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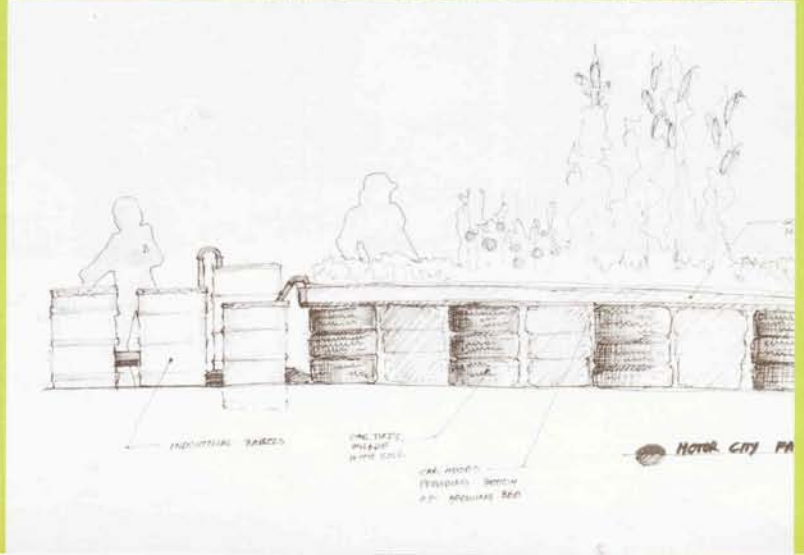
MOTOR CITY

DESIGN FOR URBAN AUTONOMY
AMPLIFYING RESOURCES IN THE FALLOW CITY

Shrinking Cities

Buffalo, New York. Detroit, Michigan. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Gary, Indiana. Today when capital moves towards new industries and properties, it trails behind it a wake of urban disinvestment. In the United States, the redundant spaces of capitalism—sites and communities once occupied and now abandoned by large-scale capital—can be mapped in the vacancies of numerous post-industrial cities. There families, neighborhoods and entire districts are finding themselves trapped between the mobility of capital and the fixity of land.[1] Under these conditions it is difficult for designers to work towards equitable land-use. Familiar models fail to serve the public good, in that they do not support all inhabitants of the city. It is time for us to identify and test new experimental approaches to these growing urban problems.

Many cities undergoing disinvestment lack the resources to sufficiently address vacancy and abandonment. As a result, city officials and planners often court outside investors by aggregating existing properties for large-scale redevelopment. This is now a common formula for city renewal: in the absence of significant new industry, cities rely on the creation of new upscale neighborhoods and regional parks.[2] But what good is a new park or neighborhood created with Olmstedean principles—intended to relieve the industrial age factory worker—in a city without factories?

The current urban redevelopment formula is sadly ineffective at addressing the needs of people who are left behind in the city when capital takes flight. Land labeled blighted and marked for redevelopment often includes neighborhoods in which many people still live, work and raise families. In order to identify alternate opportunities for the economic revival of these neighborhoods, we should not ask, "How can vacant land be made attractive to outside investors?" But rather, "How can vacant land support the people who live with it?"

An Emergent Approach

Instead of the current redevelopment model, we are beginning to identify an emergent alternative. The effects of urban disinvestment—property abandonment, poverty, food insecurity, environmental injustice, community fragmentation—have distinct spatial patterns. By studying these patterns the designer can locate unique, small-scale opportunities that, when aggregated over time, will potentially develop a constellation of new productive programs: economic, ecological and social. If designers identify unengaged resource niches in a city—locating overlooked surplus and wastes of global capital—then we can support urban communities in linking these resources to new networks and sustainable systems within the existing urban fabric.

