

# Urban Renewal In Postwar Detroit

## The Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project: A Case Study

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Where's Dinah, plaintive balladeer?  
Where's Hastings Street, where from the din  
John Hooker's voice rang, racy, clear  
To saxophone and guitar string  
Where's Koppen, Castle, Dew Drop Inn,  
Where dancers shook and blues were sung? ...  
Where are all the girls of joy and sin?  
They're all gone where spikes are hung.

- From "Old Detroit" by Dudley Randall<sup>1</sup>

Speramus meliora, resurget cineribus.

- From the seal of the city of Detroit, roughly "We  
hope for better things; it will arise from its ashes"

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1 Dudley Randall, et al, *Poems*, Black American Literature Forum, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter, 1983), 168-176.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Between 1950 and 1953, the city of Detroit embarked on one of the nation's premier postwar urban renewal programs. Since the 1920s, city planners in Detroit had drafted visions for the future of the city, but in the postwar period for the first time their plans, funding, and a political will would come together with unprecedented results. Already aware of the growth of suburban communities, city leaders saw federal urban renewal dollars as a means to reinforce property values downtown by clearing dilapidated housing, expanding the Wayne State University campus, constructing new facilities for the city's hospitals, and building a new civic center for major events, in addition to constructing an extensive highway system within the city. Perhaps in no other U.S. city in the postwar period were the ideas of planners so fully realized. City officials spent millions building new infrastructure and facilities, and the city of Detroit Planning department was renowned nationwide.

This thesis argues that the city's urban planning schemes – highways, clearance for hospitals, Wayne State University, and slum clearance of all types – were fundamentally flawed. The initiatives, in general, failed egregiously to serve the needs of most of the city's residents, some who were forcibly evicted from their homes. Renewal disproportionately impacted the city's poorest residents, and the city's black community. City planners, in viewing their task as reinforcing and increasing property values, failed to adequately address the serious social and housing issues facing the city.

### **Urban Renewal in Postwar America**

Since the 1920s, planners in the city of Detroit had dreamt of constructing freeways in the city to facilitate transit. By the late 1940s, construction of the Davidson Expressway and the Edsel Ford Expressway had begun, and for the first time the federal government would provide the financial commitment to make the latest incarnation of the freeway plan a reality. Planners envisioned a world-

class network of sunken freeways that would ease street congestion, breathing new life into the city. By the time congress passed the 1949 Housing Act, which provided federal funds for urban “revitalization” projects and public housing, the city had a program of public housing and ‘slum clearance’ well under way – planners had identified twelve sites around the city for possible construction of public housing, and construction of the Edsel Ford Expressway had already begun. The freeway construction and urban renewal projects must be considered as connected: they were conceived of as complementary phenomenon in an effort to fundamentally re-shape the city.

One particular Detroit urban renewal project – the Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project – looms as the most significant urban renewal project from the early 1950s. Not only Detroit's first renewal project, the project itself was executed as the meaning of urban renewal was being redefined. Conceived during the 1940s as part of the citywide 1946 Detroit Plan, the project received a boost after the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which provided federal matching funds for renewal projects. The Gratiot project was again pushed into the forefront of city development after Mayor Albert E. Cobo made it the cornerstone of his plan to eliminate “blight” in the city.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Gratiot Project straddles an important political shift: when the newly elected Mayor Cobo exercised his power to ensure only specific parts of the Detroit Plan vision were implemented. Specifically, he accelerated the slum clearance and highway construction programs, while stopping completely the public housing component and doing little to alleviate the severe housing shortage faced by the African-American community. The project is an extreme example of one type of urban renewal: an entire neighborhood was torn down for little more than the simple reason it looked run-down. When the Detroit Plan was announced, there

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2 Thomas Sugrue describes the upset election of Albert Cobo against George Edwards in his *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 82-88.



existed a limited political coalition which believed that slum clearance and new, publicly-owned housing, could together provide a solution to the problem of slums the city.

### Historiography

The historical treatment of urban renewal in Detroit has acknowledged the disparate impact that highway building and slum clearance policies had on the city's poorest, and mostly-black residents. Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* identifies and describes the way “Postwar highway and urban redevelopment projects further exacerbated Detroit's housing crisis, especially for blacks.”<sup>3</sup> Also, Wayne State University sociologists Robert Mowitz and Deil Wright had as early as 1962 raised serious questions about the impact of the Gratiot Project in the city, observing “... the majority of the former residents, informed observers agree, are now living under slum conditions equal to, if not worse than, those they left,” although concluding “It is still too early to cast up the final accounts on the Gratiot project.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, June Manning Thomas' *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* asks of the city's “renewal” policies,

How could a city that for so long enjoyed prosperity turn into what exists today, given that so many people tried, for so many years, to improve it? For years, municipal politicians and staff fought the tide of decline, trying to recreate a viable and livable city ... Were their efforts completely in vain? Why were they not more successful?<sup>5</sup>

Thomas identifies two “reasons” why the city's professional planners and developers “could not do more than they did”: “that the city politicians and staff, particularly urban planners,

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3 Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 47.

4 Robert J. Mowitz and Deil S. Wright, *Profile of a Metropolis A Case Book*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 78-79.

5 June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

did not have the implementation tools and administrative structures necessary to ward off the city's deterioration,” and that “racial bias stunted efforts.”<sup>6</sup>

The perception of historians that city planners failed to do a better job is indeed correct. The city's policies had the effect, whether intentional or not, of physically demolishing Detroit's African-American economic community surrounding Hastings street and in the Black Bottom area more generally. However, Detroit's citizens were not merely passive participants in these processes, but rather they played an active role voicing dissent and organizing political opposition as the city's plans evolved and the true character of urban renewal emerged. Similarly, the failure of planners was not simply due to the political victory of wealthy white businessmen whose schemes viewed poor and black neighborhoods of the city as land on which to construct their elaborate visions, although that was certainly true. Detroit Mayor Albert Cobo, elected in 1949, certainly vigorously opposed public housing and accelerated the “clearance” of “blighted” neighborhoods, however, he was working within a framework created by his political opponents and predecessors – liberal democrats firmly in the New Deal tradition which drew its political base from a coalition of blacks and unionists. Certainly Cobo's policies aggravated the distress inflicted on the city's neighborhoods, but had the entire agenda been completed – urban renewal, slum clearance, civic centers, freeways, and public housing – the outcome might not have been significantly different. Many poor blacks would have been forced to move, and the experience of Chicago and New York have shown high-rise public housing projects were not the social and physical panaceas once believed. Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* chronicles how idealistically conceived public housing programs in Chicago functioned to continue patterns of economic and racial separation in the city.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Ibid, 2.

7 Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, (New York :

### A Critique of “Renewal”

The historical accounts in general critique postwar urban renewal along two lines. First, some argue their failure was a product of their implementation – that slum clearance did not adequately accommodate the existing residents, and that urban renewal and freeway construction disproportionately impacted poor and black neighborhoods. This approach implies the renewal schemes might have been more successful had they been implemented in a more sensitive, and equitable manner. Second, some have perceived the success or failure of urban renewal projects primarily in terms of design.

An example of a critique primarily addressing the design of public housing is housing advocate Catherine Bauer's critical essay on public housing published in *Architectural Forum* in 1957 titled “The Dreary Dead-Lock of Public Housing.”

Bauer argued that “the bare bones of oversimplified New Deal theory have never been decently covered with the solid flesh of present-day reality,” and that the practice of constructing high-rise public low-income housing not only was undesirable to those it was intended to house, but also had an overly “institutional” feel. Bauer rejects the narrow options provided by the policies of the federal government – institutional public housing for “slum dwellers,” and monotonous tract homes for the “middle class,” – arguing “The kind of home best suited to a given American family can never be decided by officials. Their highest responsibility, rather, is to make sure that public policies keep the “effective market” broad enough to provide some real selection at all economic and social levels.”<sup>8</sup>

Urbanist Jane Jacobs argued in her famous 1961 work *The Death and Life of Great*

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Cambridge University Press, 1983)

8 Catherine Bauer, “The Dreary Deadlock of Public Housing,” *Architectural Forum*, May 1957, 140-141, 219-221.

*American Cities* that large-scale renewal projects were inherently disruptive of urban neighborhoods. Jacobs' work has inspired many others, including Oscar Newman whose *Defensible Space* argued high-rise housing projects were by nature unsafe due to their designs which frequently contained dark, windowless hallways, elevators, and stairways.<sup>9</sup>

However, the design-based critiques of urban renewal seem insufficient in the case of the Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project, since it was not the site of high-rise low-income housing. Rather, the Lafayette Park complex which would ultimately be built on the site has been praised as a “success” and “a prototype for future urban redevelopment,” because of its high property values, and “low turnover and high occupancy rates that attest to the residents' affection for their neighborhood.”<sup>10</sup>

How should we judge such apparent success? After all, Lafayette Park was constructed on the site of hundreds of homes and businesses formerly the home to over seven thousand poor, mostly black Detroiters. In order to reach a more accurate and nuanced evaluation of urban renewal in the postwar period, both the implementation and design of renewal projects must be considered together.

The problems of “slums” and “blight” were not moral, mystical, or cultural problems, but simply an economic one: people live in housing they can afford. During the great depression, “Hooverilles” appeared at the outskirts of major cities, along rail lines, and along riverbanks, consisting of tent cities, shanties, and wooden shacks depending on the materials available and climate. The reaction of bureaucrats in the burgeoning New Deal state was twofold: to provide publically constructed housing, and to help individuals afford to purchase homes and pay

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9 Newman, Oscar, *Defensible Space; Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

10 U.S. Department of the Interior, *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: “Mies van der Rohe Residential District, Lafayette Park*, 1996, p. 8.

mortgages through the direct loans and mortgage insurance of the Home Owners Loan Corporation, and the Federal Housing Administration, both created in 1934.<sup>11</sup> This established a sharp divide in the government's approach to housing. When World War II had ended, the public housing maintained by the government was deactivated, as more and more veterans took advantage of the easy credit to build or purchase new, single-family homes. Meanwhile, instead of providing financial resources to poor and African American residents so that they would have the same autonomy to build or purchase housing as white suburbanites, government officials would raze many minority urban communities, giving them two housing options: high-rise low income public housing, or what little was available on a “free market,” which, unlike newly developed suburban communities, did not enjoy the benefits of easy access to loans for repairs or new construction.

Urban renewal policies failed because they failed to conceive the problem of “slums” and “blight” beyond simplistic aesthetic and cultural prejudices. Cities would not be able to eliminate their poor black residents simply through constructing new public housing, or by the forced removal of them from their homes. In fact, the solution to the “blight” that so plagued the planners of the 1940s could only have been broad and redistributive policies addressing the root cause of deteriorated housing conditions: the poverty of the residents.

Planning failures were not a matter of insufficient authority. City officials had plenty of authority at their disposal, and in the immediate postwar period more money to achieve their goals than they had ever anticipated. Detroit was able to harness this money. The reason why urban “revitalization” policies failed was because large-scale urban renewal projects were simply a bad idea for dense cities. The freeways not only dislocated tens of thousands of citizens, but

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 200-230.

also grafted massive chasms into the city's fabric. The postwar urban renewal schemes – whether renewal “lite” as concocted by new deal liberals, or “hard” as implemented by conservative republicans – both were fundamentally flawed: they failed to view poor housing as a function of social inequities of wealth and income, and both demanded an approach which was massively disruptive to existing residents, businesses, and communities.

The history of redevelopment was not “a sad tale of the valiant attempts of a city government to counteract and overcome regional trends that could not be overcome,”<sup>12</sup> as some historians have argued, but rather a story of planners and bureaucrats run amok. The solution to the very real crisis of adequate housing and the deterioration of older neighborhoods in American cities was not massive destruction and re-building, but the application of what Jacobs would call “gradual money.” Perhaps an approach similar to that used in the overwhelmingly successful development of the suburbs: the heavy involvement of government in concert with the “free market,” might have worked. In that model the federal government insured home mortgages, encouraging banks to reduce the cost of purchasing a home, and spread out mortgage payments over long periods of time so that purchasing a home became accessible even to those of modest means.

Similar credit for new construction or repairs in black neighborhoods was almost never available. The work of Kenneth Jackson and others have highlighted the now widely condemned practice of “red-lining,” where entire neighborhoods and districts are prohibited from loan consideration by federal agencies. Also, as much as Albert Cobo claimed to represent the “free market,” his designs for the Gratiot Project were anything but free – he went so far as to nit-pick about the size of the proposed lots on an early plan (city planners had decided 16.5, Cobo wanted

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12 Joe T. Darden, et al. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 154.

18 ft, and restrictions on the height of apartment buildings).<sup>13</sup> In a “packed meeting” of interested parties, the mayor responded to plans which would have constructed row homes on the site, “What makes you so sure it's going to be a row housing development?”<sup>14</sup>

Hence what was at work was not primarily an issue of “the free market,” but rather the moralizing eye of a colonizer who sought to control and dictate how a minority community ought to live. This imperialistic attitude towards the city's black community imposed upon their neighborhoods a type of city most neither wanted nor desired. It was automobile-based, a landscape of malls, shopping centers, and single-family homes, built at a heavy cost: the physical destruction of their homes, businesses, and the intangible destruction of a social network of relationships.

Well functioning cities don't need freeways. In fact, there might not be space in a well-functioning city for a freeway. The first photograph in June Thomas' work on postwar planning in Detroit is a photo of “Congestion on Gratiot Avenue,” taken in 1941, ostensibly to illustrate the problems facing a rapidly growing Detroit.<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 1)

Ironically, the photo caption notes it was taken during the 1941 transit strike, and the rail tracks in the center of the street are unused, and the street, although carrying nine lanes of traffic is lined with businesses and storefronts. To channel this traffic on a limited-access expressway might move the cars more quickly to their destination, but would also have the effect of making longer commutes more possible, and would isolate its users from any economic life surrounding it. Anyone with experience trying to get off an urban freeway to find a business and then get back on the same freeway in the right direction knows this difficulty first hand.

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13 “City to Scan Gratiot Slum Clearance,” no date, Detroit Free Press, in “Gratiot Project” Folder, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. (Hereafter abbreviated “BHC”)

14 “Row-Housing Plans for Project Irk Cobo,” 2 June 1950, Detroit Free Press, 13.

15 Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 15.

I'll discuss in this thesis how the landscape of Detroit today came about. Born in the offices of city planners compiling a mammoth city plan in the early 1940s, planners imagined a city conforming to their vision about what the city should look like. Their ideology is described in Chapter 1, which describes the ideology of city planning in Detroit, utilizing some of the department's many documents, including the famous 1946 Detroit Plan itself – a document produced after years of analysis which would guide the city government's urban development in the post war period. In making decisions about the future of the city, Detroit city planners were imposing a very specific vision of a city – a city based on autos, freeways, and carefully segregated by uses.

However, the urban form advocated by city planners sharply diverged from the form which already existed in the city. Chapter 2 describes the ways in which the existing urban neighborhoods functioned, drawing inspiration from the work of Jane Jacobs. Small businesses played a critical role in the social and economic life of Detroit's poor neighborhoods, a role entirely overlooked by city planners.

Chapter 3 explores the events surrounding the election of Detroit Mayor Albert Cobo in 1949. This election was a watershed for the city's politics: a conservative businessman running as a republican was able to win votes from previously Democratic whites by positioning himself as an opponent to “Negro” public housing. Cobo's election determined the pace and way the 1946 Detroit plan was implemented. Cobo and his allies canceled plans to construct public housing in the city, expunged liberals and representatives of Detroit's black community from all levels of city government, and rapidly accelerated the “clearance” of a large, poor neighborhood located near downtown known as the Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project.

This is the story of a city who perhaps tried so hard to re-make itself it began to come



apart at the seams. The ideas of a small cadre of planners and policymakers would become distorted through the lens of the city's changing political landscape. Running rough-shod over a chorus of complaints, Mayor Cobo removed entirely new housing from their schemes and rapidly accelerated “slum clearance” efforts. Yet beyond simple criticisms of the amount or style of public housing constructed (or not constructed) the approach was fundamentally flawed.

City planners in Detroit presumed to know the needs and desires of the city's residents. In the process of creating the city they thought could best do this, government policies forced tens of thousands of the city's poorest residents to move into an already severely overcrowded black housing market, closed permanently dozens of flourishing black-owned businesses, and imposed on many city neighborhoods freeways, zoning restrictions, and renewal projects they neither desired nor requested.

## CHAPTER 1 – THE IDEOLOGY OF POSTWAR RENEWAL

WE CAN EITHER LEAVE them in the slums or tear down the slums and help them find decent places in which to live.

*From a 1949 Detroit City Plan Commission publication*<sup>16</sup>

The City Plan Commission ... was a group of exceptional young men with degrees to verify their abilities to foresee and forestall, by projected planning, the problems of large cities. Under the leadership of George Emery, the Commission had successfully put together a plan which, if implemented, would virtually guarantee the City of Detroit's ability to correct past mistakes and avoid future errors. Detroit would show the other large cities how to rid themselves of slums and other undesirable aspects. This was the Commission's brain child and they were here this morning to protect it. They could not concern themselves with minor details of whose property would be involved in the plan ... the PLAN was pre-eminent.

Burniece Avery, in *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly*<sup>17</sup>

### **Planning in the Motor City**

At the turn of the century, Detroit was a dominate leader in the construction of a major mode of transportation. Its location near ample wood, metal ore, and labor supplies made Detroit the perfect place to make cars - rail cars - the Pulman to be precise. The city, still largely confined within Grand boulevard, was largely walkable – workers lived near the factories and workshops that employed them. As the city grew, so did its transportation needs, and a number of competing companies established trolley systems.

