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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1952g26n>

Journal

Places, 21(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Moon, Whitney

Publication Date

2009-05-19

Peer reviewed

Reclaiming the Ruin: Detroit's Second Coming?

Whitney Moon



But there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential. That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins: ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins. There has to be (in our new concept of history) an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape.

— J.B. Jackson¹

Detroit may be littered with ruins and abandoned lots, but it is not empty. In response to architectural neglect and decay, individual acts of appropriation suggest that the remedy for postindustrial ruin begins with ad hoc, underground, and unsanctioned practices. By calling attention to derelict and downtrodden conditions, Detroit residents are, in a variety of ways, initiating an urban revival. Resuscitating Detroit will require a multilayered strategy, one that is currently bringing signs of revitalization, but whose future is uncertain.²

In a city where demolition far outpaces construction, one must ask what role architecture may play in a program of revival. Indeed, in Detroit, architecture is typically seen as the problem rather than a solution; rather than employing creativity to address its crises, the city has adopted a policy of eradication. But while bulldozers and wrecking balls may serve as proactive measures to counteract apathy and abandonment, the negative consequences are obvious. In Detroit, erasure has given birth to a new crisis of emptiness.

Above: DDD Project, 2005. Images courtesy of Object Orange.

This essay explores the implications of covert action as a catalyst to reverse apathy and address conditions of abandonment and decay. It then proposes that the evolution from unsanctioned individual effort to sanctioned institutional action can be traced through three stages: highlighting, appropriation, and transformation.

The solution to Detroit's urban crisis does not lie in grand architectural gestures. Opting for raw over refined, Detroit in recuperating must employ limited economic resources to achieve maximum effect. Toward this end, the loose, bottom-up, and ad-hoc transformation of abandoned spaces brings immediate results, employs fewer resources, and minimizes the crisis of erasure. If Detroit has an urban future, it will begin as a network of such spaces.

Stages of Reclamation

Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an invention in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen.

— Paul Virilio³

In *The Original Accident*, Paul Virilio argued for the inevitability of the industrial accident, suggesting that catastrophes are “the fruit of Progress and of the labour of mankind.” Rather than approaching the accident exclusively from a vantage of prevention, he suggested the need to “uncover what was hidden, just waiting to happen.”⁴

Virilio's approach is not nihilistic, nor is it a glorification of catastrophe: he postulates that it is precisely in the accident that the substance of progress and invention is revealed. Because progress invariably wreaks havoc,

disaster is intrinsic to growth. Hence, it could be said that the architectural ruin is not a sign of Detroit's failure, only evidence of its potential for rebirth.

Detroit possesses a rich history of optimism when confronted with disaster. It was destroyed by fire in 1805, and its residents were determined to rebuild. The city's official seal, adopted in 1826, reads: "We Shall Rise Again from the Ashes / We Hope for Better Things."⁵ Featuring two female figures—one representing Detroit's recent loss and the other its promising future—the seal reflects the city's dialectical relationship with renewal. In the background, the city is illustrated in flames; in the foreground, a new city is born. Thus, while symbolizing resilience, the seal likewise exposes the paradox of rebirth: loss is necessary for something new to be gained.

The case studies here show how the reclamation of Detroit needs to follow three stages: 1) Highlight, 2) Appropriate, and 3) Transform. Varying in scale and ranging from the anti-institutional to the institutional, they present emergent strategies for architectural reform. Analysis of their pros and cons implies a projective fourth phase, in which "the city full of holes" is seen as a raw network of architectural potential.⁶

This view suggests that "Detroit's Second Coming" is a myth misplaced. In other words, the reclamation of Detroit does not reside in the romantic notion of renaissance, where one grand architectural gesture will save the city. Rather, the promise of rebirth resides in stitching together and building upon an existing set of operations to generate a fertile network of reclaimed sites.

Highlight

Pick up a roller. Pick up a brush. Apply orange. The dialogue is going. Our goal is to make everyone look at not only these houses, but all the buildings rooted in decay and corrosion. If we can get people to look for our orange while driving through the city, then they will at the same time, be looking at all the decaying buildings they come across. This brings awareness. And as we have already seen, awareness brings action.

