Date: May 27, 2008

I, Thomas J. Rudary, hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
Master

in:
Architecture

It is entitled:
Identifying Detroit:
Representing Tension, Conflict, and Hope in Detroit Architecture

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IDENTIFYING DETROIT
representing tension, conflict, and hope in detroit architecture

A thesis submitted to the
Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture
in the School of Architecture and Interior Design
College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning

2008

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Since the 1950s, Detroit’s businesses and residents have been steadily migrating to the suburbs, taking with them much of the cultural, social, and economic diversity that once clearly defined Detroit’s sense of identity. The area surrounding Grand Circus Park, intended to be the city’s center upon its inception 200 years ago, is today characterized not as the heart of a major metropolis, but rather by a few significant attractions surrounded by a sea of empty lots and abandoned buildings. These attractions serve Detroit as independent, isolated nodes of life with no real connection to the rest of the city – people drive in, view what they wish to see in a static, isolated environment, and drive out. By filling the empty lots with useable outdoor space, and eating, shopping, living, and working opportunities, this thesis will attempt to stitch the individual entities together into a cohesive whole, creating a forum for public interaction in an area where so many of the different classes and groups of Detroit are already drawn. By focusing on the physical and social history of the city, the resulting urban design and architecture project will establish, explore, and celebrate the hybrid sense of identity that has been so crucial to Detroit’s sense of self. This will be design inspired and guided by the tension and conflict that has defined Detroit, but also the hope for the future that will allow Detroit to rise beyond the city’s decline. The result will serve as a unifying entity in the city, both functionally – bringing people together in a beautiful public space; and ideologically – reestablishing the positive identity of Detroit by transcending the social and economic barriers.
Growing up in the suburbs of Metro Detroit, I was always fascinated by the city. Detroit represented the rest of the world, everything that existed beyond the confines of my comparatively small town – big, intimidating, but full of life and possibility. Detroit was a place where there was always something to do, the place I could go to see a concert, or go out to dinner, or to watch a ballgame; although I was aware of the negative aspects of the city as well, the positive parts outshone the negative. I had developed what Edward Relph deemed “empathetic insideness” with the city – an appreciation and respect for Detroit and the essential elements of its identity without actually being geographically within its boundaries (Relph 54). Despite this locational disconnect, my proximity to the city (less than twenty miles outside the city proper) meant I spent my formative years drinking Detroit city water, reading and watching Detroit news, and listening to Detroit radio, so it seems natural that I would establish this relationship with the city.

As I got older, I began to understand the identity that Detroit presented to the rest of the world, an identity based on equal parts fear and misunderstanding from the years of strife from which the city suffered. I never saw the city in that light – the good of the city always outweighed the bad in my mind. Whether this was due to denial or naïveté, my understanding of Detroit was always of a positive city with some negative qualities, like most other urban centers. This thesis is an exploration of this identity, an attempt to reconcile three different cities: the city that I envisioned, the city that the rest of the world sees, and the city that actually exists.
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a novelty today, tomorrow a ruin from the past, buried
and resurrected every day…
the city that dreams us all, that all of us build and unbuild
and rebuild as we dream,
the city we all dream, that restlessly changes while we
dream it,
I speak of the immense city, that daily reality composed
of two words: the others,
and in every one of them there is an I clipped from a we,
an I adrift…
I speak of the buildings of stone and marble, of cement,
glass and steel, of the people in the lobbies and doorways, of the
elevators that rise and fall like the mercury in thermometers…
of the coming and going of cars, mirrors of our anxieties,
business, passions (why? toward what? for what?)…
I speak of the longed-for encounter with that unexpected
form with which the unknown is made flesh, and revealed to each
of us…
I speak of our public history, and of our secret history,
yours and mine,
I speak of the forest of stone, the desert of the prophets,
the ant-heap of souls, the congregation of tribes, the house of
mirrors, the labyrinth of echoes…
I speak of the city, shepherd of the centuries, mother that
gives birth to us and devours us, that creates us and forgets.

- Octavio Paz, “I Speak of the City”
Detroit, once the definition of progress and development, now presents a bleak image to the rest of the world. The last sixty-five years have not been kind to the city – urban instability, race riots, and even characterization as the homicide capital of the United States have taken their toll on this once great city. Citizens have been steadily leaving Detroit for the suburbs since the 1940s and 50s, and the population decline has not yet reversed. Empty lots now fill the urban landscape, and abandoned buildings cast their shadows over streets and sidewalks operating at a fraction of the capacity for which they were intended. Compared to what it once was, Detroit seems like a ghost town. Those that are left are largely poor and poorly-educated, neglected individuals who have inherited a city and a history “scripted to exclude them from the scheme that made modernity so highly profitable to somebody else, someone who has now moved away.”

Things were not always this way. Detroit was once a booming metropolis, and the manufacturing center of the world. In fact, it has been claimed that, of all the cities in the United States, Detroit “is the most unequivocally modern and therefore distinctive of our national culture… the place, more than any other, where the native history of modernity has been

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Fig. 1.1 (above) - Abandoned Detroit lot
Fig. 1.2 (left) - Deterioration of Detroit neighborhood

1 Herron (2001) 40
The urban environment – the “material world of people, objects and events” – reflects today, the downward trend of the city, and the fear, despair, and emptiness that was left after Detroit’s proud past gave way to decline. When one considers any given locale, they “receive signals, physical impulses that steer in a particular direction the construction of an imaginary that [they] establish as that of a specific place or city.” The imaginary that Detroit has constructed is powerful and frightening. Even as Detroit attempts to redefine itself, to restore what it once was, the image that was established by the decades of strife haunts the city, stifling attempts to rebuild. All the negative aspects of the city’s downhill slide have created an identity that Detroit must fight against in order to establish itself, once again, as a positive urban environment.

Detroit needs a new plan. It needs a new urban design to take advantage of the abandoned space and to bring residents back into the city. It needs architecture that is intelligent and appropriate, that reflects the city, and is more than just hand-me-downs from other cities, or “phoned-in” designs from architects halfway across the country. More than anything, Detroit needs to reverse the negative image that the city has acquired through its painful past. To achieve these things, there needs to be a solid understanding of what identity is, and how it can be applied to architecture. This can lead to establishing a new identity through community, one that celebrates the positive aspects of Detroit, both historic and contemporary, bringing together the myriad social, ethnic, political, and economic groups that define the city.

This is not an attempt to “save” Detroit. The issues that face the city stem from hundreds of years of conflict and can not all be addressed, let alone solved, by any single architectural intervention. The goal instead is to recognize these issues, and to acknowledge their existence, in an attempt to understand them and move past them, one step at a time. This thesis examines the role identity plays in defining people, and how that translates to architecture, as an evasive but essential presence in all life and all built form. It then looks at Detroit, a city that has suffered much from a negative identity, and how the built environment can address this identity crisis. It examines the history of the city, and how that has contributed to defining its identity – in ways both good and bad – and how that has led to the state of the city today. According to Detroit author Jerry Herron, what is needed in Detroit is “a structure for changing nostalgia into intelligence, ruin into history, for recalling the sights of modernity to a still relevant specificity.” In this spirit, this thesis will offer a small scale design solution that takes clues from the city in dictating a design that is appropriate to the city today, in an attempt to be one of those steps toward moving past the issues that plague the city. This will be an architecture that, if not necessarily timeless, will capture the beauty and soul of Detroit without becoming obsolete the instant the last drop of mortar

2 Herron (2001) 33
3 Madanipour 123
4 Sola-Morales 119
5 Herron (2001) 40
is placed. Although the resulting design will not single-handedly provide the social and economic change that Detroit so desperately needs, it will be part of establishing a forum in which it can take place, a piece of the urban infrastructure necessary for a community to be rebuilt and a downtown life to be re-established.
Identity is an elusive, intangible phenomenon that can not be easily defined or distinguished. However, it is a fundamental notion that is inherent in everyday life, and as such should be understood and viewed for what it is: “everywhere, wherever and however [people] are related to beings of every kind, identity makes its claim upon [them].” Identity is essential for people defining themselves as people, and represents the essence of everyone; as philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, the basic principle of the state of being is “to every being as such there belongs identity, the unity with itself.” In other words, to achieve a state of being, to have what might be defined as a state of existence, one must assume a sense of identity, the “fundamental characteristic of Being.” Thus, all people have a sense of identity, simply as a function of their existence.

According to sociologist Manuel Castells, “identity is people’s source of meaning and experience.” It is their “beliefs about who [they] are, [their] relations with others, and the basis on which [they] can act in the world.” Identities are constructed on the basis of culture: class, gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, politics, and profession all contribute to the broad definition.

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Fig. 2.1 - View of downtown Detroit
of what forms an individual’s identity. Together, they form an identity that could be considered “hybrid” – a plurality of influences each laying claim to a person, fluid, overlapping, and interrelated.\(^6\) Identities are chosen by adjusting the priority and power given to different groups or associations that lay claim on an individual, making the role of choice – despite some constraints that may exist – essential in establishing identity.\(^7\) To define oneself as a human being, one must determine “the qualities that must be present, or the processes that must be at work, for the individual to attain a meaningful sense of self-identity or self-knowledge.”\(^8\) Essential in this is a place in which to undergo this development of self-identity.

As philosopher Gabriel Marcel says, “an individual is not distinct from his place; he is that place.”\(^9\) Whether referring to where an individual was born, grew up, lives now, or had significant life experiences, people form strong associations with place.

> “This association [with place] seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which [people] orient [themselves] in the world.”\(^10\)

It is important, then, to consider the identity of place, and the myriad unique characteristics that form said place. Place, like identity, is a difficult concept to define, but could be considered to be “a phenomenon of the geography of the lived-world of [people’s] everyday experiences” as defined by Edward Relph.\(^11\) This means that everything that is encountered in daily life encompasses the formation of place: the physical setting of built objects and landscape, the people and their movement and activities, and the meaning that is derived from the combination of these elements. These, therefore, are all fundamental in creating a sense of place identity. Individual identity, group identity, and place identity unite together to define an urban environment.

### Importance of Identity

The unity of identity, or the state of having an identity, is a basic characteristic in the state of being, and, as Heidegger was quoted earlier, it makes its claim upon everyone; “if this claim were not made, beings could never appear in their Being.”\(^12\) What this says is that if people do not have a sense of identity making its claim upon them, they would have no sense of being, no sense of individuality or understanding of who they are. People are “influenced to an amazing extent by people with whom [they] identify.”\(^13\) Although people tend to be drawn to those with similar interests or backgrounds, the hybrid nature of identity means that as a result, dissimilarities in character and personality will inevitably mix, creating a richer, more complex group. It is important to celebrate diversity and difference between individuals, to understand

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\(^6\) Tajbakhsh 20
\(^7\) Sen 7
\(^8\) Richards 111
\(^9\) Relph 43
\(^10\) Relph 43
\(^11\) Relph 6
\(^12\) Heidegger 26
\(^13\) Sen xv

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*Fig. 2.2 - Relationships of identity*
individuality as something to be appreciated, not feared.

“When interpersonal relations are seen in singular intergroup terms, as “amity” or “dialogue” among civilizations or religious ethnicities, paying no attention to other groups to which the same persons also belong (involving economic, social, political, or other cultural connections), then much of importance in human life is altogether lost, and individuals are put into little boxes.”

Establishing meaning in places is a more difficult matter than the rather simple tasks of identifying the physical setting, or observing the activities existing within. While the meanings of places may be rooted in the physical or active realms, they are in actuality a “property of human intentions and experiences.”

This is why it is important to look closely into the historical and sociological principles of a community or urban environment. Establishing a strong sense of identity, through embracing and celebrating diverse backgrounds and cultures, is crucial in establishing a sense of place, and, “an understanding of [people’s] location within social groupings and in space has long been recognized as fundamental in this process.”

“The manner in which these [qualities of place emphasized by people’s cultural groups] are manifest in [their] experience of places that governs [their] impressions of the uniqueness, strength, and genuineness of the identity of those places.”

An urban setting, as a large scale manifestation of the basic concept of place, relies on the diversity of its residents to contribute to the overall identity of the city. As the largest man-made physical element in a given place, architecture asserts itself as a key opportunity to establish a clear, positive identity; an identity that is both internal to the design, and that projects itself externally to the place it occupies. With this in mind, identity proves to be an essential element in establishing an architecture that is relatable on a personal and cultural level.

