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Urban Triage, City Systems & the Remnants of Community:  
Some “Sticky” Complications in the Greening of Detroit

**Abstract:** Detroit’s long-range planning agenda – as articulated in the Detroit Future City (DFC) plan – is based on an innovative vision of a smaller, greener city. Implementing this vision rests on clearing the city’s most deteriorated neighborhoods and then transforming the area into vast green spaces. For this vision to be realized, however, the 88,000 people currently residing in this zone of abandonment must be relocated. In the coming decades, according to the plan, this is precisely what will happen: as services are phased out and infrastructure networks gradually decommissioned, outmigration from the area will accelerate. This is a strategy of “urban triage” – broadly defined as any plan or policy that geographically targets expenditures on the basis of viability, such that the flow of public resources to “non-viable” neighborhoods is constricted. While there are several distinct types of triage, they share a set of common objectives and assumptions that should be critically examined.

This paper explores one assumption that underlies triage-based policy and planning. Put simply, it is believed that by removing infrastructures and services from a given urban area, people will leave that area. We break this causal proposition into its two constituent parts. First, there is nothing unproblematic about removing, no matter how incrementally, the dense infrastructure and service networks (“city systems”) that serve as the skeletal framework of the city. City systems are *politically and institutionally embedded* within a complex web of intersecting structures, processes, relationships, and interests – a “stickiness” that complicates efforts to dismantle them. The second half of the proposition is that removing city systems will provide the needed incentive for people to voluntarily move out of the targeted areas. However, this assumption may not appreciate the degree of *socio-spatial persistence* that can be exhibited by groups occupying abandoned spaces. Put differently, even if the city proved highly proficient in the targeted shrinkage of city systems, there is no guarantee that the remaining residents would relocate quickly or on their own accord.

We analyze these twin complications through the empirical lens of the DFC plan. First, while the plan wants desperately to shrink the city in a targeted fashion, the city systems that must be manipulated to achieve its vision are controlled by a variety of powerful agencies and institutions that may have other objectives. Secondly, there is reason to believe that social remnants of community may indefinitely persist in target areas even in the face of great hardship – including the cessation of basic services. Our analysis suggests that the burden of proof falls on those predicting that the withdrawal of city systems will succeed where decades of generalized deprivation have failed. We conclude with a few thoughts about the relationship between coordinated shrinkage, the emergency management of fiscally distressed cities, and urban democracy.

## Urban Triage, City Systems & the Remnants of Community: Some “Sticky” Complications in the Greening of Detroit

### **Part I – Introduction: Abandoned Detroit**

The broad strokes of Detroit’s rise and decline are well known – perhaps iconic. At its peak, Detroit was a Fordist-era industrial powerhouse: the fourth largest city in the country and home to a thriving automotive industry, dynamic unions, and a robust urban culture. In the intervening decades, however, processes of decentralization ravaged Detroit, as both (industrial) jobs and (suburban) homes spread away from the urban core. The numbers tell a stark demographic tale. Detroit’s population fell from a peak of 1.85 million in 1950, to 706,000 in 2011, a staggering 62% drop (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). As middleclass whites fled the city in increasing numbers, they left behind a blacker, poorer city. The percentage of black Detroiters soared from 16 percent in 1950 to 83 percent in 2010 (Sugrue, 2013, 118). Simultaneously, signs of economic distress proliferated. Today, over a third of the city’s residents (35.5%) live below the poverty line, compared to 11.7 percent nationally, and the median value of an owner-occupied home (\$50,200) is less than a third of the US average (\$173,600). Things look no better on the fiscal front. In the wake of the subprime and financial crises, Detroit’s chronic budgetary stress turned into an acute structural crisis that no amount of belt-tightening seemed likely to resolve. In July 2013, the city filed for bankruptcy, the largest municipal filing in US history.

The decline of Detroit has manifested spatially, as well. By 2000, a third of the city’s total land area lay abandoned and unused (Oswalt, 2006, 148). This land is concentrated in a 20 square mile “swath” that sweeps in a rough arc around the commercial core of the city – a zone of abandonment identified by a housing stock of rapidly decreasing quality and value, high vacancy, forfeiture, and abandonment rates, and uneven demolition efforts. This is not an uncommon pattern. Processes of urban erosion in large shrinking cities tend to create a “doughnut” effect consisting of “a reviving core, extensive tracts of declining middle and outer city areas, and extensive (and spreading) suburban developments beyond the city limits” (Hall, 2006). Detroit’s “doughnut” is often depicted as being derelict, unpopulated, and “re-natured” – a space of social death and feral emptiness. These images depict the city as void: hulking industrial ruins, panoramic urban prairies, and dramatically burned-out or overgrown homes. Popular attention thus fixates on spaces of the city curiously devoid of community.<sup>1</sup> But, in fact, this space is not empty. While beleaguered, many families and neighborhoods continue to exist there; community formations and social practices still animate these spaces. It is currently estimated that over 88,000 people still live in Detroit’s zone of abandonment (DWP, 2012, 107).

Of course, Detroit is not the first city to struggle with problems associated with urban decline and shrinkage. One response has taken the form of a particular strain of urban policy and planning that seeks to shift resources away from the least “viable” parts of the city. Often the objective of such efforts is to shrink both the infrastructural footprint and fiscal

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<sup>1</sup> A withering critique has labeled the product of such occlusion “ruin porn” (Millington, 2010; Binelli, 2010). At issue is the tendency of the popular chroniclers of urban obsolescence (journalists, bloggers, etc.) to “crop-out” the abandoned – but occupied – spaces of the city. By manufacturing an exaggerated sense of emptiness, the purveyors of “ruin porn” elide the true (human) stakes of urban decline and shrinkage.

obligations of the city in the face of chronic population decline and structural budget deficits. While this objective can be implicitly pursued in a variety of ways, formal strategies such as “urban triage” and “planned shrinkage” hinge on the geographically targeted withdrawal of public works and municipal services. As we will see, there are several distinct types of this strategy, but they all share certain objectives and assumptions. Generally, for instance, they tend to favor a process of socio-spatial and fiscal retrenchment that creates (additional) incentives for residents in hard hit neighborhoods to move to more municipally hospitable parts of the city or region. We will refer to this “passive” method of reshaping urban space as shrinkage-by-attribution.

