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Reclaiming Motor City: Creating Equitable Infrastructure in Post-Urban Renewal Detroit

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ABSTRACT

Detroit's Black Bottom was a historically black neighborhood that was demolished and replaced with modern housing projects and the I-375 Freeway as part of Detroit's urban renewal between 1945 and 1965. Urban renewal is a significant part of the legacy of Modern architecture, and its effects are still felt today in the layout of cities and the lived experience of residents. The City of Detroit is developing a proposal to transform the lowered freeway into a boulevard at the same elevation as the rest of the downtown area, but community organizations have argued that this step does not adequately repair the damage historically done to the community. Plans for redevelopment today often take on a large-scale approach, but lack a level of thoughtfulness at a personal, local level. This research aims to first detail the history of the Black Bottom neighborhood of Detroit and its development over time. Then, to document and model the act of erasure in the built environment through the case study of Black Bottom. Finally, it will propose a design solution that focuses on the direct interventions for individuals at a local level and offers opportunities for ownership for the past residents of Black Bottom and their descendants. The goal is to demonstrate the necessity for public redevelopment based on the voices and the needs of communities and locals that will be directly impacted. Many cities have legacies of displacement and urban renewal and will likely be developing plans to unravel some of harm they have caused. I hope to offer an alternative model to the plan proposed by the Department of Transportation that prioritizes local voices and demands.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Architectural Issue

The Bottom: An Urban Typology

In her paper, “The Bottom: The Emergence and Erasure of Black American Urban Landscapes,” landscape architect Ujijji Davis writes about a certain type of black cultural landscape that can be found in many American cities. She explains that “The Bottom” is “a colloquial term used to describe black communities within or surrounding larger—visibly segregated—urban areas” (Davis). The formation of these neighborhoods often shares a common origin. In the early 1900s, many black Americans fled cities in the South due to racial violence and lack of opportunities. This led to the Great Migration, a great influx of African Americans from the south to developing industrial cities in the north where they did not face as direct violence and could find more economic opportunities. However, due to segregation and discriminatory housing practices, many of these migrants were constrained to specific neighborhoods. These neighborhoods came to be known as “Bottoms,” a term that signified their status within the hierarchy of the city (Davis). This is a type of neighborhood that has existed in many cities across the United States.

These neighborhoods certainly weren’t perfect, and they often faced issues such as inadequate housing and infrastructure due to the lack of investment and support. However, they were places where black residents could enjoy a vibrant sense of community and shared values. In many cities, these neighborhoods made significant contributions to popular culture, in particular with the development of blues and jazz music. Unfortunately, the high concentration of marginalized people and the lack of political power left these neighborhoods particularly susceptible to changes in urban planning ideals. Ujijji Davis describes the Bottom as a typology that “possesses a distinct vulnerability when confronted

with American planning protocols and inequitable power structures that deprioritize—and destroy—the presence and importance of these communities.” This vulnerability resulted in the razing of these communities for the creation of new structures and developments. Figure 1 shows an aerial view of Detroit’s Black Bottom before its demolition compared to the site today with a completely different landscape and built environment. In nearly every city where a Bottom existed, there is a similar story of displacement of these communities for the sake of urban redevelopment.

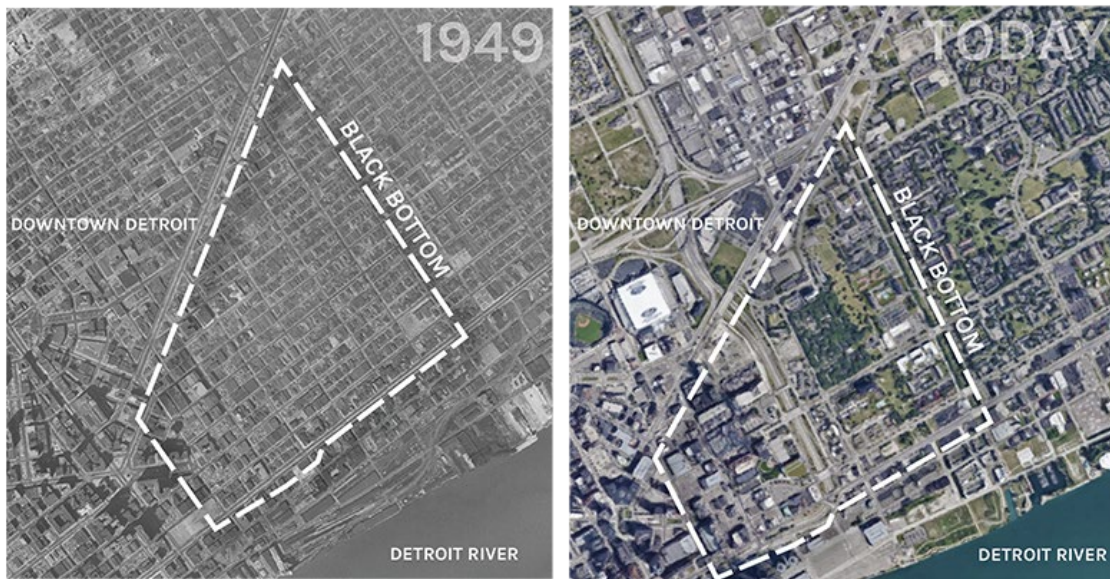


Figure 1. Detroit's Black Bottom Neighborhood in 1949 and Today

Image Credit: Ujijji Davis, The Avery Review

Urban Renewal

Urban renewal was a common trend in cities around the world as municipalities and local governments attempted to reinvent themselves and keep up with the rapidly modernizing technology and systems of urban life. Renewal often involved a city or municipality claiming land using eminent domain, demolishing the buildings and infrastructure in place, and replacing them with alternative uses that better fit the ideals of urban planners and developers. Robert Moses is perhaps the most notorious proponent of urban renewal and made many enemies spearheading such projects in New York City (“Robert Moses”). He was responsible for many large-scale infrastructure projects in the city such as bridges, tunnels, and highways, as well as public parks. In Figure 2, he can be seen examining a detailed model of Battery Bridge, one of his transformative infrastructural projects. Moses often faced criticism for his projects due to their common themes of displacing vulnerable communities through “slum clearance” protocols and transforming the character of urban life to prioritize automobile transportation rather than pedestrian walkability. Not all of Moses’ plans came to fruition due to strong pushback from community advocates in New York City, but his ideas for urban renewal did take hold throughout the United States.



