

To understand Detroit today, its uniqueness and its special challenges, it helps first to visit a city like Philadelphia. During the summer of 2009, as I was writing this book, I toured many of Philadelphia's distressed districts with a guide named Bob Grossmann. Bob runs the vacant land restoration programs for Philadelphia Green, which is the city's nonprofit tree-planting and community gardening organization. In his younger days, he worked as an autoworker and then as a builder before his love of gardening and volunteering led him to his current job. As he drove me through several neighborhoods on Philadelphia's north side, all of which have been scarred by poverty, the drug trade, and the loss of jobs, we passed many signs of hope: small urban farm gardens and vacant lots his group had rescued with clean-ups and fencing and regular maintenance. While I did see some vacant buildings and peeling paint, I had expected much worse from my tour—some collapse on the scale of what I see in Detroit. All these Philadelphia districts looked surprisingly solid and even healthy to my eyes. Brownstone buildings stood in unbroken ranks around many parks and squares, and the vacant lots remained in the minority. The city showed good bones. Philadelphia still looked *urban*.

Visiting similar at-risk districts in Detroit, the most striking characteristic is the vacant feel of the city, those ghost streets with just one or two houses left, those expanses of what Detroiters long since have taken to calling "urban prairie." Detroit has lost roughly 50 percent of its population since the 1950s, but Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and other cities have lost about the same percentage, and St. Louis has lost even more; yet those other cities don't convey this same emptiness and feeling of abandonment. There's a cable television show called *Life After People* that, with computer-generated effects, illustrates how nature will reclaim our great cities the moment we're gone. Grass will grow

in our streets and trees will take root inside buildings. Detroiters point out that nature already triumphs in many parts of their city today. Trees and overgrowth reclaim the vacant lots; wildflowers bloom amid the rubble; grass and weeds stand so tall and lush in July and August that a wanderer can feel overwhelmed with the creeping intensity of it all—*stifled in vegetation*, to borrow a phrase from Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*.

It's this scale of vacancy, these vast patches of rural landscape within a city of several hundred thousand residents, that defines Detroit's uniqueness among American cities. "This is probably the most significant vacant property problem in the country," Dan Kildee told me when I spoke with him on April 23, 2009, at the offices of the Genesee County Land Bank, of which he was chair. "I've visited virtually every city in America that has this problem," he said, "and no city has a more profound problem than Detroit."

One seasoned observer is Robin Boyle, chair of Wayne State University's Department of Geography and Urban Planning. Recruited to his post from his

Even downtown, vacancy abounds. Some of these lots on the northern edge of downtown were cleared for Super Bowl XL parking but remain awesomely empty most of the time. (Author photo)



native Scotland in the early '90s, Boyle says he was immediately struck by the uniqueness of Detroit's wide-open spaces. Those spaces resist normal planning, he told me in one of our many conversations. Dealing with voids within a city lies outside the experience and even the language of most urban planners, architects, and social scientists. Planners and architects build and manage growth, while social scientists—economists, sociologists, epidemiologists—learn to use data, mostly from the U.S. Census, to study, characterize, and help distressed residents. Nobody trains to deal with the emptiness other than by filling it with traditional development—housing, retail space, industrial parks—but that kind of development is inadequate to deal with the scope of Detroit's prairies.

In late 2009, Boyle challenged his Wayne State students to create innovative solutions to Detroit's vacancy. Think of the scale, Boyle urged his students. "I kept saying, 'A hundred-thirty-nine square miles,'" which is the land area of the city of Detroit. "I kept throwing that number up on the wall, a hundred-thirty-nine square miles: 'How does your prescription—wilderness or farming or neighborhood/village development—how does that assist in the hundred-thirty-nine square miles?'" But the monumental scale of the problem dwarfed the students' imaginations, and they turned in mostly block-and-neighborhood-level solutions.