The Detroit case gives us a good opportunity to observe the nuances of this strategy. In particular, the city’s long-term planning agenda – as articulated in the Detroit Future City (DFC) plan – is based on a vision of a smaller, greener Detroit. For this vision to be realized, however, the 88,000 people currently residing in the zone of abandonment must be relocated. In the coming decades, according to the plan, this is precisely what will happen: as public infrastructure networks in the area are gradually decommissioned and services are withheld, residents will voluntarily move out of the area. In an important twist, the DFC plan sees the vacated land then being transformed into vast green spaces.

The strategy of “greening” abandoned neighborhoods is based on two foundational assumptions (running through much of the triage-shrinkage tradition) that should be critically assessed. The causal proposition is that if you simply remove infrastructures and services from a given area, then people will leave that area. Both halves of this equation will be explored. First, there is nothing simple or unproblematic about removing, no matter how incrementally, the dense infrastructure and service networks (“city systems”) that serve as the skeletal framework of the city. Quite to the contrary, city systems are *politically and institutionally embedded* within a complex web of intersecting structures, processes, relationships, and interests – a “sticky” embeddedness that greatly complicates efforts to dismantle or decommission them. The second half of the assumption is that removing city systems will provide the needed incentive for people to move out of the targeted areas. However, despite their symbolic and discursive erasure, the *socio-spatial persistence* of the people occupying abandoned spaces pose special hurdles in the pursuit of the vision laid out in the DFC plan. We conclude with a few thoughts about the relationship between coordinated shrinkage and urban democracy.

## **Part II – Urban Triage & Planned Shrinkage**

In the broadest sense, urban triage refers to any plan or policy that spatially targets expenditures on the basis of viability, such that the flow of public resources to “non-viable” neighborhoods is constricted. However, a vast array of different practices fall into this category, some of which may be rather innocuous (Cooper-McCann, 2013). Following Marcuse, et al. (1982), among others, we can begin making sense of this definitional confusion by designating three ideal-typical forms of urban triage. The first, “classic” type of triage most closely resembles its medical-military namesake as it involves ranking neighborhoods based on their perceived “health.” Available resources are then concentrated in those neighborhoods in need of aid, but with the best chance of survival. Anthony Downs was one of the first to make an argument for “classic” triage in 1975, just as neo-

liberalism was emerging as a coherent urban policy regime.<sup>2</sup> From a cost-benefit perspective, he argued, it simply made no sense to invest scarce resources in the city's poorest neighborhoods<sup>3</sup> – a significant “departure from the Model Cities and War on Poverty strategy of spending federal money in the poorest [urban] areas” (Metzger, 2000, 16).

The second, “narrow” type of urban triage “involves not only setting priorities for expenditures but also excluding the most deteriorated areas from receiving any funds” – a tactic also known as “planned shrinkage” (Kleniewski, 1986, 564). While classic triage promises to direct the “bulk” of development resources to “in-between” neighborhoods, it continues to provide deteriorated areas with basic city system services. Downs maintained that even the lowest ranking neighborhoods should receive “in-put benefits” such as “human services, jobs [training], and income maintenance” (Downs, 1975[1980], 530). By contrast, planned shrinkage involves the conscious, targeted removal of the systems necessary for modern life. An early advocate of this “narrow” form of triage was Roger Starr, a high-ranking New York City housing official who rose to prominence in the wake of the urban fiscal crisis of the 1970s. In the context of population loss and fiscal crisis, Starr argued, New York had to embrace the idea (and reality) of being smaller.

“[New York] City cannot survive if the pattern of its costs remains the same for the smaller population as it was for the larger. The same miles of streets cannot be patrolled, cleaned, repaired, and served with public transportation; the same pattern of healthcare, fire protection and education cannot be used for a smaller population without bankrupting the city all over again” (Starr, 1976).

Starr's strategy was as simple as it was devastating. In order to “accelerate” population decline “in certain ‘slum areas’ [such as] the South Bronx” (Derienzo, 1989), residents would be “encouraged” to resettle in areas that “remained alive.” “Planned shrinkage,” Starr frankly noted, “is the recognition that the golden door to full participation in American life and the American economy is no longer to be found in New York” (1976).<sup>4</sup>

Proponents of planned shrinkage tend to face a difficult obstacle, namely grassroots political resistance stemming from the tactic's devastating social, infrastructural, ecological, and epidemiological affects (Wallace and Wallace, 1998). And, in fact, resistance to the “draconian” impacts of this “narrow” form of triage is broad and fierce. “Planned shrinkage is not a popular idea,” Starr wryly concedes. “[F]or simply suggesting [it], I was denounced as a genocidal lunatic and enemy of man” (Starr, 1976). Urban America's political distaste for planned shrinkage often extends to “classic” forms of triage as well. As Baer notes, any municipal strategy based on withholding resources from the neediest, while providing resources to the less needy, “quickly stirs political conflict.” Urban triage is widely considered “heartless policy,” he continued, and “not a strategy that can be

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<sup>2</sup> Down's (1975[1980]) was writing in response to the just-rolled-out Community Development Block Grant program, which gave cities high levels of autonomy concerning where and how to spend federal funds. Cities were also struggling with definitive fiscal limitations, which is why Downs was cautioning them to spend their newfound money wisely – by getting the biggest municipal bang for their limited federal bucks.

<sup>3</sup> “[For] many cities,” Downs argues, “the cost of providing enough major physical upgrading to fully renovate the most deteriorated areas would be... far more than the local government can afford. Even if [a city] allocated all of its federal funds... it would probably not succeed in returning them to [health]” (1980, 530).

<sup>4</sup> Coming to a similarly sobering conclusion, William Baer (1976) argued that the most compassionate course of action was “urban euthanasia.”

openly espoused in a political setting” (Baer, 1976, 16). It would seem urban triage – in both its classic and narrow manifestations – was banished from the urban political scene, as evidenced by its thorough “unpopularity and the seemingly instant rejection of... triage policies wherever they were proposed (Cooper-McCann, 2013, 6).<sup>5</sup>

The “classic-narrow” typology is a useful tool for assessing contemporary municipal trends. In recent years, both “classic” and “narrow” forms have re-emerged as topics of study and debate, though often the idea is expressed using new terminology, such as “strategic geographic targeting” (Thompson, 2008). Cities now face a set of challenges shaped by the demands of urban belt-tightening and neoliberal austerity. In this scenario, triage may come to appear both necessary and desirable. Detroit provides us with a good opportunity to observe the re-emergence of triage as an explicit municipal strategy and to examine the twin assumptions underpinning it.

