



“Perforated” block in Detroit (Steve Rugare)

# IMPROVE YOUR LOT!

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Interboro is a New York City-based research and design group. Its subject is the extraordinary, exciting complexity of the contemporary city, which it engages through writing, teaching, and professional practice. Interboro is Tobias Arnborst, Daniel D'Oca, and Georgeen Theodore.

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## Introduction: The New Suburbanism

Ten years ago, Victor Toral of 4930 Wesson Street, Detroit, MI owned one house on one 30' x 135' lot. Today, Victor Toral owns the same house on three 30' x 135' lots. Victor's new, suburban-scale yard allowed him to add an additional first-floor bedroom to his house, build a garage for his pick-up truck, and erect an enclosed playground for his kids. Victor is an unsuspecting pioneer of what we call "The New Suburbanism," the process through which entrepreneurial homeowners take, borrow, or buy adjacent vacant lots. All over Detroit, homeowners—many of who have stuck it out through race riots, deindustrialization, and the resulting depopulation and disinvestment—are starting to spread out, expanding their property by gradually accumulating lots that others abandoned. While the results are not always spectacular (many individuals accumulate lots in order to accommodate parked cars, satellite dishes, trampolines and the like), it is nonetheless the intention of this paper to position the New Suburbanism as an epilogue to the familiar story of Detroit's decline by demonstrating that it is an important (albeit overlooked) phenomenon perhaps best understood as an unplanned, unacknowledged, and yet entirely plausible response to Detroit's depopulation and disinvestment. One thing we wish to highlight here is that the New Suburbanism is being unknowingly authored by thousands of entrepreneurial, self-interested individuals like Victor.

In Part I of "Improve Your Lot!" we present a few case studies of the expanded lots that are the basic building blocks of the New Suburbanism. (We call these expanded lots "blots.") We ask: in what ways have self-interested individuals such as Victor benefited from these modest property expansions? After evaluating these property expansions at the scale of the (b)lot, we look at the New Suburbanism at the scale of the city. Here we ask: how widespread is this phenomenon, what is its cumulative effect, and what significance will it have for the future of the city? In Part II, we look at the context of the New Suburbanism to answer the question: why is the New Suburbanism happening in Detroit? Finally, in Part III, we look at this phenomenon in the context of contemporary urban planning practices. After looking at the mechanisms that are currently available to individuals who wish to expand their property, we look at whether or not there other ways in which the urban planning profession might help further the cause of the New Suburbanism. We also attempt to position our work in the context of an ongoing exchange about the role of advocacy in planning. Following thinkers as diverse as Paul Davidoff, William Whyte, and Hernando DeSoto, we argue that the careful scrutiny of the practices of citizens should be the starting point for public policy. Here we ask: might the best way forward for Detroit be a phenomenon that is being acted out every day by thousands of self-interested homeowners who are merely making do? If so, might we as planners and policy makers learn from what people are already doing? Might an appropriate role for the

planner be to identify, document, and finally advocate for potentially progressive practices that, like the New Suburbanism, already exist, but are underappreciated and have little legitimacy (and even fewer resources)? If so, what form would this advocacy take?

## Part 1: Case Studies in the New Suburbanism

It is difficult to precisely determine the extent to which Detroit has been New Suburbanized. Detroit is notoriously bad at keeping its property records up to date, and currently, blots are not acknowledged by the city, let alone enumerated. Nonetheless, estimates and extrapolations can be made. In a random sampling of 200 tax-reverted properties sold by the City of Detroit, Margaret Dewar, professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan, found that about one quarter of the sampled properties were sold to adjacent homeowners.<sup>1</sup> If the same ratio holds for the approximately 27,000 tax-reverted parcels the city of Detroit sold between 1973 and 2004, there would certainly be a lot of blots.<sup>2</sup> Our own research, which is the product of hours and hours spent both looking at cadastral maps and driving around the city, has produced a database of literally hundreds of blots. While we haven't yet examined every block, we have found only a handful of blot-less blocks (i.e., only a handful of blocks on which at least one homeowner hadn't expanded her property by accumulating neighboring lots).

This suggests one reason why we think the New Suburbanism is an important phenomenon in its own right. If, as our research suggests, the New Suburbanism is happening all over Detroit, the New Suburbanism's cumulative effect will be a gradual rewriting of the city's genetic code: a large-scale, unplanned re-platting of the city that will happen through the bottom-up actions of thousands of individual homeowners. This will obviously have enormous implications for the city's future, not the least of which is the fact that future Detroiters will inherit a city with fewer, less homogenous lots.<sup>3</sup> That is, it is quite possible that the New Suburbanism could change Detroit forever, making it more and more difficult for the city to accommodate the population it was originally platted out to accommodate. Would this be a good thing? If you are a Detroit booster looking to return the city to its past glory, then it certainly would not be. If you think that urbanity is somehow synonymous with density, then it certainly would not be. If however, you are (as we are) an advocate of what Genesee County Treasurer Daniel Kildee calls "smart downsizing,"<sup>4</sup> or what the New York Times Magazine dubbed "creative shrinkage,"<sup>5</sup> then it certainly would.