Figure 2. Robert Moses with Battery Bridge Model

Image Credit: C.M. Stieglitz, Library of Congress, 1939

Many American cities created their own urban renewal or urban redevelopment plans that they hoped would revitalize their economies and carry them into the Modern era. Unfortunately, these urban plans often developed at the expense of marginalized communities that did not hold the political power to fight back against the city. In many cities, the “Bottom” was the easiest target to demolish and start fresh due to the lack of political power that the black residents of these neighborhoods held. In many cities that share this common history of the “bottom” and its development into a tight knit community, there also exists a history of its complete destruction and replacement for urban renewal. NYC-based architect Adam Paul Susaneck illustrates this problem in his personal project, “Segregation by Design”, in which he documents the segregation and displacement of marginalized communities through comparisons and analysis of historical maps. He has mapped the changing landscape of many American cities, demonstrating how common this trend of renewal was during the 20th century. These analyses often show a community with a certain style and scale of built environment in a map from the early 20th century, compared with a map from the late 20th century that is practically unrecognizable from what was there previously. Figure 3 is Susaneck’s analysis of the University City development of Western Philadelphia, which razed an existing black community and replaced it with larger scale university buildings.



Figure 3. Black Bottom in Philadelphia

Image Credits: Adam Paul Susaneck, Segregation by Design, 2024

Detroit's Urban Renewal

The city of Detroit is perhaps one of the best examples of urban renewal and the displacement of existing communities in an American city. While some cities like New York proposed urban renewal plans but never saw them to completion, Detroit was able to execute many of their plans during the mid-20th century. The map in Figure 4 depicts the sites of urban redevelopment sites in the downtown area, overlapping with three historic neighborhoods that were prominent for their vibrance and cultural significance. The neighborhoods of Black Bottom (A), Paradise Valley (B), and Corktown (C) were all primarily populated by marginalized groups and held a strong cultural identity before they were demolished for urban renewal. The map also calls out large projects that were completed during urban renewal or in the following decades, which also primarily fell within the remains of these historic neighborhoods. The sites of urban renewal in Detroit's downtown area tell a story of erasure and cultural displacement.

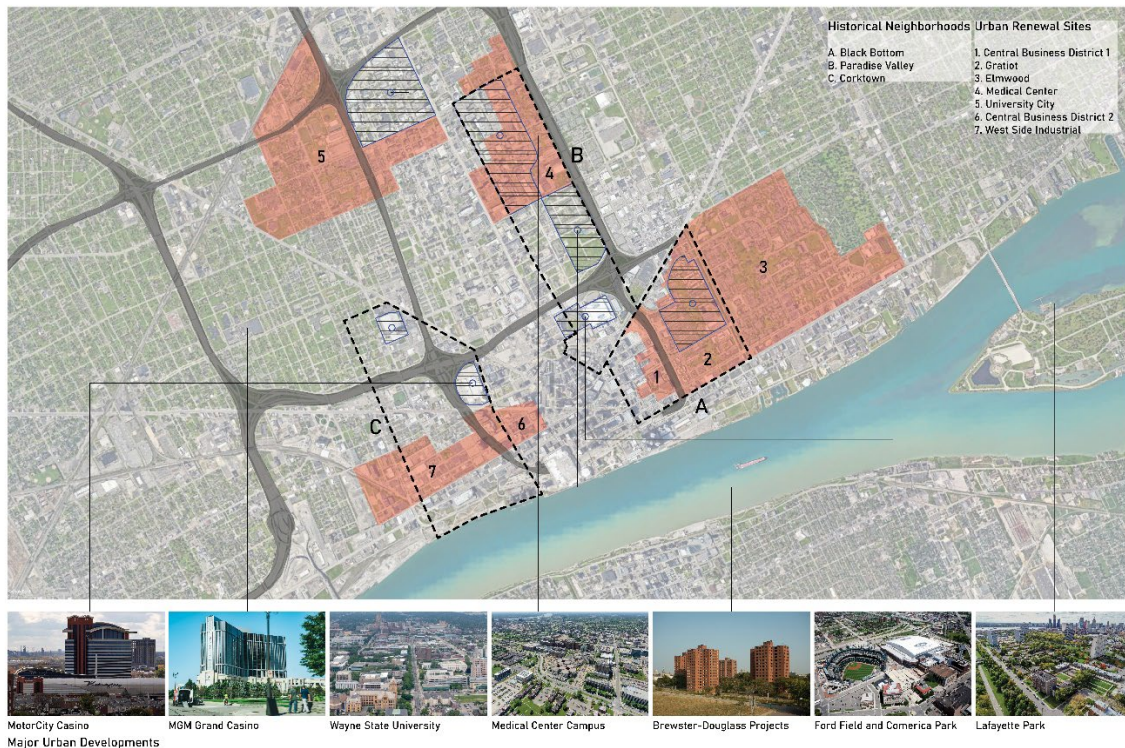


Figure 4. Map of Detroit's Urban Renewal Sites

Chapter 2

The Site

Detroit's Black Bottom

The Black Bottom Neighborhood of Detroit is one of the most famous instances of the “bottom” in the United States. Ken Coleman’s compilation of historical fire insurance maps in Figure 5 gives insight into the density of the neighborhood, the scale of the buildings, and the organization of the street grid (Coleman).



Figure 5. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Black Bottom in 1950

Image Credit: Ken Coleman, HUMANITIES, 2021, edited by author

Black Bottom's African American population increased greatly at the start of the 20th century with the Great Migration bringing many African Americans from the south up to cities in the north ("The Great Migration (1910-1970)"). By the 1930s and 1940s, the neighborhood was well known for its lively entertainment district, with many famous blues and jazz artists playing or recording music there, such as Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. The area was primarily made up of small, one- or two-story homes in the eastern portion, and commercial buildings towards the west as it blended with Detroit's downtown center. Examples of these structures can be seen in the historical photographs in Figure 6. The residential streets were very densely packed with homes that were laid out organically as the site developed. Despite the adversity they faced through housing and economic discrimination, the African American community in Black Bottom established a variety of professional offices, stores, and services that built up the economy of the neighborhood. Ujiji Davis explains that Black Bottom had "a laundry list of business owners and professionals including 151 physicians, 140 social workers, 85 lawyers, 71 beauty shops, 57 restaurants, 36 dentists, 30 drugstores, 25 barbershops, 25 dressmakers and shops, 20 hotels, 15 fish and poultry markets, 10 hospitals, 10 electricians, 9 insurance companies, 7 building contractors, 5 flower shops, 2 bondsmen, and 2 dairy distributors." Former residents of the neighborhood fondly remember Hastings Street as the center of activity and economy in Black Bottom where many of these shops were located. The walkability and close-knit nature of the community, as well as the countless small, local businesses made this a place that people took ownership of and took pride in.



Figure 6. Commercial Building and Residential Building in Black Bottom

Image Credit: Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

Gratiot Redevelopment Project

The landscape of Black Bottom fundamentally changed with the coming of Detroit's urban renewal efforts. Plans for urban renewal began with the city's mayor, Edward Jeffries, who proposed The Detroit Plan in 1946 (Stahl). This plan authorized mass amounts of "slum clearance" which designated certain areas as unfit for living and determined they should be completely demolished. In their place would be brand new developments that the city hoped would revitalize their economy. While there were many sites of renewal across the city, Black Bottom suffered one of the most extreme transformations. The urban renewal plan in Black Bottom was known as the Gratiot Redevelopment Project, which began around 1946 and reached completion around 1964. Prior to renewal, the majority of the residents of the site were African American. The Gratiot Redevelopment demolished nearly all of the structures in the area, replacing them with large scale developments and infrastructure projects. The final report for the project, seen in Figure 7, depicts photographs of the demolished structures contrasted with the nicely manicured residential towers following redevelopment. The majority of the residents were pushed to public housing projects in other parts of the city, with no compensation for the loss of their homes, businesses, or livelihoods (Stahl).

