The winners of Detroit
Detroit city strategy

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Summary

Detroit became in 2013 the first big city in the United State that went bankrupt. It was the result of decades of urban decline and a city that was built up on a unsustainable ideology - the 'American Dream'. The American Dream was the underlying factor at different causes that caused the decline of Detroit. The Motor City was once a thriving city with over 1.5 million inhabitants but is nowadays being left over with not even half of that. Detroit was a surreal patchwork of abandoned neighbourhoods separated by nearly empty expanses of land. People left downtown for the suburbs where the white separated themselves from the black community. Detroit is a city that is ripped apart with at its peak its bankruptcy. Instead of the 'Great American Dream' it has became the 'Great American Nightmare'.

There is however, a very a dim light at the horizon. Since its bankruptcy in 2013 Detroit has made numerous efforts to get the city back on track and these efforts can be slowly seen. Nowadays, some people even may say that Detroit is becoming 'cool' or 'booming' again.

So while the first signs of revival may be seen, the city has still a long way to go. This report therefore, imagines a city strategy for the future of Detroit in which 'clusters' and 'transit' will play a big role. Proposed are different clusters who will support the urban revival of Detroit each in its own way. The clusters will be serve as mixed-use and high-density walkable environments. In order to connect these clusters, a suitable transit system is designed. The transit system will rely on the Light-rail network that is already there and will fully optimize this system. Clusters and transit are vital parts of a healthy city, and it is therefore remarkable that Detroit is lacking both. This report is a way to the future where Detroit will be an attractive place again, serving anyone and being a city with a history.

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Introduction

Detroit is the most populous city in Michigan and the Greater Metro Detroit area, and it serves as a major port connecting the Great Lakes to the Saint Lawrence Seaway. In 2018 the estimated population of Detroit was 683,443. Detroit is part of the Detroit Metropolitan Area which houses about 4.3 million people (Statistical Atlas, 2018). Detroit got shaped over the years by the car industry, which was for years the thriving force of economic prosperity in Detroit. The city earned its nickname of the motor city, while it became the symbol of a new generation that knew great mobility. Today however, Detroit isn't the thriving city it once was. In 2013, it became the first major US city that went bankrupt, after years of decline (Neill, 2015). A city once inhabited by over 1.5 million people is now being left with not even the half of that – 683.443 in 2018 (Statistical Atlas, 2018).

This rapport argues that the underlying factor contributing to the decline of Detroit is the ideology – or 'myth'- of the 'American Dream'. The American Dream of upward mobility, together with the car industry of Detroit, resulted in a new middle class that, turned out to be unsustainable. With the arrival of the new middle class. New dwellings were built, aimed at the aspirations of the middle-class auto worker. Large neighbourhoods of single-family

detached homes spread out across the city. The building plots were large and enabled residents to have room for the private owned cars (Detroit Future City, 2012; Florida, 2017). While people moved to the suburbs they left behind downtown. Resulting in urban blight and a shattered urban fabric, and above all resulting in a city without a centre (Neill, 2015). The downward trends in economic and social conditions resulted in joblessness, housing foreclosures and abandoned structures disproportionately experienced by residents in the central city. Detroit has become a surreal patchwork of still-dense neighbourhoods separated by nearly empty expanses of land (Detroit Future City, 2012; Macdonald & Kurth, 2015).

All this resulted in the bankruptcy of a once major U.S. city. It was a shock that the ever suffering city perhaps needed. Since the bankruptcy things are changing in Detroit. A new direction has been set and the first signs of revival are becoming clear. Some people may – carefully - say that downtown is booming again. While in some parts the revitalization is becoming clear, big parts of Detroit are still lacking a brighter future and have a long way to go.

This report therefore, is a vision on how the city of

Detroit can be improved over the next 5-20 years. The report aims to propose a strategy that focusses on clusters and transportation in order to support Detroit while it is recovering from its bankruptcy. It is strategy that, if being right implemented, can bring the city closer together, making it a place for everyone again.

   The report is divided in three different sections. First, the city diagnosis will be discussed. The city is being analysed in order to get an overview of the root causes that caused the decline of Detroit in the first place. Secondly, a vision is proposed which will strengthen the urban fabric, support clusters and envisions a new transit system. In the third and last section this vision will be worked out, proposing actions and implementations which will serve Detroit the coming decades.

