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The depopulation of once-major central cities is no longer an uncommon occurrence. Between the years 1950 and 2010, over 350 large cities worldwide lost a significant number of residents, businesses, and industries. Following nearly a half-century of shrinkage, a few urban centers rediscovered the benefits of density and traditional pedestrian street life and began to regain jobs and residents in inner-city neighborhoods. In other regions, however, the migration of residents from the central city to the periphery continues. The city of Detroit remains the prominent example of American regional restructuring due to its still-ruinous downtown, general lack of central employment, and unyielding population loss.

Since 1950, Detroit has lost over 50% of its population, 165,000 industrial jobs, and 147,000 housing units. The depopulation that the city has experienced over the last sixty years created a fractured and dislocated urban environment divided by over 66,000 vacant lots. Generated by default rather than intent, these discarded, neglected, and forgotten spaces evoke strong memories of past turmoil and abandonment within the city. This thesis investigation uncovers the historic factors and city-responses associated with the extensive suburbanization and the subsequent emergence of urban empty space in Detroit. Emphasizing the historic formation and strange identity of Detroit’s vacant land becomes the design measure in which to re-imagine and regenerate these urban conditions.
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Introduction
Introduction

Today, the city of Detroit has reached a near ninety-five year population low. In the year 1920, with the rapid rise of the automobile industry, the city boasted a population of 993,678 residents. Thirty years later, in 1950, the population peaked at 1,849,568 residents. Over the course of the next sixty years the city of Detroit lost nearly 1 million residents, 165,000 industrial jobs, and 147,000 housing units. The city is now left with an average annual income that is half that of its surrounding counties, 37,000 vacant housing units, and well over 66,000 vacant lots. In the midst of urban decay, arson, and massive demolition efforts, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed Detroit, in 2005, as one of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The depopulation that the city experienced created an abundance of forgotten, unoccupied, and neglected spaces.

The massive decline of Detroit’s urban population greatly altered the city’s image, urban landscape, and economy. A shrinking urban population is manifested in the physical makeup of the city. With fewer people and fewer financial resources available to maintain a city designed for a larger population, buildings and city infrastructure quickly decay. As abandoned and unoccupied buildings collapse, burn, and are demolished, vacant spaces accumulate and create a disjointed and fractured urban environment. Viewed as uninhabitable, unproductive, and unsafe, abandoned spaces are disconnected from the remainder of the city. They experience an infiltration of overgrown and wild vegetation, collect garbage, succumb to vandalism, attract illegal activity, and become a growing blemish within the urban fabric of the city.

A complex mix of social, economic, political, and cultural factors has caused the depopulation of major central cities worldwide. The causes of the extensive suburbanization and subsequent emergence of vacant space experienced by Detroit are not fully understood, but certainly include the following factors: Industrial decentralization, personal transportation advancements, racial segregation, and federal transportation, housing, and urban renewal policy. Together, these factors diminished the traditional dominance of the urban core as a center for financial, commercial, residential, and manufacturing activities. They are the driving forces behind urban disinvestment and population shifts out of the city of Detroit. As the urban core continues to decline in population, adjacent suburban areas throughout Metro Detroit simultaneously expand. The result is a doughnut-shaped metropolitan statistical area (MSA) and the rise of conflicting goals, images, and power relations.

Introduction

For some, the accumulation and strange characteristics of vacant urban land are not purely negative. Instead, they represent a moment of freedom against the constraints of traditional urban society. This thesis investigation reviews three theoretical perspectives that encourage designers to both preserve and amplify the unique identity associated with empty space in the urban environment. The perspectives aid in defining this urban condition and also propose the creation of new urban places that challenge conventional urban form, function, and thought. In order to capture the strong sense of memory associated with these untended and abandoned spaces, designers are encouraged to respond to the specific location, emphasize the particular nature, and better understand the historic context of the changing urban landscape. The focus of this investigation is to uncover the historic factors and city-responses associated with the extensive depopulation of the city of Detroit. This is done as a means to direct design intervention and promote another way of addressing urban voids with application to a select site near downtown Detroit. In order to address this issue, the thesis investigation asks:

• What are the primary factors that led to the abundant accumulation of urban empty space in the city of Detroit?

• How can knowledge of these factors inform design intervention and facilitate the regeneration of voids within the urban environment?

• What barriers within the disjointed and disconnected urban landscape can be re-imagined as urban amenities?

In order to answer these questions, the thesis investigation will:

• Review the theoretical perspectives of three designers that have made significant contributions to discussions on urban empty space

• Identify the primary factors associated with the depopulation and abandonment of Detroit

• Utilize the findings to develop a set of general recommendations that will guide design intervention of vacant urban land.
Methodology
Methodology

The inspiration for this thesis investigation is the unique characteristics and hidden potential associated with vacant land in the urban landscape. Research focuses on defining the problem, uncovering the causes, evaluating the responses, and promoting new intervention strategies associated with empty space in the post-industrial depopulating city of Detroit, MI, USA. Social, economic, cultural, and physical problems linked with the depopulation of urban environments result in the formation, accumulation, and spread of voids. These forgotten and neglected spaces are absent of both activity and purpose. Disconnected from vital city life, urban empty spaces become overgrown with vegetation, collect garbage, attract illegal activity, decrease adjacent property values, are perceived as unsafe and dangerous, and lower the overall quality of urban life. Negative urban trends associated with the depopulating city and the rise of vacant land reinforce one another and create a downward spiral of physical urban decline.

Two distinct bodies of research were gathered as part of this thesis investigation. The first body of research includes the causing factors, physical characteristics, and city-responses associated with the suburbanization and the emergence of empty space experienced by the city of Detroit. The second body of research explores relevant discussions on urban empty space from three contemporary architectural theorists. Design recommendations are extracted from the historic research and theoretical discussions on the urban void. They promote a new way of addressing empty spaces within the context of the American post-industrial depopulating city. These principles offer a framework for design intervention that can be applied to a wide range of city void types and conditions.

The focus of the literature review is on Eduard Bru, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio. Each designer was selected for his specific interest and interaction with empty space in the urban environment. The views, ideas, and concepts of these three theorists comprise the theoretical basis for this investigation. The writings of the designers contribute to a better understanding of empty space and guide the intervention strategy. Each designer acknowledges the problematic nature of voids and emphasizes the importance of addressing them within the context of the contemporary city. They are skeptical of conventional and aggressive intervention strategies that treat land as a resource to be exploited and manipulated. Instead, the designers foresee the promise and opportunity that exists by regenerating these spaces outside of traditional urban form, function, and process.

The case study on the city of Detroit traces the process of depopulation and the emergence of urban empty space in this post-industrial depopulating city. In general, case studies are used to gather and analyze data in academic and professional settings in order to produce an in-depth view of a particular issue or concept. Case studies provide insight and understanding that facilitate the ability to theorize about a broader context. The purpose of the Detroit case study is to better understand the problems, causes of, and responses to city depopulation and the rise of abandoned spaces. The emergence and spread of empty space in Detroit is viewed as the result of industrial decentralization, personal transportation advancements, racial segregation, and federal housing, highway, and urban renewal policies. Additional research on the city of Detroit

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Methodology

focuses on the physical and literary responses of the city to its depopulation and accumulation of voids. The in-depth analysis of Detroit addresses key historic, social, economic, and physical factors that are present in many post-industrial depopulating cities within the United States.

The practical nature of the case study complements the theoretical concepts provided by the three designers. The insight of the theorists, coupled with the social, economic, and physical needs of Detroit, informs a regenerative process that brings life back into city voids over time. The process uses limited demolition and building intervention and emphasizes a program that serves the needs of all residents, workers, and visitors. The time sensitive regenerative process stands contrary to the conventional notion of the master plan and common *tabula rasa* projects. It rethinks historic elements of the past and addresses the changing contemporary needs of the remaining population.
Literature Review

*Literature Review includes excerpts from author’s 2010 Master of Architecture thesis at the University of Cincinnati
Literature Review


Eduard Bru is a Spanish architect and urban planner that earned his Ph. D. in architecture in 1987 and is currently living and working in the city of Barcelona, Spain. In addition to being a practicing architect and planner, Bru is also a professor, and former school head, at the Barcelona Technical College of Architecture (ETSAB).

Bru’s focus is on contemporary urban and geographical phenomena. His work addresses contemporary urban issues related to geography, ecology, and the environment. He is skeptical of quick-fix solutions related to urban sustainability and green architecture. He also warns of the dangers associated with “forever building new things.” Instead, Bru emphasizes the relationship between ecology and urbanism and proposes that architecture and city planning is based on the “metamorphosis and recycling of materials, forms, and uses.”

