Our City, What Ruins

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture on January 18, 2018 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture

Master of Architecture

ABSTRACT:

Leaks, demolitions, vacancy and ruins. Our City, What Ruins is a double entendre we use to describe the conditions of urban life at the peak time of our practice. On the one hand, one third of the land lay vacant, transforming into blight, and targeted for demolition. The city was the world’s flagship destination for wonders of the modern day ruin. We declared the largest federal bankruptcy in the nation’s history, and our democratically elected officials were on their way to prison. It was clear the ruin landscape was an allegory for a failing system from the top down. On the other hand, Our City, What Ruins willfully drops the connotations associated with the ruins and the blight that surrounds them, and the bodies who still call the neighborhoods home.

Our practice was born out of a necessity we saw to fill a void in society; a collectively led spatial justice practice that was willing to work both nefariously and legally, on the psyche and on the land, on damaged histories and invented futures.

We advocate for an expanded agency of the architect; especially in landscapes of divestment and subtraction. This thesis explores spatial and socio economic tactics relating to rebranding of the body, community wealth building and emancipatory infrastructures in the form of drawings, models, slides, legal documents, literature, animation, collage and various other materials and documentation from the time of our practice. All of this presented in the very bureaus we discovered and rescued from a school tainted for demolition. Just as our practice worked to unravel the failed bureaucracy that helped produce Our City, we dive into our bureaus to question What Ruins?

ANATOPIA

Thesis Supervisor: Joel Lamere
Title: Homer A. Burnell Career Development Professor, Assistant Professor of Architecture
Mentions:

**Advisor:**

Joel, I can’t thank you enough for your ability to consistently meet my ideas from a place of authentic curiosity and allowing me to take on the known. You have true talent in intellectual stewardship and curatorial feedback and have been among my favorite voices throughout my career studying in higher education.

Congratulations on becoming a father this year! I wish you happiness wherever life takes you next.

**Readers:**

Azra, Azra, Azra, you are such an amazing energy to be around that brings me true joy! It was an amazing opportunity to work together in so many ways throughout my time in this crazy, ridiculous place we know as MIT. Your incites and unique perspectives certainly rubbed off on me in many ways that I am grateful for. I’m looking forward to see what new amazing work you have in store in the future (heritage lab!)

Hashim, it was a privilege to attend this department under your deanship, as it was a privilege to borrow your intellect from time to time throughout the course of my thesis semester.

**Helper:**

Joey Swerdin, although spending 10 hours printing endless material on custom paper isn’t the most glorious job you’ll ever have, it was one of the most helpful I have ever had. Thank you so much for offering to help me when I needed it most and good luck with your future endeavors; I’m excited to continue following your work!

**press:**

To Daniel Glick-Utterman, Dwight Portocarrero, Ian Donaldson & last but certainly not least, Philip Marcantonio - you four are a dangerous breed when it comes to exchanging ideas, collaborating in thoughtful debate and following through on passionate projects. Each of you have my utmost respect as I look forward to growing further alongside yourselves.

**Mom & Dad:**

It’s difficult to even know where to begin thanking the two of you. My entire life you have continuously supported and believed in my abilities while coaching my inabilities. Regardless if you agree or disagree with my ideas or beliefs, you support my passion which means so so much to me. You’re truly amazing teachers in the category of life and love and I thank you for your being.

**All Kinds of Support**

Sam Arabbo, thank you for listening to the endless hours of rambling thoughts, insecure lows and excited highs. Sharing ideas, receiving feedback, criticism and overall support was overwhelmingly helpful throughout the process, and made the process that much more enjoyable.
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Against a place determined by an external body politic
A new place discovered by an internally born person.
Dear Applicant:

We are pleased to inform you that upon review of your application for tax exempt status we have determined that you are exempt from Federal income tax under section 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions to you are deductible under section 170 of the Code. You are also qualified to receive tax deductible bequests, devises, transfers or gifts under section 2055, 2106 or 2522 of the Code. Because this letter could help resolve any questions regarding your exempt status, you should keep it in your permanent records.

Organizations exempt under section 501(c)(4) of the Code are further classified as either public charities or private foundations. We determined that you are a public charity under the Code section(s) listed in the heading of this letter.

Please see enclosed Publication 4221-PC, Compliance Guide for 501(c)(4) Public Charities, for some helpful information about your responsibilities as an exempt organization.

Sincerely,

Lois G. Lerner
Director, Exempt Organizations

Enclosure: Publication 4221-PC
Like many,
we found ourselves in a landscape of subtraction.

