

## DREAM CITY: CREATION, DESTRUCTION,

And Reinvention in Downtown Detroit

Conrad Kickert

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In *Dream City*, Conrad Kickert examines how two centuries of changing social, economic, political, and cultural forces shaped the urban morphology of downtown Detroit. With a series of detailed maps of the built-environment, he meticulously documents how city planners', politicians', and developers' never-ending focus on creating a car-oriented built-environment to emulate the suburbs not only sacrificed attempts to create a vibrant pedestrian orient urban core but also exacerbated the movement of wealth and people from the central city to the suburbs. Whether it was the removal of businesses for street widening projects in the 1920s, the razing of land for freeway constructions in the 1940s and 1950s, the leveling of African American neighborhoods for urban renewal developments in the 1950s and 1960s, or the clearing of downtown blocks for casinos and sports stadiums in the 1990s and 2000s, Detroit's decision-makers continually prioritized short-term automobile-centric developments that have resulted in a downtown devoid of any authentic sense of place and vibrancy and disconnected from its neighborhoods. Today, the downtown is nothing more than a series of self-contained corporate fiefdoms with highly choreographed and controlled public spaces that cater to a suburban clientele and a new generation of gentrifiers.

By juxtaposing the ebb and flow of downtown developments against a backdrop of urban planning paradigms and changing city administrations, Kickert shows that Detroit struggled with a deteriorating urban core, traffic congestion, and retail decline well before such issues became national trends plaguing American downtowns. Likewise, Detroit was the forerunner of urban renewal programs and a pioneer in private revitalization strategies common in urban planning and local economic development circles. Kickert's morphological approach to the historiography of downtown Detroit is thematically organized into four seasonal subsections, spring (birth), summer (growth), fall (decline) and winter (stagnation).

Chapters 1 and 2 comprise the Spring section of the book and discuss the birth of downtown Detroit from 1805 to 1911. These chapters focus on the changes to Detroit's built-environment brought about by its transition from a trading outpost and port city to a prosperous industrial and automotive powerhouse. The city's economic growth was reflected in the establishment of a retail, commercial, and entertainment center anchored around

## Book Reviews

the Campus Martius section of the downtown. This nascent commercial downtown was surrounded by residential neighborhoods, which were becoming increasingly overcrowded with the arrival of European immigrants and African Americans from the South. As the city grew and prospered, the downtown expanded and skyscrapers dotted the landscape. With the establishment of a streetcar network in the decade following the Civil War, middle-class and wealthy Whites began to relocate out of the downtown while the surrounding neighborhoods segregated along class, ethnic, and racial lines. In order to offset the ills associated with this growth, civic leaders inspired by the City Beautiful movement focused on creating spaces for public art and parks and other developments to make the downtown a more livable and orderly urban space.

Chapters 3 and 4 make up the Summer section and detail how the automobile driven growth of the city transformed the built-environment into one that prioritized cars over people from 1911 to 1929. In these chapters, Kickert details how the rapidly growing automobile industry was a double edge sword for the physical, social, and economic landscape of downtown Detroit. The car industry employed the majority of residents, ushered in an era of prosperity, and its growth continued to benefit an expanding commercial downtown. Yet, it also was the catalyst for the suburbanization that would eventually undermine the downtown. Many automobile plants were relocating to the suburbs and edges of the city, which spawned new subdivisions and commercial districts. The increasing affordability of the automobile enabled residents to live farther away from the downtown.

The magnitude of suburban growth weakened the symbiosis between the downtown and its surrounding residential areas as retail establishments followed residents into the suburbs and automobile-oriented commerce became a staple in the downtown. In response, a new typology of car-dependent architecture and urban design arose to alleviate traffic congestion and to ensure that suburbanizing workers could easily reach downtown. Street widening became the norm to help augment these developments. Yet, these efforts only served to disconnect people from the existing retail establishments while increasing property values and bankrupting commercial businesses located on the streets. The end effect was a declining downtown residential fringe marked by vacant land and parking lots.