Fast forward fifty years, and Detroit had exploded into the “arsenal of democracy.” Detroit was home to Henry Ford's massive River Rouge automobile factory – which, for a time, was the largest industrial facility in the world. What had begun as a modest regional industrial center had exploded in

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16 "What the new national housing legislation means to metropolitan Detroit," (Detroit: City Plan Commission, 1949). found in Folder: "Housing 1949-1950," Box 43, Detroit Urban League Papers, Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan. (Hereafter abbreviated DUL)

17 Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly Through the Night and Cry Softly*, (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1977), 152.

size after Henry Ford revolutionized industrial production with his assembly line. Known worldwide as the “Motor City,” Detroit continued to attract people looking for work in one of the city's many manufacturing plants.

In the intervening half-century, the way city residents would move around the city would also change radically. The city's famous progressive mayor Hazen Pingree would campaign on the regulation and control of the city's independent trolley companies in 1889, setting the stage for the eventual public consolidation and regulation of the companies under the name the Detroit Street Railway in the 1920s. And in the 1930s, as the trolley systems nationally were being purchased by General Motors to be converted into bus systems – Detroit was no exception – the system saddled with debts and prohibited from increasing its rates by law. Also in the 1920s the Detroit newspapers famously asked “does Detroit need a subway?” But little was done as the great depression made it an apparently expensive pipe dream. By the World War II period, the car was king, and Detroit was an industrial and automotive boomtown.<sup>18</sup>

This reality of the primary role of automobiles in 1940s Detroit was reflected in the city's planning ideology. In the 1940s, leaders of city government seemed to share a consensus about the future shape of the city that was most clearly summarized by the famous 1946 “Detroit Plan,” which in reality was the culmination of a decades-long ideological project within the city's planning department, who as early as the 1920s had proposed vast highway construction schemes within the city.

However, the ideology of the late 1940s and early 1950s took on particular importance

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Hazen Pingree's struggles with transit companies, see Olivier Zunz's *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111, 124-125. For a description of how fare restrictions and the public's refusal to support infrastructure upgrades, in combination with the efforts of General Motors to purchase and convert street car systems to bus systems, see Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, 170-171.

since the power of the Planning Department arguably reached a crescendo – with their vision fitting with the will of the city's politicians and the federal government's willingness to fund most of the cost of “slum clearance,” the construction of new public housing, and new highway construction. In the 1940s, as city bureaucrats and professionals were generating the Detroit Plan, it wasn't clear whether resources would be available to implement it. In 1944, an influential planning consultant hired by the city to help develop the Detroit Plan told the Detroit Plan Commission “The network of expressways will not be accomplished in 5, 15, or 20 years because of the cost, which is very high, running to \$2.5 million per mile.”<sup>19</sup> Hence it is their vision of Detroit which became etched into the city's geography, and since so much was accomplished it seems a full evaluation must include an analysis of their ideology.

What I'll define as the “Ideology of Postwar Planning,” includes a number of related values which guided the city's urban development and “renewal” policies of the period. The first and overriding value of this ideology was the importance of the automobile. Planners sought to create a city where virtually all traffic was by automobile, and consequently embedded within their plans for Cobo Arena and other new projects in the city the parking garages which would increasingly dominate the urban landscape. Although auto ownership statistics are difficult to come by, presumably the city's more affluent residential neighborhoods had higher rates of auto ownership than the largely poor and minority neighborhoods to the East and West of downtown. The Black Bottom neighborhood in particular was situated near enough to the businesses along Hastings St. and the limited opportunities downtown for blacks so that many residents presumably did not need a car.

Related to the primacy of the automobile in city planning decisions (and the related

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<sup>19</sup> Detroit Plan Commission Minutes, Vol. 1944, 363, BHC.

expectation that autos and buses would serve as the city resident's primary forms of transportation) was the belief in the necessity of highway construction. Planners and city leaders saw the problem facing their city as one of capacity: to increase the ability to move throughout the city was viewed as an intrinsic good. Although some material from the planning department showed a passenger rail car traveling alongside the highway, they were built for autos only.

The planners thought strictly in terms of increased road capacity, not about the nature of the city. Ironically, their efforts to separate the city into residential, commercial, and industrial zones using the expressways as buffers, would produce the need for more automotive trips. Also, although Baron Von Haussman's urban renewal in Paris creating that city's famous boulevards, and U.S. Cities like Washington, D.C. where broad avenues like K Street served as the primary conduits of traffic circulation within the city, limited access freeways were the only form of new road construction considered by Detroit planners.

“Traffic problems, however, are caused not by automobiles but by roads,” boldly claims a 1946 publication of the Detroit City Plan Commission, one of many full-color pamphlets and booklets outlining the citywide “Detroit Plan” that had been recently announced. In this booklet, “Proposed system of Trafficways,” a citywide system of 105 miles of depressed highways was proposed to speed transit within the city limits, (Fig. 2) developed from a 1925 document that called for 53 miles of expressways in the city.<sup>20</sup>

The expressways sought to rectify Detroit’s traffic problem, and the city offered this proposal as critical to the continued health of the city: “Free circulation of traffic within the city is essential to its very existence ... a clogging of a city’s circulatory system – its street and highways – can result in death.” The planners reasoned that increasing the average operating

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20 *Master Plan Report*, (Detroit: Detroit City Plan Commission, 1946) (Hereafter abbreviated “Detroit Plan”)

speed, and hence the efficiency of the roads, would solve the traffic problem, and decided a system of expressways with grade separations at intersections would “eliminate the defects of the older one and projects for Detroit the most advanced thoroughfare system in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

Detroit's unique 300-foot wide sunken freeways took their shape due to another, related goal of city planning: to boost the property values within the city. “Since experience in other cities indicates that the depressed type does not destroy the value of property near the right-of-way, much of the Detroit expressway system will be built below the surface of the ground,” suggested city consultant Ladislav Segoe, who had been advocating sunken freeways as early as 1944.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, as the pedestrians were increasingly encouraged to get into cars, the previously valuable land along major thoroughfares declined in value, and new development occurred in areas easily accessible by auto – whether one of the Detroit area suburban malls which would open in the early 1950s, or in shopping centers which began appearing within city limits with parking lots or garages.

The freeways would have several implications: in addition to economically isolating the city's cross-city traffic with street-level commercial activity, it served to create deep divisions in the fabric of the city. Related to the importance of the auto and highways in the planning department's vision of the city was a strict separation between commercial, residential, industrial, and even perhaps recreational and educational spaces within the city. On the mind of the planners, as always, is a clear separation between work and residence, industry and commerce: “Wherever possible, the expressways will be routed along belts of industry, thus they will avoid carrying heavy traffic through residential neighborhoods, and at the same time will act as buffer

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Detroit Plan*, 16, also see the notes from the August 31, 1944 Detroit Plan Commission meeting in *Detroit Plan Commission Minutes, Vol. 1944*, p. 363, BHC.

strips, separating industrial installations from living areas.”<sup>23</sup>

The planners did not, however, overlook alternative modes of transportation, noting that “This speeding up of traffic will also increase the efficiency of our mass transportation system. The expressways have been located and designed carefully for the stated requirements of the Department of Street Railways, which plans to operate express busses on them. On some routes, busses will be able to cut their present time schedule in half.”<sup>24</sup>

The city estimated the cost of construction of the 105 mile system to be \$294.5 million, but estimated the city would only pay \$5 million of the \$41 million estimated for the first sections of the Lodge and Ford Expressways, the rest coming from state and federal sources.

In fact, the importance of the locations of new freeways was not lost on city planners, who viewed them as a unique opportunity to rationalize the city space:

“In a few neighborhoods where peculiarities of the thoroughfare system break the neighborhoods into two portions separated by a thoroughfare, it is recognized that special crossing and safety devices must be employed ... routing of expressways at the borders of communities, or between residential and industrial areas as frequently served the purpose of providing useful separations or buffers.”<sup>25</sup>

Although professing a concern for the integrity of the city's neighborhoods and communities, the implementation of city policy bore out not only a disrespect towards the city's poor neighborhoods, but in fact what can only be understood as an aggressive hostility. In particular, the West side neighborhoods of Corktown and Black Bottom were both ravaged by the city's “urban renewal” policies. Corktown saw wholesale clearance to make way for a planned industrial district which failed to materialize as envisioned by city planners. The Black

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23 *Master Plan Report no. 4: Proposed System of Trafficways*, (Detroit: City Plan Commission, 1946)

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Detroit Plan*, p. 70.

Bottom neighborhood saw its residential neighborhoods destroyed for the Lafayette Housing Project, the medical center expansion, and most notoriously, thousands of mostly African-American residences and businesses were razed to make way for the Chrysler Expressway, which was routed along Hastings Street, long the main street of the city's black community. The destruction of city neighborhoods was not simply the product of racial or class hostility. Rather, it was the logical result of the specific ideology of city planning which viewed projects strictly in terms of property values, rather than their ability to serve the needs of the larger city.

Liberal mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh commented on precisely this issue in a city publication:

“Greatly increased tax revenue is the key to urban renewal. The new taxes produced by urban renewal makes it not only possible but profitable for local and federal government. .... In Detroit, the tax revenue picture is most satisfying. It is strikingly underlined in the Gratiot Project where one building produces more taxes than the entire 51.5 acres of residentially redeveloped land before clearance.”<sup>26</sup>

A city study published in 1959 assessed the taxable value of the Gratiot area at \$15 million, a significant increase from the \$2.844 million when the 129 acre plot was home to thousands of people. Other projects' taxable value increased dramatically as well: Lafayette Park was now worth \$12 million, up from \$1.8 million, and Elmwood Park \$8.25 million from \$2.375 million.<sup>27</sup> (See Fig. 7)

Finally, the most controversial component of the city's broader urban planning agenda was known as “slum clearance.” The poorest parts of the city had long been visual eyesores for the city's wealthy residents and leaders, and for city leaders in the 1940s the “blight” of the poorest part of the city was described in nearly biological terms, as if it was a disease which

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26 “Urban Renewal and Tax Revenue: Detroit's success Story,” 1959, Folder: “Housing Department General File,” Box 53, DUL.

27 Ibid.



would go away if drastic actions were taken. This simplistic view of the physical deterioration of the city overlooked the root causes: namely poverty reinforced by economic structures documented by Thomas Sugrue where the poor, and in particular blacks, were often the “last hired and the first fired,” during the auto industry's cycles of boom and bust.<sup>28</sup> The common practice of “redlining” as documented by Kenneth Jackson also reinforced urban inequality: banks adopted as conscious policies to refuse to make loans for home construction or improvement to entire neighborhoods – almost always those inhabited by blacks or perceived to be in “transition.”<sup>29</sup>

However this type of sophisticated economic and social analysis of the causes of the visual inequality between different parts of the city was rarely seen: although poverty might be nominally acknowledged, the problem was almost always framed in city documents and the major daily newspapers in term of a lack of adequate housing. City planners thought that city's run-down properties could be eliminated entirely if only enough public housing were constructed, and the dilapidated housing of the poor were torn down, and the land used for other uses.

A 1956 city report on a marketing strategy for the “central area,” wrote off entirely the area's existing population. Defining the “central area” as an 11,148 acre section part of the city, officials estimated it contained a population of 376,340 constituting 18.9% of the total city. “In much of the area, the structures have deteriorated to the point where land is worth more vacant than with the existing structures,” concluded the report, which viewed the land exclusively in economic terms, apparently casting aside the interests of the nearly 20% of the city which called the area home. In their haste to “redevelop” the land, existing residents are easily brushed aside

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<sup>28</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 91.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 190-219.

in the planner's haste to encourage the construction of luxury apartments:

The development of a practical marketing strategy for the projects in the area will involve among other things the solving of the very basic housing problems of the low income population while at the same time providing the environment conducive to successfully marketing the cleared land for a substantial number of high rise luxury apartment buildings.”<sup>30</sup>

Of course, this dream where the poor would mysteriously fade away, and luxury apartments miraculously take their place was pure fantasy: urban renewal would place severe economic and social burdens on those displaced, who were forced to find frequently overpriced and overcrowded housing in other neighborhoods in the city. The vacant land, so easily filled with “luxury apartment buildings,” in the city's marketing strategy would in the case of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project sit empty for nearly ten years as a series of private developers withdrew from the project.

The Gratiot Area Project is the largest and earliest example of the city attempting to implement this vision in the city. It was a poor and densely developed part of the “central area” cleared entirely through the legal doctrine of eminent domain, only to sit empty as the city struggled to find a developer willing to purchase and develop the property.

If these characteristics - the universality of automotive transportation, the importance of limited-access highways, the strict segregation of commercial, industrial, residential, and leisure space, and the fixation on property values - sound familiar to a contemporary reader, it is because they are recognized as the values which guided the growth and development of the postwar American suburb, encouraged through Federally Insured home loans which frequently made the mortgage payments of new suburbs like Leavittown – often closed explicitly to blacks – cheaper

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<sup>30</sup> *Outline for a comprehensive marketing study of Detroit's central community, prepared for the Detroit City Plan Commission by Research Division Detroit City Plan Commission, (Detroit: City Plan Commission, 1959), 9.*

than apartment rent in the city.<sup>31</sup>

While the implementation of the suburban ideology in the outskirts of the city would mean the wholesale destruction of large tracts of farmland and environmental degradation through air and water pollution, imposing the same ideas in an older industrial city meant physical destruction and human and economic trauma. Instead of reflecting a different urban structure than the suburbs, city officials considered themselves in direct competition with the suburbs, and sought as vigorously as possible to transform the city's physical structure according to their values. This view, that drastic measures were necessary, found its way into city publications as well as internal documents. The May-June 1953 report of the Detroit Housing Commission to the Common Council contained an excerpt of an article originally printed in the "Mortgage Banker" in October the previous year, written by Fred Kramer:

"Suburbs offer what Mr. Kramer describes as the "four freedoms". These are freedom from noise, dirt, confusion and blight. The city must compete on even terms and is in a good position to do so. The city has the advantage of choice location and huge resources. To compete on even terms, surgery is needed. Cities are too far gone for rehabilitation. The inefficient checkerboard pattern, wasteful alleys and narrow lots must be eliminated ... this surgery is now possible through urban redevelopment."<sup>32</sup>

A 1951 publication of the City Plan commission described the necessity of radically changing the city, singling out a wide variety of criteria that could necessitate "rebuilding:"

"There are no sharply defined conditions which establish the need for

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31 Jackson, p. 241: "After World War II, ... it was quite simply cheaper to buy new housing in the suburbs than it was to reinvest in central city properties or to rent at the market price" and on the same page "The Leavitt organization, which was no more culpable in this regard than any other urban or suburban firm, publically and officially refused to sell to blacks for two decades after the war."

32 In an article by Ferd Kramer from *The Mortgage Banker*, October 1952 reprinted in the May-June 1953 monthly report of the Detroit Housing Commission, Folder: "Detroit Housing Commission 1953 Feb-Mar," Box 41, DUL.

rebuilding but rather the accumulation of many factors, frequently interacting upon each other. These include the deterioration and obsolescence of individual structures, the mixture of industry and commerce with residential neighborhoods and a street pattern which encourages through traffic on residential streets. ... In some cases the individual buildings are so badly deteriorated, and the general environment so blighted that the areas must be cleared, replanned and rebuilt in a wholesale manner. This process of clearance and rebuilding is known as redevelopment.”<sup>33</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the implications of this statement. Here, the city was in effect arguing virtually every part of the city could be candidate for “redevelopment.” If taken seriously, the city planners ideology rendered virtually every neighborhood in the city obsolete. Since the 1900s, the city had reflected an eclectic mix of commerce, industry, and residential space, and virtually the entire city platted out on a gridiron system of interconnected streets which surely “encourages through traffic on residential streets.” Jane Jacobs would title a chapter of her 1961 work, the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, “The Importance of Short Blocks” arguing that interconnected streets facilitate movement through the city, encourage economic and social activity, and reduce traffic on busy streets. However, to the postwar Detroit City Plan Commission, interconnected streets represented something which could make a neighborhood candidate for “reconstruction.”

The Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission report sent to Governor Williams in 1947 reported that between 1939 and 1947, while Detroit grew by 47%, the region grew 222%, and 143,000 people moved out of the city of Detroit. Clearly, well before the construction of most of the city's interurban freeways, the process of suburbanization which would transform the American metropolis had begun in Detroit.<sup>34</sup> The governor responded

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<sup>33</sup> *Detroit Master Plan*, 1951, 86.

<sup>34</sup> “Attitudes Toward Planning Alternatives,” (Detroit: Detroit Metropolitan Area Regional Planning Commission, 1950) found in Folder: “Detroit, City of (1950),” Box 27, G. Mennen Williams Papers, Bentley Historical

blandly: “As governor of Michigan and a suburban resident of Detroit, I am keenly interested in the planned development of the Detroit metropolitan area, particularly as it affects housing and public facilities.”<sup>35</sup>

In 1947, city officials were confident that their vision of the city could reinforce property values downtown, help solve problems of “blight” in the city, and open space to construct public facilities – hospitals, a new civic arena, an expansion of Wayne State University, and others. The planners' vision for the city was ultimately that of an elite minority, and determined with an extraordinary lack of public input. Their ideas almost totally ignored the real economic and social life of large portions of the city, particularly the city's poor and black neighborhoods. However, the ideas alone meant little isolated in the imaginations of a few city “leaders” and planning professionals. In Detroit, the combination of dramatic political shifts in the city in concert with unprecedented federal support for freeways and renewal meant in the early 1950s city government had the desire and ability to rapidly proceed with slum clearance and expressway projects with drastic social and economic costs for many of the city's residents.

Quoted in the official minutes of the city plan commission, Mr. Ladislav Segoe, a planning consultant whose ideas proved influential in the commission, struck a pessimistic note about the future of his dreams: “The network of expressways will not be accomplished in 5, 15, or 20 years because of the cost, which is very high, running to \$2.5 million per mile.”<sup>36</sup> However, Segoe would be surprised to find major construction on the first freeway already begun within five years, and the entire plan well on its way to being implemented by the fifteen year mark.

