

Unexpected Definitions: Practicing with a City

Truthfully, if it were not for the complicated state of the city of Detroit this work would not exist. Buildings and houses are left empty, crumbling, burnt, and eerie. Outsiders are held away from interiors through boarded up windows. Vacant lots seem to multiply. Historical preservation loses to demolition. Scrapping is a legitimate occupation. Arson is a hobby. And until recently, building new was rare and offensive.

THE SETTING

Paired with its abundant indiscernible material conditions, Detroit is suffering from a lack of civic infrastructure. Law enforcement is sporadic.¹ Red tape is faded. Streetlights stand as statues to darkness.² Law is created as much by practice as it is by the text of a given regulation.³ Other cities see hints of such demise, but the extent to which Detroit swallows these and countless other strained material and civic conditions sets the stage for questionable legal, cultural, and environmental interpretations. Spatial and legal definitions are contentious, enabling a mindful and bold form of architectural practice that works directly within the realities of our cities as a means to investigate, comment, instigate, and inject into precise settings

To take part in the problems and possibilities of historic cities – Detroit as but one example – the architect must take cues from immediate circumstances of the city; embracing the setting for its fantastic pressures on space and re-inventing from the thrill and promise of otherwise daunting circumstances. The prompt does not come from a normative client, is not spurred on by money, and will not follow a conventional set of drawings. Instead, with the conditions of the city replacing the patron as the premise for new work, the current circumstances are the grounds from which to breed new architecture. As such, the material wildness, the fluidity of the law as enacted or ignored, the visual effects, the unintended inhabitations – are creative catalyst for narrative and spatial alterations.

An example of such a relationship between the existing city and design strategy can be found in works of Alibi Studio. Alibi Studio operates with the premise that architecture must engage in the immediate situation through ephemeral constructs that expose dire conditions of the city, yielding amplified and varying understandings of the urban setting. Demonstrated through a series of works, the act of full-scale making and re-making permits an engagement

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with an existing setting that is nimble, quick, and responsive to the immediate dilemmas and resources. Engaging these urban conditions with the urgency they demand permits us to propose an architecture that is in direct dialogue with the city, responding to conditions that are difficult, even at times senseless. Such work produces tangible spaces that serve as commentary on the host city, participating demonstratively in the urban realities at the precise time of their existence and giving architecture an agency in the ongoing life of the city. Dedicated to this physical dialogue with the city, the practice of Alibi Studio, and its related academic instruction, work outside the traditional models of architectural practice to envision novel types of engagement with the unreal, uncanny and contentious state of the 21st-century city.

PATRON OR CITY

The material conditions of the city both shape and reflect the underlying legal and regulatory structures of the city. While the material conditions of the city allow for (or encourage) new forms of engagement and architectural practice, in ways replacing the patron as the premise for new work, the city as a legal entity often stands in direct opposition to new works that engage with counter narratives. The city as legal patron necessitates a monopoly over legal authority. The architect's examination and interaction with a growing fluidity of legal definitions challenges this authority as even simple engagement can have the unintentional outcome of recalibrating definitional boundaries and expectations. The counter narrative the architect introduces becomes increasingly powerful in circumstances in which traditional means of shaping and maintaining legal boundaries, such as routine enforcement and nimble infrastructure, are not present and customary law, the law of practice, is more prevalent.

The architect's practice in Detroit occurs in an environment of contested space, both materially and within the public consciousness that our legal norms reflect. In this contested space, true definitions are only revealed after the fact.⁴ The contested space surrounding legal authority is particularly relevant to the architect's work in Detroit because it suggests a potentially limiting definition of the city as patron. From a definitional perspective, the line between the city and the City of Detroit - where a City Council and City Departments enjoy a monopoly over legal authority - has increasingly blurred and merged into a conglomeration of public-private partnerships and non-city entities that influence or control large portions of the city's legal apparatus that determine questions related to property ownership and permitted uses of property. Examples of influential quasi-governmental entities include: the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, a public-private corporation that in effect serves as the city's economic development branch, Midtown Inc., a community development corporation possessing a range of government-delegated powers within its district of operation, and Detroit Future City, a public-private partnership that developed the city's defacto economic development plan.⁵ While these entities provide much needed services to the city, the definition of the city as patron that emerges can be in opposition to engagement and exploration of the city's material conditions because of the framework imposed on property use and ownership. For example, The Detroit Land Bank Authority is a public authority, legally separate from the City of Detroit, that has brought order and administration to the city's auction process and improved the city's capacity for dealing with vacant structures. Similar to other public-private, state, and city entities, part of the Detroit Land Bank's core mission is to promote economic

