A photograph of a brick building facade. The building is made of dark red and brown bricks. A window on the right has a purple-tinted glass. A window blind in the center is painted with horizontal stripes in rainbow colors. Below the main title, there is a large section of the wall covered in graffiti. On the left, there is a sign that says 'WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY? FREE EXPHERE'. In the center, there is a large blue sign that says 'VOTER INFORMATION PARTY TODAY AUG 3 6:00 PM'. Below that, there is a white sign that says 'all welcome'. On the right, there is a large red and white graphic that looks like a stylized 'M' or a similar symbol. The overall scene is one of urban art and community expression.

# The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit

Andrew Herscher

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is dedicated to publishing work in new media studies and the  
emerging field of digital humanities.**

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“Precisely because physical devastation on such a huge scale boggles the mind, it also frees the imagination ... to perceive reality anew; to see vacant lots not as eyesores but as empty spaces inviting the viewer to fill them in with other forms, other structures that presage a new kind of city which will embody and nurture new life-affirming values in sharp contrast to the values of materialism, individualism and competition that have brought us to this denouement.”

—Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*

“The world of capitalist culture, economy, politics, and consciousness ... is full of an incredible variety of imagined schemes (political, economic, institutional), many of which get constructed ... If such fictitious and imaginary elements surround us at every turn, then the possibility also exists of ‘growing’ imaginary alternatives in its midst.”

—David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*

“The waste of the system, that which refuses proper integration: these are the remains of a commons defeated, and the anticipatory omens of a commons to come.”

—Rob Halpern, “Provisional Prepositions for a Project on the Commons”

<b>The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency: A Preface</b>	2
<b>Unreal Estate: An Introduction</b>	6

## **Unprofessional Practices**

<b>Ruin Harvest</b>	24
Detroit Demolition Disneyland	26
FireBreak	30
Salvaged Landscape	34
<b>Food Infill</b>	38
Earthworks Urban Farm	40
D-Town Farm	44
Georgia Street Community Garden	48
Brightmoor Farmway	52
Peaches and Greens	56
Field of Our Dreams	60
<b>Municipal Therapy</b>	64
Motor City Blight Busters	66
Greening of Detroit	70
Hope District	74
Navin Field Grounds Crew	78
Detroit Mower Gang	82
<b>Furtive Inhabitation</b>	86
Detroit Blues	88
Hookie Monsters	92
Urban Yoga Lab	96
Seed Detroit	100

## **Unwarranted Techniques**

<b>Feral Research</b>	106
Detroit Geographical Expedition	108
Pink Pony Express	112
<b>Waste Curation</b>	116
Tree of Heaven Woodshop	118
Architectural Salvage Warehouse	122
Friends of Corgeous Berries	126
<b>Public Secrecy</b>	130
Hygienic Dress League	132
Secret Pizza Party	136
Trtl	140
<b>Radical Hospitality</b>	144
Boggs Center	146
Catherine Ferguson Academy	150
Block Clubbing	154

## **Unsanctioned Collectives**

<b>Temporary Communities</b>	160
Dally in the Alley	162
Theatre Bizarre	166
Detroit Guerrilla Queer Bar	170
John's Carpet House	174
Tashmoo Biergarten	178
<b>Do-It-Yourself-Then-Together</b>	182
UFO Factory	184
Yes Farm	188
<b>Micropolitanism</b>	192
Farnsworth Street	194
Fourth Street	198
Trumbullplex	202
<b>Urban Toeholds</b>	206
Center for Creative eXchange	208
Filter Detroit	212
Ego Circus	216

## **Unsolicted Constructions**

<b>Accidental Architecture</b>	222
Michigan Building Parking Garage	224
Peacemakers International	228
Blotting	232
<b>Extreme Housework</b>	236
Detroit Industrial Gallery	238
Full Scale Design Lab	242
Power House	246
<b>Scavenged Space</b>	250
Alley Culture	252
Crafikjam Alleys	256
The Lot	260
Submerge	264
Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit	268
<b>Patrimony of the Unlost</b>	272
Hamtramck Disneyland	274
Car Wash Café	278
African Bead Museum	282
Heidelberg Project	286
<b>Glossary</b>	290
<b>References</b>	296
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	305
<b>Image Credits</b>	307





# The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit

## The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency: A Preface

The Detroit Unreal Estate Agency was founded in 2008 as an open-access platform for research on urban crisis, using Detroit as a focal point. Against the apprehension of Detroit as a problem that needs to be solved, the Agency has regarded Detroit as a site where new ways of imagining, inhabiting and constructing the contemporary city are being invented, tested and advanced.

In its research, the Agency has produced an array of concepts to describe and analyze Detroit; tendentiously recovered a series of accidents, false starts and prematurely abandoned projects; and sublimated urgent expressions of longing. This work has been unified by an interest in animating valueless or abandoned urban property by new cultural, political and social desires. Sometimes this interest has yielded experiments such as the nighttime illumination of vacant lots by hijacked electricity; sometimes it has yielded the collaborative mapping of territorial incongruities with licit and illicit community groups; sometimes it has yielded the production and distribution of manifestos, atlases, postcards and other urban texts; and sometimes it has yielded the recruitment of art and architecture students for unreal estate agency via the teaching of studios in institutions of higher learning.

The Agency's program of feral research is an outcome of its engagement with unreal estate; the Agency thereby exists as one of this guide's subjects. At the same time, however, my own unreal estate agency emerged amid the Agency's collective work. The Agency, then, is both within and beyond this guide, at once a context for the guide and a text included in it.







# Unreal Estate: An Introduction

**unreal** (ŭn-rē'əl, -rēl')

*adjective*

1. not corresponding to acknowledged facts or criteria;
2. being or seeming fanciful or imaginary;
3. lacking material form or substance;
4. contrived by art rather than nature;
5. Slang: so remarkable as to elicit disbelief.

**Detroit:** a city seemingly so deep in decline that, to some, it is scarcely recognizable as a city at all.

And so, to most observers, and more than a few residents, what's there in Detroit is what's no longer there. There is a city characterized by *loss*: of population, property values, jobs, infrastructure, investment, security, urbanity itself. What results is vacancy, absence, emptiness, catastrophe and ruin. These are conditions of the “shrinking city,” a city that by now seem so apparent in Detroit as to prompt not verification but measurement, not questions but responses, not doubts but solutions.<sup>1</sup>

Built into the framing of Detroit as a shrinking city, though, are a host of problematic assumptions about what a city is and should be. On the basis of these assumptions, *change* is understood as *loss*, *difference* is understood as *decline*, and the *unprecedented* is understood as the *undesirable*. These understandings presume the city as a site of development and progress, a site defined by the capitalist economy that drives and profits from urban growth. The contraction of such a site, therefore, provokes corrective urbanisms that are designed to fix, solve or improve a city in decline.

What corrective responses to shrinkage reciprocally pre-empt, however, are the possibilities and potentials that decline brings—the ways in which the *shrinking city* is also an *incredible city*, saturated

with urban opportunities that are precluded or even unthinkable in cities that function according to plan. Taking advantage of these opportunities requires an approach to the shrinking city not so much as a problem to solve than as a prompt to new understandings of the city's spatial and cultural possibilities.

Especially in the United States, architecture and urbanism almost always have learned their lessons from cities where the capitalist economy is flourishing, from interwar New York (*Delirious New York*), through postwar Las Vegas (*Learning from Las Vegas*), to late 20th century Houston (*After the City*) and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Cities where the economy is faltering, by contrast, are places where architecture and urban planning deploy what they already have learned. These apparent opportunities for assistance and amelioration thereby provide architecture and planning with precious chances to prove themselves as in-the-know, both to themselves and to larger publics, as well. Relinquishing the desire to repair the shrinking city may thus present excruciating challenges to architecture and planning. It might compel the humbling realization that these disciplines might have more to learn from the shrinking city than the shrinking city has to learn from them. It might also compel the even more humbling realization that *any* specialized kind of knowledge production, whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary, is inadequate to grasp the contemporary city, and that this grasp would have to lead towards a new transdisciplinary knowledge production with a necessarily hybrid, experimental and indeterminate form.<sup>3</sup>

But the shrinking city can teach not only professionals; it also can and does teach its own inhabitants—with “inhabitation” here posed as a political *act* rather than a geographically based *condition*.<sup>4</sup> The shrinking city is neither empty nor populated only by the impoverished and disempowered; rather, the challenges of this city have inspired many of its inhabitants to re-think their relationship to the city and to each other. This re-thinking throws into question the urban ambitions and capacities that the “creative class” has been endowed with, if not arrogated to itself.<sup>5</sup> Most postulations of a “creative class” imagine that group as wholly different—by socio-economic level, by education, and by other parameters of entitlement—from the socio-economically marginal communities that inhabit cities like Detroit. This imagination has allowed the “creative class” to pose itself as the heroic savior, engaged educator, or sympathetic interlocutor of what some have called the urban “underclass.”<sup>6</sup> It has also yielded the race-



and class-inflected portrayal of members of the “creative class” as the fundamental harbinger of change in Detroit, a portrayal that has played out in media exposure, access to grants, and a host of other forms, as well.

Socio-economic marginality, however, should be understood not as a call for creative others but as a condition of possibility for the emergence of creativity itself. In this sense, marginality allows for the formulation of new and innovative ways to imagine and inhabit the city. This is not to suggest that the mantle of heroism be transferred from a “creative class” to an “underclass”; it is, rather, to recognize the unique capacity of Detroit’s inhabitants and communities to understand and transform their city. Indeed, for many in Detroit, hope for the city’s problems to be solved by others has not been relinquished so much as ignored as in utter contradiction to the city as both history and lived experience. In Detroit, that is, urban crisis not only solicits skills of endurance, but also yields conditions favorable for invention and experiment—for the imagination of an urban realm that parallels the realm of concern to urban professionals and experts.

What if Detroit has lost population, jobs, infrastructure, investment, and all else that the conventional narratives point to—but, precisely as a result of those losses, has gained opportunities to understand and engage novel urban conditions? What if one sort of property value has decreased in Detroit—the exchange value brokered by the failing market economy—but other sorts of values have reciprocally increased, use values that lack salience or even existence in that economy? What if Detroit has not only fallen apart, emptied out, disappeared and/or shrunk, but has also transformed, becoming a new sort of urban formation that only appears depleted, voided or abjected through the lenses of conventional architecture and urbanism? *The Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit* is dedicated to exploring these and related propositions and, in so doing, the cultural, social and political possibilities that ensue from urban crisis.

## **Properties of Crisis**

The guide’s focus is a property of crisis termed “unreal estate”: urban territory that has fallen out of the literal economy, the economy of the market, and thereby become available to different systems of value, whether cultural, social, political or otherwise. The values of unreal

estate are unreal from the perspective of the market economy—they are liabilities, or *unvalues* that hinder property's circulation through that market. But it is precisely as property is rendered valueless according to the dominant regime of value that it becomes available for other forms of thought, activity and occupation—in short, for other value systems.

Unreal estate emerges when the exchange value of property falls to a point when that property can assume use values unrecognized by the market economy. The extraction of capital from Detroit, then, has not only yielded the massive devaluation of real estate that has been amply documented but also, and concurrently, an explosive production of unreal estate, of valueless, abandoned or vacant urban property serving as site of and instrument for the imagination and practice of an informal and sometimes alternative urbanism.

Unreal estate is less a negation of real estate than a supplement of it, located both inside and outside of real estate's political economy. Unreal estate, that is, is neither merely nor altogether oppositional—it opens onto the imagination of positions beyond acceptance or rejection of the market economy. Unreal estate may thus be understood as a term that fits within what J. K. Gibson-Graham calls “a landscape of economic difference, populated by various capitalist and non-capitalist institutions and practices,” the latter not simply absences of the former but singularities with their own particular forms and possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

“Private property has made us so stupid and narrow-minded that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists as capital for us, or when we can directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc.”<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx's critical framing of real estate still points to the seeming unreality of property regarded as valueless or useless. The notion of private property, that is, stupefies us to the counter-values of property devoid of exchange-value or conventional use-values. Devoid of these values, space usually passes out of our cognitive grasp and we become unable to posit a relationship to it.

And yet, the spatial residue of capital's withdrawal—valueless property, abandoned buildings, vacant lots, unserved neighborhoods—form a system of disaggregated places that can be claimed by and for an informal urbanism that defies the enclosures of private property. The enclosure of commons was a constituent component of the

development of capitalism, a means to incorporate collective space into property regimes and profit-making processes.<sup>9</sup> Unreal estate provides a lens through which to see how a decline in the exchange value of property can yield the undoing of enclosures and the creation of possibilities for new sorts of commons—a commons that is neither designed nor intended, but one that is a collateral result of the extraction of capital.

This proto-commons exist in spatial intervals, in the fissures and voids that open up between contracting spaces of investment and ownership. It also exists in a temporal interval, in a moment between the historical failure of modernist industrial production and the possible advent of postmodern urban gentrification. Situated in these spatial and temporal intervals, a commons-in-the-making is at once potential and precarious. It is constantly susceptible not only to further deterioration, but also to further “betterment” as defined by a value regime that equates improvement with profitability. The unvalues of unreal estate, that is, are constantly at risk or even in the process of being recuperated as values—a recuperation that could become part of a process of gentrification, redevelopment or urban renewal.

The proto-commons of unreal estate is also constantly threatened by the least-developed form of capitalism: the primitive accumulation of dispossession, or what is usually identified and experienced as crime. The breakdown of capitalism, that is, invites not only the production of new sorts of values but also the extraction of existent values by force. Violence, of both legal and extra-legal varieties, thus shadows the city of unreal estate; this city accommodates both an alternative urbanism, untethered to the imperative of capitalist accumulation, and the anachronistic urbanism of accumulation by force. In Detroit, this anachronistic urbanism has been emphasized to the point of exaggeration; this guide foregrounds an alternative urbanism in order to allow for more nuanced readings of the city.

## **Urban Informality: From Everyday Urbanism to Unreal Estate**

Speculations on Detroit’s unreal estate have been authored not only by artists and architects but also by activists, anarchists, collectors, community associations, curators, explorers, gardeners, neighborhood groups, scavengers and many others—a heterogeneous array of individual and collective urban inhabitants. The political, social and

cultural agencies of these inhabitants are diverse, but their skills, techniques and knowledge are specific, directed and often profound. A concern for unreal estate, then, involves a commitment to the informal production of urban space and urban culture by a wide and diverse range of the urban public. In urban studies, this commitment has been claimed by a discourse that revolves around “everyday urbanism.”<sup>10</sup> Translating the concerns of urban informality to the North American city, everyday urbanism has placed a salutary attention on the way that the public co-authors the city through its manifold uses of urban space.<sup>11</sup> Unreal estate situates practices that overlap with those categorized as “everyday urbanism,” but these practices invite a rather different framing.

The theorists of everyday urbanism have posed it as an urbanism of the “mundane” and “generic” spaces that “ordinary” city dwellers produce in the course of their daily lives. These spaces “constitute an everyday reality of infinitely recurring commuting routes and trips to the supermarket, dry cleaner, or video store”—a de Certeau-style catalogue of “tactics” apprehended by the public.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, everyday urbanism is also supposed to be a bottom-up urbanism that “should inevitably lead to social change.”<sup>13</sup> But this layering of political agency onto the quotidian practices of everyday life produces tensions: everyday urbanism is posed as at once mundane *and* tendentious, at once descriptive *and* normative, at once inherent to a system *and* an alternative to a system. How does driving to the video store inevitably lead to social change? What sort of weakness and powerlessness mark those who rent videos? How do the tactics of the *customer* at the video store differ from those of the store’s *employee*? In some of its received versions, everyday urbanism might prompt such questions.

The fundamental forms of everyday urbanism are public responses to professionally designed urban environments; everyday urbanism is thus an urbanism of reaction, whether conciliatory or contentious, to the professionalized urbanism that shapes urban space and life. As such, it does not sustain the progressive political project that some contributors to the discourse want to endow it with—a project that de Certeau was very careful not to attribute to the everyday tactics he theorized.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the insistent elision in everyday urbanist discourse between “everyday life,” on the one hand, and “experience,” on the other, points to the commitment of the discourse not so much to alternatives to hegemonic modes of urbanism, but rather to the ways in which these modes are received by their audiences or users. Everyday

urbanism certainly offers an “alternative,” but this alternative is not so much *critical*, a question of difference from a hegemonic political structure, but rather *authorial*, a question of difference from professional authorship.

Unreal estate is a waste product of capitalism—it is not mundane or generic so much as abject. The urbanism that unreal estate sponsors is less a tactic of consumption, like everyday urbanism, than an alternative form of production. This production can be insurgent, survivalist, ecstatic, escapist or parodic; it can also be recuperative, returning unreal estate to the real estate market. The urbanism of unreal estate, then, can exist in tension with *both* the professional urbanism of architects and planners *and* everyday responses to that urbanism; it is its perceived character as subordinate, redundant or trivial that endows it with its particular differences.

