Urban Redevelopment in Detroit: The Experience of Two Centuries

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In 1805 the commercial frontier town of Detroit completely burned to the ground. Within weeks, the new Michigan territorial government had devised an elaborate plan to rebuild the town, indeed to build a city. The citizens were first delighted, but they quickly grew disillusioned, when the plan led to lengthy delays that kept the town from being fully rebuilt for years. One hundred and thirty-five years later, beginning in 1940, the city of Detroit, by then the fourth largest city in the United States, devised a new plan to deliberately tear down major portions of the city. As in 1805, an elaborate plan was devised, which first delighted the citizens and then appalled them, as delays and division resulted in gaping holes in the heart of the city.

How can we draw parallels between these two events, one an attempt to rebuild a city on the frontier after a fire, the other an early urban redevelopment effort in a huge industrial city? As this paper will show, in both cases top down planning, with little input from the citizenry, led to substantial resistance and serious delays, resulting in incomplete implementation, and a consequent failure to meet objectives. In both cases, large numbers of residents went without adequate shelter for lengthy periods of time. And in both cases, the ultimate beneficiaries were wealthy elites, while the ostensible targets of the plans were, in most cases, displaced.

Detroit in both 1805 and 1940 was a city in the midst of great changes. In 1805, the city had functionally been part of the United States for only nine years, since the Jay Treaty was implemented in 1796. During those nine years Detroit had been part of two distant territorial governments, first based out of Ohio, and then Indiana, before being granted its own territorial status as the capitol of the new Michigan Territory in 1805. The new nation was mired in a series of disputes with Great Britain that seemed to possibly be leading to war, which would come in 1812. With British territory just a half-mile across the Detroit River, war with the greatest empire of the time was a fearsome prospect. In 1940, Detroit was just coming out of the
Great Depression, and was actively starting to engage with its emerging role as the American “arsenal of democracy” for World War II. The city had been devastated by the Depression, more so than most of the nation, and found itself with obsolete housing and infrastructure that needed to be replaced to mesh with the new automobile age that it had helped to create. At both time periods Detroit was facing the threat of war and trying to find a new role for itself in a rapidly changing world.

One other factor ties these two cases together; both were an attempt to impose a vision of modernity on a benighted community. In 1805, the benighted community was a town composed primarily of former French subjects and their descendants, most of whom spoke little or no English. In 1940, the benighted communities were composed of poor slum-dwelling African Americans and immigrants, who had little money and less political power.

Modernity is a tricky subject, much talked about, but not often well defined. In an attempt to define “modern,” Chandan Reddy shows how the term has had different definitions and periodizations, depending on the discipline and time period. For our purposes, there is no point in trying to define a particular period at which modernity “began,” rather, our interest is in how the participants saw it. Reddy argues, "It was only with the rise of the European enlightenment in the mid-18th century that "modern" took on the sense of a qualitative claim about the newness of the times, in the sense of there being "completely other, even better than what has gone before.” This distinction between the contemporary newness and the traditionalism of the past became more important in the colonial context:

Largely through the force of British and European colonialism, the term was no longer contrasted with "antiquity," but instead with "backwardness," a category that encompasses both "older civilizations" in decline and "primitive societies" frozen in an
earlier moment of human history. Whole societies, peoples and art forms were now classifiable as primitive, degenerate, or modern, with the latter positioned as the leading edge of historical time and serving as the measure of human perfectibility." ¹

This idea is most clearly useful as context for the case of Detroit in 1805, with its largely French population being brought into the “enlightened” society of the newly formed United States. As we will see, it also serves reasonably well for Detroit of the 1940s and 1950s, with its large population of African Americans and poor immigrants who were often viewed as degenerate and sources of vice.

There is yet another view of modernity that can help inform our understanding of Detroit in both periods. The attempt to impose modernity on a more traditional people is characteristic of modern states. In ²

Thinking Like a State, James Scott argues that one of the first tasks of the modern state was “the administrative ordering of nature and society,” i.e., to structure its environment and to characterize and count characteristics of the environment (e.g., to count people, trees, the values of property). The creation of land-use maps based on surveys creates what Scott calls “legibility,” i.e., enabling the state to “read” the environment, whether natural or urban. While eighteenth century French and British colonizers were mostly content to trade furs and skins with the native inhabitants of the Detroit area, the Americans who arrived beginning in 1796 were primarily focused on preparing the land for large-scale settlement by white Americans. Thus, rather than creating simple maps of the territory, suitable for navigation and hunting, the Americans needed to order the entire place in detail by survey. ²

