Sarah Jo Peterson, Planning the Home Front: Building Bombers and Communities at Willow Run (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

As the United States approaches the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, there has been increased interest in communities that were quickly established just before or during World War II to help the war effort. Over the past several months two books have been published on this topic, one by a journalist and one by an academic. The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II, by journalist Denise Kiernan, is about Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where a secret uranium separating facility was erected in 1943 to assist building the atomic bomb. At peak, this hastily built city employed 75,000 residents who primarily lived in town, although there was commuting as well (Kiernan, 2013). Planning the Home Front: Building Bombers and Communities at Willow Run is about Willow Run, Michigan, where B-24 Liberator bombers were openly built by the Ford Motor Company starting in 1941. In Willow Run, workers primarily commuted to the plant from all over the region, although some temporary housing was built after 1943. The latter book is the subject of this review.

Planning the Home Front has an introduction, nine chapters, and a conclusion, in addition to a list of illustrations, a list of abbreviations, a chronology, acknowledgements, archival sources and collection abbreviations, notes, and an index. Peterson, who holds a PhD in American History from Yale University, describes herself as “a historian by night and an urban planner by day” (p. 283). Nevertheless, this very detail-oriented book is probably primarily geared towards historians, although it may be of interest to planners, political scientists, and public policy experts as well.

The book discusses the production of 50,000 bombers inside the Willow Run Bomber Plant and planning efforts in the Detroit metropolitan area, which is fragmented by cities and suburbs. The plant was located in a rural part of Ypsilanti Township, built on former soybean fields and the location of a former boys’ camp, about 25 miles west of Detroit and a few miles east of Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor. The plant briefly claimed the title “the largest manufacturing plant in the world” (p. 1), as it had grown to 67 acres on one level and under one roof in order to make the production process more effective and efficient.

The commuter shed of the approximately 100,000 workers at employment peak was about 100 miles around the plant. To enable the workers to get to the site, three solutions were suggested and pursued to some degree. These are the focus of the book: first, building an express highway that connected to an already-existing expressway; second, building a union-backed model city to house defense workers; and third, expanding existing suburbia.

Throughout the book, Peterson ingeniously shows the clash between the ideals of planning and reality. While planning, especially comprehensive, participatory, or long-term planning, is a slow-moving process, reality, World War II’s mobilization on the home front, was a fast-moving process. The difference in speed alone demonstrates a challenge to any professional involved in the process. Peterson intriguingly shows the clashes among national, state, and local actors in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. These actors were, among others, the federal government, including the military, which underwent four administrative restructurings within four years for the war mobilization; Ypsilanti and other local communities; the Ford Motor Company; the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union; and workers and local and regional residents. All the clashes led to some degree of coordination, with more or less success, depending on the topic. Thus, some interim production goals
were not met, and occasionally production was inefficient. Also, for a few months many workers lived in slum-like conditions in trailers, crowded tarpaper shacks, and tents. These substandard conditions were worsened by the harsh Michigan winter as well as by the existing rationing for rubber, gasoline, and building materials.

Peterson details the clashes between the ideals of planning and reality. For example, she describes the difference between Ford’s and the government’s perspective in terms of locating the plant (Chapter 1); Ford’s opposition to model towns favored by public housing enthusiasts in the government and within the UAW union (Chapter 2); choosing between large-scale developments with apartments and row houses versus single-family homes as a preferred option for industrial workers (Chapter 3); the Sojourner Truth housing controversy in which 200 units initially designed for Blacks were resisted by Whites, leading them to be converted to White planned occupancy (later they were reconverted to Black occupancy) (Chapter 4); the efforts to develop temporary housing to prevent death and disease due to squatting (Chapter 5); the development of bus service for a minority of commuters (Chapter 6); the difference between planned White versus Black housing, along with racial integration efforts (Chapter 7); the culmination of many initial efforts, finally leading to production successes (Chapter 8); and the Willow Lodge dormitory controversy, which was about an initially intended mixed-race war housing project, along with incidents of interracial violence (Chapter 9).

