Seek the Welfare of the City: Religion and Grassroots Revitalization in Detroit

Part 1: Motive

Detroit, Michigan, long the symbol of post-industrial urban blight, is experiencing the beginnings of a rapid urban revitalization. Small business and tech entrepreneurship are booming: a Brookings Institute study revealed that Detroit ranked third in the country - before New York - in “job growth in advanced industries” in the tech sector between 2010 and 2013.¹ Urban theorists are observing young college graduates move in, for the first time in decades, in droves, coming from the area’s suburbs and out of state to start their ventures and live inexpensively. Real estate prices are quickly rising, especially in the core of downtown and Midtown, and new developments and remodelings begin every week. Many believe that this is just what Detroit, and other post-industrial cities, need, and cite Brooklyn as an example of the potential this kind of economic growth and migration can have for success.² Journalists, scholars, politicians and planners are heralding this new age for the city, while they and other stakeholders are scrambling to capitalize off the turnaround. However the benefits of this revitalization are unevenly distributed and fail to address the systemic racial and socioeconomic inequality and lack of resources that are responsible for Detroit’s depression and that still plague a majority of its residents. By neglecting the issues Detroit faces, the burgeoning revitalization

marginalizes or totally excludes long-time Detroiters and will lead, all evidence suggests, to greater socioeconomic stratification and inequality.³

At the same time, however, there are a number of grassroots organizations, activists, businesses, and other initiatives that recognize this threat, and that propose and demonstrate alternative models for revitalization. Many small businesses, nonprofits, community organizers, activists and foundations have come to recognize the importance of democratizing the revitalization process, catering to the needs and desires of Detroiters, and broadening the accessibility of new resources. Their work falls in line with the theory and activism of philosopher Grace Lee Boggs, whose work is devoted to promoting block-by-block urban transformation in Detroit through innovations that express local cultures, promote racial and economic equality, and turn liabilities into assets.⁴ Such development offers an alternative to the widespread, top-down means of unreflective and uneven corporate and government revitalization which have been responsible for the increasing inequality and gentrification evident in cities like Brooklyn. Because Detroit is still so early in its process of revitalization, recognition of these alternatives can go a long way to shape the conversation about what Detroit should look like, and to critically decide who should have a voice in that conversation.

This was the motivation for my undergraduate thesis research, but the results thereof may also be useful to the organizations, businesses, and communities I studied, as they think about how to make the greatest possible positive impact for the city and its inhabitants. These include Detroit SOUP, the Jewish community of the Isaac Agree

Downtown Synagogue, The Greening of Detroit, Earthworks Urban Farm, the James & Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, the Build Institute, and various small businesses. In studying the “best practices” of successful organizations and initiatives through interviews with their leaders and participants and observation of their work, I have found a few highly transferable strategies that others can employ to see greater impact, accessibility, and returns on their investments.

Part 2: Action Items

Based on my research, I have learned that there are a number of things that small businesses, grassroots community builders and activists, and foundations looking to support their work can do to facilitate inclusive and diverse urban development.

I. Recommendations for community organizers and nonprofits

a. Constantly speak with and respond to the members of the communities you intend to serve

The most important thing an organization can do in attempting to serve those in need is to partner with and listen to the people they are serving. Continued authentic interaction and relationship building increases an organization’s chances of providing the best service they are able to and prevents them from adopting a paternalistic attitude towards the communities they are in.

For example, the Earthworks Urban Farm run by the Capuchin Soup Kitchen began selling their produce in local health fairs, when they realized that there was a transportation barrier between their vendors and the food stamp
recipients who were entitled to what they were selling. At these fairs, they are now able to consistently spend time with and build relationships with community members, and were thereby able to develop the idea to have open dinners to discuss the food justice issues faced by Detroiter. These regular interactions allow them to continue to tailor their service to the needs of the communities they serve.\(^5\)

Building on authentic, ongoing relationships enables an organization to identify and address the specific and evolving needs of a given community.

b. Build a compelling social media presence and website

The other community of Detroiter to which successful organizations appeal is the youth and young professionals in the city and suburbs who comprise an increasing segment of the city’s population. To attract their attention to an event or cause, organizations are using social media marketing and organizing.

