

## "Save-As: The Archive of Obsolete Objects: Engaging with Existing and Future Neighborhood Revitalization"

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Figure 1 The author and friend, Hudson's Building, Detroit. ©Allegra Pitera

### Introduction

As a product of the Detroit metro area, over time I have witnessed various attempts, both successes and failures, to 'save' Detroit, as if the people of the City did not have the capacity to do the work themselves. Historically in terms of the urban design and architecture, much of the saving has either manifested as demolition or 'restoration'. Two extremes: either abandoning existing resources in favor of starting over with a blank slate; or not making use of technical advances or community feedback and attempting to recreate an architecture based on outdated contexts. Certainly, some buildings just cannot or should not be saved. But what I intend to address in this paper is a methodology of architecture academic studio projects tying to and building on Detroit's rapidly changing urban landscape. A series of current and past projects are addressed, both in Detroit and from the classroom. The focus is on specific academic and built projects that are conceptually connected to the ethos of Save As Detroit.



Figure 2 The Ren Cen, 2018 ©Allegra Pitera

## Time and Save-As

In the past, there have been many attempts to Save Detroit. Generally speaking, and for complex and challenging reasons, many past approaches to simply ‘save’ the city have failed. One example of these early attempts to Save Detroit was the initial design of the Renaissance Center. Built in the 1970s, the “Ren Cen” was a mega-project of 7 buildings that drew criticism in the 1970’s for its fortress-like design, particularly at the ground level which consisted of a huge, encompassing concrete berm. The enormous scale of the berm (and arguably, the 7 buildings) ignored the downtown’s existing architecture and pedestrian context. Aside from a few, closely guarded entrances, mostly from the parking garage, the Ren Cen gave off an air of aloofness to the city. The berm intentionally and physically cut the Ren Cen off from the city: it was designed to be inaccessible at the street level. “Visitors could drive to the Ren Cen from either the Lodge Freeway or I-375, park in the massive on-site garage, walk into the building via pedestrian bridges, and never set foot on city streets”. (Kurlyandchik, 2012). In 1996, the Ren Cen was purchased by GM. The ground level berm was removed and the lower level redesigned; re-glazed with glass, scaled back to be more pedestrian friendly, accessible and inviting. (Meredith, 1996). It was saved. But one building or development can’t save a city. It takes a broader approach. As John Gallagher from the Detroit Free Press wrote: “Mega-projects tend to fail when they’re the only game in town. No single building could turn around Detroit back in the 1970s, even one as outsized as the Ren Cen. The name itself, “Renaissance,” promised much more than it could possibly deliver.” (Gallagher, 2018)

What the original developers of the Ren Cen failed to realize, but the later designers understood, is that Detroit's history, the architecture and people, are its foundation. Re-visioning and celebrating this foundation, if Saved As, can begin to merge modern urban planning strategies, materials, technologies and ways of designing with the strengths of the existing, even if aging, foundation. In doing so, celebrating and building on existing resources and communities; ultimately enhancing the quality of life for Detroiters and the surrounding communities. Save-As is therefore about celebrating what is working—and building up from there. What do I mean by Save-As Detroit? As we know when working digitally, one has the option of saving a version of their project without writing over an older, foundation version: Save As. Over time, Detroit's history, the architecture and people, have amalgamated to its present-day foundation. Leveraging the past through re-visioning and celebrating Detroit's foundation through a contemporary design lens, if Saved As, we can merge modern urban planning strategies with the strengths of the existing cultural and physical foundation. Time can therefore be harnessed to work for us, through the celebration of and building on existing resources and communities to create better environments for its citizens.



Figure 3 The Michigan Theatre ©Allegra Pitera

The Michigan Theatre is one example of Save As. Prior to being the site of the Michigan Theater, 220 Bagley (previously known as 58 Bagley) was actually the site where Henry Ford designed and built the quadricycle (the early automobile) in a coal shed behind his home in 1896. (Matthews, McCraw, 2012). Built in 1925, the Theatre was being used until the mid-1970s. Today it contains a bar, restaurant, retail space, office space and most notably, a unique parking garage; It is the state's only Italian Renaissance-style parking garage. (Austin, 2018). The developers wisely saved the theatre's ornate detailing and ceiling frescos while transforming it into useful, contemporary spaces that benefit the community. Interesting to note that the site has come full circle through time: first it was historically

about the car, then it was a theatre, then the site merged the car and theater: synthesized.

