

# Building Societies: Detroit's Micro Utopian Urbanisms

In an off-the-cuff conversation Patrick Bouchain, the French architect and social impact guru, once divulged why working in economically challenged urban scenarios had proved professionally consequential and politically affirming. When things hit rock bottom, he explained, change is imminent. The key for an architect seeking to guide that change is to get involved at the right moment, just as signs of an impending upswing start to show. Tricky as it sounds, design's agency spikes in that brief and transformative instant when the profession is temporarily liberated from its perennial bonds to capital and power, Bouchain alleged, offering the architect real social sway.

Delivered with affable confidence just steps from the Centre Pompidou at the Le Bouledogue Brasserie, the tip seemed alluring. Over the span of two energetic decades, Bouchain's Paris-based studio Construire had, after all, realized an impressive array of original and experimental cultural spaces in some of France's more complex, post-industrial urban environments. With each project Bouchain and his partners shrewdly advanced new paradigms in inclusive, informal, and participatory design, inspiring an entire generation of practices on the way.

Still, for an architect like myself looking to apply emergent methods in social practice to the North American context, concerns lingered: Could such collective efforts translate to a scenario with a less robust social safety net? Could significant, urban-scale projects be realized without access to public funding? And could design still make impact where basic civic infrastructure had collapsed? Soon enough, my partner Jean Louis Farges and I would have the opportunity to tackle these questions when we moved our architecture

Constructing Akoaki's stage set for the Detroit Afrikan Funkestra, an open-air opera in three acts. The first performance took place in 2016 at the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm. © Akoaki

Detroit Afrikan Funkestra performing at the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm in Detroit's North End. © Doug Coombe







studio Akoaki to Detroit, Michigan. As luck would have it, we arrived in 2008 just as the city's economic crisis had reached fever pitch and standard-of-life metrics plummeted to all-time lows.

To say that we were ill prepared for the scale of the calamity would be an understatement. Detroit, then in the throes of an unprecedented housing crisis, was struggling to pay for services other cities might take for granted: basics like security, sanitation, schools, transportation and running water had become increasingly difficult for residents to access. Dilapidated houses were being torn down by the thousands; the real estate market had tanked leaving homes for sale at prices comparable to a smart pair of shoes; and infrastructure was crumbling. On top of it all, the city was facing imminent municipal bankruptcy, the largest such default in American history.

In full transparency, from the get-go we were keenly aware of our outsider status: Jean Louis, a Parisian ex-patriot and myself, a Soviet refugee and East Coast transplant were anything but local activists. Accordingly, for the span of a few tentative years we hardly stirred at all. We continued working in the United States and internationally. In Detroit, wary of design's capacity to meaningfully address the complexity and scale of the scenario, we watched and absorbed.

From our critical vantage point, we soon became acquainted with Detroit's well-rehearsed ascendancy story: Modern innovation had made Detroit great, with Fordist-Taylorist industry, the first free-span factory floor, and the first concrete paved highway accounting for just a few of the city's notable inventions. Streamlined productivity and a robust economy enabled the emergence of a Detroit working class with middle-class buying power and progressive aspirations. This unique social dynamism rapidly transformed the boon of modernization into cultural ingenuity, with Motown and Techno, Detroit's homegrown music genres, reverberating globally.

In contrast, the demise apologue revealed a less unified take. Some Detroiters pointed to the collapse of a lethargic auto industry. Others attributed the economic disaster to federal retribution for left-leaning political affinities as typified by Detroit's once prominent unions and black-power movements. Still others, highlighting the demographics of the predominantly African American city, faulted the country's unsettled racial inequities and policy-based disparities as foils to a quicker recovery. One thing is certain: no single account suffices to naturalize the city's decades-long decline, manifested by the vast and disintegrating urban landscape of a city built for 1.8 million with now fewer than 700,000 people residing.

