A City Divided: Zoning Detroit in the
First Half of the 20th Century
Stefan Louis Nielsen

Kalamazoo College Department of History
Advisor: Dr. James Lewis
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Introduction:

"It will rise from the ashes. We hope for better things..."

When looking at the evolution of American cities, one thing is clear: the expansion of cities, both upward and outward, has often led to cramped and dirty environments. Cities minimally regulated construction and land usage, allowing for haphazard street layouts and industrial sites adjacent to neighborhoods. This was an all too common phenomenon, one that particularly influenced the industrializing city of Detroit, located along the (aptly named) Detroit River across from the Canadian city of Windsor. Its expansion in the late nineteenth century brought the city large amounts of wealth and influence, but called into question the freedom of development many businessmen and other landowners enjoyed. The consequences of limited restrictions would see the beginning of urban reforms, emerging in Detroit politics and its city government as reformers gained influence over the city’s future.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Detroit’s growth necessitated additional regulations to manage the city’s expansion. Desiring increased order over chaotic development taking place, Detroiter sought the implementation of municipal ordinances to reinforce a degree of control, that had already started decades earlier. When these

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1 Motto of Detroit (Latin: Resurget Cineribus, Speramus Mellora) c. 1805. Father Gabriel Richard.
2 Benjamin Franklin, living in Philadelphia in the mid-late eighteenth century, frequently spoke out against the location of coopers, tanneries, and blacksmiths near his neighborhood. These industries were seen as fire hazards and spreaders of “putridity and miasmata (sic),” both severe health risks to the surrounding community. (The belief of foul odors causing illness predated germ theory, but was indirectly related to potentially detrimental conditions). [A. Michal McMahon, “Small Matters”: Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, and the ‘Progress of Cities,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 116, no. 2 (1992): 165-166.]
ordinances were not enough, zoning laws were proposed to give the municipal government more power in deciding the direction of the city’s layout and function. Business interests prevented the implementation of zoning when it was introduced in the early 1920s, but by 1940 zoning was finally approved, partially as a measure to prevent expanding blight. Thanks to racially restrictive housing in the city, population growth necessitated the expansion of African American neighborhoods, moving to populate the inner city as white residents moved towards the suburbs. The 1950s and 60s saw the beginnings of the city’s economic decline, which brought attempts to rehabilitate dilapidated housing and industry, mainly through restoration and incentivizing projects that required large substantial rezoning. African American housing and the auto industry were major development focuses, with the former moving into some of Detroit’s only affordable housing and the latter with grand plans to transform derelict areas into functioning industrial parks. While only a fraction of the city’s revitalization efforts succeeded, zoning’s involvement is a testament to its usage in Detroit’s aims at controlling its destiny.

The Fire and “Rebirth”: 1805

No review of early Detroit history can be completed without considering the fire of 1805, a transformative event that while not determining the city’s future, led to it being laid out in a unique way that would bring benefits and consequences as time passed. Unlike other major American cities, Detroit’s perspective would partially be governed by its unusual layout, and its development would rely on adapting to its non-linear roadways.
On morning of July 11th, a fire began that ravaged the small town of 600, destroying most of its buildings and laying the hundred-year-old settlement to waste. Its aftermath provided room for what some saw as improvement, which officials worked to capitalize on. Augustus Woodward, the Michigan Territory’s judge, introduced a plan modeled on what had recently been laid out in the nation’s new capital of Washington, D.C. With circular parks surrounded by radiating streets, the district’s street plan was seen by Woodward as a timely introduction, refashioning Detroit to a modern and European-inspired environment (compared to the more cramped and haphazard layout of many growing American cities). What followed was the purchasing of land for the new layout, which was only implemented to an extent: out of the detailed plan for the town to be radically altered, only certain portions of the destroyed center were sold, with the rest coming from publicly owned land. Thus, a single ring road with its accompanying radial roads was constructed3, establishing two parks (Grand Circus a semicircle to the northwest and Campus Martius a rectangle to the southeast) approximately a third of a mile from each other. Campus Martius was placed just outside of the town’s main intersection, creating a natural extension that could be easily developed from and later extended.

This same layout would be preserved, other than a few minor changes, over the years and govern the city’s evolution as streets were laid out further from the old center. Unlike in Washington, D.C. where the radial layout was large enough to accommodate some growth, Detroit’s small facsimile was unable to contain development even in the immediate decades after the fire, as an over limited population growth quickly pushed the

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3 These roads would come to be known as Woodward Ave. (M1), Michigan Ave. (M12), Jefferson Ave., Grand River Ave. (US-16, formerly M16), and Gratiot Ave. (M3).
city’s boundaries past the 1805 plan. Nonetheless, the gap between Grand Circus and Campus Martius would become a hotspot for the city’s development, providing area for government buildings and many saloons at the center of Woodward Avenue’s newly asserted dominance. Its central position as the main road extending to the northwest would mirror Detroit’s expansion, and literally pave the way for inland growth.

4 "As landowners gridded their subdivisions, they generally ignored Woodward’s 1805 aspirations, leaving his baroque vision heavily truncated amid a jumble of grids." [Conrad Kickert, Dream City: Creation, Destruction, and Reinvention in Downtown Detroit, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), 17.]
Figure 1: Judge Woodward's 1805 plan. See Figure 8 on pg. 69 for 1835 map as a comparison.5

Detroit: 19006

Streets and roadways bustled with foot and horse traffic, as the occasional tram skidded down inner-city tracks. Buildings above the traditional two-story structures had sprung up en-masse, reaching heights of 60 to 70 feet up and down the major avenues. Massive foundries and factories of all kinds had sprung up along the riverfront only a few decades previously, as a growing number of smaller machine shops and smaller industrial plants expanded in other sections. This industrialization had taken over half a century, but by the turn of the century was becoming a key source of employment and urban wealth. The change was nowhere as drastic as in the downtown or center-city, where “62% of the center-city buildings were (by 1900) exclusively nonresidential [as] another 14.3% had mixed residential and nonresidential uses, leaving only 23.6% of the buildings for residences.” This change had taken only a few decades, as the city’s outward growth had facilitated the movement of older families up Woodward and into surrounding neighborhoods. Workers still occupied rooms in boardinghouses, but both these and single-family homes lost their prominence to business and industry. This exodus happened quite rapidly, as “since 1880, the center had experienced a decline of 54% in

6 For Detroit at the turn of the century, see June Baber Woodson’s “The Negro in Detroit to 1900,” Joseph Stanhope Cialdella’s “A Landscape of Ruin and Repair: Parks, Potatoes, and Detroit’s Environmental Past, 1879–1900,” and Charles K Hyde’s “‘Detroit the Dynamic’: The Industrial History of Detroit from Cigars to Cars.”
the number of its residential structures,” depopulating the city’s oldest section and refashioning it with an aim for corporate and commercial enterprises. The city’s business leaders had firmly decided that downtown would be the commercial hub of Detroit, and their decision was reflected in the expansion of their own assets.

No more than a small city on the eve of the Civil War, Detroit had doubled in population every decade, seeing an increase of 526% over the forty-year period. Such population increases were not unusual for the late nineteenth century, as East Coast cities were seeing similar increases. What made Detroit unique was its rapid rate of expansion, outstripping other mid-level cities by the turn of the century to become the thirteenth most populous in the country. Streams of immigrants who, having landed on Ellis Island and elsewhere in the east, made their way west and found a home in Detroit, contributing a shrinking percentage of the growing population. Working in tandem was a growing number of domestic migrants who poured into the city by the tens of thousands, occupying sparse housing and creating an environment with “virtually no empty zones.” In a city that used to have large tracts of sparse and unoccupied land at its boundaries, by 1900 these spaces simply did not exist “with the vacant periphery no longer vacant.” This rapid crunch for housing not only lent to booming development and a prosperous real estate market, but quickly began a crowding phenomenon that in some respects would never fully be resolved.

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8 New York City saw a 322% increase over the same period, while other cities like Boston and Chicago saw 215% and (staggering) 1,414% jumps, respectively.
These monumental changes exist as a microcosm for the ways in which Detroit would fashion itself into the 20th century, using its large amount of space to expand district footprints and radically alter the living conditions of its residents. The continued influx of people and capital would support the change needed to accommodate them, as otherwise there would be neither enough space nor development to house residents and investments. To adequately adapt to changing conditions, while maintaining a sense of order and peace, Detroit continued to fall back on a system it had frequently used for decades.

The Ordinances

Urban living had always been a risky endeavor, mainly because of the natural outcome of placing large amounts of people in a relatively concentrated space. Crowding, disease, unrest, hunger, and a host of other conditions characterized city living for millennia, and were common occurrences in even the best conditions. To establish a degree of order, city governments passed ordinances to achieve control over whatever was seen as necessitating intervention. Ordinances addressed specific problems, and were enforced by the city itself and or police force, depending on which entity had the ability to do so. These initial ordinances could be small, such as a payment for waste pickup, or large in regulating traffic patterns on roadways. As towns grew larger with a greater diversity of people and businesses, the list of ordinances expanded to meet new needs.\(^{10}\)\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) A police force might concentrate more on a city’s criminal code rather than the upkeep of property (which code enforcers working for the city would encounter), yet could still be called to impose an extra degree of compliance.

\(^{11}\) The differences between Detroit’s lists of ordinances from 1890 and 1905 are not major, but additions (such as elevator regulations) and revisions were incredibly prevalent, showing that ordinances were continually evolving to meet old and new needs.
Detroit followed this trend relatively closely, with lists having been compiled by 1854 just for the Board of Water Commissioners.\textsuperscript{12} The Common Council, or town (later city) council, had discretion over implementing ordinances and applying them anywhere that the city found necessary. As an elected body of nine or ten members, the process of running Detroit (akin to other cities in America) was a representative one, a factor that would highly influence the decisions of the council and make establishing ordinances at least in some part reliant on public support. This is not to say that all ordinances were responses to perceived common and shared issues, as some were clearly oriented towards the wishes of business or special interest groups. One of the more momentous of the city’s actions in the 1860s was the “establish[ment] [of] its first cohesive (and paid) police force” in 1865, the product of a drawn-out battle over temperance in Michigan. With state-level Prohibition passed constitutionally in 1850, Detroit openly chose to ignore the amendment as temperance groups fought for some semblance of compliance. Saloon owners, beer brewers, and distillers all combated a direct risk to their livelihood and a strong drinking culture in the city. Eventually, the establishment of a police department came out of the teetotalers’ demands for enforcement, even if the move was far beyond what was reasonably expected.\textsuperscript{13} While such an innovation as a police force was unusual in a country that had virtually no municipal departments, its implementation showed that there would always be interests other than those of the average resident that would work to force their way into city politics.