Peterson concludes that “[a]ll urban planning involves trade-offs, and urban planning in a democracy, to its credit, magnifies the trade-offs instead of hiding them” (p. 16) and offers two interpretations of what happened in Willow Run during World War II. “In the first [interpretation], self-interested groups and failures of leadership created scandal and hardship and brought into question whether democracy is capable of total war. In the second, a strong democracy engaged in participatory planning, ran through its paces, and eventually learned how to bring the bomber plant, and nation, to success” (pp. 16–17).

While many historical books focus on wartime production plants themselves, not much has been written about the communities surrounding these plants. Planning the Home Front fills this important gap. This book is based on extensive archival work throughout the entire United States. While rich in detail, a few non-historian readers might have appreciated an explicit and systematic discussion of the author’s main arguments in the conclusion. Nevertheless, the writing is engaged and engaging. The order of chapters is intuitive, although the five-page-long chapter 8 (“A Bomber an Hour”) could have been subsumed into another chapter. This book will appeal to advanced graduate and doctoral students as well as scholars in history, planning, political science, and public policy. Future research efforts could focus on other communities that went through similar developments during World War II, for example, the Kaiser Shipyards on the U.S. West Coast.

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June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

John Gallagher, *Revolution Detroit: Strategies for Urban Reinvention* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2013).
In recent years, a cavalcade of books has sought to reflect and speculate on the post-industrial fate of Detroit. The city and its body politic have stirred a seemingly endless stream of inquiry from urban scholars. Broad and complicated narratives dominate the discourse: abandonment and disinvestment, poor race relations and a high degree of regional fragmentation, political scandal, and financial bankruptcy. June Manning Thomas’s *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* offers a valuable historical account and critical analysis of the city planning process in Detroit, and John Gallagher’s *Revolution Detroit: Strategies for Urban Reinvention* presents an inspired collection of “best practices” that can inform the way scholars, practitioners, and students view opportunity and transformation in the Motor City.

Thomas’s book, originally published in 1997 and now re-released in paperback, charts the evolution of urban planning against the backdrop of Detroit’s redevelopment efforts in a rapidly deindustrializing economy, with a focus on race relations. The text is divided into three parts. The first section focuses on urban and regional planning. Thomas examines both process and outcomes through an evaluation of planning documents, including city plans for 1944, 1947, and 1951. Through her review, she describes the technocratic framework in which planners operated and the consequences that such a limited purview wrought for Detroit’s African American community, in particular widespread relocation and displacement.

In the second section, Thomas documents the precursors to Detroit’s racial change and links them to city planning policies. Detroit’s redevelopment strategies, with their emphasis on the clearance and redevelopment of Gratiot Park, had devastating consequences for the largely African American residential population. Thomas identifies Detroit’s neighborhood conservation program as a promising but missed opportunity, and emphasizes the role Detroit city planners played in perpetuating racial discrimination. She effectively illustrates the tensions between the implementation of Detroit’s lauded 1951 award-winning master plan, the evolution of organized citizen protests, and deep fissures in a loosely organized growth coalition.

In the last section, Thomas describes the effects of the 1967 riot, the litany of federal programs aimed to eliminate poverty which failed to affect lasting change for city residents, and the tenure and the enduring impact of Coleman Young as the city’s first African American mayor. Most of this section consists of a wholesale and warranted critique of urban planning in Detroit. Thomas offers a number of explanations for the failure of planners, including lack of knowledge, changing local policy environment, changes in federal legislation, and a new city charter that institutionally divided planning and development. Effective planning, she asserts, requires vision, social justice and equity, participation, consultation, and professionalism; qualities Detroit lacked. Thomas concludes by suggesting a reform agenda for the racial disunity plaguing many American cities. Overcoming discrimination, reducing disparities, and addressing regional fragmentation are key elements in Thomas’s race unity agenda. However, there is little evidence that Americans are willing to embrace metropolitan planning, let alone metropolitan government. “Instead, individualism, home rule, and self-interest reign supreme. And so we return to the need to educate both the individual and social institutions in tolerance, in the practical implications of a greater sense of responsibility of fellow human beings in the importance of social equity and human dignity. This will be a lengthy effort, but worth the trouble. Together, individuals, families, communities, organizations, and governments must come together to plan finer, more unified, more equitable metropolitan areas” (p. 239).