Theoretical Perspective

In his book, *Coming from the South*, Bru discusses what he considers to be the three new factors for city planning. These include size, distance, and emptiness. Bru suggests that all three factors are closely related and that in order to establish appropriate size and distance, one must understand the city in terms of both voids and solids. Eduard Bru states that the void is a “specific kind of matter for the planning of our cities.” He claims to be the first person to have discussed the urban void as a problem of the contemporary city and defines it as “a hollow in the midst of unresolved elements that have rendered its occupation impossible.”

According to Eduard Bru, the void is a contemporary problem that did not exist during the formation of the early city. Traditional growth of the city created empty space, in part, as a consequence of varying densities and geometric guidelines. These voids, traditionally, were public space. They made up the streets, squares, and parks. Today, however, excessive voids within the traditional urban form have created a fractured and dislocated city. Bru suggests that the urban void is an “essential element in any debate about the new city.” He argues that most planned public spaces, over the course of history, resulted from voids that experienced specific problems or obsolete activities. Today, Eduard Bru believes that planning the void is an “activity that is as novel as it is urgent.”

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7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 31.
10 Ibid., 274.
11 Ibid., 31.
12 Ibid., 31.
Intervention Strategy

According to Bru, the quality and nature of the urban void needs to be well defined. He suggests that it is the empty space within an urban landscape that contributes most to the form of a city. In his own words, Bru states, “Deciding its form means establishing – along with opting for different sizes and distances – the form of the inhabited environment.”13 His call for better defining the urban void, however, does not necessarily assume an extensive intervention or built environment. Eduard Bru discusses the intervention of empty space in this way:

The contemporary city doesn’t necessarily have to proceed along the same lines as those laid down by the classical city... Different things are happening today, new phenomena that call for new solutions and new spaces. The open space of the city has to respond to two relatively recent ideas: one is that of freedom – a greater degree of freedom than the one the street or square can provide, - and the other, that of a diversification in the range of uses.”14

Eduard Bru encourages designers and planners not to use the “typical text-book creations”15 in these difficult and conflicting spaces. Instead, he encourages the development of new amenities, properly organized within the desired space. Given the unusual and disconnected nature of their surroundings, this may require the invention of new urban places and uses. He points out that, “contemporary urban man is continually endorsing a set of customs that no longer pertain to him; and he practices these in an almost shameful way.”16

Bru suggests that there is no one method for “making a city,” and that filling the void should not aspire to conform to a certain “look” that will give prestige to the intervention. Instead, he argues that the architect and planner should “attempt to respond to its specific location and to emphasize its particular nature – its scale, size, siting, - and to convert this into something that is user-friendly.”17 Eduard Bru believes that by placing new materials and new uses within the context of the urban fabric, a “new urban specimen”18 can be created.

13 Ibid., 31.
14 Ibid., 271.
15 Ibid., 272.
16 Ibid., 272.
17 Ibid., 273.
18 Ibid., 273.
Significance

Eduard Bru’s discussion on the urban void is significant to this investigation for a number of reasons. First, Bru points out that empty space is now an essential factor for city planning and necessary for discussions about the contemporary city. Second, Bru discusses its important contribution to the form of the city and its need to be well defined. Third, Bru emphasizes the need to respond to its specific location and nature. Finally, Bru encourages the creation of new urban places by creating new solutions and exploring new materials and uses within the urban environment.

Major Points of Interest

- Planning the void is one of the three new factors for city planning and is an activity that is both novel and urgent.
- The quality and nature of urban voids needs to be well defined
- There is no one method for making a city
- Respond to the specific location and emphasize the particular nature of urban voids
- New phenomena call for new solutions and spaces
- Placing new materials and new uses within an urban context can create a new urban specimen

Sze Tsung Leong’s theoretical discussion on urban empty space is part of the *Harvard Project on the City*. Sze Tsung Leong worked on this project in close collaboration with Rem Koolhaas.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Sze Tsung Leong discusses the city and its voids in terms of control space, residue, and gaps. According to Sze Tsung Leong, urban voids result from a deformation of the city that is caused by control space. He defines control space in terms of information and the market, rather than in terms of space. For example, Sze Tsung Leong believes that space is now “computed, calibrated, assessed, predicted and optimized” in order to effectively respond to the vicissitudes and irrationalities of the market. He says that all people participate in control space. Retailers strive to “understand, quantify, record, regulate, manipulate, and coerce” the factors that determine sales. Similarly, the consumer seeks space that is convenient, efficient, accessible, secure, energetic, and offers a variety of choices.

Sze Tsung Leong says that it is control space that “deforms what used to be considered the urban.” He compares the residue that is generated by control space to the effluents that are discarded by industrial production. In his own words, Sze Tsung Leong says that:

> As space is increasingly treated as a resource to be exploited, processed, and manipulated, and as the forces of measurement become increasingly accelerated, non-geometric, and non-locale based, so must space be discarded, abandoned, expended. In spatial terms, much of the city is generated by default rather than intent, creating a new cartography – a mutant form of figure/ground – comprised of control and residual spaces.

Control space and its resulting residue and gaps are inseparable. The nature of control space, which is engineered to rapidly minimize expense and maximize profits, constantly recycles the urban environment. Its desire to find and exploit the next realm of opportunity produces gaps and contradictions alongside and within control space.

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20 Ibid., 189.
21 Ibid., 189.
22 Ibid., 191.
23 Ibid., 193.
According to Sze Tsung Leong, under a traditional lens, urban voids appear “dissolute, attenuated, entropic, and amorphous.” He argues that these spaces test the traditional boundaries between that which is public and private, inside and outside, and near and far. Despite the traditional criteria for this unfamiliar urban landscape, Sze Tsung Leong understands these spaces as representing “moments of freedom” against the grips of control space and traditional urban form.

Significance

Sze Tsung Leong’s contributions to discussions on the urban void are significant to this investigation for a number of reasons. First, Leong defines the urban void as a deformation of the city resulting from the non-spatial exploitation and manipulation of urban land. Second, Leong acknowledges that much of the city is not created by intent, but by default. Finally, Leong suggests that these spaces test the limits of what is considered urban and also represent a break from the constraints imposed by traditional urban society.

Major Points of Interest

• The city is composed of control space, residue, and gaps
• Control space deforms what used to be considered urban, resulting in voids
• Urban land is abandoned and discarded when space is treated as a resource that is exploited and manipulated
• Many parts of the city are generated by default, not intent
• Voids test the traditional limits of urban form
• Voids represent a moment of freedom within the urban landscape

24 Ibid., 193.
25 Ibid., 195.
The late Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio was a Spanish architect, architectural critic, theorist, and former professor at the Barcelona Technical College of Architecture (ETSAB).

**Theoretical Perspective**

At a time when few other designers recognized the value and potential of the urban empty and abandoned space, Sola-Morales Rubio discussed its fascination in his essay entitled, *Terrain Vague*. The French expression is a seemingly simple, yet complex phrase, which surfaced in 1970s filmmaking. It is the basis for his theory on the design of empty and abandoned urban land. The complexity of the expression, *terrain vague*, comes from the literary depth and multiple meanings of its individual parts. Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio notes that it is not possible to “capture in a single English word or phrase the meaning of *terrain vague*.”

The first French word, *terrain*, roughly translates into the English word *land*. While the word *land* typically assumes a more agricultural or geological meaning, the French term *terrain* embodies an urban quality. *Terrain* is more than just a single parcel of urban land within the city. It represents the ground that is fit and has the potential for the built environment. Sola-Morales Rubio deepens its meaning when he says that:

> The French word also refers to greater and perhaps less precisely defined territories, connected with the physical idea of a portion of land in its potentially exploitable state but already possessing some definition to which we are external.

The second French word, *vague*, has both Latin and German origins. Its German origin comes from the word *woge*, which refers to the “movement, oscillations, instability, and fluctuation” of a sea swell. From a Latin context, the two root words *vacuus* and *vagus* are joined together to create this multi-dimensional French word. *Vacuus* roughly translates to mean both “empty and unoccupied,” and also “free, available, and unengaged.” *Vagus* essentially translates into “indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, and uncertain.”

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27 Ibid., 119.
28 Ibid., 119.
29 Ibid., 119.
30 Ibid., 119.
31 Ibid., 120.
Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio’s concept of *terrain vague* thrives on the contradicting nature of the definitions of its individual parts. In his own words, he says that:

> The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city’s *terrains vagues*. Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, or expectation.32

It is in this anomaly, where contradicting values of “fluctuation,” “emptiness,” “freedom” and “uncertainty” are superimposed onto one another, that Sola-Morales Rubio best understands the uneasy potential associated with the urban void. The paradox of these uncertain and indefinite spaces is that they are not purely negative, but engage expectations of freedom and liberty that are associated with the unknown.33 Therefore, blending the term *terrain* with the triple-significant term *vague*, truly adds numerous dimensions to the understanding and characterization of the urban void.

