PLACE-MAKING IN DETROIT:
crafting identity

Rebecca Price
University of Michigan
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Since the 1950s Detroit has been a city on the decline. The ever-expanding network of freeways transporting city dwellers out to the developing suburbs, tore the fabric of the city, demolished neighborhoods, and separated those that remained. At the same time, vast public housing projects, intended to improve the situation of the poor, cleared existing neighborhoods and took over acres of land. As we know now, this social experiment did not work. Of course, these issues are not singular to Detroit. They mark the urban history of many American cities.
The Detroit riots of 1967 are often cited as the beginning of white flight to the suburbs, but actually the flight had started with the post-war building boom of the late 1940s. The destruction wrought by the riots sped up the process resulting in a starkly segregated urban area with the city being approximately 80% African American and the suburbs being over 90% white. Over the last thirty years, along with this depopulation, the city has struggled with incompetent, and at times, corrupt, government.

There’s a real turn around happening in Detroit now that feels different from the previous attempts to right the ship. Although the bankruptcy (2014) was momentous and a very difficult time, the change was already underway. The city had shrunk from around 2 million people in the 50s to just over 700,000 in the 2010 census. Yet Detroit is huge – it encompasses 139 square miles. Now approximately 30% of that land mass is vacant.

How does one provide adequate city services to an area that is almost more rural in nature? How does one keep a sense of the city when the density is gone? How does one create and maintain a vibrant neighborhood community when the “next door” neighbor is ¼ mile away?
Here’s where the idea of place-making comes in. Place-making is about identity. With the intense shrinkage of the city, the definition of place needed to re-defined, re-established and even re-created.

Many books about Detroit have been published recently addressing these changes, though perhaps not always in those particular terms. I’m showing just a handful of the titles that have come out in the last 3-4 years. Some focus on the decline, some are more optimistic and look to a comeback.
In *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* Andrew Herscher addresses one of the key problems of the shrinking city: the issue of real estate losing its traditional value. There’s still land, there’s still property; but without monetary value. What land economies remain?

Herscher argues that one needs to see the shrinking city not so much as a problem to be solved or fixed with money, but rather as a prompt to “new understandings of the city’s spatial and cultural possibilities” (7). A particularly poignant point he makes is that inhabitation of the city, once it has lost its value, is “a political act rather than a geographically-based condition” (7). There’s intent in staying and living. Staying in the city is a stake in the ground; a commitment to place; a seed for making places.
Place-making is an established strategy for revitalizing neighborhoods. It is known that “areas of the city defined by high participation in the arts, ... demonstrate higher than average income and population growth.”*

While in the past it has often been a top-down strategy stemming from city planning department initiatives, there is an increasing awareness or understanding that grass-roots, bottom-up place-making can have an even greater impact on a community.

The revitalization of Detroit is complex and different aspects of it are funded by different sources. One stream is the influx of money from investors and businessmen like Dan Gilbert, the head of Quicken Loans, who (as of early 2017) has invested over $2 billion dollars and bought close to 100 buildings downtown. While his investment in the downtown is crucial to Detroit’s turn-around, it does not do a lot for the neighborhoods, particularly those removed from the downtown area.
A second stream of investment and activity is from the millennial group; often called “the hipsters.” Given the low-cost of property quite a few twenty-somethings from Brooklyn, the Silicon Valley, and other relatively expensive markets have come to Detroit to start a business and to make a mark. In some cases, these are people who grew up in Detroit, left for college or jobs, and are now returning with renewed interest. At the risk of generalizing this group and painting with too broad a brush, these people are young and diverse and bring a new energy and a vibrancy to the city. Most of their ventures appear to be in sales, such as clothing and boutique stores with a strong online presence, or in the development of apps to provide online services. It is yet to be seen whether their entrepreneurship is fueled mostly by opportunism or if they have developed a deep commitment to the city.
This brings us to a third stream of investment. This group is to a large extent populated by the socio-economically marginalized people of Herscher’s book. Generally, it includes the older generations and their families who have lived in Detroit their whole lives and function to get by; to survive economically. Though perhaps having the least financial weight of the three streams of investment, it can be argued that this group is the most important for the longevity and implications for the city’s future. This stream is fueled by commitment to and passion for the city. Many of these neighborhood or individual based efforts are supported by philanthropic dollars.

