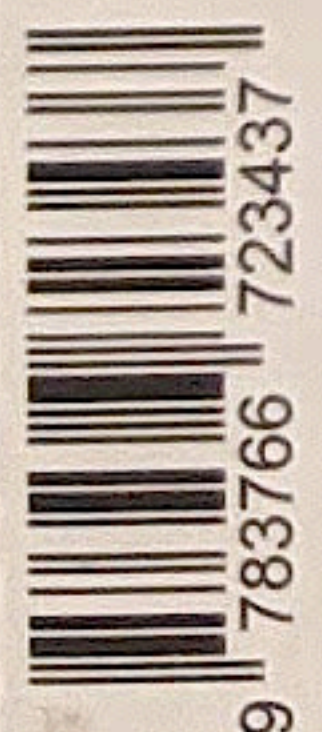


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Island sites such as this one benefit from confinement, allowing a slow evolution away from the present.





Into the

How does urban wilderness affect a city? Erin Kelly, together with photographer Peter Del Tredici, analysed its impact on Detroit to tell the story of time in the largest majority-minority city in the United States.

ERIN KELLY WITH PETER DEL TREDICI

Wild

Three typologies of wilderness-making emerged in the study of Detroit: volcano, island, and savannah.

For decades, demolition has been sought as a panacea for the tide of blight in Detroit. Waves of departure have marked the city both physically and socially, with outmigration to surrounding suburbs beginning in the 1950s. Policies promoted by federal and local government prohibited African Americans from securing mortgages, compounding declines in the local population. Detroit was transformed into the largest majority-minority city in the United States, and local resources were stretched thin in efforts to deliver maintenance to an increasingly divergent set of conditions. For a city largely comprised of single-family housing, residential demolition was initially slow to imprint change upon Detroit's urban fabric. Although demand for demolition was great, delays were rampant, and progress was financed entirely by the ever-diminishing local tax roll.

A recent infusion of federal support has radically accelerated the pace of demolition. Since 2014, almost 12,000 buildings have been removed from Detroit, creating more than 830 new acres of vacant land. Today, vacant lots are present in every neighborhood of the city: Detroit possesses almost 24 square miles of vacant land, with an average lot size of 3,000 square feet. As a construction project more than 50 years in the making, each lot has been back-filled with materials from different sources, with varying soil textures and degrees of regulatory oversight. As a result, no two basement holes are the same. Similarly, no two lots have been maintained to the same standard. Some lots contain well-graded soil and a healthy lawn of rye grass, while others have endured long

periods without mowing. The outcome is not a uniform landscape, but rather a quilted condition that tells the story of time in Detroit.

Urban wild

Given the local abundance of time, land, and delay, great promise exists for introducing the urban wilderness as a landmanagement strategy in Detroit. An urban wild is not realized through force; rather, it is allowed to emerge. These wilds are produced out of negligence, not forethought, given the space-time to actualize. In the beginning, there is no construction timeline. Maintenance, rather than original construction, holds the agency of authorship. Maintenance becomes a curatorial act, whereby spontaneous, ruderal vegetation is selectively removed, and new plants are occasionally added to emphasize the experience of a site.

The most charismatic urban wildernesses are often the product of war. The duration of war provides more robust botanical tangents required for the creation of an urban wild. Self-appointed plants possess an entrepreneurial spirit, along with what is usually a tolerance for extremes, and mix with intentionally planted species. In regions without conflict, the placement of industry and infrastructure offer more familiar routes to the quarantine and authorship of these introverted sites. Urban wilds, and wild woodlands in particular, are a widely used landmanagement strategy in Northern Europe, the result of a more resource-oriented regulatory environment. In the United States, urban wildernesses are more typically intellectually

seductive. Despite the national heritage of wilderness-making, only fits, starts, and murmurs of proof on the ground (in the form of managed, spontaneously emerging wildernesses) exist today in urban centers of North America.

Dynamic landscapes

An effort to catalog Detroit's range of existing urban wildernesses began in partnership with Peter Del Tredici. The work started with GIS- and streetview-based existing-conditions analysis, with follow-up site visits and documentation of locations across Detroit to assess the mix and density of species and marginalized uses. This initial reconnaissance allowed us to build a more targeted itinerary and thoughtful sequencing of field evaluations, for further interpretation of the landscape. After establishing our framework through these site visits and field trips, additional assessment of the prioritized sites continued as a means of supporting the storytelling we identified as a critical next step to the work. This further assessment included establishing the deeper historic context for each site, its ownership, and neighboring conditions. A cycle of regular, seasonal observation and documentation began in an effort to tell the story of these places as dynamic landscapes situated within Detroit. Initially, we sought to understand these sites' potential as a landmanagement strategy in formerly residential areas. What we discovered, however, was that the most robust examples of urban wilderness in Detroit are the byproduct of industrial quarantine and infrastructural confinement.

This patch of formerly residential land was recently reconstituted as a trucking and logistics facility.



Volcano sites are formed through the deposit of new minerals and geological materials.



