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## re-Wildin Detroit: Return of a blighted city back to nature

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# r e - W I L D I N D E T R O I T

*Return of a blighted city back to nature .*

Nivedita Keshri and Shreeya Shakya



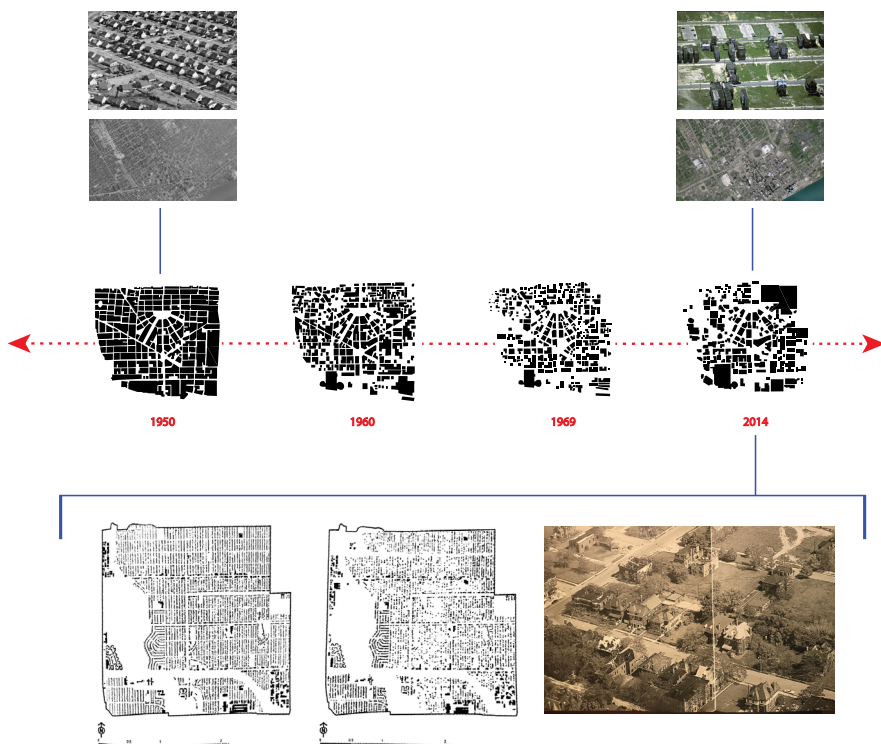
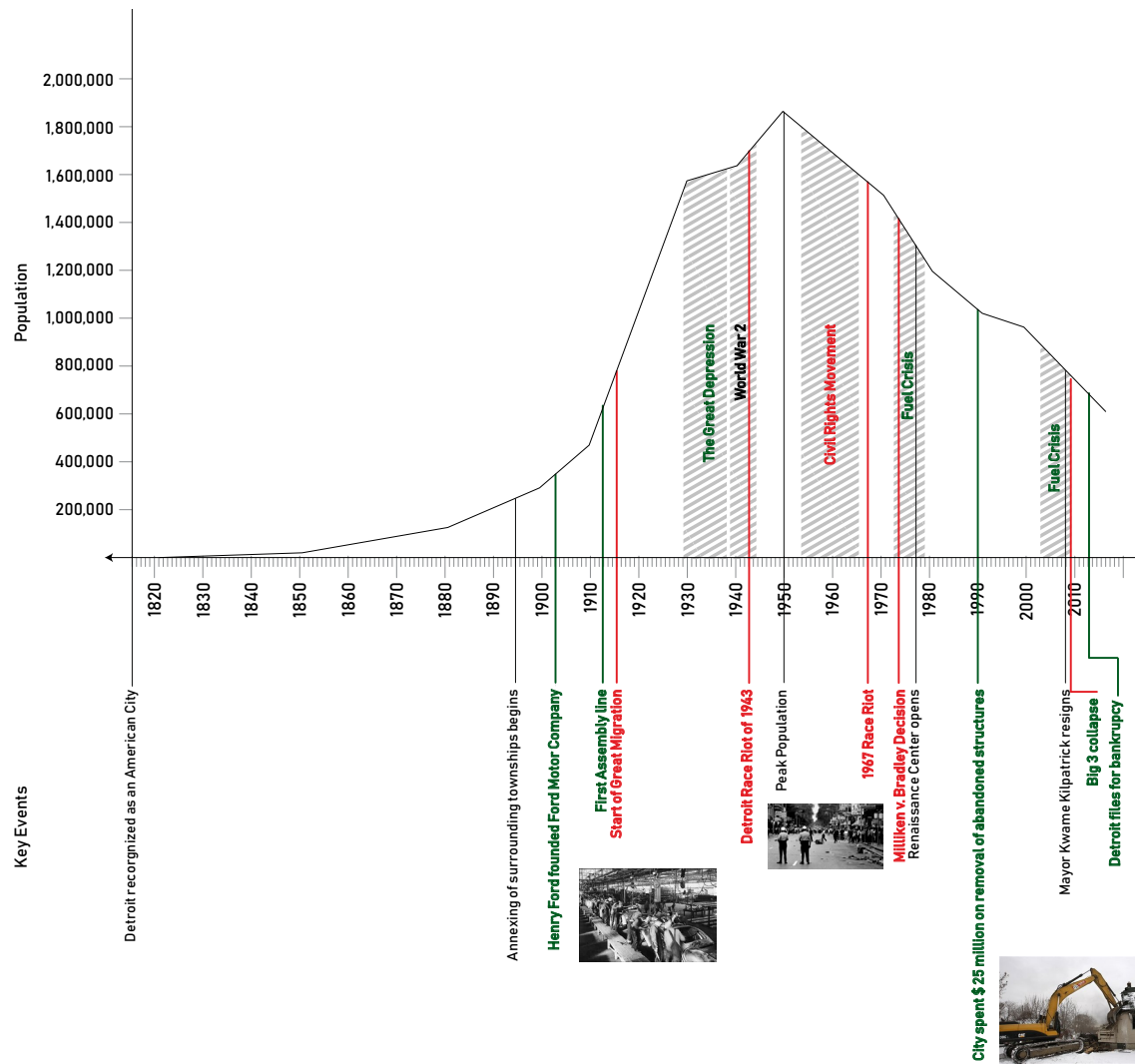
*Let voids be voids.  
The city has been robbed, blighted and scared.  
Let nature take its course,  
Something can be made out of the nothings*

