



IS DETROIT DEAD?

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ABSTRACT: *An effective way to understand the slow death of the city of Detroit is through the prism of the course of a terminal disease, tracing the stages of symptom assessment, diagnosis, and curative intervention. This essay explores that notion by taking off from several recent books about Detroit's catastrophic decline that employ the language of urban morbidity and mortality to describe the city's condition. Urban death is a function of the withering or failure of crucial vital urban functions involving, principally, governance and economic opportunity. By that standard the essay concludes that it is becoming hard to call Detroit a living city anymore.*

There is no more compelling story today of the dark side of America's urban experience than the slow death of the city of Detroit. In a host of recent books¹ exploring the city's political, social, and economic disintegration, all written before the city's actual bankruptcy, an array of scholars and journalists cannot resist employing an anthropomorphic framework—a literal take on the body politic—in which the central task they set themselves is to explore the notions of urban morbidity and mortality. Thus, Brent Ryan, a professor of urban planning, uses “the analogy to a person in hospice” to offer “palliative” strategies for the dying city (2012, p. 204), while Charlie LeDuff, a journalist, says the city is on a “death watch” and purports to conduct an “autopsy” (2013, p. 3). Former Detroit News staff writer Scott Martelle sets out to write a “biography”—not a history—of the city, recounting the critical events in its evolution from industrial prosperity to “collapse” (2012, p. 246). George Galster, an academic housing economist and fifth-generation Detroit native, talks about the city's “myopia,” “anxiety,” and “bipolarity,” and declares the place “suicidal.” He then proceeds to offer an epitaph for the headstone at the “grave of Greater Detroit” (2012, pp. 262, 277–280, 282). Finally, Mark Binelli (2012a), a contributing editor at Rolling Stone, reports on the “afterlife” of the city, suggesting that it is incontrovertibly already dead.

Viewing cities as organic phenomena is not entirely unusual in urban studies, though it has fallen out of fashion in the academy. Susan Roberts traces notions of cities as natural entities in which decline and death are implicit to nineteenth-century British thinkers influenced by Darwinian ideas (Roberts, 1991). A half century ago Jane Jacobs wrote of the death and life of the American city (Jacobs, 1961), and a few years later William Baer wrote a provocative essay “On the Death of Cities” (Baer, 1976). Neither of these works, it should be noted, truly confronted what it might mean for a city to die. R. D. Norton (1979) went on to publish his book on city life cycles of growth and decline, but beyond the observation that the size, vibrancy, and influence of some cities waxed and waned, little in the way of analytical progress followed. Yet today, after observing Detroit's terrible deterioration for several decades, anything less dramatic than the language of pathology, curative intervention, and death seems inadequate for understanding what has occurred. At the very least this perspective provides graphic insight to the nature of the death throes of one of America's formerly great industrial cities, and it helps to advance our understanding of urban death.

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A MORBIDITY REPORT: SYMPTOMS

Like a patient *in extremis* Detroit has few working vital functions. The city neither manages to govern itself effectively nor serve its residents' economic interests, to name two of the most central urban functions.² To begin with, the city is no longer self-governing. During the spring of 2013 (and before the declaration of bankruptcy in the summer of that year) its governance function was turned over to a state-appointed emergency manager, a bankruptcy lawyer from a Washington, D.C. law firm. This official, who answered neither to elected city officials nor the voters but only to the governor of the state of Michigan, was empowered unilaterally to recast the city budget, modify or abrogate city employee union contracts, restructure the city's debt, and sell city assets, including even the Old Master paintings on display at the Detroit Institute of Art. In his first report the manager, Kevyn Orr, laid out the depths of the city's fiscal condition and the dire straits of its public services (City of Detroit, 2013a).

When the emergency manager took office, the city had only \$64 million in cash on hand but outstanding current obligations—payroll, vendors' invoices, insurance—of \$226 million. For the prior five years the annual average operating revenue shortfall was \$100 million. Bond and pension obligations loomed as an additional \$15 billion,³ an apparently insurmountable debt that gave rise, among other measures, to the threat to sell the Old Masters (which experts said might generate at a good auction no more than \$2 billion). The city's credit rating is firmly in junk bond territory, lower than any other major city.⁴ The emergency manager and representatives of bondholders and pensioners held discussions during the spring where the proposals on the table focused on offers to settle the city's obligations for as little as ten cents on the dollar. When most creditors balked, the emergency manager, under the authority of the state governor, declared the city bankrupt in July, 2013.

