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Why Detroit Deserves Better Than the Land Bank Authority

Once the backbone of American manufacturing, Detroit has suffered a tremendous, steady decline in the years following the Second World War, leaving today what serves as the epitome of any combination of systemic racism, globalization, corruption, neglect, blight, and decay. To the faithless, of which there are many, Detroit is now a mockery of what once was a great city bearing its name, failing to consider the snowball of oppression that led to the city as it exists today, and focusing only on its most readily-perceived negative characteristics. Despite this, there is hope; amid the blight and decay, there lies opportunity, the likes of which have not been seen in any other major city in the United States. What's more, this opportunity comes at a time when Detroit, after over half a century of population loss and disinvestment, is at the cusp of renaissance, and the American housing market reaches new peaks in home prices, further dashing the odds of achieving that which Detroit once so readily dispersed: the American Dream. This opportunity presents itself in the form of naturally-occurring affordable housing, the purveyors of which in Michigan's largest city being the City itself. However, in the years following its founding, this purveyor, the Detroit Land Bank Authority, has existed amid a slew of controversy, amounting to a deeply contentious history that, ultimately, transgresses the very notion of an egalitarian metropolis entirely, and is in dire need of reimagining if ever it is to transform Detroit into, once again, a city of homeownership.

While true that, in the United States today, the idea of an egalitarian metropolis remains a mere idyllic notion nearly beyond the realm of attainability, there is one factor that I believe is every day becoming more of a reality, especially in Detroit. That is, a certain standard of equity and accountability, based in the knowledge that an individual's worth is not determined by any factor other than, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the content of their character. It is on this basis that I have conducted my research, and have found the Detroit Land Bank to be falling woefully short. To understand the scope of the problem that is the Detroit Land Bank, and before considering how it may be better utilized in the pursuit of achieving an egalitarian metropolis in southeast Michigan, it is first necessary to consider the state of the city overall in the years leading to its creation, as this allows the creation of a frame through which the Land Bank came to fruition. Entering the 21st century on shaky ground, with the city's population dipping below 1 million for the first time in nearly a century,¹ Detroit found itself with, as Thomas Gunton writes in 2007, “an *aesthetic of urban malaise*” (Gunton 523), resulting from an overabundance of vacant properties. He goes on, writing that these properties “contribute to a perception of the community...as intrinsically dysfunctional...[leading to] a downward ‘spiral of blight’” (Gunton 523). This account is notable, coming not only prior to the Land Bank's founding, but also the subprime mortgage crisis, at a time when Detroit remained a city comprised of a majority of homeowners. Moreover, this contributes to my understanding of pervading issues facing Detroiters in the years before the Land Bank's founding, as prior to the

¹ 2010 Census Data for City of Detroit Neighborhoods.” *SEMCOG Quick Facts*, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, 5 Apr. 2011, <https://www.semco.org/desktopmodules/SEMCOG.Publications/GetFile.ashx?filename=QuickFacts2010CensusDataForCityOfDetroitNeighborhoodsApril2011.pdf>.

housing market crash, it is apparent that one of the great issues to not only the city, but the residents who call that city home, was blight.

Blight is defined as “any malignant influence of obscure or mysterious origin; anything which withers hopes or prospects, or checks prosperity”². In the case of Detroit, this latter definition is most appropriate, and sufficiently characterizes the issue of abandonment for the citizens who remain. By 2008, the subprime mortgage crisis was well underway, leading to scores of home foreclosures across the nation, disproportionately among African American borrowers. For instance, between 2007 and 2009, 8% of African American borrowers lost their homes, nearly double the 4.5% of white borrowers who lost theirs.³ In Detroit, a city in which 82% of residents as of 2010 were African American,⁴ the result is a devastating increase in vacancy, and thus, blight. At a municipal level, this means a continually-shrinking base of tax revenue, “ruinous to a city’s financial health” (Gunton 526). On an individual-basis, however, the toll of blight becomes even more apparent. As one Detroiter, Toshiana, explains in 2008,

"You actually have to go back to the early '90s to see when all this started to happen. I could tell you a couple blocks I lived on in Detroit that I watched gradually torn down. They were really nice when I was there, but what happened? One place, I came back five years after I had moved, just to visit. I could not believe what had happened. The place was a mess; the houses were in terrible shape...Look around here. All you see are empty lots. Realtors may call these an investment opportunity, but who wants to live next to an empty lot?...The decline is very ugly," (Watson and Moore).

