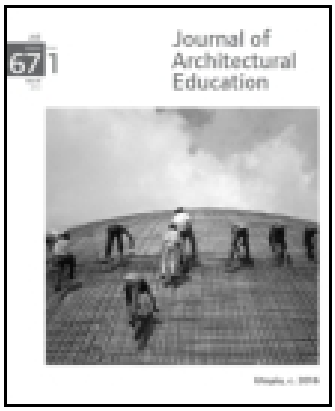

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8Mile Baseline: A Dialectical Image of The Urban Crisis

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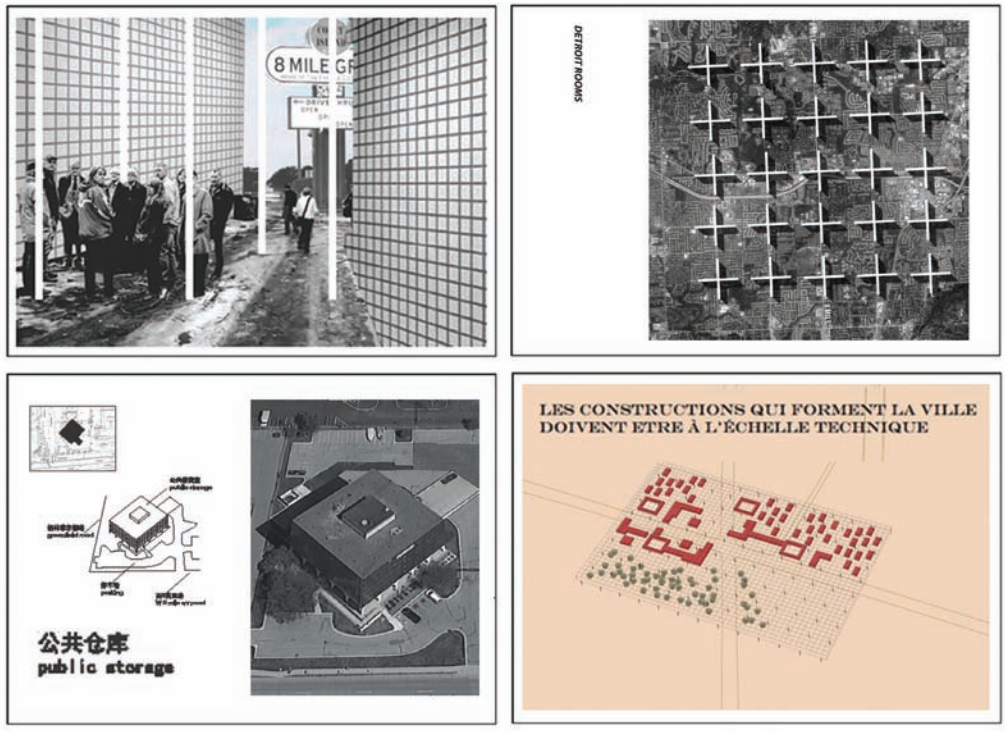

Figure 1. Greetings from Detroit. Postcard by Omar Ali, Suo Ya, Safei Gu, and Brianne DuRoss.

Detroit and the Origins of the Urban Crisis

The 1960s riots in Detroit and other American cities cast light on the disparity between the values of American Democracy and the life of African-American citizens.[1] Racial confrontation was hardly a stranger to the "Motor City," which had experienced major disturbances in 1863 and again in 1943. The Detroit Riot in the summer of 1967 erupted partially in response to the simmering anger of black residents at an abusive, mostly white police force and lasted for five days until Michigan National Guard troops first and US Army troops after that intervened to bring the "rioters to disperse." At the height of the civil rights movement, the Detroit Riot underlined a longer history of structural conditions of discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and urban renewal along racial lines. Established by President Johnson to investigate the causes of the 1967 race riots in the United States and to provide recommendations for the future, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, warned in its most famous passage: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Once America's "arsenal of democracy," Detroit became the poster child of the American urban crisis. The subsequent narrative of the city's decline interweaves white flight and capital flight with the rollback of government and economic deregulation in the wake of the global crisis of Fordism during the 1970s.[2] After a decades-long, drawn-out struggle with flawed economic development policies and fiscal conditions, the city of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in July 2013.

The spatial response to Detroit's shrinking economy and demographics has mostly favored an approach to "right-size it." Hence, the financial contraction of Detroit requires that the city's geographic and infrastructure footprints shrink to

survive. Proponents of the "right-size it" approach have constructed a deterministic argument in disfavor of the scale of the city—that its boundaries contain an area the size of Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston combined—and proposed shrinking its size as the singular response to mitigate or the resolve the economic crisis of the city. The urban rationale favors a pervasive didactic solutionism: if a place is growing, you manage growth through new infrastructure and coordination of services. If a place is shrinking, you manage such shrinkage by downsizing it and limiting urban expenditures. For proposals such as "Detroit Future City," it implies focusing money and resources around the islands of economic potentiality that remain in the city and turning the rest back to "nature." The ultrarealistic renderings associated with such visions often offer no alternative other than the speculative Real: they portray a "clean" and quaint city where the "good citizens" mingle on its streets, crowding its beautiful urban agriculture lots.

In this worldview, the crisis of the urban is one of capital accumulation, the solution to which fosters entrepreneurialism and disciplinary conservatism. Detroit might after all be an opportunity for another cycle of land valorization and capital fixes! The Renaissance yet-to-come hinges on the possibility of shrinking the economically dire city to select islands of real estate markets. The implicit consent is that capital will settle again in the city if patterns of geographic segregation are accepted, consecrated as facts of the ground, and channeled as an arm of development. These proposed visions are at best reactionary, in the sense that they propose a return to a previous condition of affairs: revitalization, redevelopment, reinvestment. Formulated as such, the question of the urban crisis does not address the sociospatial contradictions that have surfaced through the cracks of urban governance, let alone aspire to transform them. Rather, the selective revitalization scheme operates as an ideological structure to contain social disagreement and depoliticize the unevenness of the urban process. It begs the question of the proposed spatial contract of urban managerialism, for if uneven sociospatial dynamics have underpinned the current crisis in Detroit, what future worlds would yield from the reproduction of geographic segregation and a selective care for the urban?

