

Lafayette Park: In-Between Urbanism

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Criticism of modernist planning strategies in the United States has prompted the demolition of superblock housing projects and the subsequent approbation of New Urbanism as a model for urban revitalization. Despite these trends, the Lafayette Park development in Detroit challenges and contradicts the presumed failures of modern architecture and urbanism. A paradox of city and suburb amidst the contested urbanism of Detroit, Lafayette Park's significance lies in its contradictions—the reification of Modernism's potential combined with the limitations of this vision. These contradictions have enabled the success of Lafayette Park, elevating it as a development model for Detroit's future.

Cities across the country are undergoing similar transformations in a struggle to redefine and reinvigorate their post-industrial downtowns and suburban developments. This renewed interest in cities has also prompted criticism of modernist planning strategies and superblock housing projects in the United States, thus questioning the continued viability of the modernist project. Perhaps no city has experienced these shifts as fully as Detroit, a city invented by modernism, yet forever struggling to overcome its legacy. In light of these trends, the Lafayette Park housing development in Detroit both challenges and concedes the presumed failures of modern architecture and urbanism.

Completed in 1963, Lafayette Park's significance lies in its contradictions. It is a reification of Modernism's potential combined with the limitations of this vision. Further, Lafayette Park is a paradox of city and suburb, existing as both and neither simultaneously. According to Jerry Herron the neighborhood can be considered "the thing that happens when both [city and suburb] are over" (Waldheim 61). In this way, Lafayette Park confronts current and often conflicting realities of our social and built environment through its strategies of planning, landscape, and architectural design, thus establishing its relevancy to the contemporary urbanism and serving as a model for new spaces of social interaction, such as the forthcoming redevelopment of the Wigle Playfield in Midtown Detroit.

COLLABORATIVE VISIONS OF MODERNISM

Between 1950 and 1953 the city of Detroit embarked on one of the country's premier urban renewal programs in the country. Threatened by the growth of the suburbs, city leaders sought a revitalization of downtown by boosting property values. Further, public and private entities hoped to entice the middle class back to the city by providing the amenities of the suburbs. This revitalization approach utilized federal urban renewal funds in a myriad of projects including the clearance of deteriorated housing and the construction of a new highway system within the city. Driven by the prevailing ideals of the modernist movement in the postwar era, Detroit planners and city officials envisioned a city of order and prosperity, reversing the city's abandonment and decay through redevelopment strategies.

Lafayette Park played a key role in this vision. A mixed-use, mixed-income residency, Lafayette Park represented a new kind of urban typology merging order, collaboration, and architectural innovation. It sought the modernist ideal of architecture as the framework for a new, egalitarian society. Here high-rise rental apartments coexist with two-story cooperative townhouses and ground-level courthouses on 78 acres, in the center of which sits a 27-acre park. The realization of this modern experiment depended on the interdisciplinary efforts of city planner, Ludwig Hilberseimer; landscape architect, Alfred Caldwell; developer, Herbert Greenwald; architect, Mies van der Rohe; and Detroit Mayor Albert E. Cobo.

The collaborative efforts that defined Lafayette Park paralleled the modernist movement of the postwar era. Influenced by postwar German policies of mobility and dispersal, Hilberseimer's work as an urban planner explored decentralization as a remedy to the ills of the modern city. He believed that cities could achieve order and prosperity by dispersing their population and centers of production through a networked infrastructure system. Hilberseimer's visions of decentralization and modernism were structured principally, however, by the notion of landscape as the medium of social space and order. In his book, *The New Regional Pattern*, Hilberseimer states, "This decentralized city would combine the advantages of a small town with those of a metropolis. The metropolis can be located in a landscape...[and] indeed, become part of the landscape—the city set in a garden..." (149).

These collaborative, modern planning methods integrating infrastructure and nature through decentralization culminated at Lafayette Park, where the notion of order prevails. The buildings of Lafayette Park are arranged within a superblock pattern, a large residential block barred to through traffic within the grid of Detroit. The zones within the superblock of Lafayette Park are differentiated into commercial and residential areas. Vehicular and pedestrian traffic is separated as well. Cars can drive only on the peripheral ring road or in the cul-de-sacs. All other paths are reserved for pedestrians. Despite this order, however, there is an inherent flexibility to the spaces. They are open and structured, simultaneously, adaptable to shifting uses. Buildings coexist with the landscape at Lafayette Park, as the interiors of the high-rise apartments, two-story townhouses, and ground-level courthouses overlap with exterior spaces. This overlap blurs the distinction between city and countryside, private and public domains, and enclosed and open spaces. Mies van der Rohe's architecture—pristine steel and glass structures that flow seamlessly from indoors to outdoors—benefits from the context created by Hilberseimer's planning and Caldwell's landscape. The Lafayette Park collaborators pursued a new order for the development—eternal and modern, organic and technological—albeit controversial and contradictory in its application.

