

An 8 Step Recovery Program for Shrinkage

WILL WITTIG

University of Detroit Mercy

INTRODUCTION

For any designer considering the future of a contemporary shrinking city it is difficult to avoid questioning the shifting role of negative space in the urban fabric. While many urban centers worldwide are experiencing growth through increasing density, other cities, particularly those in the Upper Midwest of the United States for example, are witnessing significant attrition of mass in their cores. Much intellectual energy has been devoted to either lamenting the loss that this represents, or celebrating the utopian urge to capitalize on these circumstances either with grand visionary schemes or nostalgic "new urban" models. Perhaps another speculative course is possible; one that attempts to minimize the connotations of fragmentation, de-evolution, dystopia, etc. associated with urban vacancy, and instead accepts the reality of the void as a found condition that may not require a remedy per se. This view is at its core optimistic, as suggested in the words of Ignase de Sola-Morales Rubio; these spaces are "void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation."¹ This paper will attempt to outline a theory of urban design that has emerged specifically as a response to the phenomena of the "Shrinking City" by loosely weaving together several strategies that are born out of a careful consideration of the unique opportunities one finds in a city that can no longer be managed according to a conventional model of growth. This hypothesis does not attempt to establish an overarching recommendation for the shrinking city such as the comprehensive reorganization of land use under consideration in places like Youngstown, Ohio, but instead attempts

to increase the richness and intensity of occupation in a more incremental manner. However, when considered collectively these strategies may serve as guideposts for a more comprehensive planning effort. When considered individually, many of these strategies may also seem somewhat familiar, as most of them can be found in more codified forms within various well known urban-'isms'. However, the looseness of the weave of this argument is based on the hope that the theory could adapt to a variety of conditions rather than being seen as formulaic or authoritarian. This proposition has emerged by stitching together several conceptual threads that are evident in the work of a number of graduate students at the University of Detroit Mercy who have chosen to confront the pervasiveness of the void, most often using the City of Detroit as the context. This survey also includes one project for New Orleans and one complimentary professional example that demonstrates a real world application of the theory.

SETTING THE STAGE: THE "POST-INDUSTRIAL" LANDSCAPE

The City of Detroit is notorious as one of the prime American examples of a shrinking city. In this particular case the effects of sprawl, beginning with the post WWII federal housing and transportation policies that were pursued with particular vigor in Detroit in the hope of protecting the 'Arsenal of Democracy,' have been devastating. While the metropolitan region continues to grow in scale and population (until very recently), density continues to decrease. The central business district possesses an eerie aspect as a result of the presence of countless

vacant parcels and abandoned buildings, some of a surprisingly large scale. Some of the surrounding neighborhoods mirror this condition and often appear rural in character due to the minimal number of remaining homes. In fact the internal void condition has become at least as significant as the under-populated perimeter.

The city of Detroit has earned its reputation not only due to conditions on the ground, but also as the birthplace of Ford's influential mode of production. The adoption of this method of production has been linked to the colonial attitude toward the consumption of space that is central to our national spatial consciousness. "In the *Rediscovery of North America*, the naturalist author Barry Lopez acknowledges the implicit symmetry between colonialism and Fordism as the two most significant historical forces responsible for the shaping of the American landscape. Both regimes, Lopez argues, considered the natural environment as simultaneously a store for raw materials and a set of logistical obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of optimized profits and efficient accumulation."² Ultimately, modern production infrastructure spread throughout the country as the space of specialization expanded in a manner very reminiscent of the manifest expansion of the colonies. This move towards decentralization not only accelerated the consumption of undeveloped territory, but also contributed to the eventual devastation of the urban landscape. "By the 1990's, that process had made redundant the very city that launched the Fordist model of modern industrial development itself."³ At one point, in a move that anticipated the current interest in embracing literal strategies of shrinkage, city leaders actually suggested that certain areas of the city should be abandoned. "With an incendiary 1993 press release based on the City Planning Commission's recommendations of three years prior, the city Ombudsman publicly called for the discontinuation of services to and the relocation of vestigial populations from, the most vacant portions of the city. The empty houses would be demolished and empty areas fenced off; they would either be landscaped, or allowed to return to "nature."⁴ These plans were never realized on an explicit institutional level, although in many areas this plan is being realized through a process of attrition. As residents left and houses were demolished or destroyed by arson, infrastructural services began to fail from lack of use, and in some cases

entire city blocks have become essentially uninhabitable. It is worth noting that more recently the discussion of similarly radical planning initiatives has been revived with a somewhat more optimistic tone at even the highest levels of city government. Although the city of Detroit is not technically the most rapidly shrinking city in the United States, its role in this larger narrative does give it some claim as the epicenter of urban shrinkage in America.

