Hold, Denote or Reserve: Spatial Strategies in Detroit's Available Space

Detroiters are never passive about their city. There is a deep sense of community with many complex roots and interconnections. The residents of the city demand greater quantity and higher quality of space that is shared and used by all. In Detroit, individualism is secondary to the strong spirit of community, creativity, cooperation and citizen participation.

Echoing the powerful spirit of Detroiters, this article brings a different reading of Detroit's urban density through the analysis of eleven initiatives in the city, which negotiate unique spatial conditions and citizen demands in the context of a large American city trying to rebuild itself. If the urbanist Jordi Borja points out that, "the public space is the city"[1], and if the cities, as Fernando Carrión explains, are "the space of the domestic or the private, the area where the population interacts (symbiosis), identifies (symbolic) and manifests (civic)"[2], then this rediscovery of spatial strategies in available space is a matter of both the city and its citizens.

Saskia Sassen suggests that "multiple small interventions may not look like much, but together they give added meaning to the notion of incompleteness of our cities."[3] The city of Detroit is one that serves as a resource of sample approaches that tactically engage what Sassen refers to as the incomplete. This time of post-bankruptcy is a hopeful and unique scenario for the city and its citizens where alternative uses of available space through interventions that "hold, denote or reserve place" reinforce new ways to promote civic engagement and use of the cities open space. Given this scenario of study, how does the diversification of the public use of available space in Detroit and through citizen proposals improve the quality of urban life of the city?

To answer this question, a series of projects have been selected as case studies that intend to fill programmatic voids and were able to bring into practice a progressive redefinition of the participative role of the citizen in the process for public empowerment. The study underlines the value of the mechanisms and proposals that, through multiple configurations, have afforded solutions to basic functional questions, while at the same time integrate new systems for the incorporation of space for public use. This is an opportunity that does not only delve further into the public dimension of the projects, but pretends to question the sometimes invisible process of elaboration of these initiatives by anonymous citizens creating areas of social encounter for fellow citizens and neighbors that are demanding a greater quantity and a higher quality of space to be shared, used and promoted.

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These autonomous initiatives supported by the lack of administrative red tape that allow for gaps in the city to be filled. Using mechanisms of donation, purchase, temporary use and other means, alternative uses of vacant space and their maintenance has been possible. The negotiation and transformation of these spaces by Detroiters implies an important impact which is the feeling of resilience and place-holding entirely intrinsic to the city. Today, Detroit is a product of many neighbors of different social strata and backgrounds who are modifying its structure because of their personal and private interests within their own local neighborhoods and a broader commitment for the future longevity of the city. The analysis of the different projects reveals a comprehensive understanding of the current state and possibilities for future participative role of Detroiters in the urban life of the city.

The examples analyzed cover a wide range of programmatic diversity and were chosen based on the three distinct criteria. First, their geographic diversification, as a way to reflect a broad spectrum of the city and understand the diversity of social, economic, architectural and urban conditions of the different neighborhoods. Secondly, the overlap of public and private, where projects that create space for public activity are a result of what occurs between public ownership, regulations, private uses, individual interests, and land ownership. Lastly, their ability to provide alternative uses and incorporate programmatic requirements not only driven by economic priorities but by the need to resolve deficits for education, recreation, contemplation, nutrition and communication. The initiatives reveal the imagination and fantasies of citizens through their participative roles that are everything but traditional and demonstrate the endless possibilities for the use of available space in the city. The interventions highlights that the role of the citizen is continually more apparent in the public realm of the city, while at the same time offer an opportunity for a greater understanding of their overlapping strategies. The initiatives are classified based on common identifiable operations that include: aggregation, nesting, mobile ready-mades, soft/hard networks and linear initiatives. This classification places emphasis on the logic of these built solutions by individuals who colonize, amplify, mutate, superimpose or sensibly alter the existing condition of available space in the city. Through this exploration it is possible to make visible a different physical framework as noted by the Spanish urban planner Oriol Bohigas, "the transitions from the individual creation to collective communication."[4]

AGGREGATION

In Detroit, through the collection and curation of different units or parts, abandoned or unused spaces are transformed into a new spatial condition with new use and new opportunity. These units or spatial catalysts exploit the resources of the place through the aggregation of debris and waste that poses a D.I.Y. and local aesthetic. In some instances we can appreciate the direct connection between these artifacts and the history of the city, as can be seen in the case of Roosevelt Par which sits on three adjacent lots adjacent to the abandoned train station in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood. Roosevelt Par salvages tires, automotive scrap metal and other recycled materials linked to the city's industrial past. Industrial objects were transformed by art students from Lawrence Technological University to create imaginative obstacles for a miniature golf course open to the public, as a provocation to introduce a program synonymous with the suburban into an urban context.