Diagnosis

Detroit is the most populous city in Michigan and the Greater Metro Detroit area, and it serves as a major port connecting the Great Lakes to the Saint Lawrence Seaway. In 2018 the estimated population of Detroit was 683,443. Detroit is part of the Detroit Metropolitan Area which houses about 4.3 million people (Statistical Atlas, 2018). It is in this city where the car industry was, for years, a thriving force of economic prosperity. Detroit was for a long time the automotive centre of the world while it became a synonym for the United States its car industry, earning its nickname of the Motor City (Neill, 2015). The auto industry was crucial in the development of Detroit, playing a major part in the American Dream and the prosperity of the middle class (Florida, 2017; Lee & Nelson, 2018).

The American Dream has, for centuries, lured people to America with a promise of success for everyone (Cullen, 2004; Hochschild, 1995). It has attracted millions of immigrants with the promise of fulfilling their version of the American Dream and upward mobility (Cullen, 2004; Florida, 2017; Hochschild, 1995). The American Dream however, is a dream that turned out to not to be sustainable, especially not in Detroit when the car manufactures moved away from Detroit (Cullen, 2004; Neill, 2015). It

is also a highly individual dream, where people believed that success could be obtained regardless of background, race or ideals. However, it turned out that this success could not be obtained for everyone, leading to an ideology that became intertwined with race over the years. Eventually, together with the flee of the car industry and the unequal rights of the black community, this led to an even greater racial inequality than was already the case in Detroit (Cullen, 2004; Hochschild, 1995; Lee & Nelson, 2018).

The American Dream of upward mobility resulted in a middle class that could afford, through suspicious loans and constructions with the bank, their own houses and pieces of land and their own car. Homeownership therefore, became an expression of autonomy and part of the American Dream for many (Rohe, Zandt, & McCarthy, n.d.; Viator & Halper, 2014). Suburbs got designed for the middle class and around the car. Believed was that everybody had the right to owning a house and piece of land. (Detroit Future City, 2012; Florida, 2017; Neill, 2015). The American Dream however, evolved over the years into something exclusive for the white community, resulting in race and economic segregation (Lee & Nelson, 2018; Neill, 2015).

This rapport would argue that the American Dream is an underlying root cause for all the events that led to the bankruptcy and that it is an ideology that raged on far too long in Detroit, and in America. The decline of Detroit, with at its peak the bankruptcy, was the result of many different processes. A city once inhabited by over 1.5 million people, and thus designed for so many people, is now being left with not even the half of that (Statistical Atlas, 2018). While people moved to the suburbs they left behind a deserted downtown. Resulting in urban blight and a shattered urban fabric, and above all resulting in a city without a centre (Neill, 2015). The events that led to the bankruptcy, with at its heart the American Dream, are distinguished in the following topics.

A new middle class arouse: the domination of the car industry and the transformation of Detroit.
The car industry in Detroit was particularly influential in shaping the city. The arrival of the automobile manufacturers created many new jobs, leading to a population boom and the arise of the middle-class (Florida, 2017; Vojnovic & Darden, 2013). It was Henry Ford who endeavoured a world in where the assembly line workers should be paid enough to buy the cars they were making. As (Bentley, McCutcheon, Cromley, & Hanink,

2016) point out that Union wages provided decent standards of living and even spilled over into non-union occupations so that service sector workers such as grocery store clerks had reasonable incomes as well. As household incomes grew, and low-paying manufacturing jobs turned into new middle-class salaries, people left the cities for the suburbs and Detroit transformed (Bentley et al., 2016; Florida, 2017). New dwellings were built, aimed at the aspirations of the middle-class auto worker. Large neighbourhoods of single-family detached homes spread out across the city. The building plots were large and enabled residents to have room for the private owned cars (Detroit Future City, 2012; Florida, 2017). Once a sign of the American Dream, these neighbourhoods were never