AN 8 STEP RECOVERY PROGRAM

As evidenced by trends that have emerged in several graduate level thesis projects, a theory of urban reinvention that responds to this type of landscape seems to be emerging. Eight characteristics in particular can be found in multiple projects that suggest an operational logic that is specific to the dynamics of a post-industrial North American shrinking city, although as will be revealed by the character of these strategies, the overall theory is decidedly malleable. As an interesting corollary, one representative project was located in the City of New Orleans, which creates a valuable comparison. Clearly the devastation in New Orleans was of a different magnitude, but by comparison one could argue that Detroit has suffered a similar level of devastation extended over the last 60 years. It should be stated, just to indicate a level of awareness, that none of the ideas in the "8 Step Recovery Program" are particularly new. Each one is indebted to various influential figures, movements or urban design theories. In each of the following concepts one may detect the influence of Network Urbanism, Landscape Urbanism, Everyday Urbanism, Urban Ecology, Splintering Urbanism, Community Based Design, Mat Urbanism, Territorial Urbanism, Jane Jacobs, Seedling Urbanism, etc. In some cases the students who have authored these projects are aware of these influences and have based their proposals on solid research. However those connections are not explored here in any detail based on the author's belief that the work that prompted this theory was influenced by the student's intuitive reaction to a particular place much more so than by any specific intellectual discourse.

1. How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Void

In a city like Detroit, which has lost such a significant percentage of its building mass from its peak level of development, a pervasive condition

of vacancy has become a significant component of the city's very identity. In a truly post-industrial city, we are forced to recalibrate the way we measure the connective tissue of the city. The voids of street, park, vacant lot, and even unoccupied buildings begin to blur together to such an extent that the normative condition of void as connective tissue is lost. When the void is pervasive enough to challenge the very basis of the figure-ground understanding of block and street, the perception of void shifts and two intertwined readings begin to emerge. First is a sense that the void represents a "pregnant possibility" for a future condition that can be innovative rather than regressive by operating outside the norms of typology. The second is the sense that the void has become written into the DNA of the city, and should not be completely erased even as we attempt to improve living conditions by making productive use of the void.

The sense of possibility unleashed by urban vacancy certainly brings to mind Morales's defining theory of the *terrain vague* noted in the introduction. In Detroit however, the filigree of space that occurs at the margins of legitimate inhabitation that one initially imagines as the locus of the *terrain vague* is actually overwhelmed by a field condition of vacancy. The *terrain vague* does not happen at the unclaimed folds as Morales suggests, but is in fact the central figure in the fabric of the city. In areas of the city where erasure is so widespread that the original settlement pattern is almost unrecognizable, a sense of not yet imagined possibilities is palpable. In Morales's words, "The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city's 'terrain vague.'"⁵

On the other hand, some would say that the void has become a part of the DNA of the city, and should not be eliminated in the name of conventional expectations of urban space. Of course many of the remaining residents of the city possess vibrant memories of the city as it was, but many other residents have come to know the city in its current state, and have established their own personal "cultural identity" attachment to the fragmented urban landscape. In several of the projects that are used to illustrate this theory, dealing with some level of occupation of the void is a primary theme, but the objective is not necessarily to literally fill the void. The tears in the urban fabric offer opportunities, but

it is not seen as desirable, and certainly it is not possible to suture every tear. After over 60 years of abandonment and disinvestment it is no longer rational to lament the loss of urban mass and assume that our response should be to re-fill every parcel of property when the very definition of these spaces as property has been lost. Instead, this condition begs for a reinvention of this category of space. The work of these students recognizes that if one were to simply fill in and erase the very thing that makes this urban condition provocative, then it ceases to be alluring, and more importantly another stage in our metropolitan history would simply be erased. "Indeed, there are powerful examples of modern art, literature, and cinema that have celebrated the sublime quality of these places in part because of the implicit creative, social, and intellectual freedom associated with the order of disorder."⁶ This first strategy essentially asks a question; how does one recast the void, moving it from a condition of latency and abandonment to a condition of being claimed and renewed without erasing its sublime sense of potential from our collective consciousness?