In a similar approach, Brush Park BMX transforms a small children playground, abandoned by the Detroit Recreation Department into a BMX course. Local bikers, in search of a place to practice their sport, adopted the park and engaged neighbors and volunteers to breathe life back into this forgotten space. The project claims space through aggregation by composing a series of obstacles excavated in-situ and approaching the material inherent to the site. Brush Park BMX keep to a minimum the aggregation of elements from outside the park but is much more invasive through its transformation of the topography of the site.

The fragile maze of groomed trails, ramps and jumps require constant maintenance by the group that uses them and as a result strengthens the relationship between the community and the revived space. The last project to leverage aggregation as a spatial strategy is the Lincoln Street Art Park & Sculpture Garden. The park appropriates and recovers a private lot adjacent to the old Lincoln plant, occupied by the non-profit and only recycling center within the city limits of Detroit, Recycle Here. The space is an eclectic collection of murals, street art and found objects from many prominent Detroit artists coupled with a shipping container transformed into an educational recycling classroom insulated with shredded US dollars. The content of the park is constantly changing and as a result generates a new urban landscape constantly in flux where the public can enjoy some of the salvaged materials that Recycle Here offers a medium to the local creative community. However, the three projects have different degrees of success and failure resulting from their funding, maintenance, social agenda, level of permanence, and materials employed.

NESTING

Another observable operation in Detroit is the use of nesting, or the fitting of a space or spaces inside a larger existing one. If an area is large enough to accommodate different activities or uses, it is possible for the new interventions to modify the original uses of the larger space through occupation. In the projects analyzed, nesting mainly occurs in underused public parks that serve as hosts to smaller interventions happening inside of them. "The Edible Hut" is a community gathering space in Calimera Park on the northeast side of Detroit. In this project, a new programmatic element is introduced inside the park that combines an open-air covered space (hut), sculpture, neighborhood gathering point and community garden. The hut was introduced to unify and activate the park by complementing the existing Memory Field and Nsoroma garden with a space for community gathering inside of the larger park.

Similar to the Edible Hut, Social Sushi in partnership with Roosevelt Proxy, Lawrence Tech University and Western International high school proposed a new covered space inside of Roosevelt Park. The group of students set out to redefine the park through the introduction of a community space and restaurant to be run by a local entrepreneur selected by the community. Through the nesting of a new program, the underfunded park would use the revenue from the rental of the space to pay for its maintenance, improvements and further programing of the park. The project proposes the use of recycled shipping containers to create an interior space while at the same time define exterior spaces to be programed with different complementary activities that would revitalize the park through various forms of recreation.

Existing spaces for sports are also susceptible to be colonized through a nesting strategy. The Wigle Recreation Center near Martin Luther King Blvd and the Lodge Freeway is an example of nesting through the retrofit of an existing infrastructure. Since, 2005 the underutilized park and the public recreation center abandoned by the city has fallen into disrepair. In 2013, a non-profit organization, Community Push, led the transformation of one of the basketball courts into a skate park affectionately known as "the Wig". In this case it is important to recognize the limitation of this new activity to only of one of the basketball courts. The newly introduced program does not have an invasive character and respects the use of the surrounding host space, which despite its state of abandonment is frequented from time to time by other users. In this case marking of place is respectful through the introduction of a new revitalizing program desired by la group of ocals into a space not forgotten, but slowly slipping into the abyss of decay plaguing the city.