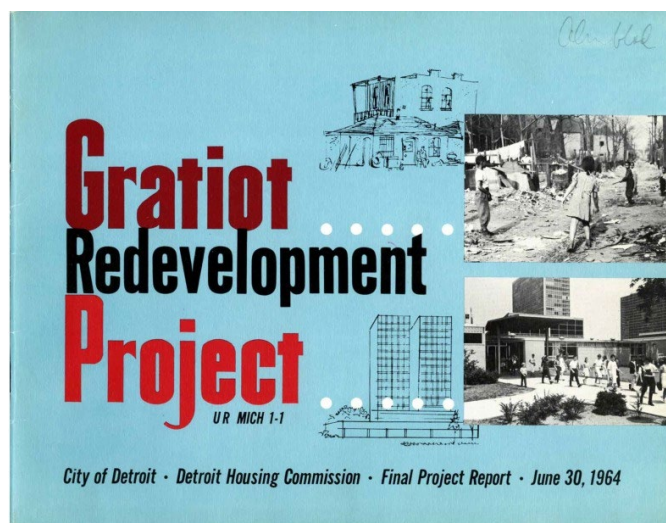


Figure 7. Cover of Final Report for the Gratiot Redevelopment Project

Image Credit: Brochure, Gratiot Redevelopment Project, 1964

The Language of Erasure

Nearly every building in Black Bottom has been destroyed between 1950 and today. The site models below were based on the historical fire insurance maps and the building elevation data that they contain. Figure 8 shows the site in 1950, while Figure 9 shows the site today. The buildings highlighted in brown in each drawing are the only ones that remain today from before 1950.

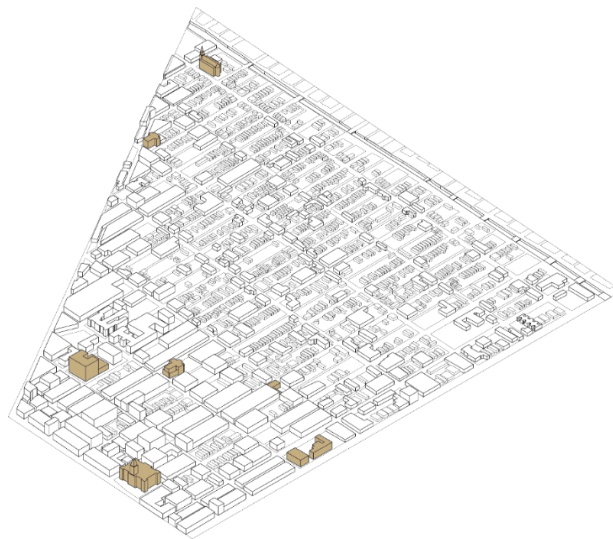


Figure 8. The buildings of Black Bottom in 1950

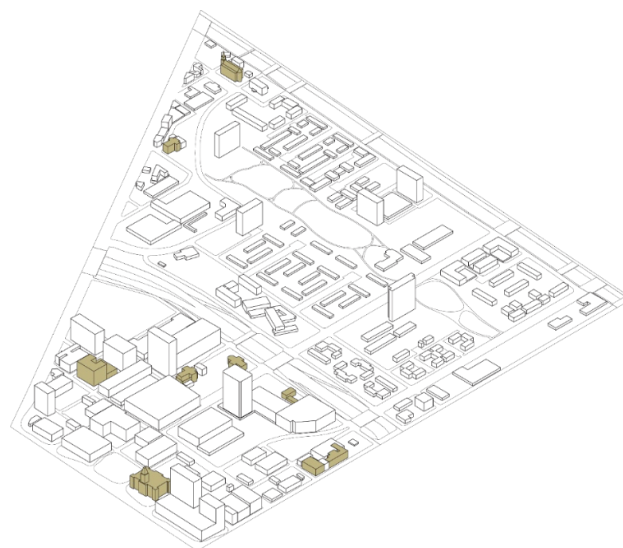


Figure 9. The buildings of Black Bottom today

I created a detailed physical model of the Black Bottom neighborhood as it existed in 1950, juxtaposed with the site today. The model, shown in Figure 10, provides insight into how drastically different the place is today compared to what it was before urban renewal. The layer of the old site is populated with many small, densely packed homes and shops, while the newer site above is sparsely populated with taller structures that are from a completely different architectural language as what was there before. The act of modeling this site in such detail helped me to engage with its history on a deeper level and allowed me to truly ground myself in the history of this place. The buildings on the lower site were modeled in brown, while the new buildings on the upper site were modeled in white. The few buildings that remain today are modeled again in brown on the top layer, which creates a very stark contrast of the old and new structures. The top layer of the model was created with clear acrylic to allow for viewers to look down through the two layers, as seen in Figure 11, and read the history of the site through its contemporary form, creating a visual juxtaposition and a literal layering of history.

