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Detroit Urban Renewal Without the Renewal

By JODI WILGOREN

Like a gardener pruning rosebushes, Mayor Kwame M. Kilpatrick wants to tear down this city to save it.

Not the whole thing -- just the rotten parts. The burned-out facades and shattered windows, caving porches and crumbling rooftops that mar the landscape from the crux of downtown to the city's outskirts.

But what sets the mayor's project apart is not the pace at which buildings are coming down or the scale of the effort -- other cities have become more aggressive about demolishing abandoned buildings as part of revitalization -- but the high likelihood that little will go up in their place. Few people in Detroit expect anything to replace the rubble, a reality that frustrates both the mayor, who took office in January, and the city government's critics.

The population of the 140-square-mile city has been halved since its heyday, with little hope of a big rebound. Year after year, dangerous vacant houses have been turned into desolate vacant lots, creating an oddly sparse urban patchwork.

For Mr. Kilpatrick, the need to rid the city of deserted buildings outweighs the consideration of what will replace them. "This is where drug dealers stash their drugs, this is where people stash guns, this is where girls get abused," said Mayor Kilpatrick, 32. "It's also a pride issue. If you don't have community pride, if you don't have a safe, clean city, you don't have a world-class city."

After campaigning on a promise to raze 5,000 houses by September, Mr. Kilpatrick, has so far seen only about 1,000 come down. He blames lack of money and a diffuse bureaucracy. But he vowed to step up the process in the new fiscal year, which began on Monday, and expects to destroy some 4,000 buildings near schools by summer's end. Mr. Kilpatrick also hinted that at least two of the dozen once-magnificent pre-Depression skyscrapers sitting empty downtown -- but for squatters and urban spelunkers -- might soon be bulldozed.

Though the mayor has the support of county prosecutors and state officials, with groups devoted to fighting urban blight, others are beginning to express concern that the city may be moving too fast and without firm enough plans.

"The real tragedy is that there is no effort to reclaim what was there, no aspiration and no resources to go back to something that approximates what was there before," said Camilo Jose Vergara, a photographer who has proposed creating an urban theme park out of the downtown wreckage, which was highlighted in his 1999 book, "American Ruins."

Other once-faltering cities, helped by demographics and economics, have been able to link demolition with development. Philadelphia has issued \$160 million in bonds to demolish 10,000 structures in five years in hopes of assembling larger, developable parcels. Baltimore is trying to obtain titles to 5,000 properties, and plans to give or sell the lots to residents to use as yards or gardens. In West Palm Beach, Fla., 50 abandoned buildings were leveled and a commercial and residential development called City Place constructed, raising property values to \$85 per square foot from \$7.

In Detroit, there is some rehabilitation and redevelopment near Comerica Park, the \$300 million baseball stadium that opened downtown in 2000, but in the neighborhoods, the abandoned houses are seen more as garbage to be removed than as opportunities for growth.

Detroit, the nation's 10th-largest city with 961,000 people -- down from 2 million in 1955 -- may just need right-sizing. According to the 2000 census, it has 6,855 residents per square mile, compared with 12,750 in Chicago, 26,403 in New York and 7,877 in sprawling Los Angeles.

Detroit's lack of population density is clear after a short drive. Though there are a few pockets of well-maintained buildings, none are far from a block pockmarked with skeletal structures and grassy emptiness. The city list of 1,587 properties ready for destruction -- as well as the nearly 10,000 others that are abandoned and deemed dangerous -- includes multiple addresses in each of its 22 tax wards.

Al Fields, the mayor's deputy chief operations officer, who is overseeing demolition, said Mr. Kilpatrick's ambitions had been frustrated by a bureaucracy in which permits and inspections were spread over four agencies, and by a limited budget for \$10,000-a-pop demolition. He is combining the process into one department, trying to improve cooperation with the state, which owns hundreds of the houses, raising the budget request to \$13 million from \$12 million, and seeking private donations.