"We had an argument one night on the Dequindre Cut," Boyle said, referring to one of Detroit's newest bicycle and strolling paths. His students saw the Dequindre Cut as a model project, but Boyle urged them to consider how difficult it would be to emulate the project throughout such a huge city. "I said, 'That's great, it's 1.3 miles at the cost of about one million dollars a mile or more. Expand that out. Think of the cost that would be.'" Boyle does believe, however, that Detroit has a chance for revival. "We're not going to give up," he said. "We're going to fight for it. There are enough people willing to fight for it. But I think their tools are blunt."¹

Why does Detroit look so sparsely populated today when other cities equally stricken by population loss look so much better? "Better" may be a relative term; many parts of Chicago may look dreadful, but they look dreadful in an urban way, while Detroit slowly returns to nature. There are two reasons, I think, and again we'll look first to Philadelphia for comparison. There's a stretch in the

northern section of Philadelphia along the Delaware River that once housed so many mills and factories that it gained fame as “The Workshop of the World.” Stetson made hats there, just one of thousands of products churned out. When those businesses collapsed or moved out in the years after World War II, the hole each one left behind was relatively modest—an acre here, perhaps five acres there. But when Detroit lost its auto factories, many of which once employed thousands of men and women, it often lost a hundred acres of urban landscape at a crack. A lot of those empty factories still stand, most famously the Packard plant, the first great automotive manufacturing center of the early 1900s, abandoned now for decades. Everyone knows the Packard plant. It’s the one with the trees growing from the roof and the slowly crumbling walls and the trash fires set weekly if not daily by vagrants and punks. But the city of Detroit razed a lot of other empty factories, and the gaping holes in the landscape today are numerous and large. When a tannery in Philadelphia closed down, it was possible for Bob Grossmann and Philadelphia Green to help residents build an urban park and a community garden to fill up the space. It’s harder to do that when the vacant site measures a hundred times larger.

The second reason for Detroit’s striking emptiness today is the quality of the city’s housing stock. Detroiters boasted for generations of having the highest percentage of homeownership of any big city. The ability for working-class families to buy their own homes—and even to buy a fishing boat or a cottage up north—remained Detroit’s proudest achievement throughout its Auto Century. But vast numbers of those working-class and middle-class houses sprang up so quickly that there wasn’t time or space for the painstaking construction and deliberate planning we see in, say, the neighboring Grosse Pointe communities. For example, the city of Highland Park, a one-time farming village now contained entirely within Detroit’s borders, mushroomed from four hundred residents in 1900 to forty thousand just twenty years later. While there are some wonderful Arts-and-Crafts bungalows in Highland Park, as there are good houses throughout Detroit, there are also many quickly built wooden houses that have not withstood time as well as the brownstones of Philadelphia and New York and Chicago.

Detroit, too, is a relatively humid place, nestled as it is alongside the Great Lakes, and the humidity is not kind to houses with wooden siding, especially

when they don't get the upkeep they should. Detroiters also say the city has a high water table, meaning you can dig down just a couple of feet in many places to strike water. To be more precise, the glaciers that came through thousands of years ago left a dense layer of clay a couple of feet below the soil, so that rain and snowmelt doesn't percolate down easily. The water perches atop the surface of the clay, trapped there, so it's no surprise that wet basements are a problem throughout the city. Combine the hasty wood construction with a humid environment, then layer on poverty rates among the nation's worst, and the result is a city that loses many houses to decay. Metal strippers and arsonists worsen the problem many times over, but Detroit would be suffering a deteriorating housing stock even without them.

Without meaning to, civic leaders have contributed to the city's wide-open spaces by ambitiously demolishing many vacant structures in the expectation of new development, much of which never happens. In 1999, the city mapped plans for the I-94 Industrial Park, a project meant to spark an economic rebirth

Vacant houses, beyond repair in many cases, slowly rot across Detroit's landscape. (Author photo)



by attracting new companies. It was the old “build it and they will come” idea. The city bought and razed hundreds of houses, adding to property it already owned, creating a 189-acre development-ready park. You have to see 189 acres of vacant land in the middle of a big city to understand the term urban prairie. The problem, of course, is that only one building has been developed in the park, and the rest of the site remains awesomely empty.

This is the city that journalists and documentary makers come to see today. Detroit, poster child of urban decay, has always drawn journalists or filmmakers looking for gritty material, and Eminem’s film *8 Mile*, shot in the city, no doubt increased the level of interest. But during the spring and summer of 2009, the visiting writers and photographers became a swarm. It seemed that everybody with a camera or a notebook wanted a piece of Detroit. Britain’s BBC, America’s PBS, filmmakers and journalists from France, Ireland, and Australia all came to town. Time Inc. bought a house in the city’s West Village district from which to write a year-long blog on Detroit. Commonly these out-of-towners used to Google “Detroit” and then call up the resulting local experts to ask for tours of the city. I showed several around myself, careful always to show the vibrant areas like Eastern Market and Indian Village as well as the requested evidence of vacancy.