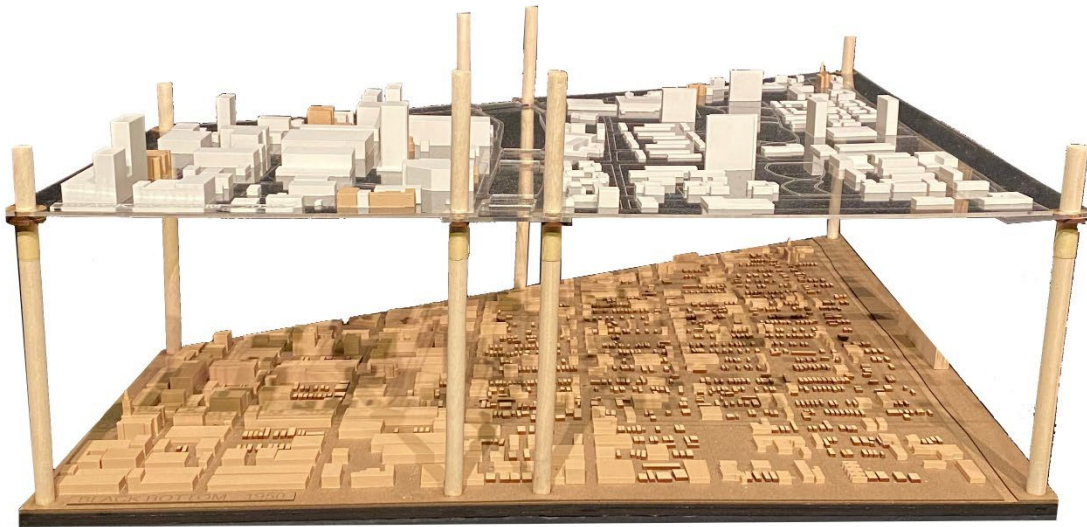


Figure 10. Model juxtaposing Black Bottom in 1950 with Black Bottom today

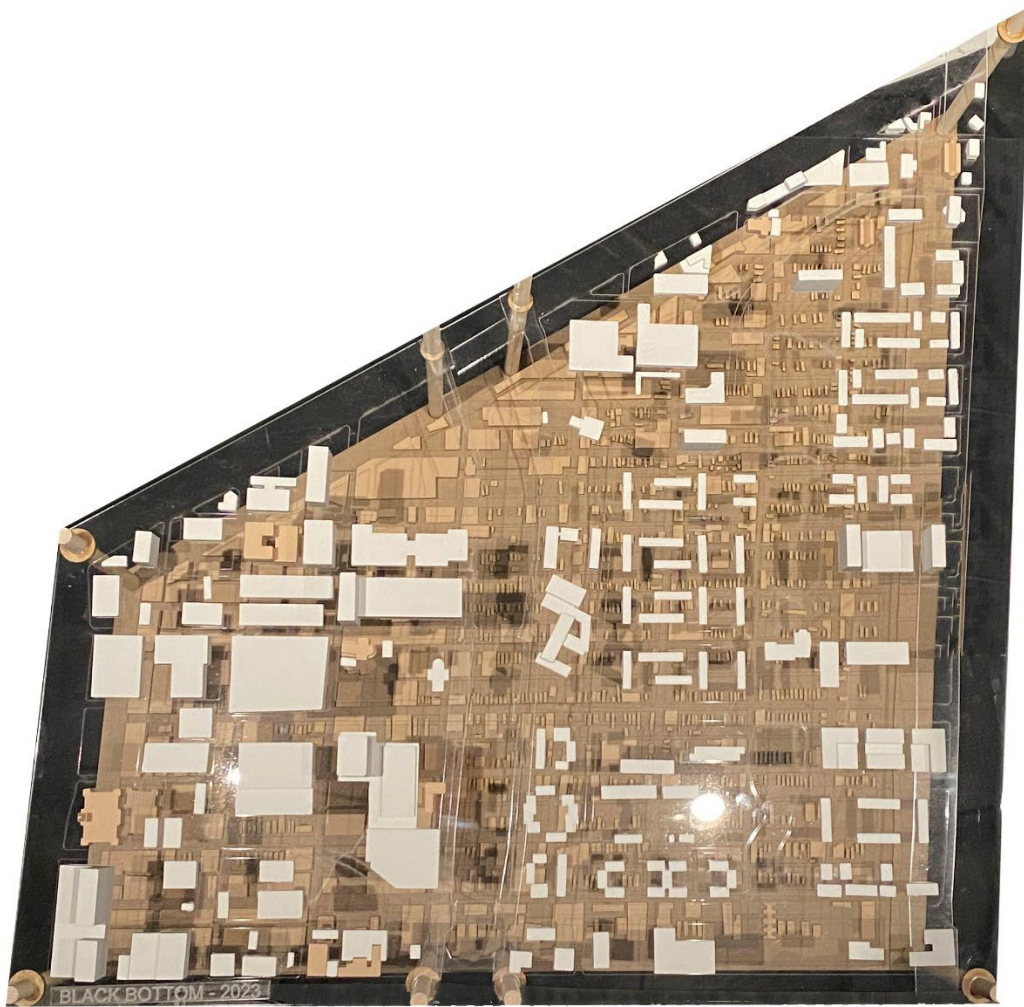


Figure 11. Top view of Black Bottom site model

The dense city grid filled with small homes and shops of Black Bottom was replaced with a few large-scale projects with green space and parking in between. Figure 12 depicts an aerial view of the site today. Some of the key projects, highlighted in Figure 13, were the Chrysler Freeway, the Lafayette Park housing project, and the Blue Cross Blue Shield Medical Center.

2



Figure 12. Detroit's Black Bottom Today

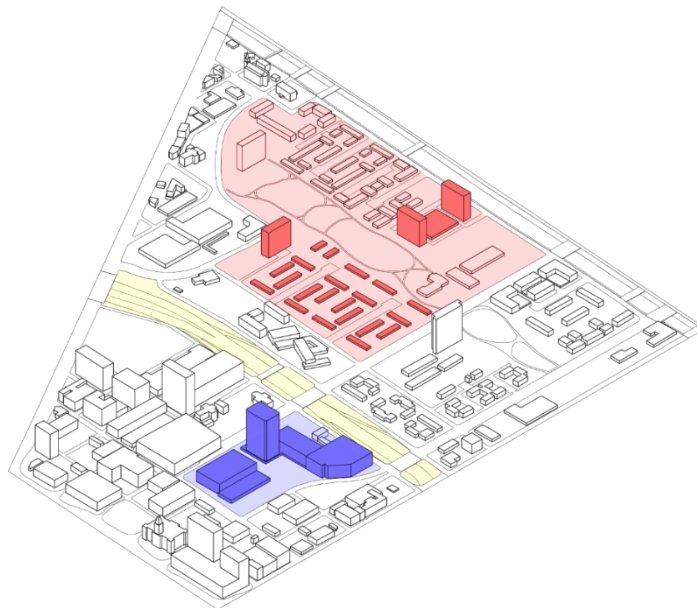


Figure 13. Key developments of urban renewal

The Chrysler Freeway, or I-375

Many of the urban renewal plans that were developed across the country were centered around the highway as a new means of transportation to allow for people to live in the suburbs while still working within the city. Detroit championed the highway as a necessity for modern life given its close relation with car manufacturing companies that were founded in the city, such as Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors. The Chrysler Freeway, or I-375, is a 4-lane freeway that is lowered about 20 feet below the ground level of the surrounding areas and can only be crossed by a few bridges. The freeway cuts directly through the center of the Black Bottom neighborhood and essentially creates a physical barrier between the residential side of the district and the commercial side.

The Chrysler Freeway was located close to the site of Hastings Street, the main economic center of Black Bottom. Historic photographs, shown in Figures 14 and 15, depict Hastings Street, followed by the newly constructed Chrysler Freeway that creates a barren swath of pavement where there was once shops and homes. The bustling, local character of Hastings Street was replaced with the impersonal transportation corridor of I-375. Figure 16 shows I-375 today, now populated on either side with larger, more scattered structures.



Figure 14. Hastings Street in Black Bottom

Image Credit: Detroit Historical Society



Figure 15. The Chrysler Freeway after the razing of Black Bottom

Image Credit: Detroit Historical Society



Figure 16. I-375 Today

Lafayette Park

Lafayette Park, photographed in Figure 17, is a housing development that took up the largest area of the former Black Bottom neighborhood, and has a prominent legacy within the history of architecture. The project was developed by the world-famous modern architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his frequent partners, landscape architect Alfred Caldwell, and urban planner Ludwig Hilberseimer (*Mies Detroit*).