By 1900, ordinances had become a business in themselves, taking up sizable volumes that were published every few years as regulations were added and updated. This reality would become incredibly evident as Detroit moved into the twentieth century, as its progress would necessitate further regulation that would not always end up addressing persistent problems. Even as the ordinance books expanded, certain issues remained untouched thanks to limitations by the document that mandated Detroit.

The City Charter

The central constant in Detroit’s existence as a formal municipality has been its charter. A municipal charter, traditionally stemming from the ability for a town or city to create its own laws, acts as a governing document (by which its administration can be structured). Charters for Michigan cities had to be approved by the state up until 1909, when the passage of the Home Rule City Act allowed for municipalities to create an enact their own without state involvement. Just like a constitution, the charter can be amended to match the desires of the populace, and can retain any amount of control over city affairs that are otherwise legal within the state and country. Detroit’s charter has worked in the same way and, like other charters, has been frequently changed to meet new needs. Just as the list of ordinances grew in length and complexity, so has the charter, which sets the limit on their uses and extent. No ordinance can be implemented unless it complies with the charter, or it would not be passable by the Common Council (and if it was, would be struck down by the court). The charter’s significance makes it crucial in understanding how Detroit functioned, as it set effective guidelines for the city.

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14 The Home Rule City Act, Act 279 of 1909.
government and Common Council to exist under. Its capabilities would be put to the test as Detroit would soon venture into a new method of regulation, taking steps beyond its traditional ordinances and beginning a multi-decade fight over just how far the city could stretch its influence.

**Beginnings of Zoning: 1915-1925**

What the automotive industry brought to Detroit was nothing short of a miracle, transforming Detroit’s industrial and business landscape to be fundamentally shaped by their interests. Automobiles were increasingly produced in numerous state-of-the-art manufactories: Henry Leland’s Lincoln Plant, James and William Packard’s Automotive Plant, and the Dodge Brothers Factory among others. While a decent amount of America’s auto industry was not located in Detroit, enough of it was to give the city’s corporations an advantage, having their factories and suppliers within a short distance of each other.

As the hub of the city’s changing vertical landscape, downtown was rapidly changing by the 1910s. Once the location of large boardinghouses and various factories, the heart of this expanding metropolis gave way to towering office buildings and storefronts for a growing clientele. As people continued to move further from the downtown area, personal vehicles and public transit allowed shoppers and other visitors to access the downtown shops and parks relatively quickly. Widespread building projects stimulating downtown and the rest of the city, which in 1916 had doubled to over $4.6
million in value from the previous year.\textsuperscript{15} Such an explosion added to the concentration of high-rise buildings in the downtown, aiding in the rapid commercial expansion it was already facing. Previous options of walking and horse-drawn carriages was changing to one of automobiles and streetcars, transforming the attitudes that Detroiters had about the locations of home, work, and play.

Ultimately it was these and other changes that stimulated a citywide set of growing predicaments, which would soon overwhelm Detroit’s ability to continue functioning as it had. In an effort to solve some if not all of these problems, Detroiters and their government could begin calling for the implementation of a relatively novel idea across the city.

\textbf{Detroit’s Problems}

With growth virtually unopposed throughout the city, and as more people flowed into tighter living conditions, a whole host of problems rapidly began to affect the city’s livability and functionality. Several of these issues were readily apparent to residents and government offices alike, and would soon dominate discourse over the best courses of action for amelioration. Though some of these issues had affected certain sections of Detroit for years, the coalescing of both new and old fielded a continued emphasis on improvement that the city would soon seek to capitalize on.

\textbf{Urban Disorganization:}\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} Heading for each issue is bolded.
One problem that had only increased in complexity before and since 1900 was urban disorganization. Administrative and electoral reasons had led to the de-facto division of the city through the ward system, yet without physical stipulations (such as building restrictions). Without zoning policies to delineate the types of structures that could be established in different sections of the city, people and businesses were largely unrestricted in construction. Industry was easily built up along the riverfront, choking off leisure access to the river (other than Belle Isle), and the establishment of new automotive factories within largely residential neighborhoods both in the city proper and in the communities surrounding it. In effect, landowners and developers played a central part in the “marring of residential sections by the encroachment of factory and business structures, as a result of the city’s rapid growth,” a seemingly continual phenomenon. Ultimately, there were very few mechanisms preventing developers and businesses from expanding in this manner.

As encroachment continued unabated through the 1910s, the efforts to address it only increased in intensity, and galvanized awareness of the other issues that it partially helped to cause. With few limits to development, Detroit would only suffer further disorganization and popular discontent, especially as conditions began to worsen in other areas of the city.

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17 As of 1916, there existed 21 wards in the city of Detroit, neatly dividing the city up for its many services and other interested parties. [“Municipal Manual of the City of Detroit.” Serial. 1915/16. 19-29.]
Figure 2: Packard Automotive Plant built between 1903-1911 on the east side. Note the housing around the factory.¹⁹

**Overcrowding & African American Detroit:**

In a city that had previously been sustained by single-family homes (in 1880 7.3% of Detroiters lived in multi-family homes, which had only gone up to 13.3% by 1900), Detroit’s model of sprawl began to seriously suffer as the single-family housing market

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failed to keep up with an ever-growing population.\(^{20}\) With the city doubling in population every decade, a trend that would continue until the 1930s, the sheer number of migrants put a strain on the city’s ability to adapt that virtually eliminated the chances of newcomers obtaining better-quality housing. This phenomenon was especially acute in African American sections of the city, which had begun to rapidly expand thanks to the Great Migration’s push out of the Deep South (beginning in the early 1910s). Previously African Americans had settled on the near east side of the city, in sections that were populated by large immigrant communities, with the reality that “seldom did blacks find themselves concentrated in predominately black neighborhoods.” Before 1914, the number of African Americans was simply far too small to cause a noticeable change in ethnic and racial living patterns.\(^{21}\)

During the First World War, the number of African American migrants grew to a point of introducing predominately black neighborhoods, with concentrations of recent arrivals breaking the previous model of scattered living. For a group that barely exceeded 5,700 residents in 1910 (1.2% of the city’s population), by 1920 there were over 40,000 African Americans living in the city.\(^{22}\) Arriving to find work and establish stable lives, African Americans experienced the same communal arrangement that other migrant groups had in previous decades, settling in concentrated sections of the east side and increasing their footprint over time. What was significantly different was the forced nature of this pattern, as discriminatory racial views and policies made inroads into

\(^{20}\) Poles in 1880 accounted for the largest ethnic percentage of multi-family homes in the city at 69%, yet by 1920 African Americans were experiencing similarly high rates of overcrowding in worse conditions. Olivier Zunz. *The Changing Face of Inequality*. 156.


Detroit, quickly materializing alongside previously held (yet less evident) racist attitudes. African Americans would begin experiencing these new feelings through their restriction from the ability to 'move up and move out,' with restrictive covenants and forceful assertion of neighborhood racial unity, largely preventing them from moving into wealthier and whiter sections of the city. This dynamic effectively assured that African Americans would be mostly confined to the Black Bottom\textsuperscript{23} and Paradise Valley neighborhoods on the east side, with the exception being a sizable settlement on the west side until at least the 1940s.

Overcrowding did not only affect African American and other migrant neighborhoods, as new offices and commercial spaces increased crowding in downtown. An increase in skyscrapers and other large structures, thanks to unrestricted development, rapidly increased its density and strained its ability to handle larger crowds. At a luncheon of the Detroit Lawyer's Club in January 1920, the special advisor to the planning commission, Harald Bartholomew, discussed the consequences of skyscraper overcrowding. Using Manhattan as an example, particularly the skyscraper-lined Nassau St.,\textsuperscript{24} he estimated that "if there was an explosion or earthquake or some calamity that would necessitate the emptying of all the buildings at once, the street couldn't hold them unless the people stood on top of one another." If just the occupants of the Woolworth building had to be evacuated, the solution would be a dismally slow one, as "to hustle away the people... requires 10-car express trains in the four-track subway at the base of the building 45 minutes, running only one minute apart." Such a plan was certainly not

\textsuperscript{23} Known today as Lafayette Park (thanks to redevelopment in the 1950s and 60s).
\textsuperscript{24} Located in Manhattan's Financial District, Nassau St. has been lined with skyscrapers for over a century, and during the 1910s would have been subject to rising rooftops and increasing density, a model for a small 2-lane road dominated by buildings far beyond its own human capacity.
ideal. Bartholomew warned that similar conditions were being created in Detroit. At another address Bartholomew commented on the city’s expansion, making it clear that it was changing in ways that were not intended to be orderly. Treating Detroit as an ascending metropolis, he noted “Detroit just grew up, and as a result, industry and commerce encroach upon residential thoroughfares, not only ruining the general appearance of the city, but playing havoc with property values.”

If there was to be any sense of order and neighborhood distinction to be preserved, then something had to change.

**Property Values and Blight:**

With Detroit’s communities and districts constantly fluctuating in the 1910s, city employees kept a close watch on city affairs, as incursions into residential continued unabated. Property values, which had been a key method of gauging wealth and land importance (and by extension the status of the property owner), were put under constant threat by the appearance of non-residential buildings into neighborhoods. This dynamic raised alarm for residents and realtors, both of whom did not desire decreases in value and wished to preserve the “sanctity” of residential areas. The city’s government had an inherent interest in preserving property values as well, since they were the basis for taxes. If the city wished to maintain a stable budget, then preventing property value deterioration was a high priority.

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26 Detroit’s bankruptcy declaration in 2013, while outside of the scope of this paper, showed what decades of declining property values and gross mismanagement could do to the city. Such an outcome might have been extreme for the early 20th century, but nonetheless would have been a worry for long-term planning and investment.
Involved in property values considerations was the location of African Americans in the city. Faced with racially restricted covenants on where they could hold, African Americans lived in small, dilapidated neighborhoods with less funding and fewer options than most white Detroiter's. Racial animosities played the largest part in this containment, which hinged directly on preserving property values within white neighborhoods by preventing African Americans from moving into them. Realtors, working to keep their image and business among white Detroiter's, "followed the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Real Estate Boards," which stipulated that they could not "introduce (a) character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any industry whose presence will be clearly detrimental to real estate values." If white neighborhoods were to be kept white, then realtors were expected to comply, under the punishment of being pushed out of the official real estate market.27 Persistent racial politics kept these biases alive and well for the next several decades, and would have even more sinister effects as Detroit began to shrink in the 1950s and '60s.

As middle- and upper-class white Detroiter's began to move from their neighborhoods surrounding downtown and along Woodward, African Americans frequently moved in to rent or, less frequently, purchase the unoccupied properties. By 1920 the phenomenon of ethnic divisions in Detroit had been transformed to one of a racial divide, demarcating neighborhoods by color with often forceful assertion of these arbitrary boundaries by whites.

