

Catalyst Final Project Report November 2019

Project title: *The Rustbelt Herbarium: Engaging Weeds as Urban Subject*

Project team:

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External Partners: City of Detroit's General Services Division (GSD); Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP); Detroit Mower Gang (DMG)

Summary

The Rustbelt Herbarium is focused on understanding the performance and perception of spontaneous urban vegetation, with a specific interest in the challenges and opportunities of so-called “legacy” cities such as Detroit. Building upon previously funded field research from a recent Graham “fast track” grant, the goal of this catalyst research effort was focused on needfinding with local partners and further analysis of previously collected data. We targeted various leaders in Detroit that are directly involved in the maintenance and transformation of marginalized, overgrown or “blighted” landscapes throughout the city. The collaboration ultimately included engagement with the following organizations: the City of Detroit's General Services Division (GSD), the Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP) and the Detroit Mower Gang (DMG). These organizations exert direct influence and agency in the shaping of urban landscapes, yet to date there is very little known about what drives their maintenance decisions and how they define their territories. This is largely due to a lack of engagement between the disparate worlds of academic researchers on the one hand, and decision makers on the other. What do we have to learn from their accumulated experience and on-the-ground insight? How can we bring these insights into a shared space of communication?

One of the primary outputs from the project was an online spatial storymap entitled “Mow Town”, available at the following link:

<https://umich.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=8ccde0491c134e0fa7ba5df985f47078>

The Mow Town storymap synthesizes disparate sources of data and insights and is the first of its kind for the City of Detroit. It is intended to be used as a communication tool for managers, citizens, and the

design research community to guide the development of future landscape engagement strategies and maintenance regimes suited to the legacy cities of southeast Michigan and beyond. With this baseline of foundational understanding set, future funding and engagement will focus on implementation, testing and iterating these new landscape management practices at various scales throughout Detroit, utilizing lands which are already maintained under the auspices of the local partner organizations (vacant lots, freeway medians, etc.) as an active laboratory for social-ecological experimentation.

Project background and goals

The overall goal of The Rustbelt Herbarium was to establish a permanent and ever-evolving physical and online repository for urban vegetation research. It engages with spontaneous urban vegetation (i.e. “weeds”) as subjects to be rigorously re-considered. By suspending conventional value judgements of these emergent conditions and creating an infrastructure of inquiry within and outside the university, we aim to support new ways of seeing and understanding these plants, while considering the role they will continue to play in our cities. This involved both qualitative and quantitative research methods targeting the perception and performance of spontaneous urban plant communities.

Our research hypothesis: that some of the ‘weed’ species flourishing in the urban landscape are providing vital ecosystem services that are currently undervalued, undiscovered or under-acknowledged. This holds great potential for applications to low-maintenance urban landscape management practices, green infrastructure, and the bottom-up enhancement of urban commons.

Stakeholders included the following:

Organization	Description	Contact, interviewee(s)
The Downtown Detroit Partnership (DDP)	Semi-public entity tasked with maintaining landscapes within the Business Improvement Zone (BIZ), basically all of downtown Detroit.	Alana Tucker, Urban Innovation Manager
Downtown Detroit Ambassadors program	Funded by DDP, a program hiring disadvantaged Detroiters to directly carry out a range of landscape care and services in the downtown area.	Rachael Allen, Operations Manager
General Services Department	Official public authority overseeing all landscape maintenance operations for the City of Detroit	Barry Burton, Project Manager Landscape Design Unit
		Juliana Fulton, Urban Parks Planner
Brightview Landscape Services	Large private landscape maintenance company	Jon Wurges, Senior Account Manager
Detroit Mower Gang	Volunteer-based organization who mow various lots, parks, and playgrounds in Detroit	Tom Nardone, founder and director

Research approach

Our process involved the following modes of engagement:

- Semi-structured phone and in-person interviews with landscape leaders
- Follow-up field visits to various sites throughout the city to better understand and document practices and phenomena.
- Synthesis of these findings and various data sources into the [Mow Town storymap](#).

