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# “Blight,” Spatial Racism, and the Demolition of the Housing Question in Detroit

“Blight is a cancer. Blight sucks the soul out of everyone who gets near it, let alone those who are unfortunate enough to live with it all around them. Blight is radioactive. It is contagious. Blight serves as a venue that attracts criminals and crime. It is a magnet for arsonists. Blight is a dangerous place for firefighters and other emergency workers to perform their duties. Blight is also a symbol. It is a symbol of all that is wrong and all that has gone wrong for too many decades in the once-thriving world-class city of Detroit.”

*Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan, 2014*

## Introduction

### *The Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan*

Splicing together references from science and religion, disease and crime, and emergency and everyday life, the all but hysterical prose that introduces the 2014 *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan* nevertheless employs “blight” into an all too conventional narrative.<sup>1</sup> What connects the disparate references in the plan’s introduction is its evocation of a condition that primarily affects not “those who are unfortunate enough to live with it

all around them,” but rather those who imagine that their fortune is vulnerable to a threat that cannot be kept at a distance. Thus, as in contemporary American architectural and urban-planning discourse, civic imagination, and politics more generally, the term “blight” in the *Task Force Plan* translates the inadequate housing of communities disenfranchised by racism and class prejudice into a menace to the health, security, property value, and prosperity of the entitled.

The *Task Force Plan* therefore attends in minute detail to the disposition of “blighted” properties, while attending not at all to the disposition of the inhabitants of those properties displaced by the plan itself. The demolition proposed as the primary response to the appearance of “blight” is, then, a dislocation and dispossession of the already dislocated and dispossessed: a doubling of violence that is fully comprehensible only in light of the political invisibility of the politically excluded. As such, “blight” can be usefully understood in light of a dynamic that Friedrich Engels had already described in 1872 in his analysis of the housing shortage facing working-class communities in German towns and cities:

The so-called housing shortage, which plays such a great role in the press nowadays, does not consist in the fact that the working class generally lives in bad, overcrowded and unhealthy dwellings. This shortage is not something peculiar to the present ... On the contrary, all oppressed classes in all periods suffered more or less uniformly from it ... *(T)his* housing shortage gets talked of so much only because it does not limit itself to the working class but has affected the petty bourgeoisie also.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the history of “blight” as an object of urban politics and expertise over the course of the twentieth century is one in which the housing interests of marginalized communities have struggled, ultimately unsuccessfully, for recognition against the social, political, and economic interests of the entitled. The history of “blight” in Detroit provides one of the clearest examples of how these latter interests, mediated by racism, have reformulated a housing question into a question of public fear. Thus, the continual failures of “blight-removal” projects in Detroit on their own terms have been accompanied by continual successes in extending the disenfranchisement of those already disenfranchised by race,

as well as the posing of that disenfranchisement as a response to the fears that “blight” conjures.

In the following, I place the *Task Force Plan* in the contexts of both the history it ignores but extends and the future it disavows but advances. The history within which the plan inserts itself begins with “neglectful owners” unwilling to maintain their properties; in so doing, the plan excises from politics and public consciousness the structural racism and discriminatory government and corporate policies that have yielded a population of predominantly African-American homeowners unable to maintain their properties. The future to which the plan imagines itself to yield is one where “hope” is restored to neighborhood residents; in so doing, it similarly excises from politics and public consciousness the afterlife of the properties it repossesses and clears as commodities traded in the real estate market. “Why ... are houses being destroyed when the housing needs of Detroit’s citizens are so pressing?”<sup>3</sup> As the repeated posing of this question for at least the last fifty years indicates, the housing needs of Detroit’s citizens have been more or less irrelevant in the programs that demolish “blighted” houses; a study of the *Task Force Plan* reveals that these needs remain irrelevant in the current mobilization against “blight.”

