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## A Vision for Detroit

[Brendan Crain](#) | Apr 2nd, 2010 | Topics: [Infrastructure](#), [Governance](#) | Region: [Midwest](#) | Cities: [Chicago](#), [Detroit](#) | 5



Detroit's New Center neighborhood. Credit: [DigDowntownDetroit.com](http://DigDowntownDetroit.com)

Over the past few months, Detroit has experienced a renaissance, of sorts. There may be a dearth of public money, a staggering unemployment rate, and mounting poverty, but Detroit has been flush with what is shaping up to be the most important currency of the digital age: coverage. Unfortunately, as can often happen when something receives a burst of attention, Detroit is already seeing backlash from its citizens as it plans to [tear down vacant neighborhoods and open large urban farms](#). Sudden limelight, as many former child stars would tell you, can often be confusing, and can wind up doing more harm than good (especially when visionary ideas get mixed in with plots to teach public schoolkids [how to work at Wal-Mart](#)). What's necessary to turn interest into action is vision, and Mayor Dave Bing's administration would do well to start offering its constituents a clearer picture of what the city could be if they hope to make headway in Detroit's fortunes.

For inspiration, Detroit need look no farther than Chicago, which recently celebrated the centennial of Daniel Burnham's famed 1909 plan of the city. One of the projects that coincided with that year-long event was the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's (CMAP) [GoTo2040](#), a regional, visionary plan featuring recommendations for how Chicagoland can direct growth to shape the region in the coming decades. In fact, Chicago is one of a slew of cities around the world that is reviewing historical urban plans to draw cues for the future of their regions. Barcelona, for instance, [recently reflected on the 150-year-old l'Eixample plan](#); Savannah has begun considering the [expansion of its historic grid](#), the earliest example of a city plan in the US; and Adelaide, Australia is looking back on Colonel Light's original plans for their city to [craft a 30-year plan](#) to rein in sprawl.

When it comes to historical vision, Detroit is hardly lacking. As anyone who's ever visited the city's central business district can attest, Detroit features a very unique layout at its core. Rebuilt along plans established by Judge Augustus Woodward after a fire in June of 1805, the city was planned around the central Campus Martius, with arterial roads radiating from that hexagonal plaza out into the surrounding countryside. While it did not follow Woodward's plans for a series of radial hexagonal campuses extending out as the city grew and opted instead for a more standard American grid, Detroit did grow up along those principal avenues, which all remain major thoroughfares today.

If it was Woodward's avenues that guided growth in the past, it is a project on today's Woodward Avenue, named for the Judge himself, that could provide the glue that brings Detroit's scattered plans together to create a model for right-sizing shrinking cities in the future. The M1 is a [privately-planned and funded light rail corridor](#) that will connect Campus Martius, which has seen significant redevelopment over the past few years, with the city's New Center neighborhood. The 3.4-mile line, which will eventually be absorbed into a larger public transportation network planned for the city, has received Federal funding assistance, and is set to break ground this fall.

This should be especially exciting news for Bing, who's looking at demolishing [2,500 houses](#) around the city, leveling far-flung neighborhoods and [turning the vacant stretches left behind](#) into job-producing urban farms through partnerships with [Hantz Farms and RecoveryPark](#). The M1 and the larger system it theoretically precedes should be positioned as the



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new arterial along which a re-organized Detroit will center itself. As the city tears down old neighborhoods and relocates their residents to other areas within its 143 square miles, presenting those people being uprooted with solid reasoning and a strong vision will be crucial to accomplishing those relocations as quickly as possible.

Right now, the vision for Detroit's future is myopic, not necessarily in intent, but in scope. Converting abandoned neighborhoods into farmland could actually be an economic and social boon, but without being presented as part of a larger vision for the city, it's easy for such a plan to sound like a massive step backward, or even a waving of the white flag of surrender. But contrast the image of today's Detroit with one where a network of compact neighborhoods stretches out between large agricultural tracts, and parents walk their kids to neighborhood schools in the morning on their way to the trains that take them to the hydroponic greenhouses where they work. Americans seem to have a fixed idea of urban fabric as looking something like a quilt, but there's no reason it can't look like a web instead.

If there is the political will and the financial might in Detroit to privately fund a light rail line (which would take a miracle in almost any American city, much less one with Motown's reputation), there should certainly be enough energy to create a broad, forward-thinking vision for the region to tie various initiatives together into a narrative that the whole city can rally behind. Detroit has everyone's attention; now it's time for the city to decide what story it's going to tell.

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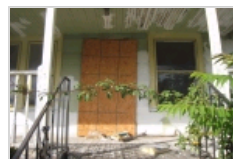
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 **Ross Hammersley** in Traverse City, MI on Fri, Apr 02, 2010 at 10:51 am

Thanks for the thoughtful article on our city. I think the piece is largely on-point, but to the extent that you're calling for the immediate communication of an all-encompassing vision for the city, I would actually argue that such a step is simply not yet possible. You must remember that Mayor Bing has just completed his first year in office, and the city has been in dire straits for some time, so this initial period for the mayor has been one of getting its law enforcement and fiscal house in order while also getting the lay-of-the-land generally.