In Detroit, the urbanism of unreal estate has yielded an array of practices, techniques, collectives and constructions. Sometimes—but not always—committed to the extraction of unvalues from capitalism’s spatial waste products, this urbanism is also often defined by a number of other common dimensions. This urbanism tends to be improvised, taking shape as unrehearsed and sometimes makeshift moves and actions, as opposed to being planned in advance as a means to a specified end. It tends to dissolve differences between work and play, as well as between art and other forms of cultural or symbolic production, from activism and political organization, through cooking, gardening, caretaking and teaching, to craftwork and social work. It tends to appropriate spaces that appear available to occupation or sub-occupation, or else to furtively occupy spaces that appear to be claimed or otherwise used. The products of this urbanism are often temporary or dispensable and its users and audiences are often limited to its authors or those in their direct company. And these authors tend to be self-organized, taking on responsibilities and functions typically displaced to institutions in functional cities.

The study of everyday and informal practices is often suffused with a desire to endow those practices with resistant or critical force. The urbanism of unreal estate, however, does not mount a critique as much as it claims a right: the right not to be excluded from the city by an inequitable and unjust system of ownership and wealth distribution.<sup>15</sup> Claims to this right run the gamut from recuperative, through reformist, to radical, so that the politics of unreal estate are various.<sup>16</sup>

Occupations of unreal estate emerge from both long-term community activism, short-term artistic interventionism and a whole range of practices that are situated between the preceding in terms of their political, social and cultural stakes. Indeed, as this guide documents, unreal estate development includes escapist fantasies as well as transformative actions; it includes creative survival as well as cultural critique; and it includes the ephemeral aesthetic servicing of those supposedly in need as well as material responses to objective needs through long-term self-organization.

One of the dangers in assembling this unruly set of examples is that it may smooth over the actual and important differences that distinguish these examples from one another. Perhaps the most significant of these differences is that between unreal estate development undertaken by choice, by those with negotiable or flexible relationships to a place and a community, and unreal estate development undertaken by necessity, by those with non-negotiable or given relationships to where they live and who they live with.<sup>17</sup> This guide does not intend to blur this or any other distinction between the projects it includes; rather, the guide seeks to suggest the manifold variety of forms of occupation that unreal estate can sustain by including projects that possess wholly different political, social and cultural valences.

While the urbanism of unreal estate takes place in dead zones for both free-market capitalism and formal politics, this is not to say that this urbanism is apolitical. Rather, it is to assert a distinction between governmental politics and non-governmental politics and to locate the potential politics of unreal estate in the latter—a politics devoid of aspirations to govern.<sup>18</sup> Just like exits or expulsions from the market economy, rejections of formal politics also comprise invitations: to neglect or parody rather than resist, to mimic rather than replace, to supplant rather than reverse. These are invitations to consider political change and political difference not even from the ground up, for “ground,” too, is the province of government, but on other grounds entirely, grounds “not corresponding to acknowledged facts or criteria,” grounds that can instructively go by the name of “unreal.”

## **Unreal Estate Development: Crisis as Opportunity**

I do not document unreal estate in this guide in order to facilitate its growth, consolidation or protection. Instead, my aim is to investigate

the forms and possibilities of self-organized urbanism in the context of the shrinking city. Indeed, if there is such a thing as “unreal estate development,” it would not be based on *investments* that pay off in a better world-to-come, whether within or beyond the market economy; it would rest, rather, on *expenditures* in the present moment, critically refusing to mortgage that moment for another, different future. If the development of unreal estate involves an exchange, then it is the exchange of a teleological system of progress, in which the present is, by definition, inferior, incomplete or inadequate, for an ongoing commitment to that present as a site of exploration and investigation. In the frame of unreal estate, therefore, Detroit is not a problem to solve by means of already understood metrics of evaluation, but a situation to come to terms with, in terms of both its challenges and possibilities. In this sense, this guide does not presume to show a “solution” to Detroit’s problems; if anything, it indicates ways in which the city is failing better—more equitably, justly and beautifully.

This is not a mere surrender to an environment suffused with social suffering, a bad present that calls out for improvement, whether that improvement be offered by the grassroots labor of artists and activists or by the top-down programs and policies of governments. On the contrary: it is the postulation of the present as a temporary phase within a moralized continuum of progress that allows that present to be tolerated and accepted. The conditions of this temporary present are redeemable “problems” and “failures,” subject to improvement in and by a future yet to come, rather than inexorable situations whose values and potentials must be analyzed rather than assumed.

To explore unreal estate, rather than undeveloped real estate, is to confront the complex (un)reality of property that has been extruded from the free-market economy. It is to see the margins of that economy as a site of invention and creativity as well as of suffering and oppression, a perspective that may very well be “so remarkable as to elicit disbelief.” The world of unreal estate thus offers a parallax position from which to assess value, an alternative to the single fixed vantage point established by the market economy.<sup>19</sup> In the world of unreal estate, precisely those urban features that are conventionally understood to diminish or eradicate value (inefficiency, inexplicability, waste, redundancy, uselessness, excess) are what create possibilities to construct new values. What usually appears to be the “ruin” of the city thus becomes projective or potential. Reciprocally, the processes that are conventionally understood to support the “renewal” of the city (investment, community-building, securitization, large-scale

construction) become, by contrast, banal at best and destructive of unprecedented futures at worst.

Detroit is frequently framed as a city in need: of investment, infrastructural improvement, good governance and many other things besides. And yet, a city in need is also something else besides. Needs create spaces and opportunities for alternative means of achieving viable urban lives. Unreal estate is one heuristic for detecting and exploring these alternative means. Freed from the constraints of free market valuation and development, unreal estate is a site of manifold possibilities of alternative uses, actions and practices. Unreal estate thus opens onto other forms of urban life, culture, sociality and politics—sites at which the city is not only endured, survived or tolerated, but also re-imagined and re-configured.

Such perspectives on urban crisis have begun to emerge in contexts where the urban status quo is taken to be unsustainable, labile or both. For example, AbdouMalik Simone describes “the double-edged experience of emergency” in the African city—an experience of both crisis and openness, of both challenge and opportunity. With the disruptions that emergency brings, Simone writes, simultaneously come possibilities for new ways of thinking, acting and being:

Emergency describes a process of things in the making, of the emergence of new thinking and practice still unstable, still tentative, in terms of the use of which such thinking and practice will be put ... a present, then, able to seemingly absorb any innovation or experiment; a temporality characterized by a lack of gravity that would hold meanings to specific expressions and actions ... This state of emergency enables, however fleetingly, a community to experience its life, its experiences and realities, in their own terms: this is our life, nothing more, nothing less.<sup>20</sup>

Overwhelmingly interpreted as a mere urban failure, Detroit partakes of the possibilities brought about by emergency, and, as such, is one among a global ensemble of similar urban sites. In this context, the urbanism of unreal estate is more than just a compensation for “normal” urbanism and more than a response to the lack of formal urban planning. Rather, the self-organization and informality of unreal estate development open onto alternative ways of imagining, building and inhabiting the city. Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs has thus often remarked upon the city’s challenges as conditions of possibility for conceptualizing and producing new ways of living in the city: “the thousands of vacant lots and abandoned houses not only provide the space to begin anew but also the incentive to create innovative ways of



making our living—ways that nurture our productive, cooperative and caring selves.”<sup>21</sup>

## Unreal Estate Agency

In a market economy, a real estate agent assists with the buying and selling of property; real estate agents act as representatives of buyers and sellers both, helping each fulfill their intention to invest or disinvest in property. Unreal estate requires no such agent: it is not for sale; its values are often obscure, limited or perverse; and it usually does not circulate in a public monetary economy as much as in intimate networks of desire, imagination or shared concern. In compiling this guide, then, I was an unreal estate agent who represented individuals and communities that did not ask for and may not have even wanted such representation in the first place. This ambivalent representation maps onto my ambivalent accountability to those whose work is documented in this guide. I could not presume to share the accountability of the authors of the projects in this guide to their particular neighborhoods and communities. My accountability to these authors is premised not on the ratification of their projects on their own terms, but on opening these projects to new interpretive communities, discursive contexts and disciplinary and transdisciplinary affiliations. This may actually be a form of accountability that hollows itself out—the projects I seek to open up may be destabilized and dislocated by such openings, at least from the perspective of their authors. If so, then “accountability” may become yet another unreal value, impossible to consolidate as simply positive or negative.

My unreal estate agency also extended from the actual to the possible, from the authentic to the imaginary, from the here-and-now to the where-and-when. The unreality of what is contained in this guide, therefore, is various; it encompasses invention of many sorts. My hope is that this unreal estate agency might provoke questions about the “real” existence of what this guide documents, as well as, more significantly, about what the parameters of the “real” are or could be. These parameters ought to invite scrutiny. When parameters of “reality” are passively accepted rather than actively made, all of the ideologies and contradictions that pass as objective conditions of the world are accepted along with them. Marx long ago pointed out that the commodity is a mystification on par with those of the “mist-enveloped regions of the religious world”: through the commodity, he wrote,

“there is a definite social relation between men that assumes ... the fantastic form of a relation between things.”<sup>22</sup> Real estate is the spatial form of this mystification. This guide thus solicits a skepticism toward given models of urban “reality” in order to provoke imagination of the unreal’s possible potentials.

The representation of unreal estate in this guide, then, is both partial and eccentric. The guide includes no addresses of the sites it lists and no itineraries to aid the visitor interested in seeing unreal estate for herself. The visualization of sites in the guide favors intensity and evocation over clarity and comprehensiveness. The guide organizes the sites it lists not according to their location or their type, but according to the categories of unprofessional practice, unwarranted technique, unsanctioned collectivity and unsolicited construction. Like the term *unreal estate*, these categories may be supplemental more than oppositional, located both within and beyond their proper counterparts. These categories may offer little in the way of obvious, apparent or useful knowledge; they also may prevent too-easy apprehensions of unreal estate according to received understandings of the city, as well as offer preliminary suggestions for new ways of thinking about the distinctive urban culture that unreal estate facilitates.

At the same time, however, I hope that this guide might partially fill in what is often regarded as empty and abandoned space, space whose only sanctioned future is to be transformed into something else. Such a documentation may act as a friction against many of the schemes that have been and continue to be proposed to save or rescue Detroit. These schemes tend to be predicated on the “acknowledgment” of Detroit’s abandonment or emptiness—“acknowledgments” that, at least to some degree, conjure the vacancy they seemingly only point to. What the focus on unreal estate reveals is that these seemingly objective “acknowledgments” are founded on imprecise readings of the city. What appears as empty space from a distance becomes, in closer view, space that is occupied, albeit in subtle, provisional and at times hidden ways.

This guide also offers a picture of Detroit that is in contrast to the picture offered by projects that seek to visually document Detroit’s decline.<sup>23</sup> These projects can be characterized by a shared fascination with ruins. Yet some of these projects do not document decline as much as they polemically invent images of decline by proffering the ruin as the definitive urban figure of contemporary Detroit. According

to photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, for example, Detroit is “a contemporary Pompeii, with all the archetypal buildings of an American city in a state of mummification.”<sup>24</sup> If the spectacle can be understood as “capital accumulated to the point when it becomes images,” then photographs of a contemporary Pompeii can be understood to represent a counter-spectacle, images that emerge from an extreme extraction of capital.<sup>25</sup> Against the counter-spectacle of a city of ruins, then, this guide offers a view of a different city, suffused with potential instead of oblivion.

While this guide is dedicated to a close view of Detroit, it is also a view that is far from comprehensive or complete. If, on some level, this guide maps unreal estate in Detroit, then the map it yields contains many blank spaces, many gaps, many openings to further work and play. The projects that are included here do not form a closed set but rather an open-ended field of investigation and proposition. Much important work that belongs in this field has undoubtedly been left out of this guide. Unreal estate is, by definition, difficult to detect amidst the visually and semantically overloaded landscape of real estate, even in Detroit. If the guide has any effects (which it cannot and should not seek to predict), one might be to focus attention not on what it contains but on what it overlooks: its own failures, whether of theory, history, representation or anything else.

From a wider perspective, this guide is not only an investigation of Detroit’s particular condition, but also of urban informality in the wake of capitalist development and, more generally still, the urban culture of crisis. In this sense, it may offer clues for detecting a spatial economy joined to many economies of real estate as a faint but fantastic aura. This is also a guide, then, to many cities that exist on or beyond the boundaries of formal economies, state regulations and public visibilities—cities that are not invisible as much as they are places that professionals and experts are often blind to. These cities exist in a middle landscape between the sanctioned and the rejected; they are cities whose time is both interim and now. Some of the places and practices in this guide, then, may be found not only in Detroit but also in other cities, perhaps including the city where you now find yourself.

## Notes

1. See *Shrinking Cities: International Research*, ed. Philipp Oswalt (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005); *Shrinking Cities: Interventions*, ed. Philipp Oswalt (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006); *Atlas of Shrinking Cities*, ed. Philipp Oswalt (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006).
2. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli, 1997); Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott-Brown, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Lars Lerup, *After the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
3. See, for example, *Urban Asymmetries: Studies and Projects on Neoliberal Urbanization*, ed. Tahl Kaminer and Miguel Robles-Duran (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011) and *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production in Architecture and Urbanism: Towards Hybrid Modes of Inquiry*, ed. Isabelle Doucet and Nel Janssens (New York: Springer, 2011).
4. On the politics of community, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
5. See, for example, Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
6. On the urban “underclass,” see, for example, William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). The concept of the “underclass” has been widely critiqued; see, for example, Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008).
7. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 54.
8. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McClellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 91.
9. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002).

10. See *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Leighton Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008).
11. This translation also reflects the propensity in urban studies to produce theory *in* the Global North *for* the Global North, rather than to theorize the city in terms of global models. On this propensity, see Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006).
12. Margaret Crawford, "Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life," in *Everyday Urbanism*, 24.
13. Margaret Crawford, "Introduction," in *Everyday Urbanism*, 11. On "tactics of consumption," see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
14. "The actual order of things is precisely what 'popular' tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that (the order) will change any time soon": see de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 26.
15. On urban informality and the right to the city, see Anaya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71:2 (2005).
16. On the various formulations of the right to the city, see Peter Marcuse, "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City," *City* 13:2-3 (2009).
17. On this difference, see Martha Rosler, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism," part 3, *e-flux journal* 25 (May 2011), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/231>.
18. See *Nongovernmental Politics*, ed. Michel Fehrer (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
19. In this sense, this guide might provide evidence for a critique of what Gibson-Graham call "capitalocentrism": the economic discourse that "distributes positive value to those activities associated with capitalist economic activity however defined, and assigns lesser value to all other processes of producing goods and services by identifying them in relation to capitalism as the same as, the opposite of, a complement to, or contained within." See Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 56.

20. AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4-5.
21. Grace Lee Boggs, "Detroit: City of Hope," *In These Times* 33:2 (February 2009).
22. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1992), 98.
23. See, most recently, Andrew Morton, *Detroit Disassembled* (Akron: Akron Art Museum, 2010), Dan Morton, *Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruin* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010) and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011).
24. Marchand and Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit*, n. p.
25. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), 14.

# Unprofessional Practices

**Ruin Harvest  
Food Infill  
Municipal Therapy  
Furtive Inhabitation**



*The city of unreal estate is, in part, a city of ruins. These ruins are usually regarded as distressing eyesores or entrancing spectacles; they can also be posed, however, simply as material, able to accommodate new uses. These accommodations are various; the ruin can fabricate something that will amaze, delight or disturb; something that contributes to or detracts from the common good; something that provides respite from other ruins or renders the city's ruination even more intense.*

*Some ruin harvests are clandestine, their results appearing suddenly and mysteriously: abandoned houses inexplicably painted, one after another, under cover of night. And other ruin harvests are public entertainments: a group of people coming together to watch films projected on the whitewashed walls of an empty house. Abandoned by inhabitants, the ruin is nonetheless occupied by distinct, if enigmatic architectural potentials. Why abandon a building that itself has been abandoned? Why not seize upon just such a building to do something that cannot be done elsewhere and otherwise?*

## Ruin Harvest

Ruin Harvest

## Detroit Demolition Disneyland

In the winter of 2005, Detroit's municipal government prepared to host the Super Bowl by ramping up its demolition of abandoned houses and thereby "beautify" the city. At the same time, a series of abandoned houses in Detroit were painted bright orange. In a communiqué sent to the online site, *The Detrouter*, a group of artists claimed authorship of the project, which the group termed "Detroit Demolition Disneyland." Describing its project, the group wrote that it simply endeavored to appropriate houses "whose most striking feature are their derelict appearance" and foreground them by painting them Tiggerific Orange, "a color from the Mickey Mouse series, easily purchased from Home Depot."

In its communiqué, the group claimed that, through painting houses, it invited Detroit's citizens to "look not only at these houses, but all the buildings rooted in decay and corrosion." This scrutiny, claimed the group, brought "awareness." The precise object of this awareness, however, was left undefined. Abandoned houses themselves? The city's attempt to repress awareness of that abandonment by destroying its most conspicuous examples? The agency of art to critique that repression? Or the limits of art, able to rhetorically critique an urban disaster without proposing alternatives to it? Indeed, while invoking



“action,” the only action that the group explicitly attempted to incite in its audience was mimetic: “Take action. Pick up a roller. Pick up a brush. Apply orange.” It is just this sort of action, however, that casts the Detroit Demolition Disneyland as an occupation of unreal estate—an occupation that registers a site’s deviation from a norm without destroying that very deviation in the process.