#### Prehistory: “Blight,” Slums, Housing

“Nothing can so effectually destroy a city’s future as the disproportionate increase of homes that are unsanitary, damp, dark, unclean, unattractive, unventilated, overcrowded and immoral. And this disproportionate growth is exactly what is taking place today. ... The cancer is spreading.”<sup>4</sup> Echoed one hundred years later in the introduction to the *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan*, these words were spoken in 1910 by Luther Lovejoy, general secretary of the Detroit Housing Commission—*at just the moment when Detroit was beginning its period of unprecedented metropolitan growth*. Here, then, is a preliminary expression of the inextricable relationship between capitalist urban development and urban phenomena staged as obstacles, dangers, or threats to that development. Not only did “unsanitary housing” accommodate the population of reserve labor on which Detroit’s industries depended—a feature of the housing question on which Friedrich Engels had remarked in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*—but this housing, as underdeveloped property, also existed as a

location in which to reinvest the surplus value accumulated by those same industries.<sup>5</sup>

In a gesture that would be continuously reprised into the present, Lovejoy's invocation of an urban future threatened by an architectural cancer would lead, first, to a comprehensive survey of the city to counteract this danger. "We intend to make a systematic study of conditions in Detroit," Lovejoy proclaimed. "We will pick out sections in different parts of the city, find out just what is the environment of the people living in these sections, and how it should be improved. We wish to be in a position to speak intelligently, not of isolated cases, but of the actual situation in Detroit."<sup>6</sup> As today, the city would be studied in an effort to detect and manage seemingly pathological conditions. As today, these conditions would be posed as the product of marginalized urban communities—described by Lovejoy as "a poor and ignorant alien immigration." And as today, the state would act on these conditions by criminalizing those who were compelled to inhabit them, so Lovejoy recommended that the inability to maintain property be regarded as a violation of "the general nuisance act" of the city—a legal translation of *substandard housing* into a *public danger* would be consolidated and advanced with the development of concepts of "blight" up to and through the *Task Force Plan*.

The Detroit Housing Commission's invocation of architectural conditions that presumably threatened the city's future, inaugurated a history in which projects that were framed as responses to the inadequate housing of marginalized communities would yield the dislocation and dispossession of those very same communities. As elsewhere, inadequate housing in early twentieth-century Detroit, was typically described by a vocabulary of "slums," "tenements," and "decadent districts." As early as 1917, moreover, an article in the *Detroit Free Press* related inadequate housing to the growing wave of African-American migrants to the city.<sup>7</sup>

The term "blight" would enter this set of terms in the 1920s. In late seventeenth-century British agricultural discourse, "blight" named an invisible, unknown, or atmospherically derived cause of plant disease, in the eighteenth century, the term also came to specify plant diseases caused by fungal parasites.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, in the context of the industrializing metropolis, "blight" moved from countryside to city in both Britain and the United States, becoming a metaphor

for undesirable, strange, or menacing urban conditions.<sup>9</sup> Early in the twentieth century, "blight" joined a lexicon of other terms that social scientists from the period drew from ecological and agricultural discourse to conceptualize the modern city—and, in so doing, naturalize that city's politically structured forms and conditions.<sup>10</sup>

In architectural and urban planning discourse, "blight" became associated with the term "slum," a linkage that was a particular focus of interest after the advent of the Great Depression. In a typical formulation, Clarence Perry wrote that, "'blight' ... refers to an insidious malady that attacks urban residential districts. It appears first as a barely noticeable deterioration and then progresses gradually through many stages toward a final condition known as the slum."<sup>11</sup> Here, "blight" provided a way to understand the origin and development of the "slum"; as such, "blight" was not a phenomenon that *extended* into adjacent urban areas but one that *intensified* into the more deteriorated form of the "slum"—a genealogical model that was also visualized in a series of diagrams in Henry Wright's *Rehousing Urban America*.<sup>12</sup>

Depression-era discourse on "blight," then, usually discussed "blight removal" in the context of "housing reform"; the demolition of "blighted" or slum housing would be prescribed in conjunction with the construction of new housing. According to a typical proposal of the time from Detroit, "the same economic and racial group as that now occupying the area ... is to be rehoused, and ... the measure of the success of the schemes proposed is the extent to which this can be accomplished."<sup>13</sup> This rehousing would prevent the putative consequences of unchecked "blight" from unfolding: "depreciated property values," the "collapse of tax revenues," and a "wholesale exodus of population" followed by a "racial invasion"—in other words, the replacement of middle-class white neighborhoods by working-class African-American ones.<sup>14</sup> In Detroit as nationally, the perceived benefits of avoiding these consequences motivated state support for "rebuilding" or "rehabilitating" presumably "blighted" areas through new channels of funding for urban redevelopment and new municipal legislation and policy for condemnation.<sup>15</sup>