Traffic & Mass Transit:

27 [Thomas J. Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 46.] Even if neighborhoods wished to integrate, banks and realtors effectively prevented such actions from being feasible.
The presence of these issues, difficult to deal with in of themselves, only coalesced into a larger predicament that adversely affected daily life for nearly all Detroiter. Thanks to the car companies’ emphasis on personal vehicles and the wide availability of cheap options by the mid 1910s, the soaring rate of vehicle ownership put a strain on Detroit unlike any other. Though the city’s vacant periphery had predominately filled up with single-family homes, spreading out the population even more than it had formerly been, a lack of roadway expansion and lackluster projects to increase capacity ended what was fast becoming an unwinnable battle over traffic. The congestion became so severe, thanks in part to the radial design of Judge Woodward’s incomplete vision, that “the downtown corner of Woodward and Michigan avenues [became] the nation’s busiest intersection.”²⁸ In the heart of downtown, the intersection was located over a previously paved Campus Martius, showing just how car-centric the city had become. Any hopes of mass transit alleviating these conditions were dashed, as continuous proposals for subways and extra light rail were shot down and abandoned throughout the early 1900s, with little help given by an aging streetcar system that was already greatly far above capacity.

It was obvious that the traditional system of municipal ordinances could no longer handle all the problems Detroit was facing. A degree of organization and regulation could be maintained, but no normal ordinance could stop an automotive tycoon from establishing a factory in a neighborhood, or prevent blight from proliferating throughout the city.

Figure 3: “Campus Martius in downtown Detroit was a jumble of streetcars, automobiles, pedestrians and a horse-drawn wagon in 1917.” Note the lack of green space in the former park.²⁹

City Planning in Detroit³⁰

The Planning Commission was not created from the first interests of zoning implementation. In fact, as it was originally created, the City Plan and Improvement Commission was established in May of 1909 under Mayor Philip Breitmeyer. With a nine-member board, the ordinance directing its creation cited its responsibilities as “procuring[ing] information and mak[ing] recommendations to the mayor and the Common Council... upon the needs of the city['s] parks, recreation grounds, boulevards, the river front, the extension or opening of streets/ or other public ways or places and city plans

³⁰ For more on the City Beautiful Movement, see Daniel M. Bluestone’s “Detroit’s City Beautiful and the Problem of Commerce.”
and improvements generally.”31 Despite its wide responsibilities, the commission initially
focused on beautification work. One of its first major projects, assessing tree planting in
the city, soon led the commission to adjudicate the design and construction of the James
Scott Fountain on Belle Isle. From there, the commission was quickly given even broader
responsibilities, and began inspecting the conditions within Detroit. By 1915 it was
publishing multiple reports a year on citywide studies and surveys, releasing three reports
in the first half of that year alone.

    Thanks to the nature of its main projects in its first years, the commission quickly
adopted projects that would stimulate design changes within Detroit, and subsequently
would allow for the easier introducing of zoning. The Preliminary Plan of Detroit,
released in 1915, brought citywide planning to the forefront of the city’s urban
development discussion. The plan argued that planning should “aim at the convenience of
the people in the city,” not only to stimulate good public works but also to avoid “a
deliberate search for beauty” by only planning for appearance. Ultimately, there would be
beauty in Detroit “because there is beauty in good order and convenience,” not in one
purely of artistic expression.32

    Edward Herbert Bennett, an architect who led studies into a wide variety of urban
dynamics in Detroit and other major American cities, helped to motivate the
commission’s plans. In Detroit, Bennett’s studies touched on everything from traffic
congestion to park and plaza development. Most notably was his concept of turning “the
entire Detroit River, from the head of Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie, one great park... all of

32 Detroit City Plan Commission, Cass Gilbert, and Edward Herbert Bennett, “Preliminary Plan of Detroit,”
[Detroit: City Plan and Improvement Commission, 1915], 2.
the islands in the river should be developed in a park-like fashion.” This would have meant that many of the riverfront industries, which had for decades relied on easy river access to ship raw materials and finished products, would have been cut off from it. While the commission’s rejection of any riverside development supposedly stemmed from “fear… it would be the refuge of idle people and loafers,” the plan claimed that its effects on public wellbeing would make “the people of Detroit more interested in the improvement… than in anything else.”\(^3\) This assurance may well have been an exaggeration to bolster the work of the commission, but would not eliminate other considerations that supported the river and lakefront development of parks for the city’s populace. The same concepts that Bennett had written for Plan of Chicago were applied to Detroit, with the expectation that an orderly and beautiful city would make for a contented populace and attractive urban landscape.\(^4\)

With 1915’s Preliminary Plan, Detroit showed that it was finally willing to introduce concrete changes to its makeup and improve its appearance, devoting more time and resources than it likely had at any point since the fire of 1805 to improving the city’s condition. Going beyond basic park planning, the planning commission would only take about four years to begin looking at zoning as a step towards their desired orderly metropolis.

Inklings of Zoning Implementation

\(^3\) “Preliminary Plan of Detroit,” 4.
\(^4\) Co-authored with Daniel Burnham, the 1908 plan followed the Beaux-Arts model in fashioning a wholly new look for the city, dominated by large public spaces, developed lake and riverfronts, and symmetrical road layouts [The Plan of Chicago: A Regional Legacy. Last modified, 2008.].
The Plan Commission began studying the applicability of zoning in Detroit by mid-1919. Proposals were to be forwarded to the city government and residents for deliberation. This process would combine the skills of a nearly decade-old commission and the expertise of professionals brought in as consultants, such as Harland Bartholomew of St. Louis and Lawson Purdy of New York.

The commission released its first planning report to include zoning in November 1919. The Building Zone Plan for Detroit presented "a preliminary explanation of what this plan will accomplish," relating the plan directly to "the development of the city and/ regulations adopted in similar plans in other cities." While not a finished product, the Building Zone Plan was a basic introduction to what the planning commission envisioned for the city, following practices of other urban studies, and taking advice from cities that were already experiencing the effects of zoning regulations. The plan proposed "five classes of use districts," each pertaining to building function and modeled on districts in other cities. The commercial and industrial districts remained straightforward, pertaining to activities that were not seen as acceptable within residential districts. Yet the division of the residential district into two types (first and second) saw the introduction of "apartments, hotels, or any other type of dwelling" besides single and double family dwellings in the second district, while still allowing for "schools, hospitals, libraries, and similar institutions" as in the first. An unrestricted district covered any other buildings or facilities not addressed in the four other areas. With this basic system, the planning commission emulated other American cities in their own reform efforts. As for building
height and lot density, those future standards were similarly expected to "correspond to those established in New York and St. Louis."\textsuperscript{35}

Centrally, the plan sought to alleviate future problems by "avoid(ing) past mistakes of omission as well as of commission in the upbuilding of the city," arguing that "what is true now will be to an even greater degree true twenty-five or fifty years from now." If nothing were to be done, the plan suggested it would be far harder to correct the same problems in the future. Connected to the desire for improvement was the commission's choice of ordinance application. The division between retroactive and proactive regulation has always been of central consideration, with the former traditionally more difficult to legally enforce. As zoning was predominately a proactive measure, the decision to not force changes on preexisting buildings would give it a forward-focused aim, which would ultimately be easier to enforce in the long term and make the commission's rhetoric more palatable to residents.\textsuperscript{36}

Whether it be encroachment or blight, lost property value or overcrowding, addressing such growing problems earlier rather than later gave the planning commission much of its justification for pursuing the implementation of its zoning plan. Yet to begin doing so, Detroiter's would have to understand that zoning was not a great leap from what the city government had already been doing, and that it would be staying within its abilities to use zoning to address the city's problems.

Tying Together Zoning and Ordinances

\textsuperscript{35} "A Building Zone Plan for Detroit." 15.
Naturally, one of the first obstacles that the plan commission had to deal with was the nature of new zoning regulations. Since many believed they were unprecedented extensions of government control over urban development, their basis as well as extension had to be kept within a strict framework of preexisting legal conceptions, while still charting a path into testy realms of regulation. What is first worth noting (then and now) is that regular municipal ordinances and zoning ordinances are fundamentally the same: originating as government regulations over the usage of space, regulating its development, and managing its appearance. Zoning takes the practice a step further in influencing the usage and dimensions of buildings in various sections of a given municipality. If there was to be any sort of base upon which zoning ordinances could find reasonable stability, it would be on top of building codes. Having existed in one form or another since the nineteenth century, regulations on buildings had been continually evolving like the city’s other ordinances. As buildings became larger and more complicated, the desire for further controls over developers’ projects became a concern for the city and its residents. With increased density and commerce, the risk for larger buildings having problems naturally put more people and property at risk, which the city continually worked to address.\(^{37}\) As long as the city continued to grow and evolve, the building code had to do the same, just as the rest of its ordinances would.

Whether it be proper structural reinforcement or fire escapes and adequate drainage, Detroit already hosted a well-regarded building code. By 1905 its building code

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\(^{37}\) The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 is one of the most telling examples of the necessity for building regulation. The fire’s death toll and destructive ability was sighted to the owner’s choice of locking the factory floor doors, and of disregarding basic safety measures. Such was the case that “the ninth floor fire escape in the Asch Building led nowhere, certainly not to safety, and it bent under the weight of the factory workers trying to escape the inferno.” New York City would adopt new provisions to reinforce fire safety as labor unions continued to address working conditions. ["FIRE!." Remembering: The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire. Last modified 2018.]
filled a 141-page book that was specifically created due to the "inaccessibility of these laws to the layman, and the inconvenience of reference to them." The creation of a simplified code book was paramount to introducing regulatory practices to residents, helping them understand the scope of the city's ordinances.\textsuperscript{38} With this list, and the proper authority to enforce its provisions, the building code served as a powerful reminder that the city was the main arbiter, with architects having to ultimately obey the city on how a building could be constructed and maintained. Modeling traditional ordinances, the city could justify how it would apply zoning regulations, already having a basis by which to legislate and enforce the building code. Though normalized over time, legitimate legal backing was required for the code's initial implementation, something that zoning would also have to be given, partly through its justification as an extension of earlier city ordinances.

The Legality of Zoning

As a second component of implementing zoning, Detroit's government had to justify the legality of these new regulations. Seen as an offshoot of previously accepted municipal regulations, zoning ordinances did not emerge from a vacuum, but they did require legal backing. If the city was to enforce new ordinances, then it had to show them to be a natural extension of its laws. The planning commission addressed this problem directly in the Building Zone Plan, dedicating an entire section solely to its justification. Connecting the zoning ordinances to previous code, the plan stipulated that ultimately "zoning is undertaken as an exercise of police power[;] the restrictions established must

clearly be shown to be a reasonable exercise of that power for the sake of promoting public health, safety, general welfare, or the public convenience.” Like mandates prohibiting dumping sewage and monitoring meat quality at markets, zoning could only be justified if it was shown to be of interest to public wellbeing, which would necessitate the usage of ‘police power’ to enforce it. Without such backing, zoning’s enforcement could be seen as a legal overstep, taking power away from people solely for the government to wield its own control.