— DDD project⁷

The first stage of ruin reclamation may not only be anti-institutional, anonymous, and ephemeral—it may also be illegal. Flying under the radar, unsanctioned acts are early signs of life in the aftermath. Quick to be seen, heard, and felt, their immediacy not only attracts but also refocuses attention. In Detroit, such interventions may call attention to architecture's demise as sublime

catastrophe. Derelict buildings may be suspended in a state of ruin, where entropy is assaulted, suspended, celebrated, or accelerated. The result is a new relationship between art and architecture, where art utilizes architecture's public facade as a canvas for announcing failure through constructive practice.

To expose the city's crisis of abandonment, an anonymous group of four artists, calling themselves Object Orange, carried out such an act of ruin reclamation in 2006, entitled Detroit Demolition Disneyland (DDD). Armed with Tiggeriffic Orange paint (a cheerfully vibrant color from Disney's "Mickey Mouse" series), they transformed a collection of abandoned structures marked for demolition. By highlighting Detroit's ruins, Object Orange sought to build awareness of neglect and encourage Detroit residents to participate in direct physical discourse with the ruins around them. By encouraging them to look closely at the effect of transformation, and to take up their own brushes, Object Orange operated as a catalyst for collective critique.

Such covert interventions are clearly not a solution. Indeed, as a result of DDD, four of the eleven painted houses were immediately demolished.⁸ But as a provocation, Operation Orange questioned the city's lack of effort to devise a solution. Why create such voids without plans for recuperation? "If the city doesn't rebuild, will it be better to have nothing there rather than an abandoned house?"⁹

