

# Letter from the Editor

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At the outset of planning last year's edition of *Agora*, the staff decided to— in the midst of the 2009 election — construct the issue around the theme of “change.” This year, the staff chose to start with a clean slate and not constrict article selections with a predetermined theme. We received a strong batch of submissions that, in the end, gave us a journal centered on the theme of “Detroit.” That our authors hail from a number of programs across the university, both undergraduate and graduate, speaks to the fact that Detroit is more relevant than ever. Additionally, I am proud that, for the first time, *Agora* welcomes a faculty submission to the journal. Professor and former dean, Doug Kelbaugh, brings his experience working in Detroit to our pages.

Detroit, long a focus of the work done by the urban-planning and urban-design programs at the University of Michigan, has also found itself as a mainstay in national headlines this past year. From bankruptcy to entrepreneurialism, foreclosures to right sizing, Detroit is reentering the national consciousness. While the media may have spent the last year focusing on trivial problems such as private jets, the planning and design programs and the university as a whole have chosen to tackle more substantive issues, some of which are showcased in this volume.

*Agora* 2010, the journal's fourth edition, begins with Robert Linn's topical “Complementing Demolition.” Detroit grapples with a shrinking population and the accompanying problem of home abandonment while facing a mounting budget deficit, making the expensive task of vacant-home demolition even more daunting. Linn's article presents alternatives to the current city policy, looking to improve an issue currently being discussed at local and federal levels.

Returning contributor Amanda Tillotson, complements Linn's piece with her article “Pathologizing Place and Race.” Linn's discussion of demolition and the alternative approaches to vacancy segues to Tillotson's discussion of slum clearance. Her analysis of the language used to justify slum clearance through time has had a connection to pathology, but this language changed in some subtle — and not so subtle ways — such as the increasing inclusion of race in to the discussion. This historical analysis has modern-day implications, both for Detroit and the rest of the country.

“Inside/Outside,” by Barret Bumford, addresses increasing divisions in our society. Metro Detroit is one of the most segregated areas in the country — racially and economically. However, as Bumford discusses through literary analysis and personal experience, divisions are becoming more prevalent in our physical spaces and day-to-day interactions, as well. How do planners need to adapt to the fact that social interaction is increasingly moving to cell phones and the Internet and away from face-to-face interactions? How do our planning decisions impact the built environment's shift toward walls and gates? Addressing segregation on all of these levels are planning issues exemplified in Detroit.

Issues such as these are among the challenges tackled during design charrettes, which is the subject of Doug Kelbaugh's article of the same name. Charrettes bring together students and professionals in an intense environment to tackle issues at the forefront of urban design. As Kelbaugh discusses, the University of Michigan has conducted more than half a dozen charrettes in Detroit in the past decade.

In keeping with the urban design theme, Andrew Broderick's “Tapping Terrain Vague” looks at the reclamation of former industrial space for public parkland and the need to better provide open space in under-served communities. Rails-to-trails projects are gaining popularity across the country, from New York's High Line Park to Detroit's Dequindre Cut, as a way to encourage exercise and alternative transportation, while providing planned reclamation of post-industrial areas.

The next feature is the product of an urban-design studio focused on the prospect of light rail along Woodward Avenue, Detroit's main north-south thoroughfare. This team project addresses current shortcomings in Detroit's mass transit, specifically in the New Center area, which is the site of the city's current train station. The article explores the transformative potential of the currently in-progress M-1 Rail project.

Damon Healey's case study of the Argonaut Building (now the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Design Education) provides valuable insight on the complex task of adaptively reusing historic structures in a depressed economy. This example of Detroit's shift from manufacturing to a new creative economy is located in New Center, which was highlighted in the previous article. It gives a glimpse of what could lie ahead for Detroit — and an example for others to learn from.

Looking at education in Detroit from a different perspective is Karey Quarton, who wrote about after-school programs in Detroit Public Schools. Along with the issues of demolition and public transit, Detroit's schools are a current mainstay in local and national headlines. With attendance and graduation rates declining, the district has begun to look at an extensive restructuring of the city's schools. This piece investigates more simple, but no less important options, for improving the outlook of public education.

Jennifer Williams explores Atlanta's demolition of public housing and the issues involved in attempting to move low-income residents away from typical governmental support to the free market. As the country copes with the recession and foreclosure crisis, the needs of those in our cities who are the most vulnerable should be considered. This issue is compounded in central cities, such as Atlanta and Detroit, where race and poverty are often closely linked with troubling certainty.

"Failed Linkages" ties in to the Detroit theme with its discussion of the city's People Mover. This discussion of the elevated rail line in the city's downtown dovetails with the Woodward Avenue light-rail project discussed earlier in the issue. Proponents of the light-rail project feel that a light-rail link feeding downtown will increase relevancy and ridership of the People Mover and help improve the diversity of the Motor City's public transportation.

We conclude our fourth edition with a piece from Michael Glynn. While "Healthy Planning" is not place specific, this thoughtful and thought-provoking article takes a planning-centric look at the national debate about health care — one that has repercussions from Detroit to Los Angeles. Glynn argues that a focus on community and sensible planning has the power to foster better health for an entire nation.

A focus on the local — on our own community, or however we choose to define it — might be the answer to a number of our problems. Boarding up houses, improving living conditions for the rest of the neighborhood, designing an old industrial space to give the disadvantaged a place to play close to home, and providing both public transit and affordable housing for all are community-focused plans that have the power to make a difference on a scale that extends far beyond their physical reach.

In Detroit, where a number of the traditional-planning and governmental frameworks have ceased to exist, much has been made about the "grassroots" community work that has filled the void left behind — and rightfully so. Detroit has the ability right now to show the power that urban planning can have on a community, and the power that, as Glynn argues, a community can have on an entire country.

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