2. Avoid Mainstream Programs

A slightly more specific strategy that in part is a reaction to the first is the need to create spaces that retain a sense of indeterminacy by being open to interpretation in terms of their possible uses. When the void is reclaimed, it would be illogical to attempt to fill it with familiar and conventional activities. If housing, coffee shops, galleries and other developer-driven programs were sufficient and appropriate, then one might ask why they have not been inserted yet. The obvious answer is a lack of capital, but the point here is that to propose an architectural response based on conventional programming denies the reality that economics do in fact drive development. Clearly the economic conditions that would lead to conventional uses simply do not exist. Furthermore, if one buys the argument that the void has taken on a new role in these urban environments, then filling the void with familiar and standardized programs would deny the potentially progressive role of these spaces. In most cases the projects referenced here reject normative programmatic typologies. Sometimes reinvention of a familiar typology is included, but more often there is a distinct desire to ignore familiar programs or models of development. Often times the proposed use is actually somewhat vague, but

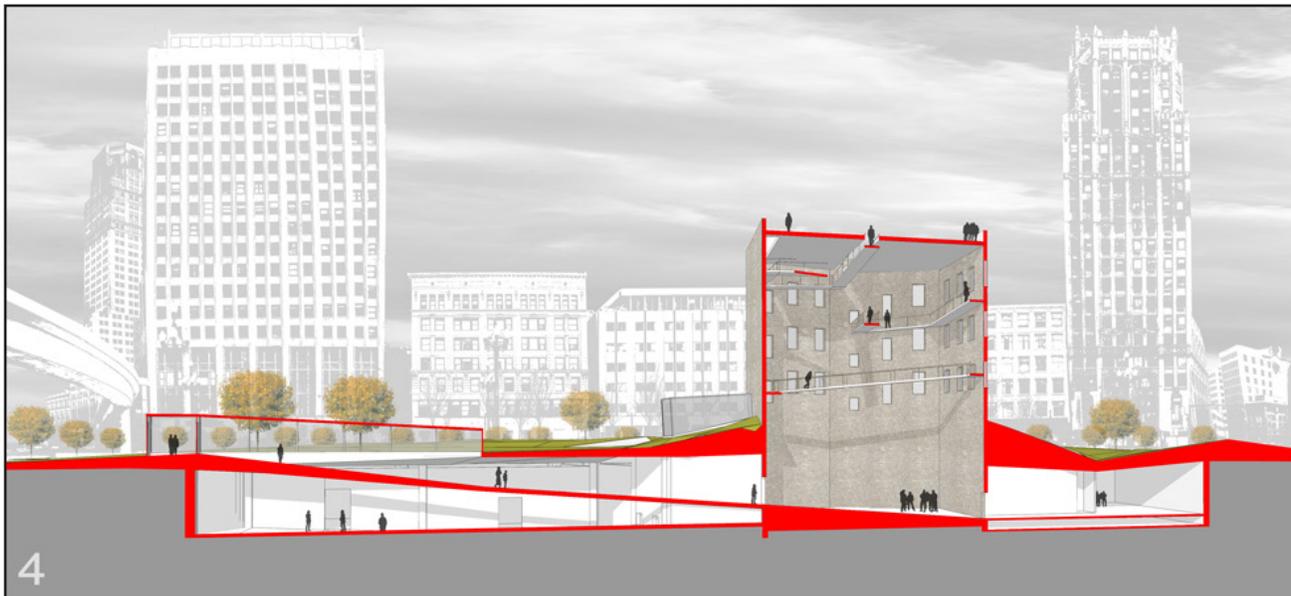


Figure 1: Fractured Park-Scape: Sami Al-Jureidini

the projects do not go so far as to completely abdicate the responsibility of the designer to encourage some form of occupation. Although they may not be aware of it, many of these students have taken to heart an attitude towards programming that has been expressed very clearly by Stan Allen. "A successful public space is precisely a space where something unanticipated happens. So the job of the architect becomes calibrating the right mix between specificity, imagining and projecting potential uses into the space, creating the right measure, understanding flow and access, while always leaving some noise in the system, a degree of 'play', that allows for the unexpected. The architect's job is to create spaces with potential."⁷

