

**Kimberley Kinder.** *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 238 pp. \$87.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-9707-6.



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Kimberley Kinder gives an in-depth analysis of self-provisioning activities in the most disinvested city in the United States in her new book, *DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services*. Detroit's inability to provide basic services, such as trash collecting, street lighting, policing, and park maintenance, for much of its population have led many of its residents to take matters into their own hands, working individually and collectively to improve their own neighborhoods and quality of life. In this way, one might say that the citizens of the city no longer have the same rights to services they once did. Considering the vast, emerging literature on nongovernmental, alternative, and informal ways people access resources, this book presents some timely and important findings. Kinder reveals that localized self-provisioning, if de-linked from broader political organizing, often reinforces market dynamics, rather than seeks to transform them.

Kinder begins her discussion by examining the history of self-provisioning activities, as these

practices are not new: early American cities were developed primarily by private individuals and businesses that had to work together to build roads and provide other services. It was not until the twentieth century that sanitation and other basic services were provided by public works. Structural changes since the 1970s have led to an increase in self-provisioning in the United States, however, as cities have struggled to deal with budget shortfalls and declining populations. Matters became even more dire in the 2010s, as neoliberalization and the Great Recession led many US cities to reduce or privatize services once provided by the state. Kinder stresses that these problems are widespread, with Detroit being the most extreme example in the United States. In the contemporary situation in American cities, higher income populations maintain access to resources and services through the market and market-led governance practices, while lower income populations are not as well served, and sometimes severely underserved. Kinder explores how, left to

their own devices, Detroit's residents struggle to transform the urban landscapes that surround them, as disinvestment and decay continue city-wide.

Kinder conducted seventy-three formal interviews of residents of four neighborhoods (as well as interacted informally and engaged in participant observation) to investigate these activities. She focuses specifically on self-provisioning acts regarding "gray spaces," or land that has been abandoned by private and public entities. Her findings are divided into chapters based on the type of self-provisioning she observed, including recruiting new residents, defending vacant homes, repurposing abandonment, performing public works, improving public safety, and producing local knowledge. Each chapter provides a general overview of patterns Kinder found, along with representative anecdotes and quotes demonstrating residents' different approaches to the given theme. Kinder's extensive research and analysis at times feel repetitive, but her work offers an impressive level of detail with clearly articulated results.

The second chapter details how residents faced with home vacancies in their neighborhoods serve as volunteer, informal realtors to attract new neighbors, a practice she witnessed as very widespread in Detroit. These "resident realtors," tired of drug activity and theft, seek out homebuyers who will keep up their houses and make the neighborhood safer for their own families. Sometimes they helped friends and family members squat in neighboring homes, preferring their tendency to take care of the lot, albeit illegally, to the blight that came before. They "believed they could manage property more effectively than could the impersonal market actors who were undermining their communities" (p. 66). Kinder notes that these practices are exclusive in nature: resident realtors used their own judgment to choose future neighbors that would improve their neighborhoods.

The third chapter details how neighbors worked to protect vacant homes in their neighborhoods by disguising them as occupied, boarding them up, or having them demolished. These practices cultivated what Kinder calls "defensible space," deterring arson and theft, making the neighborhoods safer and more attractive. Some neighbors covered doors and windows of vacant homes and put up "No Dumping" signs to prevent theft, squatting, and further decay. Others took another approach: mowing vacant lawns, hanging curtains in the windows, and painting exterior walls to feign occupancy. In some cases, where the housing condition warranted it, neighbors bought houses and had them demolished. Other neighbors bought blighted homes and rented them out, or informally welcomed "civilized" squatters to increase occupancy in the neighborhood.

In chapter 4, Kinder details the ways in which vacant properties have been repurposed for gardens, artwork, and other creative projects. These countercultural practices were rare in her findings. She found that the people most likely to imagine and work to create post-urban alternative futures tended to be white activists, and class and race differences created tensions around some of these activities. Most of the participants in her study wanted a "normal" neighborhood, hoping new neighbors would move in rather than having empty lots transformed for one of these purposes. Differences in methods to address blight created conflicts between neighbors, cultivating landscapes Kinder calls "hybrid spaces of overlapping ambitions and nested scales of action" (p. 118).