as efficient to serve as more mixed-use, compact neighbourhoods would have been. While cities of Detroit's vintage-built subways, Detroit never did. Hence, Detroit never developed the increasing capacity to move its population, which by freeing its roads would increase capacity to transport goods. Without a subway, Detroit was not able to achieve the residential and business concentrations in its core that comparable cities realized (Vojnovic, 2006). Detroit's population increased to over 1.8 million at the city's peak in 1950, where after it only decreased. The over sized neighbourhoods, and over- scaled systems that serve them, fell on hard times as the city lost population and revenue (Detroit Future City, 2012).
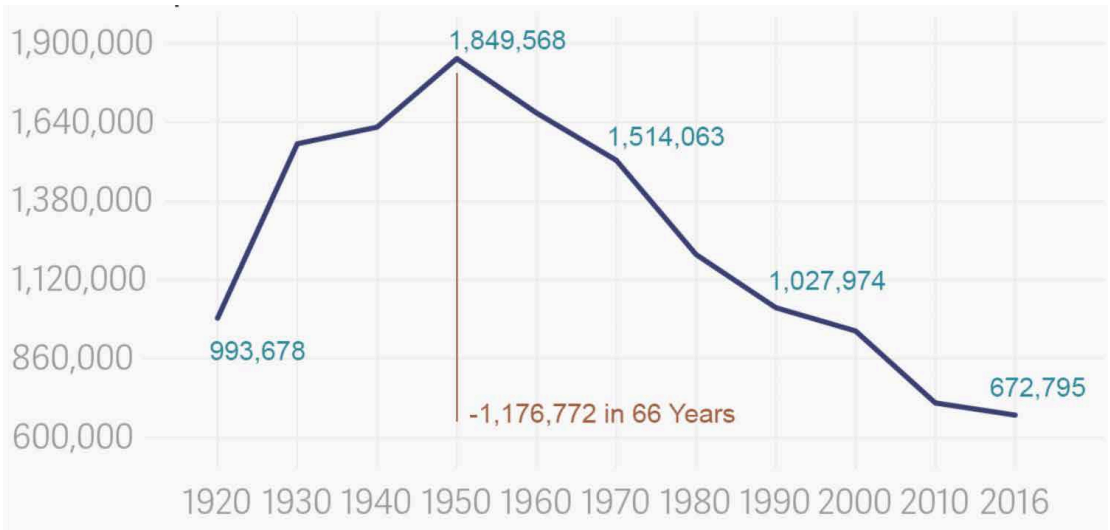

Figure 1.1 The population decline of Detroit over the years

The flight to the suburbs and the fall of the middle class: the glory days are over.

While the city of Detroit lost an astounding 57 percent population between 1970 and 2010 (Benfield, 2011), the population of its suburbs grew 27 percent and the physical size of metropolitan Detroit expanded by 50 percent (Xie, Gong, Lan, & Zeng, 2018). This suburbanization of auto investment had severe impacts on the city, since many managers and other white-collar auto company employees had moved to the suburbs as well. The suburbanization was largely a white process, many Detroit suburbs aggressively prevented black families from moving to white areas. Due to urban sprawl, Detroit's population was more than cut in half and its proportion of Black population substantially increased from 1970 to 2010. While the Black population decreased by about 70,000 the non- Black population decreased by more than 725,000. Bentley et al. (2016) state that the cycle of the glory days of Detroit broke down when an ongoing decline in American manufacturing employment began in the 1970s due to the acceleration of globalization of production as well as increasing automation. A downward spiral began; the working class shrank, the city lost population, the real estate market declined, the tax base was undermined, city services suffered, people moved away, and housing vacancy increased.

Urban Blight: the abandoned city.

While regional sprawl and fragmentation are at the core of Detroit's abandonment, spatial decentralization of the metropolis fostered geographic divisions between affluent and mobile populations, isolating the disadvantaged left behind in the inner city. The downward trends in economic and social conditions resulted in joblessness, housing foreclosures and abandoned structures disproportionately experienced by residents in the central city. Since 2005, 1-in-3 Detroit properties have been foreclosed, owing to mortgage defaults or foreclosures for delinquent taxes, and amounting to a total of almost 14,000 foreclosed homes (Macdonald & Kurth, 2015) These massive foreclosures have led to abandonment, squatting, demolition, blight, and devastation for surrounding communities. Detroit has become a surreal patchwork of still-dense neighborhoods separated by nearly empty expanses of land (Detroit Future City, 2012; Macdonald & Kurth, 2015).

Rising problems: poverty, crime and lack of education.