URBAN RENEWAL: CONTRADICTIONS OF MODERNISM

Perhaps the most controversial application of the modernist agenda, however, was the ordering of cities through the elimination of "blight." Jon Teaford states, "When they spoke of blight, city officials, business leaders, and urban planners meant the process of physical deterioration that destroyed property values and undermined the quality of urban life. Moreover, blight was often referred to as a cancer, an insidious, spreading phenomenon that could kill a city if not removed or forced into remission" (11).

Such widespread removal "blight" was sanctioned by Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 through means of "urban renewal." Detroit planners identified twelve sites for possible construction of public housing through urban renewal, some of which included the land required for Lafayette Park. Unfortunately, those who executed urban renewal in Detroit assumed that physical problems, rather than social, were responsible for the city's decline. This assumption was held by most cities, as revealed in newspaper headlines from 1961 announcing some of the earliest urban renewal projects: "Urban Renewal Only Way to Slow Decline of Cities," "the Busy Bulldozers," and "Fighting Blight" as noted by Martin Anderson (12). In this way, more plausible causes of urban decay were discounted, such as discrimination and economic and political inequity. These incongruities would surface fully at the site of Lafayette Park.

THE "RENEWAL" OF BLACK BOTTOM

The Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project was Detroit's first urban renewal project and the city's most significant project of the early 1950s. The Gratiot Project encompassed eighty-five city blocks in eastern Detroit and was conceived as part of the citywide Detroit Plan of 1946, which included slum clearance and freeway construction in efforts to fundamentally reshape the city. By the late 1940s construction of the Davidson

Expressway and the Edsel Ford Expressway had begun. This "world-class" network of sunken freeways was intended to ease street congestion and breathe new life into the city. Such unprecedented federal support for freeways and urban renewal, in combination with dramatic political shifts in Detroit, drastically impacted the social and economic fabric of city. These changes were facilitated most by Mayor Cobo, who made eliminating "blight" the cornerstone of his agenda, putting the Gratiot Redevelopment Project at the forefront of the city's development.

The Gratiot Area Redevelopment Project included a neighborhood known as "Black Bottom." Developed around a thriving commercial spine, Hastings Street, Black Bottom was an African-American "slum" neighborhood with substandard housing and countless "social pathologies," according to city officials and noted by Charles Waldheim (22). Ironically, these substandard conditions were facilitated in large part by the government. The policies enabling the construction of the suburbs—home mortgages under the G.I. Bill of Rights, investment in highways, sewers, streets—were almost never applied to poor black communities. Furthermore, the new suburbs were closed to blacks due to policies of segregation and neighborhood covenants. African-Americans in Black Bottom were also unable to get loans for home improvement, construction, and repair. Disenfranchised by the city's segregation measures, Black Bottom developed into an independent enclave within Detroit and thrived in spite and because of these exclusions.

The thriving Black Bottom neighborhood became the site of Lafayette Park. By the summer of 1952, the Cobo administration had evicted all the residents of the Gratiot Area and razed the buildings. The development forced over seven thousand residents from their homes and drove thousands of the city's poorest residents into an already overcrowded black housing market. The Gratiot Redevelopment Project encapsulated for Detroit the hope that African-American slums could forever be expunged through redevelopment—replacing unsightly downtown neighborhoods with new, attractive, modern housing. Ironically, in its quest to attract the middle class back to the city, Lafayette Park emulated the design of the neighborhood it replaced: walkable, diverse types of housing and open space, businesses and schools in close proximity, and the easy accommodation of the automobile.

