

Readymade Urbanism

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However Unspectacular...

Many authors, artists, and architects have written about Detroit's decline and shrinkage, and have envisioned numerous spectacular futures for the city. The city's corporate elite conceived of the fortress-like Renaissance Center as an iconic, new beginning of Detroit's economy. Artist Camilo Vergara famously photographed the city's crumbling train station and proposed turning it, along with other abandoned civic buildings, into a park of ruins.¹ Detroit's City Planning Commission proposed that large swaths of the city should be "returned to nature" by evacuating, bulldozing, and fencing off the most blighted areas in order to manage its land.² In some ways, such large-scale and spectacular approaches seem warranted: Detroit faces an undeniable crisis with no ready-made solutions. The city's population is about half of what it was in 1950 and consequently, the city owns approximately 28,000 vacant parcels. Currently, there is no consensus on what to do with them. While urban visionaries have publicly grappled with what to do with this land, some of these vacated, city-owned lots have been bought up—not by developers or speculators, but by the owners of adjacent houses. Buying the vacant land next to their homes for very little money, these homeowners have created larger (and often oddly shaped) lots to expand and improve their houses or gardens.

These expansions deserve attention: Firstly, at the scale of the individual parcel, the conjoining of multiple lots into a single, larger parcel creates opportunities for new residential configurations that differ significantly from the historic housing stock.

Secondly, through taking vacant property off of the city's tax rolls, these land purchases offer an incremental and small-scale approach to urban redevelopment that doesn't rely on the "mega-project." Thirdly, because they occur frequently and all over the city, the cumulative effect is a rewriting of the city's genetic code, a large-scale, unplanned "re-platting" of the city that happens through the bottom-up actions of individual homeowners. Remarkably little attention has been paid to the activities of these residents who are incrementally adapting the city to suit their individual needs.

I would like to situate this paper, which is based on research done in collaboration with Tobias Armbrorst and Daniel D'Oca, in the context of the *Shrinking Cities—Reinventing Urbanism* project. Sponsored by the Federal German Cultural Foundation, this ongoing, multi-phased investigation examines and speculates about cities that are losing population. The first project phase (2002-2004) centered on a broad, multi-disciplinary analysis of shrinking cities. The second project phase (2004 to 2006) consisted of an international ideas competition. The competition challenged participants to consider new ways to intervene in four shrinking cities: Detroit, Ivanov (Russia), Manchester/Liverpool (Great Britain), and Leipzig/Halle (Germany). We three, partners in the office Interboro, and collaborating with the Center for Urban Pedagogy, participated in the competition and won first prize with our proposal for Detroit: "However Unspectacular."³ We argued for two approaches to confront depopulation and disinvestment: a long-term strategy based on education and a more immediate strategy to

encourage people to take advantage of opportunities that are already available to them. Observing that central city was becoming more suburban than spectacular, we proposed a more modest approach that was rooted in our observations of residents “making do” and taking advantage of shrinkage to “improve their lot.”

The competition structure, i.e. a study of four cities in four different countries financed by the German federal government, implied that “best practices” in one shrinking city might be relevant to another. However, the conditions that led to Detroit’s shrinkage and the characteristics of its de-densification are unique. Racism represents perhaps the single most important influence in Detroit’s decline.⁴ While many African Americans came to Detroit in the 1940s and 50s seeking better jobs and a higher quality of life, their housing opportunities were severely limited. More or less excluded from homeownership by federally-sanctioned, discriminatory mortgage lending, most African Americans had no choice but to live in rental housing that was concentrated in the most dilapidated and overcrowded areas of the central city. As some African Americans gained access to the broader housing market—mostly through the increased spending power of an expanding black middle-class and the limited successes of the open housing movement, blockbusting and white flight to the suburbs ensured continued residential segregation. At the same time that African Americans were gaining access to the housing market, deindustrialization greatly reduced the number of jobs in the city. With the reduction or elimination of the limited employment opportunities African Americans and the remaining blue-color population had had, many homeowners defaulted on their mortgages. Over the following decades, many properties foreclosed and were abandoned. The result was extreme population loss and economic decline in the central city.