Detroit's complicated history of corruption, racial tensions and economic decline have made conventional strategies for growth, repopulation and infill inadequate for dealing with ongoing and overwhelming urban vacancy. Dealing with voids within shrinking cities have been difficult because it lies outside the existing experience and vocabulary of urban planning, architecture and socio-economics. Most have failed to recognize that voids are not useless and there is potential value in keeping them as voids.

What are the current conditions of these voids? How do we make use of it without erasing it? How can we revisit ideas of a city that embraces its existing voids? How do cities retreat and reorganize in a productive ways? What agency does design have in a void, if any at all?

Allowing nature to reclaim the voids of a blighted city could generate tensions that allow for a new kind of ecological urbanism. We propose a future for the city of Detroit that lets nature take its course by rewilding remains of a post industrial city. By using current contextual logic we speculate on reorganizing the city into nodes of urban villages and allowing the voids in between them to be spaces of regeneration for communities within Detroit and greater ecologies. We consider the qualities of the disregarded to claim that something can be made out of nothing. We explore how boundaries can work to let the urban and the natural coexist.

We are also critical of the viability of landscape architecture's solutions to remaking urban land into large parks. While the practice of landscape architecture offers compelling design solutions from an urban and ecological perspective, it often resolves itself in form of expensive parks which are not a replicable model. The idea of rewilding is taken very literally. While we understand landscape architecture as crafting nature, we understand rewilding as letting nature have its own agency. We are more interested in the idea of doing nothing and the work it takes for rewilding to take place on its own. In resolving the system for rewilding to take place we have the opportunity to revisit the place of architecture.



