



A Detroit Future City (DFC) Implementation Office Special Report: Vacant Industrial Properties Require Innovative Reuse

Certain areas once appropriate for industrial use should be reassessed and transitioned to land uses more beneficial to Detroit communities.

Detroit has hundreds of vacant industrial sites that are not likely to be returned to industrial use. A DFC Implementation Office assessment indicates that there are almost 900 vacant industrial buildings spread across the city[1].

Many of these buildings abut residential neighborhoods in some of the city's most disadvantaged areas. Without a strategic approach to repurposing these properties, they will remain fallow for years to come, posing threats to public health and safety, and undermining Detroit's recovery.

There of course remain traditional opportunities for redevelopment. One example of a recent success was [the ground breaking for automotive parts manufacturer Flex-N-Gate's](#) 350,000-square-foot, \$95-million-dollar plant on 30-acres of vacant land on Detroit's east side. The new facility will generate up to 750 new jobs, 51 percent of which are guaranteed to go to city residents.

Large-scale, industrial development projects like the one being developed by Flex-N-Gate are important to the city's revitalization, but such shovel-ready projects aren't ample enough to redevelop large swaths of the city.

That's why the Detroit Future City Strategic Framework advocates for innovative, adaptive reuse of some of the city's vacant industrial sites. The goal: to put these properties back into productive use; economic, creative, and ecological reinvention for the benefit of Detroit residents and communities, and the preservation of some of the city's history.

In the report below, the Detroit Future City (DFC) Implementation Office examines the opportunity to transform vacant industrial buildings and sites in the city into viable alternatives, including not only commercial, residential, and recreational uses, but food production, energy generation, and green infrastructure as well. This report also outlines key challenges vacant industrial sites pose for redevelopment and offers up creative solutions.

The Challenges of Detroit's Vacant Industrial Structures and Land

Detroit is a city with a rich industrial heritage that was built on a strong base of manufacturing businesses. As the city's manufacturing base declined over the last half century, industrial businesses downsized, closed, or relocated, leaving behind numerous vacant buildings.

These vacant industrial sites present significant challenges to redevelopment, among them:

- Scattered Locations:** Many vacant industrial properties are in areas where traditional manufacturing, logistics, and industrial uses are still appropriate and desirable. However, almost a third of vacant industrial sites are outside of Employment Districts identified as part of the development of the Strategic Framework, in small pockets throughout the city that are often near low-income residential neighborhoods. These pockets of industrial blight undermine adjacent property values, isolate the surrounding communities both geographically and economically, and exacerbate poverty.
- Building Condition and Contamination:** Not surprisingly, former industrial sites have left behind a legacy of environmental contamination, adding substantially to the cost and complexity of redevelopment. Some buildings have been vacant and unsecured for years, falling victim to deterioration, vandalism, and scrapping. In many cases, the buildings themselves have been demolished, leaving large swaths of contaminated land. Adaptive reuse of these sites can eliminate threats to public health and safety, while creating new assets and amenities to benefit Detroiters.
- Size:** Some of Detroit's best known vacant industrial sites are enormous, making redevelopment expensive, and requiring large-scale new uses. These sites will require bold visions, creative financing and, in most cases, strong public-private partnerships. However, most industrial sites in Detroit are not too big, but in fact too small to be practical for modern industrial use. More than two thirds of vacant industrial buildings are less than 10,000 square feet in size. While a relatively small size may make reuse for modern industrial unlikely, it can be an advantage for alternative reuse.
- Ownership:** One of the greatest challenges to the repurposing of buildings and land across the city is ownership. Many of Detroit's industrial sites have been vacant for years and have changed hands because of bankruptcy, tax foreclosure and speculation. Currently only approximately 28 percent of vacant industrial buildings are publicly owned. Of the buildings that are privately owned, Detroit residents own 58 percent; Michigan residents own a total of 91 percent.