So many of these out-of-town visitors scamper around Detroit these days that a writer named Thomas Morton mocked them in *Vice*, an online magazine of journalism and commentary. Titled “*Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff*,” Morton’s piece skewered the obsession with “ruin porn” and the tendency for everyone to shoot the same clichéd images: “Detroit is being descended on by a plague of reporters. If you live on a block near one of the city’s tens of thousands of abandoned buildings, you can’t toss a chunk of Fordite without hitting some schmuck with a camera worth more than your house.”²

In this city, contradictions await on almost every street. Eastern Market on the city’s near-east side thrives as a center of the local food economy. On Saturday mornings, local farmers arrive as dawn is smearing the eastern sky, and thousands of shoppers stroll the stalls buying fresh fruits and vegetables. They linger over breakfast or lunch in the many cafés, smile at the music of street musicians, hunt for antiques and bottles of wine in the shops. Not long ago, the

financially strapped city of Detroit turned over governance of Eastern Market to a nonprofit corporation. That move alone, and the hiring of an excellent manager named Dan Carmody to run the corporation, did wonders to spruce up the down-at-the-heels operation. Nonprofit foundations have been giving generously to renovate the historic market buildings, many of which date back a century. New loft apartments in old brick industrial buildings share the outer blocks with bakers, wholesale produce dealers, and meat packers. The towers of downtown Detroit glimmer in the morning sunlight less than a mile away, and the Market bustles with activity and promise and hope.

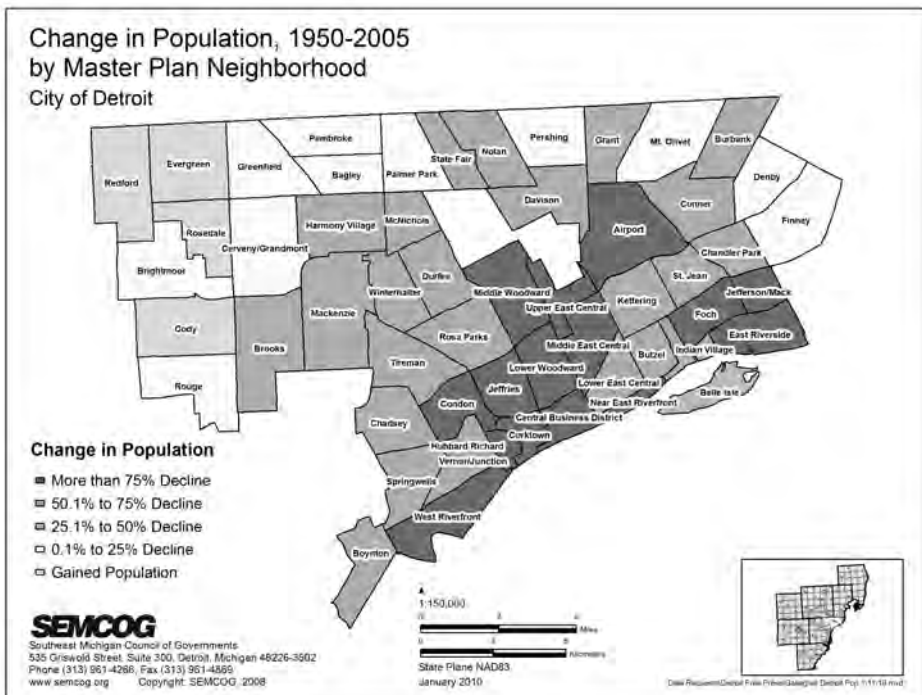
Yet just a few blocks farther to the east, many streets are silent and abandoned. Several of the blocks have few houses left, or just one house, or none at all. A French independent filmmaker named Florent Tillon, who filmed a documentary in Detroit in mid-2009, characterizes this emerging Detroit landscape of emptiness as the revenge of nature upon the corporate world.³

Many Detroit neighborhoods appear more rural than urban, like this expanse on the city's near-east side. (Author photo)