### **Part III – The Detroit Future City Plan: The Greening of Detroit**

Detroit has been on a downward trajectory since at least the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Sugrue, 1996), yet formal calls to shrink the city have been rare.<sup>6</sup> This is due to the fact that triage and shrinkage are typically resisted from both ends of the socio-political spectrum. On one hand, the tactic faces grassroots opposition. On the other, local officials and land-based elites tend to be biased in favor of pro-growth and pro-expansion land use strategies (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Despite this resistance, the idea has recently gained traction in the public affairs of Detroit. This is most clearly signaled in the recently released 50-year “Strategic Framework Plan” – or “Detroit Future City” plan. The plan is the product of the Detroit Works Project (DWP), a public-private entity with close ties to both the Mayor’s office and deep-pocketed foundations (especially the Kresge, Kellogg, and Ford Foundations, respectively).<sup>7</sup> This collection of “civic leaders” has produced a plan that represents the leading edge of thinking with respect to planning and land use management in large shrinking cities. The plan has been lauded for emphasizing residential participation,<sup>8</sup> key social and institutional actors have championed its objectives, and it has been held up as a “model for other North American Cities” (DWP, 2012, 93).

The Detroit Future City (DFC) plan begins with several assumptions concerning the necessity of “rightsizing” the city. This involves shrinking municipal services and infrastruc-

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<sup>5</sup> According to some, urban triage never went away, it merely took a covert form. A third, “broad” type of urban triage refers to the pervasive ways that the logic of triage implicitly shapes cities, long after the strategy is explicitly repudiated (Marcuse, et al., 1982). Hence, triage is not a temporary response to episodic crises, but rather, “a longstanding practice stemming from the economic constraints of local government” (Kleniewski, 1986, 564), and taking the form of “policies of benign neglect” (Shiffman, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> An exception was the city’s release of the “Detroit Vacant Land Survey” in 1990. The plan called for the “discontinuation of services to, and the relocation of vestigial populations from, the most vacant portions of the city” (Waldheim, 2004, 78). “Derelict houses would be demolished, empty stretches fenced off, and the whole mess turned over to ‘nature’” (Byles, 2006). The proposal touched a nerve. Perhaps most “striking” was “how quickly the report’s recommendations were angrily dismissed” (Waldheim, 2004).

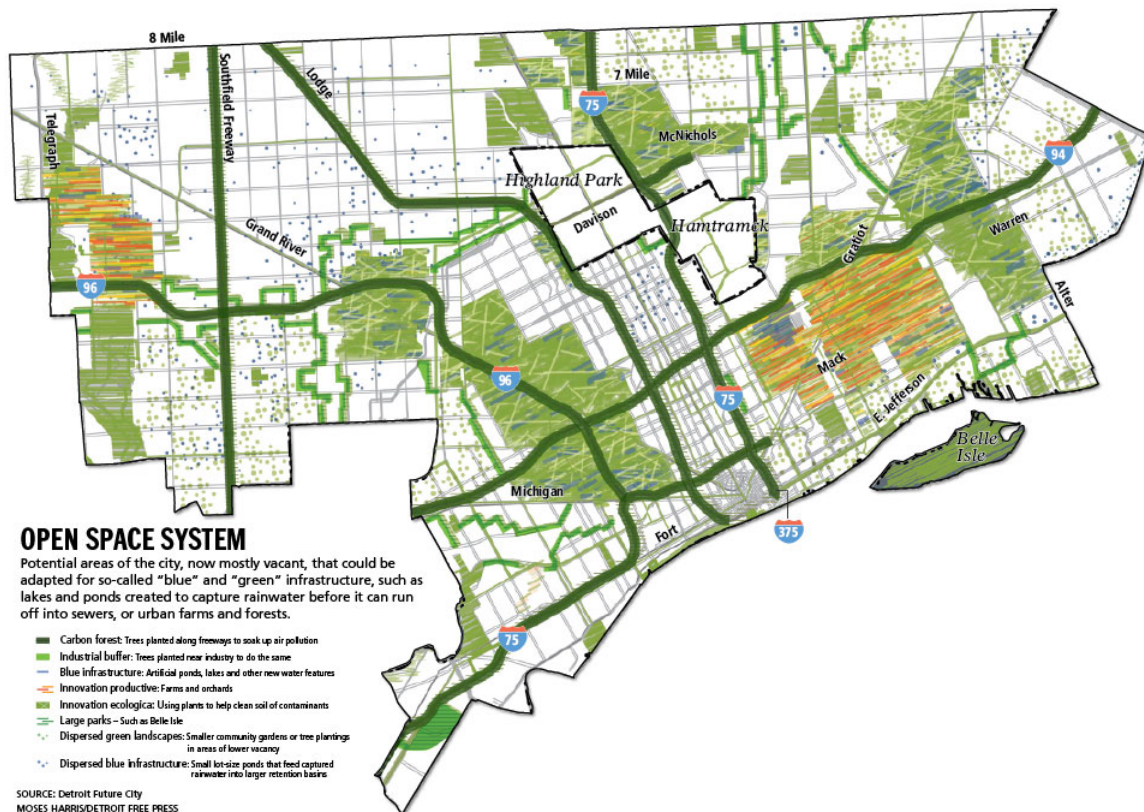
<sup>7</sup> The DWP’s fourteen-member Steering Committee – appointed by Detroit Mayor Dave Bing – also includes healthy representation from the private and nonprofit sectors.

<sup>8</sup> The plan is based in part on input from a two-year participatory planning process, involving 30,000 community “conversations,” 163,000 individual “connections,” and 70,000 survey responses (DWP, 3).

ture networks to better match the city's reduced population and limited fiscal capacity. From this broadly agreed upon premise, a vision emerges of a smaller, greener city. This can be essentially realized, it is reasoned, if people living in sparsely populated neighborhoods move to medium or high density "clusters" interspersed with vast green spaces. People find this vision compelling for reasons both ecological and fiscal.