Unquestionably, Thomas (now a professor at the University of Michigan) makes a significant contribution to the literature. The book’s key contribution is its detailed examination of the relationship between race relations and urban planning efforts. Few historical case studies of urban redevelopment give so much attention to urban planners. The text is as relevant today as when it was originally published. However, it also offers an especially timely illustration of the potential dynamic interchange that can be fostered between urban planners and their respective communities. Thomas is especially adept at advocating for collaborative models of planning and partnership. The book is suitable for urban scholars, as well as planning practitioners or anyone with an interest in furthering social justice in our cities.

In *Revolution Detroit: Strategies for Urban Reinvention*, John Gallagher (a journalist) proposes a partial blueprint for redevelopment in Detroit, framed within an optimistic narrative. Gallagher’s
central premise is that the municipal model in America is broken. He describes a catalogue of best practices from other economically distressed cities that have implemented a variety of programs, policies and projects that could also foster opportunity in Detroit. The book is largely a compilation of these strategies and accompanying vignettes. Some of the many effective examples detailed include land banking in Flint, geographic targeting in Richmond, and the ArtPrize in Grand Rapids. Gallagher intersperses these examples with a discussion of current and future projects in Detroit, including vacant land reclamation, restoring the natural landscape through “daylighting” (the re-direction of a stream into an above-ground channel), and urban agriculture, among others.

I greatly appreciated Gallagher’s sincerity. He is clearly and unapologetically an advocate for the city. While many, if not all, of the strategies that he mentions may sound familiar to JUA readers, Gallagher writes about them in a fresh, engaging, and interesting manner. The book also introduces the reader to a broad range of Detroit’s community and economic development “urban heroes.” These examples demonstrate the importance of individual leadership, even within the context of broad structural changes.

Gallagher argues that cities can be more effective when specific functions are spun off into special purpose entities. Gallagher should have, but did not mention, that this model can undercut accountability and transparency and can impair a city’s ability to produce a cohesive comprehensive plan. However, all in all, Gallagher’s work provides many useful ideas regarding tools and mechanisms available to planners, policymakers, community organizations, and neighborhood residents.

While Revolution Detroit makes only a modest contribution to the scholarly literature, it should prove helpful to planners and other practitioners dealing with extremely distressed cities like Detroit. The book would also be useful for courses covering redevelopment, economic and community development, and related subjects.

Gallagher’s book does not fully pick up where Thomas’s book concludes. Although he further augments some themes in Thomas’s book, particularly with regard to redevelopment, he mostly ignores race, clearly an important omission. Nevertheless, taken together, Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit and Revolution Detroit: Strategies for Urban Reinvention provide an important account of Detroit’s past and strategies for a better future. Both are valuable and insightful reads for anyone interested in understanding Detroit’s progression, decline, and (prospective) revitalization.

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Lewis D. Solomon, Detroit: Three Pathways to Revitalization (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014).
Charlie LeDuff, Detroit: An American Autopsy (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

Detroit, the city that once served as a symbol of American industrial prosperity, was thrust onto the global stage when it declared bankruptcy. This, along with decades of industrial decline, racial segregation, and depopulation, has garnered the attention of urban scholars and public policy commentators. To understand how one of America’s richest cities became one of its most fiscally challenged, Detroit must be studied by both scholars and practitioners. Lewis Solomon’s book, Detroit: Three Pathways to Revitalization, increases our knowledge but falls short as a solutions-oriented narrative.

