

Introduction

I followed Jerome down the crumbling sidewalk in his Westside Detroit neighborhood. The sidewalk narrowed where grass and weeds had won the fight with the concrete, leaving only a small tread left open from feet trampling through. On our right, we passed by several burnt-out houses with collapsed porches. Sandwiched in between the charred remains was a dingy white post-war bungalow. It sagged visibly in the middle, looking tired from struggling to keep up appearances amidst the disrepair. An elderly woman sat on the front porch, waving to Jerome and greeting us as we walked. He stopped and chatted with her for a moment before we continued.

“Here’s the garden,” he said. Jerome pointed up ahead to an entire city block, vacant of any homes but filled with brightly colored raised beds that were lined up neatly across the lots. A tiny orchard of young fruit trees filled another section. At the far end in a grassy area was a homemade projector screen—a large wood panel painted white—facing lawn chairs arranged in a semicircle. His neighbors—skeptical at first—love it. Jerome put local kids to work on these gardens, and hosted neighborhood meals from its bounty. He didn’t mean to become a community organizer or a food activist, Jerome says. Instead, these gardens and community space grew from his frustration with the conditions of his neighborhood, overlooked by a

municipality that does not have the resources for maintenance. Jerome was merely out one cold winter day trying to unclog the sewer drains at the intersection at the end of his block. He wanted to keep the street from flooding as the snow melted. His father sent his younger brothers out to help him, asking Jerome to keep them busy. Once the drains were clear he looked around and thought, “What else can we do?” His gaze settled on the vacant lots straddling either side of the intersection. He decided that they would clean them up once the snow thawed, and after they did that, Jerome kept adding projects to keep the momentum going. First some planter boxes, then a compost pile, next some fruit trees. Then he came home one afternoon to find some neighbors building the projector screen.

Jerome did not own any of these lots, nor did he and his neighbors have explicit permission from the owners to use them. Bank of America owned some, the city of Detroit others. Jerome looked up the owners online when he began to clean them up but had since forgotten where the lot lines of one owner began and another ended. *It’s irrelevant*, he said, *because nobody minds*.

On the contrary, police officers often joined in, pulling up their squad cars to catch a glimpse of the game on the projector. Once, Jerome was interviewed for a panel on some of the promising aspects of urban agriculture in Detroit; many city officials were in attendance. Afterward, Jerome stood up and turned around to find Dave Bing, the mayor at that time, reaching out to shake his hand. Jerome grinned as he recounted Mayor Bing telling him: “You know, I’ve heard everything you’ve been doing . . . I appreciate what you’re doing. Continue to do what you need to do, to do what you do.” Jerome explained that to him, this meant doing things informally, without express permission, even when he was technically violating the law.

To people familiar with Detroit, this story is not surprising, so commonplace are various informal uses of property. Recently, much attention has been paid to urban agriculture that, in many contexts, proliferates without express permission. But community gardens are but one kind of technically illegal property use that shapes the city of Detroit and the lives of its residents. Squatting, blotting (“squatting the block”), demolition, scrapping, salvaging, and art projects are commonplace as well.

While a resident of Detroit for 4½ years, I conducted ethnographic research and sixty-five in-depth interviews, learning about and document-

ing these practices. I interviewed residents illegally using property to find out why they did it and what it was like for them. I interviewed their neighbors to find out how they felt about these practices nearby, and often discovered that they too were illegally using property in some form or another. I talked with city officials and local authorities to find out how they responded, both on the books and off, to illegal uses of property. Through this research, I discovered not only how prevalent these practices are, but how they influence the form of the city and the experiences of everyday life for residents. Neighbors I spoke with recalled decades of demolishing nearby drug houses together, stepping in to keep their neighborhoods safe when the city would not. A mother and her son showed me how they kept their squatted house warm in the bitterly cold Michigan winters despite not having electricity. Other squatters explained enjoying the process of building rain collection and heating devices (like furnaces out of 55-gallon drums) to get by without utilities. I met with longtime residents who refused to leave after their homes were taken via tax foreclosure, steadily paying the utility bills to keep the heat and lights on despite their now technically illegal residency. I learned how scrappers earn meager income picking through the remains of burnt houses or by dismantling pieces of old buildings and selling their finds at scrapyards. And I followed salvagers as they foraged through Detroit's decaying buildings, looking for everything from extra bricks to unique architectural pieces to use in home renovation or art projects.

