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FOREFRONT

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# CAN URBAN PLANNING RESCUE DETROIT?

The Hopes, Fears and Possibilities of the Detroit  
Future City Plan



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In the basement of Detroit's Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, in the brisk early dark of a February evening, dozens of activists and neighborhood residents come together to talk about the future. It's a touchy subject. This is Detroit, a city pinned to what went wrong in its past, not what will go right in its future. Organizers ground the discussion in conviviality. The meeting opens with a meet-your-neighbor exercise and will end with bowls of chili served out of tall steel pots. In between, longtime activists discuss **Detroit Future City**, an unprecedented, philanthropy-backed

"Make" neighborhoods are introduced as a solution for adapting former industrial areas into artistic and residential spaces. In high-vacancy parts of the city, the framework proposes investing in sustainable landscape and incentivizing job creation around productive land use. The word "engagement" appears roughly 61 times in the first 150 pages.

The hope is that Detroit Future City will inspire decision-makers at all levels — block club presidents and city councilmembers, community patrol leaders and investors — to make choices that align with a



Charles Cross lives on a block where streetlights have been out for months.

plan to guide the next 50 years of decision-making in a place that has, to many, become emblematic of backward-looking stasis.

To a casual reader, the sprawling 347-page plan can feel like a kind of Choose Your Own Adventure for liberal urban planners. In one section, authors champion the possibility of transforming vacant land into "carbon forests" to buffer neighborhoods from expressways, and urge the city to "become a national leader in green industrial districts." Another section imagines the city's downtown as a center for "new creative, digital, and professional services," where historic structures are reinvigorated for a "24/7 mixed-use environment." Elsewhere, "Live-

coherent vision for a city that is working to become whole after decades of bleeding.

More so than previous plans for Detroit — the city's master plan was adopted in 1992, with updates in 2009 — Future City does not avoid difficult truths. In this version of Detroit's future, the city of 701,475 is, simply, smaller. It is not trying to lure back the 1.1 million people who left since its residential peak in 1950. In Future City's future city, Detroit's housing footprint is smaller and some historically residential neighborhoods now decaying and largely vacant will be rezoned for agriculture or green infrastructure.

"We accepted some of [Detroit's] realities, like the population being a lot smaller, and then planned

from there. And within that, I think [the framework] is strongly bold,” said Toni Griffin, the urban planner who led DFC’s planning process, then known as the Detroit Works Project. Last year, Griffin launched the J. Max Bond Center on Design for the Just City at the City College of New York. She is speaking nationally these days about urban planning in Detroit, while her former DFC colleagues lead the plan’s implementation.

Future City comes at a critical moment. In March, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder appointed Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to oversee Detroit’s finances. Tasked by state law with solving the city’s bracing money problems, Orr has the power of both mayor and city council through at least the end of 2014. In the fall, Detroiters will vote in a new mayor and host its first election of a city council where most members are elected by district, rather than at-large. Separately, Detroit Public Schools are under their own

headquartered in Troy, Mich., has been its most significant donor and took an active role in coordinating the planning process. Kresge further promised \$150 million over the next five years to projects supporting DFC’s vision. Kresge and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation are together supporting the new office, which opened this spring, with \$3 million over the next two years.

But for Future City to become the real future of the city, adoption by the public sector is key. While highly touted, Kresge’s \$150 million is not new money, but only what the foundation already budgeted for projects in Detroit. Its commitment is simply that funded projects will align with the Future City outlook. For any large part of the framework to take shape requires investment in public infrastructure, services and updated public policy — feats well beyond the scope of foundation money.

Whether buy-in from government will happen

**While there are reports that Orr has a copy of the DFC book feathered with sticky notes, to date he has not met with anybody from the project – and not because they haven’t asked.**

state-appointed emergency management; the system’s second consecutive EM retires this year and will likely be replaced by a new appointment.

Detroit Future City functions largely outside this turbulence. The steering committee for long-term planning was assembled by Mayor Dave Bing and reported to him regularly. City Hall’s planning efforts under the then-named Detroit Works Project focused on short-term projects in three neighborhoods, presenting models of how a market approach to service delivery can work.