This essay argues for the disciplinary significance of narratives of the urban in which recovery is not the a priori denouement of crisis. It proposes to open up the crisis-imagination beyond the prescribed scripts of a constellation of emergency manager, bailout plan, a new Whole Foods, a preserved collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and fine-dining options in restored historic buildings. It asks, What matters of the urban do we value beyond land revalorization, building restoration, and urban renewal? And how do we representationally engage potential other Crisis Coda scenarios? Is it possible to conceive the crisis as dark, and darkening further, thus rejecting the false hope offered by positivist scenarios and desperate economic fixes, all without collapsing into despair?

The essay conceptually frames the urban crisis at the geographic scale. It tackles Detroit's urban crisis through the 8 Mile division line that separates the city from its metropolitan region. Pursued as a pedagogical methodology, it discusses the issues and strategies of representation as they have been explored in the context of a graduate studio. In particular, it introduces the concept of the dialectical image as a pedagogical tool to open up disciplinary conversation, as both discourse and image, of the urban process.

From Urban Crisis to Urban Condition

> The urban crisis has often been understood as the sum of discrete microcrises of housing, transport, finance and the like, and new public policies are proposed to deal with each of the diagnosed "social problems." The language of analysis is clinical, not political; diagnostic, not historical. Far too much remains hidden from view. Institutionalized inequalities, overall patterns of capitalist development, and the nature of the contemporary state are not seen as part of the crisis.[3]

The "urban crisis" has often been said to be the result of the city itself, of a city too big or too much a diverse pool of humanity that produces conflict, poverty, and violence. Framed as a series of discrete problems, the crisis is approached with a troubleshooting mindset. In its pragmatism and sense of immediacy, the problem-solving approach equates the urban crisis with a crisis of the city; it exacerbates a historic and spatial myopia that dissociates the city from the *longue durée* and larger-scale processes of urbanization. In this sense, the very term "urban crisis" serves as a "bureaucratic euphemism to dissociate a majority of citizens from, while at the same time accommodating them to, the dysfunctional workings of fundamental processes shaping the whole of American society."[4] Rather than exceptional, critical geographers have reframed the urban crisis as a crisis of (surplus) capital accumulation, and which in periodic cycles overcomes this problem through "spatial fix" (geographical expansion) and "accumulation by dispossession" (privatization).[5] A dialectical worldview thus offers the conceptual device for understanding the totality and totalizing nature of capitalism and does so by emphasizing process and singling out contradiction.[6]

From Abstract Space to Right to the City as Creative Symbolic Process

What attributes of space characterize the capitalist process? For Henri Lefebvre, the emergence of capitalism has paralleled the production of "abstract space," characterized by social fragmentation and homogenization. He states that capitalism

engenders a "vast displacement of contradictions ... by occupying space, by producing a space," and in the process that such social contradictions become contradictions of space.[7] By "abstract space," Lefebvre refers both to the physical commodification of space in the chain of production and consumption and to its subjugation to systems of representation to divide, measure, calculate, and compare. Abstract space, Lefebvre argues, mobilizes representations of space according to the exigencies of land speculation, functionalist zoning, or segregation by the state: it suppresses difference and friction to create instrumental homogeneity as its image and its goal.[8] That's why Lefebvre claims that violence is inherent to the social use of abstract space and the image of homogeneity upon which it rests. The deconstruction of abstract space is thus a representational project that uncovers the elements of disjunction in the formation of the urban. To transform and renew access to urban life, Lefebvre had coined the "right to the city" that implies the collective design of production processes and products, of buildings and infrastructures, and above all of the organizations (the concrete social relations) that run these on a day-to-day basis. This right to the city manifests itself in creative terms: it is the right to participate in the perpetual creative transformation of the city, which thus becomes "the ephemeral city, the perpetual œuvre of its inhabitants."[9] The concept has since been extensively deployed as a catalyst to thought, policy, and action at a range of scales, most recently in relation to neoliberal developments to assert the right for the poor to remain in central and inner areas of the cities and the right of all groups to use public spaces of the city.[10] For the most part, however, the concept is used in more restricted meanings than initially conceived. Beyond the right to participate in the physical use of urban space, dialectical humanism implies a call to challenge the abstract and homogenizing representations of space. Lefebvre argues the right to the city "is like a cry and a demand" expressed by "[a] need for creative activity, for the œuvre (not only of products and consumable material goods), of the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play."[11]

From the Image of Homogeneity to the Dialectical Image

Within the architecture studio, the image of homogeneity is reproduced in factual and metric modes of representation such as statistical data, diagrammatic charts, aerial views, and soft renders. The ubiquitous proliferation of infographics and datascapes has favored a disciplinary conservatism rather than offering a radical positioning on the conditions of urbanization. While the "mapping" project was significant in the expansion of architecture's scalar and thematic concerns by making visible the unacknowledged or invisible territories of logistics, its deployment as spatial evidence has often served to propose or legitimize a corrective intervention under the banners of economies, ecologies, or infrastructures.

In *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin argues that information processing is replacing ways of storytelling in relation to changes in the regime of capitalism.[12] The essay concerns itself with the incommunicability of experiences in the modern world, in part because of the dramatic influx and rapid distribution of information in the early twentieth century. Information, according to Benjamin, cannot impart any wisdom upon its reader. The beauty of the storyteller, according to Benjamin, was the ability to communicate a story and allow the audience member to integrate this story into her own experience, with meaning and purpose.