growth and to foster the development of the properties acquired.⁶ As a regulatory framework, conventional property development requires a monopoly, or near monopoly, on legal authority. Many of Alibi Studio and its collaborators' explorations of material conditions have been premised on the existence of properties that could be characterized as unregulated or deregulated due to inconsistent enforcement or administration. While the city provides the material conditions to interact with and challenge definitions of space, Alibi Studio and its collaborators often come into direct opposition with the legal and regulatory paradigm of the city as patron, which necessitates a definitional uniformity that can leave little room for the survival of contested space or the formalization of developing customary law and practices.

A RANGE OF WORK

The primary context of the work of Alibi Studio has been the conditions of Detroit: the city's raw materiality of declined physical composition and integrity, its shifting distinctions between public and private ownership, uncertain economic prospects, lack of program or function, and varied degrees of cultural influences. Owing to the city's indiscernible material conditions, law in Detroit is created as much by practice as it is by written regulations, generating confusion over the rights of space and claims of property ownership or responsibility. The fluidity of the law as enacted or ignored becomes a creative catalyst for the narrative and spatial decisions of each project and folds into the spatial realities and operation of each site.

In a series of full-scale installations conducted in former domestic spaces the creative practice of Alibi Studio has sought to transmute these conditions. This ongoing set of projects, the *Once Residence* installation series, is characterized by intricate installations made to manipulate and respond to specific physical environments. The broad familiarity with the formal presence of a house is a starting point for this work, which provokes the city's occupants to contend with associations of lost domestic space. The four installations, *Weatherizing*,



Salvaged Landscape, *Second Story* and *Unlit* respond respectively to: barriers against harsh atmospheres and invasions; the material violence of arson and demolition; the loss of occupation and vanishing spaces; and the intangible darkness of abandonment. Although each work is driven by the nuances of a specific space, these projects can also be read as a broader commentary on the definitional conflict inherent in the materiality of the city due to the temporality

Figure 1: *Weatherizing* and *Salvaged Landscape* by Alibi Studio.

of legal and spatial realities. Through this more expansive discourse they provide a lens and a foundation for a deeper understanding of their host city.

Owing to real conditions of strained cities that architecture optimistically ignores – arson, vandalism, theft, abandonment, historical eradication – our built world takes on unexpected definitions. For example, in a way, it is possible to consider Detroit as a city of captured volumes of darkness, held behind structures that were once fully operational homes, and now have an extra ad hoc skin that cloaks the apertures – a skin that has evolved out of tending to broken window panes, issues of security or privacy, and trying to deter away squatters or scappers. At its most basic level, *Weatherizing* slips into this observation as a strategic manipulation of the common flat pane window. Comprised of nearly 1000 glass tubes, the work amplifies the light conditions and contradictions between the internal dark volumes, the stolen electrical infrastructure, and the sporadic weather of Michigan. To do so, it spatializes what one would consider to be the window sliding into the setting of electrical theft, invasion, and privacy.

Another condition ubiquitously altering the landscape of Detroit is arson. *Salvaged Landscape* is the curated demolition of an arson home to create a new room in the house-- made only possible because of the criminal existence of a fire. Using existing material from the house as the palette and existing spaces as formwork, *Salvaged Landscape* creates a new room in the life of the house and implicates the visceral weight of arson throughout the city. Embedded deeply into many harsh realities of the city from arson, to historical policies, to conspiracy, to deep social setting of the transient population *Salvaged Landscape* is by far the longest and most invested story of production and urban inquiry that Alibi Studio has created.

