

Black Bottom Street View: Mobilizing a City Archive

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This paper discusses Black Bottom Street View, an immersive representation of an historic African American neighborhood in Detroit that was destroyed during Urban Renewal. The exhibit recreates Black Bottom's street grid and envelops visitors within panoramic views constructed from stitched archival photographs of the neighborhood. The exhibit's lightweight, tensile, and flat-packed structures allow the project to be deployed across the city and region. In spatializing the photographs, Black Bottom Street View transforms the archive from a stack of disconnected snapshots into a shifting but cohesive whole: a public spectacle, a transient monument, a social platform for connection with the archive. Black Bottom Street View also helps to augment the city's fragmented, incomplete record of Black Bottom by working with a local organization, Black Bottom Archives, to collect, preserve, and provide digital access to oral histories that tell the story of Black Bottom from the perspective of its former residents. Through collaborative means, the Black Bottom Street View exhibit visualizes, spatializes and mobilizes a city archive in order to amplify ongoing efforts to preserve Black Bottom's history and help connect its legacy with the present.

CONTEXT

Black Bottom, named for its rich, riverfront soil, was the center of African American life in early twentieth century Detroit. The neighborhood stood directly east of downtown and adjacent to Paradise Valley, the economic and entertainment hub of Detroit's African American community. While businesses and institutions lined its street corners and main thoroughfares, Black Bottom was primarily residential, composed of the oldest housing stock in the city. Its homes were built by working class European immigrants in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Hundreds of thousands of people moved to Detroit between the 1910s–1950s, drawn by the city's booming industry and war economy. The city's population quadrupled from about 465,000 people in 1910 to almost 1,850,000 people in 1950—making Detroit the fifth largest city in the United States. A significant proportion of these newcomers were African American families taking part in the Great Migration, fleeing racist violence and the “feudal caste system” of the American South.¹ Detroit's African

American population grew exponentially during this time period, from under 6,000 people in 1910 to more than 300,000 by 1950.²

As Detroit's population exploded, the city's housing crisis escalated. Housing in Detroit was almost completely segregated by race, and African Americans were faced with crushingly limited housing options. In *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Thomas Sugrue details the barriers African American families encountered when seeking quality housing in Detroit in the 1940's: pervasive workplace discrimination resulting in low pay for the worst and most dangerous jobs, an overpriced rental market with demand far exceeding the supply, racially restrictive neighborhood real estate covenants, racist federal redlining policies and state-sanctioned racial violence all worked to limit the geographic areas where African American families could live.³

As a result, the majority of African American families who came to Detroit during this time were confined to overcrowded neighborhoods on the near east side of the city. In this context, Black Bottom became an African American economic and cultural hub with dense and interconnected businesses, cultural institutions, and residences. A 1942 Detroit Urban League Report listed hundreds of businesses in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: “151 physicians, 140 social workers, 85 lawyers, 71 beauty shops, 57 restaurants, 36 dentists, 30 drugstores, 25 barbershops, 25 dressmakers and shops, 20 hotels, 15 fish and poultry markets, 10 hospitals, 10 electricians, 9 insurance companies, 7 building contractors, 5 flower shops, 2 bondsmen, and 2 dairy distributors.”⁴ Fannie Richards, Detroit's first African American schoolteacher, founded her first two schools in Black Bottom to teach African American children excluded from Detroit's public school system; Mercy Hospital, the first Black-owned hospital in Michigan, was founded in Black Bottom to serve African American residents who were excluded from other hospitals in Detroit; James H. Cole Funeral Home, Detroit's oldest Black-owned funeral parlor, was founded in Black Bottom to serve African American families excluded from white-owned funeral homes; countless other examples exist. Many of Black Bottom's displaced institutions persist today and continue to anchor communities in Detroit. Detroit's vibrant arts and music culture finds its origins in Black Bottom; influential artists and musicians from Black Bottom have transformed American music.⁵



Figure 1. This corner of the Black Bottom Street View Exhibit shows a grocery store at Congress and Riopelle. The window reads, “Jack’s Market.” Quiet houses line Congress. On one porch, a empty rocking chair waits. Lines of laundry hang beneath a tree in a sidelot; they float in the September afternoon air. At the far end of the street, a busy mechanic’s shop is having its sign repaired. Photo by Michelle & Chris Gerard.