To differentiate the homogeneous image of abstract space, dialectical humanism draws on a lineage of aesthetic techniques of de-alienation from Walter Benjamin, André Breton, and the Surrealists through Guy Debord and the Situationists, all of which weave the contradictions in everyday life and an open-ended philosophy of practice, sometimes with a dash of humor told by means of a montage of fragmentary texts. In *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss observes that the dialectical image is "a way of seeing that crystallizes antithetical elements by providing the axes for their alignment ... the 'synthesis' of which is not a movement towards resolution, but the point at which their axes intersect."[13] While an image is meant as a singular frame and a single moment in time, the dialectic refers to a relationship or contradiction between two entities or opposing values—just as these issues and actors act simultaneously within urban space. The Dialectic Image dispels the homogeneous image of reality (and remedies) by its ability to combine conciliatory with contradictory elements in a single frame. The image itself is the argument and therefore is able to project dichotomies, juxtapositions, or exaggerations in order to make its point clearer or easily identifiable. It is frictional: it is not a spatial fix, nor does it posit itself as a logical negation of the capitalist world of commodities. Across these reflections, the discontinuity or difference of the image becomes a question of form. For Sergei Eisenstein, montage is a "dialectical assemblage," based on the principle of collision and conflict—not just juxtaposition. He declares, "in the realm of arts this dialectical principle of dynamics is embodied in conflict as the fundamental principle for the existence of every art-work and every art-form."[14] For Eisenstein, who treats form as process, the agitational artwork must not only reflect the dynamic of the world but also provoke the spectator into patterns of thought and the setting in motion of chains of associations.[15]

How does a dialectical image perform? Breton's position in his first manifesto is exemplary: "The value of the image depends on the beauty

Figure 2. Learning from Detroit. Rania Ghosn.

of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors."[16] Especially in the Arcades Project, such "constellations" or "dialectical images" are ascribed meaning by virtue of their capacity to "blast open the continuum of history" by unearthing specific alternatives in the mediation of past and present.[17] The practice of a dialectic image can best be described as the staging of spatial evidence, as the creation of a world of concerns shaped by the argument that it sets into motion. According to Benjamin, images become dialectical when they produce a moment of historical cessation in which a viewer could come face-to-face with "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."[18] The point of the dialectic image is to shock the viewer into a new emotional response: an aspiration that endorses that an image can portray an immediacy that a concept or an abstract idea cannot. By outsourcing resolution, the dialectical image inducts the viewer, whether confronting the absolute nonresolution of the urban's contradictions or witnessing the aftermath of an "urban crisis" episode in the life of a city.

In the specific context of the urban crisis, the dialectical image disturbs the normalized scenario of recovery. To appropriate Benjamin's "On the Concept of History"—replacing *history* with *geography*—the *geographical* materialist approaches the "urban crisis" as a geographical object solely and alone where he encounters it as "a constellation overflowing with tensions."[19] Rather than the recovery of a new economic normal, the agency of architectural speculation in this case lies in pointing to contradictions in the urban process and framing some relevant questions and approaches. It juxtaposed contradictions, exaggerates the real, and points to the absurdity of underlying social relations.

The 8 Mile Baseline

> The lesson of Detroit is a warning to every city in America. It is my belief the best days for this nation are still ahead of us, if only we can confront the reality of Detroit's demise.
> —Paul Kersey, *Escape from Detroit*

How can such a dialectic framework on the territorial and representational structures of capitalism inform discussions of the urban crisis in American cities? I pursued this investigation as a pedagogic experiment in the context of a University of Michigan coordinated graduate studio on "Enclaves and Utopias: Possible Futures for Detroit," which proposed to envision future worlds in a series of Detroit's surviving enclaves: Eastern Market, Hamtramck, Highland Park, New Center, Belle Isle, and so on. Beyond the insinuated binaries of utopian idealism and archipelago realism, the utopian impulse of the "8 Mile Baseline" studio section was anchored in the politics of the present and in the iconic geographic symbol of the rift of fortunes between the city and the metropolitan region. Rather than envisioning enclaves within Detroit, it probed the status of Detroit as exceptional within its metropolitan region.

In the context of Detroit, the 8 Mile Road draws an almost exact demographic and social line between the city and the metro region. A recent continental mapping by Justin Cable displays the population distribution of every person in America along racial and ethnic lines. The map features 308,745,538 dots, each smaller than a single pixel and each representing one person: Caucasians are blue, blacks are green, Hispanics are orange, Asians are red, and other races are brown. Along the 8 Mile Road, the divide is exact. Catapulted