With *Salvaged Landscape* an act of curating the demolition, *Second Story* instead was a house looking to evade demolition. The work is a delicate cast and translation of the physical massing of a historic home that was under threat. Alibi Studio was approached by the President of Flint's Historic Carriage Town Neighborhood Commission to help assess the value and life of the city's abandoned Spencer's Funeral home. A rare gem of a building that was a duplex turned into a double funeral parlor. The space was entangled among civic disputes over the appropriateness of its demolition or restoration. As a response, *Second Story* focuses in on the a portion of the upper story of the abandoned Spencer's Funeral home, and amplifies, transports, and distorts the space of the house, simultaneously doubling its presence, while also beginning to make it a ghost. Acrylic rods imprint the interior and exterior surfaces of the contested funerary environment constructed in a pattern that resonates with the details of the original duplex. Inherently transparent, the material both captures and permits the passing of light, visually distorting the details of the house through reflection and refraction. A transparent material was specifically chosen so that the texture and coloration of the original funeral home was not amongst what was to be moved, but instead, provided a focus solely on the massive volume and its potential loss; and argument between city and citizens.

Unlit is the re-visiting of *Weatherizing* for the purpose of an exhibition elsewhere. Keying into the extensive presence of dark volumes captured throughout Detroit as a result of boarded up windows, *Unlit* conceptually strives to trace and honor that sublime darkness and those efforts. Wood, as the common material used to close off a space from elements and intruders is used in this delicate, yet aggressive, inhabitable texture to imply the obstruction of light leaks within an

actual space in Detroit. But instead of being a solid panel, the wood for *Unlit* is used in this delicate, yet aggressive, inhabitable texture. As very thin shards, capable of tracing and thwarting the light, *Unlit* volumetrically implies a larger presence while simultaneously obscuring our relationship to the domestic implications of the familiar form.



Through the work, Alibi Studio highlights an array of contemporary urban circumstances, ranging from spatial and legal definitions to material culture, using physical interventions and lighting as forms of material communication capable of amplifying and agitating a context. To engage these realities, the research pays close attention to a range of scales and effects including: the behavior and use of materials, the visual effects of observed and honed illumination and darkness, the geographical location within the city, and the difference between the documented and the lived legal and cultural contexts. The work and its conceptual underpinnings are a means by which Alibi Studio and its collaborators discuss, temporarily arrest, and acknowledge this period in time, giving architecture a stake within the daunting hurdles affecting our built and lived environments. Because materials are our direct connection to spatially defining and experiencing a space and culture, to make – to go beyond drawing and text – is to provide a real space that exposes and contributes to its setting; a space that is defined by its context, and remains an agent and recipient of its laws, both on paper and in practice. To build is to better understand the city as lived and living, to engage its physical attributes as well as implications of property rights, ownership, zoning, privacy, and territory, and to do so at a pace that involves immediate action at a time when public services are deteriorating and conventional agendas are exacerbating rather than mitigating the issues.

SHARED PRACTICE

The premise and momentum of this creative practice is reinforced by an intensifying inter-disciplinary conversation. Resonating amongst a shared interest in the existing state of our urban surroundings as self-proclaimed instigators and makers of things, the core practitioners and their respective practices formulating this shared intellectual and material stance are: Catie Newell, founder and principal of Alibi Studio in Detroit, a creative practice that has been widely recognized for exploring design construction and materiality in relationship to location and geography, and cultural contingencies, Brandon Weiner founder and director of Creative Rights, a nonprofit organization in

Figure 2: *Second Story* and *Unlit* by Alibi Studio.

