

STRATEGIC DEMOLITION

Construction of Blight

Matthew Story

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As noted in Cleared for Development, the Detroit Blight Authority is emerging as an important actor in blight remediation in Detroit. This inset takes a close, critical look at the organization's larger current efforts across the city.

In February 2013 the Detroit Blight Authority (DBA), a privately funded not-for-profit group, altered the City of Detroit's normal script of demolition. Bill Pulte IV, grandson of the largest homebuilder in the United States, William Pulte of Pulte Homes, founded the organization. The DBA stepped into a role that it calls "total blight removal," a role that it believes the city is unable to fulfill. Blight is neither a monolithic nor specific condition; rather blight has broad and nebulous cultural and legal definitions ranging from structural degradation to property-upkeep problems specified in Detroit City Ordinances, such as long grass and inappropriately low birdfeeders. Therefore, that blight and its removal or remediation are contested territory.

Within the contested territory of blight, the DBA undertakes blight removal "blitzes," removing vegetation, trash. The DBA touts a 50% cost savings, spending from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per structure, by leveraging multi-block sites and having a retired Army logician with experience in Iraq and post-Katrina New Orleans run the operation (AlHajal, 2013). With powerful institutional allies such as Governor Snyder, Dan Gilbert of Quicken Loans, the Mayor's Office, the Skillman Foundation, DTE Energy, and Honigman Miller Schwartz and Cohn LLP as partners, the DBA has privatized blight removal. The DBA secures a "Right to Enter" contract from home and land owners and uses its connections and logistical expertise to consolidate approvals, permits, and utility shut-offs in a target area (Zillman, 2013). This process differs from city demolitions, which are sporadic and involve difficulties in gaining permission to act on non-city owned property. The DBA does not explicitly state how it chooses sites, though its partnership indicates that the city plays a significant advisory role in the DBA's choices. With sanction from the city, Bill Pulte speaks about deploying the DBA demolition model throughout the city to an unclear number of "blighted" buildings, somewhere between 40,000 and 80,000 depending on the source (Muller, 2013).

In February 2013, the DBA conducted a 10-day pilot project on a 10-block site near Eastern Market on the East Side of Detroit. The project consisted of non-structural blight removal on

218 parcels and removal of eight residential structures and two commercial structures that are owned by the city (Pinho, 2013). The DBA initiated this project secretly, choosing not to inform residents near the site of its activities. Mayor Bing withheld comment until a joint press conference with the Pultes, underscoring the city's connection with the DBA (Burns, 2013).

The East Side demolition site is located in "Recovery Park," a priority area for the city marked for future large-scale urban agriculture. The city is likely interested in this site due to its proximity to Eastern Market and its ability to connect Midtown and Downtown with the Dequindre Cut and the riverfront. (Beshouri, 2013b) This demolition site, in conjunction with the city's September 2013 demolition of the neighboring vacant the Brewster-Douglass Homes, demonstrates the city's emphasis on clearing a perimeter around Eastern Market.

In June 2013, the DBA began its second removal project on a 14-block stretch in the Brightmoor neighborhood. Over four weeks, contractors and residents removed a self-reported 70,000 lbs of trash, 200 tires, 14 boats, and one dead body from 500 parcels on over 98 acres. The clean-up cost was \$500,000, and 70 vacant structures remain on the site (Reindl, 2013b)

The privatization of large-scale demolition and private enactment of public policy are the most unsettling and easily apprehended critiques of DBA. City-driven mass demolition and clearing of land would immediately generate an outspoken critique; however, when the same operation is undertaken by non-state agents like the DBA, critique and opportunities for public recourse are notably absent. It is important to extend the critique beyond the initial trauma and spectacle of demolition to the future trajectory of city.

Yet the media representation of the DBA's demolitions has been extremely positive compared to its narratives of the city's demolitions. City demolitions lack the spectacle of mass "blight removal" and do not signify "progress" in the same way. In a media climate that portrays Detroit as inept and out of money, the privately funded DBA is touted as exactly what the city needs. Bill Pulte IV, at only 25, has become a media darling. He is the only visible figure and the primary voice speaking about the demolitions. A counter-narrative about the DBA does not exist, even though the secrecy surrounding the East Side demolition signaled a lack of democratic imperatives.

If this is indeed the model, future possible sites could include the areas surrounding University of Detroit Mercy, Marygrove University, the Northend, Morningside/East English Village, Jefferson-Chalmers, and Southwest Detroit in accordance with the city's focus areas (Detroit Hardest Hit Fund Strategic Plan, 2013). These neighborhoods are targeted not for growth or development like Midtown and Downtown, but rather for "stabilization," a code for retaining property values. Neighborhoods perceived to have detrimental effects on property values are the focus areas undergoing stabilization and being targeted for "blight removal."

The DBA sees Brightmoor as an effective site to test large-scale clearance. Brightmoor is located directly west of Grandmont-Rosedale, a designated priority area by Detroit Future Cities and the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP3). The city, therefore, might be directing the DBA to do large-scale clearance as urban triage around the high-priority area of Grandmont-Rosedale in order to stabilize property values.

The DBA has not articulated what happens to the cleared land once it serves its purpose in stabilizing adjacent neighborhoods. Since the DBA is not acquiring the land for development, the cleared land, considered a territorial drain on value around the city's focus neighborhoods, would serve as an economic shield for land with stabilized property values. This strategy follows the city's narrative of shrinking, or "right-sizing," the city. Neighborhoods that are peripheral to focus areas are becoming useful to the city as "alternative use" areas. The city desires deurbanization rather than growth, so that the potential for displacement of residents is not from rising property values but rather ruralization. The cleared land, newly deurbanized and rendered unbuildable by current demolition practices, will be given over to what the Detroit Future City Plan calls alternative uses such as green or

blue infrastructure, green spaces, and low-lying lakes and ponds, respectively. These interventions effectively formalize and infrastructuralize a zone of neutral value around retained neighborhoods. The language of infrastructure, not solely its performance as infrastructure, capitalizes on the monopoly of rational corrective measures that is found in engineering and thus instrumentalizes the landscape through dominant development narratives. When the state uses the term infrastructure, it imbues a project with the power of science, rationality, and universal ambition. Yet, in the case of these future infrastructural interventions in Detroit, "infrastructure" is the transformation of poor neighborhoods into parks. This reinforces the property values of the surrounded neighborhood and replaces underserved neighborhoods with non-urban amenities that serve stable neighborhoods.

Yet skepticism is less welcome when the demolition of abandoned, vacant, and destroyed houses is praised by the community leaders (those who adhere to development narratives), generates (temporary) jobs, and is done thus far without expending any public resources. The clearing of vegetation and garbage is difficult to argue against, even if the removal is an act of governance mediated through neo-liberal divestment of the state (i.e., authority no longer rests in the public realm, but in the hands of the private DBA). The "scorched earth" physical manifestations of the DBA's demolitions should be enough to heighten the senses to detect camouflaged practices, even in the absence of direct evidence of destructive consequences. It is this absence of definitive evidence, the immediacy of the DBA's actions, and the lack of historical distance that produces an instrumental anxiety. This anxiety of the self confronts our dispositions, skepticisms, and blind spots with blight in order to hold governing practices accountable. ■

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