Reimagining Vacant Industrial sites

Despite these and other challenges, the numerous vacant industrial properties that dot Detroit's landscape present a unique opportunity for innovative and adaptive reuse, neighborhood regeneration, and sustainable redevelopment.

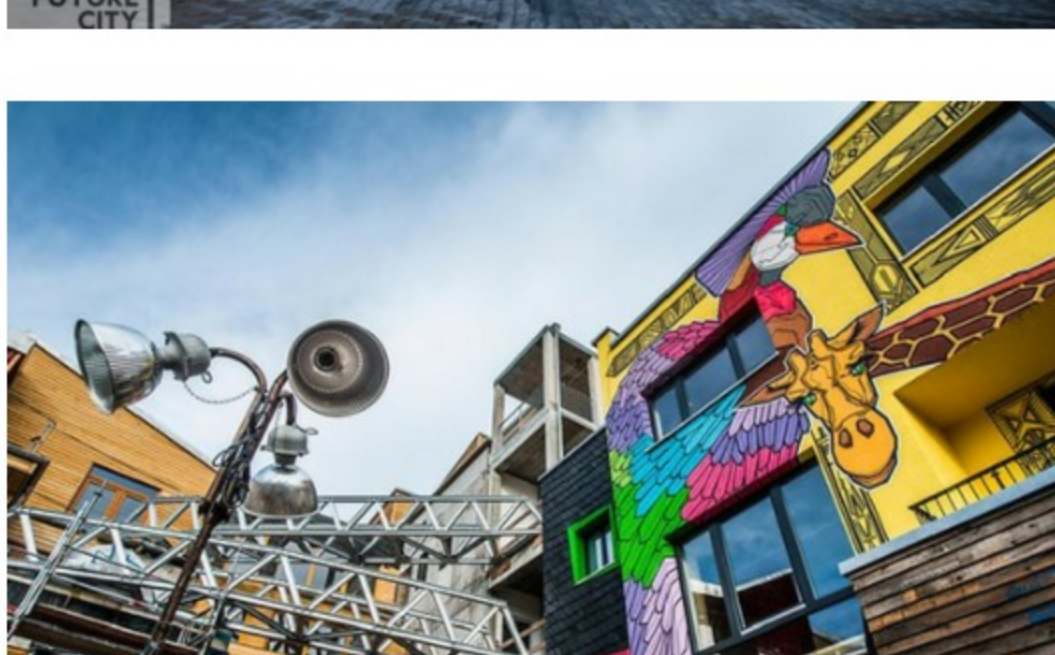
One of Detroit most notorious industrial dinosaurs, the Packard Plant, [is making significant strides toward these types of redevelopment](#). On May 16th, an investor broke ground on the first phase of a multi-year, \$500-million-dollar renovation of this long-shuttered factory, the skeleton of which sits on 40 acres. The planned redevelopment will bring new housing, office, retail, and recreational uses to this former industrial behemoth.

The large-scale redevelopment of vacant industrial sites, such as is proposed for the Packard Plant, have been successfully implemented in other locations in Detroit, and across the country and globe. Here are a few shining examples:

Global



Lingotto Building (Torino, Italy): This nearly 100-year-old former Fiat auto plant – once the largest auto manufacturing facility in the world – was renovated into [a modern, multi-use complex](#) that includes a shopping arcade, concert hall, theatre, art gallery, and more.



Holzmarkt Project (Berlin, Germany): This massive, former industrial site was converted into an [urban village](#) made of recycled windows, secondhand bricks, and scrap wood. It contains a studio for circus acrobats, a children's theatre, a cake shop, a nursery, and a nightclub. The redevelopment even includes a landing stage for beavers.

