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## COMMENT

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# Carry on Shrinking?: The Bankruptcy of Urban Policy in Detroit

WILLIAM J V NEILL\*

### Abstract

*Much attention has recently been focused on the bankruptcy of the City of Detroit in 2013 and the reasons for the largest municipal fiscal melt down in US history. Contrary to a view gaining currency, which dismisses Detroit as the product of exceptional forces and largely calls it the architect of its own collapse, this article argues the case that Detroit conveys more general lessons for European cities struggling with decline, not least of which is the need for interventionist regional planning to avoid predictable but avoidable urban distress. The article briefly reviews the well-documented decline of the city of Detroit measured against population, economic, fiscal and image impacts. It considers five current misreadings of the reasons for Detroit's predicament and implicit signposts for European practice before concluding with an assessment of what has been hailed as the shoots of yet another possible renaissance in the originally proclaimed Renaissance City over 40 years ago.*

**Keywords:** Detroit; shrinking city; urban policy; regional planning and governance; bankruptcy

### The scope of decline

Detroit has lost over 60% of its population in the last 60 years and 25% in the 10 years up to the last census. In a recently growing metropolitan region, where population has now stabilized at around 4.7 million, the population of the 139 square miles of the city of Detroit (large enough to swallow up Manhattan, Boston and San Francisco) has fallen from around 60% of the core region to less than 18% in the last 60 years. During this time, the African-American population of Detroit has increased from 16% to 82% in a city with a population hovering around 700,000, down from well over 1 million at its peak (Table 1, Figure 1).

In the space of 60 years, the city of Detroit has traded the positive sobriquets of 'Arsenal of Democracy', 'All-American City' and 'the Motor City' for more recent, negative, labels including 'Titanic City' (Rusk, 1993), 'Pariah City' (Neill, 1995a, 1995b), 'City in Freefall' (Boyle, 2000), 'Broken City' (Detroit Free Press, 2001) and, most recently, 'Zombie city', in need of resurrection through radical public policy (Phillips, 2014). While Detroit cannot be conveniently dismissed as exceptional, having parallels with other shrinking US cities such as Cleveland, Buffalo and Milwaukee, the scale of the distress has made the city 'the poster child for our most paranoid dystopian fears' (Borden, 2013, pp. 135–136). A recent

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TABLE 1. Population change in Southeast Michigan 1930–2010.

	Tri-county 'core' region population	Remaining SEMCOG <sup>a</sup> counties population	City of Detroit and %of African-American	City as % of tri-county region population
1930	2,177,343	204,852	1,568,662 (9%)	72
1940	2,377,329	236,515	1,623,452 (9%)	68
1950	3,016,197	328,596	1,849,568 (16%)	61
1960	3,762,360	418,994	1,670,144 (29%)	44
1970	4,199,931	532,460	1,514,063 (45%)	36
1980	4,043,633	638,498	1,203,339 (63%)	30
1990	3,912,679	677,789	1,027,974 (76%)	26
2000	4,043,467	790,026	951,270 (81%)	24
2010	3,863,924	840,819	713,777 (82%)	18

Notes: US Census Bureau.

<sup>a</sup> The counties comprising the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments consist of the core counties of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb in addition to Monroe, Washtenaw, Livingston and St Clair.

proposal even promoted the virtues of a zombie themed amusement park taking vicarious thrill-seeking to a depth of exploitative sensationalism that even Robocop, in both its cinematic incarnations, does not surpass (Drake, 2012). It cannot be but sad when a traumatized city, in the face of economic desertion, is reduced to appealing to such dark tourism to stake out a new niche urban brand.



FIGURE 1. Southeast Michigan. *Source:* Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

Here, the ‘ruin porn’ industry in Detroit holding up to the tourist gaze landscapes of despair has already tested the ethical limits of perversely aestheticizing the city’s tragic circumstances described in graphic terms by Anderson:

If a city is defined by its distance from nature, what is the most efficacious way to define Detroit, where ruined structures are actively reclaimed by nature’s agents? Here, houses, industrial plants and former corporate headquarters—abandoned by their human inhabitants in waves of ex-migration occurring steadily for some 60 years—are occupied by native grasses, wildflowers, snowdrifts and wind storms. A ketchup bottle sits on a dining room table of a house that no longer has a roof. Plastic blinds flap against glassless window frames in a high school filled with desks, chalkboards and filing cabinets, but no students. Detroit’s deserted landscape, in some cases seemingly evacuated in medias res, is retreating into the rural. (Anderson, 2012, p. 199)

In July 2013, the city of Detroit, already under emergency management and grappling with collapsing city services, filed for bankruptcy, the terms of which were settled, after much protracted wrangling, in late 2014. Meanwhile, a task force, appointed by President Obama, reported in mid-2014 that the cost of dealing with growing residential and industrial abandonment in the city would cost upwards of \$2 billion (Rushe, 2014).