When the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 provided federal funding to local governments for “slum clearance” projects, cities across the United States used these funds to displace and demolish low income communities and communities of color.⁶ Detroit already had a “slum clearance” plan in place; the City went to work immediately, beginning by documenting the properties it intended to seize through eminent domain.⁷ The Housing Act of 1949 was passed on July 15, 1949; four days later, on July 19, the City of Detroit took its first photograph of a property in Black Bottom that was slated for demolition.

By 1974 the city had demolished all of Black Bottom—almost a full square mile—and replaced the community with I-375, Lafayette Park, and five other Urban Renewal developments. I-375 was designed to demolish Hastings Street, the main commercial corridor for Black Bottom and connected neighborhoods. The land that was cleared in the first phase of Black Bottom’s demolition sat empty for almost a decade. Black Bottom’s 7,500 residents, mostly renters who received no compensation, had been displaced; its institutions and businesses had been forced to move or close. Finally the developer Herbert Greenwald from Chicago bought the property and hired Mies van der Rohe, Alfred

Caldwell, and Ludwig Hilberseimer to design what we now know as Lafayette Park.

The City of Detroit profited significantly from the destruction of Black Bottom and development of Lafayette park through dramatic increases in property tax revenue. The Detroit City Plan Commission’s 1959 “Estimated Project Costs and Estimated Future Assessed Values of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area” notes that the first phase of Black Bottom’s demolition and redevelopment increased the assessed value of its land and buildings by 725%, and increased its assessed value per acre by 1,100%. All of this equates to an estimated \$441,000 per year in increased city tax revenue (about \$4.1 million per year in 2021 dollars). Beyond a vague allusion to “social benefits and costs” being “very difficult to measure,” not once does the report mention the tremendous cost paid by Black Bottom’s residents in their displacement, their exclusion from quality housing and home ownership, and the destruction of their community.⁸ In “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates likens this unacknowledged cost to a maxed out credit card: “the effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.”⁹ The legacy of Black Bottom and the violence of its destruction echo through the city and through the lives of its former residents, their families, and their communities. These histories are not