The courts did play an early role in deciding whether zoning would be allowed in Detroit and the rest of Michigan. A November 1919 law to regulate the establishment of “shack-like structures” in the city, an item of piecemeal zoning that had been implemented to the dismay of the planning commission, was struck down by the Michigan Supreme Court in early 1920. The court found that the law went beyond the city’s authority by regulating the placement of structures that it could not clearly prove it was allowed to influence.39 This ruling did not foreclose the possibility of zoning being instituted, but it did prevent the city from doing so until an appropriate law was passed at the state level. It was clear that legality would be a central element in making zoning a viable option for Detroit. The timing of the high court’s decision left the city in a weakened position, as it sought to petition the legislature for zoning laws while dealing with the public’s reception of the zoning proposal.

Opposition to Zoning

The release of the Building Plan in November of 1919 gave Detroit businesses and residents their first clear view of what zoning in the city might look like. The proposal made a straightforward case for Detroit's future landscape, which could only exist with zoning. Yet this solution was not universally well received, with tension having already begun before its release and increased after. What would ensue would be nearly two decades of political conflict between the city and business interests over who would decide the future built reality of Detroit. The conflict would be strongest during the first years after the proposal's release, pitting developers and corporate leaders against the planning commission, and setting the stage for Detroit's continued evolution through the 1920s and into the Depression.

A fixture of urban politics has always been an element of conflict, one that involved all elements of city society and pitted various interests against one another. Detroit had dealt with its fair share of political conflict in the past. It had seen vicious election campaigns and serious arguments over ordinances, with the occasional scandal rocking the urban establishment. The turn to zoning to fix many of the city's growing problems brought an array of protests, from all walks of life, that was stronger than most past resistance. At hand was a plan to radically transform the way in which the city changed and grew, taking power from developers and business owners and giving it to the city. The placement and usage of building became the central issue the city wished to address, pitting their regulatory aims against determined property owners and developers.

The prospect of widespread government intrusion angered many, and soon galvanized action against it. Only a few decades earlier, big businesses had basked in the success of the Gilded Age and its rapid economic progress. Part of the consequence of
such growth was a rise in activism against it, targeting any array of unsafe working conditions to assailing the capitalist system itself.40 While America would not turn to a socialist economy, it did rein in businesses by passing regulations against harmful corporate practices. Continued animosity towards regulations made businesses wary of further government intervention, stimulating their response to zoning as a direct attack upon their interests.

With the presentation of another completed proposal to the public in 1922, objections quickly emerged. Many critics tied their concerns to the weakening of property rights. The Property Holder’s Protective Association spoke out against what it saw as the “invad[ing] [of] the rights of property owners unreasonably and improperly restrict[ing] the use of such property which otherwise is unencumbered and unrestricted.” Violating property rights only had the possibility of causing undue harm, as the association believed going forward with zoning would “jeopardize the value of every factory, home or business and every piece of property in this city.”41 Similarly, the potential decrease in property investment and development dominated an address by B. R. McCready, vice president of United Holdings, who worried that a decrease in property values would leave owners with no “assurance if any zoning ordinance is enacted that his investments in property will not deliberately or ignorantly discriminated against.” McCready reasoned zoning would destabilize widespread practices in the city and ruin

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40 Works such as The Jungle by Upton Sinclair mobilized many who had no knowledge of the disturbing conditions in slaughtering and food processing. Politically minded organizations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and The People’s (or Populist) Party both worked to improve working conditions and negate the inequalities generated by laisse-faire economics. [Charles W. Calhoun, The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 239-60.]

the potential for further industrial expansion, handicapping Detroit’s ability to attract new workers and further investments.⁴²

Others saw a connection between expansions in government power and “foreign” influences, particularly that of German regulatory practices. H. A. Starrett, a real estate agent from Detroit, argued that Germany was zoning’s “country of origin,” in which local and city governments were given “wide range of power in the issuing or refusing of these [building] permits.” This process generated immense resistance, leading to the formation of protective leagues, such as the Berlin-based “Protective League of Land and House Owners.” “Eventually, the business classes of Germany united to fight the whole zoning plan, and they backed up their arguments with the unanswerable evidences of increased rentals and decreased incomes. The results were inevitable.” There were no positive effects of zoning, which would only harm property owners and dissuade common practices such as renting.⁴³ Walter L. Henderson of Homer Warren & Company objected to zoning along these lines, arguing New York City tried zoning “on a limited scale” and found it to produce 493 appeals in one year (“one half cases a day for hearing,”) only leading to an aggregation of state power and larger bureaucracy. Henderson believed that zoning used in Germany, where the government had taken power to manage the regulations, was receiving particularly poorly, owing to controls that kept “real estate values [from] rarely go[ing] over $300 a front foot.” If profits could not be maintained,

then the effects of a sluggish real estate market would certainly take hold, a prospect that
Detroit property owners wanted to avoid.\textsuperscript{44}

With many of these complaints and associations emerging years after the 1919
proposal, it was evident that such a political debate shows that there was no quick
solution to the controversy. The implication of zoning’s potential effects remained a
potent reminder of what business owners, developers, and other property owners might
lose if it was introduced, helping to keep their lobbying organized and consistent. Even
with such outcry, support coalesced around the proposals, combating interest groups and
advocating for the preservation of residential neighborhoods.

Support for Zoning

As the plan commission faced property owners and business interests, one key
sources of support quickly materialized: realtors. Real estate agents played a role in
perpetuating Detroit’s low-level sprawl, with its continuation reliant on constructing and
preserving single-family neighborhoods. Threatened by the introduction of larger
buildings, Detroit’s homes remained vulnerable to unrestricted construction, risking
market destabilization and shaky land values. The support of residents was a factor,
especially those who had organized via street or neighborhood associations, but could
only influence their immediate surroundings.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} "Zoning Plan Called Form of Bureaucracy: Henderson Says Only One Big City Tried it; Found it Failed." \textit{Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)}, Oct 22, 1922.

\textsuperscript{45} Examples of such activism include Connecticut Ave. residents attempting “to declare the Stevens subdivision (sic) a residential district entirely,” and Bethune Ave homeowners preventing the construction of a
Realtors, while concerned with property values other than homes (especially those coming from previous development), were not solely concerned with losing deals in the downtown area. Their worries were much larger, and encompassed the entirety of the city’s real estate market. Fluctuating land values were not what realtors wanted to see, especially when properties ran the risk of losing value due to conditions on nearby lots. Whether it be the erection of an apartment block next to a single-family home, a rundown shop, or the occasional skyscraper towering over its neighbors, the number of uncertainties for real estate investments that accompanied Detroit’s continued expansion incentivized the eventual stabilization of real estate markets. The Detroit Real Estate Board “recorded its favor” for the institution of a zoning ordinance in 1921, acknowledging that housing did deserve some form of protection from larger developments, but at the same time resisting “any legislation that would tend to further restrict the rights of apartment owners.” All the city’s housing remained a focus, but single-family homes required extra protection due to their vulnerability.\textsuperscript{46}

The support of realtors partially came from lessons from other cities where zoning had been implemented, with positive results already making the news and highlighting the possibly beneficial ramifications of the laws. A prime example came from “a recent instance in Oak Park, Ill., where a piece of property previously valued at $7,500 was sold for $20,000 within 60 days after zoning became effective. The increased value is entirely attributed to the protection assured through zoning.”\textsuperscript{47} If zoning had an inherent ability to stabilize property values, then realtors would willingly back its implementation to prevent

\textsuperscript{46} "Mortgage Law Change Urged: Realtors Would Shorten Foreclosure Period; Favor Zoning Laws."  
\textit{Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)}, Mar 03, 1921.

\textsuperscript{47} "Civic Zoning is Talk Theme: Realtors Arrange Convention Conferences Also On Other Problems and Policies."  
\textit{Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)}, Apr 09, 1922.
value deterioration. Economic growth after the First World War stimulated expansive homebuilding across the country, but in Detroit was hardly enough to supply for the growing population. The construction that did occur, aided by decreasing lumber costs, had realtors wanting to alleviate other problems that would decrease home values.

If realtors were willing to get on board with zoning, they were unwilling to tackle the growing racial divide. Having decided to follow national professional standards, the only “official” real estate market in the city existed among whites by the 1910s, which purposefully restricted agents from selling property to African Americans. As such, the changes in property values within the African American sections of Detroit mattered little to most real estate agents. The blight in African American areas could be ignored unless it affected investments and potential sales in surrounding or transitional areas (those neighborhoods near African American communities, where racial h seemed likely to fall or shift). Due to prevailing sensibilities, there would be little challenge to this standard until the 1940s.

The Zoning Enabling Act of Michigan: Act 207 of the Public Acts of 1921

As the debate over zoning raged in Detroit, the plan commission and its supporters received a clear sign of state endorsement: the passage of state legislation allowing for zoning ordinances. After the piecemeal zoning in 1920, such a law needed to be enacted for future zoning in the city. Petitions to the legislature had begun in earnest

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even before the ruling, with the League of Municipalities drafting an amendment to the Home Rule Act in February of 1921, looking to "give cities jurisdiction over all strictly local matters, including zoning and public utility rates." In establishing its right to enact zoning ordinances, Detroit had to show that it had the legal support necessary to do so. The previous actions taken against the 1919 piecemeal zoning regulation could not be allowed to happen for future ordinances, and a statewide law was the best assured form of protection against hostile legal action.

Lobbying efforts finally bore fruit on April 14th, 1921, when the state legislature passed Zoning Enabling Act 207. Originally put forward by Senator Arthur Wood, the bill had "slumbered for a long time," but after its signing could act in the favor of Detroit and other Michigan cities. A Detroit Free Press article at the time commented that "this bill is of greatest interest to the larger cities, as it will make possible the regulations of building operations and also avoid many unsightly nuisances which communities have now to contend with." The act was exactly what the city and its supporters had been looking for, as it contained the provisions allowing for cities to institute zoning regulations.51

In the strictest sense, the act "establish[ed] the right of cities to divide the city into zones or districts where the use of the land and structures are regulated," addressing the two central tenets of the zoning proposal. Finally it was legal for Michigan cities to institute zoning ordinances, insulating the practice from the state's high court and its previous rejection.52

Detroit's Urban Government

The city’s political environment had faced significant change only a year prior to the 1919 proposal, which heavily affected political participation. Before 1918, residents elected representatives through the ward system (with twenty one wards in Detroit), concentrating political power within ethnically dominated neighborhoods. This dynamic allowed for primarily Democratic control of the mayorship and Common Council, with a handful of Republicans elected for reform efforts during the late nineteenth century. With the introduction of the Home Rules Act in 1909, the city was able to institute its own charter, doing so nine years later after concerted efforts by reformers. The new charter fundamentally changed the makeup of elected positions, abolishing the ward system and introducing citywide council races that effectively disenfranchised ethnic strongholds. Anglo-Saxon Republicans took power over city politics, monopolizing Detroit’s most powerful positions and denying them to ethnic minorities (including at this point the growing African American population). Tied to industrial and business interests, these officials were less sympathetic to zoning, and failed to pass any ordinance during their decade in power.

