

# INTRODUCTION

## GREENING DETROIT'S HISTORY

### A Century of Urban Gardens, Parks, and Outdoor Spaces

**Detroit is a surprisingly green place. When the photographer Andrew Moore** came to photograph the city in 2008, he was enthralled with the ways in which nature had overtaken abandoned structures. It seemed to him “a landscape where the evidence of human endeavor was slowly being subsumed by nature.” For those outside Detroit, Moore’s images shape a familiar vision of urban decline in so-called rustbelt cities, where nature overtakes the lingering grittiness of an industrial past (see figure I.1). Photographs of weeds overtaking abandoned buildings are powerful images and have become a common genre among both professional photographers and amateurs in the digital world. They provoke a sense of disbelief for onlookers. “Detroit’s transfiguration,” writes Moore, “has led it beyond decay into a surreal landscape, where the past is receding so quickly that time itself seems to be distorted.”<sup>1</sup> For those living in Detroit, though, the city is far from surreal, as numerous critics of these images have noted. Instead, the landscape is a daily reminder of loss and destruction.<sup>2</sup> Detroit, of course, is not an empty urban wilderness. Despite all his tropes of wilderness and sublime nature, the landscape Moore found on his visit is anything but natural. His images are more shocking because they represent places cultivated by years of policies that instigated urban disinvestment, prioritized suburban areas, and divided the region along racial lines.



FIG I.1 *Birches Growing in Decayed Books*. 2009 © Andrew Moore. From *Detroit Disassembled*.

When Moore visited Detroit to photograph its ruins, he also found reassurance in the apparent abandonment, explaining, “out of this reordering have come new symbols of renewal and growth. . . . Perhaps this re-ruralization is a sign of hope.” The perceived emptiness that Moore found in Detroit challenges the boundaries between urban and rural, wild and controlled. “Detroit has become an open city repopulated by trees, grasses, flowers, moss, and pheasants,” he continued. “This emptiness is an invitation to wander and reflect upon new and radical solutions for the Detroit of the future.” But Moore was far from the first to find signs of hope and a kind of moral compass and environmental sensibility rooted in Detroit’s landscape. Popular images of Detroit taken by urban explorers conceal a more intricate urban and environmental story that goes beyond a straightforward struggle between nature and culture.

A closer look at Detroit’s past, beginning in the late nineteenth century, reveals a more human terrain. Civic leaders and residents made diverse efforts to bring nature into their everyday lives as a way to reconcile the challenges of living alongside industry. Through gardening and urban greening efforts, nature became more than the raw material of industrial production. Whether they were Polish immigrants growing food on vacant lots in the nineteenth century, African American migrants from the South during the first half of the twentieth century, planners and civic leaders in the 1940s, or activists in the twenty-first century, Detroiters created visions of nature, green space, gardens, and life alongside industry, landscaping the city to make it a more socially and environmentally sustainable place. The industrial past that made the

city famous is intertwined with an urban environmental history of parks and gardens that helped to make Detroit a modern city of national stature.

When we widen our frame of Detroit today, we can see that photographs such as Moore's depict spaces that are part of a larger landscape and region. Four and a half million people live in Detroit's metropolitan area. However, fast-paced industrial development in the first half of the twentieth century followed by postwar suburbanization and economic restructuring since the 1960s caused the population in the city limits to fall from nearly two million during the 1950s to just under seven hundred thousand today. Discriminatory housing policies—beginning with restrictive covenants in the 1920s and continuing with redlining through the 1940s—created a situation where just over 80 percent of Detroit's current residents are African American, while many of the city's suburbs are largely white. Some researchers estimate that one-third of Detroit's 139 square miles is land that is now vacant of its former uses.<sup>3</sup> The vast amount of open space in Detroit has created a patchy city that appears almost rural in some areas. But for those who live in and use the city on a daily basis, it is far from empty.