² “Blight.” *Oxford English Dictionary, 2d Edition*, University of Michigan Library, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/o/oed/oed-idx?type=entry&byte=34632605>.

³ Hedman, Carl, and Rolf Pendall. “Rebuilding and Sustaining Homeownership for African Americans.” *Urban Institute*, June 2018, p. 3. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98719/rebuilding_and_sustaining_homeownership_for_african_americans.pdf.

⁴ “2010 Census Data for City of Detroit Neighborhoods.” *SEMCOG Quick Facts*, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, 5 Apr. 2011, <https://www.semco.org/desktopmodules/SEMCOG.Publications/GetFile.ashx?filename=QuickFacts2010CensusDataForCityOfDetroitNeighborhoodsApril2011.pdf>.

This account suggests a deeply emotional cost of disinvestment in one's community, and further underscores the case for a land bank authority at a human level, a crucial point of consideration in the pursuit of an egalitarian metropolis.

Adding to the issue of blight, Amy Brooks et al. with the University of Michigan lays out a myriad of salient issues in Detroit in preemptively establishing the frame, as I see it, through which the Land Bank is created. The most revealing factor I have found in quantifying the scope of these issues, by and large, was the sheer volume of vacant property held by the city. As of 2004, "the City of Detroit...owns approximately 38,000 parcels of land" (Brooks et al. 3), a number which, over a decade later, amounts to nearly 30,000 vacant homes owned by the Detroit Land Bank.⁵ They goes on to detail how "[the] large volume of properties, the majority of which are vacant residential lots, contributes to the [Detroit Planning and Development Department's] inability to maintain an accurate record of properties, provide clear title or ensure that structures are secured, maintained or demolished" (Brooks et al. 3), making clear that, at a municipal level, the need for a Land Bank was rooted foremost in the necessity of a cohesive method of land inventory management. In other words, as the 21st century began, the issue of blight became so vast that the City of Detroit no longer knew the extent of vacant property under its ownership.

Before beginning my research, my general assumption about the Detroit Land Bank was that its purpose was to, in effect, foment an amount of equity through eliminating traditional monetary barriers to homeownership in the city, thus increasing the net rate of homeownership overall. Taken at face value, the organization's mission statement reinforces this assumption,

⁵ DeVito, Lee. "Report: Detroit Land Bank Is Hoarding Houses." *Detroit Metro Times*, Detroit Metro Times, 30 Mar. 2022, <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/report-detroit-land-bank-is-hoarding-houses-14963274>.

being “to return the city's blighted and vacant properties to productive use...[utilizing] a variety of sales programs to make homeownership and land purchases accessible to Detroiters” (Detroit Land Bank Authority). I found this assumption challenged through my research into its origins, however, resulting in the creation of a specific frame, primarily that of inventory management and blight removal, which I have used in considering the notions of housing and land equity, and the Land Bank’s place in the pursuit of an egalitarian metropolis. On this basis, in the years since its founding the organization has been met with apparent overwhelming success. Through the creation of a unified, cohesive mode of record keeping, the City of Detroit was able to sell off 5,660 adjacent side lots to neighboring residents at a cost of \$100 per lot as of 2017,⁶ allowing not only for the not insignificant decrease in owned parcels at a municipal level, but also for added opportunities for home and land ownership, specifically for Detroiters. As for the issue of blight, I came to realize in my research this does not go unnoticed by the Land Bank, who between 2014 and 2019 have demolished over 10,000 structures in the city.⁷ Additionally, the Land Bank allows discounted rates on properties listed for auction of 50% for Detroit school employees, city employees, and skilled tradesmen, and of 20% on the completion of a homebuyer counseling course.⁸

⁶ Gallagher, John. “Despite Missteps, Detroit Land Bank Proves Its Worth.” *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Free Press, 5 Feb. 2017, <https://www.freep.com/story/money/business/columnists/2017/02/04/detroit-demolition-kildee-land-foreclosure/96833026/>.