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Scott discusses another characteristic of states attempting to impose modernity: an ideology of “high modernism.” This is an unbounded confidence in the ability of science and technology to produce progress toward a well-ordered, rational, better world. A key aspect of high modernism is the belief that if a place looks well ordered it must function better. Scott links high modernist ideology to twentieth century urban renewal. He is particularly critical of famed city planner Le Corbusier, who proposed the complete replacement of large sections of cities with his geometrically simple, orderly designs in which millions of people would live. While Le Corbusier was never able to complete any of his extravagant designs, his ideas were tremendously influential in the city planning community. Urban redevelopment efforts that stressed the removal of disorder and its replacement with modernist “superblocks” became standard practice in American cities, including Detroit, beginning in the 1930s and through the 1960s.3

The Great Fire of 1805

Detroit was founded in 1701 by the French explorer Cadillac as a fur-trading center. Cadillac laid the town out in the form of a military camp, with small lots and narrow streets. Figure 1 shows the layout of the fort in 1749, substantially enlarged from Cadillac’s small stockade. Around the fort are the “ribbon farms” where many settlers lived.4

3 Scott, 104-117.
Detroit grew to about two thousand inhabitants by 1763, when the British gained control after the Seven Years War. In 1783, Detroit was included in the British cession after the American Revolution, but they refused to vacate until 1796 in compliance with the Jay Treaty. Michigan became a separate territory in 1805, with Detroit as its capital.\(^6\)

For the government of the new Michigan Territory, President Thomas Jefferson appointed General William Hull, a Revolutionary War veteran from Connecticut, as the Governor, and Augustus Woodward and Frederick Bates as Judges. Woodward was a friend of Jefferson’s, who had become a prominent lawyer and real estate investor in Washington. Bates already resided in the city.\(^7\) Hull and Woodward set out for Detroit and planned to arrive for the installation ceremony on July 1, 1805. But on June 11 the whole city burned down. Woodward

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\(^6\) [http://www.library.yale.edu/MapColl/oldsite/map/detr1764.gif](http://www.library.yale.edu/MapColl/oldsite/map/detr1764.gif), accessed June 26, 2016.

\(^7\) Thomas Maitland Marshall, ed., The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates, Volume 1 (St. Louis, MO: Missouri Historical Society, 1926), 7; Woodford, 13-14.
arrived on June 30. When a meeting of the people on July 1 proposed to rebuild the town as it
had been, Woodward and Bates suggested waiting until Governor Hull arrived to help sort things
out. Hull arrived that evening. Figure 2 shows the town at the American takeover in 1796 with
an overlay of current streets to provide context.

Figure 2. Detroit in 1796

One consequence of the new Territory was the elimination of representative government.
The only government was the Governor and Judges, appointed by the President. Those four men

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9 Farmer, 33.
comprised the executive, court, legislative board, and land board. The only formal recourse to their decisions was to petition Congress in Washington. This meant that all decisions about how to rebuild would be up to the Governor and Judges.\textsuperscript{10}

The townspeople were of two minds about rebuilding. One faction, composed primarily of the French-speaking descendants of the original residents, wanted to rebuild quickly on the existing lots. The other faction, primarily newer American arrivals, wanted to rebuild as a modern city, with wider streets and larger lots. Governor Hull sided with the Americans, and appointed Judge Woodward as a one-man planning commission.\textsuperscript{11}

Woodward’s plan was not a traditional gridiron, but rather an imaginative complex of triangles, plazas, circles, and irregular lots (Figure 3). It included wide streets, with principal avenues 200 feet wide and secondary streets 120 feet wide. In contrast, old Detroit had streets that were ten to thirty feet wide, with the narrow streets contributing to the destructiveness of the fire.\textsuperscript{12}

