



The Public Realm and City Life

Pursuing the Rejuvenation of American Urban Neighbourhoods

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Rust-belt cities in the United States have been striving to rejuvenate their city centres for decades since deindustrialization undermined their economies, driving residents to seek opportunities elsewhere. The population loss reduces vibrancy on city streets and revenue for municipal services, stressing the remaining urban population.¹ In this context, cities often turn to private capital to develop rejuvenating projects and invest in city initiatives. While this investment can generate new economic activity, these efforts often target specific audiences and generate isolated pockets of prosperity that are hoped to trickle down to legacy, often low-income urban neighbourhoods nearby.² While the glamorous projects gain attention, the critical places where city residents live and seek to improve their lives require different solutions, both in regard to scale as well as focus. In these places, a focus on the public realm offers one component of a rejuvenation strategy. Detroit's extreme depopulation and commensurate abandonment of building fabric offers an important case study of how the public realm's redefinition can establish and support neighbourhood life and community resilience. This paper explores how the innovative heritage of urban design in Detroit can offer inspiration for remaking its urban form to support the legacy population and efforts to rejuvenate and re-invent this rust belt city.

Introduction

In the last seven to eight decades American cities were transformed by the ideologies of suburbanisation, urban renewal and neoliberalism that in many cases undermined their urban form and left a fragmented landscape of zoned large-scale development projects and urban highways.³ The impact of these ideologies is especially significant in cities that suffered the loss of their industrial economies. Among these so-called rust belt cities, Detroit's transformation has drawn wide attention as this major city

1 Frey 2024. Long 2022.

2 Kimmelman, 2019.

3 Čamprag 2018.

lost more than half of its population during this period, leaving the city in a dysfunctional condition marked by thousands of abandoned buildings and sparsely populated neighbourhoods.⁴ In the midst of this urban crisis, neoliberal ideology continues to be promoted as a central strategy for rejuvenation of economies of cities like Detroit.⁵ This approach to the transformation of cities, however, overlooks the nature of the urban form generated by these ideologies and its drag on the resilient revitalisation of city neighbourhoods. In Detroit, where a consensus seems to exist that the city must be re-imagined,⁶ this paper poses this question: how can the innovative heritage of Detroit's historic urban design offer both inspiration and lessons for re-making urban form in this and other cities to support their legacy populations and their efforts to stabilise, rejuvenate and re-invent their city?

In the face of immense challenges, Detroit's urban formation heritage emerges as a potential foundation for an urban re-formation that balances local community priorities with cutting edge sustainable infrastructure, pointing to a future Detroit, already acknowledged as a potential receiver city,⁷ that could be a model of resilience for other American cities. This paper examines Detroit's urban planning heritage and its initial role in shaping the city's formal trajectory. It explores the ways that Detroit can centre re-urbanisation efforts around a reflection of this heritage with an approach that balances urban and rural qualities that facilitate a robust resilience and sustainable life for the city's residents. Detroit's urban history should not be seen simply as a relic of the past; it is a dynamic and innovative foundation that can inform ongoing urban planning and revitalisation efforts and serve as a catalyst for an innovative urban future.

Thematic Context: Transforming the Public Realm to Promote Pedestrianism

The rust belt cities of states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois and Michigan all experienced significant structural changes in the 20th century, especially in their downtown centres.⁸ The planning context of this moment in these cities' histories is one that promoted functional zoning and easy access for cars, both of which were rooted in ideologies that misunderstood the nature of cities and the damage that these policies wrought.⁹ Detroit in particular suffered significantly from this transformation of the city, especially with its unique dedication to promoting the primacy of the automobile.¹⁰ In Detroit this dedication impacted the urban formation of the city, which during its boom years emphasised lower density single family housing for its expanding urban territory, placing residents in neighbourhoods where they were reliant on cars for most activities in daily life. This prioritisation of the car has left public transit in a precarious state,¹¹ limiting pedestrian mobility in many areas of the city. This in turn results in a deteriorating state of the public realm, where use of public space is inhibited.

The re-envisioning of the modern American city around the car instigated large scale demolition of urban fabric to cut new urban highways through the cities but also major construction of new parking infrastructure, often in conjunction with the dismantling of transportation infrastructure.¹² In the midst of these significant structural changes in the mid-20th century, rust belt cities lost important industrial economic engines, leaving them struggling to maintain population and finance adequate municipal services.¹³ The resulting degradation of urban life pushed many city residents to

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- 4 Detroit Future City 2013, pp. 571-585.
 - 5 Clement & Kanai 2015, pp. 371-372.
 - 6 Detroit Future City 2013, p. 5.
 - 7 Steuteville 2022.
 - 8 Neumann 2016, pp. 2-6.
 - 9 Jacobs 1992, pp. 338-371.
 - 10 Berlatsky 2013, pp. 100-101.
 - 11 DDOT Performance 2024.
 - 12 Slater 1997, pp.45-56.
 - 13 Detroit Future City 2013, pp. 579-585. Rubin 2012.

leave for the newly forming suburbs. Not all residents, however, were able to leave the city, however, due to racist practices that restricted access to suburban neighbourhoods for people of colour.¹⁴ These residents often had no choice but to remain in decaying urban neighbourhoods that were previously redlined, restricting access to capital for renovation and entrepreneurial pursuits.¹⁵ This is the common narrative for the fate of the rust belt city.

