



## 2013 Remaking Cities Congress

Planning and Social Innovations for Post-Industrial Cities

Case Study Summary

# Detroit, Michigan

## Lessons from Detroit: Urban Transformations for Rebuilding Legacy Cities—Smaller is Better

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On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for chapter 9 bankruptcy and since that time, there has been much public conversation about the fate of the city and its residents. Economists have been debating the various financial work out options for the debt restructuring, speculating about where the pain is going to be felt the hardest among the city's pension workers, the unions and the creditors. Municipalities across the United States have been carefully watching the drama unfold with the hopes of learning key lessons from how Detroit manages to regain enough solvency to effectively run essential public services, reengage an underutilized workforce and rebuild a stronger tax base.

But the conversation among Detroit's civil society reveals the more domestic sentiments about bankruptcy and its impact on the 700,000 people that still call Detroit home. These local dialogues illustrate the long-standing frustrations and fears about forced relocation, reduced city services, rising fees, falling property values, and a diminishing quality of life in terms of physical conditions, public safety, education and access to economic opportunity. Detroit's civic leadership, whether governmental, nonprofit, faith-based, community-based, business, institutional or philanthropic, has been managing these declining conditions at the scale of the city and its neighborhoods for the last four decades and some hold the opinion that bankruptcy may function as a "reset" button for the city's future.

Long before the declaration of fiscal insolvency, these same civic leaders began to realize that something beyond the incremental and single-sector approaches to rebuilding the city had to be explored. By 2010, Detroit had lost another 24% of its population from the previous decade and grown to house over 100,000 vacant parcels and 80,000 abandoned homes. These conditions over time have eroded many of the city's once vibrant residential neighborhoods. In some cases, neighborhoods that once had an urban residential density of 23 units to the acre, generating \$151,673 in tax revenue, now stand with only 5 units to the acre generating \$32,794. The severe loss of tax income resulting from a 60% loss of population since the city's 1.8 million people peak in 1950 has left the municipal governments strained to deliver city services across a geography where residents and businesses are randomly disbursed across 139 square miles.

In this same year, civic leaders recognized that business as usual was no longer acceptable and that a bold and comprehensive plan of action was needed. The Detroit Work Project (DWP) was launched in 2010. The Detroit Works Project, Long Term Planning initiative (DWPLTP) was a three year planning and civic engagement process resulting in *Detroit Future City: 2012 Detroit Strategic Framework Plan (DFC)*, a comprehensive and action-oriented blueprint for near

and long-range decision-making. The Strategic Framework aimed to be 1) aspirational towards a physical vision for the city; 2) actionable with strategies for new policies and implementation; and 3) accountable with assignment of implementation responsibilities. The DWPLTP process developed and used a careful methodology of gathering, integrating and synthesizing anecdotal, qualitative, and quantitative technical and community-driven data to inform the Strategic Framework's final recommendations. Together, the Detroit community and planning experts identified important core values, project goals, quality of life components, and imperative actions necessary to transform Detroit's liabilities into assets, and to build upon the strengths that exist today in neighborhoods across the city.

Not unlike other US cities, Detroit has no shortage of citywide and neighborhood plans or economic development strategies, many outlining still relevant recommendations yet to be deployed. However, years of civic distrust across the various civil sectors of the city, including government, community development and philanthropy, required many of these plans to be created in ways that were not perceived to be inclusive. Many stakeholders believed that planning efforts were either top-down or community-driven, but rarely collaborative. "No one ever talked to me" or "when are you going to stop talking to me and do something" were common sentiments expressed at the beginning of this recent planning process. This time, the civic leadership was determined to connect bold transformational ideas, informed by an inclusive set of civic participants, with practical implementation measures and that would set Detroit on a path towards a more affordable and sustainable future.

The result of this approach yielded a Strategic Framework with 24 bold transformative ideas across six planning elements including economic growth, land use, neighborhoods, city systems, public land and assets and civic engagement. This case study will highlight six key planning and social innovations that hold important lessons of other "legacy cities" – defined as US cities over 50,000 people that have loss greater than 20% of their population since their peak. (There are 48 such cities in US that meet this description.) The planning innovations address the following three land and infrastructure systems imperatives:

1. Detroit must accept itself as a smaller city in terms of population and redefine its growth strategy to increase jobs in the city;
2. Because not every neighborhood will return to its traditional urban form or density, Detroit must create new urban form typologies for neighborhoods that for stabilize, improve and transform areas that still house residents and businesses; and
3. Detroit must reconfigure its 20th century infrastructure systems to align with the 21st century demographics and land use vision of the city.

The social innovations operate to address the following three civic engagement imperatives:

1. The path towards change in a city with social, political and spatial contests requires managing fears and rebuilding civic trust;

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2. An effective planning process requires building civic enthusiasm and uplifting community expertise as a legitimate component of the process and outcomes of change; and
3. An effective implementation agenda requires organizing all sectors of Detroit's civic capacity to actively participate leading for change.