## Ruin Harvest

# FireBreak

The tens of thousands of vacant and abandoned homes in Detroit have frequently been targets of arson. Sometimes this arson provides a means for property owners to collect insurance on homes they are unable to sell; sometimes it is a means for neighborhood residents to eradicate activities that they deem threatening or damaging to their community; and sometimes it is a form of recreation that is of particular salience in a city where dedicated recreation facilities are scarce or inaccessible.

FireBreak appropriated a series of burned-out, single-family houses throughout Detroit as sites of architectural celebration, performance and provocation. Instigated by Dan Pitera, director of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit's School of Architecture, FireBreak transformed burned houses from unusable private property to proto-public space—properties that temporarily sustained public occupations and uses. Some of the FireBreak interventions exploited formal properties of burned houses; in HouseBreath, for example, a house was draped in sheer orange strips of fabric so that gaps in the façade would be accentuated by gusts of breeze and wind. Others exploited the status of abandoned houses as large-scale templates for formal transformations; the Hay House was



created by attaching 3000 rolls of hay to the house's facades. Still other projects re-fashioned abandoned houses as venues for performances or events. The entire exterior surface of the MovieHouse was painted white and films were projected nightly on one of its facades during the course of one summer, while the SoundHouse sheltered a performance by a group of musicians, allowing the sound of the performance to filter out to the neighborhood while visually screening them from the exterior.

In the FireBreak projects, post-arson conditions became objects of investigation, speculation and even pleasure, rather than simply sites of absence or lack. In Pitera's words, "the 'gap,' the vacancy, the abandonment ... has become the space of social, cultural, and environmental actions, interactions, and reactions. What is seen as void of culture is actually culturally rich."







Ruin Harvest

## Salvaged Landscape

In Detroit, the city typically clears away the remains of burned homes. In so doing, the city's history of arson becomes visible only through the architectural absences it yields. In "Salvaged Landscape," architect Catie Newell apprehended the remains of one burned house as a resource for new construction; adjacent to the abandoned but iconic Michigan Central Station, this house became both a palette of materials with specific formal qualities and a scaffold upon which a selection of those materials could be assembled, displayed and inspected.

The resulting installation formed a passage into the burned house as well as a construction that emphasized the contrast between the charred surfaces and pristine interiors of the wood from which it was fabricated. While the site and residue of arson are usually regarded as dangerous and unappealing, "Salvaged Landscape" posited this site and residue as raw material for the production of new aesthetic and spatial experiences. The project thereby eschewed "solutions" to arson in favor of attempts to claim, inhabit and exploit arson's material and spatial remainders—a devotion to working with unvalued places and materials that is characteristic of unreal estate development.



“Salvaged Landscape” was also designed to be a piece that could be removed from the burned house it was made from and displayed elsewhere. The facilitation of this displacement registered two conditions. One condition is the city’s almost inevitable destruction of burned houses, even when architecturally reconfigured—its inability to recognize unreal estate’s unvalues. Another condition, however, is the possibility for these unvalues to become valuable in other contexts—the ever-present capacity for unvalues to be transformed into values. “Salvaged Landscape” is thus symptomatic of unreal estate’s precarious existence between actual misrecognition and possible commodification.





*There are many hungers in the city of unreal estate: for memory without anger, for futures worth wanting, for a politics offering authentic alternatives. There is also, still, a hunger for food. The residents of the food desert in Detroit are among the hungry. Providing for themselves in omnipresent liquor stores and corner markets, they make do in ways that, outside the desert, defy easy comprehension. But some take on the ambition to cultivate the desert, converting empty lots into gardens or farms, while others circulate produce on vans, pick-ups or converted ice cream trucks that wend their way through neighborhoods where fresh fruit and vegetables are otherwise scarce.*

*A cascade of activities often accompanies these food infills. Growing food, an act of self-determination, invokes other such acts, from the personal to the collective. The products of food infill are thus consumed in meals that tempt other occasions, from think-tanking and partying to political organizing and community building. Food consumers are thereby offered any number of other identities: gardeners, farmers, food activists, community advocates, locovores, gourmands or hybrids of any of the preceding.*

## Food Infill



Food Infill

## Earthworks Urban Farm

The Earthworks Urban Farm is one of the largest urban agriculture initiatives in Detroit. It emerged from an intersection of two conditions: first, the desire of Capuchin friars and associated volunteers to feed and otherwise assist needy residents in Detroit's impoverished Eastside, and second, the availability of large plots of vacant urban land on the Eastside for non-profit community service activities.

Earthworks was initiated in 1997 as a garden located adjacent to the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. This soup kitchen not only served healthy meals, but also distributed food, clothes and furniture to needy families, provided showers and a change of clothes to homeless people, and offered substance abuse treatment programs, a children's art therapy studio and a children's library.

Originally cultivating produce for the soup kitchen, Earthworks expanded a few years later to a .75 acre site several blocks away, behind the Cleaners Community Food Bank, and began to distribute its yield at weekly markets hosted at Eastside health clinics. In subsequent years, Earthworks also began process produce into such products as canned tomatoes, pickled beets and jams, as well as honey and beeswax hand balm made from bee hives situated on the roof of the



food bank. In addition, it added a greenhouse where seedlings are grown for use both by Earthworks and for gardens of local families, communities, and schools that participate in the Garden Resource Program Collaborative. In 2008, Earthworks began to host monthly community potlucks where food justice issues are advanced and discussion groups with patrons of the soup kitchen are held.

Just like the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, with its diverse assemblage of service programs, Earthworks assembles a diverse array of agricultural programs into a single urban institution. The complexity of this assemblage, indexing perceived social needs, exploits openings in both space (a vacant lot becoming a farm, a roof becoming an aviary) and in time (dinners becoming activist discussion groups and community-building occasions). The filling of these openings creates, in turn, opportunity to facilitate new models of food consumption, community and urban environment.





Food Infill

## D-Town Farm

The D-Town Farm is an urban farm in the Rouge Park neighborhood operated by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. The Network was started as a response to a number of food-related issues in Detroit's predominantly African-American population: the lack of grocery stores in many neighborhoods in Detroit; the replacement of home-cooked meals by fast food in many African-American families; and the dependence of those families, and the communities they are part of, on distant others for their sustenance.

The D-Town Farm was developed by the Network as part of a larger project to provide food security, which the Network defines as "easy access to adequate amounts of affordable, nutritious, culturally appropriate food." The farm sits on a two-acre site on the City of Detroit's Meyer Tree Nursery, which the city agreed to let the Network use for ten years. The farm includes organic vegetable plots, two beehives, a hoop house for year-round food production, and a composting operation. Produce from the farm is sold at the farm itself, at Eastern Market, and at farmers' markets throughout Detroit; it is also distributed through the Ujamaa Cooperative Food Buying Club, which the Network also operates. The farm's activities are presented publically in a number of formats, including an annual Harvest



Festival and the Food Warriors Youth Development Program, in which elementary school students at three African-centered schools (Aisha Shule, Nsoromma Institute and Timbuktu Academy) are introduced to urban agriculture.

Through the D-Town Farm and allied programs, solutions to food insecurity have intersected with a range of other issues and sponsored a range of other effects; the farm is a site of community-building, collective-identity formation and political action, as well as agricultural production. The Network's response to food insecurity has thus cascaded into responses to other problems, not all of which are food-related, facing Detroit's African-American population.







## Georgia Street Community Garden

The Georgia Street Community Garden was started by Mark Covington, who grew up in the Eastside neighborhood around the garden's site. Covington began to spend more time in the neighborhood after he was laid off from his job in 2008. His effort to clear garbage from three city-owned vacant lots next to his grandmother's house soon evolved into a project to cultivate those lots as a community garden for the neighborhood, where many families face food insecurity. The garden, mainly planted in vegetables, is tended by both neighborhood children and a network of volunteers drawn from across Detroit and its suburbs; the garden serves as a nexus for the formation of new social networks as well as a new means of food security.

Taking advantage of unreal estate's openness to occupation and re-definition, the Georgia Street Community Garden is also a platform for a variety of neighborhood-based events, actions and initiatives. The garden has thus become a venue for collective children's book readings, family film nights, and public barbeques. It has also become part of a broader project of neighborhood revitalization; the Georgia Street Community Garden Association has acquired abandoned buildings adjacent to the garden from the City of Detroit and plans to convert them into a corner market and community center.





Future Home Of:   
**Georgia Street  
Community Center**

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Food Infill

## Brightmoor Farmway

Brightmoor is a neighborhood in Northwest Detroit with large numbers of abandoned buildings and vacant lots. The neighborhood's growth was spurred in the beginning of the 20th century by the nearby development of auto industry facilities; its decline was reciprocally spurred by the post-war suburbanization of those same facilities. As the neighborhood's working-class residents left to find employment elsewhere, their houses were sold to landlords. In weak-market conditions, these houses were cheaply rented, leading to further downturns in property values. In combination with a national economic slowdown, a local epidemic of crack cocaine use, and an upsurge of gang violence, Brightmoor's decline became precipitous in the 1980s.

Around one quarter of all property in Brightmoor is currently vacant. In recent years, some neighborhood residents have come to perceive this vacancy as offering a precious opportunity to self-organize the development of their community. This perception led to the founding of a series of gardens and pocket parks on vacant lots. In the summer of 2009, a consortium of community organizations then began to plan the linkage of these gardens and parks by a neighborhood-scale "farmway." As this farmway developed, it has come to include not only a path connecting around 20 existing gardens, but also new pocket parks,



new community gardens, a wildflower garden, an orchard and a market garden for neighborhood youth. The farmway both joins these self-organized projects to one another and also joins them to Eliza Howell Park, an existing public green space in the neighborhood. In so doing, the farmway has created a neighborhood infrastructure that connects agricultural and cultural spaces, planned and informal initiatives, and sites of food production and food consumption, all taking place on readily available unreal estate.



HE GAVE ONLY → SON so that Whosoever BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE everla



## Peaches and Greens

In response to the food insecurity that many low-income residents of central Detroit experience, the Central Detroit Christian Community Development Corporation initiated Peaches and Greens to make fresh produce available to residents of the central Woodward neighborhood. Enhancing the neighborhood's access to nutritious food, the project has also facilitated the development of new kinds of political agency and the emergence of new cultural practices.

The Peaches and Greens Market was founded in a former dry cleaners, purchased at a Wayne County property auction. Opened in the fall of 2008, the market provides a place for residents to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at affordable prices; it also buys produce from local gardeners, thereby empowering these gardeners as food producers. In addition, the market was envisioned as a wholesale distribution point where fresh produce could be sold to the liquor stores, party stores and corner markers that serve as primary grocery stores for many neighborhood residents. Recruiting local youth to canvas these stores and establish commercial links between them and Peaches and Greens, the market thereby assists in the transformation of *food consumers* into *food activists*.



The Peaches and Greens Market has been augmented by the repurposing of a former UPS delivery truck into a mobile produce market. Mimicking the motion of an ice-cream truck, the Peaches and Greens truck circulates slowly along streets in central Woodward, its loudspeaker playing rhythm and blues music and its interior containing shelves of fresh fruit and vegetables. Residents can either flag the truck down or arrange for it to deliver produce to their homes. In either case, produce consumption is transformed into a local ritual, specific to the Peaches and Greens community.





Food Infill

## Field of Our Dreams

Field of Our Dreams is a mobile produce market serving the Eastside of Detroit. The market emerged from conversations at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen between artist Nick Tobier and Keith Love and Warren Thomas, local residents and patrons of the kitchen. Once a week, via a converted pickup truck, the market roams through Eastside neighborhoods that are underserved or unserved by grocery stores and that as a result have constrained access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Most of the market's produce is purchased from wholesale produce distributors using proceeds from previous sales; the market also sells produce from Earthworks' Youth Garden, which receives all proceeds from these sales.

[p.40]

Serving a series of locations adjacent to or within public housing or other public institutions, the market takes advantage of the unregulation of both commerce and public space in Detroit. Field of Our Dreams, however, is not only a market by default, filling a gap in Detroit's commercial infrastructure. It also suggests the availability of Detroit's sidewalks and street corners for any number of other interim uses, from social gathering to informal economies—all equally unreal from the perspective of the free market.









*Where there is pain, there is an opportunity to provide therapy. Municipal therapists take on pain at the scale of the city, appropriating responsibility for urban repair from the authorities and institutions to which that responsibility has been delegated. In so doing, municipal therapy asserts a right to the city—a right that is often forgotten or even abandoned when urban life functions according to plan.*

*Municipal therapy reveals how the city opens precisely when it fails. While these failures are manifold in the city of unreal estate, so, too, are the therapies that these failures invoke. Damaged homes can be repaired, fallow land can be replanted, space can be provided for exchange, socializing, or remembrance of the forgotten; for any urban failure, or even missed urban opportunity, there is an opportunity for a therapeutic response.*

# Municipal Therapy

## Motor City Blight Busters

The Motor City Blight Busters is a non-profit organization in Northwest Detroit dedicated to “stabilizing and revitalizing neighborhoods.” It defines the beneficiary of this project as “the community,” an entity with complex and at times contradictory relations to reigning political and economic structures. One component of the organization’s ambitions intersects with the city’s demolition program, with the Blight Busters employing volunteers and laborers to take down abandoned homes. Another part of the organization’s work is dedicated to renovating and building new homes, again with the assistance of volunteers. Among the urban renewal projects that the Blight Busters are in the midst of carrying out is an “Artist Village” in the Old Redford neighborhood in Northwest Detroit, where the organization is headquartered.

The Artist Village takes place in a series of adjacent buildings acquired by the Blight Busters. Spaces in these buildings have been converted into a gallery, café, theater and artist studio, with the aim “to provide a space for artists to nurture and develop their creative spirit ... while also providing a community gathering place where residents of the area could come together to enjoy arts, music and entertainment.” The artist studio in the village is occupied by Chazz Miller, who has painted



murals over the exterior walls of the complex of buildings, as well as on a number of other buildings in the neighborhood. Miller also leads workshops where volunteers, many from after-school programs, paint large plywood cut-outs shaped like butterflies, which Miller then places on walls throughout the surrounding neighborhood, including on abandoned buildings that have been boarded-up by the Blight Busters.

The Blight Busters adeptly involve volunteers in the production of art, just as in housing demolition and construction; in so doing, art is entered into the city's sanctioned, if thwarted, development processes. The urban "beautification" produced by the application of painted butterflies to the sides of abandoned buildings becomes a means to symbolically occupy those buildings and assist in their conversion from unreal estate to real estate. This conversion is community-based, but it also advances potentially exploitive economic processes—ways for the community to profit from real estate development.





## Municipal Therapy

# Greening of Detroit

The Greening of Detroit is a non-profit organization dedicated to the enhancement of the city's stock of trees and plants. It was founded in the late 1980s as an urban forestry initiative; though Detroit was shrinking rapidly and many areas of the city were becoming uninhabited in this time, the city's urban forest was also undergoing a sharp decline due to the spread of Dutch Elm disease and the municipality's inability to carry out tree maintenance. The Greening of Detroit organized many initiatives to restore the city's supply of trees, from the restoration of parks, through plantings along streets, to full-scale streetscape renovations.

Over time, the Greening of Detroit's interest in urban forest restoration expanded to encompass a wide range of other greening projects. These projects exploited Detroit's many open spaces as resources; urban agriculture was supported by providing assistance to community gardeners and by establishing community gardens on vacant lots; neighborhood tree nurseries were established on other vacant lots; self-maintaining wildflower gardens were planted on lots that the city owned but could not maintain; and infill parks and other landscaped environments were created in collaboration with community groups. The organization also collaborated in the transformation of an



underutilized 26 acre urban landscape, Romanowski Park, into a model urban farm, with community farm plots, teaching gardens, fruit tree orchard and a sugar maple grove.

Through these projects, the Greening of Detroit transformed the vacancy of urban space in Detroit from a liability into an asset. While vacant space lacks value in the frame of conventional models of urban development, it possesses value to a city posed as a site of intense and thorough forestry and agriculture.







## Municipal Therapy


# Hope District

The Hope District was conceived by Mike and Lilly Wimberley as a means to develop an impoverished neighborhood on Detroit's Eastside. The Hope District functions as a platform for a series of initiatives oriented around entrepreneurship, self-expression, community-building, food security, spirituality and healing. As such, it eloquently expresses the double bind of wanting to both assist the needy in the world as it is, but also change the world into a more just form. Many Hope District initiatives take place through the appropriation and re-framing of vacant lots: one such lot has become the Little Egypt Open-Air Market, a place for grassroots commerce; another has become the Butterfly Dream Garden, where blank billboards provide places for residents to leave written comments. Other lots have been designated sanctuaries, conflict-resolution zones and places for prayer; still other have become urban gardens growing medicinal herbs, vegetables and fruit trees. The district also includes a building, Club Technology, where neighborhood residents can receive training in computer use, culinary arts and other vocational skills.

The initiatives carried out in the Hope District are conceived as means to consolidate the residents of the district into a community and to make this community self-sustaining and socially and economically



viable. The responses to economic challenge offered by the Hope District thus do not aim at simply meeting that challenge, but rather at fundamental transformations of a neighborhood's urban context, social form, political agency and economic status.



