

# Collective Culture and the Cooperative Housing Model in Detroit

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Hyper-commodified housing is alienated housing. It is dominated by people who see dwellings through the eyes of an investor interested in profit or a technocrat interested in control, instead of seeing it as a social right. Commodified dwelling space is not an expression of the residential needs of those who live in it. It is determined by landlords, sublessors, management companies, real estate developers, banks, bailiffs, and bureaucrats—by the ensemble of social roles and institutions that prop up the seemingly inhuman laws of housing markets in contemporary society.

—David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*

### HOUSING RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Like most of its peers, Detroit's history is filled with standard plays: large-scale urban renewal, highway expansion, redlining, racial restrictive covenants, and widespread single-family zoning.<sup>1</sup> There is perhaps no greater compounding injustice in Detroit than the construction of I-375 that occurred in the areas known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. Once home to over 140,000 people, the immediate area is now a major 8-lane highway interchange with two distinct tales of residential redevelopment on either side.<sup>2</sup> To the East, blanketed in tree-cover and punctuated by squared hedges, a private residential community called Lafayette Park features a mix of rental apartments and signature glass-and-steel townhouses designed by Mies van der Rohe. To the West, an empty and overgrown field where the Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects once stood. Brewster-Douglass was the physical antithesis to Lafayette Park as a cluster of six identical 15-story, brick-clad towers with small punched-windows towering over the highway.

Sadly, neither of these developments countered the elimination of generational wealth from the destruction of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. As home ownership is the greatest source of wealth for Detroit's Black population, there is undoubtedly an opportunity to close the wealth gap going forward.<sup>3</sup> With a clear strategy to support the expansion of home ownership, we might finally see movement toward housing equity. Yet, how can a

working person afford a down payment when the State's hourly minimum wage is \$10.10? A working person in Michigan earning minimum wage would have to work two full-time jobs to afford a two-bedroom rental.<sup>4</sup> The impossibility of home ownership has become synonymous with urban life, where the most dense and desirable cities are afforded only with extreme salaries, grand inheritances, or multi-generational mortgages. Given this climate, Detroiters are poised to reclaim housing as a human right.

### STARTING FROM R-ZERO

Detroit's biggest landowner is coincidentally the city's very own Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA), a public-benefit nonprofit corporation that oversees approximately 75,000 parcels of property.<sup>5</sup> Over 13,000 of these properties, or approximately 1.6 square miles, exist as clusters of 2 or more properties, and half of them are clusters of 5 to 9 properties.<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging the vast stock of open land currently held by the DLBA, we propose to enable various scales of cooperative housing structures by using decommodified and rezoned clusters of parcels for the purpose of enacting a large-scale housing strategy.

R-0 is a proposed zoning type and strategy for the future of housing in Detroit. It sets a standard for removing capitalist principles of property that have historically dominated the built environment. Major underpinnings of R-0 include: acknowledging that current zoning policy and reform efforts do not actively support collective, affordable housing innovation; that the individualist pursuit of housing will no longer be a rite of passage for urban living; and that land will no longer be profitable from external interests. Tactical organization of R-0 cooperatives allow for a range of "live-and" housing typologies that change in scale and use while supporting existing communities and neighborhoods. Implementation this approach relies on a participatory relationship of community support and stewardship, rather than outside, top-down investment. R-0 pursues a more honest relationship to the land than R-1 through R-6 have ever allowed.

### COLLECTIVE CULTURE

Cooperative housing has worked effectively within capitalist systems throughout major cities of the world, however, this time-tested approach to secure and affordable housing is consistently overlooked in the United States of America in favor of