For example, the project illustrated below proposed the creation of an undulating landscape of hard and soft-scapes with no particular program assignment at all. Several of the fragmented planes of this landscape become the starting point for a series of ramps that occupy the interior of an abandoned building and eventually lead to a new roof garden on the top of the abandoned shell. This structure simply serves as a lookout tower, giving residents the ability to engage the city landscape from above and to witness the present condition of the city while occupying a structure that helps us remember its past. This is certainly not a function that would be included in most conventional urban mas-

ter plans, but it could nevertheless be a valuable re-occupation of the space.

3. Work Small not XL

Another strategy that has been fairly effective and prevalent in these projects is an avoidance of the temptation to work from a definitive master plan down towards specific proposals. Instead these projects have consistently favored small moves. However, smallness does not necessarily refer to the literal scale of the proposals. In some cases interventions have been proposed that have encompassed several city blocks, but in all cases these interventions are born out of a careful analysis of a specific condition rather than being driven by an objective that is preordained by a larger plan. Because the proposals are situational, they operate tactically rather than seeking to articulate an overarching vision. The most successful projects tend to ignore the production of an a priori master plan that is subsequently flushed out by studying the fine grain. This approach can also be linked directly to the Everyday Urbanism movement given Margaret Crawford's description of the theory, in which she states that "it does not seek to transform the world through totalizing master planning, large-scale operations or 'best practices.'" Although in some cases an opportunity might be missed by ignoring the overall diagram of the void as it permeates the

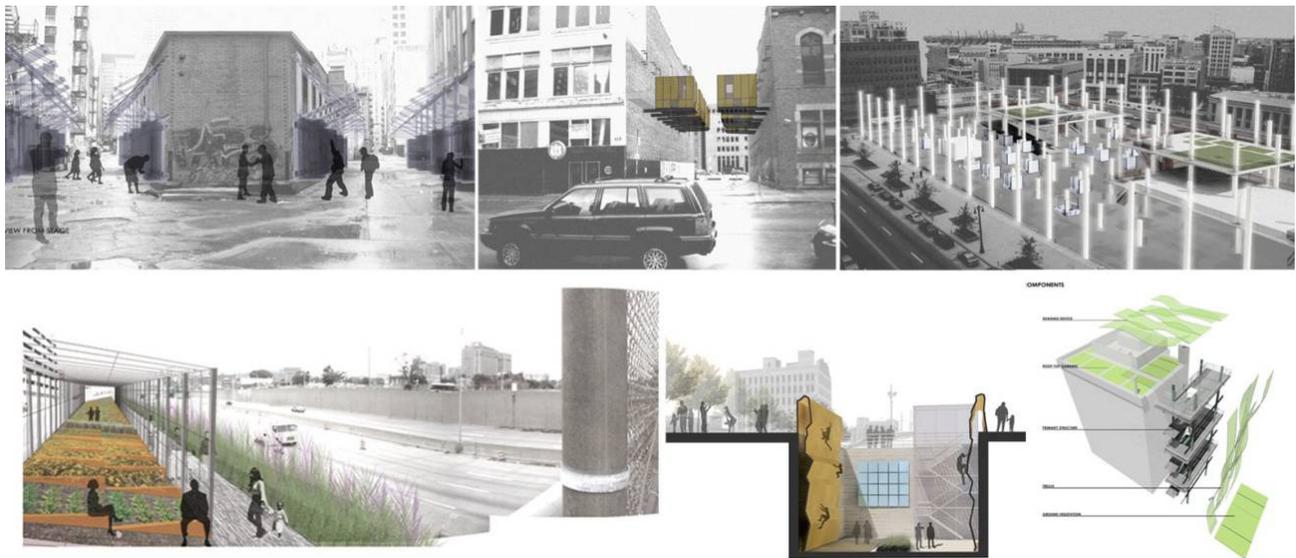


Figure 2: Detroit Interventions: Carl Bolofer

urban fabric, the knee-jerk reading of shrinkage as a virus seems to be alleviated precisely by not treating it as a condition that needs to be dealt with systematically or holistically.