### "Blight Removal" and the Unhousing of Detroit's African-American Communities

In 1946, *The Detroit News* published a map prepared by the Detroit Bureau of Governmental Research revealing,

according to columnist James Sweinhart, that “30% of the city is blighted.”<sup>16</sup> When Detroit’s urban planners began to script the city’s postwar development, they placed their attention on this “blight” as a “fungus-like growth (that) menaces the entire city,” threatening “to invade and destroy every neighborhood in the community.”<sup>17</sup> Now, “blight” was no longer imagined to *intensify* into a slum, but to *expand* into adjacent neighborhoods; to “check the spread of blight,” planners thus argued, “a broad program of rebuilding must be undertaken.”<sup>18</sup> In this “rebuilding,” as in subsequent urban “renewal” and “redevelopment,” the Progressive-era housing reform ambitions that were initially included in “blight” discourse began to be abandoned in favor of the development of the city’s seemingly threatened business districts and neighborhoods—still supported, however, by the same public-funding streams and legal mechanisms that emerged to assist inadequately housed communities.

Detroit Mayor Edward Jeffries, Jr., thereby emphasized that the 1946 *Detroit Plan for Blight Elimination* prepared by the city’s Housing Commission “is not in its essential a housing plan.”<sup>19</sup> In the *Detroit Plan*, which ultimately yielded the Lafayette Park development designed by Mies van der Rohe, the Housing Commission pointed out that the city’s “blight has particularly struck areas immediately surrounding the high-value downtown commercial district” and that “surrounding the central commercial district with an increasing number of inhabitants of subsidized housing would not be conducive to the maintenance of that district.”<sup>20</sup> The plan therefore proposed that the city condemn and acquire one hundred “blighted” acres adjacent to the Central Business District, sell this land at a loss to a private developer, and then recover this loss through the increased tax revenues generated by the redeveloped site.

The residents who were to be displaced by this plan were almost all African-American.<sup>21</sup> The plan proposed that these people should be “admitted to residence in newly constructed public housing projects” but, crucially, these projects were regarded as the object of a *different* plan—and a plan that would never be made. In subsequent decades, “blight elimination” projects would continue to externalize the rehousing of the predominantly African-American communities that were displaced by those projects. In 1955, for example, the Detroit City Planning Commission conducted a citywide housing

survey that discovered fifty-three neighborhoods “threatened by the encroachment or actual presence of blight.” Remarking, symptomatically, that “the continued spread of these conditions is a menace to adjacent stable neighborhoods” (i.e. the unstable neighborhoods described as “blighted” were *not* the problem at hand), the Commission noted that the “foreseeable displacement of families caused by public improvements as a result of this program will present no major problems.”<sup>22</sup>

In these postwar years, as previously, the housing available to Detroit’s displaced African-American communities was fundamentally determined by racial discrimination and its legal and illegal manifestations. First, African-Americans had only limited access to the city’s public housing; as Thomas Sugrue has described, “because of the city’s discriminatory (public housing) policy, most black demand for public housing went unmet through the mid-1950s.”<sup>23</sup> Second, in the wake of the 1934 Federal Housing Act, the federal government and lending institutions collaborated in restricting mortgages to white borrowers seeking to live in white neighborhoods; non-white inhabitants, regarded as signs or agents of decline, were prevented from receiving loans to buy homes in those neighborhoods. In the words of June Manning Thomas, “the FHA (Federal Housing Administration), bankers, builders, real estate agents, local officials, private home owners, and landlords were almost completely unfettered by fair housing laws until 1968 or by antidiscrimination mortgage laws until 1979. Even after that time, enforcement was weak and sporadic.”<sup>24</sup> The result of these policies in Detroit was that “the chief source of dwelling units for Blacks was housing vacated by White families moving out of aged structures within older parts of the central city.”<sup>25</sup> Third, not only were African-Americans structurally directed towards inferior housing to purchase, but because they usually had to purchase these homes with land contracts, they then had less capital to devote to maintaining or improving their homes, as well.<sup>26</sup> Fourth, municipal authorities often failed to enforce zoning codes and planning guidelines in neighborhoods occupied by African-American communities. An editorial in the *Michigan Chronicle* noted a “reluctance or refusal of responsible authorities to continue and enforce land-use restrictions in areas where Negroes have moved in. The net result has been to propel the process of deterioration.”<sup>27</sup>

Thomas also describes how Detroit's building, health, and fire departments did not enforce housing codes: "racial discrimination in code enforcement was documented; Black renters could not depend on the city either to enforce the code or to prevent landlords from evicting them once they complained about violations. This led to a protracted war by civil rights organizations against 'slum landlords.'"<sup>28</sup>