First, the spatial retrenchment of public infrastructure will shrink the city's ecological "footprint," thus encouraging the growth of green space. (See Map 1) In the future, Detroit residents will live in a "canvas of green" – "stately boulevards, open green space, urban woodlands, ponds and streams, and new uses of natural landscape to clean the air, restore ecological habitats, and produce locally sourced food" (Ibid, 93). This is not an altogether uncommon scenario; when planners and policy makers in shrinking cities become disillusioned with the pro-growth paradigm, there are often calls to "green" abandoned spaces. "Twenty first century renewal is less about bulldozers and fresh concrete than back-to-nature amenities," affirms a local report (Reindl, 2/11/13).<sup>9</sup> From an ecological perspective, there's a lot to like about such proposals. Green spaces contribute to sustainability, have positive health benefits, and provide desirable natural amenities (parks) to a city that has historically poor access to such amenities.

**Insert Map 1:** Detroit Future City, "Open Space System"



<sup>9</sup> This includes complex "green" and "blue" infrastructure systems (DWP, 185; Schilling and Logan, 2008).

Second, coordinated shrinkage would appear to bring much needed fiscal relief to the city. “Current infrastructural systems (including open spaces and recreational facilities, school[s], etc.) were built to accommodate populations more than twice the size of current-day Detroit,” explains the plan. “These systems are too big and maintenance intensive – and they consequently cost too much too sustain” (DWP, 2012, 99). As the city gradually moves away from high-cost, low-density settlement patterns (found in the abandoned “doughnut” around the urban core) and toward lower-cost, higher density “cluster” model, its fiscal prognosis will undoubtedly improve. Proponents find a lot to like about the budgetary benefits of infrastructural rightsizing, especially fiscal efficiency and optimization – the key benefits of triage originally touted by Downs some 40 years ago.

The DFC plan articulates a certain vision of a smaller, greener city, the promised benefits of which are well articulated and broadly desirable. However, it’s a vision that should be critically analyzed. In so doing, we should not focus solely on the vision set forth by the DFC plan, but rather on how that vision will be achieved. As Kleniewski argues, the key point of debate is “how to treat the most deteriorated areas” of shrinking cities (1986, 565). The DFC plan gives us good, if at times conflicting, clues about how its vision will be attained and how the most deteriorated neighborhoods will be treated in the process.

The basic building block of the DFC plan is the “Framework Zone.” Like all triage-based policy, the plan sorts the city’s neighborhoods by viability – here essentially measured by vacancy rate (low, moderate, and high). A fourth zone was added for the Downtown area because it suffers from a high vacancy rate yet simultaneously enjoys strong market characteristics (and thus qualifies for funding where other high-vacancy areas do not). The demographic characteristics of the respective zones are telling. The Low-Vacancy Zone (largely located in suburban-adjacent parts of the city) has a population of 254,000 (mean income \$48,500). The Moderate-Vacancy Zone has a population of 318,000 (mean income \$35,800). The Downtown Zone is home to 45,200 people (mean income \$32,600). And lastly, the High-Vacancy Zone has a population of 88,300 with a mean income of \$28,000 (DWP, 2012, 107). It is this final zone that is slated for “green spacing.”

If we boil the 350-page plan down to its essential thrust, it would be that municipal investments should be directed away from the city’s High-Vacancy Zone, and toward its “in-between” neighborhoods. “In almost all cases,” this involves “transforming” Detroit’s physical systems “to reflect the changing scale and pattern of residential, commercial, and business activity” (Ibid, 174). This theme permeates the document.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the plan proposes to coordinate the distribution of city systems with current vacancy patterns. This includes a new “system delivery” zoning scheme that reflects and reinforces the plan’s basic ranking system (Ibid, 175). In this formulation, Detroit is divided into five areas that determine the placement of city systems. These areas range from “Upgrade and Maintain” (corresponding to Downtown), to “Replace, Repurpose, or Decommission” (corresponding to the High-Vacancy Zone). (See Map 2) The reasoning behind the proposed system of prioritization is that Detroit’s city systems are aging, overbuilt, and

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the plan’s economic development strategy is based on nurturing economic activity “where job growth is already occurring” (DWP, 2012, 51), in order to develop “concentrated employment districts” (Ibid, 37) and “core investment corridors” (Ibid, 49).

inefficient. “The city’s main systems were planned for [a] larger city with a heavier load of industrial activity than Detroit has today,” argues the plan.<sup>11</sup>

The DFC plan promises that spatially prioritizing city system expenditures will help accelerate the outmigration of those 88,300 residents currently living in the High-Vacancy Zone. Following Starr’s euphemistic suggestion that people require “encouragement” to voluntarily uproot their families (1976), the plan sketches a future in which services are gradually withdrawn and infrastructure networks are segmentally decommissioned. In seeking to regulate and incentivize spatially differentiated patterns of (dis)investment and depopulation, the plan codifies “the tale-of-two-cities scenario that already exists, formalizing the boundary between neighborhoods that retain critical mass and the more sparsely populated hinterlands where the amenities associated with urban living are generally unavailable (Dickerson, 1/10/13).

The plan notes that many have voiced concerns “about whether utilities would be shut off in the more vacant parts of the city, whether families might be forced to move from their homes (as in the days of urban renewal), or whether some city departments or community facilities would be shut down completely.” It responds,

While there has been much speculation and fear around such unfair, unjust, unacceptable, (and unnecessary) actions, one thing has become very clear – the ways things are and ‘business as usual’ are no longer acceptable (DWP, 11).

It’s an oddly delivered assurance. While the rhetoric being used is exceedingly forceful, the statement itself is equivocal. This sort of equivocation (characteristic of the implementation elements of the plan) can be traced, in part, to the strategic and rhetorical balancing act being attempted. Essentially, the DFC plan seeks to physically remove city systems from the most deteriorated areas of the city while simultaneously insuring access to core services and networks for people who remain behind. As a local report explained to anxious Detroiters, “Nobody will be forced to move, or denied *the municipal equivalent of palliative care* wherever they choose to live” (Dickerson, 1/10/13; emphasis added).

The DFC plan is walking a fine line with its strategy of “palliative care.” On one hand, the plan insists that infrastructures and services undergo a differential process of contraction and retrenchment in response to new fiscal realities. This must necessarily involve removing physical and social service networks from targeted neighborhoods. “Mandated service levels and areas may need to be changed to reflect actual need,” reports the plan. “For example... bus service for high-vacancy areas may need to be re-patterned” (DWP, 2012, 167). The key, we are told, is to “allocate limited funds... spatially.”

