

Detroit Future City: re-imagining the way a city works

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Figure 1: [Detroit Center for Urban Agriculture and Seed Bank](#)

Abstract: Detroit has been described as an “urban prairie,” a city reverting to nature. In 2009 the new mayor of the city chose to embrace urban farming as part of a new land-use plan, working with local residents and investors to realize a green city of the future.

This paper examines the events that led to the decline of Detroit after it reached its peak population in 1950 and the efforts made to cultivate the city through urban farming. In particular, the new land-use plan from the comprehensive plan entitled Detroit Future City, published in 2012.

The author looks at the competing interests as well as attempts at civic outreach by the municipal government to realize this new plan by the year 2060. Detroit has become an urban laboratory for a variety of urban farming initiatives, drawing attention from around the world. The success of these initiatives depends greatly on the city’s ability to adopt and modify its land-use plan to the changing needs of the city.

Keywords: Detroit, Urban farming, Sustainable Planning

Repurposing Detroit

Looking at Detroit today it is hard to imagine that this was once the hub of the automotive industry in the world. The city peaked in 1950 with a population of 1.8 million, and has seen its fortunes wane each succeeding decade. The distinctive sound of Motown, a rhythm and blues record label that arose in the 1960s, has now become a lament for a city that currently has a population of less than 800,000 persons.



Figure 2: Detroit, 2009

There are over 100,000 vacant properties scattered across the city, leaving approximately 30 per cent of the land area fallow. As a result the former mayor of the city, Dave Bing, began courting corporate agricultural interests who would be interested in developing the roughly 100 square kilometers of empty land. In order to make this lucrative to the agro-industry, Bing had to consolidate the city, forcing persons to move out of sparsely populated neighborhoods into more densely populated neighborhoods, so that these “farming” interests could have entire blocks of the city for themselves. Not since New York City set aside 3.4 square kilometers for Central Park had so much urban land been earmarked expressly for horticultural development. Detroit has the equivalent of 30 Central Parks at its disposal.

Not surprisingly, this concept of “repurposing,” as Mayor Bing described it, wasn’t well received by the citizens. Many persons had already turned to small scale gardening to help offset the loss of income due to cuts in pay or the loss of jobs as a result of the decline of automotive industry in the city. These local residents weren’t willing to give up their homes for Dave Bing’s urban renewal program, especially since the city wouldn’t promise them any form of compensation.

One of the companies the mayor attracted to the city was Hantz Farms, which bought 70 hectares of land for about \$500,000, well below market value, ostensibly to grow trees. John Hantz has promoted this project as the “world’s largest urban farm,” allocating the land to hardwoods that will take decades to grow to full maturity. Hantz representatives claimed the company didn’t want to compete with local farming initiatives that were making a more direct impact on the city. These initiatives are largely ad hoc, working on vacant small plots. Attempts to coalesce into larger farming cooperatives have been thwarted by their inability to purchase the land outright the way Hantz Farms did.

It is hard to figure how the Hantz tree farm fits into the mayor's "Detroit Works" program other than to provide green space. The land use plan put forward in 2010 imagined high tech agricultural projects providing an abundance of fresh food at the local markets. The city appeared to embrace the reduced density of the city population, imagining a much greener city that would also attract tourists, and in turn boost the entertainment industry with new resort hotels and casinos. Unfortunately for the mayor, the city wasn't willing to wait to wait 50 years to see his plan through to fruition and elected a new mayor in 2014.

The Disappearing City

To understand what went wrong, or rather what hasn't happened yet, we need to look at some of the factors that resulted in this unprecedented urban decay. This [pair of photographs](#) show how the city has devolved over the last 60 years.



Figure 3: a Detroit neighborhood as seen in 1949 and 2003

In many ways Detroit is your prototypical American city. The only natural boundary is the Detroit River to the Southeast, which separates the city from Windsor, Canada, to the East. In all other directions it is a flat prairie land as far as the eye can see. This meant that as the city grew rapidly in the 20th century, thanks to the automotive industry, spreading outward and engulfing the cheap land around it. The city limits takes in approximately 360 square kilometers, one of the largest cities in terms of land area in the United States.

Much of the development is low scale, stretching out from a relatively dense city center. This has been the pattern throughout the country. To a large extent it echoes Frank Lloyd Wright's [Broadacre City](#), in which he imagined the end of the centralized city in 1932, offering a distinctly American version of Ebenezer's Howard's [Garden City](#), which had been proposed 30 years before in England.

Unfortunately, there wasn't as much care given to planning as there was in Wright's model city. Smaller urban centers sprung up when neighborhoods reached a certain size, containing convenience stores and other services. Wright had allocated land for farming. Detroit didn't. However, as you got further away from the city center restrictions became less, so you could plant a small garden if you so desired.