As these cities tried to reinvent themselves around new economies, private business interests were sought to bring new investment and jobs. This condition opened the door for further transformation to meet the requirements deemed important by these private interests.¹⁶ As Detroit's economic struggles continued, social and political strife led to further population loss through the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century.¹⁷ This resulted in many areas of low-density blocks becoming untenable places to live as more houses were abandoned than occupied. The city's decision to demolish abandoned structures has left the city in a hybrid condition with rural landscape-like features overlapping with occasionally active suburban-like streets and blocks across the city's large territory.¹⁸ The loss of population and fabric places Detroit in a more extreme unsustainable position than many of its peers, where public services can no longer be adequately provided due to the serious inefficiency of the new low-density conditions. Now, as Detroit shows signs of turning a corner, with a slight population increase and improving property values, the question of how to manage its re-formation is urgent.¹⁹ Should the fabric be re-established as it was or, is there an opportunity to learn from the problems of low-density, auto centric sprawl and chart a new future for Detroit? How will these decisions impact the sustainability and resilience of the city over the next century?

Detroit's search for solutions to its challenging condition offers a case study for a broader conversation regarding the priorities for struggling American cities and their neighbourhoods. As these places consider their options for reinventing themselves, economic and cultural opportunities are often the focus, but another opportunity for consideration is the critical renovation of urban form around pedestrianism, public transit, and public space. In fact, the Detroit's urban heritage offers a unique and innovative model that could be adapted and reapplied in the effort to reimagine the urban form of the rust belt American city.

Innovations of the Woodward Plan

After a fire destroyed an early settlement in 1805, Detroit needed a strategy to rebuild. By this point, the east coast of the young country provided a testing ground for visions of new planned cities, drawing out the priorities and culture of the elite authorities charged with overseeing the urbanisation process. The Woodward Plan of 1807 was developed in this context of the early post-revolutionary period with a number of cities offering precedents to consider. The recent L'Enfant plan for Washington DC and the plan of Annapolis, Maryland most likely served as inspiration for the remarkable plan that emerged for Detroit.²⁰

Woodward's plan is notable for its unique strategy of a modular approach to the city that could grow when the city's population demanded it. The module of this system, referred to as a "section" consisted of 8 small scale blocks that were platted with approx. 90-100 lots.²¹ The remarkable aspect of this modular section is the central public space at the heart of the module. As documented by John Reps in his book *The Making of Urban America*, "the central portion of each triangular section of land was

14 Miller 1947, p. 99.

15 Duncan, Hood, & Neet 1975, pp. 510-511.

16 Čamprag 2018.

17 Detroit Future City 2013, p. 20.

18 Detroit Future City 2013, pp. 533-560.

19 Long 2024 and UM Study 2024.

20 Reps 1955, pp. 240-250.

21 Sewick, 2016.

left open. An Act of the Governor and Judges in May 1807 makes the reason clear.²² Reps continues describing the details of the plan:

the internal space of ground, in the middle of every section, shall be reserved for public wells and pumps, for markets, for public schools, for houses for the reception of engines or other articles for the extinction of fires, and the preservation of the property of the inhabitants, for houses for the meeting of religious, moral, literary, or political societies, or other useful associations, and generally, for such purposes of utility or ornament, as the city council of Detroit may, at any time, by law, provide; or as, otherwise, the inclination and taste of the proprietors of the lots in such section, or that of the major part of them, may direct; and in the same manner shall be paved, graveled, planted with trees, or otherwise improved and ornamented.²³