This will mean upgrading network capacity in priority employment centers and neighborhoods, while reducing capacity where there is little or no demand. All investments must be guided by a clear plan that removes uncertainty... and demonstrates the maximum possible cost savings for each dollar spent up front (Ibid, 168).

On the other hand, the plan also insists that residents who remain in deteriorated areas will continue to receive basic services and will retain access to key infrastructure networks.

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<sup>11</sup> “The legacy systems of Detroit are not right for [today’s] city. The systems’ capacity far exceeds what is needed today: sometimes usage levels are as low as 30-40% of designed capacity” (Ibid, 161).



Hence, the plan emphasizes “aligning infrastructure capacity to Detroit’s future form [while] continuing to serve people *where they live and work now*” (Ibid, 159; emphasis added).

Moving forward, one of these sets of demands must yield to the other. Detroit cannot continue to indefinitely provide basic services for the 88,300 people living in the most deteriorated areas of the city, while also shrinking city systems in the manner it proposes (unless we radically re-define the notion of “basic services”). The plan suggests that delicate task becomes easier as triage accelerates what was already an inevitable regression. However, even if we accept the premise of inevitable decline (which many emphatically do not), questions remain concerning the implications of accelerating community disintegration. At a certain point, “encouragement” becomes community violence – a distinction that can rest on the (contested) time horizons of triage plans.

The DFC plan is organized around a 50-year time horizon that lends itself to an image of long-term, organic change. “If the [plan] is implemented,” one report notes, the “one-quarter of Detroit that is now mostly vacant would, *over a period of five decades*, be transformed into woodlands, orchards, urban farms, ponds, and man-made lakes” (Reindl, 2/11/13; emphasis added). This is not incorrect conclusion to draw. It’s also a pleasing image: slow change with minimal community violence. But the transition outlined by the DFC plan is perhaps not as leisurely as the image suggests. Along with the many 50-year maps and projections are 20-year and 10-year benchmarks, and these indicate a more accelerated timeline. For example, one 20-year map (DWP, 2012, 175), proposes that the “area transitions from current use [to green space] *in 20-25 years* [as] systems [are] eventually retired” – a process that may begin long before “residential use is phased out completely” (Ibid; emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> (See Map 2) Elsewhere, the timeline is accelerated even further. Despite concerted efforts to retire city services, the plan predicts, “[i]t will still be necessary to maintain the systems in [High-Vacancy] areas *for some time (up to 10 years)* in order to provide core services to the remaining residents” (Ibid, 177; emphasis added).

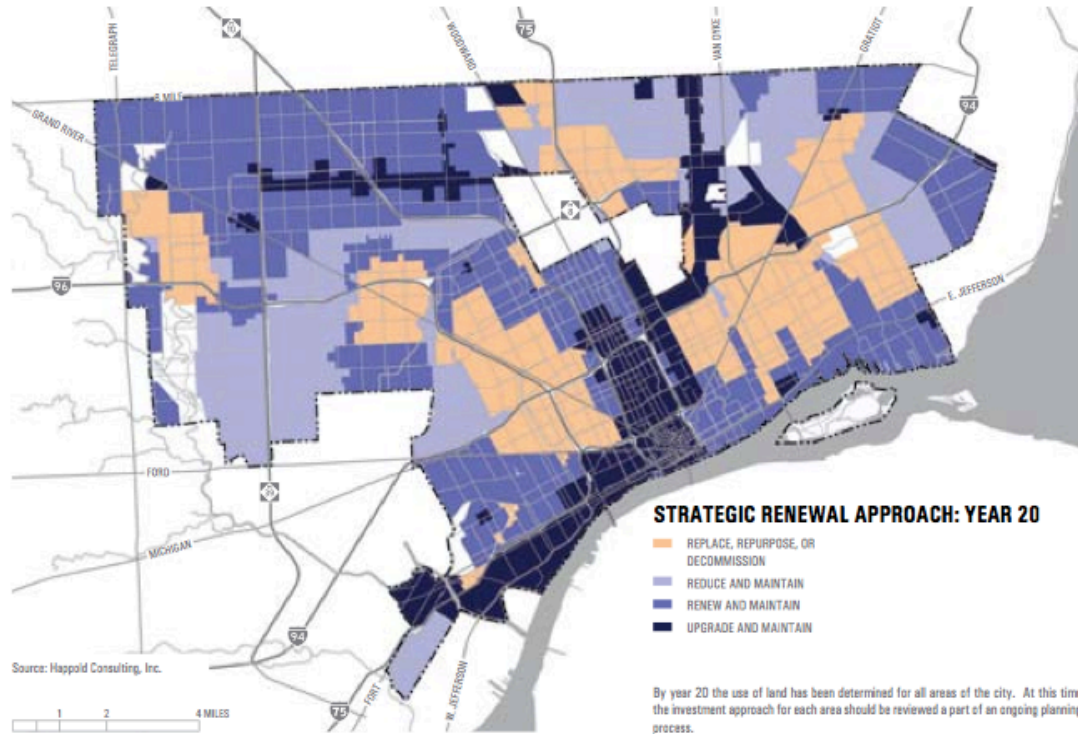
Needless to say, when it comes to “encouraging” 88,300 people to uproot their lives and disband their communities, there is a great deal of difference between 50 years and 10 years. A 50-year time horizon suggests a “classic triage” scenario: a slow, incremental, inter-generational shift during which residents retain access to crucial city systems yet are denied access to capital improvement resources. It would be easy to get the impression that the DFC plan is a simple case of classic triage. (Sorting and ranking neighborhoods based on vacancy and concentrating resources in the “in-between” zones would seem to indicate as much.) A 10-year time horizon, on the other hand, suggests a more aggressive form of “planned shrinkage” whereby city systems are proactively removed from the target areas. This is the more violent scenario as communities are asphyxiated by the arterial blockage of public utilities, infrastructure networks, and vital services. The fact that we can observe evidence of both types of triage in the DFC plan comes as no surprise. Research indicates that the various types of triage are not mutually exclusive and can co-

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<sup>12</sup> The plan predicts that “basic services” will diminish in quality and quantity and “non-essential services” will be retired in the High Vacancy Zone. For example, a road “with 100% [residential] vacancy that [is] not required for through traffic” may be decommissioned while it is still in use (DWP, 2012, 177).

exist in a given city or plan.<sup>13</sup> But there is a more pressing reason why the DFC plan exhibits hybrid characteristics – namely, the embeddedness of city systems.