But as Future City pivots into implementation for its most transformative projects, its new program management office moves under the umbrella of the **Detroit Economic Growth Corporation**, a quasi-public non-profit agency. Future City is funded not by taxpayers, but by private foundations. The Kresge Foundation, a \$3.1 billion philanthropic organization

remains to be seen. While there are reports that Orr has a copy of the DFC book feathered with sticky notes, to date he has not met with anybody from the project — and not because they haven’t asked — though the *Detroit Free Press* has reported him saying, “If Detroit Future City were done 30 years ago, imagine what it would be like now.” Bing has championed DFC, which began as a project of his administration, but he is not seeking reelection. Former Detroit Medical Center CEO Mike Duggan, a prominent candidate for mayor until he was dropped from the ballot for residency issues, toured DFC’s home base in an Eastern Market storefront and **told the *Free Press*** that he supports the plan. Other candidates, including Wayne County Sheriff Benny Napoleon and former state Rep. Lisa Howze, offered cautious support — but framed it in the form of a hypothetical, making it appear that they haven’t delved deeply into it.

Regardless, Griffin believes the plan will stick. The current uncertainty, she said in a recent interview, is just another step in a long process.

“Any city that moves through a big planning process has great anxiety about what happens next,” she said.

This anxiety was evident, for example, in another major effort at long-term non-governmental

across the city. He remembers the deep tensions felt as residents heard urban planners from around the world speculate about how Katrina would reshape their city. People who had recently lost their homes listened angrily as planners discussed how the storm and subsequent levee failure had created an opportunity to rebuild a “smarter,” geographically smaller city with their flooded neighborhoods — areas including the



Some 80,000 homes are boarded up and vacant in Detroit.

strategic planning. In New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, the Rockefeller Foundation, Greater New Orleans Foundation and the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund spent millions to bankroll a community planning process that resulted in the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), a broad-reaching vision for recovery.

Steve Bingler, a New Orleans architect who directed the UNOP process, led a five-month process of public community meetings in neighborhoods

predominantly black Lower 9th Ward and Eastern New Orleans — not rebuilt and instead turned into parks or open space.

Before UNOP even began, maps created by the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute and funded by deep-pocketed local real estate interests showed these parts of the city as green dots. The tension, Bingler, recalled, “was about who was in control more than which areas of the city were going



Charles Cross has talked to thousands of Detroiters about the Detroit Future City plan.

to come back.”

“It was about power,” he said. “It was about equity. Whether people’s voices were being heard.”

Just like in New Orleans, planning in Detroit is fraught with questions about the role of national foundations in local matters, and about how to actualize an urban agenda that arose outside of popular elections.

“The foundations, which are really corporations in drag, are making sure that certain neighborhoods are... getting infrastructure improvements, lighting improvements... [while] other neighborhoods are decommissioned,” said Elena Herrada, a Detroit Public Schools board member and city resident who opposes the framework.

Charles Cross, who co-directs civic engagement for Detroit Future City, has the job of communicating with skeptics like Herrada — not through bland surveys or suggestion cards, but face-to-face. By building on-the-ground support and engagement, DFC is generating a sort of de facto democratic process to buoy its vision.

In February, Cross joined the gathering at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, hosted by an

immigration reform group. Cross moved his glasses to the top of his head as he told the attendees about how he hustles from one meeting like this to another — three or four a week — to demystify DFC. “We try to accommodate as many people as we can, because this is meaningful,” Cross told me later. “These are hard times. There’s a lot of suffering, a lot of fear. We have to communicate with the people of Detroit, because the people of Detroit are the ones that are going to make this happen.”

A landscape architect by training, Cross lives near downtown Detroit and works at the University of Detroit-Mercy’s Detroit Collaborative Design Center, which led civic engagement during the planning process and continues to do so during implementation. Cross backs DFC because it presents a vision for “improving the quality of life for all Detroiters... We need to be an equitable city.”