Racism also shaped the city’s parcellation and land use patterns, and as a result, influenced the process of Detroit’s de-densification. City planners, developers, and residents conspired to exclude poor African Americans from the housing market by limiting apartment buildings and multi-family housing from being built during Detroit’s boom and expansion in the 1940s and 50s.⁵ The spatial legacy of this

exclusionary zoning is a low-rise city whose housing stock is primarily single-family homes. The city has a very regular, orthogonal grid, and most houses are sited on rectangular parcels in the 30’x100’ range. Therefore, the city’s basic “building block” is a relatively small, independent unit.⁶ With Detroit’s economic decline and population loss, individual properties were foreclosed, vacated, and demolished and ownership of many vacant lots reverted to the city or other public entities. The result is a large inventory of vacant parcels scattered throughout the entire city.⁷ While there are concentrations of multiple, vacant parcels and also much larger parcels, studies estimated that nearly one quarter of all vacant, city-owned lots are small and adjacent to occupied homes.⁸

Since having completed the second phase of the *Shrinking Cities* competition, we have focused our research on the portion of vacant, city-owned lots that have been purchased or appropriated by adjacent land owners. We call these recombined parcels *blots*, a neologism we use to describe such *blocks of lots*.

It is difficult to give a precise number of blots; Detroit has struggled to keep its property records up to date and currently blots are not counted by the city. However, rough estimates and extrapolations can be made. In a random sampling of 200 tax-reverted properties sold by the city of Detroit, Margaret Dewar found that about one quarter of the sampled properties were sold to adjacent homeowners.⁹ Between 1973 and 2004, Detroit sold approximately 27,000 tax-reverted parcels.¹⁰

We at Interboro did our own random sampling of blots, which included street-level surveying, aerial analysis, and property record research. Our sampling indicated that there are many, many blots, and they are all over the city. Surveying properties by foot or car, we found different spatial signs indicating territorial expansions. Temporal additions such as parked cars, trampolines, satellite dishes and above-ground pools suggested an occupation of a vacant lot. Fences, often chain-link or stockade, but sometimes custom designed, signaled the owner staking out the boundaries of her expanded property. House extensions and garages demonstrated longer-term investments. We found that these expansions spatially reorient the way Detroit residents

use their homes, and in the most advanced stage of blotting, change the architecture of the typical Detroit house (fig. 1).

When examining aerial maps, we looked for certain characteristics or clues that could be easily read from above, such as a parked car or grass worn away by inhabitation or use. We cross referenced properties with an online database, whose cadastral map gives tax information, including property ownership and parcel size.¹¹

Our property record research identified many more blots, most of which had no physical signs of blotting. This analysis indicated an

amazing array of new parcel configurations, suggesting that the city's "DNA" is in the process of changing from a regularized grid to something much more eccentric and heterogeneous.

We surveyed hundreds of blots using the methods outlined above and then selected a number of geographically dispersed sites to investigate further. Margaret Dewar, professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan, generously gave us property records of the parcels. From this research and information, we developed a number of case studies, four of which follow.¹²



Fig. 1. Blots. (Photographs by Corinne May Botz and Interboro)

Case Study One: *Garden Blot*

The growth of the Anderanin family's property over time reflects the incremental way in which many blots are assembled. In the 1930s, Jean Anderanin and her husband purchased a single-family bungalow sited on one 30'x104' lot. At this time, every lot on the block had a house and most homes were owner-occupied. The block physically

remained more or less the same until 1970s; following the riots, many owners on the block moved to the suburbs and rented out their homes. Over the next twenty years, the block experienced a physical decline resulting from disinvestment, arson, and city-led demolition. By the early 1990s, numerous vacant, city-owned parcels surrounded the Anderanin home (fig. 2).