**Map 2:** Detroit Future City, “Strategic Renewal Approach: Year 20”



## PART IV - The Embeddedness of City Systems

While the DFC plan wants desperately to shrink the city in a targeted fashion, the infrastructures and services that must be manipulated to achieve its vision are highly complex systems controlled by a variety of powerful agencies and institutions that may have other objectives. To its credit, the DFC plan clearly and cogently outlines the imposing scope of the endeavor. Creating a smaller, greener city will require nothing less, the plan reports, than massive institutional restructuring on both urban and regional scales – “an entirely new framework for decision making and regulation” (DWP, 2012, 93). We can explain the plan’s necessarily ambitious agenda in terms of *embeddedness* (Polanyi, 2001). Extant policy regimes and city system bureaucracies act as a dense thicket of constraining factors (institutional, regulatory, legal, and political) that must be “cut-through” in order to implement coordinated shrinkage. Exacerbated by the fractured nature of urban and regional governance, this complex web of structures, processes, and relationships greatly complicates the multi-institutional and multi-scale effort that is required.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, in a 1986 study of urban planning in Philadelphia, Kleniewski finds evidence of all three types (classic, narrow, and broad). A related reason involves the “ideal type” as a heuristic device. No empirical case will ever perfectly fit a mold established by an abstract ideal type (e.g. classic vs. narrow triage).

We can begin getting a sense of this complexity by looking at existing regulatory frameworks governing land use in the city, which is dominated by two municipal documents – the Master Plan of Policies (MPP) and the City Zoning Ordinance (CZO). The DFC plan urges they be “amended to recognize [its] recommendations... in order to establish a fully aligned and coordinated city, regional, and state approach to the city’s long-term transformation” (Ibid, 149). Notably, the Detroit Works Project can only make recommendations to formal decision-making bodies, as it has no formal, binding authority vis-à-vis any of the organizations, agencies, or officials that would enact the proposed plan. On the other hand, the project is well funded (via foundation grants), well connected, well publicized, and has garnered support from city hall, all of which increases the likelihood that its recommendations will be adopted. However, this may be easier said than done. Shrinkage often runs counter to the interests and instincts of traditional land-based elites and their coalitional partners in municipal government. Hence, pro-growth biases may persist. Yet even if we were to imagine that the MPP and the CZO adopted the plan’s bold recommendations, there are additional layers of land use policy that would also need to be navigated. In point of fact, the DFC plan must be reconciled with at least *eleven additional land use plans and regulations* – from a variety of scales – that also guide development in the city.<sup>14</sup> Each of these competing plans – with their distinct governing bodies – must also be “aligned” with the DFC vision.

The situation becomes even more complex when we consider municipal services and infrastructure networks. The DFC plan identifies five city systems that are pivotal in reshaping urban space: waste, water, transportation, energy, and communications (a sixth, public lighting, is sometimes included).<sup>15</sup> We have seen the ambitiousness of the plan’s land use and regulation proposals, and its recommendations with respect to city systems are no less bold. The plan calls for “changes to *all aspects of [all] systems*: not only the physical networks but also the legal and regulatory bases for... financing[,] citywide or regional management of systems, operation and maintenance regimes, and, potentially, organizational and management structures” (Ibid, 167; emphasis added).

The DFC plan is clearly hunting big game here. But the plan’s ambitiousness matches the obstacles it faces. The structural challenge lies in the fact that the political calculus and institutional dynamics of large, semi-autonomous “city system” bureaucracies are often distinct from the entities and interests that orchestrate and support coordinated shrinkage (such as the DWP). To the extent that such authorities have their own bases of power and their own agendas, they may be disinclined to dismantle and decommission the systems they control. This can be a major obstacle for those seeking to implement

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<sup>14</sup> These include: 1.) Green Infrastructure & Sustainable Technologies Plan; 2.) Planning & Development Dept. Strategic Plan; 3.) Stormwater Management Plan; 4.) Detroit Public Works Solid Waste Plan; 5.) City Capital Budget; 6.) Detroit Economic Growth Corp. Strategic Plan; 7.) Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) Transportation Improvement Plan; 8.) Michigan State Housing Development Authority Plan; 9.) Michigan Dept. of Natural Resources Urban Initiatives program; 10.) State Strategic Plan; and 11.) Michigan Economic Development Corp. Strategic Plans (DWP, 2012, 148-153).

<sup>15</sup> The key city systems are controlled by public, private, and public-private organizations that span multiple scales. The six systems and their respective governing bodies are: 1.) Waste (Detroit Dept. of Public Works); 2.) Water & Wastewater (Detroit Water & Sewerage Dept.); 3.) Local & Regional Transit (Detroit Dept. of Transportation; Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation); 4.) Energy (Detroit Edison [DTE]; Detroit Thermal; 5.) Telecoms (AT&T); and 6.) Lighting (Detroit Public Lighting Dept.).

coordinated shrinkage. Consider, for example, a brief profile of one of Detroit's key city systems – the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD). Owned and controlled by Detroit since its inception as a regional entity in the 1950s, the water system – now stretching far beyond the diminished urban core – currently ranks as the third largest in the US with \$6.2 billion in assets and 1,700 employees.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact it operates independently of the Detroit budget and enjoys dedicated revenue streams and positive cash flows, the DWSD has come under regular attack from suburban officials as an inefficient system controlled by a bloated, endemically corrupt bureaucracy. The DWSD has adopted a defensive posture with respect to such charges, a stance that is reinforced by local perceptions that the suburbs are orchestrating an illegitimate “system grab” of the prized municipal asset. In this context, the DWSD has shown little appetite for an aggressive right-sizing campaign, which would shrink (in both absolute and relative terms) urban interests within the regional system. From the perspective of the DWSD, there is little political upside in joining a coordinated shrinkage effort.

The water system is institutionally embedded in a manner that demonstrates the “stickiness” of city systems. The challenges do not end there, however, as the other city systems also need to be addressed, each with “specific issues arising from their installation and ownership history, as well as their unique technical aspects” (DWP, 2012, 159). These systems are interconnected in densely intricate ways. The DFC plan “recognizes that systems are linked and interdependent at multiple levels. Changes in one system will often only achieve their full impact when accompanied by complimentary changes in others” (Ibid, 167). This logic applies to a long list of municipal services: “Detroit’s infrastructure... is linked to the location of its other important community services, including schools, health clinics, policing, and other public services (Ibid, 174). Ultimately, the plan can only vaguely articulate an implementation strategy because its authors would have no way of knowing how these negotiations would play out on a system-by-system basis.