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[1] For more information see the Shrinking Cities Web site, www.shrinkingcities.com

[2] See remarks presented by Robert Beauregard at "Beyond the Post-Industial City," Rutgers University-Camden, November 18, 2005. (online at invinciblecities.camden.rutgers.edu/papers)

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A frequent collaborator with Sarah, Margot Lystra is a landscape architect living in San Francisco. Most recently she could be found teaching and designing at University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture/Detroit Collaborative Design Center. Her ongoing research focuses on improvisational design and the collaborative process. Margot attended Swarthmore College and is a recent graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. She can be reached at mlystra@gmail.com.

But where are these "resource niches" and how can they be engaged? Already city inhabitants—graffiti artists, co-operative workers, urban farmers, bicycle messengers, material scrappers—access and exploit multiple resource niches. A new set of mobile urban tactics is emerging, engaging land uses, policies and programs, and developing new practices, skills and networks. The result is an enticing hybrid of community building, process ecology, agriculture and microcapital economics. Here are some examples:

Neighborhood Land Trusts
In Boston, neighborhood activists formed the Dudley Street Land Trust to acquire vacant properties and develop parks, community gardens and affordable housing developments.

Microcapital Lending
Once considered too high-risk for traditional banks, American inner-city entrepreneurs and cooperatives are now receiving start-up capital from Chicago's South Shore Bank.

Worker-owned Cooperatives
Arizmendi Bakery and Cupid Courier in San Francisco, and Cooperative Home Care Associates in New York provide a living wage and profit sharing to all worker-owners.

Materials Re-Use
Demolition and salvage programs such as the Bronx's Green Worker Cooperatives collect and sell "waste" materials to new industries.

Artists and Arts Organizations
Organizations such as the Village of Arts and Humanities and the Philadelphia Mural Arts Project are developing a new kind of public art-making: spontaneous, reclaiming, inventive, collaborative and community-based.

Urban Agriculture Networks
In West Oakland (People's Grocery), Milwaukee (Growing Power), Philadelphia (Greensgrow), and Detroit (Earthworks, Detroit Agriculture Network), networked market gardens provide produce to communities that lack fresh food outlets.

These programs occupy urban land in order to generate opportunities for skills development, entrepreneurship, mentoring, research, innovation and community involvement. Such initiatives develop productive practices that reinvent public land-use within the city. Accordingly, the redundant spaces of late capitalism are becoming sites of change.

Design Examples
Where does the designer fit into this? By working with emergent initiatives we can assist groups of people to use urban land as they need. Designers can identify network opportunities and design tools that support the autonomy, success and expansion of the city's small-scale creative entrepreneurs.

For example: in a recent undergraduate architecture studio at University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, two students designed new uses for vacant land with economically beneficial, neighborhood-supporting effects.

Sinisa Simic's fish-farming/agriculture unit is built for $700 (with new materials), or less (using found materials). Water flows through the unit in a nutrient/cleansing cycle between fish tank and agricultural bed. A resource hub and outreach strategies are designed for the unit as well.

Jason Wah's temporary shelters use materials commonly found in vacant lots to build temporary shelters for people without access to more permanent housing. The units are designed for incremental development. They incorporate shared garden spaces and "off-the-grid" resource-generating strategies.

In a separate example, the authors' recent proposal for Philadelphia's Urban Voids ideas competition (designed with Jana Cephas and assisted by John Bela) maps existing micro-industry networks in the city, designing a series of tools to support the further expansion of these networks. The resulting sites and linkages are dynamic intersections and accumulations of multiple small-scale projects.

Conclusion
Designers can learn to privilege the dynamic over the cosmetic, to engage the social and economic intersection of soil and sky over the coarse filter of the synoptic. The locus of these interventions: the increasingly permeable surfaces of late 20th century disinvestment. We can learn to identify untapped potentials within the city and design resource nets: anti-efficiencies that capture material, economic and ecological flows that move through and around the urban environment.

These ideas and others like them should to be tested, practiced and developed. They need support from city governments, progressive funders and enlightened developers. Who is ready to engage this enormous and enticing challenge? You know who you are. Contact us. C