Sola-Morales Rubio argues that *terrains vagues* are the reverse image of the city. Even though these spaces exist within the physical makeup of the city, they are “external to everyday use.”34 The weary fascination that embodies the abandoned and empty space is reminiscent of occurrences that have previously taken place within them. *Terrains vagues* are forgotten and strange places where “the memory of the past predominates over the present.”35 Despite the romantic and enthusiastic imaginations that are fed by distant memories, Sola-Morales Rubio notes that spaces not dominated by architecture are foreign to the urban system. He suggests that the urban void nurtures insecurities and fear within people. In return, people condemn the space as uninhabitable, unproductive, and unsafe. Sola-Morales Rubio points out that *terrains vagues* are often found within unsafe residential neighborhoods, railway stations and ports, industrial and contaminated areas, unincorporated margins, and other locations that are oversights and voids of activity within the city.

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32 Ibid., 120.
33 Ibid., 120.
34 Ibid., 120.
35 Ibid., 120.
Intervention Strategy

Following his exploration of both terminology and empty space, Sola-Morales Rubio addresses the topic of design intervention for the *terrain vague*. He asks, "What is to be done with these enormous voids, with their imprecise limits and vague definition?"³⁶ In his response, he fears for the loss of identity in these strange places. It is an identity that represents an “uncontaminated magic of the obsolete.”³⁷ It is an identity that is specific to the *terrain vague*, but unique to the remainder of the city. Sola-Morales Rubio warns of the problematic nature of the architect and other designers who intervene into these strangely unique spaces. In his own words:

Architecture’s destiny has always been colonization, the imposing of limits, order, and form, the introduction into strange space of the elements of identity necessary to make it recognizable, identical, universal. In essence, architecture acts as an instrument of organization, of rationalization, and of productive efficiency capable of transforming the uncivilized into the cultivated, the fallow into the productive, the void into the built.³⁸

In his recommendation for the design of *terrains vagues*, Sola-Morales Rubio argues against violent transformations. He suggests that architecture not become an aggressive instrument of power, but instead, that the designer preserves the unique nature of these strange and alternative spaces. By challenging the “modern movement’s efficient model of the enlightened tradition,”³⁹ Sola-Morales Rubio argues that architects and other designers can avoid the creation of typified and planned continuity. Instead, he encourages the designer to amplify “the flows, the energies, the rhythms established by the passing of time and the loss of limits.”⁴⁰

The words of Sola-Morales Rubio challenge the designer to better understand the historic elements and current conditions of the urban void. Respecting the historic changes and the present condition of the urban void allows the designer to create a space that reflects both numerous periods and the passing of time. By preserving the strange identity of the urban void and highlighting its loss of limits over time, the designer creates a space with a depth that no single period can equal. The introduction of new elements and the preservation of existing elements produce a heterogeneous space that challenges conventional urban form, function, and thought.

³⁶ Ibid., 122.
³⁷ Ibid., 123.
³⁸ Ibid., 122.
³⁹ Ibid., 123.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 123.
Significance

The theoretical contributions of Sola-Morales Rubio are significant to this investigation for a number of reasons. First, Sola-Morales Rubio portrays empty urban space as having great possibility and potential. These spaces are no longer viewed as purely negative, but are also free and unengaged. Second, Sola-Morales Rubio places a strong emphasis on the unique character and strange identity associated with abandoned and unoccupied space. He insists that these spaces are unique to the remainder of the city and should be preserved. Third, Sola-Morales Rubio critiques architecture as an aggressive instrument of power. He argues against violent transformations that mask the true character of space and time. Finally, Sola-Morales Rubio inspires the designer to amplify the flow of energy and loss off limits experienced by empty urban spaces.

Major Points of Interest

- Urban voids are not purely negative
- Empty and unoccupied spaces are also viewed as free, available, and unengaged
- The identity and characteristics of voids are unique to the remainder of the city
- Architecture acts as an aggressive instrument of power that imposes limits, order, and form on urban voids and creates identical, recognizable, and universal spaces
- The strange identity, energy, and loss of limits associated with vacant urban land should be preserved and amplified
Case Study
Detroit
The writings of Eduard Bru, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio eloquently portray the multidimensional nature of the urban void. The designers reveal the eerie presence of the past, present, and future that lies embedded within the empty and abandoned spaces of the city. The nostalgic history associated with the past, combined with the vacant and neglected condition of the present, help to shape future aspirations of freedom and change within the void. When developing an intervening strategy, it is essential to possess knowledge of both the historical formation and the current condition of the urban void. Throughout its life, the city of Detroit has experienced a variety of changes in both urban growth and form. At its height, Detroit boasted a population of nearly two million people and ranked fifth among the most populated cities in the United States. More recently, however, the city has experienced great abandonment and neglect as development and population trends shift to the suburbs. Changes in the population density and in the urban fabric of Detroit have been immense. For example, the city now contains over 66,000 vacant lots (4,600 acres) of previously developed land. The following will trace the rise and fall of the city of Detroit in an attempt to identify factors and circumstances involved in the historic emergence of Detroit’s urban void.

The Rise

The Industrial Revolution marks a great turning point in both the population growth and urbanization of cities worldwide. In Shrinking Cities, Ronaldo Munck states that, “although the term ‘Industrial Revolution’ is sometimes contested by ‘revisionist’ historians, it remains an evocative symbol of a great social transformation.” As fossil fuels replaced wind, wood, and water as the primary source of energy and as machinery supplemented the more traditional manual labor, production capacity increased. This altered the production and availability of nearly all basic human needs. Initially, it also allowed for, and encouraged, the creation and densification of urban areas. The concentration of factories that ensued created a modern working class, which had its own distinctive social, economic, political, and cultural life.

Before the onset of the capitalist industrialization, the city of Detroit experienced modest levels of growth. For over one-hundred years after its original French founding in 1701, Detroit’s economy and growth was focused on the fur trade and farming. The unique shape of the French ribbon farms, which extended out from the river in long narrow strips, is still visible today in the urban form and layout of the city. Many of the original farm boundaries now mark present-day streets in Detroit that are named after the original owners, such as, Riopelle, St. Aubin, Chene, and Livernois.
Growth of the city was accelerated in the early nineteenth century with the introduction of both improved transportation and cheap land. The first steamboat arrived in Detroit in 1818 and the Erie Canal opened in late 1825. These inventions helped to propel the export of Detroit area wheat, corn, fish, and pork. Between the years of 1830 and 1840 the population of Detroit increased from 2,222 to 9,124 inhabitants.47

Over the next few decades, Detroit gradually developed into a center for heavy industry. The availability of materials necessary for the production of steel and pig iron encouraged the placement of numerous foundries and machine works within the city. The engines and boilers that were built facilitated the expansion of mining, sawmills, and other emerging industries. By the close of the nineteenth century, some of Detroit’s most dominant industries included railroad cars and equipment, shipbuilding, steel, stoves, drugs, paints and varnishes, shoes, soap, tobacco, and seeds. The city exited the century as the thirteenth most populated city in the United States, with a population of 285,704 inhabitants.48 Arthur Woodford, author of This Is Detroit: 1701-2001, notes that, “although Detroit was indeed a big city by 1890, it would be the motor car that would transform its destiny to that of one of the world’s major urban centers.”49

The first “horseless carriage” appeared on the streets of Detroit on March 6, 1896. The opening of the first Detroit automobile plant in 1901 followed this. The earliest automobiles produced in Detroit carried a price tag of over two-thousand dollars and were only affordable to the wealthy. Henry Ford, who incorporated the Ford Motor Company in 1903, envisioned a “mass-produced, low-priced automobile so simple in construction that any handyman could repair it.”50 His vision led to the early standardization of Ford parts and, in 1913, the first automatic assembly line. Production of the automobile quickly jumped from 7.5 Model T’s per hour to 146 per hour. The newly found ease of production also lowered the price from $780 to $380.51 This technological advancement laid the groundwork for a great expansion of automobile investment and employment within the City of Detroit. The automobile industry quickly dominated every other existing industry within the city.