Detroit experienced its first racial conflicts in the 1940s as Black Americans began arriving in large numbers, escaping the segregation of the Southern states. Sadly, they found much the

same segregation in the North, confined to outlying communities and forced to commute by bus to the automotive plants, which were the principal source of employment. However, in 1960 the Motown Record Corporation was formed, which grew into a multi-million dollar entertainment industry that literally became the “Sound of Young America.”

The city had already started to shrink in population, with the smaller automobile companies no longer able to compete with the larger companies. Detroit also found it could no longer annex bordering communities, which had incorporated themselves into cities, offering better amenities that attracted Detroit residents. The race riots of 1967 further encouraged “white flight,” in which the majority of white residents left the city fearing violence. The tax base began to shrink and so did public services. The city has struggled ever since.

The Potato Patch Plan

Urban agriculture in America has grown out of hard times. The first known examples of urban farming in Detroit date to 1894, when Mayor Hazen Pingree initiated a “[potato patch plan](#)” that allowed poor residents to grow crops on vacant land at the time of a major economic recession. Such urban farming has sprung up periodically due to economic crises. Unfortunately, it is seen as a vocation for the poor, and cities have not made it a permanent part of urban planning.

In the 1960s, increased ecological awareness led to the proliferation of urban farming initiatives across the country, including Detroit. It was seen as a way of bringing the garden closer to home, reducing the need for transportation, which was now seen as the principal source of pollution in the country. Communities took over empty plots of land and turned them into small gardens until the city would force them to vacate the property.

Yet, these practices remained on the fringe of urban planning. The mayor of Detroit was forced to consider urban farming because there was no other alternative to deal with the vast expanses of open land, which pundits have called an “urban prairie.” Even still, the focus was less on agriculture than it was on creating attractive green space that would lure recreational interests, given the city’s proximity to a large lake. Hence, the deal struck with Hantz Farms for 70 hectares of prime urban real estate to be cultivated as “woodland.”

Fortunately, the mayor hasn’t discouraged the urban agricultural initiatives in the city, essentially making Detroit into an “urban laboratory” for persons like Taja Sevelle, who chose to locate her [urban farming collaborative](#) in the city in 2008. She bases her organization on the same principles as those of the 1960s, providing small scale gardens for the urban poor.

This provides immediate relief, but the desire of local residents is to turn these farming initiatives into lucrative small businesses that can provide income as well as food. Only then can it become a viable industry to make up for the shortage of jobs in the city. This is why it is so important for the city to embrace urban farming and seek financing for these efforts as well as make it part of its urban planning.

Of Goats and Man

In order to make urban gardening work as a self-sustaining enterprise, a city has to devote approximately one-third of its land area to cultivation. This was the assessment of the Institute of Physics, which published a research paper entitled [Global assessment of urban and peri-urban agriculture](#) in 2014.

This is approximately the amount of open land currently available in Detroit. Urban agriculture doesn't necessarily have to be indoors. With fluorescent lighting you can grow products in abandoned factories. Vertical gardens are another option, which has been explored at various scales. Bryan Christie presented this conception of integrated gardening for Detroit in [Fortune magazine](#), showing gardening on multiple levels.



Figure 4: an artist's conception of Detroit urban farming

This eye-catching image is part of John Hantz's broader vision for Detroit. He says he is willing to commit \$30 million toward this goal of a sustainable Detroit, hoping to attract other investors. But, so far his "pilot project" is the planting of a woodland on Detroit's east side. What is actually happening is not as eye-popping, but it puts plants on the ground and food in the markets. The question for Detroit, or any major city for that matter, is how to make the two visions meet while not making one subservient to the other.



Figure 5: a typical Detroit urban garden, 2012

The biggest fear among local residents is “gentrification.” Once an idea like this takes off, there are a lot of investors who want to become a part of it, especially with depressed real estate prices that making buying property in Detroit very attractive. The city has to establish safe guards so that the local community, many of whom are poor, are not squeezed out of the city by new arrivals.

Models for such integrated societies exist in South America, notably Curitiba, Brazil, which committed itself to [sustainable urban development](#) with its master plan in 1968 for a city that has since grown to a population of 1.8 million. Much of its success was built around an innovative transportation system that allowed the city to effectively link its far-flung neighborhoods on a relatively limited budget. It also used green areas to visually pull the city together, cultivating some of these areas into small scale farms for the urban poor. A situation not much unlike that of Detroit.

Detroit’s new [land-use plan](#) (2012) incorporates urban farming. The city has included farming under two landscape typologies, innovative productive and innovative ecological, with a minimum size of 0,8 hectares for such plots (pp. 265-268). The blue areas represent the two typologies, with the green areas representing green residential and park lands, together comprising over 50 per cent of the overall city footprint in this 50-year land-use scenario, which is more than adequate to support long term sustainable development.