The political situation changed in 1930 with the election of Frank Murphy, an Irish Democrat whose ties to labor broke the Republican hold on power and brought Democratic dominance back to the city. The increase in ethnic political participation coincided with the emergence of a more liberal city government, aligning itself with FDR’s administration and New Deal policies. While Republicans would assert

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53 The new charter also introduced clauses allowing for the eventual institution of zoning ordinances.
themselves in later elections, in the meantime zoning had the potential to pass under a more amicable Common Council.

Depression and Reconsiderations (1928-1939)\textsuperscript{55}

The largest development of the 1920s in Detroit was not that of zoning’s triumphal win and implementation, but the lack of its presence. Instead of the city passing the proposals that the plan commission had prepared, myriad business interests thoroughly prevented the Common Council from acting on the expert advice. As such, no portion of the zoning proposal was instituted, remaining on the outskirts of any official action by the city government. This meant that development in Detroit continued virtually the same as it had previously, with rampant encroachment and no limits on building height and density allowing for even more factories and skyscrapers to dominate a growing downtown and New Center. The expansion of commercial interests and lower property values followed from the perpetuation of advantageous development, with mass transit slowly phased out and roads becoming more congested than ever before.

Overcrowding and blight only became worse, as population density increased.\textsuperscript{56} Clearly, in the absence of zoning, little was being done to effectively mitigate these issues as they continued to grow.

The onset of the market crash and subsequent Depression in 1929 vastly diminished Detroit’s economy, virtually clearing the downtown’s sidewalks and leading to the demolition of countless properties. Massive layoffs rapidly led to the deterioration

\textsuperscript{55} For Depression-era financial conditions, see Kris James Mitchener’s “Bank Supervision, Regulation, and Instability during the Great Depression.”

\textsuperscript{56} Kickert, \textit{Dream City}, 77-101.
of incomes and further imperiled already disadvantaged areas of the city (especially the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods). Automotive companies froze production as consumer consumption decreased nationwide. New development ceased from a lack of funding while planned projects were cancelled. The city government receded to a state of bare existence, cutting programs to avoid bankruptcy and avoiding public works projects (other than avenue widening). These prevailing conditions primarily prevented the reintroduction of zoning during the first half of the 1930s, even as blight, overcrowding, and traffic problems continued to grow.

Though Detroit still had yet to passing any zoning ordinance, since 1920 more cities had begun doing so. A report completed by the United States Department of Commerce in 1927 found “more than 30,000,000 persons, representing over 55 per cent of the urban population of the country, now have the protection afforded by zoning ordinances.” Major cities such as New York, St. Louis, and Chicago did contribute large percentages of citizens to this statistic, but did not hold anywhere near 55% of America’s urban population, showing an overall growth in zoning’s acceptance. Detroit and Philadelphia remained the largest non-zoned cities in the country, even as “the highest courts of twenty-two States had upheld comprehensive zoning ordinances,” including Michigan’s (which already had nineteen zoned municipalities). Act 207 had been upheld in court, allowing Michigan municipalities to implement zoning ordinances.

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57 Kickert, *Dream City*, 112.
58 Per the 1930 census, New York had 6.9m people, St. Louis 821,960, and Chicago 3.3m. As the urban population of the US in 1929 was 58m, these cities made up less than a quarter of this number.
Redlining

What had continued to dominate the lives of African Americans in Detroit, both for newcomers and multi-generational families, was the looming reality of physical racial division. Following beliefs and practices that were prevalent throughout America, the separation of whites and blacks remained a tangible reality in Detroit, as neighborhoods of both races were often starkly divided by major roadways (a prime example being that of Woodward, with white neighborhoods on the west side and African Americans on the east side). Conditions were often noticeably different across dividing streets, with years of restricted opportunities and continued overcrowding disproportionately affecting African Americans. The isolation of black neighborhoods only became more severe as the population grew, with white residents and realtors going out of their way to prevent interracial neighborhoods and exasperating the desperate conditions that many blacks remained stuck in. Just as there had been an “unofficial” real estate market operating within Detroit’s ethnically divided landscape of the late nineteenth century, the same continued for the city’s now racially divided neighborhoods. Operating outside of the normal regulations that realtors were expected to observe, unofficial sellers in the early to mid-twentieth century played a major part in the expansion of African American neighborhoods, and consequently became the source of questionable dealings to spark neighborhood turnover.60 Ultimately, Detroit and its residents were affected by the continual process of redlining, with a rigid pattern of artificial barriers erected to solidify the city into a segregated landscape.

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Redlining in Detroit began during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as the explosion of the city’s African American population drew the concern of white residents, realtors, and banks. National standards for granting mortgages (through the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation) utilized maps produced by the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, who categorized mortgage eligibility based on a multitude of factors. One of these factors, the racial makeup of neighborhoods, weighed heavier than just about any other, where the presence of any number of African Americans would lead to a rating decrease. Realtors followed these standards and refused to sell home to African Americans in white neighborhoods, creating a strict racial housing divide based on HOLC’s policies.\textsuperscript{61}

Covenants provided another form of sale restriction, with the addition of racial clauses legally preventing even the “unofficial” sale of many homes to African Americans. This tactic only lasted for a few decades, as in 1948 it was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in \textit{Shelley v. Kraemer}, removed a major barrier for African American resettlement. Even so, covenants were only one of many legal and cultural obstructions to new housing. In a racialized system as myriad as housing segregation, there remained many more obstacles for African Americans to navigate in establishing more equal patterns of housing.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins}, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{62} Sugrue, \textit{The Origins}, 45.
Figure 4: 1939 map of Detroit with mortgage eligibility ratings and overlaid dots. Note dense concentrations of dots and D (Fourth Grade) rating correlating with presence of African Americans.  

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The 1940 Ordinance Approval

After two decades of effort, zoning finally found a place in Detroit. While for twenty years the encouragement of the city government and realtors had come to naught in convincing the Common Council\textsuperscript{64} to pass a zoning ordinance, 1940 saw a dramatic change in attitude towards zoning and the disintegration of most organized resistance. Mayor Edward Jeffries, elected earlier that year, pushed forward with major urban reform plans after Detroit’s harsh experience with the boom-bust period of the 1920 and ‘30s. But without the baseline support of previously recalcitrant corporations, little could have been changed; with their endorsement, the government could strive towards addressing many of the city’s growing issues.

After years of review and community input, the 1940 zoning ordinance differed from the proposals of the early 1920s. Instead of five basic districts, the ordinance divided the city into four basic categories, with subcategories further delineating various restrictions: out of the four overall categories, there were five separate residential, four business, one commercial, and three manufacturing districts.\textsuperscript{65} Subzones (such as R1 and R2, both residential designations) had slight variations between them, attempting to account for the full array of existing and future buildings that might be constructed within the newly-designated districts. The zoning ran to sixteen pages, accompanied by seventy-eight maps. The plan neatly dividing the city into regions of relatively uniform size for administrative purposes.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{64} Detroit’s City Council
\textsuperscript{66} The Black Bottom and Woodward areas remained of similarly smaller size, while those in the northwest corner of the city were divided into even squares. The divisions were often made with population concentrations and (in the case of black and white divides) neighborhoods in mind.
What had driven business interests, developers, and residents to support zoning, after so many years of opposition, were two effects of the previously unrestricted development. The first was a "realiz[ation] that downtown was not going to grow any further...," as such "zoning was no longer perceived as a threat to growth," allowing a concerted effort towards downtown's condition and overall outlook. At the same time the problems of twenty years earlier had only grown worse, leading more residents to elect Common Council members to support the new proposal. Ultimately it was blight, the second of the two major effects of past policies, that galvanized the support necessary for a positive vote by the Common Council. Most of the districts surrounding downtown struggled with blight, with other problem areas having expanded radially from the city center. As wealth and investment opportunities dried up for the expansion of suburbs (both on the edge of the city and in neighboring communities), the inner city slowly faced population loss and growing condemnation of its properties.67

There was no feasible economic model that could succeed in a crumbling Detroit, and it took the efforts of a forward-thinking mayoral administration, backed with an influx of government money, to begin addressing the city's decline. While residents and businesses may have worked to improve the city, the necessary resources nor foresight were present. Detroit was certainly fortunate that the city government was still willing to persevere with urban redevelopment, even after years of little activity and significant resistance to its previous plans. With zoning, the city's residents and business interests could finally jointly address what had been growing issues across its landscape, starting the beginning of a long process in seeking solutions to the continued prevalence of

67 Kickert. Dream City, 129-130.
detritus and deterioration. While these would only expand over the years, and continue to
present the city with an ever-worsening problem, those seeking to work towards better
conditions would have new tools to use.

Rearmament & the War Years (1939-1945)\footnote{For more on entrepreneurial and entertainment in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, see Jeremy Peters’s “Cultural and Social Mecca: Entrepreneurial Action and Venue Agglomeration in Detroit’s Paradise Valley and Black Bottom Neighborhoods.” For labor activism, see Andrew E. Kersten’s “Jobs and Justice: Detroit, Fair Employment, and Federal Activism during the Second World War.”}

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 initially had no effect on the
city of Detroit. While many Detroiter recoiled at the idea that war had once again
returned to the European continent, American neutrality kept the country and its citizens
isolated from the immediate effects of the conflict. But within a little over a year’s time,
the nation would be thrown headlong into the new world war from Pearl Harbor’s
bombardment. Rearmament efforts in 1940, at the urging of President Roosevelt, began
the retooling process that would transform Detroit into an “Arsenal of Democarcy,”
emulating its previous commitment to the Great War two decades earlier. Sizable
investments from the federal government furnished the city’s industries with millions in
contracts, reviving production from Depression-era decreases and reinvigorating
struggling firms. Within only a couple years’ time, the city once on the edge of economic
ruin had completely rebounded, becoming one of the wealthiest benefactors of the Lend
Lease Program and the subsequent war effort.\footnote{Measured from the beginning of the Lend Lease Program in 1941: “Over the course of the war, Britain, the Soviet Union, China and other allies received in excess of $20 trillion worth of armament and munitions – enough to equip two thousand infantry divisions. Detroit businesses alone accounted for almost $7 trillion of that.” [Joel Stone, "Detroit: The "Arsenal of Democracy"," Detroit Historical Society. Pg. 4. Accessed February 21, 2023.]}
Detroit’s choice for wartime production was a consequence of its peacetime economic success. Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler ruled the industrial makeup of the city, with countless machine shops and parts suppliers managing the convoluted supply chains necessary for automotive production. The Big Three played a major role in the American automotive industry, having been established in the first few decades of the twentieth century. American automotive production topped two million vehicles a year in 1920, and by 1928 made up seventy two percent of worldwide exports. Owing to higher productivity levels, Detroit companies dominated through their adoption of assembly line mass-production.70 Detroit had firmly become the “Motor City,” a moniker owing to its continued automotive expansion and domination, both on the national and international stages.