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

2. Ibid, p. 171.

3. Although we should point out that not all homeowners who accumulate adjacent vacant lots combine them.

4. Daniel T. Kildee, "Rethinking Urban Land," p. 39; source: <http://www.thelandbank.org/pressreleases.asp>.

5. Belinda Lanks: "Creative Shrinkage." *New York Times Magazine*, December 10th 2006. *The New York Times Magazine's* "Year in Ideas" issue used the term "Creative Shrinkage" to characterize Youngstown, Ohio's planning strategy, which calls for razing derelict buildings, cutting off sewage and electric service to fully abandoned tracts of the city, transforming vacant lots into pocket parks, and turning abandoned lots over to neighboring landowners and excusing back taxes on the land.

Either way, one factor that you would be wise to consider is that the New Suburbanism is merely the latest—and certainly most interesting—way in which Detroit is suburbanizing. The first kind of suburbanization is perhaps best evidenced by Lafayette Park, Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer’s celebrated 78-acre housing complex just east of the downtown. An urban renewal project consisting of towers, a park, and low-rise apartment buildings, the project—which certainly doesn’t look very suburban—nonetheless contributes to suburbanization because it boasts a lower density than the neighborhood that was cleared to make way for it. The second, and in every way simplest, kind of suburbanization is perhaps best evidenced by Victoria Park, a gated, 44-acre subdivision consisting of 250 single-family homes that was “plopped down” into the city with no regard for anything that was there before it (especially the denser Detroit street grid, which was partially erased to make way for it). The third kind of suburbanization—what we call the New Suburbanism—is best evidenced by the case studies you’re about to see. As should be clear by now, what sets the New Suburbanism apart is the fact that it is gradual, unplanned, uncoordinated, and bottom-up.

We chose a dozen or so blots from our database for further investigation.<sup>6</sup> From this research and information, we developed a number of case studies, four of which follow.<sup>7</sup>

### Case Study One: Garden Blot

The Anderanin’s Garden Blot is a six-lot blot whose growth reflects the incremental way in which many blots are assembled. The story of the blot is as follows: initially, Jean Anderanin owned a single-family bungalow sited on one 30’x104’ lot (fig. 1). By the early 1990s, numerous vacant, city-owned parcels surrounded the Anderanin home, and in 1992, Jean acquired two that happened to be next to the Anderanin home. 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, Michael purchased one more lot from the city of Detroit for a total of six. The result is an expansive, suburban-scaled property. Enclosed 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’.<sup>8</sup>

Planners and architects alike should appreciate the way this property is configured. When Michael Anderanin fenced in his blot, he didn’t erect the fence on the property line (as many other property owners do), but respected a 15’ setback on the street side. Aside from being compliant, this makes for an interesting detail: the fence does not entirely enclose the Anderanins house, but intersects it roughly at the back of the front porch. The elevated front porch projects out of the enclosed area, and provides

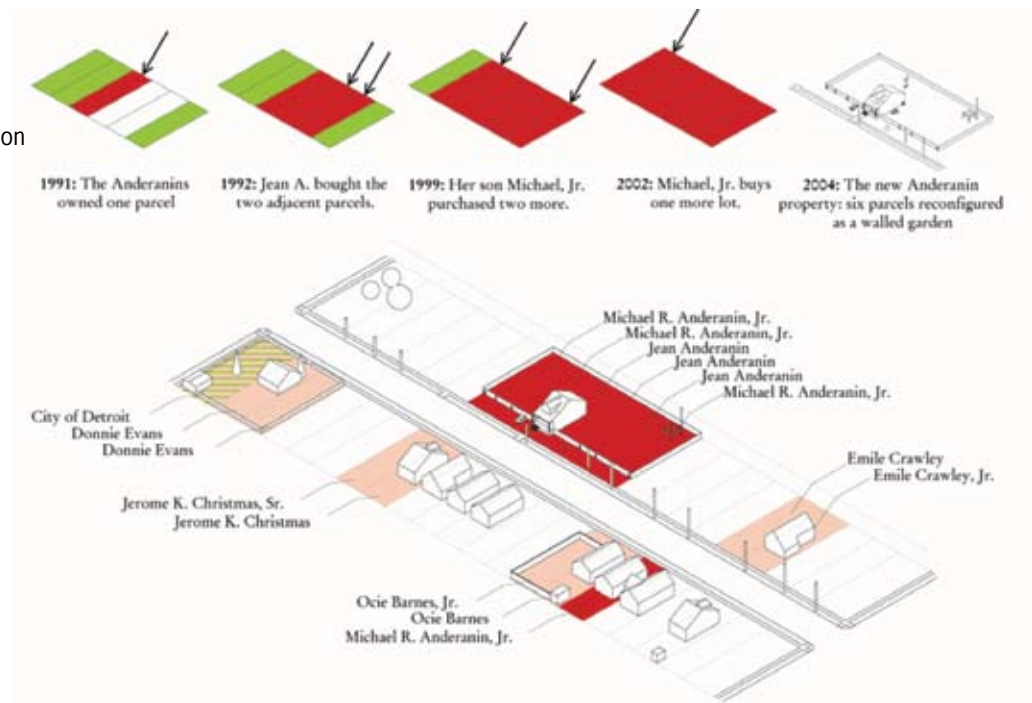
6. Margaret Dewar generously gave us property records of the parcels.