The emergency manager's report is unsparing in its judgment about the quality of the city's services. Police department efficiency and effectiveness, judged by such metrics as response times, case closure, and the number of officers per capita, are "extremely low" (City of Detroit, 2013a, p. 6).⁵ On any given day 12 of the city's 52 fire department facilities are out of commission due to staffing shortfalls or broken equipment. (Journalists LeDuff and Binelli dwell at length on the plight of Detroit firefighters, working with outdated, broken, or makeshift equipment.) As for its skeletal public transit system, the report concludes: "In 2011 the city did not deliver reliable, scheduled bus service" (p. 8). And as visitors and residents alike complain, Detroit is one of the few cities in the United States without public transportation between the city and its major airport.

Other public services hang by a thread. After the city announced in early 2013 that it would close nearly half the public parks, several private organizations and companies raised \$14 million to keep them open at least through the summer (Burns, 2013). Street lighting is another service in perpetual crisis. Roughly half the city's 88,000 street lights do not work, due to the theft of copper wire, burned-out bulbs, vandalism, and lack of repair staff. In late 2012 the Michigan state legislature shifted control of the street lights to a newly created Detroit Public Lighting Authority, charged with repairing and maintaining the system. Although its board is appointed by the mayor and city council, the authority has independent borrowing powers, enabling it to issue bonds free from the constraint of the city's poor credit rating (Detroit Public Lighting Authority website, pladetroit.org).

If government has atrophied, so too have the city's economic functions. Detroit is no longer able to provide the critical economic opportunities that make cities migrant destinations,⁶ vibrant labor exchanges, and fertile sites for business formation. An excellent analysis of the withering of Detroit's manufacturing sector is contained in Thomas Sugrue's classic, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996 and 2005). He reports that in the immediate postwar period Detroit was home to 338,000 manufacturing jobs. By 1977 the number had fallen to just over 153,000 (p. 144). In 2011 manufacturing accounted for only 27,000 jobs (Green & Clothier, 2013).

Galster reports that the number of business establishments in Detroit fell from about 23,500 in 1972 to roughly 8,300 in 2002 (p. 224), a sharper rate of decline even than that of the population loss in that period. Visitors to the city are almost always struck by the absence of retail shops, both downtown and in the neighborhoods. Most parts of the city are a retail wasteland. Supermarkets, hardware

stores, clothing stores, dry cleaners, jewelry stores, specialty food shops, luggage emporia, taverns, movie theaters, appliance and furniture stores, bookstores, and places to buy kitchen gadgets are few and far between.⁷ Although a few large corporate employers have moved their operations from the suburbs to the downtown in recent years, the metropolitan region remains the most decentralized labor market in the nation. Brookings researcher Elizabeth Kneebone reports that only 7.3% of jobs in the metropolitan area are located within three miles of the central business district, while 77% are beyond the 10-mile radius, well beyond the city limits and thus exempt from the city's payroll tax (Kneebone, 2013). The indigenous labor pool holds little attraction to employers in technology or information fields: only 12.5% of city adults have a college or postgraduate education, making the city the 94th least educated among the top 100.⁸ Jobs in the financial, software, and insurance companies that recently moved into the city are held predominantly by suburban residents.⁹ Not surprisingly, unemployment rates for city residents are high: a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) ranking in 2010 of the 50 largest cities found Detroit at Number 50 with a rate of 23.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). More recent BLS figures put the spring 2013 unemployment rate at 16% (more than twice the national average), but city officials have always said that it is in reality much higher (*Huffington Post*, 2013). Although much of the city's unemployment is no doubt a function of the mismatch between workers' limited skills and the nature of available jobs in the technology and medical sectors, the central issue is that there are simply very few jobs in the city. As the *Detroit Future City* report shows, there are only 27 jobs per 100 residents in Detroit, compared to 35 per 100 in Philadelphia and 73 per 100 in Atlanta (City of Detroit, 2012, p. 26).

DIAGNOSIS

Popular diagnoses, often misleading or at best incomplete, complicate any prospects for recovery. Charlie LeDuff's analysis of the roots of this decay is a colorful rant about the city's deep-set public corruption, lack of resources, and the simple ineptitude of its public servants. Murders go uninvestigated, house fires are left to burn, and crooks and buffoons hold public office, loot the people's money, and go to jail. Certainly, broadly speaking, lawlessness and lack of capacity are contributing factors: an analysis by the *Detroit News*, for example, found that nearly half (47%) the owners of Detroit's 305,000 taxable parcels had failed to pay their prior year property taxes. Uncollected taxes amounted to more than 12% of the city's operating budget, and the city does not have the resources to track the scofflaws down efficiently (Macdonald & Wilkinson, 2013).