THE HOPE DISTRICT  
COMMUNITY  
CREATE SELF-HELP  
WORK EARN MONEY  
SUPPORT THE HOPE DISTRICT  
A SELF-HELP COMMUNITY

AT A SELF-HELP  
UNITY  
EMPLOYMENT  
Y SPEND MONEY  
HOPE DISTRICT  
COMMUNITY

WELCOME TO  
THE HOPE DISTRICT

ALONG E. FOREST FROM  
E. GRAND BLVD TO CADILLAC

Municipal Therapy

## Navin Field Grounds Crew

Professional baseball has been played in Detroit since 1895. For over one hundred years, it was played on the same site, in the Corktown neighborhood, in a series of facilities: Bennett Park, Navin Field, Briggs Stadium and, most recently, Tiger Stadium. After billionaire Mike Ilitch purchased the Detroit Tigers in 1992, he initiated plans to construct a new baseball stadium, leveraging federal grants and other public funds to realize the project. The new Comerica Park, located about one mile away from Tiger Stadium, was opened in 1999.

In 2009, after a series of attempts to either preserve or redevelop Tiger Stadium, the stadium was torn down, leaving only an open field surrounded by a fence. That field, which still bore traces of the baseball diamond's infield, soon became overgrown. At the beginning of the 2010 baseball season, a group of Tigers fans organized as the Navin Field Grounds Crew and dedicated themselves to weeding and mowing the field and reconstructing the pitcher's mound, bases and base paths. Their groundwork has allowed fans to play pick-up games on a site where professional baseball had been played since the sport's beginning.



The city regards this upholding of baseball tradition as trespassing on city-owned property; while the city tries to sponsor the development of this property, it has attempted to exclude the Grounds Crew from the site. The members of the Grounds Crew, however, have continued to access and utilize what is, for them, a historical site unrecognized by the city. Respecting, tending and enjoying a site that the city merely regards as undeveloped real estate, the Grounds Crew is apprehending that site as unreal estate.







## Municipal Therapy

# Detroit Mower Gang

In the city of real estate, public amenities like parks are regarded as luxuries, only to be maintained when the municipal coffers allow it. As Detroit's budget deficit has ballooned in recent years, then, parks have become one of the most vulnerable targets of municipal cost-cutting. In the summer of 2010, the city announced a plan to close 77 parks, comprising around 1,400 acres; while the implementation of this plan was deferred, park maintenance has been reduced to a bare minimum nevertheless.

Public parks, offering space for recreation to all, are never more precious than in times of economic challenge. Recognizing this value, the Detroit Mower Gang was formed as a group of public service vigilantes, dedicated to the upkeep of the city's neglected parks. Acknowledging the pleasure of collective mowing on lawn tractors, the Mower Gang poses its activities as "one part cleanup effort and one part biker rally"; the Mower Gang thus approaches lawn tractor display and riding with all the passion of motorcycle enthusiasts. In so doing, the Mower Gang transforms park maintenance from laborious drudgery to creative play.



[p.78] Among the spaces that the Mower Gang has tended are O'Shea Park, Riverside Park, Roosevelt Park and the Dorais Velodrome, abandoned in the late 1980s and now used for formal and informal bicycle, moped and go-cart racing. The Mower Gang also collaborated with the Navin Field Grounds Crew to reconstruct the infield of Tiger Stadium. Through this work, the Mower Gang renders park maintenance a public right—the right of the public to care for spaces that it cares about.





*What happens when the occupation of space is illegal, unauthorized or just unusual? What happens when dwelling proceeds without permission or is specifically unpermitted? In its desertion and disuse, unreal estate insistently invites these questions.*

*Furtive inhabitation can be fleeting, lasting as long as a yoga pose is held in a vacant lot; it can persist through the time that trespassing explorers remain undetected in an abandoned building; in the form of a squat, it can last as long as any other form of dwelling. There are vicarious forms of furtive inhabitation, like the seed bombing of an empty field. And furtive inhabitation can remain secret, something that need not be disclosed, publicized or otherwise represented. In the city of unreal estate, neglected and empty spaces can thus be occupied while seeming to remain neglected and empty all the while.*

## Furtive Inhabitation



## Furtive Inhabitation

# Detroit Blues

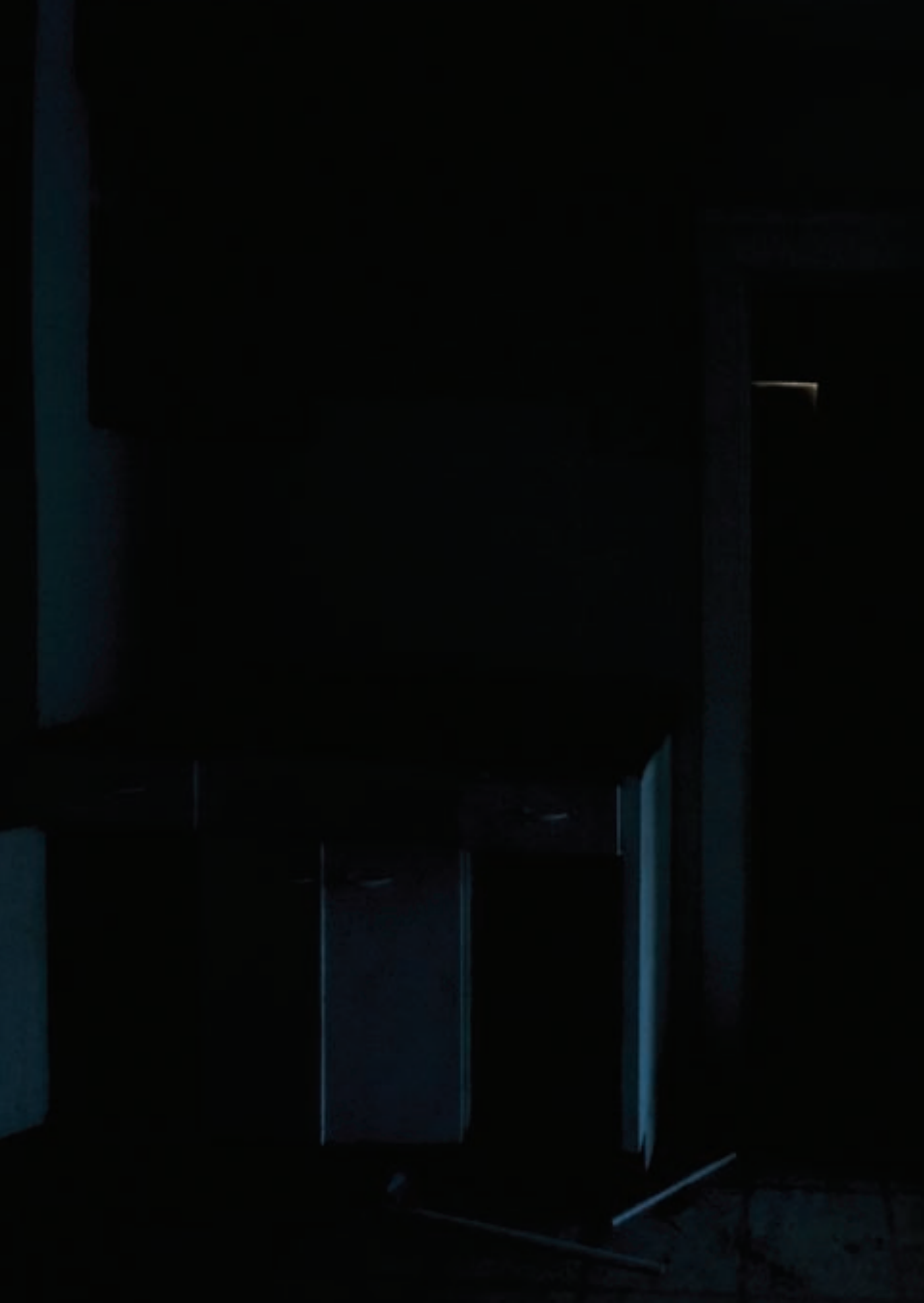
The Detroit Blues are one among the groups that explore abandoned buildings (“urban spelunking,” “urbexing”) in Detroit. In the group’s self-scripted history, its first trip was to the Statler Hotel, where its members pretended to play blues on the stage of the abandoned hotel’s ballroom and then decided to name themselves, a white exploring crew, after a musical genre primarily associated with African Americans. With its ironically racializing name, the group inserted itself into Detroit’s racial history, a history in which the majority of the city’s white population fled in the wake of the late 1960s civil unrest (a depoliticized “riot” to whites and a highly politicized “uprising,” “revolution” or “rebellion” to African-Americans). In the context of this history, the Blues’ urban exploration became a post-white flight activity—a white fly-over through a now predominantly African-American city.

The Blues’ itinerary began with twelve abandoned buildings in downtown Detroit. In a 2004 article in the *Detroit Free Press*, these buildings were termed “Towers of Neglect” in drastic need of renovation. The Blues re-conceptualized these buildings as the “Dirty Dozen,” key destinations of urban exploration in Detroit. In so doing, the group appropriated the abandonment and decay of the buildings as



positive values enhancing the experience of trespassing within them. This was an aestheticization of abandonment and decay, but one that stands in opposition to the aestheticization of occupation and growth that drives urban development.

In the group's self-understanding, however, urban exploration is voided of all utility except that of affordable leisure: free entertainment for free time. The exploration of abandoned buildings, that is, becomes a kind of *budget blight tourism*, with the conditions of blight registered not only by the destinations of exploration, but also by the form of exploration itself.





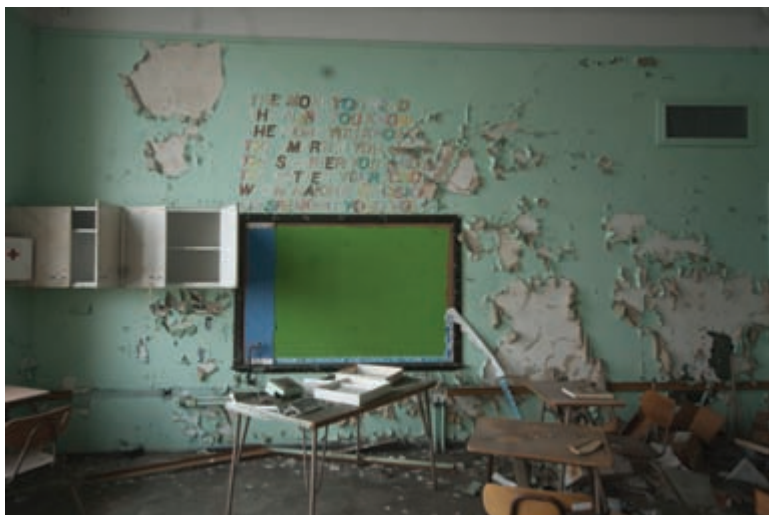
## Furtive Inhabitation

# Hookie Monsters

Abandoned schools are prominent landmarks in Detroit's cityscape. They are outcomes not only of declining student enrollments but also of the city's strategy to cope with the school budget deficits that these declines cause: as the city closes schools and raises class size to reduce costs, more students are driven out of the public school system, necessitating still more school closures.

The ejection of school buildings from the system of formal education also makes these buildings available for alternative forms of self-organized education. The Hookie Monsters are an urban exploration crew whose trips began as investigations of the architectural residue of school closures. These investigations posited Detroit's abandoned schools as an object heritage as worthy of attention as those inheritances from the past that the city frames as such.

Branching out to explore abandoned architecture of many types, the Monsters have opened a new perspective on sites that tend to be either ignored as devoid of historical interest or visualized as sublime ruins. For the Monsters, the abandoned building is a *counter-public space*—a site that can accommodate those whose identities and interests are



not socially valorized. The exploration of these sites thus offers a way to occupy the city according to self-generated codes and conventions.

In February 2011, Detroit's Emergency Financial Manager announced a plan to close half of the city's remaining 144 schools and consolidate students into the remaining schools by increasing maximum class size to 60 students. If implemented, this devastating blow to the city's public education system will also open up a number of new sites to explorations like those undertaken by the Monsters.







## Furtive Inhabitation

# Urban Yoga Lab

In the summer of 2007, a group of Detroit-based yoga adepts, aficionados, poseurs and wannabes self-constituted as the Urban Yoga Lab and began to stage clandestine yoga sessions in decrepit urban spaces around the city. At each session, the group developed new yoga positions in response to the particular formal, visual and emotional qualities of the space it occupied. In so doing, the group claimed to extricate yoga practice from its post-modern context of physical and spiritual fitness and return to that practice as a means of “conjoining” or “unifying” subject and object into oneness, as yoga was originally constituted.

The vivid and strange spaces of Detroit, according to the Lab, can prompt new forms of urban subjectivity; the yoga practice the Lab is evolving is intended to provide one entry to that subjectivity. At the same time, the members of the Lab seek to position yoga practice not as a therapeutic response to personal suffering, as is often done, but rather as a way to access landscapes that society's privileged members usually encounter only under duress. The access to these landscapes provided by urban yoga is metaphorical and deliberate, rather than actual and forced; at the same time, however, it opens onto other accesses whose targets and consequences cannot be predicted in advance.







## Furtive Inhabitation

# Seed Detroit

In Seed Detroit, wildflowers were planted on some of the many vacant lots in the Brush Park District. This planting did not “improve” these lots so much as foreground them as distinctive spaces providing unique sights, smells and sounds to city dwellers. Surfaced with wildflowers, vacant lots were thus re-framed as “urban prairies.” This re-framing was accomplished by *flower tagging*—marking a surface with flowers in order to render that surface visible in a new way.

By using wildflowers as its tagging instrument, Seed Detroit turned planting into an easily accomplished act. Wildflowers seeds were placed in envelopes left on signs posted at vacant lots; instructions directed participants to simply tear an envelope open and sprinkle the seeds within on the lot. While involving the public in planting, this involvement required a minimum investment of time and energy; Seed Detroit created an *uncommitted community* only unified by its brief participation in acts of seed bombing.



1 container = 1 person



1 container covers 19 sq. ft.

1 person spreads 19sq. ft.  
of wild flowers!

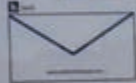
[www.seeddetroit.blogspot.com](http://www.seeddetroit.blogspot.com)



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4. SHINE



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# Unwarranted Techniques

**Feral Research  
Waste Curation  
Public Secrecy  
Radical Hospitality**

*To study unreal estate while participating in its unreality requires feral research—an improvised and provisional study of an improvised and provisional city. Feral research is devoid of commitment to a discipline; it is dedicated to the exploitation of circumstances rather than to the extension of a formalized body of knowledge. Feral research promises neither contributions nor predictable outcomes; opportunistic and tactical, the feral researcher makes it up as she goes.*

*The feral researcher can move stealthily through the city, incognito and unannounced, or loiter, waiting for something to happen, or stalk, devoting obsessive attention to her object of interest. The outcomes of feral research are as various as its processes: these outcomes can disappear amidst the city's surfaces and spaces, or be misrecognized as mere aesthetic play, or, worst of all, devalued as an inferior form of "authentic research." Feral research will, then, never be proposed for peer review; its evaluation will always rest on stakes that it has to invent for itself.*

## Feral Research

## Detroit Geographical Expedition

In 1968, radical Detroit geographer William Bunge founded the Detroit Geographical Expedition. The Expedition was a platform to produce a new sort of spatial knowledge—neither disciplinary nor professional knowledge, but knowledge that could serve as a resource for Detroit and, most especially, for the city’s disenfranchised African-American population. For two years, Bunge and his students at Wayne State University collaborated with Detroit activists and residents to expose the spatial effects of racism, disinvestment and impoverishment in the city. Then, in still-mysterious circumstances, Bunge either resigned or was fired from his position in Wayne State’s Department of Geography in 1970 and the Expedition disbanded.

The four reports of the Expedition were never published, but copies of these reports were archived in the Map Collection of the University of Michigan Graduate Library in Ann Arbor. In 2009, a group of Michigan architecture students found these reports in the course of conducting research on Detroit. Inspired by the Expedition’s ambitions, the students re-founded the Expedition and attempted to continue Bunge’s effort to produce “maps that could change the map of the world.”



Based on the family connections of one of its members, the Expedition initiated a collaboration with residents of an Eastside neighborhood and began a project to map that neighborhood's spaces of insecurity. Over the next 18 months, the project developed into a complex atlas documenting a series of spatial conditions, events and practices in and around the neighborhood. Following the precepts of the original Expedition, this documentation was founded on the urban knowledge and experience of the city's marginalized communities, groups and individuals.

As the Expedition's atlas was being prepared for publication, a crack house whose location was documented in the publication was burned, probably by neighborhood residents. Members of the Expedition split over their interpretation of this burning; most thought it represented an unwelcome extension of their research while a few thought it was one of the most profound ways that this research could be put into practice. This split subverted the atlas project but also led to the Expedition taking new form as a laboratory for urban advocacy.







## Pink Pony Express

The Pink Pony Express is a research collaborative investigating small-scale urban initiatives in Detroit. The basic strategy of the Ponies is *research through making*, with every exploration taking material form. These forms occupy or are brought back to the places under study, so that the practice of the Ponies includes a kind of “giving back” to the communities they live and work in. What the Ponies return, however, may not be immediately recognizable to the members of those communities; their work *gives back what was never possessed in the first place*, with research thus becoming an occasion for generous and eccentric exchange.