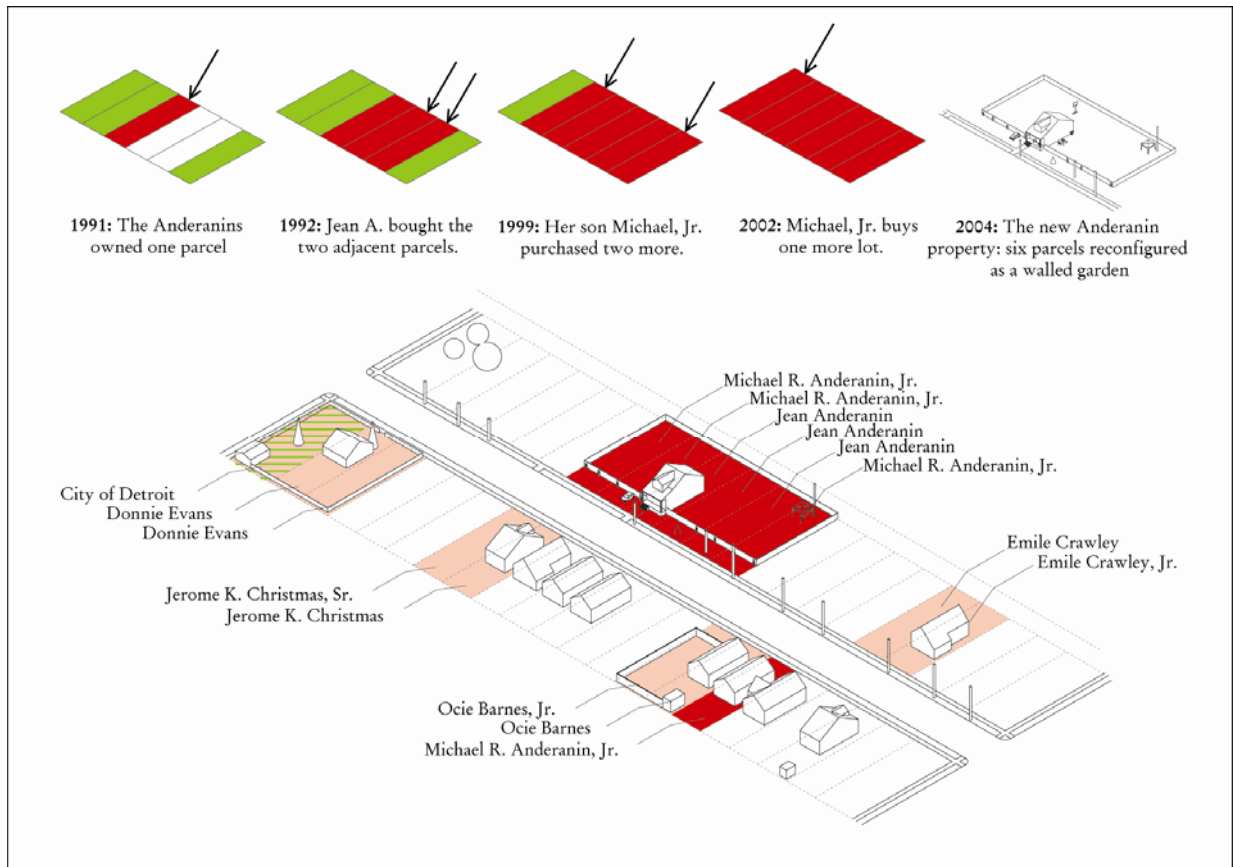


Fig. 2. Garden Blot. *Above*, the blot's evolution over time, with city-owned lots shown in green and the blot shown in red; *below*, blots and their owners on the block. (Illustration by Interboro)

In 1992, Jean acquired two adjacent parcels. In 1999, Jean's son Michael Anderanin, Jr. purchased two lots, one from the State of Michigan and the other from the city of Detroit, expanding the family's property to five contiguous parcels. In 2002, he purchased one more lot from the city of While suburban in scale and density, the organization of the parcel is unique to the site and to Detroit. The property's stockade fence does not enclose the house, but intersects it, with the front porch projecting out towards the street. This porch, like a gatehouse, mediates between the public street and the private garden, giving the Anderanins a clear, long view down the street and a direct site-line to their car. A closer look, both in the field and through the previously described investigative techniques, reveals that there are other blots on the Anderanin's block. The Christmas and the Crawley families also created blots; each family owns a house on two lots. In these cases, there are no visible signs to indicate blotting; it is only through

Detroit. Marked by a wooden fence, furnished with a gazebo, and improved with a basketball hoop and numerous bird houses atop cedar poles, the six contiguous parcels are reconfigured as a large, walled garden of 180'x 104'.¹³

reviewing property records that the blots reveal themselves. Other blots on the block have indicators of blotting, such as fences, landscaping, and ancillary structures. For example, the Barnes family enclosed its two-lot blot with a fence. Other residents created blots not solely through property acquisition, but through appropriation. Donnie Evans enclosed three parcels with a chain-link fence and added some landscaping without owning all the lots; records indicate the city owns one of the blot's parcels.

Of the eleven houses remaining on the block, six qualify as blots.