**Dangers of Conflicting Identity**

A positive sense of identity clearly carries with it many positive attributes. What also needs to be considered, however, is the potential for negativity inherent in a strong sense of identity. While identity can be a source of pride and joy, strength and confidence, thoughtless adherence to one particular group or system can create distance and separation for others. This is why it is necessary that, while recognizing the positive values identity can have, there exists the “recognition that a sense of identity can firmly exclude many people even as it warmly embraces others.”

“Many of the conflicts and barbarities of the world are sustained through

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14 Sen xvi
15 Relph 47
16 Erickson 2
17 Relph 45
18 Sen 1
19 Sen 2
the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity.”

People are very strongly influenced by the concept of identity, and that choosing the wrong one – that is, placing too much emphasis on one singular, negative group association, so much so that it “drowns other affiliations” – can be the source of hatred and violence. Much of this can be traced to the “illusion of singularity,” the “implicit belief in the overarching power of a singular classification.”

Focusing on any singular classification while disregarding the rest is a form of “civilizational partitioning,” which “undermines the diverse identities [people] all have which do not place [them] against each other along one uniquely rigid line of segregation.”

Essentially, judging an individual based on their membership with one particular collectivity, a direct result of adhering to the illusion of singularity, is crude, over-simplistic, and potentially confrontational.

These dangers have been focused primarily on the potential issues with individual identity, but this is equally applicable when applied to the concept of group or collective identity. Problems can develop in these group situations when “many-sided persons” are seen as having “exactly one identity each,” often based on religion or ethnicity. Even when class identities are similar or identical, community identity can overwhelm and take precedent, creating hate or conflict. It is the illusion of singular identity that serves this “violent purpose.”

This is especially important when looking at the poorer classes in urban environments with a tumultuous history, such as Detroit; although blacks and whites shared many similar characteristics, such as economic disadvantage, lack of employment, and inadequate housing, it was the difference in racial identity on which many chose to focus – with ultimately deadly results.

“The advocacy of a unique identity for a violent purpose takes the form of separating out one identity group – directly linked to the violent purpose at hand – for special focus, and it proceeds from there to eclipse the relevance of other associations and affiliations through selective emphasis and incitement.”

It is here that choice in establishing identity becomes a key consideration. When one considers also that “place identity is an essential part of self – identity,” and that these shared places and their meanings form “a collective self-identity of the community,” it becomes clear how important it is to establish this positive sense of identity.

Although identity can create anger and hostility, it shouldn’t be feared or mistrusted, as “identity can be a source of richness and warmth as well as of violence and terror”; instead, it is important to recognize that these hostile identities can be “challenged by the power of competing identities.” This
is something that is done in everyone's daily life; one constantly chooses their identity by adjusting the priority and power given to different groups or associations that lay claim on them. The need to recognize the role of reasoning and choice in identity-based thinking is thus both exacting and extremely important. Despite the fact the assertion by sociologists and philosophers that identity has an “inescapable plurality,” “the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others.” People should “jointly affirm [their] many common identities” rather than focus on those that divide [them] negatively. By defining public spaces that encourage community interaction, architecture can assist these common identities to assemble and be celebrated.

Identity in an Urban Setting

Edward Relph looks at the writings of Albert Camus, who states three components of place: the static physical setting, the activities, and the meanings. Relph characterizes these components as the obvious, but fundamental, three basic elements of the identity of places. By understanding and utilizing these elements, a deeper, more meaningful identity can be created, rather than a superficial or synthetic one. "There can be little doubt that the community or culture to which a person belongs can have a major influence on the way he or she see a situation or views a decision." The attitudes and beliefs that are shared by the cultures and communities people belong to influence the nature of their reasoning, and the identity that they claim, although these attitude and beliefs do not determine these ideas fully. A strong sense of

29  Sen 5
30  Sen 8
31  Sen 182
32  Sen 19
33  Sen 186
34  Relph 47
35  Sen 34
community based on diversity and independence will create a strong sense of
identity, without forcing opinion into singular identity.

This identity, the characteristics that establish a place’s individuality and
distinction from other places, is what makes it recognizable as a separable
entity.36 This refers not only to the identity of a place, but also to the identity
that a person, or groups of people, have with a place, and how they establish
and experience that identity.37 The basic dualism that comprises the essence
of place – the relationship between inside and outside – is fundamental in
one’s experience of lived-space. “To be inside a place is to belong to it and to
identify with it, and the more profoundly inside [a person is] the stronger is
this identity with the place.”38 Fewer and fewer are actually profoundly within
Detroit anymore; however; the mass suburbanization of the metro region
over the last half century has whittled away at this intimate relationship that
at one point so many shared with the city.

While there are many reasons for the decline of Detroit (which will be
discussed later), they all lead to the resulting image of a suffering, dying city.
Empty lots of rubble and abandoned skyscrapers tell more about the state
of the former metropolis than any news article can. Reversing this trend is
a crucial step in the restoration of the city’s identity, as “it is not considered
possible to conceive the self separately from its external environment and the
experiences it has there.”39 The interaction of social and physical elements
of the micro-context of the city, how they operate and relate to each other,
directly influences the course of people’s activities.40 “The identity of our built
environment is thus both raw material and the product of social practice.”41

Architects and urban designers are not able to directly control social practices
in an urban setting; however, they do have the unique opportunity to shape
the physical setting in such a way as to create positive physical spaces. This
will help to foster a sense of community that is based off the interaction of
people rather than arbitrary physical boundaries such as neighborhood lines
or city limits, regaining the ‘social’ phenomenon of community rather than
’spatial.’42 “First, we are in crisis but community will save us; second, the
creation of community is predominantly a spatial problem to be addressed
by designers.”43

Identity Expressed Through Architecture

The deepest, richest identity of place is experienced through “empathetic
insideness;” understanding of meaning, through the experiences and symbols
found within a place, allows the insider to become intimately associated
with the place, hence identifying with it.44 When the concept of place is

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36 Lynch 6
37 Relph 44-45
38 Relph 49
39 Richards 112
40 Madanipour 125
41 Erickson 2
42 Richards 115
43 Richards 119
44 Relph 54-56
focused down to a more singular setting, that of a single built element, then Relph’s insideness helps to express how important architecture can be in defining identity. The key, then, is to represent local identity accurately and honestly, without falling into the trap of representation based around Relph’s “mass identity of place,” a superficial identity based on “glib and contrived stereotypes created arbitrarily and even synthetically.”

Because of this, identity proves to be an essential element in establishing an architecture that is relatable on a personal and cultural level. Looking back to Camus’s three components of place, it is the static physical setting that is of major concern here, the spatial problem that designers can impact. While the activities and meanings of the occupants of a city are important for definition of the identity of place, the built environment represents the important third leg of that triumvirate, and its importance can not be disregarded. By creating a world out of the fusion of edifice, site, and environs, the architectural creation of place “establishes a phenomenological linkage that experientially combines them into an evolving organic entity.” Architecture can be vital in establishing identity — first, however, it is necessary to understand what that identity is.

45 Relph 58
46 Robinson 144
three
To truly understand and define the concept of hybrid identity, one must examine not only isolated events, physical environments, and social culture, but also the connections between – and development of – these characteristics. Because of this, history is inherent in identity.

“The value of history seen as collective memory, as the relationship of the collective to its place, is that it helps us to grasp the significance of the urban structure, its individuality, and its architecture which is the form of this individuality.”

This collective memory “becomes the guiding thread of the entire complex urban structure.” Understanding the complexity of the past will help shape the future in a thoughtful, intelligent way.

Detroit has a particular need to understand the past, as the city has developed to a current state that is widely considered to be negative; understanding the history that has lead to this point is an important step toward comprehending the true identity of the city. The evolution of Detroit has been complex, and often tragic, truly determining the way the city functions today. Any intervention in the city, especially something as visible and permanent as urban design and architecture, must be sensitive to the tumultuous past if it expects to have any significance or

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1 Rossi 173
2 Rossi 173

Fig. 3.1 - Detroit industry fresco from Detroit Institute of Art, 1933
appropriateness in the urban fabric. This is not to say, however, that one should fixate on the past and become completely enamored with its meaning. “The way forward is the way out” – understanding and appreciating history provides designers with the tools to find this way forward.3

Early Detroit
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded Detroit as a French Fort in 1701, although it had been occupied for hundreds of years prior to this by French travelers and traders, and for thousands of years before that by various Native American tribes.4 It changed hands twice after that: first, falling under English control in 1760 after their victory over the French in the French and Indian War; second, being established as an American city in 1794 following the Revolutionary War. While these events were essential to establishing the identity of Detroit today, they are also the origin of the history of conflict that characterizes the city. A sleepy fur trading outpost to begin with, Detroit began setting itself up as a major western city in the early 19th century, thanks to, among other things, the development of the steamboat and the opening of the Erie Canal. The quick and affordable passage to New England that was established accelerated trade and development in the city, and brought settlers in by the thousands.5

By mid-19th century, the combination of available transportation (both railroad and steamboat) and easy access to the iron ore deposits of the Upper Peninsula had laid the foundation for Detroit to become a center of heavy industry. Foundries and machine and boiler works were established, allowing the city to begin producing ships, sawmills, locomotives, stoves, and furnaces. The drug and pharmaceutical industry began growing, as did banking, brewing, and textiles. Goods and products shipped in and out of the city through a complex transportation system including arterial avenues, railways, and the Detroit River.6 The need for a labor force to work in these new industries brought immigrants en masse to the city. By 1890, Detroit had swelled to over 200,000 residents, with foreign born coming primarily from countries such as Germany, Ireland, England, Scotland, and Poland. At the end of the 19th century, Detroit had established itself as a major manufacturing center of the region, with much more growth to come.7

The Changing Form of the City
As noted earlier, one of the key characteristics of place, in forming place identity, are the physical aspects of the geography. As such, it is important to recognize Detroit’s physical characteristics as well as those that are less tangible, such as historical and sociological. Inherent to every construction are the terrain upon which it is located; surroundings that constitute its physical environs; and a context consisting of both material and immaterial features. Taken together, these aspects offer opportunities of “shaping and

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3 Hoffman 43  
4 Woodford 5-14  
5 Woodford 49-53  
6 Woodford 75-88  
7 Woodford 87-88
shading a variety of experiences.”8 This is why understanding the physical is so important in understanding the character of a place, which is very true in Detroit, as the visible clues and signs of Detroit's physical landscape that still exist today “help [Detroiters] to understand how [they] developed as a City while explaining why [their] surroundings look as they do.”9 Distinct periods of Detroit’s history are reflected in the different grid systems, parts of which are still clear in the layout of the city today.10

Detroit is a city defined first and foremost by its waterway, the Detroit River; the adjacency to this essential transportation route was one of the primary reasons for settling in this city. The name Detroit is even derived from the French le détroit, meaning “the strait.”11 Just as it was crucial to starting the city, the Detroit River was critical in originating Detroit's physical layout. Because road travel was unreliable due to weather conditions, the river became the primary mode of transportation; lots were drawn in a manner that would allow as many of these original French settlers access as possible. This created “ribbon farms”; only 200-400 feet wide, they would stretch inland linearly up to three miles. This created a French rectilinear grid, oriented northwest-southeast so as to fall perpendicular to the southwesterly flowing river.12

Just before the 19th century influx of immigrants began, a tragedy occurred

8 Robinson 143
9 Mullen p. 3
10 Mullen 1
11 Woodford 15
12 Mullen 1
identifying detroit

that changed the face of Detroit forever. In 1805, a baker knocked the ashes from his pipe, inadvertently starting a fire which ended up consuming the entire town. This generated Detroit’s city motto: “Speramus meliora, resurget cineribus,” or “We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes.” The fire erased the French physical imprint that had existed in the downtown area up until this point. To replace it, a plan was drawn up based on Pierre Charles L’Enfant’s plan for Washington D.C., and was drafted by Augustus Woodward, a federal judge with no formal training in architecture or urban planning. This so-called Woodward Plan featured a circular plaza, known as a circus, to which 200 foot wide boulevards were leading, running along the cardinal directions. Secondary avenues also extended from within the circus, like the spokes of a wheel. Adding to this wagon wheel effect were a series of minor avenues forming twelve sided polygons that revolved around the center circus in three concentric circles. This ultimately created a hexagonal unit, with the intent of repeating this unit as necessary to allow for modular expansion to Detroit’s downtown.

Woodward’s Plan was adopted, and by 1807 began to be laid out. Washington Boulevard, a north-south road extending through Grand Circus Park, was intended to be the main road; however, Fort Shelby prevented its extension to the river. Instead, the road passing through Grand Circus Park and falling perpendicular to the Detroit River became the city’s main road, which was aptly named Woodward Avenue. Woodward’s Plan was ambitious and forward thinking; however, it was never fully implemented.

