



DETROIT

An area the size of Manhattan, a quarter of Detroit's total acreage is empty. Credit: Alex MacLean
The M-1 streetcar (right), now under construction, will link the city's densely settled Downtown and Midtown areas by late 2016. Credit: M-1 RAIL

By John Gallagher

OLD-TIMERS IN DETROIT LIKE TO RECALL THE 1950S AND '60S AS A GOLDEN AGE OF URBAN PLANNING. Under Charles Blessing, the city's charismatic head planner from 1953 to 1977, Detroit carried out a series of ambitious attempts to reshape its urban landscape. Sweeping aside a century's worth of tenements and small commercial structures, it created the Mies van der Rohe–designed Lafayette Park residential development just east of downtown, a light industrial park west of downtown, and block after block of low-rise moderate-income housing on the north side. Edward Hustoles, a retired veteran planner of those years, recalls how Blessing enjoyed such status as Detroit's visionary that over lunch at a nice restaurant he would sketch his plans all over the tablecloth; if a server complained, Blessing would roll it up and tell her to put it on his bill.

housing moldered; arson, crack, metal stripping, blight, and other ills corroded entire neighborhoods, forcing the city to raze block after block of homes in the 1990s and 2000s—a trend accelerated by the 2007–2008 real estate crisis, which compounded a vicious cycle of property tax delinquency and foreclosure, decimating what remained of Detroit's housing market. Today, the best estimates suggest that at least 24 square miles of Detroit's 139-square-mile land area are

Detroit Future City won praise as a visionary new way of thinking about older industrial cities and for its ambitious effort to include ordinary Detroiters in the conversation about their future.

The Once and Future City

Times change. Blessing retired in the 1970s, and by then Detroit was mired in its long-agonizing slide into Rust Belt ruin. The twin scourges of deindustrialization and suburban sprawl, which hurt so many cities in the American heartland, hit Detroit particularly hard. Numerous factories, so modern when they were built in the early 20th century, looked obsolete by the 1950s and '60s, and were mostly abandoned by the end of the 1980s. The new car-enabled culture of suburbia, aided and abetted by federal highway building and other measures, encouraged hundreds of thousands of residents to flee the city for Birmingham, Troy, and other outlying communities. The exodus was hastened by fraught race relations, which grew especially toxic after the 1967 civil disturbances. Without inhabitants, Detroit's vast stock of small wood-frame worker



empty, and another six to nine square miles have unoccupied buildings that need to come down. Add in municipal parks that the city no longer maintains and abandoned rights-of-way like old railroad lines, and 25 percent of Detroit—an area larger than Manhattan—is vacant.

By the 1990s, urban planning had become obsolescent as a focus and a guide. A series of mayors tended to latch onto whatever showcase

projects came along—the much-maligned Renaissance Center in the 1970s, or casino gaming in the late 1990s. Detroit’s municipal planning department found a new role administering federal community development block grants, and, in recent years, the department had more accountants than planners. But in 2010, then-Mayor David Bing initiated a strategic attempt to address the problem of widespread

vacancy and the burden it placed on municipal services and budgets. That effort culminated in 2013 with the publication of *Detroit Future City*, the 354-page comprehensive framework for how Detroit might strengthen and regrow its troubled neighborhoods and repurpose its empty lots and buildings over the coming decades. Advocating widespread “greening” strategies—including “productive landscapes” that would put vacant land to new use through reforestation, rainwater retention ponds, the installation of solar panels, and food production—*Detroit Future City* won praise as a visionary new way to think about older industrial cities and to include ordinary

citizens in the conversation about their future. “In the annals of civic engagement and community planning, *Detroit Future City* is probably the most extensive community outreach and planning exercise that I’ve ever encountered,” said George W. McCarthy, president and CEO of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