Regional



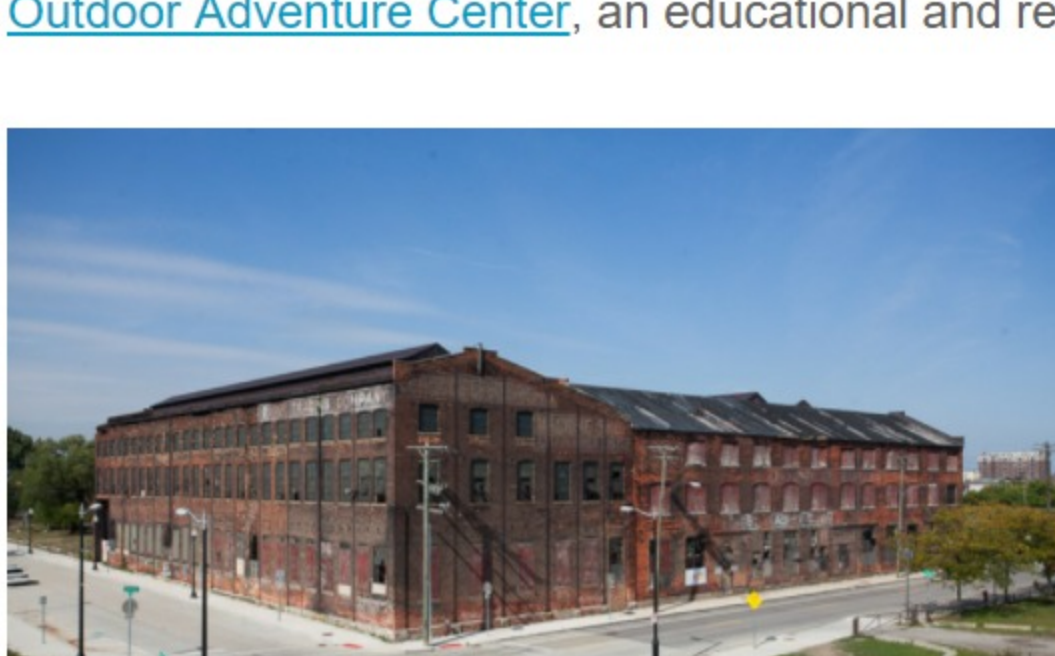
Growing Power (Chicago, Illinois): This 10,000-square-foot former warehouse and seven surrounding acres now have seven greenhouses growing produce year-round, an aquaponics farm that recycles fish waste, an apiary, and composting operation that recycles over 450,000 pounds of waste annually.



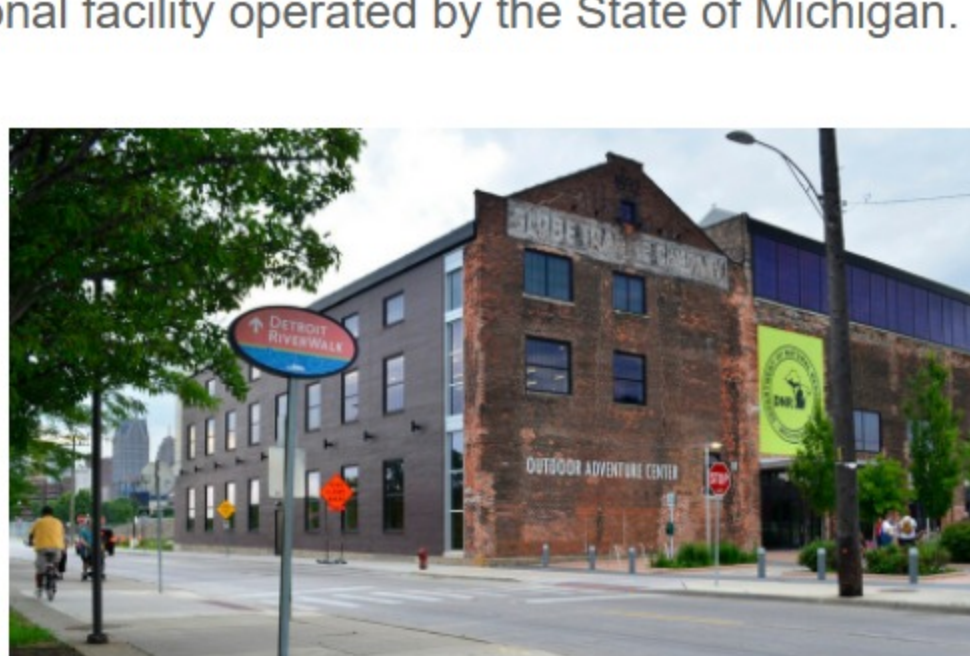
Maywood Solar Farm (Indianapolis, Indiana): [This facility](#) is one of the largest solar farms in the country. It was built with the help of federal dollars, covers 43 acres of the former Reilly Tar and Chemical Corporation industrial site, and feeds electricity into Indianapolis Power & Light's power grid.