Not far away from where Moore took his photographs, the Peacemakers Garden on Chene Street conveys a different sense of place amid the ruins. The rectangular brick walls of this former warehouse sit without a roof; rusted steel I-beams span the length of the structure. Within this impromptu courtyard that so visibly embodies the end of America's industrial era, gardens of lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, and tomatoes grow, and rabbits are raised in cages for food. The interplay of the visually distinct natural and built environments is at once jarring and hopeful, utopian and complex. As the bucolic murals on the walls suggest, Peacemakers Garden reimagines an abandoned space in Detroit so as to give it a renewed sense of *place* (see figure I.2). As Teresa, one of the caretakers, put it: "we just wanted to use space."<sup>4</sup> And use it the Peacemakers' community residents do, producing fresh vegetables for an undernourished neighborhood. This garden is a microcosm for a movement happening across the city and elsewhere, where residents rework nature to create a more human terrain and a sense of place and belonging from a dehumanizing, industrial landscape.

Urban gardening and larger-scale urban agriculture is increasingly prevalent in a range of cities globally, east and west, north and south. In this sense Detroit is one city representative of a global phenomenon that seeks to make energy-consuming cities and population centers more environmentally sustainable. Neighborhoods in other cities such as Gary, Indiana, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee have faced similar challenges to those of Detroit. The scale of social and environmental abandonment across neighborhoods also gives Detroit a specific context for the germination of urban gardening and other urban greening efforts. Emerging from the racism and deindustrialization of urban life in America, new agri-urban forms develop in spaces where industry once flourished. A reporter writing for the *Guardian* in



**FIG I.2** Peacemakers Garden, Peacemakers International, 2007, part of the *Your Town Tomorrow* series, Detroit 2007–2017, by Corine Vermeulen.

2010 argued that “like no other city in the world urban farming has taken root in Detroit, not just as a hobby or sideline but as part of a model for a wholesale revitalization of a major city.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, after a 2007 visit to the city, Rebecca Solnit went so far as to describe Detroit as an “arcadia” for the renewed sense of idealized rural life that has taken root in the city through urban gardening.<sup>6</sup> According to residents and outsiders alike, green spaces such as gardens offer a way forward in a city with an abundance of urban prairies and open lots. But what is the longer urban environmental legacy that brought rural spaces back to a major industrial city and gave them such cultural salience?

When I first visited gardens such as Peacemakers, I too was struck by the contrasts between nature and a landscape of partial abandonment and open space. I wanted to know more about the city and the urban past from which these gardens evolved. As the garden historian Kenneth Helphand explains: “when we see an improbable garden, we experience a shock of recognition of the garden’s form and elements, but also a renewed appreciation of the garden’s transformative power to beautify, comfort, and convey meaning despite the incongruity of its surroundings.” The city’s landscape was not merely a setting for cultural interactions but, rather,

part of the way in which people gave meaning to their experiences in the city. Detroit's urban gardeners grow improbable gardens that fulfill a practical need and a basic right for healthy food while also conveying a deeper meaning—that, despite widespread abandonment, Detroit remains a peopled place. The seeds from which these gardens grew also reveal another side of Detroit's history, a story of important and continuing environmental legacies.<sup>7</sup> Looking back from the first decades of the twenty-first century to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, today's urban gardens, farms, and greening efforts are connected to a broader history of people making and using urban places such as parks, yards, outdoor spaces, and gardens to grow environmentalism in the city.<sup>8</sup>

Detroit may seem like an unexpected place to look for nature. Even before Detroit became the Motor City though, residents knew the challenges of urban nature. In a 1908 article, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that “weeds are thriving on many vacant lots in Detroit.” More seriously, the article warned residents and city leaders that it was “possible, too, that the luxuriant growth of burdock and various other noxious vegetation will not be interrupted.” To remove them would mean “a loss of several thousand dollars to the city,” which it could not afford. With no funds available to relieve the city of this nuisance, one of Detroit's city commissioners hoped that “a revival wave of civic consciousness will reach the owners of the weed decorated lots, and that they will come to the aid of the department.” Often taking up “civic consciousness” out of necessity in addition to the common good, Detroiters from different walks of life looked to nature in their quests to create a more hospitable sense of place and environmental ethic for an industrial city.<sup>9</sup>