As city planners dreamt of a city exuding modern suburban splendor, where middle class

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Library, the University of Michigan. (Hereafter abbreviated “GMW”)

35 Ibid.

36 *City Plan Commission Minutes, Vol. 1944*, 363, BHC.

families lived in single-family homes and were whisked from their quiet residential neighborhoods through the city to industrial or commercial districts in autos on modern expressways, there existed quite another city among the nearly 85 city blocks slated for demolition as part of the Gratiot Area Redevelopment project. This Detroit was frequently desperately poor and in need of improved housing. However, where city planners simply saw a cancerous blight needing surgical removal, there actually existed in these “blighted” neighborhoods communities struggling against difficult odds to build adequate housing, start businesses, and get ahead in life.

## **CHAPTER 2 – BLACK DETROIT**

The segregation and limited opportunities which created Detroit's east side ghetto had the incidental effect of intensifying the economic clout of the community. Shut out of the economic life of the city through a variety of means – legal, overt and covert hostility – Black Bottom became its independent world: complete with black doctors, a black hospital, a black hotel (since the city's other hotels were closed to blacks) and a wide variety of other businesses, from auto dealerships, restaurants, to a variety of bars and clubs.

However, by the 1940s, the black community was expanding north along Hastings and Oakland streets, and moving to an area along Twelfth Street. Although Detroit's black elite had long lived in the West Side enclave of Conant Gardens, the beginnings of the erosion of overt commercial segregation in the city and the modest expansion of the area open to black residence meant the oldest and poorest neighborhoods faced depopulation, losing many of their more affluent residents and businesses.

Home to the city's poorest residents and in general unable to get loans for building construction or repair, the housing conditions in the Gratiot Area site and similar neighborhoods was notoriously bad. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Michigan Chronicle, Detroit's oldest and largest black newspaper, ran dozens of articles and editorials exposing the poor housing conditions available to the city's blacks.

A 1948 editorial titled “We Must Have More Housing,” was typical of these stories, and demanded city leaders start taking action to improve housing in the city:

“ ... it is time for the city administration to move out of the planning stage and do something about the deplorable condition of housing in Detroit. ... the city fathers ... must push a program which in the long run will eliminate many of the social and economic problems which after all are only by-products of slums, poor housing and in

many cases no housing at all.<sup>37</sup>

The Chronicle also ran a number of journalistic exposes about poor housing conditions in the city, including a full-page photo-story published May 22, 1948 titled “Glaring Evidence of the need for Slum Clearance in Detroit”<sup>38</sup> (Fig. 4) A similar spread of photos from October 1, 1949 titled “Homes Rarely Seen on a Detroit sight-seeing Tour” was accompanied by a short article, “Slum Areas Exposed by Chronicle.” This article began stating that “Scattered through the city are the vile, growing cancers called slum areas.” The article connected the slums to a high number of robbers, a tuberculosis rate “twice as high as that in other sections of the city,” and higher incidents of fire and infant mortality. The Chronicle observed that although new homes and apartment buildings were being built in the city, “the people in the blighted areas cannot afford these prices.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, although the end of World War II saw many new housing options for the city's whites, black Detroiters seemed little better off than during wartime or before. In 1949, the Chronicle continued their crusade exposing the abysmal housing conditions in many of the city's black neighborhoods with a series of articles. “In one house on Congress a tiny, wrinkled old woman who looked about 70 years old huddled close to a rusty coal stove where a few burning coals gave forth a feeble warmth,” read one story, “At other houses, we found similar and worse conditions – defective toilets, no toilets, dangerous coal stoves, filth, brazen rats, roaches, bed bugs crawling on alls and chairs, other insects whose scientific names we aren't sure of.”<sup>40</sup>

The area selected by city planners as the site of their Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project

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37 “We Must Have More Housing,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 10 January 1948, 6.

38 “Glaring evidence of the need for slum clearance in Detroit,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 22 May 1948, 24.

39 Clotye Murdock, “Slum Areas Exposed by Chronicle,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 October 1949, 4.

40 Roy W. Stephens and Clotye Murdock, “Negro Families Jammed in Substandard Housing,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 31 December 1949, 1.



almost certainly contained many houses similar to those described in this article. By 1950, although in many parts densely settled, the Gratiot area also contained a number of vacant lots. And although there seems to have been a movement of businesses out of the area, there remained amid the “blight,” many homes, apartment buildings, businesses, offices, and dozens of small churches. The businesses included a number of small auto repair shops, a scrap iron yard, a hotel, a plumbing and heating supply company, a laundry company, a tobacco factory, a food packing plant, a metal stamping plant, a manufacturer of automobile gas tanks, an electric plating company, a mattress manufacturer (The Warren Wells Company), a company called the Michigan Printer Roller Works, and a brewery – the Goebel Brewing Company - which owned a number of buildings in the northwest corner of the area slated for demolition.<sup>41</sup>

The expanded size of the black ghetto in the immediate postwar period meant depopulation of the oldest and poorest sections, a process which included the famed strip of businesses along Hastings Street. This street formed the heart of the neighborhood known in the city as Paradise Valley, a commercial district at the heart of the larger Black Bottom district. Although famous for its vibrant musical scene, Hastings Street also boasted a broad variety of commercial enterprises. Musician and historian John Cohassey has observed that Hastings, located immediately to the north of the Gratiot Area, had experienced economic decline in the late 40s and 1950s:

Nearly a decade before the bulldozers began to tear into the earth around Hastings, the loss of business in Paradise Valley crippled the economy and spirit of the community. Black entrepreneurs, like [Forest Club owner Sunnie] Wilson and [owner of a chain of drug stores Sidney] Barthwell, contended that integration destroyed Black Bottom's business districts by allowing blacks to shop more comfortably throughout the city. ..By 1958, hundreds of businesses on Hastings lay vacant ...<sup>42</sup>

41 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Detroit 1950, Vol. 4., Map Library, The University of Michigan.

42 John Frederick Cohassey, *Down on Hastings Street: A Study of Social and Cultural Changes in a Detroit*

Although not in the same condition as in its heyday as the cultural and economic heart of Detroit's Black community, Hastings Street in 1958 nonetheless contained a hundreds of mostly black-owned businesses forced to close or re-locate to accommodate the construction of the Hastings-Oakland Expressway: "In the construction of its first three-mile stretch, the expressway claimed four hundred and nine business, including forty-nine eating places, sixty-eight markets, twenty appliance and furniture stores, fifteen drug stores, eighteen bars, and twelve churches."<sup>43</sup>

Although city planners commonly viewed the problem of "slums" in the city as an organic, mystical phenomenon demanding "surgery" to keep the city "alive," there have been others with a more nuanced view of urban life. In particular, activist and author Jane Jacobs has provided a description of how urban neighborhoods function to support the needs of their residents.

In her 1961 classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs elegantly described how dense urban neighborhoods functioned to provide safety for their inhabitants by encouraging "eyes on the street," provide opportunities for socializing and assimilating children, and how small businesses could cluster and function in mutually supporting ways. Jacobs viewed deteriorated structures primarily as a relatively simple economic problem. In describing a possible technique of providing affordable housing,<sup>44</sup> Jacobs describes the task this way: "This is no vague, futile and humiliating transaction in all-purpose uplift of the human soul. It is a

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*Community 1941-1955*, (Masters's Thesis, Wayne State University, 1993), 87.

43 Ibid.

44 Jacobs proposes the Federal Government insure or provide loans to private developers to construct apartment buildings, similar to the Federal Housing Administration, and after the landlord has selected the tenants provide assistance to prospective residents who can't afford the rent, decreasing the assistance if the resident's income increases. See Chapter 17, "Subsidizing Dwellings," in Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1961)

dignified, businesslike transaction in shelter rental, no more, no less.”<sup>45</sup>

If planning professionals viewed the outcome of their efforts in boosted tax revenue, Jacobs thought good urban policy should accommodate the existing businesses and residents arguing that:

... cities need not 'bring back' a middle class, and carefully protect it like an artificial growth. Cities grow the middle class. But to keep it as it grows, to keep it as a stabilizing force in the form of a self-diversified population, means considering the city's people valuable and worth retaining, right where they are, before they become middle class.<sup>46</sup>

Most importantly, perhaps, was that Jacobs provided a vocabulary to recognize and embrace the logic of dense urban communities. Even within black ghettos such as New York's Harlem or Detroit's Black Bottom, the social and economic life of dense urban communities served to mitigate the acute economic disadvantages faced by blacks within the larger economic system, and functioned to incubate small businesses, musicians, and entrepreneurs. It was on Hastings Street where founder of Motown Records Barry Gordy started a record store and dreamt of owning his own record label, and ultimately the musical scene in the clubs in Paradise Valley which would provide many of Motown's musical stars.

Jacobs was also an early critic of large-scale urban renewal projects. Making distinctions between “gradual money” and “cataclysmic money,” Jacobs argued large urban renewal projects were by definition socially and economically disruptive, and actually served to erode the dense urban fabric of mixed age and use buildings she believed necessarily to the healthy social and economic life of urban neighborhoods, arguing that,

Our present urban renewal laws are an attempt to break this particular linkage in the vicious circles by forthrightly wiping away slums and their populations, and replacing them with projects intended to produce higher

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 327.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 282.

tax yields, or to lure back easier populations with less expensive public requirements. The method fails. At best, it merely shifts slums from here to there, adding its own tincture of extra hardship and disruption. At worst, it destroys neighborhoods where constructive and improving communities exist and where the situation calls for encouragement rather than destruction.<sup>47</sup>

The Detroit City Plan Commission as early as the mid 1940s had the opportunity to pursue the type of revitalization advocated by Jacobs, which would not have meant the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods. In recent years, community organizations have begun to utilize the legal precedent of eminent domain to revitalize urban neighborhoods by legally obtaining abandoned lots or buildings. However, as early as 1944, black businessmen in Detroit had approached the Plan Commission to do exactly that: obtain through Michigan law abandoned homes and lots to use to construct new housing in Detroit's Eight Mile – Wyoming neighborhood.

Settled in the 1920s by black migrants from southern states, the Eight Mile area became home to a number of homes, which the residents often constructed and added to themselves. Although poor, many residents maintained large gardens in their yards or in neighboring lots, and by the late 1940s the 13-block area was home to a number of home owners. Initially encouraged by the creation of the low-interest loans offered by the Federal Housing Administration, the community quickly discovered they had been “red-lined,” or part of neighborhood unilaterally banned from receiving federal funding. Burniece Avery, a schoolteacher and community activist describes a community meeting hosted for members of the city's Common Council before a meeting to consider whether or not to condemn existing structures to build temporary war housing:

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 270-271.

Many of us have tried to do more in the way of either building new houses or modernizing the ones we have. Some of us have lost the lots we were trying to buy when work was slow, but we want every inch of ground in this community used for PERMANENT HOMES! ... A member of the Common Council wanted to know if there was anyone present who had been denied a loan for home improvement, and the hands of every resident went up.<sup>48</sup>

Although facing formidable opposition, the Eight Mile community organizations would ultimately compromise over the construction of war housing in a plan which included some temporary structures, and some new, FHA-insured homes. However, this neighborhood found themselves constantly under attack: between the late 1930s and 1950 the well-organized community convinced the FHA to issue loans to residents of their neighborhood to build new homes, resist a Plan Commission which on several occasions had considered targeting the neighborhood for wholesale “slum clearance” to either sell to a private corporation, construct high-rise public housing (The neighborhood is labeled “Site 9” in Fig. 3), or even use to construct a city airport. Historian Thomas Sugrue concludes that “In the end, the Eight Mile community groups – acting out of aspirations for homeownership and a sense of entitlement from the federal government changed the course of FHA policy. Their neighborhood became a bastion of black homeownership.”<sup>49</sup>

Upon closer analysis, it seems Sugrue might be overstating the case. Although the community did finally agree on a compromise with the FHA, it was after community members had found their efforts to redevelop the neighborhood on a fine-grained basis thwarted by a city council who perceived the blight to be endemic to the character of the residents, not simply an issue of financial resources.

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48 Burniece Avery, *Walk Quietly*, 151.

49 Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 71. For Sugrue's discussion of the Eight Mile community see pp. 63-72.

Between 1944 and 1945, the Detroit City Plan commission turned down a half-dozen requests by various representatives of the Eight Mile neighborhood that they be allowed to work with city government to obtain title to a few abandoned buildings City policies in this case systematically and actively thwarted efforts of leaders within the black community to rehabilitate and building new housing in a way which would be destructive at all to existing housing.

Before the Federal Housing Act of 1949 had made it official federal policy, the State of Michigan had Passed the Urban Redevelopment Corporations Law in 1941 which would empower city governments to use eminent domain and tax money to purchase and condemn blighted and abandoned properties and then sell it to private corporations for “redevelopment.” In 1943, the Detroit Plan Commission was approached by at least two individuals claiming to represent businessmen who sought the help of city government in obtaining “scavenger” (or abandoned) lots in the Eight Mile and Wyoming area to “clear out bad building, repairing those in fair condition, and redeveloping the entire area.”<sup>50</sup> Although raised at the June 10, August 5, and September 2 meetings that year, in each case the city planning department denied the requests, refusing to help the community group even though they claimed to already have the funds required. The official minutes conclude that “requests have been made at various times for the release of scavenger lots for partial redevelopment of the area. It was generally agreed that reclamation should include the entire area, and that piecemeal proposals should be rejected.”<sup>51</sup> The commission reaffirmed their preference for “complete reclamation” when approached by David Hubar, an attorney representing businessman Nash Russ at their August 5 meeting.<sup>52</sup>

Many critiques of urban renewal which echoed the concerns of Jacobs would appear in

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<sup>50</sup> Detroit City Plan Commission Minutes, Vol. M6 1944, 84, BHC.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 120.

Detroit after the city began implementing its urban renewal plans. Community organizations like the Detroit Urban League (DUL) knew well the destructive effects of the city's urban renewal program, here in a speech given by the organization's director George Henderson:

“Within the past few years, no single local governmental activity has done more to disperse, disorganize, and discourage neighborhood cohesion than urban redevelopment. ... the aged Negro is the most adversely affected individual ... thus, an unplanned but positive result of racial flight has been the widening of the ghetto area.”<sup>53</sup>

What few sociological studies about the impact of urban renewal that exist seems to corroborate Jacob's suspicions: she points to housing projects in East Harlem which displaced more than 1,300 businesses, an estimated 80% were believed to have closed forever, in addition to 500 “noncommercial” store front properties which also totally disappeared.<sup>54</sup>

A study of 363 small businesses located on the sites of urban renewal projects in Chicago conducted by sociologist Basil Zimmer concluded 33% of all businesses forced to relocate for urban renewal and highway construction closed forever, although some (about 10%) moved successfully to the suburbs. However, of those displaced strictly for urban renewal efforts, 34% closed forever, perhaps reflecting the continuing difficulty for blacks (the primary neighborhoods targeted for urban renewal) to find economic opportunities in the suburbs. Significantly, Zimmer concluded that of the business owners forced to close their shops, “for a very large majority, their present income is less than what they were making from their businesses prior to displacement.”<sup>55</sup>

Also, what little evidence available suggests the efforts of the Detroit City government to

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53 George Henderson, “Urban Redevelopment and the Detroit Negro,” in Folder: “Housing Department General File,” Box 53, DUL.

54 Jacobs, *Death and Life*, 307.

55 Basil George Zimmer, *Rebuilding cities, the effects of displacement and relocation on small business*, (Chicago: Quandrangle Books, 1964) 41, 89.

help victims of urban renewal schemes relocate was severely inadequate. In the early 1960s, the DUL sent a survey to 73 people who had been forced to relocate by the city's clearance projects. Of the 57 who replied, 4 said they had received any help whatsoever relocating from the city government, and only one reported being satisfied with that help. Although the city's urban renewal efforts were nearly ten years old, 39 respondents said they didn't know when they were required to move out, 41 didn't have a house to move into, and 44 were interested in attending a meeting to discuss complaints and problems about the relocation process. The DUL's analysis of the survey concluded the city failed to communicate adequately with neighborhood residents, and should have established a temporary office in the area being condemned, and take steps as simple as make a map of the proposed expressway route available to the neighborhood's residents.<sup>56</sup> This fundamental failure of city government to inform residents and property owners about the fate of their homes drove many to write to the governor in search of information. Mrs. Ossie B. Thompson of 2214 Maple Street is a good example, writing to Governor G. Mennen Williams in 1953 after she heard her home was condemned for a city project, "So, if you can give me any information concerning this section I certainly would appreciate it."<sup>57</sup>

### **Sunnie Wilson: Business and An Urban Community**

If one of the primary effects of large-scale urban renewal in black bottom was the dislocation of a number of small businesses, it seems worth examining precisely what role these businesses played in the community, and if they were characteristically different than the type of businesses which profited from the type of city planners sought to create – with carefully

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<sup>56</sup> *Detroit Urban League Survey*, in Folder: "Housing Department General File," Box 53, DUL.

<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Ossie B. Thompson to Governor G. Mennen Williams, Folder: "Detroit, City of. General 1953," Box 93, GMW.



segregated “zones” interlaced with freeways.

One of the most successful black entrepreneurs of Hastings Street was Sunnie Wilson. A native of South Carolina, after moving to Detroit Wilson worked at a series of clubs before opening his Forest Club in 1941. The Forest Club was the largest black-owned night club in Detroit, containing a 100-foot long bar, a roller rink, and playing host to a wide variety of black musicians including Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Detroit's own John Lee Hooker. Wilson's autobiography, *Toast of the Town* testifies to the characteristics of small businesses in Detroit's Black Bottom in the 1940s. Wilson is significant because although nearly invisible in the eyes of city planners, through his activities he served the community of which he was a member in many ways described by Jacobs: providing employment to local residents, providing for a safety in his club and neighborhood, handling children, and even providing a venue for political speakers and union meetings.