⁷ Damico, Rachele. "Changing the conversation: Detroit Land Bank Authority Executive Director Saskia Thompson on leading through controversy." *Crain's Detroit Business*, vol. 35, no. 7, 2019, pp. 7. *ProQuest*, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/changing-conversation/docview/2184235226/se-2?accountid=14667>.

⁸“City of Detroit Discount - English.” Detroit Land Bank Authority, <https://buildingdetroit.org/city-of-detroit-discount>.

On researching the structure of the organization, I was initially pleased to discover the existence of these policies, as they convey on the surface an amount of acknowledgement if not care for citizens with vested interests in their communities, and my general assumption was that they are generally beneficial in the creation of an egalitarian metropolis. At an institutional level, these outcomes suggest successes both for the city of Detroit as well as for its Land Bank. Whether or not these successes are palpable on a human level to Detroiters, however, is dubious. To the contrary, on further analysis, I have identified several factors which call into question the Detroit Land Bank's true purpose, and to whom the organization truly serves. Returning to blight: research has revealed that the Detroit Land Bank's demolition program, funded in part by the federal government, first came under scrutiny in 2015, "amid revelations that demolition prices under [Mayor] Duggan's administration had increased dramatically" (Guillen), prompting an investigation by the FBI in 2016, "after demolition prices spiked 60% under a new management structure Mayor Mike Duggan put into place after he took office" (Baldas & Guillen), as well as an audit in 2017 by the Detroit auditor general, Mark Lockridge. In the report, Lockridge details a Request for Proposal (RFP) by the DLB and the Detroit Building Authority for debris removal, open hole completion, and site finalization for 19 properties, in part finding a lack of transparency as to demolition costs on the part of the Land Bank, as well as "clear evidence of non-compliance with contract and program requirements...[in addition to] lack of oversight and good program management [due to demolition inaction]" (Lockridge 7). Upon surveying each of the 19 properties, the Office of the Auditor General found them in various stages of demolition since the process began eight months prior in July, 2016, noting, "[Each property presents] a clear and present danger to the community. We are concerned that

there may be additional sites across the City in this same hazardous condition, which puts all residents of Detroit at risk” (Lockridge 7).

Following Lockridge’s audit, the Detroit Land Bank ultimately offers little by way of explanation, often appearing in my view dismissive if not hostile in its delivery. Of the audit, Land Bank chairwoman Erica Ward Gerson retorts, “I am very disappointed that the auditor general’s report today was full of errors and misinformation. It is normally the process of an auditor general to give a draft of response to the department for this very reason to avoid obvious factual inaccuracies. Unfortunately, the auditor general inexplicably failed to do that in this case,” (Thompson), in no way offering any information to counter the findings of the auditor general, and by no means clarifying Lockridge’s supposed “misinformation”. In my research, I have found that this dismissive approach to confronting criticism persists with the Land Bank over time and across representatives. When prompted in an interview in 2019 over the Detroit Land Bank’s misconceptions, for instance, then-executive director Saskia Thompson states,

“The misconception that frustrates me the most is that we're mismanaging demolition. With all the negative press the land bank received about demolition, there was no focus on all the other positive work the land bank was and still is doing... Most people think that demolition is most of our business, but it's not. Community members have every right to be frustrated, but they're not worried about our demolition programs. They're worried about the vacant houses on their block. If anything, they want us to be doing demolitions faster. There've been calls from people telling us that we shouldn't be doing any demolition at all, but I guarantee that the people living in the neighborhoods where we made a real impact by tearing down some of these vacant homes feel differently about that. When we demolish a house we are eliminating a noticeable blight on the neighborhood, as vacant houses attract all sorts of crime”.⁹