Solomon’s book is divided into four sections: a background narrative, an overview of the public sector’s fiscal crisis, commentary on the private sector’s role in the economy, and a proposal for Detroit residents to build an alternative economy. Solomon attempts to make sense of the complexities and broad scope of Detroit’s problems and challenges to rebuilding its economy. Although Solomon presents his ideas in an authoritative voice, he fails to provide well-reasoned solutions, ones rooted in a solid understanding of urban planning, municipal politics, public administration, and regional economics.
Where the book succeeds is in providing context to how Detroit became what Solomon defines as “America’s most dysfunctional big city.” He also does a quality job in presenting needs and challenges in manageable pieces. As a result, the book is a good starting point for scholars and students wishing to delve more deeply into particular issues, such as the visionary long-term plan, right-sizing, or conflict associated with major initiatives. Ultimately, he places the burden of revitalization on the residents of Detroit, a daunting task given the described lack of work skills and education. The book’s conclusion is a brief commentary on Detroit’s revitalization in three key areas: public finances, schools, and jobs. Despite titling the two-and-a-half–page chapter “Conclusion: Evaluating the Likelihood of Success,” these final pages constitute a summary of his opinions rather than an evaluation taking into account a complex urban system subject to multiple internal and external forces.

It will take years, perhaps decades, of research to fully evaluate Detroit’s formal and informal revitalization strategies and processes. Solomon’s 147-page commentary makes too many assumptions and the author too quickly blames failure on those charged with the task of making and implementing hard decisions. This blame, along with placing the burden of success on the general populace, is the major weakness of the book. Solomon is competent in developing commentary, but his analysis leaves the reader questioning his qualifications for doing so in the realm of urban studies. Whereas Solomon focuses on failed government processes and the role of local residents in revitalizing a major city, Charlie LeDuff, in Detroit: An American Autopsy, focuses on individual stories of citizens. His book provides an unintentional complement to Solomon’s commentary.

By presenting a provocative narrative of “the backward march of a great city,” Detroit: An American Autopsy constitutes an excellent resource for any graduate course dealing with urban decline. Avoiding deep examination, LeDuff delves into the topics of global economics, manufacturing and the middle class, racial segregation, political corruption, crime, poverty, and addiction as they intersect within the urban space of Detroit. He is a good storyteller, with an unapologetic “gonzo” style (i.e., a style of journalism that is written without claims of objectivity), and he leads the reader straight into the hard stuff of society, government, and his own drinking problem . . . this last a cliché of old-school urban journalists. Despite the rawness, he provides a first-person emotional account that serves as a useful counterbalance to books and articles based on aggregate statistical data and objective analysis of urban problems.

The most compelling reason to read LeDuff’s book is the charge delivered by his feeling of pain and hardship upon returning to his home city. He expresses despair and heartache for those who have given up and those who refuse to give up in spite of tremendous challenges. LeDuff makes it easier to understand why some people stay, and why a place matters. By the end of the book, urban scholars and students will feel as though they have been given a dystopian tour of the city. While he unforgettingly exposes the ugliness of urban decline, he is mindful of the paradox that this city still boasts professional sports teams and one of the busiest international airports in the United States. It is within such a framework that urban scholars, practitioners, and students can work through the complexities of cities, and of Detroit.

Like Solomon, LeDuff ends on a cautiously positive note. While Solomon does not project confidence in Detroit’s political system, LeDuff finds hope in the citizenry who are committed to stay, do their civic duty, and do their jobs as best they can. His book is a good launching pad for analyzing grassroots revitalization projects in declining cities, and also for casting light on how Detroit may or may not succeed in saving its crumbling infrastructure and maintain an adequate level of city services. Together, these books provide an entryway into Detroit’s history, social fabric, economic and physical decline, as well as possible urban revitalization initiatives.

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Amy L. Howard, *More Than Shelter: Activism and Community in San Francisco Public Housing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

There are a number of reasons to welcome Amy Howard’s book on public housing in San Francisco. While we have excellent scholarship on the history of public housing in older, rustbelt cities (see Bloom, 2008 on New York; Vale 2003 on Boston; Williams, 2004 on Baltimore; and Hunt, 2009 on Chicago), Howard’s book gives us a new perspective. She provides an account of the public housing program outside of the rustbelt, in a city that did not feel the acute pain of deindustrialization and has not suffered from extremely high rates of black–white residential segregation. Further, the case gives us an account of public housing in a city that has a notably unique political culture. Howard’s account of public housing in San Francisco provides an example of how so-called progressive regimes have approached the program and its challenges. Finally, Howard’s focus in the book is on the ways in which tenants sought to and were successful in forming (and reforming) community bonds under conditions of official disinvestment and mismanagement.

