

Design, Policy and the Human Experience: Historic Development and Current Typology of Community Spaces in Detroit

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In the city of Detroit, policy interventions, public life and urban design are intertwined. Civic spaces that are unique to the Detroit landscape have evolved overtime in response to political momentum (or lack thereof) and design directions, informing and informed by community leadership and human use. This paper will track the evolution of three central types of urban spaces in Detroit, documenting morphology alongside contemporaneous social, economic and cultural contexts that intersect with urban space. This research and documentation seeks to link the braided narratives of design, policy and community experience in the historical development of three spatial typologies – commercial corridors and streetscapes, the vacant lot as neighborhood landscape, and the changing site of the community center from civic structure to repurposed residential space – all of which are central to urban form and public life in the city. This work is couched in a larger narrative of urban development and design in an industrial legacy city, including histories of racist policy, deep disinvestment and outmigration that have had a profound impact on the spatial experience of residents in the city. This past has also informed the role of design in the formulation of iterative public spaces. Research methods include: archival research of news clippings, city policy, urban photography, and drawings; graphic documentation and analysis of typological change over time; and testimony from community leaders and designers. The paper seeks to overlay political and social trajectories with design evolution of urban spaces and their role in community life and thus account for the complexities the built environment unique to Detroit overtime. The resulting documentation will tell the story of changing urban spaces in a political and social context and in relationship with public life in the city of Detroit.

INTRODUCTION

In the city of Detroit, policy interventions, public life and urban design are intertwined. Civic spaces unique to the Detroit landscape have evolved over time in response to political momentum (or lack thereof) and industry, informing and informed by community use and leadership. These places persevere

within a larger narrative of urban development and deeply rooted histories of racist policy, disinvestment and outmigration that have had a profound impact on the spatial experience of residents in the city. This paper begins to track the evolution of three central types of urban spaces in Detroit, documenting morphology alongside contemporaneous social, economic and cultural contexts that intersect with urban space. This research and documentation seeks to link the braided narratives of design, policy and community experience in the historical development of three spatial typologies – commercial corridors and streetscapes, the vacant lot as neighborhood landscape, and the changing site of the community center from civic structure to repurposed residential space – all of which are central to urban form and public life in the city. This past has also informed the role of design in the formulation of iterative public spaces. This effort examines historic and contemporary events, imagery and narratives to piece together the stories of these places. This paper marks an installment in an ongoing documentation project at the intersection of research and practice that tells the interwoven stories of people, place and politics in the unique urban landscapes of Detroit. Future work will expand upon and graphically represent the typologies introduced here.

BRIEF CONTEXT OF DETROIT URBAN FORM

Although the story of Detroit feels ubiquitous to those who live it, background setting is necessary for this narrative and a cursory overview of urban form and the major pressures on the direction of development is included here for context.¹

Originally home to the Huron, Odawa, Potawatomi and Iroquois people, Detroit was first colonized by French explorers in the early 1700s and developed as a series of ribbon farms, fort and trading port along the Detroit River with a strong French and Catholic influence. Over time the city expanded as industry grew, and outskirts were slowly annexed. Central to this city's story is the advent of the automobile industry, famously led by Henry Ford, whose rapidly expanding industrial facilities commandeered the city's auto-centric urban form, sprawling growth, architectural language in collaboration with Albert Kahn, single family home landscape for workers, and the modern machinations of an assembly line economy. The latter included the homogenization of workers entering the Ford factory experience, the enticing



Figure 1. Early Livernois Avenue. Image credit: Burton Historical Collection.

normalization of \$5 work days, and rampant union busting. The lure of factory jobs drove much of the great migration as southern workers moved to the Rust Belt to benefit from wages and jobs. This in turn spurred the rampant development of affordable and quickly built single family homes that comprise much of the Detroit and Dearborn cityscape, punctuated by neighborhoods built by the auto elite and industrial facilities themselves, now problematically integrated in residential zones. During this auto-fueled period, Detroit's population grew to nearly two million people.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as the typical story of post-war highway development, suburban sprawl and white flight played out and the auto industry waned, Detroit's population decline began. This trajectory was hastened by urban renewal projects that further enabled suburban relocation, decimated communities of color, and concentrated poverty. The rebellion of 1967 shed national limelight on racist tensions and politics in the city and led to further population loss. Once vibrant commercial corridors lost businesses and the demographics of the city shifted toward today's makeup, with a population hovering around 650,000. In the 1990s, as the auto industry continued to relocate overseas, population decline continued. Infrastructure built for a much larger population coupled with a declining tax base led to disinvestment and inadequate maintenance. In the 2000s, over-assessed property taxes and the recession led to a massive foreclosure crisis impacting innumerable Detroit families as still more population loss and vacancy accrued, contributing to the landscape often cited in the contemporary urban annals of the city, exacerbated by demolition programs.