Camilo Vergara, the Chilean-born photographer who has documented Detroit (and other cities) in photographs for the past 30 years, describes this group as “the authentic” Detroiter.* I think he’s pointing out something that is important in the discussion of place-making, especially as an outcome of art-based initiatives. Revenue and profit are not the motivators for place-making; instead it is about identity and community.

While investments by billionaires and energy from hipsters improve some core areas of the city, Vergara points out that they have little noticeable effect on the outer blighted neighborhoods (268).

*Vergara, Camilo, Detroit is No Dry Bones, (Ann Arbor, 2017)
Grass-roots place-making is fundamental and critical for the revitalization of the vast vacant areas of the city. Some of the examples of place-making in Detroit, particularly art-generated and art-inspired places, confirm that idea.

One crucial tool for both the hipsters startups and the authentic startups is a solid support structure. Over the past decade or so an infrastructure in the form of programs that support entrepreneurs, small-businesses, and neighborhood groups has developed: support that provides networks of assistance: information, expertise, community, and in some cases seed money. Fortunately, providing that support has been a priority of the past couple of mayors.

To name just a few; there is Motor City Match, which matches small businesses with real estate opportunities. There is Build Institute assisting startups with tools and training. The Detroit Creative Corridor was established to create communities around artists and creative ventures. There are endeavors like Ponyride that provide communal space, tools and resources that entrepreneurs can use.
As I wind down, I want to share just a few examples of creative ventures that build community and establish place in Detroit. In a couple instances I will stretch the definition of place-making. To a large extent the success of these examples is because they tap into both the new energy of the millennials and the history and authentic, deep-rooted passion of the natives.

**Detroit Soup**
An event in which people come together, pay $5 for a bowl of soup, listen to a few pitches for various neighborhood projects. After all the pitches, a vote is taken and the money is given to the winner.

**Detroit is Different**
I would suggest that in today’s online world, this online newspaper represents a kind of place. It is edited and authored by a hip-hop artist Khary Frazier and focuses on happenings in Detroit.

**Culture Lab Detroit**
This one is the least on target as far as local place-making but it is important because it is an initiative that reaches out to involve international artists and connects them to Detroit, thereby extending the reach and networks of Detroit artists.
Talking Fence
Design99

promoting community by storytelling and sharing space

Photos by Design99
Illuminated Garage
Design99

creating space that
becomes a neighborhood
landmark

Photos by Design99
Powerhouse
Design99

Powerhouse
The term Power House describes two functions. First, the house is a power creator: it produces its own electricity from solar and wind power with the intention of powering an additional adjacent house, thus creating a localized power grid. Second, the term implies a kind of taking control of one’s own community by becoming an example of self-reliance, sustainability and creative problem solving.
O.N.E. Mile
Oakland North End Mile Project

Mothership
A collaborative effort to support the cultural production and socio-economic activity of the North End neighborhood. The Mothership is a portable DJ studio that brings funk music to neighborhood venues, creating temporary places.

Photo by O.N.E. Mile
Oakland Ave Urban Farm

Plans for Creating Place

* Foster worker-owned businesses as economic drivers, and integrate the arts into the fabric of community life.
* Transforming a vacant residence into a convivial community dining hall and hostel accommodating visiting artists, agriculture specialists, and chefs.
* Creating the Art Farm House—an exhibition space and mini art school for children and adults set in a neo-rural landscape—and an irrigation infrastructure that will serves as an “urban marker” and other energy-efficient systems.
* Launching of the North End Superette, a farm-fresh convenience store and retail space for the farm’s value-added products. (Afrojam)
* Hosting a series of culinary happenings and developing arts programming in conversation with residents by providing neighbors with space for creative experimentation.

(Recently awarded $500,000 grant from ArtPlace America)

City Farmer News: http://www.cityfarmer.info/2016/12/17/detroitsoakland-avenue-urban-farm-has-snagged-a-500000-grant-from-artplace-america/
You can see there is a range of initiatives aimed at involving the local community and reaching out to neighboring communities with the intent of making a place and claiming an identity. As a librarian I see it as my role to be as involved as I can be, but primarily to be acutely aware of what’s going on in my local and nearby communities so that I can help students and faculty as they both learn from and improve their neighborhoods and communities.

any questions: rpw@umich.edu