7. 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 of interpretation were made, they were unintentional.

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



Fig. 1. 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)



both a view over the fence back into the enclosed garden and a clear, long view down the street (with a direct sight-line to the Anderanin's cars). The Anderanin's house is now at the intersection of two very different types of private open space: a large, enclosed, and entirely private "rustic" garden and the semi-private porch that connects to (and to a degree controls) the street.

We emphasize this particular detail because it points to the fact that the New Suburbanism is not only the large-scale transformation of Detroit's landownership, density, and platting. On the scale of the individual property, we can also observe the small-scale transformations of house, garden and street, and observe the ways these spaces are being inhabited. As we will show in other case studies, blotting practices often entail a complete transformation of the domestic space and indeed the domestic architecture.

If we zoom out a bit, we see 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.<sup>9</sup> To give a small sense of the ubiquity of the New Suburbanism, of the eleven houses remaining on the block, six qualify as blots. Most of these have indicators of blotting—such as fences, landscaping, and ancillary structures—that can easily be seen from the street. The Barnes family, for example, enclosed its two-lot blot with a fence.



9. Although it should be noted that in these cases there are no visible signs of blotting, and that the blots only reveal themselves when one looks at the cadastral map and sees two contiguous parcels owned by the same individual). This can be contrasted with appropriated blots, in which individuals utilize adjacent lots without buying them. This kind of blot—which are visible from the street but invisible on the map—is evidenced here by Donnie Evans, who enclosed three parcels with a chain-link fence and added some landscaping even though he only owns two of the three lots that make up his blot.

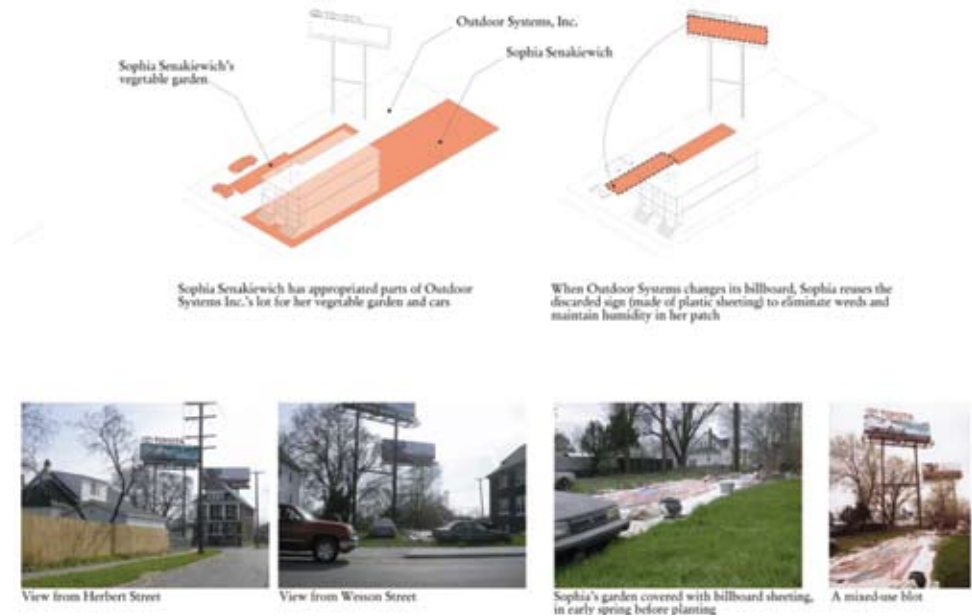
## Case Study Two: Billboard Blot

Contrary to our expectations, our research showed that the majority of blots are acquired through legal property purchases and 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<sup>10</sup> does (fig. 2).

Outdoor Systems purchased two parcels in this neighborhood because of their high visibility from the adjacent I-94 highway corridor. One of these parcels 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 engender a new, mixed-use symbiosis.

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

Fig. 2. 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

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. 3). 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’.