That said, in terms of getting planning underway Mayor Bing is actually one step ahead of you:  
<http://detnews.com/article/20100318/METRO01/3180406/Noted-urban-planner-coming-to-Detroit>


The city's "right-sizing" initiative is just the first step of broader planning stages that will take some time to come into effect. Because the size of the city is so large (it could fit Manhattan & San Francisco inside the city limits with room to spare) and the population is so small now, taking time at the outset to develop an overall infrastructure & resource inventory and determining which areas of the city must be prioritized for redevelopment and for the provision of even basic services (given the precarious financial state of the city), is an essential and long-overdue first step. The demolition you mention is something that has been planned for (and needed) for quite some time, and beginning that has always depended on simply obtaining sufficient funding, which the Feds have now provided. Ridding Detroit's neighborhoods of these dilapidated fire-hazards & crime-magnets can only help.

In general, it has simply not been possible to provide adequate services throughout the vast city limits for some time, so once the Mayor's administration & planners have moved past the initial stages of assessment and development of an overall plan I fully expect that a broader vision will be incorporated and outreach undertaken, as you suggest. While it would be nice to develop and communicate a 100-year vision / plan from the get-go, this simply cannot take place until these preliminary steps (which have clearly been needed for quite some time) have been completed.

In short, the city, with its pragmatic and sensible new Mayor, is on the right-track, but it will take us a long time to make progress sufficient to be even mentioned in the same breath as the cities you cite in your article. Give us time, however, and even come visit, because we'd be glad to have you!

 **brandi** in alexandria, va on Fri, Apr 02, 2010 at 12:12pm

Sounds like Detroit is transitioning to the famed Garden City movement but with an urban twist. I agree that shrinking the city does not have to be defeatist but can be viewed as smart evolution.

 **Brendan Crain** in Chicago on Fri, Apr 02, 2010 at 2:20pm

Ross - Thanks for that link; I tried to figure out if there was any long-range planning going on but couldn't find anything. This news about Toni Griffin is huge! Very exciting for Detroit.

I agree with what you said about Bing; his administration seems to have job of using Year 1 to get things in place for more ambitious work down the road. I'm really looking forward to seeing what he comes up with, because Detroit is finally starting to look like it may be reaching a turning point. That's big news not just for the Midwest, but for American urbanism. (And, having been to the city three times, I'd love to see the progress a few years down the line).

Finally, in regards to the size of the city—Detroit is pretty large, but I don't think it's unmanageably so. The density is also surprisingly high for a US city, which I think is reason to hope that the city can reorganize successfully and stop shrinking. That's part of what this post is about—creating an "optimistic" vision of what the city could be; something to guide growth, even if it isn't a hard-and-fast plan. The majority of what Burnham prescribed for Chicago back in 1909 never came to fruition, but his Plan helped Chicagoans of the time see their city for what it "could" be. Chicago was dirty, dangerous, and congested, but Burnham's Plan provided a new frame of reference for Chicagoans. That was probably ultimately more important than any of the infrastructural changes that the Plan actually achieved.

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Brendan.

Great article summarizing the point that Detroit has come to... and I agree that a large-scale vision, perhaps a modern interpretation of Burnhams credo to 'make no small plans' - is sorely needed. While not new, the proposals we put forth in the SDAT process in 2007 were a step towards the idea of an integrated solution taking into account economics, physical space, and cultural resources for Detroit (summarized here with links): <http://www.terrafluxus.com/archives/408> There were many threads of wonderful momentum already going when we visited and made the recommendations, and it feels like it all needs a comprehensive armature in which to exist - one that isn't predicated on a population of 2 million, but rather 800,000 residents.

While much has spawned recently about large-scale urban ag and demolition, the idea of an integrated solution that looked at right-sizing, diversity, appropriate and manageable levels of infrastructure, re-purposing industry, and creation of jobs and retraining blue-collar workers in green manufacturing all have parts to play - which was part of that proposal as well. While urban farms in vacant lots isn't the panacea, neither is the wholesale demolition of areas with a plan, development of greenway trails, implementation of the M1 light rail, rehabilitation of the waterfront, or delineation of a music inspired tourist destination. The combination of strategic thinking and implementation of all of these, including the support of the residents, will create the result Detroit truly deserves.

The new planner is in a unique position to reshape a new form of urban evolution for shrinking cities, but more appropriately, develop a cohesive view of that which is specifically Detroit. As a previous commenter mentioned, there is a need for action, which will incite some push-back, but people will truly not feel included and invested until the pieces make sense as a whole.

 **Brendan Crain** in Chicago on Sat, Apr 03, 2010 at 12:52pm

Just saw this over at Democracy Now:

[http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/2/community\\_activists\\_criticize\\_detroit\\_urban\\_renewal](http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/2/community_activists_criticize_detroit_urban_renewal)

I agree with a lot of what Sharon Howell is saying in that video—namely that the people of Detroit need to be told (and shown) exactly how these plans fit together to revitalize the urban fabric, and how they will impact individual citizens' lives directly. But the idea that the city can pull itself up by its bootstraps, buoyed solely by the small-scale efforts of its citizens is pretty naive. Small-scale efforts like independent urban gardens and entrepreneurial new business will have to play a critical role in Detroit's revival, but they also need to fit into a larger plan—one that, I would argue, needs to include the reorganization of Detroiters in more dense, evenly-populated neighborhoods with the critical mass of people that will allow such things to succeed.

Like you say, Jason, Detroit has no room for small plans. There should be plenty of small-scale ideas in the larger plan, but the plan itself should not be small. The city is just too big to not have a cohesive vision.

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