Three typologies of wilderness-making emerged from the study of Detroit: volcano, island, and savannah. These can all be considered distinct successional outcomes that follow the cessation of the glaciation process that is urbanization. Volcano sites are marked by the deposit of new minerals and geologic materials, including the infilling of basement holes with rubble, the illegal dumping of construction and demolition debris, and the creation or erosion of parking surfaces. Cars or car parts, gravel, and other rubble alter a site's geomorphology. These frequent, mostly illicit acts shift the land's microclimate and pH. Island sites are the most traditional form of urban wilderness. Here, quarantine and confinement allow for capture, for self-directed interior cultivation, and the creation of divergent conditions. A remnant fence, a hedgerow, or an actual wall often precedes the process of island-making, acting as a focal point for plant establishment. These sites host the most concentrated collection of woody growth, and with a lengthier gestation period, the greatest intermingling of intentionally planted species. Finally, the third and most pastoral of the landscape types are savannah lots, which are created and maintained through mowing. This urban grazing reduces the range of onsite species into a smooth monoculture and severely limits woody plant growth. This is perhaps the most immediately embraced landscape of the three.

Ultimately, each site results from the absence of maintenance and an in-migration of new botanical conspirators. With the growing season, they spring to life, animated by an international cast of characters. As a group of places, they offer a wild pretext in which a curatorial act could one

day occur. Beyond these discrete locations, however, species that signify wildness persist across the city, lending a unifying visual identity to many of Detroit's neighborhoods. Composed largely of pioneer species, the cast of characters are not native, but urban-tolerant. These immigrants are resilient but out-of-place – a truly cosmopolitan urban meadow, associated locally with blight. Would-be garden species like sweet pea, Queen Anne's lace, and milkweed are associated with lack of maintenance and are the botanic personification of neglect, violence, and disinvestment. The perception of these landscapes is reversed in the imagination of those who are visitors to Detroit. Those less familiar with the city's history experience a pastoral tapestry of swaying summertime color, conflating this with a landscape experience that might be celebrated in another setting.

Living with wilderness

Detroit residents aren't living with the urban wilderness; rather, they are living amidst neighborhoods where acts of maintenance like mowing provide clear lines of site and offer a route to self-preservation. At present, city planners, administrators, and politicians are searching for ways to implement fiscally solvent maintenance strategies. Unfortunately, the tax base does not adequately support the demands for maintenance that the expanding portfolio of vacant land requests. And while vacant lots exist throughout Detroit, not all of them are problematic. Sites of cultural expression, community gardens, and green stormwater infrastructure, for example, persist largely without issue within the quilted conditions of Detroit. The

real problem goes beyond politics, as Detroiters don't entirely identify or derive a valued sense of place from the mix of species that currently thrive on the city's vacant lands. Although Detroit was built on the backs of hardworking immigrants, and sustained by the pioneering spirit, this experience has not translated to an acceptance of this wild-looking biome. Some community groups do embrace the role of pollinators and habitat-friendly landscapes, but the prevailing aesthetic of wildness is at odds with popular preference.

Designing with wilderness

Detroiters crave contrast to this condition. Very few intentionally formed spaces exist through which to interact with Detroit's urban wildernesses. Residents do not clamor for meadows, but for lawns. Along with economic stability and job creation, local emphasis is placed on the introduction of cues to care, of clean edges, visible geometry and well-graded, smooth sites: the same formal landscape gestures that began departing Detroit with the waves of out-migration in the 1950s. Significant design and planning efforts are currently underway in Detroit that acknowledge the potential for landscape to unlock economic recovery and contribute to a sense of place, character, and beauty in Detroit's neighborhoods. Recent landscape design and planning commissions in Detroit include work by Design Workshop, Elizabeth Mossop, Michel Desvigne, and Walter Hood. Mossop's commission, the first of the new political administration, sought to reimagine the role of landscape and its ability to partner with and spur development by introducing new land

management strategies to vacant, residential land in the Fitzgerald neighborhood. Construction of a new, signature neighborhood greenway designed by Mossop is expected to complete early next year. Desvigne's work began last summer through the articulation of a very well received and recently released Framework Vision for Detroit's East Riverfront District, a formerly industrial riverfront area poised for redevelopment. The plan links the central business district through the waterfront to a range of neighborhoods and to Detroit's Frederick Law Olmsted-designed island park, while contemplating appropriate redevelopment strategies for a district poised for vibrant revival. Design Workshop and Walter Hood each began work this January on neighborhood plans in two separate parts of the city. Both planning processes address an approximately quarter square mile area of Detroit, while placing an emphasis on resident engagement and the role of landscape to support

an improved quality of life for residents. Plans for both neighborhoods will be released by the city this fall. Ultimately, the work of city planners, politicians, and advocates is to ensure that the design process is resident-oriented, and that emerging design proposals are embraced.

The future

In Detroit, a locally spurred economic resurgence is underway. After decades of decline, the city is pivoting towards growth. Over the last year, Detroit's population decline slowed to .05 percent, the smallest change in decades. The city has expanded its role in local planning efforts, and private investment is beginning to flow into Detroit. Willful ignorance at multiple scales has authored each of Detroit's sites of urban wilderness, creating space for the uninterrupted passage of time and thereby a progression towards wildness. Urban

wilds tend to occupy territories of jurisdictional conflict or disregard. These marginalized spaces are later rediscovered and re-integrated into their surroundings through intentional, recovery-oriented processes. Two of Detroit's largest examples of island-type wilderness will be re-articulated as part of this local economic resurgence: a 58-acre formerly residential site recently transformed into a trucking and logistics facility, and a 35-acre stretch of a former rail line that the city and partners are seeking to revive as part of a 26-mile-long interconnected system of greenways. Lamentably, landscape alone cannot facilitate Detroit's complete recovery: Economic and social forces are at play, and Detroit cannot simply design its way out. Perhaps more than anything, deeper social healing is required – a process well-supported through access to intentional, shared public spaces and the provision of beauty that the urban wilderness can offer as long as it is given appropriate recognition.

Photos: Peter Del Tredici

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