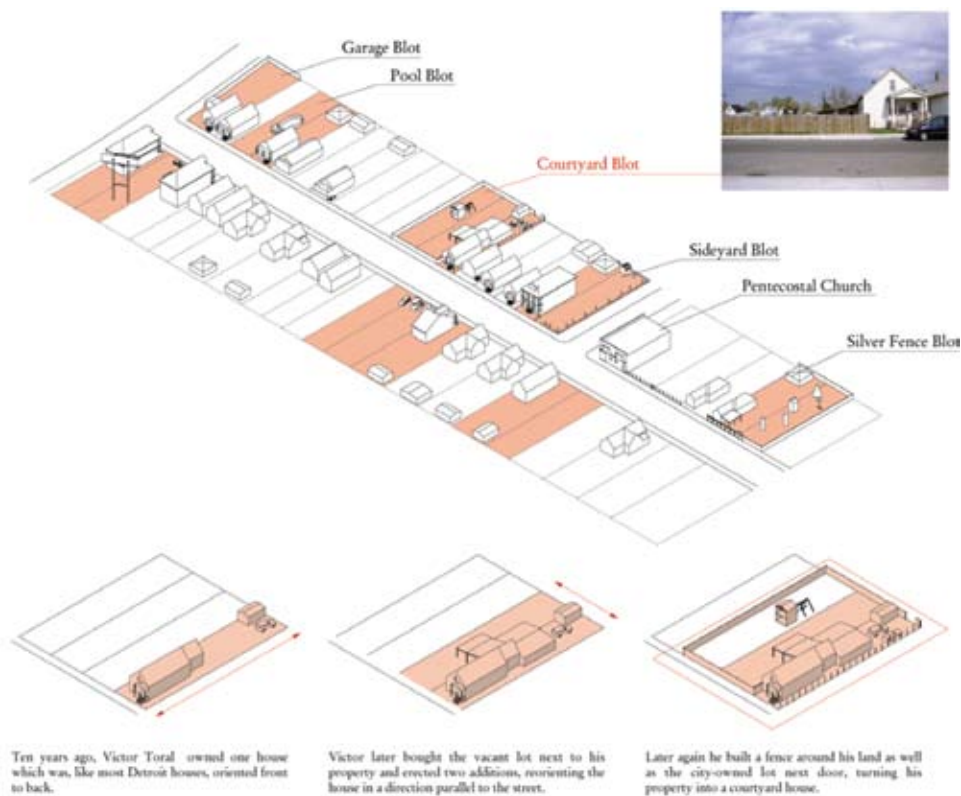


Fig. 3. Courtyard Blot—Above, in context on a block full of blots, with blots shown in pink; below, the blot’s evolution and re-orientation over time. (Illustration by Interboro)

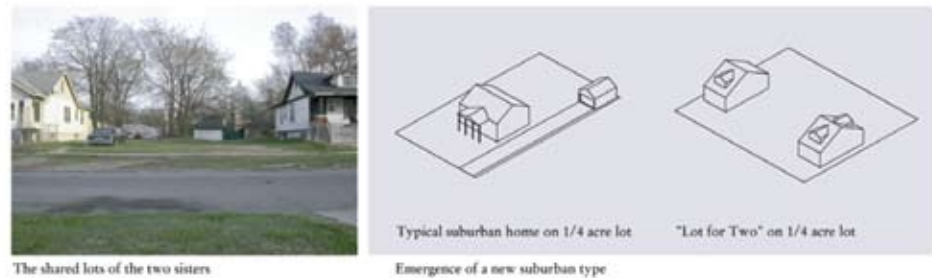
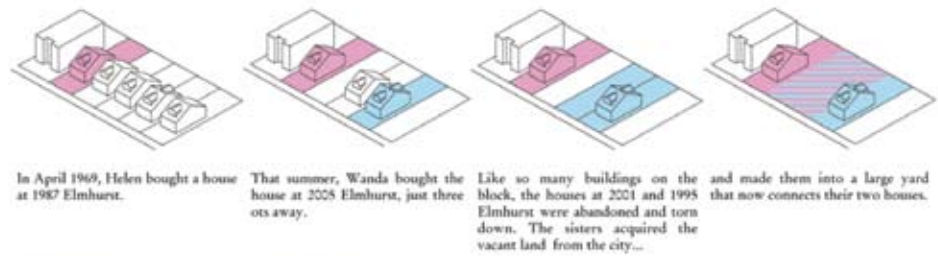


Fig. 4. Blot for Two Sisters—Above, land purchases by the sisters; below left, their shared lots; below right, a comparison of suburban and New Suburbanism lot acreages. (Illustration by Interboro)

11. 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.

#### Case Study Four: Blot for Two Sisters

Wanda Cowans and Helen McMurray are two sisters who created a shared blot.<sup>11</sup> 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 (fig. 4). Helen was in the process of saving money to buy a house, but at that time still couldn't afford one. 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. 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.

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 enlargements are typically purchased legally, 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.<sup>12</sup> In 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.

Hopefully through these case studies we can begin to see how the New Suburbanism is an important phenomenon that might be seen as a plausible response to Detroit’s depopulation and decline. We have already speculated a bit about the consequences the New Suburbanism could have for the city. Now we would like to add two more points. First, these case studies suggest new ways to consider who makes and remakes the city. The New Suburbanism can be thought of as an incremental, smallscale approach to urban redevelopment that restores property to the city’s tax rolls (and thus contributes much needed property tax revenue) without large-scale, coordinated development. When thought of as urban redevelopment, the contrast between Wanda and Helen’s blot and, say, the Renaissance Center, the fortress-like icon conceived of by the city’s corporate elite as a new beginning of Detroit’s economy, couldn’t be starker. But the contrast between the New Suburbanism and more modest urban redevelopments such as Victoria Park is pretty strong as well. The point here is that Detroit is being transformed, not according to some visionary plan implemented by a large redevelopment agency, but by the accumulated actions of thousands of self-interested homeowners. Second, we’d like to point out that at the scale of the individual parcel, one can observe the resourceful new residential configurations that emerge when larger, suburban-scale lots are grafted onto the old urban infrastructure and housing stock. This “architecture without architects” is typically very modest, but should interest the planner and architect alike for its resourcefulness. Blotting often opens a house to the landscape, increases natural ventilation, and generally creates more desirable spaces than are possible on the typical 30’x100’ lot.