The Ford Motor Company, in 1904, employed thirty-one workers. By 1920, employment at the company exceeded fifty-six thousand workers. The same trend was mirrored by the population growth of the city of Detroit. By 1920, the city boasted a population of 993,678 residents and was now the fourth largest city in the United States.52 As the automobile industry continued to grow, increased employment opportunities and innovations, like Henry Ford’s famous five-dollar workday, attracted jobseekers from all over Michigan, the United States, and Europe. Most notably, perhaps, was the influx of African Americans from the southern states. In spite of numerous depressions and two World Wars, the dominance of this single industry continued and the city grew rapidly. The city’s population peaked in 1950 at 1,849,568 residents.53 It was at this time and under these conditions that Detroit entered into a state of decline, devouring the city at a rate reminiscent only of its own extraordinary growth.
Case Study

The Fall

According to Philipp Oswalt of the Shrinking Cities exhibition and publication, the depopulation of cities results from various transformation processes. When considering the global phenomenon, Oswalt argues that it is possible to differentiate four primary sources of city depopulation: deindustrialization, suburbanization, post-socialist transformation, and demographic aging. The two sources that are most rigorously acting on cities in the American Rust Belt are deindustrialization and suburbanization. Even then, it is more the decentralization of industry than deindustrialization that changed the face of Detroit’s dominant automobile industry, largely contributing to the city’s demise.

The Shrinking Cities study, funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, deems the City of Detroit as one of the most extreme examples of shrinkage due to suburbanization. As part of an international comparison of depopulating urban regions, Detroit was chosen as the primary case study for suburbanization. Walter Prigge, from the Shrinking Cities project, defines suburbanization as “the exodus of residents, industry and services, and culture from the big city centers into the outlying regions.”

The suburbanization of Detroit is made apparent through city statistics since 1950. Between the years of 1950 and 2000, the city lost more than one million residents, 165,000 industrial jobs, and 147,000 housing units. It only added 30,000 service sector jobs. At a regional scale, however, the metropolitan area increased significantly. Over the same fifty-year period, the neighboring counties of Detroit gained nearly two million residents, 50,000 industrial and 600,000 service sector job, and over a million new homes.

An interesting mix of closely related and tightly woven-together social, economic, political, and cultural factors contributed to the decline and disinvestment of the city center and the associated suburbanization of Metro Detroit. No one factor truly stands alone and often numerous factors are difficult to tease apart. Some of the factors contributing to the depopulation of Detroit and the subsequent increase of empty space include industrial decentralization, personal transportation advancements, racial segregation and its corresponding effects on education, crime, and public perception, and Federal housing, highway, and urban renewal policies. It is for these reasons that the city of Detroit is recognized as a temporary, disposable, movable, and terminal city.

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55 Ibid., 14.
Industrial Decentralization

In his essay on the city of Detroit, Charles Waldheim notes that, “the motor city was once an international model for industrialized urban development.” In reality, however, this title was short lived as the process of decentralization in Detroit began as early as the 1920s. Henry Ford initiated this process by relocating facilities outside the city in hope of reducing production cost. Woodford explains that in later years companies had additional incentive to decentralize. This was largely because it was more efficient and economical to produce products in factories closer to migrating consumers. In his own words, Henry Ford expresses his view on the decentralization of industry:

The belief that an industrial country must concentrate its industry is, in my opinion, unfounded. That is only an intermediate phase in the development. Industry will decentralize itself. If the city were to decline, no one would rebuild it according to its present plan. That alone discloses our own judgment on our cities.

Unknown to Henry Ford at the time of his comment, the decentralization of the automobile industry in Detroit would perpetuate the decentralization of residents and businesses from the city proper. Many authors have related the changing trends in manufacturing with the rise and fall of the concentrated industrial city and with changes in its urban form. Robert Fishman, as part of the Shrinking Cities project, argues that, “the key to this strange pattern of shrinkage and growth for Detroit... can be found in the changing fate of the manufacturing base that grew from 1890 to 1930 and reached its height in the early 1950s.” In Stalking Detroit, Patrik Schumacher and Christian Rogner observe that, “Detroit served as a visible model of Fordist industrial development during the first half of the twentieth century.” Similarly, Charles Waldheim, in Shaping the City, argues that, “the flexibility and increasing pace of technological change associated with Fordist production served as models for an increasingly temporary urbanism.” These authors all point out the urban and spatial implications that the changing face of industrialization had on the city.

In the early stages of Detroit’s industrial development, factories clustered near the urban core. They were compact, often occupying four or five-story loft buildings located on or in close proximity to the railroad. A dense pattern of small bungalow housing formed nearby to accommodate the working class. It was under this vertically compact model that Henry

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59 Arthur M. Woodford, This Is Detroit 1701-2001, 110.
64 Robert Fishman, Vol. 1 of Shrinking Cities, 66-68.
Ford was able to house the first complex assembly line under a single roof, thus allowing the production of the widely affordable Model T. The compact nature of the industrial facility at that time mirrored the surrounding dense urban condition.65

In subsequent years, beginning in the 1920s and shifting more radically following the Second World War, extensive one-story structures replaced the vertical loft factory. This change, which allowed production to occur more efficiently on a single level, required more land. These factories sought out cheaper land near the periphery of the city limits. Unlike the previous model, which utilized a dense network of central city rail lines, factories now depended on trucking and the highway.66 Eventually, as production numbers grew, the factory itself broke apart into a complex of sub-components. Each separate building represented a specific task and inter-related functionality determined the layout of the factory complex.67 These changes to both the factory location and layout represent alterations made to the city fabric and population dispersion. Instead of vertical growth, the physical city stretched-out horizontally at an increasing distance from the city center.

Patrik Schumacher and Christian Rogner suggest that the final phase of decentralization emerged with the “re-application of Fordist principles of production on regional and national scales.”68 This eventually developed into the global scale that dominates today. Schumacher and Rogner argue that this move, by Ford Motor Company, was an implementation of “decentralizing anti-urbanism.”69 As production sites became scattered across the nation, the infrastructural networks that linked them became increasingly important. Industrial dependence on the national highway and technologically advanced communicative systems diminished the role of the city. Schumacher and Rogner observe that the expansion of Fordist production patterns “fueled the rapid decompression of urban industrial cities and the decentralization of both mass production and mass consumption.”70

Charles Waldeim notes that, “with each successive transformation in production paradigms, Detroit re-tooled itself more completely and more quickly than virtually any other city in history.”71 The movement of industrial facilities from the urban core and its subsequent effect on city residents and businesses ultimately changed the urban composition of the city of Detroit. The city became filled with industrial brown fields, abandoned buildings, and empty space as residents shadowed industrial trends.

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68 Ibid, 50.
69 Ibid, 50.
70 Ibid, 50.
71 Charles Waldheim, “Detroit: Motor City,” 82.
Ironically, the product that most defines Detroit and facilitated much of its rapid growth is also largely responsible for the demise of the city. Charles Waldeim suggests that the genius behind the Fordist paradigm was that it created “a culture that consumes the products of its own labor while consistently creating a surplus of demand.”72 Henry Ford made it possible for the average American to purchase an automobile. He did this in two ways. First, he perfected the standardization of parts and introduced the assembly line as a means of making the automobile easily accessible and affordable. As discussed earlier, these two mechanisms greatly increased the rates of production and minimized the cost to the consumer. Second, Ford invented the five-dollar day and five-day workweek. This innovation, as intended by Ford, fueled mass product consumption by the working classes themselves.73

The availability and affordability of the automobile to all working class Americans changed the urban landscape forever. The people of Detroit were no longer limited by locational restraints and forced to live within close proximity of work and the streetcar. Enhanced mobility allowed for residents to both visit and live at the city’s perimeter and beyond. According to Arthur Woodford, automobile owners were quickly “no longer satisfied being restricted to city driving.”74 Both the urban and suburban landscape rapidly changed to accommodate the needs and desires associated with the automobile. In 1909, a stretch of Woodward Avenue became the world’s first concrete highway. In 1911, the world’s first set of white center dividing-lines were painted onto a roadway in Detroit. In 1920, the first traffic light was installed at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Woodward Avenue. Three years later, the first stop sign was installed.75

The innovations and extensive street networks that soon dominated the urban landscape of Detroit provided an escape for residents who could afford to leave the dense and later depopulated urban core. Residents left for numerous reasons. Streets quickly widened and extensive highway systems soon ripped through the city in pursuit of a more distant place. Woodford notes that by the late-1970s, over two hundred and sixty-five miles of expressway was either completed or under construction within the Detroit metropolitan area.76 The implementation of the highway system will again be discussed under the context of Federal policies and the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act.

America’s dependence on the automobile changed the nature of pedestrian activity in the city and diminished the demand for mass public transportation. Auto-dominated streets became void of traditional pedestrian activity. The streetscape grew to favor the automobile over the pedestrian. Additionally, the large expanse of streets, highways, parking lots, and other auto-dominated facilities brought about the rise of new voids. These included the interstitial and marginalized space along, between, and within streets and other auto-dominated areas. As more and more residents and businesses followed the expressways out to the suburbs, inner-city Detroit was left with an over-sized street infrastructure, thinning streetscapes, and a growing number of abandoned buildings and vacant parcels.