Detroit musician and composer Cornelius Harris of Underground Resistance speaking at the inaugural convening of the nomadic Detroit Culture Council. © Doug Coombe

Musicians Efe Bes + IBM performing with Akoaki's Mothership at the Flint Free City Festival. The space capsule was designed as a DJ booth and urban marker to activate vacant and underused spaces. © Akoaki



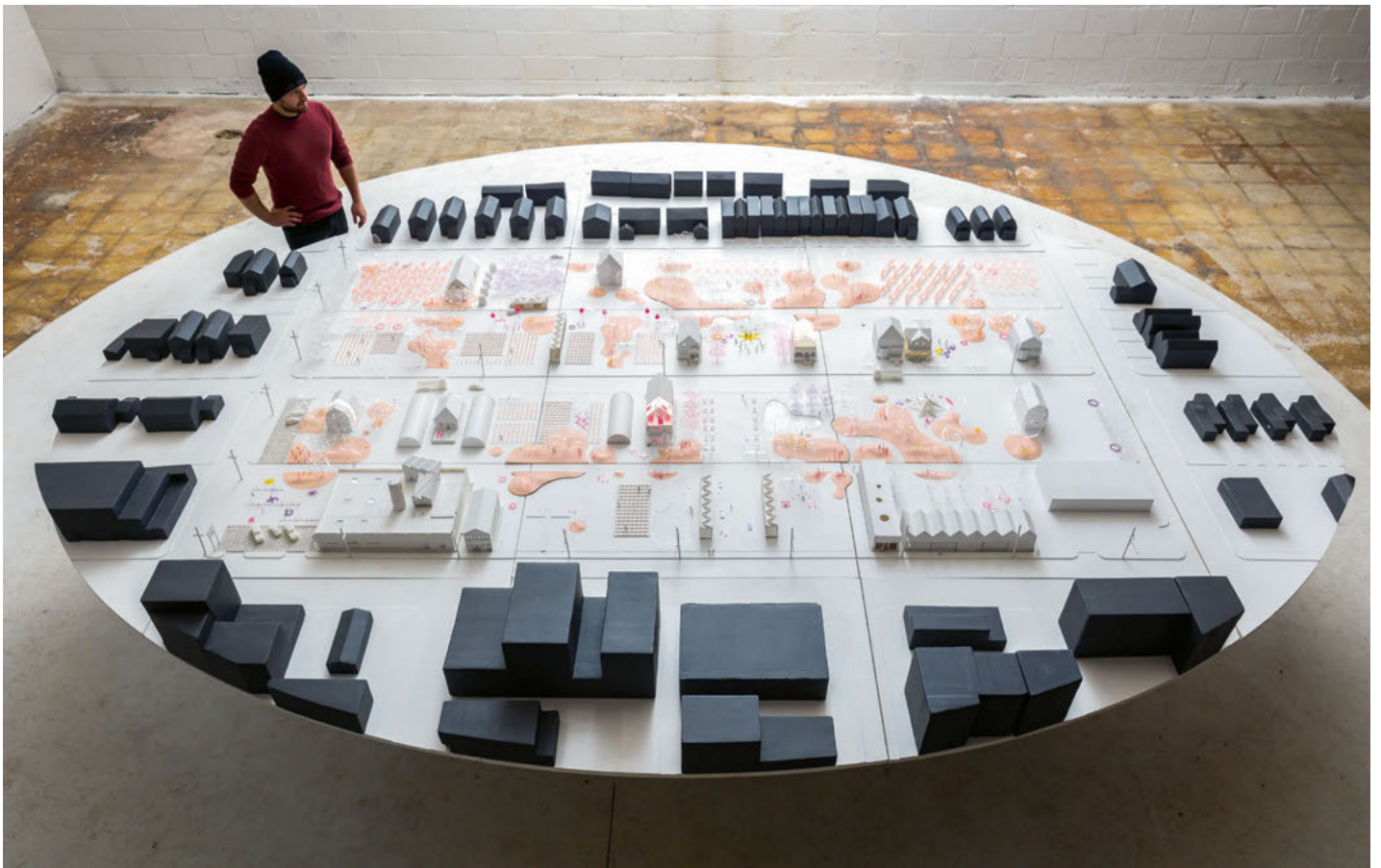
In the interval following our arrival, we encountered countless architects, designers, planners, artists, and cultural tourists struck by the visual power of Detroit's modern ruins and shaken by the human catastrophe. Keen on combating decline and lured by the scenographic power of the circumstances, many considered the seemingly limitless expanse that makes up the city's 139-square-mile urban center a formidable attractor for participatory design experiments, tactical interventionism, and dexterous contemporary practices. For all the good intention such efforts brought, and the institutional support they garnered, projects were often met with significant measures of criticism: allegations of parachute aid, cultural insensitivity, and bad politicking all virtually unavoidable in a climate of exceptional social need and resource paucity.