Detroit that uses the law as a tool of agency to promote social imagination through the study and facilitation of artistic and spatial interventions in Detroit, and Justin Langlois, founder and senior research fellow of Broken City Lab in Windsor, an artist-led interdisciplinary collective and non-profit organization working to explore and unfold curiosities around locality, infrastructures, education, and creative practice leading towards civic change. Distinct in their work but bundled in their broader approaches each member of this cohort operates through an active definition of making in the city. Their contributions broadly defined as material culture, law as craft, and making circumstance, respectively. The work of Alibi Studio is characterized by built research that manipulates and responds to existing spaces as a means to simultaneously situate and obscure the present cultural and legal realities, while making compelling new environments that provoke or deny occupation.⁷ The raw materials for Creative Rights are sets of statutes, common law principles and judicial decisions, and institutional/administrative conditions. The work is invested in charting real acts executed through considering the definitional struggles involved, re-examining or re-situating expected definitions, and the risk-reward outcomes as seen through legal consequences.⁸ Broken City Lab actively combines spaces and policies of the city through creative disruption as a practice of making circumstances.⁹ This practice is unified by a commitment to the act of making individual and collaborative works demonstrate a means by which to test, reveal, critique, and alter the expected definition of our urban settings.

Stemming from their collective energy and insight, this discourse can be defined with the following principles:

1. An awareness of the immediate legal, material, and cultural urban conditions.
2. The goal of revealing present circumstances and instigating definitional shifts.
3. A dedication to making as the method of research with the tools being actual matter, legal circumstances, or civil engagement, and most importantly, the collapsing of all three.

PLOT FORMAT

This collaborative works together to challenge and advance one another's projects while also collaborating on pedagogy as a means to develop a research practice attuned to the immediate and timely circumstances of the city. Across a yearlong thesis trajectory, the cohort developed the PLOT thesis studio as a practice of research and design that is predicated on working within the realities of our cities as a means to investigate, comment, instigate, and inject into precise settings. Embracing a two-fold definition, the premise of PLOT simultaneously collapses the keen focus on the physical and circumstantial attributes of explicit locations, and the weight of the scheme or narrative conjured up by the work.¹⁰

Tested first as an exhibit at the Civic Space gallery in Windsor, the public gallery space of Broken City Lab, the participating thesis students (the PLOTTERS) focused on specific plots of land in Detroit, exploring their material and atmospheric conditions as well as their immaterial circumstances (regulations, neglect, anomalies). For this exhibit, Cross-Plotting: From Detroit to Windsor, material from selected plots were physically or conceptually lifted from sites in

Detroit, re-worked, and re-plotted in Windsor.¹¹ Relocated from vacant, strained, controversial, or cultural sites, the material is familiar to the faltering conditions and regulations of Detroit: declined physical composition and integrity, confused public and private ownership, uncertain economic projections, lack of program or function, and varied cultural acceptance. More specifically, the contents of the exhibit included honed alterations and commentaries ranging from bottles of water collected throughout the city archiving its status, sample soil from a contaminated, abandoned factory site recognizing a dormant lawsuit, lifted sound clips from the infamous ruinous Detroit Central Station permitting its occupation, and latex castings of recently demolished historical homes.

Defining “re-plotting” within the legal arena proved to be a complicated task given the existing regulatory scheme governing border control.¹² Simply stated, the concept of re-plotting is not recognized in the law.¹³ The water samples collected from different points on the Detroit River had to remain sealed.¹⁴ Soil from living plants had to be removed and replaced with inert material such as vermiculite, perlite, or sphagnum moss.¹⁴ Even dried plant materials used for decorative purposes had to be covered in a fixative, such as Krylon, due to fear they may carry thistle or other weed seeds.¹⁵ Cross-Plotting provided the PLOTTERS an opportunity to interact with and explore expected definitions within a framework of established and predictable legal constraints, generating a skill set towards this form of research practice. The second stage of the thesis studio allowed the PLOTTERS to not only continue exploring expected definitions, but to begin shaping them in areas of discourse where expected definitions are highly contentious.



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Across the year, deeper and more thorough investigations followed this form of practice. Originally sparked by the emerging interests of each student exposed through their exhibition efforts, the work carried forward ranging in issues such as postindustrial landscapes, the desaturation of color in failing materials, legal claims on toxicity, the threat of arson, the perception of historical value and the immaterial attributes attached to vacant built works and exposed land, amongst others. While the interests varied between students, the work was unified in a

Figure 3: *Cross-Plotting: From Detroit to Windsor*; Exhibition of material findings and legal implications for specific plots in Detroit.

practice of making as a means to expose and express the circumstances at play in an effort to understand both the material and immaterial conditions and consequences of making amongst the raw physical and legal material of the city as it falls in and out of expected definitions.