Poverty and economic and racial segregation got intertwined with Detroit over the years (Draus,

Roddy, & McDuffie, 2018; Florida, 2017). Even after the bankruptcy, Detroit is the second most distressed city in the United States, with a poverty rate of 40 percent and a housing vacancy rate of 29 percent (Draus et al., 2018). Detroit is also notorious for its crime, its violent crime and homicide rates, at 2137 and 48.2 per 100,000 residents respectively, have earned Detroit the nickname of 'most dangerous city in America'. Moreover, only 8.7 percent of crimes go solved compared to the statewide average of 30.5 percent (Macdonald & Hunter, 2018). Detroit is also struggling to provide good education. In 2015 the majority of students graduating from institutions in Detroit were white. In this group of 5,799 graduates there were 1.56 times more white graduates than the next closest race/ethnicity group, Black or African American, with 3,717 graduates ('Detroit, MI', n.d.). The Detroit Public Schools have the worst test scores and graduation rates of the United States of America. A study conducted by the CBS news stated that the number of schools with an "adequate" level of education is less than 25 percent ('Nation report card ranks Detroit schools worst', 2018).

The fallen city: the bankruptcy of Detroit.
The American Dream, the increased middle-class,

the car industry, urban sprawl, urban blight all contributed in the fallen city with at its peak the bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013. The city had become unsustainable, driving a course that eventually resulted in the collapse of the city. In 2013, Detroit became the largest city to enter bankruptcy in the United States of America (Farley, 2015). From over 1.5 million inhabitants to a bankruptcy, some disturbing facts (Farley, 2015; Neill, 2015):

- From 1950 to 2013, the population fell by 63 percent;
- From 1950 to 2013, the number of occupied homes and apartments fell by 49 percent;
- From 1950 to 2013, the number of Detroit residents holding a job declined by 74 percent;
- From 1947 to 2012, the number of manufacturing firms in the city fell by 88 percent;
- From 1947 to 2012, the number of manufacturing workers employed in the city fell by 95 percent;
- From 1947 to 2007, the number of retail stores fell by 88 percent;
- From 1947 to 2007, the number of wholesale businesses fell by 88 percent.

Vision

Detroit is on its way back from a bankruptcy that hit the city hard. It did not come as a surprise and perhaps it was just what Detroit needed. The Future Detroit City document was a good start to get Detroit back on track. However, there is more effort needed, especially from inhabitants, before big problems as poverty, crime or urban blight are somehow recovered. It is especially here, on the people level, where Detroit need hard work. There need to be a shift in attitude and habits of the people. This is going to take years. Policy and Urban Design are only part of the solution. Different areas of Detroit need to be treated differently and once abandoned areas will be having trouble to recover.

The vision of Detroit will therefore, focus on two topics that together aim to recover shattered urban fabric and revitalize the important clusters. The two main topics which will be addressed in this vision will be 'mixed clusters' and 'transit for the city'. Every topic is important on its own but together they really can make a difference. Every vital city needs clusters with mixed-use and high-density backup up by a transit system that can move people from one to another. This is the vital system of a city and Detroit is currently lacking one. It is too reliant on a car infrastructure resulting in urban sprawl that is good for nobody.

It may look like a good idea to give the whole city the same treatment, however Speck (2013) would argue that a much more refined strategy would be to pick your winners and focus on them. One cannot pay the same attention to every neighbourhood and street in Detroit – it is simply too big for that. But one can however, focus on the neighbourhoods and streets with already some potential. It is much easier to strengthen them than to revive a neighbourhood where nobody is coming anyways.

When one revitalizes the clusters and the potential great areas then gradually the rest will follow. It will be an example and people tend to join the party. The areas around it will also get new energy.

Of course, the rest of the city tend not to be forgotten and has in the long run going to need the same attention and care. But as a starting point it is much better for the city to pick your winners and focus on them.
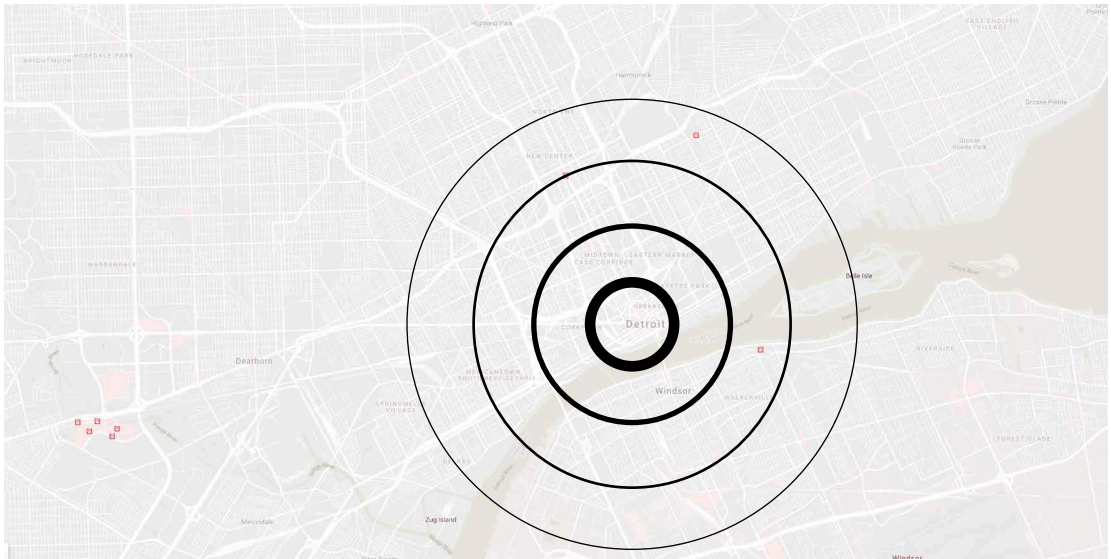
Figure 2.1 Illustrating the influence downtown can have for the city