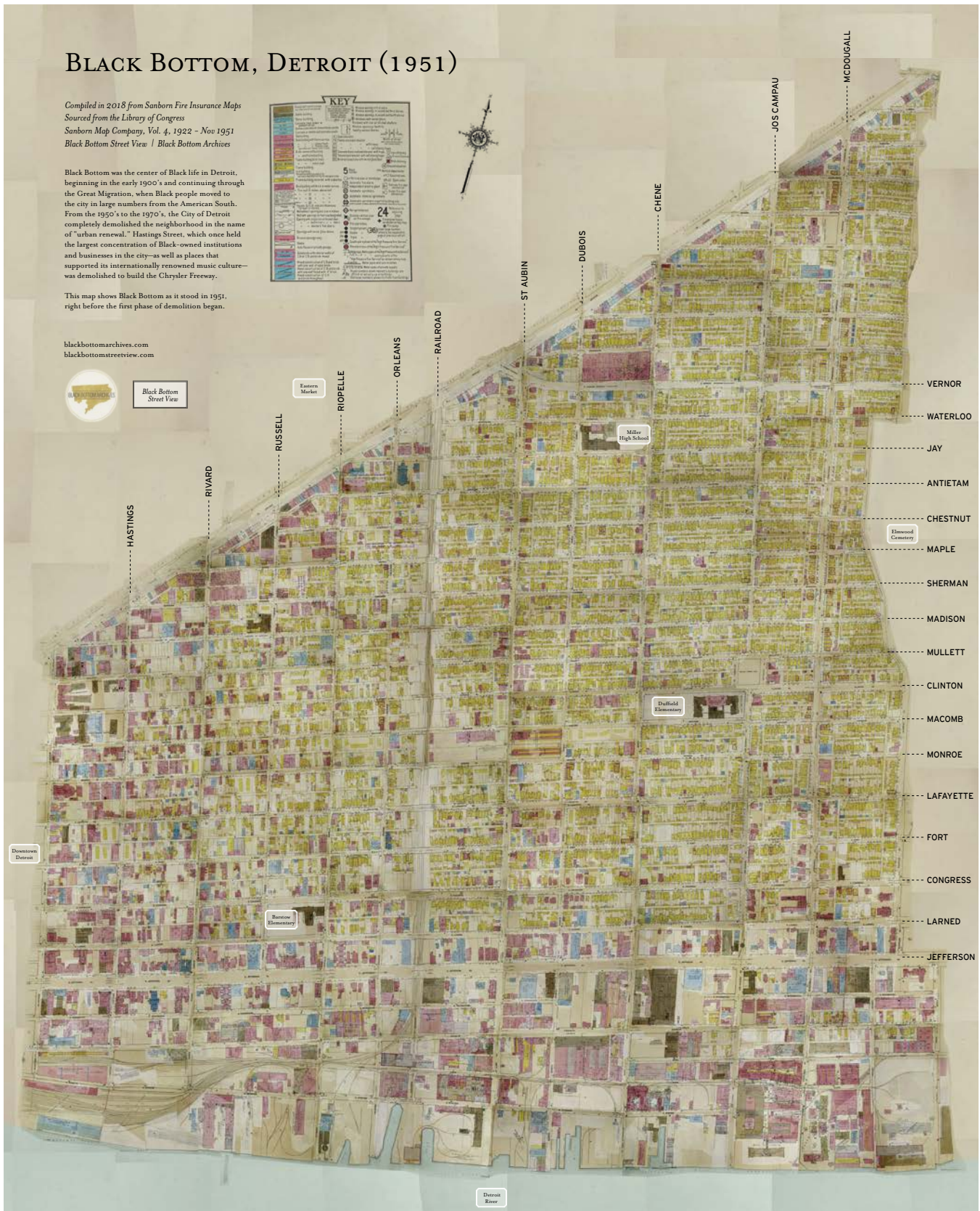


Figure 2. This map of Black Bottom is composed of 90 individual pages of Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, sourced from the Library of Congress. This map was printed at 9' x 9' for the Black Bottom Street View exhibit so that each property's addresses was legible.