Wartime efforts brought vast wealth in government contracts and a growing stream of migrants to partake in military manufacturing. Tanks, trucks, planes, and a plethora of other equipment flowed off Detroit’s assembly lines, with the capital, facilities, helping to meet the Allied war machines’ insatiable demand. But with the departure of thousands of Detroiters for the armed services, more workers were always needed to fulfill the industrial output that the War Board demanded of Detroit companies. Fulfilling this need were two intermixed groups: women and Southerners. In Detroit as elsewhere, women filled many positions that men abandoned for wartime service, especially assembly line posts that were crucial to the continued high output of

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70 Productivity levels for automotive companies in 1914 saw four Detroit firms (and one Lansing firm) among the top six most productive in the world (the sixth, Franklin Automotive, was located out of New York state). [Dassbach, Carl H. A. “The Social Organization of Production, Competitive Advantage and Foreign Investment: American Automobile Companies in the 1920s and Japanese Automobile Companies in the 1980s.” Review of International Political Economy 1, no. 3 (1994): 491-495.]
equipment. Aircraft manufacturing, taken up by Ford and Chrysler, had a forty percent rate of women on assembly floors, “changing social dynamics overnight” and influencing wartime perceptions on working women. In the same way, white and black southerners flooded to Detroit’s factories, covering other work that had been abandoned by enlistees and draftees. Large numbers of whites and African Americans made up these migratory movements, arriving in the city seeking the same jobs. The interactions and confrontations that would soon occur would fuel a crisis, one which would eventually explode into days of death and destruction.

The Sojourner Truth Project: A Lesson in Housing

With such major population influxes to the city, Detroit’s government was aware of its growing housing shortage, and sought to mitigate conditions with several housing projects. Public housing projects aimed at low income city residents, having begun several decades before during The Depression. Cities across the country, from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles, received millions in federal grants during the 1940s to construct single and multi-family housing, with apartment blocks becoming the mainstay of these rebuilt communities. Generally laid out to allow for parks and other recreational spaces, these developments quickly became lightning rods for racial housing issues, as whites and blacks both sought new developments in crowded urban conditions.

Built between 1941 and ’42, the Sojourner Truth Project was the only defense-related housing project in Detroit during the war, with 200 brick units for occupancy by

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71 Joel Stone, "Detroit: The "Arsenal of Democracy"," pg. 9.
72 The Techwood Homes in Atlanta, Georgia was America’s first public housing project, constructed in 1935. [Irene Holliman, "Techwood Homes." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Aug 26, 2020.]
defense workers. Located on the city's east side, the Detroit Housing Commission (DHC) initially intended for African American families to occupy the dwellings, giving relief (if only a little bit) to overcrowded neighborhoods. Yet the project's placement in-between several white neighborhoods (and adjacent to the upper-class African American neighborhood of Conant Gardens), immediately instigated resistance. A joint campaign by surrounding residents initially convinced the city to place white workers in the homes, in turn sparking protests by African American activists. Once again, the city and DHC relinquished to complaints and returned African Americans as tenants. This act of betrayal enraged white neighbors, who surrounded the projects as workers and families moved in. Crowds formed on both sides, with fighting soon turning into a minor riot. The riot's outcome was such that "220 were arrested, and 190 were held for trial – all but three black," indicated a clear disparity in police action and the heavy toll it took on the project's residents. While the riot was relatively contained (remaining within and around the project), wartime violence existed as a major concern for authorities, hoping to maintain unity around the war effort and prevent dissention. To further avoid potential outbreaks of violence, the DHC chose to mandate racial continuity for housing projects, with occupants being of the same race as the surrounding neighborhoods. Though this existed as a solution to individual locations, it could not address racial animosity on a citywide scale.

74 While involved in the initial resistance to African American workers in the project, residents of Conant Gardens did not take part in the later rioting against the new tenants.
75 Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis, 73-75.
The Race Riot: A Reminder of the Delicate Balance

The war’s effects would hit the hardest across the country not through the draft and rationing, but through race riots unlike those since the Civil War and Great War. Detroit was no different, hosting an environment that was in constant flux from labor migration and economic expansion. Even though the Sojourner Truth riot had already exposed simmering tensions, a larger event would be required to further show the state of the city’s racialized atmosphere.

Detroit’s detonation would occur on June 20th, 1943, as Belle Isle hosted tens of thousands of Detroiter during the year’s hot summer days. Fights broke out between black and white youths, soon spilling out into the city at-large as roving bands assaulted each other and uninvolved residents. Looting and attacks were widespread in Paradise Valley for several days, with federal troops eventually instituting a curfew on the 22nd. Thirty-four deaths (twenty-five of them black) and 1,893 arrests shocked the city, shattering expectations of wartime unity that previously dominated social imperatives and pro-war propaganda.

The riot was a seismic event for Detroit, sending ripples through social and political realms while breeding further distrust between the city and its residents. African Americans took issue with the response from the city, both in terms of police action and Mayor Jeffries’s endorsement of suppression tactics. Making things worse, Jeffries

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76 For a comparison of the Detroit and Harlem riots in 1943, see L. Alex Swan’s “The Harlem and Detroit Riots of 1943: A Comparative Analysis.”
77 The New York Draft Riots of 1863 and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1922 were directly influenced by sociopolitical conditions during and after their respective conflicts, which had massive effects on race relations and hierarchy in both cities. Other riots during these same periods affected cities across the country, destabilizing urban life and bringing into question the perceived status of African Americans within the United States.
78 Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis, 29.
accused African American leaders of having instigated the riot and refused to endorse civil rights laws, commenting that "I support the civil rights law only because it is the law." The mayor's support of zoning regulations brought another point of contention, partially due to a clause that mandated "existing pattern of a neighborhood (in racial terms) cannot be changed." This restriction, among others, handicapped African American mobility and consequently played a role in overcrowding. Jeffries's reasoning for the stipulation was that of "a man ha[ving] a right to select his own neighbor," effectively a double standard as whites were only restricted from a fraction of overall city land. For racially heterogeneous neighborhoods, he approved of the status quo, with the belief that "part of (your) right under a democracy is to choose your friends." Such paradoxical answers made a poor impression on African American Detroiteres, as Jeffries's attempts to navigate racial discourse floundered. These comments would only breed skepticism over Jeffries's commitment to racial reform, reducing hopes that his other efforts would produce progress in the foreseeable future.79

Kept in constantly deteriorating conditions and only afforded improved employment opportunities due to rearmament, African Americans in Detroit were consistently treated as second-class citizens, even after many had left the Jim Crow-dominated south. Their inability to exploit opportunities to the same extent as whites, consistently held back by discriminatory regulations and hiring practices, fostered an environment of dissent that exploded as conditions hit their tipping point. Aggravation by white locals and Southern transplants only made the situation worse, seeking to maintain their own racial and economic prominence by resisting African American progress.

Unwilling to address how racialized the city had become, Detroit’s government sought to mitigate only a portion of these issues through targeted work, abandoning the possibilities of racial reconciliation and endorsing pragmatic improvements.

Figure 5: “Police use tear gas to disperse a crowd gathered on the main street of Detroit (likely Woodward Ave.), Michigan, in an effort to halt race rioting on June 21, 1943.” Far bloodier scenes were common during the riot’s three days of chaos.80

The Rebuilding Proposal

Mayor Jeffries’s administration launched a massive program, primarily focused on urban revitalization and improving condition for some of the worst areas. It was

“proposed in 1946 as a local slum clearance (or blight) program known as the ‘Detroit Plan,’” a monumental city-led operation to fundamentally redesign the decrepit section of the city and prepare for growth it believed would soon arrive.\textsuperscript{81} Large in scope and funding, the “Detroit Plan” was presented as a gold standard by which the city could not only lay out strategies for repairing neighborhoods and bringing businesses back, but prove that it had the resources to do so with other initiatives. Stemming from this and other Jeffries inspired and directed projects, housing and industrial redevelopment was a focal point of Detroit’s efforts to stall and reverse its own decline. Mobilizing the funding and expertise it could acquire, the city took an active role in transforming the otherwise organic nature of economics and population changes, using them as tools both to readjust its fortunes and to strive towards successful stabilization. Detroit’s zoning patterns became tailored to the intended improvements that the city’s plan commission worked to develop and carry out.

\textbf{Postwar (1945-1955)}

The end of the Second World War, just like the end of the first, was both a blessing and a curse for Detroit. While those in military service were finally returning home, and the auto companies could begin selling to GI bill-toting Americans and in nations devastated by the war, the evaporation of wartime contracts and readjustment to peacetime would not be straightforward. Expanded and newly constructed production lines returned to peacetime conditions, with the consumer market being satiated in the first few years after 1945. As factories closed and cut back on employees, tens of thousands were laid off from industrial jobs, losing well-paid and often union-protected

positions. These workers would have to compete with veterans who, expecting employment and housing, placed extra strain on Detroit’s resources. Yet with the end of the war, the city government could fully refocus towards city affairs, moving resources previously dedicated to national defense and directed industrial output. This shift became incredibly important, as the city’s swelling population required improved conditions, especially within African American areas as before the war. Major Jeffries’s reforms continued looking towards a future led by the city’s government, taking care of urban problems while limiting their potential for proliferation. Over the next decade, the city would attempt to tackle its problems with a renewed vigor not seen since the 1920s, bringing visions and solutions not seen since before the Depression.

Detroit’s Master Plan

While planning and zoning remained of dominant concern for the city in the 1940s, master planning soon became a major consideration that, just like zoning, would take time to gain traction. The city’s first master plan was completed in 1951, “a product of more than a decade of planning and public vetting.” It combined zoning, traffic management, and other aspects to create an all-encompassing overview of Detroit, going a step further than zoning’s concentration on building use and placement. It neatly divided the city into “relatively self-sufficient (or independent) districts of roughly 100,000 inhabitants” that were decentralized (according to the city) but also under the “hierarchical system that reinforced the hegemony of the urban core.” The plan involved road development, following the expansion of highways in and around the city since the

82 Joel Stone, "Detroit: The "Arsenal of Democracy"," pg. 15.
construction of the first in the 1940s, to facilitate greater access between sections of Detroit and the expanding suburbs. Just like the 1915 survey undertaken by Frederick Olmsted Jr., riverfront renovations were included as a crucial aim of the city's improvement.\textsuperscript{83} A major step for Detroit, the master plan showed that the city's government had the time and resources to contribute towards an all-encompassing review and revision process. The administrative measures that allowed for the master plan to be formulated, stemming from the work of the plan commission and other agencies, benefitted from zoning, making it a core element of the city's future planning initiatives.