In this landscape and, until relatively recently, in the absence of government intervention and resources, community organizations, residents and business leaders have largely led the resurgence of the cityscape, organizing resources and exemplifying human capital and care. It is in this context that civic



Figure 2. Auto-centric Livernois Avenue, mid 20th century. Image credit: Burton Historical Collection.

and community spaces have evolved within the shifting formal landscape of Detroit. Streetscapes tell a story of evolving city priorities and resources alongside business and cultural histories and broader urban design trends. Vacant land in Detroit is abundant, relaying a very visible story of disinvestment, depopulation and demolition in neighborhoods previously populated with row after row of working class single family homes. Here, city politics and policy have created landscapes that are both a liability and opportunity at the large and small scale. As the city shrank, so did resources for recreation, namely staffing and upkeep of parks and community spaces. While this pattern of investment is seeing a generation-defining reversal right now, a steady extraction from school and recreation facilities by the city contributed to communities redefining shared space. This paper will emphasize a streetscape case study story while introducing vacant land projects and ad hoc community spaces for further narrative development and documentation in the future.

LITERATURE HIGHLIGHTS AND REQUIRED READING

This story of Detroit's trajectory and particularly the causes and impacts of depopulation and disinvestment is best presented in Thomas Sugrue's seminal *Origins of the Urban Crisis*. The geography and spatial history of Detroit is further documented and explicated by University of Michigan scholar June Manning Thomas's body of work. Her *Cartography of Detroit* lays bare many histories of the city. A more current work of cartography by Alex Hill defines today's Detroit, in sometimes pithy terms. Other authors contributing to the literature on Detroit's urban landscape and community development include preeminent activist Grace Lee Boggs and former newspaper architecture critic John Gallagher. Academic takes on the trajectory of Detroit are abundant across disciplines. Importantly, contemporary media coverage documenting unsung news from Detroit neighborhoods with an anti-gentrification lens is exemplified by the relatively new *Bridge Detroit*.²



Figure 3. Livernois Community Light Up, 1964. Image credit: Burton Historical Collection.

STREETScape CASE STUDY: CITY MORPHOLOGY, CULTURAL HISTORY, AND THE EVOLUTION OF LIVERNOIS AVENUE

Livernois Avenue is a largely north-west street that runs from Fort Wayne on the riverbank in Southwest Detroit into the northern suburbs. Historically, Livernois included the celebrated Lincoln plant near Warren Avenue and vibrant commercial activity proximate to Fenkell Road (5 Mile), auto-oriented and active along its length. This narrative charts the evolution of the route with a focus on the stretch of Livernois known as the historic Avenue of Fashion and its evolving influences.

History

The Livernois area was first surveyed in 1816 and was farmland until the area was annexed by the City of Detroit in 1922 and subsequently subdivided for urban home construction in the 1920s. In 1927 both Marygrove College and the University of Detroit opened their new campuses at their current locations. The area was also impacted by Henry Ford's nearby Highland Park Plant, which spurred single family home development in nearby neighborhoods. Commercial land was largely developed during a WWII boom, contributing to the Livernois corridor as a primary retail destination. The John C. Lodge Freeway was built in 1959. In the 1960s, the area became a destination for African American middle and upper class families, contributing to today's strong communities and the arts and business culture along Livernois and McNichols.

From the 1950s to the 1970s the stretch of Livernois from 7 Mile to 8 Mile became known as the Avenue of Fashion as shops bustled and a pedestrian retail corridor thrived. Businesses like B. Siegel, Woolworths, and Winkelmans were destination shopping locations known for quality and customer service. Baker's Keyboard Lounge, America's oldest operating jazz club, opened in 1934 and continues to anchor Livernois at the corner of Eight



Figure 4. Today's Livernois streetscape with ample sidewalks for cultural production. Image by author.

Mile, leading a rich musical legacy in the area. Activity along Livernois began to decline in the 1970s, a trend that is still evident today with remaining vacant properties. Nevertheless, some new businesses opened along Livernois in the 1980s and 1990s, and retail activity in the 2000s set the stage for today's resurgence. Joe's Gallery and Simply Casual are among the businesses that jump-started the current revitalization along the Avenue of Fashion.³

Modern Morphology

Although not a radial road, Livernois, like many of the major thoroughfares in Detroit, was initially established along a horse-drawn and later mechanical streetcar line organizing urban form. The avenue swiftly grew into an auto-oriented roadway of six lanes flanked by car sales lots, also typical. According to accounts of local leaders, in the 1980s and 90s, Livernois was treated like a highway, with high speeds, frequent accidents and even highway-style signage, thwarting the reinforcement of a safe walkable commercial corridor.⁴ In response, the City of Detroit constructed a much-maligned median with the intention to reduce speeds and accidents along the wide roadway. The same local leader cites a design led by traffic-engineering for a still-very-auto-oriented roadway post-median, with inconvenient crossings and turnarounds that discourage stopping to support local businesses. While the median did make for a slower and safer driving experience, it was massively unpopular. The median was later beautified with city dollars in the 2010s, gussied up with landscaping in a cross-sector and coordinated effort to invest in the Avenue of Fashion. As one of the city's preeminent neighborhood commercial corridors with a rich history of Black businesses and shoppers, Livernois has seen considerable attention in the last decade led by the city, local institutions and business leaders, working both collaboratively and in parallel.