Perhaps, somewhat extraordinary is the fact that this destination on a long road had been predicted at regular intervals for decades previously. An early warning, in the aftermath of accelerated white suburban and capital flight to the suburbs after the urban riots in 1967, was a report by Michigan State University academics examining the fiscal trajectory of the city and calling for the need to ‘save Detroit’ through ‘fiscal adjustments between Detroit and other political units’ (Taylor & Willits, 1971, p. 8). A few years later, a regional planning report, reinforcing the imperative of regional governance and fiscal adjustment, predicted that without action to dampen city versus suburban struggle, Detroit would end up as a ‘ghost region’ and a ‘metropolitan Atlantis’ (Mathewson, 1975, p. 1). From a viewpoint of 40 years hindsight, this prediction seems less hyperbole than actuality. Two years later, an Urban Action Group, appointed by the Michigan Governor to look mainly into the problems of Detroit as ‘a city in transition’, raised with alarm the spectre of ‘throwaway’ cities with the associated profligate trashing of past public investments (Urban Action Group 1977, p. 12). At the beginning of the 1980s, when the United States entered the Reagan era of a more neo-liberal outlook, the consequences of a laissez faire approach to the worsening problems of the city of Detroit continued to be highlighted by urban scholars predicting Detroit to be on course to a ‘discarded city of vacant factories and abandoned homes from which the remaining affluent shield themselves in residential enclaves and a well-fortified downtown’ (Luria and Russell, 1981, pp. 5–6).

A region-wide process to avert such a worst-case scenario was attempted by the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) 10 years later. It failed miserably. This ‘Regional Development Initiative’ (RDI), launched in 1990 on the basis of extensive trend analysis and research, attempted to chart what

a ‘business as usual’ spatial future would look like for the Detroit region in 2010. Showing that this would most likely lead to, *inter alia*, continuing racial polarization and crime, and worsening sprawl and traffic gridlock, discussion workshops were held in municipalities throughout the region to try to agree a consensual alternative on the basis of the common knowledge base provided (SEMCOG, 1991). No such agreement proved possible, with business as usual continuing to rule. In the words of a city planning director in Detroit: ‘SEMCOG was burnt by RDI’ (Robinson, 1999). With the danger of SEMCOG losing local membership from what is a voluntary association of governments, the organization has since taken a more cautious and circumspect stance on issues of regional co-operation and ex-urban containment. In the birthplace of Edge City (Garreau, 1993), the metropolitan fringe has thus been sprawling further outwards at the rate of 10,000 acres per year (SEMCOG, 1999). The predictions of the SEMCOG RDI from a quarter of a century ago have indeed been borne out (Figure 2). Between 2000 and 2010, the population growth rate of no fewer than 15 ex-urban local political jurisdictions exceeded 30% and frequently reached over 50% (SEMCOG, 2011).

Before considering five current misreadings of the reasons for Detroit’s predicament, and what lessons this may have for European practice, it is worth acknowledging that this is a discourse arena where interpreting the causes and challenges of ‘shrinking Detroit’ is open to vitriolic ideological polemic, going to the heart of how the United States and its local jurisdictions are governed. The following assessment by a Fox News commentator, for example, spares no punches in blaming the victim:

Consider the multitude of governmental actions that got Detroit into its financial predicament. High taxes, crime, hostility toward business, excessive social welfare spending, political corruption and crony capitalism decimated the viability of America’s most industrious city. The result: \$18 billion in debt . . . absent (in bankruptcy) is the humility and sobriety of a city whose fate was sealed by decades of ineptitude and depravity from its political and municipal leaders. (Sayegh, 2014)