“A blueprint does not predict the cracks that will develop in the future; it describes an ideal state that can only be approximated.”

This ideal state ended up only being enacted in a small part of downtown; it was abandoned in 1818, and the checkerboard pattern originally laid out by the French settlers was resumed. Whether the reason for the dismissal of the plan was resentment from the French inhabitants, the local farmers’ lack of understanding of the sophisticated design, or simply too many complications from transferring old land titles to the new plot layouts – all have been argued – the plan was dismissed and largely forgotten after barely a decade.

Although only partially implemented, the Woodward Plan left the city with two enduring features. The first is the physical shape of downtown. The original intended center of the city is still clear in the form of Grand Circus Park, a half-circle representing the south half of Woodward’s intended main circus. Adams Avenue, running along the north side of the park, represents the northern extents of the Woodward Plan’s implementation. The radiating boulevards and circling polygons are still evident, as is the form of Campus Martius, the public square south of Grand Circus. The form left upon the city, though relatively small in area, is extremely distinctive, a unique portion

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13 Sharoff xiii
14 Sharoff xiii
15 Koolhaas 11
16 Woodford 37-41
17 Glazer 21
of Detroit's plan which is easily identifiable with the city. Second, is the
dominance of the single-family home. The creation of large lots in the myriad
open space of early 19th century Detroit allowed any Detroiter who could
afford it to build their own private home. This set home ownership as a
universal goal of Detroiter, a standard that dictated the development of
Detroit – and the mindset of Detroiter – for the next two centuries.18

More crucial to understand is the importance of this time in Detroit's history.
The time following the fire marks a period of pure hope for Detroit, a general
desire to rebuild, as a city, from the tragic event befell them. This universal
hope, the spirit of rebuilding following an unfortunate past, was ingrained in
Detroiter, and will be the reason that Detroit can rebuild itself again.

The Advent of the Automobile

By shortly into the twentieth century, Detroit presented itself to the world
as, according to historian Olivier Zunz, a “total industrial landscape.”19 The
status of Detroit as a small center of production transformed overnight,
when early one June morning in 1896 Henry Ford’s “quadricycle” rolled
down Grand River Avenue for the first time.20 This lead to the invasion of
the automobile factories, and the industrial boom that followed transformed
Detroit, helping cement the city’s role as a “world-class industrial center.”21
The automobile was a mixed blessing; it defined Detroit, creating an image of
the “Motor City” that will always make Detroit synonymous with American
cars. At the same time, a city that is based off of the automobile loses the
human interaction that is so fundamental in creating a community, a sense of
connectivity between inhabitants that forms a strong urban identity. Making
the city both accessible and outmoded at the same time, “the automobile is
the mechanical summation of our urban predicament.”22 Henry Ford’s Model
T Ford, along with creating a “technical and logistical revolution in America,”
also brought about a “social transformation and a profound demographic
restructuring of American society.”23 Few cities, if any, exhibited that more
clearly than Detroit.

The potential negative aspects of the automobile will be discussed further
when looking at the post-World War II decline of Detroit; however, at the
beginning of the 20th century, the automobile represented an explosion of
life and economy in Detroit. Workers poured into the city as Henry Ford
developed the assembly line in 1913, and intensified even further with the
introduction of the $5 a day workday in 1914 – more than twice what any
worker had been paid before.24 This “Great Migration” was not just isolated
to Detroit; in the years between 1916 and 1929, over a million African
Americans from the Southern United States moved into urban settings in the

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18 Woodford 39
19 Sugrue 18
20 Sharoff xv-xvi
21 Sharoff xvi
22 Herron (2001) 41
23 Moen 201
24 Woodford 93-94
By 1930 the new workers and their families that moved into the city had increased Detroit’s population to five times what it was in 1900, bringing it to over 1.5 million residents. Ford’s assembly line allowed workers to integrate themselves into the working environment quickly and easily – a new worker could be taught many of these new jobs in two or three days, making them easily replaceable, the “most expendable tool in the auto plant.” While this offered opportunity to the millions of new workers, it also gave the working environment a transient nature, a feeling of constant turnover and change. This feeling extended into every aspect of Detroit life, an uneasy sense of impermanence, which defined the nature of the city in a way that was not entirely positive.

**Arsenal of Democracy**

By the early 1940s, Detroit had reached its “industrial zenith,” a national leader in progressing economically beyond the crippling losses suffered during the Great Depression. Soon, however, the United States entered World War II. Following the call of the Michigan National Guard into service, Detroit men began registering for the draft; by the end of the war, over 200,000 Detroiters had served the country in the armed forces. The needs of the nation turned from automobiles to planes, tanks, jeeps, and other war paraphernalia. Having already established an infrastructure for mass production over the previous forty years, Detroit was in the unique position of being able to quickly convert its plants and factories to producing these war machines in mass quantities, earning the city the nickname “The Arsenal of Democracy.” By 1944, Detroit had been awarded almost $13 billion in war contracts, with more to come.

The need for workers brought on another influx of workers from around the country, a movement known as the start of the “Second Great Migration”. From 1940 to 1943, this included more than 50,000 blacks from the South, and 200,000 white from the Appalachian states, many so called “hillbillies” with racial prejudices. This, exacerbated by a poor housing situation which had become intolerable by 1941, helped bring about a clash in what had previously been a relatively harmonic racial mix. Despite the many economic opportunities available in the North during World War II, racial discrimination was still endemic. Employment discrimination was a daily reality for working class blacks in Detroit, spurred on by “racial ideology and culture, politics, labor market structures, and internal firm dynamics.” Blacks were often denied jobs in all-white workplaces based solely on tradition; employers were afraid that the hiring of blacks would upset the status quo, disrupting workplace dynamics by destroying the social
homogeneity of an office or factory. In general, black employment was restricted to unskilled positions, often tedious, unpleasant, and potentially dangerous. These positions were also the first to go upon plant automation, making the jobs tenuous as well. Seniority issues also came into play; as the standard method for determining who was let go in rounds of layoffs, blacks and women, as more recent hires, were the first to go. The cyclical nature of the automobile industry put their jobs constantly in peril.

Blacks found more employment opportunities in city jobs, especially as World War II drew white employees into military service. They were mostly focused in the service department, in unskilled labor, such as sanitation, public works, parks and recreation, and welfare. Positive strides were difficult to make in retail sales, as management feared that “black sales clerks would alienate white shoppers.” It was extremely difficult for blacks to break into the very segregated field of white-owned and –operated stores, which were the “most prominent businesses in Detroit’s African American neighborhoods and the most convenient symbol of the systematic exclusion of blacks from whole sectors of the city’s economy.” The building trades had similar discrimination issues, leading the Detroit Branch of the NAACP to complain that the trades set up a “vocational iron curtain” ensuring a “self-contained monopoly for white labor.” The nature of the building trades also helped contribute to negative black stereotypes reaching to every realm of society. Casual labor markets, or groups of black day laborers, would hang around near major intersections in downtown Detroit, looking for work from the contractors and construction workers that would drive through that area on the way to their job sites for the day. Although they were looking for work, an atmosphere of “‘hanging out” was created in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area, right near the heart of the black enclave of Detroit. This informal labor market “helped to crystallize an image of black male shiftlessness that came to represent the African American urban ‘underclass,’ creating a “metaphor for perceived racial difference.” A “street corner society” came to life, which “fostered a ‘pathological’ sense of present-orientation, self-defeat, personal failure, and hopelessness” in African American urban life. Ultimately, this painted a picture of the black community as chronically jobless, further reinforcing the racial domination politics of the time.

It is easy to reduce the issue of employment inequality in Detroit down to the single cause of racial prejudice; however, this disregards the “variety of causes and manifestations of workplace discrimination.” Most important to recognize is that discrimination, both in the home and in the workplace created a “psychological wage that reinforced white identity.”

33 Sugrue 112
34 Sugrue 112
35 Sugrue 114
36 Sugrue 118
37 Sugrue 120-121
38 Sugrue 121
39 Sugrue 121
40 Sugrue 122
41 Sugrue 122
manifested itself physically, with tragic results, when racial tensions boiled over in the early summer of 1943. On June 20, a series of fights broke out on Belle Isle, eventually working their way across the bridge to the mainland. This developed into a mob of blacks rioting in the streets, sometimes attacking and in at least one case killing whites. White mobs formed and counterattacked, resulting in general fighting spreading all over the city. By the next night, the governor declared martial law, and federal troops occupied the city for ten days to restore order. In total, 34 people, twenty-three of whom were black, were killed in the riot.42

Housing and Identity
Along with a huge supply of new citizens, the Great Migration saw the development of racial boundaries in Detroit.43 Prior to the early 20th century, blacks had settled mainly on Detroit’s East Side, in a neighborhood known as Black Bottom. As more arrived, the majority expanded outward into Paradise Valley, a neighboring section of the city. The neighborhood expansion was greatly limited, however, by severe racial animosity that was growing in the city. Early in the twentieth century, settlement in Detroit was determined largely by ethnic background, like in Polish Hamtramck and Hungarian Delray neighborhoods. By the 1940s, however, class and race had taken the place of ethnicity as the key factor in determining the city’s residential geography.44

Living in the American South, black workers found racism, unemployment, and economic despair. The urban North offered the promise of “independence, economic security, and property ownership,” all things denied to them in the post-emancipation South.45 The reality of the North proved to be bleaker, as the housing situation in segregated Detroit continued the “social, economic, and political marginalization” of African Americans.46

“Adequate housing for African Americans remained one of

42 Woodford 157-159
43 Sugrue 23
44 Sugrue 22
45 Sugrue 33
46 Sugrue 36
Private housing was scarce, and those moving in and around the city—veterans, growing families, Detroiters displaced by redevelopment and highway projects, migrants from the South—all competed for the same small selection of homes. This high demand inflated the costs of the even the oldest and most deteriorated buildings, making ownership of these homes almost entirely out of reach. Rapid turnover from evictions and unscrupulous landlords meant few people had any long-term commitment to quality of life in their buildings, or urge to properly maintain the neighborhoods, leading to a “self-perpetuating cycle of ghettoization.” By the late 1940s, these marginalized neighborhoods were essentially slums, characterized by deterioration and abandonment; this allowed the city to declare them blighted so that they could be razed for a system of cross-city expressways, which city planners promised would dramatically improve the residential and economic situation in the city.

White neighborhood development in Detroit was characterized by a desire to “preserve both architectural and social homogeneity.” Civil rights activists believed that desegregating housing would create daily contact between the races, solving the issues of racial prejudice and inequality. However, the concept of public housing—multiple family homes built primarily for racial and ethnic minorities—went against the desires of these middle class white neighborhoods. Homeowners associations worked to pass restrictions governing architectural standards and lot sizes, efforts that helped to legally preserve this neighborhood homogeneity by excluding anything different, specifically large public housing projects. This, coupled with intimidation tactics invoked against anyone who dared cross the invisible race boundaries, helped keep the neighborhoods white for as long as possible. This created issues in the workplace as well, as recruitment of new hires often relied on references from friends and family. Geographic separation from the white workforce made it difficult for black workers to establish relationships necessary for access to jobs.

Private housing in Detroit stood for more than simply a place for workers to sleep—they represented all of the values that “family” stood for. The values of homeownership and family stability were held strongly by immigrants in the early twentieth century, although the stage was set for the single family home’s dominance in Detroit at least 150 years earlier by the Woodward Plan.

“A half century before the automobile, the cultural ideal of the American dream house in the suburbs was already

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47 Sugrue 188
48 Sugrue 53
49 Sugrue 55
50 Sugrue 47
51 Sugrue 44
52 Sugrue 190
53 Sugrue 107
54 Sugrue 62
Owning a home was considered a sign of success, especially for the eastern and southern European immigrants, who considered homeownership "as much an identity as a financial investment."

Desegregated communities were associated with squalor; which, to more affluent communities, signified personal failure and the breakdown of traditional family values. This threatened the communal identity of white neighborhoods, and as a result, jeopardized the individual or family identities that the immigrants had worked hard to achieve.

"Black 'penetration' of white neighborhoods posed a fundamental challenge to white racial identity."

The physical existence of the ghetto in the divided city also generated an "ideological construct" emphasizing racial inequality, further perpetuating the inequality in access to proper housing and quality jobs.