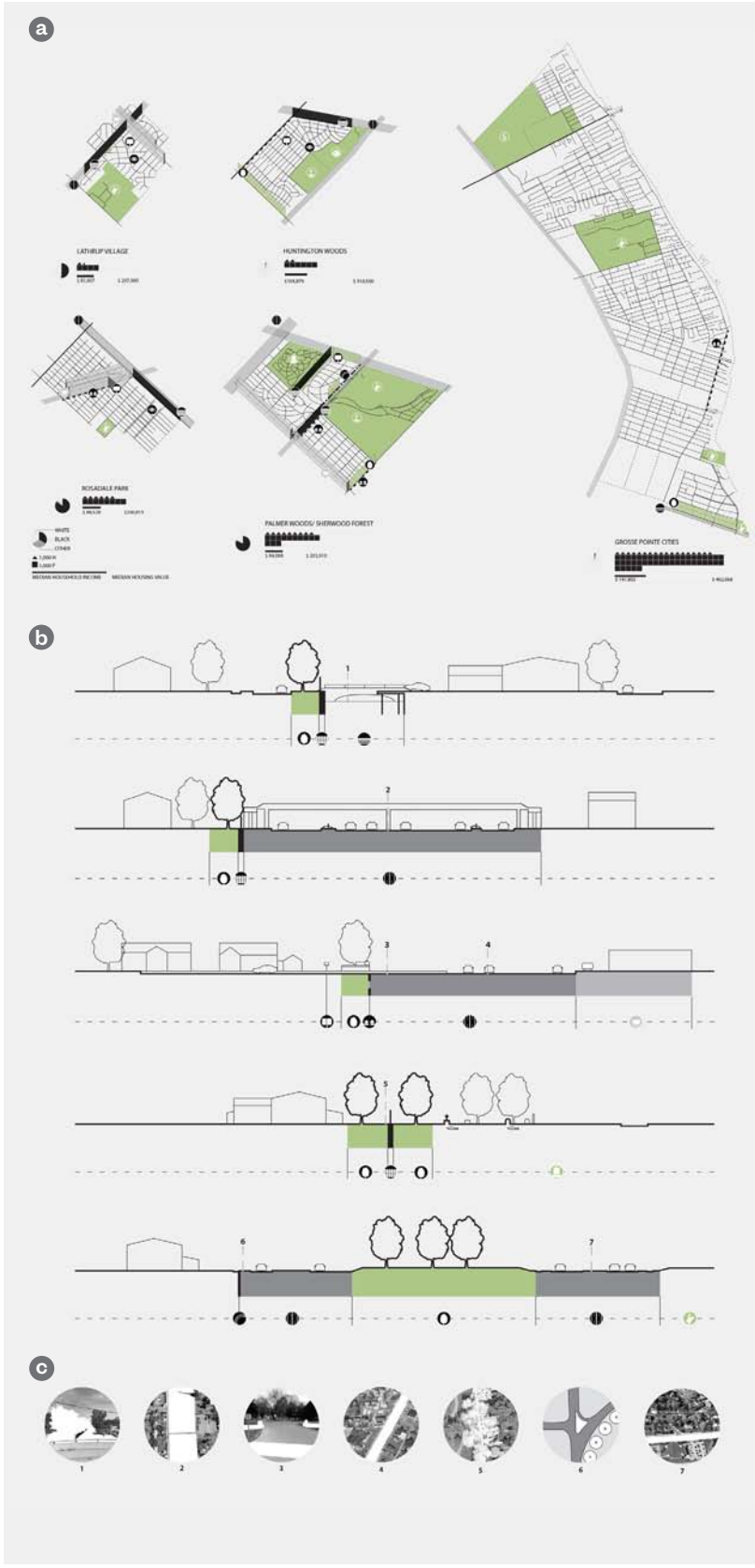

Figure 3. Territorialities. (a) Median Incomes and Economic Enclaves in Metro Detroit. (b) Territorialities. Mapping and Analysis of Threshold Conditions. (c) Sections of Territorialities. Suo Ya and Alexandra Chen.

into the national media through local rapper Eminem's film *8 Mile*, the road has long served as the de facto dividing line in the most segregated American metropolitan region. While Detroit's land annexations left its boundaries jagged along its other borders, the northern border along Eight Mile Road remained a straight line that runs west following the Michigan Baseline. In Detroit, the racial divide can be shockingly exact, without much buffer. As Thomas Surgue argues in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, institutionalized racism resulted in sharply limited opportunities for Detroit blacks for most of the twentieth century. Following the 1967 race riots, regional divisions were further exacerbated according to differences in income and racial lines—white "donuts" around black holes. The 8 Mile Road is the dividing line that separates the predominantly dispossessed African-American urban core from the more affluent, predominantly white northern suburbs in Macomb, Oakland, and Livingston counties.

The shrinking city portrays a different economic profile when framed at the metropolitan scale: the population of the three counties that make up the metropolitan area has been steadily growing since 1950. Detroit's suburbs are among the richest in the nation. Oakland County, for example, is the fourth wealthiest county in the United States, of counties with a million or more residents, with a median household income of $50,000 a year. The median household in Birmingham, just across the border that delineates the city of Detroit, earned more than $94,000 last year; in nearby Bloomfield Hills—still within the Detroit metropolitan area—the median was more than $150,000. In other words, as Robert

Reich notes in "Detroit and the Bankruptcy of America's Social Contract," "much in modern America depends on where you draw boundaries, and who's inside and who's outside. Who is included in the social contract? If 'Detroit' is defined as the larger metropolitan area that includes its suburbs, Detroit has enough money to provide all its residents with adequate if not good public services, without falling into bankruptcy."[20]

The Method Is the Message: The 8 Mile Baseline Dialectical Image

The 8 Mile Baseline Studio proposes to formulate a political-aesthetic project on urban unevenness in the object of the division line between the city of Detroit and its suburbs.

Step 1: Greetings From

For their first exercise, students were asked each to produce a set of eight postcards on the 8 Mile Road (Figure 1), by appropriating the concerns, tools, and structures of a place-based manifesto from a list that includes works such as Venturi and Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*, Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*, Atelier Bow Wow's *Made in Tokyo*, and Aureli's *Brussels: A Manifesto towards the Capital of Europe*. Along with the list of works, I shared with them a quote from French surrealist artist Tristan Tzara from *Feeble Love & Bitter Love*, *II*:

> A manifesto is a communication made to the whole world, whose only pretension is to the discovery of an instant cure for political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agronomical and literary syphilis. It may be pleasant, and good-natured, it's always right, it's strong, vigorous and logical. Apropos of logic, I consider myself very likeable.[21]

The exercise in détournement had a few pedagogic desires: to anchor the studio in the tone of the manifesto, to familiarize students with geography-based tools and discourses, and to invite them to rearrange signs from the 8 Mile Road collective consciousness with the help of iconic disciplinary precedents.

Step 2: Learning From the 8 Mile Road: Thematic Mappings

The second exercise invites an understanding of Detroit across multiple themes and issues, rather than a reduction of the city to a "problem" that needs to be solved. In groups of two, students were asked to propose a series of original mappings of an assigned theme, as it was manifested at the scale of Metro Detroit and on both sides of the 8 Mile division line (Figure 2). The assigned themes included Territories, Landmarks, Infrastructures, Programs, and Land Structures. How are structures of land use, financing, taxation, mortgage, ownership, building permits, parking meters, light fixtures, and neighborhood associations similar or different along the baseline? What are the materialities of unbuilt, vacant, or abandoned grounds? What are significant industrial or infrastructural sites in the vicinity—railroad stations, power plants—and how do they operate at the scales of Michigan, the Great Lakes, the world? The team addressing the question of territorialities examined the administrative and legal borders that mark the dividing line—their topographies, physicalities, levels of permeability. They analyzed the related structures of exclusion and securitization, as well as enclaves on both sides (Figure 3).