Findings

Selected key insights from the catalyst process includes:

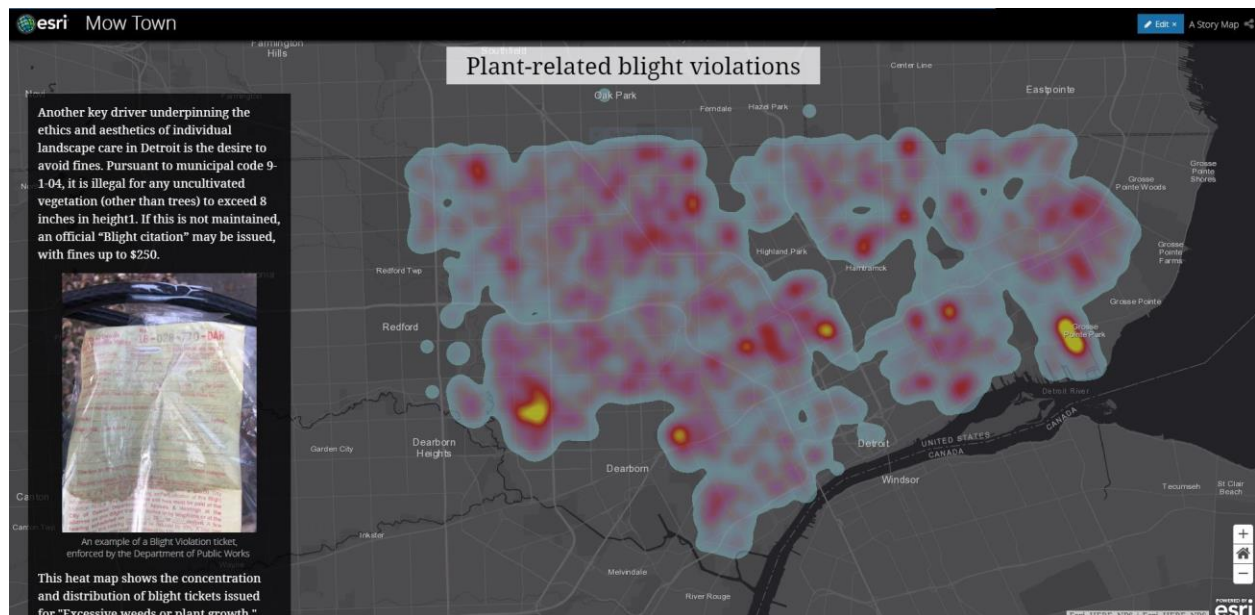
- 4 basic typologies of landscape maintenance practices (see [storymap](#))
- 4 basic categories of actors (see [storymap](#))
- The identification of one particularly interesting spatial typology/designation (the *Community Open Space Park*), which may be useful to target in future research and engagement projects
- Spatial territories and landscape maintenance resources roughly correspond to the core-periphery dilemma in Detroit, with some areas of overlap.
- Blight violation “hotspots” (perhaps opportunity zones for future intensified engagement)

Outputs

All key insights and outputs are further explored and detailed in “[Mow Town](#)”, our online story map that synthesizes our process in a publicly accessible narrative format.

The project also resulted in a conference submission to the 51st annual [Environmental Design Research Association](#) conference titled “*The Rustbelt Herbarium: Understanding the Processes Shaping Landscapes in Legacy Cities.*”

Additional outputs (i.e. academic research papers) are in development, and will provide deeper analysis of the data generated from our various surveys on biodiversity and perception/etc. Below is a screenshot from the Mow Town storymap.



Outcomes

Among the more immediate outcomes of this process is increased transparency and mutual understanding across the various agencies and organizations who exert influence over the maintenance and management of Detroit's vast territories of unoccupied or neglected land. Additional forthcoming outcomes will include the identification of strategic areas in which to focus future collaborative design proposals and future local demonstration projects.

Longer term metrics would include the extent to which engagement continues to occur across agency types, and between our team and the landscape leaders we began this partnership with.

Project personnel details

Any inquiries can be forwarded to Daniel Phillips, the primary contact and corresponding researcher for this work: 424-209-2650 drph@umich.edu

References

Please see [storymap](#) for embedded links and references