In the example of the Eastern Market Football Club (EMFC), there is an introduction of program into space with a lack of program. The intervention grew out of a personal initiative, where a single individual passionate for the sport of soccer, converted an unused lot in Eastern Market into a soccer pitch.
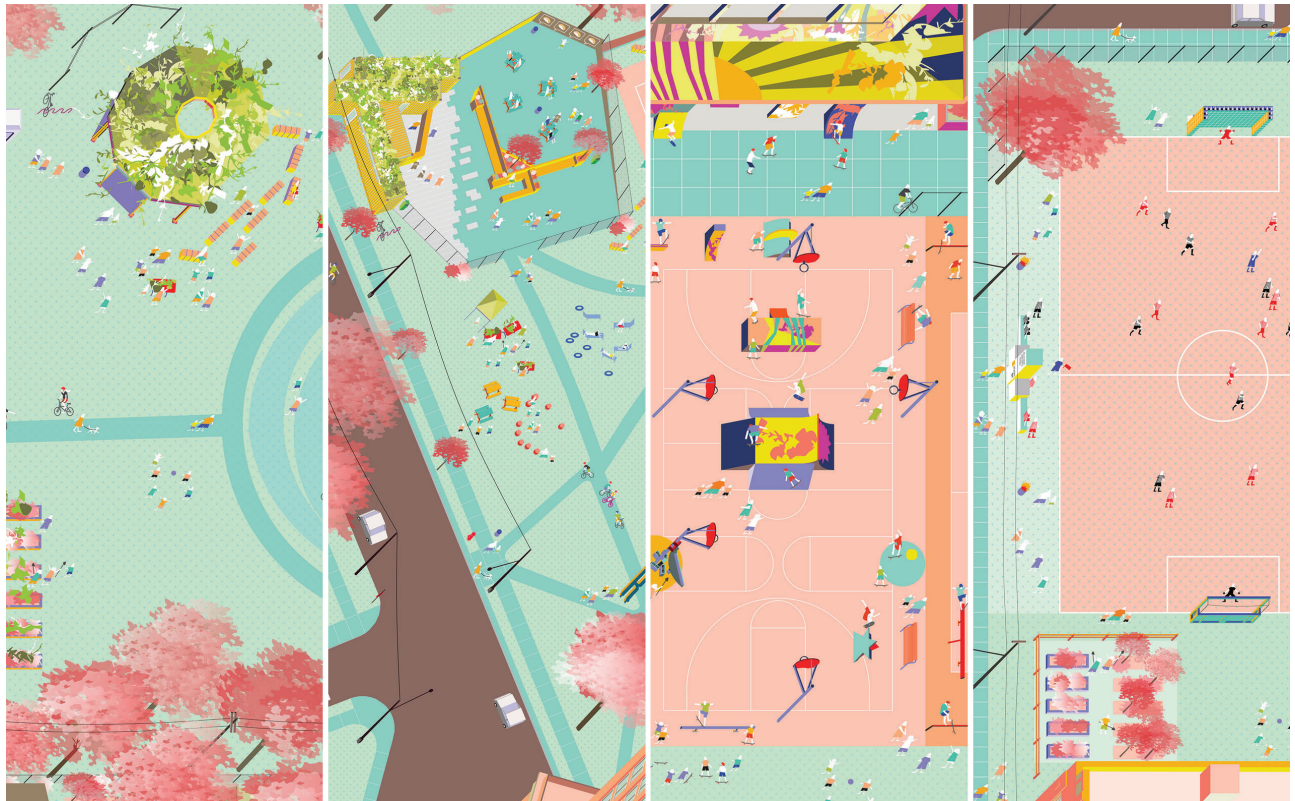
Figure 1: Aggregation, *Roosvelt Par,
BMX Brush Park & Lincoln Street Art*

Figure 2: Nesting, *The Edible Hut,
Social Sushi, "The Wig" & EMFC*

Hold, Denote or Reserve

EMFC presents a minimal intervention in the landscape through the simple cutting of the vegetation to the right height for soccer practice, manufacturing goals and corner flags by recycling found objects from the food market and referencing to the neighborhood it is part of. Only part of the lot is adapted for playing soccer where an informal league of locals meet Saturday afternoon to play and maintain the lot which in turn is free for those who want to use it during the rest of the week. These examples propose alternative guest programs in decaying a larger space in need of change. They are perfectly contained within a larger space with no intent to take over but to propose a symbiosis between new programs based on demands for a larger change to take place in the host space.

