

SYMPOSIUM

The Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute Then and Now...:

Commentaries on *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community*

**Learning from *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community*:
Reflections on the Politics of Urban Land and Participatory Research**

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Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community is yet another example of the groundbreaking activist-scholarship for which the DGEI has now become renown. In choosing to focus on contestations over land control between Wayne State University and the surrounding community, the DGEI's long-standing theoretical interests—spatial inequality, the politics of knowledge production, research as social justice, and children's geography—come across particularly vividly. Despite the name “Field Notes No.4”, the piece's empirical and methodological rigor makes for a focused, easy to understand, and well-argued example of activist scholarship ready to be passed out to neighbors and journalists or slapped down on the desk of policy-makers.

Work of this kind has never felt more urgent as the United States finds itself entering a revanchist period manifesting itself in both a rise of street-level hate crime as well as ideological

aspirations for policies at the federal level which will exacerbate the marginalization of immigrants, working people, people of color, women, and LBGT communities. In hindsight, the political contestations of the early 2010s between the State of Michigan and its majority African American cities—notably Detroit and Flint (though lesser known examples such as Pontiac, Benton Harbor, and Highland Park abound as well) over the impositions of emergency managers who were given sweeping power over city finances and operations seem to have presaged this dynamic. With that in mind, the DGEI’s stated goal of providing “technical assistance for tackling crisis situations” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:1) feels as relevant as ever for Detroit, or for that matter, the US in general.

“The Trumbull Community” is a rich document, but we would like to highlight two aspects in particular that merit discussion: the DGEI’s unique way of defining the project; and its understanding of the social value of land. These concepts resonate with our mapping work in Detroit 40 years later, but they are also guides for engaged scholarship across the board.

Defining the Project

When lauding the groundbreaking aspects of the DGEI’s writings, it is important to remember that what we can’t see now are the discussions taking place in the free community planning class held by the DGEI over a six-week period. Created at the invitation of residents from the community, this social space for talking, thinking, and doing radical politics sets the DGEI’s project apart from traditional extractive models of research. For all of the strengths that *Field Notes No.4* has on its own merits, one can’t help note that this written document is but a remnant of a long-term series of conversations evolving alongside the research, and then, presumably, continuing to live and evolve after the report was complete. This is most apparent from the interviews with neighborhood activists, “Kay”, “Sam”, “Leo”, and “Joanne” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:5-12). It is notable that the quotes are not scattered through the report as interview data often is—parsed and broken up into verbal raw material for researchers to insert into their own arguments at will. Rather, the interview segments are generally allowed to retain their internal coherence. As a result, the segments set the tone for the piece, but more profoundly,



they provide a window into a series of conversations in which people are processing and working through internal and external struggles, which in turn give rise to the research report that follows.

Such an approach raises the interesting question of what the “work” actually is. Is it the text and maps created for consumption by academics, or the dynamic and yet ephemeral convergence of people and conversations that the DGEI helped to make possible?

In 2011, we became part of a community-based participatory research group called Uniting Detroiters. As part of the project we organized a series of similar conversations and mapping workshops in Detroit from 2012 to 2013 that focused on the emerging development agenda in Detroit and how it fit into broader national and global trends, and intended to identify local challenges to and opportunities for transformative social change.¹ From these conversations, as well as a series of interviews, we developed a full-length documentary called *A People's History of Detroit*² and are in the final stages of completing a companion book called *A People's Atlas of Detroit* (forthcoming from Wayne State University Press). The documentary and atlas provides a window onto the meaning of governance, land, food justice, infrastructure, and environment for Detroit residents as a wave of revanchist policies overtook the city.

Yet, much like the DGEI report, the atlas and documentary have been only the most tangible outcomes of the Uniting Detroiters project. From the outset, one of the main goals of the project was to use research and collective study to strengthen the infrastructure for grassroots organizing and reassert residents' roles as active citizens in the development process. Over the years, we've also watched the kinds of conversations and debates we had around around governance, democracy, and land (and the people involved in them) translate into organizing against emergency manager rule, bankruptcy proceedings, water shutoffs, and intensified gentrification in the downtown area (coupled with deep austerity in the outlying neighborhoods). In 2013, a broad network of Detroit-based social justice organizations, activists, and residents

¹ We were fortunate to have the support of the Antipode Foundation for this work through a Scholar Activist Project Award: <https://antipodefoundation.org/scholar-activist-project-awards/201213-recipient/sapa-1213-safransky/>

² See <https://antipodefoundation.org/2015/09/17/a-peoples-story-of-detroit/>

banded together under the People's Platform³ and committed to bringing about just transformation in the city in six key areas: land, food, transit, good jobs, governance, and poverty and inequality.

The Uniting Detroiters project has been much inspired by the DGEI. At the time the project began, Andy was a new professor at Wayne State University in the Anthropology Department and Sara was a graduate student conducting dissertation research in Detroit. We were introduced to each other by Linda Campbell of the Building Movement Project⁴ who invited us to become thought partners. The themes, research approach, and outcomes of the Uniting Detroiters project emerged from conversations between us and partner organizations.

Unwittingly, we found ourselves, like the DGEI (but with less intentionality) without “any preconceived notions about the research being undertaken,... [and were thus] able to respond to the daily struggles of the community” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:1).

In hindsight, this turned out to be a good thing, as involving community members in answering a preconceived research question is one thing; working with residents to define the project itself is another. Taking this route means that the stakes behind the research are real to people involved in the work. Such an approach also challenges the academy's monopoly on defining the framework within which “legitimate” questions are asked. Indeed, in writing the atlas we have essentially done the opposite of what a lot of “engaged” scholarship does: we formulated the research questions through conversations with activists on the ground, and then we sought to translate those conversations into ongoing scholarly discussions. Admittedly by accident, in doing this, we stumbled upon what the DGEI understood quite well. It seems, however, that many discussions of “participatory” research could benefit from this lesson as well. There is often an implicit assumption underlying such studies which defines participation as recruiting people on the ground to carry out and “legitimate” the production of knowledge as its defined in the academy. The DGEI, and *Field Notes No.4* in particular, shows us the value of inverting those power relations by redefining the nature of the project itself.