Chapter 5 discusses the ways residents responded to the loss or decline of public works in their neighborhoods. Residents worked to maintain public spaces, like parks and playgrounds, by mowing and repairing broken equipment. When the public grid for street lighting was reduced, they coordinated the use of their front-porch lights to maintain safe, well-lit streets. When am-

balances no longer serviced their neighborhoods, they organized phone trees to get neighbors to the hospital when necessary. Kinder points out that these self-provisioning activities were limited: residents could not repave roads or repair sewer lines, but in some cases, residents' volunteerism demonstrated to the city that they deserved a degree of help for services they were not able to provide on their own. Some residents also offered tips and bribes to public workers to entice them to complete maintenance work on their blocks. These activities demonstrate that city services have degraded to the point where residents cannot expect municipalities to provide all the necessary amenities, so they must meet their needs using their own manual labor in most cases.

Chapter 6 discusses the way Detroit residents police their own neighborhoods. Many residents intentionally keep watch of the street for suspicious looking passerby. Kinder notes that some of her participants admitted to pretending to do yard work in order to watch suspicious behavior. She also found that many retirees take coffee breaks on their porches at times when children walk to and from school, as a protective measure. In more affluent neighborhoods, security systems were prevalent, while in poorer neighborhoods, guard dogs were the norm. She highlights some interesting collective practices to aid in policing, such as the convention of keeping parked cars off of the streets to improve sight lines. Some civic groups in her study went to the extent of hiring neighborhood patrols, while others put community policing activities in place. These efforts underline the desires of Detroit residents to have a "normal" neighborhood, which has become harder and harder with the increased decline of the population and housing stock.

Chapter 7 details efforts to systematically record local knowledge regarding properties in Detroit because the municipality lacked the resources to keep their records up to date. In some cases, simply buying a house has become nearly

impossible due to the lack of official record keeping. Identifying an owner and even property addresses could take months. Therefore, residents in many instances took it upon themselves to do surveys, make maps, and compile databases regarding property status in their neighborhoods. These datasets were often used by residents in advocacy campaigns or grant applications to support a positive image of their neighborhoods. In some cases, data collected by residents in conjunction with nonprofit organizations would be used by the municipality, because residents' data was more accurate than the data kept by the city itself. Kinder notes that this locally produced data was political and partial, however. For instance, if a vacant house was disguised as occupied, it might be intentionally misrepresented as occupied rather than vacant on a spreadsheet. Like the other forms of self-provisioning, local knowledge production replaced a once taken-for-granted service of the state, producing a parallel but different understanding of the landscape of Detroit's neighborhoods.

*DIY Detroit* is frankly the Detroit book I have been waiting for. Kinder's detailed research answered any questions I have pondered about the experience of Detroit residents in cultivating their own reimagined landscape in the midst of disinvestment. Kinder straightforwardly demonstrates that self-provisioning in a severely disinvested city is anything but romantic. Most residents want their old neighborhoods back, and they self-provision out of necessity. In many cases, they reinforce notions of private property and the capitalist market, rather than seek to imagine alternative futures. In the end of her book, Kinder raises questions about how self-provisioning efforts could potentially be linked to political campaigns that might help residents advocate for their needs on a citywide basis. Because the groups she studies work in isolation from each other, she suggests that if they were to coordinate at a larger scale, they may be able to work more diligently toward their goals. Still, most of the participants had no

broader political goal. Kinder's work shows that when self-provisioning activities are de-linked from any political mission, they tend to replicate and extend market-oriented philosophies. These conclusions lead me to wonder whether and how a situation like Detroit might cultivate alternative, noncapitalist subjectivities on a broad scale. Perhaps a citywide network of self provisioners linked to a global network of solidarity economies would help local residents recognize their position in a global market that has left them behind, facilitating the imagination of postcapitalist futures. Of course, as Kinder's work shows, many residents of Detroit simply want stability, and these political goals may never be attractive to them. As Kinder reminds the reader repeatedly, the case of Detroit may be extreme, but it is not unique: disadvantaged residents in many cities across the United States and the world live in similar situations, as municipalities reach record budget shortfalls and further reduce service provision. *DIY Detroit* offers insight into their experiences and the limitations of the outcomes of self-provisioning in a tangible and thought-provoking way. It adds a much-needed perspective to the literatures on urban decay and collective self-provisioning activities.

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