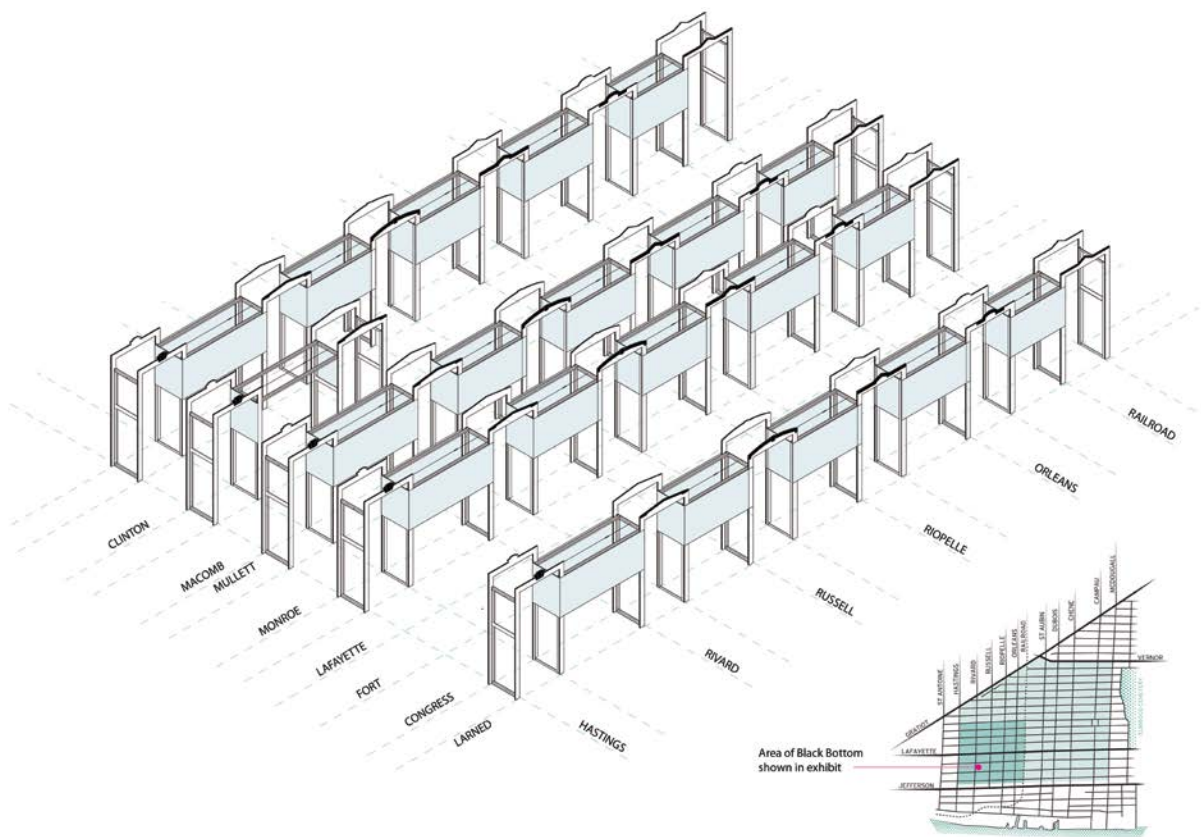


Figure 3. The Black Bottom Street View exhibit recreates Black Bottom’s street grid, placing the panoramas of each city block in context with one another. The full exhibit covers 21 blocks of Black Bottom.

contained within the past, but are enmeshed in ongoing conversations surrounding racial equity and community benefits in contemporary development in Detroit.

MOBILIZING THE ARCHIVE

As part of the eminent domain process in the first phase of Black Bottom’s demolition, the City of Detroit produced over 2,000 photographs of the neighborhood. The photographs were taken to assess the value of each property; now held by the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library, they have become a powerful record of its people and spaces. Black Bottom Street View organizes and recomposes the photographs to present a panoramic snapshot of life in Black Bottom before the neighborhood was destroyed. A child pushes a tricycle down the sidewalk. Neighbors gather at a corner shop. A group of young women pose for the camera as the photographer passes by. The panoramas use layering, scale shifts and rotation to recompose continuous city blocks while maintaining a fragmented and incomplete representational quality. Photograph borders, dates and address labels are maintained to connect the panoramic images with their archival source. The panoramas belie the dominant narrative that Black Bottom was a “slum” that wasn’t worth saving, showing instead a dense community with vibrant public life and unique urban form.

The full exhibit occupies about 2,000 square feet. Its large footprint is necessitated by the size of the archive; 2,000 square feet allows just enough space to view the images clearly. The scale also speaks to the impact of what was lost; visitors can become immersed within the panoramic blocks, slowly taking in the details of daily life captured in the images. Comparing the footprint of the exhibit to the footprint of Black Bottom, shown on the exhibit’s large map, delivers a shock: even at its sprawling size, the exhibit captures only a small portion of the entire Black Bottom neighborhood—but the whole neighborhood was demolished.

In order to be able to install an exhibit of this scale in a wide range of spaces, the exhibit structures needed to be free-standing, modular, and easy to transport and assemble. The panorama blocks are supported by plywood portals, each cut from a single sheet of plywood. The portals mimic doorway proportions and echo the varied trim details that topped Black Bottom’s windows and doors. Tensile cables and compression rods connect the portals to one another, making the whole system rigid. The panoramas wrap lightly around the frames to present simple, uninterrupted views of each city block.

In summer 2018, before the official launch of the exhibit, I helped to organize Pedal to Porch: Black Bottom. Created by Detroit

Cornetta Lane, Pedal to Porch orchestrates neighborhood bike rides where residents use their porch as a stage to tell stories about the neighborhood's history.¹⁰ We worked with Pedal to Porch, Marsha Philpot, Bert Dearing, Black Bottom Archives, and Mogo Detroit, a local electric bike company, to organize a version of Pedal to Porch that would explore the neighborhood that once was Black Bottom. Since Black Bottom and its porches no longer exist, we designed and built pop-up porches that served as stages for the storytellers. The ride culminated at Bert's Warehouse Theater, where we had installed the full Black Bottom Street View exhibit.

The porches, based on designs from the archival photographs, were placed along fragments of old roads that once ran through the neighborhood—at times still visible in the alignment of trees or expressed within the altered street grid. Made of plywood like the exhibit portals, the porches are light and quick, designed to be packed flat, moved, and assembled by a small team in a few hours. The structures use planes, profiles, and shadows to reference and imply historic constructions without replicating them exactly. These collapsible porches, designed to serve as temporary stages for the Pedal to Porch event, have become an important component of the Black Bottom Street View exhibit, doubling as event stages and oral history listening stations.

