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Detroit: from Motorcity to an unexpected urban laboratory

After years of decline, transforming Detroit into a resilient city might appear as an insurmountable challenge. Hesitating between despair and enthusiasm, Detroiters try to build a better future. Shrinking the city and developing urban farming have received significant media attention, but there are many more solutions being tried out in order to reflate the city's battered economy.

Philanthropists come to the rescue

Detroit, once one of the most productive industrial cities, put not only the US, but the majority of the world on wheels. But the post industrial era and decline of the auto industry, followed by the exodus of the middle-class to the suburbs, has left a dilapidated center and a sprawling urban area of de-industrialized fabric and junk spaces.

What chances does Detroit have of becoming a resilient and sustainable city in the future?

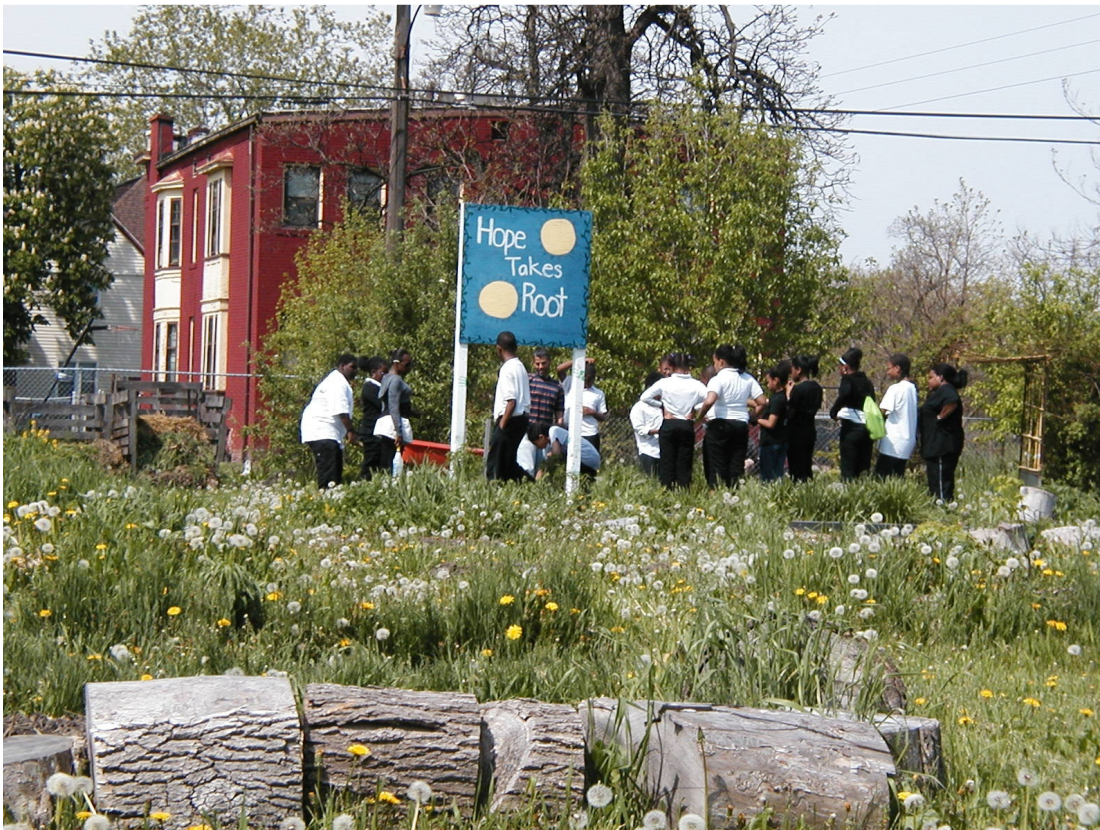
The city can rely on strong philanthropic foundations, dating back from its flourishing past. Business

leaders have taken the helm and got involved in regeneration projects, including sustainable infrastructure. For instance, the Detroit-based Kresge Foundation is investing in a light rail system, and in the Greening of Detroit project. Its much-awarded green headquarters show the way to a greener urban fabric.

Promoting neighborhood driven initiatives

Complementing private projects, citizen initiatives are literally popping up all over the metropolitan area. The "Detroit Mower Gang" is a group of residents leading parkland restorations. According to their website, they "refuse to allow bureaucracy and tightened city budgets get in the way of children playing". Their urban interventions are planned and promoted via social media like Twitter and Facebook. Last month, their fund-raising campaign via Kickstarter allowed them to replace swings in Detroit playgrounds.

Some neighborhoods, however, have irreparably gone downhill, and city officials are now considering "shrinking" the city by demolishing houses and turning them into agricultural land. Redensification and urban farming are some of the cutting-edge solutions Detroit is now embracing. Farming provides fresh and healthy food to the local population, and creates new "green" jobs in a region hit by unemployment. A recent study from the Michigan State University found that the creation of urban farms and gardens within the Detroit's boundaries could supply local residents with more than 75 percent of their vegetables needs and more than 40 percent of their fruits needs.