At Pleasant Grove, a neatly dressed minister named Alonzo Bell stood and asked Cross how the framework could support his community organizing in an east side neighborhood. He was trying to help young people and was surprised to find a lack of

options for support. (Incidentally, during the meet-your-neighbor exercise, I spoke with this minister's brother-in-law, who told me that he'd been lost until he met Bell, "a good man" who he said saved his life.)

Cross asked if Bell knew about another group doing similar youth-centered work in the same neighborhood. The minister did not. Cross promised to put them in touch, so each could amplify the work of the other. "That's what this is all about," Cross said from the podium. He extended his index fingers and tapped them together. "Making sure we're working together, talking to each other, and not isolated from each other. Making connections." Three months later, Cross told me, with real enthusiasm, that the two east-

the latest in a long line to imagine Detroit's future. Those who try often spin into the weeds. There have been nonsense proposals, like one [offered by a group of moneyed libertarians](#) to turn Belle Isle, the city's 985-acre island park, into a private self-governing commonwealth where citizenship is priced at \$300,000, a unique currency — the "Rand" — is adopted, and neighboring Detroiters are employed to build skyscrapers and helipads for the Belle Islanders.

Other imaginings of Detroit's future are profoundly offensive. It's been suggested the city be left "in ruins" as a warning story for citizens elsewhere — a bizarre proposal in its erasure of the hundreds of thousands of modern Detroiters, and its notion that

**"These are hard times. There's a lot of suffering, a lot of fear. We have to communicate with the people of Detroit, because the people of Detroit are the ones that are going to make this happen."**

side groups are meeting biweekly. He remembered Bell by name.

There was no vote at the meeting about whether the group supported or rejected the framework. Rather, a cautious, hopeful, ambivalent mood settled in the room. But this was a group attentive to means, as well as ends. They closed with a familiar crescendoing chant: "This is what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!"

Detroit Future City needs that energy if it hopes to transform a city staring down 40 square miles of vacant land, 72 Superfund sites and food insecurity at double the national rate. "We have to let people know this is not for someone else," Cross said. "This is for you."

If Detroit Future City succeeds, it could be the most significant urban turnaround story the country has ever seen. If it doesn't... well, there's no plan for that.

## SELLING THE VISION

Toni Griffin and Charles Cross are only

the city's best use is as a museum piece for people who live far away.

On the shaky precedent of imagining a way forward, Detroit Future City is not exempt from stumbling. Its launch, as the Detroit Works Project, was indisputably bad. Rumors that this plan would push residents out of their homes as the city "downsized" its 139 acres were baldly affirmed when Bing indicated that relocating residents was "absolutely" part of the plan. "There will be winners and losers, but in the end we've got to do what's right for the city's future," Bing [said in February 2010](#).

Backlash was intense. Community meetings devolved into chaos. Two people then working on civic engagement under Griffin abruptly left the project. The whole initiative was nearly dropped with an ignominious thud. Its second life came in 2011, when at the behest of its major funder — Kresge — Detroit Works split into two. The city took on short-term planning efforts, while a team of local and national planners led long-term planning. The new program management office is a distinct entity, created to turn ideas into reality.

Why did Kresge prioritize such a tricky project? Wendy Jackson, senior program officer with the foundation's Detroit and community development team, said the decision grew from Kresge's "very robust structure and groundwork in Detroit."

"It was extremely important to look at [a long-term vision for Detroit], not only for how to improve our own grantmaking, but also — looking at where the city was at three years ago — it was clear that a comprehensive framework for the future was imperative," Jackson said.

Relocation is off the table. However, the framework does suggest incentives for Detroiters to move into denser neighborhoods (about 104,000 of Detroit's 385,390 parcels are vacant, as are nearly 80,000 of 349,170 housing units). While demand for multi-family housing is rising, the city's miles

by providing smaller, flexible and on-demand shuttle services, instead of propelling full-size buses down long routes several times a day with only a handful of passengers rattling in the back, as happens in the current system. Roads with 100 percent vacancy, and no use for through-traffic, would be repurposed as stormwater catchments or green space. Core city systems would take a "maintain only" approach in areas where "the future population level remains uncertain and the infrastructure system is of such an age that prolongation of its renewal is still viable." DFC takes pains to note that this strategy would be used sparingly, and in respect for how residents and businesses will stake claim to the land in the future.

