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Razing the City to Save the City



Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

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DETROIT — For generations, residents of this hollowed-out city hoped that somehow Detroit could be reborn — its population would return and its crumbling core would be rebuilt. No idea was more heretical than widespread demolition of thousands of derelict buildings.



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Janet Jones, a bookstore owner, is cautious. “We have a lot of history of things being promised, land being taken,” she said.

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One idea calls for the some abandoned areas of the city to be designated as agricultural.

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But a new momentum has taken hold here that embraces just that: shrinking the city in order to save it.

“There’s nothing you can do with a lot of the buildings now but do away with them,” said Mae Reeder, a homeowner of 35 years on the southeast side, where her bungalow is surrounded by blocks that are being reclaimed by nature, complete with pheasants nesting in vacant spaces where people once lived.

The residential vacancy rate in Detroit is 27.8 percent. This is up from the 10.3 percent rate found in 2000 by the United States census.

“People are deciding we can’t live like this anymore,” said Steven A. Ogden, executive director of a nonprofit group, [Next Detroit Neighborhood Initiative](#), which works to help stabilize communities. “It is my contention that we can’t afford to wait a single day without a strategy.”

Strategies are now coming from every corner, with community groups and nonprofit organization and trade groups producing frameworks.

The burst of creativity is partly a function of desperation. For the sixth decade in a row, this year’s [census](#) will bring bad news: the population, already sparsely distributed over a vast 139 square miles, has declined again, to an estimated 790,000 residents, down from

951,000 people in 2000 and a high of almost 2 million in 1950. Population loss was hastened in the last few years, experts said, by the twin blows of the foreclosure crisis and jobs lost to the recession.

Detroit has already struggled through 55,000 foreclosures since 2005 and is expecting another wave to hit soon as temporary moratoriums, meant to stabilize the nation's housing markets, are lifted. That will mean even more vacancy, emptiness and blight.

After decades of mostly ignoring its hemorrhaging population, the city government earlier this year began using federal money to demolish 10,000 empty residential buildings, with a goal of bringing down the first 3,000 structures by the end of the year.

But only 784 demolitions have been completed so far, and Mayor [Dave Bing](#), whose predecessors were chastised at the mere mention of large-scale demolition, has been criticized not for embracing the idea but for failing to articulate a long-term vision.

“They haven't really thought this through,” said Kurt R. Metzger, an urban affairs expert and demographer who directs an independent agency, [Data Driven Detroit](#), which is given money by foundations to create a demographic, real estate and infrastructure [database](#) about the city. “You don't have any real direction given by anybody.”

The group released [a lot-by-lot survey](#) in February showing that, on average, 20 to 30 percent of the city's lots were vacant.

In February, [Community Development Advocates of Detroit](#), a nonprofit trade group of local development organizations, offered a framework developed after 15 months of study that suggests classifying each part of the city into one of 11 neighborhood types like green zones, homestead sectors, village hubs and traditional residential sectors, to name a few.

High-density neighborhood hubs and downtown business and civic centers would be connected by green thoroughfares — low-maintenance, naturally landscaped traveling corridors that could help Detroit handle one of its main challenges: that its strongest areas are on the fringes, with weaker patches scattered throughout the core.

An urban homestead — one of the more popular parts of the plan — would be tantamount to country living in the city, the plan says, with homeowners enjoying an agricultural environment and lower taxes in exchange for disconnecting from some city services like water.

Another community group, [Detroit Declaration](#), has developed a land-use policy that proposes setting up [urban farming](#) and reducing the size of lots for building to encourage housing development known as in-fill.

Yet another proposal has come from Mr. Ogden's group, Next Detroit Neighborhood Initiative, which calls for an intensive intervention to prop up the city's strongest areas, the city's tax base and community anchors, which are just starting to suffer after weathering decades of storms.

"It's really about reorganizing our land to make a more livable city," said [Tom Goddeeris](#), an architect who lives in the vibrant northwest part of the city and is a longtime advocate of rethinking Detroit. "I don't know that it's ever been done before on our scale, but we've got to get started."

Despite the energy poured into rethinking the city by a half dozen groups, there are limits to how much those outside government can accomplish. There are both political and financial obstacles to putting any of the plans into effect.

For instance, though many of the plans presented to the city for consideration aim to create density in viable neighborhoods by consolidating and relocating residents from dying or dead neighborhoods, most do not go so far as to say which areas they would choose for destruction. Those decisions, group leaders said, are for the city to make.

"What we believe is that it should be data driven, in collaboration with residents," said Anita Lane, director of programs at Community Development Advocates of Detroit. Any process for redesigning the city, she said, "needs to have all the stakeholders coming together to take ownership for this."

Her organization's idea to designate 11 types of neighborhood does not have a price tag yet, and it is hard to gauge how much the total remodeling of a city would cost, especially on the scale of Detroit, which is already on life support from the federal government and philanthropic organizations. As a point of reference for the cost of a larger project, the city is expected to spend \$20 million on demolitions alone this year.

"This is by far the biggest city that has faced this challenge in this country," said Frank Popper, a professor of planning and public policy at [Rutgers University](#). "Some of the thinking has been that Detroit would be the model."

That hope has taken a hit.

“My sense is while there may be plans on the ground, the situation is so fluid that everybody’s winging it,” Dr. Popper said. “I’m trying to follow it day to day, and I get the feeling of improvising all the way. But doing nothing is a prescription for dwindling away, if not dying.”

There are skeptics of large-scale change, to be sure.

[The Michigan Citizen](#), a local alternative newspaper, has likened neighborhood change and possible resident relocation to “a modern-day ‘Trail of Tears’ for Detroiters.”

Adele Nieves, a public relations specialist who moved to Detroit from New Jersey three years ago, said she suspected something akin to a land grab in the works.

“It’s in the government’s interest to continue the perception that everything is abandoned and destroyed, or that Detroit needs to be flattened,” she said.

“The reality is a different story,” Ms. Nieves said as she extolled the virtues of her neighborhood in the Cass Corridor, where she grows her own food in a garden and has access to an increasing number of stores and restaurants.

No official strategy exists, beyond a nascent planning process. City officials said it was likely to take 18 to 24 months to develop a framework for moving forward, perhaps incorporating ideas from existing proposals. So far, members of the so-called land use summit have met once, in early May. Public-participation sessions are scheduled next month.

Under the city’s demolition plan, 2,216 buildings have to be taken down by Dec. 31. What comes next is anyone’s guess. Mayor Bing declined several requests to be interviewed for this article.

“We have a lot of history of things being promised, land being taken,” said Janet Jones, a bookstore owner in the Cass Corridor, who is skeptical about the new proposals. “We have to be vigilant about everything. We have to be on guard.”

Many residents agree, however, that doing nothing is a recipe for continued, unplanned shrinkage and misery in the housing market.

“Those dreams of going back to two million — no one believes that anymore,” said Mr. Goddeeris, the architect. “We’ve had a tumultuous couple of years.”

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