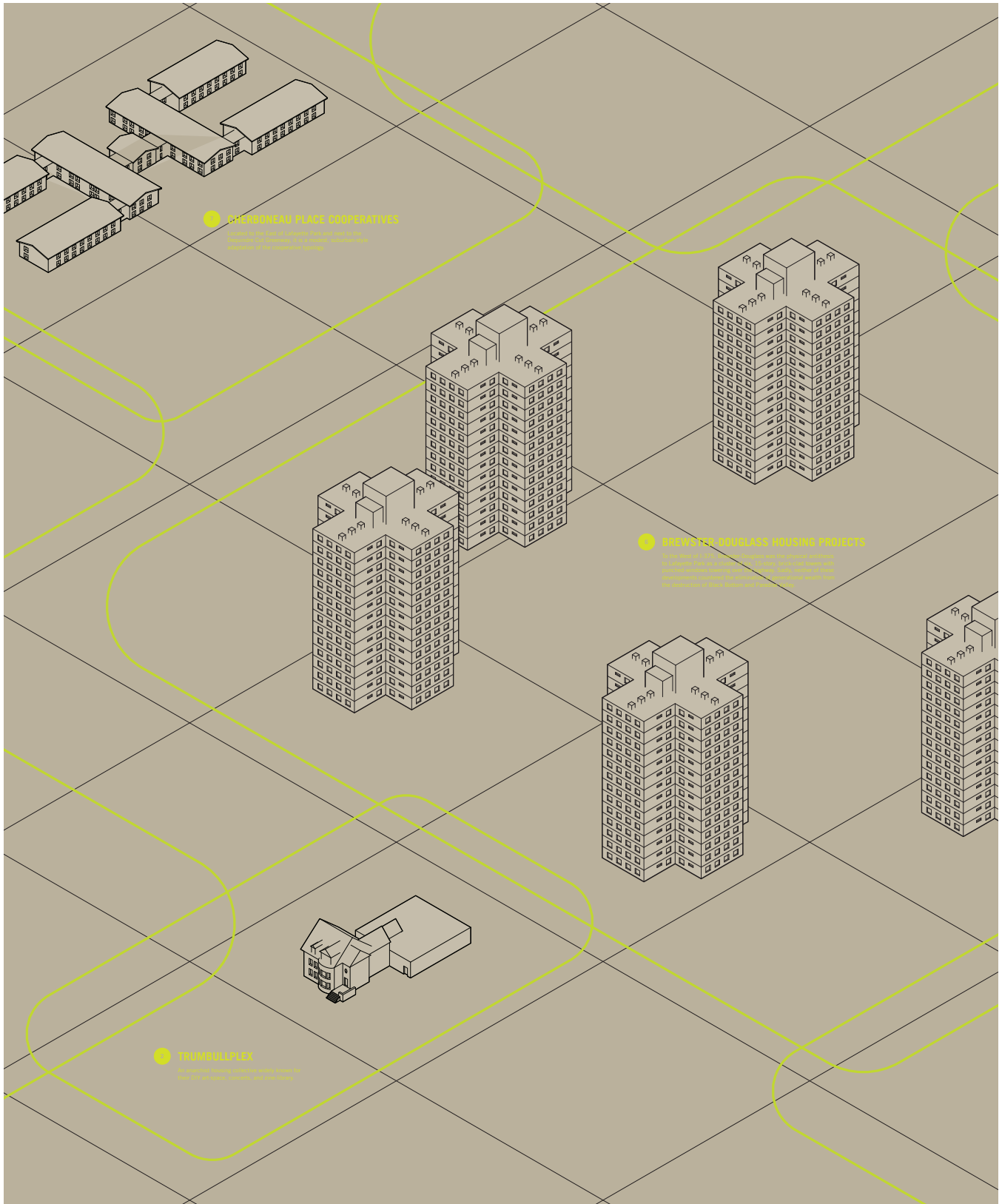


Figure 1. Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects. Credit authors.

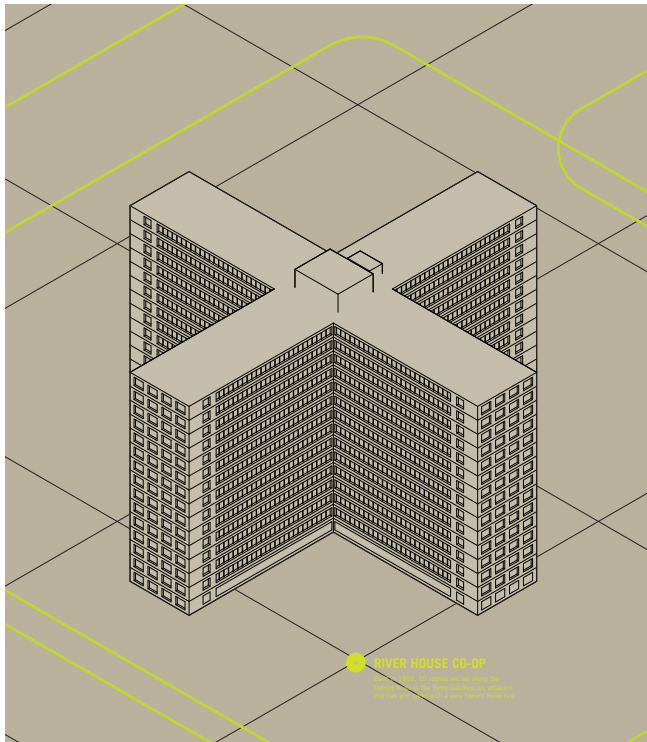


Figure 2. River City Co-op. Credit authors.

household-based subsidies, inclusionary zoning policies, or tax increment financing. As a result of the continued belief in the individualist pursuit of housing, we have crafted a largely unjust financialization of housing—a basic human need in an increasingly plutocratic, market-driven system.<sup>7</sup> The biggest challenge inhibiting widespread adoption of cooperative housing seems to be our cultural attitude toward collective responsibility of space and property. Despite this, the track record of cooperative housing in Detroit is both positive and plentiful.