In less eyebrow-raising form, but technically no less illegal, residents in my neighborhood a few miles from Downtown Detroit rounded up supplies to board up an abandoned commercial strip, painting the boards lively lavender and turquoise after affixing them to the building and cleaning up broken glass. In another neighborhood, a local artist helped children paint butterflies across abandoned buildings. Dotted lots throughout the city are informal play and parking spaces, unsanctioned community gardens, and *de jure* illegal art installations using empty land or abandoned buildings

What practices like these all have in common is that they are made possible in part by the illegal appropriation of real property—land, houses, or buildings. That is, residents occupy, take over, use, take from, alter, deconstruct, trespass across, or otherwise engage with real property that they

have no formal legal right to. I call these residents “appropriators.”¹ But, unlike many illegal activities, the laws and regulations surrounding these practices are poorly enforced and many of these practices have gained legitimacy in Detroit, in large part because of the positive effects they have for individual residents, community dynamics, and the built environment of distressed neighborhoods.²

The prevalence of practices that brazenly transgress property laws may be unthinkable in a different urban context, such as in booming cities where there is competition for urban property and authorities reliably uphold private property rights and enforce regulations. But increasingly, scholars are uncovering the ways that informality—the proliferation of illegal or effectively unregulated but commonly accepted/legitimated practices—shapes the form of the built environment and the everyday experiences of residents in the United States, from Los Angeles³ to Philadelphia⁴ to rural Texas.⁵ It is productive for scholarship and policy to recognize the way informality shapes cities and spaces beyond the Global South, where squatter settlements and informal economic activities are common and have been well researched.

The informal practices that are the focus of this book violate laws of land and property ownership. This kind of informality needs interstitial, poorly regulated spaces in which to proliferate, which declining US cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh or Buffalo have in abundance. Urban decline or “shrinkage” is a process of urban change stimulated by global/regional drivers like economic shifts, demographic changes, suburbanization, political conflicts, or natural disasters. At the local level, decline manifests with decreasing populations and the resulting underutilization of housing and infrastructure, and diminished tax revenues.⁶ In post-industrial Rust Belt cities in the United States, these changes leave behind vacant homes, abandoned garages, defunct factories, and empty lots. On, within, and through these spaces arise diverse informal practices in Detroit, undertaken by residents from varied backgrounds seeking to meet a plethora of different needs and desires. Poor residents take over property to meet daily needs like shelter and income. More stable long-time residents, like Jerome, use property without permission as part of their repertoire, developed over time, for negotiating the difficult conditions of the city. While more privileged newcomers to the city often occupy

houses or land as a kind of urban pioneering adventure. These practices unfold against the historical backdrop of suburbanization, white flight, institutional racism, and the enduring spatiality of racial segregation.

Real property is a particularly salient element of both social and spatial dimensions of urban life, and purports to function very differently under conditions of growth versus decline. Under the former, property is in high demand, low supply, and often increasing in economic value (a central concern during processes of gentrification). In many growing urban spaces in the United States, private ownership of real property is a source of investment and stability, and a state tool for sociospatial control. But under conditions of decline, property is in abundant supply, holds little economic value, and is often a liability more than an investment. These conditions help to promote property usage that transgresses formal property laws and rights, as residents reimagine the physical environment of their neighborhoods.

In the United States, what I call “property informality” (informal practices that arise from the transgression of laws regulating real property—land, houses, and buildings) has been overlooked by researchers. Property law-breaking violates very deeply held American values about the sanctity of private property ownership. And our legal, regulatory, surveillance, and governance systems are staunchly committed to protecting private property rights as a kind of public good. Thus, in some ways, it is difficult to conceive of property informality as being at all prevalent in the United States.

At the same time, some legal scholarship has argued that property law violations like nineteenth-century homesteaders or civil rights protests have influenced the transformation of real property law over time.⁷ Others have noted how informal practices can act as “law” when they are upheld and promoted by authorities.⁸ In furthering our understanding of everyday life, studying informality also deepens our understanding of formal rules and norms, how they might change, and why they are sometimes not enforced. In Detroit, the illegality of practices such as squatting, scraping, or gardening does not explain who participates, who does not, nor how neighbors or even authorities respond. Instead, many forms of illegal property use have achieved a level of legitimacy and are common among residents, in part due to the constructive impacts they can have for individuals and their communities. The sociospatial conditions of decline

have altered the social relations of real property, and a different framework—one that decouples the law and legitimacy—is needed for understanding these practices.