The exhibit has, to date, been installed at eight venues in and around Detroit: the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture (2018), Bert's Warehouse Theater as part of Pedal to Porch: Detroit (2018), University of Michigan FRONT Gallery (2018), the Detroit Public Library Main Branch (2018-2019), the University of Michigan as part of the Journal of Law Reform Symposium *Dispossessing Detroit* (2019), the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as part of the DSO centennial celebration (2020), Lafayette Park as part of the Detroit Historical Society's outdoor exhibit for the Detroit Month of Design (2021), and the Wayne State University Undergraduate Library (2021). The modular nature of the exhibit allows us to adapt the footprint of each installation to its context. We work to install the exhibit in venues that are freely accessible to the public and connected to Detroit communities. At the grand opening for the exhibit at the Detroit Public Library, project advisors Jamon Jordan and Marsha Battle Philpot, writer Ken Coleman, and Black Bottom Archives director PG Watkins spoke to a full house about the history of Black Bottom and its continuing relevance for Detroit. Each venue has brought the project to a new audience; each audience has placed Black Bottom's history within a new contemporary context. By stitching, spatializing, and mobilizing the archive, the exhibit works as a bridge between the historical digital collection and the contemporary physical world: the spaces, geographies and social events that make up the life of the city.

RELATIONSHIPS

Black Bottom Street View aims to support, amplify, and provide resources for the people and organizations who have worked to preserve Black Bottom's history for decades. Local historians,

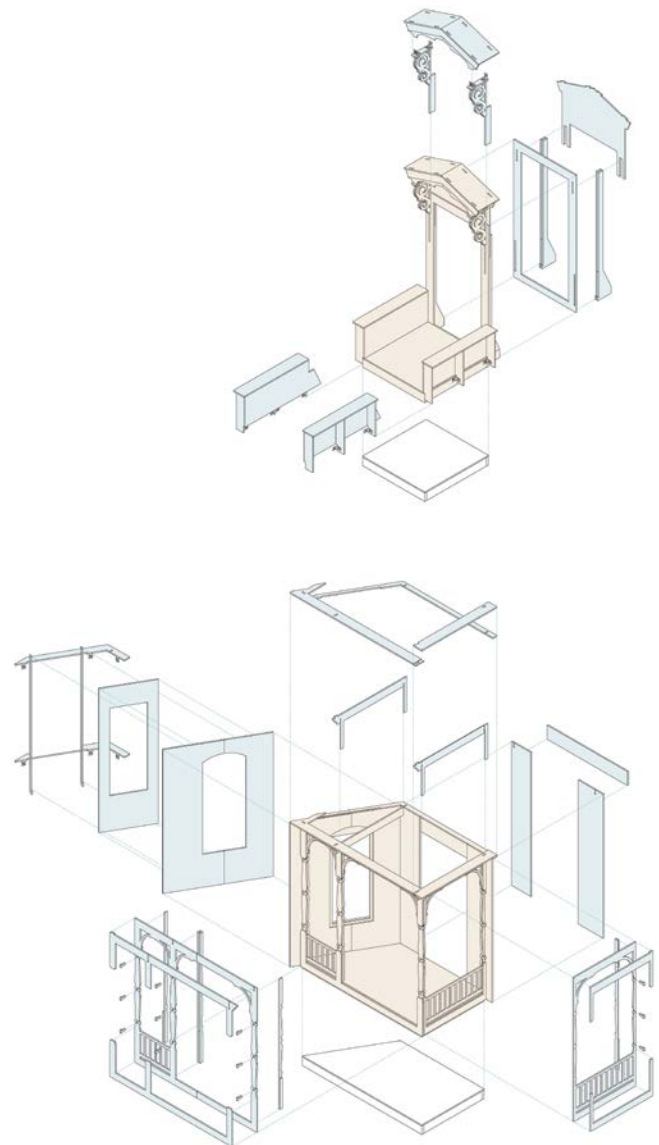


Figure 4. For Pedal to Porch: Detroit, the collapsible porches served as stages for the storytellers.