Postwar Housing Projects

To tap into large amounts of federal support, Detroit made a concerted plan for multiple large and small-scale housing projects, dotted around the city, to serve both white and black Detroiters. Initially, several of the smaller developments were aimed at helping veterans returning from the Second World War. These were often subsumed into the racial housing conflict and included potential restrictions against black veterans. Plans to include blacks in built communities in or around white neighborhoods, or at least included whites in the intended tenant makeup, resistance frequently erupted and stymied efforts towards integrated housing. Unsurprisingly, this same phenomenon had already been practiced in existing neighborhoods, undermining government projects to mitigate race-based divisions in the city.

As a few other cities built widespread projects, Detroit only managed three, having dismissed nine other potential sites in the face of substantial community

\textsuperscript{83} Kickert. \textit{Dream City}, 139.
resistance.\textsuperscript{84} Racial animosity had only widened since the wartime riot, and conservatives finally surmounted liberal opposition to elect Albert Cobo to the mayor’s office in 1949. Quickly Cobo made it a point to prevent the continued improvement of African American neighborhoods, while also aiding in restricting African American’s movement into predominately white areas.\textsuperscript{85}

The Gratiot Project

The city’s largest project was that constructed between Gratiot and Lafayette in the Black Bottom neighborhood, adjacent to downtown in a chronically overcrowded portion of the neighborhood. A key component of Mayor Jeffries’s urban development strategy, it was a focal point of the mayor’s “Detroit Plan” and the flagship development of his government’s ensuing projects. As the main postwar development planned by Jeffries and carried out under Cobo, the Gratiot project survived the city’s political shift and still found favor within the mayor’s office.

Due to the project’s significant size (a total of forty-three city blocks) and number of resources necessary for its completion, the Gratiot Project was the subject of annual progress reports, provided to the city by the Housing Commission. Every year from the project’s beginning in 1950 to its completion in 1959, these reports detailed the drawn-out progress that characterized government-sponsored projects, regardless of its construction by private developers (who may otherwise have finished the work much sooner). Even so, the city government’s desire to utilize federal funds towards urban redevelopment projects continually supported such work.

\textsuperscript{84} Sugrue, Thomas J. \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 56.
\textsuperscript{85} Sugrue, Thomas J. \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, 84.
In surveying the project’s intended site, the city found “958 buildings, mostly residential, with about 1,550 dwelling units,” indicating that most (if not all) were multi-family dwellings. It quickly became evident that these dense streets, situated on the southwest end of Black Bottom, were in a horribly dilapidated state. A full two-thirds of units were substandard, with the same number (1,000 dwellings) being “dilapidated or ha[ving] no running water.” To make matters worse, overcrowding was all-pervasive, with “1,953 families and 989 single persons living in the 1,550 dwellings.” The conditions of the neighborhood made it a prime candidate for redevelopment, with the city able to demolish all existing properties and replace them with new housing units. The redevelopment plan focused on a diverse array of components as the city sought to provide a variety of housing options and amenities for future residents, stabilizing the immediate area with the intent on helping to ensure its stability. Gratiot’s intended makeup included “portions… designated as low density residential areas… (others) high density residential sections with multi-story apartment buildings,” with another “portion… redeveloped for commercial uses.” This balance, providing housing and shopping within proximity to one another, would effectively make Gratiot its own sub-neighborhood, making it sustainable in the eyes of the city’s planners.86

Though it would take nearly a decade to complete, the Gratiot project would be the beginning of the end for Black Bottom. With the city government’s ability to exert influence over areas that were deemed unsafe and unsustainable, and with negligible resources from Black Bottom and Paradise Valley to prevent such incursions, the process of bulldozing sections of these old communities would only continue into the 1960s.

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Population Capacity: A Study

Studies by the planning department had been instrumental in influencing the city’s planning, from revitalization to basic management and planning for the future. As population was a fundamental factor in the city government’s work, it also became the focus of several municipal studies, with the Population Capacity study attempting to quantify the contemporary conditions of Detroit’s neighborhoods. Released in December of 1954, the study also sought to predict “a population capacity for Detroit in the year 1980” based upon calculations of “acreage and dwelling unit densities... both on the basis of (1) the existing zoning pattern and, (2) the proposed master plan standard.”

In seeking to understand the population’s future size, Detroit’s government sought to plan for continued growth and adjust its outlook accordingly. The report concluded that “the 1980 population for Detroit under the present (residential) zoning pattern is estimated at 2,004,304,” an increase of approximately 200,000 residents (or 11% from 1950). The study only considered potential population growth and not decline as eventual outcomes, clearly a product of the city’s belief in its never-ending expansion, and one that would sway their expectations over the next several decades. Yet over the next several years, Detroit’s government would realize how wrong its predictions were, and ultimately have little use for its study.

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88 “Population Capacity: A Study. 2.
Inner City Decline and Rebuilding (1955-1967)\textsuperscript{89}

The mid-to late 1950s marked a turning point for Detroit. The city had grown to the largest in its history (1.8 million residents as of 1950), and the Big Three projected an economic force far beyond the city’s boundaries, Detroit had truly become the pinnacle of what its citizens had worked for over the previous two and a half centuries. Many had big plans for the city’s future, and residents were certainly optimistic, but the reality of Detroit’s rise showed the ills created by rampant economic development and a booming population. Beginning in the late 1940s, changing economic patterns and the relocation of automotive factories whittled away existing economic infrastructure and coincided with the movement of white Detroiter s to the suburbs, removing two major sources of revenue for the city and its remaining population. These processes would begin a downturn that would continually bleed the city of funding and ruin its economic prospects for decades to come.

The loss of business in Detroit dealt one of the hardest blows to the city, as it effectively doomed those already destitute to remain so, and sent tens of thousands of those previously employed into poverty. The traditional industrial workforce dwindled, as “blue collar jobs continued to disappear, to be replaced by service sector jobs.”\textsuperscript{90} This hit African Americans, who were already limited in employment options, particularly hard; they now lost some of the only well-paying and secure jobs left in the city by the mid-late 1950s. Compounded with unemployment was the wholesale destruction of African American neighborhoods for an expansive highway system, meant to connect its

\textsuperscript{89} For more on Detroit highway development, see Charles K Hyde’s “Planning a Transportation System for Metropolitan Detroit in the Age of the Automobile: The Triumph of the Expressway.” For urban renewal, see Jean M. Ernecq’s ”Urban Renewal History of Detroit 1946-1970.”

\textsuperscript{90} Sugrue, Thomas J. The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 268.
wealthier peripheries with the downtown while avoiding surface streets. Both phenomena would continue to worsen conditions in the slowly dying city, ensuring remaining residents suffered as the city failed to provide for their needs.

“A Ten-Year Investment and Program to Eliminate Deterioration and Prevent Blight and Slums in Detroit’s 53 Middle-Aged Neighborhoods”

A major study released on October 7th, 1955, based on work done in the 1954 housing survey, laid out a plan to reverse the tide of blighted homes and businesses. The Program to Eliminate Deterioration and Blight went beyond basic data gathering, and even past the neighborhood restoration that had already been taking place. The report looked at fifty three neighborhoods that the city sought to deal with as “Conservation - Major Improvement Areas,” which would be infused with city funds and prevented from continually draining city resources in order to “reverse the trend of a declining accessible base in one-third of the residential areas of the City.”91 Like other studies and subsequent plans that Detroit had begun implementing, the Ten Year Investment was not only lengthy and involved, but also sought to address blight in an area large enough to mitigate declines of both the city’s population and economy.

The city sought to focus on areas that were in dire need of aid, concentrating on those with “continued physical deterioration of property by reason of age, lack of maintenance, repair and misuse.” Whether it be owners who lived offsite refusing to maintain their properties, or owners living onsite unable to fund repairs, the deterioration

of these neighborhoods progressed in great part through the lack of care. Another key issue was the transient nature of many living within the neighborhoods, as chronic poverty, illness, and other issues fueled high turnover in rented housing. This turnover meant that "neglect (was) aggravated by the high mobility of families moving into and out of the areas," aiding to and compounding the factors that were previously cited as being central points of neighborhood deterioration. Yet to a larger extent, this instability also meant that there was a "common acceptance of the idea that the neighborhood will not be a permanent home," giving little reason for many people to have no stake in improving the present conditions. Without the stability of longer-term residents, the prospect of a well-kept neighborhood was hardly realistic, with the social development of longer-term residences (that are necessary for creating a sense of shared community) not present within the neighborhoods.

Beyond the analyses of Detroit's transient residential areas, the report also cites surrounding neighborhoods as being potential victims of deterioration, drawing attention to detrimental factors having an outsized influence on the wider community. The report claims that with all the issues affecting underserved neighborhoods, their "continued spread... is a menace to the adjacent stable neighborhoods," whether by proximity or their spread into healthier surrounding areas. It sums up the assertion by arguing that because of how these problems tend to expand, the only conclusion is that the condition of the deteriorating neighborhoods "obviously becomes a community problem." Whether it be prevention of blight expansion into surrounding areas, or working to improve conditions within blighted neighborhoods, it was evident that only with a concerted effort could such problems be prevented from encompassing even greater areas of the city.
While it could have been the case for other neighborhoods to fight against blight, in their minds by preventing African Americans from moving onto their streets to avoid property devaluation\textsuperscript{92} and "invasions," Detroit's government sought a more intrusive and aggressive approach. Much like what the city government had done during the war years for other housing projects, invasive measures were seen as the central feasible solution to avoid continued deterioration, even if they were meant as conservation efforts and not wholesale rebuilding.

The whole plan aimed at completion within 10 years, spanning from 1956 to 1966 at a cost of $73 million, with $3.2 million spent annually. The initiative contained three stages, with each supposed to take three to four years and cover 15-19 neighborhoods per stage. Planners estimated that a large majority of properties would be salvageable, with only a 25-30\% increase in relocations (per average annual relocations).\textsuperscript{93} Realistically, this plan was incredibly expensive and time-consuming, facilitating the renewal of a full one-third of the city's worst neighborhoods. Even so, its aims were notable in attempting to eradicate conditions that had steadily grown worse for nearly half a century, showing there remained support for pervasive urban redevelopment policies.

\textbf{Industrial Renewal}

Alongside large-scale housing projects and rehabilitation, industrial renewal was the other central focus of Detroit's government in the 1950s and 60s. Just as it seemed to turn dilapidated neighborhoods into modern apartment complexes, so too was it the case for building new and improving old industrial complexes to attract industry that had left

\textsuperscript{92} Due to real estate regulations and lending practices.
\textsuperscript{93} "A Ten-Year Investment and Program to Eliminate Deterioration," 6-10.
the city. While there was still a significant industrial base in Detroit as of the 1950s, the age of automation had begun to whittle away at traditional manufacturing jobs, decreasing employment opportunities and incentivizing layoffs for replacement by machine labor. At the same time, the departure of factories from the city compounded the effects of automation, taking away even more manufacturing jobs and affecting white-collar workers. Cheaper labor costs in the southern US and other countries (often due to a lack of comparable minimum wage and the absence of unionization) drove countless companies away from their traditional bases of manufacturing, a phenomenon that struck much of the American Midwest in the second half of the twentieth century. Unemployment rose as industry continued its exodus, shattering Detroiter’s notions of long-term stability from factory work.