### **Interpreting a planning disaster**

One prominent but myopic reading of Detroit’s shrinkage and now bankruptcy is to blame the misfortune on a failure of internal city governance (Zavattaro, 2014, p. 1073). Given the serious criminal conviction of a recent Detroit mayor for corruption in 2013, this ‘reading’ of Detroit presents an easy target. However, given the predictions of analysts over the much longer term, the predicament of the city cannot be reduced to an assemblage of local mismanagement practices, substantial as some of these have been. The city, after all, was strongly criticized for its wasteful and inefficient government practices, in the 1950s, while under white control (Bledsoe, 1990, p. 18). Here, Peck refers to the importance of avoiding overly endogenous accounts of agency and causality:

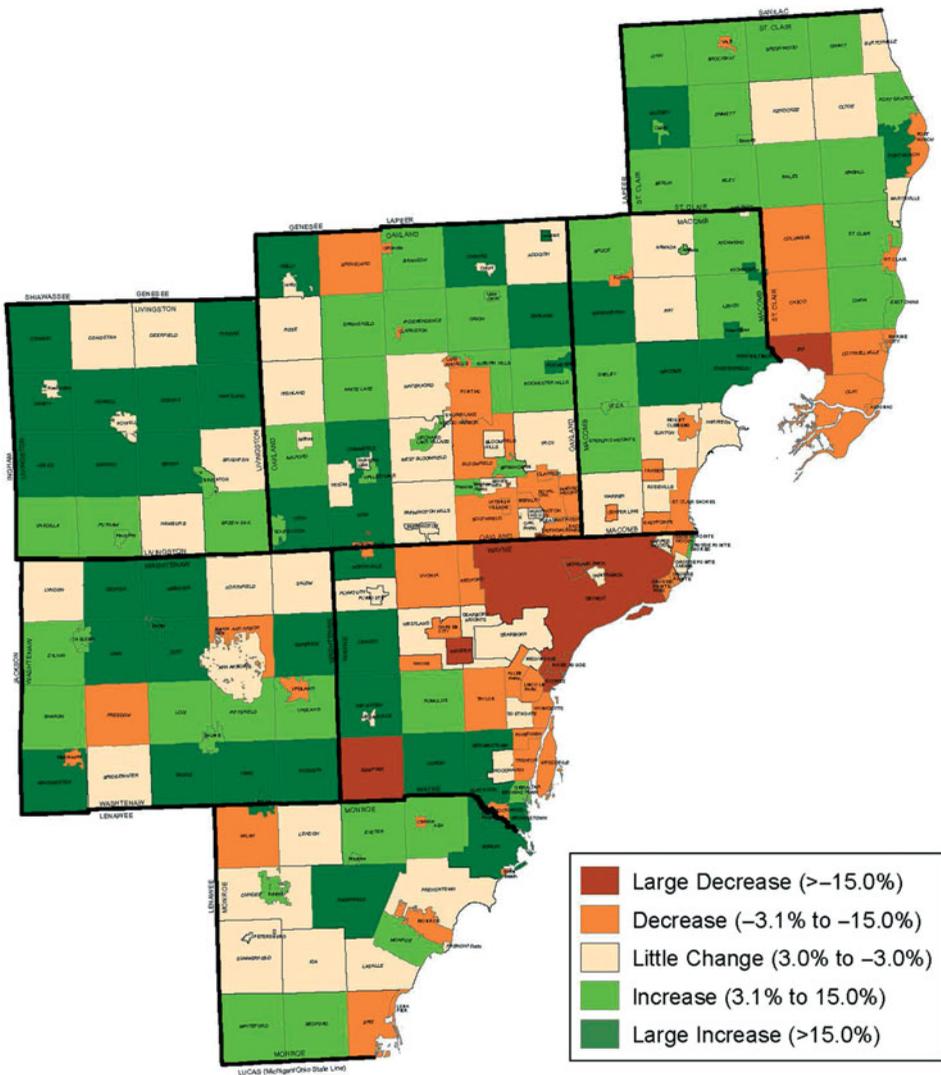


FIGURE 2. Percentage population change Southeast Michigan 2000–2010. *Source:* Courtesy of Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

... how do we account for Detroit's bankruptcy? Detroit's bankruptcy is a good example of a moment where we need to think about the position of a particular city in a stressed fiscal system more generally. We don't need separatist, localist accounts of Detroit's bankruptcy. We can get those from Fox News. (Peck 2014)

A lesson is the importance of understanding context and not seeking to scapegoat by blaming the victim.