12. 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.

## Part 2: Setting the Stage

It seems appropriate at this point to ask a few basic questions: Why are there so many blots in Detroit? Why are the conditions in Detroit so favorable for the New Suburbanism? Does the New Suburbanism thrive in other cities? The setting of the New Suburbanism is well-known enough. Through a combination of industrial restructuring, anti-urban federal policies, and racism, Detroit lost nearly one million inhabitants in the past fifty years. One consequence of this is that Detroit is home to an unfathomably large amount of vacant land, much of which—40,000 lots, by some estimates—has reverted to city ownership. Most of these lots, which



56 cities growing smaller

Detroit blot sampler

are typically small, single-family lots next to occupied homes (as opposed to larger, developer-friendly parcels), have a very low market value, and theoretically can be purchased for very little.

But the New Suburbanism has also thrived in Detroit because the city is physically very conducive to the New Suburbanism. Outside the downtown, the city's most basic building-block is the 30' x 100' single-family lot.<sup>13</sup> The result is a largely single-family city. In fact if you compare the housing stock of the 25 most populous cities in the United States, Detroit has the highest percentage of dwelling units that are detached, single-family houses. And while we have found evidence of the New Suburbanism in the more densely-populated, rowhouse neighborhoods of other cities such as Philadelphia, these are far less congenial to the New Suburbanism than the kinds of single-family neighborhoods that characterize Detroit, if only because the low-density, single-family zoning keeps away speculators who might otherwise look to build apartments or townhouses (and who might inflate property values, discouraging blotting).

Another peculiarity that makes Detroit a favored site for the New Suburbanism is the fact that since the city revised its zoning code, most of the originally-platted, 30' wide parcels are actually non-conforming, and are therefore ineligible for any substantial redevelopment. This would include a house, but would certainly not include a garden or a home expansion, just the sorts of things one typically finds on blots.

### It Ain't Easy Being Jean

Though the New Suburbanism is happening all over Detroit, because the city has no mechanism for facilitating the transfer of vacant, city-owned land to private ownership, accumulating vacant lots can be exceedingly difficult. Individuals wishing to purchase tax-foreclosed vacant land invariably experience frustration at each stage of the process, from the identification of the lot's ownership (the city maintains no comprehensive database of the properties it owns), through the receipt of the title deed: a "quit-claim deed" that offers no guarantee that the title is not clouded with liens, utility bills and the like.

In many respects, what the Peruvian economist Hernando DeSoto has said about securing property in developing countries applies equally well to Detroit. DeSoto has written about how in countries like Peru, Haiti, and Egypt, individuals who try to buy vacant land from the government are invariably frustrated by a lengthy, labyrinthine, and overbureaucratized process that requires one to fill out countless forms in

13. As Thomas Sugrue notes, during the period of the city's growth, whites thought they could exclude nonwhites by platting and zoning a city that would discourage the construction of lower-income apartment buildings. Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of The Urban Crisis – Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 45.

14. See Henando DeSoto, *The Other Path*, Basic Books, 1989 and Hernando DeSoto, *The Mystery of Capital*, Basic Books, 2000.

the hard-to-find backoffices of literally dozens of public and private agencies.<sup>14</sup> In Detroit, the process of purchasing land from the city isn't quite as defeating, but it does manage to discourage many would-be buyers.

Advocates for improved land-disposition mechanisms have done a good job outlining the problems in the current system. But let us here recount the argument by dramatizing the experience of a hypothetical Detroit homeowner who wants to purchase a vacant lot next to his or her house. Doing so will easily enable us to understand how broken the system is while at the same time suggesting ways to fix it.

The first thing this individual—let's name her Jean—will have to do is figure out who owns the lot. Jean might start by calling Detroit's Department of City Planning to ask if the city owns the lot, but if she does, she'll likely be told that there is no real way to know, as the city maintains no database of the property it owns. Jean might be told to check out the yearly auction where 250 or so lots are sold off, and told that if she's lucky, the lot might be on the list. If by some miracle it is, Jean will have to submit an offer for the lot with full payment (this is true of all purchases of \$1,000 or less). If she does so, she will be told at closing that she must pay the Buildings and Safety Engineering Inspection Fee of \$295, as well as a deed recording fee. Following this, Jean is given a "quit claim deed" that makes no guarantee of clean title.

15. The city, county, and state all own vacant tax-reverted parcels in Detroit.

Of course the odds are that the property won't be up for auction. In this scenario, Jean might call the county or the state to see if either of them owns it.<sup>15</sup> If she calls the county, if she's lucky enough to get someone on the phone, she'll at least be told whether or not the county owns the lot, but she'll also be told that if she wants to purchase the lot, she'll have to go to the county's annual auction (where she'll have to hope that the lot is on the auction block). If the lot is not owned by the County, Jean will likely have better luck with the State, as she can search the Michigan Land Bank's inventory online for free. Once she locates the property, she can apply to purchase it. Jean would then send an application to the Land Bank by mail, and after an assessment, the Land Bank would offer the lot for a "market" price.<sup>16</sup> Inexplicably, Jean will be told that for the duration of the application process, she is forbidden to step foot on the property.