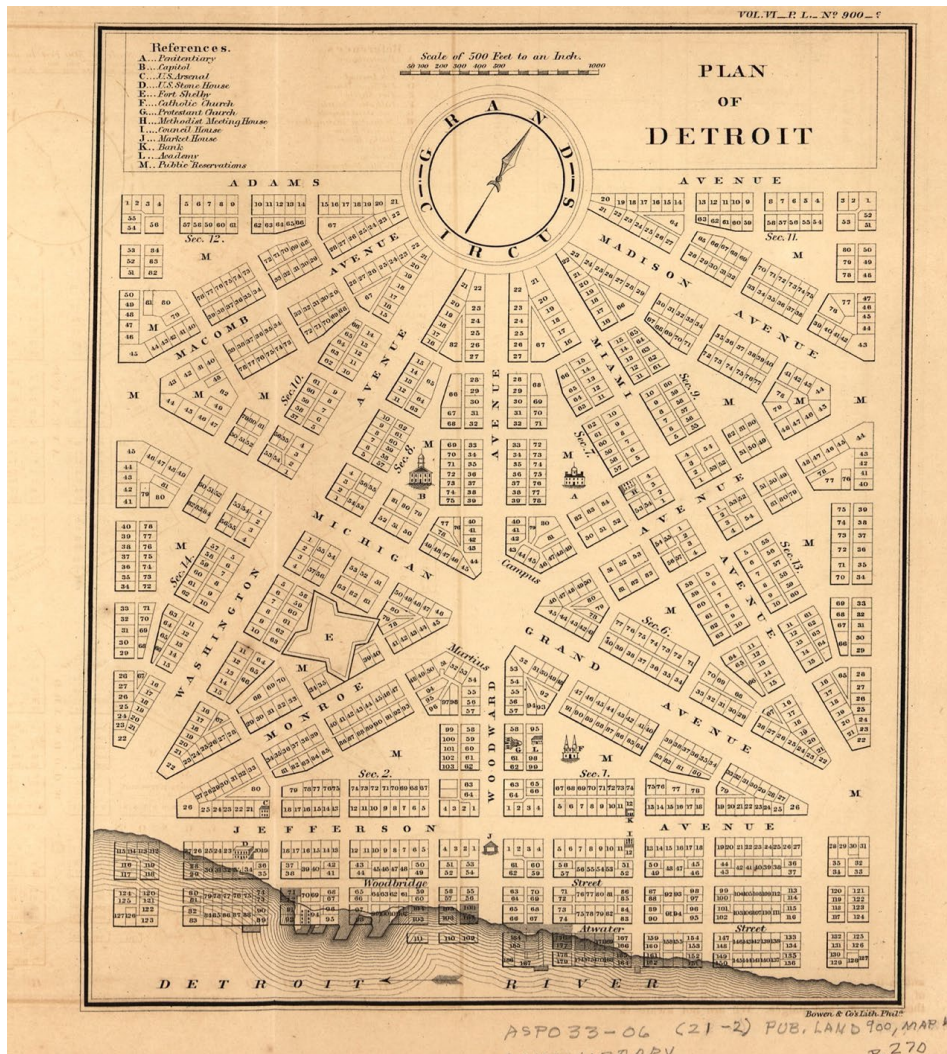


Figure 1. 1807 Survey and Plan for Detroit (Source: Library of Congress)

This intense provision of public space relative to the unit density establishes a potential for a special quality of urban life that would be defined by easy access to urban space for diverse range of activities and gatherings of the city residents. This plan's modular nature, which rivals Savannah in the concentrated integration of public squares, suggests an egalitarian aim with even distribution of access to public squares or parks across the urban territory. The plan also offers an opportunity for

²² Reps 1965, p. 270.

²³ Reps 1965, p. 270.

neighbours to define their preferences for the character and use of this space. Embedded in the modular concept is a remarkable conceptual shift regarding the determination of the nature of a key spatial infrastructure the city's public realm.

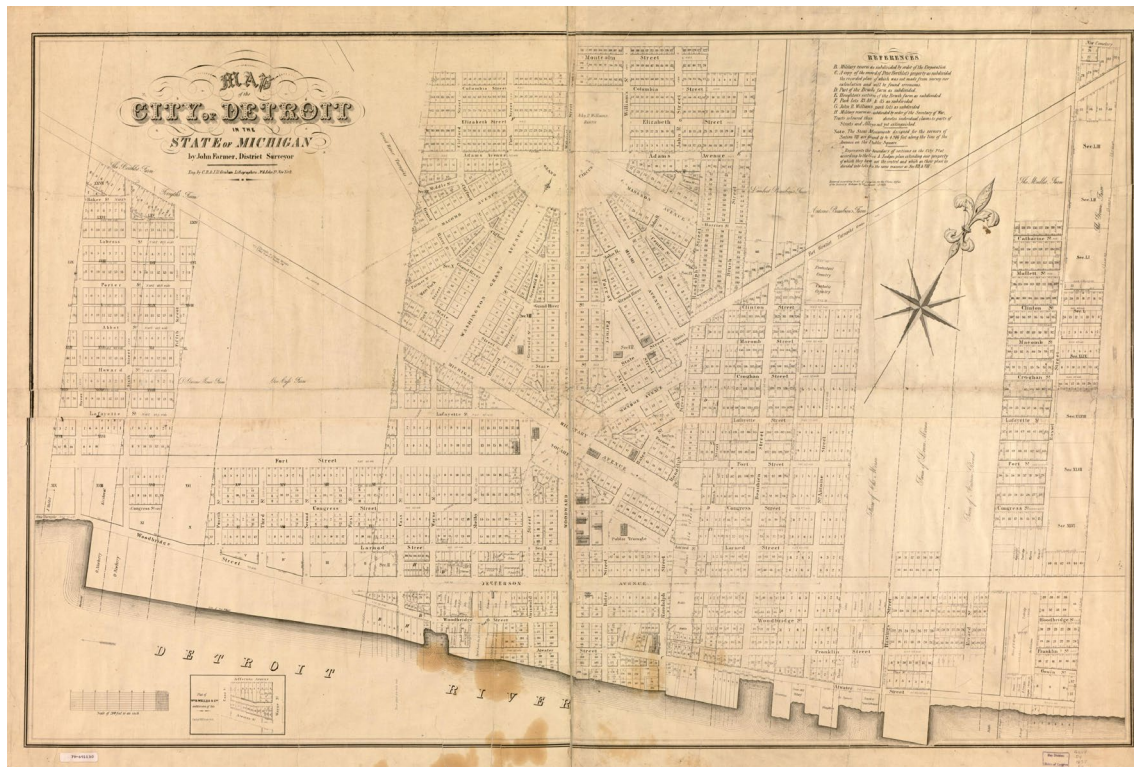


Figure 2. Map of the city of Detroit in the State of Michigan, 1835 (Source: Library of Congress)