Figure 5. Livornois Avenue streetscape evolution 2002, 2007, 2022. Image credit: Google Earth + author.

Infrastructure + Culture

This recent attention has led to a new streetscape design, strategic infrastructure investment, and the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing growth of the Avenue of Fashion as a cultural corridor that highlights the impacts of civic and community investment in place. In 2013, a group of city, business, institutional and residential leaders launched the Livornois Working Group to focus investment and attention on the corridor. Of many outcomes, this included the creation of the Livornois Community Storefront as an area third space launching pop-up businesses and offering shared space preceding the current landscape of cafes. This coincided with a series of events called Light Up Livornois, intended to draw visitors to the corridor to support local businesses on a monthly basis. This small scale effort has since grown to become a massive annual event as part of the citywide Month of Design, still known today as Light Up Livornois. This cultural event has infrastructural implications. In 2013, the City of Detroit lacked basic services including functional street lights citywide. In planning for the Livornois Community Storefront, the dark roadway was frequently cited as the dominant hurdle to business development and a sense of safety for both workers and visitors, coinciding with many DIY attempts at adequate lighting. For the launch event, organizers installed construction lights to literally “Light Up Livornois” and act as an advocacy call to action. Unbeknownst to planners, a similar effort had taken place in 1964, with businesses organizing a “Community Light Up” on a stretch of the Avenue of Fashion, with floodlight poles concealed behind trees to bring more light

to storefronts and sidewalks, drawing customers. In the years following the more recent Light Up Livornois, the city worked to establish a new Public Lighting Authority and effectively transformed the lightscape of Detroit with the installation of tens of thousands of finally functional LED streetlights citywide. This political focus on lighting highlights community and civic leadership intersecting with spatial implications for everyday life and retail landscapes.

Another iteration of lighting for the pedestrian shopping experience has been central to the newest streetscape developments in the area. In the last half decade, the city has again reenvisioned Livornois Avenue, with the help of landscape architecture firm Spackman Mossop Michaels. The product of much debate and a protracted construction season, the new streetscape reduces the number of driving lanes, eliminates the median, and includes a deep sidewalk that integrates a bike lane. This infrastructural investment is significant as it creates more space for street life, devaluing the car while amplifying places for people and retail. Coinciding with the COVID pandemic, this wide sidewalk allows commercial spaces to spill outdoors and community to gather in safe shared civic space. Simultaneously, the investment in sidewalk reinforces the Avenue of Fashion identity as a cultural corridor, creating space for artwork, fashion shows, and performances that the area is known for, at the annual Jazz on the Ave and otherwise. Brass markers embedded in concrete celebrating historic businesses further underscore this identity. Livornois Avenue’s spatial evolution tells a story of city investment in



Figure 6. Brewer Park 2002, 2016, 2023. Note the landscape improvements at the south end of the park. Image credit: Google Earth + author

infrastructure that impacts the cultural development of place and aligns with larger trends pertaining to municipal resources, transportation and revitalization. Lighting and sidewalk design illuminate how city priorities and investment intersect with civic life and community space.

RESIDENTIAL REPURPOSING, BRIEFLY: NEIGHBORHOOD RECREATION AND THE CREATION OF PLACE IN SPACE

Apart from the commercial corridor, Detroit residential neighborhoods vary in character, density and staying power. While some neighborhoods, including those flanking the Avenue of Fashion, are bustling and intact, others manifest Detroit’s depopulation, foreclosure crisis and hodge podge attention on demolition. In these areas, city disinvestment overtime is evident in both civic spaces and the vacant land that used to be a landscape of single family homes. In the 2000s the city consolidated recreation services and spaces due to budget concerns. As a result, many recreation centers that served the city’s neighborhoods were shuttered, to be subsequently scrapped and demolished, leaving lasting scars. In their place, a range of community places have popped up at the hyper local level, in both open spaces and repurposed buildings amidst the residential fabric. While there are endless examples of Detroiters reclaiming vacant land for community use, the tale of one recreation center and its surrounding neighborhood demonstrate community prowess, design initiative and reuse of land with varying levels of city investment.