Sunnie Wilson is a characteristic example of an entrepreneur whose livelihood was directly connected with the physical and social community of the lower east side and Hastings Street. However, planners in the city viewed the older buildings, like the one he would convert into the Forest Club, as obsolete and blighted. By destroying older buildings and mixed-use neighborhoods through urban renewal and expressway construction, city government was encouraged the auto-based homogeneous corporate capitalism of the booming suburbs, and undermined a critical component of the social and economic life of Paradise Valley: its urban form.

Also, although denying in his autobiography he intended to do anything other than to run a successful business and help people have a good time, his business activities seem intertwined with community service. Wilson recounts helping set up a school “for poor black people to learn

to read and write,” says two black sororities were started at his club, threw annual Christmas and thanksgiving parties that distributed food and gifts to children, organized an egg hunt on Easter Sunday, and, “As a member of the National Roller Rink Operators Association, I hired women managers, making me one of the first businessmen in the city to stress the employment of black women in supervisory positions.” Through his roller rink and other activities, Wilson also clearly helped the development of neighborhood children, channeling the energy of rambunctious children in constructive ways: “I took the bad children of the neighborhood and gave them jobs keeping order at the skating rink. I would say, ‘Come here, boys, you sell tickets today, and you collect skates, and you be the floor man.’”<sup>58</sup>

Wilson even rented the Forest Club to the American Federation of Labor to use for a meeting during their strike of Ford's River Rouge plant in 1941, hosting a tense meeting of roughly two-thousand workers with police outside. Wilson also describes a number of incidents where he was able to help control volatile situations in cooperation with contacts with the Detroit Police Department.<sup>59</sup>

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58 Sunnie Wilson and John Cohassey, *Toast of the town : the Life and Times of Sunnie Wilson*, (Detroit: Great Lakes Books, 1998), 107-111.

59 Ibid, 100-101.

## CHAPTER 3 – THE GRATIOT AREA PROJECT AND MAYOR COBO

*“Condemnation awards paid for slum properties in the path of the expressways go to the absentee landlords. The tenant families that are evicted are simply left standing on the sidewalk with no place to go and no funds with which to provide themselves with shelter. ... In the face of a severe housing shortage, any municipal government that ignored the plight of these evicted families would be morally bankrupt.”*

-- U.S. Representative George G. Sadowski, May 18, 1948 <sup>60</sup>

On November 3, 1955, the Detroit Free Press published a panoramic photograph taken near the city's downtown. Instead of a photo illustrating the majestic Art Deco skyscrapers downtown, or the civic improvements dreamt by city planners, the photo highlighted something unpleasant – nearly 130 acres of empty land. With a headline reading “Fotoscope Looks at the Gratiot Project,” the panorama was of one of the city's most controversial urban renewal projects – the Gratiot Area Redevelopment project. The first and largest urban renewal project in the state, the Gratiot Area project encapsulated for Detroit the hope of many in the city that the mostly African American “slums” could forever be expunged through “redevelopment” - replacing unsightly downtown neighborhoods with new, attractive, modern housing.<sup>61</sup>

Designated “UR Mich 1-1” by state officials, the Gratiot Project was originally conceived as part of a comprehensive urban renewal and housing plan for the city, as presented as a part of the Detroit Plan of 1946, a summary document which had been in the process of being produced for most of the 1940s. That plan had identified twelve locations for the construction of public housing (Fig. 3),

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<sup>60</sup> Congressional Record, 80<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Tuesday, May 18, 1948. Found in “Housing 1947-1948,” Box 43, DUL. Sadowski represented Michigan’s first district in the U.S. House from 1933 to 1939 and from 1943 until 1951.

<sup>61</sup> The Gratiot Project is described in good detail in two places: Joe T. Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), particularly chapter 5, “City Redevelopment Policies,” 151-171. The other source is Mowitz, *Profile of a Metropolis*, particularly Chapter 1, “The Gratiot Redevelopment Project: Regenerating the Core City,” 11-80. I’ve drawn from both of these sources but also returned frequently to primary source materials; including newspapers, city documents, letters, and other archival material.

proposing that some existing, densely settled portions of the city be razed for new construction and some public housing be constructed on virtually vacant land remaining within the city limits yet outside the area defined by Grand Boulevard. The city's intention to redevelop what would become the Gratiot area project was first reported by the *Michigan Chronicle* on November 30, 1946 in a 4<sup>th</sup> page story titled “Hastings-Gratiot Slum Clearance Announced”<sup>62</sup>

The site, although remaining vacant for nearly ten years, would eventually be re-developed by an architectural team led by the world-famous architect Mies Van de Rohe. Census statistics reveal a significant shift in the residents of the area in the 1950 census – when, although the city had begun to obtain ownership of properties, no structures had been demolished – and 1960, when census officials counted the residents of the newly constructed Lafayette Towers.<sup>63</sup>

In 1950, the region which had been designated part of the Gratiot Area Redevelopment project was 95.7% “non-white” according to government statistics. The census counted 1,238 dwelling units, 120 of which were owner occupied. The rental units were some of the cheapest in the city, averaging \$29.17. In 1960, the census showed a greatly different picture: 6.1% of the 507 dwelling units were occupied by nonwhites. The area (two census tracts which each shared approximately half the future redevelopment project) was 11.58% white in 1950. In 1960, the census tracts were re-drawn to include the Lafayette project in one contiguous tract, and was 90% white. The new population was also relatively wealthy: 84 families, or 58.7% of the total, earned over \$10,000 per year. The new residents also mostly had advanced educational degrees: 270 of 534 had completed four years or more of college, and the median school years completed was over 16 – roughly double the median for any other central city census tract, and double the

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62 “Hastings-Gratiot Slum Clearance Approved,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 November 1946, 4.

63 For a good account of the “Design Process” resulting in the current complex see Roger Montgomery's “Improving the Design Process in Urban Renewal” in James Q. Wilson, ed. *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967) 454-487.

median of the same area from 1950. City policies had displaced a mostly poor, black community, with a mostly white, wealthy, and highly educated one. Also, interestingly, the number of dwelling units had been cut by more than half.<sup>64</sup>

This was not always the intended goal of city government. When the Detroit Plan was unveiled, it proposed targeting the city's most run-down, dilapidated neighborhoods for “renewal,” where the city would obtain the property through eminent domain and construct new housing in its place – at first public housing, but later housing to be constructed by “private enterprise.” The city began legal proceedings to obtain property in the Gratiot area in 1947 and was briefly interrupted by a legal challenge. After the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that the city could condemn land to be sold to a private developer, the city continued with their plans unimpeded by any legal obstacles.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Battle Over Public Housing and the Election of Albert Cobo**

As the plans of city bureaucrats to construct public housing in outlying neighborhoods became known, they were subject to bitter protest by white neighborhood groups. Residents in an African-American community near the eight-mile Wyoming neighborhood hoped the city would construct public housing on vacant land there to alleviate the shortage, however events would prove otherwise. A flier signed by the “Van Dyke Home Owners Association, Inc.” was distributed that said “Protect the valuation of your property. If you don’t want a NEGRO HOUSING PROJECT in your neighborhood, come out and demand your protection.” Rev. Robert L. Bradby, Jr., president of the Detroit Branch NAACP and also a member of the Detroit

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64 U.S. Census of Population and Housing, *1950 Summary Population and Housing Characteristics: Michigan*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951, also *1960 Summary Population and Housing Characteristics*.

65 *General Development Corporation v. City of Detroit*, Decided October 4, 1948, 322 Mich. 495; 33 N.W.2d 919; 1948 Mich. LEXIS 420.

Housing Commission condemned the authors of the flier as “Klansmen without bedsheets and Americans in name only.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition to organizing neighborhoods to oppose public housing and vote for sympathetic members to represent their interests on the city's Common Council, the white neighborhood associations attended and spoke at city government meetings. Scenes like one reported by the *Chronicle* in 1949 were typical. In a story titled “Housing Project Foes Stage Uproar in Council,” the newspaper reports that approximately 400 people came to a city council meeting to protest what they had heard would be a “negro” housing project in the area of Eight Mile-Conant on the city's Northeast side, even though “[Housing Commissioner James] Inglis declared that it was merely propaganda that the housing would be mixed, but he was shouted down by the crowd ... who would not let him be heard.” The story continues to speculate that “Close observers of the current fight over housing, however, say that the demonstration last week is merely the beginning of an organized effort to block and all public housing in the Detroit area.”<sup>67</sup>

In the November 1949 election for mayor, liberal democrat and common council president George Edwards made a strong case for public housing as part of his campaign. Edwards said he would construct as mayor over 12,000 units of public housing with the estimated \$130 Million made available by the federal government's 1949 housing act, saying “Modern housing must be constructed to replace Detroit's slums. ... The Cobo plan, which would call for private construction of public housing would actually result in double taxation. Units would cost from \$100 a month up and slums would not be erased during our lifetimes.”<sup>68</sup> Edwards received strong

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66 “Outer Drive Residents Await Housing Project Decision,” *Michigan Chronicle*, March 13, 1948, 1.

67 “Housing Project Foes Stage Uproar in Council,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 6 August 1949, 1.

68 “‘There is No Excuse for Slums,’ Edwards Declares in Speech at YMCA,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 29 October 1949, 3.

support from the city's unions as well as influential leaders in the black community. In their editorial endorsing Edwards, the *Michigan Chronicle* would quip, “Cobo at one time said the he felt that the people of Detroit should get their money’s worth out of government. It’s conceivable that this could easily mean that the people who have the most shall get the most.”<sup>69</sup>

However, activities within city government would be profoundly effected by the outcome of the election; Cobo defeated George Edwards in an electoral upset. The darling of many of the city's reactionary white neighborhood associations, Cobo had made public housing a primary issue of the election, campaigning on the promise he would stop what was understood to be “negro housing projects.” Although Edwards would win key endorsements from union leaders and the *Michigan Chronicle*, it was widely assumed Cobo won with the votes of whites who opposed public housing. Cobo's election would intensifying and focused the planning department’s urban renewal and housing plans for the city.

The *Michigan Chronicle* characterized the election of Cobo as “one of the most vicious campaigns of race baiting and playing upon the prejudices of all segments of the Detroit Population.”<sup>70</sup> That newspaper reported on November 19 that thousands of copies of a fraudulent letter allegedly from the members of the Baptist Ministers' Conference of Detroit were sent to whites, which promised “a proposed plan for placing Negroes in key positions in the City government”<sup>71</sup>

A terse summary in the Planning Commission’s monthly report of a December 14 1949 public forum suggests the ideological and political tension between the new mayor and the long-time Housing Director-Secretary James H. Inglis. Inglis was head of the city's powerful housing

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69 Staff, "George Edward Deserves Your Vote," *Michigan Chronicle* 1949, 6.

70 “George Edwards Beaten, Cobo Elected Mayor,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 12 November 1949, 1.

71 “Edwards Defeat Credited to Vicious Race-Baiting,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 19 November 1949, 1.

commission, charged with implementing the City Plan Commission's urban renewal goals. The Plan Commission's notes describe the natures the positions both took at the forum:

“Mayor-Elect Cobo and Housing Director-Secretary Inglis differed sharply in their proposed solution to the [housing] problem, the mayor-elect favoring using federal funds for slum clearance and turning most of the cleared land over to private developers, with the minimum of public housing, while Mr. Inglis favored making maximum use of federal funds for low-rent public housing in order to relieve the housing shortage and make possible a more extensive slum clearance program by easing relocation problems.”

At the forum, the city report records Inglis saying “Private enterprise never has, is not, and never will supply good low-rent housing,” while mayor-elect Cobo assures the group “I have conferred with private developers in the last few days and I am convinced they are sincere about wanting to help get rid of slums.” The same report estimated that the Detroit Plan sites 1,2, and 3 (which would constitute the Gratiot area redevelopment project, medical center project, and Lafayette park extension) contained 6,900 families.<sup>72</sup>

On December 20, Inglis announced his resignation from his Housing Commission post with a strongly worded statement: “I am in almost complete disagreement with Mayor-Elect Cobo’s announced housing program. I feel that it falls far short of meeting the real needs of the community and that it completely disregards the seriousness of the housing shortage ...”<sup>73</sup>

After his resignation, James H. Inglis described his views on WDET-FM, saying,

I feel very strongly that the city's best interests will be served by starting at once to develop new public housing as soon as humanly possible on vacant land sites, in order that there will be places to move families who are displaced from future slum clearance projects and also so that federally-aided low rent housing can be available to thousands of deserving low-income families, who are living under deplorable conditions, but not necessarily in areas that will be selected for slum

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72 "Monthly Report to Commissioners: Nov. - Dec. 1949," in Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1949,” Box 41, DUL.

73 Ibid



clearance.<sup>74</sup>

The Chronicle paraphrased Inglis, saying “This latter group according to Inglis includes disabled veterans, old people living on small pensions or savings, widows and others who are working for low wages which do not permit them to enjoy decent housing.”<sup>75</sup> However, despite the apparent conflict, both Cobo and Inglis conceived of the city's housing problems in a similar way: it was a matter of the dilapidation of buildings, not fundamentally a social or economic problem.

### **Mayor Cobo and the Gratiot Project**

Shortly after Inglis' resignation, Cobo named Detroit builder Harry J. Durbin Director of the Housing Commission. Across city government, Cobo moved to silence or remove critics of his slum clearance program, replacing many experienced bureaucrats with builders and realtors, leading historian Thomas Sugrue to observe, “The roster of housing officials in Detroit in the Cobo years reads like a Who's Who of the city's real estate and construction industries.” Cobo's appointments include not only Durbin, a developer and former president of the National Association of Home Builders, but also two members of the Housing Commission, Ed Thal and Finlay C. Allan, members of the Detroit Building Trades Council of the American Federation of Labor, and “real estate magnate Walter Gessell and property manager George Isabell.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, after his inauguration, Cobo quickly set up a meeting between government officials and the Detroit Construction Industry Council. Cobo also appointed City Controller John H. Witherspoon as a liaison between city departments and interested private businessmen. In order to expedite the slum clearance plan, which had been languishing as a low priority in the late

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<sup>74</sup> “Inglis Demands Prompt Action on Housing,” Michigan Chronicle, 31 December 1949, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 85, and “Cobo Fires Third Housing Commissioner,” Detroit Free Press, 8 March 1950, 17.

1940s, Cobo asked Witherspoon to hold a meeting “as quickly as possible” with the city council representatives and relevant city department heads.<sup>77</sup>

In December 1949, Cobo, who had been catapulted into office through the activism of neighborhood associations, announced his official housing policy:

“We all recognize that there will always be honest, sincere families who cannot meet the rental charges required by private ownership . . . But it is my belief the participation of the city government should be limited to the needs of these families. It will not be the purpose of the administration to scatter public housing projects through out the city, just because funds may be forthcoming from the federal government. I will not approve Federal Housing Projects in the outlying single home areas.”<sup>78</sup>

The Detroit Plan had included twelve potential sites for public housing, including some on the mostly white “outlying single home areas,” and some that were in practically vacant land, yet within city limits. However over the following year all of these sites would be “removed” from the city's public housing program. Cobo would remove the administration of city “redevelopment” out of the purview of the Housing Commission entirely, creating a special unit charged with “slum clearance.”

To Cobo, the matter was clear: “I feel that we must acquire the land in these backwards sections, that we must remove the building therefrom, and sell the property back to private individuals for development.”<sup>79</sup> This vision of clearance and resale was exactly what happened on the Gratiot site. However, Cobo did not invent the idea of slum clearance, he simply advocated a modified implementation of city policies which had been over ten years in the making. In the same report, outgoing Democratic Mayor Eugene Van Antwerp was reported to

77 Weber, Charles, “Cobo Begins Work on Slum Plan,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 January 1950, 3.

78 Detroit Housing Commission Monthly Report to Commission, December 1949, Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission,” Box 41, DUL. Emphasis in original. Also reprinted in “Complete Text of Mayor Cobo's Address at Inauguration,” *Detroit Free Press*, 4 January 1950, 8.

79 Ibid.

have said: "Slum clearance is necessary. It will mean the displacement and moving of many thousands to make room for modern and up-to-standard dwelling places. Let us hope that the humanitarian phase of this problem is kept uppermost in mind..."<sup>80</sup>

Cobo's announced policy of scrapping construction of any type of public housing in the city came under immediate vocal attack in the early months of 1950. Gloster Current, the national branch director of the NAACP and head of the executive committee sent a letter to mayor-elect Cobo, calling his housing program "dilatory, vacillating and discriminatory," saying it "seems to torpedo the entire program for the provision of adequate housing for a portion of citizens now in dire need."<sup>81</sup>

Soon joining the chorus of dissent was the Mayor's Interracial committee, a largely powerless body charged with investigating claims of discrimination and discussing race relations in the city created after the race riot of 1943. Infuriated by external attacks, and his perception that the Interracial Committee was either in agreement, or refusing to speak out on the issue for political reasons, Cobo lashed out at them, demanding "Why don't you talk to some of these people and tell them there is no racial issue in the housing program? ... I realize you may not be able to stop the spreading of untruths, but I certainly would like to hear that you are trying to do something about it." Cobo singled out a fund raising advertisement of the NAACP which referred to his plan as a "sham" as an example of the unreasonable portrayal of his policies as having racially charged overtones. The NAACP maintained that they opposed the plan because Cobo refused to integrate the city's public housing, in violation of the Supreme Court's ruling on restrictive covenants.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Current Flays Cobo's Anti-Housing Attitude," *Michigan Chronicle*, 19 November 1949, 1.