Step 3: 8 Mile Baseline Stories—Narrative and Collage Jameson Science Fiction

In the last phases, students individually developed proposals and narratives for their scenarios. In class we discussed techniques of architecture storytelling in relation to the dialectical image. Drawing on the work they developed in the previous phase, I asked students to draw their architectural sustenance directly from reality yet convert this often-stark reality into fantasy, into visions that tell a story more real than objective reality itself. In a sense, their visions bizarrely tell the truth while pointing to the limits of both reality and the disciplinary discourse within which they operate. In their words, those urban features that are usually purified in narratives of recovery (race, enclave, waste, inefficiency) are the matter through which they create possibilities to construct new values. The aspired outcome: dialectical visions that are so magically real as to elicit disbelief, disciplinary disruption.

What follows are the two project narratives that were developed by the Territorialities team.

Detroit SAR: The Land of the Chinese God of Wealth

Last fall, when a group of Chinese investors paid $9.4 million for the Art Deco David Stott Building, a thirty-eight-story downtown tower named for Detroit's former flour mogul, it was the first time Gilbert was outbid on a building there (Figures 4–8). For Chinese investors, Detroit is the Land of Opportunities: low real estate prices and a Fordist test bed par excellence and an opportune municipal bankruptcy. With the blessings of its God of Wealth Cai Shen, China drafts a feasibility study that learns from nearby Hong Kong to propose to buy off the city and establish Detroit Special Administrative Region. Detroit SAR is established: the American Dragon was born. The God of Wealth was quite pleased that Detroit SAR was the new frontier of world capitalism. The residents of Detroit's suburbs, however, had mixed feelings toward the new fortunes of the city. They benefited from the newfound prosperity of their metro center, and yet they had a deep-seated fear of losing their cultural identity to foreign investors. In their eyes, the dragon and pandas were scaring away the American eagle. They request that the city's important landmarks be moved north of 8 Mile Road administrative boundary. Tensions between Chinese investors and the residents of the suburbs worried the God of

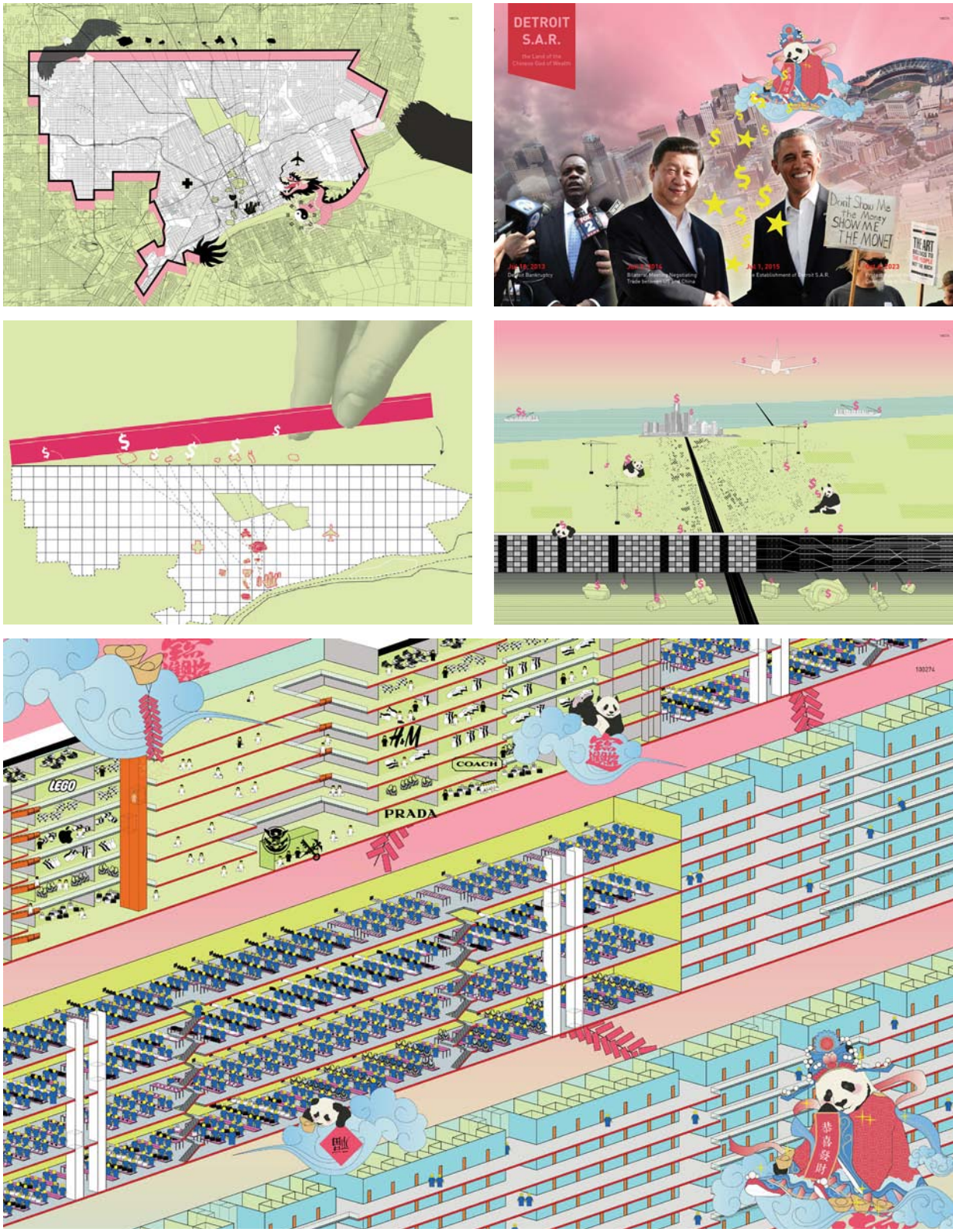

Figure 4-8. Detroit SAR. The Land of the Chinese God of Wealth. Suo Ya.

