



Speech by Rip Rapson:

Re-Imagining Land Use in Detroit: Is It Really Possible?

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One of the great philosophers of the 20th century, Woody Allen, remarked many years ago: “More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.”

There are those who would argue that this captures perfectly Detroit’s current dilemma. It’s very difficult to read national media accounts about Detroit without coming away with the impression that there are no realistic options for a once-grand city, leveled as it has been, by forces both of its own making and out of its control.

There are considerable truths in these accounts, which you will see if you have the chance to explore the community while you are here. Amid the challenges, however, you will also witness the opportunity for equally momentous potential transformation. It is my ardent belief that Detroit is slowly putting in place the building blocks to recast the arc of aspiration for this proud and resilient city and, by extension, for other once-great industrial centers of mid-America.

I want to take a few minutes to describe the role of land use in that transformation.

First, I’ll note some of the changes that frame how we are approaching reimagining the form and function of the city.

Second, I’ll describe the machinery of the Detroit Works project.

Third, I’ll suggest the contours of the strategies that are likely to emerge.

A Changing Reality

In the face of the long and inexorable contraction of the region’s industrial base, the devastation wreaked by the foreclosure crisis and the pervasive and persistent pain of the economic meltdown, Detroit has embraced four overarching changes to the way it thinks about its future.

First, Detroit has come to understand that incrementalism is no longer an option.

Mayor Bing has acknowledged that pursuing a straight-line path of working just as we always have leads Detroit directly and unalterably over the cliff, and sooner rather than later. There is a pervasive civic realization that Detroit must be, and will be, reimaged in all dimensions – from restructuring municipal government to exploring new economic drivers, from putting our financial house in order to pursuing radically different concepts of the city’s physical form.

Second, Detroit has embraced a new political path that rejects the maddeningly divisive and destructive gesture politics that have so characterized its recent history.

The mayor ran on a platform of reform and urgency, emphasizing the elimination of the structural drivers of the budget deficit, the redesign of the city’s administrative structure, the reclamation of thousands of blighted and abandoned properties and the promotion of diversified job growth. He is pursuing this agenda with steely discipline, with transparency and with the sense that we don’t have a day to waste.

Third, Detroit has found a demanding partner in a federal administration that believes Detroit can no longer be isolated and ignored.

From the secretaries of Education, Transportation and HUD, to the head of the National Endowment for the Arts, to the president himself, the federal government is paying attention. They realize that Detroit is *the* emblematic post-industrial city, a harbinger of the challenges of competing in a global economy, redesigning the nation’s basic economic architecture and building a competitive workforce.

And fourth, Detroit philanthropy has emerged as the sector best able to provide the long-term vision and shorter-term investments of capital that the city will need to right itself.

As the public sector focuses on rationalizing basic operations, as the private sector hunkers down and tries to rebuild, and as the nonprofit sector concentrates every ounce of its energies on meeting heightened demands for lifeline services, philanthropy simply has to step up, get on the same page, aim clearly and get something done.

The foundations working in Detroit accordingly realize that they can no longer sit at the margins, hoping that their good intentions and charitable impulses will help the community slide through tough times. Instead, foundations – both national and local – are positioning themselves at the center of a new public agenda, aggressively helping shape a very different civic trajectory. Just a word about that.

Estimated conservatively, private philanthropy in Detroit – from Ford, Kresge, Kellogg and Knight at the national level to Skillman, Hudson-Webber and Fisher locally – will spend \$1 billion in Detroit in the next seven years. The question is whether we have the sophistication and discipline to understand what we seek to accomplish through those investments.

My sense is that, increasingly, we do. About a year ago, I developed a drawing on a single sheet of paper that sought to describe nine discrete, yet tightly interrelated, bodies of work currently underway in Detroit:

- From creating transit along Woodward Avenue to promoting entrepreneurialism and creating an anchor institution investment framework in Midtown;
- From strengthening the city’s arts and cultural ecology to advancing educational reform;
- From birthing a “green and sustainable city” agenda to aligning neighborhood investments among banks, foundations and public agencies through the Detroit Neighborhood Forum.