16. The market price of a vacant, tax-foreclosed parcel is a difficult thing for an assessor to determine, as there are typically very few comparables.

Again, even if Jean abides by these terms, and agrees to the "market price," she still will only receive a "quit claim" deed, which is hardly a consolation, as quit claim deeds merely quit the city's (or county's or state's) claim to the lot. As it is quite possible that another private party might make a claim to the lot (for example, a former owner, a utility company, or a speculator who purchased the lien) Jean would be wise not to make any substantial improvements to the lot. Without a clear title, it's hard to have a clear conscience.

The need for a mechanism that could facilitate the transfer of vacant, city-owned land to private ownership (but also enumerate the city's stock of vacant lots, clear titles, and vacant lots for developers) has long been recognized.<sup>17</sup> In Detroit (as in Cleveland and Flint), the attempt to meet this need has taken the form of a land bank. By its simplest definition, a land bank is an entity—typically an authority—that can reduce the obstacles that prevent productive reuse of abandoned properties.<sup>18</sup> A common goal advanced by advocates of the land bank is that the latter should serve as a “one-stop shop” for people looking to purchase vacant property. At the very least, land banks can help individuals identify who owns a particular parcel of land, accept payment for said parcel, and issue a title deed that does more than simply “quits” the city's claim to the parcel.

From the city's perspective a land bank would help in the collection of property taxes which so far has proven difficult in Detroit. A *Metro Times* review of documents and interviews with city, county and state officials, estimates that Detroit loses \$60 million in uncollected property taxes every year, with more than \$1 billion lost in the past 20 years. Every year, Detroit collects 87 percent of its property taxes on average. This is one of the lowest collection rates among large cities in the United States. (Most cities collect 98 percent.) Records indicate that one-third of all properties in the city are tax delinquent, and that more than \$165 million is owed in back taxes. Compounding this problem is the fact that Detroit employs a total of two tax collectors for the entire city, that with the exception of Kalamazoo, Detroit is the only city in the state to collect—or attempt to collect—its own property taxes (every other Michigan city lets its county government collect taxes for it, with much greater return), and that the city historically has been loath to foreclose, letting deadbeats and low-rent landlords skate by with impunity. While 70,000 properties in the city are eligible for foreclosure, the city takes only 1,500 parcels a year.<sup>19</sup>

Bills to create a land bank in the City of Detroit first appeared before the Michigan Legislature in 2002.<sup>20</sup> While there was widespread support for the land bank—the concept was proposed by Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and Detroiters in the Legislature—the legislation did not pass, largely because of debates about how the land bank would be administered. According to the legislation, the Mayor would appoint four members of the land bank authority board, while the Governor would appoint one. Not surprisingly, the City Council, led by President Maryann Mahaffey, objected, accusing the Mayor of intentionally locking them out, and making himself “king of city real estate.”<sup>21</sup>

These objections and others led to PA 258, a revised, six-bill fast track package known as the Land Bank Fast Track Act. The Fast Track Act, which Governor Granholm signed on Jan. 5, 2004, enables state and local governments to create a land bank authority that would have the following legal abilities: 1) expedite quiet title

17. The coalition for a Detroit Landbank was a broad one that included: Detroit LISC, Moses, Community Development Advocates of Detroit and Community Legal resources, Detroit Renaissance.

18. For a good review of the landbank see “Harnessing Community Assets: A Detroit Land Bank Authority” by Amy Brooks, Demetria Collins, Barbara Eichmuller, Melisa Tintocalis and Simon van Leeuwen, Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning, University of Michigan, April 2004. Available at: [http://sitemaker.umich.edu/urpoutreachreports/capacity\\_building\\_b\\_da.data/89052/ReportFile/a\\_detroit\\_land\\_bank\\_authority.pdf](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/urpoutreachreports/capacity_building_b_da.data/89052/ReportFile/a_detroit_land_bank_authority.pdf).

19. Lisa M. Collins: “Dearth and taxes: Detroit officials say their dysfunctional property tax collection system costs the city \$60 million a year. Finding the people who owe is easier said than done,” *Detroit Metro Times*, 8/20/2003.

20. Although the need to better dispose of tax-foreclosed properties was addressed much earlier in 1999 with the passage of PA 123, in which Michigan significantly changed its tax foreclosure law.

21. Linda M Collins: “Bank Shot—Power struggles stall Detroit's long-awaited land bank,” *Detroit Metro Times*, 12/18/2002.

and foreclosure action, 2) sell land at nominal prices, 3) generate operating revenue, 4) receive releases from taxation by the state or other political subdivisions, and 5) purchase property, assemble property, and hold property.

A proposal to create a land bank authority in Detroit first came before the City Council in the Spring of 2005. The vote was postponed until April, 2007, when the proposal was rejected. Katy Locker, the former director of the Coalition for a Detroit Landbank, suggested that the Council rejected the land bank for fears of gentrification (several council members favor a land trust, in which property is held by a nonprofit organization that can lease land to a developer).