Detroit's poet laureate Dudley Randall also reminisced about urban nature in his 1942 poem “Vacant Lot.” More at ease with weeds and happenstance plants than the city commissioners mentioned in the *Detroit Free Press* article published forty years earlier, Randall wrote: “It was the wilderness to this city kid,/ And paradise to each pariah weed . . . it was chameleon stage containing all.” Small urban places like vacant lots containing “sunflowers, goldenrod, and thistle” were among the sites within an urban landscape where Detroit's residents encountered nature.<sup>10</sup> Connections to nature such as these—closer to home in the heart of the city and not in a distant wilderness—shaped how many residents like Randall came to know nature.

Detroit-based photographer Bruce Harkness also stumbled upon the intricate meanings of urban nature. While documenting a multiethnic and multiracial neighborhood known as Poletown, which was soon to be razed through eminent domain for a General Motors assembly plant in 1981, he found the Poletown Botanical Gardens (see figure I.3). Here someone had labeled what would otherwise appear to be an overgrown lot as a garden. On a large piece of plywood with admissions prices listed to the left, the “Plant Life Preservation Society” claimed the space was protected from the pending demolition. Perhaps a playful antic, the sign also provokes



**FIG I.3** Poletown Botanical Gardens, 1981. Bruce Harkness Poletown Photographic Collection, Image 186, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

questions at the heart of my study, such as, What counts as an urban garden? And how have people created meaning from the changes of urban and industrial life? The boundaries between urban, rural, industrial, and natural were not as clear-cut as we often think of them. Urban gardens and green spaces link these disparate landscapes to create cultural significance for their designers and users.

While metaphors of rust have long been used to describe America's once industrial cities, examples such as Harkness' photograph, Randall's poem, and the *Free Press* article illustrate that it is the relationships between humans and nature—a rustbelt *ecology*, as geographer Matthew Gandy has articulated—that shapes the landscapes of cities like Detroit.<sup>11</sup> Historians such as Matthew Kingle, Catherine McNeur, and Colin Fisher have brought attention to the politics of urban nature through case studies of specific cities, and have challenged our assumptions about where we can find nature and environmentalists.<sup>12</sup> Building on these works, I look at how residents and city leaders in Detroit reworked the landscape to create urban green spaces that reflected their environmental ideals. In turn, places such as vacant lots and more formal green spaces such as parks and gardens all shaped varied cultures of nature in the city. Environmental historians have studied the relationships

between cities and nature, looking at larger-scale relationships between the city and its hinterland and focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups, nature in the city itself, pollution, and the environmental inequalities that urban change and development create for human communities.<sup>13</sup> Environmental historians, however, have paid less attention to nature in Detroit. Recent studies have begun to examine the city's environmental changes and struggles more closely, bringing forward the sense of a rustbelt ecology to which Gandy refers.<sup>14</sup> New research can continue to reach beyond the rust, weeds, and ruins to more fully illustrate how the city evolved over time. A longer view of urban and environmental change in Detroit's past refines our understanding of environmental thought.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century Detroit was a green, urban, and industrial place. This is easy to forget amid powerful narratives of the city's industrial rise and fall. Urban and social historians have helped us understand the political, social, and cultural creation of Detroit's landscape of abandonment and decline during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the planning, policies, and decisions that enabled ruins and gardens to sprout from abandonment. Scholars, such as Thomas Sugrue and Victoria Wolcott, have also, importantly, focused on examining racial and class inequality through social and political history.<sup>16</sup> Without losing sight of other important aspects of Detroit's history, looking at gardens, parks, and outdoors spaces sheds light on the ways in which social and political history intersect with urban and environmental history. Places such as gardens, parks, yards, and green spaces can help us see the importance of environmental factors in the city's past. While Detroit's industrial rise and fall created dramatic racial and social inequities, these structural challenges also affected how residents and city leaders accessed nature and distributed environmental assets across the urban environment. Many residents and city leaders turned to nature and environmentalism to contend with the discord of urban life. Their ideas about nature and the city entailed real consequences. The landscape fueled their imaginations and made their thoughts tangible.<sup>17</sup>