4. Insert Constellations not Icons

Working in tandem with the concept of small localized interventions is the corollary necessity to make multiple proposals in one project. If one is determined to work small, then obviously the impact of a singular localized project would be minimal. In contrast to the big signature proposals that have dominated many realized post-modern urban projects such as stadiums and casinos; this system relies on a loose affiliation of multiple interventions to create a critical mass of transformation. In most cases the individual interventions are in fact independent, so the term 'network' is perhaps a bit strong. Maintaining the concept that individual proposals are still based on very localized conditions translates here to a strategy of loosely associated parts that make no particular claim to operate literally as system or infrastructure. The projects typically hope that the overall impact is greater than the sum of the parts, but actually that outcome is not essential. In the project illustrated below as many as eight independent proposals were developed by one student for the central business district of Detroit. Each intervention is a specific

reaction to unique void conditions of varying scales (6 proposals are shown below). Each response is also unique programmatically, spatially, and formally, but it is not hard to imagine a kind of gestalt that might result from the ensemble of proposals.

5. Mark Intervals

When working from a point of view that values change that is executed with the kind of surgical precision implied in the previous two points, the rhythms and intervals of change are often important. This strategy emphasizes the role of incremental change, rather than sudden and wholesale shifts. It also tends to place a greater emphasis on temporal conditions over formal conditions; process over image. One finds a similar mind set in the Landscape Urbanism movement, which seeks to initiate processes that may lead to new urban hybrid spaces. As James Corner has said "urban infrastructure sows the seeds of future possibility, staging the ground for both uncertainty and promise. This preparation of surfaces for future appropriation differs from merely formal interest in single surface construction. It is much more strategic, emphasizing means over ends and operational logic over compositional design."⁹ As with several of these principles, the impetus for this strategy is born out of a belief that cities generally evolve over long periods of time as a result of countless inde-

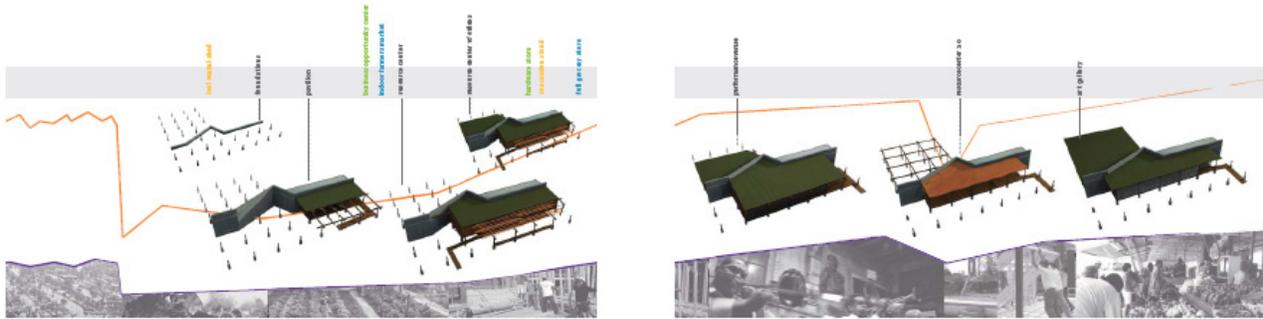


Figure 3: Lower Ninth Ward Community Center: Brittany DesRocher

pendent decisions (with the exception of responses to cataclysmic events). In this case, the designer embraces the need for an incremental form of morphology that diminishes the importance of any particular design move. Although this can be difficult to simulate in the artificial realm of a theoretical design studio, the schemes often make some attempt to project into the future by imagining a slow transformation over time that is likely to be influenced by outside forces. In some cases the interventions are intended as seeds for unpredictable forms of future growth. In other cases specific proposals are made that are intended to be temporary. In other cases small steps are proposed that anticipate accretion over time. Of course this particular strategy is also born out of necessity; a city that has witnessed over half a century of disinvestment simply cannot be transformed with a single bold stroke.