At its heart this line of analysis stresses the failure of political leadership, manifested, generally speaking, by incompetence and mismanagement and particularly by the propensity to sign off on over-generous pension agreements with public employee unions. Governor Rick Snyder attributes the city's condition to "60 years of decline in which promises were made that did not reflect the reality of the ability to deliver on those promises" (State of Michigan, 2013). Analysts at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a conservative-leaning Michigan think tank, told the news media that the city's condition stems from a failure "to aggressively fac[e] their problems and fix their mismanagement issues" (Mackinac Center Blog, 2013). The emergency manager's report does make clear that Detroit's penchant for borrowing to cover current operating costs was always unsustainable.

In the heated environment of the city's "deathwatch" (LeDuff, 2013, p. 3) a related diagnosis of Detroit's morbidity takes us to racially contested interpretations of history and motivations. In a popular version of history, despite evidence to the contrary, Detroit was a prosperous and vibrant place until the terrible violence of the summer of 1967. In the aftermath white families fled the city, and eventually black voters achieved the numbers to elect Coleman Young the first black mayor of the city in 1973. A sometimes profane and aggressive leader, Young is portrayed as alienating many remaining whites and increasing racial tensions, driving out many of the remaining businesses.

A more balanced perspective on the causes of decline, however, suggests that most of the city's fiscal and governmental distress is a function of crippling structural changes, including severe and long-term loss of population and jobs that began well before 1967 and had little to do with the absence of competent leadership (Martelle, 2012, pp. 144, 214). As Edward Glaeser has written, speaking

first of Jerome Cavanagh, the (white) mayor during the 1967 riot, and then of Coleman Young, the first black mayor of the city:

[Cavanagh cannot] be blamed for failing to halt the manufacturing exodus from his city—the economic headwinds were just too strong. . . . By the time Young was elected, Detroit was far gone, and I suspect that even the best policies could only have eased the city’s suffering (Glaeser, 2011, pp. 53, 63).¹⁰

Specifically, the population of the city has declined from its peak in the 1950s of around 1.85 million people to about 685,000, according to a December 2012 estimate by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (City of Detroit, 2013a). Although this exodus accelerated after the riot, Sugrue makes clear that migration to the suburbs was well under way before the events of 1967. Indeed, more than 180,000 people, almost all of them white, left the city in the decade of the 1950s alone (Sugrue, pp. 23, 149). Much of the movement to suburban locations was not a response to black collective violence, but rather the product of the relocation of manufacturing facilities from city to suburb and the federal subsidization of home mortgages for newly built homes, which, incidentally, were rarely available to blacks. Galster shows in detail that a combination of easy incorporation of suburban municipalities under Michigan law, their propensity to adopt exclusionary zoning policies, and their resistance to fair housing laws and federally subsidized low-income housing all posed major impediments to black suburbanization. And, of course, this public effort was aided by the discriminatory practices of the private real estate industry. The result is a racially divided “jagged topography of inequality [that] is one of the region’s defining characteristics” (Galster, 2012, p. 60).

Most of those who departed were middle- and working-class taxpayers, both white and eventually black,¹¹ and they left behind a very poor distillate. In 1950 the median income in the suburbs of Detroit was only 3% higher than that of the city. By 2000 the suburban median income was nearly 100% larger (Galster, p. 61). Data from the 2009 American Community Survey ranked Detroit as the poorest of the 100 largest cities in the United States, with 36.4% living below the federal poverty line. The same survey found Detroit with a median house value (an indicator of available property tax resources) of \$67,000, the 97th lowest value among the 100 biggest cities.¹² The result of all these changes is that for decades the city simply has not had the resources to fight its maladies or even to perform its very basic service responsibilities.

The diagnosis of Detroit’s condition does not hinge solely on the loss of jobs and population to the suburbs. Some of the city’s decline can be traced to its high reliance on the automobile industry. Martelle stresses the costs to the city’s workforce of the cyclical nature of car-making. As early as 1914, when Detroit was already making half the nation’s cars, an economic downturn just before World War I cost the city 80,000 manufacturing jobs, establishing a boom and bust pattern that persists today (Martelle, 2012, pp. 78, 114, 177–178).

Galster’s analysis is particularly persuasive on the manifold effects of Detroit’s dependence on the auto industry. He says the city entered into a Faustian bargain (2012, pp. 243ff.): it embraced an industry to the exclusion of nearly all else that provided jobs for workers with little education but that offered incomes and benefits that lifted them into the lower middle class. But the catch was not only that they had to deal with the cyclical instability of economic boom and bust (pp. 80–81), but also the de-skilling effects of assembly line work that made labor more vulnerable to automation (p. 112) and made displaced auto workers unprepared to compete with skilled labor in other industries. In any event, other employment opportunities in Detroit were limited, for the vertical integration of the auto industry, where everything from financing to accounting to design were done in-house, meant that all these jobs were subject to the same boom and bust forces that affected car sales. The absence of foreign competition until the 1970s bred a complacency that dampened entrepreneurialism and the formation of spin-off businesses. In addition, the auto companies decentralized their production facilities after World War II, leading the move to greenfield sites in the suburbs and out of the region altogether. When the industry finally collapsed, there was nothing in Detroit for workers to fall back on.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE PATIENT?

