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RESTORING HOUSES AND RESTORING LIVES: AN EXPERIMENT IN LIVABILITY IN THE DETROIT EAST SIDE

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Abstract: A place – a neighborhood, a town, a block – thrives when people living there perceive it as theirs, and have or can create the material, social, and spiritual connections that provide traction to change the shape of things. But how can a place thrive when it has been polluted and neglected? How can people thrive when their lives have been shattered?
These questions arise with urgency on the Detroit East Side. Here industrial ruins lie side by side with the newly planted lots of the Hantz Woodlands, the famed Heidelberg Project is rebounding after suffering several arson attacks during winter 2014. Urban farms are still a growing trend. The Detroit Eastern Market is flourishing. Blight, record unemployment, and lack of services continue also as an everyday reality. Investors are coming in droves to Detroit attracted by the media blitz of cheap land and building an investor's paradise, yet with little knowledge or concern for the needs of the longstanding, not 'invisible' residents, who might face eviction should some large rehabilitation project be approved, or better yet, some investor who simply has a plan.
In this context, a small non-profit organization, We Want Green, too! (WWG2) launched the idea of retrofitting blighted houses with sustainable material and technologies, labor provided by differently-abled, unemployed, homeless veterans, on a shoestring budget. The dual mission of the organization is to rebuild blighted homes, souls, and communities while providing affordable housing that is environmentally friendly and energy efficient.
The project focuses on several social issues facing urban areas around Detroit, seeking to address how we design living spaces (homes, communities, cities, states etc.) that revitalize us as human beings? How do we restore the resilience and creativity that speaks to the human inner being? WWG2 and its partners aim to educate residents and introduce sustainable practices to build livable, viable, safe communities, not just "neighborhoods" for the 21st century.
In the long term, WWG2's vision is to create sustainable, livable communities where residents can grow their own food, produce the energy they need, develop local businesses, and create friendly, safe urban environments for all dwellers of all ages and skills.

1. Introduction

The challenge for sociology is not just to recognize the importance of both the physical and the social factors, and certainly not to argue over the relative importance of the two, but to recognize the extent to which what we take to be 'physical' and 'social' factors can be conjointly constituted. (Freudenburg, Frickel, and Gramling 1995)
"The truth of the matter is, a city is as natural as a forest or a desert or an ocean. Its structures will ebb and flow and cycle much as the trees and the sand and the waves will" (Palm inMillington 2013: 278).

On a chilly spring day, as chilly as Michigan can make them, two women coming from very different paths in life met at a hipster coffee shop in the historical Indian Village neighborhood in Detroit to

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talk about their ideas, and specifically about what can be done to support the growth of livable neighborhoods and communities in Detroit and beyond. This paper is an initial step in the direction of building a collaborative project. Following a paradigm that is traditional in both African American and Italian culture, we start our long-term collaboration by telling a story about Detroit. In this draft, the two voices are outlined in different print colors.

Storytelling has transformative and healing powers (Senehi 2009), specifically for marginalized groups to maintain cultural connections and make their voices more audible. Of course, many others are currently telling stories about Detroit, to highlight their viewpoint, to convince foundations to support their project, to attract investors, to make monies, sometimes at the expense of residents[3]. Such as the story told by Bruce Katz, director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program to an audience at Tedx Hamburg, posted later for Linked in under the blog, Want to Change the World? Start with a City (Sept 23, 2015), his perception of Detroit as that city of change.

As a story with two narrators, two different voices will be heard throughout the paper. Following Mead's lead (Mead 1934), this paper aims to be a piece of research that does not just report facts about Detroit, but instigates actions. As such no distinction between the role of the academic (who in too many situations portrays herself as a detached observer) and that of the activist (who needs to be intensely involved with her job) can be made. (Frank 2005) The life and works of (Boggs and Kurashige 2012; Boggs 1978), also have significant influence on both authors: her lifelong commitment to grow knowledge and transformation from the ground up is an inspiration for both of us. The paper is thus set up as a montage of two different voices, following Salamon's (2013) idea of polyphonic ethnographies.

