

Circle Forest restoration clears a path for community growth in Detroit's Poletown East

JAISHREE DREPAUL | TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2022





Not too long ago, Circle Forest at 3301 E. Palmer St. in Detroit's Poletown East was a place some people would have found too forboding to visit. Dirty toilets, swimming pools, soiled beds, and old carpeting are just some of what lay buried and forgotten amid a tangle of neglected trees and vegetation, and heaps of debris. Today, thanks to a native habitat restoration project, what was once 1.3 acres of vacant, unusable land being transformed from an eyesore to a valuable community asset.

"The land was just really overgrown in a way that was kind of scary and not really welcoming and inviting. There's an expression that goes, you can't see the forest for the trees. Well, we couldn't see the forest for the garbage," says Andrew "Birch" Kemp, president of Arboretum Detroit.

Kemp has been a leading figure in Circle Forest's community comeback, which was executed in partnership with Detroit Future City, and made possible through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. As a longtime resident of the neighborhood where Circle Forest is located, the project holds special importance to him, and Kemp is proud that its impact can already be seen.

"It's now a place where people can walk in, take a breath and feel like they're somewhere else," he says. "We have meetings there, camps come through, and just the other day some kids were sitting in the trees writing songs."

Revamping the 40-year-old forest was no easy task. Kemp explains that it was sitting on 12 vacant lots that had been "grossly neglected and dumped on for 30 years." The first steps of the project involved clearing a way in and then assessing the already existing trees – which covered 30% of the land – that were already there.



Andrew "Birch" Kemp was surprised by some of the clean-up findings at Circle Forest. Photo: Arboretum Detroit.

"A lot of spaces in Detroit are forests because somebody had dumped a bunch of concrete and they can't mow anymore and so then the trees come up," Kemp says. "Suddenly, there's this little forest at the end of a block. And those are great, but oftentimes, they're just filled with garbage, and the trees are coming up through the garbage."

Since April, Kemp, and other project leaders, have been rallying the support of numerous local partner organizations and community volunteers. They joined forces to clear out 60 yards of debris across the football field-sized space.

"I call them garbage warriors, these people who came out to do the heavy lifting with us, ripping garbage out of the ground and sweating through a really ugly, hard job," he says. "There's been a vibe of people understanding that this was such a traumatized landscape. And, if we can do anything to heal it, we're doing good."



Photo: Arboretum Detroit.

Clearing a Path for Community Growth

Pulling part of a toilet out of the ground during a Circle Forest cleanup event was "eye-opening and rewarding" for Mark Pervine, manufacturing executive director for General Motors (GM). Earlier this year, Pervine was part of a 15-person-strong company contingent that pulled everything, from weeds to commodes, out of the ground. One of the GM sites he manages is Factory Zero, so giving back to the nearby community is especially meaningful to him.

"I saw it as an opportunity to support our residents. When we can make a difference in our residents' lives we support our area's growth and future talent pool," he says. "Residents become employees, so working on a good cause that supports the prosperity of the neighborhood is a win-win situation."

He adds that he's looking forward to seeing how the growth of Circle Forest develops over time. The potential of the project to have a ripple effect throughout the area is something that he's thought about since his first experience on the land.

"When you see something like Circle Forest you feel more positive about an

area versus seeing clumps of dirt and trash. It signals this is a community that is on the way up, not on the way down," Pervine says. "I would love to see the project continue to move down the block, continue to move on to other blocks and areas, and just revitalize the land a bit at a time."



Photo: Arboretum Detroit.

Helping other Neighborhoods Turn Over a New Leaf

According to Patrick Crouch, Detroit Future City's landscape innovation manager, there is great potential for the project to be replicated. Circle Forest, he says, could be a model for learning and provide inspiration for other communities' growth.

"Maybe not all communities can do it at the same scale. Some may want to do it on a larger scale, some smaller," he says. "We'd like people to come see some of the lessons we've learned and think of ways they can apply them in their own communities."