The 1831 documentation of this plan, shown in Figure 1, further depicts how the modular sections of the urban form in turn set up a larger system of public space that provided a rich network of avenues and squares. At major intersections nodal points are skillfully resolved to define impressive public squares with strong visual connectivity. The same law defining the modules also provided for double lines of trees on both sides of the 120-foot avenues, and for trees in “clumps or groves to be of an elliptical shape”²⁴ on both sides of the 200-foot avenues. Spaces for walks and front yards and porches were also defined in this law. Repts reflects that “Judge Woodward and his colleagues were clearly concerned with beauty as well as utility.”²⁵ This planning for Detroit lays out a highly systematic, functional but also aesthetic approach to urban form, with a provision for local determination, establishing for Detroit a powerful heritage and culture of urban morphology to draw upon.²⁶

Post-Woodward Urban Spaces and Infrastructure

Despite the power of the plan, the actual urban growth of Detroit falls into a pattern of development driven by self-interest, land speculation, and a path of least resistance.²⁷ This process abandons the continuation of the initial survey area of the Woodward plan and gives each landowner the power to set up an urban subdivision. As shown in Figure 2, the Woodward plan is truncated and left as a fragment to be surrounded by a default grid iron pattern most common in emerging cities in the mid-west. A few diagonal avenues extend beyond the fragment, but otherwise the powerful systematic nature of the plan that recognised the importance of smaller

²⁴ Repts 1965, p. 270.

²⁵ Repts 1965, p. 270.

²⁶ Markus & Krings, 2020.

²⁷ Repts 1965, p. 272.

neighbourhood units seamlessly woven together into a larger civic structure is not pursued.

Within this shift of the urbanisation process, however, there are interesting moments that seem to build on the innovative heritage of the 1807 plan. For example, two remarkable public parks are developed by a landowner to the west of the Woodward fragment. Crawford and Elton Parks, shown in an 1884 survey in Figure 3, are two neighbourhood scale spaces of distinctive definition, with stepping lots that set up an oval-like space. The perimeter wood houses, most likely with gracious porches, vary in configuration and position on their lots, defining the edges of the parks with an elegant complexity. These innovative urban spaces carry forward an interest in both neighbourhood social/civic infrastructure but also geometric playfulness as a place-making strategy.

Neighbourhood Public Space as Critical Social Infrastructure

While the Woodward plan was only partially executed, it established a powerful precedent and urban heritage for the city. It anticipates the growing understanding of the significance of public space for life in urban neighbourhoods where neighbourhood squares and parks facilitate active and passive uses, places for community gatherings that can help build social capital in the community. Through the research and observations of Jan Gehl and others, the neighbourhood square and park can be understood as essential to the sustainability of urban communities and the flourishing of urban residents. While the provision and accessibility of urban parks is well represented in literature, the square is an important urban spatial typology that deserves renewed discussion.

Urban places with distinct spatial quality offer a critical form of urban life precisely through their place-ness, their distinction from the normative network of streets of a city. While streets typologically serve the needs of connectivity and movement, the square is defined by its spatial differentiation from the street and its typological emphasis on coming to rest and being in a place. While the street is a corridor, a square is an outdoor room. As Paul Zucker notes, the spatially distinct, room-like square supports gathering and a different form of human contact. Zucker describes the square as “a psychological parking place within the civic landscape.”²⁸ The square for Zucker is not just an aesthetic work, but a central formative element of the urban community. He states that without the square, the inhabitants of the urban fabric are merely individuals living as an aggregation. The urban square serves both a physical and psychological function. Zucker describes how urban squares “create a gathering place for the people, humanising them by mutual contact, providing them with a shelter against the haphazard traffic, and freeing them from the tension of rushing through the web of streets.”²⁹

28 Zucker 1959, p.1

29 Zucker 1959, p.1



Figure 3. 1884 Sanborn Fire Atlas of Detroit Detail (Source: Library of Congress)

Across time, the square is where paths of daily activity may intersect, a place where being in space can offer a powerful communing with strangers, where community may form and gather and be reinforced, where community celebration, commemoration, mourning can endow place with meaning and memory, where neighbours can gather in times of crisis and support each other, where political voices can be raised. This spatial typology, however, is rare in most American cities, especially at the neighbourhood scale. The Covid-19 pandemic in fact made poignant the deficit of urban spaces where people could be together out of the homes and apartments and appreciate the power of being in space together. The desire and appreciation for places in cities where one can simply *be* but also be around others and feel the power of the human spirit and share the joy of life is a latent condition in American cities that can be addressed through transformation of urban form. The immediate success of ad-hoc transformations of street space into square-like spaces during the pandemic is strong evidence that these spaces are necessary for urban life, not just a pleasant amenity.