Detroit might have emerged from bankruptcy, and is being promoted around the United States as the new frontier for young entrepreneurs, but most of the problems that caused the city to collapse have not been addressed. Many aging residents are barely able to keep up with house expenses. Families who are delinquent on water or taxes, sometimes by small sums, get their water shut off and the kids sent to foster care. Access to affordable and healthy groceries is still very limited for those who don't own a car, and public transit is in dismay (Taylor and Kerry 2015). Blight here is more than just the abandoned factories and decrepit mansions powerfully shown by the work of Vergara (1999) in his investigation of the American ruins. In that book Vergara famously quipped that maybe it could be a good idea to let Detroit to go back to nature, to let it became a monument to the mistakes of the past. Touring the ruins of Detroit has become a pastime, and journalists and scholars flocked to the city in the past ten years to record its demise. Detroit city of ruins is just one of the many narratives that circulate and it is a perspective that dehumanize the people that call Detroit their home.

As one of us outlined in the past (Giorda 2011; Giorda 2012), conflicting narratives compete in making statements about what route should local government and agencies take to eventually restore Detroit to its past greatness. Another set of narratives, outlined by Millington (2013: 282) presents a "discursive scripting of Detroit as a blank slate for artists and creative gentrifiers who want to tap into the city's history of art and working-class culture." The story we tell with this paper aligns more with the work of researchers such as Monica White, who look at the groundwork of black activists as a powerful political message of re-empowering black communities from the ground up (White 2011a; White 2011b).

The first part of the paper sketches the challenging and exciting situation the city is facing after ten of the most turbulent years in its life and looks into the mainstream ideas about growing, shrinking, or

[3] Malik Yakini, 2013, personal communication.

leading Detroit on a novel route. The second part describes in depth the work one of us is doing to suggest yet another, and more livable, direction.

Detroit, like many of the cities in the Rust Belt of the Midwest, symbolizes the premier age of industrialization with the automobile, assembly-line production and the establishment of the blue collar middle class, and today is in a struggle for re-imagining itself as a 21st century model that survived industrial decline and urban decay. The main problems the city faces are unemployment, housing, and access to services.

Detroit is the largest city in Michigan, and is at the center of a metropolitan area that spans 10,130 km^2 and six counties. The governments of the six counties, 150 cities and townships that comprise the Detroit metropolitan area talk little and cooperate less. While the population of Metropolitan Detroit increased during the last two decades, the city of Detroit went from almost two million people in the 1950s to less than 714,000 in 2010. There is a significant difference in median household income between the suburbs and Detroit, and a persistent racial divide (Clemens 2006) While the population in the suburbs is primarily white, Detroit's population is 83% black[4]. The unemployment rate of Detroit is 19%, and about one-third of the population receives welfare support (Bing 2011; Gallagher 2010; Steinmetz 2009). These social, political and economic conditions impact the health and wellbeing of the residents of the city.

To suggest that these conditions occurred by accident would be shortsighted and revisionist at best. Historically, waves of urban renewal, beginning in the late 1940's (Pisani 2012), fostered plans for redevelopment funded by federal government initiatives that failed to account for the displacement of residents living in the affected areas. One of the most egregious examples of urban renewal through state violence took place in the Black Bottom neighborhood on Detroit's East Side. Urban renewal projects have " failed egregiously to serve the needs of most of the city's residents, some whom were forcibly evicted from their homes."(Goodspeed 2004: 6) For that project, which took 14 years to complete, city planners focused on an area of approximately 129 acres. The revitalization of Black Bottom received funds for the removal of approximately 7,000 African Americans from their community, as a part of the overall Detroit Plan of 1950. It was the first deliberate attempt to remove residents from their community for the construction of a highway that would in fact provide whites that had fled to the suburbs with a viable transportation route back into the city for economic reasons.