One example of this strategy comes from a project located in the St. Claude corridor in the Holy Cross neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, which was the site for a progressive series of interventions that attempted to respond to an anticipated series of future events. The intervention began with a temporary tool shed that would be used to loan out tools to local residents who are attempting to rebuild, and was shown to evolve into a series of interventions that included a community center and infill housing. Working in consultation with several local community leaders, a number of possible scenarios were developed by the student to guide the design of the project. The project anticipated a period of stability during which time the community center would become reprogrammed, and also anticipated the likelihood of another major flood in the neighborhood.

6. Nurture Urban Ecology

In cities that include vast tracts of land that are no longer occupied in the conventional sense, nature often is able to make a startling recovery. Many of our shrinking cities are literally greening themselves from the inside out due to the fact that the “built” landscape is no longer actively maintained. This re-emergence of soft systems in the urban environment has led to a popularization of the term “urban ecology.” Certainly from a systems theory point of view the connection between incremental urban morphology (also discussed in the previous point) and ecology seems obvious. As James Corner stated in *Terra Fluxus*, “the discipline of ecology suggests that individual agents acting across a broad field of operation produce incremental and cumulative effects that continually evolve the shape of an environment over time.”¹⁰ Furthermore, in cities where nature is literally resurgent, even the basic categorization of hard and soft spaces becomes problematic. The pervasive horizontal surface becomes fertile ground for hybrid forms of cultivation that may coexist comfortably within a landscape of customary urban forms. Not surprisingly many of the proposals cited here that operate in this kind of environment include a healthy dose of vegetated spaces, sometimes organized as a filigree of territories that are claimed and redeveloped, but not necessarily with an aspiration for higher levels of density. Of course in the wake of the pervasiveness of suburban models, it is not surprising that many urban designers and theorists revert to a defensive posture that favors a completely filled urban fabric. However, in the spirit of the Landscape Urbanists, a more pragmatic point of view is adopted here that tends to accept if not