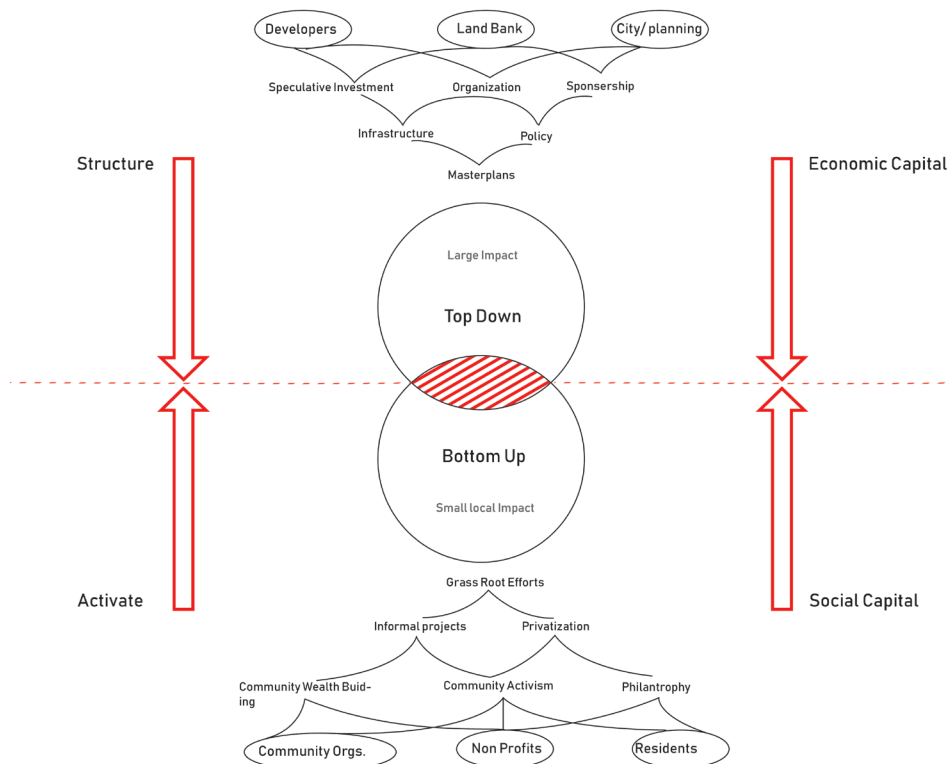
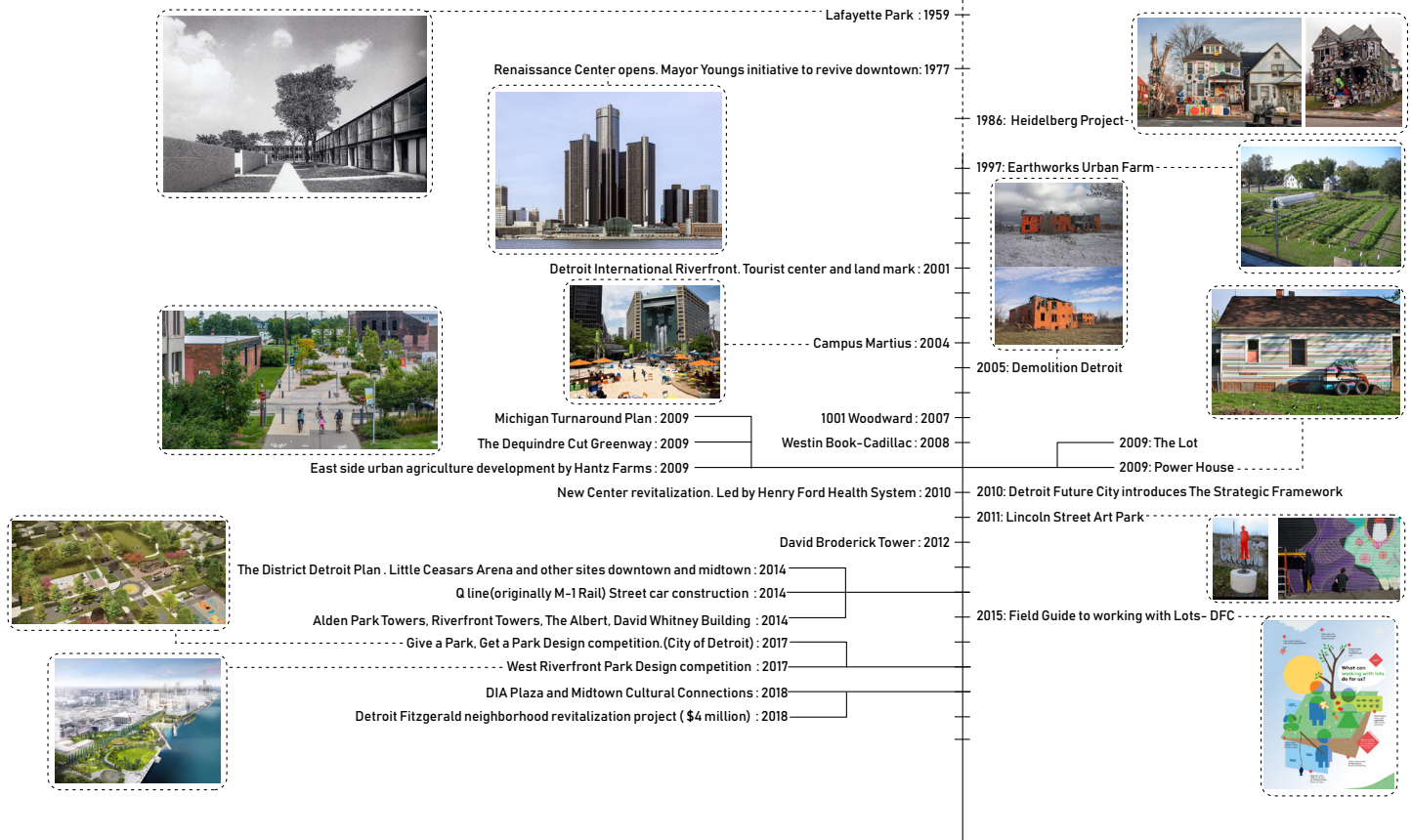
*“Forget what you think you know about this place. Detroit is the most relevant city in the United States” - Jerry Herron, Stalking Detroit*