We began with a key causal proposition underlying triage: If you remove infrastructures and services from a targeted area, people will leave that area. While this has an intuitive veneer, we have identified some complications – namely, city systems cannot be unproblematically contracted. To the contrary, such systems are institutionally embedded in ways that can make them extraordinarily difficult to remove or shrink (under normal political conditions). But the Detroit case can also shed light on the second half of the equation – namely, the assumption that once city systems are removed, people will leave.

## **PART V – Social Persistence & the Remnants of Community**

A cornerstone of urban triage is the assumption that people will relocate when the infrastructures and services in their neighborhoods are withdrawn. This can take two forms, corresponding to classic and narrow triage, respectively.

*Classic Triage & Community:* In order to “green” abandoned urban space it is necessary to “assemble large contiguous areas of vacant land under public ownership” (DWP, 2012,

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<sup>16</sup> The expansive system covers over 1,000 square miles of territory while servicing 127 municipalities and 4.2 million residents (over 40% of Michigan’s population), all under the centralized control of the DWSD.

258). However, urban shrinkage – both planned and unplanned – tends to create a “patchwork” pattern of de-densification that unfolds in episodic and irregular fashion (Ryan, 2012). There are a host of forces that contribute to this type of socio-spatial persistence, ranging from structural constraints on mobility, to cultural preferences, to social and familial ties. But we can identify the general process at work. As residents with sufficient resources and motivation relocate, they leave behind scattered, lower-density social “remnants” – a spatially and temporally persistent subset of the original community. These remnants remain in the area long after their more affluent (and whiter) neighbors move-out, private investment capital departs, and public resources are withdrawn. Again, the DFC plan largely acknowledges this.<sup>17</sup> The reality of decline belies the common image of the inner city as marred by a “swath” of devastation – sweeping scythe-like across the urban landscape. In fact, abandonment is noncontiguous and socio-spatially indeterminate. Abandoned urban spaces are clumpy and have fuzzy boundaries.

There is nothing in the classic triage model that would fundamentally alter this patchwork pattern. This is important because it raises a key fiscal issue. Claims concerning the fiscal benefits of the DFC plan are intuitively appealing. However, when Marcuse (et al.) notes that fiscal arguments for triage “have a certain superficial plausibility” (1982, 34), he reminds us that a healthy skepticism is warranted. In some cases, fiscal benefits will be compromised if system operators are required to provide ancillary coverage to remnants of community. “Sizable savings in the cost of producing and delivering public services are most likely to be achieved only if whole service areas can be emptied out, so that the service can be completely withdrawn” (Thompson, quoted in Ibid, 33). The DFC plan (in its more “classic” moments) proposes a different strategy with different fiscal implications.<sup>18</sup> Few categorical statements can be made about the fiscal benefits of targeted system withdrawal. Retiring underused network segments will yield different returns for different types of systems. In the Detroit case, more research is required to critically evaluate the fiscal impacts of the classic strategy (on a system-by-system basis).

*Planned Shrinkage & Community:* The fate of Detroit’s most deteriorated communities would be much different under conditions of planned shrinkage, whereby the targeted removal of city systems is rapid and proactive. Yet even if the city proved highly proficient in the targeted shrinkage of city systems, there is no guarantee that the remaining residents would relocate quickly or on their own accord. There are three sources of evidence that suggest that people may not relocate after key infrastructures and services have been withdrawn. First, the experience of Detroit residents over the past 60 years demonstrates their resolve. Deindustrialization and suburban outmigration contributed to a number of hardships involving education, public health, crime, and environmental degradation. And yet, remnants of communities continue to exist in those areas long defined in terms of market failure and state retrenchment. Given this tenacity, it would seem that the burden of proof falls on those predicting that the withdrawal of city systems will succeed where decades of generalized deprivation have failed.

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<sup>17</sup> “The [plan] recommends a gradual depopulation of [the target] areas, but recognizes that there will be residents still living in these areas for years, if not decades, to come” (DWP, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> “Where residents do choose to remain for the long term,” the plan notes, “future infrastructure service provision will be incorporated into the systems serving the main new land use in the area” (DWP, 177).

Second, the experience of abandoned communities in other large shrinking cities also gives us pause. As but one example, consider again New York City's fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Despite the planned shrinkage strategy deployed by Starr and his allies, "neighborhood residents refused to give in – they squatted in many buildings, others banded together and formed their own ad hoc management associations. [Grassroots] housing organizations began to evolve [and the] collaborative efforts of neighborhood-based organizations" emerged to protect targeted communities" (Shiffman, 2006, 15). This account (and similar reports from other distressed cities) reinforces the notion that Detroit's impoverished neighborhoods are not anomalous with respect to their persistence.

If, as suggested, social remnants will indefinitely persist in the face of great hardship – including the cessation of basic services – than we might expect the city to more forcefully intervene in vacating the area. In theory, at least, Detroit could employ a direct tactic of forced relocation and eminent domain – a method of *planned shrinkage by fiat*. However, and this is the third barrier to relocation, direct tactics are not currently being considered as part of the coordinated shrinkage effort. This is due to several factors. To begin, local historical events triggered an ongoing reluctance to deploy direct methods,<sup>19</sup> such that forced relocation is not a politically viable option for local elected officials. Current legal-judicial norms also dissuade its use.<sup>20</sup> Further, the costs associated with forced relocation are prohibitive. The DFC plan affirms this noninterventionist stance with respect to relocation.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the plan suggests establishing a "voluntary House-to-House program to assist residents in High-Vacancy areas move to more densely populated areas" (Ibid, 258) – though voluntary resettlement programs tend to be ineffective.

In sum, abandoned communities do not simply dissolve and melt into air, even when targeted for contraction. This is certainly true in the case of classic triage, as the DFC plan acknowledges. Yet even if a more aggressive and proactive method of implementation were to be orchestrated, there is still no guarantee that residents will vacate the area. We've outlined several reasons why we might expect social formations in abandoned spaces to persist, even in the absence of modern municipal amenities. Abandoned communities demonstrate a dogged persistence, such that the total social erasure of a given target area would be difficult to achieve.