Local

Globe Trading Company: This building near the Detroit Riverfront was redeveloped into the [Michigan Outdoor Adventure Center](#), an educational and recreational facility operated by the State of Michigan.



BEFORE



AFTER

[555 Nonprofit Gallery + Studios:](#) This vibrant organization is raising funds to transform a vacant commercial structure on E. Warren Ave. into studio space, an artist residency and an outdoor art park that will include a foundry and public space for gatherings and events.

An Agenda for Action

Manufacturing and industrial businesses will continue to play a critical role in Detroit's economy for many years to come. However, with vision and creativity, the city's legacy of vacant and obsolete industrial property can also be reimagined and repositioned to contribute to a vibrant and inclusive 21st century economy.

The DFC Implementation Office continues to work with stakeholders and experts both locally and globally to identify innovative recommendations to help catalyze the transformation of these sites.

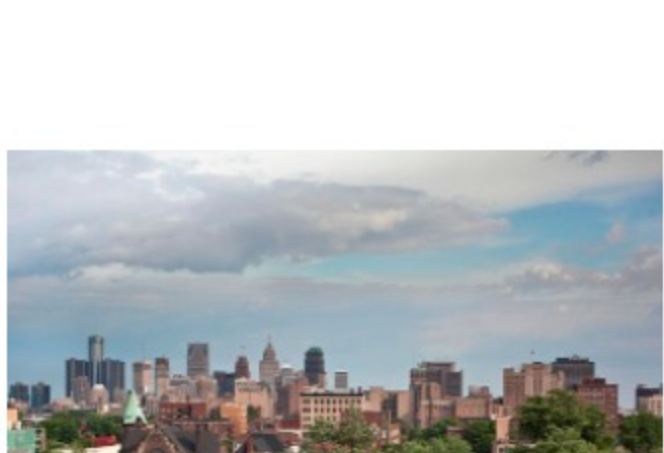
The recommendations include:

- Address building and zoning code barriers to building reuse and streamline plan review processes for adaptive projects.
- Build the capacity of local developers to tackle adaptive reuse projects.
- Sharpen financial tools and incentives for building reuse, including the expansion and reform of the State's Community Revitalization program and reinstatement of the State Historic Tax Credit.
- Integrating building reuse strategies into the major planning initiatives underway or planned across the city.

Through equitable stewardship of these recommendations, which requires a participatory process where global best practices meet resident interests, we can achieve the recommendations outlined in the Detroit Strategic Framework – to transform the nearly 900 vacant or obsolete industrial sites here into a mix of small-scale manufacturing, creative and artistic industries, food and energy production, green infrastructure, and open space.

These uses can generate a better quality of life, with improved health and prosperity for Detroiters, and help create a more sustainable Detroit.

[1] The Detroit Industrial Parcel Survey from 2010 indicates that there are 872 vacant industrial buildings in the city, and an analysis of Motor City Mapping data indicates that as of 2014 there were 891.



DFC in the News

Detroit Free Press: [Next for Detroit? Find uses for 900 vacant manufacturing sites](#)



DFC Field Guide

Enewsletter
Summer is approaching! Now is the perfect time to begin designing your perennial garden.



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