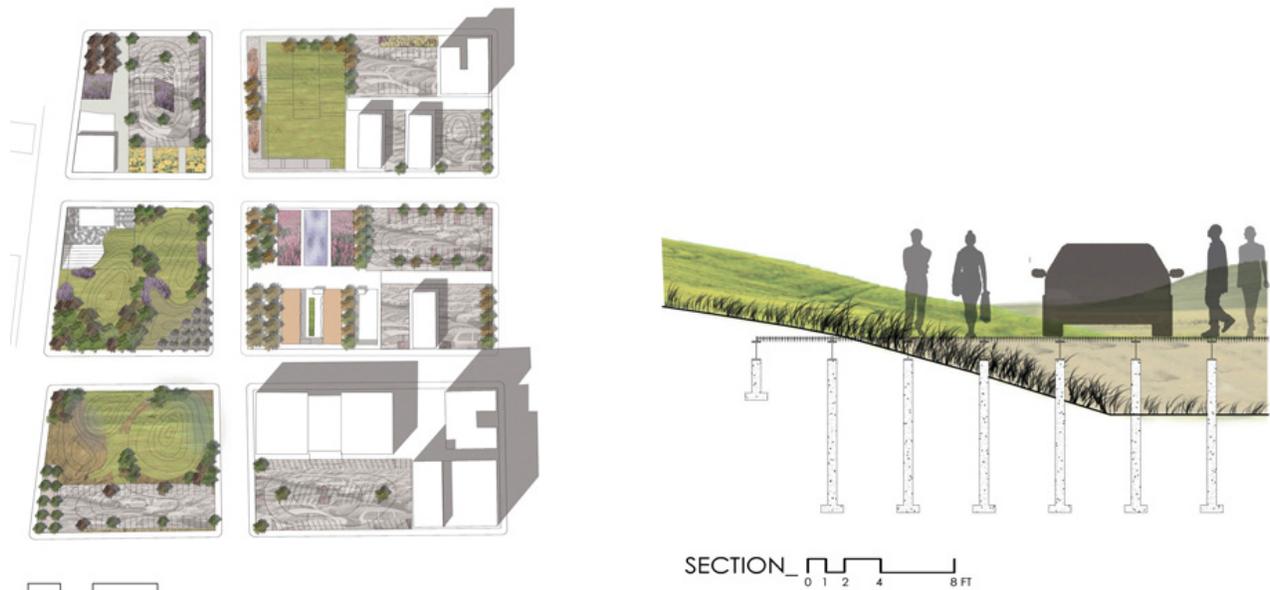


Figure 4: Detroit Park[ing]: Carl Bolofer

embrace the reality of a more open and dispersed “mat-like field, where scattered pockets of density are knit together” by the horizontal landscape.

One prevalent programmatic typology that is found in the post-industrial landscape is the use of vacant land as temporary parking lots. In one quadrant of Detroit that contains a high concentration of vacant lots, it is not uncommon for these spaces to be appropriated by entrepreneurs as temporary parking for special events. The project illustrated below proposed the reclamation of these spaces as a kind of bio-swale system that included parking suspended on metal grating. Considering the short cycle of temporary parking for events like baseball games, the proposal presumes that a constructed wetland could serve as a natural filter for the relatively low level of contaminants from the permeable parking layer that floats above the wetland, creating a hybrid soft landscape within the central business district.

7. Value Public not “Civic” Space

One irony that can be found in the typical shrinking city is the fact that although there is no shortage of open space in the city, many have claimed that

there is a lack of any identifiable civic space. In fact much has been written about the lack of quality public space in American cities, whether they are shrinking or not. However, it is debatable whether there ever was such a thing as civic space in America, at least to the extent that it has been romanticized through the image of the town square, etc. Returning to Stan Allen’s discussion as quoted in *Architectural Design*, “we need to be skeptical of the vague notion of ‘public space.’ Public space is a concept that is on the one hand hardly ever defined with any degree of specificity, and on the other never questioned as to its value. That’s a dangerous combination...If we look specifically at the American city...the romantic notion of the European piazza (as the emblematic public urban space) is something that never really existed in the American city.”¹² Perhaps this principle is more of an observation than a directive, but it is noteworthy that the projects cited here have not been motivated by the loss of civic space. In many cases they do attempt to activate common open areas as much as possible, however, they do so without making any larger claims about the cultural significance of these spaces. In these examples commerce, recreation, and as noted above, indeterminate uses are seen as just as worthy of investment as spaces

that make some additional claim to serve the citizens of the city in some higher, altruistic way.

8. Respect Local Expertise

Underlying all of these design strategies is a faith in the idea that the most useful forms of knowledge are derived locally. In relation to the aforementioned “Work Small not XL” strategy, beginning with a specific condition that is best understood at a small scale is critical in this approach to revitalizing shrinking cities and neighborhoods. Working from what is there (and whenever possible interpreting what is there as an asset) rather than using a site as a location for preconceived development is central to the ethos of these projects. In this final point however, it is important to note that this understanding of the local is not based solely on the interpretation of the design “expert,” but is often influenced or even instigated by the vision of local residents. In some cases this influence is direct, coming in the form of interviews with local residents who provide their opinions about the needs of their community. In other cases it comes indirectly through observation of local initiatives or emergent activities that are then amplified by the students’ proposals. These projects embrace the significance of local everyday urban narratives, as well as the engagement of residents who know their own neighborhoods best. As a result these projects avoid the problem of becoming trapped within a self-referential theory at the expense of real local concerns. “Daily use of city places provokes responses and counter-responses to utopian visions. The result, the everyday cacophony of the city, is not traditionally defined as beautiful. When the designer begins with everyday reality and defines it as beautiful, existing situations become a starting point rather than a stumbling block. Reality, as opposed to [*the myth of*] utopian stability, provides inspiration.”¹³ Furthermore, if a designer is conscious of how the challenges of a modern urban environment impact real residents, they are simply more likely to propose plans that take real world concerns and impacts into consideration.