Despite the abundance of space, low-income housing has been traditionally neglected in Detroit, and the widespread practice of redlining further increased the problem for black residents. In many suburbs, local homeowners' associations specifically prohibited selling houses to Blacks.

The planners never considered the cultural, social or economic impact their actions would have on the residents of this area; it was a calculated political move by Mayor Albert Cobo to win the election (1946). Historians are correct in stating that the city policies on urban revitalization, intentionally or not, were a means of removal of African American from their economically viable community in Black Bottom. The residents were not passive onlookers, though. Voices of dissent led to political organizing. However, it was difficult, and they were no challenge to the coalition of government and political leadership that considered urban "blight" removal a priority that would be accomplished through the creation of public housing projects, freeway construction, and slums clearance.

[4] United States Census, 2010

We now recognize that large-scale urban renewal projects are disruptive of communities. We have sufficient research that acknowledges the problem of inadequate housing as a result of social inequities of wealth and income, access of which is not readily available to communities of color and immigrants. A solution to poor, deteriorated housing stock in Detroit could have been designed differently, but governments are not architects, and this program of renewal designed out of "free market" ideology was created and viewed through the lens of colonization with plans to control communities of color (See: Darden 1990). In the current climate of efforts to "right size" the city, there are no clear plans to help residents maintain the cultural, social and economic links to the neighborhoods in which they live, as if the past lessons have been forgotten.

Two examples –which have been widely covered by local newspapers and scholarly literature - are the Hantz Farms Detroit, and the Detroit Future City plan by Detroit Works. Hantz, a Detroit resident and rich entrepreneur, started and ambitious reinvestment program centered about urban farming in 2010 (Holt-Giménez, Wang, and Shattuck 2011; Walker 2015). Since then the scope of the project changed from a futuristic urban farm from a more doable, and already under implementation, urban tree plantation. Anderson (Anderson 2013: 1172) summarizes the issues with the project clearly: "A company called Hantz Farms Detroit, for instance, which is owned by one of the wealthiest men remaining in the city, purchased 1,500 lots in Detroit for less than $350 each—a "bake sale price" (217) that was criticized as a "land grab," but embraced by a mayor battling to manage an estimated 60,000 parcels of vacant or blighted property.(218) The company plans to clear the lots and turn the properties into commercial tree farms—more than 15,000 oaks and maples will be planted—thereby bringing the land back onto the productive tax rolls, improving safety in and around the properties, providing local jobs, and beautifying neighborhoods. It is a good plan, perhaps even a virtuous one, but nonetheless it is an indicator that if city land is being sold at nominal prices, the procedures to buy it should be transparent and available to small buyers, like local entrepreneurs and neighbors, as much as major landowners."
Akers (2013) also points out that the privatization efforts of the past administrations did not bring the expected results, increasing instead the role of external speculators, and opening spaces for business practices that do not support local communities nor give residents a voice to spell out their concerns and fears.

This is the starting point for this discourse. There is and there has been a gap in the discussion between those in power, government at local, state, and federal levels about urban renewal policies. This gap is creating the environment for the destruction of communities and leaves residents with no expected economic gain and no actual improvement of their living conditions. Institutional solutions to remove blight support the creation of a "blight task force," promote charter schools instead of viable public education, and aim at increasing rates for city services when possible. Currently, the Detroit Future City revitalization initiative seems identical to the failed Detroit Plan of 1950, complete with citizen removal and lacking minimal public housing availability. Today, throughout the area once known as Black Bottom, the I-375 highway connector is being considered for removal because a gentrified core downtown occupied mostly by white dwellers has no need for this piece of highway, the city never did.[5]
Yet, the planners and politicians have not learned necessary lessons that will allow the city to move forward and be inclusive of all its residents. Our leadership should understand that a fruitful, stable and attractive 21st century city is a balance of development and civic engagement with all its

[5] http://www.freep.com/article/20140223/OPINION05/302230041/Sugrue-Trickle-down-urbanism-won-t-work-Detroit

communities. People want to see a better future and are willing to do their part in achieving it. Let's examine the path of reconciliation from past mistakes to future problem solving.