<sup>82</sup> "Mayor Blasts Work of Interracial Group," *Detroit Free Press*, 15 March 1950.

In the early months of 1950, Detroit's newspapers were filled with critics of Cobo's policies, who consistently argued that the failure to construct public housing would have dire consequences for the city. The Federal government's Public Housing Administration, which had a field office in Detroit, joined in the chorus of voices calling for the sensitive clearance of the city's slum neighborhoods and the construction of public housing on vacant land. The director of the Detroit office, Hugo C. Schwartz, told the northeast Detroit Exchange club that restricting the public housing to only slum sites would “undoubtedly require that the projects be constructed on a piecemeal basis,” apparently underestimating the Cobo administration's ability to “relocate” thousands of people into thin air.<sup>83</sup>

The Michigan Chronicle carefully documented the growing cry of alarm. Paraphrasing the comments an “author and national consultant on public housing” Charles Abrams to the city's common council in February, the Chronicle reported he said “the city of Detroit should spend time and money building more public housing rather than tearing down homes in slum areas. He blasted the present slum clearance plan as conducive to the creation of more slums in Detroit.” Quoting him as saying, “Detroit is the only city attempting to do this type of housing job.”<sup>84</sup>

Since Cobo made it clear he planned to “clear slums” without constructing public housing, leaders in the city's black community began to lobby the city to end its practice of segregating its existing housing projects in order to alleviate the housing crisis. Reverend Bradby, a member of the city's Housing Commission, took a two-pronged approach. As director of the Detroit branch of the NAACP, he continued to criticize the policy, telling the Chronicle in November 1949,

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83 “PHA Slaps City's 'Piecemeal' Slum Clearance Program,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 22 April 1950, 3.

84 “Slum Plan Under Fire,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 11 February 1950, 1.

The slum clearance program which is sponsored by Mayor-elect Cobo and the City Fathers is nowhere near the answer to our problems. This program will not add any housing to the total in Detroit and will take approximately nine years to complete. What we need in Detroit is new housing built on vacant land, and the NAACP is going to fight for this type of housing program.<sup>85</sup>

With the identification of the Gratiot Project as a particular priority for Cobo, Bradby stepped up his pressure to end the city's practice of racial segregation in city-owned public housing, introducing a surprise motion to end housing segregation at a Housing Commission meeting, where the clearance of the Gratiot area had been approved. Bradby told the Detroit Free press "abandonment of the city's segregation policy would cut down the time by many months in relocation of families."<sup>86</sup>

On March 8, before the next scheduled meeting of the Housing Commission, Rev. Bradby was removed from his post by Mayor Cobo and replaced by George Isabell, an African American Realtor. The Michigan Chronicle reacted to Cobo's sudden dismissal of the popular Reverend and NAACP figure with a blaring, two-line headline at the top of the page reading "Cobo Housing Purge Complete, Bradby Kicked Out," observing "Detroit has never witnessed such a ruthless extermination of the opposition as the present administration has used in getting rid of the people who oppose the administration's position on public housing." Accompanying the story was a front-page editorial arguing that the firing illustrated "the ruthlessness which opponents of decent housing for Negroes will use to kill the housing program." In a letter to Cobo refusing to resign his position voluntarily, Bradby said the policies of the Housing Commission under Cobo "are determined by the selfishness and greed of small-minded men who are more concerned with property values and bank statements than with fundamental human

85 "Negroes Protest Cobo's Public Housing Program," *Michigan Chronicle*, 26 November 1949, 1.

86 "Housing Official Hits Segregation," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 February 1950, 1.

rights,” decrying the remaining members as racist segregationists: “The members of the Commission have succumbed to the vicious evil of white supremacy theories for their policy of segregation is an affirmation of their belief in racial supremacy. It is this policy which determines the program of the Detroit Housing Commission,” Bradby wrote.<sup>87</sup>

On March 14 the Common Council approved the February recommendation of the Housing Commission – that all of the Detroit plan sites except 1,2,3 and 4 under advisement be rejected from the city’s low-rent housing program. Sites 4 and 3 were removed May and June 1950, leaving the only sites for low-rent public housing 1 and 2 of the original eleven.<sup>88</sup> In December 1949, the housing commission reported 19,457 applicants for public housing, just under 2,000 placed, and a waiting pool of 9,656 – of which 6,000 were identified as ‘negro families’<sup>89</sup> (The city would eventually repeal its policy of racial segregation in public housing on April 18, 1952<sup>90</sup> )

In early 1950 it became clear Cobo’s administration intended to rapidly “clear” the Gratiot area and not construct any type of new public housing in the city. Additionally, the Housing Commission held meetings in effected neighborhoods telling them they were not responsible for the relocation of widows, single men, or couples. A ‘frail aged lady,’ 32-year resident of the lower east side, Mrs. Semanta Sampson, told the Michigan Chronicle, “The head man, Mr. Durbin, told us that whey would not find places for widows, single men or couples, and for me to go out and find myself a home.... The only thing I can do is move in with someone

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87 Charles J. Wartman and Clotye Murdock, “Cobo Housing Purge Complete: Bradby Kicked Out,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 11 March 1950, 1. See also “Cobo Fires Third Housing Official,” *Detroit Free Press*, 8 March 1950, 17.

88 Detroit Housing Commission, “Public Housing in Detroit: 1949-1950,” Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1950,” Box 41, DUL.

89 Detroit Housing Commission, “Monthly Report to the Commissioners, Dec. 1949,” Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1949,” Box 41, DUL.

90 “Housing Commission Bans Race Segregation Policy,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 19 April 1952, 1.

else. But if we all move in with other people in other parts of the city it will make new slum areas.”<sup>91</sup> In fact, the federal Housing Act of 1949 did not require local governments to facilitate the relocation of single people, and thus the Housing Commission simply left them out of their statistics as they tracked the “relocation” process in their monthly reports. This process generally amounted to counting how many families remained on the site, and surveying them about where they intended to move.

In March 15, Rev. Charles Hill, who had run for city council four times and had a long history of political activism including membership in the mayor's interracial Committee called a meeting of an organization he called the “Emergency Committee on Housing,” citing Cobo's removal of Detroit NAACP president Rev. Robert Bradby from the housing commission and ongoing policy of segregation in existing public housings as reasons why it was “imperative for the people of Detroit to act.”<sup>92</sup> Hosting a meeting, Hill told the audience not to move out in the face of city letters urging relocation: “Stay in your homes until you have your day in court. We will be there with you.” The evictions were felt most severely by the aged, handicapped, and single people, and the city not only cleared aging buildings but a social network of support.

By Late June, Cobo's administration had initiated eviction proceedings in the Gratiot area. Sixty five families were given barely three weeks to relocate by a circuit court judge. Seventy year old Mrs. Cornelia Patterson and her 90-year-old mother Pallana Flood told the circuit court they shared their small apartment with two blind men – one 58 and the other 68, telling the court “wherever we go, we want to take them with us ... they are both like members of the family.” The housing commission representatives at the court hearing told them that by law “they could

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91 "Aged Widow Criticizes Detroit Slum Clearance Plan," *Michigan Chronicle*, 29 April 1950.

92 “Negro Group to Fight City Housing Plan,” *Detroit News*, 15 March 1950, in Folder: “Gratiot Redevelopment Project” topical vertical file, BHC.

only provide housing for her and her mother.”<sup>93</sup> In the words of the *Chronicle*, “Is is the old ... the unemployed .. the couples with many children .. the small businessmen ... and the very poor who worry.”

Other vocal critics of city policies would find themselves sidelined or attacked. In February 1950 the *Michigan Chronicle* reported that Orville Linck, an associate professor of English at Wayne University, criticized the city's urban renewal policies at a Common Council meeting. “We may as well wake up to the fact that the building and real estate interests have been successful in electing a stooge mayor and a stooge council.”<sup>94</sup> Dr. Linck was identified as chairman of the Detroit chapter of a political organization Americans for Democratic Action which became a vocal opponent not only of Cobo's housing policies but also his moves to re-organize the interracial committee.<sup>95</sup>

Several months later the same organization would be denounced in a *Detroit Free Press* editorial in May 26, 1950 as socialists impeding the mayor's efforts to provide “modern housing.” Writing off the critics as political allies of the defeated candidate for Mayor George Edward, the paper concluded:

“The voters made their decision last November. Cobo now is doing only what he openly said he was going to do ... What should gratify Detroit is that the campaign promises are being kept, and the slums which have for so long laid like a dead weight upon the City's progress, are now being cleared. Decent housing for thousands of citizens , at prices they can afford, is about to be a reality.”<sup>96</sup>

On April 1, 1950, Cobo announced the first in a series of plans for the Gratiot site. This

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93 Cloythe Murdock, "50 Families Face Eviction from Homes," *Michigan Chronicle*, 24 June 24, 1950, 2.

94 “Slum Plan Under Fire,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 11 February 1950, 1.

95 “Let Schermer Stay, Ada Urges Cobo,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 April 1950, 1.

96 “Enterprise or Socialism: Slum Clearance,” *Detroit Free Press*, 26 May 1950 in Folder: “Gratiot Area Redevelopment,” BHC.



plan, which the Chronicle would characterize as a “Jim Crow Project,” called for over 2,000 housing units, schools, playgrounds, and a parkway to replace the 119-acre site.<sup>97</sup>

The relentless evictions to make way for expressways, slum clearance, and the civic center in the face of tightly limited housing options likely produced many newly homeless. In late September the problem had become so severe the Chronicle featured a photo and short story about a family of 9 left homeless after their home was obtained and demolished by the city to make way for the John C. Lodge expressway. “Mrs. Pacely called the Chronicle Monday from the shelter. She wanted to know if we had heard of a place where she and her family might live. “We can pay for it,” she said. “And the children are nice. Maybe some of your readers know of a home where they don't mind a family with children.”<sup>98</sup>

As the relocation of families and demolition of buildings continued on the Gratiot site, the fears of many that the project would place additional stress on black neighborhoods seemed to come true, motivating generally moderate voices to become alarmist. The DUL, normally considered a fairly “conservative” organizing offering job training and some social services to Detroit's blacks, became increasingly concerned by the situation created by forced relocation of poor blacks by city government. “As the relocation program was accelerated, the needs and problems of the families increased,” stated an internal report, continuing:

This acceleration of program occurred in the absence of a documented relocation plan ... We repeatedly made the housing commission aware of the needs and hardships encountered by the families. In spite of this, the Housing Commission publicly expressed that the program was operating smoothly, hardship was at a minimum, and that families were being satisfactorily relocated.<sup>99</sup>

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97 “City Ready to Level 119-Acre Slum, Build \$6,000,000 Jim Crow Project,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 1 April 1950, 1.

98 “Family of 9 Left Homeless,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 30 September 1950, 5.

99 “Addendum C - Gratiot Redevelopment: Steps Taken,” Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1951,” Box 41, DUL.

The DUL issued a formal report to the Detroit Housing Commission in April 1951 accusing them of flagrantly disobeying the 1949 Housing Act, which required relocated residents of renewal sites be provided “decent, safe, and sanitary housing.” The report accused the city of violating the “letter and spirit” of the law.<sup>100</sup> The Michigan Chronicle praised the organization as reaching a “new high in community leadership” in an April 14 editorial, writing “the completeness of the report removes it from the usual criticism of routine complaints. It establishes the Urban League's case against the proposed slum clearance program with all the thoroughness of proof and evidence.”<sup>101</sup> The criticisms caused the city to admit some had merit, Mark K. Herley, assistant director of the housing commission admitted “it has been difficult to place many people in private permanent housing, but we are trying to do more, and shall continue to do all we can.”<sup>102</sup>

City residents who opposed slum clearance and expressway construction voiced their dissent in a variety of ways: protestations in the city's newspapers, through government channels such as the Mayor's Interracial Committee, at Common Council meetings, and at mass meetings. Some also wrote letters to the Michigan governor at the time G. Mennen Williams. Interestingly, opponents to freeways and “slum clearance” seemed to come from a broad variety of city residents. Husband and wife Harvey C. and Naomi Royal exhibited a characteristic tenacity when faced with a 60-day eviction notice sent by the city. Their neighborhood – the 1600 block of West Grand Boulevard - stood to be destroyed to accommodate the Edsel Ford Expressway – one of the first major expressways constructed in the city. In a letter Dated May 4, 1950, Naomi

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100Clotye Murdock, “Urban League's Report Rips City Relocation Program,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 14 April 1951, 1.

101“Urban League Hits New High in Community Leadership,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 14 April 1951.

102“Housing Commission Answers League Blast,” *Michigan Chronicle* 14 April 1951, 1.

wrote to Governor Williams: “The eviction notice that came to us on April 28, 1950, giving us sixty days to vacate the premises causes us great hardship and grief. The acute housing shortage intensified by the present slum clearance project going on in the city makes it impossible to find housing on such short notice.”<sup>103</sup> She continues:

Governor Williams, is it more human to build highways so people can kill themselves faster than it is to give people decent places to life? ... Please Governor Williams, if you haven’t already signed the bill permitting Mr. Cobo to get the money don’t until he agrees to see that the people who are here being put out of their homes be given someplace to go.<sup>104</sup>

Her letter was routed to the governor’s legal adviser, who sent a patronizing reply: “Almost inevitably when a public construction is planned some individuals must suffer inconvenience, and unfortunately in this situation you happen to be one of those who apparently must bow to the need of a greater number of people”<sup>105</sup> Naomi Royal replied to this correspondence on June 6, , saying “We have been able to find a place and have moved out although, the rent we have to pay is outrageous.” She continues “[Mr. Adams] was very insulting to me. He told me what to do with my time and energy ... I’m sure he did not understand my letter ... No doubt he is working with Mayor Cobo who is in my mind all for the rich man + the poor, well they don’t count.” The letter was accompanied by a hand-written petition of 30 neighbors protesting the freeway construction accompanied by a note from Harvey: “After all we may not be property owners + can’t. But we do pay taxes.”<sup>106</sup>

The Royals were characteristic of the residents who protested most bitterly the repossession of their property under eminent domain. In letters, residents complained

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<sup>103</sup>Naomi C. Royal to G. Mennen Williams, May 4, 1950, Folder: “Detroit, City of (1950),” Box 27, GMW.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup>Clark Adams to Naomi C. Royal, Folder: “Detroit, City of (1950),” Box 27, GMW.

<sup>106</sup> Naomi and Harvey C. Royal, “Letters and Petition to Governor G. Mennen Williams,” Folder: “Detroit, City of (1950),” Box 27, GMW. Letter was handwritten and has been transcribed as accurately as possible.

consistently that adequate housing was extremely scarce, and the order to move had come out of the blue. City officials did little to accommodate the situation. A letter sent to residents in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area told residents “We urge that you move as soon as possible,” encouraging them to “make every possible effort to find housing on the private market,” although conceding “there is not a wide choice of location or type of housing” and claiming that a representative from city government would contact them “soon” to provide them help relocating.<sup>107</sup> No matter how well intentioned city bureaucrats, there existed a severe shortage of housing open to blacks in the city: there was simply an extremely limited number of spaces in public housing projects or in the private market the city could offer displaced residents.

Many property owners who received what they considered unfairly low appraisals for their properties in the condemnation proceedings also wrote to the governor for help. A resident of 1559 East Lafayette wrote to Governor Williams “I have a 8-room house that is to be sold in a few weeks and I am very much disgusted at the price. It is one in the slum clearance and what they are offering is far from what it cost me.” Mrs. Speed continued to say that she and her husband purchased the house for \$5,000, but preceded to spend \$8,000 to improve the property, including new siding, new bath tubs, 4 sheds, and a back porch. “I worked day and night to pay for it with my husband,” she wrote, saying the city was offering “three thousand and a few hundred.”<sup>108</sup>

Caroline G. Moutray owned a 12-room house condemned because it lay in the path of the John C. Lodge Expressway on 932 Euclid West. In a letter to the governor, she wrote that she had purchased the house for \$19,500 in 1925, and in the course of living there for 27 years spent

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107 Harry J. Durbin, Director-Secretary of Detroit Housing Commission to Residents of Gratiot Area Redevelopment Area, Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1951,” Box 41, DUL.

108 Mary Burton Speed to Governor G. Mennen Williams, August 13, 1951, Folder: “Detroit, City of (1951),” Box 48, GMW.

over \$29,000 on an addition and a variety of renovations, but the city had appraised her property at \$23,000. “It is paid for and there isn’t a ‘tainted’ dollar in the place – I earned it by hard work and sweat and did without everything until I got it paid for – for my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday thinking I was safe and would have security for the rest of my life. .... What is this, Russia or the U.S.A.?” Ms. Moutray concluded her letter with a personal appeal to the governor: “I listened to your lovely talk at the colored church Sunday ... and from it I believe you are a good Christian, and I have always had an abiding respect for you both as a man and governor, so I know you will understand and I hope you can lend a hand before the jury decides [the final amount].”<sup>109</sup>

The city's housing picture was not entirely bleak during the early 1950s. The Frederick Douglas housing project, the first public housing project in the city, was finally opened in September of 1951. Although the Cobo administration gave some former residents of slum clearance areas priority to move into the Frederick Douglas units, the roughly 1,000 units were a much needed but ultimately an insignificant improvement in the city's housing crisis. The Gratiot site alone displaced over 7,000 people, and when added to the west side Corktown project, the Wayne State University campus expansion, the Elmwood project, and expressway construction, tens if not hundreds of thousands of people would be forced to move into a city already short of housing to make way for city bulldozers.

The letters protesting the city's policy over represent those forced to move for freeway construction, which city planners could sometimes not avoid routing through neighborhoods with a higher proportion of home owners. The Gratiot Area that was totally cleared between 1950 and 1953 had a relatively low percentage of homeowners – the 1950 census counted 120 “owner-occupied” dwelling units, versus 1,107 renters. (See Appendix C). These renters would receive

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<sup>109</sup> Caroline G. Moutray G. Mennen Williams, "February 14, 1952, Folder: "Detroit, City of (1952)", Box 70, GMW.

no compensation from the city – they were simply given an eviction date from the city. Also, the city's rental population was used to moving frequently, in search of better housing conditions and cheaper rents.