Each of these nine “modules” is supported by real investments. Each is being shaped by foundations. Each has the possibility of taking root over the long term. And taken collectively, the nine serve to infuse the Detroit circumstance with a sense of coherence, discernable direction and a long-term investibility.

Called “Re-Imagining Detroit 2020,” this framework has become a form of common vocabulary among foundations. It has crystallized a sense of urgency. It has provided a scaffolding for various actors to build out work plans for each of the

nine modules. And it has cemented a close working relationship with Mayor Bing's administration, which has grown increasingly comfortable thinking about the Re-Imagining Detroit framework as an essential complement to its priorities.

The Detroit Works Machinery

The Re-Imagining Detroit framework pivots on land use – the investments and practices we pursue in each of the nine bodies of work are driven by, and in turn themselves drive, the choices we make about the city's physical configuration.

If you draw a map of Detroit and then you stick in Boston, stick in Manhattan and stick in San Francisco, you still have room left over for a good portion of St. Paul. This is an enormous city – 139 square miles. It was once a city of 2 million people, but currently is home to about 725,000 residents.

Stated slightly differently, in those stretches of abandonment that have reduced significant expanses of the city's geography to Dresden-like scenes of devastation, Detroit has more public open space than any American city – the equivalent of 40 square miles – or the size of San Francisco. Waves of plant closings have vacated hundreds of acres of land at a time and less-than-hardy wood-frame structures have deteriorated like houses of cards, leaving the city with some 70,000 vacant homes or abandoned parcels. It is more space, far more space, than traditional planning and development constructs can handle. More space than a municipality can manage through its normal tendency to spread services in equal portions across its land mass.

In a word, the city's geography dwarfs its governance machinery. Detroit has no choice but to concentrate its investments in nodes of strength and repurpose its underutilized land in order to survive, stabilize and grow. That's a complex undertaking, riddled with layer upon layer of difficult choices.

Mayor Bing understands all of this, as you heard yesterday. He has accordingly launched the Detroit Works project, which has been managed by City Hall, but underwritten thus far largely by philanthropy – principally Kresge and Ford. We have conditioned our support not on *what* the future form and function of Detroit's land must be, because we don't know that, but instead on the *way* the work is to be done.

Our position is that three elements need to be interwoven into a long-term, comprehensive vision and implementation strategy: first, creating a platform of empirical analysis and scenario development to nest the entire project; second, engaging the community; and third, identifying short-term project successes. A quick word about each of these strands.

1. *Technical Analysis*

The first strand, the empirical analysis and scenario development, will require a powerful data-driven architecture of information and analysis to undergird the process. How does the city's ecological infrastructure vary from neighborhood to neighborhood? What constraints do utility networks impose in different parts of the city? Where are the pockets of contamination? Where will the next wave of foreclosures occur? Where do the kids live? And the like.

About a year ago, Kresge took the unusual step of offering to seek out and pay for a world-class urban planner who could assemble a set of teams from both inside and outside of city government capable of answering these questions and presenting scenarios that would serve as the point of departure for conversations with the community. We were incredibly lucky to find one. Her name is Toni Griffin, who is here tonight and whom many of you know. She is beyond fabulous.

Toni and her teams developed a "current state" analysis that animated the launch of the Detroit Works community engagement process – a half-dozen citizen town halls that attracted thousands of citizens. We are now in conversations with the city about the technical teams' role in the next phase, which will explore scenarios based both on their analyses and input from the community.

2. *Community Engagement*

Philanthropy has taken a particularly hard line about the second strand – putting in motion a robust community-engagement process.

It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that leadership is solely the act of standing up and pronouncing authoritatively, when it may equally be the act of sitting still and listening respectfully. There is a balance to be struck – sharing intricate technical analyses with residents in ways that don't crowd out citizen perspective, furnishing an opportunity for both the city and citizens to learn through interaction, developing a mutual set of understandings, building buy-in for approaches that will place the city on a different course.

