

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.”¹ 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.² 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.³ 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."⁴ 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