Case Study Two: Billboard Blot

Our research showed that the majority of blots are acquired through legal property purchases, not through appropriation. The most modest and temporary of improvements sited on an empty lot—such as a fence, a trampoline, or a shed, were most often on parcels purchased from the city. Nonetheless, we found several innovative blots that were made through “borrowing” land. The *Billboard Blot* represents one such case of appropriation. Here, homeowner Sophia Senakiewich does not own the lot adjacent to her house; the billboard conglomerate Outdoor Systems does (fig. 3).¹⁴ Outdoor Systems purchased two parcels in this neighborhood because of their high visibility from the adjacent I-94 highway corridor. One of these is directly adjacent to Sophia’s house. Sophia uses the land underneath this billboard for her vegetable garden and to park her cars. When Outdoor Systems changes its billboard,

Sophia reuses the discarded sign (made of plastic sheeting) to cover the earth to prevent the growth of weeds and to maintain the soil’s humidity. The intersecting cycles of vegetable gardening and advertising engendered a new, mixed-use symbiosis.

The expansion and re-orientation of Victor Toral’s house indicates the blot’s potential for creating new residential configurations. Ten years ago, Victor owned one house on a 30’ x 135’ lot (fig. 4). The house, like most Detroit bungalows, was oriented front to back. Victor later bought the vacant lot next to his property and erected two additions, reorienting the house in a direction parallel to the street. Later again, he built a fence around his land as well as the city-owned lot next door, turning his property into a courtyard house. He has since added a tree-house and swing-set for his children in the courtyard. The property enclosed by the fence is 90’ x 135’.

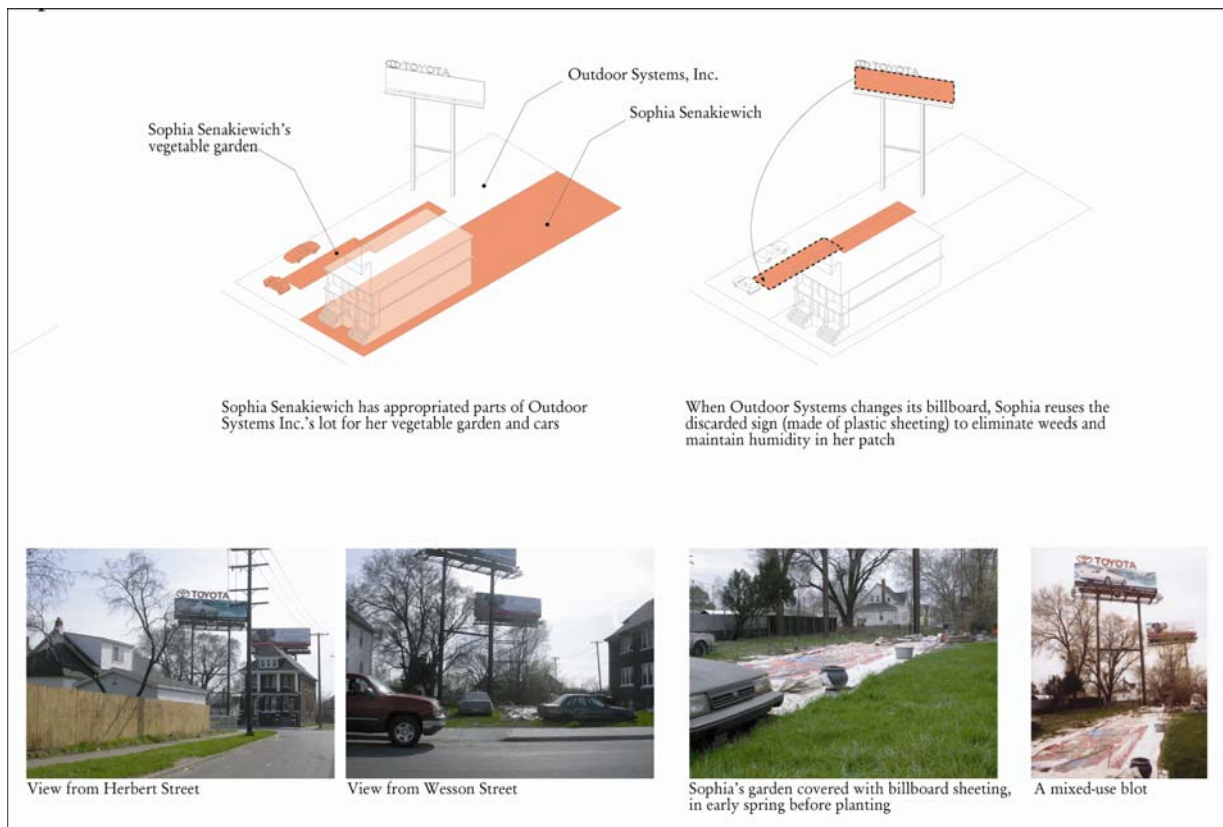


Fig. 3. Billboard Blot. *Above left*, property ownership (and appropriation); *above right*, the cyclical relationship between the two owners; *below*, photographs of the blot. (Illustration by Interboro)