The awareness of the differences in means and access, and the historical memory of neglect and discrimination are one of the first obstacles to overcome when underserved communities try to rebuild and renovate.

Internalized oppression is both a psychological and socio-cultural term used to define the experiences of many marginalized groups of people who feel inferior, living under oppressive circumstances, such as discrimination and structural racism. The marginalized groups adopt the negative, inferior images produced by the hegemonic ruling class, and use these images internally as "their own self-images." Accepting these images, a self-fulfilling prophecy effect occurs in which the marginalized group acts out the behavior as defined by the hegemonic powers. Freire (2000) speaks to this phenomenon as "identifying with the oppressor." Internalized oppression makes people fight with themselves and those in their own group rather than the dominant class. A current of self-hatred runs underneath.
Gramsci (Gramsci and Buttigieg 1992) describes a similar situation with his idea of cultural hegemony, which he defines as the system of values, perceptions, and beliefs of the prevailing ruling class (elites), which are absorbed by the lower classes and accepted as natural and uncontroversial. To perceive and to resist cultural hegemony, the working class would depend on their own organic intellectuals, grown within the communities, people not just of letters but also of engagement in community life, organizers of the people for the benefit of the people. Gramsci knew that in order to re-imagine a new society a new consciousness needed to be developed. For Gramsci this was a crucial element the political and social strategies needed to design a new and fair political structure.
Gramsci pointed out that cultural hegemony is the vehicle that drives internalized oppression and its manifestations: physical violence, psychological withdrawal, physical impact, and mimesis just to name a few behaviors that work unconsciously to destroy self-esteem. We see this behavior displayed in Black on Black crime. Self-hate the materialization of internalized oppression, unemployment, and homelessness can result in a wreck (Fonte 2001).
One way to recover is to find ways to recreate connections with the community that support spiritual as well as material growth. In contemporary Detroit the public recognition of skills and achievements comes mostly from the ability to be employed, which is difficult for people who suffers from post traumatic stress disorders and have low academic achievements. Health, the exercise and development of skills and capacities, self-esteem based on the recognition of one's achievements, a sense of social connectedness and exposure to the demands of cooperation are some of the intrinsic goods associated with a working life that is very difficult for many Detroiters to obtain.

There are some organizations in Detroit that are working to create holistic and supportive environments for new social and environmental projects.

Located on Detroit's East Side is the James and Grace Boggs Center for Nurturing Leadership, which shares in the belief that re-imagining society for the new human being will require a strategic plan to re-educate the masses, provide place-based education and design a local economy through New Work. One of the first students of the Boggs' Detroit Summer program, Julie Putnam, opened The James and Grace Boggs Educational Center in 2013, to nurture creative minds and critical thinkers at a young age. The primary school's core value is the development of the Beloved Community as envisioned through the philosophy of Dr. King that requires "a qualitative change in our souls as well

as quantitative changes in our lives". The school provides an environment that fosters learning through participation in service projects for the school and surrounding neighborhoods.
Another organization that has expanded its yearly conference to invite people to think about livability and how we can create the Beloved Community in Detroit is the local Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit (GLBD). Formed in 2005 as a regional chapter of the National Bioneers Conference, it embeds Social and Environmental justice as the main focus of dialogue at the annual conference. GLBD's mission is rooted in spirituality and sustainability for all life and Mother Earth, and the balance that we (humans) have to create for our survival and that of the Planet. In the past ten years the Detroit Bioneers have applied knowledge on sustainability and innovative approaches to pioneer changes between community and many non-profit community based organizations serving in Detroit.

Examining the work of these groups a question arises: why is sustainability so frequently presented as a luxury that poor people cannot afford, when they are the ones who need it most?