writers, former residents and cultural organizations helped to develop and guide the project. Project advisors include Marsha Philpot, a writer and Detroit cultural figure whose father owned a significant record shop on Hastings Street, and Jamon Jordan, a local historian who leads African-American history tours throughout Detroit and who was recently appointed as the City of Detroit's first city historian. Jamon led tours of the Black Bottom Street View exhibit throughout its time at the Detroit Public Library. Bert Dearing, the owner of Bert's Warehouse Theater, former resident and informal archivist of Black Bottom, and Jiam Desjardins, a writer, actor, and local historian whose uncles co-founded the original Paradise Valley Business Association, contributed crucial insights to the project's research and development. Bert's Warehouse Theater hosted *Pedal to Porch: Detroit* and the first full installation of the Black Bottom Street View exhibit, and a framed version of the large-scale Black Bottom map hangs permanently in Bert's Warehouse Theater next to a mural depicting life in Black Bottom.

Many former Black Bottom residents and their descendants, journalists, scholars and Detroit history enthusiasts have supported the development of the Black Bottom Street View project

by contributing oral histories, commentary and critique. We the People of Detroit co-founders Debra Taylor and Monica Lewis-Patrick organized key oral history interviews. University of Detroit Mercy Architecture students Lama Chamseddine, Bilqees Salie and Jalen Smith contributed invaluable work to develop and fabricate the exhibit, and the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture contributed resources and tools to support exhibit fabrication. University of Detroit Mercy NOMAS volunteered to help transport the exhibit. Students in my *Mapping the Land Crisis* seminar at the University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning helped to place the history of Black Bottom within a broader historical context of land justice in the United States. Dr. Andrew Herscher and Dr. Ana María León hosted early discussions of the project in their seminars at the University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, and Ingrid Schmidt hosted a discussion of the exhibit's design process in her seminar at the University of Kentucky College of Design. Sina Almassi and Tyler Schaafsma provided critical support with exhibit fabrication and panorama creation.

Black Bottom Street View has also had some unlikely collaborations and encounters. The composer Nkeiru Okoke used the