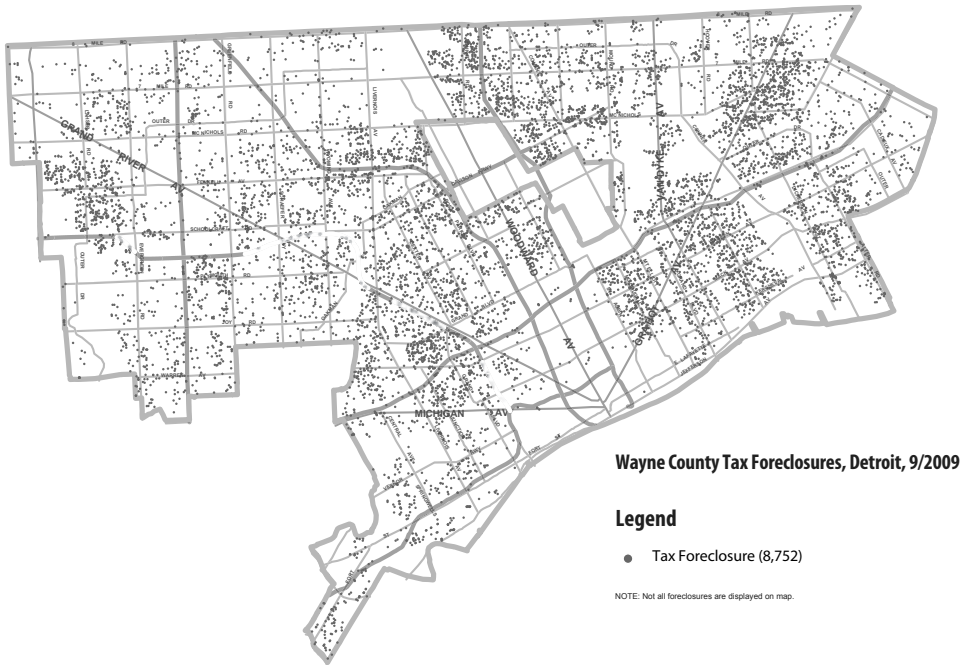


Here and there humans have left their spoor—pop cans and shards of bottles, broken television sets, an old couch or a small boat left by itself in a field or along a curb. Old tires pile up by the truckload, dumped by somebody too poor or lazy to dispose of them legally. In these empty spots on Detroit’s map, a vacant house often collapses on itself (often with the help of arsonists) and nature gradually reclaims it, so that many of Detroit’s emptiest stretches are dotted with mounds of debris overflowing with vegetation. Sometimes a visitor can spot the entire process in a single field, as if nature operated an assembly line—a pile of tires or a collapsed house in one spot, a similar pile partially covered by grasses but with the human debris still poking out in another, and finally a fully formed earthen mound that appears to be solely the work of nature.

Add up all the vacancy, and the usual estimate one hears is that about forty square miles of Detroit’s 139-square-mile area stand vacant today. Dan Pitera, a professor of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy, captured this empty



A half-century of population loss drained the inner heart of the city. (Courtesy Southeast Michigan Council of Governments)



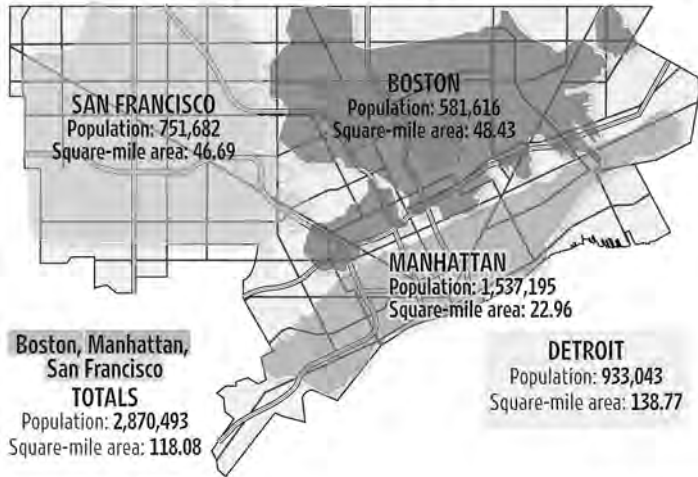
Wayne County’s tax foreclosure auction in late 2009 offered almost nine thousand properties for sale. Many were vacant lots. Yet even this number captures only a fraction of the vacant and abandoned parcels in Detroit. (Courtesy Detroit Vacant Property Campaign)

expansive brilliantly with a map showing how the landmass of Manhattan and the cities of San Francisco and Boston could fit entirely within Detroit’s borders. Those three urban centers are home to a combined population of nearly three million people. When the *Detroit Free Press* reproduced Pitera’s map on the front page,⁴ the debate over what to do with Detroit’s empty spaces landed on the kitchen tables of people all over the region.