Detroit in 1805 occupied a small space of about twenty acres by the river. In contrast, Woodward’s full plan was enormous, extending over the existing “commons\textsuperscript{13},” and crossing the existing ribbon farms. Although the plan was initially well received by the inhabitants, there were concerns. In a letter to the Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn, Woodward notes the Army’s desire to keep the space between the fort and the river clear for observation. This however, was the site of the old town, and the residents valued it highly:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Farmer, 134-135.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Cangany, 147.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Buford L Pickens, “Early City Plans for Detroit, A Projected American Metropolis,” \textit{Art Quarterly}, 6 (1943), 34-51.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} The “commons” refers to land held by the entire community for shared use by all members of the community. A typical use of this land was for grazing cattle. The modernist perspective held that such land holdings were not as productive as lands used more intensively by individual landowners.
\end{itemize}
All the attachment of the inhabitants is to the old spot. They have none of the expectations with respect to the prosperity of their country, which are so common elsewhere, and which those who have seen what has been effected in various parts of the United States very justly entertain. They value all the ground within the vicinity of the old town enormously rich, and all the rest scarcely worth any thing.\textsuperscript{14}

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Figure 3. 1807 Woodward Plan

In this letter to Dearborn, Woodward impugns the patriotism of the (mostly French-speaking) “inhabitants” and notes their lack of vision and sophistication. He reminds Dearborn that the people of the city are not well integrated into the American way of life.

The site of St. Anne’s Catholic Church was a major point of contention, since its cemetery was in the line of fire from the fort. Woodward proposed to move it, but the

\textsuperscript{14} Woodward to Henry Dearborn, March 5, 1806, Box 2, File 1806 Jan – Oct, Woodward Papers, BHC.
inhabitants objected strongly to moving their ancestors. Woodward backed down temporarily, but it remained a sore spot for many years. \[15\]

After the fire, those who could afford to rebuild immediately were assigned plots of land and permission to build. By October of 1805, some thirty homes had been built or started. These would be the last homes built until after 1807. Woodward and Hull left for Washington in October 1805 to obtain Congressional approval; this was required so the Territorial government could allocate Federal lands to the citizens in exchange for their previous properties which were displaced by the streets and new lot arrangements. \[16\]

Six months later, on April 21, 1806 Congress approved the Woodward Plan. The legislation was generous, allowing landholders to exchange their property for other lots in the city, and providing free lots to every inhabitant on the day of the fire. These became known as “donation lots.” The legislation assigned 10,000 acres of public lands to be used for donation lots or to be sold to fund public buildings. The 10,000 acres included the existing “commons” north of the fort, as well as land further north of the city\[17\]. Woodward and Hull returned from Washington to much approval by Detroiter. That was the last bit of political harmony the city would see for years. \[18\]

The first problem the Governor and Judges encountered upon their return was to decide who would get which lots. Given the preference of almost everyone for land on or near the river, choosing who would get those was a political minefield. Meeting as the Land Board on September 6, 1806, the Governor and Judges decided to sell riverfront and corner lots, and use

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\[15\] Woodward to Charles Moran, August 17, 1805, Box 2, File 1805, Woodward Papers, BHC.
\[16\] Hull to Henry Dearborn, September 22, 1805, Box 2, File 1805, William Hull Papers BHC.
\[17\] One implication of this is that the federal government appropriated the “commons” land viewed by the French inhabitants as owned in common by the whole city. This was in accord with the modernist view that such land held in common was not being used for its most productive purpose. The inhabitants of course disagreed, to no effect.
\[18\] Farmer, 27; Woodford, 44-45; Dunnigan, 51, 167.
less desirable properties as donation lots. Many citizens objected strongly to this, so on October 6 the Land Board met again, this time to ask the citizens how they wanted to distribute the land. There is no record of how the argument proceeded, but we know that by December 1806 donation lots had been distributed to 251 people.19

But, three weeks later, Hull began to question this distribution after realizing that many recipients had not taken the oath of allegiance to the United States. The 1806 law distributed lots to everyone who “inhabited a house in Detroit at the time of the fire, and who does not profess or owe allegiance to any foreign power.”20 The Jay Treaty said that residents had one year to declare their allegiance to Britain. If they did not, they would be considered citizens of the United States. Thus, anyone who did not swear allegiance to Britain should have been eligible. Hull interpreted this differently. As many as two-thirds of the initial recipients may have been disqualified.21

It is unclear what were the ultimate criteria used to allocate property, although we know that only 158 donation lots were ultimately distributed. Furthermore, not all donation lots went to residents of the city at the time of the fire. Hull assigned himself one of the best lots on Jefferson Avenue, near the Detroit River, and other late arrivals also received donation lots.22