If we've learned anything about engagement from post-Katrina New Orleans, it's that a community-engagement process has to break out of the mold of endless large meetings and take full advantage of a wider range of engagement strategies. Social media and Internet-based tools that people otherwise use regularly. Targeted canvassing and door-knocking. Phone mobilization. Small neighborhood gatherings in people's homes. All ways of creating a continual feed-back loop of information, reactions, synthesis, updates and adjustments.

3. *Short-Term Wins*

At the same time as the more contextual planning and community engagement moves forward, the city is understandably anxious to find short-term successes that create for Detroit Works the kind of civic acupuncture points that visibly improve residents' daily quality of life: using HUD resources to demolish blighted properties; channeling foundation, business sector and HUD dollars to rental and home ownership incentives in a half-dozen stronger residential neighborhoods; applying CDFI and Living Cities resources to provide small business loans.

The Syncopation Strategy

That's a pretty general description of the machinery we'll use. The question is, of course, what it will produce. In particular terms, the answer is not yet clear. But let me nevertheless describe some broad patterns that seem likely to emerge in one form or another. These won't surprise you – the articles in the background volume by Terry Schwarz and by Hunter Morrison and Margaret Dewar anticipate each of these elements.

A Syncopated Landscape of Urban Villages

After bringing a group of urban planning experts to Detroit two years ago, Allan Mallach – our esteemed editor – concluded that the land-use patterns of Detroit were clearly forming into areas of concentrated assets surrounded by areas of very low density – a form of urban stew.¹ He proposed that Detroit capitalize on this pattern to create a more intentional and guided framework based on “urban villages” – built-up clusters or nodes of activity separated by green space, forested land and other low-density uses. Or, stated somewhat differently, a “syncopated landscape,” with some notes strongly accented and others more weakly so.²

Mallach has captured the essence of what needs to be done. Without a sense of strategy, the city would continue to move toward a stew-like pattern through haphazard abandonment and uncontrolled decline. The detritus is not productive: vast swaths of land that are untamed, polluted, impoverished or otherwise destructive of any sense of community. With a

¹Described in John Gallagher's excellent discussion of land-use in Detroit in *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City*, page 31 (Wayne State University Press, Detroit: 2010). Mallach is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Community Progress and the editor of the American Assembly's background publication for this conference.

²The term is borrowed from Dan Pitera, professor of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy.

strategy, on the other hand, the abandoned land could be put to imaginative, productive use and the nodes could be built up intentionally.

Detroit's Strong Beats

So let's start with the strong beats – the areas of Detroit in which investment can reinforce pre-existing energy.

It's sometimes difficult to remember that Detroit of the 1920s was arguably the premier city of North America. Its layout was a model of city planning, with a radial structure of grand boulevards emanating from the downtown core and taking full advantage of its waterfront location. And it had good bones, which continue to this day to provide the building blocks for its future:

- It still contains world-class examples of 20th-century architectural styles, particularly in the central business district.
- It has the largest contiguous middle class housing stock in the state of Michigan, including its historic Indian Village, Boston Edison and Palmer Woods neighborhoods, and Lafayette Park, the largest extant collection of Mies van der Rohe housing in the world. It's in these neighborhoods that Mayor Bing is likely to concentrate his residential revitalization monies.
- It has reclaimed a spectacular riverfront, propelled by the creation of the Detroit RiverWalk, a \$250 million effort led by a \$50 million grant from my foundation and a partnership with the city and private sector.
- Right in the middle of that river sits one of this nation's most extraordinary public spaces, the Fredrick Law Olmstead-designed Belle Isle, home to a yacht club, a conservatory, miles of picnic areas and ball fields, a golf course, a miniature zoo and public beaches.
- In the Eastern Market, it possesses the largest public market in the United States, with wholesale and retail sitting side-by-side a mile square.
- Its southwest corner includes Mexican Town, a vibrant residential and commercial district that is home to hundreds of small Hispanic-owned businesses and scores of places of worship, public parks and cultural centers.
- It is the birthplace of the African-American middle class, the place where generations of African-American families entered the economic mainstream through not just the automobile plants, but through law firms, accounting firms, supply firms and architectural firms.
- Its cultural richness embraces both leading classical institutions such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, the symphony, the opera, the African-American museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art and a deep and rich tradition of jazz, the blues and, of course, Motown.