For years, we witnessed the steady divestment,
watched our city morph into ruin as the world progressed.
We felt the urban fabric corrode away with time, we watched architecture animated,

performing a dance with nature and the body.
On occasion, some would gather to watch and bid the buildings farewell as they disappeared in a fiery spectacle of instantaneous reversal.
Other occasions were less glorious

as our memory boxes were violently erased from the landscape.
And even at times, it feels like the necessary mutilation.

After all, we've grown tough skin.
As the years progressed, it became clear we were not the only communities on the losing side of progress.

A pattern evolved, and we recognize ourselves across the region.
Foreclosures led to vacancy  
Vacancy led to blight  
Blight led to subtraction,  
to demolition,  
to erasure  
lots and lots of erasure.
Our city became a destination for so called “urban explorers” who found awe, romanticized, fetishized and for some, found freedom in the ruin.
Often, these passerbys rendered our city as a zombie wasteland - absent of life of any kind beyond trees.
Narratives developed,

casting blame on the citizens of the city for the scenarios that surrounded them.
Our bodies were branded synonymous with failure, with danger, with the ruin.
And so,

we wear our ruins like fashion
Our practice was born out a necessity and an urgency to fill a void in society; a collectively led spatial justice that was willing to work both nefariously and bureaucratically, on the psyche and the land, on damaged histories and uncanny futures.

We are ANATOPIA
Our City, What Ruins
ru-in

/ 'rooin/ noun

1. the physical destruction or disintegration of something or the state of disintegrating or being destroyed.

verb

1. reduce (a building or place) to a state of decay, collapse, or disintegration.

1 Superimposition of contemporary ruin. Packard Plant, Detroit MI and painting by Canaletto
Over the past decades Detroit's reputation has been determined by largely by economic forces and policies outside the fault of everyday citizens of the city. This reputation has been amplified by national and international media who have helped solidify the narrative of a failed, empty, dangerous city; a city in ruins. However Detroit's ruins are unlike the classical ruins of Rome or Athens. Where classical ruins have reached their absolute form and work towards re affirming a historical identity for the present, the contemporary ruin erodes our sense of identity as they expose the true fragility contemporary society is built on. We are told our neighborhoods are blighted like a disease; that if you get too close you could be infected with the same misfortune of inequality that produced the urban infestations.

There is no denying the large scale abandonment of the city; beginning in the 1950's and continuing right up to our latest 2020 census. Detroit and its longstanding residents have not had it easy, from the racist redlining policies that oppressed Black homebuyers freedom to purchase, the white-flight to the suburbs taking billions of yearly tax revenue for schools and public infrastructure, the riots of '67, the initial Big 3 auto-bailouts, the 2008 financial crisis, and of course, the largest Title-9 Bankruptcy in United States history.

However, at the moment there is yet another ongoing injustice to the communities of Detroit who have pioneered through wave after wave of economic and political hardship. Since 2002 there have been over 155,968 tax foreclosed homes, the vast majority of those occurring after 2008.
1. Detroit Parcel Map
DETROIT FORCLOSED PARCELS

155,958 FORCLOSED PARCELS

2 Every tax foreclosure from 2003-2016
Information provided by Data Driven Detroit
Cartographed by Loessland Technologies
blight / blɪt/

noun
1. a plant disease, especially one caused by fungi such as mildews, rusts, and smuts.

verb
1. infect (plants or a planted area) with blight.

1 From Kevin Bauman's 100 Abandon Houses series
https://www.100abandonhouses.com/
In February of 2010, during the wake of the financial crisis fallout, the Obama Administration established the Hardest Hit Fund (HHF). The program targeted aid to families in states where the effects of the economic downturn were greatly felt. States were selected if the steep home prices declined greater than 20 percent or if the state’s unemployment rate was higher than that of the national average.

The program funds were distributed to primarily provide mortgage payment assistance for unemployed or underemployed homeowners, principal reductions to help homeowners who are transitioning out of their homes and into more affordable housing, and for blight elimination and downpayment efforts.

“We need to remove every single structure and building in this city that is no longer viable. Once you remove all of that, and I mean all of it, you start renewing hope.” Dan Gilbert

Michigan received a total of $761 million, the fourth highest allocation to a state behind Ohio, Florida and California. Of the $761 million over $500 million has gone towards demolitions across the state. In 2013, the mayor of Detroit, Mike Duggan, with the help of the federal funding, partnered with capitalist Daniel Gilbert to create the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force (DBRTF).