Because of the invisible race lines dividing the city's neighborhoods, black Detroiters would create distinct subcommunities within the areas to which they were relegated. This division, however, was not only a function of race; it was also present between classes of blacks, as illustrated by an apparent status and class consciousness that developed in the housing market.

Blacks who could afford to relocate would flee the inner-city just as the whites before them, leaving inner-city neighborhoods "increasingly bereft of institutions, businesses, and diversity."

"As the city’s economy began its downward spiral in the mid-1950s, rates of burglary, robbery, and murder began to rise… the sustained violence in Detroit's neighborhoods was the consummate act in a process of identity formation."

White Detroiters attempted to separate themselves from this constant violent presence by maintaining and enforcing physical racial boundaries in the city in an attempt to reinforce their own "fragile racial identity." Ironically, blacks attempting to flee this inner-city violence by settling in white neighborhoods were met with more violence, as "black movement into [white Detroiters'] neighborhoods was the moral equivalent of war." Outsiders, or "undesirables," were subject to protests, verbal abuse, vandalism, and violent resistance; this hardened and objectified definitions of white and black.
Deindustrialization of Detroit

The lull after the postwar production boom hit Detroit hard. Recessions began affecting the city in 1949, causing auto manufacturers and suppliers to begin reducing work force and closing and relocating plants to other parts of the country.

“The 1950s marked a decisive turning point in the development of the city – a systematic restructuring of the local economy from which the city never fully recovered.”

Prior to 1950, industry in America followed a “pattern of centralization,” moving plants close together in areas determined by topography, access to transportation, and availability of materials. After 1950, however, the automobile that had so shaped Detroit in the early twentieth century began to contribute to its downfall; the construction of highways after World War II reshaped the American landscape, making transportation easier and more accessible, which made centralization less crucial to the success of industry. Technological advances, primarily the advent of automated processes, were also a large contributor to the process of decentralization and deindustrialization. “Silent firing” — entry-level jobs being replaced by machine labor — further reduced the number of jobs available in Detroit, especially for unskilled labor and uneducated workforce. This effectively excluded from the workforce a great majority of young men, primarily black, limiting or eliminating the “experience, connections, and skills that would open opportunities in later years.”

New plant layouts that would favor the new machine labor often required larger expanses of land, something that was offered by the ample open space outside of the city as opposed to within the urban framework. These rural areas also offered nonunion labor — a cheaper alternative to the workforce in urban centers — and reduced tax rates that, because of aging infrastructure, large school district, large population of the economically disadvantaged, and expensive welfare programs, with which the city of Detroit could not compete.

Detroit planners believed that the industrial change in Detroit was the result of technological determinism, the belief that technological change was inevitable and the determining factor in social and cultural change. They attempted to address this by establishing new “industrial corridors,” which relied on destruction of existing neighborhoods for land and the hope that companies would move in once the land was cleared. Revitalization of Detroit continued through a massive urban renewal program, aided by federal funds. Many of the areas targeted by this renewal plan were residential, occupied by Detroit’s ethnic working-class communities, such as Black Bottom, Paradise.

Fig. 3.19 - Fisher Freeway cuts through downtown Detroit

Fig. 3.20 - Packard plant auction, 1960
Valley, Bagley, Corktown, and Chinatown. This renewal overtook 1500 acres of land, containing 17,000 housing units and 2,000 businesses, displacing 7,660 families and 6,730 individuals.75

This demolition of existing neighborhoods in the effort to revitalize Detroit was exacerbated by the development of the highway system. In 1956 the Federal Highway Act was passed, providing $32 billion to construct 41,000 miles of interstate highways in the US. However, this development came at a cost. By 1970, over 20,000 Detroit homes had been demolished to make way for the construction of the freeways, primarily in poor, inner city neighborhoods.76 If a neighborhood wasn’t entirely destroyed by the freeway passing through it, the disruption and division created by these massive thoroughfares helped accelerate its decline. The population shift in Detroit, both in total residents, and in racial composition, was dramatically accelerated. Life and work expanded outward, following along the developing highway system, establishing residences and reconcentrating municipal functions in new “edge cities.”77 Different attempts to repair and restore the inner-city only helped a little to reduce the ill effects of “poor infrastructure, widespread poverty, and social and spatial fragmentation.”78

The automobile itself, especially when coupled with the new expressways, helped provide “affordable mobility” and “new opportunities for social advancement” for huge numbers of US citizens. At the same time, though, it acted (and continues to act) as a “forbidding agent to the advancement of others,” namely those who are too poor to afford, or otherwise lack the ability to access, an automobile.79 This created “donut” cities, trapping underprivileged at the center, and creating an insulating layer between them and the more wealthy class living in the outside rings. This layer could be completely bypassed by traveling through at speed along the elevated expressways. This pushed the United States into being characterized as a “two-thirds society,” where the other third is left behind to try to survive in the dilapidated neighborhoods known as “zones of transition,” “belts of decay,” or just “slums.”80 “The underprivileged are stationary, lacking mobility, both horizontal and vertical.”81 These underprivileged, without automobiles, are unable to access jobs or amenities outside of their immediate neighborhoods, relegating them to their current social class with no opportunity to advance.

“The problem is not that so many people used the city to get to where they wanted to go, which was someplace else. The problem is that not everybody was allowed to come along for the ride, so that a population who has been excluded from its entitlements now often inhabits the structural apparatus of modernity.”82

A feeling of helplessness and abandonment became prevalent in the inner city,
leaving frustration, anger and despair amongst those left behind.

The “anger and despair” resulting from the continued denial of opportunities would prove to be a crucial factor in the civil unrest on Detroit streets in the 1960s. The combination of discrimination and the industrialization of the non-metropolitan area limited black economic opportunity in the city. The boarded up stores and restaurants, abandoned factory buildings, burned-out homes, and vacant lots signified the “profound social and economic changes that were reshaping the metropolis.” The subtle animosity and prejudice existing between the racial groups became more pronounced, severely illustrated by the fatal riots of 1967. Like in 1943, the emotional frustration overwhelmed the population, with terrible results.

Early one morning in July, 1967, a police raid on an illegal after-hours bar turned from routine to violent when the heat wave, combined with the frustrations of the underclass, lead to looting and rioting. Unlike the riot of 1943, which saw the participation of blacks and whites in equal proportions, the riot of 1967 was almost entirely black and poor, representing resentment that was defined by racial division and social class, focused against all figures of authority. Seventeen thousand law enforcements officials, National

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83 Sugrue 147  
84 Sugrue 141  
85 Sugrue 148  
86 Woodford 180  
87 Sugrue 260
Guardsmen, and federal troops were eventually able to suppress the riot, but not without a heavy toll. After a nearly week of fires, looting, and violence, forty-three were dead, with thousands of buildings burned and millions of dollars in damages. Once the violence subsided, the fear was left, further accelerating the process of abandonment and suburbanization that the city was already experiencing.

**Detroit Suburbanization**

Detroit’s withering and shrinking has been occurring in parallel with the suburbs growing and thriving, seemingly “sucking the life out of the older central city.” This is better known as suburbanization, the “exodus of residents, industry and/or services, and culture from the big city centers into the outlying regions.” The “endless array of wasted spaces” of the suburbs stand in stark contrast to the abandoned, dying spaces in the inner-city, clearly expressing why Detroit has been labeled an “incredibly shrinking city.” The new highway system allowed workers with automobiles easy access to the suburban neighborhoods and businesses, helping the suburbs to grow six times faster than cities in the 1950s. The suburbs represented promise, leaving behind the problems of the city, and the “icon of American individualism” that is the single family home helped draw Detroiters out of the city by the hundreds of thousands. Today, it all comes down to space.

“The defining characteristic of each and every built form in suburban Detroit today is that it requires more land, more space, than the older comparable model in the city itself.”

Movie theaters, airports, churches, hospitals, and shopping malls all exemplify this, each new one spreading out horizontally instead of vertically. To return to the idea of space as a public concept, it is necessary to “educate the public that the traditional urban form is as useful as the newer suburban one.”

Manufacturing jobs traditionally formed around the urban core of the city, following along railroad lines, in four- and five-story loft buildings. New technologies emerging after World War II made single story factories a cheaper, more efficient option; these required more land than was available within the inner-city, prompting their development to follow the new highway system out toward the suburbs. The important thing to note during the “shrinking” of Detroit during the latter half of the twentieth century is not that the city’s inhabitants were disappearing, but that they, along with employment, shifted and grew on the periphery of the city in a transformation that could be described as radical “regional restructuring.” Reversal of this regional

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88 Sugrue 259
89 Gallagher 242
90 Prigge 43
91 Gallagher 243
92 Moen 202
93 Gallagher 244
94 Gallagher 246
95 Gallagher 247
96 Fishman 68
97 Fishman 69
98 Fishman 67
restructuring is responsible for the recovery of other shrinking cities in the United States such as New York and Chicago, cities that rediscovered the traditional concept of urbanism. Countering suburbanization is necessary for Detroit to return to the flourishing metropolis it once was.

“The future of the American metropolitan region clearly depends on the re-urbanization of the shrinking central city.”

Tarnished Image: Detroit Today

Although other cities may better exemplify conditions of poverty, racism, or violence, Detroit has a special quality that makes it unique and frightening. Detroit represents the “first great American city to die.”

The swing in the city’s reputation, from a great industrial center known world wide, to a concrete jungle of crime and terror, is too profound and extreme to not take notice. It represents the worst that could happen through a “discourse of negative exceptionalism” that people seem to need, to understand who they are in relation to it. Detroit offers “the ultimate in street credibility” because it, as a city, is seen as “the ultimate bad place,” the place no one wants to live – not because they know anything about the city, but because of all that they’ve heard about it. The made-up Detroit was necessary to invent because the real Detroit is “too painful and too genuinely dangerous to contemplate,” and shows the real results of the development of the nation, from plans, both conscious and subconscious, with “cruel and violent and racist outcomes.”

This reputation has been at least a hundred years in the making, eventually becoming most apparent with the riot of 1967; however it still materializes presents itself today in different forms. A more extreme example is October 30 – the night before Halloween – which has become infamous in Detroit as Devil’s Night, “the day that Detroit sets itself on fire.” Beginning in the 1970s, the countless acts of arson taking place were the result of “Detroit’s ‘ills’ converging with Halloween traditions.” The reasons are numerous: insurance fraud to recoup losses or make profit; gangs burning down rival drug-houses; police or residents burning down drug-houses; intimidation to clear land for development; thrill/recreation seeking youths vandalizing. It is a successful case of “negative-sploitation” – media and thrill-seekers would come to participate and watch, which would “dramatize and sensationalize” the night of arson, exacerbating and inflating the issue.

Fig. 3.25 - Remains of former business, Grand Circus Park

Fig. 3.26 - Abandonment and deterioration, Grand Circus Park

Fig. 3.27 - Devil’s Night fire, 1986
The reputation of crime and violence that Detroit has gained exhibits itself in popular culture, in works of fiction. Popular movies, such as the *RoboCop* series, portray a Detroit that is overrun with crime and unemployment, beyond hope or repair, perhaps generated from the riots and civil unrest of the sixties. *The Crow* is based largely around gangs in Detroit running wild on Devil’s Night. Even movies that could be considered sympathetic to the city, such as *8 Mile*, present a very grim view of daily life in Detroit, with events related to the burning of abandoned buildings in the neighborhoods around downtown. These films exaggerate and glorify the negative aspects of the city, further reinforcing the negative identity. Movies are just one example of the way that Detroit’s reputation can manifest itself in the outside world, but they illustrate an issue that is symptomatic of this much larger problem of the image that the city presents to the world. Paradoxically, Detroit’s harsh reputation instills a certain sense of pride in many who call themselves Detroiter’s. A history has been established based on hard labor, turmoil, instability, and occasionally violence; many identify with (or attempt/pretend to identify with) the “tough” image that results. Again, this creates a self-perpetuating cycle of identity crisis – an ongoing negative image that will take decades of work to overcome.

However, for the real Detroit – the one that actually exists, not the one that has been fabricated through popular media and mass generalizations – things are beginning to improve. Though sometimes ironic, and often cynical, there is still a sense of hope for the restoration of the city to its former glory. Devil’s Night vandalism, for example, has been on the decline for the last decade, thanks largely to citizens banding together to patrol the streets and stop the violence before it can start. The post-riot mentality, the fear and defensiveness of so many inhabitants and visitors to the city, are beginning to subside, replaced by “a new, albeit cautious, sense of optimism.”110 The key is capitalizing on this sense of optimism, this desire to advance the city to a functioning metropolis once again. The city’s motto, now over 200 years old, still seems apropos:

“We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes.”

