

## AUTOMOBILE EROSION IN DOWNTOWN DETROIT – 1920-2020

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### ABSTRACT

*Both the rise and fall of Detroit greatly has impacted the morphology and functioning of its downtown. From the 1920s onward, the city's own invention – the automobile – has eroded downtown fabric through the spread of parking lots and deleterious street widenings. Unable to build significant public transit, city planners subsequently made way for car traffic until a majority of downtown space was dedicated to parked and moving automobiles today.*

*Focusing specifically on the dichotomy between automobiles and the city, this paper surveys the array of planning, engineering and design strategies to keep downtown moving between 1920 and 2020, and places these strategies in a larger framework of downtown reinvention. Modernist and Post-modernist urban planning and design planning stand in stark contrast to automobile erosion and market failure. This paper not only describes this dichotomy; it demonstrates and studies its morphological manifestation through a series of maps and statistics that show the level of urban erosion.*

*The paper concludes with a final phase in which downtown is reappreciated rather than reinvented, through the private preservation and repurposing of its historic urban form and architecture – although the car remains king.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Detroit's reputation as the Motor City is both globally famous and infamous. On one hand, this moniker recalls narratives of industrial power and technological innovation, which certainly rings true for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the Motor City's namesake invention, the automobile, has been quick to turn against its inventor – first and foremost in its downtown. Decades before the city's population peak in the 1950s, downtown experienced its own economic, social and morphological peak. Newfound automotive wealth and construction may have shaped downtown Detroit's skyline during the 1910s and 1920s, the one-the-growth benefits of skyward growth rapidly diminished as downtown's pre-automobile form was unable to adapt to an influx of Detroit's four-wheeled offspring.

As a result, downtown Detroit experienced a rapid yet uneasy morphological transformation from a fine-grained walkable fabric toward a car-dominated archipelago of historic fabric, introverted architecture, interspersed with a sea of parking lots and garages. For over a century, downtown Detroit has effectively 'dehumanized' itself, transforming its buildings and public spaces for people toward car parking. Parking has especially eroded the periphery of downtown Detroit, effectively creating an automobile fringe belt through decline rather than growth cycles (Whitehand, 1988). This paper will survey this process of transformation in narrative form and a series of morphological maps based on a range of private and public sources, ending on a somewhat positive note with today's reappreciation of downtown.

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### THE CANARY IN THE COALMINE

Like most other American downtowns, Detroit's downtown skyline rapidly transformed during the 1910s and 1920s. Transforming from a northern provincial town into an international center of

automotive production, Detroit experienced some of the most rapid population and economic expansions known in the United States. While most growth was outward – the result of cultural pastoralism and anti-urban industrialists like Henry Ford – downtown reflected the city’s new role in the form of a construction boom during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A motley crew of local boosterists, retail and entertainment magnates and national banking conglomerates transformed the downtown skyline in a series of superlatives – from the Art Deco glamour of the Guardian Building and the Fox Theatre to Hudson’s, America’s second-largest department store. Down at eye level, Ukrainian car parts salesman Max Goldberg built an entirely different empire – of private, off-street parking lots. Understanding the value of private lots to house Detroit’s growing cohort of cars parked in downtown, Goldberg’s empire expanded from a single 1917 lot to dozens of owned and managed lots in the 1930s. These lots formed at the fringes of downtown, servicing the needs of new skyscrapers, while cutting them off from the older neighborhoods surrounding the city. By 1929, one can already recognize a solid ring of parking around the downtown – covering enough unpaved land to throw veritable dust storms at times of drought (Kickert, 2019). A series of widened arterials cut through the periphery of downtown to keep downtown accessible to cars, further eroding walkability and transit access. In a sense, downtown had become the canary in Detroit’s coalmine of morphological and socio-economic decline.



Figure 1. Buildings added (green) and removed (red) in downtown Detroit between 1921 and 1929 demonstrate a dichotomy between central skyscraper construction and peripheral parking lot demolition.

Initially, car parking was simply an issue of capacity in a downtown that remained at the region's center. By the 1940s, it became clear that the car was taking residents away from Detroit and its downtown more than the other way around. A ring of secondary shopping and office centers had grown around the city, threatening the hegemony of downtown as a commercial destination. In a bid to maintain downtown accessibility to Detroit's automobile middle and upper class, City Hall aggressively became involved in forcing downtown into the automobile era. Drastic urban renewal and infrastructure projects cut through the downtown periphery, already eroded by parking and undermaintained neighborhoods – often housing African Americans. The planning mantra was to beat Detroit's prospering suburbs at their own game, by making downtown into a car-accessible middle class environment. Under newly hired planner-engineer Charles Blessing, thousands of inner city residents, homes, businesses and entire blocks were bulldozed to make way for an auto-centric "Dream City" of highways, Modernist housing, office towers, and parking garages. Effectively, this dream paved over the fringe belt that had grown around downtown since the 1920s, solidifying a ragged pattern of remaining buildings and gravel lots into a concrete world of ramps and towers. Yet in many cases, this dream failed to materialize as market demand stalled after Detroit's population and economic peak during the 1950s, leaving swaths of peripheral land vacant for decades to follow.