It is not uncommon for people to include an advance directive in their wills as a way of maintaining control of end-of-life medical decisions. Such planning is designed to resolve potential conflict among patient, doctors (“experts”), insurance companies, and relatives over prognosis and treatment and to resolve it according to the patient’s wishes. Detroit, of course, has no comparable advance directive, but its leaders and populace do have a strong desire for autonomy, even if it does not appear to outsiders always to be in the long-term interests of the city’s health and survival. This tension between the desire for local autonomy and the prescriptions and interventions of outsiders plays out inevitably along racial lines.

Racial suspicion took root in Detroit in the nineteenth century, as Martelle’s historical account¹³ makes clear, but the sense of siege in the black community became more acute after the establishment of black political control in 1973. Although Coleman Young’s victory in the mayoral contest of that year was accompanied by a brief racial détente (Eisinger, 1980), this watershed election eventually gave rise to a new urgency among blacks who feared whites would take away what blacks had so painstakingly won. Young began to see white conspiracies everywhere: Martelle reports that the mayor even saw racism behind the U.S. Defense Department’s efforts to decentralize war industries beginning in the 1940s, leaving black Detroit “strand[ed]” (Martelle, 2012, p. 213). Arguing for a commuter payroll tax in 1981, Young asked: “Are we going to do what we have to do to guarantee the city continues to move forward and our destiny remains in our own hands? Or will we do what thousands of bigots hope we’ll do and vote ‘no’ and the state takes over?” (quoted in Galster, 2012, p. 200).

Many initiatives are initially portrayed in the city as efforts by outsiders to seize city assets. When a closely divided city council eventually approved a plan by a white entrepreneur to acquire a huge tract of unmarketable vacant land in the eastern part of the city, clear it, and plant hardwood trees for eventual harvesting, many in Detroit claimed that this was a corporate “land grab” that would displace local people (Gallagher, Wisely, & Helms, 2012). A proposal to divest the city of control over the water system that serves much of the metropolitan region and create a regional water authority, relieving the city of expensive operating costs, was resisted by some as another example of outsiders trying to grab the city’s valuable assets (Wisely & Helms, 2013). So too was the state’s offer to purchase the Belle Isle park from the city and run it as a state park, relieving the city of the park’s considerable operating and overdue maintenance costs.

Galster (2012) offers other examples of proposals that some in the city see as threats to its self-determination (pp. 264–265):

- The City Council refused for five years to create a land bank in the wake of state enabling legislation because the city would only be able to appoint a minority of the members of its governing board.
- The City Council voted to withhold federal funds from Detroit charitable organizations unless 51% of their board members were Detroit residents.
- The City Council initially turned down a proposal to turn over the convention center to a regional authority, relieving the city of the facility’s debt burden and high maintenance costs, on the grounds that it would be “giving away or transferring another Detroit asset.”¹⁴

Now, under bankruptcy, all control of the city’s dwindling assets is in the hands of outsiders. The city, lying on its deathbed, is no longer master of its own course of treatment.

RUBBERNECKING AT THE SCENE OF THE ACCIDENT

There is an irresistible, if guilty, urge to look at the dead and dying as we pass an accident on the road or peer at television images of the victims of a natural disaster. Gazing upon such tragic scenes elicits a range of emotions: sympathy for the victims; gratitude that you and yours are safe and whole; a sense of awe at the arbitrary hand of fate; wonder at the power and visual impact of

destructive forces. These are some of the feelings experienced by visitors and residents alike as they encounter the ruins of Detroit. In the mid-1990s Camilo José Vergara, a photographer and social provocateur, suggested half seriously that Detroit preserve intact its large collection of abandoned art deco office towers that dot the downtown and create an “American acropolis,” a monument to a lost civilization (Bennet, 1995). He went on to publish several volumes of Detroit ruins photographs, giving rise to a small cottage industry of websites and picture books by others that critics derisively call “ruins porn.” Charlie LeDuff, a native Detroiter, takes a similarly jaunty but more calculating approach to the ruins: Detroit “is Candy Land from a reporter’s perspective. Decay. Mile after mile of rotten buildings, murder, leftover people” (2013, p. 19).