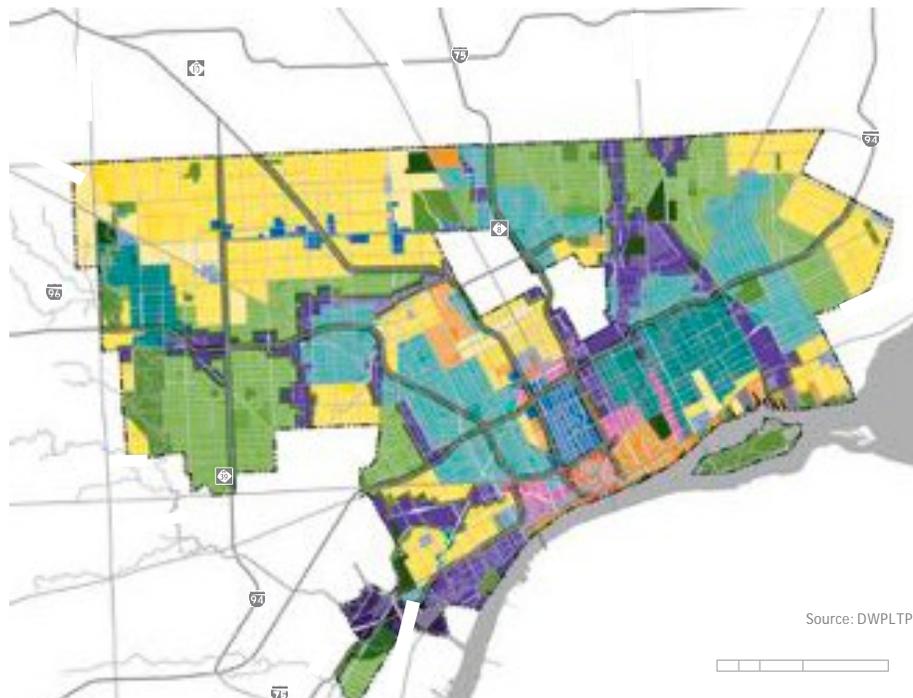


Figure 6: Detroit’s projected land-use development, ca. 2060

Currently, nearly 60 per cent of Detroit is low scale residential, much of it abandoned. The blue and green areas are projected over this neglected residential sector of the city. This means civic outreach is very important to insure local residents that they will be a part of the growth plan of the city, not subject to removal, or “repurposing” as Mayor Bing called it.

The documentary film, [Detropia](#), captured the anxiety of the mayor's plans, presenting a rather bleak portrait of the city.

The new mayor, Mike Duggan, is open to urban farming initiatives begun in the city, but he outraged locals when he shut down a goat farm last year. The State of Michigan extended Right to Farm laws to the city to allow for animal husbandry as well as agriculture, but Idyll Farms [goat farm](#) didn't fit with the new zoning laws of the city.



Figure 7: Mark Spritznagel and his goats in Brightmoor

The owner of Idyll Farms is Mark Spritznagel. Like John Hantz, he made a fortune in hedge funds and since looked for creative ways to invest his money. Spritznagel saw a golden opportunity to [introduce goats](#) in one of the most overgrown areas of Detroit, Brightmoor, employing local residents. He said the range of vegetation was perfect for these animals, and a way to keep the neighborhood clean. Brightmoor is one of the centers for urban farming in the city. He took advantage of the state's Right to Farm law, but hadn't applied for a permit with the city, which is what drove Duggan to evict the entrepreneur's goats.

Spritznagel also comes from a Libertarian background, believing strongly in individual rights, which are often at odds with community rights. The problem with Spritznagel's goats is that they cut across the grain of traditional zoning laws, which were put in place to maintain a stable real estate market place, something the new mayor wants to see return to Detroit. Land prices plummeted in the first decade of the 21st century, creating an environment for "Guerilla farming," as Spritznagel calls it. However, this is not the city that Mayor Duggan and investors like John Hantz imagine in the near future. Tree farms seem to be preferable. So, you can expect animal husbandry as well as other forms of urban farming to be tightly controlled in Detroit.

City of Tomorrow

One can only speculate on how Detroit will grow in the next 50 years. It certainly will be a very different city than it was in the 1950s when the automotive industry was at its peak, imagining a world of radial cities and highways, not much unlike that of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Detroit still imagines itself as a sleek new city. It doesn't appear fully willing to give itself over to an agrarian society like that Thomas Jefferson once imagined for the country back in the early 19th century. It would like to see its automotive industry reborn, even if most of the assembling plants are now outside the country. What remains are corporate headquarters in Detroit.



Figure 8: City of Tomorrow, 1950

This is a similar situation many cities face around the world as they look for creative ways to sustain their growing populations. Currently, 54 per cent of the world's population is urban based. One can cut the cost of transportation and reduce carbon emissions if more cities began to adopt urban farming practices, bringing food closer to home.

Unfortunately, many city planners and policy makers still see this as regression into the past and are slow to include urban farming in their municipal land-use plans. They would prefer to keep urban farming to the fringes of the metropolitan areas, hoping to find new industries to include within the city itself. It takes a special case like Detroit to see if these new planning policies will actually work, but it may take 50 years to do so.

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