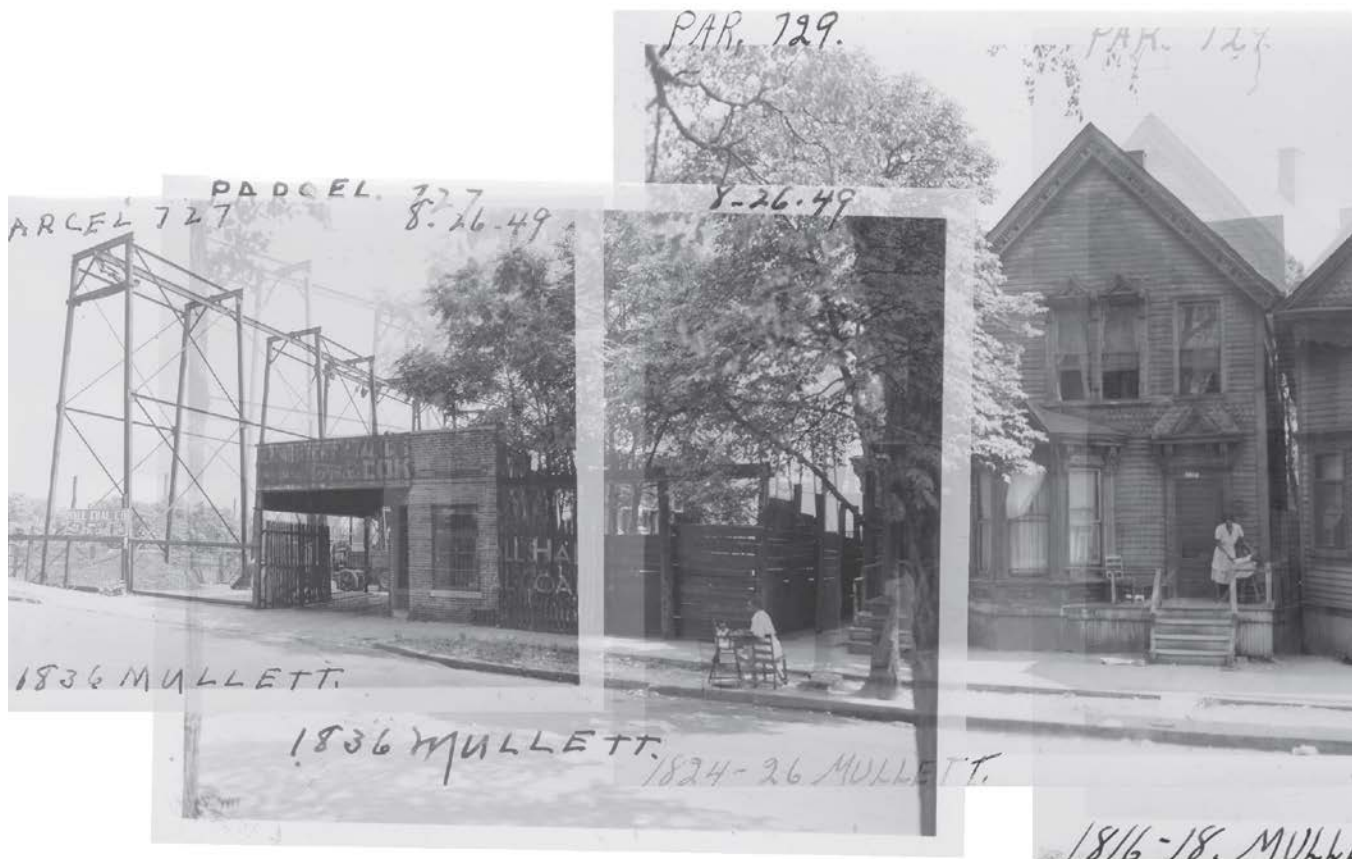


Figure 5. In this panorama, a woman sits with a small child at the corner of Mullett and the Dequindre Railroad. The photos capture her carrying first a chair, and then the child, from a front porch to a shady spot under a tree. Next door is a structure for loading coal onto trains on the sunken railroad below.

exhibit as inspiration for her commissioned composition for the Detroit Symphony titled “Black Bottom.”¹¹ Screenwriter Ed Solomon used the exhibit to research Black Bottom while writing the 2021 film *No Sudden Move*; the film’s opening scene references Black Bottom Street View’s panoramas.¹²

Since collaborating on Pedal to Porch: Detroit in 2019, Black Bottom Street View has partnered with Black Bottom Archives, a “community-driven media platform dedicated to centering and amplifying the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black Detroiters through digital storytelling, journalism, art, and community organizing with a focus on preserving local Black history & archiving our present.” Black Bottom Archives manages the exhibit, continues collecting oral history interviews, and has developed an interactive digital archive that provides free access to the oral histories.¹³ Black Bottom Archives mentors young people through an archival internship program and curates public events and conversations surrounding Black Bottom’s significance to the present. Together, we are currently redesigning the Black Bottom Street View exhibit to be more agile, easier to transport and deploy for changing groups of people as the project evolves.

TRAJECTORIES

Since the Black Bottom Street View project began in 2015, Detroit has seen tremendous advancements in its public discourse on housing, development and inequality. In 2016, in an attempt to intervene within Detroit’s dramatically unequal real estate development landscape, Detroit voters passed the first-ever community benefits ordinance in the United States.¹⁴ A movement to demand compensation for years of unconstitutional tax foreclosures due to over-assessment by the City of Detroit, led by the Coalition for Property Tax Justice, has gained momentum.¹⁵ In November 2021, Detroit voters passed a proposal creating a “reparations task force to make recommendations for housing and economic development programs that address historical discrimination against the Black community in Detroit.”¹⁶ Each of these achievements has been won by organizations and citizens working collectively and consistently to create change. In smaller ways, the discourse surrounding Black Bottom’s history has also changed. In September 2021, the Black Historic Sites Committee of the Detroit Historical Society unveiled the first state historic marker commemorating Black Bottom’s history. That same month, a semi-permanent outdoor exhibit on Black Bottom created by the Detroit Historical Society opened in Lafayette Park.

In Dr. Gloria House’s 1991 book *Tower and Dungeon*, which analyzes the spatial politics embedded in the Detroit Renaissance Center and Jackson State Prison, House describes the roles that architects commonly play in upholding and reifying capitalist spatial inequality: “the roles of the architect and the urban planner are key... Through these professions, the values of capitalism are passed on and inscribed in the environment as a matter of course.”¹⁷ How then, can architects break this pattern? How can architects fight spatial inequality?