Astonishingly, though, for a city so abandoned, the population density of Detroit today remains twice or more than that of sprawling Sunbelt cities such as Phoenix and Dallas. At its population peak in the 1950s, Detroit swelled with about thirteen thousand residents per square mile. Even today, with its population less than half its peak, Detroit still remains a crowded city by most standards, with about 6,500 residents per square mile. Phoenix boasts a comparatively sparse 2,900 residents per square mile and Dallas about 3,400 per square mile. Detroit’s neighboring Oakland County to the immediate north, one

Comparing Detroit to three other major cities

Dan Pitera's map as it appeared on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press*. The realization that entire cities could be dropped into Detroit with room to spare sparked new debate on what to do with Detroit's vacant spaces. (Courtesy Dan Pitera and *Detroit Free Press*)



of the nation's wealthiest counties, fits in about 1,400 residents per square mile. Rural Livingston County to the northwest, which currently forms the outer edges of Detroit's suburban sprawl, boasts a rural-like three hundred people per square mile. Relatively speaking, Detroit is still densely occupied, but it's as if the old population density of the city and the gradually increasing suburban densities were destined to even out somewhere in the middle.

Indeed, many people describe Detroit as a new middle landscape, something between urban and rural. Others prefer the term "the new suburbanism" because in many ways the patterns of land use in Detroit have come to resemble suburbia. The very things many people enjoy about suburbia—the big backyards and the spacious setbacks that separate buildings from the roads and from each other—can now be found in Detroit, albeit by accident.

In many places around Detroit, we find residents who have reclaimed one or more of the vacant lots near their homes. Some have gone to the trouble to buy a vacant lot from the city's inventory. But since dealing with the dysfunctional city bureaucracy requires a degree of tenacity and patience beyond most of us, many people have simply squatted on the vacant properties, fencing them off or planting them as gardens. Three New York City-based designers, Tobias

Armborst, Daniel D'Oca, and Georreen Theodore, dubbed these newly enlarged residential sites in the city "blots."⁵ Many of Detroit's residential lots measure only thirty feet across and a hundred or so feet deep, developed long before attached two-and-three-car garages became standard. When an adjacent lot or two is added, the standard city lot begins to look like a suburban lot. Armborst, D'Oca, and Theodore found many different configurations of these newly expanded lots, including a simple one-plus-one, where a homeowner took over the lot next door, or cases where neighbors separated by two or more empty lots took them over in common and created a small fenced compound. Striking a hopeful note, the trio writes that the cumulative effect "will be a gradual rewriting of the city's genetic code: a large-scale, unplanned re-platting of the city that will happen through the bottom-up actions of thousands of individual homeowners."⁶ Of course, this newly suburbanized landscape in Detroit will be gradual, unplanned, and uncoordinated, and the total impact is yet to be seen.

When Alan Mallach, an urban planner and the research director of the National Housing Institute in Montclair, New Jersey, led a team of experts to study Detroit in the later half of 2008, he concluded that Detroit was fragmenting and dissolving into a lumpy urban porridge, with areas of concentration surrounded by areas of much lower density. Mallach used the term "urban villages" to describe the more vibrant districts in the city. In one of the conversations we shared, I suggested that what Mallach was describing is what most people think of as a county—suburban villages surrounded by rural space. Mallach opted for the imagery of the English countryside. "In England they have very strict land-use rules," he explained. "The basic idea is you have no right to develop." Landowners only have the right to use land in whatever way it's been used before. "So government imposes very strict growth boundaries and only permits development when it's a logical extension of an existing village," Mallach said. "It's fabulous because you have high-density development on one side of the street and cows on the other, quite literally. And so you have this very strong pattern of built-up village, green space, farms, fields, forests, whatever for however long, then the next village, and only a few miles from each other."⁷ In thinking about Detroit's future, Mallach suggested, think of it as a twenty-first-century version of a traditional country pattern.

