

URBAN FUTURES/FUTURE ARCHITECTURES USA 1.0  
Catalytic Detroit: Hacking Infrastructures, Inequalities & Ecosystems



What if Detroit has not only fallen apart, emptied out, disappeared, and/or shrunk, but has also transformed, becoming a new sort of urban formation that only appears depleted, voided or abjected through the lenses of conventional architecture and urbanism?  
Andrew Herscher, Unreal Estate

Catalytic Detroit radically re-envision the future an American rust-belt metropolis. Once among the world's greatest manufacturing cities with the highest per capita income in the United States, Detroit was synonymous with the "future city," a twentieth century lifestyle of work and leisure made possible by booming automobile production. Its pernicious decline fueled by racial tensions, financial missteps, and the expansion of a post-industrial globalized American economy have left Detroit the cultural exemplar of a distressed metropolis. Yet, in Detroit, possibility is emancipated from constraint. Imaginative and alternative urban practices **hack** the city's infrastructural *excess* to create new definitions of property, value and public. Insurgent urban farming practices have fueled bottom up community organizing strategies and provided radical solutions to food security while redefining the public sphere. Billionaires and flows of global capital have been quietly infiltrating Detroit's boundaries as clandestine land grabs lay the groundwork for multinational players and corporations to speculate on the city's future. Distressed urban conditions in Detroit have impelled Detroiters to tap the underground and the overhead, to locate overages and slippages in larger capitalist networks and use them to fuel catalytic possibilities by way of new experiments in urbanism, redefinitions of the public realm and the invention of new architectures. Extraordinary possibilities can be imagined through the projection of these phenomena into the future by asking: "*What will Detroit be in 100 years?*"

Detroit was built for 1 million more residents than it currently has. Detroit's oversized infrastructural system is among the most expensive to maintain in the nation and in a perpetual state of decay due to endemic underfunding. Ironically, Detroiters are underserved due to an **excess** of infrastructure. Abandoned homes pepper the city, existing on blocks with occupied structures that make proposals to "shut off" water, gas, and electricity in order to effectively shrink the city's infrastructural systems amount to nothing less than forced relocation. Abandoned parcels of land and

decaying structures within Detroit are being reclaimed by nature. This readily available land with infrastructural connections has catalyzed 50,000 urban farms to date and they are growing in number and size each year. Some see the growing number of agri-business scaled urban farms as a twenty-first century land grab, allowing individual players to control vast swaths of the city. Social inequalities set into play generations ago through financial, legal, urban planning, and logistical instruments still demarcate and delineate socio-economic, racial and regional boundaries throughout the city today. Detroit is one of the most racially segregated cities in the U.S. today. Detroit's multi-scalar borders and thresholds punctuate and choreograph the rhythms of daily life.



Still from *Detropia*, Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have been subsequently consumed by the search for legible traces of its history imagine possible futures? Mark Dery, "Black to the Future"

#### **PROMPT:**

**Catalytic Detroit** will explore speculative architectural and urban futures for the city of Detroit. Complex and sometime contradictory conditions of the present will be exaggerated and imagined into possible future scenarios that offer analytical and critical perspectives. We will reconsider "site" as a twenty-first century networked, relational and logistical condition existing within global flows of capital, material and labor. We will seek out catalytic opportunities, confluences and/or anomalies to leverage new architectural possibilities. We will design catalytic propositions that speculate on new forms of urbanism and new productive applications of architectural thinking. We will engage in the redevelopment propositions slated for Detroit to envision new forms of exchange between global capital flows and Detroiters. The first four-weeks of the studio will examine how Detroit has been imagined through media and how the city was been networked through its various infrastructure. The studio will have tutorials that introduce techniques of data mining, visualization, and spatialization through parametric modeling. With specially developed software for the studio, students will sift through social media feeds and other relevant resources. These topological models developed in Rhino with Grasshopper\* will allow these systems and phenomena to be studied in temporal magnitudes. This rich body of research, parametric and analog modeling techniques will be refined through a site visit to Detroit to engage in further on site research. We will hold project reviews and workshops with architects, artists, urbanists, and curators. The studio will develop architectural propositions in the form of digital videos and drawings on six nodes that radically re-envision Detroit on a 100 year time scale. Students will develop theses on the utopian and dystopian possibilities of Detroit's architectural and urban future.

*\*Note: prior knowledge of these tools is not required; but interest in learning how to use them is mandatory!*

I was playin' in the beginnin', the mood all changed  
I been chewed up and spit out and booed off stage  
But I kept rhyming and stepwritin' the next cipher  
8 Mile, Eminem