## The Save As Model

Save As is somewhat like trying to capture a moment in time. Designers, artists and visionaries often try to capture time and reframe it in a contemporary context. Around 1878, Eadweard Muybridge tried to capture time to study

anatomical movement. To do so, he took a series of still images of animals and people, capturing a moment in time while the creatures were in motion: photographic sequences that when played rapidly, created the illusion of motion. This idea of capturing time can also be tied to the way many artists work: using earlier works as influences in later, contemporary pieces. It is said that Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting entitled "Flexible" (1984), was influenced by the earlier Picasso "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907). ([Rakaa, 2013](#)).



Figure 4 ©The Alley Project, Detroit



Figure 5 Brush Park, Detroit 2015, ©Allegra Pitera



Figure 6 Brush Park, Detroit 2015, ©Allegra Pitera

But Save As is more than capturing time, it is more than restoration, it is more than embracing nostalgia. Save As is about interpreting what qualities from the past are strong, efficient and functional while actively engaging the community needs, building technologies and philosophies of today. In 2011, Erik Howard coordinated efforts with the nonprofit Young Nation to create The Alley Project. Also known as the TAP Gallery, located in Southwest Detroit, is "a community-driven organization that sponsors graffiti in the neighborhood. It showcases art that is locally grown". (Capps, 2014). The Alley Project includes a series of graffiti marked garage doors along an alley which is situated next to what used to be an abandoned lot. Designed and built by the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture's Detroit Collaborative Design Center along with Professor Wittig's studio class, the vacant lot was transformed in to an outdoor street art gallery. Art panels, benches and work areas adjacent to the garages create an outdoor, public studio. TAP has become a gathering spot for street artists and community youths to gather, hold workshops and create. "TAP seeks to provide a positive environment that is linked to surrounding neighborhood assets such as community centers, bike paths, and parks. Most importantly, TAP provides the immediate need for a safe and inspirational place for the community that is centered on youth, art, and culture". (DCDC, 2011).

Figure 7 City Modern, Brush Park, "Bedrock Management Services LLC 2015"





Figure 8 City Modern, Brush Park, "Bedrock Management Services LLC 2015"



Figure 9 City Modern, Brush Park, "Bedrock Management Services LLC 2015"

Alternatively, there are huge, highly-financed infusions of *Save As* that promise to forever alter the downtown Detroit landscape. Bedrock Management in Detroit is investing significant financial and design resources in to developing many commercial parcels in downtown Detroit. These projects intend to be woven within already existing contexts, contributing visionary frameworks including bike sharing, mass transit and urban parks. The prioritizing of contemporary and appropriate architecture and urban design in these developments shows an unwavering confidence in the power of creating walkable, dense, and verdant spaces to transform urban life from

desolate to highly desirable, economic drivers. One example is Bedrock's City Modern, Brush Park project. The City Modern development not only layers multiple types of housing, promising to attract young families and empty nesters alike, but also will be restoring several historic Brush Park mansions and weaving those in to the newly formed urban context. "City Modern seeks to merge the enduring spirit and historic character of Brush Park with contemporary design and modern amenities fit for everyday urban living" (Brush Park Development Company, 2018). Brush Park promises to be "emblematic of our time while celebrating history". (Dittmer, 2018).



Figure 10 ©DCDC, *The Play House*

On a smaller, local grass-roots scale, the nonprofit School of Architecture's Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) has a proposal to re-vitalize an abandoned home in Detroit's East Side in to a usable space called PlayHouse: An Exterior Community Amphitheater. The PlayHouse is designed to be a community band shell amphitheater to provide performance space for plays and events. "PlayHouse: An Exterior Community Amphitheater offers a long-term reuse that is neither full renovation nor complete demolition. The project is designed to completely remove a two-story sidewall of an abandoned house so that the interior will be visible to the exterior side yard, which currently exists as three under-utilized properties. Exterior seating will then face the interior of the house making it a two-story stage. Using simple garage and barn door hardware, a new exterior wall will be composed of rising, rotating and sliding panels. They will open to reveal all or only a portion of the stage. The moving panels will be constructed using the original material from the sidewall that was deconstructed and removed". (DCDC, 2009). Transforming an abandoned house in to a space of community use and celebration, the PlayHouse becomes another example of harnessing the benefit of time, as a *Save As Detroit* project.