Detroit emerged as the “Capital of the Twentieth Century.”, as one of the most modern cities in the world. Its sharp rise was built on a single model of production- the automotive industry and the Fordist assembly line. The history of modernity was written in Detroit. Since the height of its population in 1950, Detroit has lost almost half of its population. The decline of Detroit is a complicated matter with a lot of factors contributing to it. We mapped out a timeline of major events (*top*) that highlight economic, political, geographical aspects to understand how these factor came into play. No one thing can be blamed for the state that we find Detroit in, so we acknowledge that any future proposals must take into account various perspectives.

As in most cities with shrinking populations, the effects can be clearly seen in the urban fabric. It can be seen over time how the structure and density of the city begins to disintegrate over time at different scales (*side*).

## Formal Urban Renewal

## Informal Urban Renewal



We are critical of the current narrative that is emerging out of Detroit claiming that it is going through a "Renaissance". In tracking the revitalization projects (*top*) carried out by the city and developers, we derive that this is a dangerous narrative that primarily favors the gentrification of downtown and midtown and does not acknowledge challenges of the neighborhoods of Detroit. There is also an incredible rise of people taking matters into their own hands in these forgotten neighborhoods of Detroit, giving rise to creative solutions and informal urbanisms.

We tried to understand how top down and bottom up systems work in Detroit (*side*). Our main understanding was that top down players like the city, land bank and developers are driven by economic capital and bottom up non-profits and communities are driven by social capital. Top down succeed in providing structure and bottom up is successful in engaging and activating the community. Our project seeks to take cue from practices like Estudio Cruz that place themselves as the mediator and design framework and systems along with architecture.