The arbitrary nature of these decisions led citizens to seek redress. On December 12, 1806, a petition was presented to the Legislative Board, complaining about Judge Woodward (who was a member of the Board, along with the Governor and his fellow Judges). Among the many complaints was that, “he has begun a partial project, which injures and will reduce to

21 Woodford, 47-48.
22 Farmer, 27-28; Woodford, 47.
Misery all the Inhabitants of the Territory in throwing all the advantages on the side of the Speculators.” This almost certainly refers to the Woodward Plan, which took land used as a common and platted it out into city blocks to be sold. The petition also complains that Woodward was digging wells “for the animals in the woods,” a reference to Woodward’s proposal to provide services in the outlying and uninhabited new blocks of the city.\textsuperscript{23}

In September 1809, the Grand Jury of the Michigan Territory, consisting of 17 citizens, accused Governor Hull and the Judges of greatly exceeding their powers. They accused Hull of paying for land surveys to be done out of tax dollars, when they should have been paid for from the sale of lands. They also declared that several laws passed by the legislative board were unconstitutional, and they objected to Hull “forcing Aliens and renegade Negros” into the militia, when it should have been reserved for “free, white, males.”\textsuperscript{24} Shortly after the Grand Jury accusation, a memorial was sent to President James Madison asking for Hull’s removal. The memorial accuses Hull of being incompetent, providing favors for friends, and profiting from the sale of goods to the Indians.\textsuperscript{25}

Word of this discord reached far and wide. In a letter from Frederick Bates in St. Louis to Woodward in February 1808, Bates describes rumors about the “absurd accusations against Governor Hull and yourself.” He has heard that impeachment is possible, but he encourages Woodward to not fear this, since he would be able to publicly defend himself and would surely be exonerated. Clearly the inhabitants had found a way to fight authority.\textsuperscript{26}

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\item \textsuperscript{23} “Deliberations of the Principal Free Holders of the Northeast Coast, Presented to the Legislature of Michigan by George McDougall on December 12, 1806,” Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society (MPHS), 579-581.
\item \textsuperscript{24} “Action of the Grand Jury Relative to Governor Hull,” signed by Geo. Hoffman, Foreman, September 26, 1809, MPHS, 587-589.
\item \textsuperscript{25} “Memorial to the President for the Removal of Governor Hull,” unsigned, January 24, 1810, MPHS, 592.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Frederick Bates to Augustus Woodward, Feb. 23, 1808, MPHS, 561-562.
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The ability to build on a property depends on knowing its actual boundaries, which requires a physical survey. In 1806, Hull appointed Thomas Smith to conduct a survey. Smith began work quickly, but he was a Canadian. In January 1807, U.S. Surveyor General Jared Mansfield replaced him with Abijah Hull, a cousin of the Governor. After a year of working, Surveyor Hull had completed no surveys, and as a result no buildings were erected in that time. After much public outcry, Hull began work, but so incompetently that he was publicly humiliated and resigned.27

Hull’s problems were not all of his own making. Property owners were uncooperative and resisted having their lands surveyed, at least in part because the government wanted them to pay for it, but also because they could see no use in it. In effect, the inhabitants were not only resisting the Plan but also the entire modernization effort to bring the territory under the formal systems of the United States.28

A third survey in 1808 did no better. As a result, there was no baseline on which to sell property or to proceed with the Plan. In desperation, the Land Board parceled out properties using old landmarks and property lines. The result was such a mess that, in February 1809, during Woodward’s absence from the city, Governor Hull and one of the Judges repealed the Plan. Upon his return Woodward declared the action illegal, since the Congressionally-mandated plan could not be repealed by the Territorial government. Work on the city was further delayed by the War of 1812. Hull’s speedy surrender to the British in 1812 resulted in his replacement by Lewis Cass in October 1813.29

27 Cangany, 157-158.
29 Cangany, 158-159.
Cass reappointed the original surveyor, Thomas Smith, in 1814 and he wrestled with the conflicting claims and haphazard rebuilding. In 1816 Smith completed his survey, which included Woodward’s angular roads cutting across existing farms. The farmers, including Governor Cass, who had become a major landowner, objected strenuously. In October 1816, the Land Board ended the Woodward Plan’s streets where they exist today, with a half-completed Grand Circus Park and only a few radial streets. The rest of the city would be laid out with rectangular blocks. In 1829, the city petitioned Congress to repeal the Plan, and Congress complied, ending the Woodward Plan forever.30