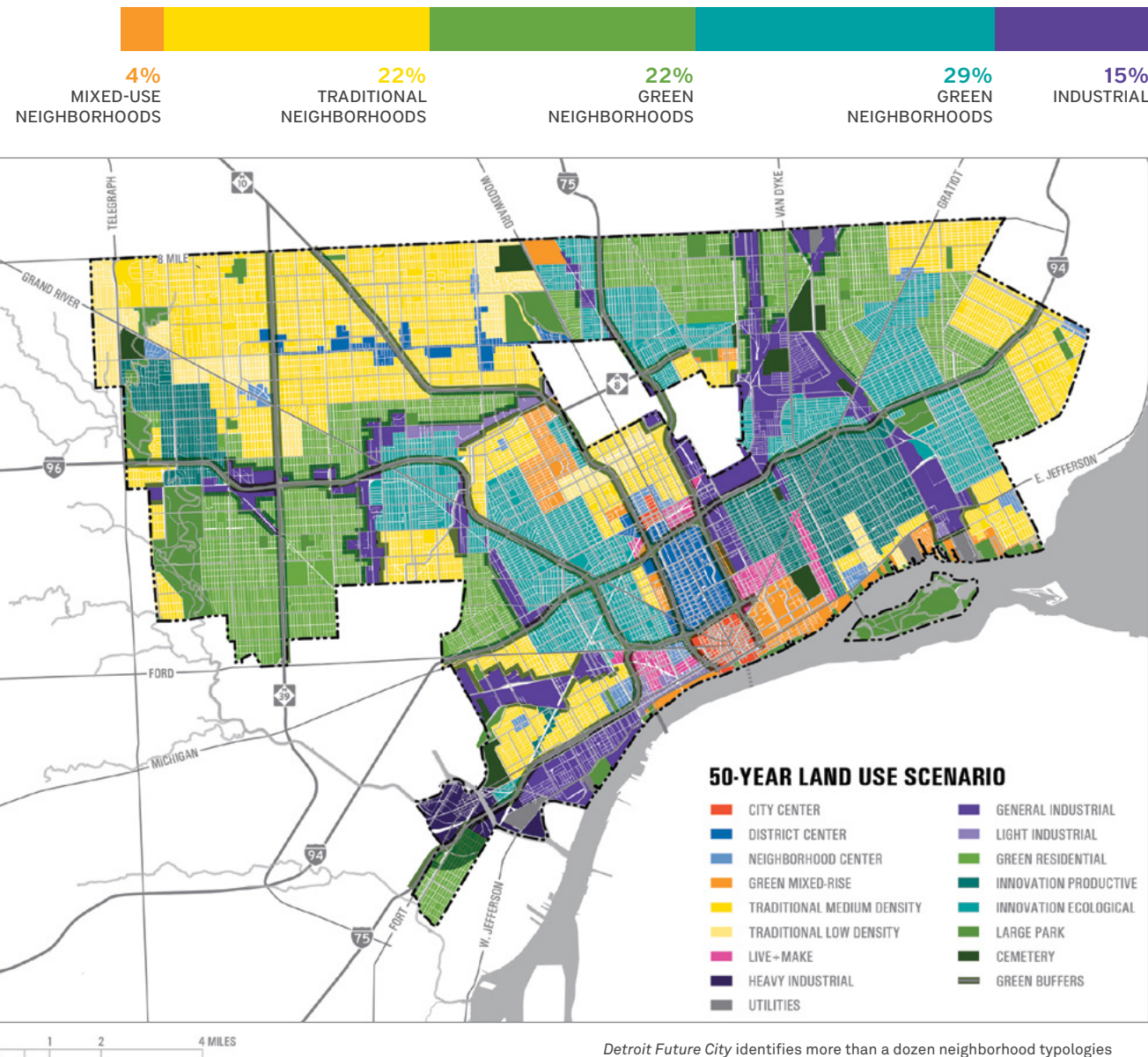
Origins and Essence

By 2010, three years before Detroit would file the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history, the population had dwindled to 700,000 from its peak of 1.85 million in 1950. Then-Mayor David Bing needed to realign city services to account for the diminished tax base and thinning of the urban streetscape. His initial suggestion to reporters that he would move the few remaining inhabitants out of some of Detroit’s most abandoned “ghost” neighborhoods drew blistering comparisons to the urban renewal projects of the past and even hoots of “ethnic cleansing”; the idea was quickly shelved. Also that year, the mayor and top aides staged a series of community meetings called Detroit Works to elicit a dialogue with citizens about the need to rethink how the city should operate in the future. But

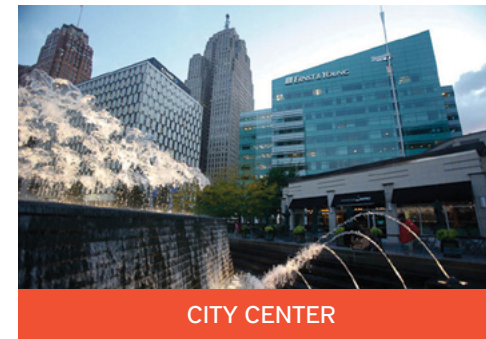
Unlike a traditional master plan, *Detroit Future City* is a strategic framework for thinking about different neighborhood types and how each might evolve given existing trends.

residents had other ideas. The meetings quickly devolved into chaotic complaint sessions where hundreds of residents demanded better street lights, police protection, and other city services fast.