Chapters 5 through 8, the Fall section, encompasses the steady erosion of downtown Detroit and its surrounding neighborhoods from 1929 to 1967. During the Great Depression, half of the city's auto workers became unemployed and the downtown began to shrink as a wave of business closures ushered in an era of demolitions that hollowed out the downtown landscape. By the late 1930s, the downtown was surrounded by a ring of parking lots and vacant land that effectively cut off the struggling downtown from the residential neighborhoods which were themselves deteriorating.

Even with the economic resurgence brought on by the Second World War, the downtown still was losing population and economic activities to the suburbs. Traffic congestion in the downtown was at an all-time high and deteriorating social and physical conditions in the neighborhoods was exacerbating racial tensions in the city. Rather than implementing programs to strengthen the urban core and its surrounding neighborhoods, city officials and planners implemented a series of street improvements, urban renewal projects, and freeway constructions in an attempt to lure suburbanizing middle-class residents back into the city.

During the 1950s, the exodus of White residents and businesses into the suburbs combined with the growing blight around the downtown led city officials to hire Charles Blessing as the head of the City Plan Commission. Blessing's revitalization strategy was to utilize modernist design principles to emulate the suburbs in the downtown by creating a retail core surrounded by ample parking to mirror the region's first shopping malls while shielding the downtown from the deteriorating residential neighborhoods. Subsequently, low-income and predominately African American neighborhoods were cleared to make way for his vision.

As Kickert details in chapter 8, Blessing's urban renewal projects failed to rejuvenate the downtown and exacerbated racial tension in the city. New downtown buildings only cannibalized workers from existing buildings rather than lure in new tenants. These projects also solidified an unwalkable ring of freeways and parking lots around the downtown. In the African-American neighborhoods bordering this ring, worsening socioeconomic conditions and persistent racial residential segregation boiled over into the 1967 rebellion that devastated the city.

Chapters 9 through 12 encompass the Winter section and examine the long struggle to reinvent downtown Detroit from 1967 to 2011. Chapters 9 and 10 examine the two decades after the Detroit rebellion which saw White middle-class suburbanization surge and the election of Mayor Coleman Young in 1974. Young condemned the racial prejudice of past planning regimes that placed downtown business interests over the well-being of the African American community. Consequently, Blessing left and Detroit's planning department was weakened under Young as the modus operandi for revitalization shifted from public to privately funded programs.

During this era, Kickert identifies the seeds of corporate consolidation and control of the downtown with Detroit Edison buying city blocks to build a corporate campus and the Detroit Renaissance, a coalition of business interests, bought up riverfront properties to build the Renaissance Center. Similar to past developments, these projects failed to remedy the challenges facing the downtown and the street-widening and land clearances associated with them carved up the downtown. Throughout the 1980s, the downtown retail market continued its decline and the residential periphery of downtown fared worse than the core.

Chapters 11 & 12 focus on the slow revitalization of the downtown in the 1990s and 2000s. Kickert carefully details how corporate entities utilized public subsidies to acquire and transform entire sections of the city into a series of entertainment districts. These publically subsidized districts were self-contained venues surrounded by ample parking in which suburbanites could parachute in for a few hours then leave. By the late 2000s, downtown Detroit had transformed itself into a corporate-owned center of leisure that failed to revitalize the surrounding neighborhoods.

*Dream City* is a methodically crafted narrative about the rise and fall of downtown Detroit. Kickert excels at presenting a detailed urban morphology of the downtown that intersects with the well-known social, economic, and political forces reshaping the city. He elegantly shows how the potential for a strong pedestrian orient core was sacrificed in order to emulate the suburbs and cater to suburbanites at the expense of the surrounding residential neighborhoods. *Dream City* will be a welcomed addition to the bookshelf of Detroit scholars and for geographers and urban planners interested in the history of American downtown development trends.