A second misleading attempt to explain the final coup de grace of bankruptcy seeks a focus in the decline of Fordism and the hastening demise of the ‘Motor City’ in the recent financial collapse and recession. With but 2 remaining automobile assembly plants where it formerly had 12 (Vlasic, 2013), the city of Detroit is cast as ‘the bust engine of America ‘ where, with 40 square miles of vacant land, ‘the Midwest’s industrial powerhouse has turned into a production line for drink, drugs and deprivation’ (Binelli, 2013, p. 57). However, Detroit’s problems, it may be suggested, cannot be simplistically read off from the vicissitudes of the auto industry (Neill, 1991; 1995a) including recent turmoil. The accelerating decentralization of auto plants goes back to before the 1940s (Sugrue, 2004), and moreover, General Motors and Chrysler, with the aid of billions of dollars of federal bankruptcy bail outs under both Bush and Obama, have bounced back to healthy solvency. As one leading auto analyst born and raised in Detroit puts it, speaking of ‘Detroit’ in broad terms as a symbol for the US auto industry:

Detroit, battered though it is, remains the linchpin of the U.S. manufacturing base... (it) is a high tech industry, not simply a rusted relic from the last century, as it is often portrayed. (Shaiken, 2009, p. 51)

Firmly post-Fordist, Ford and General Motors have restructured with flexible assembly lines and body shops in most US plants (Shaiken, 2009, p. 54). In other words, in terms of accounting for the city of Detroit’s plight, it is not the economy stupid! Here a veteran Detroit Free Press journalist goes to the nub of the problem:

By 2012...the Detroit suburbs have become the city, in any real sense...only six percent of the taxable value of real estate in the tri-county Detroit area can be found in the city itself, while ninety-four percent is in the suburbs...there’s no denying that the city has largely been rebuilt out there beyond 8 Mile Road, the city’s northern border. (Gallagher, 2013, pp. 15–16)

For Chrysler’s city of Detroit east side Jefferson assembly plant, this carries the dubious advantage of being able to operate on an urban prairie with accessibility on a par with any possible green field site (Vlasic, 2013). A lesson for Europe is that economic explanations of place destruction should not provide excuses for unnecessary fatalism and strategic governance impotence.

A third misreading of Detroit is to see a solution as lying in some new big ticket/silver bullet development project, currently a 3.3-mile long street light rail system on Woodward Avenue, the main city axis heading north (Adelman, 2014). Detroit has been bedevilled with the failure of such a reimagining approach. While mayor Coleman Young had argued for Woodward rail, over 30 years ago when it might have made a difference (Neill, 1988), Detroit’s experience points to the stark reality that a city cannot build its way out of shrinkage by investing in the centre, in the absence of wider metropolitan growth management. In the 1960s, while the city was beginning to shrink in population due to rapid suburbanization, supported by an aggressive federally subsidized highway building programme, the city’s hope and expectation was that through modernization of building and

flagship projects, the tarnished image of Detroit, portrayed in Time Magazine in 1961 as already a 'city in decline', could be reversed. A promotional strategy was endorsed that for 50 years has failed to transform Detroit's fortunes, while the interests of private investors have been primarily concerned with developing the ever-extending metropolitan periphery into lucrative suburban housing projects and shopping malls.

Responding to this, various Detroit 'big ticket' reimagining projects came on stream in the early 1960s. This included the new Civic Center complex on the riverfront and the massive Cobo Hall and Arena, at the time the largest convention facility in the world which was promoted in a 1964 Detroit guide book as 'a symbol of the New Detroit'. However, in the Detroit civil riots in 1967, fundamental problems rooted in regional urban development policy were exposed. In the aftermath, 'white flight' to the suburbs gathered pace leaving marginalized African-Americans and the old trapped in what was increasingly the hollowed out core of the city.

The 1970s were the last best hope for turning around the image and the reality of what one Detroit journalist called at the end of that decade the phenomenon of 'the incredible shrinking city' (Cheyfitz, 1979). The most visible building project during this time was the huge flagship Detroit Renaissance Center, or 'RenCen', which opened on the riverfront in 1977 trumping the previously built Civic Center. Comprising a towering prestige hotel with office and retail space, the complex continues to dominate, as intended, the city skyline and provides a place identity symbol for much promotional literature. As the name implied, it was to herald the beginning of the renaissance of the city. Sold at a knock-down price, the 'RenCen', which has never been the centre of any renaissance, became the headquarters building of General Motors in 2003. More important for the city, however, is the fact that no flotilla of private investment ever followed.