This book borrows epistemological insights from scholarship on urban informality in the Global South to understand the sociospatial dynamics of Detroit. Focusing on *informality* rather than *illegality* illuminates facets of everyday life and the form of the city that elude the strict dichotomy of legal/licit and illegal/illicit. Using this framework reveals Detroit as a city whose form and content is comprised of an intricate interweaving of informality and legality: they depend on each other rather than one substituting for the other.⁹

Dominant approaches to managing urban problems have largely failed to tune in to the dynamics of informality in the Global North, particularly in the United States. Yet there are social costs to policymakers' and urban authorities' ignorance of the way that informality shapes daily life in cities and regions of the United States. In the context of decline, the consequences of this lag are significant for how new regulations and revitalization strategies reproduce longstanding urban inequalities. This book explains why property informality arises and how alternative ways of using and relating to property shape neighborhood conditions and community dynamics in Detroit. I elucidate the constructive impacts of property informality that have bolstered various practices' legitimacy among residents and authorities. I draw out the important, fine-grained differences in informal practices which, in the eyes of the law, are largely the same. These differences are consequential for the disparate ways in which new property regulations impact residents: formalizing the practices of more privileged newcomers while criminalizing and erasing the informal practices of longtime residents.

More broadly, this book contributes to sociological understandings of declining cities, informality, and property. First, I show how property informality is intertwined with formality across the social and spatial landscape of a declining city, identifying various alternative ways of using and relating to property that persist in the city. And second, I uncover how the interface of the formal and informal reproduces inequalities in ways that declining cities aiming to revitalize must confront. Scholarship on urban informality in the Global South over the past half-decade has

produced a wealth of important knowledge about cities and urban life. Urban researchers in the United States should tune in to these epistemologies to inform our understandings of and possibilities for improving the conditions of declining cities in the Global North. Finally, this book reiterates the centrality and complexity of property relations for everyday life and calls us to critically engage with and challenge the liberal private property regime.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book unfolds as follows. Part I (chapters 1–3) provides an overview of the social and spatial conditions that lead to the concurrence of decline and property informality. In chapter 1, “Urban Decline and Informality,” I introduce readers to the process of urban decline and explain how it impacts urban conditions, property relations, and everyday life. I contextualize this arena of research with reference to my case: Detroit. I discuss some of the obstacles of existing plans and policies that attempt to intervene in the problems of urban decline. Finally, I scaffold existing research on urban informality to explain my analytical framework and define my concept “property informality.” I explain how the lens of informality can advance our understanding of declining cities in the United States.

In chapter 2, “Regulations and Enforcement,” I present four main reasons why the conditions of Detroit—and other declining cities—are ripe for informal practices that transgress property laws. First, there is a plethora of property vacancy and abandonment providing spatial opportunity for informal appropriation. Second, there is essentially no functioning monetary property market in many neighborhoods in Detroit. Third, city authorities are overburdened, underfunded, and do not effectively or uniformly enforce property laws. And fourth, there is a good deal of need and other motivation among residents to construct alternative use-values for the vacant property that surrounds them. Together, these conditions undermine the liberal private property regime and mean that resident and neighborhood well-being is often harmed by the enforcement of legal ownership. Residents find themselves with opportunities for *de jure* illegal property use that carry little risk of punishment because it is effectively

unregulated (meaning, existing regulations are rarely enforced and diminish in meaning).

In chapter 3, “From Illicit to Informal,” I explore the way that these *de jure* illegal—but effectively unregulated—practices achieve legitimacy in Detroit. I interrogate this transition, uncovering why residents and authorities in Detroit frequently accept or even encourage practices that violate property laws in their neighborhoods. Detroiters in my study view illegal property use as legitimate when it conforms to a community-embraced norm rooted in an ethos of care, requiring that appropriators demonstrate care for both the property and the community. Together, chapters 2 and 3 provide empirical evidence for why informality—not illegality—is an appropriate framework to better understand urban life in the context of decline.

Part II of the book focuses on appropriators (informal property users) and how their informal property use is integral to the experiences of everyday life in a declining city like Detroit. In chapter 4, “Beyond Politics or Poverty,” I argue that existing categories for understanding informal practices are not sufficient for capturing the diversity among appropriators in my study. I propose a typology of informal appropriation to make sense of the wide variation among appropriators and their practices in Detroit: Necessity Appropriation, Routine Appropriation, and Lifestyle Appropriation, highlighting how race, class, and place-based backgrounds are stratified across these types of appropriation. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 then explore in detail the different motivations, experiences, and material conditions of these three types of appropriation. Chapter 5 examines Necessity Appropriators who are poor, predominately Black residents of Detroit who rely on informal appropriation for meeting daily needs. These appropriators scrap metal to sell at scrapyards for quick cash and squat houses to secure adequate shelter for themselves and their families. Chapter 6 examines Lifestyle Appropriators who are predominately younger, white newcomers to the city who call their illegal occupation “homesteading,” start large farms and gardens, and salvage materials from vacant properties for art or remodeling supplies. Chapter 7 examines Routine Appropriators, more stable, longtime residents of the city, who informally use property as a coping mechanism developed over time for navigating the harsh conditions of the city. These residents help tear down