

Shrinking Cities and First Suburbs

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The Case of Detroit and Warren, Michigan

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To Vani and Agnish

PREFACE

This book is about first suburbs. I have undertaken an empirical study of Warren and Detroit as a case study of shrinking first suburbs of American metropolis. The case study of this type of shrinking at the urban periphery investigates multiple challenges shrinking communities are facing and different ways in which these communities are trying to survive, sustain, and even develop. Contemporary theories and practices of urban design often posit a notion of suburbs as a site and context of perpetual growth that is conceived as an undifferentiated and a universally growing space. In contrast to such universal understanding of suburban sprawl, the current book examines the relationship between Detroit, a prominent shrinking city, and Warren, largest suburb of Detroit at its northern periphery.

The book in many ways is a reflection of my personal and professional experiences of living, teaching, and working in Metro Detroit. Some of them are worth mentioning here. After moving into Metro Detroit region, nine years back, I was struck by the city-suburb divide in academic discussions, policy framework, and most significantly in people's everyday perceptions. Though the entire region was facing serious but common challenges, any attempt of coordination and collaborative efforts was critiqued and crushed through racial and political segregation. While questioning and understanding some of the historic socio-political divide, in fall of 2013, I had an opportunity to participate in an RSVP event, "From Crisis to Projects," hosted by the City of Warren in collaboration with Macomb County and Michigan State Housing Authority. The event brought together local universities like Lawrence Tech with international architectural and urban thinkers from Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), Abitare,

and the *Volume Magazine*. This international experience, here, instigated the thought of examining the Detroit-Warren relationship as a possible case study of central city-first suburb dynamic. Following the RSVP event, I have taught several undergraduate and graduate urban design studios studying Warren and Detroit and speculating possible scenarios to address issues of decline and shrinkage. The student works in documenting and analyzing the built form and green infrastructure in the region and possible solutions have inspired me to work on this project to tell the story of Detroit, Warren, and this Midwestern metropolitan region.

The book provides three specific narratives. First, the book presents a narrative of suburbs as a critical site of crisis at the urban periphery. It considers first ring suburb as a site of shrinkage of population and infrastructure. Second, the monograph addresses problem of metropolitan shrinkage. It considers the question of how we can attempt to address depopulation, vacancy, and foreclosures in a first-ring suburb. Broadly, this is a fundamental question of shrinkage (as opposed to growth) as a paradigm of urban design and planning. Third, within the context of shrinkage and decline, the book presents first suburbs as possible new urban models. The case study of Warren in the context of Detroit illustrates projective role of incremental development and creative partnerships in making first suburbs new models for adaptive reuse, smart growth, economic entrepreneurship, and social diversity.

The emphasis is on Warren, as a shrinking community in the urban periphery of Detroit (a well-studied large shrinking city). Emphasis on the suburb brings reference to some important literature. One is Mary Corbin Sies's article "North American Suburb, 1880–1950," published in the *Journal of Urban History* (2001). Sies argues for re-examination of the term "suburb" with consideration of geography and economic circumstances as a base with additional numerous factors. Mary Corbin Sies's article is an effective anthology of suburban development in North America. Using economic and geographic data, Sies argues that the urban-suburban divide is less clear and actually more blurred, when seen in terms of social demographics, land development, and gendered patterns. This specific literature is confined to suburban development up to the 1950s. Building on Sies's understanding of suburbs and extending her urban-suburban relationship, my book focuses on evolution of Warren after it was established as a major peripheral urban development in the 1970s and then its dynamic evolution until present. Literature such as "Suburbs in transition: new approaches to suburban history"

by Ruth McManus and Philip J. Ethington (2007) in *Journal of Urban History* is also relevant. Considering my project to be more about shrinking cities and implication of the phenomenon on a first-ring suburb, literature on shrinking cities (Hollander, Palagst, Oswalt, Luescher and Shetty) is also reviewed and used.

The purpose of this book is to showcase first suburbs—strategically located between the urban core and the suburban periphery—as new models for adaptive reuse, smart growth, economic entrepreneurship, and social diversity in the face of urban shrinkage typically characterized with large central cities. My work focuses on shrinking suburbs because these towns represent a distinct suburban condition, with their older housing stock, increasing diversity, restructuring market, and challenges of metropolitan coordination. Most of the work on shrinking cities is focused on medium and large central cities (like Detroit, Youngstown, Manchester-Liverpool, and Berlin). This project on Warren provides an alternate model to understand shrinkage in suburban communities, which is timely and long-needed. It also adds rich diversity to the academic scholarship on shrinking cities as well as on-the-ground efforts and discussions on addressing problems of shrinkage in fringe communities.

There is a continued and growing interest in the “shrinking city” phenomena and literature. However, most of the works on shrinking cities are limited to the urban core and inner-city neighborhoods. This book on Warren adds diversity and richness into the discussion of shrinkage; it focuses on a first-ring suburb depicting challenges of shrinking and possible ways to respond in the urban fringes, ignored in current dominant literature an urban studies. So, students, teachers, and practitioners of architecture, urban design, and urban planning as well as community development will be interested in the project. In addition, municipal leaders and economic development groups in first-ring suburban communities will find specific solutions and approaches to address serious challenges facing their communities in this book.

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I would like to express my special gratitude to City of Warren Mayor's office, office of the Warren Downtown Development Authority (DDA), and the Tax Incentive Financial Administration (TIFA), for giving me the opportunity to study Warren in relation to Detroit. Specifically, I would like to mention Tori Mocerri (Macomb County); Gina Cavallier; Bonnie McInerney; Nancy Bourgeois; Martha Potere (all from City of Warren), who have provided invaluable time and help in terms of documents and discussions.

I acknowledge that "From Crisis to Projects," the 2009 RSVP #13 event organized by the City of Warren in collaboration with the Macomb County, Lawrence Tech, and Volume magazine, was the original inspiration and instigation for the book on Warren. A note of thanks to my colleagues at the College of Architecture and Design, Lawrence Technological University, who provided useful feedback and encouragement. My Chair, Jim Stevens, needs special mention for encouraging me to write the book. A shout out also to Philip Plowright, a colleague and friend, for being an inspiration and for being kind with his time for many conversations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| CDC | Community Development Corporation |
| DDA | Downtown Development Authority |
| Detroit SMSA | Detroit Statistical Metropolitan Statistical Area |
| FCA | Fiat Chrysler Automobiles |
| GM | General Motors |
| HERA | Housing and Economic Recovery Act |
| ICRJ | Interfaith Center for Racial Justice |
| IONA | Islamic Organization of North America |
| MCPED | Macomb County Planning and Economic Development |
| MSHDA | Michigan State Housing Development Authority |
| Metro Detroit | Three-county region around Detroit |
| NSP | Neighborhood Stabilization Program |
| SEMCOG | Southeast Michigan Council of Governance |
| Southeast Michigan | Seven county conglomerate region around Detroit |
| TIFA | Tax Incentive Financial Assistance |
| V8 initiative | Van Dyke-8 Mile corridor business group initiative |

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