[p.56] In one typical project, the Ponies mapped the itinerary of the Peaches and Greens produce truck as it sold fresh fruit and vegetables to liquor stores and on street corners in Highland Park. Rather than producing a literal map, however, the Ponies made a still-life tableau of all the fruit and vegetables sold in one day, photographed the tableau on Belle Isle, made pies and tarts with the assembled produce, and then gave those baked goods away at the Peaches and Greens market. The Ponies also have experimented with cooking on manhole covers heated by steam from Detroit’s controversial municipal incinerator; broadcasting messages of urban possibility on Christian ministry radio shows,



[p.194] Sunday church services and church message boards; and physically mapping social networks on a block of Farnsworth Street. By returning, in various ways, the results of these experiments to members of the relevant communities, the Pink Pony Express enters the world of unreal estate instead of merely producing commentary on that world from a position of presumed distance.





*The city in crisis is a city of loss, but also a city of gain: in ruined buildings, in the flora and fauna of abandoned landscapes, in the detritus that gathers where homes and neighborhoods are forsaken. What's left behind and left unattended are waste products, but only in a conventional sense; they are also perverse treasures, available to eccentric forms of care.*

*Waste curation seizes on the products of post-industrial decay. These products can be curated by endowing them with new forms—the “ghetto palm” that colonizes ground around abandoned buildings offers wood for the crafting of furniture, the berry bushes that grow on vacant lots offer fruit for scavenging and jamming. Curation can also involve the circulation of detritus from one site, where it is useless, to another site, where it assumes new functions—the doors, windows and ornaments of abandoned buildings taken to buildings under construction or reconstruction. These techniques are drastically sustainable—waste curation is a technique for sustainability in drastic circumstances.*

## Waste Curation

## Tree of Heaven Woodshop

The Tree of Heaven Woodshop was founded by Mitch Cope, Ingo Vetter and Annette Weisser as a collective of artists, craftspeople and researchers who work with wood from the *Ailanthus altissima*, or “tree of heaven,” the English translation of the tree’s Chinese name. The “tree of heaven” is a rapidly growing and aggressively spreading deciduous tree that easily withstands polluted soil; able to colonize areas that other plants and trees cannot tolerate, it is found in, on and around abandoned buildings throughout Detroit. Conventionally regarded as a sign of post-industrial decay, the “tree of heaven” is posed by the Woodshop as, conversely, a post-industrial resource with its own unique qualities and values. According to the Woodshop, these qualities and values can refract from the “tree of heaven” to Detroit, whose signs of blight and ruination can also become materials for new forms of production.

The Tree of Heaven Woodshop stages its harvesting and processing of lumber in Detroit as an “absurd performance”—a performance that acknowledges the city’s existing condition through a complex admixture of celebration, parody, mourning and pragmatic use. These performances yield objects that are custom-made for exhibitions or galleries. The objects are, in the words of the workshop, “highly



rhetorical"; their function is not simply to be used as equipment or furniture, but to communicate aspects of their urban site of origin. The Tree of Heaven Woodshop suggests an innovative kind of sustainable economy, one which is premised not on transforming Detroit into a recognizably renewed city, but on recognizing and responding to the city's particular condition in the present.







## Architectural Salvage Warehouse

The building demolitions that are widespread in Detroit typically yield debris destined for landfills and dumps. The Architectural Salvage Warehouse is a non-profit organization that has apprehended building demolition as an opportunity to salvage and reuse architectural material, create skilled jobs, augment historic preservation practice and enhance environmental sustainability. As alternatives to demolition, the Warehouse offers *deconstruction*, the systematic disassembly of buildings into reusable parts, and *skimming*, the capture of easy-to-remove building components such as doors, windows and fixtures. The Warehouse trains workers in these practices, which then yield materials that are offered for purchase at its retail store.

Through deconstruction and skimming, the Warehouse transforms building demolition from an end point, the terminal moment in the life of a building, into a point of transition, a moment when a building's materials leave one site and become available to other sites, other architecture and other purposes. Moreover, the articulation of this transition as an opportunity for a specific sort of labor practice, environmental awareness, and historical consciousness adds values to what would otherwise be a mere reaction to value's absence.







## Friends of Corgeous Berries

Among the plants that flourish on vacant lots in Detroit are mulberry trees and blackberry bushes, both native to the region. In the summer, these plants, located on abandoned and rarely visited property, produce huge quantities of fruit that often remains unharvested. The Friends of Corgeous Berries is an urban gleaning project focused on the harvesting of mulberries and blackberries from plants on public and untended property.

During the summer, the Friends organize harvests in which members glean large yields of berries. These yields then form the basis for pies, jams and other berry-based goods created by the Friends. These goods are often exchanged for goods and services offering equivalent pleasures, both within and beyond the circle of the Friends, so that the circulation of berries functions to deepen and extend both friendships and community bonds.









*With few and fragile barriers to its occupation and use, unreal estate allows for secrets to be publicly exposed, accessible to all at the same time that they may be comprehensible to a few, or even to no one. Enigmatic graffiti, inscrutable signs, advertising campaigns that advertise only themselves: these are public secrets exposed on the underused and untended surfaces of unreal estate. It may also be the availability of these surfaces that inspire public secrecy—thoughts, expressions or forms that assume the status of a secret only with their public appearance.*

*While public secrets may be inscrutable even to their authors, their apparent mystery often prompts attempts at interpretation. Secrets can thereby be endowed with meanings, although what the disclosure of secrets usually bears are the desires, anxieties and dreams of those who attempt to decipher them.*

## Public Secrecy

## Hygienic Dress League

The Hygienic Dress League is a corporation that creates nothing but its own corporate image. It therefore uses videos, fashion shoots, branding and advertising not as means to the end of selling products or services but as reflexive artistic works. Recognizable as advertising, albeit of an enigmatic variety, these works invite questions about themselves (what exactly are they advertising?) and about corporate modes of identity and publicity more generally.

The League's project exploits the availability of urban space and urban surface in Detroit to *unprofitable expertise*. Its advertisements are painted on the boards that seal up abandoned buildings, re-purposing instruments of physical closure into ones of conceptual opening. Announcing the presence of the League and the "coming soon" of something left unspecified, these advertisements also focus attention on Detroit as an object of relentless campaigns of betterment. These campaigns, premised on the inadequacy or incompleteness of the city in its current state, pose Detroit's present as nothing but the pre-history of a hoped-for future. Exaggerating this condition, the Hygienic Dress League brings Detroit's obsessive futurology into public visibility and allows it to be newly scrutinized or resisted.









## Secret Pizza Party

Secret Pizza Party was a design studio founded and run by Josh Dunn and Andy DeGiulio, two graduates of Detroit's College of Creative Studies. As well as doing commercial work, the studio also engaged in ambient advertising campaigns in which signs were posted on the facades of abandoned buildings throughout Detroit. These signs depicted slogans that ran from the vaguely exhortative ("Make Things Better") to the enigmatically descriptive ("The Whole Why World").

The campaigns conducted by Secret Pizza Party exploited the surfaces of abandoned buildings as public space available for speech acts to a collective audience. These speech acts, though formatted like advertising, were conspicuously open-ended. "Make Things Better" seems an appropriate injunction to be made in Detroit, yet it does not describe *what* should be made better, *who* should make things better, and *how* things should be made better. "The Whole Why World" (from a 2006 *New York Times* article on second-graders, one of whom mistranslated the phrase "the whole wide world") similarly points to a city whose mysteries, challenges and problems continually provoke the question "why?" Both campaigns, then, alluded to Detroit's constantly narrated problems but left the identification and potential solutions to those problems unspecified and so up to its audience to determine.







**THE  
WHOLE  
WHY  
WORLD.**

In 2003 and 2004, abandoned buildings, bridges and road signs in and around downtown Detroit began to be tagged with graffiti featuring cartoon turtles and the words “trtl,” “trdl,” “turd,” “turtl,” or “turtldz.” After turtles appeared on a sculpture outside of the Detroit Artists’ Market and on the Detroit Institute of Art’s regal building, turtle-tagging became the object of police attention, public critique and media speculation alike.

Most generally, turtles were understood to signify “slowness.” Their status as subject matter for graffiti in Detroit was thus posed as a comment on the slowness with which Detroit was being reconstructed, as if the graffiti were calling for the eradication of the derelict surfaces on which they were themselves inscribed. More precisely, however, the enigmatic action of turtle-tagging converted the city’s surfaces into mirrors that reflected the the city’s own collective sense of itself. The “slowness” ascribed to the turtle-tagger, outed by the *Detroit Free Press* in 2004 as the graffiti artist, Ronald Scherz, was actually a product of the artist’s audience. This audience saw an image they themselves projected onto turtles—the image of a city historically constructed on the basis of mobility and speed but one currently defined by torpor and inactivity.









*Both within and beyond the city of unreal estate, the possibilities for sanctuary dwindle; there are fewer and fewer places offering haven or refuge. What replaces these places are facilities and centers—institutions where judgments are passed and fates decided. Sidewalks, parks and abandoned buildings house the homeless human remainder of this dynamic.*

*There are also places, however, where radical forms of hospitality continue to be extended. Sites of radical hospitality can extend no farther than a city block or encompass an entire neighborhood. They offer refuge both to the homeless and to those whose homes lose the capacity to shelter. These are places where visitors are welcomed as citizens of a usually disregarded or unknown city. This is the city of unreal estate—a city that shadows, faintly but fantastically, the city documented on maps, patrolled by authorities, divided into public and private, inhabited and empty, saved and lost.*

## Radical Hospitality

## Radical Hospitality

# Boggs Center

The Boggs Center was founded by friends and colleagues of Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs, prominent community activists in Detroit, as a place to “honor and continue their legacy as movement activists and theoreticians.” The Center is located at the Boggs home on the Eastside of Detroit. This location formalizes the status of that home as a community center and activist think tank, as well as exemplifies the unimportance of drawing firm boundaries between private and public space in the context of unreal estate.

The Center’s positing of Detroit as a “city of hope” as opposed to a “city of despair” draws upon a conception of crisis as an opportunity to create new conditions of community, new forms of livelihood and new ways of thinking—a conception that also underlies the theory and practice of unreal estate. Among the many activities, programs and projects that take place at the Center are the Freedom Schooling Project, in which students, parents, teachers and community activists are brought together to discuss and create new models of education; the annual Detroit Summer, in which youth volunteers plant community gardens, paint public murals and participate in inter-generational dialogues with community elders; and the Detroit Asian Youth Project, in which Hmong and other Asian-American youth develop greater



awareness of identity, community and social justice issues. The staff at the Center also lead study groups, to learn from and about those involved in “transforming themselves and Detroit”; monthly conversations to “struggle around theory, vision and ideas, as well as ... ongoing practice”; and tours of Detroit that, in opposition to the prevalent blight tourism, focus on the city as site of activist labor and creative survival.





## Catherine Ferguson Academy

The Catherine Ferguson Academy is an alternative high school for pregnant young women and young mothers on the Westside of Detroit. Named after a freed slave who became an important promoter of education for impoverished children in New York City despite her illiteracy, the Academy allows its students to attend classes and care for their babies and young children in a single environment. Attending to both education and parenting, the Academy is a hybrid institution whose agenda has been transformed by the needs of its students.

[p. 194] As well as teaching a high-school curriculum, parenting, and college preparation skills, the Academy also makes prominent use of an urban farm. The farm is located on the site of property formerly used for high-school sports. The farm was initiated and is overseen by Paul Weertz, the Academy's science teacher, who also organized the farming community on Farnsworth Street. Each student involved in the farm program tends her own plot in a vegetable or flower garden; students also work collectively in fruit orchards, beekeeping, and the raising of chickens, ducks, rabbits, goats and horses. Residents of Farnsworth Street, some of whom also teach at the Academy, raise feed for many of the farm's animals.



As well as reinforcing the teaching of parenting skills, work on the farm yields products such as goat milk, eggs, and honey, as well as fruit and vegetables, all used in the Academy's meal programs. But work on the farm also intersects with many other aspects of students' lives, from the reinforcement of familial traditions of gardening and cooking to the formation of new networks of friendship and community.

In the spring of 2011, as part of a large-scale corporatization of public services in Michigan, the Catherine Ferguson Academy and seven other Detroit-area schools were slated to be closed, along with the sale of 45 other Detroit-area schools to for-profit charter companies. Attempting to process unreal estate into real estate, this proposal represented a typical but wholly dysfunctional response to economic crisis.







## Radical Hospitality

# Block Clubbing

Block clubs exist throughout Detroit; they index the city's low level of municipal services and the corresponding need for city residents to provide those services themselves. They also reflect the high capacity for the self-organization of collective groups in a city where such organization is loosely supervised, if it is officially registered at all.

[p.232] Block clubs often comprise organized systems to watch over neighborhoods where violence is frequent but police surveillance is low. As such, a large part of the block club's work is announcing its presence through signs and other visual media. Block clubs also often function as collective agents of blotting; many vacant lots in neighborhoods with block clubs have been appropriated and used for such collective activities as gardening, barbequing or socializing. The accommodation of these activities by block clubs indicate how these clubs exceed any specific mandate they are formed to carry out and thereby enter into unreal estate speculation.





WELCOME  
TO  
FABULOUS  
GENDER PL  
GREAT PLACE!

# Unsanctioned Collectives

**Temporary Communities  
Do-It-Yourself-Then-Together  
Micropolitanism  
Urban Toeholds**



*The fragile and incomplete infrastructure of unreal estate supports communities whose existence is also fragile and incomplete—temporary communities that coalesce and disperse according to need, desire or circumstance. A temporary community may emerge in response to freedom or necessity; in either case, its location and duration are provisional and often contingent on such imperatives as size of membership, means of affiliation, accumulation of resources, or weather conditions.*

*A straight bar might become queer for a night; a newly mown field might become a gathering place for blues musicians and their audience; an abandoned house might become a haunted house, inhabited by a circus of lost souls. The limited duration of the temporary community allows it to assume a flexible relationship to place and endows it with a nimble ability to take advantage of unreal estate's low or non-existent barriers to occupancy.*

## Temporary Communities

## Temporary Communities

# Dally in the Alley

The Dally in the Alley is an annual community fair held in alleys, backyards and streets in the North Cass neighborhood in Detroit. The event began in 1977 as an inner-city art fair; it has subsequently evolved into a means to temporarily re-program disused and under-used urban space and to leverage that re-programming to support activist community initiatives. In its current form, the Dally includes a variety of recreational activities and events: musical performances, an art fair, and vendors selling crafts and food from tables and tents set up in streets and alleys.

Many of the initiatives supported by the Dally fill gaps left by Detroit's inadequate supply of municipal services: proceeds from the Dally have funded nighttime security in the North Cass neighborhood, a neighborhood soup kitchen, snow plowing in neighborhood alleys, trash pick-up, and the maintenance of a community garden. Other initiatives have been aimed against municipal policies and practices deemed harmful to the community. Most prominently, proceeds from the Dally have supported litigation against the Detroit Trash Incinerator, a waste disposal facility seen as a major cause of air pollution and pollution-related health problems in the city. The Dally thus comprises an adaptive reuse of urban space as a resource for the self-management of a community.







## Theatre Bizarre

Theatre Bizarre was a performance and party venue or “live-event playground” taking place on a complex of adjoining properties in the Highland Park neighborhood. It began when Ken Poiyer, owner of a house on W. State Fair Street and several adjacent vacant lots, offered space to his friend, the artist John Dunivant, for Dunivant’s annual Halloween party. Dunivant had previously used the Russell Industrial Center for the party, building a shanty in the middle of the center and cutting scrub trees from city alleys to fashion a surreal Halloween environment. Poiyer’s proposal enabled Dunivant to build a permanent and more extreme environment for the Halloween party, and then for other live theatre events, as well.

Dunivant conceived of the Theatre Bizarre Halloween party as an abandoned carnival that comes to life once a year in the mind of the fictional serial killer, Jacob Edward Torrent. Guests entered the party following the path that police had to take through Torrent’s maze-like house, accessing the basement and then a tunnel Torrent dug out of a wall and up to the ground in his attempt to escape. Finally entering the party through a clown’s mouth, guests were intended to feel as if they were inside Torrent’s deranged consciousness, an experience that was amplified by costumes some guests worked on all year, as well as by



carnival exhibits like the Fiji Mermaid, Fortune Teller, Scaredy Cat Club and a homemade roller coaster.

As well as being used for public events like the Halloween party, the Stolen Media Festival, and the Squared Circle Review (a burlesque wrestling tournament), the Theatre Bizarre complex was also home to a group of tenants, a combination of Poiyer's family, friends and friends of friends. In 2009, Poiyer purchased two lots across an alley behind his complex, one empty and one with a salvageable house, as well as an adjacent house separated from his property by two burned and abandoned houses. This complex of owned and appropriated land would have enlarged Theatre Bizarre to the size of a city block. In the context of the Theatre, the block's decay would have become not a target of repair but an aesthetically evocative setting for unusual performances, parties and other events—a cultural resource to exploit and exaggerate. A week before the 2010 Halloween party, however, city officials shut down Theatre Bizarre, citing it for a number of code violations—one more instance of the city contributing to its own demise by failing to recognize the possibilities of unreal estate development.