Figure 2.2 The skyline of Detroit may look surreal, the problems it is facing are still real

Strategy

Mixed clusters

Focus on important clusters - *by strengthening different clusters in Detroit – downtown in particular – the idea is that if one gets the clusters right they will positively be of influence on the surrounding.*

Clustering can be seen as one of the thriving forces of a city, it reinforces urban density and is a key driver in economic growth (Florida, 2017). It is concentration, not dispersion, which it the elixir of urbanity Clusters who are dispersed over the city provide inhabitants with quick access to different needs such as work, shop, eat, drink, learn, recreate, worship, heal, visit, celebrate, or sleep (Speck, 2013). Clusters can be the heart of a community, with their own centre and edges (Speck, 2013). The best clusters are usually the mid-rise, mixed-use density clusters that promote mixing and interaction. Filled with different kinds of housing – industrial lofts together with renovated office towers and social housing – this enables constant mixing and interaction to take place (Florida, 2017). Detroit, known for its sprawl, is a city which occupies a lot of land but very few clusters which can provide inhabitants with a own community or the amenities they need.

Because clusters make up communities and are at the heart of the urban fabric, the idea is to strengthen the clusters who are already present and use them as the hubs that will connect the city (Florida, 2017). One cluster that will be particularly important, as it is the core of every city, is downtown. Downtown is a cluster that got abandoned years ago with the flight of people to the suburbs. However, it is now on its way back and things are starting to look brighter again. Downtown got all the ingredients of being a great cluster that supports economic growth and empowers the rest of the city. It is a combination of mid- and high-rise, there is a mixed-use density and it has interesting places for people to visit (Crawford, 2018).

Some may ask, why would one focus on these clusters and downtown first? Why working on downtown if it's already in a better shape than most of the neighbourhoods, and why not make plans for every community? Well, downtown is the only part in the city that belongs to everyone. It was for a long time left alone, being a ghost town, however it is still the heart of the city. And it does not matter if you live in a gated community or if you are being surrounded by vacant plots because everybody can access downtown. Therefore, any progress in downtown and thus in the city can be made directly visible to everyone. This area needs to serve as an example and have a positive influence on the rest of the city. In a city as big as Detroit it is
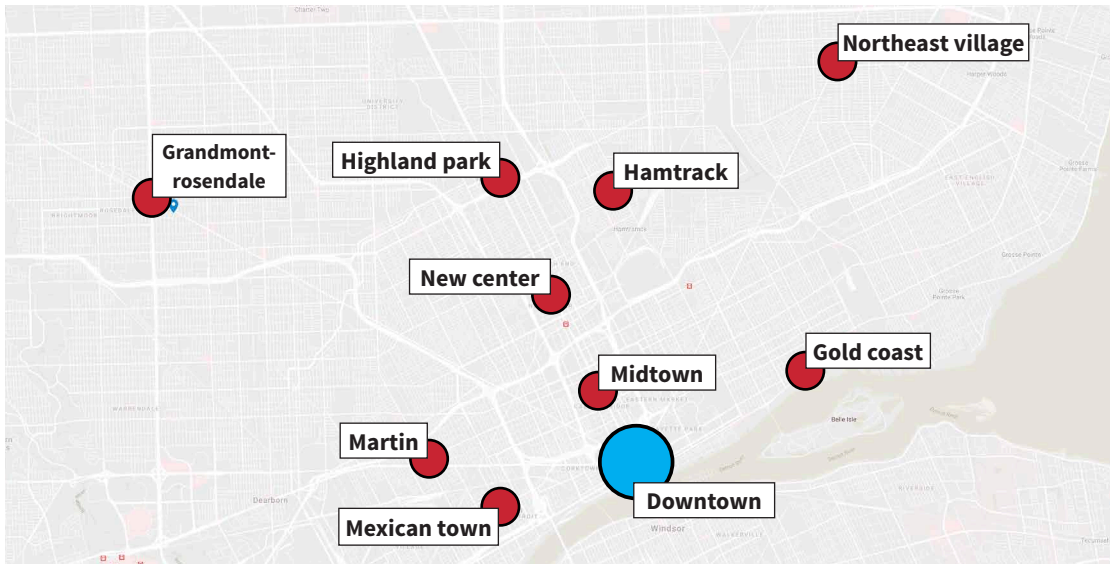
Figure 3.1 The clusters which the strategy will focus on