Through the 1960s and 1970s, municipal surveys continued to discover that 15 to 30 percent of Detroit's properties and/or buildings were "blighted."<sup>29</sup> The passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act), which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, did not so much shift attention to the substandard housing of African-American communities in Detroit in "blighted" areas as it shifted the forms and beneficiaries of spatial racism. As an alternative newspaper noted at the time, "HUD officials and real estate sharps ... joined forces to take advantage of inexperienced home-buyers—selling substandard housing to financially insolvent people at exorbitant rates."<sup>30</sup>

More recently, in the 1990s and 2000s, predatory mortgage-loan practices, in which low- and middle-income African-Americans were issued high-risk loans, sometimes fraudulently, elevated foreclosures and home abandonment in Detroit's central and predominantly African-American neighborhoods.<sup>31</sup> Those named as "neglectful owners" in the *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan*, that is, can more precisely be called the inheritors of a century of racist housing practices carried out by a constellation of federal, state, municipal, and corporate actors. Moreover, even as some, if not all, of those racist practices changed over time, their effects continued to structure urban space; those effects—the architectural dimension of racist housing practices—became threats to urban order in their re-description as "blight."

## Demolition Urbanism

### From Urban Renewal to "Blight Removal"

In the 1980s and 1990s, as Detroit's population dramatically shrank, the demolition of substandard houses was separated not only from the construction of new housing, but also from urban renewal and urban redevelopment schemes, becoming the free-standing urban goal of "blight

removal" in the process. As Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer put it in 1997, "when you say you're going to tear down abandoned houses ... it creates an enormous pride in the city."<sup>32</sup>

Two problematic elisions lay at the base of this demolition urbanism. First, "blighted houses" were elided with "abandoned" and "vacant" houses. This elision overlooked the many people who homestead in otherwise-empty homes—a number that homeless advocates in Detroit have estimated in the tens of thousands.<sup>33</sup> Second, "depopulation" was elided with "surplus housing"—the dramatic drop in the city's population was correlated with a dramatic increase in housing availability. This elision overlooked the question of housing affordability—the fact that housing was only *available* if it was *affordable*. The demolition urbanism that emerged as the consequence of these two elisions thereby produced a situation in which increasing numbers of houses were destroyed precisely at a time when needs for affordable housing were increasing.

While the city was never able to achieve planned levels of demolition, it tore down around 38,000 houses between 1995 and 2010, with ten times more demolition permits than building permits given during this period.<sup>34</sup> Detroit Mayor Dave Bing initiated his tenure in 2010 with the ambition to demolish 10,000 of what a contemporaneous study determined was 33,000 vacant houses in the city. In his "State of the City" address, Bing proclaimed that:

Blight is more than an eyesore. Abandoned and dilapidated buildings are hotspots for crime and a living reminder of a time when the City of Detroit turned a blind eye to owners who neglected their properties. Tonight I am unveiling a plan to demolish 3,000 dangerous residential structures this year and setting a goal of 10,000 by the end of this term.<sup>35</sup>

In the Bing administration, this program was a project proposed by an elected municipal official and carried out by municipal authorities with the aid of federal funding. A few years later, however, demolition urbanism and the unhousing of Detroit's most disadvantaged communities became privatized along with many other city programs and services. In March 2013, the governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, placed Detroit under

“emergency financial management” and Kevyn Orr, the city’s appointed emergency manager, filed for bankruptcy protection in July 2013. A month earlier, Governor Snyder had announced a plan to use \$100 million from the federal “Hardest Hit Fund”—intended to assist homeowners struggling to pay their mortgages by providing mortgage payment assistance, new affordable mortgages, and elimination of second lien loans—for “blight removal” in five Michigan cities.<sup>36</sup> Then, in August 2013, in the fine print of “Emergency Order No. 15,” Emergency Manager Orr declared a “blight emergency” in Detroit.<sup>37</sup>