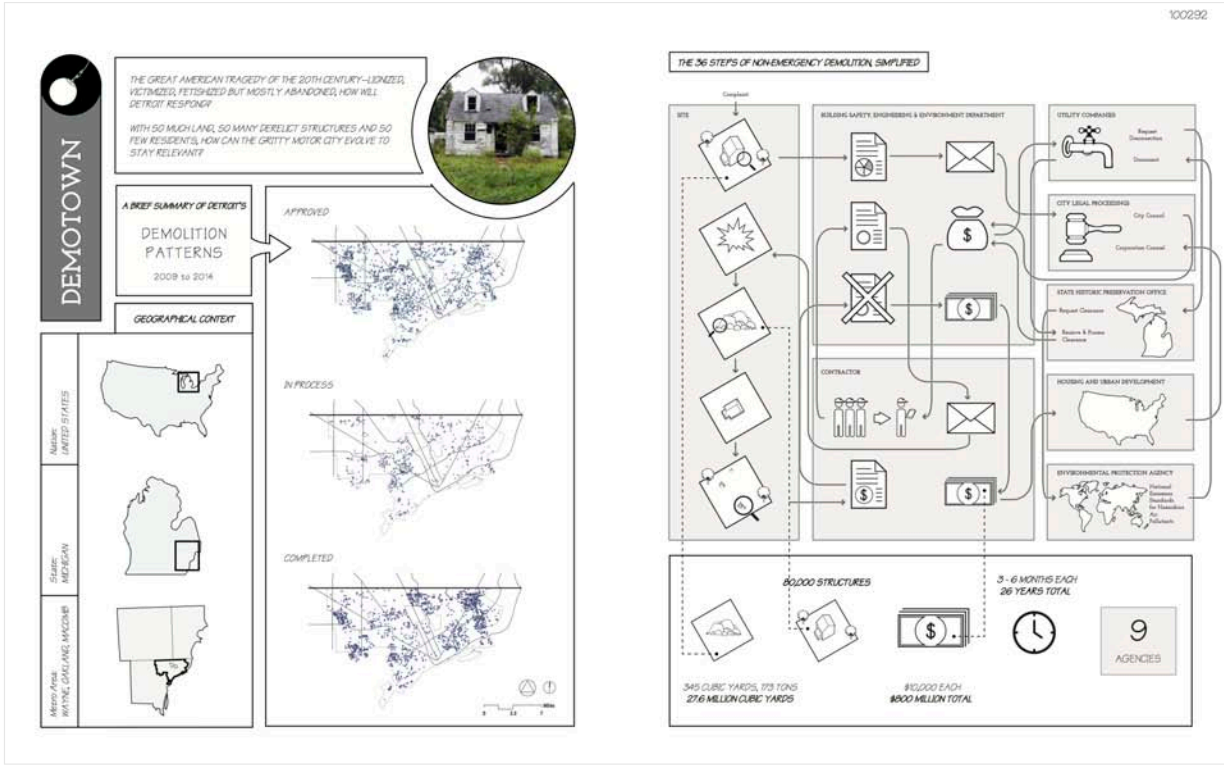

Figure 9. Demotown Detroit, Diagram of Demolition Process.
Alexandra Chen.

Wealth. "Such frictions could scare away capital," he thought, adding "only a great wall can bring peace back to the region." So the landmarks were relocated. A border wall wrapped around the city. It housed the mutual dreams of American and Chinese capitalism. With on-site production, the aisles were never out of stock!

Demotown Detroit

Demotown operationalizes the demolition process in Detroit to critically engage the processes that underpin urban unevenness and obsolescence. Currently, some 80,000 buildings are listed for demolition in Detroit. The city employs a thirty-six-step process to deal with nonemergency demolitions. On average per structure, it involves nine agencies on all scales, costs $10,000, and creates 345 cubic yards of debris. It would take twenty-six years to address Detroit's vacant structures at the current rate of demolition (Figure 9). Both public and private sectors have great plans on the demolition front. The city received $150 million of federal funding in September 2013, specifically designated for the "effective, coordinated demolition of blighted properties, neighborhood revitalization and redevelopment in Detroit." Bill Pulte's Blight Authority, Dan Gilbert's Blight Elimination Task Force, as well as other self-organizing community groups, are also looking to get into the demolition business. The proposed series of interventions appropriate the process of demolition within a broader critique of the disciplinary tropes of shrinking cities.

RECLAIM shifts the framing of the problem of Detroit from the abundance of land to its uneven valuation in real estate markets. The project uses the demolition debris toward an iconic reclamation project off the Grosse Pointe cities, where real estate values and median incomes are amongst the highest in the nation. Reclaim extends the 8 Mile administrative boundary of the city into the Detroit River to create "Debris Mota," an iconic hyperreal Detroit D island. In a spin on contemporary "green city" discourses that occupy the redevelopment imaginary of Detroit: Debris Mota leverages the Great Lakes for an aquaculture industry based on high-priced commodities, such as shrimp (Figure 10).

RELINQUISH conceives the footprint of demolition at the urban rather than individual building scale. The project figures the distribution of demolition to propose reverse annexation, or land renunciation as a possible strategy for Detroit. Similarly to the recent takeover of Belle Isle by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the voided area would be a new state park, the largest continuous green necklace in the United States! In areas of high demolition, the foundation of demolished buildings form a Memorial Field to the obsolescent forces of Fordist urbanization (Figure 11).