Is this a plan for divestment from high-vacancy neighborhoods? Not now, at least. Instead it's a tactic for maintaining basic city systems while focusing

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of single-family homes are increasingly unused. Somewhat surprisingly, only 88,900 residents live in high-vacancy neighborhoods, compared to nearly 619,000 in more stable areas. However, high-vacancy areas make up 21 percent of the city's footprint — and images of them have come to symbolize Detroit.

Future City defines high-vacancy neighborhoods as those with "very high rates of both land and building vacancy" that have "largely lost their residential character." Most of this land is neglected, with a great deal of illegal dumping, and is largely under public ownership. "For those who would choose to relocate (if they had means or opportunity), programs should be developed to allow them to do so," advises the framework. "For those who choose to stay, it is imperative to ensure that their basic levels of service are met, including provisions for safety and security." Incentives might include a voluntary house-to-house swap program.

The framework further recommends tiered transportation that would serve high-vacancy areas

upgrades and capital investments on populous areas. Investment in high-vacancy neighborhoods will model an alternative urban density that measures more than just numbers of people — instead of trying to fill empty homes on a residential street, deconstruction could make way for urban farms and retention ponds, using the land while eliminating the need for additional spending on residential services and utilities. Divestment is possible in the future, once "maintain only" is no longer practicable for aging infrastructure and either an upgrade or shutdown is necessary. In other words, the plan prepares for divestment but does not implement it: Implementation depends on how many people are living and working in these areas in years hence.

Threaded through Future City is an emphasis on reforming the city's blight management. Increasing the cost of demolition by neglect will discourage neglectful private ownership; the towering ruin-porn icon Michigan Central train station, last used as such in 1989 and owned by Michigan billionaire

Manny Maroun, is the city's most infamous example. (Maroun's company also owns the Ambassador Bridge, connecting Detroit with Windsor, Ontario.)

But Detroit Future City's vision goes far beyond high-vacancy areas.

The framework features five planning elements — economic growth, land use, city systems, neighborhoods, and land and building assets — that offer integrated approaches to improving the city. “Transformative ideas” are highlighted as a guiding vision for each element (“a city of equitable economic

term strategy to grow minority-owned businesses. Racial minorities make up 89 percent of Detroit's population, but own only 15 percent of its businesses. Strengthening minority business ownership is clearly a catalyst for the city's future, and would reverberate across at least two DFC planning elements (economic growth, neighborhoods). DFC suggests doing this by relaxing licensing and regulatory requirements, as well as reducing costs and capital burdens that limit the ability of businesses to transition from the informal economy to the formal one. It also recommends the



Detroit Future City Director Dan Kinkead wants to see empty, historically residential areas eventually rezoned for agriculture and green infrastructure.

growth,” for example, and “a green city where landscape contribute to health”). After detailing the current unsatisfactory state of affairs under each issue, DFC outlines recommended strategies for change. There are hundreds altogether, large and small, and they're mapped across time: The next five years (stabilize), years 5-10 (improve), years 10-20 (sustain) and years 20-50 (transform). The city is also parsed into zones, and within those are land use typologies that offer a picture of how it can coordinate neighborhood, industrial and landscape districts, resulting in a more complete city.

Among DFC's recommendations: Create a long-

city develop low-cost shared spaces for sectors with high levels of self-employment, like accounting and landscaping, that can provide storage for equipment and products.

“Strategies must attempt to address the larger social and economic factors that curtail [minority-owned business] creation and growth, including lower average personal wealth, less experience with family businesses, lower average education levels, and challenges with access to capital,” the plan emphasizes.

“There are other cities with population loss and a high percentage of vacancy,” Griffin said. “The question is, how can we plan for a vibrant city even

under those conditions? It does take time and patience to happen. This is a multi-year project. But there are things we can do today.”