MOBILE READY-MADES

One of the most successful place making mechanisms utilized in the city have been mobile ready-mades. In the 1970's and 80's, one of the most popular projects in this category was the Swim Mobile. The Swim Mobile was joint venture between the Detroit Parks and Recreation department and private local sponsors to outfit a semi-trailer with a mobile swimming pool that could be located anywhere in the city. The trailer was parked on the street and using water from the fire hydrant created an instant swimming pool for any given neighborhood on any given day. The mobility of the initiative allowed the city to offer recreation to a much larger group of users, without the uncertainly of an investment in a permanent facility. Its mobility wasn't taken for granted as if it were a permanent pool in a neighborhood. By visiting an area once or twice every week, it created an increased interest in the project, becoming something special and highly desired. Its non-permanence also allowed for the pool to be tested in different locations. If the pool was not successful in a particular location the itinerary could be easily modified and the pool relocated to meet the needs and demands of the community. The Swim Mobile was not the only project that proposed a mobile strategy. Other initiatives such as mobile libraries and mobile theaters were tested as activators of public space in the city. Mobile ready-mades, concentrate investment on a small project but yield a wide spread effect on the city. The roaming platform both satisfies the needs of private donors through wide spread advertisement and neighbors needs by providing services temporally to different areas with a deficit in certain recreational, educational and nutritional amenities.
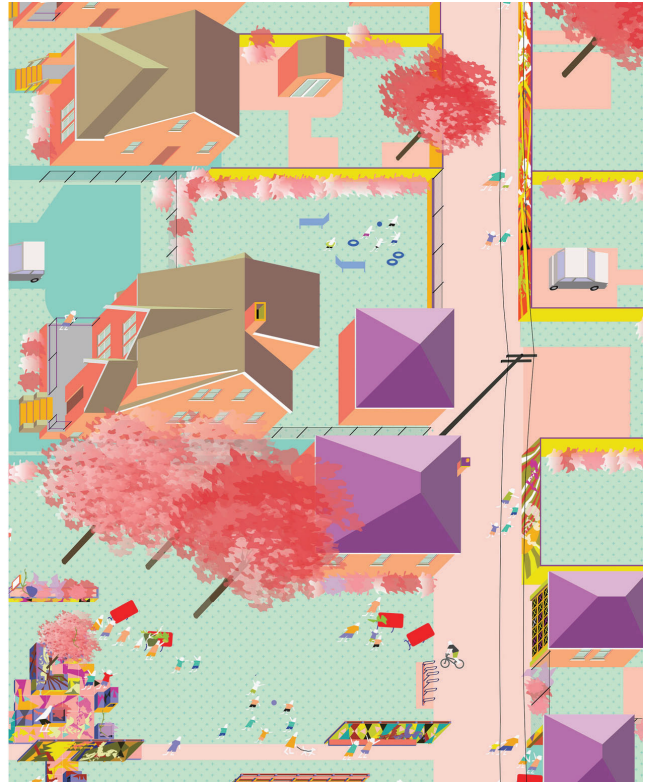
LINEAR INITATIVES

Linear spatial strategies can be seen in projects such as The Alley Project (TAP) located in a residential neighborhood of southwest Detroit. TAP is an intervention that curates different graffiti murals along a residential alley with a neighbors garage serving as a studio and two empty lots converted into pocket parks and educational spaces for the neighborhood. TAP showcases the street art produced by local youth at risk of social exclusion. The initiative transforms a secondary space with a high rate of illegal activity by appropriating it with art work that encourages creative expression and community responsibility across a diverse neighborhood.

