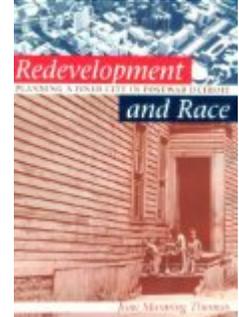


**June Manning Thomas.** *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. xx + 274 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5444-6.



**Reviewed by** Mike Smith

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Detroit is often considered to be the prototype for the declining American city. Ask someone to create a mental image of Detroit and that person may first think of crime, racial conflict, social disorder, deindustrialization, or general urban decay. Sadly, Detroit has indeed weathered an era of extreme social, political, and economic turmoil. Recent scholarship has investigated the history of the modern urban crisis in Detroit and other American cities, demonstrating the failures of federal and local policies, and the salient influence of race relations upon the urban environment. Building upon these conclusions, June Manning Thomas' *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* focuses upon a particular aspect of Detroit's troubled urban history: the role urban planners and planning institutions played in shaping the postwar city.

Thomas clearly states her major themes in the book's introduction. First, she asserts that past federal and local policies and programs were weak, ill-conceived, and discriminatory to many communities within the city. Second, accepting the contention that redevelopment negatively af-

ected race relations in Detroit, Thomas believes the reverse is also true: race relations negatively affected redevelopment. Moreover, she states the underlying principle behind her work. Thomas endorses "equity planning." In other words, urban planning should ensure that the benefits and losses associated with redevelopment programs are equally distributed among affected citizens (p. 3; endnote 1, p. 241).

Thomas places her investigation of planning in Detroit within an overall narrative that traces the history of postwar redevelopment. The heart of the book is an exploration of the actions of and programs developed by the city's official planning institutions.

Like many American cities, Detroit faced serious postwar problems such as housing shortages, blight in older core areas, a shrinking economy, and population loss. Initially, despite these structural problems, Detroit's planners were optimistic and developed ideas for public housing programs and regional planning networks. The city supported planning as a viable enterprise and issued a master plan in 1951. As Thomas stresses, howev-

er, there were impediments to success: the Detroit City Plan Commission itself was highly discriminatory to African Americans; white Detroiters through direct and indirect actions supported racial discrimination in housing and other developments; Michigan's legal structure hindered regional planning; and, the implementation of redevelopment programs was largely left to private real estate developers and financiers. National legislation and local policies did not protect the interests of low-income city dwellers nor did they prevent discrimination against black Detroiters in housing and other areas.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Detroit's planners forged ahead and, ironically, as faith in planning waned, implemented much of the city's master plan. City planners created grand designs for city redevelopment, but they did not anticipate, indeed many even ignored, the social consequences of their plans. For example, Thomas discusses the creation of Lafayette Park. This integrated middle-class residential development near the central business district was a success and is still considered a desirable community. But, there were negative aspects to this success story: low-income black residents who had previously lived in this area were forced to relocate in a discriminatory housing market that left them little opportunity to obtain good housing. Indeed, this story speaks to one of the maxims of Thomas's perception of redevelopment in Detroit: where redevelopment occurred, African American communities were often forced to relocate and disperse. Redevelopment generally meant expressways, buildings, factories, and vacant land supplanted black neighborhoods. Community organizations emerged and began to influence the redevelopment process, and Detroit's black population began to enter political and professional city offices in larger numbers.

Both citizens and politicians lost faith in city planning. Having borne the brunt of redevelopment's harsh effects, African-American Detroiters

were particularly distrustful of city planners. Many white citizens, often following jobs that were leaving the city, simply moved to the suburbs. Racial relations became increasingly strained and finally boiled over in 1967 when Detroit experienced the worst civil disorder in its history. During this period, Thomas suggests, city planning virtually disintegrated; however, there were positive developments. Community organizations emerged and began to influence the redevelopment process, and African Americans began to enter political and professional city offices in larger numbers.

Coleman Young became the city's first black mayor in 1974 and the nature of Detroit politics was radically transformed. Young was a powerful force in the city, with overwhelming voter support, and the adoration of a large segment of the African American citizenry. City planning was revived but was consistently plagued by political squabbles. In short, the city's formal planning institutions were weak and redevelopment was largely controlled by Young. Not until the early 1990s, did city planning--or as Thomas suggests, a more modern corporate-style "strategic planning," regain some measure of support and influence.

Thomas's narrative is solid and it certainly demonstrates the validity of her themes. She presents the primary ideas, events and people that the story demands, and sorts through a myriad of federal and local redevelopment initiatives and programs; from notions of regional planning after the war, through Community Block Grants and Urban Renewal, to the current federal Empowerment Zones/ Enterprise Communities Act. Thomas deals with controversial issues in an even-handed manner; in particular, this is demonstrated by her treatment of Coleman Young. As the most powerful man in Detroit for 20 years, Young was and is often either glorified or vilified by his observers. For many black Detroiters, he was the most important person in the world. Thomas directly addresses both the great

achievements and negative attributes of his tremendous reign as mayor of Detroit. This work also presents another key message: master plans and strategic planning cannot be completely successful if they are not embraced by the community. Finally, Thomas concludes, city planners, if sensitive to the many citizens that will be affected by their programs, can be important, perhaps crucial, participants in the rebuilding of Detroit or any American city.

City planners, urbanists, and graduate students in urban affairs will greatly benefit from reading this book. It presents a solid overall story of postwar redevelopment in Detroit, one that contains important historical lessons for planners. Thomas provides some fresh information mined from several archival collections; in particular, she relies heavily upon the collections of city planning institutions such as the Detroit City Plan Commission, the Detroit Commission on Community Relations, and the Detroit Charter Revision Commission. She also provides insights from her role as an urban planner in Detroit during the 1980s.

Historians and other scholars will find this work useful, but limited. Thomas certainly adds new historical information to the literature of the urban crisis, and is one of the few authors to carry her narrative through the 1990s. Generally, her conclusions are sound and do not radically differ from the current historiography; however, in certain instances, her research lacks depth. Often, only one source will be given as supporting evidence. For example, Thomas states that "The city did not freely choose its automobile orientation. The automobile industry pushed it in this direction and actively discouraged rail transit schemes" (p. 69). The evidence she cites to support this account of a most controversial issue is a single interview from a rather obscure participant (endnote 46, p. 249). More importantly, other significant archival collections that might yield supporting or conflicting evidence are not cited.

Thomas discusses the roles of New Detroit, Mayor Jerome Cavanagh, and the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, but apparently did not consult the extensive archival collections that exist for these as well as other related organizations and individuals. Would a review of these collections alter or strengthen her assessment of planning in Detroit?

Overall, *Redevelopment and Race* is a good book for many audiences. All readers will appreciate the clear prose and organization, and will learn from the narrative. Hopefully, city planners will read and consider its lessons about the consequences of historic redevelopment in Detroit.

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