## **Part VI – Conclusion: Urban Stickiness & the Teflon Coated Knife of Austerity**

The DFC plan articulates a compelling vision of a smaller, greener Detroit. Over the next several decades, according the plan, large segments of infrastructure and substantial service areas will be retired. To the extent the plan rejects the fetishization of urban growth and expansion, it is a refreshing change for a city in such desperate need of stabilization

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<sup>19</sup> In 1981, the city used eminent domain to move an entire neighborhood ("Poletown") to make room for a GM plant. More than 4,000 people and hundreds of businesses and civic institutions were relocated in the process. Fallout from the affair was intense and resistance to such measures continues to run hot.

<sup>20</sup> While the city's pursuit of mass relocation in the Poletown case survived initial legal challenges, the State Supreme Court reversed course in 2004, greatly limiting the practice of "public use" eminent domain.

<sup>21</sup> "These [deteriorated] areas hold the potential for reinvention with new productive land uses, but the rights of existing residents must be upheld" (DWP, 2012, 221).

(and in such little need of another failed growth scheme). However, the city systems that support modern urban communities cannot be easily decommissioned or radically rightsized due to the socio-political and institutional “stickiness” of such networks. City systems that are deeply embedded within a palimpsest of institutional, political, and organizational layers are not amenable to a strategy of coordinated shrinkage. As noted, the plan largely acknowledges the challenges associated with the embeddedness of urban infrastructures and services. “No single agency, public or private, can make all the changes necessary... including changes governing land use, systems, charging, and taxation,” the DFC plan concedes (DWP, 2012, 167). Essentially, the plan suggests, for the vision to be achieved, a new authority must be created with the power to slice through the institutional embeddedness of Detroit’s city systems.<sup>22</sup> In a “normal” political context, this seems rather unlikely (for many of the same reasons that city systems are unlikely to voluntarily decommission large network segments).

Importantly, however, at certain times and in certain contexts, city systems *can* be relatively easily dismantled. For instance, in cities facing fiscal crisis and subjected to “emergency” austerity measures, traditional political, institutional, and legal norms may be suspended in a manner that allows for the more direct and aggressive pursuit of targeted contraction. Detroit has recently been plunged into just such a “fiscal emergency.” In March 2013, the Governor of Michigan appointed an “Emergency Manager” (EM) to Detroit with vast powers to enforce urban austerity measures (over the objections of local elected officials and residents). These powers include dismissing local officials or dissolving departments or other governmental units, rewriting public contracts, engaging in collective bargaining on behalf of the city, privatizing public assets, and determining who receives incoming funds. Just months later, the city filed for bankruptcy, further disrupting normal the legal and institutional frameworks of the city. Until the fiscal emergency is deemed resolved and the city on solid fiscal footing, the state of emergency continues and the normal workings of local democratic rule remain suspended.

In an era of advanced neoliberalism, urban shrinkage and abandonment are typically fragmented and uncoordinated and their results partial and porous. The EM is in a position to address this state of affairs. In the figure of the EM, advocates of coordinated shrinkage have found an office with the power to orchestrate the restructuring the effort. In many ways, the EM can be thought of as a Teflon-coated knife that is able to cut through the “sticky” institutional, political, and legal webs of embeddedness that would otherwise act as an obstacle to urban “rightsizing.” Consider again, briefly, the case of the DWSD. As mentioned, the DWSD is a formidable institution that has historically been able to fend off the fiercest political challenges. But this time the DWSD found itself relatively powerless in the face of “emergency management.” Once a state of fiscal emergency was declared in Detroit and an emergency manager was appointed, the DWSD was rather quickly and easily dispatched (a process that is currently ongoing). The new, regionally controlled entity will have different decision makers with a new political calculus operating within new institutional dynamics, and we would expect the new system to be more amenable to a strategy of coordinated shrinkage.

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<sup>22</sup> The DFC plan “recommends that an interagency platform be created to serve as a forum for coordinating the reform of systems that serve Detroit” (DWP, 2012, 201).

The EM seems to be sympathetic to the general vision proposed by the DFC plan. On the broadest level, both envision a smaller, streamlined city. Both pursue municipal reforms that conform to the tenets of neoliberal austerity, such as “measures that reduce costs and increase revenues” (DWP, 2012, 167), via increased competition, low taxes, and privatization.<sup>23</sup> And both have signaled that large-scale regulatory, legal as well as “managerial and organizational” changes are necessary, and both employ rhetoric about making the “tough decisions.”

The appointment of an EM may prove to be a boon for advocates of a smaller, greener Detroit. However, we should consider his Teflon-coated powers critically. Emergency management raises important questions concerning the relationship between coordinated urban shrinkage and de-democratization. In Detroit, the EM assumes a broad range of powers that allow him to circumvent traditional democratic channels and nullify the principles and practices of local democratic self-governance.<sup>24</sup> An overview of the literature suggests that this is not an uncommon scenario in large shrinking cities.<sup>25</sup> We are reminded of Roger Starr’s ominous “recognition” at the dawn of neoliberal austerity and retrenchment “that the golden door to full participation in American life and the American economy is no longer to be found” in shrinking US cities (Starr, 1976).

Detroit’s zone of abandonment is not an empty void; it cannot be neatly razed and summarily returned to nature. Unless and until more aggressive efforts are undertaken to vacate Detroit’s zone of abandonment, we are left with the image of persistence. Rather, remnants of community continue to occupy these spaces – existing in the murky socio-spatial twilight between inclusion and exclusion. If our aim is to make Detroit a smaller, greener, *and more equitable* city, these remnants of community must be identified and acknowledged as stakeholders in the democratic process of reshaping urban space – a challenging prospect considering the Teflon-coated tools of austerity. (6750)

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<sup>23</sup> The plan encourages competition in the provision of services (DWP, 2012, 174), as well as outsourcing and privatization by “contract[ing] out maintenance and operation to a third party” (Ibid, 170).

<sup>24</sup> Grassroots socio-political resistance to targeted shrinkage is easily sidestepped via the emergency management of cities. Traditional legal and bureaucratic norms associated with urban democracy are also suspended. These developments foreground issues related to citizenship, rights, and social justice.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, in the case of New York’s fiscal crisis, a Financial Oversight Board was appointed that played a similar structural role (Tabb, 1982).



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