DECENTRALIZATION OF DETROIT

by

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During the last fifty years, the Detroit area has been transformed from a predominantly urban area with isolated centers into a complex metropolitan system dynamically growing: many changes have taken place, which can be defined as phenomena of overall growth and modification affecting the total structure of the region. Their explanation must be looked for in the dynamic power of the various economical and social forces acting in the area, overlapping each other in space and time.

In the history of Detroit, even if this is short as compared with the history of the European towns (200 years as against 2,000) we should look for the explanation of the present situation of the physical pattern of the city and of its region, to understand in which way the economical and social pressures have organized the present physical pattern, and to explain the negative effects which we can observe in the various parts of the urban environment of Detroit. Not always is it possible to set-up an organic explanation of the present stage of development through study of its history, be it physical, economical, social, or political: such a work would require an accurate analysis and examination of hypothesis, an exhaustive inventory of all elements, a deep knowledge of disciplines; and only an extensive study could give results of certain value.
Most of the phenomena of growth and change that have taken place during this time could be explained through the sequence of economic events that have characterized the economic level of the region, and of its poles of attraction.

Local economy has always had a great impact on:

- industry mix
- growth of employment
- growth of local population
- level and distribution of income

And it is the most important determinant of the size of the human settlement. On size, depends the most important urban problems: population density, political fragmentation, public expenditure. Size determines the character of urban environment and the disciplines which are necessary for its full understanding.

The increase of the population in Detroit has caused all the problems of physical organization of different social groups, of different economic activities, has expanded the demand of transportation and of utilities, has increased the horizontal expansion, creating the disequilibrium of the different parts of the area. Even the blight phenomena are due to the growth of population.

Rapid postwar migration from rural areas and small towns to the big cities has kept the pressure on core-area housing, over-crowding and overloading it. Thus, the oldest part of the housing stock has aged prematurely, and then this blighted housing is kept in service unusually
long. By the same token, the depopulation of small towns has left them with a redundant housing supply and their blight of vacant dilapidated houses.

Thus, the great migration to the larger cities has created housing blight at both ends.

As a result of the development of the last 50 years, it is probably possible to describe the city of Detroit through the words that Burgess used to analyze the social physical trends of the proliferation of the city:

The typical process of the expansion of the city can best be illustrated, perhaps, by a series of concentric circles, which may be numbered to designate both the successive zones of urban extension and the types of areas differentiated in the process of expansion.

This chart represents an ideal construction of the tendencies of any town or city to expand radially from its central business district on the map "loop" (I); encircling the downtown area there is normally an area in transition, which is being invaded by business and light manufacturing (II); third area (III) is inhabited by workers in industries who have escaped from the areas of deterioration but who desire to live within easy access of their work. Beyond this zone is the "residential area" (IV) of high-class apartment buildings of exclusive "restricted" districts of single-family dwellings. Still further, out beyond the city limits, is the commuter zone--suburban areas, or satellite cities within a thirty- to sixty-minute ride of the central business district.

Although a deep analysis would be necessary to show scientifically how Burgess' model suits the Detroit area, and even if only statistically it would be possible to find the spatial distribution of the boundaries of the circles Burgess proposes, it seems impossible not to agree with him. If we analyze the physical pattern of Detroit, and if we look at the
quality of the environment, as the trends of spatial distribution of income, we can find around the CBD pole of location of regional activities, a factory zone with a radius of five miles around, characterized by declining physical qualities, by poor housing conditions, by low-income levels, etc.

The growth of Detroit and the increase of urban problems started shortly after the beginning of the 19th Century when Detroit entered its "automobile era."

On June 10, 1903, after some months of preparation which included negotiation of contracts for various components the Ford Motor Company was formed for the manufacture of automobiles. Production was to be whatever number could be sold. The first car reached the market that October. The firm had an authorized capital of $150,000. However, only $1,000,000 worth of stock was issued and only $285,000 of this was for cash. The Company made a handsome profit that year and did not fail to do so for many years thereafter. Employment in 1903 averaged 195 men.

The population of Detroit rapidly increased and in 1910 reached 466,000 inhabitants. The city expanded according to the new demands for commercial space and the rising population. Intensive growth started to have, for the first time, a negative effect on the physical structure of the city.

In the period between 1910-1920, Detroit became the automobile capital of the world. This phase did not really begin until Henry Ford started producing the Model T on the assembly line in 1913, although to a certain extent, it
may be dated back to the last years of the previous decade when motor cars began being produced in substantial numbers.