Mid-Century Urban Renewal

Flash forward to 1945 and Detroit was a very different place. With more than 1.6 million people, Detroit was America’s fourth largest city and the center of its automobile industry. But, beginning in 1927, Detroit had been in a uniquely depressed state, although the economy had revived during the war. However, spending on public works had been minimal for 15 years, and except for a small amount of public housing, there had been no new homes built. As part of its 1949 Master Plan, the city proposed two major urban renewal efforts to replace dilapidated housing near the downtown: the Gratiot Redevelopment Project and the Westside Industrial Redevelopment Project.31

The city was highly segregated. The nine percent of the population that was African-American was concentrated on the east side of downtown in one of the oldest parts of the city

30 Cangany, 159-163.
31 Thomas, 14; *Detroit Master Plan*, Detroit City Plan Commission, 1951, 70-96.
known as Black Bottom\textsuperscript{32}. Black migrants from the south, drawn to the city by the auto industry, were almost all forced to squeeze into the deteriorated housing in this area.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1946, the Detroit Housing Commission created \textit{The Detroit Plan: A Program for Blight Elimination}. This was one of the first programs in the nation to use public-private collaboration in housing and urban renewal. The city would assemble and clear sites for redevelopment, which would be turned over to private developers. The intent of the plan was to protect the downtown from the “blight” that surrounded it.\textsuperscript{34}

The plan began with slum removal and redevelopment on the city’s near east side, in the heart of Detroit’s Black Bottom. This became known as the Gratiot Redevelopment Project.\textsuperscript{35} The initial reaction to the \textit{Detroit Plan} was generally positive. The \textit{Detroit News} lauded it, headlining an editorial “Detroit Leads Again.” Even the local Black press praised it, mostly because slum clearance at the time meant clearance for public housing.\textsuperscript{36}

In 1949, the federal government took over most funding for urban renewal through the Housing Act of 1949. This required new housing to be affordable by residents of the cleared area, and that residents of slum properties to be removed had to be relocated into “safe, sanitary” housing. Both requirements would prove problematic in Detroit.

As early as the late 1930s the City Plan Commission had designated Black Bottom to receive public housing for the current African American residents. However, throughout the

\textsuperscript{32} The name “Black Bottom” predated the arrival of African Americans to Detroit. It was named by the first French settlers for the color of the soil.
\textsuperscript{34} Thomas, 49-51; \textit{The Detroit Plan: A Program for Blight Elimination}, Detroit Housing Commission, Box 3, File 24, Det CPC Gratiot-Orleans Redevelopment, Almblad Collection, Reuther Library, 5.
\textsuperscript{35} Thomas, 40, 59, 78, 104-110; Sugrue, 48.
1930s and 1940s racial tensions around housing in Detroit had been building. World War II made matters worse, with a massive influx of blacks and whites from the south to work in wartime manufacturing. Racial tensions rose, leading to the worst race riot in U.S. history in June 1943.\(^{37}\)

The riot realigned Detroit politics. African-Americans joined in a political coalition with left-leaning unionists, but they were defeated in 1943 and 1945 in mayoral campaigns focused on housing integration. The balance of power in the city for two decades would be with forces opposed to integrated housing and aligned with the city’s real estate interests. The election of Albert Cobo as mayor in 1949 cemented this coalition in power.\(^{38}\)

Cobo removed all new public housing projects from the city plan. The Gratiot Redevelopment Project was pushed as a priority, but with a focus on supporting downtown redevelopment rather than providing new housing for current residents. By 1950, the project had shifted to providing a mix of housing for both low and middle-income residents.\(^{39}\)

The city began to condemn land within the project area in 1947 and demolition continued until 1954. Business owners adjacent to the project area complained that their businesses were being subject to “a private depression,” because of delays. In July 1952, the city asked for bids from builders. But, there were no bids; local developers claimed that the requirement for low-income housing made the project unprofitable.\(^{40}\) The city modified the requirements in 1953 and

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\(^{37}\) Sugrue, 29; Martelle, 147-158.