Figure 2. Downtown urban form in 1951 (left) and 1967 (right) show the extent of Modernist renewal.

In 1967, Detroit experienced some of America's worst civil disorders, reflecting African American dissent with decades of segregation, lack of opportunities and police brutality. As a result, downtown Detroit's gradual decline accelerated, leaving offices, retailers and homes empty. By the 1970s, downtown was no longer shaped by the public forces of urban planners and traffic engineers, but by the private forces of large corporations and real estate developers. Interestingly, this regime shift hardly decelerated the trend of coarsening downtown's urban fabric toward car accessibility, as a "postmodern urbanism" geared around safety and simulation reigned (Ellin, 1996). The Renaissance Center, a 1977 mixed-use office, retail and hotel complex notoriously had no front door, welcoming visitors only through a web of surrounding parking garages and lots. Surrounding new construction similarly turned away from the street, instead internalizing public life into interior atriums, walkways and courts. Under various mayoral reigns, this pattern exacerbated

to the point that private developers were able to obtain, demolish and rebuild entire downtown districts for office campuses, sports palaces and casino complexes. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this car-centric architecture and urbanism had effectively turned downtown into its own parasite – the suburb.

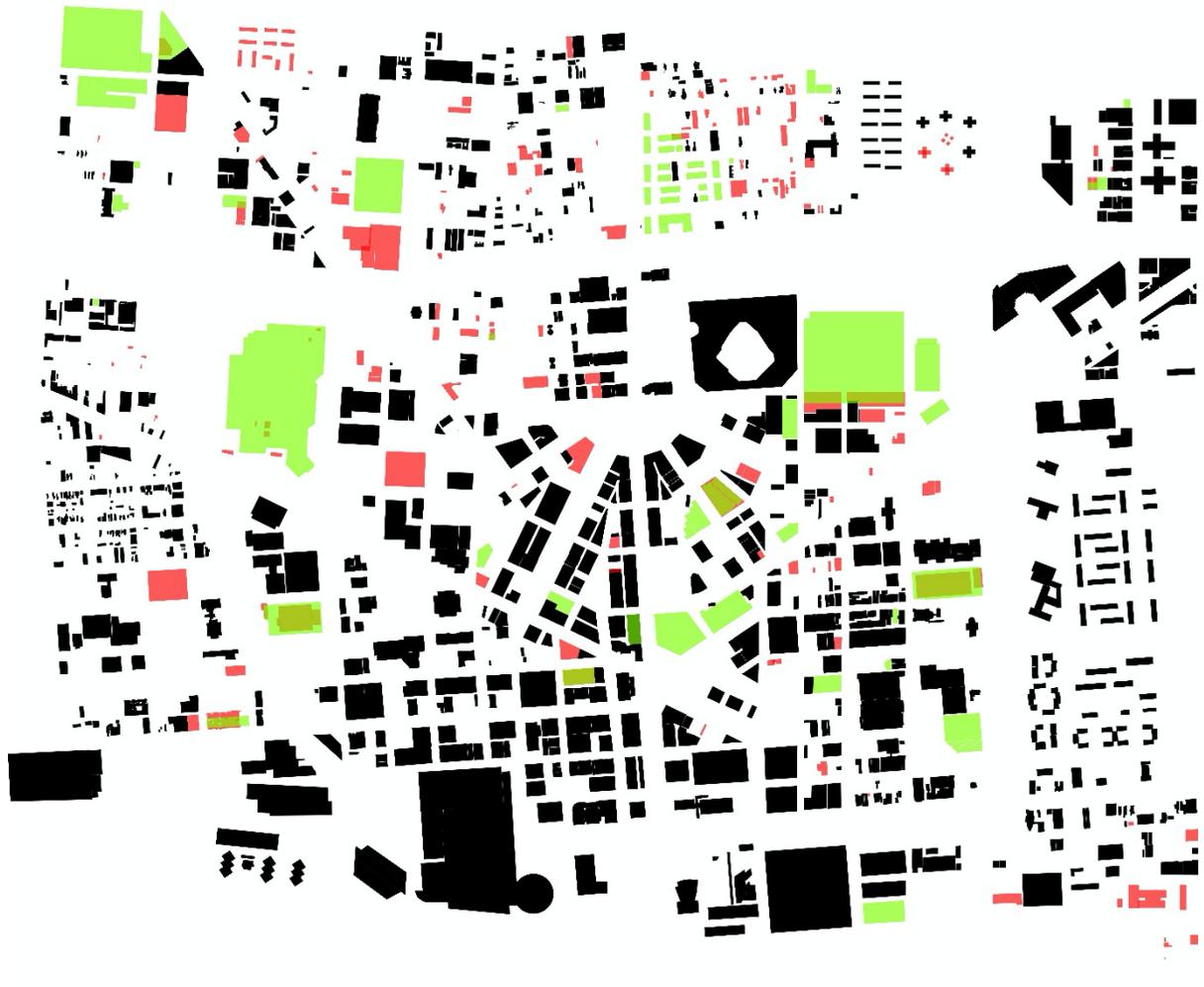


Figure 3. Construction and demolition between 2001 and 2011 shows the construction of multi-block casinos and sports complexes.