Figure 17. Lafayette Pavilion Housing Tower

Image Credit: Jamie Schafer, Arch Daily, 2013

While Mies van der Rohe and his associates are best known for their projects in Chicago, Lafayette Park today is the area with the highest concentration of his buildings in the world. The plan featured a few housing towers in Mies' now famous style, along with smaller townhomes. The landscape design is tied together with a large green space with paths and recreation spaces. Lafayette Park was

designed to experiment with new ideals for city living that incorporated nature and recreation space while still living close to a commercial center. While the design intentions of the development can be commendable, the impact of its creation displaced countless black residents. Many of these newer developments were primarily advertised towards white residents, while the former black residents of this place were in some cases provided with public housing in a different part of the city, and in other cases were left completely without accommodations following their displacement.

Lafayette Park and the Gratiot Redevelopment Project were some of the most fully realized urban renewal plans in United States history. The development, shown in Figure 18, was designated as a historic landmark by the National Parks Service in 2015 (*Mies Detroit*). Unfortunately, the residents and businesses that were displaced by urban renewal never received reparations for the harm that was done to their community and their livelihood. While Lafayette Park does carry a certain legacy of prestige for its role in the history of modern architecture, it cannot be separated from its role in the displacement of a prominent black community.

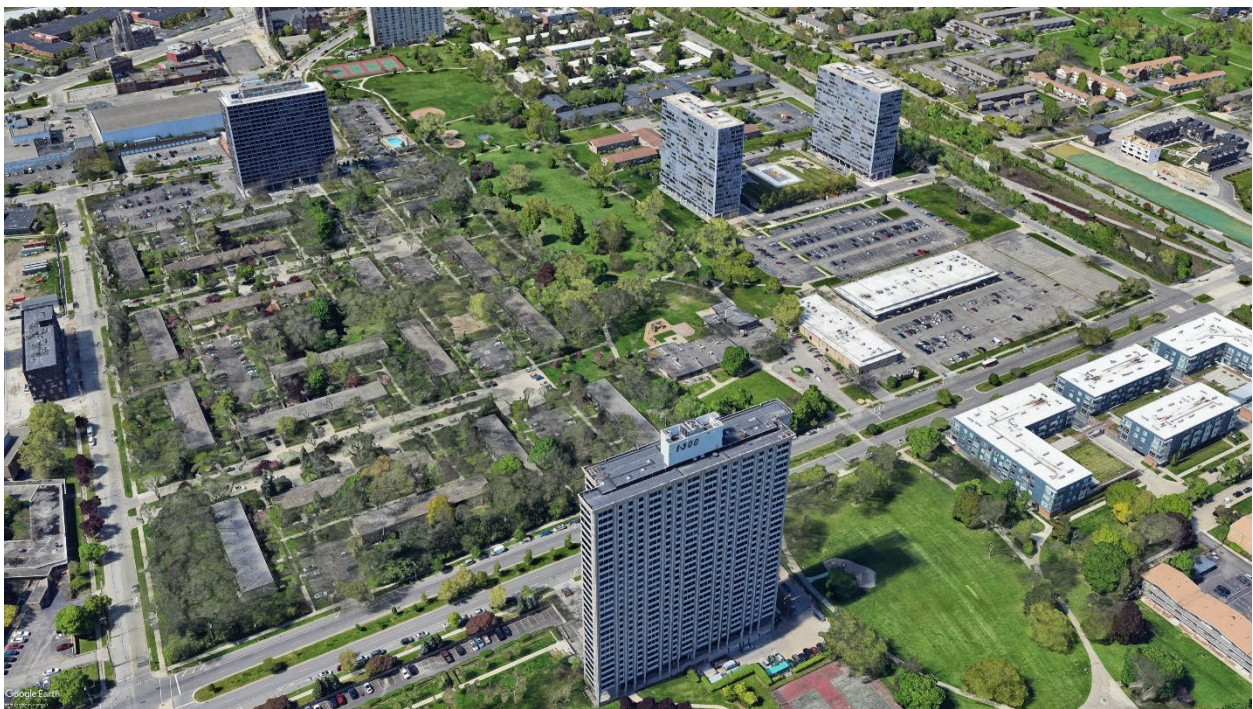


Figure 18. Lafayette Park Today

Detroit Car Culture

Downtown Detroit today offers one of the clearest examples of the prioritization of automobiles over people in American cities. Figure 19 highlights the highways, main streets, minor streets, and parking lots, of downtown Detroit, and shows that more than half of the surface area of the downtown core is dedicated to cars. Additionally, the freeway surrounding the downtown core acts as a physical barrier since it is lowered below the typical ground level and can only be crossed by bridges. Ultimately this creates an environment that is inhospitable to pedestrians and discourages sustainable transportation options for local residents.



Figure 19. Map of downtown Detroit highlighting space dedicated to automobiles

Detroit Demographics

Detroit is one of the cities with the highest population of African American residents in the United States (“Black City Population”). Detroit’s racial demographics over time, as seen in Figure 20, varied greatly based on significant national trends of movement and migration. As the city grew in the later 1900s, the population was almost entirely white. In the early 20th century, many black Americans moved from southern cities to cities in the north to escape violence in the south. This period, which lasted from about 1910 to 1940, is known as the Great Migration (“The Great Migration (1910-1970)”). The majority of these migrants settled into neighborhoods like Black Bottom. As the automobile became more central to American cities, many white Americans moved out of the inner core of cities and into the newly constructed suburbs. This would allow them to live in an idealized community, while commuting to work in the city by car. This trend across the country was known as White Flight (Gorey). The outcomes of these trends have remained to today, with most of Detroit’s population being African American. Given that the overwhelming majority of the city is black, the solutions to problems of infrastructure and displacement need to address the specific needs of this community.