\(^{38}\) Sugrue, 80-86;

\(^{39}\) Sugrue, 86-88.

made an award to a California developer. But after a year of planning, that developer withdrew, and the city started all over.41

By now the Mayor was in trouble; the city’s newspapers were publishing embarrassing articles about the project and its effects on downtown. In September 1954 Cobo established the non-profit Citizens Redevelopment Corporation (CRC) to run the project.42 Under CRC the Gratiot Project became middle-income housing, totally inaccessible to the former residents. The result is what we know today as Lafayette Park, a Modernist superblock with several buildings designed by famed architect Mies Van der Rohe. The project’s first completed apartments were opened in 1958, the last in 1964, some seventeen years after the project was announced.43

The Gratiot Project did nothing the help the poor residents of Black Bottom, since few if any of them could afford to live in the housing that replaced theirs. A 1956 survey of families dislocated by the project, showed that only 34% had been placed in public housing. The rest were forced to squeeze into what little segregated housing there was for blacks in Detroit.44

Not only did the project fail to help the residents of the neighborhood, it also failed to save downtown. The long delays in rebuilding removed shoppers and taxpaying businesses from an area close to downtown, and it made the area less attractive for an extended period, deterring suburban shoppers.

The Gratiot Project generated relatively little protest. There were two law suits filed by local businesses and the Wayne County CIO. Both lost in the Michigan Supreme Court in 1951. The NAACP and the Urban League complained about the failure of the Housing Commission to

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41 Mowitz and Wright, 57-60.
44 Mowitz and Wright, 17-19.
find replacement housing for the residents of the area. But, it was not until most residents were already gone that it became apparent that only the middle class would benefit. By then residents were too dispersed to protest. However, this did set the stage for more effective protests in future projects.45

The West Side Industrial Redevelopment Project in the Corktown neighborhood took a very different trajectory. This was originally intended to remove the slum to the west of downtown and to replace it with warehouses forced to move from downtown by development of the Civic Center in the early 1950s. Corktown was the oldest extant neighborhood in the city, with the oldest housing stock and a mixed population of Maltese and Mexican immigrants, as well as some African Americans. In the late 1930s, city planners began to talk about building public housing in Corktown, not so much to “replace” the neighborhood as to improve its housing stock.46

As World War II approached its end, and politicians began to get more serious about redevelopment, the Pennsylvania Railroad began to lobby the city to rezone a portion in Corktown for industrial use. With real estate interests pushing hard for this, the City Plan Commission went along. At this time, the city’s planners believed the city needed new areas for industry to locate since there no large spaces in which to site an industrial plant. Manufacturing firms were leaving for the suburbs and planners worried about losing the industrial tax base. By the late 1940s there was a full-blown debate among the city planners and the real estate community about what should go into Corktown. The planners were convinced that, while the city might need more spaces for industry, Corktown was the wrong spot; it was too close to

45 Thomas, 105; Michigan Chronicle, Feb 4, 1950; “Report of the Housing Situation as it Affects the Community in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area” Urban League Report GRA 4/51, Gratiot Redevelopment Clipping File, BHC.
46 Mowitz and Wright, 85-86, 110.
downtown. The real estate community believed otherwise. Albert Cobo’s election as Mayor in 1949 turned the tide against the planners. In 1950, after the election, several professional planners resigned in protest over the Mayor’s decision to redevelop Corktown for industry; several members of the City Plan Commission either resigned or were fired at the same time over the issue. ⁴⁷

In 1953, as the city began to hold hearings about Corktown redevelopment, the community began to organize against it. Having seen what happened in Black Bottom, which at the time was an undeveloped wasteland, the community was strongly against losing their neighborhood. Opposition was led first by two church leaders, Father Clement Kern from the Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church, and Reverend John Mangrum of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Over time however, leadership shifted to the Corktown Homeowners Association, led by Ethel Claes, owner of a local bookstore in Corktown. ⁴⁸

For five years, residents of the neighborhood attended public hearings in large numbers, lobbied the City Council, and wrote letters to the local newspapers. As many as five hundred attended the first City Council hearing on the subject. Congressman Charles Diggs supported their cause both within the Federal government and in local hearings. Their primary argument was that their neighborhood was not a slum and did not deserve to be redeveloped. The Homeowners Association encouraged residents to fix up their properties to demonstrate that this was the case. Moreover, they pointed to statistics about the community, such as crime rates, school truancy, etc. that refuted the city planners’ data about the community. Ethel Claes argued that the very idea of moving industry to that location was a bad one. In a letter to the Detroit Times, Claes presciently wrote that industry would find the small area too confining and that the