### **Lafayette Park**

By the summer of 1952, the Cobo administration had evicted all the residents of the Gratiot Area and razed the buildings formerly occupying the site. City government placed a large ad in each of the city's major newspaper, announcing a “Public Auction Sale of Land” to be held in the council chambers on July 30, 1952. The invitation for bids included the stipulation that potential purchasers meet a number of requirements, including a document called the “Redevelopment Plan” determined by the housing commission and a “Redevelopment Agreement” the purchaser of all or part of the land would be required to sign.<sup>110</sup> However, something unexpected occurred on July 30. Nobody bid.<sup>111</sup>

Mayor Cobo put on a brave face, at least to the media, yet for many the failure of the land to sell must have corroborated fears that redevelopment through “private industry” would prove more difficult than Cobo promised when he told a public forum three years before as mayor-elect that ““I have conferred with private developers in the last few days and I am convinced they are sincere about wanting to help get rid of slums.” After the failed auction, Cobo told the *Chronicle* he was “a little amazed but not the least bit disturbed” about the outcome, optimistic that “they will be in to try to negotiate for purchase of it,” at what he insisted was a “fair market price.”<sup>112</sup>

At another auction in spring of 1953, the property did in fact sell. A bidder calling itself the Housing Corporation of America won an auction for the Gratiot land, agreeing to pay \$1.266

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<sup>110</sup>“Public Auction Sale of Land,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 5 July 1952, 5.

<sup>111</sup>“Private Builders Balk on Purchase of Slum Site,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 9 August 1952, 1.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*

million. The company stated they intended to construct middle income housing units: “We believe there is more to housing than combining brick + mortar, we feel we are obligated to plan and produce an attractive development, one with a warm and healthful atmosphere.”<sup>113</sup>

However, the requirements of city council and the intricacies of the requirements of the 1949 Housing Act caused this deal to fall through later that year. Finally, in 1954 United Auto Workers (UAW) President Walter Reuther donated \$10,000 to jump-start the effort, and a citizen's committee was appointed. The committee created a non-profit corporation called the Citizens Redevelopment Corporation, which raised \$500,000 and hired the Chicago-based firm of Herbart Greenwald and Samuel Katzin as “co-developer.” Greenwald's firm had a long history working with the German imigree and famous modern architect Mies van der Rohe, who recruited city planner Ludwig Hilberseimer and landscape architect Alfred Caldwell to help design a complex of high and low-rise housing. Although city government had intended to encourage the construction of a project which would accommodate a variety of incomes, the long delay and costs associated with the project meant the committee abandoned the goal of including affordable units in the project.<sup>114</sup>

The eventual design was called by its designers Lafayette Park, and is considered an excellent example of modern “superblock” architecture which incorporates a large central city park, extensive landscaping, parking for each residential unit, and which terminates each street in the area into a cul-de-sac. Low-rise apartments called “Pavillion” would open in 1958, and two 22-story towers would open in 1963 – sixteen years after condemnation proceedings had begun

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113“Monthly Report to the Commissioners, April-May 1953,” in Folder: “Detroit Housing Commission 1953,” Box 41, DUL.

114*National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Mies van der Rohe Residential District, Lafayette Park*, (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1996) 6.

on properties in the area.<sup>115</sup>

Today, the Lafayette Park neighborhood is considered a bright spot in an otherwise economically depressed downtown area. “This is the best neighborhood in all of Detroit and one of the best functioning urban renewal projects in the nation,” resident Reggie McGhee told the Detroit News in 2002 for a story which characterized the project as part of a

... thriving, 20,000-resident community ... that has plenty of parks to practice soccer, tennis and bicycle riding. There, wealthy to low-income residents throughout the neighborhood live next to each other in condominiums, homes and apartments, some of which are subsidized by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Michigan State Housing Authority.<sup>116</sup>

However, the city of Detroit received \$4,671,000<sup>117</sup> from the federal government to help clear the land, and presumably spent a significant amount of city money on the project as it dominated the activities of the Housing Commission and the City Plan Commission in the early 1950s. The final development required at least \$500,000 raised from a variety of sources for the design. Without including the cost of actually constructing the buildings, clearing the site and hiring a designer cost well over \$40 million in today's dollars. It is no wonder the project has been successful – built highly subsidized by taxpayer money, located near a city center area which retains a number of white collar jobs, and conveniently located adjacent to a taxpayer-funded freeway which makes suburban supermarkets, movie theaters, and amenities near easy commuting distance. How can Lafayette Park be evaluated taking into consideration its controversial and costly origins?

The analysis in this chapter suggest the heavy costs of the Gratiot Area Renewal Project

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Maureen McDonald, “Lafayette/Elmwood thrives with urban renewal assistance,” *Detroit News*, 18 September 2002.

<sup>117</sup> An amount that would be equivalent to roughly \$34 million in 2004 dollars.



outweigh its rather modest outcome. In the Gratiot Area alone, city government force over 7,200 people out of their homes – and only 120 of those were homeowners who would receive any compensation from the city. The remainder were expected to find private housing in a severely limited housing market. The policies of the Cobo administration destroyed dozens of small black-owned businesses, forced thousands of Detroit residents who could least afford it to relocate, all with the end result of providing housing to a few hundred of Detroit's wealthiest and most educated citizens, who in the 1960s and today enjoy a wide variety of housing options in the city.

## CONCLUSION

Postwar urban renewal in Detroit can be measured in different ways. From one perspective, the projects were a success. The citizens of Detroit had new facilities, and the property values of the redeveloped “slum” areas subsequently skyrocketed. Traffic problems downtown have been eliminated as the John C. Lodge Expressway whisks Detroiters swiftly into the bowels of Cobo Hall, the civic center named for the city’s mayor who advocated so strenuously for the construction programs, Albert E. Cobo. In the near east side, on the site of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project, the Lafayette Park development seems a remarkable oasis of careful landscaping and modern style buildings surrounded by a city filled with deteriorating homes and abandoned lots.

From an economic perspective, from which Cobo as a former treasurer would have almost certainly viewed the situation, the Lafayette Project superficially appears to be a smashing success. Through generous federal funding from the Public Housing Act of 1949 the city was able to acquire the land with a minimum of city tax money. A 1959 “redevelopment survey” published by the planning department estimated the assessed (and thus taxable) value of the land and buildings combined increased from about \$2.5 million before to over \$20 million after the project. However, the impact of displacing so many residents and businesses must have also been great – although difficult to calculate, and the land would remain off the city's tax rolls for over ten years – something not taken into consideration by city reports.

From another perspective, the project's outcome outstripped its costs – financial, social, and perhaps even spiritual. Tens of thousands of poor and mostly black citizens dislocated in the name of civic progress saw their homes, businesses, and communities appraised, bought, and destroyed without their input or permission. A vibrant urban community in black bottom was dismembered, sections

becoming the Lafayette Project, the medical center expansion, and its heart – Hastings Street – was expunged from the map, reincarnated as the Oakland-Hastings Expressway, renamed the Chrysler Freeway (today I-75). Importantly, this process did not take place with either the participation or approval of large segments of the city's population. Cobo's redevelopment strategies were persistently critiqued from organizations as diverse as radical political leaders in both black and white communities, churches, community organizations, and even former and current federal and city planners.

Importantly, both Cobo and the planners and professionals involved in the formulation of the Detroit Plan fundamentally agreed on what city government should do to improve housing and transit in the city. The Detroit Plan included freeways and slum clearance as parts of a coherent agenda to fundamentally re-shape the city. Cobo's role was simply the selective and unexpectedly vigorous and selective implementation of their ideas. The planners consistently advocated a strict separation between urban land uses – residential, commercial, and industrial, and accepted automobiles as the only form of urban transportation – principals which remained unchanged although Cobo would replace many officials in city government, and his urban redevelopment policies widely denounced, frequently by those formerly officially involved.

What planners persistently failed to realize was that the urban form they advocated and its effect, either destroying existing communities or creating new communities were intimately connected. Many small-time businesses and landlords saw their sources of independence and income forcibly bought out, and the massive destruction of housing without adequate relocation policies placed additional stress on the already overloaded Detroit housing market.

The Gratiot and the neighboring Lafayette redevelopment sites (merged to construct Lafayette Park) alone displaced thousands of people, according to the city's own estimates. The

city was also engaged in six other similar projects of varying sizes, not including the substantial impact of freeway construction. The cultural and commercial district of Detroit's black community, the "Black Bottom" area just east of downtown centered on Hastings Street was demolished in three parts: the over 150 acres in the Gratiot and Lafayette projects, the Medical Center project, and the Hastings-Oakland Expressway with its sizable interchange with the Ford Expressway, routed on top of the former Hastings Street.

While politicians and professional planners were for the most part dogmatic in their narrow vision for the city's future, City residents, in addition to pointing out the obvious fallacies of the logic of slum clearance, were not without planning ideas of their own. A resident of St. Clair Shores wrote to governor G. Mennen Williams suggesting Detroit investigate construction of a city-wide light rail system. "I have watched for many years the struggle for existence of [Detroit's] transportation system." Vern Bernier wrote, accompanying his written proposal with a hand-drawn map reminiscent of the former Detroit Street Railway lines – a radial network centered on downtown: "In the Detroit area, this rapid monorail system could be fed by trolley coaches using a transfer system. The outlying areas could be fed by private bus companies or by individuals driving their cars to the terminals where parking space would be provided"<sup>118</sup>

Other possible governmental solutions to the housing crisis of the postwar period were certainly known and successfully applied. The policies which facilitated the construction of the suburbs were almost never applied to poor or black communities. These policies included insured home mortgages under the G.I. Bill of Rights and through the Federal Housing Administration, as well as heavy government investment in new infrastructure, including sewers, streets, and expressways in outlying regions of the metropolitan area. The experience of the

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118 Vern Bernier, "Letter," March 21, 1950, Folder: "Detroit, City of (1950)", Box 27, GMW.

Eight Mile Community has shown FHA loans could in fact stabilize and improve a “slum,” however that neighborhood was an exception to the general rule. These policies, while allowing and encouraging the rapid growth of the suburbs, successfully provided housing for millions of Americans. However, for years these new suburbs were closed to blacks due to overt policies of segregation. After racially restrictive covenants were ruled unenforceable, white suburban communities frequently retained the covenants, and used restrictive zoning to ensure class homogeneity.

The ideology of city planning I have outlined reveals a fundamentally two-tracked approach by government to housing in the postwar period. Federal housing policy for most Americans were financial manipulations within the framework of the “free market” – whether allowing citizens to deduct the amount of their mortgage payment from their taxes, or reducing the burden of those mortgage payments themselves. Importantly, these policies made the suburban tract homes which some Americans preferred the cheapest and frequently only housing option available to those seeking new housing. Similarly, the government's approach to housing for poor, mostly black urban residents was equally narrow. Instead of encouraging small business or new construction in poor neighborhoods, federal policies forced many to go out of business, and the practice of “red-lining” meant virtually all blocks with any black residents would be ineligible for a FHA loan to renovate or construct new homes.

Even extraordinarily successful black businessmen found themselves unable to find financing for what would prove extremely lucrative businesses. Sunnie Wilson was unable to get a loan to fund the construction of his massive Forest Club from a regular bank, but through his contacts in Detroit's illegal numbers racket was able to secure a private loan. Such financing schemes were probably common, yet this meant black businessmen and entrepreneurs frequently

paid extraordinarily high interest rates – as high as 30% in some cases – while white suburbanites and white chain corporations enjoyed mortgages amortized over 30 year periods and much lower commercial lending rates.

Although federal policies respected the interests of at least a plurality of Americans, mostly white, conservative, and upper-class who had for years extolled the benefits of suburban living, the government's approach to black communities was entirely different. While newlywed white veterans living in an apartment in an older building after the end of World War II simply needed a little financial assistance in the eyes of city planners, a similar black couple would be considered to be inseparable from a pathological condition known as “slums.” The Gratiot Project is an example of such an approach. Planners justified inflicting further economic plight on a poor community by arguing its degraded physical condition was the result of an almost supernatural phenomenon, whose residents needed drastic cultural reform if they were to be productive members of society or maintain high quality housing. To planners, “slums” were an economic problem for the city, but a cultural problem for their residents which could only be solved by the destruction of the existing buildings.

If the problem of blight was fundamentally aesthetic, not social, then Cobo might truly have believed razing entire neighborhoods and constructing a “modern” community might help solve the problem. The problem with this analysis, of course, is that Cobo was fundamentally wrong. I have drawn on the work of Jane Jacobs to show how urban communities can be understood on a practical level. “Slums” and “blight” were not caused by any inherent characteristics of their residents, but simply basic social realities: there did not exist enough housing in the city open to the growing black community, and residents were frequently facing extraordinary economic hardship. This is a profound and deep flaw in the planning of the period

– the desire of planners to imagine a city without properly understanding how deeply cities are social phenomenon. Reduced to property values, the decision to tear down low-value buildings to be replaced with high-value ones was simple. However this approach to planning naively assumes the poor will simply disappear – or magically be able to afford the high rents in the newly constructed buildings, without changing their basic economic condition. Both are of course absurd, yet both underly the rhetoric and ideology of city planners in the late 1940s.

At issue in the policies of the 1946 Detroit Plan was a geographic re-ordering of the city of Detroit to the values of a planning class who believed in automobile transportation and use-segregating “residential,” “industrial,” and “commercial” districts in the city. For Detroit's black community, the dense social and economic fabric functioned, although facing severe economic and social challenges. Some of the ways described by Jane Jacobs clearly helped make up for their lack of capital in a myriad of small ways. From eliminating the need for expensive suburban necessities like cars, child care, and caring for blind and elderly who might otherwise be homeless, the nature of even Detroit's poorest neighborhoods allowed economic advancement through small businesses. These economic opportunities in business were frequently impossible in the larger economic community where opportunity was defined by overt and institutional ethnic, race, and class barriers: formal education degrees, references, and the hesitance of white businesses to hire blacks in general.

Thus, Lafayette Park, although modestly priced and more flexible than more dogmatic expressions of suburban ideology (since it included a variety of sized apartments and condos), still lacked the low prices and flexibility of older urban neighborhoods. In this light, it only looks flexible and attractive in comparison to the rigid structure of the suburbs: successful urban communities have existed before and after in Detroit without the modern architecture, modern

“superblock” design and landscaping which fans of the development argue are responsible for its success. In fact, the characteristics of Mies van der Rohe's design which were successful simply emulated the design of the neighborhoods it replaced: dense, with diverse types of housing, businesses, and schools in close proximity.

One characteristic of the project that has been praised by its residents and which ostensibly made it “innovative” was its “walkability” – the site included a store and school within close walking distance. However, the urban community displaced had been a dense network of residential and commercial uses before, many black owned. What made Lafayette Park different from the neighborhood it replaced was the way it fit in with the dominant planning ideology – the residents would all own cars, drive elsewhere to work and shop, and the commercial needs of the residents would be strictly regulated and planned – isolated into a small strip-mall at one corner of the project. As much as Cobo might have pretended to be a fan of the “free market,” in reality the brand of planning was anything but free – it presumed to dictate for city residents not only how they would live (in single family detached homes), but also how they would get around (in cars, on expressways) and where they could purchase goods or start businesses (in regions of the city specifically selected by city planners for these purposes).

The problem of urban renewal in Detroit has not been that there has been too little, or even too much, but rather there has been too much of the wrong type: large projects which ignores the needs, desires, and skills of the residents they displace. Cities are not simply accumulations of physical infrastructure or concentrations of money, but rather fundamentally organic ecosystems of human life.

Also continuing into the present is the perpetual debate about how to weigh the costs and benefits of urban renewal efforts in the city. An op-ed piece by Ron Seigel published in the



Detroit News in November 2002 argues that “it is blacks who are paying the heaviest price” in current urban renewal efforts in the city, suggesting a better plan that the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods might be one “where the new and the old can mix.”<sup>119</sup> The experience of the 1940s shows this might be precisely the proper approach to urban revitalization.