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110 Palm 111
four
The architecture of a city is one of the strongest indicators of its well being. As the largest built form, minor changes to the city will have very little impact on a building – they can weather out economic, political, and social changes with little to no lasting effects. However, in time, disregard and deterioration will materialize, and will disappear as slowly as they appeared, becoming an ever present signal of the state of the city.

“The greatest monuments of architecture are of necessity linked intimately to the city.”

Detroit’s history can be summed up quite well by some of the more notable pieces of architecture – between the abandonment or misuse of formerly notable buildings, and the construction of new, inappropriate designs, Detroit’s story is told by the skyline.

**Architecture in Decline**

Detroit can be described as “The Capital of the Twentieth Century” because of its “singular devotion to the idea of industrial production, investing all of its resources into a technology and product that has transformed the face of every modern city.”

Detroit has a long history of restructuring and reinventing itself based on latest production ideas, of forgetting – or at least ignoring – the past in an effort to embrace new technologies and

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1 Rossi 173
2 Hoffman 42

*Fig. 4.1 - Detroit riverfront and skyline at dusk*
production techniques.³

“With every new idea comes the realization that a part of the city is now obsolete… a new idea has great power in [Detroit] and architecture is always one of the first casualties.”⁴

The abandoned shells of Detroit’s architectural jewels emphasize more than anything else the tragic, empty feeling of downtown. The temporality of the city, the mass migration away, and the planned obsolescence of downtown are all inherent in these empty hollow forms. These landmark buildings from nearly a hundred years ago project a new identity unto the world – one of desolation and abandonment.

**Hudson’s Building**

Hudson’s, a famous Detroit clothing store, was opened by Joseph Hudson in 1881. Thriving from Detroit’s rapid expansion, it eventually moved to its own site by 1929, a sixteen-story building that was a focal point of downtown Detroit.⁵ This new building represented the ultimate modernity, the replacing of the outmoded forms of culture such as city hall and churches by a new commercial culture.⁶ Suburbanization, however, took its toll on downtown Hudson’s. 1954, the same year that the suburban Northland Mall was completed, was also the same year that Hudson’s downtown sales began an “irreversible decline.”⁷ As Detroit declined, so did shopping downtown, and in 1983, the downtown Hudson’s was forced to close, representing a symbolic peak of the transfer of urban functions to the suburbs.⁸ The formerly great building stood empty for 15 years after this, standing as a reminder of the city moving to the point of obsolescence. In 1998, the building was demolished to make way for a parking garage, an arguably unnecessary building considering the numerous empty or abandoned lots already present downtown. The destruction of the past that is represented by the demolishing of the Hudson’s Building is simultaneously sad and liberating – destroying urban memory but releasing the chains of a decaying society, allowing for a rebirth. While it is true that destruction is sometimes necessary to move forward, removing a building that is iconic, both in style and in service, and replacing it with a solely utilitarian (and unnecessary) construction seems to be a poor approach to this idea of rebirth.

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³ Hoffman 42
⁴ Hoffman 43
⁵ Gay 32
⁶ Herron (2001) 36
⁷ Herron (2001) 36
⁸ Gallagher 244
Michigan Theater
The grand opening of the Michigan Theater was on August 23, 1926, a seven story, 4000 seat auditorium abutting a 13-story office tower, all on the site of Henry Ford’s first workshop. Television, and the migration to the suburbs, caused the audiences to dwindle and then disappear. By 1967, the Theatre was closed down with the intent of being demolished. It was saved at the last minute, but after failed revival attempts, was finally abandoned in 1975. Two years later, it was planned to be torn down to create a parking garage for the office tower; however, after the process had already begun, it was found structurally interconnected with the tower and could not be destroyed. As a solution, the interior was gutted and a parking garage was retrofitted into the existing theater, providing parking for 160 cars on three levels. The work was done crudely, with “marks of brute force” visible on every surface. The theater now is a clear demonstration of intentional ruin, a sad example of former beauty falling victim to neglect.9

9 Kleinman 73
The 1920s represented an architectural adventure in downtown Detroit, where companies looked to project a distinct identity through their architecture. A building that clearly represents this is the David Broderick Tower; a 35 story building completed in 1928 on the south side of Grand Circus Park. As the second tallest building in the state of Michigan when it was built, and with a distinctive neo-classic and beaux art style, this tower became a clearly identifiable symbol in downtown Detroit. With the David Whitney Building, a 1915 Daniel Burnham building sitting opposite from the David Broderick Tower across Woodward Avenue, the “Gateway to Downtown” was formed. These buildings would greet visitors entering the city along the most important thoroughfare in the city, an indication of the majestic urban landscape they were about to enter. Today, they stand for something much sadder, as they have both been abandoned for over twenty years. The hollowed out shells of the David Broderick Tower and the David Whitney Building serve as a constant reminder of what the city used to be, but more importantly, the identity that Detroit has since assumed – that of a ghost town. Perhaps most telling is the sign that is first noticeable upon stepping off of the People Mover at the Grand Circus Park stop: “David Whitney Building Closed.” Nailed into sheets of plywood sealing off what used to lead into a large retail atrium, that simple statement sums up the way Detroit has presented itself to the world for the last fifty years: closed for business and boarded up. It is a cruel twist of fate that finds these distinct buildings distinctly abandoned, representing a new, sad identity of a once great city.10

10 Detroit 1701
Misguided New Architecture
A potential strategy for Detroit’s renewal has been coming from “the decisive re-colonization of corporate headquarters within the downtown core, reversing the trend of the Fordist era.”11 Today’s cities begin to lose their character and sense of self because of the ability for architects, construction companies, developers, and planners to be based anywhere in the world, “without the possibility of emotional or symbolic attachment to the place.”12 The effect of this is evident when one looks at the current state of downtown Detroit. New large-scale constructions have no grounding or connection to the city, some even seeming to be little more than transplants from other cities, dropped in to Detroit with no regard to context or appropriateness. An alternative, but arguably just as damaging, architectural mishap in Detroit are architectural entities in the city that may be appropriate or native to the city, but are poorly thought out or executed. Both flawed development schemes largely serve to further alienate the residents and increase the negative aspects of identity in the city.

Grand Circus Park
Grand Circus Park presents a conflicted scene in the organization of the city of Detroit. Under the Woodward Plan, Grand Circus Park was set up as the city’s center plaza, with spoke-like boulevards leading to other such plazas and open areas. Because of the abandonment of the Woodward Plan, the circus was not entirely conceived; however, the half of Grand Circus Park that was constructed remains as evidence of its original intention. Tracing back the development of Detroit, Grand Circus Park stands as its clearest form, a

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11 Schumacher 56
12 Madanipour 124
permanent identifiable feature in the center of an ever changing cityscape. It also represents the small amount of planned green space within downtown Detroit.

The park today, however, seems to be flawed. Although a beautification effort in 1998 by Albert Kahn Associates improved some aspects of the park, there is still a distinct lack of utility. It is divided by Woodward Avenue, Detroit's major transportation thoroughfare, making it essentially two separate, smaller parks. Despite small differences, the two halves are pretty much identical. Each centers upon a decorative fountain, which has a small paved area circling it. This provides a reasonably attractive place to sit, but not a very good area for gathering, making public events unfeasible at this location. There is little respite from the noise of the city, either, as there are busy roads in every direction, none further than 150 feet away. At the center of the half circle lay statues on either side of Woodward. On the east is William Cotter Maybury, and on the west Hazen Pingree, two prominent figures in Detroit history, though one would be hard pressed to find anyone who would recognize those names, much less name what accomplishments led them to be honored in this park. The most upsetting detail, however, is the fact that the main function of the park now is as a roof to the below grade parking garage lying beneath Grand Circus Park, which one is constantly reminded of when traveling through the park; punctuating the landscape are driveways into the garage, exhaust pipes, and mechanical sheds. It is a sad testament to the state of the city that, despite being filled with empty lots – several surrounding this park alone – the city found it necessary to put additional parking even under the small amount of dedicated green space.

As Woodward is a main artery in, out, and through the city, bus lines – Detroit's major mode of public transportation – run continuously up and down the street, with a stop at Grand Circus Park. To provide an ample bus lane, the bus stop is centered along the park's Woodward frontage, as opposed to the north or south corners of the park. While this in itself is not necessarily a problem, the park's layout has no paths leading directly to the bus stops, instead directing traffic to the north and south corners. This discourages any public transportation users from actually experiencing the park from within, forcing them instead to skirt the edges. While none of these issues make the park unusable, it is simply further evidence of what feels like improperly planned actions in the city.
Renaissance Center

The Renaissance Center was designed by John Portman, and completed in 1977. Prior to this, the city had experienced significant decline — by the time the Renaissance Center opened, the decline had been too extreme for this single project to save the city. The Renaissance Center was not able to obtain projected rents or meet ideal levels of occupancy, and there were not enough customers to support the retail areas. Rather than drawing in businesses from outside the city into the new commercial space, businesses from the city’s already failing central business district leased space in the towers, furthering the district’s abandonment. On top of this, the building is separated from downtown by Jefferson Avenue, a twelve-lane road connecting to the interstate system. This emphasizes the Renaissance Center’s disconnect from the rest of the city, making it “essentially circular, self-referential, and complete in itself.” This is part of the idea of fortification that is present in Detroit, through the form of walls, roads, fences, and earthworks. “Fortifications in Detroit are designed to guard against the city itself,” a reaction to the turbulent decades prior to this construction. Because of this, it could be argued that the design of the RenCen, as it is called, truly was appropriate to Detroit, accurately reflecting the state of the city at the point that it was built; however, that is more a sad statement to a troubled past than a testament to the acumen of the architect. Ultimately, the Renaissance Center failed in its goal in revitalizing the downtown — it may have even helped accelerate the decay.

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13 Smith 34-35
14 Smith 35
15 Cope 288
Identity is a fundamental element in defining and establishing individual personalities and sense of being. This identity is derived from individual traits, such as class, gender, race, and profession, but also from interaction between individuals, establishing a group dynamic. Both individual and group identity are in turn shaped by identity of place, the interaction with the physical landscape, built objects, and indigenous groups that inhabit that place. Recognizing and celebrating differences in identity, while allowing many different sources to claim identity upon oneself allows a hybrid identity to be established, one that encompasses the qualities of a number of different groups to form a stronger sense of self. Individual identity, group identity, and place identity unite together to define an urban environment; architecture is simultaneously derived from, and informs, this urban environment.

When examining the history of Detroit, the problems of the city — though they spread and mutate into myriad different forms — often seem to originate from civilizational partitioning, the focus on a singular classification while disregarding others. Detroit’s development shows this to be a long, recurring trend. Whether it was human conflicts such as French vs. English, English vs. Colonists, Black vs. White, or Rich vs. Poor, or ideological conflicts such as Suburbs vs. City, Ownership of Automobiles vs. Immobility, Disenfranchised vs. Authority Figures, Radial Grid vs. Orthogonal Grid, or Technological Innovation vs. Human Labor, Detroit has...
experienced at least 300 years of confrontation based on reduction of identity to one specific characteristic. Many times this confrontation manifested itself in the form of physical violence, but even the psychological or dogmatic warfare that has existed between the opposing factions of Detroit life and society has instilled lasting damage to the city.

This dualistic nature of Detroit has lead to a metropolitan identity crisis. Although the state of conflict that has existed in the city has subsided a great deal, there still exists a sense of fear and lack of security in the urban environment. This stems from an extremely negative identity that has been created by the turbulent history of the city, an identity that broadcasts an image of the city as dangerous and unpleasant, can not be easily overcome. Attempts to move past this seem to have been flawed or poorly executed, exacerbating an already fragile situation. It is necessary to regain a positive sense of identity, both internal to the city and communicated externally to the rest of the world, in order to reverse the decline of the metropolis.

Even given these flaws, however, Detroit forges on. It is a city that has been beat down from every angle, from within the city and from outside, yet continues to gamely fight onward. There is a genuine hope within those who have ties to Detroit in one way or another that the city will finally embrace its potential and arise to form a healthy metropolis once again. It is this hope – this omnipresent spirit – that will allow Detroit to establish its positive identity once again, because the infrastructure is there in the spirit of its people. Now it is simply a matter of capturing it and capitalizing upon it.

Architecture can help to achieve this. Detroit is filled with empty lots and abandoned buildings; however, there is potential to all of this. “Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation.”1 The power of the current state of Detroit lies in this space of the possible. Architectural interventions that are sensitive to the city can be achieved by understanding the identity of the city, and reflecting that in design. This can lead to architecture that is grounded and appropriate, and can help generate the positive sense of identity that is so desperately needed in Detroit.