McCarthy, who was then with the Ford Foundation and a supporter of Detroit’s revitalization efforts, said leaders should have known better. “When you bring normal citizens into the planning process, they enter the exercise as if it’s a public meeting and the way to be heard is to shout the loudest,” he said. “If you’re sincere about civic engagement, you have to take the time to train



Detroit Future City identifies more than a dozen neighborhood typologies (above)—from city center zones to “live + make” warehouse districts, to green residential areas (right)—and provides a menu of strategies for each. Credit: Detroit Future City



CITY CENTER



LIVE + MAKE



GREEN RESIDENTIAL



Residents helped to inform *Detroit Future City* by attending civic engagement events like this one at the Detroit Public Library. Credit: Detroit Collaborative Design Center

“We did not want to leave the city with static illustrative pictures of what their city could look like,” Griffin says. “There were already lots of those around. We wanted to leave the city with a tool that would enable people to manage change, because as you know Detroit is still very much in flux in terms of its governance, fiscal structures, city services, population loss, and ever-changing composition of land vacancy.”

The framework had to enable decision makers to act as that change was occurring over various periods of time. “It offers different decision-making structures that allow someone to say, if this is your condition today, here are the kinds of options you might think about to move that condition from A to B,” Griffin says. To simplify: If a neighborhood is showing a significant and growing level of vacancy but still retaining some useable housing and commercial stock, the vacant land there could be converted to food production or to a solar panel field to power local businesses. But a neighborhood with little vacancy and with much higher levels of density might plan infill development for its few vacant lots. Rather than suggesting that the corner of Woodward Avenue and 7 Mile Road ought to get a shopping center, the framework offers a series of examples of what might take place given certain neighborhood typologies. The mantra became “every neighborhood has a future, just not the same future.”

Detroit Future City's greening strategies were particularly important and drew the most attention because of the huge amount of vacant land where development is not a realistic option and probably won't be for many years to come; perhaps one-third of the entire city cries out for some new purpose and use. The more vacant spots on the map could be rendered productive by the installation of fields of energy-producing solar panels, reforestation, farming, or “blue infrastructure,” such as rainwater retention ponds, bioswales, and canals that provide water for agriculture and that redirect rainwater and snowmelt away from Detroit's already overburdened combined sewer system. Almost all these uses presumably would be private endeavors but would require city permitting and perhaps

citizens to be planners. You have to devote a significant amount of time and attention to get people to understand that planning is about making difficult decisions in a constrained environment.”

With funding from the Kresge Foundation and other sources, the city regrouped and hired teams of consultants, including nationally respected planning staffers such as Project Director Toni L. Griffin, professor and director of the J. Max Bond Center on Design for the Just City at the Spitzer School of Architecture at the City College of New York. Under Griffin's leadership, they began to map out the document that would become *Detroit Future City*.

The group took pains to avoid the word “plan” when they presented it to the public. Unlike a conventional master plan, which basically creates a map of what uses will go where before the private sector comes in to fill it out with development, *Detroit Future City* is a strategic framework for thinking about different neighborhood types and how each might evolve given existing trends.

other assistance, including zoning changes or partnerships with various philanthropic or nonprofit groups. “You need to have a greening strategy, so you can use this land in ways that, at a minimum, don't drag down existing populated areas and, at a maximum, enhance the quality of life, economic productivity, and environmental quality for the people of Detroit,” says Alan Mallach, a *Detroit Future City* consultant, nonresident fellow of the Brookings Institution, and author of *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities*, published by the Lincoln Institute.