Dan Kinkead left his role as design principal at the architectural firm Hamilton Anderson Associates to direct Detroit Future City’s new program management office. Kinkead, a member of Next City’s [2013 Vanguard class](#), supervised the Detroit Works technical planning team and effectively served as the on-the-ground project lead while Griffin, based in New York, traveled in and out of the city. He’s had his hands in the dirt of Detroit, so to speak, for years now.

To implement a plan that radically reimagines urban density and neighborhood identity, Kinkead told me, DFC will “continue robust civic engagement. This will go down as a landmark in participatory process. Civic engagement will shape what is implemented and moved forward.”

There is good reason for DFC to prioritize civic engagement just as much as technical planning. As Cross told me, one woman approached him after seeing a DFC map in a local newspaper with three Detroit neighborhoods clearly outlined, and the rest of the city pictured in gray wash. “Does that mean the rest is getting bulldozed?” she asked him. It’s not an unreasonable question, given how mid-century “urban renewal” that demolished majority-minority Detroit neighborhoods is still in living memory for many residents. Meanwhile, the rise of investment in downtown and Midtown is beginning to impact residents, and not always for the better.

Dan Gilbert, CEO of Quicken Loans and owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers, bought 19 major buildings in the city center, part of a rise in development that prompted a nearby Section 8 residence for seniors to announce it is transitioning to market-rate units in the next year. Similarly, in April three low-income apartment buildings in Midtown were bought by an owner that kept its business ties hidden. It abruptly notified residents that they had 30 days to leave.

With these sorts of stories at hand, Elena Herrada, the school board member, described Future City as part of a larger scheme that is “bringing resegregation and Jim Crow back to Detroit.”

“Other neighborhoods are decommissioned, and they call it ‘right-sizing,’” she said. “They are cordoning off poor people into reservations, so that

rich people coming in don’t have to see them or send their kids to school with them.”

Kresge, under president Rip Rapson, embraces its active character in the city. “The first role philanthropy has played in Detroit is to help reset the civic vision,” Rapson [said in a 2011 speech](#), in which he argued that “philanthropy has to assume a new leadership role, far different from, and more difficult than, the role it has played in the past.” Rapson went on to suggest that Kresge’s role was to bring coherence to disparate visions already under way in Detroit, rather than originate them.

I asked Kresge’s Wendy Jackson how she responds to critics like Herrada. Jackson replied in an email:

We certainly recognize the concerns that arise as philanthropy in Detroit no longer works at the margins. We are deeply engaged in the city’s long-term transformation but we’re also very clear that our work isn’t a substitute for democratic process. At a minimum foundations provide grants to nonprofits working to provide any number of other supports for people in need of help but we also have permanence and can help the city build a framework to address its most intractable problems. We don’t set the vision but we help communities organize to a vision and recognize that because of this enormous responsibility and privilege we must work with transparency.

An advisory board will be created for the new Future City office, which is tasked with full-time advocacy for the framework’s initiatives. This board is a way to give voice to various stakeholders in the city, including residents, on the framework’s implementation. As director, Kinkead will work with Heidi Alcock, who co-led the project’s civic engagement during planning and now serves as the PMO’s senior program manager. The new project managers, Griffin said, will “make sure we’re organized to shepherd [the] work forward.”

“We’re very aware that this framework for change can’t be done by one sector alone,” Griffin said. This brings real uncertainty to the project’s long-term viability, but also keeps it lithe enough to adapt to the rapidly shifting power dynamics in the city — and to



Kinkead is a native Detroit. He worries about raising his child in a city with empty streets and failing schools.

the choices residents make about where they live and work. “We believe the framework is strong enough and flexible enough to move with the ebbs and flows,” Griffin said.

Charles Cross is still hustling to meetings, months after the framework’s release. He’s thoughtful about how he approaches people, finding ways to connect his own experiences with others. He’s not from Detroit, but he’s lived in the city for 10 years and can identify with the problems people share with him.

“Yeah, my streetlights are out too,” Cross said. He had a bemused smile, and he gestured while holding a black notebook with a “Detroit Hustles Harder” sticker pasted across the front. “Yeah, there’s a vacant car that’s been outside my building for six months and I can’t get anyone to remove it. When I lived on the east side, our street would flood, and that meant my basement would flood. Yeah, I’ve got the same concerns. I have a stake in this, too.”