Over time, despite the challenges and the enduring aura of apology around working in Detroit, we met people doing things differently. Self-aware of issues around gentrification, race relations, and cultural appropriation, some designers were persevering, working on slow-cooked, inclusive projects at neighborhood scales. The artist-architect design duo Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert of Power House Productions, for instance, were transforming a series of vacant homes in a predominantly Bangladeshi community into a network of experimental sites for performance, music, studio art and sport. Anishinabe artists Sacramento Knox and Christy B. were building a multi-media art collective honoring the cultural practices of Detroit's first nations; and dancer-curator Ryan Meyer-Johnson had launched the Sidewalk Festival, an untethered outdoor performance space intended for annual events. Different as the sites and programs appeared, the projects shared common attributes. Each advanced incrementally; formed partnerships across professional and creative fields; navigated the pitfalls of the city's overburdened and dysfunctional bureaucracies; independently sought public and private funding; and thought critically about how locally-rooted culture strengthens cities.

Learning from these politically astute efforts, and with newfound confidence from a deeper understanding of the context, our studio began stepping up its contributions to the growing constellation of Detroit's micro-utopian urban projects. At first, we acknowledged a tinge of envy of firms working in the European context, where the production of culture benefits from steady access to state funding. Soon enough, however, we looked for ways to reconcile our aspirations with the realities of local governance models, and began crafting an autonomous practice dedicated to making change through a synthesis of aesthetics, social enterprise, and event planning. In Detroit's historically African American North End neighborhood, we proactively articulated design questions by seeking out sites of need, formulating necessary programs, convening the appropriate user groups, and securing external funds, all before the conception of design proposals even began.

Akoaki's Bureau of Emergent Urbanity, a former barber shop converted to host events in Detroit's North End. © Akoaki

Akoaki's model for the Detroit Cultivator project, a six-acre civic commons designed for the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm in Detroit's North End neighbourhood. The project combines food production, cultural programming, and enterprise to imagine new sustainable models in urban farming and collective land ownership. © Jacob Lewkow



Tangibly, over the course of five years, the work took the form of architectural interventions, art objects, and social environments, designed to make urban impact. We launched the Mothership, a P-Funk inspired DJ booth and space capsule. We built opera sets in vegetable gardens. We clipped extravagant gilded arches onto vacant buildings and catalyzed ephemeral arts institutions. We created fetching images of neighbors and collaborators. We published shiny magazines, generated programs, harnessed social media, and planned parties. We instigated a series of collective projects: O.N.E. Mile, Detroit Cultivator, and Detroit Afrikan Music Institution, among others. In short, we deployed design to communicate invisible cultural narratives through the power and prowess of a latent collective imaginary. But perhaps more importantly, we amassed a set of experimental and emergent tactics conceived to productively re-situate design and architecture in the realm of planning and equitable urban development.

Paradoxically, since the city's bankruptcy, economic indicators have been improving, and Detroit, poised for a comeback, finds itself in the international limelight once more. With the attention comes a steady stream of young international designers and architects eager to explore new ways to exercise agency in a changing world. For visitors, our studio's self-sufficiency, rising from necessity, often conceals liberating possibilities by expanding the role of the designer to include cultural instigator, developer, collaborator, and even scriptwriter for the production of urban situations. Our strategy, I concede, has benefited from engaging in an urban scenario at a pivotal moment; one Bouchain alluded to some years back.