More than 28,000 houses have been demolished since 1989-90; the city spends \$800,000 a year maintaining its empty lots.

Along Michigan Avenue, the old train depot is a behemoth of broken glass surrounded by a razor-wire fence. The clock on the CPA Building seems to have been stuck at 5 of 11 for decades.

In the Brush Park neighborhood behind Comerica Park, a row of new town houses has sold for about \$100,000 each. A block away is a dilapidated apartment building with plywood in its windows, a red-brick number with broken windows and, in the distance, an eight-story building with no windows at all.

"We're kind of taking a chance," said Keith Hustak, 23, who is moving into Jacobs Manor, a 1930's building that had become a crack den before a developer bought it at auction in November for \$500,000. Mr. Hustak's apartment has a view of the ballpark, as well as the drug deals at the empty house next door.

John George, a former insurance agent, watched for months as addicts traipsed in and out of a house near his in Northwest Detroit. He called city officials daily before boarding the place up himself. In the 14 years since, the group Mr. George started, Motor City Blight Busters, has demolished 100 houses, helped build 101 others and renovated 158 more.

"Blight is like a cancer; our theory has been we can eliminate it before it spreads," he said.

Mr. George welcomed the mayor's attention to the problem that defines his life, but worried that the city would flatten houses that could be rehabbed and siphon corporate money from grass-roots groups like his that can do the work more cheaply.

"There are dozens of homes in our community that if we could have gotten the titles from the city quickly, we could have families in there and have them back on the tax rolls," he said. "When the city demolishes a house, they don't plant grass, they don't plant trees, it's just a big scar."

At 21425 Santa Clara sits Blight Busters' 101st target, a burned-out bungalow. On one side is an empty lot, on the other is another empty house, then another empty lot.

The 15700 block of Burgess Street, once a vibrant row of postwar homes, is a patchwork of weedy swatches, a gray house with the yellow "D" spray-painted to signify imminent demolition, and a "fresh

grave," as Mr. George calls the gravel-laden sites left by the city's crews.

"Whatever happens to the houses deemed unsalvageable, we need to do something with the streetscape," said Katherine Clarkson, a local preservationist who is resigned to the demolition but hopes to save the downtown landmarks the mayor has called dinosaurs. "If you have nothing to walk past for blocks and blocks, just empty weed-filled lots, you're going to end up with similar kinds of scariness."

See the article in its original context from July 7, 2002, Section 1, Page 10Buy Reprints. View on timesmachine. TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers. Like a gardener pruning rosebushes, Mayor Kwame M. Kilpatrick wants to tear down this city to save it. Not the whole thing -- just the rotten parts. The burned-out facades and shattered windows, caving porches and crumbling rooftops that mar the landscape from the crux of downtown to the city's outskirts. But what sets the mayor's project apart is not the pace at which buildings are coming down Detroit has become a laboratory for economic innovation. Now it's time for more cities to adopt its urban renewal model.Â Offers may be subject to change without notice. Quotes delayed at least 15 minutes. Market data provided by Interactive Data. ETF and Mutual Fund data provided by Morningstar, Inc. Dow Jones Terms & Conditions: <http://www.djindexes.com/mdsidx/html/tandc/indexestandcs.html>. S&P Index data is the property of Chicago Mercantile Exchange Inc. and its licensors. All rights reserved. Terms & Conditions. Powered and implemented by Interactive Data Managed Solutions. | EU Data Subject Requests. Detroit may have filed for bankruptcy but it's still a city rich in history, architecture, and innovation. See whatâ€™s restored and what awaits renewal.Â More information on the 'Why' the urban fall and why the urban renewal is happening would be great. Mr. Travis L. from Australia travelled on 26 Oct 2016. Bob was brilliant.Â Our visit to the city would not have been the same without having done the tour. Not only we learned a lot from the city and its architecture but also helped us to guide us in the coming days. Highly recommended!