The essence of the strong beat strategy is to build on the strength of these assets. That is perhaps most evident in the emphasis the Re-Imagining Detroit framework places on the Woodward Avenue Corridor, the region's central nervous system.

Not only is Woodward the home to dozens of cultural institutions and commercial enterprises, it is the educational and medical hub of the region, employing 30,000 employees, spending \$6 billion annually, and pursuing ambitious campus renovation and expansion strategies.

Under the formidable leadership of Omar Blaik, we are working with these anchor institutions to develop a suite of strategies that will encourage their employees to live in the adjacent neighborhoods, that will expand the institutions' efforts to hire employees from those neighborhoods, and that will lead to the anchors buying more extensively from local providers of goods and services.

We have created a \$100 million aggregated philanthropic capital fund called the New Economy Initiative, focused on building an "Innovation Cluster" in Midtown that will provide grants, loans and technical support to high-tech start-ups, community-based businesses and tech-transfer efforts emerging from the region's higher education institutions.

We have worked hand-in-glove with Living Cities to bring its "Integration Initiative" to Detroit, where it will combine and integrate seamlessly almost \$25 million of senior debt, PRIs and grants to tie community residents closely to the suite of Woodward Corridor strategies for transit, entrepreneurialism, education reform and anchor-institution engagement.

And it's on Woodward Avenue that Detroit will construct its first light rail line: the inaugural leg of a regional transportation system that will extend in subsequent phases to the job centers in the northern suburbs and connect to the high speed rail line coming from Chicago.

If there was ever an environment that was toxic to public transit, it has been the city of Detroit. But about two years ago, Kresge proposed to put \$35 million on the table for the construction of a street car line, provided the private sector would match that commitment and work with the public sector to secure federal transportation dollars. Both those things have happened.

We are close to completing the draft environmental impact statement, so a real-live project is within reach. That would not have been possible without attracting the attention of Ray LaHood, the secretary of transportation, and Peter Rogoff, the federal transit administrator. Believing that Detroit offers a new model of urban transit, they have sent a Tiger grant in our direction, dramatically telescoped the environmental review period, and agreed to introduce regulatory flexibility into the Department of Transportation's consideration of the project.

At the end of the day, what we will build is a line that won't necessarily take cars off the road – that's not particularly a problem in Detroit – but a line that will spur the development of a very different Woodward Corridor. New connections among the institutions all up and down the spine. New patterns of land use around the stops. New opportunities to link housing and jobs.

Detroit's Weak Beats

So, those are some of the strong beats, where one starts. But it's every bit as important to attend to the weak beats – viewing Detroit's abandoned and blighted land not as a liability, but instead as the carrying vehicle for imaginative, productive uses. You are all familiar with the spectrum of possibilities presented by other communities, particularly in Europe, but let me just mention a few as seen through the lens of Detroit.³

1. Restoring Natural Ecology

A first possibility is the restoration of the city's natural ecology.

³ Much of the analysis that follows is based on John Gallagher's fine treatment. See *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City*, *op cit*.

Detroit is blessed with a remarkable ecological infrastructure, bracketed on the west by the sprawling Rouge River Park and on the south and east by the Detroit River and a system of canals. What is missing is the interior ecological connective tissue.

That connective tissue might come through reforestation. For example, the Trust for Public Land recently proposed an approach to urban forestry in Detroit whose scale would have the potential to model heightened levels of carbon absorption, promote the restoration of wildlife habitat, and create a richer amenity palette for residential and commercial development.