CRITICISMS OF URBAN RENEWAL

The urban renewal program has been widely criticized for its exclusionary effects that contradicted modernist aspirations. Lafayette Park is no exception. While urban renewal sought an elimination of slums, the prevention of blight, and the revitalization of cities, in his book, *The Federal Bulldozer*, Martin Anderson asserted, "it is much more likely the federal urban renewal program shifts slums instead of moving them, and in so doing, may actually encourage the spread of slums and blight" (21). Further, Jane Jacobs, an early critic of large-scale urban renewal projects, argued that, by definition, such projects were socially and economically disruptive. According to Jacobs urban renewal eroded the dense, diverse urban fabric necessary for the social and economic health of neighborhoods. Urban renewal called into question the efficacy of planning strategies involving federal dollars in solving urban problems. Jacobs contested that large-scale projects and the sudden infusion of federal

funding, or “cataclysmic money,” could not create vitality in cities. Rather, only “gradual money,” or small-scale investments, could nurture an appropriately diverse urbanism (161).

Another key criticism of urban renewal was that it benefited only some at the expense of others. Because if this, the federal urban renewal program had strong racial overtones, often referred to as the “Negro Removal Program.” Martin Anderson posed the following question, “Is it right to deliberately hurt people, to push around those who are least able to defend themselves, to spend billions of dollars of the taxpayers’ money, so that *some* people might be able to enjoy a prettier city?” (21). Additionally, those eager to attack modern architecture regarded urban renewal projects as easy targets. During the 1970s postmodern architects challenged the modernist principles illustrated in urban renewal schemes. They believed buildings should fit into the existing urban context, not clash with it. Finally, many critics argue that urban renewal failed because it did not address the root of the problem: poverty and poor housing as a function of social and economic inequities. Cities could not eliminate poor black residents simply by constructing new public housing or forcing residents from their homes. Despite these eminent concessions, Lafayette Park is successful on multiple scales. It challenges the presumed failures of urban renewal through scales of urbanism, landscape, and architecture.

URBAN SCALE: BETWEEN CITY AND SUBURB

The contradictory forces of urbanism that created Lafayette Park define the project still. Lafayette Park is more than an architecture and housing project; it is an urbanism that champions the modernist agenda within the urban context of Detroit. Occupying a 78-acre site within a half-mile walking distance to downtown, Lafayette Park affects, and is affected by, its surroundings. It is both permeable and impermeable to the city. Lafayette Park’s visual connection to the Detroit skyline reinforces this permeability. Cars can drive into the development at the townhouse entrance, or park freely around the periphery of the park and walk to the site. In this way, the development is open to visitors and its context. Lafayette Park also integrates retail on its west side, allocating 4.26 acres for shopping. This retail center is used by Lafayette Park’s residents as well as by the greater Gratiot neighborhood. However, Lafayette Park also projects an image of security. Certain boundaries are gated, and the tower entrance maintains a security station and guard. Thus, despite its seemingly penetrable border, Lafayette Park is also restricted to residents at key locations, establishing it both as inclusive and exclusive.

Despite its urban character, Lafayette Park is simultaneously suburban in nature. In the center of the development is a 27-acre park, which includes a school and multiple playgrounds. The idea of the superblock strategy—a large residential and commercial block preventing through traffic and crossed by sidewalks and access roads—is brought to fruition here, rejecting the vestiges of the grid in favor of a *tabula verde*, a suburban enclave. Moreover, Caroline Constant argues Lafayette Park lacks the programmatic integration of living and workspace that Hilberseimer deemed essential to the new city—despite the development’s elementary school, shopping center, and mixture of housing (Waldheim 95). There is a lack of relationship among the programmatic elements, and each is experienced independent from the other.

LANDSCAPE SCALE: VISION OF ORDER AND ADAPTABILITY

Lafayette Park is moderated through its landscape, the primary spatial and organizational means through which order is constructed. Here, the relationship between architecture and landscape is complementary. The site promotes interrelationships between buildings and landscapes. Detlef Mertins states, “the buildings and landscapes have provided a framework for life to unfold not only in dignity and comfort but in diversity and other unexpected ways” (Waldheim 13). Through its landscape, Lafayette Park fosters conditions of community and individuality in its simultaneous presence of prominence and passivity.

The landscape of Lafayette Park was conceived as a democratic integrator, intended to inform the urban populace through its suggestion, rather than imitation, of natural beauty. In this way, Hilberseimer and Caldwell associated their park with social reform. The landscape is not as sparse as Le Corbusier’s plans for cities or as vast as Wright’s Broadacre City. Rather, it compromises at 22 units per acre and offers spaces for both communal and individual activities. These differentiated spaces are achieved through private, semi-private, and public domains as well as enclosed and open spaces; for the larger communal landscapes give way to shared yards and private courts. For example, hedges adjacent to townhouse sidewalks delineate the public realm versus the semi-private front yards. In contrast, the brick-walled courtyards of the one-story cooperatives provide total privacy.