The ruins are compelling. Estimates of the number of abandoned buildings, many in a state of decrepitude, range as high as 70,000.¹⁵ They include commercial office towers built in the 1920s, neighborhood shopping strips, empty schools and churches, industrial facilities designed by Albert Kahn, and dwellings in working class and formerly upper class neighborhoods. When Brent Ryan first visited the city in 1993, he “was shocked to see that even the city’s train station, designed by Warren and Wetmore at the same time as their Grand Central Terminal, had been left open to the winds of fate . . . I felt as if I was walking into the ruin of America” (2012, p. ix).

George Galster, too, fixes on the station, now the iconic ruin of Detroit. He begins his book by taking the reader on a driving tour of the city. No sooner have we left the expressway on the trip in from the airport than we find that “our eyes cannot help but be drawn to a solitary fifteen-story building sitting apart from the downtown skyline. Approaching, it becomes clear that the building is abandoned and hollow. Shards of glass protrude from the frames of over 900 windows . . . the Michigan Central stands like a forlorn headstone marking the remains of a buried civilization” (2012, pp. 16–17). The station still sits empty today, a destination for clandestine visits by self-styled urban spelunkers.

Mark Binelli provides the most thorough treatment of this fascination with the city’s ruins. He points out that meditation on architectural ruins dates at least to Renaissance Italy, when efforts began to preserve the remains of ancient Roman structures. (Ironically, the architects of the Michigan Central Station used the Roman Baths of Caracalla as the model for the interior grand waiting room.) Later, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European landscape painters and nineteenth-century British poets used ruins motifs to suggest faded glory and the passage of time. Binelli rejects the blanket condemnation of the preoccupation with the ruins: “ignoring the blight altogether would [be] reportorial malpractice” (2012a, p. 273). To this end he allows himself to be taken on (and even occasionally lead) unofficial tours, during one of which he encountered a group of German college students. When Binelli asked them why they had come to Detroit, one answered, “I came to see the end of the world” (2012a, p. 281).

THE VITAL CORE: SPARKS OF LIFE

In 2013 a coalition of downtown business organizations and a large local foundation published an optimistic report on the assets and prospects of the downtown core of the city (*7.2 Square Miles*, 2013).¹⁶ This 7.2 square mile area,¹⁷ which is called Greater Downtown Detroit (GDD), encompasses the Woodward Corridor up to the New Center, the riverfront neighborhoods to the east, and several contiguous residential neighborhoods. It is described as a “growing,” “vibrant” and “diverse” employment, housing, entertainment, and tourist center, home to thousands of new high tech and medical jobs, people seeking urban living, and visitors attending major league sports and cultural events. The area has the “second largest theater district in the country” and is host to numerous seasonal events, ranging from ice skating in Martius Park to the Detroit International Jazz Festival. Wayne State University, Techtown science park, and a huge medical complex are located in the Midtown neighborhood, and there is a cluster of major cultural institutions.

The report offers some data to justify this portrayal of a lively city. Between 2006 and 2012 the downtown core has seen \$6 billion in real estate development, including 25 new construction projects and several notable reclamations of abandoned skyscrapers. A number of major white collar

employers, including General Motors, Quicken Loans, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and Compuware, have moved their large operations from the suburbs to the downtown. New housing projects now occupy land on the periphery of the central business district where burned-out houses once stood. More than 150 restaurants and bars dot the area. Over 10.5 million people visit GDD for cultural and sporting events or to buy fresh food at the outdoor Eastern Market.

Does this evidence of urban life contradict the judgment that the city is dying? Martelle is skeptical: he writes that “Detroit remains a place of surprising—if often misplaced—optimism” (p. 233).¹⁸ But how in fact is this apparently vital activity to be understood? One possibility is that against all odds the patient is actually beginning to recover. A more likely explanation is that even in dying patients there are some organs that remain vital, even suitable for harvesting.

Martelle, Binelli, and Ryan all doubt that a sustained recovery is taking place: the spillover effects of downtown development are simply insufficient to raise the rest of the city from its plight. Ryan calls the new downtown jobs, the new housing and the sports facilities in the center of the city “sadly underscaled against the evident abandonment” (2012, p. ix). In a similar vein Binelli argues that any plan to “reinvent Detroit . . . require(s) the one thing Detroit lack(s) most of all: unimaginable amounts of money” (2012a, p. 179). Any of the recent success stories, he writes, have only come about through “spectacular levels of capital investment” that are not sustainable (p. 179). Martelle, speaking of Quicken Loans, the General Motors purchase of the downtown Renaissance Center for its headquarters, and other similar investments, notes that “these incremental flickers of life . . . do nothing to address the city’s core problem: disinvestment and abandonment propelled by corporate decisions framed and aided by government policies, from housing and free trade, with an overlay of stubbornly persistent racism” (2012, p. 234).