#### POSTMODERN REAPPRECIATION – AT LEAST IN PART

By 2010, downtown Detroit had transformed itself into a leisure destination, welcoming suburbanites to visit for sports and gambling, with freeways and car parking allowing for easy car access, but most importantly an easy exit from downtown. Most remaining historic buildings that used to cater to pedestrians sat empty, awaiting a new purpose. Historic preservation efforts, no matter how valiant, simply could not counter a stagnant market and sky-high renovation costs after decades of vacancy and neglect. This paradigm shifted with the rediscovery of downtown as the home of a young, educated Creative Class cohort of workers, visitors, and residents, by local mortgage billionaire Daniel “Dan” Gilbert. Discovering the value of downtown’s historic buildings as a unique setting for his envisioned workers, Gilbert set off on a “skyscraper sale”, now owning over 100 historic downtown buildings, which he has transformed into offices, homes, bars, restaurants and shops (Gallagher, 2014). Gilbert followed his predecessors accumulation of downtown land and buildings, yet he understands the value of a walkable and fine-grained urban

fabric – at least for those who can afford it. What can be seen as a revived walkable mecca for urbanites, can also be seen as a sanitized “urbanoid environment”, free of any of the grit and risks that define the rest of Detroit (Goldberger, 1996).

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## CONCLUSIONS

When taking count of downtown’s transformation between 1920 and 2020, one may think of a near-constant narrative of decline and erosion. The morphological maps have been combined with GIS measurements of building volume to derive the total floor area size of downtown, which actually reveals that while downtown shrank from 1929 onward, it actually rebounded in size after the city’s 1967 civil disorder nadir. Decades of failed urban renewal proved to fuel the most prolific decline. However, when taking into account how much construction is for car parking, one can see that after 1967, the city has continued to shrink its built area for people, instead replacing it with buildings for cars. Between 2011 and 2018, this accounted for around 80% of new construction. Similarly, the majority of downtown space remains the territory of automobiles. Despite the launch of the city’s first streetcar system since the 1950s, as well as bicycle sharing programs, downtown remains an island surrounded by car parking and freeways in the Motor City. A century after its first opening, downtown’s fringe belt is proving quite resilient to change.

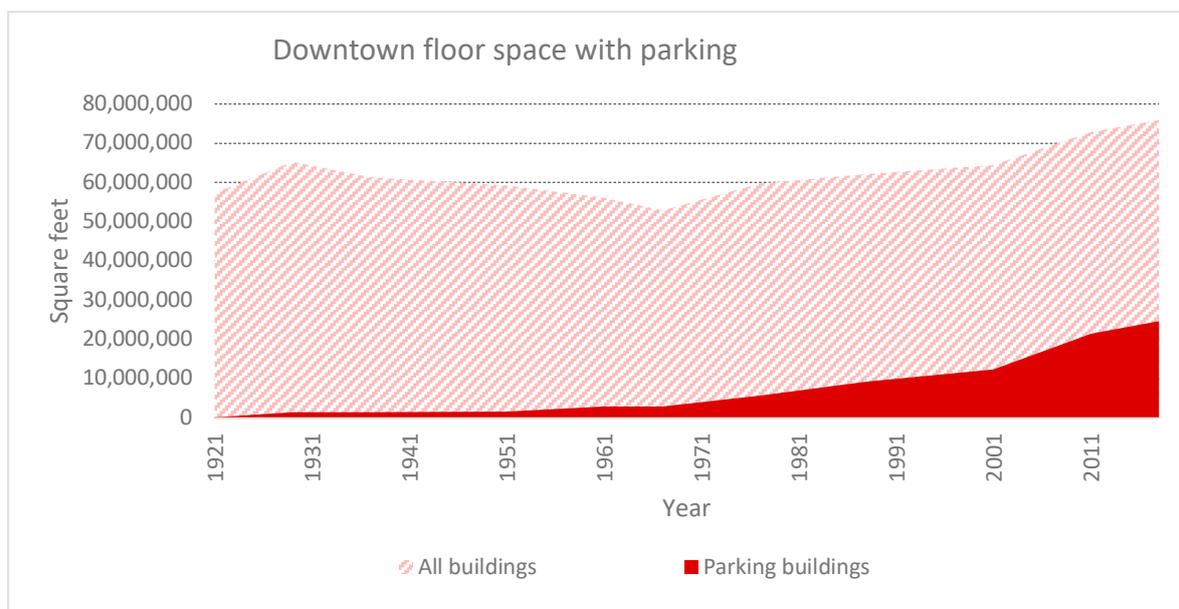


Figure 4. Floor space of all downtown buildings in square feet, including parking.

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