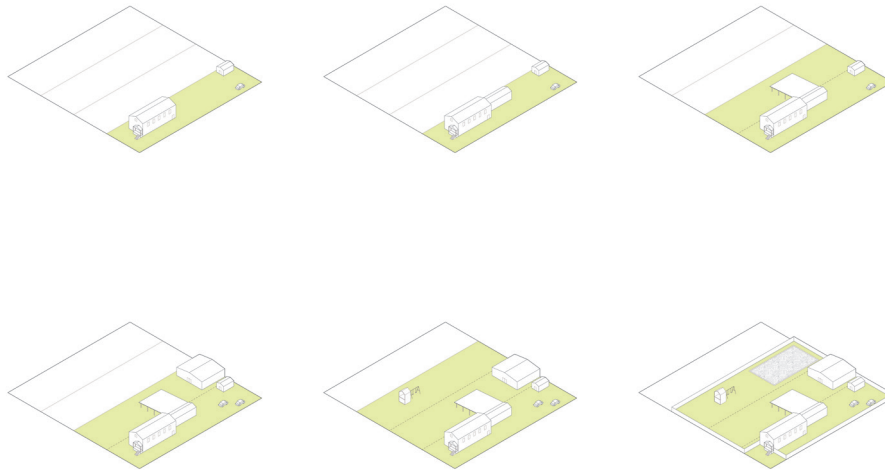
The total area of vacant land in Detroit is about 20 square miles, for scale, that's approximately the size of Manhattan. The majority of the vacant lands in Detroit are owned by the Detroit Land Bank Authority, a quasi government entity. The DLBA is a public authority that owns and maintains approximately 100,000 parcels of land, making them the largest landowners in the city. They operate through multiple programs to reduce the amount of vacant land in public ownership. One of the methods that they use to sell property are through side lot programs. Side lot programs are favorable for any homeowner who lives adjacent to a vacant property. Side lots are available for a fixed price of \$100, making them an affordable alternative to increasing property size. The benefit of the side lot program is that it encourages the community to purchase the land and maintain it, while also increasing taxable land for the government. Purchased side lots are often converted

into urban farms or simply used as a spatial extension of an existing backyard.

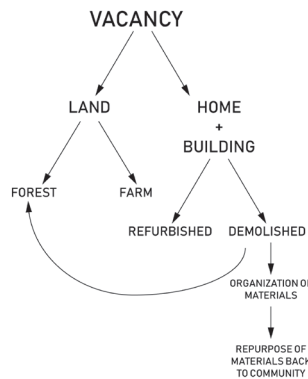
However, not everyone is interested in purchasing and using a side lot and a majority of the vacant land that are not side lots are still held by the DLBA. The DLBA is restricted by the city in the selling of this land unless there is a plan for development, which is rare in the current economic condition of Detroit. The city's primary interest is to gain revenue from these properties as it is just recovering from bankruptcy. 200 parcels of land was sold to a developer for The Fitzgerald Revitalization Project, a public and private collaboration. The 42 million dollar project is unlikely to be replicated.

When we visited Detroit we found it important to breakdown the types of vacancy to get a better understanding of what we are dealing with. Along with the percentage of vacancy, we categorized three general conditions of a block (right). The vacancy types include blocks with houses that have been demolished completely and nothing is left empty lots, or the house still exists in bad condition that need to be demolished and with lots that have illegal dumping. Another typology of vacancy is when there are mostly vacant houses, that are in bad condition or boarded up.

We used the timeline tool in Google Street maps to make a series of certain blocks overtime that had fallen into negligence (*following pages*). It was interesting to us that when left alone, the vacant lots and houses started getting taken over by nature and building their own ecologies within them.



In our project vacant lands are revived through productive use of the land and through the construction of public spaces and connectors built from materials from demolished homes. A number of communities have taken up urban farming in vacant lots as this offers not only a viable ecological solution for the community, but also the potential for economic growth and social change. Farms however, cannot be the single solution to the scale of vacancy as there is no interest from the people of Detroit to return back to an agrarian lifestyle. Lands that are deemed vacant have the potential of returning back to nature by becoming forests, with limited intervention on the part of the community and the government.



This ecosystem is purposed to integrate back into the landscape, housing a myriad of plant and animal species. To make way for this forest we image the reorganization of the city. By determining areas of higher vacancy, we speculate on the relocation of houses to create denser, healthier neighborhoods. The other side of the rewilding would be the material that comes from the restructuring of these neighborhood. In our project we also look at constructing communal spaces and edge conditions from repurposed material. We use the neighborhood of Brightmoor, located in the western edge of Detroit with high levels of vacancy. The void of the city are used to densify the neighborhood and the disregarded spaces and material get a second life.