Pedestrianism and the Social Sustainability of Urban Life

Gehl describes how cities designed with a focus on the human dimension facilitate two modalities of being in city space: as a pedestrian moving through space and as a pedestrian “staying” in city space.³⁰ The human dimension of urban form that Gehl argues for depends on the spatial nature of the city and the important but often subtle features of the public realm. The public realm of cities has changed over time due to major structural interventions but especially through the engineering of city space around the car. Both Gehl and Jacobs see the tension between pedestrianism and the car as a central problem of the modern city. Gehl goes so far to say that the accommodation of the car “erodes the conditions necessary for people to engage in city life.”³¹ Engaging in city life in this context provokes conversations around the intersections of the human dimension, the right to the city, sustainable urban environments and resilient urban communities.

³⁰ Gehl 2010, p.6

³¹ Gehl 2010, p.5

The conditions for a sustainable life and for flourishing in the city are tied to the social/spatial nature of the public realm. Jacobs observed that, in intensely urban contexts, the daily contact of strangers in the streets of a neighbourhood establishes the base condition of safety and thereby confidence in the use of this space.³² Our daily life in cities requires a myriad of activities in the public realm: frequent grocery shopping, heading to school or work, meeting friends for coffee, walking the dog, picking up a subscription. These activities rely on this confidence in the free access and safety of this space. Jacobs posits that this confidence is built over time where frequent benign or mostly fortuitous contact with strangers builds a special form of public trust that can nurture social cohesion and build social capital in the neighbourhood.³³ Without this confidence in the social nature of this space, the public realm transforms into a space of frequent contestation, undermining the quality of urban life and greatly restricting the potential for flourishing.

Pedestrianism's fostering of social contacts in the public realm both establishes the foundational condition of the social ecosystem of the city and sustains it. The spatial nature of the public realm is the place for this social engagement and sets conditions that can either support or hinder social contact. To support the two modalities Gehl refers to and to nurture the social contact that Jacobs sees as the foundation of sustainable urban life, specific typological forms of public space need to be provided in urban neighbourhoods.

The examination of historic American city plans shows a range of strategies for urban form, some without any significant spatial differentiation of their public realm.³⁴ Where the spatial condition of the public realm is limited largely to the street grid, the general design of street space including its subtle qualities that support, or hinder pedestrianism are of great importance. In this context, the sidewalk is the lowest common denominator of infrastructure addressing the human dimension of the public realm. The sidewalk of course evolved over time with technological advancements and street space was increasingly turned over to modalities of movement other than pedestrian. Where the sidewalk is reduced to accommodate the flow of traffic as shown in Figure 4, a progressive occurrence in the 20th century, the spatial provision for social contact is marginalised, placing immense pressure of this bit of pavement.



Figure 4. Bird's eye view of West 125th Street, Harlem, looking west from Seventh Avenue, 1943 (Source: New York Public Library)

³² Jacobs 1992, p.56

³³ Jacobs 1992, p.56

³⁴ Reps 1965.

The public square, then, can be understood as an essential alternative spatial condition that addresses the limitations of the sidewalk. But the square is clearly not merely a spatial response to the social limits of the sidewalk, it is the specific urban spatial typology that facilitates a different type of being in city space. It is also a spatial typology with great lineage as a meaningful and aesthetic embellishment of the city. A survey of early American city plans, however, shows no consistent evidence of an understanding of the importance of the square to urban life.³⁵ In 1807 as Detroit's plan was published, New York City formed a commission to plan its expansion. With the publication of their plan in 1811, the commissioners betray a skeptical view of the importance of public squares, obliquely making reference to the remarkable recent plan of Detroit as a model they reject. Instead, the commissioners remark that they see the prioritising of cheap and efficient housing as the essential determinant of the urban form and say little about the quality of the public realm they are generating.³⁶ The clear outcome of the commissioners' work at this pivotal moment in New York's urbanisation is their failure to establish a rich spatial culture of the public realm.³⁷ Further, as the American city evolved into the modern era, many squares that were established in the early process of urbanisation were lost.³⁸ Detroit's 1807 plan therefore stands out among approaches for urban form in the American city, rivalling Savannah for this saturation of urban squares.