When I wrote about Mallach's suggestion for the *Detroit Free Press*,⁸ there was some good-natured joshing about English country villages and the Shires of Detroit, suggesting something out of *The Lord of the Rings*. But at bottom, Mallach was offering a very modern, even futuristic, vision of the city. The individual nodes of activity (think, say, the area surrounding Mexicantown in southwest Detroit where Latino immigrants have produced one of the few districts to gain population in recent years) would all be connected by transit lines. The areas of less activity in between could be converted to many uses—urban agriculture or recreation or wildlife corridors or wind farms or any number of other things.

For those who found Mallach's ideas fanciful or worse, he had a quick answer.

Isn't that basically what's happening? Even without any plans or strategies? And in a sense it really is. But the problem is it's happening in a sloppy, destructive fashion, where you end up with the worst of both worlds. You get areas that are essentially abandoned, but they're not useable open space, they're not environmentally sound, so they're basically wasteland. And then because you don't have any policies to strengthen the nodes, you're having the areas that are still surviving and could be not only viable but thriving neighborhoods are being undermined by the population loss and the impoverishment and everything else. So in that sense, Detroit is moving to a pattern of nodes and open space, but because there's no plan and there's no strategy, they're moving to it in a way that is destructive in terms of the environment, the quality of life, the economy, and everything else, instead of moving to it in a way where it could be constructive and positive.⁹

DYSFUNCTION, DETROIT-STYLE

At this point, we can reasonably ask why Detroit hasn't done more about its problems. Detroit may rank at the wrong end of so many indices of urban woe—poverty, illiteracy, crime—but it also does less about those problems than other cities. Cleveland is way ahead of Detroit on its vacant land planning, while Pittsburgh has largely shaken off its loss of steel-industry jobs and based its economy on health care and education. Flint, a gritty automotive town that suffered at least as much abandonment as Detroit, is widely viewed as a leader

for creating the nation's model land bank. Youngstown, Ohio, as we saw, leads the way in planning to be a better, smaller city.

Detroit has failed for years to address its problems, never more so than during the chaotic months of 2008 and 2009, when Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick—he of the infamous text messages to and from his chief-of-staff Christine Beatty—battled unsuccessfully to stay out of jail. At the same time, the city council all but fumbled away the city's signature annual auto show by stalling on a deal to upgrade the Cobo Center convention facilities. When rain leaked onto the floor during one event at Cobo, city council President Pro Tem Monica Conyers (who herself would shortly plead guilty in a bribery scheme) said it was a bid to win sympathy for the Cobo renovations.¹⁰ The low point came when council member Barbara-Rose Collins broke into a rendition of “Onward Christian Soldiers” at the council table, leading columnist Nolan Finley of *The Detroit News* to say Detroit was being led by “lunatics and crazy old ladies.”¹¹

But the incompetence has been going on for years. In the 1990s, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development made Detroit the first city to be cut off from a portion of HUD's largest home repair program, known as HOME, because of quality problems with repairs. The *Detroit Free Press* found that Detroit's HOME program had received \$80.5 million between 1992 and 1998, yet only \$26 million had been spent, and just 448 homes had been repaired or built.¹² Another outside study in the late '90s criticized the city's demolition of vacant houses, finding that Detroit's demolition program was hurt by a seriously fragmented administrative structure, and the cost of demolishing vacant homes had doubled in ten years.¹³ The scandals continued into the new century. In 2003, federal judge placed Detroit's police department under a federal watchdog because the city's police killed too many people and arrested witnesses without probable cause. Even that federal oversight turned into a fiasco when the court-appointed watchdog couldn't or wouldn't account for millions of dollars in work billed to the city.¹⁴

Detroit, of course, has no monopoly on either incompetence or corruption. It may be, however, the only big U.S. city to be left almost entirely dysfunctional by its failings. In 2009, a Harvard professor of environmental economics named John Briscoe spoke in Detroit and mentioned that Brazilians have an expression in Portuguese, *rouba mas faz*, meaning “he steals, but he does” or “he steals,

but he produces results.” In many cities (Chicago, say), corrupt pols fling that justification at their critics, but Detroiters lack even that excuse. Many Detroit politicians steal but get nothing done.