Data presented in the *7.2 Square Miles* report itself undermine the claim that the city—or even the downtown core—is on the verge of sustained recovery. For example, the report notes that while the city as a whole lost 25% of its population between 2000 and 2010, the downtown core lost population only at half that rate in the same period. This “growing,” “vibrant” area in fact *fell* 13% from 41,930 residents to 36,550 over the decade. The only age cohorts that increased in the downtown were the 18–24 and the over 55 groups, neither of which could be construed as age groups at their most productive periods in their working lives. Approximately 1,000 members of the youngest cohort are in fact either interns in the large tech and financial firms or Teach for America or Detroit Revitalization Fellows, all of whom are only committed for between three months and two years. The average household size in the core has decreased over the decade, suggesting that the central city is increasingly the home of singles and childless households.¹⁹

Although the Greater Downtown is better educated than the city as a whole,²⁰ income data suggest that many jobs are still poorly paid. The median household income in the GDD in 2010 was \$19,410, only a few thousand dollars above the federal poverty line for a household of two. Other indicators also suggest the weakness of the downtown economy. Although the number of downtown housing units increased in the decade by 5%, the share of vacant units also increased from 18% of the total to 24%, suggesting that supply is outpacing demand. The share of renter-occupied units went from 11% to 15% in this period. Commercial vacancy rates are high by comparative standards: 25% of the commercial space in Detroit is vacant, which the 7.2 report contrasts to vacancy rates in Cleveland (19%), Philadelphia (14%), and Pittsburgh (10%) (2013, p. 63).

These data all cast doubt on the prospects for a sustainable recovery in the city, even in the downtown core. The scale of all this activity seems far too modest to raise or rescue the rest of this very poor city. The human capital and financial resources for building a stable foundation just for a vibrant downtown core alone seem both uncertain and too small for the challenge at hand.

INTERVENTIONS

To carry on the medical analogy, much of this activity in Greater Downtown Detroit is comparable to the patient’s young relatives and friends flocking to the bedside to provide a moment of cheer in the face of an otherwise unhappy prognosis. But to portray the development and

investment of money and commitment only in those terms is to minimize the fact that many believe that a cure can be found, even though no one really knows what interventions will actually reverse the city's decline. Ideas and initiatives to revive Detroit are not in short supply. The city is a blank slate for small projects and grand plans alike, each envisioning a different sort of future.

Mark Binelli calls Detroit the first "DIY city,"²¹ a place where private action replaces absent civic functions and where people pursue inexpensive, often quixotic, sometimes utopian, self-sufficient lives. In this vision the city is a collection of small, insular communities barely connected to the larger metropolitan economy. Thus, the city has become a modest magnet for artists from here and abroad seeking rock-bottom prices for housing and creative venues, and its vast empty spaces have spawned hundreds of small urban farms and garden plots. Plucky young entrepreneurs have formed a few small niche businesses: a silk-screen tie maker, an artisanal bakery, a French creperie, some brewpubs in the downtown, a popular barbecue restaurant. People compensate for the absence of crucial public services by establishing volunteer neighborhood patrols or by cleaning up vacant lots. Galster summarizes a report by the American Institute of Architects Sustainable Design Assessment Team that envisions Detroit as a series of "villages" separated by farmland and parks (2012, p. 239). To Galster the idea of urban farming is "oxymoronic" in a city densely covered by brownfield sites and surrounded by fertile farmland on the far periphery. Whatever these various communitarian or alternative schemes are—artists collectives, artisanal food producers, urban farmers—none could possibly achieve the scale required in terms of employment, spending multipliers, or tax revenues to revive and support a major urban center.

Ryan points out that the city has never had either the inclination or the capacity to develop a centralized housing, planning, or urban design policy (2012, p. xii). Without such a tradition, and in its current helpless state, it represents a blank slate for grand schemes. As Ryan puts it, "when left to their own devices, cities such as Detroit simply answered the wishes of the loudest and most powerful voices" (p. 184).

Coalitions of young professionals and individual entrepreneurs offer their dream scenarios for Detroit's recovery, including a light rail line down Woodward Avenue, which Ryan calls a "recurring fantasy of salvation" (2012, p. 123). Planners claim it would bring suburban workers to Midtown and Downtown employment centers, even though employment remains extremely decentralized in the metropolitan area. Individual investors and business magnates have also offered plans, often backed up by substantial investments. The Illitch family, owners of the Detroit Red Wings hockey team and the Detroit Tigers baseball team, is almost single-handedly responsible for creating a downtown entertainment district anchored by the renovated Fox Theater and Comerica Park, which replaced Tiger Stadium in 2000. John Hantz, a wealthy financial services businessman, proposed an ambitious urban farm development, which later evolved into a much smaller proposal for a 140-acre urban forest planted on parcels abandoned or purchased from small householders. The 15,000 hardwood trees would eventually be harvested, according to the plan, which was awaiting permission from the emergency manager to proceed. One of the earliest manifestations of belief in the future of the city occurred a decade ago when Peter Karmanos moved his software company, Compuware, and its 4,000 employees to a new downtown office building. Compuware helped to finance the renovation of Campus Martius, the public square and park at its front door.