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1 Sola-Morales 120
This thesis will approach the design problem from two levels, moving from macro — looking at a portion of the city, and suggesting design possibilities at an urban scale — and ending at micro — focusing down to a singular site, developing an architectural solution at the scale of a building.

**Urban Scale**

At an urban design level, this thesis begins its focus on the Woodward Plan that has been discussed earlier, and the implications of its discontinuation. Beyond that, it considers a scenario where that plan is continued today, in different ways; sometimes a literal translation of the original plan, sometimes manipulations of the original radial form, sometimes using three-dimensional urban forms to express Woodward’s design in less tangible ways. The ultimate goal is to present a new way of looking at the static grid system that exists in the area north of Grand Circus Park, informally known as the Theater District, the area where the Woodward Plan would have continued had it not been cut short. This is not necessarily to suggest a plan that should be enacted — instead, it is meant as an impetus to reconsider the current plan of Detroit, an idea of moving beyond the safe and ordinary that is represented by the Jeffersonian Grid that is prevalent in the city proper and beyond, and doing it in a way that is culturally and historically relevant to Detroit by recalling past style and form.

*Fig. 6.1 - Theater District, 2008*
1807: Woodward Plan turns Central Business District into radial grid

1818: Woodward Plan breaks down, orthogonal grid returns

1818-1950: Psychological barrier formed between radial grid and orthogonal grid

1950: I-75/Fisher Freeway forms psychological & physical barrier between city and suburbs

Adams Avenue: Psychological Barrier

I-75/Fisher Freeway: Psychological & Physical Barrier

Adams Avenue: Psychological Barrier
In the Woodward Plan, the area now known as Grand Circus Park occupied the center position, featured prominently and clearly as the future center of the city. When that plan was reduced, Grand Circus Park was cut in half, and the plan just existed south of that area. Consequently, the main growth of the Central Business District was focused south of Grand Circus Park, eventually centering around Campus Martius and the Riverfront. The Theater District was developed as well – though at a slower rate than the main Central Business District – but as the city began to deteriorate, that area, along with the rest of Detroit, emptied out. Only a few major buildings, such as the Fox and State Theaters remained. Directly to the north of the Theater District lies Brush Park and Midtown, historic Detroit neighborhoods that fell into decline in the early twentieth century as the more affluent residents began moving further out of town. Although Brush Park began restoration attempts in the 1990s, including the construction of condominiums on the south side of the neighborhood, both neighborhoods are marred by the overwhelming presence of abandoned lots – just some of the 40,000 such lots existing within the city of Detroit. Focusing development on Grand Circus Park and working north will help to rebuild this town center, filling in the missing spaces in the Theater District, and stimulating growth in the northern neighborhoods. This development could cross the Fisher Freeway, and begin to enter the empty lots north of this highway. As this area connects downtown Detroit with Wayne State University, Detroit Medical Center, Detroit’s New Center area, and the art museums, there is prime growth opportunity in this centrally located space.

Two major barriers present themselves in Detroit’s Theater District. The first, extremely noticeable issue is the major scar left on the town in the form of the Fisher Freeway, a section of Interstate 75. One of the country’s largest highways, this 8-lane road cutting through the city effectively forms a wall, both physically and psychologically, between the residential neighborhoods on the north side of the Theater District and the Grand Circus Park area on the south side. The negative social effects of the freeway construction have been discussed earlier, but the lasting effect of its physical presence is what is most applicable to this study. Growth, or indeed positive interaction of any kind, between the Theater District and the neighborhoods north of I-75 is prohibited by the presence of this highway. Some method of crossing the highway, minimizing the impasse formed by it, is necessary to begin stimulating the
communication between these districts.

The second, less tangible issue is the psychological barrier created by Adams Avenue, the north border of Grand Circus Park. This is the north border of the portion of the Woodward Plan that was enacted, and represents the abandonment of rational planning in Detroit. While it does not have the same physical power in disrupting the area that the highway does, it still forms a divide between the area south of it, or the radial grid, and the area north of it, or the orthogonal grid. If this second line of divide is considered along with the first, then what is left is the area between these two boundaries, a sort of no-man’s-land that spans a few blocks just north of the Central Business District, but still south of what could be considered the residential area of Detroit. Detroit’s dual nature collides here, the spot where the many different faces of the city come together in a neutral environment.

In this sense, this area maintains its traditional historical role. The area of town known as Paradise Valley once occupied the land that is now the eastern section of the Theater District. This area was the business and entertainment district of Black Bottom, the primary African American neighborhood of Detroit that expanded rapidly during the Great Migration of the 1920s. By the 1930s and 1940s, the nightclubs and bars of Paradise Valley attracted both blacks and whites from all over Detroit in a relaxed atmosphere of drinking and dancing. These nightclubs represented “true melting pots,” areas that

Fig. 6.3 - Block Bottom, 1970

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1 Woodford 171
could entertain groups traditionally at odds with each other without tension or incident, where violent crime was at a minimum. The Theater District today maintains that reputation and attitude – from sports to opera, a diverse crowd is accommodated by diverse attractions, with a minimum of tension or violence.

The major issue that exists, however, is that these attractions serve Detroit as independent, isolated nodes of life with no real connection to the rest of the city – people drive in, view what they wish to see in a static, isolated environment, and drive out. A lack of a neighborhood feeling, without any sort of pedestrian traffic or street life leaves this area a void at all times but show time. This requires: first, bypassing the boundaries to the area, and second, filling the empty lots with useable outdoor space, and eating, shopping, living, and working opportunities. With these simple options, there is ample opportunity to stitch the individual entities together into a cohesive whole, creating a forum for public interaction in an area where so many of the different classes and groups of Detroit are already drawn. This offers the chance to restore a sense of community to a formerly great area of town, a vital step in establishing a positive identity to this neighborhood.

**Urban Solution**

As an exercise in understanding the power of the Woodward Plan, this thesis begins by exploring applying it to the under developed neighborhoods north of the Fisher Freeway, to the Midtown and Brush Park areas. This is inspired by the redevelopment of Rome in 1589 by urban planner Domenico Fontana and Pope Sixtus V. In an attempt to bring more tourists to Rome, and as an effort to promote Catholicism, the new plan for Rome cut long boulevards through the city, focusing on squares and piazzas as new centers. Often, these were designed to glorify individual objects or monuments, such as the Egyptian obelisk relocated to the center of the Piazza del Popolo. The results were iconic centers and grand streets, encouraging community and celebrating connections. This very baroque concept is directly related to the original Woodward Plan. In Detroit, these diagonal cuts through the city would help bring people off of Woodward Avenue and explore the neighborhoods, as the new boulevards could connect the important new buildings around the area. Cass Technical High School, Masonic Temple Theater, and the Motor City Casino in Midtown would all benefit from this, as would the residential complexes in Brush Park. The next key, then, is linking these new boulevards back across the Fisher Freeway into the Theater District.

The obstacle of the highway can be addressed by the fairly simple step of constructing a park on top of it, creating a bridge between two parts of the city that reestablish the link between them.

“Land bridges, which are public spaces like a park or square over freeways, would give the city a chance to recreate linkages that were torn up during the construction of highways during the 1950s. The tiny bridges that exist now are intimidating, lack character, and...”

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2 Kostof 218-237
These freeway parks are gaining prominence in the United States, with over twenty already in existence, and a dozen more currently in the planning stages. A freeway park, as simple of a notion as placing a green lid on top of the “trenches of noise and smog” that cut through cities in the form of the Interstate Highway System, can go a long way in minimizing the impact that these endless stretches of concrete have on the urban landscape. One of the major examples of this is Freeway Park in Seattle, a five acre public space built in 1976 featuring hardscape, fountains, open space and wooded areas in an effort to mitigate the noise and congestion so apparent from Interstate 5 passing through. I-5 in Seattle was sunk down when passing through the city, making the trough very easy to build a deck above it; I-75 in Detroit shares the same characteristic, making it ready for a similar development. The potential that a freeway park in Detroit has is unlimited – like Seattle, it could spark economic growth in the surrounding area, while overcoming the disrupted access to the city that I-75 creates. Creating a direct path to downtown that is pleasing and inviting, unlike the small, ugly bridges that currently cross I-75, could help reestablish the connection between urban and suburban in a positive way.

Crossing the barrier that is present between the north edge of Grand Circus Park and the area north of this is a more difficult notion. This line, where the city transgressed from the bold, rational design solution that was the Woodward Plan into the drabness of the Jeffersonian grid could be considered the first point where “the city escapes from itself over the horizon.” To restore the connection, again it is important to look back at the Woodward Plan. The extension of the original plan across Adams into the central part of the Theater District would help restore the connection between it and the Central Business District by crossing the psychological barrier that has formed there. It is not necessary to cut literal boulevards and radial streets into the existing urban fabric; there are several functioning entertainment spots here that that would destroy. Instead, shaping the area with planned, rational designs that implied the radial plan through built form would begin the interaction between the radial grid and the orthogonal, recalling historic Detroit planning ideals.

The position of the Theater District makes it an ideal spot to play off of the contradictions inherent in Detroit today. Situated in the gray space between suburban and urban, and focusing on neither residential nor commercial building, this neighborhood represents the duality and conflict that is present in every factor of Detroit life. Because of this, it is an ideal opportunity to express this identity through architectural design. Carrying the neighborhoods north of the freeway into the Theater District via the freeway park, and bring the Central Business District north by extending the

3 Chranko 2
4 Harnik 102-103
5 Roberts 56
6 Hoffman 47
Woodward Plan are both attempting to achieve the same idea – connection between opposing areas. The goal is to create a sense of center in this district, to sew together the gaps along Woodward and foster a greater sense of community by addressing and embracing the conflict present in the city. This center would be a “point of reference in the environment,” providing both the “physical and perceptual tools necessary to understand connections.” It is the location where “significant events of existence can be experienced,” a “location to which things aspire and are attracted.” The very nature of the Theater District begins to achieve this; through a thoughtful urban design and architectural intervention, this thesis attempts to complete this idea and further the possibilities of downtown Detroit.

Fig. 6.9 - Urban design plan for Theater District

Robinson 148
Architectural Scale

The architectural intervention will focus on a small site that lies between Woodward Avenue and Comerica Park, equidistant between Fisher Freeway and Adams Avenue. Although currently it is just two parking lots separated by a path connecting the Fox Theater to Comerica Park, the home ballpark of the Detroit Tigers, Detroit’s Major League Baseball team, the site has a great deal of potential to be explored. At approximately 3 acres, there is ample room to explore building design and create an outdoor meeting space for Detroit residents. The axis between the Fox and Comerica is extremely important, as it connects two of the Theater District’s – in fact, Detroit’s – most important attractions. The site’s position directly between the two barriers highlighted earlier is also very significant. This represents the point where the two opposing ideals of Detroit – urban and suburban – begin to overlap in earnest. The final design looks to highlight this.

The site is also notable because of Detroit’s consistent connection to athletics as a definition of identity. From at least as early as the 1930s, with the success of Joe Louis, Detroit has embraced its athletes as heroes, a source of pride even in the darker times through which the city suffered. The Detroit Tigers, especially, embody this. Regardless of race, the success of this team served to unite the city. A clear example of this is the 1968 World Series; barely a year after the horrific Twelfth Street Riot, the Tigers’ World Series Victory became a unifying force despite the civil strife tearing the city apart. Even the old English D, the Tigers’ team logo adopted in 1904, has become a representation of Detroit attitude. Because of this, a site directly adjacent to the ballpark is extremely appropriate to embrace the idea of city identity, and creation of community and unity between opposing forces of Detroit.

The final building will be a boutique hotel, with a restaurant, bar, and shops on the ground floor. It will forge a strong connection with the street in an attempt to retrieve the lost pedestrian-friendly environment, to create “new hope for street life in this auto-centric metropolis.” The ground floor public spaces will open up to both Woodward Avenue, interacting with the “critical stretch” of road stretching out of the city, and leading to an open piazza on the east side of the site. An expansive atrium will connect these spaces, a metaphorical bridge between the opposing grids. The site will operate on the theory “create a destination and the community will find it and use it” (Cityscape 6). This will especially be true during the spring and summer, where the piazza and the building’s amenities will provide much needed entertainments outside of Comerica Park before, during, and after baseball games. It will also appeal to employees from the Central Business District as a beautiful environment to enjoy lunch, or dinner and drinks after work. Most importantly, it will serve as a centrally located place to stay for business travelers and tourists, with easy access to both the entertainment district, and a short walk from the Central Business District and the People Mover, Detroit’s public transportation.