³ See <http://detroitpeoplesplatform.org/>

⁴ See <http://www.buildingmovement.org>

The Social Value of Land

It is noteworthy that the immediate “crisis” that inspired *Field Notes No.4* was conflict between a university and an adjacent community over access to open space and recreational facilities; in the same period Columbia University and UC Berkeley also saw significant uprisings over Morningside Park and People’s Park, respectively. All of these struggles were over “*control of the land*” (Society for Human Exploration 1972:27) and, in particular, the power to define what the DGEI refers as the “social value of land”. In Detroit, the land known as Matthaehi Playfield was especially valued by the surrounding community of Trumbull as the area lacked infrastructure for children and families (a form of deprivation that was famously identified and mapped by the DGEI in the *Fitzgerald* study; see Bunge 2011). These needs for “recreation” are more accurately described as the politics that connect urban environments with social reproduction in working class communities (and, in particular, gender roles and the domestic division of labor). This social value of land as determined by the Trumbull community was pitted against the needs of the university who saw the land primarily as parking space for an increasingly suburban faculty and student body. Thus, by focusing on the importance of land grabs in urban politics—as opposed to housing or property—the DGEI touched on an idea that would be fully developed years later in the literature on displacement emerging in cities of the global South (see, for example, Ghertner 2014).

The changing fortunes of the Trumbull neighborhood since the era of *Field Notes No.4* speak volumes about how these basic concerns remain vital even as the city itself has transformed. Today, the name “Trumbull” has mostly disappeared from everyday parlance, having been discursively displaced by the more recent name “Woodbridge”. The former neighborhood of Trumbull is now divided into two sections. The eastern section, adjacent the Lodge Freeway, was demolished to make way for series of fenced-in superblocks that contain suburban-style apartment complexes of 1990s vintage, which house seniors citizen as well as families eligible for Federal Housing vouchers. The western side of Trumbull Avenue has now become known as Woodbridge, and its Victorian mansions are a prime destination for

“marginal” gentrifiers in Detroit. Wayne State University students, recent graduates, and some remnants of an earlier wave of musicians and artists all attempt to negotiate the neighborhood’s overheated rental market alongside aspiring homeowners and property speculators. Despite these changes, however, the lack of open space and recreational facilities—and specifically land valued for working class and poor families with children—remains a problem for the area as in the 1960s and 1970s.

Indeed, in our conversations and co-analysis conducted around the *People’s Atlas* project, we found that control over land—and the social definition of its value—has become an axis by which nearly all urban politics can be understood in Detroit today. As documented by another DGEI inspired mapping project in Detroit⁵ developers and institutions have taken advantage of depressed property values to amass large multi-acre tracts of land in the city. One of most well-known of these examples, a corporate tree farm known as Hantz Woodlands, consists of over 140 acres of land (roughly 2,000 residential parcels) and appropriates the social valuation of land often associated with urban farming for its identity, even though its founder explicitly seeks to create land scarcity in order to raise land values (see Smith 2010). Despite widespread opposition to the project, the Detroit City Council voted to sell the roughly 2,000 resident parcels of public land to Hantz for less \$500,000. They gave the project the green light in no small part because of the way a citywide planning process called the Detroit Works Project (later to be known as Detroit Future City), also contentious, was reimagining blue and green infrastructure atop neighborhoods that it considered to be distressed markets. That plan, or “framework”, takes the problem of *surplus* land as a starting point for the city’s ills. With highly stylized graphics, it reorders large swaths of Detroit’s postindustrial landscape into “green” land-uses types such as “innovative productive” and “innovative ecological”, in which:

These landscapes put vacant land to productive, active uses: growing food and productive forests, reducing maintenance costs, cleaning soil, generating new knowledge, and reshaping public perceptions of vacant land. (Detroit Future City 2012:265)

⁵ See <http://blog.propertypraxis.org/about>

On paper, this green future city sounds appealing. Yet, thanks to the work of cartographer and *People's Atlas* co-editor Tim Stallmann,⁶ we found that under the Detroit Future City plan more than 90,000 Detroiters, the vast majority of whom are African American, live in areas slated not only for such “innovative” land uses but also the decommissioning of basic needs infrastructure. In a perverse twist on the “back to the land” nostalgia that underlies some urban farming projects, Detroit’s often fetishized postindustrial pastoralism has seemingly become more socially valued than people who live and survive in it.

The conversations that emerged during the United Detroiters Project, and which are documented in the *People's Atlas of Detroit* represent an effort to answer a question asked by co-editor Linda Campbell: “What does a land justice paradigm look like, as opposed to cheap land for individuals?” To do that, we look at efforts in urban agriculture and other forms of urban commons, such community land trusts, that make addressing racial injustice the starting point. Otherwise, as we show, ostensibly “alternative” forms of land use in Detroit have a tendency to reproduce patterns of white privilege and even contribute to displacement.

It goes without saying that *Field Notes No.4: The Trumbull Community* is of immense relevance to our work in Detroit. But it and other work by the DGEI offer an important blueprint for reimagining urban research in a broader sense. As graphics-rich, high-concept mapping projects such as Detroit Future City become a fixture of urban knowledge production, the insights made by the DGEI regarding what a map should look like, how it should be made, and, most importantly, by whom will only grow more urgent.

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⁶ See <http://www.tim-maps.com/>

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