Case Study Three: Courtyard Blot

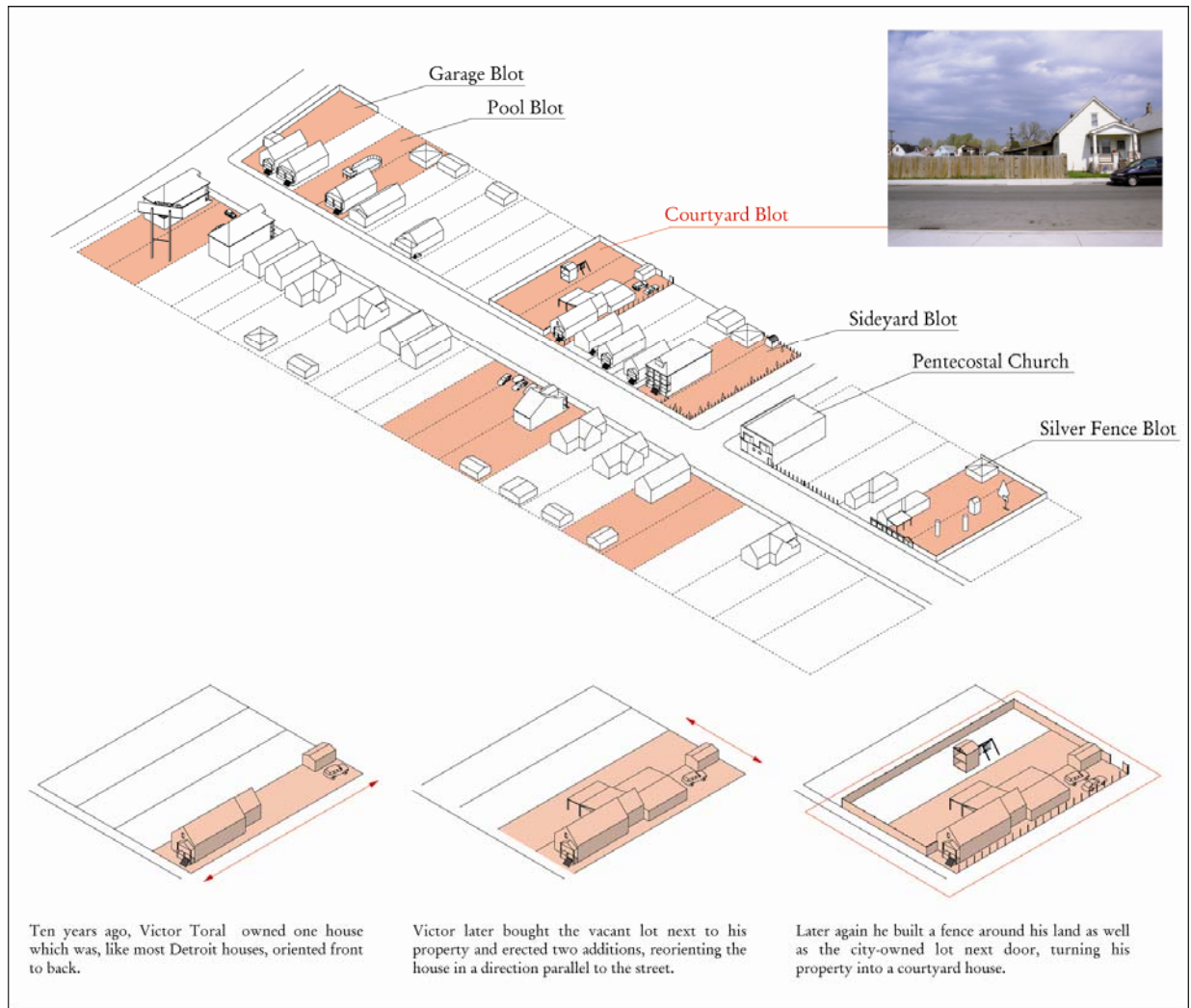


Fig. 4. Courtyard Blot. *Above*, in context on a block full of blots, with blots shown in pink; *below*, the blot's evolution and re-orientation over time. (Illustration by Interboro)