hard to address the whole city at once, beginning at downtown and the clusters and thus giving the city a body, is a good starting point.

However, with the scale of Detroit and the spread-out community, focussing on downtown may be a good starting point, but more clusters are needed to support the Detroiters. Based on 'areas of interest' of Google Maps , the Detroit Strategic Future Plan (2018), and the Detroit Future City (2012) framework, different clusters got selected (figure 3.1). These clusters all have already some form of mixed-use and mid-rise buildings are a good starting point for more walkable urbanism. The clusters can be connected to downtown with an expanded transit network, which will allow the cluster to be in direct contact with downtown. Some clusters are already doing a fairly good job at prioritizing the pedestrian and bicyclist over the car but some of them need some work. By upgrading these clusters, the idea is that these places will become a connection to downtown and will have a positive influence on the neighbourhood. With place-based investments such as better roads a more mixed-use program people can, once they arrive at a cluster, stay here or move through the city by transit. The idea is to create a place where people can work and stay, removing the need to drive outwards the city. The clusters will form the heart of a community and will connect people with downtown.

Transit for the city

Transit that connects the clusters with downtown

- *build a transit system around the light rail network (the Q-line) that will push the city closer together and that will strengthen the clusters and downtown.*

With the introduction of the Q-line in 2017, Detroit has started to expand its transit infrastructure. The Q-line is a light-rail line that is running in a straight line along Woodward Avenue, connecting downtown with new town (Lawrence, 2017). The Q-line is a good start of investing in infrastructure and supporting neighbourhoods. The idea therefore is, to embrace this light-rail line and expand it with more lines connecting the clusters with downtown. Figure … shows how the clusters will be connected to each other. The full transit system is showed in figure …. This map, originally intended as a fantasy map for the metro of Detroit, will serve as a blueprint for the expansion of the light-rail transit system.

Currently, the City of Detroit made plans to connect the Detroit region with a bus system that will serve the city (Detroit City, 2018). However, there are numerous advantages of a light-rail system over a bus system. Light rail systems in Detroit will have their own place on the road and therefore won't be affected by congestion. A light-rail system will

not go anywhere once it is completed, meaning that clusters can be built around stops with the assurance that the clusters will be served over the next decades. In traditional cities, transit stops are the reason that real estate around these stops has seen a significant increase in value and price. Also, unless busses get their own dedicated lane – which is not the case in the current plan- busses won't ride at the same frequency and can transport the same amount of passengers a light rail can.

Detroit missed the dismissed the opportunity to build a metro line long ago and instead focused on creating more roads to support its infrastructure. The result is that Detroit is built around the car and that congestion became a major issue (Vojnovic, 2006). One could argue that building a metro system is a perfect opportunity for Detroit to connect its clusters and relieve its traffic system. However, if one has to be realistic a metro system is probably going to turn out way too expensive.

The expansion of the light-rail network can therefore, be a solution. When done good, the light-rail network will have its own place on the road, meaning it won't be affected by congestion, resulting in a much quicker and efficient way of transportation than the car will ever be. The road infrastructure can be utilized, making more place for the light-rail and less for the car. The city can now

narrow down its street, reducing car traffic, and can offer a more sustainable solution in return, namely the Light-rail. Research shows that transit-served neighbourhoods provide better access to jobs and improve residents' changes for upward mobility. Expanding transit with the light-rail system can help with this, enabling greater numbers of people, especially in less advantaged neighbourhoods, to gain access to them, while also connecting downtown with the rest of the city (Wang & Woo, 2017).