Erik Howard, the organizer of the initiative, explains that TAP provides a bridge to create unexpected relationships between renters, home owners, artists, youth and service providers. The simple linear extension of this model along the alley masks a complex process of adaptation and conversation between the parties affected by the project. According to Howard, the graffiti implies an action at the threshold between the public and the private. While in the alley creating a mural the space being occupied is considered public; however, the medium used to generate the art is private property, the garage door of a neighbor. The real success of the work lies in the strong connections and the symbiosis created between neighbors and artists.
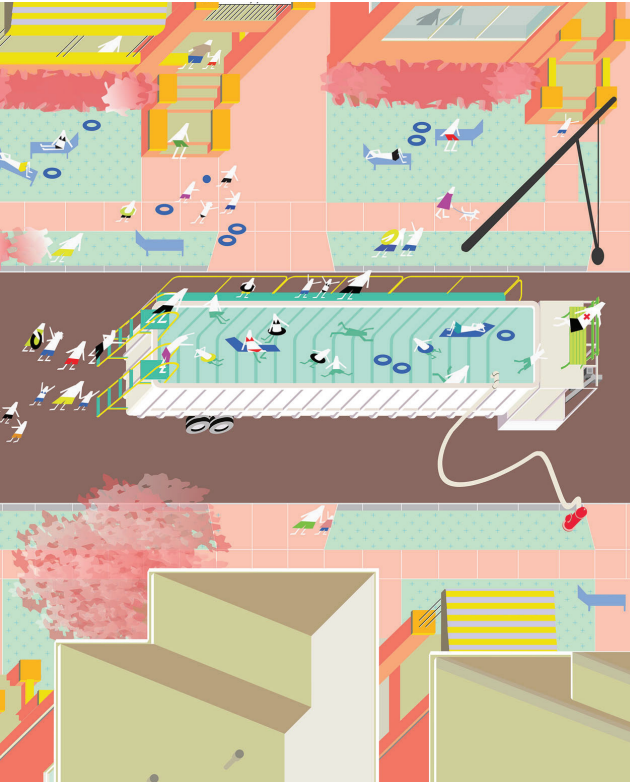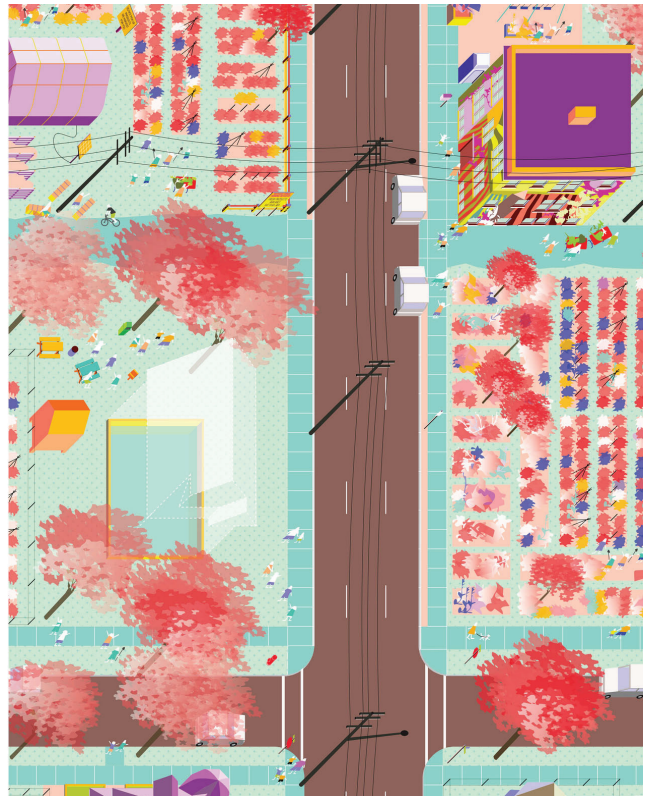
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Figure 3: Mobile, *Swim Mobile.* Linear
initiative, *The Alley Project*

Figure 4: Networks, *ECOsphere &
Michigan Urban Farming Initiative*

NETWORKS

Local networks are spatial strategies that connect spaces through geographical proximity or virtually through digital devices. The Ewald Circle Sphere Project or ECOsphere is a virtually community network in Detroit born out of the intention to construct a community wireless mesh network to serve as a primary component of a digital ecosystem. This virtual network located in Detroit's historic neighborhood of Oakman Boulevard was created with the intention of compensating for spotty or nonexistent coverage by corporate internet providers in Detroit neighborhoods. The State Department financed trial runs of this mesh network as a low-cost gateway to wireless Internet access and as a community-organizing tool. In an interview with the New York Times, the creator of the ECOsphere mesh, Uri House said, *"Access to information changes your life."*[5] The first stage of the project is to provide reliable Internet access to users in homes. The connection to the virtual network strengthens the physical space where a second phase of the network extends access to the network from the public realm, the streets, bus stops, and informal pop-up stores in the area.