Urban Space Endowed with Civic and Community Meaning

In addition to the social contact benefits of public squares, these spaces provide a sense of place and potential layers of meaning and memory that can come to be embedded in these spaces. In fact, the history of Brooklyn's public square adjacent to City Hall provides a poignant example of this potentiality but also the poor stewardship of place and meaning in American cities. Like the commissioners in their sister city, Brooklyn's landowners, focused on real estate speculation, failed to produce adequate public space as the rural land is urbanised after the Revolutionary War.³⁹ One square Brooklyn did produce however, so called City Hall Square, provides an example of how an urban space can be a vibrant centre of daily life as well as an important civic place in the city, with its rich commercial and transportation activity. Tracking the placement and documentation on Brooklyn's first monument, which commemorates Henry Ward Beecher, in this square, reveals the power of design and decision making that can preserve and enhance the meaningfulness of place or diminish it. Documentation of the square's early history after the monument is installed is evidence of a richness of everyday life in this urban space but also the power of moments where the community gathered to celebrate, commemorate, and protest.⁴⁰

35 Reys 1965.

36 The Greatest Grid.

37 Montgomery 202

38 A study of surveys of St. Paul Minnesota offers one of many examples of established squares lost, mostly through structural changes or infill in the 20th century. Hudson Square in Manhattan is another notable example of a square lost in a changing city.

39 Many articles in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle from the 1840s to the 1920s discuss the desire for and lack of public squares as Brooklyn urbanises.

40 Brooklyn Daily Eagle.



Figure 5. *Dedication Ceremony for Memorial Statue of Henry Ward Beecher* (Source: Brooklyn Public Library)

While the 1807 plan for Detroit set up a rich system of public spaces that could support social/economic/political life in the city, the plan was truncated with a reversion to a largely undifferentiated grid plan. The scant production of public squares in American cities and neighbourhoods revealed through this research, it must be noted, is not a reflection of people's intuition on how to make use of the public realm or the lack of recognition of the special qualities of life in the public realm. The denial of the development of public squares in fact can be understood as a consequence of priority, not cultural behaviour. Cultural behaviour in the public realm, Gehl notes, is in part a response to invitations signalled by the nature of public space.⁴¹ Barcelona's transformation of city space to prioritise pedestrianism, for example, through the application of curbsless, shared street space is one recent powerful example of the latent potential of city space and the opportunity to rebalance the cities' social/spatial ecosystems around the human dimension.

Jan Gehl notes that an essential human delight is to observe others in city space.⁴² The square is precisely a typology of urban space that intuitively allows both a wide range of human activity and with this activity the opportunity to enjoy the moment of simply observing others around us. Residents of American cities have been occupying the few spaces they are offered and enjoying the camaraderie that comes with these experiences.⁴³ Especially when we reflect on how these experiences impact on our well-being, the paltry provision of these spaces is deeply problematic. The extent

⁴¹ Gehl 2010, p.6

⁴² Gehl 2010, p.23

⁴³ Snyder 2022.

to which the production of public squares is hampered by economic, political, or other motivations must be challenged if cities like Detroit are to sustain and nurture its legacy population and new arrivals, allowing them to build social capital, flourish as a community and grow resilient in the face of the challenges to come.

Opportunities for Leveraging Detroit's Urban Form Legacy

Spatial analysis of Detroit's remnant urban core generated by the 1807 plan reinforces the dynamic legacy of its unique urban culture and the place qualities it generates. The urban core in fact is already serving as a catalyst for Detroit's revitalisation and can continue to provide a laboratory for thinking about the reformation of other sections of the city.⁴⁴ The complex geometry of the Woodward plan sets up spatial conditions where many views of the downtown streets terminate in oblique perspectives of distant buildings. This geometry defines an intimate sense of place and rich visual stimulation for Detroit's downtown where fabric is still in place and occupied. The edges of the fragment provide a definition of this urban core that can be an asset, generating a distinct urban quarter and a clear transition to the surrounding neighbourhoods. The unique place quality is indeed a powerful heritage for the city, as exemplified by the symbolic turnaround of the downtown core's vitality through the re-imagining of the Campus Martius. This square, a critical and unique space generated by the 1807 plan is now the heart of the urban core, providing a powerful link to the city's history and a demonstration of the vitality and importance of public space to the civic and social life in the 21st century city.⁴⁵

Housing Types and Existing Neighbourhoods

Analysis of the existing public spaces and housing fabric beyond the city centre reveals further urban heritage that Detroit can leverage. Small public parks that survived the devastation of urban renewal carry forward the culture of neighbourhood public spaces that can serve as the heart of the neighbourhood.⁴⁶ The scale and structure of existing neighbourhoods that stand proudly amidst the urban decay surrounding them point to a possible new version of the modular approach that could guide the re-formation of neighbourhoods as the city's population once again grows.

Analysis of the surviving early 20th century fabric also reveals a seamless integration of differing housing typologies despite the overall emphasis on car-centric single family housing. This skilful integration of higher density housing along with single family homes on small and mid-size lots anticipates the current debate regarding zoning restrictions that prohibit this type of mixture. Today the mixture of housing typologies is recognised as being critical to the effort to support demographic diversity amongst an urban population, particularly in regard to income levels. This mixture of typologies also generates a sense of place marked by variety and visual interest and increases the potential for active streets. This also insightful and powerful heritage could serve also as a critical concept for new development patterns across the city.