The use of the automobile provided in this way a greater degree of mobility than previous transportation systems offered, and more urban centers of the Detroit area were included within the areas exercising pressures on the city of Detroit.

This resulted in the continued growth of the city and of its central business district. The expanding CBD pushed out the high-income residences; high-income people abandoned the city and settled for the first time in suburbs, such as the Grosse Pointes, Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, Dearborn, etc. This movement, which assumed the dimensions of an exodus in the 1920's was due to a number of factors, but the most prominent was the new mobility provided by the motor car, combined with the negative physical environment of the city: the gap left behind by those who could afford to move out continued to be filled by lower-income people who were immigrating to the central city.

The years between 1930-1950 were dominated by the Depression and by World War I. Although the first and second decades of this phase were entirely different in many respects, they are the same in their effect on the physical structure of the city.
The population of the city grew very slowly from 1,569,000 in 1930 to 1,623,000 in 1940. The growth of population of the three-county Central Region (Macomb, Oakland, Wayne) was not much greater: from 2,077,000 in 1930 to 2,337,000 in 1940. The number of automobiles registered in the Central Region increased by 26% during the decade 1930-1940. At the same time, demand for space in the Central Business District—and other central areas—decreased. The combined effect of higher traffic pressures and lower demands for central space was the fast growth of open parking lots which became a serious problem during this period, inaugurating a new period in the physical deterioration of urban texture and leading to its complete disintegration in the central parts of the city.

In the second decade of this phase, the trends observed during the Depression period, in relation to the physical structure continued although the reasons behind them were different. War production revitalized the economy of the Central Region (Macomb, Wayne, Oakland) and population grew at a faster rate: from 2,377,000 in 1940, to 30,016,000 in 1950; an increase of 26.9% compared to 9.2% of the previous decade.

The physical deterioration of the urban environment continued on a larger and more rapid scale: not only were there no positive developments in the form of open parking lots. In addition, the growth of slums and the general lack of maintenance
caused by the Depression and the War resulted in a wide-spread and rapid deterioration of the housing inventory. The entire urban physical environment was no longer appealing from any point of view.

The highest income groups continued to abandon the central city was now followed by a corresponding outward movement of commercial activities and services that catered to high-income people.

The trends of growth that we observed during the last 50 years still affect the present structure of the city and the land organization of metropolitan Detroit. Deterioration of the physical environment of the area surrounding the CBD has increased without any emerging phenomena pointing out the alternative trends; the urban sprawl due to the demand of the middle classes for more suitable environments in which to live did not stop--which, thus, only made the problem of the physical organization of the Detroit area worse. All of these elements combined together made the central area of the region a critical area, where part of the elements of the system are declining more and more--and where it is possible to find a decrease in population; decline in income; changing social and racial confrontation, leading to segregation; declining level of education of the population.
A study prepared for the city of Detroit (1962) compared the ten largest cities in the U.S., pointing out the following characteristics of downtown housing:

- the ten largest cities employ an average of 19,000 professional and technical workers and 31,000 clerical workers within three miles of their central business district;
- these cities contain an average of 158,000 households within the three-mile zone;
- 14.6% of this zone’s residents earn more than $10,000 per year.

The averages in the above study point out the corresponding critical values for Detroit:

- only 5,300 professional and technical people, and 10,000 clerical people are employed in the three-mile zone;
- Detroit has only 87,700 households in this zone;
- Only 38% of the Detroit SMSA white-collar employees live within the three-mile zone;
- Only 5.6% of Detroit’s residents in this zone earn more than $10,000 per year.

Lack of control of the urban proliferation and lack of a real over-all urban policy capable of correcting the undersirable trends, has been the main reason for the present
situation. Future action should be directed at confronting these problems in order to achieve new and effective urban policies and to create new institutions having the power of carrying out all of the necessary operations for an improvement of the living conditions of the city.

In recent years many studies have been conducted concerning the urban area of Detroit—for example, the Doxiadis Report. This was conceived by the Edison Company to provide a study for Detroit's future growth, and to develop a framework for the expansion of Edison's facilities in order to meet the increasing requirements for electric energy of its service area. The project is divided into three main parts:

Part I is concerned with an analysis of existing conditions and trends;

Part II is an analysis of the problems of the future urban growth;

Part III is a detailed development of the location pattern which has been chosen as the best solution.