The new Future City office will advocate for policy changes to smooth the path to implementation, like reformed zoning regulations and business licensing requirements. Kinkead said that it will also launch “a number of pilot projects” of various sizes and scales “even in the first year” to build momentum. The idea will be for the pilots to illustrate the impact of all five planning elements because, Kinkead said, “at the intersection is where our work can have the greatest impact.” Everybody on the DFC team knows it: People need to see something tangible come out of this, and soon.

## OF DETROIT, FOR DETROIT

Jenny Lee is a 30-year-old Detroit native who co-directs Allied Media Projects, a grassroots non-profit dedicated to using media strategies for social justice, out of a repurposed furniture factory on Third Street.

Lee takes issue with the process that led to the creation of the plan, because she doesn't think it went far enough to engage people living in the affected neighborhoods. Lee is interested in seeing one of the most significant planning projects in city history meet Detroiters in a way so that, she said, "people have wherewithal to say yes, we support this plan because it addresses our needs and long-term visions for our communities, or no, we reject it because it marginalizes us from the

Future" name with the U.S. patent office when, in January, the Detroit Works Project transformed itself into Detroit Future City. What was likely a coincidence cut close for these advocates. It wasn't as if the urban planning team didn't know about their work: The Detroit Digital Justice Coalition was recruited to help build a video game Detroit Works created to generate community feedback. But it asked that its name not be cited during the planning process.



Detroit Future City envisions urban agriculture as an economic engine.

process of shaping the city's future, and we have our own visions for what should happen."

AMP, as it happens, also works under the Detroit Future name. AMP and a sister member of the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition, the East Michigan Environmental Council, partnered to create three major training programs designed to build digital justice in the city: Detroit Future Media, Detroit Future Schools and Detroit Future Youth. Hundreds have participated over the last several years. The coalition had already moved to trademark the "Detroit

When I spoke with Lee, she was moving forward in conversations about the Detroit Future name with Kresge, the PMO and Dan Pitera, an energetic architect with the Detroit Collaborative Design Center. With Cross, Pitera co-directs the mammoth DFC civic engagement effort.

Rather than brewing resentment and legal battles over who owns "Detroit Future," there is an opportunity for the name to be shared through a terms of use that will function like a community benefits agreement. That is, DFC can continue to use the

name if it commits to certain participatory processes that ensure the project systematically integrates empowered community voices in its decision-making. Pitera noted that if DFC weren't porous enough to authentically integrate community voices into its work, it would have already had an implementation plan in place when the framework was released on January 9. "We really did not," Pitera said.

"We're confident that the work of DFC is built by and implemented by Detroiters," said Pitera, who noted that he'd been aware of AMP's "very strong and very exciting work" long before he got involved with Detroit Works. "We want to make sure these won't be empty words, but that they further build trust and build accountability."

That is the best hope for Detroit Future City:

Amplifying the success and innovation already here, rather than planning the city as if it were emerging from scratch. Cross realized early on that some of the best civic engagement didn't emerge with DFC. "People are already doing this!" he said. At a music festival, he noticed people adding ideas to a collaborative board about Detroit, outlining "what's bad," "what's good" and "what should." He asked to photograph the board and use it to help inform the DFC team.

"There are people here. This is not a blank canvas," Cross said. When he hears some newcomers suggest that "we can do anything in Detroit," he cringes. "No, you can't," he said. "The community will shut you down." Cross gestures, as if with a paintbrush. "It'd be like painting over a Van Gogh."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anna Clark is an independent journalist living in Detroit. Her writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The American Prospect*, *Salon*, *The Nation*, *The Daily Beast*, *Grantland*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Boston Review* and other publications. She is currently a political media correspondent for the *Columbia Journalism Review*. In 2011, she was a Fulbright Fellow in Nairobi, Kenya, where she focused on creative writing. She also has been a fellow with the Peter Jennings Center for Journalists and the Constitution. She writes the literary blog *Isak* ([www.annaclark.net](http://www.annaclark.net)) and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.



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