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<sup>119</sup>Ron Seigel, “Detroit’s Renewal Destroys Integration,” *Detroit News*, 22 November 2002.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. This photo of Gratiot Avenue illustrates the traffic problems facing city planners in Detroit the 1940s. Unlike limited-access expressways which would be constructed throughout the city in the 1940s and 1950s, this busy avenue accommodating nine lanes of traffic was lined with businesses. This photo was taken during the 1941 transit strike, and presumably normal traffic would have been significantly lighter. Source: June M. Thomas' *Redevelopment and Race*, p.15.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

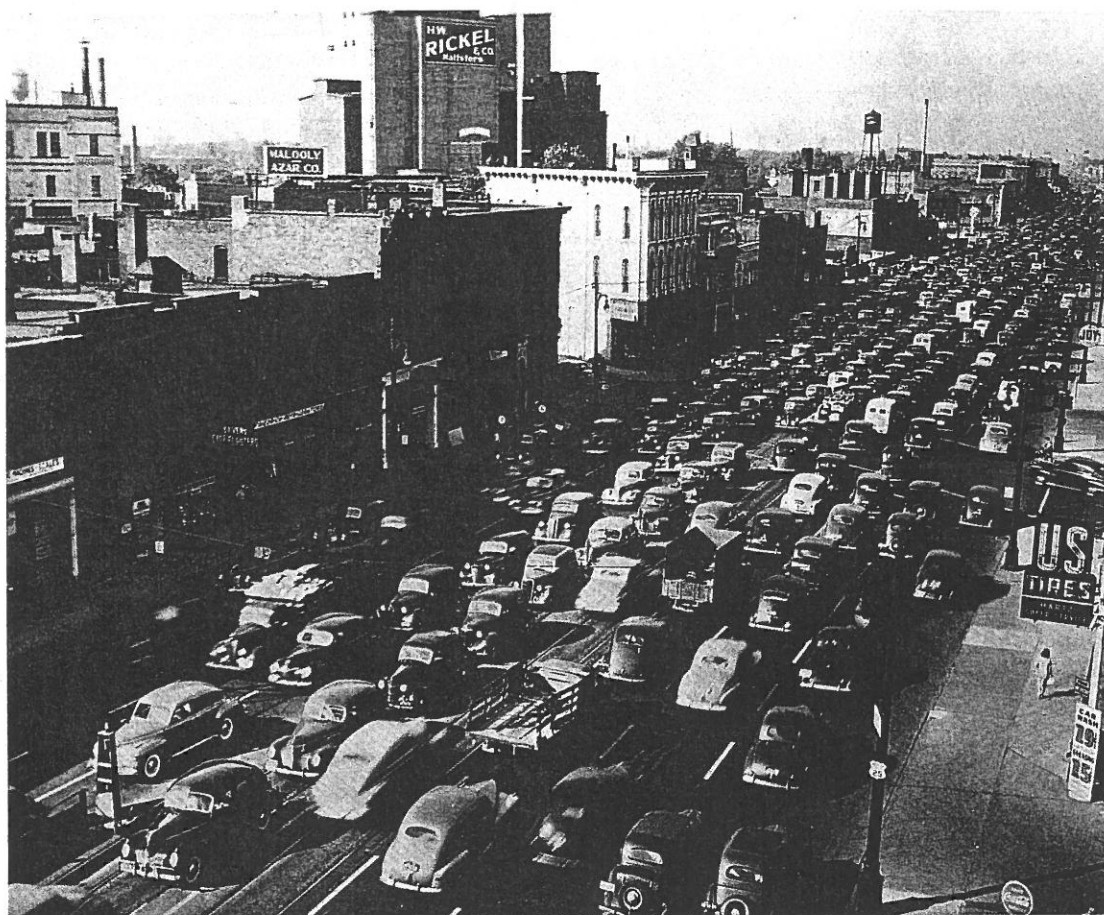


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Figure 2. In the 1946 Detroit Plan, city planners sought to use urban renewal, zoning changes, and highway construction to create discrete districts within the city for industrial, residential, and commercial uses. City planners sought to reinforce property values in the city's major business districts by encircling them with freeways, and using slum clearance to replace the dilapidated neighborhoods of the city's poor with a "substantial number of high rise luxury apartment buildings." Source: *The Detroit Plan*, 1951, p. 11.

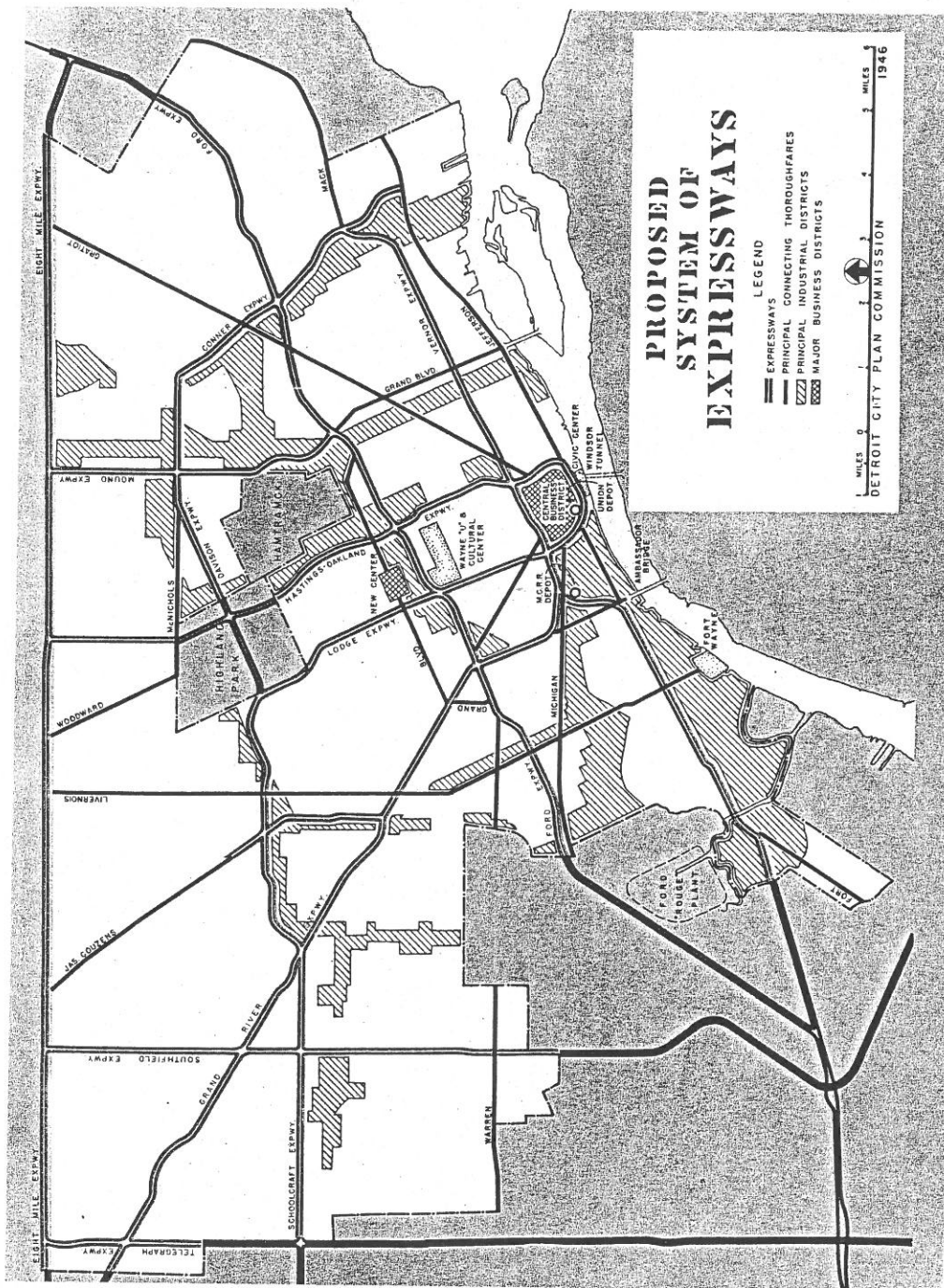


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Figure 3. The Detroit Plan proposed the city construct public housing at twelve locations in the city. Neighborhood groups bitterly protested the outlying sites. Source: Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 56.

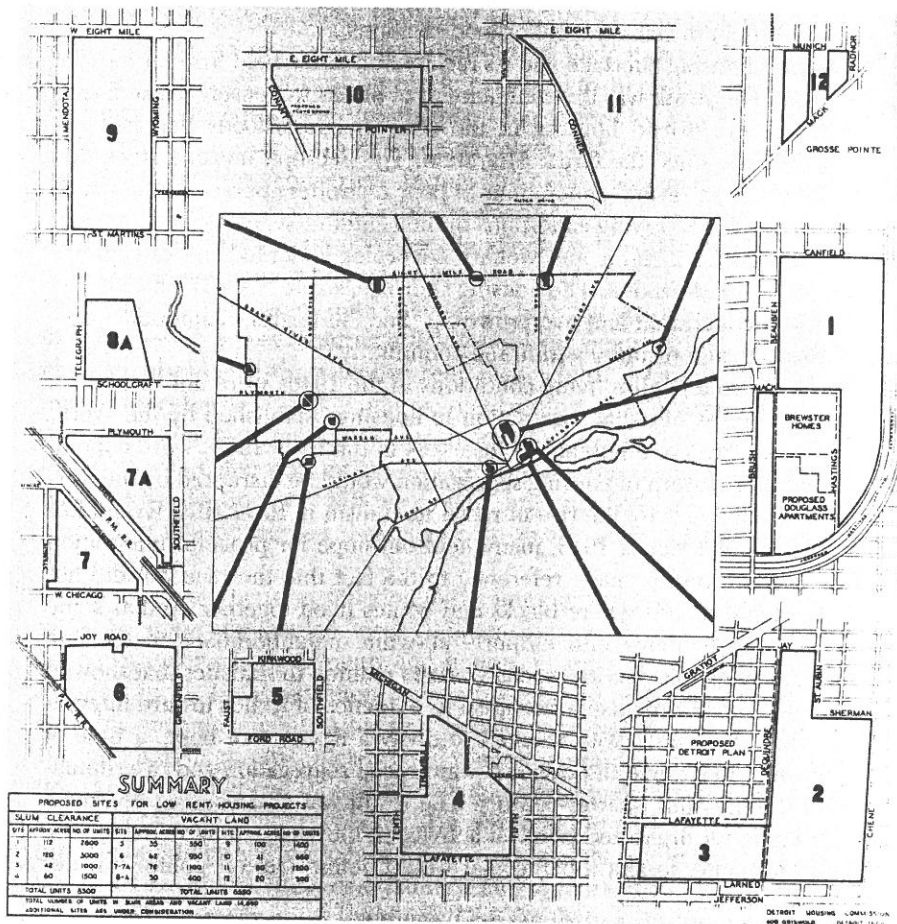


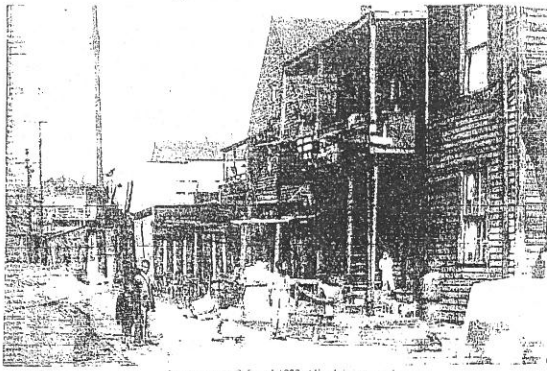
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Figure 4. “Glaring Evidence of the Need for Slum Clearance in Detroit,” published in the Michigan Chronicle in 1948, is a good example of the Chronicle's ongoing effort to highlight deteriorated housing conditions in the city. Source: “Glaring Evidence of the Need for Slum Clearance in Detroit,” *Michigan Chronicle*, 22 May 1948, 26.

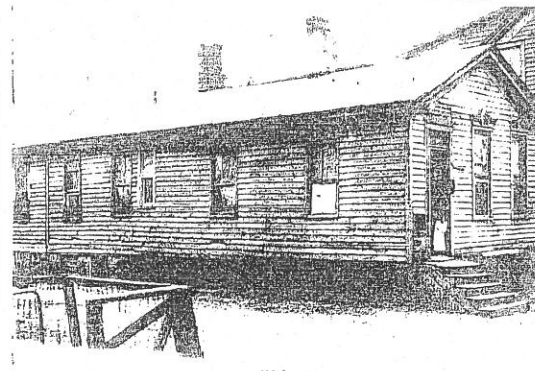


## Glaring Evidence Of The Need For Slum Clearance In Detroit

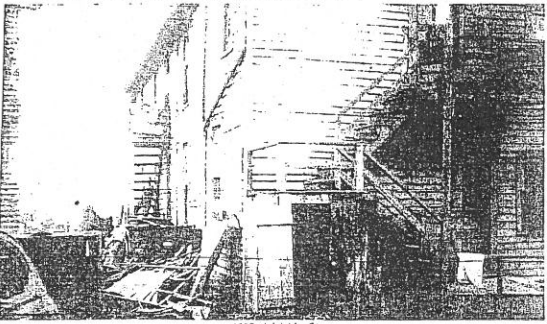
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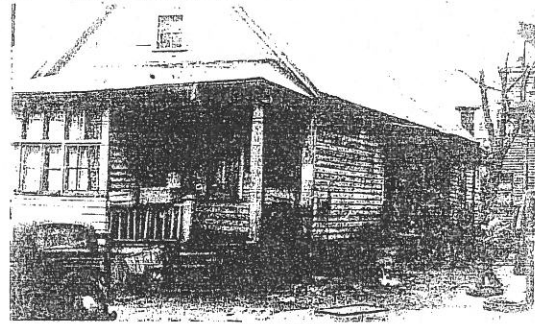
Along alleyway 925 and 1000 Alfred (page 26)



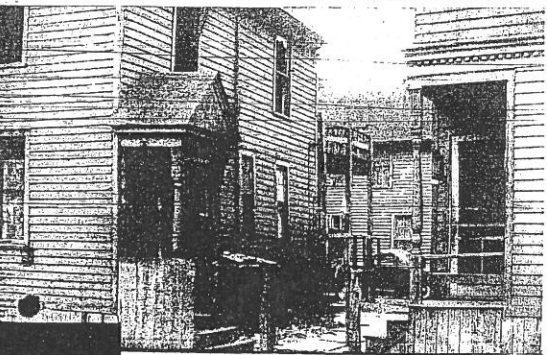
1319 Benton



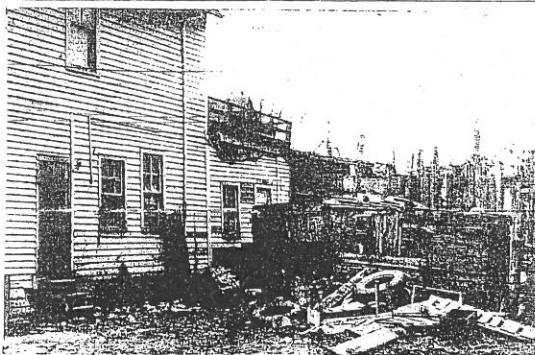
1017 Adelaide St.



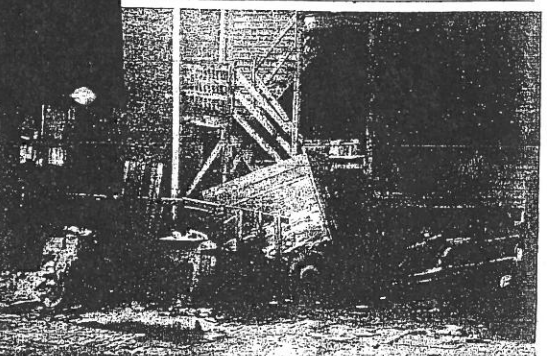
1340 Alexandrine



3063 Russell



1308 Benton St.



920 Brewster St.



955 Alfred

The above pictures of bad housing in Detroit were made by the Chronicle photographer to indicate the tremendous job of slum clearance that needs to be done on the lower east side. In various stages of disrepair and dilapidation, these houses speak

out for the great need to rehabilitate this large section of the Motor City. Thousands of Detroiters are doomed to live in such shacks unless the city fathers and the state government get together on some kind of program.

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Figure 5. The Gratiot, Lafayette, and Central Business District #3 Detroit Plan Urban Redevelopment sites would raze the buildings on 217 acres in the poorest part of Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood, forcing over 1,100 renters to find new housing. Source: Alvin A. West, ed, *Estimated project costs and estimated future assessed values of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area*, Detroit: Detroit City Plan Commission, 1959.