According to its own narrative, the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force commenced work in September 2013. Led by Dan Gilbert, billionaire owner of the online mortgage lender, Quicken Loans, and major investor in Detroit real estate, the Task Force “brought private, philanthropic, nonprofit, federal, and state partners together with the city.”<sup>38</sup> As such, the Task Force represented the privatization of “blight removal”—a transfer of procedures for defining, documenting, and removing “blight” from the public sector, where it was guided by elected officials, to a consortium of actors, funded, and led by, corporate interests and corporately funded foundations. Indeed, the bright colors, infographics, highlighted taglines, and other reader-friendly design features of the *Task Force Plan*, released in May 2014, were precise registrations of the *Task Force Plan*’s status as a private initiative that required public advertising, rather than a public initiative to be collectively formulated, debated, and decided upon.<sup>39</sup>

The *Task Force Plan* both drew upon and radicalized the city’s deployment of “blight” as a means to raise public fear and correspondingly render demolition urbanism a management of that fear. The survey commissioned by the Task Force discovered 84,641 “blighted parcels” among the 377,602 surveyed. The vast majority of these “blighted parcels”—72,328, or one-third of the structures in the entire city—were single-family dwellings. What was new here, however, was *not* the documentation of this “blight” by individual parcels—claimed as an innovation of the plan itself—but rather the proposition that every “blighted” parcel in the city be demolished and that existing legal and bureaucratic procedures structuring the administration of these parcels be bypassed in favor of an “expedited foreclosure process” and “aggressive eradication timeline.”

The plan thereby advanced the transformation of racially based socioeconomic disadvantage into public threat and legal offense. Extending the existing definition of “blight,” the *Task Force Plan* defined the public ownership of property or ownership by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac as an “indicator of future blight” (p. 14) and redefined boarded-up properties as “dangerous properties” and therefore as “blighted” (p. 103).<sup>40</sup> It recommended increased penalties for “blight offenders” (p. 202), foreclosure on properties with “unpaid blight tickets” (p. 110), legislation to prevent violators of “blight ordinances” from bidding on foreclosed property (p. 204), and taking “aggressive action” to gain title to “blighted property” through “nuisance abatement, or demolition liens and foreclosures” (p. 102). The *Task Force Plan* also proposed that squatting be redefined as non-occupancy so that a squatted property can be legally considered “vacant” and therefore “blighted” (p. 100).

## Conclusion

### The Demolition of The Housing Question

Urban historians have amply documented how racial prejudice and violence in Detroit yielded a racially segregated city. The same forces can also be related to the city’s repository of substandard housing and the disproportionate ownership and occupancy of this housing by African-American communities. This relation has been clear to many in those communities. A 1976 article in the alternative newspaper, *The Sun*, for example, claimed that “Detroit’s thousands of abandoned structures are much more than an eyesore and an immediate danger to those who live near them; they are one especially visible and undeniable consequence of decades of racism, corporate greed, and inhuman callousness.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the 84,461 “blighted parcels” identified by the *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan*, index Detroit’s long history of race- and class-based inequities in access to housing. This is a history that traverses legally sanctioned and informal neighborhood segregation, redlining, and discriminatory lending practices, as well as race-based dispossessions of property in the frame of slum clearance, urban renewal, and urban redevelopment.

In 2014, the Detroit Land Bank Authority was allocated \$52 million from the federal Hardest Hit Fund allocated to Michigan—a fund intended to assist homeowners struggling to pay their mortgages—for blight

removal. Using data collected by the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force, the Detroit Land Bank Authority initiated a project to demolish 3,300 blighted buildings in the city and then auction off the properties where “blight” had been removed.<sup>42</sup> It is too early to determine what will happen to these properties in and after their auction, but the fate of auctioned tax-foreclosed properties in Detroit provides a useful comparison. The most detailed study of these auctions has found that only 10 percent of auctioned houses were purchased by buyers of only one property—in other words, buyers who purchased houses to occupy; the other 90 percent of auctioned properties were purchased by businesses, investors, and nonprofits, with eleven buyers purchasing 24 percent of all properties sold at all auctions from 2002 to 2010.<sup>43</sup> Five of those eleven were investors practicing equity extraction, renting properties until they become uninhabitable, while five others were speculators who purchased multiple properties in order to sell them to developers.<sup>44</sup>

If the auction of properties subject to “blight removal” will resemble the auction of tax-foreclosed properties, then the “blight removal” process will not only dispossess and displace Detroit’s most disadvantaged communities, but will do so as part of a land transfer from those communities to real estate investors and speculators. It is symptomatic that the *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan* ignores the relocation of those who would be dispossessed by the plan—inhabitants of “blighted houses,” from owners, through renters, to home-steaders. Among those who would be dispossessed by the plan would be an estimated 13,000 people who occupy so-called “vacant houses,” along with the uncounted inhabitants of 40,000 or so occupied but “blighted” houses.<sup>45</sup> While the plan deals with tens of thousands of houses, it is, quite precisely, the opposite of a housing plan.