The trio between the federal government, the mayor of Detroit and one of Detroit’s most influential and invested business people has ignited an urban renewal on the scale not before seen in the United States. Demolition industries became the new construction contract, except it was deconstruction and material flows that became the new interest of the city.
### ANATOMIA

#### HARDEST HIT FUND (HHF) NATIONAL

**ALLOCATION 2011-2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location A</td>
<td>$1,234,567</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location B</td>
<td>$2,345,678</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location C</td>
<td>$3,456,789</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location D</td>
<td>$4,567,890</td>
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**Funds Distribution**

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**Regions**

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**Programs**

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<tr>
<td>Program D</td>
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**Total Allocation**

*Total Allocation: $14,000,000*

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**US DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

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Gratiot redevelopment area, a view of the neighborhood before demolition. Source: Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

1. Gratiot redevelopment area, a view of the neighborhood before demolition. Source: Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

The Detroit Housing Commission characterized the area as "a fertile breeding spot for the development of crime - an area in which juvenile delinquency and major crimes are common... contagious disease flourish"

Journal of HOUSING
"Around the Hood"
Site Visit 11/26/2017
Digital Photograph
"We need to knock down every single structure and building in this city, that is all. Once you remove all of it, you start renewing hope."
Demolition Diptychs
Bedford High School
DEMOLED 2012
Redford High School
DEMOLISHED 2012
Paul Robeson / Malcolm X Academy / St. Francis Home for Boys
DEMOLISHED 2012
Demolition Dyptich

School Exterior

Henry Clay Sherrard Elementary
1/15/09 / 4:56 PM / 2010
Demolition Diptych

Breitmeyer Intermediate School
DEMOLOSHED 2010
Guardian Angels Catholic / Brewer Elementary School
DEMOLISHED 2013
Demolition Dyptich

School Exterior
Demolition Diptych

Samuel B. Dixon School
DEMOLISHED 2017
Demolition Dyptich

School Exterior

Greenfield Park Elementary
DEMOLISHED 2016
Greenfield Park Elementary
DEMOISED 2016
Jane Cooper Elementary
DEMOISHED 2010
Helen Newberry Joy Middle School
DEMOLISHED 2009
Demolition Diptych

Lillibridge School / McKinney Day Treatment Center
DEMOLED 2015
Original photographs in "Demolition Dyptichs" are pulled from anonymous photographers from the website: detroiturbex.com/
AD: 4006 MILFORD
PARCEL NUMBER: 14008116-7
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
"17 Plots" Satellite Annotation

AD: 4006 MILFORD
PARCEL NUMBER: 14008116-7

S - 22665 (P. 158)
AD: 4436 Tireman
PARCEL NUMBER: 14001506
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
AD: 4653 Allendale
PARCEL NUMBER: 14001967

S - 22665 (P. 158)
AD: 5002 Allendale
PARCEL NUMBER: 16002504
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
AD: 5048 OREGON ST
Parcel Number: 16002764
AD: 5040 OREGON ST
Parcel Number: 16002765
Owner: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
AD: 5048 OREGON ST
PARCEL NUMBER: 16002764
AD: 5040 OREGON ST
PARCEL NUMBER: 16002765
AD: 5925 NORTHFIELD
PARCEL NUMBER: 16012752

Owner: Anatopia Community Land
"17 Plots"
AD: 6349 IRONWOOD
PARCEL NUMBER: 16011737
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
"17 Plots"
ADDRESS: 6064 28TH ST
PARCEL NUMBER: 14011070
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
"17 Plots" Satellite Annotation
MOORE PL 40' W.D.

MILFORD AVE 60' W.D.

AD: 6401 30th st
PARCEL NUMBER: 16010728

AD: 6337 30th st
PARCEL NUMBER: 16010739

OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
Plots" Satellite Annotation

AD: 6401 30th st
PARCEL NUMBER: 16010728
AD: 6337 30th st
PARCEL NUMBER: 16010739
"17 Plots" Satellite Annotation
AD: 6540 Hartford
PARCEL NUMBER: 14011426-7
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
AD: 6540 Hartford
PARCEL NUMBER: 14011426-7
AD: 5200 Ivanhoe
PARCEL NUMBER: 16003017-8
OWNER: ANATOPIA COMMUNITY LAND TRUST
In this space....

Draw what you see
Draw what you don't see
Draw what you'd like to see
Draw what you think about
Draw your reaction
Draw your invention

And in this space....

Write what we need to be doing, thinking, feeling about the illustrated spaces.

Tell us about your vision.
Sculpture Garden
Description:
An intersection between the institutions of play and destruction, these play structures may serve more as scaffolding for the mind to jump, swing, and slip from past to future than purely a physical form. The models represent a grounding of the idea that destruction is made possible by the remains of relict ruins, scattered boxes, tables, industrial brick facades and chimneys whose collected like everyday duration of excess building materials.

Scouring:
making walls constructive out of the deconstruction of the industrial building at 4423 Humboldt st
wood supplied by the decomposed urban features
re-used wood supplied by 3093 Humboldt st
Thesis Discussion
The discussion (photo by Sarah Wagner)
Bureau Side Elevation
Our City, What Ruins