But the plan also envisions significantly greater population densities in those areas of Detroit already undergoing a rebirth, such as the Greater Downtown area, where young professionals have sparked a recent residential boom and where companies led by Quicken Loans, which moved downtown in 2010, have filled up previously vacant office towers. It suggests that Detroit's existing hospital and manufacturing corridors could and should see concentrated new investment to beef up job training opportunities and new residential and retail development in those nodes. Key employment districts could be linked by new public transit options, such as the M-1 Rail streetcar line now under construction along Woodward Avenue, the city's main street, thanks to public-private financing. Construction began in mid-2014 on the \$140-million, 3.3-mile line, which will connect downtown from Jefferson Avenue to the city's New Center area, another hub of activity, running through the rapidly revitalizing Midtown district. The line is expected to be finished in late 2016. If voters approve a new property tax millage expected to be on the ballot in 2016, M-1 could be followed by a regionwide bus rapid transit system to be built out over the next several years.

Mallach describes *Detroit Future City* “as a reality check against what's actually happening, against how you're spending your money, where you're making your investments, what you're prioritizing, and so forth.”

“*Detroit Future City* offers a menu,” he adds. “It doesn't say this site should become an urban farm; it lays out the options.”

Civic Engagement

Deciding what would happen where would be left to the political process—with neighbors, city leaders, and other stakeholders all taking part. Thus, public input would be critical to success.

In 2012, the *Detroit Future City* team hired Dan Pitera, a professor at the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) School of Architecture, to design a new and better civic engagement strategy to harness and direct residents' desire for change. Efforts ranged from informal chat sessions at a “roaming table,” designed by UDM architecture students and set up at various locations in town, to a series of meetings at community centers, where 100,000 residents engaged in discussions that informed the urban rehabilitation.

During this planning stage in 2012 and early 2013, a new walk-in office in the Eastern Market

“Now it's not just the environmentalists or the climate change folk talking about carbon forests; it's residents and the executive directors of community development corporations,” Griffin says.



DFC Executive Director Kenneth V. Cockrel, Jr. (right), was among the 500 volunteers who planted 400 trees as a carbon buffer near the Southfield Freeway in late 2014. Credit: Detroit Future City

district allowed residents to meet staffers, see plans, take surveys, and the like. Those working at the office included staffers from UDM's Detroit Collaborative Design Center, directed by Pitera, and the nonprofit Community Legal Resources. Pitera's group also created a mobile phone app to encourage community involvement. And the team created 25 color posters keyed to city issues, such as vacant land or community gardens, for distribution by the thousands throughout the city.

During one Saturday morning meeting in 2012 at the Detroit Rescue Mission, some 50 residents got a peek at what various neighborhoods might become depending on current conditions and residents' desires. Some of the attendees gave positive reviews. "The conversation is just what we need to get back to the real issues," said Phillis Judkins, 65, of the North End district. And Larry Roberts, 70, who lives in Detroit's Indian Village neighborhood, said the 2012 public meetings were more productive than the somewhat chaotic mass meetings Detroit Works held in the fall of 2010. "Today it looks like there are people with ideas that can move forward," he said.

Some skepticism remained, of course, about how many of the good ideas would become policy in the cash-strapped city, and how many might ever be carried out. "If the city government buys into this plan and communicates to us what they're going to do, I think it will work out all right," Roberts said.

Under current Mayor Mike Duggan, who took office in 2014, a roster of neighborhood offices have opened to deal more closely with citizens and their concerns than previous administrations had done. The level of community involvement to date has been evidence that Detroiters have not given up on their neighborhoods, even in the hardest hit areas.

Rubber Hits the Road

Happily, concerns that *Detroit Future City* would sit on the shelf gathering dust like so many previous documents in Detroit seem unfounded. With Kresge's financial backing and leadership,



A garden grows amid the abandoned Victorian mansions of Brush Park. Credit: Melissa Farlow/National Geographic Creative

the Detroit Future City (DFC) Implementation Office was established as a nonprofit charged with realizing the plan's visions and suggestions. Dan Kinkead, an architect who helped to write *Detroit Future City*, was appointed director of projects. The group now has a fixed location in Detroit's New Center district and a staff of about 12, including staffers available through various fellowship programs underway in the city. Kenneth Cockrel, a former president of the Detroit City Council who briefly served as interim mayor after then-Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick resigned in disgrace in 2008, was hired at the end of 2013 to be director of the implementation office.

In early 2015, the implementation office had multiple pilot projects underway in partnership with other organizations. These include:

Solar Fields. Working with Focus: HOPE, a nonprofit job training facility in the city, and a small start-up, the DFC team is planning to cover some 15 acres of vacant land with solar panels. Kinkead estimates that the field could produce five megawatts of energy—enough to power several hundred houses. Planners hope to start the project this year or next, but it was unclear how many people it might employ.