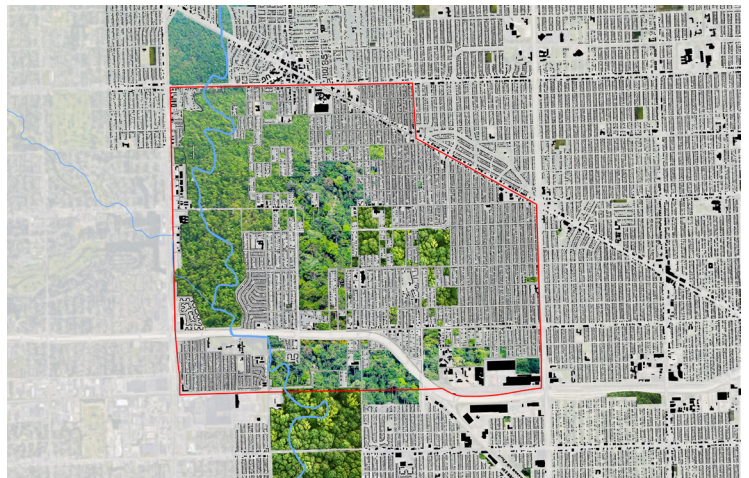
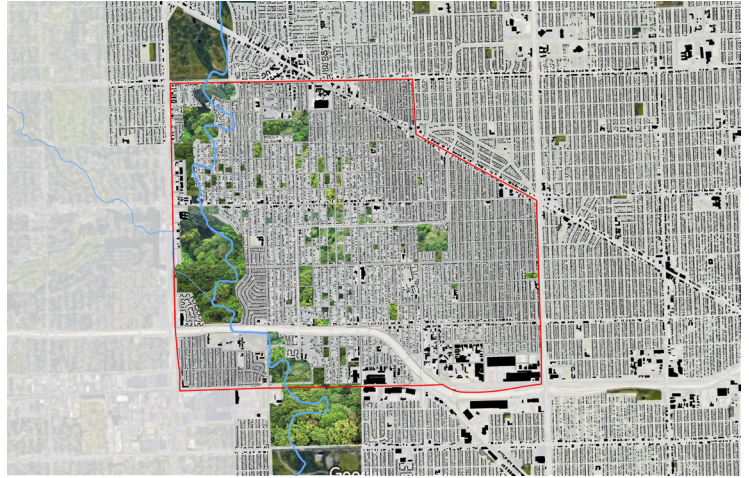
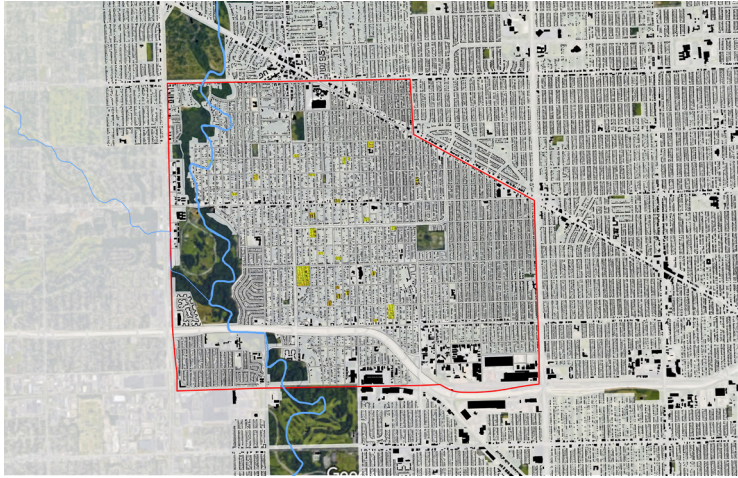