The connective tissue might also come from daylighting our creeks, which are largely hidden in culverts running underneath the city's East Side. The most notable is Bloody Run Creek, so-named because Chief Pontiac's defeat of the British in 1763 left the waters red with blood.⁴ The inimitable Richard Baron, a Detroit native, has proposed using a daylighted Bloody Run as the natural anchor for a 3,000-acre mixed-income housing development and park. Kresge has supplied the planning monies to scope out the engineering requirements. It's an audacious proposal, but doable, and we're pursuing it.⁵

2. *Re-Using Vacant Properties Through the Arts*

A second response to the land has become the darling of international media: using land and property as a canvas for the ingenious and viral creation of art.

Take, for example, the guerilla-culture efforts of the Heidelberg Project. Created some 25 years ago by artist Tyree Guyton, Heidelberg is essentially an outdoor art installation project using abandoned houses and vacant lots as a stage for found objects from the neighborhood – stuffed animals, discarded appliances, clothes, car parts, and anything else that can be painted or arranged. The project is not everyone's cup of tea – the City of Detroit demolished it as a nuisance twice in the 1990s. But it's now here to stay, drawing nearly 300,000 visitors a year.

Artists are coming to Detroit from all over the world, attracted to what some have termed "Rust Belt chic." The possibility of buying a house for \$1,000 or renting for a pittance. Of working unconstrained by the city's bureaucracy to carve out unexpected uses in unexpected places. Of converting the public ruins of factories and warehouses into studio and exhibition spaces. For the generation of artists experiencing Detroit for the first time, it is not a city on the skids but – in the words of a transplanted New Yorker – "a theater of engagement."⁶

3. *Pursuing Urban Agriculture*

A third use is urban agriculture, which has also captivated the media.

Detroit actually has a history of urban gardens, tracing back to 1895, when Mayor Hazen Pingree lent more than a thousand unemployed families quarter- or half-acre garden plots known as "Pingree Potato Patches." These families not only had enough food to consume, but could also sell the surplus.

Urban agriculture in modern-day Detroit shares many of these characteristics. The premise is that Detroit can become a laboratory for urban farming and, in the process, not only become part of a fresh food economy centered on the Eastern

⁴ Much of the analysis that follows is based on John Gallagher's fine treatment. See *Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City*, *op cit.*

⁵ And the connective tissue might come through the shaping of new parks. As part of the Bloody Run Creek development. Through small patches related to artistic projects. From Community gardens and pocket parks. In reforested areas. There are always complicated questions of funding, maintenance, and legal liability, but communities throughout America and Europe have wrestled successfully with these issues. And Kresge is exploring the feasibility of piloting a "Detroit Urban Conservation Corps" in conjunction with the project.

⁶ Yablonsky, Linda, "Artists in Residence," *New York Times*, September 26, 2010. Yablonsky also quotes a photographer as saying: "I think it's the most visually compelling place on the planet. If you have a sense of adventure and curiosity, there's no place like this."

Market,⁷ but also put people to work, create a micro-economy and build a sense of community. And indeed, the possibilities are considerable, as is suggested by the nearly 1,000 community gardens in Detroit, ranging from postage-stamp-sized tenth-of-an-acre plots to gardens of a couple of acres.⁸

Even if urban agriculture continues to expand, however, it has inherent limitations. It can only be a sliver of the solution in so vast a place. It's unlikely to produce enough food to feed large numbers of residents. It's very difficult, dirty and sometimes dangerous work that doesn't pay very well. And yet, it is an animating, creative response that can stand alongside others in redefining Detroit's relationship to its land.

4. Redefining Movement

The fourth component of reimagining Detroit's landscape is redefining how people move through the city. For 75 years, that was a straightforward proposition: Pour concrete to accommodate ever-increasing numbers of automobiles. But times have changed, to say the least. Redefining how people move from one part of the city to another will be a central element of Detroit's future form and function.