APPENDAGE

In addition to the student work that has served to articulate this theory, one professional example is offered in order to demonstrate the success of the theory in a real world application. *The Detroit Col-*

laborative Design Center, which is affiliated with the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, has worked on numerous development proposals in neighborhoods that are typical of post-industrial dispersal. They are also involved in the shaping of public policy in their role as advisor to city government and quasi-governmental development organizations that also serve the city. In the particular example illustrated here a small neighborhood within the city of Detroit called Woodbridge is in the process of being transformed based on a vision that has been developed in collaboration with the residents and community leaders in the neighborhood. Of all the strategies noted above, the engagement with local residents is definitely the most difficult for students to sustain given the recognition that their projects are not “real.” In this example, the ability of the *Design Center* to engage the residents over a longer period of time, with more confidence in the likelihood of tangible results, means that the role of local expertise can be fully embraced. In this example, “stakeholders were asked to develop narratives of what a day in a person’s life would be like in the year 2020. Seven “meta-narratives” were developed based on the individual ones.”¹⁴ This process informed both the analysis of existing conditions, and the eventual proposal of a series of small initiatives throughout the neighborhood. The image below is a conceptual rendering for a commercial corridor in the neighborhood. As a result of the meta-narrative, several specific infill programs and public spaces were proposed in the local ‘voids.’ This project, which also includes other targeted development proposals for the neighborhood, is an excellent example of most of the principles that are found in a less refined state in the emergent work of the graduate studio. This professional example serves as a signal that when working in combination, the eight step recovery theory can be an effective process that actually has the capability of meeting the needs of the residents of our shrinking cities.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the introduction, none of these concepts are particularly innovative when considered independently. However, what seems to be promising is an overall strategy for non-shrinkage that is born out of a direct response to conditions on the ground. In some cases big, bold moves that deal with land use and other comprehensive policies will



Figure 5: Woodbridge Infill: Detroit Collaborative Design Center

be necessary, but in many situations the principles of working small, working from the assets that one has and in consultation with local residents, encouraging the resurgence of natural systems as well as built interventions that can evolve over time, and respecting the void as something that is now a part of our urban DNA seem to hold some promise for reclaiming the abandoned territory that fills our once vibrant cities. In some ways this approach is anticipated by Koolhaas in his essay *Whatever Happened to Urbanism?* "If there is to be a "new urbanism" it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; it will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form, it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering un-nameable hybrids."¹⁵

ENDNOTES

1. Sola-Morales Rubio, Ignasi de, "Terrain Vague." *Anyplace*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. 119.
2. Waldheim, Charles. "Decamping Detroit," *Stalking Detroit*. Ed. Jason Young. Barcelona: Actar, 2001. 108.
3. Waldheim. 105.
4. Ibid.
5. Sola-Morales Rubio. 120.
6. Kaliski, John. "The Present City and the Practice of City Design." *Everyday Urbanism*. Ed. John Chase. New York: Monacelli Press, 2008. 105.
7. Allen, Stan. "Architecture and Dispersal." *Architectural Design 1* (2008): 103.
8. Crawford, Margaret. *Everyday Urbanism: Margaret*

- Crawford vs. Michael Speaks*. Ed. Rahul Mehrotra. New York: Distributed Arts Press, 2005. 19.
9. Corner, James. "Terra Fluxus." *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, Ed. Charles Waldheim. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006. 31.
10. Corner. 29.
11. Allen, Stan. "Mat Urbanism: The Thick 2-D," *CASE: Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and the Mat Building Revival*. Ed. Hashim Sarkis. Munich: Prestel/Harvard Design School, 2001. 118-26.
12. Allen. "Architecture and Dispersal." 102.
13. Kaliski. 107.
14. Detroit Collaborative Design Center. Woodbridge Neighborhood Redevelopment Project Summary Statement.
15. Koolhaas, Rem. "Whatever Happened to Urbanism?" *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large: Office for Metropolitan Architecture*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1998. 969.