Case Study Four: Blot for Two Sisters

Wanda Cowans and Helen McMurray are two sisters who created a shared blot.¹⁵ The chronology of their blot formation is as follows: both sisters migrated from the South and upon arrival in Detroit were renters. In the mid-1960s, Wanda lived in an apartment and Helen rented a house at 2005 Elmhurst Avenue. Helen was in the process of saving money to buy a house, but at that time, still had not saved enough to afford a home. In

the aftermath of the 1967 riot, property values on Elmhurst Avenue plummeted. In April 1969, Helen was finally able to buy a house at 1987 Elmhurst (fig. 5). That summer, Wanda bought the house at 2005 Elmhurst that Helen had just vacated, which was just three lots away. Like so many buildings on the block, the houses at 2001 and 1995 Elmhurst were abandoned and torn down. The sisters acquired the vacant land from the city and created the large shared yard that now connects their two houses.

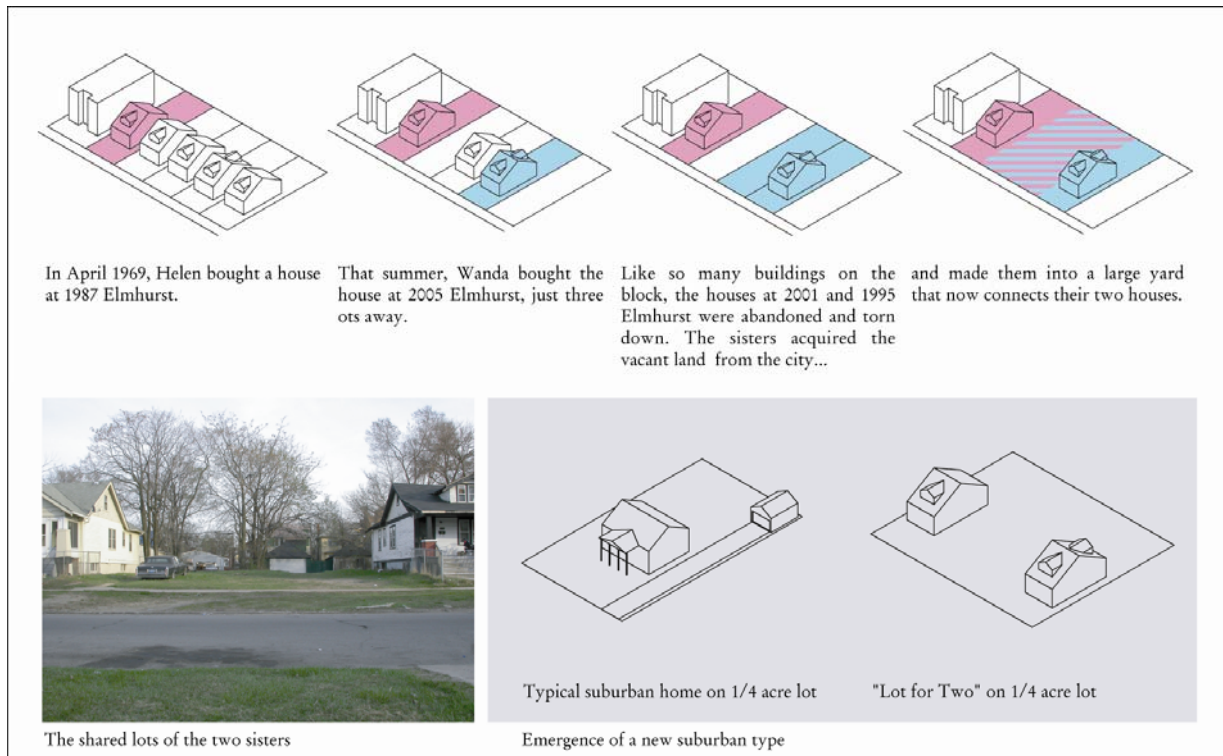


Fig. 5. Blot for Two Sisters. *Above*, land purchases by the sisters; *below left*, their shared lots; *below right*, a comparison of suburban and New Suburbanism lot acreages. (Illustration by Interboro)