An alternative network in Detroit can be seen in the project known as Michigan Urban Farming Initiative (MUFI). This physical network, located in the North End neighborhood, connects underutilized city owned and private properties through urban agriculture. Utilizing adjoining vacant spaces that weaves its way through urban blight, and the property of steadfast neighbors, the program looks to agriculture as a method to promote education, sustainability and a food source shared by neighbors. The ultimate objective is that this active food producing network begins to heal the community and offer a resource where organizations and neighbors can collaborate, pool resources, engage in relevant dialogue and ultimately create shared space, with the ideas that Jane Jacobs introduced fifty years ago: "the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."[6]

CONCLUSIONS

The diverse use of urban space by these initiatives through the partial, temporal or permanent initiatives, leverage different strategies of aggregation, nesting, incorporating ready-mades, colonizing through networks or linear interventions that share a common determination to hold, denote or reserve space. The study of these five formal strategies reveals the possible transformation of the city's available private and public space for use by its citizens. This vision intends to manifest that not only large projects can help revive a great city but the diversity shown through these examples reinforces the small scale as fundamental to strengthening the quality of urban life. However, the success and longevity of these small scale interventions cannot be evaluated based only on good will and intent. Instead it is important to evaluate them based on other key factors that guarantee the quality and the permanence of these urban spaces, such as:

1. **Maintenance and supervision.** While all of these interventions intend to foster a change in their local contexts, the degree to which they are successful is determined based on the level of investment in the site and the initiative. Mechanisms such as mobile ready-mades are easier to supervise, clean, repair and transform with respect to other in-situ strategies which require a greater level of investment to update their infrastructure.

2. **Political support.** These interventions become a litmus test for revealing the true needs of the city, and even though their origins are not seeded with political backing, their permanence reveals an administrative recognition of the interventions impact on the city. Aggregation initiatives which started as an acupuncture of a larger space, like the Lincoln Street Art Park which is coupled with Recycle Here, the largest and only private recycle center in the city, find success through the overlap of citizen based initiatives and funding by the public administration for services not able to be provided by the city

ENDNOTES

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6. JACOBS, Jane. "Death and Life in Great American Cities." Ramdom House, Nueva York (1961)

7. LYNCH, Kevin. "The image of the city." The MIT Press, Cambridge (1960)

without private collaboration. In contrast the case of Roosvelt Par lacked support from the public administration and was condemned to fail. In addition, the intervention did not have a direct link to an adjacent private interest that would ensure its maintenance and security. While both use the same formal strategy to occupy space, it can be noted that it is not the aggregation that guarantees a productive space, but the need to be acknowledged through political support.

3. **Symbiosis between the initiative and the local context.** Linear interventions such as The Alley Project are rooted in a specific need by neighbors to combat crime and help a population under the risk of social exclusion. In this case, there are strong underlying cultural ties that reinforces the strategy for making place. The linear colonization and network of neighbors presents a continuous strategy of expansion built through different phases: the pocket park, the graffiti garages, and the art studio. This in conjunction with the extensive personal investment that supports the project is inevitably guarantees its success.

4. **Private and independent funding.** Lastly the active participation and commitment of external agents with the initiative is fundamental to its development. Examples of urban networks such as MUFI demonstrates the involvement of third party investors that through grant funding financially support initiatives at a distance. The network in this case goes beyond the local and the formal to include a broader audience who invests in it and connects it to a larger financial network. In addition, constant surveillance and active maintenance by neighbors and owners of the non-profit organization allows for the continued growth and acceptance of the urban farm. In comparison, a nesting strategy such as the Edible Hut also uses private investment for seed funding; however, in this case the formal strategy and the one time investment is not enough to actively maintain and encourage growth on the site.

With this knowledge, the work allows one to reflect on the possibilities for the revitalization of the city's available space, understood through generative interactions that might not be a direct result of the initiatives spatial layout. The specific qualities of these cases, their formal strategies, site, politics, funding and aesthetics are a reference for present and future application by individuals recognized and valued for their contribution to the vitality of their city. As Kevin Lynch, stated in his book "The Image of the City": "Not only is the city an object which is perceived (and perhaps enjoyed) by millions of people of widely diverse class and character, but it is a product of many builders who are constantly modifying the structure for reasons of their own. While it may be stable in general outlines for some time, it is ever changing in detail. Only partial control can be exercised over its growth and form. There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases."[7]