- 1 Here, and in the following, I write “blight” in quotation marks to stress the enormous gap between the term’s material referents and the meanings and identities with which these referents are conventionally endowed. This strategy is intended to counter the usual assumption that “blight” is capable of substantive definition, an assumption that guides even seemingly nuanced definitions of “blight” as, for example, “a complex and dynamic phenomenon with different meanings shaped and influenced by a variety of actors and institutions”: see Vacant Properties Research Network, *Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight: A National Literature Review on Addressing the Community Impacts of Blighted Properties*, Final Report (Virginia: Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, 2015), 2. My perspective is closer to the counter-position that “its heterogeneity of form and substance seems to deny to urban blight consistency and cohesion”: see G. E. Berger, “The Concept and Causes of Blight,” *Land Economics*, 43, 4 (1967): 369. However, I conjoin the semantic indeterminacy of “blight” to its practical efficacy in bracketing the needs and rights of the disadvantaged in urban development.
- 2 Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, ed. C. P. Dutt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1942/1877), 17.
- 3 David Weiss, “Abandoned Buildings in Detroit City,” *The Sun* (April 22, 1976), 4.
- 4 “Housing Plans are Mapped Out,” *Detroit Free Press* (December 9, 1910), 8.
- 5 Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, tr. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958/1845). On the relationship between housing and automobile-industry investment in Detroit, see Michael McCulloch, “Building the Working City: Designs on Home and Life in Boomtown Detroit, 1914–1932,” unpublished PhD Diss. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2015).
- 6 “Housing Plans are Mapped Out.”
- 7 Len Shaw, “Detroit’s New Housing Problem,” *Detroit Free Press* (June 3, 1917), E1.
- 8 “Blight,” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 9 On references to urban “blight” in late nineteenth-century American contexts, see, for example, “The Real Estate Field: Much Business is Doing and the Promise is Good,” *The New York Times* (March 10, 1895), 23; “Chinatown’s Doom is Foreshadowed,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 25, 1898), 9; and “The Tenement House Blight,” *Chicago Tribune* (July 10, 1899), 6.
- 10 On the use of ecological discourse in early twentieth-century urban study, see Jennifer S. Light, *The Nature of Cities: Ecological Visions and the American Urban Professions* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).
- 11 Clarence Arthur Perry, *The Rebuilding of Blighted Areas* (New York: Regional Plan Association, 1933), 8. See similar definitions in Mabel L. Walker, *Urban Blight and Slums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938); and Edith Elmer Wood, “Slums and Blighted Areas in the United States,” *Housing Division Bulletin*, 1 (1935).
- 12 Henry Wright, *Rehousing Urban America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 8.
- 13 Allan A. Twichell, *A Planned Housing Community for Rehabilitation in a Blighted Area on the East Side of Detroit, Michigan: A Preliminary Study* (Ann Arbor, MI: Earheart Foundation, University of Michigan, 1933), 13.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 15 On this history, see Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 346–80.
- 16 James Sweinhart, *What Detroit’s Slums Cost Its Taxpayers* (Detroit, MI: Detroit News, 1946), 8.
- 17 Detroit City Plan Commission, *Toward a Greater Detroit* (Detroit, MI: Detroit City Plan Commission, 1944), 3.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 19 Detroit Housing Commission, *The Detroit Plan: A Program for Blight Elimination* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Housing Commission, 1946), n.p.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 5.