Transit oriented street design - *every transit stop needs its own place on the road and needs to be at the centre of the clusters.*

In order to let the light-rail system succeed it need to get a couple of things right. First, depending on the location, the streets need to be re-designed for the light-rail. In downtown and in the clusters, where there is slow traffic and which has increased density, the light-rail network can function as a street car and thus serve the pedestrians directly (figure 3.2). In these zones the light-rail functions as a 'pedestrian accelerator'. In between the clusters, on roads with higher speeds, the light-rail network will need its own place. A dedicated two-way lane in the centre of the road will be made in order to serve the network (figure 3.3). In these zones the light-rail will operate at higher speeds, bringing the clusters closer together.

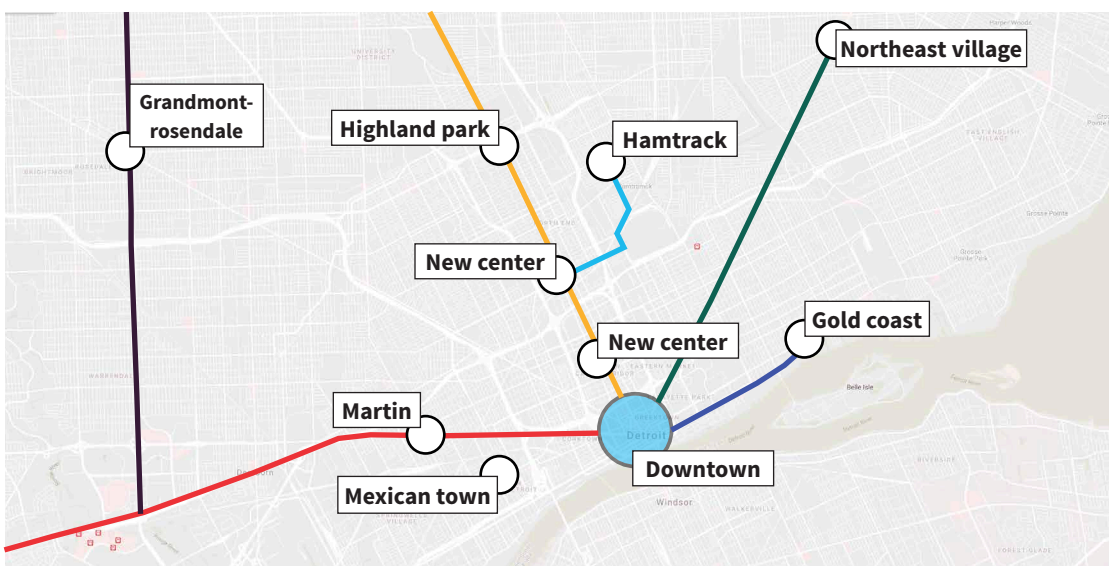With this lane introduced, the space for the car on

Figure 3.2 The connection of the clusters

the road is reduced. Meaning, if the same number of cars will keep using the road, congestion will increase. The idea is therefore, when there is less room for the car this will encourage people to get on a transit line as soon as possible in order to reach downtown. Resulting in less congestion, and transit and pedestrian oriented streets.

Different streets with different designs are needed to support the light rail at different pieces of the track.

Some streets will be narrowed down to reserve space for the light-rail. Designing for transit thus, becomes a very important part to let the transit system succeed.