For example, Detroit Mass Mob, which organizes monthly flash mob-style attendance of mass in historical, financially struggling churches in the city, advertises their events on Facebook, where they attract hundreds of families and young adults from the suburbs to come to their events.\(^6\) The Greening of Detroit, a nonprofit that supports hundreds of local community gardens and urban farms and offers urban agriculture education, has an active Facebook page marketing


\(^6\) Anthony Battaglia, interview by author, October 28, 2014.
their events and publicizing their projects, which links to their website containing a page for individuals and groups to sign up for volunteer workdays.\(^7\)

To mobilize social media platforms to market events, raise awareness and attract volunteers is critical to an organization’s success today. Although it may only reach a certain subset of Detroiters, those reached are equipped with the wealth, energy and social capital to support an organization’s work with their time, money, or word of mouth awareness-raising.

c. **Build partnerships with existing organizations**

Right now, the nonprofit and service organization sector in Detroit is increasingly saturated. To ensure that an organization, particularly a new organization, is having the greatest possible impact, it should make itself aware of and build relationships with other similar organizations already in existence. Doing so gives an organization the opportunity to learn about effective practices, share resources, and target its services to make sure it is not needlessly repeating what another group is already doing.

For example, Repair the World places its fellows and volunteers into partnership positions with long-standing local organizations, such as Project Healthy Communities, that already have a broad network and do substantive work in the city. By positioning their volunteers to support PHC’s work, they increase the manpower and capacity of the existing organization.\(^8\)

---


\(^8\) Ben Falik, interview by author, October 28, 2014.
At the very least, a new organization should partner with or become members of networks of existing nonprofits that provide newcomers with resources to assist them in getting started. There are a number of incubators and accelerators that offer business classes, co-working spaces, pop-up opportunities, networking events, and micro-grants, including Food Lab, for food businesses, the Build Institute, for small business and nonprofit entrepreneurship, and The Greening of Detroit, for urban agriculture and community gardening. Working within these networks can offer a startup organization financial and informational support, as well a community of peers that can share ideas and tips.

II. Recommendations for small business entrepreneurs

a. Make your business accessible and flexible

There are a few things a new small business can do to be well received in a neighborhood and to provide a welcoming space to neighborhood residents.

To make their space accessible, businesses should hire as many locals as possible, being mindful to have a diverse staff. A business can also offer its employees dignity training, to ensure that they treat every customer or person who enters their store, regardless of appearance and background, with dignity, as Detroit Institute of Bagels has done. 9 Furthermore, they can fix their price points so that they are accessible to local residents, as the Southwest coffee shop Café

---

9 Ben Newman, interview by author, October 27, 2014.
con Leche and the Grandmont Rosedale coffee shop Always Brewing Detroit have prioritized.\textsuperscript{10}

Additionally, a business can agree to host events staged by local organizations and religious or other community groups in their retail or dining space, thereby promoting its own sales while becoming an integrated and vital public space for its neighborhood, as Café con Leche has become for the community in Mexicantown.\textsuperscript{11}

New small businesses are often pointed at as agents of gentrification, and can face psychological barriers and backlash from the communities they move into. By proving themselves accessible and malleable to the desires of their neighbors, entrepreneurs can undermine these assumptions and play a genuinely meaningful role in revitalizing a local economy and adding social and economic value to a neighborhood.

\textbf{b. Partner with local religious groups and other community groups}

Another way for a small business to produce a positive social impact for their area is to partner with local religious groups, who have often been present in the community for a long time, and who often have a broad reach among long-time residents. Additionally, religious groups are frequently engaged in charitable giving or social justice in the city, and can provide a valuable point of access for businesses who are interested in engaging in those spheres.