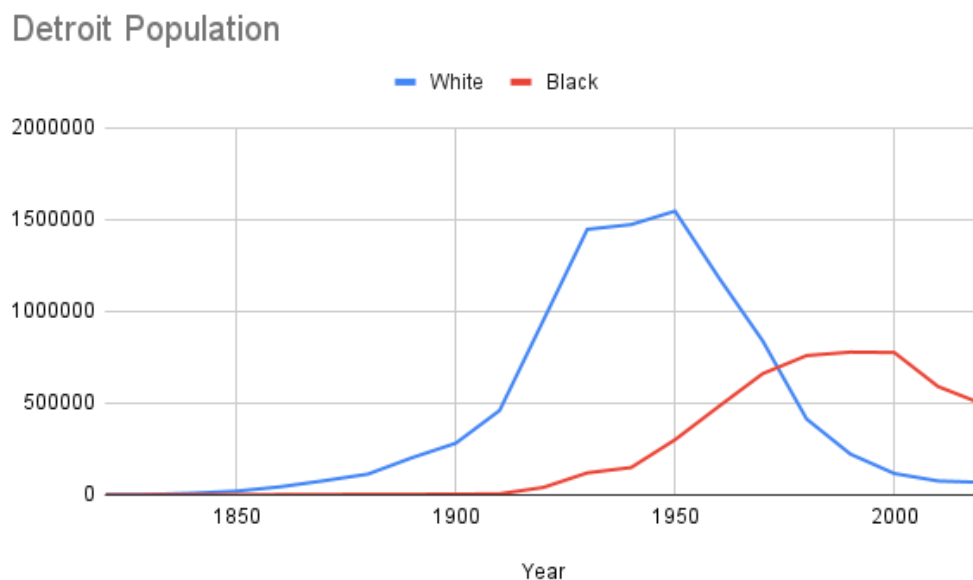


Figure 20. Detroit Population by Race, 1820-2020, based on US Census Data

Detroit Economy

The economy of the city of Detroit was largely built off of the automobile companies that call the city their home. This includes the Big 3 automobile makers, Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford Motor Company, all of which were founded in this city. Henry Ford famously test-drove his first car through the city in 1896 (Farnell). The development of the city's economy benefited for decades from the success of these companies. Unfortunately, the economic conditions for these companies declined in the second half of the 20th century due to social conditions in the city and global economic factors. By the late 2000s, Chrysler and GM filed for bankruptcy, and by 2013, the entire city of Detroit filed for bankruptcy. This was the largest municipal filing or bankruptcy in U.S. history (Farnell). This economic turmoil has taken a toll on the citizens of Detroit. According to a report from Detroit Future City, "more than 40% of Detroit's residents, and 57% of its children under the age of 18, live below the federal poverty line of \$24,339 for a family of four" ("People"). This city is in desperate need of economic revitalization, with a focus on direct improvements for citizens.

Chapter 3

Plans for Redevelopment

I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project

The Michigan Department of Transportation has been developing a plan to transform the Chrysler Freeway to undo some of the damage caused to the urban fabric of the site. In 2013, MDOT began discussions to either repair the highway, or replace it with a boulevard at the same level as the surrounding streets (“I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project”). As of today, the city plans to move forward with the “I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project”, seen in Figure 21, which promises to turn the highway into a boulevard and provide space for recreation and mixed-use developments in some of the leftover space. While community members were involved in the earlier stages of the planning process, some advocates have spoken out against the planning team for moving forward with the project even as the Covid-19 pandemic made participation more difficult for residents (Wilson). Some residents have voiced their concerns regarding several key aspects of the MDOT plan. First, the proposed boulevard does not dramatically improve the experience for pedestrians trying to cross over the corridor—the boulevard would be a 9-lane road that is too wide for pedestrians to safely cross. Second, the boulevard still allocates a significant area to be prioritized to cars and would likely see a similar amount of traffic pass through the neighborhood. Finally, the mention of “reconnecting communities” in the project’s name sparked the community’s interest in the potential for reparations, but ultimately the project has lacked any direct economic action intended to truly reinvest in the community harmed by the highway’s creation. (Wilson). Despite these concerns from the community, the project seems to be moving forward as planned and is set to begin construction in 2025 (“I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project”).



Figure 21. I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project, proposed changes

Image Credit: Michigan Department of Transportation, 2023

Reparative Investment in Black Bottom

Many community organizations and activists have been calling for reparations for the former residents of Black Bottom due to the harm caused by urban renewal. The publication, “A Call for Reparative Investment in Black Bottom Paradise Valley” from Detroit Future City seen in Figure 22 is one example of direct demands for reinvestment in this community. Many of these demands involve increased resources for support and ownership for black residents.

Reparative Investment in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley

To properly offset the destruction of these neighborhoods caused by urban renewal and the construction of I-375 and to generate and protect wealth for Black Detroiters, a reparative investment in historic Black Bottom and Paradise Valley should be made. Detroit Future City has developed an initial list of key components that would support reparative outcomes in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley:²

- **Emphasis on those displaced and their descendants** by urban renewal as well as Black Detroiters currently living in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods.
- Strategies to **increase homeownership among Black Detroiters** living in the neighborhoods.
- Programs to **strengthen the housing stock** by supporting home repair for existing residents.
- **Ensuring Black developers have the investment and access** to be at the forefront of development opportunities.
- Support for the **development of a business district focused on Black owned enterprises** and the cultivation of Black entrepreneurs.
- Implementation of **land use-based climate resilience solutions** to build the neighborhood's resistance to acute shocks caused by climate impacts.

Figure 22. Demands for investment in the Black Bottom community

Image Credit: Detroit Future City, 2023

Stakeholders

There are several key stakeholders in the community whose needs should be addressed in a transformative plan such as this. Many of these community members and organizations have voiced their concerns about the current MDOT plan for the site, and their hopes for more improvement in the future. Many of these opinions are summarized within the article, “Is Detroit ‘Reconnecting Communities,’ or Missing an Opportunity?” Current resident and University of Michigan professor of architecture Bryan Boyer spoke about MDOT’s plan for the site, saying, “The suburban commuters are going to have a slower trip downtown; my neighbors and I are going to have more pedestrian danger; the businesses will have years of closures. There’s no winner” (Wilson). Lauren Hood, co-chair of the city council’s Reparations Task Force, spoke about the suggestions of community activists when she said, “What about a land trust? What about a cultural corridor? What about a business corridor for descendants of the displaced” (Wilson)? In a similar article from the *Detroit Free Press*, Local historian Jamon Jordan offered other options for the site’s development, such as “creation of a community center or making capital more accessible for those whose families were displaced or suffered losses during highway construction” (Lawrence). Other organizations have called for what they believe are more realistic options for development. Todd Scott, executive director of the Detroit Greenways Coalition, is “advocating for what he sees as more modest but impactful design changes, like removing turn lanes, designing for tighter turn radii at intersections, and bike signal heads along a proposed cycle track” (Wilson). These opinions offer a wide range of visions for the site, but a common theme for many of the residents and activists is a stronger focus on investment in the black residents of the community. Many activists believe that this opportunity to transform the Black Bottom neighborhood can offer much more to the residents of Detroit than what the Michigan Department of Transportation is currently offering.

Chapter 4

Design Proposal

Proposed Intervention

The I-375 highway and the related urban renewal historically caused harm to the Black Bottom community and divides the site today. I am proposing that the very site that caused this harm can be adapted to provide reparative action and opportunities for reoccupation of the historic site. This proposal will offer an alternative solution to MDOT's "Reconnecting Communities Project". It will attempt to address some of the key concerns that community members raised regarding the project, including: the lack of pedestrian safety and comfort with the new boulevard, the continued prioritization of cars over people, and the lack of monetary reinvestment in the displaced community despite the implied intentions to address past harms.

I am proposing a cap structure that will be constructed to span over the sunken I-375 highway and will provide space above the highway for a functional public corridor that will be used to create equitable spaces for the former Black Bottom community. This solution offers a few key advantages over the existing plan for I-375. First, this solution deprioritizes cars in the public landscape by putting the highway underground, but still appeases the powerful automobile companies of Detroit by maintaining this transportation corridor to avoid serious pushback on the project. In addition, the highway covering will create a more pleasant landscape that makes for a more seamless transition from one district to another, without the need to cross a highway or 9-lane boulevard. Finally, by creating programmatic elements above the highway that are specifically intended to provide opportunities to black-owned businesses and residents in the area, this plan begins to address the harm historically caused to this community.