In the newly minted East Canfield Village on Detroit’s eastside, Brewer Recreation Center used to be the heart of the community, built in 1927. In its heyday, the center housed a gym, boxing ring, pool, auditorium and classrooms. In 1964 Joy Middle School was built on the adjacent property, linked to the rec center, and in subsequent years the center saw upgrades funded with both public and private dollars. In 2006, Brewer Recreation Center suddenly shuttered due to budget concerns and a swift consolidation. Joy Middle School had closed less than a year prior. Both were scrapped, open to the elements and demolished by 2010. Sadly, this trajectory is common in Detroit, where population loss and mismanagement led to deterioration and closure of community assets.⁵ Today, Brewer Park is the focus of a community nonprofit known as Canfield Consortium and residents rally to program and improve the now relatively-empty property. Canfield Consortium, led by two sisters who grew up in the area, has also developed multiple vacant lots as community spaces, cobbling together various grant resources intended for the redevelopment of vacant land in the city. Most recently, they created the East Canfield Art Park, showcasing rotating artworks and performances, partnering with arts programming organizations like Sidewalk Detroit as well as the adjacent school, creating community spaces from swaths of otherwise vacant lots, lending identity and vibrancy to the area. The group has also envisioned a greenway traversing the neighborhood, transforming a chain of vacant lots into walkable landscapes and linking neighborhood amenities like churches, schools and parks. These outdoor



Figure 7. Examples of vacant land and home reuse for community space in Fitzgerald neighborhood. Image credits: Spackman Mossop Michaels, Brilliant Detroit.

spaces that redefine how land is used in the city are common across Detroit's neighborhoods, providing ad hoc centers for community activity. Canfield Consortium is propelling the community center concept further as they work to develop a former corner store – long vacant but once a neighborhood destination – into a community space and café.⁶ This community led initiative envisions a new use for a former commercial space and recalls an earlier era with more resources embedded within the neighborhood.

ONGOING THOUGHTS + FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The Canfield story is representative of spatial trends in other parts of the city – the reinterpretation of recreation centers, repurposing of residential and retail spaces as community places, and reclaiming vacant land as neighborhood landscape. Small scale reappropriation of vacant land by community groups is the norm in the city, where municipal oversight and maintenance of properties is minimal and much land is owned by the Detroit Land Bank Authority. In every neighborhood, residents repurpose vacant lots as playscapes, seating areas, gardens, farms, and more through both formal and informal processes, contributing to a sense of identity, upkeep and place. In a city-led example, a bank of vacant lots was transformed into the new Ella Fitzgerald Park and greenway, traversing the Fitzgerald neighborhood and creating a new marquee community space. Residents led the way with an initiative to program the lots that continues in the park today. In the vein of indoor spaces filling the void of recreation centers, Brilliant Detroit has transformed nearly twenty single family homes and yards into spaces that support young children and families, partnering with neighborhood leadership. These welcoming spaces provide family resources, stability and the intentional design of outdoor spaces that radiate out into the neighborhood. Like Canfield Consortium, Inside Southwest Detroit has transformed a small commercial space – a former square dance dress factory – into a space for year-round local cultural programming. And in O'Shea Park, the

site of a now-demolished recreation center was envisioned as a partially reclaimed viewing platform for a new solar array and ultimately constructed as a community plaza in the footprint of the former building. These examples and their political and spatial implications will be further explored and illustrated in future documentation.

Livernois Avenue and East Canfield Village begin to tell a story that weaves Detroit's political history, and waves of disinvestment and reinvestment, with a narrative of neighborhood spaces that are manifest by neighbors themselves in response to the physical landscape of the city. The curation of civic places in the leftover spaces of the city – wide roadways, vacant land and abandoned buildings – is the work of Detroiters reclaiming their city and celebrating local culture and community. The spatial opportunity itself is the result of trends in urban policy and municipal priorities and capacity that have shaped the landscape of Detroit. This evolution is ongoing, as streetscapes are reenvisioned with every planning project, officials seek to solve for Detroit's abundance of land, and demolition perhaps becomes a less prevalent approach. In this space, citizens will continue to harness resultant spatial possibilities.

ENDNOTES

1. This narrative is well known and highly simplified here.
2. For those interested in a deeper understanding of the history and dynamics of the city, these references are invaluable.
3. History drawn from a planning study and subsequent streetscape redevelopment for Livernois Avenue, to which the author was a contributor. Several of the initiatives included here intersect with the author's design practice.
4. Local expertise drawn from conversations with neighborhood and city leader Kim Tandy.
5. A summary of Brewer Recreation including images can be found here: <http://www.detroiturbex.com/content/parksandrec/brewer/index.html>
6. *Bridge Detroit* coverage of Canfield Consortium's latest ventures: <https://www.bridgedetroit.com/sisters-to-revive-former-neighborhood-hub-on-east-canfield/>