While the Black Bottom Street View project can hardly claim to have impacted the major political developments discussed above, this paper humbly puts forth two claims about the role of an architect within the social movements transforming our world. First, in order to contribute meaningfully to social movements, architects must learn, carefully, from the people who are already there: those most directly affected by inequality and injustice, and those who are already working to make change. Second, architects must understand ourselves as parts of a much greater whole, cultivating long-lasting and accountable relationships with the people with whom we collaborate and the communities in which we work. Black Bottom Street View did not begin or end the public discussion of Black Bottom’s significance to contemporary Detroit. Rather, it operates within a continuum of efforts by many people over decades to bring Black Bottom’s stories into the present. At every turn, collaborative relationships made the project richer, deeper, and more grounded in Detroit’s realities. As we exchange stories, analyses, and ideas, our collaborative work draws us closer together. House begins *Tower and Dungeon* with a discussion of the relationship between matter and space: “from electrons to human bodies to galaxies—from quantum physics to biodynamics to general relativity—parts form wholes with the environment.”¹⁸ Architects would do well to understand ourselves in the same way, as interconnected bodies inseparable from the environments in which we work.

ENDNOTES

1. Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 9. From 1915–1970, about six million African American people moved from the American South to cities in the northern and western United States, transforming American urban patterns, housing dynamics, economies, politics and culture. Wilkerson underlines the Great Migration’s significance as “the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.”
2. Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 23.
3. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 34. Sugrue contextualizes Detroit’s postwar decline within its history of racial inequality in housing and labor. On racially restrictive neighborhood real estate covenants, racist federal redlining policies and state-sanctioned racial violence, see also Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).
4. Ujijji Davis, “The Bottom: The Emergence and Erasure of Black American Urban Landscapes,” *Avery Review* 34 (October 2018). <https://www.averyreview.com/issues/34/the-bottom>
5. See Jeremy Peters, “Cultural and Social Mecca: Entrepreneurial Action and Venue Agglomeration in Detroit’s Paradise Valley and Black Bottom Neighborhoods,” *Artivate* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2020): 20–41.
6. For an account of the ways in which the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954 were used to target racial minorities and create segregated housing, see Arnold R. Hirsch, “Searching for a “sound Negro policy”: A racial agenda for the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954,” *Housing Policy Debate* v11 n2 (2000): 393–441.
7. See Alvin A. West, “Estimated Project Costs and Estimated Future Assessed Values of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area,” The Detroit City Plan Commission (May 1959).
8. West, “Estimated Project Costs and Estimated Future Assessed Values of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area,” 1, 10.
9. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>
10. See Audra D. S. Burch, “On the Front Porch, Black Life in Full View,” *The New York Times* (December 4, 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/us/porch-detroit-black-life.html>; and www.pedaltoporch.org (accessed 11/08/2021).

11. See Ryan Patrick Hooper, "Detroit Razed Black Bottom. This Composer Doesn't Want You To Forget." *WDET* (March 5, 2020). <https://wdet.org/posts/2020/03/06/89303-detroit-razed-black-bottom-this-composer-doesnt-want-you-to-forget/>
12. See Adam Chitwood, 'No Sudden Move' Writer Ed Solomon on Drawing From Real History to Craft a 50s Crime Thriller," *Collider* (July 1, 2021). <https://collider.com/no-sudden-move-ed-solomon-interview-true-story/>
13. See Black Bottom Archives, "About the Archives," (accessed November 8, 2021). <http://www.blackbottomarchives.com/aboutthearchives>
14. See Daniel Kravetz, "Fighting for Equity in Development: The Story of Detroit's First Community Benefits Ordinance," *Detroit People's Platform and Equitable Detroit Coalition* (2017). <https://buildingmovement.org/reports/fighting-for-equity-in-development-the-story-of-detroits-community-benefits-ordinance/> (accessed 11/08/2021).
15. See Bernadette Atuahene, "Predatory Cities," *California Law Review* Volume 108, no. 1 (February 2020). <https://www.californialawreview.org/print/predatory-cities/>
16. See Candace Williams, "Detroit voters OK launching reparations commission," *The Detroit News* (November 2, 2021).
17. Gloria House, *Tower and Dungeon: A Study of Place and Power in American Culture* (Detroit: Casa de Unidad Press, 1991), 123.
18. House, *Tower and Dungeon*, viii.