BURN inscribes the administrative boundary of the city into

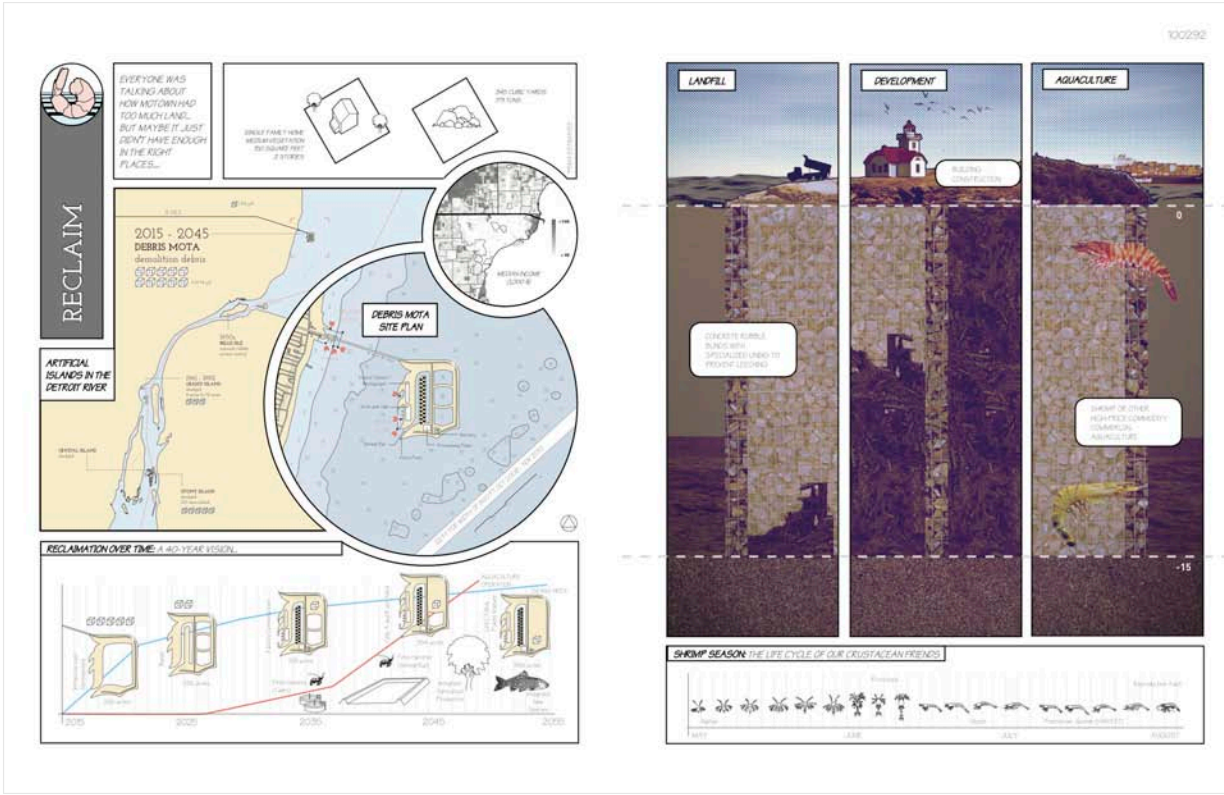

Figure 10. Demotown Detroit, Reclaim. Alexandra Chen.

physical space by recasting the Devil Night into a controlled burn strategy along 8 Mile. From the 1970s to the 1990s, October 30 represented a night of debauchery, arson, and vandalism in Detroit. The project proposes an event every year on the night before Halloween, when a half-mile-wide stretch would be set ablaze along 8 Mile. Slashing through the red tape of the current demolition process, this carnival night in Detroit would draw tourists, researchers, and ecologists, for Burn also aims to draw upon ecological models of flame-adapted ecosystems. Progressing yearly, this results in a wide scorched band between the city and its suburbs (Figure 12).

Conclusion

The 8 Mile Baseline Studio formulates a political-aesthetic project on the division line between the city of Detroit and its suburbs. In the words of Ernst Bloch, "it chooses in the present the seeds for the expression of radical difference."[22] In that sense, architecture operates as a system of thought and visualization that makes visible abstract urban dynamics that underpin the current crisis of the city. Through an inferentially oriented system of montage, the dialectical image affords the producer and spectator the possibility of critical analysis. It disturbs the matter-of-factness of the crisis narrative and the consensus on recovery by presenting two or more conflicting cognitions within the real. Such imaginary is not an effortless reconciliation. In this sense, the 8 Mile Baseline is political in that it entails antagonism, dissensus, and contestation. It explores in the most radical ways the themes defined by the urban condition—issues that might otherwise remain ungraspable—and with the help of the image and imagination deploys the speculative project for a ceaseless criticism of the tools of the discipline and our urban imaginary. Collectively, the studio proposes a baseline, a datum line that radically thinks what is laid out as objective reality, in the image of architecture's relation to development. Pedagogically, rather than reifying the systemic coherence of capital, it extricates contradictions within the real, particularly at the moment of crisis. David Harvey promises us that "only under conditions of crisis do we have the power to think radically new thoughts because it then becomes impossible to reproduce the naturalization of our own arbitrariness."[23] The representational project contributes to shed light on how to represent and speculate in relation to the crisis so as to spark the spectator's insight and action—a constellation whose potential meaning or affect is polysemic, and mostly empowering.

Acknowledgments

8 Mile Baseline students: Omar Ali, Brian Barber, Alexandra Chen, Ciera Clayborne, Linnea Cook, Brianne DuRoss, Kate Flynn, Safei Gu, Robyn Wolowchow, and Suo Ya.