Existing cooperative housing entities in the city represent a cross-section of neighborhoods, scales, and building typologies. 1300 Lafayette, the modernist tower designed by the office of Gunnar Birkerts, tells a story of empowerment and taking action into your own hands. Originally apartments, the owner defaulted on the mortgage and in 1979, residents banded together to collectively purchase the property and form a cooperative structure.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned Miesian Lafayette Park townhomes operate as cooperatives, organized block by block, approaching the restoration (or replacement) of the original single-pane glazing with different priorities.<sup>9</sup> Fountain Court is Detroit’s largest Black-owned housing cooperative.<sup>10</sup> River House Detroit is a large, cross-shaped tower that returns to the Detroit River for collective—not industrial—purpose.

Other spaces and forms of collectivity in Detroit today include the anarchist housing collective Trumbullplex, urban growers and educators Keep Growing Detroit, incubators such as Ponyride,

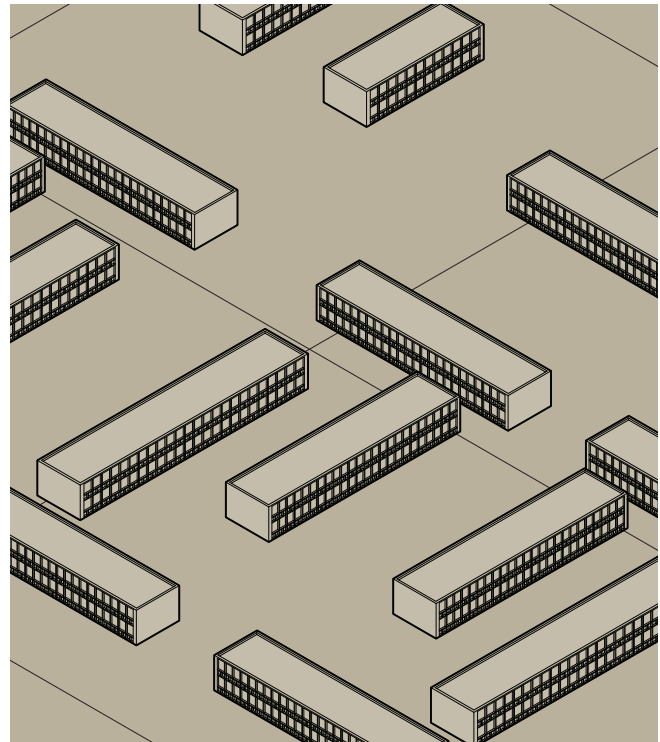


Figure 3. Lafayette Park. Credit authors.

warehouse raves, the Detroit People’s Food Coop, and the long history of collective bargaining, worker strikes, and uprisings.

### THE OFFICE FOR COOPERATIVE HOUSING

Our critical practice believes that design is important to the emotional appeal of our built environment, while also recognizing the greater impact our profession can have if actively advocating for justice and equity through policy, strategy, and action. How can a municipal housing strategy and a radical approach to re-zoning vacant land address the wealth gap? The Office for Cooperative Housing challenges the individualist pursuit of housing by providing a guiding framework for residents to come together and collectively build housing on city-owned land.

Working as the activist arm of the DLBA, the Office for Cooperative Housing fights for reparations, housing action, and implementing a new zoning policy known as R-0. The Office pursues strategies for widening access to housing in urban areas, uncovering opportunities for collective action within existing systems, and shifting cultural attitudes toward collective space and cooperative living—leading toward greater equity outcomes in a city still dealing with the trickle-down of social, political, and economic crises. As part one in a larger research trajectory focusing on implementing cooperative housing strategies throughout North America, we visualize the inner-workings of the Detroit office. Various spaces and configurations allow residents to talk and listen, discuss or shout, organize, debate, configure, and ultimately contribute to their own housing future.



Figure 4. Inside the Detroit Office for Cooperative Housing. Credit authors.

We broadcast our position on an itinerant, upcycled wooden display structure with graphics communicating major underpinnings of the proposed R-0 zoning classification, a timeline of cooperative housing projects in Detroit, and a visualization of a cooperative design prototype. The structure moves between four pilot neighborhoods where we envision R-0 and the Cooperative Housing Office to be most impactful:

Chadsey Condon is a predominantly residential neighborhood bisected by Michigan Avenue and historically defined by the

Cadillac Clark Street Assembly Plant. Core City is a transitioning mixed-use neighborhood with existing low-density housing, commercial operations, a steady reinvestment by private developers, and vast stretches of vacant land. Delray, located along the Detroit River near Zug Island, is historically industrial. According to a recent planning study by the City of Detroit, new housing construction will be prohibited by 2050. Lastly, O’Hair Park is a one-square mile neighborhood focused on introducing housing alternatives to their exclusively single-family zoned district.