RESULTANTS

Less concerned with static outcomes or singular propositions, the most successful academic endeavors of this practice model are deeply intertwined with the city; constantly in check with its realities, never finished, and suffering unpredicted and very real lessons. Detroit pushed back.

Arguably the research endeavors most physically entangled with the city is the work entitled Propose[EXISTING] by Harry Solie. With a strong attention to the depleting massing of factory neighborhoods coupled with material demise, the work mourns for the loss of the each house destroyed for its lack of need and care.¹⁷ The initial research carved deep into the historical material and craft of the housing typologies through a redesign of the contemporary outcome of the house to fantastical and shocking propositions. This foreshadowed a practice of material installation that awaits its own decay. Even more powerful, however, were the unintended outcomes of his larger built work, an intricate and aggressive installation built into the facing sides of two abandoned homes. The physical and social realities that surrounded the efforts of actually crafting the project did more to demonstrate the definitional struggles confronted within the site than even the most charged design brief could have ever predicted. Solie's original site was demolished the night before its intended installation, exposing the struggle to physically and conceptually define the results of distress. A second site was chosen for its presumably hidden access, pointing to unspoken considerations of assumed security and occupation. And lastly, the unexpected, though inevitable theft of Solie's final installation, over the first night of its existence illuminated the looming scrapper culture. All of these are conditions embedded in the depleting definitions of those sites now visualized and verbalized through the realities of his constructions.



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Figure 4: Propose[EXISTING] by Harry Solie.

Most delicately exposing laws, enforcement, and social fears is the work of Tony Killian. Interested in the overwhelming prevalence of arson, Controlled Burn walked the line between implying a threat of arson and provoking a responsibility over the latent combustibility within the city. An intense and emotional condition in Detroit, Killian's work gave a charged presence and impact to the condition afflicting the building typology by exposing the ubiquity and frequency of arson

and developing a visual commentary of its seemingly unreal presence. Killian constructed capsules that hauntingly implied a threat of fire and in doing so established conversations over the perceived value of its surroundings. The work cautioned the flammability of the aging residential fabric and stirred strong arguments over the ethics of architecture. Killian's thorough arson research drove design decisions, but more importantly his careful movement and behaviors around this delicate issue in accordance with the law.

REAL PRESSURES

In this design practice the city has agency. Its faltering definitions demand awareness and action, while providing endless sparks for unexpected design inspirations. Pressing the research deeply into the city provides design outcomes with greater definitions beyond their physical realities and attributes, taking on meaning, value, conflict, and cultural ramifications. An active provocateur must be reactionary and responsible to existing conditions that are not only unexpected, but are deeply rooted and only experienced in person. The ideas will not come from a normative client, nor do they gain any validity from being unbuilt. This forces architecture outside of a crafted autonomous space left on paper, away from fictitious environments, and into the heart of the strains evident amongst the contemporary urban settings; a valiant task for the practice of architecture in times when we cannot ignore or eliminate the strains of our existing spaces. Although the relationship can be aggressive or daunting, it's ultimately rewarding for those who dare to work outside of their respective institutional norms. And the definitions are not necessarily going to become any clearer, nor does this practice aim for that result. They may become more weighted, conditional, or pressured by the law, instigating design decisions that provide architecture with a voice to its ailing setting, not only revealing conditions but also actively creating them.

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Figure 5: Controlled Burn by Anthony Killian.