72 Ibid., 81.
73 Ibid., 89.
75 Ibid., 99.
76 Ibid., 164.
Racial Segregation

Racial tension and segregation have long been a factor in the depopulation and decay of the City of Detroit. As part of a study by the International Center for Urban Ecology (ICUE), Stephen Vogel proclaims that race is “the unspoken ‘elephant’ that dominates everything in Detroit.” Perhaps the great divide between whites and blacks in Detroit is nowhere more apparent than in the city’s changing racial composition between the years of 1950 and 2000. At the city’s population height in 1950, 16.1% of all residents were African American. By the year 2000, however, the number of white residents decreased significantly and the black population increased by over four-fold. At the turn of the century, over 80% of all Detroit residents were African American. Conversely, over 80% of all suburban residents were white.

In the late 1950s, Philadelphia Mayor Richard Dilworth referred to this phenomenon as the “white noose.” Thomas Sugrue, from Shrinking Cities, explains that inner cities became plagued by racial isolation, concentrated poverty, joblessness, and physical decay. The term used by Mayor Dilworth implies that a ring of predominately white and well-to-do suburbs was strangling the depressed urban core. According to Arthur Woodford, “when Detroit lost its white residents, it also lost a significant portion of its economic base.” The exodus of the white population, often referred to as “white flight,” removed vital businesses, services, professionals, and leadership roles from the inner city. This, coupled with both the real and perceived fear of escalating poverty, increasing crime, decreasing property values, and failing schools, further stimulated the mass exodus of white residents.

Perhaps the rise of racial tension in Detroit is most closely associated with the great influx of new residents searching for unskilled labor positions. At the onset of the Second World War, Detroit became known as the “Arsenal of Democracy.” The rapid production of wartime materials, coupled with the loss of laborers to the armed forces, left Detroit in need of additional skilled and unskilled workers. Over a three-year period, beginning in 1940, more than 50,000 Southern blacks and 200,000 Appalachian whites migrated into the city in search of employment. Arthur Woodford contends that many “Appalachian ‘hillbillies’ brought with them their undiluted racial prejudices” and that, consequently, the city underwent a rapid deterioration of race relations. Intolerable housing conditions and racial bias towards African Americans led to the first major Detroit race riot in 1943.

The migration of African Americans into Detroit continued long after the end of the War. This occurred despite the steady loss of industrial employment throughout Northeastern and Midwestern cities. According to Thomas Sugrue, “for a large number of African Americans, the

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79 Arthur M. Woodford, This Is Detroit 1701-2001, 221.
80 Ibid., 151.
81 Ibid., 156.
promise of steady, secure, and relatively well-paid employment in the North proved illusory."^82 African Americans met conditions of complete racial segregation, hardening ghettosization, overcrowded and intolerable housing, poverty, police abuse, economic inequality, black militancy and racial stereotyping. Bitter feelings and deteriorating conditions for African Americans improved very little since the riot of 1943. The result was an even more explosive outbreak of racial riots in 1967.

The Detroit race riots of 1967 greatly altered the image of the city and expedited the white exodus to the suburbs. Roughly 30% of Detroit’s 1.5 million residents left the city between 1970 and 2000.^83 Long time Detroit resident, Concetta Davis-Lewis, recalls that:

> Before the riots, neighborhoods were flourishing and people were taking care of their homes. But after the riot, a lot of them started to move. Renters moved in and didn’t take care of the property. Things just started to go down.\(^84\)

Over 4,400 Detroit police officers, 8,000 national guardsmen, 4,700 federal troops, and 360 state police officers occupied Detroit by the end of the weeklong riot. In its aftermath, there were 7,231 arrests, 2,509 looted homes and stores, 412 buildings that required demolition, and 388 families left homeless.^85 On the fifty-year anniversary of the race riots, Associated Press writer Corey Williams wrote that, “Detroit’s landscape changed forever following the five-day race riot in July 1967.”^86 Local resident Keenan Bowman notes that even fifty-years later, many of the affected properties are still vacant lots. Past resident Nathan Shiovitz recalls that, “once the first people moved out, the next family followed, then it was like wildfire.”^87

Racial tension and its associated rise in crime and poverty created an abundance of abandoned and neglected homes and businesses in the city of Detroit. The removal of these structures, by both demolition and arson, has created large amounts of empty and derelict space. The perception of Detroit as a dangerous and racially unstable city has continued to plague residents today. Despite still having nearly 900,000 residents, much of Detroit has been deemed as uninhabitable.

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83 United States Census Bureau.
85 Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw, The Detroit Almanac 300 Years of Life in the Motor City (Detroit, MI: Detroit Free Press, 2000), 519.
87 Ibid.
Federal Policy

Numerous federal policies and programs contributed to the depopulating and degrading urban landscape across the United States. Some Federal actions provided direct means for the mass exodus of urban residents into the suburbs. Other movements simply perpetuated the fears and dreams of residents, resulting in additional migration out of urban centers. Perhaps the two largest Federal stimulants of suburbanization, which forever altered the American urban landscape, were the 1956 Interstate Highway Act and the 1954 Housing Act. Both acts surfaced in the aftermath of the Second World War and helped to alleviate rising public fears of nuclear attack, fulfill strong aspirations for the “American dream home,” and expand economic growth outside of the traditional city boundary.

Michael Quinn Dudley, a research associate at the Institute of Urban Studies in Winnipeg, Manitoba, contends that urban sprawl can no longer be viewed as an accident of history. Instead, Dudley suggests that it was an “intentional but misguided strategy for survival in the nuclear age.” He points out that numerous federal agencies and the American Institute of Planners (AIP) officially endorsed the concept of defensive dispersal in response to fears of nuclear attack. Dudley defines the concept of defensive dispersal as “the thesis that major cities were such obvious targets for nuclear weapons that they would need to be built at far lower population densities and contain much smaller industrial concentrations than before.” According to Dudley, post-War transportation, housing, and urban renewal strategies all reflected the desire for decreased population densities.

Federal Transportation Policy

The 1956 Interstate Highway Act allowed for the construction of a 41,000-mile highway system that was called “the biggest public works program since the Pyramids.” According to Robert Fishman, the interstate highway system “represented a conscious plan of regional restructuring.” The system of superhighways was initially called the “Interstate and Defense Highways.” In addition to supporting the perceived need for defensive dispersal and large-scale city evacuations, Fishman also points out that the Act was meant to stimulate economic growth by removing residents and industries from the crowded and overbuilt cities.

89 Ibid., 52.
91 Ibid., 69.
Arthur Woodford notes that the highway system in Detroit, as in many cities, both created and solved problems. Boasting one of the most extensive freeway networks in the nation, Detroit rapidly moved large numbers of cars and trucks into and out of the city. The highway system provided easy access to the surrounding undeveloped landscape. The lack of natural boundaries and adjacent cities expedited the process of suburbanization. According to Woodford, “Detroiter discarded inner-city property as if it were a three-year-old car.”

In addition to providing the infrastructural means for residents to vacate Detroit and live outside of the city, the implementation of the highway system also drastically altered the urban landscape for those residents who remained. In Detroit, over 20,400 homes were destroyed to accommodate the placement of the highway. Many vibrant city neighborhoods were divided or destroyed. The stigma of the freeway, created by unpleasant noise, views, and congestion decreased adjacent residential property values. Interstitial land between the highway and neighborhoods, containing insufficient buffers, became fallow and neglected. As more and more residents utilized the highway system for transportation, traditional transportation routes and once thriving urban streetscapes throughout the city became neglected and fell into disrepair. The changing character of the cityscape further perpetuated the outward movement of residents resulting in the expansion of the urban void.

Federal Housing Policy

In a similar fashion, the 1954 Housing Act is also largely responsible for restructuring the American urban landscape and, consequently, the degradation of the urban environment. According to Michael Quinn Dudley, the goal of defensive dispersal was legislated in the 1954 Housing Act. Perhaps more importantly then perpetuating the nuclear fears of the American public, however, the Act encouraged the realization of the “American dream.” Robert Fishman contends that President Dwight Eisenhower (1953 – 1961) used the never-ceasing universal desire for the “American dream house” to encourage economic demand and facilitate high employment.

Before the Federal government created a new system of mortgages guaranteed by the Federal Housing Administration, the large single-family house in the suburbs was largely unattainable by the American working-class. Robert Fishman states that, “since the nineteenth century such houses had symbolized the privilege of escape from the crowded and unhealthy city to a family-oriented world of nature.” The 1954 Housing Act, which offered mortgages with low interest rates, low down-payments, and long-term repayment periods, helped to facilitate a “nation of homeowners.”