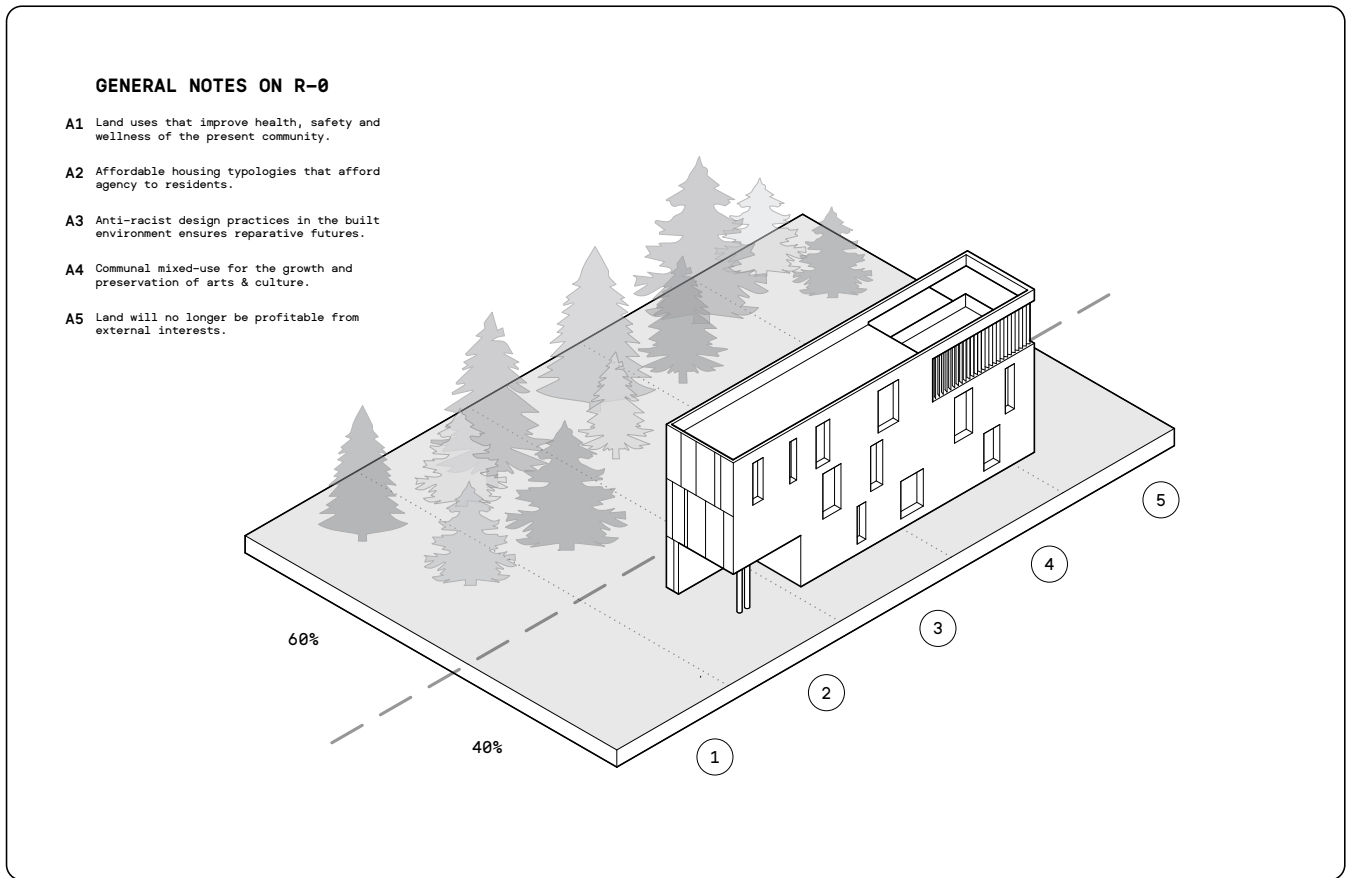


Figure 6. Cooperative Housing prototype on 5-parcel cluster. Credit authors.



Figure 7. R-0 Benchmark. Credit authors.



Figure 8. R-0 Benchmark. Credit authors.

Opening the Office for Cooperative Housing and implementing R-0 has the potential to radically change the perception and practice of housing in cities nationwide. With its multi-generational traumas tied to colonial relationships with land, Detroit is in a prime position to uncover equitable land practices given its current surplus in essential, dormant land amidst an affordable housing crisis.

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#### ENDNOTES

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