The most ambitious plans come from Dan Gilbert, the billionaire founder and CEO of Quicken Loans, an online home mortgage lender.²² In 2010 Gilbert moved his company to downtown Detroit, where it now employs 9,200 people. In the last few years Gilbert has been buying up downtown properties at a rapid pace: by the middle of the summer of 2013 he owned 22 buildings and assorted parking structures and storefronts amounting to 7.5 million square feet of space in the city core. Even as Detroit approached bankruptcy, Gilbert announced his grand plans for the revival of the downtown. The plans include offices and housing, open air markets, extensive street level retail, street benches, restaurants and bars, a beach at Campus Martius park (where there is no water), food trucks, a dog park, a children's playground, and other green space. As *Crain's Detroit Business* commented, "God may have created the earth in six days, but Dan Gilbert plans to fundamentally transform downtown Detroit by the end of 2015" (Pinho & Walsh, 2013).

Perhaps these plans, if they come to full fruition, will make the city center a destination for workers and residents and shoppers. Certainly the city is better off with than without such projects. But there are issues to consider. This transformative plan has been birthed without public participation or review or an effort to match it against the planning priorities of city planners, even though its realization will require the expenditure of public resources. It seems to accord no recognition that most of Detroit's residents are extremely poor and will presumably be unable to take advantage of the new dog park or restaurants. Nor does it acknowledge the absence—at least to this point—of evidence of market demand on a scale that would sustain such an array of urban amenities. Even if Gilbert were to implement this cure, it does not promise to generate employment benefits for Detroit's working-class or poor population nor sufficient revenues to address the vast problems of the city's dilapidated and withering neighborhoods. What Gilbert and others offer are not quack cures—the equivalent of apricot pit remedies for cancer—but neither are they carefully vetted, widely debated, generally tested interventions.

ON THE DEATH OF DETROIT

For the time being the immediate future of the city lies with the bankruptcy court. This is likely to involve a painful disposition of the city's resources and possible restructuring of city government, to say nothing of the settlements with bondholders and pensioners. Bankruptcy proceedings are not a cure for a dying city. In all likelihood the end result will be a weaker city, stripped of any vestiges of freedom of action, less able to confront its maladies and less attractive to in-migrants and business firms seeking economic opportunity. If its assets are sold off—for example, its fine art holdings—it will be less of what a fully functioning city is expected to be in the realm of preserver of the society's cultural patrimony.

Transfer of certain assets to state or regional bodies makes good sense from a fiscal and public management perspective. Authorities have their own bonding powers (though they may be tainted in the bond markets by Detroit's bankruptcy), and they have a broader constituency and tax base than what the city commands. There has been some promising movement toward regionalization: The state of Michigan established a Regional Convention Authority in 2009 to run the convention center and a Regional Transit Authority in 2012. A regional water authority is proposed. But additional stronger regional institutions such as a tax-base sharing plan akin to the Twin Cities arrangement and city-county consolidation are political nonstarters. The failure to sell Belle Isle Park to the state was a lost opportunity to relieve the beleaguered city of some of its responsibilities.

What is striking in the recent books about Detroit's death throes is that none of the authors offers much in the way of suggestions to revive the city. Most agree that a massive federal rescue plan has no political traction, nor would the creation of metropolitan regional government institutions. Ryan argues that the best that can be hoped for is to provide "palliative care" for a city in hospice (2012, p. 204), but the rest write with a tone of bitter resignation and often personal sadness.