Again, the good news is that we've started some things of promise.

I've talked about light rail, which will link points all along Woodward.

And we've made considerable progress in constructing a metropolitan system of greenways – bicycle and walking paths. The premier example is the four-mile RiverWalk, hugging the Detroit River and lacing together two state parks, a marina, multiple pocket parks and a children's carousel. We've connected the RiverWalk to Eastern Market through the Dequindre Cut rail-to-trail project, and are building a Midtown loop that would connect the Eastern Market area to the city's cultural district.

5. Creating the Preconditions for Economic Vitality

The final component of the weak-beat strategy is perhaps the trickiest – reconceptualizing land to maximize its potential to contribute to the city's long-term economic vitality and growth.

One dimension of the response lies in creating the kind of critical mass in the geographically clustered strong-beat areas. That is the strategy underlying the Innovation Cluster – geographically stacking investments that will lead to the emergence of a more complete entrepreneurial ecology. It is also the strategy that the CEO of Quicken Loans has recently adopted in trying to draw high-tech businesses from throughout southeastern Michigan into a downtown “campus” of networked, mutually interdependent businesses.

But the meta-issue here is how best to use vacant land as a canvas of economic imagination. We've read and heard descriptions of how Torino, Leipzig, Manchester and other European communities have done that. The possibilities in Detroit are, if anything, even more expansive – an invitation to true break-out thinking.

Adaptively reusing once-formidable manufacturing plants into recreation or entertainment venues. Cultivating economic enterprise that requires large expanses of land such as wind farms or large-scale agriculture. Rezoning and building out

⁷ An effort with a different ambition is the proposal of John Hantz, a businessman prepared to invest up to \$30 million of his estimated \$100 million net worth to create Detroit's first large-scale commercial farm. The farm would produce marketable crops – high-margin items like Christmas trees, exotic greens, berries, and apples – and play a potentially significant role in the city's land reclamation efforts. It would bear little resemblance to a traditional farm, instead relying on the latest in agriculture technology – from compost-heated greenhouses to hydroponic and aeroponic growing systems.

Hantz has become a lightning rod for those who see in his proposed scale and profit motive a direct challenge to the more grassroots community garden movement. Hantz replies that there is plenty of room for both. The jury is still out on whether he will be able to move forward.

⁸ One of the more ambitious examples is Earthworks Urban Farm, a series of gardens near a monastery on the east side run by the friars of the Capuchins, a Roman Catholic order. They grow dozens of crops that make their way into their soup kitchen, operate a greenhouse that produces hundreds of thousands of seedlings for gardens all over Detroit, and marshal hundreds of volunteers each year to help with the harvest.

versatile space that can serve as a launch-pad for community-based creative businesses. Bringing agriculture to commercial scale. And countless others.

All of the caveats we've read and heard apply to this domain with a vengeance – political, financial, regulatory, technical and other obstacles. But all of the other elements of a re-imagining strategy fall by the wayside without an attendant robustness of ambition about the economics.

Conclusion

So that's a fly-over of some of the choices Detroit will have to make as it reimagines its form and function. No particular scenario is a certainty. Everything is on the table.

In the aggregate, however, this syncopation strategy casts in bright relief the extent to which Detroit needs to come at its challenges with an ambition unprecedented in America. It will have to be smart – challenging our preconceptions about what a city is supposed to look like and how it works. It will have to be bold – pursuing ideas that will strike some as outlandish and others as foolish. It will have to be inclusive – eschewing the kind of resistant energy that distrusts outsiders and instead calling out a propelling, vitalizing energy that embraces anyone with a passion for the future of the city. And it will have to be unflinching in its courage – bracing against the political turbulence that inevitably arises in a town whose resistance to change is deeply encoded in its DNA.

Detroit will have to become a very different city – not just from what it was before, but also from any other major American city. In the process, we just may have something to teach the rest of this country.

So let me stop there and see what kinds of questions all of this has provoked. Thank you.