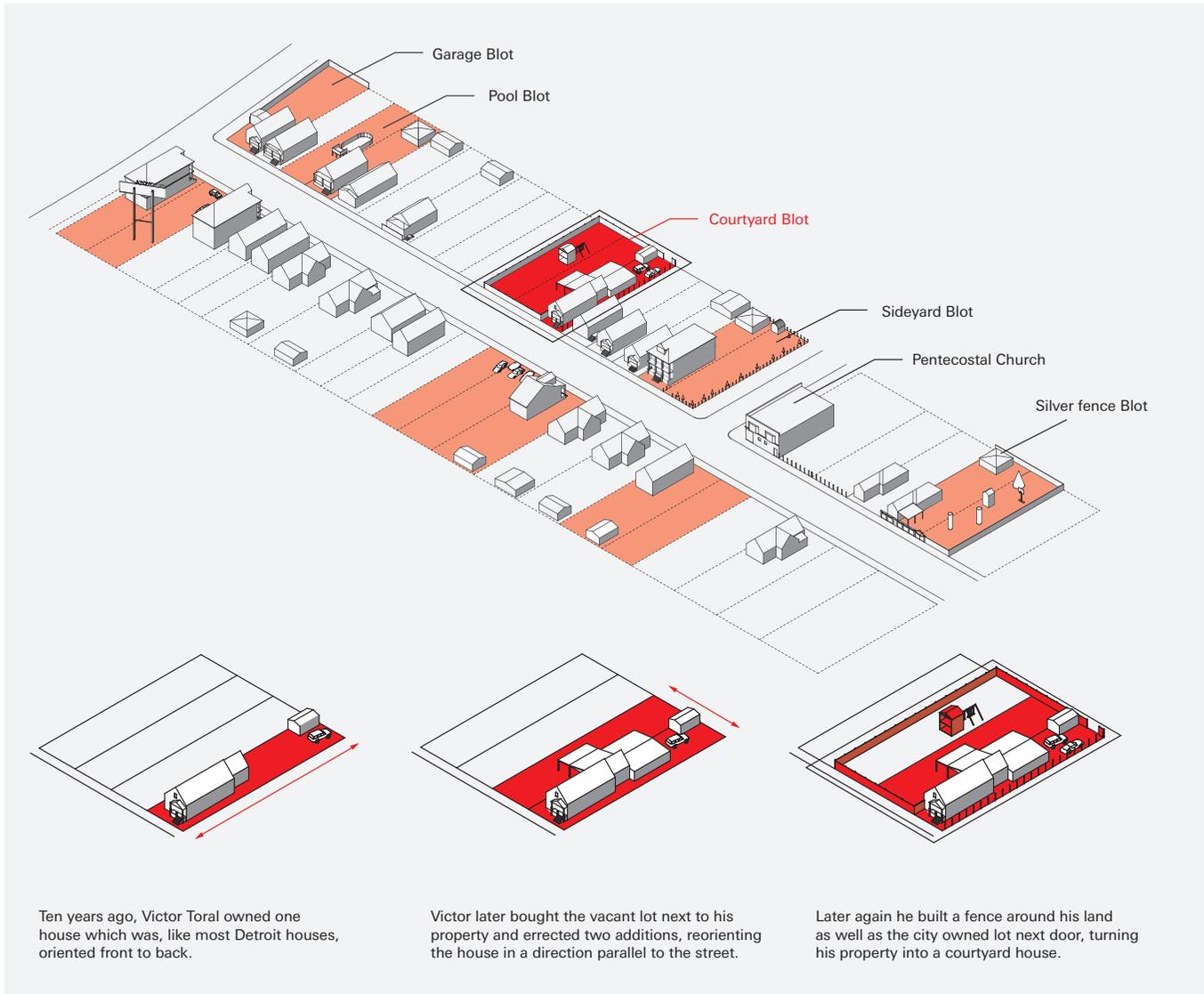
Appropriate

Here we ask: might the best way forward for Detroit be a phenomenon that is being acted out every day by thousands of self-interested homeowners who are merely making do? If so, might we as planners and policy makers learn how to better learn from what people are already doing?

— Interboro Partners¹⁰

The second stage of ruin reclamation may initially be invisible, but ultimately it seeks institutional sanction and acknowledgement. It operates by means of bottom-up, self-initiated, everyday urbanism.

Embracing the gradual and organic appropriation of abandoned sites by Detroit's remaining residents, the architects and planners at Interboro Partners have identified a practice of lot expansion, or "blots." They see this as an indicator and an example of a "New Suburbanism." Defined as "the process through which entrepreneurial homeowners take, borrow, or buy adjacent vacant lots," its "cumulative effect will be a gradual rewriting of the City's genetic code."¹¹



By identifying and documenting these practices, Interboro hopes to facilitate the informal, uncoordinated practice of staking claim to Detroit’s abandoned sites. Rather than creating voids or highlighting ruins, New Suburbanism seeks to return these now city-owned properties to responsible private hands. It also builds on an already thriving practice of “urban husbandry,” where residents lay claim to abandoned sites to plant community gardens.¹² A loose new infrastructure could one day sanction such activity and allow growth.

Despite the expansive nature of lot appropriation, however, the weakness of Interboro’s New Suburbanism is that it remains wedded to a vision of Detroit’s ultimate demise. Although blots may prevent the decay and demolition of some structures, they do little to address the primary problem of shrinkage—that “[u]nbuilding has surpassed building as the city’s major architectural activity.”¹³

The problematic nature of Interboro’s analysis resides in its acceptance of Detroit’s return to suburban densities. Rather than positing an inventive new urban vision for Detroit, New Suburbanism settles for the effects of entropy, regularized through the expansion of property lines.

Transform

I didn’t want to romanticize it...but the city had a depth of character, a real substance and integrity. And while you want to do away with the problems, you don’t want to lose that quality.

—Andrew Zago¹⁴

The third stage of ruin reclamation is formal, sanctioned, and semi-institutional. It incorporates the first two stages—highlight and appropriate—but goes further to transform abandoned buildings and vacant lots into vibrant new sites. Advocating conservation rather than demolition, transformation preserves traces of the past while turning attention to the future.

Architects may be active agents in facilitating such visions of incremental progress, utilizing the ruin as a frame for creative reclamation. Often conceived in phases, transformation necessitates both immediate and long-term actions. And since limited financial resources often prohibit realization of elaborate visions, the resultant strategy must balance pragmatism and desire.



Opened in 2006, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), designed by the architect Andrew Zago, is one such project. It highlights and appropriates an urban ruin, but it also transforms it into a vibrant cultural center. By occupying a former car dealership abandoned in the 1970s at a time of white flight, the 22,000-square-foot museum echoes a time when Detroit was a thriving center of automotive production. Yet, amidst the slow revival of a derelict downtown, architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff called MOCAD “an act of guerilla architecture, one that accepts decay as fact rather than attempts to create a false vision of urban density.”¹⁵

Zago, a Detroit native, viewed the project as a chance to contribute to downtown renewal, but in a manner that would draw inspiration from its current state.¹⁶ Taking cues from “squatter’s houses, performance spaces, local bars and grass-roots art projects,” Zago sought to take advantage of the transgressive potential of the ruin.¹⁷ He employed the vernacular of urban blight as an operative strategy, celebrating the city’s underbelly. By injecting a new but familiar form of vibrancy into an otherwise vacant neighborhood, he transformed adversity into opportunity. Zago had initially designed a far more significant

intervention for MOCAD. But the museum’s limited financial resources and its desire to open immediately necessitated scaling back to a quick-and-dirty Phase 1 that involved more pragmatic maneuvers such as installing lighting, plumbing, and a parking lot.¹⁸ Zago’s adaptation celebrates the raw aesthetic of the ruin: walls showcase their layers of peeling paint, and a patchwork of interrupted floor surfaces suggests a long history of interior alterations.