The *Blot for Two Sisters* can be understood to represent the emergence of a new residential type. With the potential for incremental growth, new mixes of use, spatial reorganizations of the typical Detroit bungalow, improved outdoor space, and affordability, Detroit blotters are creating properties that have the densities of their suburban counterparts (fig. 4, *below right*). Because these parcel enlargements are typically made through legal purchases, Detroit resident blotters are altering the basic building block of the city. Although these homes are without the schools, the street-lighting, and the garbage collection of the suburbs, future homeowners will inherit bigger lots and, by extension, a less dense environment.¹⁶ We call this process the New Suburbanism. Homeowners work with the existing residential inventory and infrastructure and adapt it for their own needs. "Making do," these incremental and bottom-up operations of individual actors yield a diversity of home types and sizes.

These conditions offer new ways to consider who makes and remakes the city. Detroit is

being transformed—not according to a visionary plan implemented by a large redevelopment agency, but by the accumulated actions of thousands of self-interested homeowners. The question then is: what is the role of the architect or planner? Her role shouldn't be to impose an image on the city, nostalgic, avant-gardist, or otherwise. Detroit doesn't need more ideas of what it should be, but more observers taking a careful look at what's happening at the smallest of scales. If there is a role, it's not as visionary but as an advocate who comes up with innovative, endogenous ways to help things along a little.

Postscript:

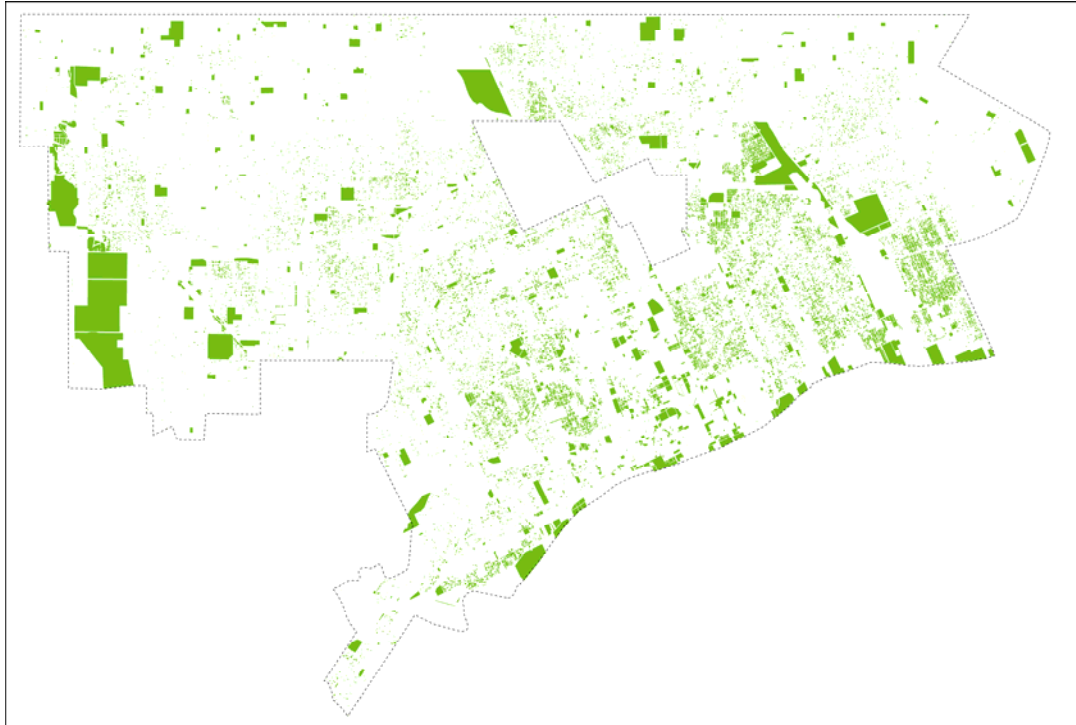
On August 3, 2006, Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick announced the launch of a new program to encourage the sale of city-owned vacant lots to adjacent homeowners. Stating in his press release that many Detroit residents "have been taking care of vacant lots for years," the initiative institutionalizes the bottom-up actions of individual residents.¹⁷ While the program will potentially

relieve the city of the burden of owning and maintaining vacant land, it falls short of creating opportunities for homeowners to make significant improvements on the vacant parcels. The initiative offers the land for \$200, but does not guarantee title—therefore