Since the 1990s, the city has continued to be subject to yet more major reimagining projects which revolved around the leisure and entertainment industry. Tax incentives to draw in investment to an 18-square mile Empowerment Zone, containing some of the worst landscapes of the shrinking city, and portrayed grimly in the movie '8 Mile', failed to compete with the fresh allure of Michigan's cornfields. New sports parks and casinos have failed to turn the city around. Detroit continues to shrink in a way that no amount of promotion and a stream of 'one off' mega development projects can change. Ongoing shrinkage is not due to irreversible laws of the market, but a lack of a suitable and viable vision of its future.

Detroit points to the conclusion that private-led visions for the city are not enough. It would be a mistake to misread the current version of such a vision (Detroit Future City unveiled in January 2013) as holding the key to civic resurrection. The record of its antecedents is not encouraging. A major privately sponsored regional planning study in the 1960s, without any public participation, was to reinforce a one-sided transportation highway-driven agenda which facilitated Detroit's shrinkage (Schneider, 1972; Neill, 1988). When the consequences of this investment model mixed with racial polarization became all too apparent in the 1980s, another private-sector-financed strategic planning report was forthcoming. Detroit's black mayor reacted unfavourably to this

Detroit Strategic Planning Project published in 1987. The initiative went beyond physical place-making to incorporate recommendations on race relations, education, economic development, crime and city image (DSPP, 1987). The mayor's sour reception was largely due to the perceived arrogance of private-sector meddling in policy in a city which it, through investment decisions, had virtually written off (Neill, 2004, p. 136). Regime-building between public and private leaders has been particularly fraught in Detroit with 'the political capacity to respond to negative forces through public-private partnerships (remaining) limited and flawed' (Orr and Stoker, 1992, p. v). The current privately funded vision for Detroit headed by the Kresge Foundation and other corporate donors, while supporting in general terms the controversial notion of more 'focused growth' in the shrinking city (Detroit Future City, 2012, p. 93), presents this seeming inevitability against a rosy picture of a pioneering new urban form which can become a model for other North American cities (Detroit Future City, 2012, p. 93). Detroit has the possibility of transforming 'into a greener city of beautiful vistas, playing fields, urban woodlands, bicycle parks and walking trails, as well as lakes and ponds, streams, playgrounds and pocket parks' (Detroit Future City, 2012, p. 99). The 'Future Detroit', with its reworked services and infrastructure for the shrunk city, is totally framed outside any reference to wider metropolitan economic and demographic trends, having no maps in its 347 glossy pages depicting any encompassing regional reality. The city cartographically and in actuality stands alone.

The final and most disrespectful reading of Detroit's pathway to shrinkage and bankruptcy is to blame the absence of both a regional planning strategy and regional cooperation more generally on racial belligerence and divisiveness within a black administered city dating back to Coleman Young's election in 1973. As an analyst in a conservative economic think tank has put it:

The truth is that Detroit was a failed city long before it became insolvent, thanks to the virtual collapse of its municipal government during Young's 1974–1994 reign as major . . . . While Young was not directly responsible for the public pension obligations that led to the city's bankruptcy, his poor governance and hostility toward the middle class drove the tax base away. (Malanga, 2013: quoted in McDonald John F, 2014).

While not agreeing with the position, Beauregard distils the essence of the widely held view that Black Detroit itself was the architect of its own downfall:

. . . Detroiters developed coping mechanisms that further hampered their ability to compete. They embraced a fealty to hierarchy, adopted an oppositional identity that resisted attempts by whites or suburbanites to provide assistance, became intolerant of people unlike themselves and engaged in racial scapegoating. Collectively, they adapted by denying the depths of their problems and myopically, by sacrificing future benefits for control over diminishing resources. (Beauregard, 2014, p. 721)

To argue that Young's Detroit had a non-cooperative attitude to regional cooperation is to ignore the racist reality of suburban behaviour. The historical reality of racial exclusionary practices in Detroit's post-war suburban geography is well documented (Neill, 2004, pp. 115–116; 153). Detroit's suburbs have in the past lobbied to prevent construction of any fixed rail construction that would perhaps compensate for freeways and dispersal but bring the city's problems (and population) closer to their doorstep (Neill, 2004, p. 133). It is a tactic that remains powerfully in place, as construction of a very limited and scaled back Woodward street car system begins in 2014 (M-1Rail 2014). Full throttle development on cheaper greenfield sites has been actively promoted with the assertion that sprawl is good (Neill, 2004, p. 143). Attempts in the 1970s to introduce even a weak version of regional tax base sharing were squashed by suburban lobbying (Cason, 1980, p. 18) and the suburbs even refrained from participating in Detroit's tri-centennial celebrations in 2001 (Neill, 2004, p. 146), thwarting what a recent commentator has termed 'the quest for respect in the Motor City' (Galster, 2012). The writing appeared on the wall in 1968 in the report of the think tank New Detroit committee, formed to find a response to the overt breakdown of consensus the year previously. Pointing out that 'most urban problems can be defined more accurately as regional problems', the report concluded that:

... the task is one which cannot be attacked solely by existing units of local government.... Local government structure in southeastern Michigan ... is a patchwork of entirely dissimilar constituencies in which parochialism and independent action continue to frustrate full cooperation in coping with problems which affect the entire region. (New Detroit, 1968, p. 129)

On the 20th anniversary of the 1967 civil disturbances that racked Detroit, the racism behind such 'parochialism' was squarely stated by the city's mayor at a regional conference and an overture, not withstanding, made to the suburbs:

It is my firm belief that around one central concept we need to unite, and that is that this region, this state, this nation cannot go on with two separate societies. This area cannot prosper divided along racial lines. This area, this region, this state cannot prosper while there is poverty and desperation, massive unemployment and despair in its central city. There is no way that a prosperous surrounding area can long maintain itself. Maybe if we discuss this central proposition and if we agree on it, we can go on from there. (Young, 1987, p. 13)

As the 50th anniversary of Detroit's civic disturbances approaches, this central proposition has been rejected in favour of shrinkage and ex-urban growth. The lesson for European practice is to heed the warning of Detroit's first black mayor of the need for cohesion and cooperation and not to hide this bigger reality behind, sometimes justified, accusations of impropriety and inefficiency. On this matter, quite a number of Detroit municipalities cannot label themselves as lily white.

## Re-imagining Detroit?

With Detroit emerging from fiscal bankruptcy in 2014 and seeking a fresh start relieved of crippling historical debt to its unfortunate creditors, controversy centres in particular on three dimensions of city land use: how far to take *neighbourhood consolidation* in right-sizing the city for realistic service provision; the possible role of *urban farming* in seeking a use for the ‘remaindered city’; and the attention to be given to *downtown* in consolidating development resources now increasingly a site of new white and young urban pioneers. This leaves open the charge of recolonization, especially now that the city has just elected the first white mayor in 40 years. These are considered in turn.

When neighbourhood consolidation and selective densification linked to more efficient service and infrastructure provision was first mooted by a senior Detroit official under Coleman Young in 1993, it was quickly derided by the mayor’s office and the city ombudsman involved in the radical proposal officially reprimanded (Neill 1995b, p. 143). In the event, in the face of shrinkage, the urban bulldozer has been used in any case to produce urban prairie landscapes in place of the dangerous left behind shells of abandonment, but explicit talk of writing off some neighbourhoods as unviable still remains sensitive. Detroit’s last black mayor did grasp the nettle of the harsh application of urban triage and the desirability of ‘right sizing’ in candidly advocating the downsizing of Detroit into 10 or so different population centers. Up to 45 square miles of the city, or one-third of Detroit’s total land, would be shut down, with city services scaled back for any remaining residents (McGreal, 2010). Published on the eve of the suspension of local democracy in Detroit and the State appointment of an emergency manager in March 2013 (a staging post on the path to formal bankruptcy filing in July 2013), the recent Detroit Future report toned down any language of enforced physical restructuring, but the intent remains clear:

New residential and commercial development must reinforce areas of strength and increase densities there. At the same time, areas with significant population loss and high degrees of vacancy can be sites of new, innovative, and productive development types that improve quality of life for city residents. (Detroit Futures, 2012, p. 104)

Sensitivity resides in a collective memory that can still evoke the past ‘negro removal’ associated with previous urban renewal and freeway projects (Neill, 2004, p. 135) in the 1950s and 1960s, and the stigma still associated with accommodating decline rather than growth especially on the symbolic ground of a black city. Here, making space has carried a special meaning in the visceral search for ‘home’ and ‘roots’ amidst a racist legacy (West, 1997, p. 88).