Figure 11 ©DCDC, *The Play House*

#### The Dequindre Cut Greenway & the Light House: Beacons of Community, Studio project

The Dequindre Cut Greenway in Detroit's east side is a successful, existing public project of a bike and pedestrian path. 100 years ago, the Grand Trunk Railroad passenger and freight service operated within the roughly 25' below-grade Cut until the 1980s when the railroad discontinued service. The corridor sat vacant and its remaining concrete bridge abutments became known as a public canvas for street artists' graffiti, some of which are considered masterpieces. (Carlson, 2011).

In 2003, the Greenway Initiative granted the Downtown Detroit Partnership moneys to remake the Dequindre Cut in to a greenway. (Woiwode, 2013). The Greenway is a Save As project: building on a past condition, revitalizing it to make it relevant to today and now is enjoyed by many; celebrating historical roots while embracing the future.

As an academic exercise and conceptual connection to the Dequindre Cut Greenway project, my freshmen 1st semester architecture design studio project is sited within and connects philosophically with the Greenway project. The *Light House: Beacons of Community* project builds on a semester-long series of process explorations rooted in capturing light within form. Utilizing digital tools such as Photoshop, students merge their *Light House: Beacons of Community physical model* designs in the Dequindre Cut site images. Harnessing light, these small structures intend to become beacons of the community: attracting and engaging visitors to celebrate with the communities in and around the Dequindre Cut.