The area of study—the Detroit urban area—has been defined according to the spatial economical inter-relations of its settlements: it includes 25 counties in Michigan, 9 in northern Ohio, and 3 in Canada, with an area of 23,059 square miles and a total population of 7,106,893 in 1960.
- The analysis of the existing conditions show that the area has been dynamically increasing between 1940 and 1960, passing from 4.7 million to 7.1 million.

- The urban forces are mostly concentrated around metropolitan Detroit. Between 1940 and 1960, metropolitan Detroit absorbed 57% of the total population growth of the U.D.A. (4,661,079).

- Metropolitan Detroit is growing along six radial corridors according to the major transportation axes, in the direction of Port Huron; Flint-Bay City, Toledo; Windsor. Of these, the most important corridor is the Detroit-Flint-Bay City one.

- Low density urban settlement, increased distances from the center, the decline of the center and the general tendency to decentralization tend to create peripheral concentrations of major functions, whose nuclei are usually the regional shopping centers.

- City of Detroit has been losing population, income and business, and the value of its land is declining. Between 1950 and 1960, population declined by 10%, while aggregate income and land values also declined by 3% and 10% respectively at constant prices.
The main characteristic of the future urban structure of U.D.A., if development is allowed to continue along its present course, will be the following:

- The additional urban forces will continue to concentrate at low densities around the existing urban centers and mainly the metropolitan Detroit area. Thus, of the additional population of 8 million, about 50% will be absorbed by metropolitan Detroit and 35% by the other existing metropolitan areas along the corridor.

- Urban development at the periphery is expected to continue to be haphazard and disorganized since urban sprawl will, in most cases, precede planning at the local level.

- The existing peripheral concentrations of central functions will expand and new areas will be created, which will lead to further expansion of the periphery and to further isolation of the core from the remaining urban systems. Thus, the disintegration process of the core shall continue.

- Due to the expansion of the periphery and the critical area, the CBD of Detroit will become even more isolated from the largest and most dynamic part of the central region, and its deterioration will increase.
The analysis of the existing conditions in UDA showed that its structure is inadequate to cope with its present needs, and its structure will be even more inadequate to cope with the future needs. All the above considerations lead to the need to seek new solutions for the future development of UDA which on one side would insure its proper connections with future regional development and exploit its central locations; on the other, would provide a new international structure which would enable UDA to cope with the future needs of rapid urbanization.

- The solution selected for the future development of UDA is based on the distribution of a total population of 15 million by the year 2,000, and provides the following elements:

  Reorganization of major functions with the creation of a new twin center of high order services located northeast of Detroit, near Port Huron;

  A new industrial pole and industrial zones in the vicinity of the new center;

  A new major port on the southern section of the St. Clair River in the vicinity of the new center;

  A new major airport in the vicinity of the new center;

  A major educational and research center for the north of Detroit.

- Reorganization of the land transportation network with the creation of a new land transportation system, following a
gridiron pattern and the existing radial system. The spine of the new system consists of three high-speed axes of national importance to which are connected a high-speed system of regional importance, and a lower-speed system of metropolitan importance.

- The combination of the international east-west land transportation axes with the creation of a new major airport will create the preconditions for the development of the new twin center into a major transportation center as well as a center of higher order services, which will be able to attract a significant portion of the future growth expected in U.D.A.

- The creation of the twin center of services to the northwest of the central region, and the concentration of major functions in its vicinity will attract a significant part of the future growth, which would otherwise have been spread around the periphery of the Central Region. In other words, potential growth of the Central Region would be directed toward one direction in an uncommitted area, which would be suitably organized and planned.

- The new concentration will be physically connected with the Central Region, and thus a twin metropolitan area will be created, served by the system of the twin major centers of services, the existing one in Detroit and the new one, south of Port Huron.
- The Central Region, relieved from part of the additional pressures, which would otherwise have been concentrated around its periphery, will acquire the preconditions for revitalization, thus establishing the one to become a vital part of the Central Region again.

- The creation of the twin center alone would not guarantee an amelioration of the critical area. Implementation of the selected solution should go together with a well-conceived program of revitalization. This would aim to improve the physical environment in the critical area and to reorganize it in well-balanced and self-contained communities.

In this context, the Doxiadis proposal does not take into account two basic elements: 1) the process of decentralization that has affected, and is still affecting, Detroit and (2) the lack of a general urban policy in the U.S., without which any change in the physical structure and growth of the metropolitan area is practically impossible.