Urban death, of course, is not identical to biological death. In the latter case the organism is eventually extinguished, but even the most distressed places tend to retain a reserve population made up of people who will not or cannot leave. At some point these places stop being what we call cities. Urban death involves the withering or failure of crucial urban functions involving governance and economic opportunity, as well as the diminution of lesser functions such as cultural preservation and the provision of public spaces. The fulfillment of these is why people want to come together in dense concentrations; it is what makes a large place not simply a collection of many people, like a refugee camp, but rather a city, an urban place. It is quickly becoming hard to call Detroit a living city anymore.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Binelli (2012a), Galster (2012), LeDuff (2013), Martelle (2012), and Ryan (2012).
- 2 Along with governance and economic functions, I would suggest that important, but less central urban functions include, among others, cultural production and preservation and the management of urban space for public and private purposes.
- 3 By the time the city actually declared bankruptcy three months later, the estimate of the size of the debt hovered between \$18 and \$20 billion. No one actually knew the exact number.
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau (2012).
- 5 According to the city's own data, the average police response time in the second quarter of 2013 was 39.8 minutes (City of Detroit, 2013b). By comparison police response time in New York City was 9.1 minutes in 2012 (City of New York, New York City Police Department, n.d., p. 5). Detroit's fire department response time, contained in the same Dashboard report, was 7.5 minutes (compared to New York City's 4 minutes), and its emergency medical services (EMS) response time was 14 minutes, compared to New York's 5.05 minutes. Detroit's figures are all contained in the Dashboard report. New York City's fire and EMS measures are reported in City of New York Fire Department (2012).
- 6 Detroit ranks 73rd among 100 largest cities in the percentage of the population born outside the state (20.8%) and 74th in the percentage born outside the United States (6.6%). Immigrants to southeast Michigan flock to the city's suburbs (data collected by the author from the American Community Survey).
- 7 There were only 9 Starbucks cafes in Detroit in 2013. Baltimore and Memphis, both slightly smaller, had 25 and 22, respectively. Pittsburgh, less than half the size of Detroit, had 34.
- 8 Data collected by the author from the American Community Survey.
- 9 Good data on the proportion of Detroit workers who commute from the suburbs is lacking. A data analyst at Data Driven Detroit, a private data consulting firm, makes an informed guess that two-thirds of the city's downtown workforce is made up of suburbanites (personal communication, Jeffrey Bross, Data Driven Detroit project manager, July 22, 2013).
- 10 Brent Ryan makes the same point: the great forces that afflicted Detroit "are irreversible. . . . Urban policy had little power to influence [the flight of people and industry]" (2012, pp. xiv, 38–39).
- 11 African American suburbanites concentrate in the older band of suburbs, like Southfield, that border the city, maintaining the largely segregated residential patterns that for decades made the region the most segregated metropolitan area in the nation (Galster, 2012, pp. 158–159).
- 12 Only Youngstown, Flint, and Buffalo showed lower values. Data collected by the author.
- 13 Martelle devotes separate chapters to the African American experience in Civil War Detroit; the beginning of black migration from the South at the beginning of the twentieth century; the rise of the Black Legion, a Klan unit, in the 1920s; the 1943 race riot; and the struggle for housing in the 1950s. The constant theme is the exploitation by white political and community leaders of white racial fears in order to control and confine geographically the growing black population.
- 14 The state legislature eventually created a Regional Convention Authority (2009) to manage the Cobo Hall Convention Center.
- 15 This is the figure Binelli reports (2012b). Other estimates are somewhat lower, in the 40,000 range. The number, most observers and officials concede, is a guess. *Detroit Future City* reports nearly 150,000 vacant and abandoned parcels, a total that presumably includes both empty land as well as buildings (City of Detroit, 2012, p. 11).
- 16 *7.2 Square Miles: A Report on Greater Downtown Detroit* (2013) was sponsored by the Hudson-Webber Foundation, the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, Midtown Detroit, Detroit Economic Partnership, Downtown Detroit Partnership, and D-Hive. No specific author is listed.
- 17 The entire city is 139 square miles.

- 18 Detroit has a well-established history of boosterism and optimism, exemplified by its mayors' annual state of the city speeches in which the city is routinely said to be "coming back," having "turned the corner" (Eisinger, 2003). Even now the city's leaders insist that the place could have a bright future. In December 2012 city planners produced a 345-page strategic plan (the third such plan in 15 years) that seeks to "align our assets to opportunity." It declares that Detroit "is poised to reposition itself as Michigan's leading urban center once again, if there is a coordinated regional urban agenda that enables more mutually beneficial relationships with the region, state, and nation." The city's key assets are "the resiliency, creativity, and ingenuity of its people and organizations." The report concedes that the main challenge will be implementing its many recommendations (City of Detroit, 2012).
- 19 Average household size fell in the decade from 1.76 to 1.63.
- 20 The report provides education data only for the 25–34-year-old cohort. Of that population in GDD, 42% have a college degree or more, compared to 11% of the same cohort citywide (*7.2 Square Miles*, 2013, p. 34).
- 21 "Do It Yourself."
- 22 Like Mike Illitch and Peter Karmanos, Gilbert is an owner of several professional sports franchises. Unlike Illitch, Karmanos and Gilbert owned basketball, hockey, and arena football clubs in other cities, not Detroit.

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