\textsuperscript{10} Amanda Brewington, interview by author, March 16, 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Jordy Carbonell, interview by author, December 24, 2014.
For example, in December 2014 the downtown coffee shop Urban Bean Co. teamed up with the congregation of the Downtown Synagogue, the Social Club Grooming Company barbershop, and St. Aloysius Parish, Our Lady Rosary Parish, Sacred Heart Parish, as well as the nonprofit organization Shelters of Love, to create the “Grooming on Griswold” event, which offered free men’s haircuts at the synagogue.¹² Not only did this event provide a meaningful service for Detroiter in need - one that its hosts intend to repeat semi-annually – but it brought together these businesses and parishes as a group of concerned residents, sparked dialogue and reflection about responsibility to their neighbors and their broader city, and garnered positive press and increased traffic for the host organizations and businesses.

III. Recommendations for foundations and grant organizations

a. Make funding available through competitions that encourage innovation and action among locals.

Foundations that have developed open competitions for grant money have been able to distribute funding to worthy grassroots projects that are integrated into local, long-standing communities in Detroit or that directly address the needs of Detroiter. They have also had the opportunity to hear about and assist programs that they otherwise would not necessarily have heard about.

Furthermore, they encourage agency and ownership of Detroit by Detroiter, and

thereby empowering more residents to start their own initiatives and transform their ideas into action. Finally, such competitions generate positive press for a foundation, and cause many residents to look upon their work and other projects favorably.

For example, the New Economy Initiative’s NEIdeas competition, which called upon existing small businesses in the Detroit metro area to apply for grants of $10,000 and $100,000 to grow their businesses, start apprenticeship programs, and employ more people.13 The Knight Foundation has sponsored the ‘Cities’ and ‘Arts’ Challenges, which call for businesses, individuals, organizations and artists to submit simple applications for project funding.14 This structure allows them to expand their reach to more communities and projects, offering micro-grants that can go further than large grants for a single, overhead project.

Hosting open competitions allows foundations to expand their reach, assist groups and programs that are locally grown and less widely-publicized, and promote projects that directly target the needs of local communities, because they are developed by residents in those communities.

b. Make resources accessible and reduce barriers to entry, such that more people may take advantage of them.

One of the reasons the Knight Challenge is so successful is that their application is extremely accessible, requiring only an initial 150-word application that answers two questions about the applicant’s intended project, requires no formal grant writing experience, and can be written in English, Spanish or Arabic. This prioritization of accessibility ensures that no one is excluded by intimidation or lack of specific writing skills or time.

Similarly, Detroit SOUP is a grassroots crowd-funding micro-grant program that hosts dinners where attendees pay $5 for entry and to vote on presented projects, and the project with the greatest number of votes takes home the money raised by entrance fees. People who want to present their initiative submit their ideas through a simple online form or on paper, and there are occasional proposal writing workshops to offer more people the skills to successfully apply.

Opening competitions to the broader public by removing language, experience, and technology barriers ensures that more individuals and groups have access to the resources offered by a foundation and thereby attracts a more diverse and accurately representative pool of applicants for funding, including applicants who can benefit most from a grant but who would not otherwise have access to loans or grants with greater competition or more rigorous initial application processes.

---

15 Locker, “Knight Challenge: Can You Make Detroit Better?”
Part 3: Conclusion

The above suggestions for small businesses, organizations and foundations are based on the proven success of “best practices” among existing grassroots initiatives in Detroit. Because many of those individuals and groups are so new, there is little data available on their impact, and it would be misleading to say that their models are necessarily sustainable.

That being said, as so many entrepreneurs, philanthropists and activists start ventures in the city, many have failed. Detroit, despite its widely recognized potential, is still a hostile climate for new initiatives, with a lack of basic public infrastructure, enduring systemic inequality and a small, predominantly low-income population. Although entry costs may be lower than in other cities, starting an initiative in Detroit is not for the risk-averse. It is therefore imperative to learn from those who are successful in order to increase one’s own odds of succeeding. The organizations, businesses, communities and foundations mentioned above have demonstrated their ability to produce tangible change in the city by identifying and utilizing the strategies listed above. They have each helped to shape the conversation surrounding Detroit’s future, and to make it more inclusive, diverse and democratic. Initiatives with similar goals could benefit tremendously from following their examples.
Works Cited


This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.
*Lauren H. Hoffman*