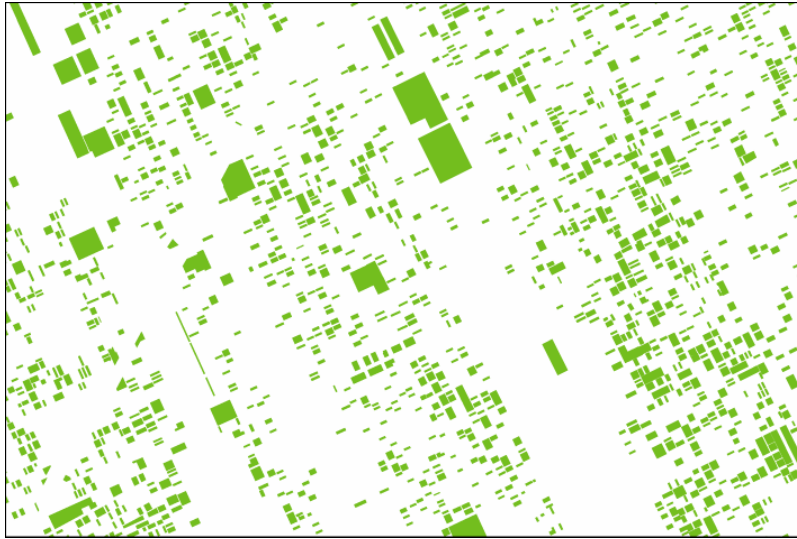
discouraging homeowners from making permanent, long-term investments like building extensions that would increase their home equity.

Appendix

City-owned Land, 2004



City-owned land in Detroit. Parcels owned by the city, shown in green, are scattered all over Detroit. (Illustrated by Interboro based on data provided by the City of Detroit Information Technology Services Department, Geographic Information Systems Sales & Service Center)



City-owned land in Detroit, *detail*. (Illustrated by Interboro based on data provided by the City of Detroit Information Technology Services Department, Geographic Information Systems Sales & Service Center)

Endnotes

¹ Camilo J. Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).

² Charles Waldheim and Marili Santos-Munné, "Decamping Detroit," in *Stalking Detroit*, edited by Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim and Jason Young (Barcelona: Actar, 2001), 105.

³ More information about the Shrinking Cities project can be found at www.shrinkingcities.com

⁴ For a thorough investigation of race and inequality in Detroit, read Thomas J. Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁵ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ This contrasts with the very large, mixed-use apartment blocks of some shrinking cities, such as those in eastern Germany that contain hundreds of housing units, retail, parking, etc.

⁷ The appendix includes a map illustrating the relatively even scattering of mostly small, city-owned parcels across Detroit.

⁸ Christopher Swope, "Land Salesman." *Governing* 12, no.9 (June 1999): 72.
http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.libdb.njit.edu:888/www/results/results_single_ftPES.jhtml (June 14, 2006).

⁹ Margaret Dewar, "Selling Tax-Reverted Land: Lessons from Cleveland and Detroit." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 72 (Spring 2006): 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹ <http://www.waynecounty.com/gis/map.htm#>

¹² All the case studies are synthetic interpretations of multiple sources of information (visual inspection and survey, analysis of aerial photography, review of property and tax records, and interviews). Information and data were sometimes contradictory, especially in the case of the city's tax records. Interboro attempted to interpret this information intelligently and correctly; if any errors were made, they were unintentional.

¹³ Property records indicate that the Anderanins took out several mortgages over the years, which may have helped finance improvements such as the fence.

¹⁴ Reported to be one of the largest billboard companies in the world, Outdoor Systems has since been acquired by Infinity Broadcasting.

¹⁵ We first learned about Wanda Cowans and Helen McMurray's land purchases from Cameron McWriter, "Sisters made a home from riot's aftermath," *Detroit News*, June 18, 2001, online edition.

¹⁶ Yet, these land purchases and improvements have historically received little attention or support. Although they decrease the amount of city-owned land, as opposed to the larger redevelopment schemes for vacant land that are often supported by the city and its planners, blots do not bring new taxpaying residents to Detroit or greatly increase property values.

¹⁷ Planning and Development Department, "City of Detroit News Release," *City of Detroit*, August 3, 2006.