ENDNOTES

1. J.C. Brooks, "Police Presence So Low in Detroit, Police Say 'Enter At Your Own Risk,'" *EURThisNThat.com*, October 9, 2012, accessed July 29, 2013, <http://www.eurthisnthat.com/2012/10/09/police-presence-so-low-in-detroit-police-say-enter-at-your-own-risk/>. See also Matthew Dolan, "Less Than a Full-Service City," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2010..
2. Joe Guillen, "Lighting department: Report says streetlights should be fixed based on population," *The Detroit Free Press*, June 16, 2013.
3. See Richard A. Epstein, "International News Service v. Associated Press: Custom and Law as Sources of Property Rights in News," *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 78, No. 1, (1992), pp. 85. "... [T]he state does not hand down the law or create property rights ... Its chief function is to discover and reflect accurately what the community has customarily regarded as binding social rules and then to enforce those rules in specific controversies. The image in this context is not of courts-or even legislatures-that "make" the law, but rather of courts and legislatures that "find and respect the law, which they then refine by incremental changes and marginal decisions."
4. Event-focused newspaper headlines sensationalizing the city's water shut-offs or bankruptcy often cloak the definitional battles that occur before institutional intervention. Concerning the water-shutoffs, the contract principle of waiver dictates that a legal right can be relinquished, e.g. the right to collect on an overdue bill, if the party neglects to enforce its right over a period of time. The water-shutoffs, as with many other contested areas in the city dealing with property and ownership rights, is a question of customary legal rights developing out of a lack of enforcement and the respective boundaries of legal accountability that can be defined when encountering ambiguous expectations on a mass scale. The boundaries of legal accountability also defined the bankruptcy proceedings. Critics of the city characterized the bankruptcy as a "pre-ordained

and planned” test case to determine the extent to which a city could shed financial and legal obligations. The strategy is not new and merely continues a trend started in the 1990’s where city and state governments sought to function more like private corporations and began to aggressively delegate traditional government responsibilities to private entities in the form of public-private partnerships and public-benefit corporations. As found in the Uniform Commercial Code, § 2-209. Modification, Rescission and Waiver (2002), accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/ucc/2/2-209> and Michael Jackman, “Five Things the Mainstream Media Won’t Tell You About Detroit’s Bankruptcy,” *Metrotimes*, November 10, 2014, Accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.metrotimes.com/Blogs/archives/2014/11/10/five-things-the-mainstream-media-wont-tell-you-about-detroits-bankruptcy>.

5. Carlos Salazar, “The Assassination of Detroit,” *Jacobin*, October 14, 2014, accessed December 6, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/the-assassination-of-detroit/>
6. Michigan Land Bank, “FAQs,” accessed December 6, 2014, <http://house.michigan.gov/sessiondocs/2013-2014/testimony/Committee233-11-7-2013.pdf>
7. For a more thorough description of the work and approach of Alibi Studio see The Architectural League of New York, Young Architects 13: *It’s Different* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 20-45.
8. See “Creative Rights’ Mission,” accessed July 29, 2013, <http://creative-rights.org/mission/>.
9. For more on Broken City Lab see “About Broken City Lab,” accessed July 29, 2013, <http://www.brokencitylab.org/about/>.
10. Jonathan Hill, *Illegal Architect* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998), 40.
11. David Gissen, *Subnature* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 26.
12. In preparing for *Cross-Plotting*, Creative Rights communicated extensively with representatives from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). Creative Rights assisted in attaining the necessary permits for the PLOTTERS such as the CFIA Import Permit and the Phyto-Sanitary Certificate from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
11. See 7 U.S.C. generally and Canadian Food Inspection Agency Act (S.C. 1997, c. 6). Importation laws can accommodate “re-plotting” in some circumstances, but generally only where the conditions between the two locations fall into similar regulatory categories. For example, water from the Detroit River could be re-plotted to a Canadian river, but only where the chemical contents of the water in each location were more or less legally identical. In many ways, the requirement of uniformity, and inertness where there are differences, undermines the notion that anything can truly be “re-plotted” and instead favors standardization and integration in a way that strips the particular plot of the very characteristics that give it meaning.
12. *Id.*
13. *Id.*
14. Information obtained from conversations with representatives from the Pesticide and Plant Pest Management Division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development between October 31, 2012 and November 3, 2012.
15. Jason Young, “The Density of Emptiness,” in *Distributed Urbanism: Cities After Google Earth*, edited by Gretchen Wilkins, 101. London: Routledge, 2010.