Chapter 5

Literature Review

Jardins Serge Gainsbourg

The Jardins Serge Gainsbourg by Matthieu Gelin and David Lafon is one of several projects that span over highways in the suburbs of Paris. Photographed in Figure 23, this structure attempts to reconnect a community that has been split by a highway, providing functional public space where there was previously just a transportation corridor. This project provides a completed example of a highway cap structure that is intended to optimize the public space surrounding transportation infrastructure (“Jardin Serge Gainsbourg / Matthieu Gelin & David Lafon Architecte”).



Figure 23. Jardin Serge Gainsbourg highway cap

Image Credit: Matthieu Gelin & David Lafon Architecte, ArchDaily, 2011

The Big Dig

The Central Artery / Tunnel Project, also known as “The Big Dig”, was a large-scale urban transformation project that reached completion in Boston in the 2000’s (“The Big Dig | CNU”). Prior to its transformation, the central artery was a massive highway superstructure that ran through the center of Boston’s downtown area and made this central public space inhospitable at a human scale. The city of Boston demolished the raised highway, moved the primary traffic flow to a tunnel underneath this corridor, and constructed a public park at the street level (“The Big Dig | CNU”). Figure 24 shows this central corridor before and after its major transformation. This transformation not only maintains the flow of traffic through the downtown area in a less obstructive manner, but also provides space for public gathering and recreation in a central urban hub.



Figure 24. Boston Big Dig before and after

Image Credit: TEDx Manhattan Beach

Precedent: Reconnecting Jackson Ward

The Reconnect Jackson Ward project in Richmond, Virginia serves as the closest example to the type of urban transformation that I am proposing for Detroit. Jackson Ward was a similar neighborhood to Black Bottom—it was primarily inhabited by African Americans until urban renewal and the construction of a highway permanently changed the landscape and displaced many of the residents and their businesses. Reconnect Jackson Ward proposes a cap structure over the highway where this neighborhood once stood, shown in Figure 25. This structure would create a corridor populated with buildings that address the needs of the local community and of the former residents of this site. This masterplan, as outlined in Figure 26, will include commercial spaces, housing, community event space, religious gathering spaces, and outdoor recreation spaces. While this plan is still in the early stages of development, it offers an alternative solution to the challenge of transforming highways which considers the historical needs of this community.



Figure 25. Reconnect Jackson Ward Study Area

Image Credit: Reconnect Jackson Ward, 2022



Mixed Use – Commerce/Housing

- Reestablish the historic neighborhood and opportunities for marketplaces, commerce, and innovation.
- Prioritize Black wealth creation by creating home, business, and land ownership opportunities.

Faith & Contemplative Space

- Reconnect Jackson Ward with paths that encourage cultural growth and discovery and provide a space for the community that encourages personal growth and development.

Youth Engagement Space

- Build and promote excellence and opportunities in Jackson Ward for youth and personal engagement.
- Provide youth with a space for recreation and leisure.

Arts & Entertainment Space

- Integrate arts and entertainment spaces that celebrate the history and culture of Jackson Ward and provide a space for community events and entertainment.

PRIMARY FRAMEWORK THEMES

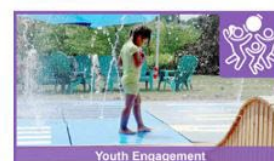


Figure 26. Reconnect Jackson Ward Masterplan

Image Credit: Reconnect Jackson Ward, 2022

Chapter 6

Design Solution

The solution I am proposing is first grounded in an exercise of asset mapping the existing community to understand the resources that exist within the site. Asset mapping is a framework of community development that focuses on the strengths and resources that already exist in a community and determining how to support those, rather than focusing solely on the deficits that may exist there. This framework was first proposed by community researchers John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann as an alternative to traditional community building frameworks that simply focus on replacing or filling deficits within a neighborhood (Lightfoot et al.). Asset mapping results in the identification of 6 different categories of assets within the community: institutions, physical infrastructure, individuals, associations, local economy, and local culture.

I followed this framework of asset mapping, as seen in Figure 27, to identify many of the strengths and resources of the Black Bottom community, including key activists and leaders, active associations and organizations, and key economic events hubs and events. This process of asset mapping revealed that while there are many community leaders and organizations that are still actively engaged with the history and culture of Black Bottom, there are very few places within the site today that allow these groups and leaders to physically occupy the space to engage with this culture. For this reason, my proposal will focus on utilizing the space above I-375 to provide places where members of this community can reoccupy the physical space of Black Bottom. These spaces will be catered towards the strengths that were identified in the asset map but will support the reoccupation of these groups within this culturally significant landscape.

The design solution that I am proposing offers opportunities above the highway for communities to reoccupy spaces from which they were previously displaced. The superstructure, shown in Figure 28, could act as a sort of stage that provides room for ownership of the very site that caused harm in the first place. These sites of reoccupation will take the form of many small interventions in key locations around the city of Detroit, particularly in neighborhoods that were harmed by urban renewal. The function of these sites will be determined by the benefits they can bring to their immediate context, as well as the existing resources and assets in the community that they can support. In the site proposed in Figure 29, a community center and memorial to Black Bottom will be placed adjacent to two historic churches to complement the focus on community gathering and cultural expression. Certain associations, leaders, and economic resources can be identified from the asset map and paired with specific sites to strengthen their reach and influence. This community center could act as a gathering space for the Black Bottom Archives, an association and media platform that focuses on uplifting local Black Detroiters and their history through storytelling and community organizing. This association could be supported by certain individuals and activists that have lived experience of this place and can act as storytellers within the physical site of Black Bottom. The act of gathering and community organization at this site can then support small, black-owned businesses with temporary market space while community events are held. This synthesis of programs in one central space allows the existing resources of the community to be strengthened by each other and thrive together.

This type of infrastructural project would likely take a long time to develop, construct, and populate. During the early stages of development, the plots to the north and south could temporarily house community spaces such as urban farms and youth recreation areas that are easy to construct and move around. In later years and with continued funding for development, these plots could be populated with black owned businesses and economic attractors that prioritize development for marginalized communities. This long-term development would ideally result in key economic corridors and districts that are born out of black ownership and culture.