One certainly gets weary dwelling on the various flavors of Detroit’s dysfunction. But since dealing with vacant land plays such an important role in this book, I want to focus on one particular example before moving on.

DEALING WITH VACANT LAND

Margaret Dewar was a freshly minted urban planner working in Minneapolis/St. Paul when she first hearkened to the call of Detroit. This was in the 1980s, and the young academic at the University of Minnesota was studying poverty in that state’s more sparsely settled regions. All the while, though, she hungered for a different challenge. “I came into planning to work on issues of troubled industries, high poverty areas, regions in decline,” Dewar told me February 18, 2009, in her office at the University of Michigan, where she’s worked for many years. “When I was in Minnesota I worked on rural decline. When coming here I thought, ‘I’m an urban planner, not a rural planner.’”

To an urban planner interested in urban decline and troubled neighborhoods, Detroit offered, even in the late 1980s, more grist that just about anywhere. Today, after twenty years of walking Detroit neighborhoods and talking to its people, Dewar still finds excitement in the city and its challenges. “It’s a city of so many opportunities and so many challenges combined, and it’s very exciting for an urban planner to work on and very enlightening,” she said to me. “So it’s wonderful for our students to cut their teeth on this. They become planners by working on Detroit issues.”

Dewar typically will work with community partners—leaders of neighborhood associations, community development corporations, and other nonprofits—to develop a project for her graduate students that advances community agendas in a neighborhood. Detroit’s hard-hit Brightmoor district on the northwest side was one recent focus. Her students talk, listen, ask many questions, analyze data, and come up with strategies for turning things around. The students share these plans with residents of the neighborhood and, if anyone at city hall is listening, with city officials.

By the late ’90s, Dewar was pondering a question that struck her as odd.

All cities take control of vacant, abandoned, and tax-delinquent properties, and all cities try to put those parcels back into circulation as quickly as possible, usually by selling them to developers or nonprofit groups or even neighbors who will put the site back onto the tax rolls and into productive use. Dewar had long suspected that Detroit bungled this process more than most cities; the evidence was all around her as she walked the city. She thought this was just the reality in a city with weak demand for land, until she went to Cleveland and saw what nonprofit developers had done with land they acquired from the city. So she designed a study to compare how Cleveland and Detroit each disposed of city-owned parcels seized for unpaid property taxes. She obtained the land records of both cities, and drew each parcel's history from tax rolls and other databases. To follow up on what happened after each city disposed of its tax-reverted land, she drew two hundred properties at random from each city's list and visited each one to assess the condition. She interviewed city officials, nonprofit activists, developers, neighbors.

Dewar's results, published in the prestigious *Journal of the American Planning Association*, offer an appalling indictment of Detroit's mangled stewardship of land.¹⁵ Fifty-two percent of the parcels that Cleveland sold became part of new projects in that city; in Detroit, the figure was 9.6 percent. Cleveland created a clear written policy for disposing of tax-reverted land. Detroit's land-disposition process was "opaque and changeable," Dewar wrote. Factional infighting between mayor and city council, and city and Wayne County often scuttled attempts at clarifying the process. Better policies developed during one mayoral administration in Detroit were often scrapped by the next mayor.

Ohio's property tax foreclosure and land bank laws meant that land bank property had clear title, while Detroit sold land without clearing title. That forced any developer or neighbor to spend considerable effort in clearing title before they committed to buying the city-owned property, and new owners were often unable to obtain a bank loan because of the danger of a previously existing claim to the site. Both Cleveland and Detroit issued holding letters to developers, giving them rights to certain parcels while they tried to put deals together. But Cleveland had a clear system for keeping track of these, while Detroit did not. When a project died in Detroit, no one would remove the "hold," so that during

Dewar's study, close to two-thirds of the city's land inventory was subject to holding letters. At the same time, Detroit sometimes gave one developer a holding letter yet sold the same parcel to somebody else. Cleveland's system for pricing land was clear and designed to sell the land quickly. In Detroit, prices for city-owned land were both unpredictable and much higher than in Cleveland. Even the simple act of learning how to buy a city-owned parcel and for what price required in Detroit an almost superhuman stamina and endurance, so intractable was the bureaucracy.