As a city that had chiefly grown relying on large amounts of blue-collar labor, which had also attracted enough migrants to instigate massive population growth up until the 1950s, Detroit was not able to shoulder the burden of the drastic economic changes that affected its population. To the same degree of ferocity that industrial departure affected other Midwestern towns and cities, the closure and automation of Detroit’s automotive plants sent ripple effects throughout its entire economic structure. The machine shops and suppliers that had grown with the first car factories, and built up a complicated supply chain to support them, were suddenly without the purchasers that made their operations worthwhile. Cascades of layoffs and shutdowns closed many of these auxiliary companies, which further decreased local purchasing power and weakened consumer markets. With industrial employment becoming a scarcity rather

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95 Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 143.
than a reassured occupation, workers could do little as the entirety of Detroit’s economy suffered under the strain of lost earnings.

While businesses were free to relocate and abandon their employees and local suppliers, Detroit was fundamentally beholden to both. It was not in the city’s interest to lose business investments or to have large numbers of unemployed workers, with the expected loss in tax revenue a serious concern for the city’s future budgets. Attempting to allay some of the concerns that deindustrialization brought, Detroit partook in a program to entice industry to move into the city, often by creating new industrial districts that could facilitate new arrivals and expansion efforts. It was the city’s belief that “the major cause of industrial flight was the lack of new land for industrial development,” which galvanized planners to utilize land that the city had to offer, regardless of whether this was the central cause of industrial flight. What did act as a factor in the relocation of industry was the fact “that most of Detroit’s existing factories were superannuated or unusable in the age of automation,” making the renovation or construction of new factories in the city two possibilities that corporations would rather have found cheaper options for (such as locating to other areas with cheaper business factors). 96 If the city’s development of industrial sites was to progress, then rezoning would be necessary to facilitate these projects, with a prime example being from the Corktown Redevelopment Project.

Corktown Transformed

Taking lessons from the Gratiot Project, the Corktown Redevelopment Project sought to sweep away decades of dilapidated and cramped properties for new

96 Sugrue, Thomas J. The Origins of the Urban Crisis, 164.
developments, in this case warehouses and light industrial facilities. As part of the city’s desire to attract industry, new business parks were settled on to alleviate primary development costs for corporations. The first studies of 54 Corktown blocks were proposed in 1953, with 1950 census information citing “approximately 8,400 persons in April, 1950,” and a racial makeup of “90 per cent (sic) white, 9 per cent (sic) Negro and 1 per cent, other races.” The area was predominately one of laborers (about 60%) with 80% of housing rented and one-third of the dwellings dilapidated. As an added factor, “nearly 1,000 persons in Corktown did not reside in households,” indicating nearly one-eight of the neighborhood lived in “rooming houses and hotels,” indicating conditions of transience and low wages.97

While Corktown was in an overall better condition than the blocks of Black Bottom bulldozed for the Gratiot Project, within half a year the city had decided to do the same. In a June 1953 memo to the head planner Francis P. Bennett from planning department staffers (Carl Almblad, Robert Clark, and Edward Hustoles), it was suggested that Corktown be turned into an industrial site. Since Corktown was designated “for light industrial use” by the city’s Master Plan of Generalized Land Use, redevelopment would not require zoning changes. As such, the neighborhood itself had no protection under zoning, and replacing the neighborhood with light industry only required the removal of the neighborhood itself. The site had ready access to rail lines, the Detroit River, and the central business district, all of which made its location optimal for its intended use. The memo detailed the overall cost to purchase the 972 present dwellings at just over $1.6

million, an investment the city was willing to take if it meant industrializing the neighborhood.\(^98\)

Corktown’s demolition did not end up being straightforward, as local and political resistance made the project much more difficult to implement. By the project’s completion, it had done little more than construct “a few small plants and warehouses (that) required a tremendous expenditure of political and economic resources,” calling into question whether the project had been worthwhile to begin with. Even though the site itself was sizable and could host several corporations, its overall effect on the city’s industrial decline left much to be desired. Ultimately, much of Corktown had been transformed into an industrial park, yet one that could only be “a piecemeal attempt to solve an economic problem with far deeper roots,” showcasing the limits of urban development. If the Corktown project presented few benefits for the scope of its work, then the city government’s efforts towards economic rejuvenation bore little promise.\(^99\)

**Inner-city Highways: The Death of Detroit’s Oldest Black Neighborhoods**\(^100\)

Undaunted by the city’s overall decline, Detroit’s government sought new ways to facilitate the survival of downtown at the expense of surrounding areas, most clearly by the construction of highways. Often sunken well below street level, highways\(^101\) offered high-speed routes between the city’s peripheries and suburban communities to its inner core, bypassing traditional avenues. Several highways had been constructed during the


\(^{100}\) Though Corktown was not a majority African American neighborhood, its physical and economic condition made it a prime candidate for southwestern highways.

\(^{101}\) Highway, freeways, and expressway will be used interchangeably to mean the same thing, i.e., a designated high-speed and restricted roadway.
war years, including the Edsel Ford (or Willow Run) and Detroit Industrial Expressways, yet all of which were “conveniently located outside of the urban areas.” As African Americans moved into white neighborhoods (and white residents left for the urban periphery), the perceived distance between downtown clientele and downtown slowly increased. To remedy what the city and businesses saw as a widening gap, the postwar years began with new initiatives towards highway construction, outlined in a city pamphlet from December 1946. Citing the latter ’40s as “the age of speed,” the pamphlet argued that the current state of congested roadways had to be abandoned, with the recognition that “our patched-up, made-over, hand-me-down system of streets and highways no longer fits. The automobile has grown up and needs a tailor-made suit.” Intersecting with established throughfares and heading in all directions from downtown, most would have to travel directly through long established neighborhoods. The reality of the projects could be disguised with the purposes of increasing connectivity and demolishing blight, overshadowing their destructive nature and lasting damage.

Detroit’s updated traffic plan of 1945 rapidly became a reality as highway construction boomed. The Lodge Freeway’s creation (from downtown to Wyoming street, at about seven miles) led to the destruction of 2,222 properties, while extensions of the Edsel Ford saw the raising of 2,800 in the 1950s. To make matters worse for residents of blighted areas, the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act provided millions of

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102 Portions of the highways slightly crossed into certain neighborhoods (including the Edsel Ford into Paradise Valley), but otherwise remained outside until after the war. [Kickert, Dream City, 136.] [Sugrue, Origins of Urban Crisis, 47.]
104 As property lines were condensed into highway boundaries, zoning would also be removed, leaving a road right-of-way in its place (a designation solely for roadways where no buildings could be built). 105 Sugrue, Origins of Urban Crisis, 47-48.
dollars for continued expansion, with little reason for the city to cease construction.\textsuperscript{106} Coinciding with other urban renewal projects (such as Gratiot and Corktown), highways divided and destroyed the neighborhoods they were laid through, with the once-thriving Hastings Street turned into the Chrysler Expressway in the late 1950s. Hasting’s destruction was accompanied by the steady condemning and destruction of properties all along the Chrysler’s planned route, which was still under construction a decade later in the late 1960s, with little of Black Bottom remaining around the newly-paved highway.\textsuperscript{107}

Black Bottom’s destruction at the hands of renewal and restricted roadways was hardly unique, as Paradise Valley and Corktown suffered the same fates. As the city government avoided middle-class neighborhoods at the expense of lower-class areas with African Americans, the systematic destruction of Detroit’s oldest black neighborhoods was nearing its climax. The city showed little sign of slowing down its projects, until events of the mid-1960s began changing the perception of what Detroit had truly become.

\textsuperscript{106} Kickert, \textit{Dream City}, 156.
\textsuperscript{107} Kickert, \textit{Dream City}, 169, 183.
Outro: Why the 1960s?

For the discussion of zoning in Detroit, there is little that makes its past as controversial as the summer of 1967. Detroit was rocked with death and destruction over the course of five days, presenting the plight of the city’s African American community to the entire nation. Fed up with generations of societal and structural discrimination, this riotous outburst once again revealed (just as it did in 1943) how dire conditions in the inner city had become. The city government and its white residents could no longer avoid the clear and present reality of their black neighbors, who were fully willing to resist continual abuse and discrimination.

\(^{108}\) Courtesy of the Detroit Free Press.
Nothing could be more obvious than the truth: Detroit’s total population had begun to shrink rapidly, with African Americans making up larger percentages of residents as their fellow white Detroiters left in droves for the suburbs. Whites took their money and resources with them, leaving little more than their homes (rapidly purchased by blacks) and crumbling city institutions they no longer chose to support. With many of those resisting African American expansion leaving the city, remaining Detroiters brought urban redevelopment to an end and refocused the city’s aims away from its previous path of destruction. Zoning would not disappear, as it had truly ingrained itself in city operations, but could finally be used in less authoritarian ways.

In working to control the negative effects of urban development, Detroit’s government advocated for order through zoning throughout the first half of the twentieth century, finding that its implementation did help restrict invasive development and volatile property values. Yet as its usage progressed, the city government began using its powers for clearing neighborhoods and laying down an extensive highway network, aiding in the city’s deterioration and effectively isolating downtown from its surroundings. Pervasive redlining only continued under zoning, as its designations on dwelling density helped restrict cheaper housing in detached single-family home neighborhoods, making it easier for realtors to prevent relocation. What had first been suggested as a remedy to help the public became one of great harm, benefitting one group (whites) and suppressing another (blacks), with racism triumphing over meaningful reforms.
Even so, as Father Richard said a century and a half before 1965, "it will rise from the ashes. We hope for better things." The future does not have to be the past, and can continue to change for the better with work towards the right solutions.

Figure 7: Skyline view from 1960, the same year Cobo Hall was completed in the foreground.109

Further Figures:

Figure 8: John Farmer's 1835 map of Detroit. Note the implementation of Judge Woodward's plan only in the center.\footnote{John Farmer, and C.B. & J.R. Graham Lithographers, \textit{Map of the city of Detroit in the State of Michigan}, [Detroit: Farmer, 1835] Map.}
Figure 9: Map of Detroit’s Urban Renewal Projects. Note concentration of redevelopment projects in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.\textsuperscript{111}

Special thanks to my SIP advisor Dr. James Lewis, who I cannot thank enough for making this project a reality, and my family, whose intense questioning helped me focus my project in its earliest days.

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