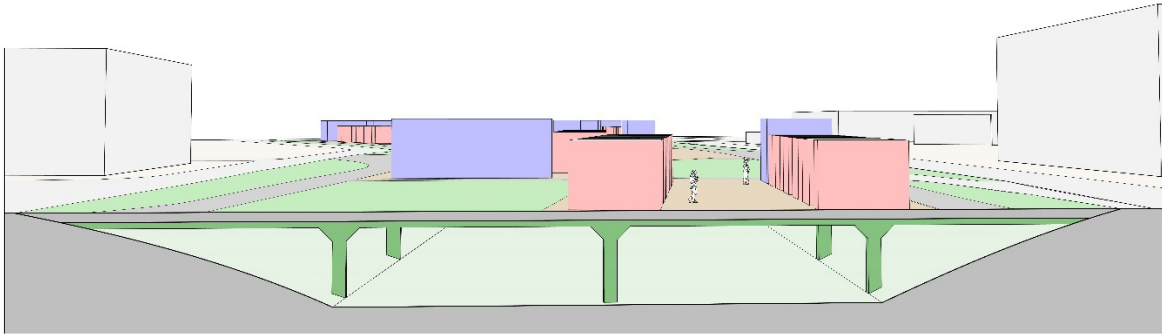


Figure 28. Section of Highway Superstructure

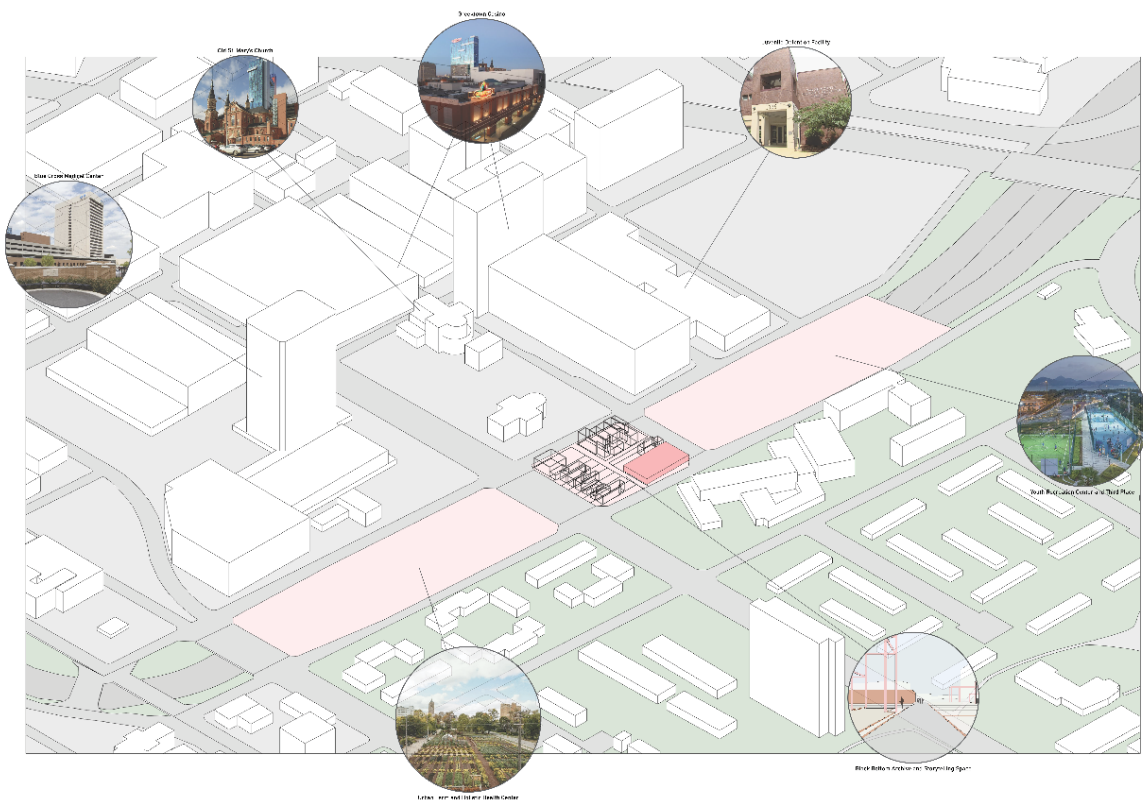


Figure 29. Axonometric view of proposed intervention site

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Reflections

Many cities across the country have recently been grappling with the harm that has historically been caused to black communities by urban renewal and proposing solutions to undo this harm. This project offers an alternative pathway towards challenging the harmful legacies of urban renewal and highway infrastructure. This alternative path prioritizes the community that exists within a given place and celebrates what makes them special, rather than viewing a neighborhood as a clean slate for redevelopment. The proposed highway-spanning structure provides an architectural solution that considers the demands of community organizations and prioritizes human-scale spaces and structures. The proposed programmatic solutions above the highway create spaces for the existing associations and individuals within the community, providing a way for the Black Bottom neighborhood to live on through continued reoccupation of the site.

Given more time and resources to develop this work, this project would ideally involve extensive engagement with the local community to determine the needs of the local residents most invested in this place. While this thesis was grounded in a study of the history of this place and in readings of publications from prominent community organizations, these steps would be strengthened further with face-to-face contact with community representatives.

Appendix

Black Bottom Model Photographs

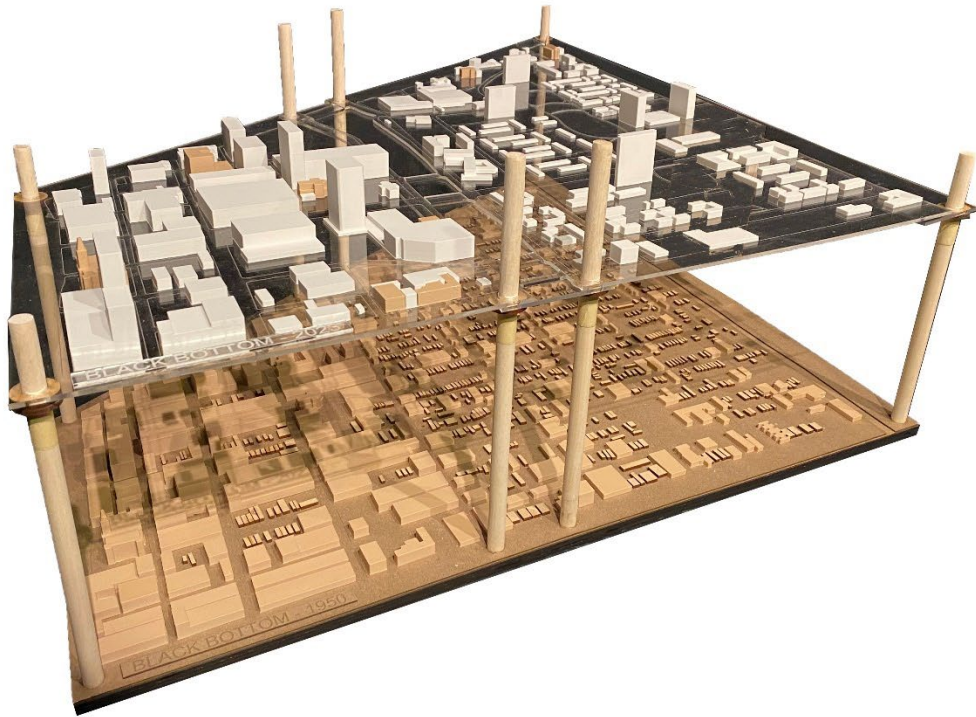


Figure 30. Angled view of Black Bottom site model

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