⁹ Damico, Rachele. "Changing the conversation: Detroit Land Bank Authority Executive Director Saskia Thompson on leading through controversy." *Crain's Detroit Business*, vol. 35, no. 7, 2019, pp. 7. *ProQuest*, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/changing-conversation/docview/2184235226/se-2?accountid=14667>.

Again, the Land Bank offers little by way of evidence to complicate its criticisms, such as elaborating on the “other positive work” accomplished during Thompson’s tenure. Interestingly, Thompson appears even to reaffirm the findings of demolition inaction in the 2017 Detroit OAG report, albeit unintentionally and in conflict with Gerson’s statement at that time. In addition to this, Thompson’s delivery, while initially dismissive, appears to convey an amount of humanism through the notion of blight removal, though at a level which, when weighed against the controversy surrounding the Land Bank’s demolition program, I find wholly insufficient in considering the Land Bank’s place in the pursuit of the egalitarian metropolis.

The DLB’s demolition program is far from the only point of controversy surrounding the organization. Further complicating my initial perception of the Land Bank are allegations of bid-rigging, beginning in 2016. In connection with the federal probe of the organization, the Detroit Free Press cites an anonymous source in laying out a scheme of land auction bid-rigging alleged against the Land Bank, in which city employees, utilizing their 50% discount, “would place a bid on a piece of property and win it at auction. But instead of moving into the home, as required under the program that gives city employees preferential treatment, the employee would turn around and flip it to a real estate company, which then sells it for more and makes money” (Baldas and Guillen). In my view, the nature of this scheme is morally repugnant, and sharply contrasts any notions of egalitarianism in sole favor of profit vis-à-vis land speculation, a practice which the Detroit Land Bank claims to stand against in its mission statement.¹⁰

Perhaps the most prominent case of this practice can be found in the current lieutenant governor of Michigan, Garlin Gilchrist, who, as a city employee in 2016, purchased an 8-unit

¹⁰ “Overview - English.” *Who We Are*, Detroit Land Bank Authority, <https://buildingdetroit.org/overview>.

apartment building at 253 Marston Street from the Land Bank at a cost of \$13,500.¹¹ After a period of three years, notably following his ascent to the executive branch of state government, Garlin sold the property for \$190,000, but only after “[the structure] became an issue in the fall campaign when neighbors complained about the eyesore” (White). This timeframe is significant, especially given the Land Bank’s “prescribed time period” stipulation to either bring an auctioned property to code, or risk repossession of that property at the Land Bank’s discretion.¹² By the 2018 gubernatorial election, “Gilchrist said he made progress on [253 Marston’s] renovations, but that it wasn’t in the condition he wanted it to be in” (Williams), selling the structure in 2019 after investing a total of \$225,798.90, he claimed in an email to the Land Bank, cited by the Detroit Free Press.¹³ On further research, Detroit Renaissance Fund LLC, the shell corporation which purchased 253 Marston,¹⁴ lists Steven M Leuthold, professor of Art and Design History at Northern Michigan University,¹⁵ as its Director.¹⁶ However, the extent of Leuthold’s involvement in the company as well as with 235 Marston, if any, is unknown. As of

¹¹ Williams, Candice. “Gilchrist Ailing Detroit Apartment Building Sold for \$190K.” *The Detroit News*, The Detroit News, 1 Mar. 2019, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2019/02/28/gilchrist-ailing-detroit-apartment-building-sold/3019721002/>.

¹² *Detroit Land Bank Authority Structure Sales Policy*, p. 3. Detroit Land Bank Authority, [https://dlba-production-bucket.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/cms/POLICIES+-+Structure+Sales+Policy+\(3.18.2022\).pdf](https://dlba-production-bucket.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/cms/POLICIES+-+Structure+Sales+Policy+(3.18.2022).pdf).