In this book I build on the work of other scholars to enhance the story of how American environmental values and urban landscapes developed together, not only by returning to nature in isolated places and bringing nature back to the city but through the connections created among diverse individuals, organizations, places, and experiences that shaped what environmentalism meant in the city.<sup>18</sup> By weaving together examples of large- and small-scale environmental changes, we can illuminate new perspectives on the urban environment, which an isolated view of one or the other alone cannot deliver. Historians and scholars of the cultural landscape have looked in bits and pieces at the history of community gardening, but more work remains to be done.<sup>19</sup> I try to bring urban gardening and agriculture into historical focus as a part of Detroit's history, where these topics have been understudied. My

aim is to contribute to this area of research by putting urban gardening and agriculture into conversation with more widely studied topics in cultural and social history such as park building, city planning, and the politics of metropolitan development.<sup>20</sup>

Conflicts and inequities among the city's diverse populations meant that creating Detroit's landscape was more often than not a "contentious collaboration" that unfolded over time rather than a straightforward process of gradual evolution.<sup>21</sup> Here members of Detroit's African American communities are placed as a set of central actors in shaping an environmental consciousness in the city through parks, gardens, yards, and other outdoor spaces.<sup>22</sup> African Americans have played a central role in the social and cultural life of the city, particularly after they began moving to Detroit in large numbers during the first half of the twentieth century. They are also important contributors to Detroit's environmental history and played an integral role in shaping urban environmentalism. Part of what makes Detroit's environmental history important is that it reveals, as scholars studying other areas have illustrated, that African Americans' connection to environmentalism has a much longer history than only being associated with late twentieth century environmental justice movements.<sup>23</sup>

In a city known today for making cars and building highways, nature had a profound presence. The environmentalism of Detroiters challenged and contributed to Americans' predominant environmental values. Residents and planners alike imagined green spaces such as urban gardens and parks as places that could blend nature and culture in ideal proportions.<sup>24</sup> Detroiters invented and tested ideas about their relationships with the natural world and one another in dialogue with the landscape and the built environment of the city. They used and altered ideas about nature in an industrial place in order to make small but tangible changes in the landscape, which helped them negotiate life in the city and which also had material implications for their quality of life. Detroiters sought to respond to the challenges of living in an urban-industrial environment—such as the challenges of inequality, racism, and poor living conditions—by endowing nature in parks and gardens with their hopes for cultural and environmental change. As the city's social and industrial landscape seemed increasingly uncontrollable, Detroiters turned toward green spaces to ameliorate the negative social and environmental consequences of industrial capitalism. Parks, gardens, yards, and other landscapes created by residents and city leaders are crucially important to understanding the history of metropolitan Detroit. These spaces, however, took on different visions, forms, and meanings for different groups of people.

Some of the individuals and groups foregrounded here may seem unlikely environmentalists and landscape designers, but all of them used nature to shape a sense of place, value, and belonging. They did not often describe their efforts in terms of environmentalism or sustainability, yet their efforts changed the land and ideas