While the landscape is the most prominent feature of Lafayette Park, it is also at times the most passive. The designers of the development envisioned an urban community that would flourish under a canopy of indigenous trees. Indeed, the now-mature landscape continues to form the primary framework for the site’s spatial organization, although it does so subtly. The palette of the vegetation changes seasonally in contrast to Mies’s austere building facades. Despite Lafayette Park’s seasonal patterns registering time, it is difficult to forge a collective sense of place through an active engagement with the site. The site is holistically passive.

Another paradox that exists at the scale of the landscape is Lafayette Park’s simultaneous integration and subordination of the car. A parking garage serves as a stage for the pool. While Hilberseimer accommodated the automobile, lots are secondary to the exterior spaces and to the architecture. Hilberseimer minimizes the impact of the car in three ways. The first is the large lot strategy realized by the two paved lots for the towers. Here, wheel level is two to three feet below sidewalk level, a grade change attempting to sink the cars into the ground, thus deemphasizing the vista of cars from certain angles. Next is the small lot, a smaller twenty-two car lot serving the two-story houses. These lots are depressed three and a half feet from yard level and four and a half feet from interior level. By utilizing this design method, cars have a tendency to disappear. Finally, “boat slips,” individual driveways for each single-story courthouse, enable the owner to park in front of his door, below entry grade. In this case, the front yard is three feet above street and parking level. This provides privacy from pedestrians without interfering with pedestrian routes.

ARCHITECTURAL SCALE: BOLD RESTRAINT

One of the goals of the Modernist project was to improve the quality of life through exemplary architecture. Too often the architect's high-rise vision resulted in regimented rows of dull boxes with empty, windswept spaces—failing aesthetically. However, Lafayette Park seems to extract and incorporate the best elements of the modernist vision providing a framework for economic and social diversity. It is successful in its understatement of solid and void, order and chaos, interior and exterior, community and anonymity, as revealed through its architecture.

The relationship between Lafayette Park's buildings and the spaces between them is perhaps more significant than the modern, architectonic form created by Mies van der Rohe. In his article "Lafayette Park: Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer," Newman states "Mies skillfully executes the restrained architecture as order and the void between buildings as chaos" (124). Here, the order comes from the regularity of the building masses. The chaos, rather, derives from the slightly staggered site plan, which creates dynamic and powerful spaces between the buildings. This clever manipulation of spaces between buildings offers opportunities for public and private interaction, evident at the tower colonnades where residents mingle.

The massing of the buildings is also notable for the juxtapositions it creates. The faces of steel and glass in both the high and low-rise buildings serve as architectural backdrops, or uniform urban walls, against which activities and the landscape display themselves. Similarly, the low-rise architecture forms a series of flat urban walls that mediate and capture movement. Also, the combination of high and low-rise residences effectively decreases the perceived density of the site by carefully stowing the largest number of inhabitants in thin slabs above the activity of the ground plane. The apartment units are far enough away from the row houses not to overshadow them. The coordination of multiple scales of massing shows a sense for the overall, not just for individual elements.

While the standardized building components of Mies's residential buildings allowed for fast construction at reduced costs, the material quality of the buildings was considered secondary to the spatial and visual relationship between the interior of each unit and its exterior counterpart. Each of the housing types—apartment, townhouse, and courthouse—presents a different relation of interior to exterior. The architecture and site plan also create opportunities for community and anonymity. Ranging from a restrained private outdoor area to the bustling parking lot, the multiple layers of open space provide opportunities for informal occupations, privacy, and collectivity. This is evident in the tower lobbies, where chance encounters occur, and on the playgrounds, where children claim spaces at different times of the day. Public events such as pool parties and picnics in the meadow are typical, as well as karaoke and Halloween parties in the West Tower. In fact, many residents attest that the public spaces contribute to Lafayette Park's "small-town" atmosphere.