This sensibility has also been exposed in the controversy over urban farming where Detroit in recent years has begun to present a new image of ‘waving fields of green rising amongst the abandoned homes, hollowed-out factories and half-empty streets’ (Draus *et al.* 2014, p. 2524). The tension does not reside in the many community gardening projects which fulfil a valuable social, educational, income augmentation and aesthetic function in keeping hope alive (Poppenk & Poppenk

2009; Gallagher, 2010, pp. 47–54), despite the absence of any formal zoning plan to acknowledge them and help to mediate the sounds and smells involved. Rather, local subjectivities are more problematic when larger commercial farming and urban forestry proposals have reared their head. While there is considerable doubt cast on the possible impact of such projects on dealing with the scale of urban despair (Gallagher 2010, p. 58; Draus *et al.*, 2014), what is more certain is at least the perception of ‘ecological gentrification’ (Dooling, 2009; Draus *et al.*, 2014, p. 2536), a possible commercial land grab with residents ‘weeded out’ and ‘deep seated ambivalence’ based on historical trauma and institutional mistrust (Draus *et al.*, 2014, pp. 2529–2533). Over the last 40 years, this neighbourhood ambivalence has inevitably spilled over into planning for Detroit’s downtown, now potentially more acute with the election of a white mayor taking office, though emasculated of power through the bankruptcy process, in 2014. The election in November 2013 saw the edging to success of a managerial candidate on a historically low voter turnout of less than 20% in a racially charged contest with accusations of suburban white interference and candidate funding but with voter demoralization at a dysfunctional city simply failing to deliver services and safety. While the content of the character of a former black mayor called to account and jailed for manifest gross corruption just before the election was undoubtedly a factor in neutralizing any race card, the president of the Detroit branch of the NAACP expressed lingering unease:

Many African Americans in Detroit feel as though this is an attempt to redo Detroit absent the African-American influence . . . Redo it without us being part of it. I have to tell folks, we ain’t going nowhere. (Anthony, 2013)

It is arguably in mid-town and downtown Detroit where this potentiality is most pronounced. Feeding of a desire to live a more intense urban lifestyle, creative class young professionals have found the atmosphere of this area a cheaper alternative to what is available in other cities (Smathers, 2013, p. 50). The local ‘rent gap’, promoting the urban vibe, has become profitable to developers and can still be considerable. In a selective cordon of the new Detroit, anchored by educational and medical institutions (eds and meds), ‘new restaurants and shops seem to open weekly; abandoned apartment buildings undergo renovations; vacant lots see new uses’ (Gallagher, 2013, p. 20). The fact that Detroit has enough gentrification space to go around does not, however, negate the emotional sensitivities involved with existing residents in the repurposing of land. One academic commentator has gone as far as suggesting that, with assets such as Cobo Convention Centre and Belle Isle Park (once considered by Coleman Young as the jewels of the city) now under regional administration, reimagining the city actually involves ‘remaking white space’:

Maneuvering to reposition the city as the global hub of mobility technology, metropolitan Detroit’s neo-liberal leadership advances particular development strategies... with implications for social exclusion. (Pedroni, 2011, p. 203)

## Conclusion

In the absence of a more radical approach to regional metropolitan governance, the future for Detroit looks bleak. Given the strong Michigan political tradition of favouring Jeffersonian local 'pure and elementary republics' combined with the theoretical economic position of Tiebout locational choice, major change to staunch Detroit's shrinkage is unlikely. Educated in graduate school at the University of Michigan, Charles Tiebout published his deeply influential classic thesis in 1956 (Tiebout, 1956) as South-eastern Michigan was embarking on the shrinking low road to fragmentation. The argument is that residents choose between local government locational possibilities based on the mix of public goods and taxes on offer and, as consumers, vote with their feet. The perspective can incorporate the recent thinking of Richard Florida that municipalities can choose to provide for the service portfolio desired by the creative class (Smathers, 2013, p. 45). The new Detroit Future City plan implicitly endorses such a strategy, with stress not on casinos and stadia but on land use repurposing for urban creative conviviality. However, it is difficult to see such a model succeeding without a more regional governmental approach such as recently argued for in the European context of urban shrinkage (Schlappa & Neill, 2013, pp. 23–30). The continued unaddressed negative externalities associated with the sacrifice of a notion of regional citizenship continue to loom large in Southeast Michigan. In this sense, the bankruptcy of Detroit is not so much a narrow fiscal issue but a question of the bankruptcy of the policy context that precipitated this avoidable predicament.

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