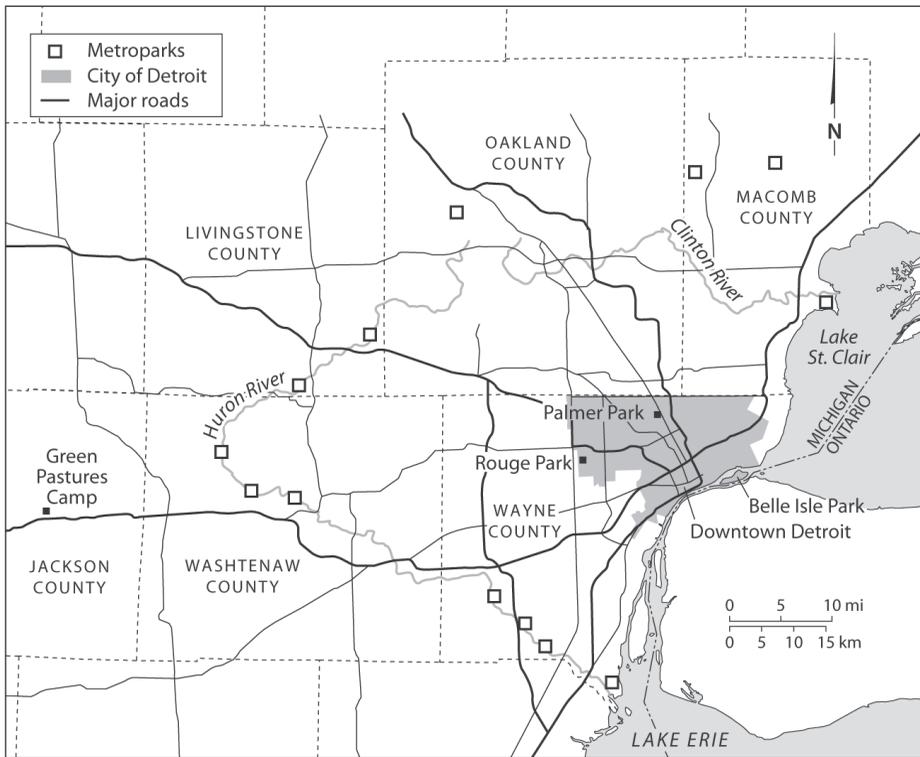


FIG I.4 Metropolitan Detroit, with prominent parks and outdoor spaces. Map by William L. Nelson.

about nature in the city. I use the broad terms *environmentalism* and *urban environmentalism* to encompass the sometimes conflicting ideas and ideals about nature that inspired diverse individuals and groups to alter the landscape and their impact on it. Environmentalism had different meanings to different groups and during the different periods under study here. Other historians have looked at the relationship between activism and the environment in American cities, paying attention to environmental issues such as pollution and health disparities that activists organized to address.<sup>25</sup> In this work, however, I use the term *environmentalism* to signal ways in which urban residents made and gave meaning to green spaces. By giving tangible form to their environmental ideas, these actors attempted to reconcile the profound challenges of urban life by transforming the land.

Seeking out the origins of environmentalism and urban gardening in Detroit led me to spaces both large and small, from the central city to the suburbs and back again. But no work can comprehensively cover all of the people, places, and organizations that shaped environmentalism in the city. The chronological arc covered in this text spans from the late nineteenth century to the 2010s, but the chapters are

organized around important landscapes that foreground different themes in the city's environmental history.<sup>26</sup> Each chapter focuses on different iterations of Detroit's landscape at various scales and proximity to the central city, from Belle Isle Park and a progressive mayor's potato patches to African American yards, an outdoor camp called Green Pastures, large metropolitan parks, urban farms, and community gardens.<sup>27</sup>

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan once wrote that the ambition of "humanistic enterprise" is "to increase the burden of awareness."<sup>28</sup> It is my hope that by focusing attention on parks, yards, and gardens as important parts of Detroit's historic landscape, we can look at Detroit and other cities like it not as abstract social problems, abandoned places, or ruined relicts of the past but, rather, as deeply human terrains where meaning continues to be made and remade. Detroit's history is greener than you might imagine. Generations of residents and civic leaders imagined Detroit as a garden city, endowing pastoral pockets dispersed across an industrial landscape with their environmental values. These gardens in the machine of industrial capitalism were where residents and city leaders invented, contested, and defined ideas and ideals about urbanism, nature, and each other.