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94 Arthur M. Woodford, This Is Detroit 1701-2001, 164.
95 Ibid., 164.
97 Ibid., 69.
98 Ibid., 69.
Unfortunately for the urban centers, the 1954 Housing Act primarily stimulated homeownership in the suburbs and beyond. Limitations on the affordable government guaranteed home mortgages typically excluded the purchase of homes within the central city. For example, as recommended by the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), many mortgages were only available for the purchase of residential dwellings with a minimum lot size of 5,000 square feet per family. It is not surprising then, that as white middle and working class Americans purchased homes in the surrounding suburbs, the urban housing stock became vacant and fell into a state of disrepair.

Federal Urban Renewal Policy

Ironically, the 1954 Housing Act intentionally replaced the concept of “urban redevelopment” from earlier housing acts with the term “urban renewal.” Its goal was to encourage renovation over demolition. Dudley comments that, “in light of the overenthusiastic land-clearance that followed, however, this is difficult to reconcile.” In part, post-War efforts to de-densify urban areas through urban renewal aimed to reduce both the presence of slums and urban congestion in overcrowded cities. The result was often the destruction of poor, yet viable, urban neighborhoods. According to Logan and Molotch, urban renewal projects of the 1960s displaced “10 percent of all central city white residents and 20 percent of all black residents.” As part of an effort towards urban decentralization, new projects were typically built with a much lower dwelling density.

In his Harvard Project on the City, Rem Koolhaas refers to the clearance of urban renewal projects with the term *tabula rasa*. The term, which Koolhaas calls “one of the twentieth century’s most important devices,” is the idea of “starting from scratch.” He contests that without it, modern architects like Le Corbusier believed that nothing was possible. This was largely the mindset of federal urban renewal projects until authors and advocates like Jane Jacobs argued that densely populated older areas encouraged urban vitality. Even today in the city of Detroit, however, demolition is seen as a much more viable option than renovation.

100 Ibid., 60.
104 Ibid., 310.
105 Ibid., 309.
Available Federal aid in the 1960s led to a massive urban renewal program within the city of Detroit. Most of the projects focused on the city’s ethnic and working class communities that were adjacent to or near downtown. Some of Detroit’s most vital and colorful neighborhoods, like Paradise Valley, Black Bottom, Corktown, and Chinatown underwent drastic transformations. The urban renewal programs of that era cleared nearly 15,000 acres of land, containing more than 2,000 businesses and 17,000 homes.107

An essential component to any discussion on urban voids in Detroit is the fact that urban renewal in the city was a long, complicated, and bureaucratic process. After buildings and neighborhoods were demolished, cleared land remained vacant and desolate for long periods of time while government officials and community members debated its fate. Many projects never materialized after site demolition. According to Arthur Woodford, “as a result, vacant land became, and continues to be, a pervasive and accepted part of the Detroit inner-city landscape.”108

The vacant land cleared for urban renewal projects, then and now, resulted in a variety of landscape types. Pushing the limits of urbanity, some common landscapes in the city today include barren construction sites, vast parking surfaces, and overgrown vegetative settings. In his own words, Woodford describes one particular type of landscape that is common to the city of Detroit:

>This land took on various hues and physical characteristics, from bare earth and weeds, to green, rural-like tranquility, to western sagebrush, and to a Detroit specialty, white wooden fences, which gave vacant blocks in the heart of the city the appearance of Kentucky horse farms.109

108 Ibid., 169.
109 Ibid., 169.

The rapid rise and swift fall of Detroit, which closely mimics technological and consumer trends within the automobile industry and also reflects racial tension and federal policy, has led many authors to render the city as temporary, disposable, movable and terminal. Kyong Park, a founder of the International Center for Urban Ecology (iCUE) and author of *Urban Ecology Detroit and Beyond*, notes that “Detroit is not simply shrinking; it is moving also.”110 Through Federal policies and programs, as previously discussed, Park boldly proclaims that “cities were asked to move and they did.”111 According to Park, over a period of fifty-years, the city of Detroit moved twenty-five miles out towards its peripheries. Moving at a rate of roughly one-half mile a year, Park describes the process as one of “construction, occupation, abandonment, demolition, and greening.”112

Kyong Park also refers to Detroit as “the ultimate disposable city.”113 Similar to the disposable culture of consumerism, Detroit continuously develops the new and abandons the old. An Arthur Woodford phrase, previously quoted, helps to highlight the disposable quality of the city of Detroit. Woodford notes that, “Detroiter discarded inner-city property as if it were a three-year-old car.”114 In the same fashion, Charles Waldheim contends that it was the same qualities that made Detroit the preeminent model for industrial urbanism (speed, mobility, and flexibility) that also doomed its urban environment to be temporary and disposable.115

It was a complex set of conditions that set the stage for the urban decline of Detroit and the subsequent rise of the urban void. Ultimately, the factors listed above all share one primary commonality. Each contributed to the exodus of residents and businesses from the central city. As roughly one million residents moved from the inner city to the suburbs, an over sized housing stock and expansive city infrastructure fell into disrepair. In a city that exudes temporality and disposability, voids quickly emerged from decreased use, decay, demolition, and arson. The neglected space, which continues to grow, has attracted minimal reuse and continues to scar the once thriving urban environment. Understanding the condition and history under which the urban void of Detroit developed is an important step in planning for its future.

111 Ibid., 177.
112 Ibid., 177.
113 Ibid., 176.
Physical Responses

The most common political response to declining populations and decaying urban landscapes is to raise taxes in an attempt to counteract rising social costs. For an increasingly impoverished city, this tactic proves to be self-destructive and only decreases the attractiveness of the city as a place to live and work.\(^{116}\) Kyong Park notes that the situation in Detroit was exacerbated by thousands of homes and businesses that were intentionally left vacant in order to decrease real estate values. The desirability of low property values, on behalf of the developer, is that large amounts of space can be cheaply and easily acquired and redeveloped for profit. Instead, decreased government tax revenues resulted in city tax increases, the closure of publicly funded institutions like schools and libraries, and the rise of illiteracy and unemployment.\(^{117}\) The changes that occurred to the urban environment in Detroit led to heavy restrictions on lending and investing within the city limits, making new residential construction and renovation projects virtually impossible. The result, according to Park, was the creation of thousands of tabula rasa project sites waiting for redevelopment.\(^{118}\)

As previously discussed, Rem Koolhaas defines tabula rasa as “the idea of starting from scratch.”\(^{119}\) This modernist concept of redevelopment, which dominated much of the twentieth century, cleared entire blocks of traditional urban landscape in lieu of newer, bigger, and better projects. Despite a large backlash from advocates and community organizations, inspired in part by Jane Jacobs and her 1961 text *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the concept of promoting demolition over renovation still lingers today. Over the last thirty years, Detroit has chosen to start from scratch again and again in numerous unsuccessful attempts to reinvent and revive its city.

Perhaps the earliest and most notable large-scale public/private downtown investment project was the Renaissance Center. Completed in 1978, the massive office and hotel complex was designed by John Portman. It dominates the skyline of Detroit today. Its placement, a now predominante location on the riverfront, erased numerous historic elements of Detroit’s industrial past. The building itself, according to Mitch Cope from *Shrinking Cities*, is one of the most extreme examples of what he calls “fortification architecture.”\(^{120}\) According to Cope, architects and planners used fortification walls, fences, roads, and earthworks, in order to “guard against the city itself.”\(^{121}\) Fortification systems in Detroit typically impede local pedestrian access in favor of the suburban automobile commuter. Ironically, the symbol of renaissance and change within the city of Detroit used “an exterior concrete façade, an entrance blockaded by 24-foot-high

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117 Kyong Park, Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond, 176.
118 Ibid., 176.
121 Ibid., 293.
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concrete pyramid bunkers, bridges, catwalks, and glass towers at each corner”\textsuperscript{122} in order to completely separate itself from the city’s urban residents. Even though this intervention filled a previously abandoned space with a solid, its fortification architecture created a series of new empty spaces that are unfriendly to pedestrian traffic and devoid of urban activity.