Real sustainability is the conscious spiritual relationship of all things to each other. It is the system of inter-connectedness that can be achieved after solving the broken-ness in the spirit of human beings. How do we become more human, how do we grow into being one with nature and with each other? This is no doubt one of the most pertinent questions to be asked in the 21st century and We Want Green, Too is an effort trying to answer this question.
Matthew Fox, radical priest and theologian, founder of the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality states: "The great work is the work of the universe, it is the unfolding of creation. Somehow, our work, our daily life, should contribute to that. We should feel that we are connected to the great work of the universe. Without that, we lose meaning in our work and the only meaning is a paycheck." (2004)
Our journey is to do development differently. African Americans came to Detroit for a better life and those dreams coupled with hard-core skills still exist, we are in need of devoted mentors to assist in the elevation of our talents not the destruction of our lives, and we can no longer wait on a system that seems to render us invisible, so we are seeking alternatives, reaching deep into our souls calling upon our spirit (resilience) and determination to create 'a way out of no way' receptive to joining forces with those offering a helping hand up, not out.
With nurturing, knowledge and encouragement from Grace Lee Boggs and Great Lakes Bioneers Detroit, listening to the stories from differently-abled, broken and homeless veterans, We Want Green, too! was born as a community based initiative whose members are invested in the re-imagining of Detroit, in creating a new story about the city, its residents, and the resilience they display in the face of adversity.
How can we thrive when our lives are so challenged and the place we call home is being taken away? Let's start by rebuilding those houses and communities, re-instilling the values forgotten, one soul, one house at a time. In late 2006 we set about the "good work" we envisioned.
A house in Jackson, Michigan, 112 kilometers west of Detroit, is where we started. As we worked, we noticed that the men –working with their hands – began to change, a sort of transformation was appearing. These were broken souls waiting for a chance to rectify their lives, and all that was necessary was good work, valuable work, work to be done with their hands (Crawford 2009). The house in Jackson was retrofitted using mostly recycled materials in an energy efficient manner. Working mostly on weekends the project was completed in a little more than 6 months, but a deeper form of work was just beginning. Few weeks after the retrofitting work was finished, the men came back, and stated that after hearing about "green this and green that, we want green, too!" They wanted another house to work on.

The year later, with a few veterans and returning citizens we started retrofitting a 1025 ft.^{2} bungalow on Detroit's East side, in a depressed and blighted community not far from the Grace and James Boggs Center. The plan was simple: we would include community members in as much of the work as possible to introduce ourselves and build trust. A few days into the project, the young son of one of the neighbors decided to throw a rock and broke one of the windows. What lesson could we teach this young man that would have lasting value after all, our goal was to give this young man a valuable lesson on work, so he worked to pay off the damages and we hired him to stay on and we paid him a small stipend. After several weeks with the team and plenty of conversation, his ways changed. By the time school started in September, he had purchased shoes for himself and many of his views were changed. This is only an example of the power of what community does.

Word spread fast about what we were doing and more young people came to visit the men working, conversations and sharing of stories became commonplace; trust was growing. The neighbors, hearing stories from their children, began upgrading their own properties.

The materials we used were the result of creativity and ingenuity. Architects and builders that volunteered time and expertise taught us which walls could be removed to achieve the open space look we desired. Once the walls were removed we salvaged the lumber for to make railings and re-framing of windows and doors. To brand our presence to the community, we installed a view to the world in the form of a 180-degree window purchased from a Habitat Reuse store for a tenth of the cost. It was the showcase for the house. We purchased environmentally friendly products online at a discount and talked about the importance of using low or no VOC paints. We built a relationship with the nearest Home Depot, whose manager would email us about products on sale or being discontinued such as the bamboo flooring we have. The 200-watt electrical system, providing enough electrical power for the appliances and computers, was installed by a neighbor and retired master electrician, at cost. A whole house high efficiency furnace with A/C was also installed at cost, through relationships in the community. Cabinetry was purchased at IKEA and the good quality and cost savings was shared with the community, which had no prior knowledge of the store.

