

Drawing on Detroit Forum Applies Lessons from City's Resurgence to the Future of Other American Cities

By Susan Wampler

Cities in crisis are crucibles for bold leadership. Such was the premise that led to a yearlong inquiry undertaken by The USC Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy (The Center) in partnership with The Kresge Foundation. The project began with an in-depth examination of the unprecedented cross-sector collaboration that led to Detroit's revitalization and the lessons it might hold for driving next-generation urban policy and practice throughout the U.S. The effort quickly expanded to a national dialogue fueled by a series of roundtable discussions and a three-day leadership forum – Drawing on Detroit: Bold Leadership and the Future of American Cities.

Held May 4-5 in Los Angeles, the Drawing on Detroit forum attracted more than 175 thought leaders, including delegations from 16 cities across the country. The gathering explored insights that emerged from earlier roundtable discussions in New York and Washington, D.C.

"Although Detroit is our starting point, it provides a way to anchor larger conversation about bold leadership, enabling conditions, and inventive approaches and structures that can shape the future of American cities," said James Ferris, director of The Center and Emery Evans Olson Chair in Nonprofit Entrepreneurship and Public Policy at the USC Price School of Public Policy.

"We're all witness to a changing municipal calculus in which roles and responsibilities of all sectors are not quite as hard and fast as we once thought, and that wading into the unruly and unpredictable realms of one another's sectors can be a necessary part of getting things done," observed The Kresge Foundation CEO and President Rip Rapson.

"There's an opportunity for cities pursuing analogous approaches to learn from each other, to compare notes, to diversify the experimentation, and spark each other to the next stage of creativity," added Elwood Hopkins, founder and managing director of Emerging Markets, Inc. "A lot of individual ideas start to add up to a new vision that is a qualitative leap forward."

The notion of community and how it is defined must underpin any discussion of how to transform cities in decline, said Heinz Endowments President Grant Oliphant in the opening plenary session. "Community is really the core crisis of our time," he said. "We are doing battle at a global, national, and local level with concepts of throwaway people and throwaway places. What I think stands out about Detroit is that a group of foundations decided to go deep on this core concept of community and how to reinvent it to make it work."

Significant takeaways from Detroit's resurgence not only included the philanthropic community's extraordinary investment of resources but also its willingness to engage with a dysfunctional city government, and how it took cues directly from the community and employed a "whatever-it-takes" leadership approach to urban revitalization.

Moderated by Fred Ali, chair of The Center's Board of Advisors and Weingart Foundation president and CEO, the panel also included Fred Blackwell, CEO of the San Francisco Foundation, and Kathryn Merchant, former president and CEO of The Greater Cincinnati Foundation.

Elaborating on the theme of community, Merchant noted that evidence of Detroit's decline was visible well before the bankruptcy and that Detroit, unfortunately, is not unique in this regard. She emphasized the importance of building relationships within and between sectors early on so that potential crises can be averted entirely or managed more quickly.

"You don't have to be very knowledgeable about Detroit to know that the revitalization of our urban centers is an all-hands-on-deck kind of activity that really needs to involve philanthropy," said Blackwell, who previously served as interim city administrator for Oakland, California. He urged foundation leaders to be prepared for the "messiness of the political process, the morass of bureaucracy" and to be mindful of the heightened accountability involved in partnering with the public sector.

"It is difficult to authentically engage in this conversation about strategies for revitalization without dealing with race," he added. "The issue of race is not one we have dealt with effectively or comfortably in philanthropy or in local government." In cities from Baltimore to Detroit to Oakland, he noted that much of the current context of urban decline evolved from segregation, desegregation, and white flight from inner cities.

That concern emerged again in the first day's keynote conversation between Rip Rapson and Kevyn Orr, a partner with law firm Jones Day and the former emergency manager for Detroit. In addition to sharing illustrative details of how Detroit emerged from bankruptcy to resurgence, Orr emphasized how certain policies related to housing and the transfer of wealth were designed to ensure that African-Americans could not participate in the process. "Some of the economic decay and income inequality was by design, and it expressed itself very clearly in some places like Detroit," he said.