If the success of Flint's and Cleveland's land banks is any indicator, a Detroit land bank would certainly make it easier for people like Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin, and Wanda Cohen to acquire the lots next to their homes, as well as receive the clear title to those lots that they would want in order to be confident about making more permanent improvements.

But is the land bank enough? Are there other programs on the table that attempt to address Detroit's vacant land crisis? On August 3, 2006, Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick announced the launch of a new program to encourage the sales of 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 offers vacant, City-owned lots to adjacent homeowners for \$200.<sup>22</sup> However, while the program will potentially relieve the city of the burden of owning and maintaining vacant land, because it doesn't guarantee title, it falls short of creating opportunities for homeowners to make significant improvements on the vacant parcels (for example, building extensions that would increase their home equity).

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

## Part III: Listening to Detroit

But the Mayor's program has the right idea in that it institutionalizes and therefore legitimizes the bottom-up actions of individual residents. Presumably, the program is inspired by people like Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin, and Wanda Cohen; in this sense, the program is in the spirit of the sort of planning we started to argue for in our introduction, namely, a planning that attempts to identify, document, and finally advocate for potentially progressive practices that, like the New Suburbanism, already exist, but are underappreciated and have little legitimacy.

This sort of planning owes an intellectual debt to Hernando DeSoto. DeSoto is best known for insisting that in the developing world, the lack of a formal property system that protects property rights by clearly recording property ownership and

transactions is the primary impediment to economic growth, and that, consequentially, the best thing governments in developing countries can do is formalize the informal, so that the poor can leverage their informal holdings (i.e., in informal, squatted land, in informal goods, and in informal jobs) for financial gain. As we mentioned earlier, there are certainly parallels between DeSoto's analysis of the lengthy, over-bureaucratized process of purchasing and titling land in developing countries and our own analysis of the same process in Detroit, but what we'd like to single out here is something a bit broader, namely, DeSoto's method of "listening to the excluded." One of DeSoto's rhetorical techniques is to point out that language, perception, and, most importantly, law often lag behind reality, behind "what [is] going on in our streets and fields," and that we often have to update our perceptions about, say, the degree to which most Peruvians are proletarians ready to rise up against their bosses, or our laws about, say, where and when a street vendor can vend. For example, in the preface to the 2002 edition of *The Other Path*, DeSoto, writing about the "importance of good class analysis," writes about how his Institute for Liberty and Democracy "had pointed out with facts and figures that the millions of people whom elite Peruvians viewed as unruly squatters and urban pests were actually enterprising citizens who were carrying the nation's economy on their backs." DeSoto argued that since the majority of Peruvians worked outside the law, "the inescapable conclusion was that the nation's people viewed the law, and the government that was trying to enforce it, as hostile to their interests."<sup>23</sup>

23. Hernando DeSoto, *The Other Path*, Basic Books, 2002, "Preface," p. xxi.

DeSoto writes that:

For too long, the Peruvian government had been acting on the basis of outdated theories and prejudices and with little access to hard facts. We needed to really know what was going on in our streets and fields if we were to discover how to put the official law in line with how people actually lived and worked. And to find that out, we had to enable government to do what few governments in history have ever done: listen to the excluded.<sup>24</sup>

24. *Ibid.* p xxiii.

We don't have sufficient time here to review the various policy recommendations DeSoto has made over the years aimed at "putting the official law in line with how people actually lived and worked." Suffice it to say that these recommendations have something in common with Mayor Kilpatrick's side-lot program, in that they all attempt to make it easier for (mostly poor) individuals to do *what they are already doing*.

But DeSoto does more than even perhaps he is given credit for. In works like *The Other Path*, DeSoto devotes as much time to the task of defining, describing, and telling seductive stories about his constituency (in this case, the "emerging entrepreneurs working outside the [Peruvian] legal system") as he devotes to the policies he

proposes in their interest. This is exactly the sort of thing we think advocacy planners need to spend more time doing. While the model we're beginning to define here owes a few intellectual debts to Paul Davidoff, the larger debt is to DeSoto. While we're certainly with Davidoff in insisting on the importance of attitudes and values in planning (we would agree, for example, that "appropriate planning action cannot be prescribed from a position of value neutrality," that "values are inescapable elements of any rational decision-making process," and that the planner should "be an advocate for what he deems proper"), we don't think Davidoff puts enough emphasis on defining, describing, and telling seductive stories about the client. This vital early work is not represented in Davidoff's seminal 1965 essay.<sup>25</sup>

25. Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" originally published in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 1965, reprinted eds. Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, *The City Reader*, second edition, Routledge: 1996.

26. Mike Ditka coached the Chicago Bears football team. Don Pierson was his ghostwriter in *Ditka: an Autobiography*.

27. We are of course referring to Walter Lippmann, who doubted that Democracy could be realized in the modern world, owing largely to its complexity, and to the unlikelihood that citizens would sufficiently educate themselves to make informed decisions.

## The Ghostwriter

Another way to put this would be to say that the planner might do well to think of herself as a "ghostwriter." The ghostwriter, who strictly speaking is someone who helps famous people author autobiographies, is an apt analogy for the advocacy model we're beginning to define here for a few reasons. First of all, the job of the ghostwriter is to make her subject sound interesting and important (perhaps more interesting and important than they are). Ghostwriters have to make compelling cases that people like, say, Mike Ditka are people readers should care about.<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the planner as ghostwriter would try to make the case that the New Suburbanism is crucial to the future of Detroit, and that Detroit would be a lot worse off without Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin, Wanda Cowans, and the thousands of other Detroit homeowners who are "improving their lot."