As a national program, public housing in the United States has followed some generic story lines over its more than 70-year history. Any account of public housing as it has played out would perforce need to account for national trends such as the original programmatic intent to house working families which targeted assistance to those above welfare subsistence levels, the strong constraints on spending imposed by federal officials, the shifting demographics of poverty and central city neighborhoods in the postwar period, the push to desegregate public housing, the job loss and significant physical decline of central-city neighborhoods in the face of deindustrialization, and the impact of crack cocaine and violent crime in the high-poverty neighborhoods of America’s central cities during the 1980s and 1990s. Each of these produced noticeable and somewhat consistent outcomes in public housing no matter what the locale.

At the same time, and despite the fact that public housing is a federal program, it was, in most places and for most of its history, an intensely local affair. Through the establishment of public housing authorities, local governments took the lead in implementing the program, and local political cultures have significantly affected the trajectory of the program in different places across the nation. Thus, to a significant extent program outcomes have reflected local conditions. Analysis of the ways in which public housing has proceeded in different urban contexts is essential for fully understanding the legacy of the program across the nation.

Howard’s account suggests that the path followed by public housing in San Francisco mimicked national patterns in some areas and was simultaneously unique in other ways. The first chapter of the book provides a history of the program in San Francisco, a history that is typical of public housing everywhere in the United States. For example, Howard documents the original high hopes of the program, and the original focus on the moral and economic standing of residents. She also documents an unfortunate history of mismanagement and cronyism among mayoral appointees to head the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA). We also learn of the Authority’s intransigence on the issue of racial integration even to the point of ignoring a 1946 resolution by the Board of Supervisors to end segregation in the program.

Bringing the history into the contemporary period, Howard documents the aggressiveness with which San Francisco adopted the demolition and relocation policies of the federal HOPE VI program. During the first decade of the program, San Francisco received five HOPE VI grants to fund redevelopment in projects across the city. Howard notes that the displacement effects of these projects mirrored what was happening across the country at the time; large African American populations were moved out and, given the lack of affordable housing in the city, were leaving the city in large numbers. That these efforts were undertaken under a “progressive” governance regime that, notwithstanding its focus on the living conditions of public housing residents, nevertheless saw displacement and relocation as the best strategy forward for public housing communities is an important element of Howard’s contribution. Specifically, she notes that the redevelopments not only resulted in a net loss of subsidized housing units, a critical outcome in a city such as San Francisco that has an acute shortage of affordable housing, but that they upset the preexisting communities that tenants had created for themselves.
The book’s greatest contributions are in the chapters that profile three different San Francisco public housing projects. In the course of recounting the history of these developments, Howard shows how postwar political, economic, and demographic trends evolved in these individual communities. Her focus on the residents reveals how they organized themselves to gain greater influence over their living environments, how they reacted to the neglect and mismanagement of the SFHA during the years in which the developments were allowed to decline, and then their reaction to SFHA plans for demolition and redevelopment.

The cases, Valencia Gardens in the city’s mostly Hispanic Mission District, the Ping Yuen development in Chinatown, and North Beach Place, provide compelling evidence of one of the most fundamental flaws in the transformation of public housing as it has occurred in most U.S. cities—the devaluation of the support networks and community life that residents had built for themselves, communities that would be destroyed through the demolition and displacement tactics embodied by HOPE VI. The resistance of tenants to their displacement ultimately led the City, through its HOPE SF program initiative, to develop a responsive model of redevelopment which calls for full replacement of lost units, rethinks the notion of mass displacement, and prioritizes current residents in redevelopment plans. As Howard writes, the assumptions behind HOPE VI and public housing transformation more generally have for too long “ignore[d] the critical fact that low-income residents living in public housing projects have already formed important bonds over time” (p. 42). Her book is an insightful and absorbing account of how that flaw has played out in San Francisco.

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