



To: Detroit City Council

From: Natalie Aramendia

Re: ReMatch: Matching Small Businesses & Repurposing Abandoned Building

Dear Detroit City Council:

I am writing to propose a technological tool to assist the City of Detroit tackle the issue of abandoned buildings. Abandoned buildings are heavily present in Detroit, which are draining city resources and hurting the neighborhoods; It is crucial that the city repurpose these buildings as a way to invest in the community and revitalize the city.

Detroit

Detroit was once a model of industrial modernity in the early 20th century and was booming with industry. But due to a variety of factors - such as 1960s urban renewal, the 2008 housing crisis, and the foreclosure crisis - Detroit has spiraled into significant economic and population decline over the past few decades. This rapid de-industrialization has left an alarming number of abandoned buildings that have become a pressing issue for the city and its residents. There are currently over 50 thousand abandoned homes in Detroit, marking Detroit as the city in the US with the highest number of abandoned homes, both in numbers and per capita (Hunting and Michigan 2022).

Threats of abandoned buildings



The presence of abandoned buildings aren't just an aesthetic nuisance; they significantly impact the quality of life for Detroit residents in the surrounding area. Abandoned buildings are a hazard to public safety as they are often left unsecured, which can lead to accidents such as falls or fires. These vacated spaces can be a breeding ground for crime, as people use these buildings to engage in illegal and dangerous activities. For example, just last month two people were found dead inside an abandoned Detroit school, with the suspected cause of death being drug overdose (Ley 2023). Abandoned buildings also are a drain on the local economy, by driving down property values, decreasing commercial appeal, and discouraging businesses and residents from moving into the area.

Detroit's current strategy

The primary approach that Detroit has taken to solve this issue over the past few decades has been through demolition. Detroit has the nation's largest demolition program and has demolished over 20,000 vacant buildings just since 2014 (Aguilar 2021). Demolition is extremely expensive; in 2010 Detroit was prepared to spend approximately \$28 million to raze thousands of abandoned buildings (Shane 2012) and has relied on over \$265 million in federal money for demolition (Aguilar 2021).

Demolition doesn't completely solve the issue of vacant properties. A study from the University of Kansas found that "a program to demolish over 500 abandoned residential

properties in Kansas City didn't significantly reduce property and violent crimes in nearby areas" ("Demolishing Abandoned Houses Does Not Reduce Crime" 2020). This was attributed to demolition leaving behind vacant lots, which still hurts the overall state of the neighborhood.

It is therefore in the city's interest for these abandoned buildings to be quickly sold and repurposed in a way that provides for neighborhood needs. Investing in repurposing abandoned buildings can help to revitalize urban areas, create new



economic opportunities, attract investment, reduces urban sprawl, and preserve the city's architectural heritage. While there have been efforts for repurposing buildings in recent years, such as how Detroit's new boutique Foundation Hotel was converted from the old Detroit Fire Department Headquarters (Reindl 2022), the process is slow and there are tens of thousands of buildings rotting around the city, waiting to be given a new life.

Introducing ReMatch

To mitigate the adverse effects of abandoned properties, I propose ReMatch: a website for matching small businesses to share space in repurposed abandoned buildings. Space-sharing can make rent more affordable for budding businesses, encourage entrepreneurship, and cultivate a community where members take an active role in providing neighborhood needs. Examples of pairings can include a repurposed two-story house having a cafe on the bottom floor and a dance studio on the top floor, or having a bakery paired with a library. We expect that this project, as it becomes a widely distributed tool, will result in an increase in the number of small business co-sharing spaces and a decrease in the number of abandoned buildings in Detroit.

In conjunction with the website, I propose that the City of Detroit subsidize these small businesses by funding the renovation of abandoned homes. Once a formal match is established through ReMatch and renovations are completed, these businesses will be ready to inhabit the repurposed building, generate revenue, and contribute to the economic health of Detroit.

The website would work in three steps. First, citizens can use the website to browse abandoned buildings in Detroit and post their business idea. Once a business idea is posted, the citizen is led to fill out a questionnaire to be matched with businesses and buildings. The citizen can indicate whether they want to inhabit a building in a certain neighborhood, requirements on the size of space or building type, and preferences on which kinds of businesses they would be comfortable sharing a space with. This way, for example, a childcare service would not be matched with a vape shop. Then, the citizen would then be provided a list of buildings and partners that match their preferences to explore options.

ReMatch would also be a useful communication and organizational tool throughout the process of inhabiting an abandoned building. Businesses can chat with potential space-sharing partners, have a direct line with the government, get updated on the building renovation, and sort out any agreements and legal details.

Future expansion & features

There are ways that ReMatch can grow and expand in the future. Currently, Detroit's Land Bank Authority (DLBA) is responsible for maintaining, demolishing, and selling vacant and abandoned properties across the city (Young et al. 2022). DLBA hosts an auction program where the public can bid on abandoned buildings; this program could potentially merge with ReMatch to create a centralized place for all dealings with abandoned buildings in Detroit.

Another potential feature would be for citizens living near these abandoned buildings to vote on ReMatch which businesses posted they want to see inhabit the vacant property. This would further cultivate a community where members actively participate in the decision-making process for improving their neighborhood.

Limitations

As with any project, there are some potential limitations. First, just as demolishing buildings is expensive, the cost of remodeling buildings requires a lot of resources. For ReMatch to be successful, we would need Detroit to be fully on board with funding the repurposing of buildings for the good of the city. Some buildings may also be environmental hazards, so buildings would have to undergo proper inspection ahead of time. Last, by matching small businesses together, ReMatch may be more suitable for repurposing smaller abandoned buildings, such as neglected single-family homes. Larger abandoned buildings, such as schools and hotels, would require more thought into how best to repurpose them. With a strong partnership with the city of Detroit, I am confident that we can find the best way to navigate limitations.

Implementation ReMatch website would help Detroit tackle the prevalent issue of abandoned buildings, encourage entrepreneurship, revitalize urban areas, and give citizens a reason to stay in Detroit. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions about how ReMatch and associated policy can create a brighter future for Detroit!

Sincerely,

Natalie Aramendia

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