The metropolitan area surrounding Detroit has been shaped in its growth by a broad process of decentralization from the center toward the outer ring, allowed by the new technology of transportation and of communication. This process is probably expensive, since it implies altogether expanded costs
of urbanization and an increasing waste of physical resources (land and water pollution, land waste, etc.), but given the system of competitive political units present in the metropolitan areas, the desire of the population to avoid residential congestion and the preference toward one dwelling unit, it is hard to believe that a reversal of the current trend can be achieved. These trends are determined by the market forces and in an economical system based on private ownership it is impossible to reverse them; they can only be slightly corrected through a setting-up of incentives, and of restrictive devices.

As a result of this decentralization process, Detroit has lost its character of the center of the metropolitan region: today many activities have been attracted from the outer centers of the area, and altogether the region presents a quite dispersed pattern of activity.

In spite of all the present considerations, Doxiadis proposes a new center as an alternative strategy for the solution of the problem of urbanization in the area. But if we take into account the future of Detroit with the forecasted increase of population, and if we consider the probable increase in the technology of transportation during the years to come, we can assume that a drive toward a further decentralization
will take place, thus enhancing again the already existing multi-nuclei structure of the area. In this perspective, I think it would have been much more realistic to apply to a more decentralized pattern, based on the idea of differentiated nuclei of activity dispersed in the region instead of a unique center.

The idea of the new town is acquiring an increasing popularity in the United States, as a way of resolving the increasing urban problems of the American city. The cause of this phenomenon is due probably to the contemporary city crisis: under the pressures of the negative events that have been observed in the last years in the urban environment, today's city has been criticized more and more and its present physical structure has been found less and less attractive. Traffic congestion, pollution, noise, delinquency, racial and social problems and more recently riots, have been, understandably, the basic reason for the expanding sensation of disappointment that a lot of people feel regarding the city.

In this general psychological atmosphere, the concept of a new town as a physical strategy alternative to haphazard urban sprawl is particularly appealing: it promises a setting with all of the features of an urban environment while at the same time, it seems to avoid all of the environmental and social evils of the contemporary city. Nobody, anyway, seems to realize
that most of the problems of the urban environment are not the
direct effect of the physical pattern of the metropolitan
area, but these represent instead the ultimate result of a social
and political structure of the American society, and that,
because of their peculiar character, such problems cannot be
resolved through new technical or locational devices. Their
solution asks for new political approaches and the organization
of new policies, where the new town concept can be taken into
account as one of the alternative strategies of location inside
the general context of the process of urbanization.

Anyway, there are many reasons going against the new
town: in a recent article in the A.I.P Journal, the larger
costs that, for instance, a new town implies compared to
alternative forms of development, have been exposed.

This requires centralized control over land use and
development at a very large scale area before anything is
created on that land, so it generates the following additional
costs:

A) The added cost of assembling a large enough site
to accommodate 100,000 (or whatever number is
considered to be "city sized) and holding parts of that
site vacant during the first stage of development, which
may last years.

B) The cost of developing and operating new institutions
for centralized planning and control of such a large
scale of activity.
C) The cost of overcoming the obstacles to new city development created by existing fragmented landownership and general institutions. A great deal of extra lobbying skill waiting time and money is needed to wrest comprehensive planning opportunities for them.

D) Not all households, businesses, or other institutions, can afford brand new quarters. But, in a new city everything is brand new. Society, however, cannot operate on a large community scale without the services of many low-income households and many low-cost business firms. To enable these entities to survive in a new city, some form of public subsidy must be extended to cover the higher cost of their occupying a new structure.

To build up an urban frontier can be particularly attractive for a certain part of the American population and as well as for the economical groups. But to try to provide a solution to the urban problems only dealing with their physical dimension and through the same political and economical mechanism which has given shape to the contemporary city structure is not, certainly, a solution. Any attempt for instance to exert a significant public influence over the nature, location, magnitude, etc., of urban growth, requires public ownership or other direct control of a significant part of the land in the metropolitan area.

The problems of the American city, and of Detroit as well, are very serious: the solutions proposed by Doxiadis and the propaganda that has been used to advertise the proposals themselves do not represent in my opinion the proper way of tackling with such an important issue as the destiny of Detroit. Again, I would
say that the problems of the physical organization of the city do not lie in the environment itself, but their solution must be allowed for in the political and institutional sphere.

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