Within the most recent decade, the revitalization efforts of Detroit have focused on constructing new theatres, new football and baseball stadiums, four new gambling casinos, convention center expansions and other entertainment destinations that are subsidized by the public, yet, for-profit and privately owned.\textsuperscript{123} According to Charles Waldheim, “these latest architectural attempts to proclaim Detroit ‘back’ have effectively committed the city to a future as a destination entertainment theme park for its wealthy suburban ex-patriots.”\textsuperscript{124} The massive \textit{tabula rasa} projects have done little for the local resident and have not restored vital urban activity back to the post-industrial city. While local residents have theoretical access to numerous unaffordable entertainment venues, the city, itself, is no longer home to a single major grocery store franchise.\textsuperscript{125} Projects continue to cash-in on the branding of Detroit, while city residents live in poverty and the urban environment continues to erode.

Outside of demolition, the intervention of the city government has been very limited exterior to the downtown central business district. According to Dan Hoffman from \textit{Stalking Detroit}, “unbuilding surpassed building as the city’s primary architectural activity.”\textsuperscript{126} Between the years 1978 and 1998, the city issued only 9,000 building permits for new homes. During the same time frame an estimated 108,000 demolition permits were issued.\textsuperscript{127} In 1990, the city drafted a document called the \textit{Detroit Vacant Land Survey}. This document, though never officially executed, called for the relocation of residents from the most vacant portions of the city to more viable areas. The City’s plan aimed to demolish vacant homes and fence-off vacant parcels. According to the plan, empty space would be “landscaped” or allowed to “return to nature.”\textsuperscript{128} Services to the abandoned areas would be discontinued in an attempt to lower operational costs.

In the face of one of the largest demolition programs in the history of American urbanism, many urban residents of Detroit have learned to no longer depend on the city government to plan the urban void and restore vital urban activity to the landscape. Residents have begun to intervene on their own accord. Interboro Partners, A Brooklyn, New York architecture firm that participated in the \textit{Shrinking Cities} exhibition, documented an example of intervention

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 293.
\textsuperscript{124} Charles Waldheim, “Detroit: Motor City,” 92.
\textsuperscript{126} Charles Waldheim, “Detroit: Motor City,” 84.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 79.
by local residents that has been occurring, nearly unnoticed, for many years now. Interboro Partners observed that many vacant lots were purchased or “taken” by residents of adjacent properties. This re-parceling of depopulating urban neighborhoods has given new life and definition to previously void spaces. Among other things, residents have used the additional space to create public and private gardens, expand lawns, extend homes, build garages, erect jungle gyms, and facilitate private businesses. It has helped residents and neighborhoods to create value and add additional equity to their homes.

A more extreme example of local residential intervention is visible in the Heidelberg Project. Heidelberg Street is located on the East Side of Detroit and is filled with numerous abandoned homes. Out of dismay for the threat that these urban voids posed to his neighborhood, local artist Tyree Guyton purchased the vacant homes and transformed them into giant works of art using found objects. Kyong Park describes the project:

They had transformed a dead street with magical objects – hundreds of vacuum cleaners, dolls, signs, car hoods, shoes and other abandoned odds and ends that they painted and attached to trees and houses; the most domestic urban monument you will ever see.

Throughout the completion of his work, Guyton emphasized both the expression and exploration of social issues and the involvement of neighborhood residents and children. Guyton’s project, which aimed to motivate community interaction, awareness, and education, earned the Spirit of Detroit Award in 1989 and the Michigan Artist Award in 1992.


130 Park, Kyong, Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond, 7.

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Literary Responses

The expanding urban void and the strained urban conditions within the city of Detroit have recently attracted the attention of many local, regional, national, and international design professionals, academics, and theorists. The ongoing discussions about the condition of the depopulating city and its degrading urban form have generated a wide range of research, intervention strategies, and general public awareness. Proposed interventions, regarding the urban void, range from radical transformations to small-scale modest initiatives.

An example of an extreme intervention comes out of the work of Camilo Jose Vergara. Vergara is a photographer who has photographed, documented, and published the decaying characteristics of Detroit in his books, American Ruins and The New American Ghetto. He has also displayed his images and ideas in national journals and magazines such as Metropolis, the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Nation. As a “solution” to the decaying urban environment of Detroit, Vergara proposes that a significant portion of downtown Detroit be vacated and preserved as a “national ruins park.” In his own words, Vergara calls for “a dozen city blocks of pre-distressed skyscrapers to be stabilized and left standing as ruins: An American Acropolis.”

Vergara has also pondered the spectacular scenario where Detroit returns to nature. His propositions, however, give little consideration to the city’s remaining 900,000 urban residents and are essentially furthering the notion of Detroit as a tourist destination and not as a home.

Intervention strategies like those of Camilo Vergara, typically considered far-fetched and unreasonable, offer creative interpretations of contemporary problems. These propositions, pushing the limits of reality, inspire people to view situations in a new light. Conversely, intervention strategies also focus on modest initiatives, common sense ideas, and interactions that are already underway. Interboro Partners, for example, state that, “instead of emphasizing the spectacular new developments that are helping to gentrify Detroit’s downtown, we take as our inspiration the small-scale individual efforts that are already underway to improve one’s lot and increase one’s space.” In the project titled However Unspectacular: The New Suburbanism, Interboro Partners contest the propositions of Camilo Vergara. They soberly argue that, “if left to its own accord, Detroit will not revert to nature... Detroit will return to the suburbs.” Warning of the opportunistic and ravenous force of the national suburban trend, Interboro Partners propose new design and policy initiatives that will lead to a new suburbansim.

Three particular research initiatives and their subsequent publications have contributed largely to discussions on the depopulation and urban decay of Detroit. Shrinking Cities, Stalking Detroit, and Urban Ecology Detroit and Beyond have all made significant contributions to the broad debate that is likely to only intensify over the following years. The three projects explore a wide range of resources and propose a diverse set of both radical and modest intervention strategies.

135 Ibid., 324.


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*Shrinking Cities*

The *Shrinking Cities* exhibition and publication is a project by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. *Shrinking Cities* is the earliest literary inspiration to the thesis. The study focuses on four international cities that include Detroit (USA), Ivanovo (Russia), Halle/Leipzig (German), and Manchester/Liverpool (Britain). Over 200 artists, architects, academics, and international teams from around the world contributed to an in-depth survey and visionary interventions of the depopulating city. The chief curator for Shrinking Cities, Philipp Oswalt, describes the project and its goals in his own words:

> The project pursues different approaches that sometimes run counter to each other, focusing on cultural themes and international correlations. The goal is to pose new questions, enable new perspectives, and formulate new approaches. Expectations that the project will produce ready-made answers or even “the great solution” are in our opinion misguided, because they are based on the classical myth of planning. A productive approach to urban shrinkage can only be successful if it is part of a long process, one that utilizes heterogeneous means and forges new paths.136

*Stalking Detroit*

*Stalking Detroit* is an anthology of essays, images, and projects that initially focused on the architecture and material remnants of Detroit. As the project matured, it became multi-disciplinary in nature and soon began to explore the “economic, political, and cultural conditions underpinning the city’s particular urban formation and the extreme urbanism that it fostered.”137

Not surprisingly, the project was heavily inspired by the work of Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio. In fact, Sola-Morales Rubio was composing the forward for the publication at the time of his death. Dedicated to his memory, *Stalking Detroit* states that, “beyond the obvious and immediate inspiration for our research found in his essay, *Terrain Vague*, he continuously generated multiple and fertile grounds of meaningful inquiry, always with an abundance of profound insights into the rhythms and flows of contemporaneity.”138

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137 Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim, and Jason Young, eds., *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona: Actar, 2001), 11.
138 Ibid., 9.
Urban Ecology Detroit and Beyond

Urban Ecology Detroit and Beyond represents the accumulation of work produced by Kyong Park and the International Center for Urban Ecology (iCUE). The founding of the iCUE, which is “a nomadic laboratory for future cities,” grew out of Park’s collaboration on a 1998 project in Detroit. The project aimed to capitalize on the unskilled and unemployed labor in Detroit and transform a historic Packard plant into a facility that manufactures prefabricated homes. Park’s interaction with the resilient and extraordinary residents of Detroit led him to reshape his thinking and focus on recreating the city with those who already started the process. The aim of iCUE is not one of drastic intervention, but instead, to “recognize the vital in what is already there.” Andrew Zago, a co-founder of iCUE, further explains the goals of the Center when he states that, “new projects are seen as catalysts rather than as ends in themselves. Art and architecture function as conduits for public imagination, allowing a community to create its own social and public space.”

139 Park, Kyong, Urban Ecology: Detroit and Beyond, front cover.
140 Ibid., 7.
Analysis & Discussion
In Detroit, as in other once-major industrial centers around the world, the emergence of empty space is viewed with great apprehension. The problem surfaces in the face of negative urban trends associated with deindustrialization, automobile domination, racial tension, and federal policies that continue to promote suburbanization and the abandonment of the central core. The necessity of intervention is made clear in the writings of Eduard Bru, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio. Bru states that empty space is one of the three new factors for city planning. Not only is the urban void an essential element when debating the form of the new city, but Bru insists that planning the void is both novel and urgent. This urgency surfaces in the face of the increasingly problematic nature of voids.