How would the planner as ghostwriter do that? By doing more or less what we're doing here, namely, identifying these adjacent lot accumulations as a phenomenon, giving a name to the phenomenon, presenting case studies of the phenomenon, and then employing pictures and text to tell a story that gets people excited about the phenomenon (good ghostwriting should make use of arguments, but it should also appeal to the reader's emotions). Second, the planner as ghostwriter, like the ghostwriter, has to create (as opposed to relate) her subject's legacy. Mike Ditka certainly has the raw material for one amazing story, but had his ghostwriter not cooked it up into a book, we might not see it as such. Similarly, though people like Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin and Wanda Cohen have been busy making blots for years, had someone not come along and attempted to ghostwrite their autobiographies, the New Suburbanism simply wouldn't exist. Third, let's remember why ghostwriters exist in the first place: famous people are too busy living famous lives to stop and think about the ways in which their lives are important. Without entering into a Lipmanesque debate about a crisis in democracy,<sup>27</sup> and with all due respect to Arnstein's

model of citizen participation, we believe that Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin, and Wanda Cowans are like celebrities who opt not to take the time out of their busy schedules to participate in any kind of formal process. They're leading by doing, and it should be up to us to follow their lead and make it easier for them to do what they are doing.

What we're suggesting here is that this starts with a new kind of advocacy that emphasizes the importance of identifying, and documenting progressive practices that already exist, but that are underappreciated and have little legitimacy. We're suggesting that there is an entire phase of planning that should happen before we start talking about policies. We think policies like the land bank and the Mayor's side-lot program are on the right track, in that they will facilitate the New Suburbanism, but we also think that these programs would be much more effective if they were part of a compelling story. We think this would help drum up support for the programs, but it would also encourage us to think up new advocacy tools.

What might these new advocacy tools look like? We have admittedly only begun to speculate. This past February, we organized a roundtable in Detroit entitled "Improve Your Lot! New Responses to Vacant Land" and brought together stakeholders and interested parties to discuss the challenges and opportunities of purchasing and improving vacant land. The roundtable participants included Interboro, Margaret Dewar (Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Michigan), Ashley Atkinson from the Greening of Detroit, and Katie Locker, Director of the Coalition for a Detroit Land Bank. In the roundtable, many audience members spoke of their desire to buy vacant property adjacent to their homes, but spoke also about the many obstacles they faced in attempting to do so (for example a lack of information, or conflicting information from the city about how to make these vacant land purchases). We realized that in doing our research, we had connected with a number of remarkable individuals—such as Michael Anderanin, Jr. — who are "blot" experts who know ways around all of the legal and bureaucratic hurdles one encounters when making blots. It was at this point that we came up with the idea of a "Blot Blog," where Detroit blot-makers can swap expertise, relate their stories, and also ask for advice on blot-making. The Blot Blog is currently in development.

We also think there's a role for the architect here to influence and shape formal outcomes. Another project that is currently in development is a Blot Book that could guide homeowners, designers, and developers in mining the possibilities of blot-making. The book would explore the architectural possibilities that are suggested in many of the blots we observed, and could be used in future building projects (for example, opening the house to the landscape, increasing natural ventilation, creating more desirable spaces, and so on).

## Epilogue

There's a story people love to tell about Detroit. Beginning with the invention of the assembly line, the story traces Detroit's rise to Fordist paradise, notes the city's role in the making of the modern middle class, and then waxes poetic about some urban version of the American dream that a combination of industrial restructuring, anti-urban federal policies, and racism brought to an untimely end. The story's next chapter is thus about Detroit's decline; it takes us through deindustrialization, race riots, and the suburban exodus, and ends by speculating that Detroit is a city that has "outlived itself." In a postscript, the story's author, who is now walking around "the ruins of Detroit" points to the trees that are growing through streets and factory floors, the houses that have crumbled into the earth, and the deer that have colonized the downtown and concludes that one day, Detroit will revert to nature.

Some people who tell this story are thrilled by this prospect. So much so, that they come up with ways to facilitate it. Detroit's City Planning Commission, for example, 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. The architect James Corner has proposed much the same thing. The photographer Camilo Vergara suggested turning the city into a museum of ruins.

But imagine for a moment that at this time when things seem like they can't get any worse . . . they don't. Let's imagine that individuals kept making blots, that the City, inspired by the stories of some of the people profiled here, finally did make it easier for individuals to acquire adjacent lots. In this case, we would, as we suggested in our introduction, have to add an epilogue to this familiar story of depopulation and disinvestment. Here Detroit wouldn't return to nature; it would return to the suburbs (it is the suburbs, after all, that you can count on to fill in whatever void civilization has left). So long as our friends Victor Toral, Michael Anderanin, Wanda Cowans, and the thousands of other Detroit homeowners who are "improving their lot" have a place in this new suburb, this might not be such a bad thing.