## Detroit Guerrilla Queer Bar

The Detroit Guerrilla Queer Bar is a gay bar that roams through Detroit, each month swarming an existing straight bar for one evening. Members of the group are informed online of the location of the Guerrilla Queer Bar in the days before a swarm is to take place; the bar and its patrons are left uninformed. The result is, initially, confusion, especially when, according to the group's director, "we colonize bars that attract a crowd that is the diametric opposite of ours." After confusion, however, comes the emergence of unusual circumstances in which unprecedented kinds of social interaction can develop, with otherwise-separated individuals and communities mingling in close proximity.

The Guerrilla Queer Bar does not formalize a space for a gay bar. Instead, the dislocation of its members becomes the point of departure for an inventive spatial practice that yields both temporary spaces and temporary communities, each of whose nature is unpredictable and variable. The Guerrilla Queer Bar's disinterest in transforming real estate precisely maps onto its traffic with unreal estate—alternative forms of urban inhabitation. "Part of the fun is not knowing who's who or what's going on": this evocation of a Guerrilla Queer Bar party eloquently registers the type of possibilities that unreal estate opens up.







## Temporary Communities

# John's Carpet House

In the mid 1980s, John Estes built a shed next to his house on the Eastside of Detroit, lined the shed with carpets for sound insulation, and founded an urban juke joint where local blues musicians played during spring, summer and early fall Sunday afternoons. Estes was both a scrapper and a blues musician; what became known as John's Carpet House was based on both of Estes' skills, as well as on the possibility to translate a rural form of public space to Detroit's depleted urban landscape.

After Estes died in 2006, his friend, Pete Barrow, took over John's Carpet House. Several years later, a fire burned down the Carpet House along with Estes' house next door—an event that was far from atypical in the neighborhood. Barrow then moved the Sunday blues performances to the vacant lot across the street, formerly occupied by the Carpet House's audience. On Sundays, Barrow brings a portable generator, mows grass, lays down a single plane of carpet to define a stage, and organizes and deejays performances. The audience of these performances supplies its own chairs and sometimes tables, coolers and barbeques, producing a participatory outdoor juke joint.









## Tashmoo Biergarten

The Tashmoo Biergarten is a pop-up beer garden located on three vacant lots in Detroit's West Village. The lots are owned by a non-profit development company; while they remain undeveloped, a consortium of local residents initiated the beer garden as an interim use that could nimbly convert open space into an urban amenity.

Place and time are consumed along with beer, sausages and pretzels at the beer garden. The beer garden serves up an experience of "locality" by offering beer from Michigan breweries, snacks from local food vendors, and benches and tables constructed of lumber reclaimed from Detroit's demolished buildings. It similarly serves up an experience of "history"; the name "Tashmoo" refers to a Native American word for "meeting place," an amusement park built in the late 19th century on an island in Lake St. Claire, and a famous steamboat that plied Lake St. Claire in the first decades of the 20th century. A house owned by a member of the Tashmoo's crew, demolished in 2011, stood on one of the lots on which the beer garden takes place, thus pinning place and time together.



The community that forms at the beer garden is allied by more or less intense affiliations to the place and time consolidated by the project, but also by more or less intense desires for *somewhere* and *sometime*—longings for spatial and temporal location. The beer garden allows these longings to be symbolically sated, satisfied without a commitment to any particular place and time—satisfied, in other words, by unreal means.





*To do it yourself, rather than to rely on others to do it, is to reclaim responsibility for creating what you need and want, and to even open the possibility of needing or wanting something novel or different. In some form, the do-it-yourselfer is a contemporary changeling, a passive consumer transmuted into an active producer. But this consumer and this producer are solitary, working alone, fitting neatly into the free market's society of disaggregated individuals—a society where the urgency of solidarity is directly proportional to the experience of oppression.*

*There are also places, however, where doing it collectively becomes desirable—where collaborative forms of work and play hover in between exercises of freedom and imperatives of survival. These places occupy unreal estate—property where knowledge, skill and imagination can be exchanged in lieu of money. To collectivize do-it-yourself culture is to transform that culture from an assemblage of individuals to a community of shared interests and blurry relations. These communities are intimate; to do-it-yourself-then-together is to fabricate or rely upon relations of trust, affection, familiarity or solidarity.*

## **Do-It-Yourself-Then-Together**



## Do-It-Yourself-Then-Together

# UFO Factory

The UFO Factory was a self-described “art/design and sound production company, recording studio, art gallery, nite klub, etc...” The three members of the UFO Factory, Davin Brainard, Dion Fischer and Warn Defever, originally met in the late 1990s at Zoot’s Coffee House, in the Cass Corridor. Zoot’s was itself an unreal estate site—a self-avowed social experiment as much as a business, it provided a place for the Cass Corridor’s diverse communities of musicians, artists, poets, freeks and others to meet, mingle and perform experimental music. The UFO Factory, housed in a warehouse near Detroit’s produce market, Eastern Market, furthered such interaction; the UFO Factory provided a venue for both art exhibitions and live music performances, especially by musicians who had played at Zoot’s, Detroit Art Space and other spaces that hosted innovative music.

Members of the UFO Factory were part of some of the noise bands that performed at the Factory, such as Princess Dragonmom, His Name is Alive and Metal Dungeon; they also released noise and experimental music through the Time Stereo label and organized the annual “Noise Camp,” a festival of noise and experimental music hosted at the **Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit**. Some of the art work displayed in exhibitions at the UFO Factory emerged from an intersection of art

[p.268]



and music, including cover art and packaging for cassette tapes, LPs and CDs; posters for concerts; etchings into vinyl; and fanzines that made music when played on a turntable.

The UFO Factory exemplified the capacity of unreal estate to support non-commercial art and music. More importantly, however, it also displayed the ability of unreal estate to blur the boundary between audience, performer and artist and to thereby form new communities of interest in which the do-it-yourself ethic of experimental art and music was extended and collectivized.





## Do-It-Yourself-Then-Together

### Yes Farm

The Yes Farm is an artists' collective in which "art" encompasses a wide range of practices, from the cultivation of community gardens, through the staging of performances with neighborhood children, to the curation of music and dance concerts and open-submission art exhibitions. In the context of these practices, "life" is not a mere support structure for "art," but is, rather, a field which is shaped by art's aesthetic and ideological values.

[p.194] The work of the Yes Farm takes place in a neighborhood that is also a focus of the farming community on Farnsworth Street. "The arts pay an important role in the community," according to the Yes Farm, which thereby seeks "to bring art into the lives of the people and places around us." This belief and goal are distinguished by the small scale of the community that the Yes Farm attempts to foster: a community centered on and around the unique block where the Yes Farm is located.

In the frame of the Yes Farm's *intimate community*, the dynamics that are valued in the free market economy—publicity, accumulation, development and, most especially, growth—are thrown into question. Eschewing both these values and the systems from which these values



emerge, the Yes Farm's relationship to its social context is subtly but decisively different from other community-based art practices in Detroit. The Yes Farm is not a community-building project that regards an existing community as somehow flawed or inadequate and that invokes some other, seemingly superior community-yet-to-come. Instead, it positions itself in an existing community and seeks to find opportunities and possibilities to work within that community on its own terms. This project is based on a radical acceptance of existing conditions and a radical suspension of programs to "improve" the lives of others, whether by art or any other means.







*The city of unreal estate is punctuated by havens, pockets, isolated islands, narrow interstices. These are the micropolitan worlds of intentional or impulsive collectives: urban farmers clustered on a city block, a subculture thriving at the tail of a dead-ended street, a complex of houses sheltering immigrants from the city of real estate.*

*Are other worlds possible? The wish for such worlds is insistent, but evidence of them is fugitive. A micropolitan enclave is a place that might also comprise a world, a world worth wanting at a downsized scale. The inhabitation of these worlds is not at all revolutionary; the micropolitan enclave offers a place not to wait for revolution, or even want revolution, but to withdraw from that particular state of affairs that passes for objective reality: to refuse, to differ, to disappear, to live otherwise.*

# Micropolitanism

## Micropolitanism

### Farnsworth Street

[p.150] In the mid 1980s, Paul Weertz, a science teacher at the Catherine Ferguson Academy, bought a number of houses on a single block of Farnsworth Street, on Detroit's depopulated and decaying Eastside. Weertz renovated one house for his family and rented out other houses on the block. He also began to farm vacant land on and around the block, on both property that he owned and property that he appropriated. Over time, other people involved in urban farming have moved to his block on Farnsworth Street, including collectives like [p.188] the Yes Farm. The block is currently the site of a number of gardens, an orchard, and a population of people who farm around the area—a micropolitan urban enclave. These farms yield alfalfa and hay, fruit and vegetables, honey, eggs and goat's milk, among other products. The alfalfa and hay are used to feed animals at the Catherine Ferguson Academy, where a number of the blocks' residents work, while other farm products are consumed by the farmers and their community.

The development of an urban farming community on Farnsworth Street would be impossible without the availability of unreal estate on and around that street, not only for farming but also for the accommodation of farmers in close proximity. But few, if any, of these farmers are *only* farmers; Farnsworth Street is a *grassroots*



*live-work-play* community whose diverse members exchange skills and interests and are thus able to participate in hybridized forms of cross-activism, with guerilla farmers, artists, musicians and bicycle repairers often merging projects and involvements.





## Micropolitanism

# Fourth Street

In the 1950s, the construction of the campus of Wayne State University and then Interstate Highway 94 destroyed most of Fourth Street, a long street running north and south on Detroit's Westside. A tiny one-block-long section of the street was preserved, however, isolated just behind Highway 94. In the 1960s, this block became a haven for artists, musicians and activists, many of whom were involved in the Cass Corridor counterculture. The block has remained an *intentional urban community* that occupies a small but complex structure of public and private spaces.

On Fourth Street, these spaces are tightly enmeshed with one another, so that both "private spaces" like front porches and "public spaces" like vacant lots function as living and dining rooms for the street's residents. Vacant lots on and around the street have thus become spaces for community gardens, fire circle, picnic table, volleyball court, chess games and dog park. The residents of Fourth Street also host an annual street fair that celebrates Detroit culture through the participation of local musicians, local artists and local producers of food and merchandise.



The isolation and fragmentation of Fourth Street are crucial to the community that has developed and evolved on the street; the physical separation of Fourth Street from its urban context has allowed its residents to organize themselves and their environment. The Fourth Street community, then, is able to support values, ideals and practices that diverge from the communities around it.







## Micropolitanism

# Trumbullplex

Trumbullplex is an anarchist-oriented collective house and performance and exhibition space. Its original five members purchased a complex of two houses and studio space that had a long history in Detroit's artistic counterculture. The sculptor and painter, Arthur Wenk, member of the activist artists' collective, Common Ground, purchased the complex in the late 1960s, converting what was an armory into an artist studio and occupying a floor of one of the houses. In the late 1970s, the complex was bought and sold several times, the last time to theatre director, Peter Malette. Malette had a stage and sound booth built in the former studio space, which he then used for community theatre productions. Malette, in turn, sold the property to an anarchist group in 1993 for the almost symbolic price of \$2,500.

The members of Trumbullplex share in household duties, make all decisions and agendas on the basis of consensus agreement, and practice an *impulsive collectivity* in which group activities are less enforced than improvised. Trumbullplex also hosts a variety of activities that critically engage with Detroit, with its public space providing a venue for art exhibitions, concerts, film screenings and theatre performances, each funded only by voluntary donations. In addition, Trumbullplex houses the Idle Kids Zine Library, an extensive



collection of zines and activist literature that was compiled at the now-closed Idle Kids Books and Records Shop in the Cass Corridor. Members of Trumbullplex cultivate community gardens both on their own property and on adjacent appropriated property; many members are also involved in the Earthworks Urban Farm, the Catherine Ferguson Academy and other urban agriculture ventures, as well as The Hub, a Cass Corridor cycling non-profit.

[p.40]

[p.150]

The contributions that members of Trumbullplex make to the city, both individually and collectively, are enabled and intensified by the physical location of the group on unreal estate—a site whose occupation is not economically constrained and so one that allows the attention and energy of its occupants to be directed outwards, with precise intentionality and heightened effect.

LISTENER

DIY PLAY  
OLD TIME MUSIC  
BASEMENT UNICORN  
SHADO'V PUPPET SHOW  
CASY + BRIAN - 12



WHY I  
BE CA  
TERRA  
ZOA  
CARA & IM  
Trumbu

FRIDAY  
JULY 31  
Night Owl  
Jeffrey William Thomas  
BEE KEEPER'S  
TRUMBULL PLEX THEATRE  
4210 TRUMBULL ST. DETROIT, MI





08



*To relinquish the thought that the city is already understood is to open the city to curiosity, scrutiny, description and interpretation. The city becomes enigmatic, uninhabited by received ideas and uncultivated by conventional thought. The urban wilderness—a typical figure for the city of unreal estate—can be investigated from a station. This station is a neighborhood outpost, a toehold on the quotidian of others, a residency for those wishing to learn more about the city.*

*What can a stranger know? Temporary resident of an urban toehold, a stranger can never know what residents of the neighborhood around that toehold know. The knowledge assimilated while in residence at the toehold, however, is not less than local knowledge as much as different than this knowledge: another apprehension of the city, with its own particular uses and values.*

## Urban Toeholds



## Center for Creative eXchange

The Center for Creative eXchange was envisioned by its founder, Phaedra Robinson, as a conduit for “creative energy” to flow into and out of Detroit. The physical location of the center was a burned-out house in the Woodbridge neighborhood, purchased by Robinson from the City of Detroit. The house was to serve as a venue for exhibitions and performances, community gardening and recycling, and residencies for artists and writers. These activities were to develop synergistically: gardens would provide food to nourish resident artists and writers; these artists and writers would create exhibitions and performances and/or assist in the rehabilitation of the center’s building; visitors to the center would sponsor work by its resident artists and writers, and so on. During the reconstruction of the physical space in which it was housed, the center also sponsored events such as a “Gallery Bike Crawl,” in which visitors rode a route connecting art studios and galleries in and near downtown Detroit.

While the programs envisioned by the center were to function synergistically, these programs also comprised an assemblage of *post-industrial urban therapies*, each seeking to re-vision the possibilities inherent in Detroit’s conditions of disinvestment and depopulation. This re-visioning framed Detroit not as a crisis or disaster, but as a



context for new kinds of creative production and exchange. In 2009, the building that housed the center was put up for sale; this building then re-entered Detroit's landscape of empty houses and became available for other uses, licit or illicit, reactionary or progressive, therapeutic or dangerous.

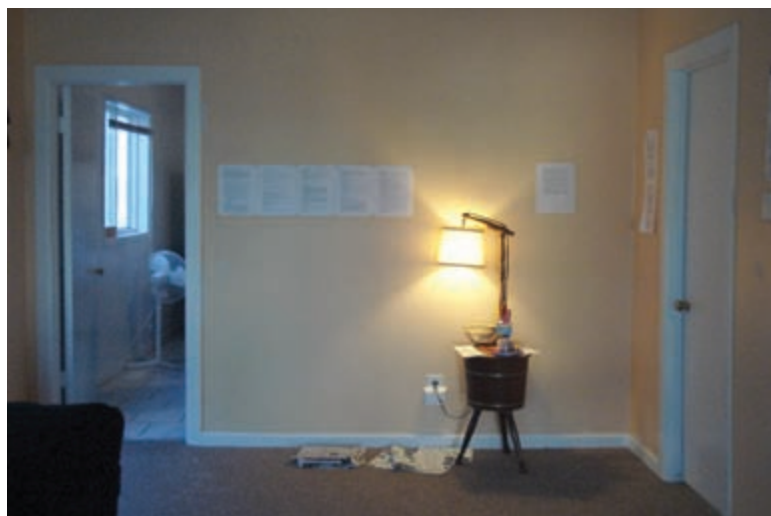




## Filter Detroit

[p.246] Filter Detroit is a guest residence for artists and researchers sited  
[p.242] in a house in North Hamtramck, across the street from the Power House and blocks away from the Full Scale Design Lab. The project was initiated by Kerstin Niemann, a Hamburg-based curator who, as a guest curator with the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, worked on the “Heartland” exhibition about innovative artistic production in the American Midwest. Filter Detroit is an attempt to further this production by providing a place for information and inspiration to be exchanged between “artists, visionaries and thinkers from the region as well as the outside.” It is also an attempt to direct creative thought specifically toward urban initiatives, with Detroit considered as both a place of challenge and opportunity.

As well as providing a physical site for exchange to take place, Filter Detroit intends to comprise a “living archive” where knowledge about alternative urban initiatives in Detroit is deposited and consolidated. As such, the project intends to institutionalize a process that otherwise occurs in a more-or-less unplanned and decentralized manner.