All three theorists assist in revealing the problems and concerns associated with empty and abandoned spaces in the urban environment. The unresolved elements of urban voids disconnect them from vital social, cultural, and economic activities and lower the quality of urban life. The negative impact that voids have on adjacent areas facilitates their expansion, creating a disconnected and disjointed urban environment. These deformed, attenuated, and amorphous spaces are foreign to the traditional urban landscape. Interacting with them is a disorienting experience. People are unclear whether they are public or private, near or far, inside or outside. For these reasons, vacant urban land evokes uneasy and insecure emotions and is deemed as uninhabitable, unsafe, and unusable.

The diverse set of factors associated with the depopulation of Detroit results in a broad range of urban void types, conditions, and characteristics. Empty and abandoned spaces exist in all different shapes, sizes, and forms. Each empty space has its own unique character that reflects the history, location, and surrounding context of the void. In Detroit, land vacancies have no limits and know no boundaries. Untended and unoccupied spaces surface in all areas of the city: commercial and business districts, residential neighborhoods, industrial areas, etc. The increasing presence of unclaimed, fallow land throughout Detroit’s urban landscape is visible in the accumulation of empty lots, vacant buildings, demolition sites, surface parking, underutilized corridors, neglected transitional spaces, and oversized infrastructure. In time, a single vacant lot in-between buildings may grow to consume a city block or even an entire neighborhood. Similarly, the edges of automobile dominated streets and highways may erode deep into the urban fabric of the city. There is no one project that can solve the problem of vacancy. The complex nature of empty spaces in the post-industrial depopulating city and the diverse set of conditions that define them make intervention into urban voids difficult.
Analysis & Discussion

Today, in Detroit, thousands of *tabula rasa* remain empty and await the right time and the right price for redevelopment. Detroit and other depopulating central cities address this issue with large-scale intervention strategies, hoping to re-establish the form and order of the traditional American city. A typical city-response to depopulation is the construction of massive entertainment, cultural, retail, and luxury residential projects. Changing the void into the built, these attempts to draw visitors and residents back into the city’s urban core require considerable public funding, additional demolition, an expansion of infrastructure, and an increase in automobile parking. They create universal, recognizable, and identical spaces that conceal the true character of space and time and provide little or no benefit to the average inner-city resident.

A different way to address urban empty spaces, inspired by the theoretical work of Eduard Bru, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio, views the abundance of void spaces as a valuable opportunity. In this case, negative perceptions must change into positive realities and barriers into amenities. The emphasis, then, shifts from rebuilding to rethinking the urban environment. By responding to the specific location, history, and nature of the void, the urban condition of Detroit can be reinvented. The unique characteristics and extensive spread of post-industrial empty spaces encourage the creation of new solutions and new places not typically found within the urban landscape. Given that there is more than one way to make a city, the rise of voids in the city provide the opportunity for the creation of a “new urban specimen.”

Intervention strategies, now, shift from violent transformations designed for a narrow subset of the population to engaging a wide range of urban residents, workers, and visitors by “recognizing the vital in what is already there.” No longer seen as a means to an end, projects become catalysts that recycle forms, materials, and functions within the city. New program and design initiatives become a conduit for public imagination. They reconnect communities and inspire residents to create their own social and public spaces.

Many of the same factors and characteristics responsible for the creation of urban empty spaces are now re-imagined in a way that revives and reconnects disjointed and disparate areas within the urban landscape. In this anomaly, where negatives transform into positives, empty spaces become a catalyst of growth rather than a symbol of decline. Urban voids, themselves, now become the amenity that stops the spread of abandoned spaces and increases the quality of urban life in the post-industrial depopulating city of Detroit.

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144 Eduard Bru, *Coming from the South*, 31.
Analysis & Discussion

The following four examples illustrate how barriers associated with post-industrial empty spaces can be re-imagined as amenities that will help regenerate the urban landscape:

1. *Overgrown vegetation*: Wild, unruly, and overgrown spaces in the city are perceived as anti-urban and consequently absent of vital urban activity. The barrier becomes an amenity by establishing connections between the vegetative and built environments that do not typically exist in densely populated cities. Urban voids become a patchwork of forests, farms, community gardens, watersheds, parks, pathways, and other valuable green spaces. A network of green connections and corridors form, balancing development with ecology and providing valuable ecological habitats and recreational spaces that connect neighborhoods and heal previously developed land over time.

2. *Automobile domination*: Neglected and eroded highway edges provide space for increasing the urban tree canopy. This will create shade and evaporative cooling, process stormwater, produce oxygen, and buffer unpleasant traffic noise and views from adjacent neighborhoods. Wide and oversized streets that discourage pedestrian activity provide the opportunity to diversify modes of transportation and also reformat urban details to the human scale. Inserting wider sidewalks, benches, bike lanes, pavement changes, traffic calming devices, rescaled lighting, shade trees, bio-filtration swales, and green corridors increases pedestrian use. The function of the street transitions from traffic trajectory back to interpersonal exchange.

3. *Racial segregation*: Racial borders and divides provide the space and opportunity to create a vital mix of races, cultures, classes, and small-scale informal economies that attract and serve both urban and suburban residents.

4. *Deindustrialization*: Local residents counter industrial deindustrialization by reusing post-industrial fallow land to recreate jobs and support neighborhood vitality. Vacant industrial and commercial buildings provide flexible and multi-use spaces that accommodate new and expanding businesses, community gatherings, residences, etc. The existing architecture acts as scaffolding that supports both permanent and temporary functions. Over time, program and function can be formalized and layered as new structures and additions densify the area.

*Examples include excerpts from author’s 2010 Master of Architecture thesis at the University of Cincinnati*
Recommendation for Design Process
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As previously discussed, two distinct bodies of research were collected as part of this thesis investigation. The first body of research includes the causing factors, physical characteristics, and city-responses associated with the suburbanization and emergence of empty space experienced by Detroit. The second body of research explores relevant theoretical discussions on vacant urban land from three contemporary urban theorists. Five design intervention principles were extracted from the historic research and theoretical discussions on land vacancies in the urban environment. They promote a new way of addressing urban empty space within the context of Detroit and the post-industrial depopulating city. The five principles provide a basic framework for design intervention that can be applied to a wide range of city void conditions and types. It is important for designers to remember that no single design project can solve the problem of urban land vacancy. All vacant and abandoned spaces in the urban environment have their own unique identity, characteristics, and history. The five design intervention principles are as follows*:

1) View the emergence of urban empty space as a great opportunity that is full of promise, possibility, and expectation. Transform barriers into amenities and emphasize the benefits and availability of urban open space.

2) Preserve the unique identity and characteristics of the urban void by amplifying the loss of limits and passing of time that have surfaced in the urban landscape. Discourage violent transformations that create recognizable, identical, and universal spaces, masking the true character of space and time and offering little or no benefit to the average urban resident.

3) Respond to the specific location and emphasize the particular nature of the urban void. Address the factors related to the emergence of empty space.

4) Challenge the perception of space as a resource to be processed, manipulated, exploited, and discarded.

5) Respond to this contemporary problem with new solutions. Challenge conventional urban form, function, and thought by creating new urban places that recycle old and insert new materials, forms, and uses into the urban environment. Encourage new program and activities that serve the needs of a wide population.

*Design principles include excerpts from author’s 2010 Master of Architecture thesis at the University of Cincinnati.
Conclusion
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The extreme depopulation experienced by Detroit greatly alters the city’s social, political, cultural, and physical composition. Large numbers of untended and abandoned spaces within Detroit create a disjointed and disconnected urban landscape. Perceived as unsafe and uninhabitable, urban land vacancies lower the overall quality of urban life as they collect garbage, attract crime, succumb to vandalism, and are infiltrated by wild and overgrown vegetation. The city of Detroit has responded to its depopulation and abandonment with large-scale cultural and entertainment projects that mask the true character of space and time and offer little or no benefit to the average urban resident.

In contrast to standard city-responses to depopulation, this thesis investigation promotes another way of addressing vacant and abandoned urban landscapes. Based on theoretical discussions by Eduard Bru, Sze Tsung Leong, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio, this approach amplifies the unique identity and characteristics associated with urban empty space. It focuses on the specific location, particular nature, and historic context of the urban void. By re-imagining the factors and barriers associated with Detroit’s abandonment, urban voids can be regenerated. The application of this methodology will be presented in detail by applying it at a select area near downtown Detroit.
Bibliography


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