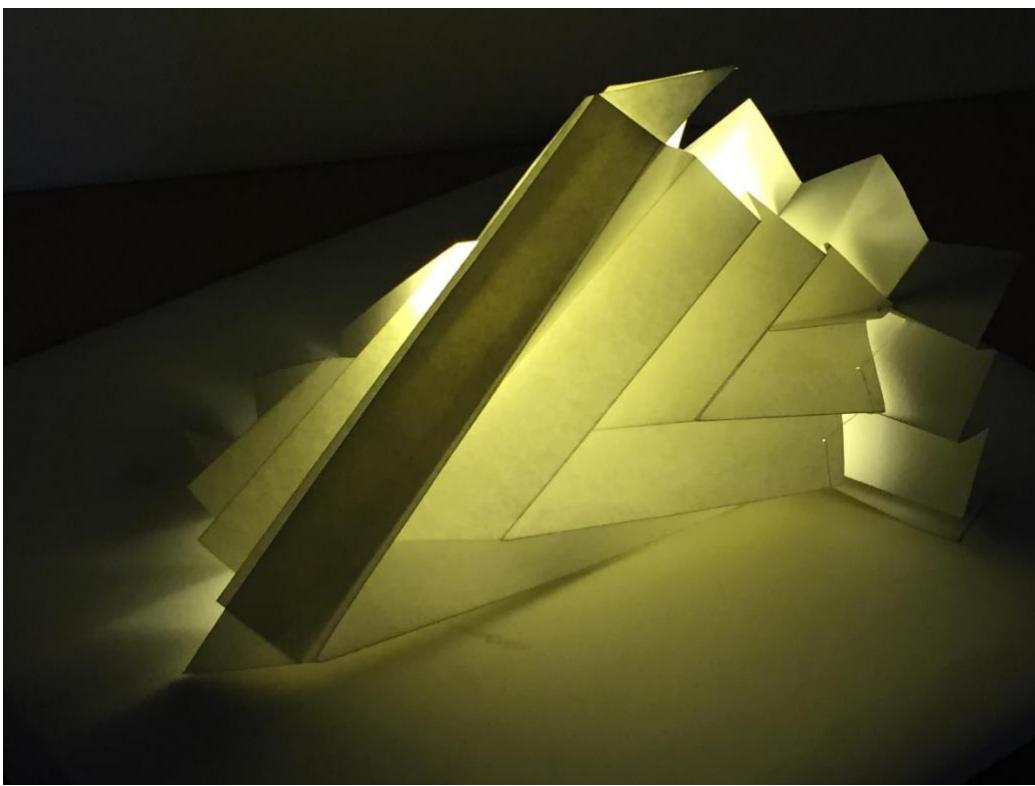


Figure 12 Angela Lazarte, student, *Light Container*

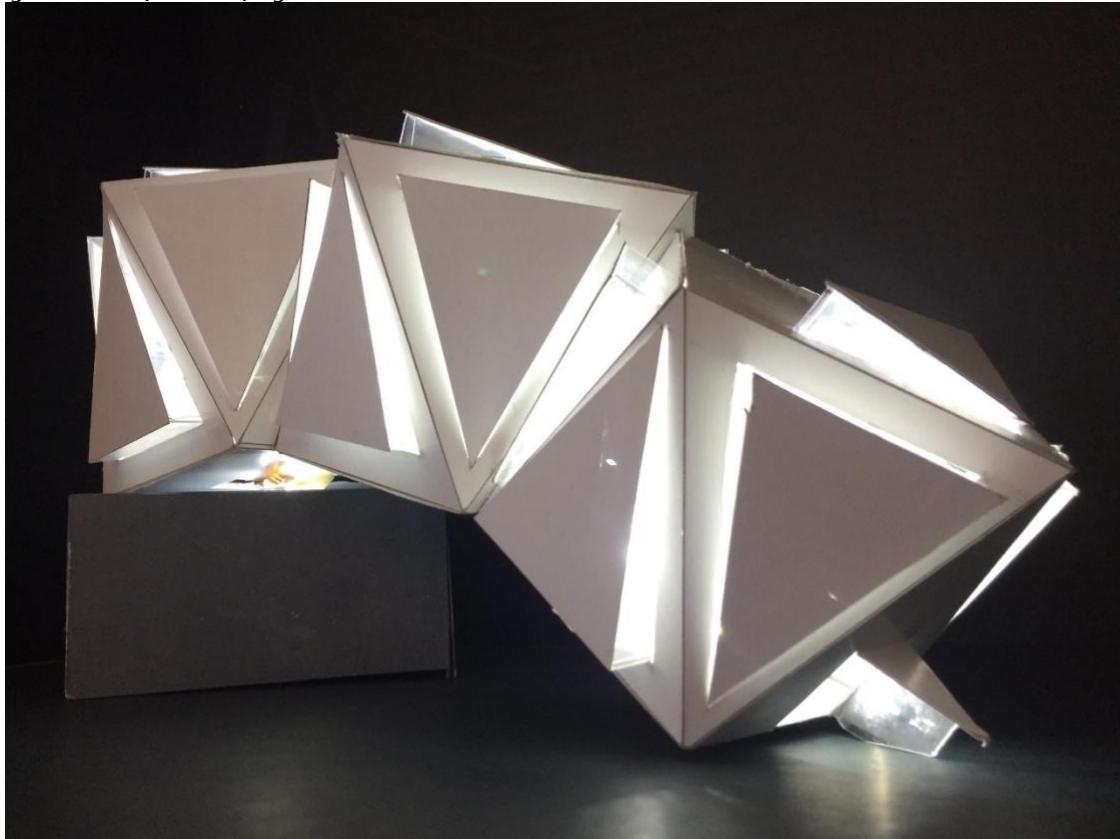


Figure 13 Tony Vannoy, student, *Light Container*

## **The Fitzgerald Revitalization Project and The Archive of Obsolete Objects, Studio project**

Detroit's Fitzgerald Revitalization project is aimed at transforming city-owned property in the neighborhood from empty, unused spaces that currently detract from the neighborhood and residents' quality of life, to a series of connecting pocket parks & gardens that weave through the neighborhood. Collaboratively with the City of Detroit, Spackman Mossop Michaels led the design process and the University of Detroit Mercy's School of Architecture's Detroit Collaborative Design Center advised on design and community engagement. The Fitzgerald Revitalization project is in its implementation phase now. The plan involves: "Renovating 115 currently vacant homes; Landscaping and maintenance of 192 vacant lots and Creating a 2-acre central park (the Ella Fitzgerald Park). The plan for Fitzgerald will preserve neighborhood character and increase density without the need to construct new structures." (Runyan, 2017). The project has the potential to enhance not just the immediate neighborhood, but also the surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. The Fitzgerald Revitalization project is *Save As*: building upon and revitalizing existing resources and spaces in the community & creating new, vibrant public spaces for its citizens.

## **The Archive of Obsolete Objects**

As a connection to the Fitzgerald Revitalization project, last winter in Design Studio II, the students' final project was the *Archive of Obsolete Objects*. Building on the Detroit Fitzgerald Revitalization neighborhood project, the *Archive of Obsolete Objects* site is the Ella Fitzgerald Park. The Archive design studio project is both macro and micro in scope. Students are tasked to: 1. Examine the effect time has on an object that may no longer be useful and how that context would impact the design of an archive to celebrate it, and 2. Design a small, exterior community gathering space and park as part of the project that tie in to the esprit of the proposed Fitzgerald Revitalization project. Utilizing drone pictures of the existing site, students digitally merged their designs in the site, as a process tool and vehicle for design visualization.