## Urban Toeholds

# Ego Circus

Ego Circus is an invitation-only residency for artists and architects in Hamtramck. The residency is sited in a house purchased in 2008 by an anonymous group of recent graduates of the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Unlike perhaps every other residency program in Detroit, Ego Circus explicitly extricates itself from the businesses of “saving the neighborhood,” “building the community,” or providing another sort of social service through art and architecture. Rather, Ego Circus informs its residents that they are free to experiment in their medium without fulfilling any putative social function—a freedom that is permitted, according to Ego Circus, by the vast oversupply of houses in the depopulated city of Detroit.

The stated backgrounding of art and architecture as social practices of course renders the precise social status of art and architecture as fraught—far more fraught than when there is a tacit agreement on the social valence of these disciplines. The freedom to experiment in and on the house where Ego Circus is based has thus yielded a series of anxious meditations on the ambitions, achievements and evaluative criteria of artistic and architectural research.



These meditations have almost all taken the form of site-specific interventions in the Ego Circus house, interventions that become mere raw material for alteration when a subsequent cohort of residents arrive. The work that Ego Circus fosters, then, leaves no lasting trace, except in photographic documentation; autonomous artistic and architectural research is performed on the remains of autonomous artistic and architectural research. “No-one was harmed in the making of this work,” Ego Circus announces at its exhibitions—but this is a claim that could also be understood to poignantly contradict its intention to liberate art and architecture from social responsibility.





# Unsolicited Constructions

**Accidental Architecture  
Extreme Housework  
Scavenged Space  
Patrimony of the Unlost**

*If architecture is, among other things, an ensemble of concepts and practices that regulate the fabrication of buildings, then architecture could be bracketed before buildings are constructed or reconstructed. This bracketing might comprise a metropolitan form of "architecture without architects"—a kind of building usually discovered on the fringes of global modernity.*

*Modernity, however, is fringed both from within and without; it is fissured, hollowed out in places, riven by gaps. Its uneven distribution creates situations where architecture can be left behind, leaving merely space, volume and ground in its place. The juxtapositions and intersections that ensue are incongruous and gorgeous, violent and absurd. To discover these architectural accidents is to recognize the sublime force of circumstance: the innovation that happens when the attempt to make something happen is surrendered or ignored.*

## Accidental Architecture



## Michigan Building Parking Garage

The Michigan Building was opened in 1925 in downtown Detroit. It originally contained a block of offices and the “French Renaissance” style Michigan Theatre. The Michigan Theatre contained a large auditorium with over 4,000 seats, an intricately detailed proscenium, mezzanine, roof, balconies and lobby, and stage with Wurlitzer organ and orchestra pit. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, as a result of declining audiences and the more general decline of downtown Detroit, the theater was transformed into a movie palace, pornographic film venue, supper club and rock concert venue; none of these ventures proved profitable and the last of several interim closures took place in 1976. At the same time, tenants in the office block adjacent to the theater demanded “secure parking” from the owners of the Michigan Building. The owners proposed to demolish the unused theater and replace it with a parking garage; due to structural conditions, however, the theater could not be demolished without threatening the adjacent office block. A solution was then improvised; a three level steel and concrete parking structure was inserted into the theater’s empty shell, leaving much of the theater’s original architecture intact.



The inadvertent result of the transformation of the theater into a parking garage is a space of enormous aesthetic effect and historical resonance. This effect and resonance emerged not because the theater was valued as a work of architecture or historic monument, but precisely because it was *not* valued as such. For the owners of the Michigan Building, the theater comprised merely valueless empty space; this perception of emptiness yielded an act of *accidental preservation* whose formal and historical properties diverge from, and perhaps exceed, any deliberately conceived work of heritage conservation.





## Peacemakers International

Peacemakers International is a Christian ministry located in a group of buildings in a disadvantaged neighborhood on Detroit's Eastside. For Peacemakers, this neighborhood provides a field of opportunity to engage with the "many precious souls who lie in this vast inner city wasteland, waiting to be rescued by the blood of Jesus Christ and rescued from Satan's capacity." Poverty, that is, provides conditions to Peacemakers that are particularly conducive to missionary work—the loss of economic value of property in its neighborhood produces the possibility to cultivate otherwise-inaccessible spiritual values.

The community activities of Peacemakers include church services, prayer meetings, a soup kitchen open for breakfast and lunch three times a week, and the hosting of activities for neighborhood children. Members of the Peacemakers ministry live and work in several adjacent buildings. Much of the work of these members is focused on urban agriculture, with gardens both inside and around abandoned buildings providing produce for the soup kitchen and sale to a commercial vendor, as well. The ministry's gardens inside a roofless and otherwise empty building comprise a remarkable example of unreal estate; the gardens are made possible by the evacuation of all architectural value from the building and the subsequent emergence of the building's footprint as its only resource for development.









## Blotting

The many vacant lots in Detroit allow both new sorts of public uses and new forms of private dwelling. One form of the latter takes place when homeowners appropriate, borrow or purchase vacant lots adjacent to their property and expand that property to a new, larger size. This expansion produces what the design studio, Interboro Partners, has termed “blots”—a hybrid urban space that functions as both a “block” and a “lot.”

Blotting emerged as a grassroots form of residential property development. Since the early 2000s, however, the City of Detroit has officially sponsored blotting by selling vacant lots under city ownership to adjacent homeowners or other neighborhood residents for nominal prices (\$150 to \$500) and by allowing vacant lots to be used for gardens under the Adopt-A-Lot program. This sponsorship reflects the municipal utility of blotting as an occupation of otherwise abandoned urban space.

Blots have been used by homeowners in a variety of ways, from parking cars, through gardening, to simply enlarging front or back yards. While these uses are not at all radical in themselves, the process by which



these uses take place is specific to cities of unreal estate like Detroit. In these cities, the creation of blots transforms empty space that is valueless to its formal owner (typically the city, county or state) to space endowed with new values by new users or owners.





*Where there is a surplus of houses, the house is available for extreme housework. This work takes the house as something that can be taken apart—carved up, tricked out, faked, parodied, re-assembled or given over to hitherto undomesticated needs and desires. Extreme housework is dedicated, then, not to house cleaning or home maintenance but to passionately rendering the house anew.*

*In the city of unreal estate, there is a great deal of this housework left to be done, but there is also a great deal of time in which to do this work. No one waits for extreme housework to be completed so that no one is bothered by its deferral. Abandoned houses spread slowly across the city's depleted terrain. Once in a while, extreme housework will transform one of these houses into something else, but something that satisfies no need for comfort or shelter. The need is for something different: what estranges the days, what beguiles the city, what renders architecture unfamiliar to itself.*

## Extreme Housework

## Detroit Industrial Gallery

[p.286]

The Detroit Industrial Gallery is a house/urban art work in the midst of the Heidelberg Project. Its creator, the artist Tim Burke, purchased a piece of property on the Heidelberg Project's block and then re-purposed an existing house as a work of art. Greatly indebted to the Heidelberg Project, Burke collects and exhibits abandoned objects on and around his house's walls and grounds.

The aesthetic effect of the Detroit Industrial Gallery is far less vivid than that of the Heidelberg Project—it is at once derivative of its precedent but also devoid of that precedent's discomfiting conjoining of mourning and celebration. Yet the Detroit Industrial Gallery was endowed with entirely new levels of meaning and import when, in the spring of 2009, Burke introduced the project to the market economy by placing a "For Sale" sign on his front door. The sign announced an asking price of \$1,000,000,000 dollars; simultaneously, Burke listed the Detroit Industrial Gallery on eBay, asking for a starting bid of \$500,000 dollars.

Describing his thoughts on putting his house up for sale, Burke wrote in his blog, "Why not stimulate the Detroit real estate market? Let's get things moving in Detroit again!" Thus, precisely the imperatives of the



market economy that many artists of urban renewal explicitly attempt to refuse (“we’re not in this to make any money...”) became the objects of Burke’s engagement. This engagement, however, was an overt over-identification in which the market was neither an object of denial nor an instrument of exploitation, but rather a site of play. For sale, whether for \$500,000 or \$1,000,000,000, the Detroit Industrial Gallery was endowed with a value that was wholly unreal—an endowment that, in turn, raised questions about the reality of values that the market economy so routinely fabricates.







Extreme Housework

## Full Scale Design Lab

[p.246]

Occupying a fire-damaged North Hamtramck house owned by Power House co-owner, Mitch Cope, the Full Scale Design Lab was a platform for experimental architectural alterations. The members of the Lab were fellows in the Architecture Program at the University of Michigan. Taking advantage of the house's position outside the market economy, the Lab apprehended the house as site on which to conduct "full scale" architectural experiments that would be precluded anywhere architecture possessed value as real estate.

The experiments were formal interventions that were tied to loosely defined or experiential programs. One intervention took the form of a movable room that could be pushed outside the house, where it would offer entry to the house; another illuminated the house's windowless garage with one thousand glass tubes inserted into the garage's wood-frame walls; still another created a new wedge-shaped room, with bleacher seating and a skylight, within the house's existing volume.

Approaching the house primarily as form, the work of the Lab extended a venerable tradition of architectural thinking and making. This tradition has been focused on the disciplinary and professional possibilities of architecture. Detroit's unreal estate offers a plenitude



of sites where such possibilities can be explored. At the same time, the concept of unreal estate also discloses the horizons of thinking about architecture as a discipline or profession; architecture in the city of unreal estate is often authored without architects, on the basis of forms of knowledge exterior and irrelevant to architecture-as-such.





## Extreme Housework

# Power House

The Power House is a self-styled “social art project” taking form through the renovation of a damaged house in North Hamtramck. Conducted by Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert, who together comprise the art/design group, Design 99, the renovation is intended to yield not only a model home but also a site of neighborhood interaction, a catalyst for new ideas about community-building, and a stimulus for new social networks. Based on these intentions, Cope and Reichert pose their interventions at the Power House as components of a “crude performance,” a process at once artistic, architectural and social, that is the fundamental work of the project.

The focus on the process of the Power House’s renovation, rather than on the product that is the outcome of this process, gives the project a unique architectural temporality. While speed is valued in market-based renovations, slowness is valued at the Power House; *slow building* allows each intervention to be considered on its own terms, resourced by unique or found materials, and carried out with attention to its performative dimension.

As one of the most widely known urban art projects in Detroit, the Power House has also consolidated an audience far beyond its



immediate neighborhood, an effect perhaps unanticipated but one that has introduced a highly-salient dimension to the project's performative status. Serving as a reference for many different ideas of artistic agency in post-industrial Detroit, the Power House has become a kind of icon of unreal estate, a figure for an entire range of creative possibilities emerging from Detroit's decline. The Power House project has also come to include the support of other projects that animate vacant homes by various sorts of artistic or cultural ambitions; these projects, all in the Power House's neighborhood, include Filter Detroit and the Full Scale Design Lab.

[p.212]

[p.242]







*The city of unreal estate is a city of apparent vacancy, emptiness and abandonment. And yet, to a gaze that sees not much left, what's left over assumes new significance. Remnants, traces, bits and pieces, odds and ends: all these can assume a newly vivid materiality and accommodate a newly expanded set of use values.*

*Some of this leftover detritus is spatial. Down an alley, in a garage, parties are thrown on spring and summer evenings; in a vacant lot, a crowd gathers to watch a performance; in a former union hall, in a city with less and less unionized work, music is made and played. Spaces empty out, lie abandoned, and are then re-discovered. These re-discoveries may in turn be discovered as scavengers of events, pastimes, and entertainments come across them.*

## Scavenged Space

## Scavenged Space

# Alley Culture

Alley Culture is a gallery in a converted garage behind a house in the Woodbridge neighborhood of Detroit. The gallery displays works by contemporary artists on exposed wood-frame walls, with visitors kept warm in the winter by a wood-burning stove. The hidden urban setting and unfinished architectural form of Alley Culture correspond to the gallery's alternative curatorial program, described by its founders as "a cross-pollination of politics, geography and generations." This cross-pollination is made manifest in Alley Culture's hybrid status as both an exhibition space and a community meeting place. "The Art World is not to be differentiated from the Hood": this claim, set out on the gallery's website, is central to both Alley Culture's location and work.

One of the founders of Alley Culture, the artist Sherry Hendrick, was a member of a Manhattan-based art group Collaborative Projects (Colab), which was dedicated to collaboration both between the members of the group and between the group and the public. During its lifetime in the 1980s, Collaborative Projects organized many of Manhattan's politically progressive artists and exploited the availability of under-used or unused property in the city.



Alley Culture translates the ambitions of Collaborative Projects to Detroit and to Detroit's specific conditions, challenges and possibilities. As well as hosting curated exhibitions, Alley Culture also organizes "Voice of the People" exhibitions, determined by artists who choose to participate in them; annual seed exchanges, where locally grown organic seeds are distributed; occasional showings of alternative films; and a web-based listing of local shops and services. This complex mix of activities is focused by the gallery's interest in sustaining neighborhood and urban culture and resisting the homogenizing forces of conventional urban "development."





ALLEY  
CULTURE



## Crafikjam Alleys

The Crafikjam Alleys are a series of alleys in a section of Southwest Detroit where home owners have allowed their garages to be graffitied by neighborhood youth. These youth were brought into an urban art program, “Crafikjam,” by the neighborhood organization, Young Nation. In this program, urban art, and, in particular, graffiti, is used as an entry-point into a pedagogy of drawing, painting and “community responsibility”—an obligation to maintain the quality of life in a neighborhood. Program participants are given material to paint garages; they are also conscripted to remove “non-permissive graffiti” on other buildings in the neighborhood.

The division of graffiti into “permitted” and “non-permitted” forms, the division of buildings into acceptable and unacceptable sites for graffiti, and the top-down formation of a socially responsible graffiti crew represent attempts to simultaneously encourage and domesticate personal expression. At the same time, however, the Crafikjam Alleys supercede the limits of the program that produced them; it is not only the product of an attempt to corral graffiti into socially acceptable forms, practices and spaces, but also a novel transformation of one part of the single-family home into a publicly available site of expressive creativity.







## Scavenged Space

### The Lot

The Lot was an outdoor exhibition venue founded by Kathy Leisen. Originally located in North Corktown, next door to Leisen's house, The Lot consisted of two empty house plots. According to Leisen, exhibitions in this space were "designed to challenge the way we think about the context of art, community, and dialogue by highlighting the value and joy of experimentation." This mission was accomplished by opening The Lot to "a diversity of local, national, and international artists, both emerging and established artists, writers, waitresses, taxi drivers, hair stylists, athletes, office assistants, historians, dental hygienists, and pop singers"—in other words, to a range of communities, whether existing, possible or imagined. If The Lot was a community-building project, then this building was not a reconstruction of an already-extant community identified with the already-extant topography of a neighborhood. Rather, "community" was here an object to investigate, re-think and design, as well as something that could transcend its customary "local" limits.

The conversion of crab grass covered vacant lots into a venue for art was accomplished by almost no physical transformation of the site; only freestanding letters spelling "The Lot" identified the site. After two years, The Lot became a nomadic exhibition venue, temporarily



occupying other vacant lots in Detroit, again identified only by freestanding letters. The Lot's spatialization, then, was primarily conceptual, based on an understanding of vacancy not as a problem to fix but an opportunity to exploit; "site-specificity" here became an appreciation of what is absent from a site, as well as what is present.







## Submerge

Submerge is the major production and distribution company for electronic music in Detroit. For Mike Banks, the company's co-founder, this music possesses vital cultural and political agencies in the post-industrial city—a place where predominantly African-American populations are “bombarded by audio and visual stereotypes that are essentially a guide for failure.” Banks thereby creates and curates music as part of an “ongoing Electronic Warfare with the programmers who seek to contain our minds.”

Detroit techno—the city's particular version of electronic music—is not only characterized by its layered sound, fast tempo, and engagement with funk music, but also by its mode of production. Many early techno musicians chose to found their own independent labels, giving them ownership and control of their work, but also many administrative challenges. In the late 1980s, Submerge was co-founded by Banks, then part of the music collective, Underground Resistance, and Christa Weatherspoon; it was intended as a platform to support independent music collectives in Detroit, allowing them to share business services and know-how so that they could distribute their work most effectively.



In 2002, Submerge completed the renovation of a former laundry workers union hall into a new building to replace its former “appointment-only” headquarters. This new building includes a series of venues to complement those of the club, where the public most often encounters dance music: “Exhibit: 3000,” a museum dedicated to preserving the history of Detroit electronic music; “Somewhere in Detroit,” a record store and meeting place for electronic music listeners; and the “Metroplex Room,” a space for film screenings, exhibitions, discussions, seminars and parties.

With its variety of spaces and programs, the Submerge building allows music to not only be produced and consumed, but also imagined, experienced, archived, studied and discussed—each an activity that is capable of releasing music’s activist force. According to Banks, “by using the untapped energy potential of sound we are going to destroy this wall (between races) in much the same way as certain frequencies shatter glass”; unreal estate makes urban space available for this, and other, counter-hegemonic projects.

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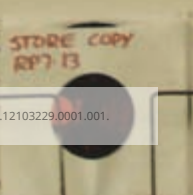
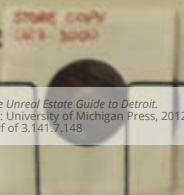
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IN DETROIT THANKS 4 Everything  
You guys really made a difference  
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## Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit

The Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit was founded in 1979 by Detroit-based artists Charles McGee and Jean Hielbrunn. Its founding was a response to Detroit's condition as a place where contemporary art was intensively produced, but also where public venues for exhibiting this art were lacking. While the institutionalization of art often implies a stifling of creativity, initiative and vision, the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit assayed a *critical institutionalization*, a deployment of institutionality against the grain by a self-organized artists' collective dedicated to the production of new connections between art and community.