Source: Google Street Maps





Source: Google Street Maps



*Brightmoo: Now - 2050*

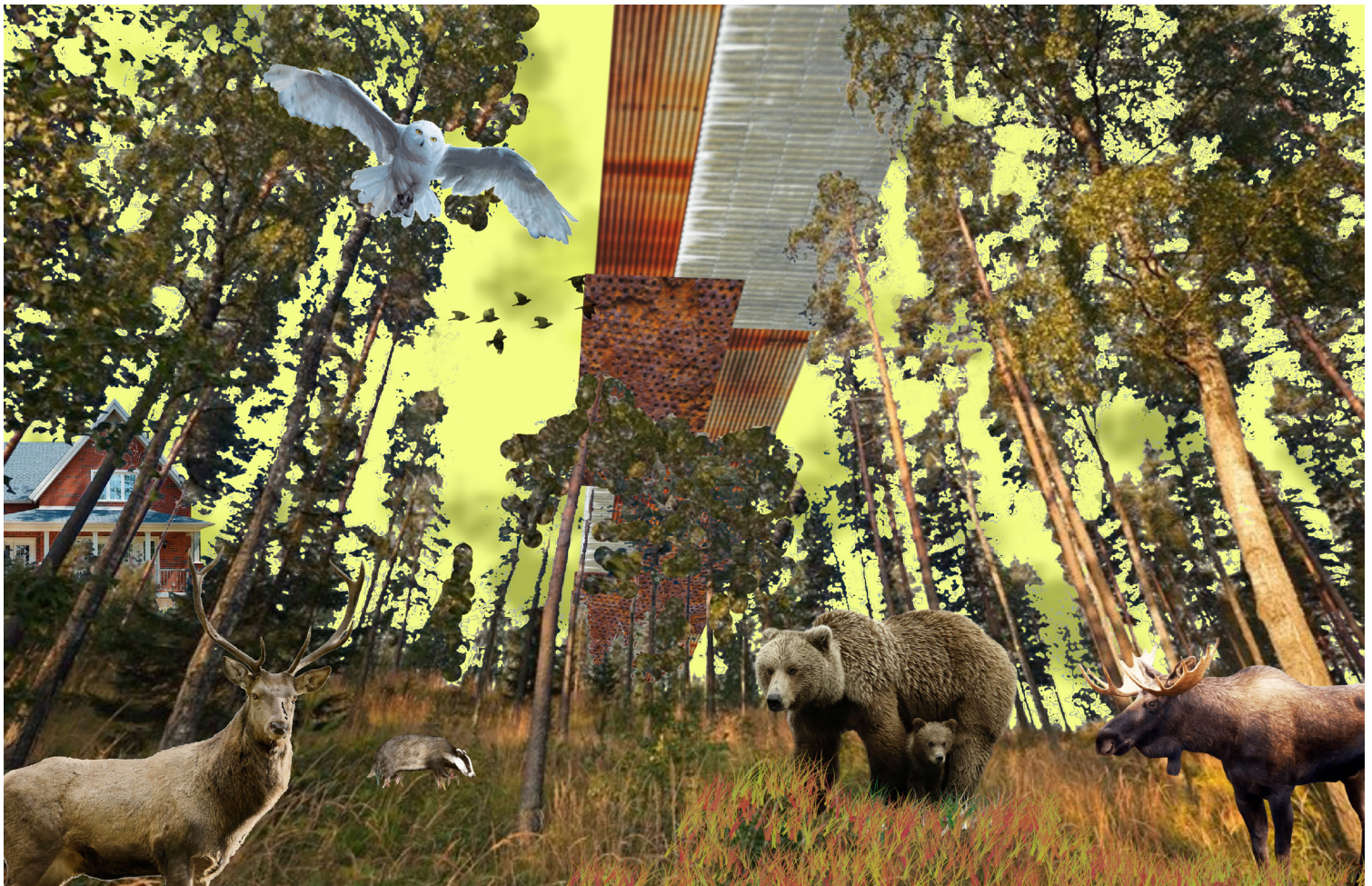














## Image Citation:

"Chapter 7." Mapping Detroit Land, Community, and Shaping a City, by June Manning and Henco Bekkering, Wayne State University Press, 2015, p. 147.

"Stalking Detroit." Stalking Detroit, by Georgia Daskalakis et al., Actar, 2001, pp. 150–151.

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