As of September 2015, 95% of the retrofitting has been completed on the project house and most of the veterans have moved on to steady work. Our work has appeared on local radio ("On Being," 2012), we received visits by folks from all over the globe, and the full story of our inception can be viewed online. We have been gifted a second house to retrofit and will be using the two locations as our community office and worker's center.

The men who spoke into existence "We Want Green, too" are former veterans, and we are recruiting new veterans for the new program. They are mostly 28 through 45 years of age, with families, disillusioned by life and financially destitute. We Want Green, too makes a difference in their lives and in the communities that bear their scars.

We cannot accept the continued stigmatization of so many veterans who fought for the liberties of all people in the United States, it is not morally right. We don't want them banished from their communities and ineligible for employment, so we have created a program that will seek to eliminate these obstacles and let them return to their families. Our mission continues, one community, one soul at a time, this is our legacy and our pathway to restoring lives and restoring communities to a livable, sustainable design for a 21st century Detroit. The outcome we expect of our program is to remedy much of the spiritual, mental and personal oppression experienced by our veterans and some returning citizens in times of international and domestic wars, and to provide them with skills they can use to regain access to the options available for securing good work and returning to their communities the victors of war, both internally and externally.

2. Final remarks

In 2014, for the first time in decades, the population of Detroit increased. It was not a huge number, just about 6,000 people, but many hope it to be the start of a trend. Most new residents are not flocking to the blighted areas: most of them moved in around the Cass corridor, in the central neighborhoods where services, amenities and businesses look good. We find it important, as the city moves forward, to underline that the way recovery and growth are framed and presented might affect the opportunities poorer Detroiters have to participate in the process or being pushed away.

Not all blight removal projects are created equal, and the means used, the goal pursued, and the stories told about them can prevent current residents to partake in the effort, or –as it had already happened in the past- they can disempower and alienate the same people they purportedly set up to help. We believe that the nodal aspect is whether the emphasis is on economic development or it is on people. Walker (2015) argues that the way urban farming has been framed by the City of Detroit is more about increasing property values than it is about providing food access, and “that the Detroit Future City (DFC) planning framework shows that the City is enrolling urban agriculture in a sustainability fix meant to attract capital” (Walker 2015: 12). That has been the explicit bet behind the Hantz Farm project since its inception (Holt-Giménez, Wang, and Shattuck 2011). Many urban farmers, though, fight against that framing and keep working to create an alternative model (Taylor and Kerry 2015).

In this paper we described a similar situation looking at blight removal and urban renewal strategies. On the one hand, the idea behind Detroit Future City (DFC) is prominently about creating the right environment for economic growth. This being a neoliberal capitalist society, the project assumes that once the growth machine starts again, all residents will benefit (Detroit Works 2012). Unfortunately, so far the model has not been working well for the lower and middle classes (Akers 2013; Harvey 2005). It is telling that in the DFC’s brief (Detroit Works 2012), the first thing to be discussed is economic development, and community involvement is the last. Walker (2015) and Howell (2013) underline that the DFC’s framework is innovative and points toward some form of sustainable city planning. They also point out that the fact that it centers on economic growth undermines much the possible benefits.

Moore (2007) pointed out that sustainability has different meanings and different implementation in any urban context. Gilles (2006) suggested a change of focus, from the very abstract concept of sustainability to the more embedded and applied one of livability. In this paper we have proposed an example of how livability looks like in the East Side of Detroit.

The core idea is not new: do things as if people matter (Schumacher 1985). Instead of looking for moneyed investors and start-up funds WWG2 invests in people and looks at what resources are available on site. Instead of looking for new designs and recreate things anew, they rehab old structures with what material is available in the area. The means and the goals coincide: restoring a community by restoring its houses using locally available expertise and materials. It is the spirit of Bioneers (Ausubel 1997) and the spirit of permaculture (Mollison and Holmgren 1978): growth and renewal can be found when we harvest human and natural resources from the place where we live in, and give back to the community in the form of renewed buildings, newly found creative skills, and restored livelihoods.

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