¹³ White, Ed. “Garlin Gilchrist Selling Troubled Detroit Apartment Building.” *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Free Press, 31 Jan. 2019, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2019/01/31/garlin-gilchrist-detroit-apartment-building/2735513002/>.

¹⁴ Williams, Candice. “Gilchrist Ailing Detroit Apartment Building Sold for \$190K.” *The Detroit News*, The Detroit News, 1 Mar. 2019, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2019/02/28/gilchrist-ailing-detroit-apartment-building-sold/3019721002/>.

¹⁵ “Steven Leuthold.” *NMU Commons*, https://commons.nmu.edu/prime_research_profiles/245/.

¹⁶ “Detroit Renaissance, LLC.” *OpenCorporates*, https://opencorporates.com/companies/us_mi_801709244.

August, 2021, 253 Marston appears from its exterior to have had little to no additional renovations since last sold,¹⁷ and is currently estimated by Zillow to be worth \$426,900.¹⁸

The story of Garlin Gilchrist and 253 Marston Street is worth considering, as it suggests varying degrees of preferential treatment toward buyers, dependent on that buyer's prominence. This alone transgresses the Land Bank's mission statement in addition to any standard of inclusivity or equity toward the people of Detroit, and is made even more blatant when scrutinized against instances in which the Land Bank adhered to its own policies. Writing for *Deadline Detroit*, Violet Ikonomova recounts multiple instances in which the family members of city employees attempted to renovate a home purchased through the Land Bank, only for the property to become repossessed into the organization's vast inventory. One such case is that of Jeffrey Marshall, the son of a Detroit Water and Sewerage Department employee. She writes,

Marshall sunk \$10,000 into his property between 2015 and [2018], foregoing paying taxes in order to cover the repairs. But...he wasn't working quickly enough and things kept getting stolen. [In 2019], with the house facing foreclosure, he paid off his 2016 tax bill in hopes of holding onto it. Shortly after, the Land Bank took it back. Marshall places some blame on the Land Bank for not fully communicating the requirements of the program or condition of the house. '...The whole thing was really, really stressful, to the point where my friends who were helping me were just telling me to give the house back,'” (Ikonomova).

This account highlights the undue burden placed onto prospective homeowners through the Land Bank's contingency plan, and when contrasted with the case of Garlin Gilchrist serves to characterize the essence of the Land Bank as prohibitive to all but the wealthy. Moreover, Marshall's story lends credence to allegations of the organization hoarding houses, only offering

¹⁷ *Google Maps*, Google, <https://www.google.com/maps/@42.3760457,-83.073298,3a,56y,4.92h,100.12t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sqxay84Tbm182xsmHFuqhQA!2e0!7i16384!8i8192>.

¹⁸ Zillow, Inc. “253 Marston St, Detroit, MI 48202.” *Zillow*, https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/253-Marston-St-Detroit-MI-48202/88529430_zpid/.

a small percentage of its stock for sale at a time while the vast majority of its stock continues to deteriorate and pose risks to the safety of Detroiters.¹⁹ In effect, this reporting suggests real estate speculation on the part of the City, waiting to sell properties until profit is assured, and causing further harm to the prospects of residents across the city.

The research I have conducted into the Detroit Land Bank has been extensive, and has left me with a list of negative outcomes far outweighing positives on a municipal and human-level of analysis. In brief, further issues I have identified include the fact that, despite receiving a \$5 million grant in April 2021 by the Rocket Community Fund specifically for the expansion of the organization's Rehabbed & Ready program,²⁰ the DLB has only one home listed for sale with the program as of this writing.²¹ Additionally, the organization officially requested \$11 million from the city in March for fiscal year 2023,²² in my view causing further concern in relation to July 2021 reporting by the Detroit News on \$13 million in "unsubstantiated costs" in the DLB's demolition program between 2017 and 2019.²³ Finances aside, perhaps the most damning evidence my research has revealed against the Detroit Land Bank is the simple fact that, in the

¹⁹ DeVito, Lee. "Report: Detroit Land Bank Is Hoarding Houses." *Detroit Metro Times*, Detroit Metro Times, 30 Mar. 2022, <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/report-detroit-land-bank-is-hoarding-houses-14963274>.