Such scars not only contribute to the visual appeal of the building but also tell a story of endurance, adaptability, and survival. In turn, the museum has inspired a form of ad hoc engagement from exhibiting artists, where the architecture itself serves as a site for creative reclamation.¹⁹ As Ouroussoff explained, “[i]t takes us back to a time when making art and architecture could be an act of dissent.”²⁰

For Phase 2 of MOCAD, Zago has proposed a more

Above: MOCAD (Phase 1). Woodward Avenue facade with mural by graffiti artist Barry McGee. Photo courtesy of Zago Architecture.

Opposite top: Courtyard blot. In context, with blots shown in pink; and below, the evolution of the blot and its reorientation over time. Illustrations by Interboro Partners.



extensive renovation, introducing a high degree of refinement: sculptural skylights, storefront windows, mechanical upgrades, a sculpture garden, a cafe with outdoor seating, and a bookstore. Although this additional program of alterations would maintain the present allure of the industrial ruin, it is guided more by aesthetic than operative urgency.

The critical need to stake a claim on Detroit's ruins, paired with an economic recession, suggests that these architectural refinements are currently unnecessary if not inappropriate. The urgency of MOCAD resides in its state of raw transformation. It functions as an index to future strategies of reclamation in Detroit, and shows how limited interventions can have great transformative effect.

Reclamation: A "Second Coming"?

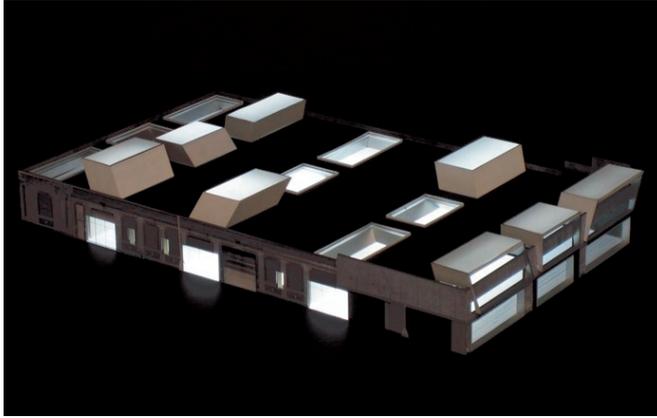
Perhaps the prime problem for the immediate future is the indicating of 'no-present-use' for a place, but nevertheless signaling that the city centre is not dead, only resting; that it is becoming available, a place for the nature of change to make itself manifest, a place of change for the better in a climate of hope.

—Alison Smithson²¹

Turning our attention toward the ruin is not only an initial stage in reclamation; it must serve as a conscious, operative strategy in the subsequent stages of architectural appropriation and transformation. In recent years, the problems of Detroit have garnered extensive public attention. Whether through the highlighting by DDD, the appropriation of blots, or transformations like MOCAD's, much of the resolution of Detroit's crisis will reside in such relatively loose and informal practices. Furthermore, each stage—Highlight, Appropriate, and Transform—lays the groundwork for a subsequent mode of renewal: raw urbanism.

Raw urbanism is a form of recuperation in which the city is improved through a sequence of individual operations. It posits a larger infrastructural framework that accepts the city as a unified yet heterogeneous fabric. In this vision, abandoned lots are no longer considered isolated and singular but rather part of a greater whole. The result is an urban fabric composed of surface interruptions, whose discontinuities must be understood as integral ecologies and whose potential is essential to the survival of the whole.

Raw urbanism implicates architecture as an active agent in the recuperation of Detroit, rejecting grand



gestures that offer false hope for salvation. As fortresses, autonomous and ideological islands of entertainment and commerce (i.e., casinos, ballparks, and corporate headquarters) have not only failed to resuscitate the city, but stand out as monuments to disappointment. What the city needs is hope—hope that a solution to current crises will emerge and that it will transcend the myth of salvation (of “Detroit’s Second Coming”).