⁴⁷ Mowitz and Wright, 90-94.
⁴⁸ Mowitz and Wright, 111-113.
resulting hole in the fabric of the city would “spell downtown’s doom.” She also pointed out that workers in the factories would simply go home to the suburbs, while retaining the residential character of the neighborhood would mean more shoppers for downtown.49

In fact, Corktown was never the total wretched slum described by its detractors; but neither was it completely the lively, vibrant community described by Ethel Claes. Parts of it apparently were just a mess, as slum-like as anyone could imagine. On the other hand, other parts had well-maintained homes and lively businesses. Unfortunately, the modernist ideology of the city planners could not deal with the disorder implied by such a mixed neighborhood, and the racist views of the real estate community could not deal with the idea that a racially mixed neighborhood could not only survive but thrive.50

The hearings and their protests took their toll in the form of delays to the project, but by 1957 the die was cast. On July 11, 1957 the City Council voted to proceed with the West Side Industrial Redevelopment Project. In October 1958 the city condemned one hundred and ten land parcels (about 75 acres) in Corktown. Relocation of residents proceeded much more smoothly than had been the case for the Gratiot project. Partly this was because most of the residents were white, but the Housing Commission was able to find public housing for most, if not all of the relatively few black residents. The site was cleared of the former residents by 1959, some ten years after planning began.51

The warehouses from downtown never moved to Corktown – the delays caused not only by the citizens, but also by the need to work with the Federal government for funding, meant that

49 Mowitz and Wright, 112-120; “Cortkown Protests ‘Secret’ Vote as Slum,” Letter to the Editor by Ethel Claes, Detroit Times, July 18 1955, Almblad Papers, Reuther Library; Ethel Claes to Detroit Common Council, January 25, 1951, Box 4, File Housing Slum Clearance, Mayors Papers 1951, BHC.
50 Mowitz and Wright, 135-136.
51 Mowitz and Wright, 132.
the warehouses had to find other locations, some outside the city. Only part of Corktown was leveled, as it became increasingly clear that the business appetite for the industrial space was limited. As Claes predicted, the space was too small for most industrial development and it never really filled in, creating another hole in Detroit’s city fabric. Today, what is left of Corktown is one of Detroit’s premier gentrifying neighborhoods.52

**Conclusions**

We have seen two eras, and two efforts to rebuild a city, yet with surprisingly similar outcomes. In 1805, the modernist impulses of the new United States resulted in efforts to impose a new type of order on a small community on the frontier. The powers vested in the Governor and Judges by Congress enabled Judge Woodward to indulge his urban planning fantasies by designing a remarkable plan for a great city, where residents of the actual small town simply wanted to get on with their lives.

Unable to vote the Governor and Judges out of office, the citizens resisted the Woodward Plan in the only ways available to them. First, people refused to cooperate, some by refusing to allow surveyors access to their land, others by rebuilding anywhere they wanted. Second, they protested directly to the Federal government. Third, they helped to create dissension between the Governor and the Judges, in hopes of getting at least someone to take their side. And fourth, they counted on their distance from the relatively incompetent new American government to slow decision-making.53

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53 Cangany, 140.
Because of this resistance, the Woodward Plan was never fully implemented. Yet, full implementation might have made future development of the city more expensive, since the uniform, rectangular blocks that fill most of the city today are much easier and cheaper for land developers to sell than the irregular spaces created by Woodward. That might have slowed the rapid automobile-fueled boom in industrial development that resulted in the unplanned, mixed-use city of the 1940s. Indeed, it might well have resulted in the center of the auto industry residing somewhere else where land was easier to develop into industrial spaces. Did the failure of the Woodward Plan enable Detroit to become the Motor City?

As in 1805, the redevelopment efforts of the 1940s and 1950s also represented the modernist view that existing communities should be dismantled to satisfy the vision of an external planner. Planners could exercise this power because government, seeking ways to improve the nation’s aging cities, was receptive to the self-serving pleas of the downtown real estate community. Yet in Detroit, those interests did not really know what they were getting into. Their efforts to redevelop the inner city to benefit downtown failed catastrophically.

The nationwide, indeed the transatlantic, failures of urban redevelopment efforts of the twentieth century are well-known. What is less well-understood is how the pattern of those failures links back to patterns of behavior from an earlier era. The Detroit of 1805 served as the roots of 1945 Detroit. Comparing the rebuilding and redevelopment efforts between the two eras enables us to better understand those connections.
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