- 21 Of the 1,355 dwelling units condemned, 1,224 of them had  
 "known non-white occupancy": see *ibid.*, 6.
- 22 Detroit City Plan Commission Report, "A Ten Year Investment and  
 Program to Eliminate Deterioration and Prevent Blight and Slums  
 in Detroit's 53 Middle-Aged Neighborhoods" (Detroit, MI: s.n.,  
 October 19, 1955).
- 23 Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in  
 Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 58.
- 24 June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City  
 in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2013),  
 87; see also Alex F. Schwartz, *Housing Policy in the United States*  
 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 238.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 27 *Michigan Chronicle* (January 16, 1960); Thomas, *Redevelopment  
 and Race*, 89.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 29 In 1962, for example, a study by the City Plan Commission found  
 that, "at present the City of Detroit has blighted areas comprising  
 almost 10,000 acres. About 15 percent of the city's land is now in  
 some stage of blight ... deteriorated structures on this land comprise  
 18 percent of all structures in the city": see Detroit City Plan  
 Commission, *Renewal and Revenue: An Evaluation of the Urban Renewal  
 Program in Detroit* (Detroit, MI: Detroit City Plan Commission,  
 1962), 13.
- 30 Weiss, "Abandoned Buildings in Detroit City."
- 31 See "Homes Can't Hide Blight," *The Detroit News* (September 28,  
 1999); and "MCA Exec Pleads Guilty to Fraud," *The Detroit News*  
 (August 29, 2001). In the ongoing case *Adkins et al. vs. Morgan Stanley*  
 it is alleged that African-Americans in Detroit were 70 percent  
 more likely to receive a subprime loan from New Century Financial  
 Corporation than economically comparable white borrowers  
 between 2004 and 2007; see American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU),  
 "Morgan Stanley Sued For Racial Discrimination in Pushing Preda-  
 tory Loans to Black Homeowners" (October 15, 2012), online:  
[https://www.aclu.org/news/morgan-stanley-sued-racial-discrimi-  
 nation-pushing-predatory-loans-black-homeowners-0](https://www.aclu.org/news/morgan-stanley-sued-racial-discrimination-pushing-predatory-loans-black-homeowners-0) (accessed  
 07/20/15); and ACLU, *Justice Foreclosed: How Wall Street's Appetite  
 for Subprime Mortgages Ended Up Hurting Black and Latino Communities*  
 (Washington, DC: ACLU, 2012).
- 32 Dennis Archer, quoted in Jennifer Dixon and Darci McConnell,  
 "HUD Hands Detroit a \$ 160-Million Gift Days Before Election,"  
*Detroit Free Press* (October 29, 1997).
- 33 For a current estimate, see *2013 State of Homelessness Annual Report  
 for the Detroit Continuum of Care* (Detroit, MI: Homeless Action  
 Network of Detroit, 2013).
- 34 Andrew Herscher, "Detroit Art City: Urban Decline, Aesthetic  
 Production, Public Interest," in: Margaret Dewar and June  
 Manning (eds), *The City After Abandonment* (Philadelphia, PA:  
 University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 69.
- 35 "Bing State of the City Address" (March 24, 2010), online:  
[http://archive.freep.com/article/20130213/NEWS01/130213094/  
 Full-text-Mayor-Dave-Bing-s-State-City-address](http://archive.freep.com/article/20130213/NEWS01/130213094/Full-text-Mayor-Dave-Bing-s-State-City-address) (accessed 07/20/15).
- 36 "Michigan Set to Receive \$ 100 Million in Fed Funds for  
 Demolitions," *The Detroit News* (June 6, 2013), A1.
- 37 Emergency Manager, City of Detroit, "Order No. 15: Suspending  
 Certain City Wrecking Requirement to Address Blight" (August  
 29, 2013), 3. The declaration of the "blight emergency" was not  
 publically recognized for two weeks; see Nolan Finley, "Blight  
 Rises to Emergency Status," *The Detroit News* (September 12, 2013), 1B.
- 38 *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Blight  
 Removal Task Force, 2014), 2.
- 39 The *Detroit Blight Removal Task Force Plan* lists its "Book Design  
 Director" as Rock Ventures, the real estate development company  
 owned by Dan Gilbert.
- 40 Fannie Mae is the Federal National Mortgage Association and  
 Freddie Mac is the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Association; both  
 buy mortgages from lenders in order to expand the funds available  
 for mortgage lending; both are also intended to keep mortgage  
 interest rates low and support affordable housing.
- 41 David Weiss and Derek VanPelt, "What Can Be Done About  
 Detroit's Abandoned Buildings?" *The Sun* (March 25, 1976), 4.
- 42 See [www.buildingdetroit.org](http://www.buildingdetroit.org) (accessed 05/17/15).
- 43 Catherine Coenen et al., *From Revenue to Reuse: Managing Tax-  
 Reverted Properties in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, MI: Urban and Regional  
 Planning Program, University of Michigan, 2011).
- 44 *Ibid.*, 73-83.
- 45 On homesteading in Detroit, see "Fast Facts," Detroit Rescue  
 Mission Ministries, online: <http://drmm.org/services/fast-facts/>  
 (accessed 07/20/15).