Rainwater Retention Ponds. On Detroit's east side, the DFC staff is considering the creation of a series of rainwater retention ponds in a residential neighborhood to keep rainwater out of the sewer system. The neighborhood, known as Jefferson Village, had been targeted for new

THE URBAN FARMING CONTROVERSY

One controversial land use the office has championed stems from a trend Detroit is already well-known for—urban agriculture. Over the past 15 years, Detroit has seen well over 1,000 small community gardens started, including such nationally recognized projects as Earthworks and D-Town Farm, each of which covers a few acres. But currently volunteers perform almost all the farming activity, and the food is consumed by neighbors, donated to food banks, or in a few cases sold at local farmers markets. Detroit has undertaken a lively debate in recent years over the possibility of expanding into large-scale for-profit agriculture. Projects like Hantz Farms and RecoveryPark have mapped ambitious plans to convert hundreds of acres to food production. But each effort remains relatively small scale at the moment, as the debate on the wisdom of large-scale farming continues.

Nevertheless, the DFC team seems committed to much greater food production inside the city, both on vacant land and in abandoned factories where hydroponic farming could take place. The DFC team, for example, is working with the RecoveryPark effort to plan a rainwater retention system to help water crops.

At the very least, farming inside the city could help some local food entrepreneurs grow their businesses, create some jobs, and strengthen the tax base, if only on a modest scale. Food production also helps knit communities together around a purposeful activity, raises nutrition awareness, and puts blighted vacant lots and factories to a productive new use. "Detroit has the opportunity to be the first globally food-secure city," Kinkead said.

But city officials have yet to sign off on large-scale for-profit farming, fearing that nuisance problems including dust, noise, and odors, will get out of hand. Others question whether the tough economics of farming—back-breaking labor performed mostly by minimum-wage migrants—would ever produce the sort of revenue and jobs to justify the effort. McCarthy remains one of the skeptics. "I thought it was a bad idea to try to grow food," he says. "The economics just aren't there; the costs are prohibitive, given the fact that you don't have to drive that far to get out into perfectly good farmland outside Detroit at one tenth the cost." So the debate continues, with the DFC implementation team working toward greater use of Detroit's vacant land for food production.

single-family housing some 15 years ago, but that project stalled for lack of funding, leaving dozens of vacant lots and little demand for them. So with funding from the local Erb Foundation, and consulting with the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department, the DFC team is targeting several dozen vacant lots for the treatment. They envision that nearby homeowners could see a rate reduction on their water bills, because the department will no longer have to build and maintain as much big-pipe infrastructure to clean up rainwater that mixes in with wastewater. If the effort proved successful, they would expand it citywide.

"Residents began to understand that they were effectively subsidizing the sprawl and disinvestment, and they began to think about ways to change these systems to be more efficient."

Roadside carbon buffers. With the nonprofit Greening of Detroit tree-planting organization, one of DFC's recommendations—to plant trees as carbon buffers alongside major roads and highways—saw one of the city's largest-ever tree-planting blitzes in late 2014 on Detroit's west side near the Southfield Freeway, a major north-south connector. Volunteers planted some 300 trees in one day along a few blocks. When mature, they will absorb at least some of the carbon emissions from the freeway.

Trish Hubbell, a spokesperson for the Greening of Detroit, said that partnering with the DFC implementation team on such efforts raises the visibility of each project, which in turn helps with fundraising. And the DFC team brings a wealth of knowledge on land use issues to any effort.

"Their biggest value is that they have the framework, and so they help steer where things go," Hubbell said. "The framework adds value to all the opportunities out there."

Perhaps *Detroit Future City's* most important contribution has been to empower neighborhoods and citizens as equal partners with high-level professional planners in deciding the future direction of the city.

Consensus Building

Rather than ignoring *Detroit Future City* as the product of a previous administration, Mayor Duggan has publicly embraced it as his guide. His top aide for jobs and the economy refers to his well-worn copy of *Detroit Future City* as his “Bible” for reshaping the city.