Viewed in isolation, Dewar's findings might strike us as the inevitable outcome of a city losing half its population since 1950. But Cleveland has lost half its population, too; as Dewar points out in her study, Detroit's 1950–2000 population drop of 48.6 percent almost exactly matched Cleveland's loss of 47.7 percent. The percent of city residents in poverty in 1999 was exactly the same for both cities: 25.6 percent. It's true that Detroit had a lot more vacant land to deal with than Cleveland, the result of a much higher population to begin with. (The percentage of decline was the same but the absolute number of parcels much higher in Detroit.) But that alone cannot explain so wide a discrepancy in outcome.

What does explain it? Numerous people have puzzled over Detroit's dysfunctional culture and offered explanations ranging from the city's poisonous race relations to the role of the federal government in subsidizing suburban growth in the 1950s. Let's examine another possible root cause—one that goes back to the early years of the twentieth century.

THE AUTO CENTURY AND ITS PERILS

Ben Hecht, the great screenwriter of Hollywood's early decades, wrote of his days as a foreign correspondent for a Chicago newspaper, living it up and staying in fine hotels on his newspaper's expense account in post-World War I Europe. When he finally came home to Chicago, he wrote, he was a pauper confirmed in the ways of a millionaire. That's Detroit's story. No boomtown ever boomed so long or so hugely as Detroit, and the city never got over it. The ride began, we might say, in 1914 when Henry Ford announced his five-dollars-a-day wage for factory workers; it didn't end, finally and decisively, until 2009 with the bankruptcy filings of General Motors and Chrysler. The end had been coming for

decades, of course, at least since the 1970s, when small, fuel-efficient European and Japanese cars began to outsell domestic gas guzzlers. But reluctance to accept that changing model saw Detroiters clinging to a belief in their own privileged status long after it was justified.

The auto industry proved a boon for Detroit, but it exacted a toll, too. The men and women who built the cars, both on the line and in the front office, grew calluses on their hands and on their souls. Labor-management struggles led to a culture of conflict in all sorts of negotiations and relationships far from the factory floor. The fractious nature of city-suburban relations in recent years mirrors what had been taking place for decades in the auto plants. It was telling that the city's first black mayor, Coleman A. Young, came to public life not as a preacher of nonviolence like many civil rights leaders of his era but as a combative community and labor organizer.

In this culture of distrust and suspicion, if somebody offered you something, you rejected it out of hand, since only chumps accepted a first offer. Conversely, if somebody withheld something in negotiations, that something must be the real deal and a thing you deserved by right. The city and region convulsed at regular intervals as these union-management struggles erupted into prolonged strikes. The United Auto Workers union shut down General Motors for 113 days in 1945–46 and again for fifty-four days as late as 1998.

Ironically, both workers and management grew fat within this system, at least until the imports arrived. The car companies' huge profits in the 1950s and '60s showered wealth on shareholders and workers alike. Yet the generous lifestyle, unheard of for past American working-class families, fed a belief that it would never end. That belief in the omnipotent and bountiful automotive giants bled into many other areas of life in the city. It fostered a sense of entitlement and a sense of denial when harder times knocked at the door. What else explains the grotesque greed of a Kwame Kilpatrick or a Monica Conyers but a belief in their own deservedness? What else explains the reluctance of the city's municipal unions in mid-2009 to face the reality that the city was broke?

Sue Mosey, the longtime head of the nonprofit University Cultural Center Association, which works to rebuild the city's Midtown district, told me this sense of entitlement holds back needed progress even today, long after Detroit's woes became clear to all the world. "The reality is, Detroit has to quit

thinking like Detroit's still the center of the universe, even in the Metro area, because nobody's buying that except the politicos downtown," she said. "Even redeveloping a neighborhood like this, we hold no delusions that there aren't plenty of other urban-style neighborhoods all around that are ahead of where we are, and where people make choices to live because the city services are better. That's just the reality."¹⁶



Detroit today is not unlike the cities in Europe following World War II. Those war-ravaged cities rebuilt themselves. Berlin was hollowed out by Allied attacks during the war; today Berlin thrives as a marvel of cosmopolitan energy. We enjoy something of that same opportunity here in Motown. No other city in America offers so vast a canvas for new thinking as Detroit.

It's time to speak of solutions.