URBAN PIONEERS: CRUCIBLE-DWELLERS

The people of Lafayette Park should be also considered when analyzing the project; for perhaps more than the physical attributes of the site, the residents have defined the place over the years. Despite the exclusionary means by which the project was born—and the belief by many that

the heavy costs of the development outweigh the modest positive outcomes—Lafayette Park has fared well overall. In a sense, Lafayette Park was destined to be a kind of crucible for urban housing policy and to epitomize urban renewal's contradictions. Further, while many claim that Lafayette Park provided housing to a few hundred of Detroit's wealthiest and most educated citizens who have always enjoyed housing options, some long-time residents have "forgiven those responsible precisely because of Lafayette Park's merits" according to Janine Debanne (Waldheim 72).

Lafayette Park has always attracted the urban pioneer, the resident seeking an alternative community from the surrounding neighborhoods of Detroit, one characterized by an idealism, urbanity, and diversity. To accommodate a mix of residents, Lafayette Park offers a range of housing options, from low-rise cooperatively owned homes to more modestly priced, high-rise rental units. While the first years of Lafayette Park (1960-65) were considered an experimental phase when young professionals and first-time homebuyers moved in, the phase that followed assumed a gradual stability that most closely achieved modernism's aspirations (1965-95). During the latter part of this phase, Detroit's economy weakened, extending Lafayette Park to lower income residents. In July 1991, the owner of Lafayette Towers signed a contract with HUD declaring some apartments eligible for occupation by federal government subsidy recipients (75 efficiencies and 42 one-bedroom units, or 20% of the total apartments). It was during this period that Lafayette Park most closely achieved modernism's vision—a true mix of residents, both economically and socially. With the economy's recovery, these subsidies ended in July 1998.

Today, Lafayette Park boasts greater racial, ethnic, and class diversity than both the city and suburbs that surround it. However, the economic prosperity of Detroit's emerging "renaissance" have led to increases in property values and significant changes to the Lafayette Park neighborhood. While it was still possible to buy a townhouse for \$35,000 in 1996, a townhouse sells for at least \$350,000 today. Hopefully market forces will not squander the original intentions of the development, replacing modern ideals with profits.

LAFAYETTE PARK'S RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY URBANISM AND THE FUTURE OF DETROIT

While Lafayette Park failed to fully curb the decay of inner city Detroit and did not reverse the flow of middle-class residents to the suburbs, the development has been an anomalous catalyst for urban revitalization and its future remains promising. The quality of architecture, site design, and position on the Historic Register has maintained the development's stability throughout the years, despite the instability of the city. The demand for the one-story courthouses and bi-level townhouses has remained strong as well, despite fluctuations in the economy and significant cooperative fees. In a *Detroit News* article by Maureen McDonald, Lafayette Park resident Reggie McGhee stated, "This is the best neighborhood in all of Detroit and one of the best functioning urban renewal projects in the nation."

In an era when the traditional city no longer exists—its territory no longer defined by a particular periphery, its downtowns struggling to find

a new identity—urbanism commands new challenges. The new type of urban agglomerations in which we live—a splintering of the city center and suburbs, simultaneously concentrated and decentralized—has resulted in a mutated and disarticulated city where urbanity is defined through multiple scales of space and time. As a development that works within the limitations of the contemporary city yet continuously challenges these limits, Lafayette Park is particularly relevant. It is a model for cities struggling to achieve high quality public spaces as well as diversity in housing type and occupancy amidst shifting conditions. For example, Lafayette Park was recently cited by the Detroit City Planning and Development Department as a model for the forthcoming redevelopment of the Wigle Playfield on the west side of Midtown Detroit. Currently an underutilized 7-acre park, Wigle Playfield is being redeveloped to reconnect future residential development to the existing street grid in order to maximize walkability and connectivity to the Midtown core. Based in part on typological precedent in Lafayette Park, the development options mix townhouses and multi-family apartments around high quality public spaces. Thus, the strategies of planning, landscape, and architectural design achieved at Lafayette Park can inform new spaces of social interaction in our cities, as opposed to those continuously reinforcing barriers. In this way Lafayette Park argues for the continued viability of the modernist project.

Lafayette Park was a creative experiment in architecture and urbanism. Its visionaries sought to create a framework for emergent forms in which individuals could order themselves, an indeterminacy that adapted to the shaping forces of the times. They envisioned a new organic order for the city integrated with, but pushing beyond the times. Subjected to conditions that revealed the contradictions of modernity, Lafayette Park achieves this, at least in part. It created an identity for itself through and in spite of its contradictory conditions. Ironically, Lafayette Park’s decentralizing and universalizing effects have become its greatest virtues, and a link to a possible future for Detroit.

ENDNOTES

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