power. Her legacy of activism continues to inspire through her writings, and lives on through countless organizations pursuing justice in the spirit of her life’s work, in Detroit and beyond.

“A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind.” —Grace Lee Boggs