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8 Woodford 137
9 Palm 110
The building’s form will originate from interaction between the orthogonal layout of the suburban grid, and the radial organization of the Woodward Plan, exploring paths and axes that will bring historical significance and recognition to the design. It will use contrasting forms to emulate the difference in planning techniques between the suburban and urban landscapes, while attempting to illustrate the juxtaposition between the impermanence of downtown and the permanence of the suburbs. The ultimate goal is to allow people to “engage with their environment, to invigorate attachments to existing places and to foster new attachments rather than relying on existing stereotypical imagery and vacuous meanings.”

Two precedents immediately suggest themselves for this design: Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and Frank Gehry’s Dancing House in Prague, Czech Republic. Analysis of these will help illustrate the theory that will help to derive form and meaning from the local vernacular.

10 Erickson 6-7
Peter Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Visual Arts was designed for the creation, study, and display of art on the campus of Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, an environment committed to the "cross referencing of ideas and the re-examination of historical work in new contexts." The Wexner Center has been described as "eclectic and multi-layered," and "thrives on dichotomies." One such dichotomy is the idea of the building being simultaneously low-profile and aggressive, multiple systems of logic colliding with each other based on conceptual and philosophical issues. Like much of Eisenman's work, it exploits the concept of deconstructing and manipulating grids to derive form. The building, at the core, provides the opportunity for insight and vision through the creation of individual precincts, potentially private environments for reflection and exploration. "Social, formal, and human elements" confront the occupants at every turn, expressed and enforced by sliding planes and wrapping grids. The grids, representing the city grid of Columbus and the campus grid of Ohio State, are shifted based on axial directions from existing site or contextual mappings. The interactions between the grids are based on the conflict that arises from the two different grids coming together and forced to occupy the same site. Conflict is a basis of the project, conflict between the building as an isolated piece of sculpture and the obligation that the building has to relevance and context. The overlapping of grids produces not just a singular relationship, but the potential for multiple, non-prescriptive relationships, a flexible system of shear, shadow, and fracture, generating new relationships of form and space. "The achievement of the building is its ability to ratify both the postmodern and the modern references: the socio-political meaning of the program and the site, and the tectonic power of architectural form." The modulation of repetitive, rhythmic elements of geometry allow for the interpretation and meditation on meaning of public space.

Fig. 6.12 - Intersecting grids
Frank Gehry’s Nationale-Nederlanden Building is an office building off of the Vltava River in the historic district of Prague, Czech Republic. A singular tower at this site was deemed too masculine, so Gehry incorporated a feminine counterpart to conflict and balance the gender division. The result was the twisting, sinuous form that brings to mind a dancing couple, bringing Gehry to dub the building ‘Fred and Ginger’ in a reference to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The building is also commonly known as the “Dancing House.” ‘Fred,’ the male tower, is clad in a neutral stucco with undulating lines of windows and a wavy bas-relief pattern, extruding from the curving wall plane. The mesh bauble atop the tower is a reference to the onion domes that cap city buildings, most directly the Gothic tower just across the river. The female tower, ‘Ginger,’ is a distorted cylinder of glass and steel, with a light sense of impermanence in contrast to the heavy form of its partner.\footnote{Miklosko 40}

The building is situated in a neighborhood that is architecturally diverse, filled with “Medieval turrets, Gothic spires, Renaissance cornices, Baroque domes, and Art Nouveau curves.”\footnote{Giovannini 55} The goal was to continue the dialogue that has been established between the aesthetic and philosophy of each individual structure, creating a unique context for new design. The exaggerated irregular placement of windows pays homage to its surroundings, as does the intentional rejection of standard grid patterns, which pays tribute to the uneven lines found in the walls of early Gothic cathedrals. The flowing, wave-like lines constructed from textured plaster on the building’s facade are reminiscent of Art Nouveau style and the motion

\[\text{Fig. 6.16 - Dancing House}\]
of the adjacent Vltava River, addressing the detailed stucco work of the surrounding nineteenth century buildings, in a manner that acknowledges without copying. Height limits combined with a financial need to maximize volume forced Gehry to add an additional floor into the plan while matching the height of the neighboring building. The staggered windows and wavy façade help to mediate the misalignment of floor plates that results. The ultimate goal was a new way to look at a traditional area, in a way that is appropriate and fitting. Functionally, the desire was to mix cultural and social aspects, ultimately resulting in an office building with a basement café, rooftop bar and restaurant, and ground level shops, making it programatically very similar to the goals of this thesis. Similar also is the goal the building had in creating a sense of animation and public interaction at the ground level, making it more open to, and inclusive of, the general public.

3 Edwards 36
Architectural Solution

The form of the building is generated largely by the interaction between the two grid systems, as mentioned earlier. The generation of this form is chronicled in the diagrams on the opposing page. While this mass is derived from the less tangible historical conditions of the city, manifested by the urban grid, the stylistic influences of the façades originate from more evident aspects. The base building, two stories plus an occupiable roof terrace, is inspired by 1920s era Detroit architecture, looking to not only embrace and explore Detroit’s golden age of architecture, but also to see what application it has today. While the rest of the world has moved on from this neo-classical and art deco hybridization, it is still the prevalent style in Detroit’s downtown area. This façade is merely a screen where it crosses in front of the emerging tower forms – ultra-contemporary style extruding from classic design, a look at the conflicting aspects of the city. Should Detroit continue to rest upon the style that once represented an emerging new confidence of a young city, before the harsh realities of urban decline drove home? Is this just something the city hides behind, afraid to venture into architecture that looks ahead, symbolic of a re-emergence of a once great city? The interaction between these two distinct styles represents a physical manifestation of the conflict between these two ideologies.

Because this is a building whose entire form is dictated by Detroit’s radial grid, portraying it literally in the façade is unnecessary, and would undermine the form that has been generated. The radial grid already has established a position of dominance for itself within the design hierarchy; as such, it does not want to be further emphasized literally on the exterior façade. However, the façades of the towers do lend themselves as an ideal opportunity in which to express the idea of conflict between competing grid forms. The external steel structure forms one grid system, following a logic based off of the internal column grid, borne out of structural necessity. Within these criss-crossing steel beams, a system of glazing, vision glass and spandrel glass, forms a rigid orthogonal system, working within the established steel structure. This is a nod to Detroit’s grid system prior to 1805, where a rigid grid was set in place in relation to the river, and the city developed within the constraints of this system. On top of this a grid of metal mesh panels is established. This has,
Main tower form derived from orthogonal grid surrounding site. Towers surround piazza, complementing courtyard form begun by adjacent Comerica Park. Public/commercial space falls at street level, transitions into private space as elevation increases.

**Radial:**
- Extension of Grand Circus
- Represents axis of movement through building

**North:**
- Extension of major boulevard
- Basis of orthogonal grid
- Neighborhoods north of 6 Mile
- Generates cut through building

Interaction between radial path, northern boulevard, and orthogonal grid develop building form. Primary vertical and horizontal movement conducted in radial zone. Commercial spaces surround the radial movement area at lower levels. towers rejoin each other above boulevard plane. Public gathering spaces occupy the area internal to the circus form.
primarily, a functional purpose. The mesh provides both shade and privacy for the guest rooms that lay behind its wall, while still allowing a view out and light in. The grid of mesh follows the same orthogonal layout of the curtain wall behind, but at a different spacing. This is representative of the relationship of the orthogonal grids in Detroit – they intersect and interact, establishing their own sense of harmony, if not perfectly corresponding. Peeling back the layers of mesh, the viewer is given an idea of the systems lying underneath, hinting at the layers of interaction that characterize Detroit.

The open space of Grand Circus Park is recreated within the building by two areas of public space – one, at the ground and first floors, and two, at the top two floors. Both are elevated above the street, celebrating the notion of useable public space, something largely lost in Detroit. Functionally, they contain the primary public realms of the building – lobby, restaurant, bar, meeting space. Aesthetically, they are opposed to each other. At the ground level, the façade is that of the rest of the base, an interpreted neo-classical. At the top floors, the contemporary style of the towers is continued out along the cantilevered slabs. These two opposing aesthetics are a very literal expression of the duality of Detroit identity, the conflict that exists between any two senses of identity that have manifested themselves in Detroit's history. The cantilevered portion still expresses the divided between the two towers; however, it is only a superficial divide. In this way, it represents the divide with which the city of Detroit still lives – present, and underlying, but whose presence doesn’t necessarily have to overwhelm or interfere with function or quality of life.

A design doesn’t need to mindlessly adhere to earlier Detroit styles to fit into Detroit's architectural pedagogy. It is simply important for it to be thoughtful, to address real Detroit issues in an appropriate manner, and to be accessible to all Detroiters, not just the privileged outsiders. With that in mind, this project attempts to embrace all of these issues, by providing public space accessible to all, regardless of class or means of transport, creating a courtyard addressing and communicating with Comerica Park, whose function is one that embraces all level of Detroiter.

**Conclusion**

The space of the possible is an overwhelming presence in Detroit, and one that needs to be capitalized on in order to return the city to the thriving metropolis that it once was. This is not going to happen overnight. One small architectural intervention, or even a larger urban design project, are not sufficient to reverse a decline that has been well over fifty years in the making. The important thing is to begin making positive strides in this direction. A thoughtful, appropriate architecture generated by a sense of respect and reverence for the city's history can help to begin filling the voids of the city in ways that will help make positive strides toward a better future. This thesis is not an attempt to save Detroit – merely an attempt to understand it, honor it, and one day be part of the eventual urban revival.


Smith, Lindsay. Detroit’s Deterioration. Department of Historic Preservation.


One of the primary reasons for the advent of postmodern architecture was the increased feeling of dissatisfaction towards the International Style. The bland, generic forms produced by this approach truly lived up to the universalization of architecture desired by the lead modern theorists – these forms fit in equally well regardless of where they were placed, regardless of the context in which they lay. That is to say, they did not fit in anywhere. Postmodernism began to address the banality of form with the liberal use of reference and ornament, an effort to design an architecture that is more relatable to the world that it inhabits. The neo-eclectic forms generated, however, did not necessarily alleviate the feelings of alienation that can come from radical architectural style, and the re-introduction of historical knowledge and cultural issues to design was merely skin deep.1

It has become necessary to seek out meaning in these new forms, to counter the sense of placelessness and the lack of meaning inherent in them; by exploring the concept of critical regionalism, local culture and identity can be embraced, simultaneously giving a sense of identity, a necessity for architecture that is relatable, to both the architecture and the community in which it occurs. Critical regionalism presents itself as an ideal process to begin exploring this concept, helping to establish a unique and appropriate identity of place.

Although the term critical regionalism was first coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in their 1981 essay “The Grid and the Pathway,” the term was popularized by Kenneth Frampton’s “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” first published in 1983.2 As a basis for his arguments, Frampton looks at Paul Ricoeur’s “History and Truth,” a work that examines historical meaning, and how it is belittled by universalization, or the creation of a unified, global culture, which destroys historicity and subjectivity. Frampton quotes a section of this writing, in an effort to establish the basic idea of universalization, and the destruction of traditional cultures inherent in this. This universal civilization, brought on by the apocalyptic thrust of modernization, he argues, is overwhelming the typical urban fabric, forcing a placeless architecture upon the world, and removing all traces of autochthonous culture.3 While Frampton does not completely deny the advantages of some sort of universal civilization, he suggests critical regionalism as a concept that can mediate the impact of this universalization.

As mentioned above, critical regionalism was examined prior to Frampton, and has been discussed many times since his original writings; however, the comprehensive definition of this process is arguably illustrated more clearly in “Towards a Critical Regionalism” than it is in most other discourses on the topic. Critical regionalism, as defined by Frampton, is a way of reviving locally inflected culture by embracing and incorporating elements derived indirectly from the unique characteristics of place. He suggests looking at the “range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a particular structural mode, or in the topography of a given site” as ways to indirectly embrace regional conditions.4 The essential characteristic of critical regionalism is that it “upholds the individual and local architectonic features against more universal and abstract ones.”5 The concept of an architecture of resistance is a continuous theme, with the resistance potential of the place form as an idea that must be employed and embraced to its full potential in order to maintain the autochthonous culture of a given site. Ultimately, this “potential strategy for resisting the domination of universal technology” is just that: a strategy.6 Frampton is not trying to suggest a style, or any sort of end result, but a process that can be applied to a variety of locations to create an architecture that is not placeless. This placelessness, that which lacks any relationship to its immediate surroundings, is a concept that critical regionalism actively fights against, and is directly at odds with establishing an architecture of identity.