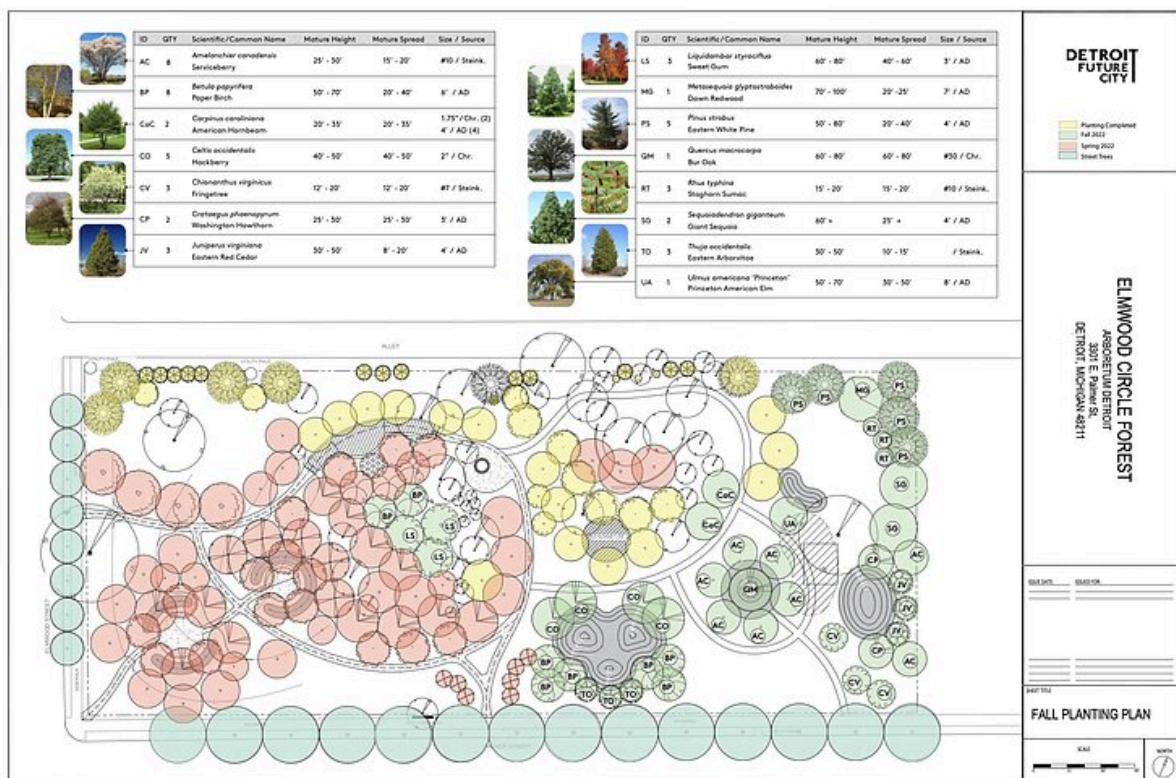
Crouch adds that he hopes that Circle Forest will serve as an accessible space where people can connect with the natural world. He explains that oftentimes, Detroiters think of nature as being something that requires traveling far up north for, or that's divided from an urban location.

Also, while qualifying that he might be "painting with a broad brush," he says that people of color often aren't comfortable or feel welcome in some rural communities.

"Making sure that there are spaces in which people can be exposed to nature without having to find transportation or go into places that they maybe don't feel as welcome, I think is a really important thing," Crouch says.

In the upcoming months, community planting events will continue to be announced. The forest itself is not contiguous – people have to cross streets, sometimes amid very fast traffic. So paths are being created that will allow people to enjoy a mile walk without having to step out onto the roads. Connecting several community greenspaces will be beneficial for all neighbors – and especially so for the residents of an adjacent health and rehabilitation center.

"If you can walk for even a half mile, you just relax in a different way. You might sit on a bench and watch the birds. Your heart rate goes down in a different way and you breathe more deeply," Kemp says. "It's a lifestyle, and it's one that every Detroiter is entitled to."



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