## **Process**

My pedagogy is rooted in iterative processes that sequentially build on architectonic learning outcomes while addressing community needs and contexts. 2D and 3D process work from the semester sequentially builds on understandings of design principles, iterative processes and lastly adding the programmatic requirements. The *Archive of Obsolete Objects* was a culmination of the following process projects: retaining a conceptual thread of an idea through the sequence.

### **A. Quilts from Gee's Bend, Alabama and the Quilted Body Space**

As part of the design and form generation, the process project *Quilts from Gee's Bend* studies select quilts from the Gee's Bend, Alabama quilt collection. Students investigate formal hierarchy through line weight, grey scale and color selections directly from the quilts. 2D line weight designs based on the quilts leads to projected 3D models of Line, Plan and Mass which begin to address architectonic connections, materiality and design principles.

### **B. Quilted Body Space**

Building on the *Quilts from Gee's Bend* Project, the *Quilted Body Space* project intention is to further merge explorations in design principles with site; combining the act of drawing with the urban environment and the human body. Students weave an urban condition—drawn elevations of the built environment—with drawings of

abstracted proportions of the body to create a new design. Project phases: 1. Site Visits + photos; 2. Site Drawings: Elevation drawings using 3 different line weights to emphasize hierarchy; 3. Body Space Drawings: Abstracted line drawings of an arm, include proportional dimensions and line weight hierarchy; 4. Adobe Illustrator: Overlay the Site Elevation drawing over the *Quilted Body Space* Design. These 2 images merge to create a 3rd design combining the proportions of the *Quilted Body Space* design with the elevation line design; 5. Color: Apply color directly from the original site photograph.

### C. The Obsolete Object

Once a solid design foundation is established, we shift to the study of an obsolete object. Studying an obsolete object through drawings and questioning: what defines obsolescence? Rooted in how to celebrate the obsolescence of objects, their obsolescence determined by time's progression. Students are tasked to first examine the effect time has on an object that may no longer be useful and how that non-usefulness impacts the design of a space intended to celebrate it through designing containers for the obsolete objects. The drawings and models along with previous process work investigating design principles are merged to create "points of departure" for form generation of the final design. Objects such as CD players, oil lamps and rotary telephones are some of the objects explored.

### Layering of Program

Students are charged with merging these formal investigations with *The Archive of Obsolete Objects* program while addressing the proposed Fitzgerald Revitalization project in an existing, complex urban site. The *Archive of Obsolete Objects* program is assigned as one of the layers in the visualization of occupiable space. Square footage and space needs are woven with previous form generation exercises to inform how the *Archive of Obsolete Objects* will physically manifest. As a tool for design visualization, students take pictures of the existing site and digitally merge their models in the site. Part of the project description is to include a community gathering space and public park engaging with the surrounding Fitzgerald community.

Through engaging with the city's Fitzgerald Revitalization Project, the student's *Archive of Obsolete Objects* project begins to ask students to become visionaries. Understanding and building on what is, but also what could be: understanding that architecture has the potential to make a larger impact on a community by tying in to larger design moves. Like the Brush Park project, the *Archive of Obsolete Objects* becomes both a celebration of a cultural foundation while embracing present-day urban and design technologies, resulting in envisioning a positive impact on the city and its citizens.

### Final Project Intention and Outcomes for the Beginning Design Student

The final projects vary between semesters, but they tend to retain a similar framework: merging academic investigations with actual urban Detroit initiatives. The project ultimately becomes a foil for merging both iterative design projects and programmatic requirements; design principles with spatial investigations in the design of occupiable space. The outcomes are layered as well; establishing an architectonic language in both verbal presentation and formal qualities; beginning to understand materiality and scale in relation to the human body; using programmatic framework to morph form and create conceptual purposefulness while grounding the concepts in real-world Detroit projects and community contexts. The semester's design process challenges the students to synthesize the evolution of architectonic form with the folding of site and community; all within a rapidly evolving and expanding set of urban projects aimed at harnessing the benefits of time to Save As Detroit.

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