An important distinction, however, must be made between critical regionalism and “simpleminded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular.”7 The notion of subscribing to the local vernacular as a basis of design often leads to little more than a carbon copy of surrounding buildings, a mindless, dull architecture that, while it attempts to combat placelessness by creating an identifiable form, ends up destroying a great deal of the potential identity of the building by allowing it to dissolve meaninglessly into the existing urban fabric. Lost, then, will be the distinguishing elements that “form the basic material out of which the identity of places is fashioned and in terms of which our experiences of places are structured.”8 While adhering religiously to vernacular design avoids “mindlessly adopting the narcissistic dogmas in the name of universality” in the global sense, it simply reduces the scale of universality from global to regional.9 It is thus essential

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1 Tzonis 10
2 Eggener 228
3 Frampton 17-19
4 Frampton 23
5 Tzonis 17
6 Frampton 31
7 Frampton 23
8 Relph 46
9 Tzonis 20
to delve into the idiosyncrasies of place, and find a way to express and enhance them on a critical, individual basis, without reducing design to a sentimental level.\textsuperscript{10}

It is claimed, though, that critical regionalism is often imposed from positions of authority from outside the space, undermining and confounding the architecture, potentially implementing upon it a false sense of identity.\textsuperscript{11} This sort of intervention does not reflect or serve its locality, Eggener argues, but distorts true conditions and over-generalizes “a range of difficult and diverse architectures arising from markedly different circumstances.”\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that critical regionalism is a flawed or an inappropriate process of design, simply that it must be applied thoughtfully and truthfully to avoid creating a perverse and trivial identity that can not be removed without considerable effort.

Vitruvius, the much celebrated early architectural theorist, looked at a regional architecture as one that was shaped by specific physical constraints, both internal and external. He acknowledged that different physical environments were a direct contributor to the varying characteristics of houses, generating the different ‘kinds’ of buildings.\textsuperscript{13} Much later (mid-nineteenth century), John Ruskin looked at memory and region in architecture, and their role in establishing identity. Although best known for his devotion to historical preservation, he became enamored with the morphology of the Alps, and saw their development as the embodiment of formation.\textsuperscript{14} Ruskin related the development of these geological forms to the influence of the physical setting on architecture, and the impact that their unique “deep sense of voicefulness” and “richness of record” could have on what inhabits the space, and the identity created through it.\textsuperscript{15} Clearly, regionalist influence from the static physical setting has a profound effect on the identity of what inhabits this setting.

The activity component of place/identity can be illustrated by the garden architecture initiated in England, primarily in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, which created “artificial labyrinths” of the picturesque. Regional characteristics of place were the primary concern, creating a new natural order and embracing topographic regionalism. In these movement based, highly active creations, English nationalism was developed, from which an English ethnic identity was forged. The architecture created an analogy between “a freedom of nature to evolve within a certain space” and “a freedom of a people belonging to a group to think and act without an absolutist or foreign power controlling

\textsuperscript{10} Frampton 29
\textsuperscript{11} Eggener 228
\textsuperscript{12} Eggener 234-235
\textsuperscript{13} Tzonis 11-12
\textsuperscript{14} Tzonis 16
\textsuperscript{15} Tzonis 16-17

\textbf{Fig. A.1 - Alps morphology}
The activity inherent within this extremely regionalist style of architecture identified an ethnic group by stressing spatial strategies, and emphasizing characteristics of the group. Identity can also be emphasized by highlighting the activities contained within a space. A huge swing in this respect occurred during the Industrial Revolution – new technologies and materials allowed massive glass roofs and facades to be constructed, as illustrated by the Crystal Palace of 1852 and the Pennsylvania Station of 1905. The glass “emphasized the monumentality of these buildings and provided unique identities and quality to these places,” while at the same time connecting to their surrounding environment through the spatial dichotomy created by the great transparent walls. In this way, both the identity of place and the local identity are enforced and celebrated, based largely around the activity that the space embodies and emphasizes.

Vitruvius recognized this, believing that natural causes and human rationality were primary influences on architectural form, intrinsic as they are on intentions and experiences. An interesting historical example of meaning embodied in place was illustrated when Niccolo de Crescenzi exhibited his political stance via architectural means in twelfth century Rome. Through integration of fragments of classical Roman buildings in the façade, half columns built as imitation Roman colonnades, and a political inscription extolling the virtues of a free Rome, Crescenzi made his political views known through these architectural stylings. Regional elements, incorporated into the architecture, represented “aspirations of liberation from a power perceived as alien and illegitimate,” a clear example of architectural form establishing meaning, and thus constructing a group identity. In the late 19th century, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe extolled Gothic cathedrals as superior architecture, claiming them to be identifiable with precise regional and historical origins. The cathedrals, like Crescenzi’s house, use their regionalist characteristics to create architecture with meaning, that simultaneously identifies with their given locale, and forms an identifiable entity to the people that experience it.

While architecture has historically used regional ideas as design influence, it did not truly begin to demonstrate the concept of critical regionalism until the mid-1950s, when the shifting ideology from modernist to postmodernist architecture began to become more pronounced. Several examples of buildings that express both Tzonis and Frampton’s idea of critical regionalism and Relph’s idea of identity become apparent, and begin to illustrate the effect that a critical examination of region can have on establishing identity.

Jorn Utzon’s Bagsvaerd Church in Copenhagen (1976) is an example of a building employing the process of critical regionalism extremely well. The church fuses together universalized production methods, such as a concrete frame with prefabricated concrete in-fill elements, with a reinforced concrete shell forming the interior volume, a method used not for its economy or simplicity of construction, but because of the multiple cross-cultural references inherent, and the symbolic significance of the vaulted space that it creates. In this manner, the “rationality of normative technique” and the “arationality of idiosyncratic form” comprise a significant duality that gives the work a complex meaning. This avoids any “symbolic allusion to the ecclesiastic,” which Frampton argues tends to degenerate into kitsch, thus making a distinct desacralization arguably more reverent and spiritual. Thus setting, activity, and meaning all combine together to form a powerful product that represents

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16 Tzonis 14
17 Tzonis 15
18 Elkadi 38
19 Tzonis 11
20 Tzonis 12-13
21 Tzonis 18
22 Frampton 25
its intended identity, and forms a sacred space with which users can also identify.\textsuperscript{23} Completed in 1999, the Nordic Embassies in Berlin, Germany, by Berger and Parkkinen come together to form a “strong regionalist sense of self.”\textsuperscript{24} Any building in Berlin presents an interesting case study for critical regionalism, given the extremely rich history of the city, but the layers of complexity generated by the nature of the buildings give this project many more levels of interest. An embassy traditionally presents a powerful, intimidating institutional feel, but the architects in this case looked to prove an exception to the rule. Though a joint project between the five Nordic countries, they broke the project down into individual buildings, each establishing a unique identity, while allowing the complex to remain public and welcoming. They come together, however, to form a single, harmonious entity, in a metaphor for how the five individual countries relate to each other. By understanding the site as a whole, the “critical urban mass” was formed by acknowledging the site boundary, the trees present, and the neighborhoods and the Tiergarten adjacent to the site.\textsuperscript{25} A process of cutting shapes the mass into separate volumes, creating a void between the units which simultaneously creates a distinct expression of diversity while still speaking to the unity of Scandinavia. Tectonic elements present in every building further emphasize the connection between the forms, while also speaking to the history inherent in the embassies. Finally, the “wall” that is created by these embassies when perceived as a whole serves as a “symbolic counter-presence to the Berlin Wall” in its ability to bring together, its feeling of openness, and its strong sense of place. Together, these embassies truly stand out in Berlin, and emphasize a unique sense of identity.\textsuperscript{26}

These examples, along with two more that will be developed here further, demonstrate nicely the profound effect that critical regionalism can have on establishing and emphasizing identity through architecture. This type of design, with the goal of “sustaining diversity while benefiting from universality” will continue to be applicable further into the 21st century.\textsuperscript{27} Meaning can be developed and enhanced in these forms, countering the sense of placelessness and embracing local culture and identity. Through critical regionalism, identity of a place and with a place can be not only defined, but truly understood, both inside and out.

\textsuperscript{23} Frampton 24-26  
\textsuperscript{24} Tzonis 89-90  
\textsuperscript{25} Tzonis 88  
\textsuperscript{26} Tzonis 88-89  
\textsuperscript{27} Tzonis 20
A classic example of critical regionalism applied perfectly is Alvar Aalto’s Saynatsalo Town Hall, in Saynatsalo, Finland, completed in 1952. It is a bit cliché because of Frampton’s endorsement of it in “Towards a Critical Regionalism,” but it is further expounded by Tzonis and Lefaivre in “Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World.” In Saynatsalo, Aalto embraces the tactile, leaving the materials – primarily brick, wood, and copper – exposed and naked. The use of these materials, along with their placement on the site and relationship in the entire composition, was carefully considered and planned in an attempt to make them appear as an organic part of the context. This group of buildings is an obvious example of the importance of the tactile, in that it “can only be decoded in terms of experience itself,” clearly emphasizing the level of identity established. The town hall is directly informed by the wooded landscape of Finland in which it is set, establishing a strong sense of place. This building is considered one of the first examples of “humanized” post-war architecture, once again elevating its level of importance in establishing an identity, local and beyond. The wooded landscape, and overall extremely rustic part of the buildings that make up the town hall, are very different from that which will be found at the given site in Detroit. However, the concept of identity that this project explores, and celebrates, is extremely applicable to the aspirations of this thesis. The post-war humanization that Aalto explores could easily be related to the notion of Detroit recovering from the ideological war that has raged in the city – lessons taken from Aalto’s work assist in finding a strategy to overcome this architecturally. The makeup of the buildings – individual units with their own personal morphology, while still conforming to a common aesthetic – strengthens ideals of individual identity being celebrated while strengthening group identity. The orientation of buildings on the site, surrounding a courtyard, also helps enforce ideas of community.
In 1986, Patkau architects entered a design competition with the task of creating a gallery to display and preserve art objects and cultural artifacts, while establishing a role as a “cultural, intellectual, and entertainment facility.” The gallery is situated in a former industrial area on the outskirts of the city core, providing the building with the unique opportunity to begin restoring an area in decline and expanding the city center. The design of the gallery questions the typical museum experience; the typical pure white cube meant to focus attention solely on the art contained within lacks character and isolates art from everyday light. The materials showcased within – clay and glass – are unique from typical art in their inherent sturdiness, allowing the galleries to be lit by exterior light, and thus have a more direct connection with the rest of the world; daily and seasonal cycles are brought inside, directly affecting the experience of spectators within.

The metaphor of transformation is embraced throughout the project, as the physical process of glassblowing and firing of clay is expressed via symbolic elements and material exploration.

1 TUNS 21
2 Carter 63-64
Monolithic, totemic elements - the courtyard, small works gallery, and tower gallery - are formed from reinforced concrete.

Two box forms composing main body of building emulate the vocabulary of nearby warehouses both formally and materially. The elements within are highly articulated, and the frame and skin vocabulary contrasts directly with the monolithic forms of the totemic elements.

Service areas and vertical movement paths contained within minor box shape sandwiched between major box forms.

Fire columns symbolize the process of making glass and clay, serving as icons for the building - reformed classical colonnades with elements of nature inherent in their design.

Fig. A.12 - Exploded axon
Three feature elements – the tower gallery, the small works gallery, and the courtyard gallery – are elevated to a totemic role by their monolithic construction of exposed reinforced concrete. These massive elements contrast with the frame-and-skin vocabulary of the rest of the building, and intensify the relationship between the artwork, the building, and the spectator, eventually articulating and emphasizing the pieces on display. The tectonic character varies in each of these spaces; the simplicity of the forms (the basic square, triangle, and circle shown above) both highlight the soullessness of the neutral white box, and clearly distinguish the separation from that standard form.
Steel beams and purlins form the roof and floor structure, creating a standard structural grid left exposed to highlight its beauty and simplicity. The floor assembly is heavy timber decking, which creates a language reflected in the door and window frames.

The spatial order of this gallery is defined by layering elements, which is expressed through tectonic details. The base form, concrete masonry, functions as bearing walls, supporting the roof and floor assemblies. These walls are clad with brick veneer at some points, left exposed at others, and detailed clearly at openings to highlight the composite nature of the walls.