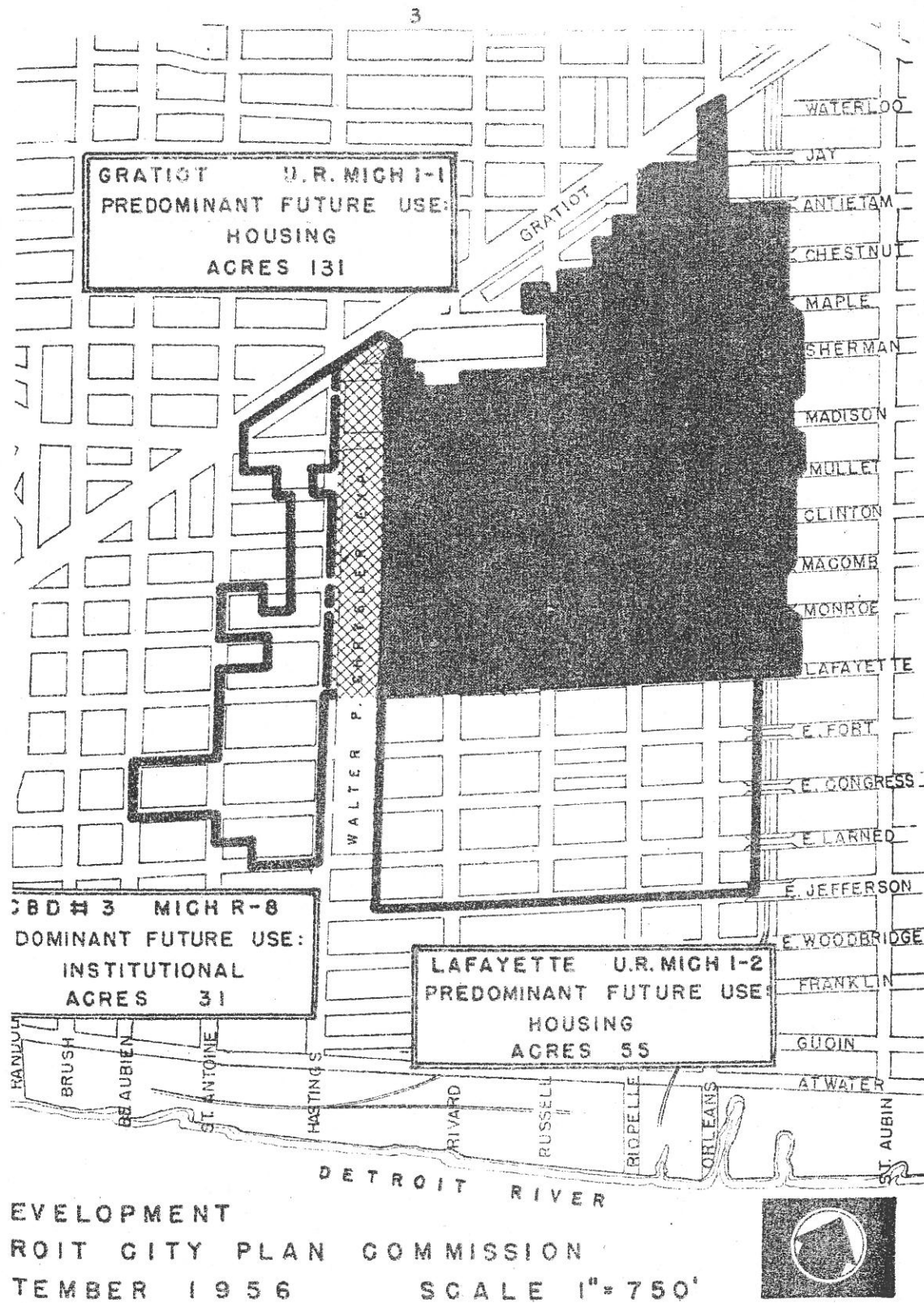
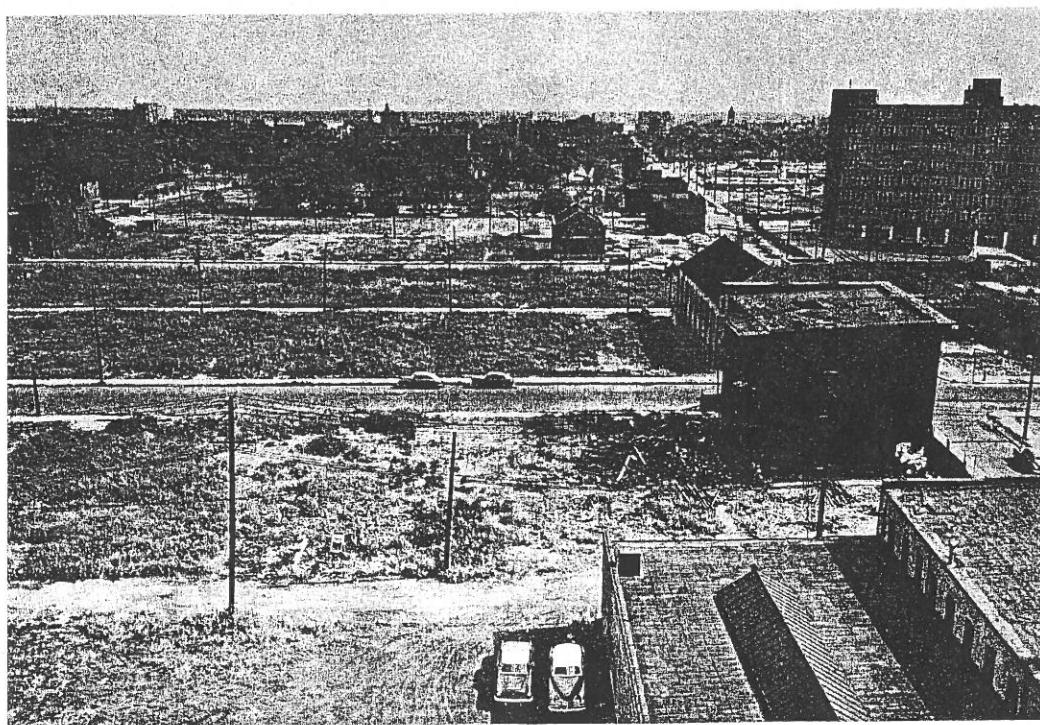


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Figure 6. These two photos, taken in November 1950 and March 1953, are both taken from the exact same vantage point, and illustrate the density of the area and how quickly it was “cleared.” Source: Detroit Housing Commission Publication “Slum Clearance and Urban Redevelopment,” found in “Detroit Housing Commission 1953,” Box 41, DUL.



*Gratiot Redevelopment U R Mich. 1-1, November, 1950*



*Gratiot Redevelopment U R Mich. 1-1, March, 1953*

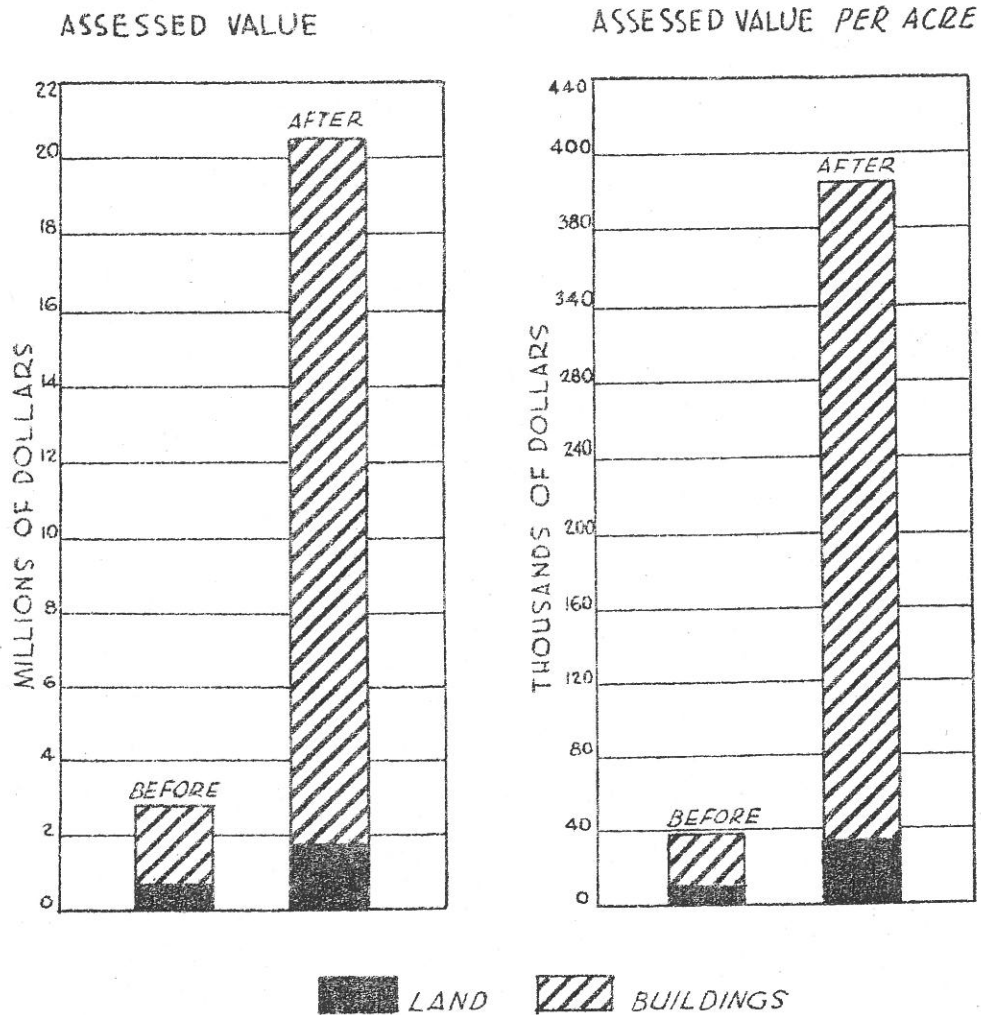
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Figure 7: This graph, from a 1959 city publication, illustrates the success of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project in boosting property values within the narrow confines of the redevelopment area..

Source: Detroit Plan Commission, *Estimated project costs*



# GRATIOT REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT



Source: Computation by Research Division, Detroit City Plan Commission from information supplied by Detroit Board of Assessors.

Figure 7: This graph, from a 1959 city publication, illustrates the success of the Gratiot Redevelopment Project in boosting property values within the narrow confines of the redevelopment area..

Source: Detroit Plan Commission, *Estimated project costs*

Figure 8. These two maps, from 1952 and 1957, show the impact of Detroit Plan redevelopment projects on Detroit's street grid. In 1958, demolition along Detroit's Hastings Street would begin to accommodate the Chrysler Expressway.

Source: (Detail) *Standard Oil Company Detroit Highway Map, 1952* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1952) and *Standard Oil Company Detroit Highway Map, 1957*.





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## **APPENDIX A: A CHRONOLOGY OF THE GRATIOT REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

Source: Newspapers, Housing Commission annual reports 1949, 1950, 1953

### **1946**

November – the poorest section of Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood is identified as a site for slum “clearance” and the construction of public housing in The Detroit Plan, a master plan which proposed the construction of new freeways, public housing, and civic facilities throughout the city

### **1947**

Condemnation Proceedings Begin in the Gratiot Area under Michigan's Corporation Redevelopment Act of 1941

### **1948**

Condemnation continues, although no structures are razed amid concerns residents would not be able to find housing in an extremely limited housing market

October 4 – The Michigan Supreme Court rules in *General Development Corporation v. City of Detroit* that the City of Detroit can legally obtain property through the legal precedent of eminent domain in order to demolish the buildings and re-sell the land to private developers under the Michigan Corporation Redevelopment Act of 1941.

### **1949**

August 8 – Housing Commission passes resolution approving construction of 14,350 low-income housing units

October 25 – The U.S. Congress passes the Housing Act of 1949, which would provide direct federal funding to cities for the construction of public housing, and for slum destruction projects

November – Republican City Treasurer Albert E. Cobo defeats Democrat Common Council president George Edwards in an upset mayoral election

December 1, 14, 21 – City government hold public hearings for sites 3 and 2 in the Gratiot area, slated for renewal to make room for low-rent public housing

December 20 – James H. Inglis resigns as Director City Housing Commission

### **1950**

January 4 – Mayor Cobo appoints Harry J. Durbin Director-Secretary of the Housing Commission

January 12 – Mayor Cobo declares his wish to “move in with a shovel within ninety days” in east side slum clearance

February 10 - Mayor Cobo appoints Robert L. Berry and Walter J. Gessell to the Housing Commission to replace H.V. Babcock and Remie Cools, who resigned

February 22 - Housing commission votes to recommend deleting all vacant sites from low-rent program, approves 1,2,3, and orders further study of 4

March 1 - Public hearing held on Gratiot-Orleans redevelopment area

March 8 – Rev. Robert L. Bradby removed from housing commission by Mayor Cobo; replaced by Realtor George Isabell

March 14 – Detroit Plan Sites 1,2,3, approved by Common Council, (4 under advisement) 5-10 rejected

April 25-26 – City holds condemnation proceedings for properties in site 2

May 2 – Site 4 removed from the city's low-rent housing program

May 31 – Public Housing Administration approves plan for housing on Site No. 2

June 1 – Title for properties in first 10 blocks of Gratiot Redevelopment Area is transferred to city

June 27 – Common Council approves creation of Slum Clearance division in the Housing Commission, Hugh Stevenson in charge

June 29 – Site 3 is removed from the city's public housing program

September 4 – First 18 units of Frederick Douglass Apartments occupied by families from Gratiot area

September 18 – Relocation of families in Gratiot area begins

November 7 – Demolition of buildings in Gratiot area begins

## 1951

August 23 – Mayor Cobo appoints Otho F. Beaudoin to housing commission to replace Robert L. Berry who resigned, (Beaudoin dies Sept. 22 of heart attack)

September 3, November. 15 1951 – Cobo named Housing Expediter: Milton Bresler, Martin L. Bass

## 1952

July 30 – City holds auction for Gratiot land, no bids are submitted

**1956**

May 2, 1956 - City Plan Commission approves Mies van der Rohe's site plan developed for the Citizens Redevelopment Corporation

**1958**

October – Pavilion apartment building in Lafayette Park opens

**1959**

May – First Town Houses in Lafayette Park open

**1963**

Twin 22-story Lafayette Towers apartment buildings open

## **Appendix B**

*This letter sent to residents of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area in early 1950.*

## Appendix B

*This letter sent to residents of the Gratiot Redevelopment Area in early 1950.*

City of Detroit Housing Commission  
GRATIOT REDEVELOPMENT AREA  
3425 Hastings Street  
Detroit, Michigan

TO ALL RESIDENTS OF BLOCK NO. \_\_\_\_\_

As you know, it will be necessary for all families living in the Gratiot Redevelopment Area to move so that new homes, parks, schools, expressways, and commercial facilities can be built to replace the substandard dwellings and structures now on the site. The redevelopment of the area will be undertaken by the City of Detroit with the financial assistance of the Federal Government made available under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949.

The City of Detroit now holds title to approximately one-half of the total area which is to be rebuilt, and condemnation proceedings have been started so as to acquire the remainder. The area in which you live is now owned by the City.

The relocation of families and the demolition of the present buildings is now being started and will continue until the job is completed. The relocation of families will be orderly and has been planned so as to eliminate as many hardships as possible.

The block you live in has now been designated for clearance, and our Relocation Staff is working to effect the removal of families just as quickly as possible. You will be contacted by a member of our Relocation Staff in the near future so that we may ascertain all the problems in connection with your moving off the site.

A formal notice to vacate will not be served upon you until a little later, but we wish to inform you now as to the plans being made which will affect you in the near future. We will endeavor to keep you and all residents in the area fully informed of our plans at all times.

We know that finding other housing will be a difficult task for many families. Some families will have less of a problem than others. We are using vacancies in public housing projects to take care of the families who can qualify for admission. Those families who do not meet the requirements for admission to public housing will have a more serious problem, but even in these cases assistance in finding private housing will be available through the cooperation of the Construction Industry Council.

We must have complete information from all families in order to be of assistance. We request your complete cooperation with our Relocation Staff in providing us with the information requested.

We urge you to keep the following points in mind:

1. Income limits for permanent low-rent housing are:

<u>Number of Children under 21 Years</u>	<u>Top Income Allowed (Yearly)</u>
None	\$2,480
1 or 2	\$2,760
3 or 4	\$2,980
5 or more	\$3,312



- 2 -

2. Veterans of World War II with incomes too high for permanent housing may be placed in Veterans' projects located throughout the city. We must see the Veteran's discharge papers or other proof of service if he is to be placed in this housing.
3. Vacancies becoming available in other areas of the Redevelopment Area will be utilized for temporary relocations if necessary. Assistance will be rendered all families temporarily relocated so that no undue hardships will result.
- \* 4. The City recognizes that there is a housing shortage. For this reason, the Relocation Staff will assist families in finding private housing. The Construction Industry Council will also cooperate in this respect.
5. We do not wish to "put anyone out on the street", and will make every effort to find a place for all our tenants. At the same time, we must tell you that there is not a wide choice of location or type of housing. All residents of the block you reside in should make every possible effort to find housing on the private market.
- \* 6. We urge that you move as soon as possible. Delay will only increase your problem as vacancies in public housing projects are limited and only a few families can be placed during any one month.
- \* 7. In asking you to move, the City is clearly within its rights because it owns the houses in which you live. They were purchased in full accordance with proper legal procedure. The rights of all former owners and present tenants have been and will be observed.

SOME FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE REDEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The area you live in will be completely cleared. Some of the land will be set aside for parks, playfields, recreation centers, schools, expressways, and commercial facilities. The balance of the land will be sold to private industry for construction of new buildings in accordance with an approved plan. A new, modern community, designed to meet present-day standards for good living, will be erected on the site.

Many hundreds of new dwellings will be built. Some of it will be rental housing and some will be available for purchase. Many of you will undoubtedly move back into the area when redevelopment is completed, either as renters or owners of a dwelling.

Redevelopment of this area (and others also) is important to all the citizens of Detroit. The time is now here so that an area of substandard, obsolete, and hazardous houses, badly overcrowded and lacking in community facilities, can be removed and replaced by a new, modern, complete community built to present-day standards to meet present-day needs.

We are counting on your cooperation to bring about this important change.

Sincerely yours,

*Harry J. Durbin*  
HARRY J. DURBIN  
Director-Secretary

WM:dc

## **Appendix C**

*U.S. Census Data of site of Gratiot Redevelopment Project, 1950 and 1960*

## Appendix C

*U.S. Census Data of site of Gratiot Redevelopment Project, 1950 and 1960*

Census Tract	Block	Total pop	All Dwelling Units			Occupied Units		
			Total	Owner Occupied	Renters	Total	Non-White	
1950								
505	2		35	0	35	35	35	
	3		44	4	38	42	42	
	4		63	8	55	62	62	
	5		63	8	53	61	58	
508	1		13	0	13	13	13	
	7		27	0	27	27	26	
	8		44	4	39	43	41	
	9		45	5	40	45	42	
	10		23	1	20	21	19	
	16		20	0	20	20	20	
	17		49	1	48	49	49	
	18		43	0	43	43	40	
	19		32	3	29	32	26	
	24		34	7	27	34	29	
	25		53	3	50	53	45	
	509	4		24	6	18	24	24
		7		49	6	40	46	41
8			19	1	18	19	15	
9			24	7	17	24	24	
10			45	5	40	45	44	
13			53	8	45	53	53	
14			75	3	72	75	75	
15			55	1	54	55	51	
16			55	2	53	55	53	
19			42	4	38	42	42	
20			39	4	35	39	39	
21			51	9	41	50	50	
22			28	6	22	28	26	
509	25		34	2	32	34	33	
	26		43	11	32	43	43	
	528	22		14	1	13	14	13
				1238	120	1107	1226	1173
					9.69			95.68
1960								
509	1	652	507	37	342		31	
							6.11	

		Total pop	White	% White	Negro	% nonwhite
1950	508	3560	767	21.54	2788	78.31
	509	3697	73	1.97	3623	98
		<b>7257</b>	<b>840</b>	<b>11.58</b>	<b>6411</b>	<b>88.34</b>
1960	509	652	587	90.03	57	8.74