A potential for green growth

Besides urban agriculture, Detroit is exploring further potential sources of green growth. Developing new technologies is one of the retained solutions for closing Detroit's "green gap". The North American International auto show now puts a great emphasis on hybrid and electric cars, and once again, non-profit organizations such as Warm Training Detroit try their best to promote clean technologies.

A denser and greener Motorcity exemplifying America's city of tomorrow: such a scenario seemed impossible a few years ago, but Detroiters are now taking up the challenge.

Facing Detroit's decline

Detroit's population plunged by 25% over the last decade.

Now, empty boulevards and deserted neighborhoods have become emblematic of the city. Faced with a \$300 million budget deficit, the municipality can't afford public services in degraded suburbs anymore. Bus service to some neighborhoods has been restricted or halted, leaving residents without public transportation.

"The harsh reality is that some areas are no longer viable neighborhoods, with the population loss and financial situation our city faces," says Detroit Mayor Dave Bing. "But instead of looking at our land as a liability, we need to begin to think creatively about how it can be a resource as we rebuild."

Private contributions to Detroit's regeneration process

Taking stock of the situation is the precondition for efficient improvements. The lack of accurate data and indicators forced some private foundations to fund [Data Driven Detroit](#), a database on Detroit metropolitan area, providing reliable information for efficient decision-making.

Concrete transformations are also taking shape. The Congress approved a 125 millions dollars donation from private investors for the construction of the [Woodward Light Rail](#). The 5,5km first section is maybe more a call for optimism than a real mass transit system. "Business leaders have come to the table and are ready to act on this. It's going to be as much of a psychological benefit as anything." says Sarah Hubbard, senior vice president of government relations for the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce.

These private, but non-profit initiatives are also supporting grassroots initiatives: John Hantz, a financial consultant, is devoting \$30 million to create [Hantz Farms](#), an urban agriculture organization meant to be owned, operated and staffed by Detroit locals.

Meeting Detroit's critical needs, they might have a dramatic influence on the city's future.

Related cases

[Cornwall: Eden adds value](#)

[London: 2,012 vegetable gardens by 2012](#)

[Frederikshavn: green mobility test site](#)

Key Learning Points

- Detroit has long been a symbol of urban failure, but many initiatives are being developed for downtown improvement. City officials have committed to "shrink" (or rather to "rightsize" it, a less frightening word) and to relocate residents downtown.
- At the same time, more than 600 community gardens are being grown in Detroit. Citizens hope to reach food-sufficiency on the long run, as many neighborhoods are now food deserts.
- [Sustainable Detroit](#) lists the multiple actors working for a greener Detroit. Despite a fragmented field, sustainability is a serious concern for the city.

Process

1903: Ford founded the Ford Motor Company
1924: Creation of the Kresge Foundation
1967: Twelfth Street riot sparks white flight from the city
1973/1979: gasoline crises
1977: Opening of the Renaissance Center
2008: Creation of Data Driven Detroit
2009: Dave Bing becomes mayor of Detroit
2009-2010: Detroit ranked seventh in the nation for economic recovery
2011: Construction of the Woodward light rail

City Facts

Country: USA
City: 713.000 (1,8 million in 1950)
Area: 370.4 km²
Population density: 1985 inh./km²
GDP/capita: 40,086\$

Project Facts

- The administration plans to cut off municipal services in 20% of the city's area, while \$300 millions will be allocated to a neighborhood's revitalization plan.
 - 3000 of the city's most dangerous structures will be demolished this year and a total of 10,000 by 2013.
 - The City adopt-a-lot program allows residents to grow a community garden.
 - Philanthropic foundations and grassroots associations are no less key actors in Detroit's regeneration. They are present on all fronts: mass transit, urban farming, clean technologies, and social inclusion.
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Facts for Thought

The food concern is conceived as an unifying issue between White and Black communities in Detroit. Urban farming would provide employs for young Afro-Americans, a group hard hit by unemployment.

Related Facts

In the so-called Rust belt, many cities are facing the same problems as Detroit. Some of them are breaking into new technologies. [Read more.](#)

References

[The New York Times](#)

[Time Magazine](#)

[OnEarth Magazine](#)

Networks

[City of Detroit](#)

[Kresge Foundation](#)

[Skillman foundation](#)

[Hantz Farms](#)

[Mower Gang](#)

Partners

[Detroit Works Project](#)

[Data Driven Detroit](#)

[Recovery Park Project](#)

[Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice](#)

[Greening of Detroit](#)

[Greening Detroit](#)

Source URL: <http://sustainablecities.dk/en/city-projects/cases/detroit-from-motorcity-to-an-unexpected-urban-laboratory>

Links:

[1] <http://www.kresge.org/>

[2] <http://www.greeningdetroit.com/>

[3] <http://www.mowergang.com/>

[4] <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/CalmTom/detroit-swings-replacing-swings-in-detroit-playgro?ref=live>

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