Jean Redfield, CEO of NextEnergy, a Detroit nonprofit working toward a sustainable energy future for the city, keeps a copy of *Detroit Future City* on her desk. “I use it a lot to go back to specific language they use to talk about specific options,” she said. “I use some of the maps and statistics pretty regularly.” And NextEnergy teams up with the DFC implementation team in planning a variety of green-and-blue infrastructure projects. “Our paths cross pretty often,” she said. “Whenever there’s a Department of Energy or City of Detroit question or challenge around land use, energy infrastructure, street lighting, or solar projects, we’re often working side by side with the folks there.”

As mentioned, the implementation team acts more as a lead advisor to other agencies, such as Greening of Detroit or the city’s Water & Sewerage Department, than as a primary actor. DFC Implementation Director Kenneth Cockrel calls the team a “nongovernmental planning agency.” He explains, “We inform decision making, but we are not decisions makers. Ultimately, what’s in the framework is going to be implemented by the mayor and by city council if they so choose to buy into it. They’re the ones who are going to drive implementation.”

Continuing, Cockrel likens the implementation of *Detroit Future City* “to what happens when a book gets made into a movie. You don’t film the book word for word and page for page. Some



A mural in the Brightmoor neighborhood, near Detroit’s northwestern border. Credit: David Lewinski

stuff gets left out, other stuff winds up on screen. I think that’s ultimately probably going to be the approach that the Duggan administration will take.”

Like any new organization, the DFC team continues to refine its role and search for where it can contribute most. Kinkead agrees their role may best be captured in a paraphrase of the old BASF corporate slogan: the DFC team doesn’t do a lot of the innovative projects in Detroit; it just makes a lot of those projects better.

“We exist in a squishy world,” Kinkead says. “It’s a different kind of ballgame, but our ability to help others is how we do what we do.”

In early 2015, it seemed clear that many of the innovative ideas at the heart of *Detroit Future City*—greening strategies, energy production, trees as carbon buffers, new development targeted toward already dense districts—ideas that seemed far-fetched even in 2010, when then-Mayor Bing launched his Detroit Works effort, now approach mainstream status.

“Now, it’s not just the environmentalists or the climate change folk talking about carbon forests; it’s residents and the executive directors of community development corporations,” Griffin says. “Business leaders and philanthropists are talking about the importance of this. A broader spectrum of constituents talking about issues that aren’t necessarily central to their wheelhouse is a very important outcome of the work.”

Perhaps just as important is the widespread realization that Detroit needs to deliver municipal services in a different way, given the realities of the city’s financial woes and population loss. The city successfully emerged from bankruptcy in late 2014, but at best that gave Detroit some breathing room to begin to grow again. If and when growth resumes, the city has to guide it more smartly than in past periods of expansion, when development sprawled across the landscape in haphazard fashion.

The Road Ahead

One reason why the city and its people were ready for a document like *Detroit Future City* was the deep understanding that deindustrialization and suburban sprawl had led to Detroit’s problems. “Residents began to understand that they were effectively subsidizing the sprawl and disinvestment. They began to think about ways to change these systems to be more efficient,” Griffin says.

As this article was being prepared for publication, Detroit took another big step toward revitalizing its long-dormant planning activities. Mayor Duggan announced that he had recruited Maurice Cox—the highly regarded director of the Tulane City Center, a community-based design resource center for New Orleans, and associate dean for Community Engagement at the Tulane University School of Architecture—to serve as Detroit’s new director of planning. In New Orleans, Cox facilitates a wide range of partnerships among Tulane University, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, and the City of New Orleans. In Detroit, among other activities, he will help turn some of *Detroit Future City's* general framework into

specific planning recommendations.

If innovative planning is back in style, as it appears to be, it’s more decentralized, less focused on big projects, and more attuned to how conditions on the ground might demand different solutions in each neighborhood. And the number of voices heard in planning discussions is greater than ever before. Perhaps *Detroit Future City's* final and most important contribution is that it has empowered neighborhoods and citizens as equal partners with high-level professional planners in deciding the future direction of the city.

Indeed, *Detroit Future City* launched a new age of planning, and it will look little or nothing like that of Blessing’s era. “Planning has certainly returned, but it’s fundamentally different from how it was 50 years ago,” says Kinkead. “In the 1950s and ’60s, the city’s broader planning objectives were often manifest from a single municipal government elite.”

“To move the city forward it takes everybody,” Kinkead says. “It’s not just *Detroit Future City*. It’s not just the government. It’s not just the business sector. It’s everybody working together.” □

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