Encourage the use of transit - *besides a decent system and carefully developed clusters, a shift in mentality is needed.*
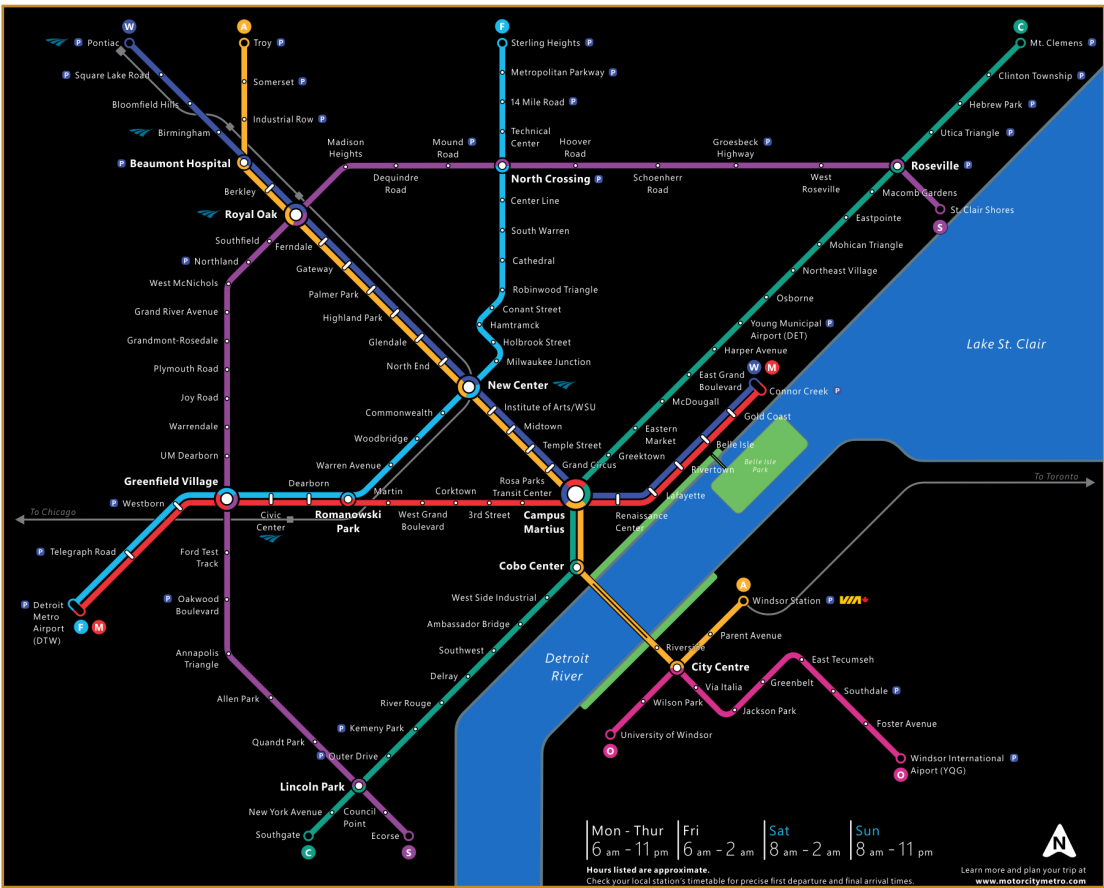

Figure 3.3 Fantasy map of the Detroit metro subway system

For decades, cars determined how the urban fabric looked like, the city is built around cars and people are being left no other choice than driving with the car to their destination (Vojnovic & Darden, 2013). Very important thus, to let transit take off ground in Detroit, is a shift in mentality, moving towards a more transit-oriented mind-set. The transit system needs to become the life vain of the city. While of course, the last thing we want to do is get rid of the car entirely – which would be like telling a obese person to stop eating at all - we want to provide Detroit with a system that is able to support clusters and can move people around the city regardless if they are having a car or not.

Therefore, it is important to build a transit system that appeals to the Detroiters as an alternative to the car. As Speck (2013) would argue there are four key things to get right when it comes to urban transit, namely; urbanity, clarity, frequency and pleasure. Urbanity means that transit needs to deliver you right at the action. You have to be able

to fall from the light-rail stop directly into a coffee shop. Clarity means that the routes are simple and direct with as few diversions as possible. Frequency means that ten-minute headways is the aim for the light-rail, preferably even more frequent. And last, pleasure means that the ride needs to be a comfortable experience and the stops need to be easy accessible. A good addition would be the reliability of the system. You will always rely on the transit system to take you home and being it on time.

In clarity and pleasure the current line is doing a great job, it is a nice ride and since there is only one line things are really simple. However, at frequency and reliability the current light-rail is missing the boat. The light-rail leaves every 15 minutes, which is too much for it to be a convenient way of moving through the city. Also, the reliability leaves to wishes - in the first year there were on average five stoppages per week, due to weather conditions or parked car on the streets (Dawsey,

Figure 3.4 A dedicated line for the light-rail

Figure 3.4 A imagined mixed use zone oriented around transit

2018). It is thus important to get these points right in order to provide an appealing alternative to moving through the city.

To further support transit we will encourage people to get to downtown by transit instead of taking the car. Parking spaces will be built at transit stops. Allowing people to park their car and got dropped off by the light-rail right in the city centre while avoiding congestion totally. As addiction to this parking in the city centre can be made more expensive, encouraging people even more to leave their car at the suburbs and take the transit instead.

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