For its first twenty-five years of existence, the Institute functioned nomadically, organizing and curating exhibitions and installations at a series of public sites throughout Detroit. In 2004, the Institute took over a building that was occupied by Detroit Contemporary, a gallery in operation from 1998 to 2003 that was co-founded by artists Aaron Timlin and Phaedra Robinson, founder of the Center for Creative eXchange.

[p.208]



The Detroit Contemporary building, owned by Timlin, was a formerly abandoned house sited amidst many vacant lots in the Woodbridge neighborhood. Located in this building, the Institute has been able to greatly broaden its activities, curating not only a regular series of art exhibitions but also a variety of music, dance, and other performance-based events, many of them organized by community groups. At the same time, the location of the Institute in a fraught urban site where “art,” contemporary or otherwise, appears to be fugitive or absent has only heightened the tendentious nature of the Institute’s own institutionality.







*With their caretakers frequently preoccupied with immediate tasks of survival, objects in the city of unreal estate are often left behind, disowned or abandoned. Precisely as such, however, these objects offer themselves for repossession, for becoming strange in new hands.*

*Yet it's not only objects that are lost in the city of unreal estate, but also identities, ambitions and plans of action; the city alienates both objects from subjects and subjects from themselves. Thus, the finders of lost objects can also, as it is said, "find themselves." Accumulating and arranging castoffs and discards, they become caretakers, curators, or outsider artists, claiming unreal estate to archive and arrange unreal estate's particular material culture.*

## Patrimony of the Unlost

## Hamtramck Disneyland

In 1990, a Ukrainian emigrant and retired General Motors autoworker named Dmytro Szylak began to scavenge abandoned objects from the streets of Hamtramck and to assemble those objects on and around two garages he owned. The objects he assembled were the detritus of middle-class American popular culture: bicycle wheels, toy dolls, pots of artificial flowers, model airplanes, Christmas lights, Elvis paintings, wooden soldiers, flags and signs. Reversing the regimented labor of the Fordist assembly line, Szylak's assemblage is ad hoc, unplanned and accretive; pieces are added, one by one, to a work that is constantly in flux.

Amid criticism from his neighbors in the early 1990s, Szylak's self-titled "Ukraine and Amerika Disneyland" was termed "art" by the then-mayor of Hamtramck, who himself studied sculpture at the nearby Cranbrook Academy of Fine Art. As a work of art, the project was protected by the City of Hamtramck from demolition. In the years since, what has become known as Hamtramck Disneyland has continued to grow and develop.



[p.286] Unlike Detroit's best-known example of an urban found-art environment, Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project, Hamtramck Disneyland is not posed by its author as a means of "healing communities through art." Indeed, Hamtramck Disneyland is not scripted as anything except "art"; it is only described by a sign that reads "Welcome to Art Show" and copies of newspaper articles about the project that are displayed, under transparent plastic, amid the project's many other bits and pieces. The project's intentions and meanings are left undefined, and thus, left to its audience to decipher, or not.





## Patrimony of the Unlost

# Car Wash Café

The Car Wash Café was an open-air auto storage facility/party venue/barbeque garden/personal museum operating on the site of a former car wash and café. Larry Meeks, the owner of the site, also owned a nearby auto styling salon. Meeks purchased the site of the Car Wash Café to use as a storage facility for cars that he was in the process of repairing. He introduced a car wash that employed teenagers from the surrounding neighborhood and, when customers of the car wash and neighborhood residents began to congregate at the car wash, opened an ice-cream stand to provide refreshments and a place to spend time. The stand eventually became a sit-down café, which spilled over into the adjacent auto storage facility, sponsoring the transformation of the latter into a barbeque garden. The explicit programming of the site was complemented by its use as a space to display the objects that Meeks collected, which comprised a rich cross-section of auto-related urban ephemera: cars, car parts, gas pumps, signal lights, roadside signs and so on.

Meek's ability to utilize his urban site without concern for profit making allowed its functions to emerge and transform over the course of time through a series of *improvisational programs*. Moreover, these programs, and the equipment that supported them, were themselves



collected in the Car Wash Café, so that the site also served as a museum of its own history. The signs and advertisements that filled the site publicized not a current reality, but layers of the past—a historical project that was all the more powerful by not being marked as such. The Car Wash Café was, at once, abandoned, completed, musealized and waiting to re-open for the next party.







## Patrimony of the Unlost

# African Bead Museum

The African Bead Museum was founded by artist and curator Olayame Dabls as a repository of the African culture that many African Americans have been separated from, first by slavery and then by other forms of social, cultural and political oppression. The museum collects and displays African beads along with sculpture, textiles, pottery, metalwork and other African material culture. The museum preserves a cultural patrimony for its potential heirs, yet it also actively reappropriates that patrimony as a resource for contemporary cultural production.

For twenty years before the museum was founded, Dabls assembled its collection in the context of a bead gallery; the gallery moved nomadically through Detroit, occupying the Book Tower, Trapper's Alley and the David Whitney Building in turn. In 1994, Dabls founded the museum and in 1998 he moved it into a large building, donated to him, on Detroit's near Westside. This building also came to house American Black Artists, an organization founded by Leno Jaxon, first director of the Charles Wright Museum of African American History, where Dabls had worked as a curator.



Dabls surfaced the exterior walls of the museum in broken mirrors, paintings and painted wood, an assemblage of materials and forms that draws from and transforms various African architectural traditions. In 2008, Dabls was given another building adjacent to the museum; told by city authorities that this building had to be closed until it was restored, Dabls re-purposed the building's closure by surfacing the building with mirrors, woods and paint and framing it as a Congolese fetish object, or N'kisi, endowed with powers to both sicken and heal.

Between the museum and N'kisi, in a space formerly used to dump debris, Dabls also built a series of installations out of debris and other found objects. The largest installation, entitled "Iron Teaching Rocks to Rust," is a *material narrative* about the historical process of Europeanization that African slaves and their descendents were compelled to undergo. Here, as on the walls of the museum and N'kisi, Dabls has appropriated unutilized urban property as a place of memory, mourning and cultural reclamation.



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Patrimony of the Unlost  
**Heidelberg Project**

At the Heidelberg Project, artist Tyree Guyton appropriates abandoned houses and vacant lots on Detroit's Eastside as sites for the display of made and found objects. Guyton, who grew up in a house on a block of Heidelberg Street, collects and exhibits objects from the detritus he finds in and around his neighborhood: stuffed animals, vacuum cleaners, television sets, shoes, hubcaps, telephones and other items of domestic urban life. According to Guyton, the project's original agenda emerged as a defamiliarization of what was conventionally perceived to be mere garbage: "there was no plan and no blueprint, just the will and determination to see beauty in the refuse." The waste objects of this *oppositional aestheticization* are carefully curated, arrayed on empty lots or hung from the walls of abandoned houses or trees. These objects are often decorated with colored polka dots, which also adorn houses, cars, trees and street surfaces on and around the site of the project.

The Heidelberg Project appropriates both abandoned objects and abandoned property. The latter appropriation could also be framed as "squatting," or illegal occupation, and the City of Detroit has twice destroyed parts of the project, in 1991 and 1999, in response to protests from local community organizations.



These protests contradicted, to some degree, Cuyton's expressed intention "to improve lives and neighborhoods through art." Yet, what and where is "the community?" Who can legitimately speak on behalf of the community? Who is able to listen to the community? How can art benefit the community? The Heidelberg Project raises these complex questions without providing simple answers in response, a provocation particularly suited to unreal estate and one that may yet comprise the project's most profound social effect.







## Glossary

**Active Neglect:** the deliberate withholding of investment and other resources from Detroit's predominantly African-American neighborhoods on the part of both business and government, especially in the post-World War II decades, as a result of both structural racism and economic restructuring; a causal factor in the production of unreal estate. Reference: Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

**Blight Tourism:** tourism focused on derelict buildings, abandoned neighborhoods and other apparent signs of urban blight, the putative products of Detroitification; a conventional means of misapprehending unreal estate.

**Blots:** from "block" and "lot," the space formed by the expansion of a single-family house lot into an adjacent abandoned lot; the building block of new suburbanism. Reference: Tobias Arnborst, Daniel D'Oca and Georgeen Theodore, "Improve Your Lot!" in *Cities Growing Smaller*, 1 (2008), 45-64.

**Cass Corridor:** inner-city neighborhood adjacent to Wayne State University and bisected by Cass Avenue; a site of vibrant art-making and art-exhibiting scenes and related countercultural activities from the 1960s through 80s; a preliminary site of unreal estate speculation.

**Charrette:** an event at which architects and urban planners come to Detroit and, in consultation with local stakeholders typically drawn from business, government and community organizations, labor intensively over a short period of time in a securitized workplace to produce design proposals for large-scale municipal development; a means for architects and planners to engage with unreal estate as empty space.

**Crackhead-to-Artist Ratio:** statistic used to evaluate the progress of gentrification, either in the context of celebrating gentrification or protesting against it.

**Creative Class:** from liberal perspectives, a socioeconomic population whose work privileges creativity and innovation and drives urban economic

development; from radical perspectives, an objective abstraction that is used to legitimize neoliberal economic restructuring, gentrification and other forms of violence against the urban poor and disenfranchised.

**Deconstruction:** the disassembly of buildings slated for destruction in order to preserve and recycle their components; an alternative to demolition and demolitionism.

**Demolitionism:** Detroit's official model of urban renewal which proceeds through demolition as opposed to construction or deconstruction; especially apparent in Detroit's Central Business District, where many abandoned buildings have been demolished to make way for parking lots. See parking empire.

**Desire Line** (also "desire path" and "social trail"): path created by foot-traffic across a field, usually the shortest distance between a point of departure and destination; in Detroit, a common feature on supposedly "vacant" lots. Reference: Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) and Jim Griffioen, "Streets With No Name," [http://www.sweetjuniper](http://www.sweetjuniper.com/2009/06/streets-with-no-name.html)

[.com/2009/06/streets-with-no-name.html](http://www.sweetjuniper.com/2009/06/streets-with-no-name.html).

**Detro:** from "SoHo" and "Detroit," a potential product of artist-led gentrification in Detroit, along the lines of New York's SoHo, imagined by some artists and their supporters; criticized from anti-gentrification perspectives as foreclosing on the cultural, social and political possibilities emerging from capitalist underdevelopment. Reference: Andrew Herscher, "From SoHo to Detro?" *Detroit Free Press*, April 1, 2009.

**Detroit Dacha:** from the Russian "dacha" (second home located in a rural area); a home on an otherwise abandoned block that avails itself of that block's landscape, solitude and other qualities and thereby complicates narratives of urban decline or ruin.

**Detroitification:** massive urban decline, on the order of the process that is conventionally understood to have taken place in Detroit; a perception of urban ruin and a neglect of urban creativity that collaborates in the production of the problematic situation it seemingly only describes.

**Detroitland:** fantasy-image of Detroit as a business friendly, culturally rich and well governed city crafted by municipal government to enhance Detroit's ability to secure investment, tourism and business services in competitive global economy. Compare with Detroitification.

**Dirty Dozen:** twelve abandoned buildings in downtown Detroit posited by urban explorers as targets for exploration; a critical re-framing of the twelve "Towers of Neglect" posed by the *Detroit Free Press* as signs of the city's dereliction.

**Everyday Urbanism:** an informal production of urban space that is posed as an alternative urbanism, opposed or resistant to hegemonic urban culture.

**Feral House:** an abandoned house that has been colonized by plants and animals and therefore rendered as an undomesticated site. See Jim Griffioen, "Feral Houses," <http://www.sweetjuniper.com/2009/07/feral-houses.html>.

**Food Desert:** the territory occupied by central Detroit's low-income residents, who lack easy access to grocery stores; a

condition that solicits alternative forms of food production and food consumption and thus new forms of self-determination in the preceding.

**Gentrification:** the process that converts unreal estate into real estate, often utilizing artists, architects, designers and other professionals who need inexpensive property; a means to colonize supposedly decrepit neighborhoods and support the conversion of those neighborhoods into investment-friendly environments. See creative class.

**Chetto:** the object of gentrification; an urban space where, due to active neglect, economic opportunities, investment, security, infrastructure and municipal services have been withheld; also an urban space where cultural, social, economic and political alternatives to dominant capitalist and liberal structures can be imagined and practiced.

**Chetto Bee:** honey bee from an urban colony, which in Detroit are often located on vacant lots or urban gardens, sites of unintended biodiversity that are very conducive to beekeeping.

**Chetto Palm:** common term for *Ailanthis altissima*, a rapidly growing and aggressively spreading deciduous tree, found on roofs and interiors of abandoned buildings throughout Detroit, which easily withstands polluted soil and can colonize areas which other plants cannot tolerate.

**Chetto Tech** (sp. also “Chettotech,” “Ceto Tek” and “Chettotec”; compare with Detroit Bass, Booty Bass and Booty Music): a form of electronic dance music, drawing from ghetto house, electro, hip hop and techno, that originated in Detroit and is showcased in the annual Detroit Electronic Music Festival; a recuperation of urban dereliction as a site of creative cultural production.

**Green:** the color of “sustainability” in environments framed as economically valuable; the color of “dereliction” in environments framed as economically valueless.

**Landlord Nation:** the post-foreclosure housing environment in Detroit, where owner-occupied houses have become increasingly scarce.

**Motor City** (similar to Motown): term for Detroit that references the city’s status in the early and mid 20th century as center of the American automotive industry; usually used nostalgically, ironically or promotionally. Compare with: Motor Shitty.

**Motor Shitty:** term for Detroit that references the city’s post-industrial decline, usually used affectionately and ironically. Compare with: Motor City.

**New Suburbanism:** process by which entrepreneurial homeowners in inner-city Detroit appropriate adjacent vacant lots and thereby amass suburban-scale parcels of land, or “blots”; a means to accomplish “creative shrinkage” or “smart downsizing.” Reference: Interboro Partners, “However Unspectacular: The New Suburbanism,” in *Shrinking Cities*, vol. 2, ed. Philp Oswalt (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006).

**Open City:** the name of a 1960s era countercultural initiative on Cass Corridor providing a range of services, including crash pad, free clinic, free store and suicide hotline; also the name of an early 21st century business initiative networking aspiring entrepreneurs in Detroit; a figure

for the recuperation of cultural critique as marketing strategy in late capitalism.

**Parking Empire:** expanding system of parking lots in downtown Detroit owned by billionaire Mike Ilitch, created by destroying buildings to make parking for Detroit-based athletic events; a conversion of architectural spaces into parking spaces that may represent the final moment of the city's auto-privileged urbanization. See: demolitionism.

**Poverty:** from dehistoricized perspectives, the product of bad choices or moral deficiencies on the part of individuals; from historically inflected perspectives, the product of structural discrimination against or oppression of entire communities.

**Prozac Tour:** synonym for blight tour; can apply to condition of tour audience, which is depressed by the dereliction of Detroit, and tour guide, who is depressed by the narrow-mindedness of many suburban audience members. See: blight tourism.

**Rebellion:** term for collective urban violence in Detroit in

the 1960s that politicizes that violence and casts it as an authorized disruption of an oppressive and violent regime of order. Compare with: riot.

**Renaissance:** term for neoliberal transformation of Detroit through privatization, gentrification and securitization, used by advocates of that transformation to cast it as a natural and objective public good.

**Riot:** term for collective urban violence in Detroit in the 1960s that depoliticizes that violence and casts it as an unauthorized disruption of a legitimate regime of social and political order. Compare with: rebellion.

**Ruin Porn:** images of derelict buildings in Detroit, posed in many media accounts of Detroit as representative of the condition of the city itself. Reference: Thomas Morton, "Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff," *Vice* 16:8 (2009).

**Scraping:** scavenging metal, such as copper, nickel and brass, from abandoned buildings, usually practiced by homeless

or impoverished men; metal is typically transported via shopping carts to scrap yards, where it is purchased by the pound. Reference: Scott Hocking, "Scrapppers," in *Shrinking Cities*, vol. 1, ed. Philp Oswalt (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005).

**Skimming:** the salvaging of easy-to-remove materials from buildings slated for destruction; a legal alternative to scrapping that can yield economic value for both the skimmer, who can resell skimmed material, and the skimmee, who can receive a tax deduction for material skimmed by a non-profit organization.

**Unreal Estate:** property that loses exchange value to the point where it can assume use values that are unrecognized by or prohibited in the property regime; a waste product of capitalist development; a resource for claiming a right to the city.

**Urbanism:** the formation of the city according to the imperatives of capitalist development, often as translated into professional expertise, political agendas or cultural ideology.

**White Flight:** the departure of whites from Detroit

to surrounding suburbs, widespread after World War II, to avoid living in proximity to the city's African-American population; both contributing to and produced by the active neglect of the city's African-American neighborhoods.

**White Fly-Over:** post-white flight return of white suburbanites or tourists to Detroit for cultural or sporting events, urban exploration or other temporary "low-risk" occupations.



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