The second day of the forum opened with a plenary discussion on Enabling Environments and Timelines for Change, moderated by The Kresge Foundation Senior Fellow Carol Coletta with panelists Jill Blickstein, managing director of corporate responsibility for JPMorgan Chase; George McCarthy, president of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; and Laura Sparks, executive director of the William Penn Foundation. The panel discussed the conditions that are paving the way for turnaround in Detroit

and other cities, as well as the elements needed to sustain the arc of growth as urban centers stabilize and work toward a new equilibrium.

The morning also included a series of TED-style talks and breakout sessions on land use, economic development, and placemaking that featured the implementation efforts of Detroit Future City and the Motor City Match Program, as well as presentation and discussion on the role of the arts and Detroit's Eastern Market in community building.

The focus of the afternoon plenary session on Building Economic Flywheels centered on the role of small-business development in creating income-generating opportunities for low-income residents and ultimately restoring market confidence. The session was moderated by Benjamin Kennedy, managing director of The Kresge Foundation's American Cities Project, who defined flywheels as the transference of energy from smaller objects — such as entrepreneurial efforts — to help lift and provide momentum for larger entities — namely the for-profit sector, government and social sector.

The panel comprised Omar Blaik, CEO and co-founder of U3Advisors; Amy Liu, vice president and co-director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings Institution; Rodrick Miller, CEO of the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation; and Dan Nissenbaum, managing director of Goldman Sachs' Urban Investment Group.

"How do you create market traction when the economy isn't there and the demand isn't there?" asked Liu. "Why not create self-employment opportunities and concentrate them in a set of neighborhoods?" She emphasized the role of philanthropy in Detroit in stimulating both demand and growth.

In the closing plenary, moderator and Urban Institute President Sarah Wartell elicited insights on the future of bold urban leadership from former New Orleans mayor and current National Urban League President Marc Morial; former Houston mayor and current Harvard Kennedy School of Government Resident Fellow Annise Parker; Rock Ventures President and CEO Matt Cullen; and University of Chicago Vice President for Civic Engagement Derek Douglas. Together, they pondered the innovative thoughts and actions that will be needed to achieve continued progress for communities in the years to come.

Regarding Detroit's recovery, Wartell observed that the next phase — making it inclusive — may be the most difficult. "You need the flywheel to start catching for a broader cross-section of the public in the city, to make sure that the momentum is not only in the downtown or around the corridors, but in the neighborhoods," she said.

Flexibility is essential, as each sector's role may shift as the process evolves, she added. In Detroit, "the private sector and philanthropy played the lead role for a period. And then in time ... public leadership came in."

Morial discussed how the roles of the private sector and philanthropy extend further than money. “They’ve got to bring their voice and intellectual capital to bear on a community’s most difficult problems.”

Douglas talked about how Detroit has not only served as an example but also as an inspiration for federal reform that led to such endeavors as Strong Cities, Strong Communities. “It enabled the federal government and those of us in the White House who wanted to work on cities to build an initiative that reached many more cities,” said Douglas, who previously served on the White House Domestic Policy Council as special assistant to President Obama.

“There’s not a major American city that doesn’t have some significant challenges,” Parker noted. Success in addressing them depends on “the individual dynamics of that particular crisis [and] the individual dynamics of the personalities involved.”

Crises can also bring certain advantages in solving them, she added. “A crisis allows you to step out of your normal patterns. It focuses your attention and allows you to think in new ways.”

The panel agreed on the importance of engaging the next generation, from children to young professionals, to be future leaders capable of meeting the next crises with new ideas.

In wrapping up the forum, both Ferris and Rapson emphasized that the closing session was by no means the end of the conversation, as additional convenings and resources are anticipated to follow.

“What’s become apparent to me,” said Ferris, “is the rebirth of place-based philanthropy. To really solve a community’s problems, you need philanthropy and the private sector to support the formal institutions of government.”

Based in the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy focuses on philanthropic strategies for public problem solving. The Center is a key part of the Price School’s mission of working to improve the quality of life for people and their communities, here and abroad.

[The Center’s website](#) contains more information about the roundtables and forum, including photos, videos, background material, and the Drawing on Detroit program — as well as the national advisory board members who were instrumental to the yearlong inquiry.