Macro Urban Infrastructure

Beyond these aspects of Detroit's heritage of urban form, the remnant of the unifying ring boulevard and the history of a dense system of street cars also point toward contemporary strategies for urban design. The Grand Boulevard could finally be executed as intended as a unifying green space and transit line.⁴⁷ The lost network of the streetcar system can serve as an inspiration for new forms of mobility that free residents from the burden of reliance on the car for daily activity and movement.⁴⁸

44 Bonner & Katz 2023. Long 2023.

45 Kent, Davies & Madden 2022.

46 Stanton Park in particular is a poignant model for neighbourhood urban public space.

47 Detroit Transit History.

48 Detroit Streetcar Rail Map 1941.

The current unsustainable and unjust condition for residents of Detroit is the result of many factors, but the fate of the city was largely determined by the conditions made possible with heavy reliance on private automobile mobility. This allowed for the low-density sprawl and the disinvestment in public transit. In addition, the dense and redundant network of urban highways destroyed vast fabric, urban connectivity, and social and public infrastructure.⁴⁹ The trajectory of Detroit's urban development centred on the private automobile provokes a serious reflection on the nature of cities, and the imperative to make them sustainable and resilient. This is a heritage that Detroit may leverage to remake itself into a leading American city around these goals.

Building on Recent Efforts

The production of a new public realm for Detroit can build further on pathways and activities that are already working towards this end. The revival of the Campus Martius demonstrates that urban places like this in Detroit are important to the image of the city, its identity, and hope for the future. The Future Detroit report of 2012 provides a robust menu of strategies for sustainability, resilience, and social justice as well as tools for participatory design. The ongoing conversion of open land to urban agriculture and landscape is a sign of Detroit's amazing opportunity to balance population, water and food supply while building a robust storm water management system that addresses extreme rain events that are now the new normal, as well as combating heat island effect, building resilience in the face of extreme heat.

These three currents in Detroit's remaking could be integrated with a strategy for focused redevelopment in the form of a polycentric system with distinct urban quarters that follow the heritage of the Woodward "sections," each with local public squares and parks that are determined by the local residents themselves.⁵⁰ Each quarter could provide proximity to employment, education, recreation. These quarters could be bordered by the agricultural and landscape zones for green and blue infrastructure. Each quarter could be connected by new transit lines and greenways with walking, running, and bike paths, supporting recreation and active mobility. These quarters could be formed around existing concentrations of fabric and use infill to provide the variety of housing typologies necessary to encourage demographic diversity. These urban quarters could maintain a low-rise character, at least initially, to maintain a human scale similar to the historic neighbourhoods that attracted middle class residents to the city in the early decades of the 20th century.

Neoliberal Planning's Contrasting Priorities

The remarkable heritage of Detroit's planning offers a framework for rethinking Detroit's urban form, especially given the opportunities presented by the open land available and the potential to decommission urban highways. This approach to rethinking the public realm, however, does not conform to the typical development strategies cities pursue today. In fact, the late 20th century and early 21st century development approaches in Detroit suggest a more typical emphasis on neoliberal priorities.⁵¹ For example, an egalitarian production of neighbourhood public squares and parks is not consistent with a concentration of capital and economic growth-oriented investment approaches.⁵² Development driven by private corporations instead seeks to establish a controlled environment for economic activity, often through a defensive posture. Hudson Yards, for example, exemplifies the private developers' view of establishing a luxury environment and seeking to control access through its low level of connectivity to the adjacent urban fabric and its inward orientation around a privately owned public space. Neoliberal emphasis on deregulation, reduced government expenditures and taxes translates to outsourcing the production of urban spaces to private entities, which inherently see these spaces as strategic for marketing and increased profit opportunity.⁵³ The control of these spaces is also typically skewed

49 Hackworth 2016.

50 Kloosterman & Musterd 2001.

51 Luna 2015.

52 Clement & Kanai 2015. Schindler 2014.

53 Harvey 2007.

towards the conditions favourable to the private entity that generated them. Spaces intended for tourists, commercial activity, entertainment are produced but may not truly support the social needs of the local population. The commercial/entertainment/touristic emphasis of major planning and investment decisions can perpetuate planning approaches that undermine genuine public space production and re-prioritise the car-centric city.⁵⁴

Reconstructing the City

The public realm is central to the sustainability of urban neighbourhoods as well as their resilience.⁵⁵ The neoliberal agenda struggles to produce the public realm that communities have a right to. The economic efficiency and return on investment are historically counter to either the preservation or production of human scaled urban form. Rather than preserve small lots and blocks to offer diversity in the structure, neoliberal development tends towards land consolidation and de-mapping public space. Yet the the urban form that supports walkability and proximity relies on small blocks within a dense network of human scaled streets.⁵⁶ A review of a sample of existing spatial conditions through mapped street views reveals that preserved small blocks with human scaled streets provide a strongly contrasting condition with significantly altered blocks, especially those along major commercial corridors. Comparing historic mapping to existing conditions in Figure 6, the divergence of urban form priorities regarding the scale of building footprints and block sizes, street network connectivity is clear.