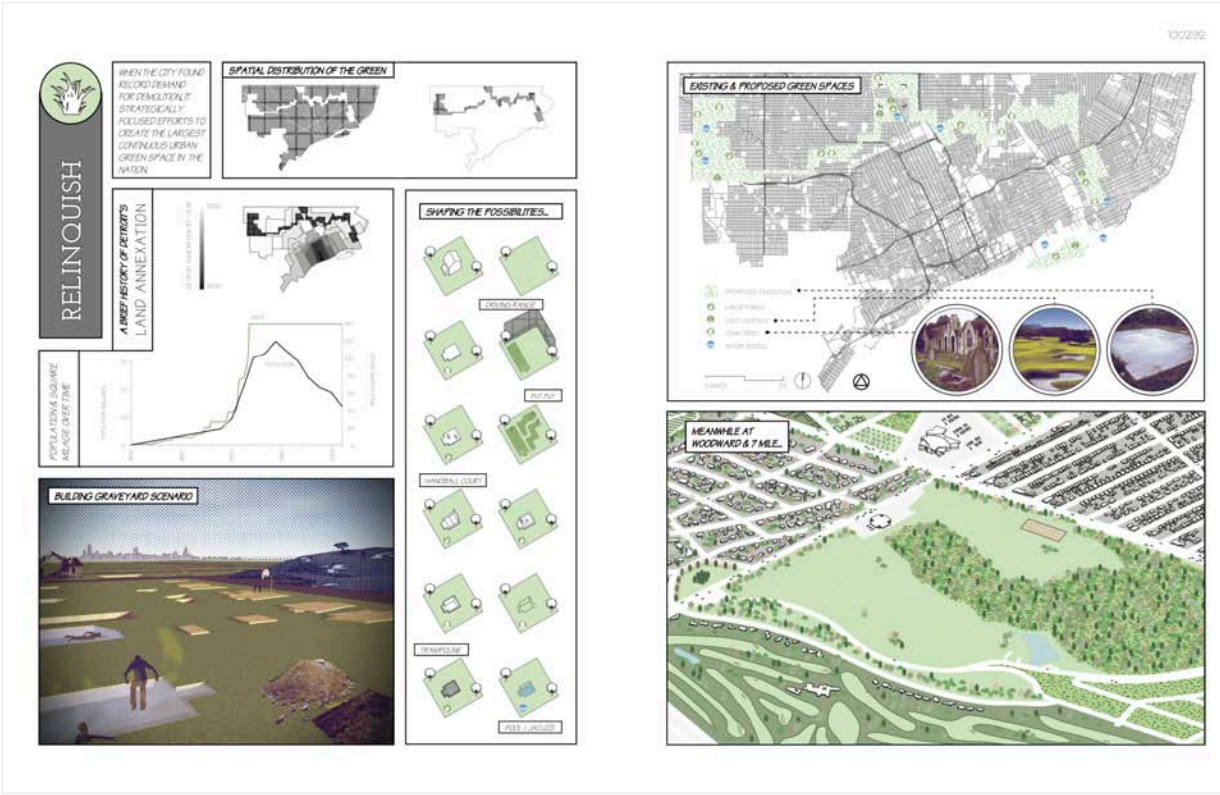

Figure 11. Demotown Detroit, Relinquish. Alexandra Chen.

Author Biography

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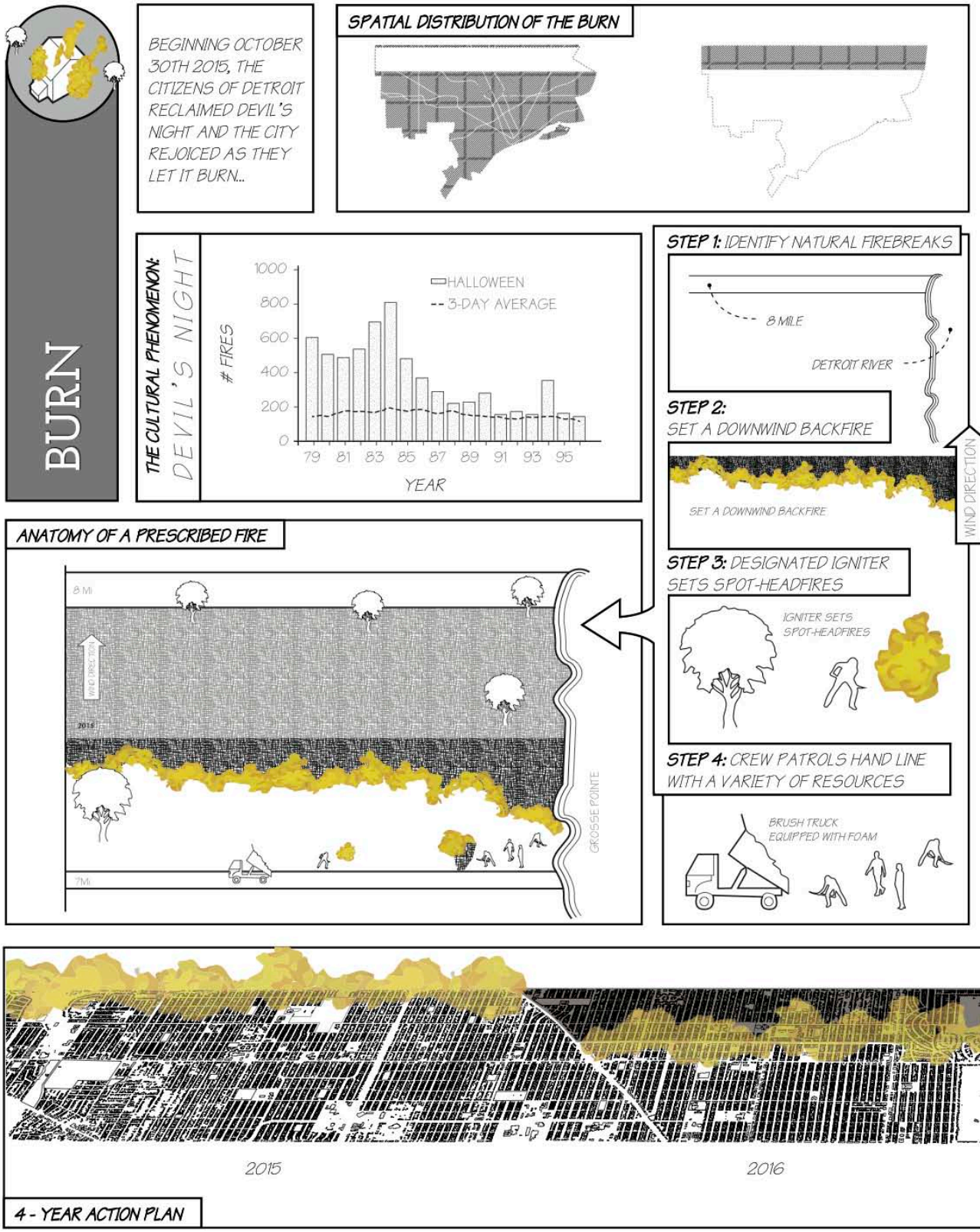

Figure 12. Demotown Detroit, Burn.
Alexandra Chen.