Detroit needs a strategy whose aim is not merely to preserve or suspend the city but to launch it into an uncertain future where it can “make itself manifest.”²² Rather than making promises, raw urbanism constructs a network of possibility, where the “city full of holes” is understood as a city of untapped potential. As the essayist Rebecca Solnit has explained, “Detroit will never be built as it was.” Rather, “it will be the first of many cities forced to become altogether something else.”²³

Notes

1. J.B. Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 102.
2. For more on Detroit specifically, see Georgia Daskalakis, Charles Waldheim, and Jason Young, eds., *Stalking Detroit* (Barcelona: Actar, 2001); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For more on Detroit’s crisis in comparison to other cities, see Philipp Oswalt, ed., *Shrinking Cities: Volume 1, International Research* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005); and Mario Ballesteros, Albert Ferre, and Irene Hwang, eds., *Verb: Crisis* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008).
3. Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 3rd ed.), p. 9.
4. Ibid.
5. Detroit Historical Museum, “Current Exhibits: Detroit’s Official Symbols,” http://www.detroithistorical.org/main/dhn/current_exhibits_details.aspx?ID=16 (accessed Nov. 23, 2008).

6. Alison Smithson, “The Center City Full of Holes,” in *Architectural Association Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2/3 (1977), pp. 3-23.
7. “Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland.: A Project,” *The Detrouiter*, <http://www.thedetroiter.com/novo5/disneydemolition.php> (accessed Aug. 18, 2008).
8. “GOOD Magazine Presents: Object Orange,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQwKkK1bggY> (accessed Nov. 22, 2008).
9. Ibid.
10. In their essay “Improve Your Lot!” Interboro outlines four distinct examples of blots: “The Garden Blot,” “The Billboard Blot,” “The Courtyard Blot,” and “Blot for Two Sisters.” See <http://www.interboropartners.net/2008/improve-your-lot/> (accessed Oct. 16, 2008).
11. Interboro, “Improve Your Lot!”
12. Rebecca Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the Post-American Landscape,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 2007, p. 72.
13. Dan Hoffman, “Erasing Detroit,” in Daskalakis, Waldheim, and Young, eds., *Stalking Detroit*, p. 101.
14. Andrew Zago, as quoted by Nicolai Ouroussoff in “Seeing the Seediness, and Celebrating It,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 2006.
15. Ouroussoff, “Seeing the Seediness, and Celebrating It.”
16. It is fitting that the opening exhibition in the newly transformed warehouse was entitled “Meditations in an Emergency.” Klaus Kertess, its curator, described the show: “None of these artists provide us with answers but rather seduce us with questions, alarm us into beauty and hold up a mirror to our consciousness.” The second exhibition was “Shrinking Cities,” a traveling show whose aim was to investigate the phenomenon of urban shrinkage in four cities: Detroit (U.S.A.), Manchester/Liverpool (Britain), Ivanovo (Russia), and Halle/Leipzig (Germany). Featuring contributions by a collection of commissioned artists, architects, filmmakers, journalists, culture experts, and sociologists, it examined the causes and effects of urban decline. <http://www.mocadetroit.org/exhibitions/MIAE.html> (accessed Nov. 25, 2008).
17. Ouroussoff, “Seeing the Seediness, and Celebrating It.”
18. Andrew Zago explained to the author June 9, 2008, that what is now called Phase 2 of MOCAD was the initial design for the museum. Zago produced the Phase 1 design only so the museum could to cheaply and quickly occupy the space.
19. In addition to Zago’s minimal interference in Phase 1, two artists were invited to alter its exterior facade on Woodward Avenue. For the opening show, the San Francisco graffiti artist Barry McGee created a mural intended to reflect Detroit’s gritty, blighted character. Martin Creed has since added to McGee’s mural with a neon sign reading “Everything is going to be alright.”
20. Ouroussoff, “Seeing the Seediness, and Celebrating It.”
21. Smithson, “The Center City Full of Holes,” p. 13.
22. Ibid.
23. Solnit, “Detroit Arcadia,” p. 70.

Above: MOCAD (Phase 2), model.

Opposite: MOCAD (Phase 2, unbuilt), rendering. View along Woodward Avenue. Images by Zago Architecture.