Detroit is among the most extreme car-centric urban environments where walkability is highly challenged.⁵⁷ If Gehl's position holds, that city dwellers are unable to engage with city life due to the car-centric realm of the city, then unless there is a significant change of approach to the urban form, Detroit's revitalisation could be undermined and prove ultimately unsustainable. The prevalence of parking garages tied to office towers, for example, continues a defensive posture where there is resistance or hesitancy to be on the street. The attempt to make up for the tragic dismantling of the public transportation system by establishing a new streetcar line prioritised to serve a gentrified corridor rather than a general service for the legacy residents that have carried the weight of the hardships of a radically contraction of the city may do more to expose the challenges of revitalisation than build a rejuvenated mobility culture for the city around public transit.⁵⁸

54 Herron 2012.

55 Gehl 2010, p. 6.

56 Jacobs 1992, pp. XXX

57 Walk Score 2024.

58 Barrett 2023, Skorup, 2023.

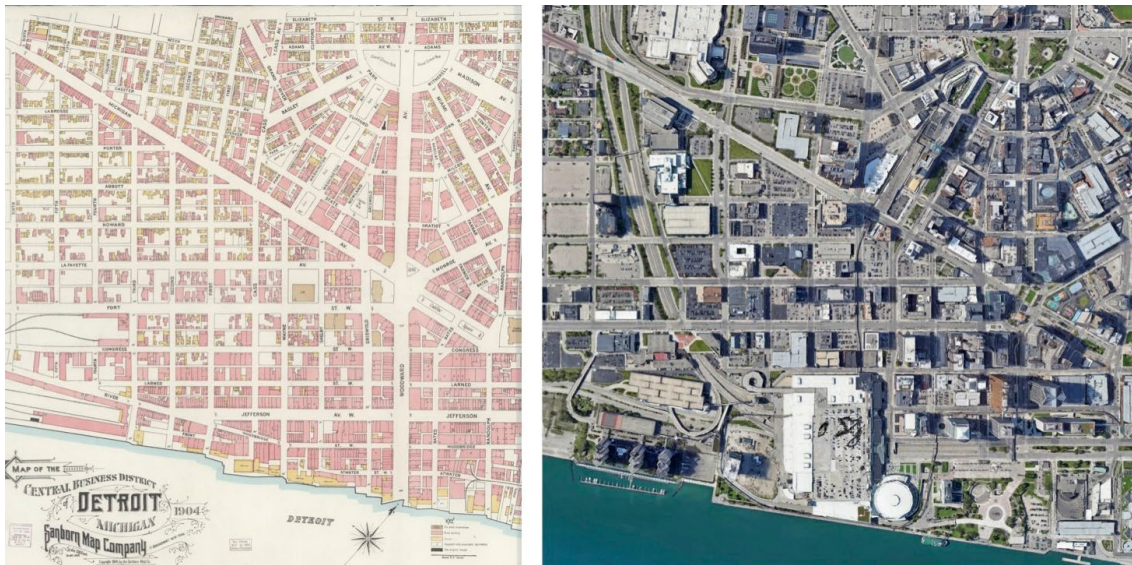


Figure 6. 1904 Sanborn Map left and 2024 Google Earth Satellite Image right. (Source: Library of Congress and Google Earth)

Conclusion

Detroit's dramatic reduction of population and density opens the door to a reconsideration of resilient infrastructure, density, proximity, connectivity, mobility, but also self-determination of this structure. Detroit's new form could accommodate rural and urban characteristics simultaneously in interesting new patterns, with farmsteads or hamlets in-between urban enclaves. All of this, however, would depend on consensus that the Euclidian zoning and car-centric era of Detroit is no-longer the model for Detroit's remaking. In this sense, heritage provides a critical reflection to guide the future.

This research evokes the question: can a new emphasis and dedication to building a robust system of public spaces provide a critical infrastructure for re-establishing vitality as well as economic sustainability in a way that a focus on private capital investment that seeks perpetual economic growth cannot? If this is the case, then Detroit should pursue the opportunity to redefine its public realm, and this is where the attention to the Woodward plan comes into play; this remarkable plan established a model for an intensive integration of public open spaces intimately linked to the fabric of the city. In a way this can be seen as the inverse of the car intensive infrastructure that is spatially all consuming, delinking territory and separating people. Especially in the context of a diminished urban population, the car infrastructure spatial consumption of urban territory undermines/limits the linking people and neighbourhoods. At the least, research and case studies like this can provide city dwellers and their political representatives with new insights into the potential of innovative approaches to urban form and urban public space integration that could be the most important transformations for a sustainable and resilient urban future.

Detroit is primed for a transformative future necessitated by the drastic change to the urban population and the city fabric. The city cannot provide services and maintain the ad hoc condition it finds itself in today. But rather than merely working towards a restoration of the problematic car-centric city, Detroit can reflect on and leverage its unique heritage and establish a path for the sustainable and resilient cities of the future.

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