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Beating Axles into Plowshares

As businesspeople, we have always been warned to diversify our clientele and services so that we don't suffer so badly when one client or one line of work no longer provides us the same (or any) income. But the fortunes of communities and cities often rise and fall due to a single focused purpose or industry. Witness Motor City, USA, also known as Detroit, Michigan. While also boasting a major port on the Detroit River (which connects Lakes Erie and Huron) and direct passage to Canada, it is for manufacturing that the city is probably best known at present (or at least, right after the Motown record label), and of all its industries, most particularly automotive. Nothing further needs to be said about the state of that business.

Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded the French settlement of Detroit in 1701 as a fort and missionary outpost, but under the Jay Treaty, adopted in 1796, the city became part of the United States. When Henry Ford opened his first factory in Detroit in 1904, the city was already a thriving center of business and culture with two centuries of rich international history. Packard had already begun producing automobiles there in 1899, and the growth of the new automobile industry drew others to this major urban transportation and manufacturing industrial hub. Southerners and Europeans arrived by the thousands to work in Detroit's many factories, and a wide variety of other businesses served the growing population. Around the middle of the 20th century, however, social and industrial changes began to turn the tide, and the metropolis began to decline in both

wealth and population. When jobs disappear, so do a city's people.

After several decades of growing blight, the idea of turning vacant buildings and former parking lots into open farmland first arose in the 1990s. But the decisions that had to be made about which neighborhoods to save and which to raze were not easily answered, and the proposal was set aside. Instead, city revitalization focused on waterfront parkland conversion. Numerous abandoned buildings were torn down, sometimes leaving only a few houses remaining in a city block. More than another decade later, the

equity factors in achieving its ultimate goal of community sustainability and vitality.

Although "paradigm shift" is by now an aging buzzword, this is indeed what it will take to turn around Detroit's long decline. More than one group is already buying land in inner city areas of low (or zero) population density, hoping to grow food crops where the soil is clean, or nonedible crops such as Christmas trees where the ground holds industrial contaminants, even building apiaries to produce honey.

While all this may sound idyllic, there are residents understandably upset and concerned about the loss of their

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idea of urban farming sparked interest as Detroit's 2004 master plan and 2008 neighborhood revitalization efforts began to draw new and younger populations back to the city.

The American Institute of Architects Sustainable Design Assessment Team published its report "Leaner, Greener Detroit" in November 2008, a 61-page document that acknowledges the strength of Detroit's educational, medical, and cultural institutions while proposing a smaller sustainable urban future for the city. It attempts to balance economic development (jobs), environmental (land use and land reutilization), and social

neighborhoods, or what is left of them. Sense of place is one of those quality of life matters that usually is shunted aside in the cost-benefits analysis of redevelopment, or perhaps in this case, undevelopment. No matter what it is called, plans for revitalizing and reinvigorating a community's economy must include the human factor, an emotional variable not easily quantified. This is the social equity facet that is so often overlooked or purposely ignored in the grand plans of both development and renewal.

The term "social equity", of relatively recent vintage, broadly includes education, welfare, housing, transportation

and other public services. The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) convened a panel on the topic, which came up with the following definition: *“The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.”*

This is not identical to the concept of “social justice”, in which human rights and equality are the primary defining principles. However, there is an element of social justice within social equity.

If community and city are able to communicate without throwing knives at each other, this could be an ideal time to forge strong partnerships for planning and implementation of those plans.

This will work well towards preserving strong neighborhoods. But some citizens of emptier areas may prefer the present less dense residential situation, with less traffic and safer, quieter streets. Some have strong family ties to the homes and neighborhoods forming the core of their lifetime experiences. Perhaps the means of consolidating neighborhoods and public services is in some form of life estate rather than instantly setting lives adrift through eminent domain.

Detroit is not the only “rust belt” city turning to urban agriculture and general downsizing. In Ohio, Cleveland (“Green Triangle”, “Shrinking Cities” initiative) and Youngstown (“Grow Youngstown”) promote urban agricultural land development to create jobs, build community involvement, and create a relationship between people and the land on which they live. It harks back to our colonial days, when William Penn envisioned his “Greene Country Town” of Philadelphia as far back as 1681 in response to the plagues and fires of European cities, planning lots of a half or full acre to allow private gardens so that city dwellers could live in a country-like setting.

The success of some plans leads to their eventual demise, as crowds flock to live in successful, desirable regions. While Detroit may be beating the axles of its former automobile industry into plowshares for the near future, the tide may turn yet again as a new cycle of inhabitants are drawn to live in such an attractive area. The lessons from the present situation, however, should not be shelved, but instead infuse sound planning with a sense of realistic sustainability. *A*



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