²⁰ "Report Leads to Additional \$5M Investment in Detroit Land Bank Authority's Rehabbed & Ready Program." Report Leads to Additional \$5M Investment in Detroit Land Bank Authority's Rehabbed & Ready Program | Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, <https://fordschool.umich.edu/news/2021/report-leads-additional-5m-investment-detroit-land-bank-authoritys-rehabbed-ready-program>.

²¹ *Rehabbed & Ready*, Detroit Land Bank Authority, <https://buildingdetroit.org/properties/16853-stoepel>.

²² Afana, Dana. "Detroit Land Bank Authority Expects Its Remaining Structures to Be Listed for Sale by 2023." *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit Free Press, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2022/03/17/detroit-land-bank-authority-for-sale-2023/7075152001/>.

²³ Ferretti, Christine. "Federal Watchdog Finds \$13m in 'Unsubstantiated Costs' in Detroit Demo Effort." *The Detroit News*, The Detroit News, 29 June 2021, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2021/06/28/detroit-home-demolitions-backfill-dirt-unsubstantiated-costs-treasury-department/7783649002/>.

years since its founding, the rate of homeownership in the city has continued to decline, from 51.1% in 2010²⁴ to 47.6% in 2020.²⁵ Ultimately, this leads me to conclude that the Detroit Land Bank exists not to serve the people of Detroit, nor to advance any cause of egalitarianism, and if ever it is to sufficiently meet its purported purpose, there is a great deal of work left to be done.

Envisioning a Detroit Land Bank which can equitably serve all Detroit residents is difficult, but not impossible. I believe that, first and foremost, creating such an organization would entail a foundational restructuring, allowing the Detroit City Council, not the mayor, to vote on representatives to the Land Bank's board of directors. In effect, this would ensure a greater amount of oversight in the organization's business dealings, and that the city at large, that is, the people, have a greater say in the spending of their tax dollars. Adding to this, a further amount of equity could be ensured through either expanding the Land Bank's City worker discount to all Detroiters, or by eliminating the policy entirely, thereby placing all individuals on a more level playing field with regard to accessibility to vacant housing stock. Other potential changes may include, but are not limited to, altering contingency plans by creating new rules stipulating owner-occupancy in Land Bank-purchased homes for a given number of years, ensuring that the individual who purchases a property is the one actually living there, or rules preventing deed transfers to developers and/or individuals with a history of land speculation. This would entail a vetting process in purchasing property to verify the intent of the prospective buyer, as well as a potential longer period of time between listing a property for sale/auction and closing. In the short term, this could potentially inflate housing stock, going against the goal of

²⁴ *Census Demographic Profile*, p. 5. Data Driven Detroit, 2010, https://www.datadrivendetroit.org/web_ftp/Census/PlaceProfiles/Detroit_city_MI.pdf.

²⁵ *U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Detroit City, Michigan*. 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/detroitcitymichigan>.

decreasing city-owned property, in addition to causing potential budgetary issues in maintaining the upkeep of vacant property to prevent further deterioration. However, given the Land Bank's history of neglect toward owned property, ultimately any change in its handling of vacant structures would first be premised in a greater effort toward ensuring the health and safety of neighboring residents. Of course, none of these changes can occur overnight, and change is at times a painfully slow process. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that as long as there are those with the will to imagine the creation of an egalitarian metropolis, who hope for better things, and seek to inspire that same hope in others, the first strides toward a more equal and inclusive society have already been taken.

Word Count: 3545

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