

Tapping into people power to plant trees on vacant neighborhood land

As groups see their influence, undertakings grow, the struggle to balance an aspirational vision with resources and impact persists



by Erin Kelly
February 9, 2022



Zenaida Flores and Tharmond Ligon Jr. are the vice president and president of Rescue MI Nature Now. Since its founding in 2013, RMNN has expanded to become a collective aimed at rebuilding habitats on vacant land while also rebuilding social relationships. *Photo credit: Nick Hagen*

When Tharmond Ligon Jr., 42, moved back to Detroit from Southfield in 2013, his childhood neighborhood near the former Michigan State Fairgrounds, “wasn’t being cared for as it could be,” he recounted.

At the time, he was 33. His move was motivated by an interest to tackle problems in the neighborhood.

“We know nature provides a great healing source for the body and mind,” he said.

Detroiters like Ligon, acting alone and as part of small, self-organized groups, animate the history of leadership around stewardship of Detroit’s urban environment—in part due to how the work of environmental justice is organized as well as the limited capacity of local government to deliver services. The motivation to improve—and control—nearby neighborhood conditions feels particularly high in Detroit’s lower density neighborhoods, like the one Ligon lives in and where the organization he founded works.

The organization, Rescue MI Nature Now (RMNN), is waiting on more than 40 parcels to build on their work over the last several years and realizing a 2.25-acre Therapy Forest. But as RMNN and organizations like it are gaining influence over more of their environment, the struggle to balance an aspirational vision with resources and impact persists.

Ligon got into his environmental stewardship work largely to stop illegal dumping in the neighborhood, but RMNN has expanded to become a collective aimed at rebuilding habitats on vacant land while also rebuilding social relationships. The approach is incremental and intergenerational. Their work started small, with a simple vegetable garden in 2013 and is rooted in an adoration for bees and the power of the land to provide food.

“The first year, it looked like we were just playing in a vacant lot,” recounts Zenaida Flores, vice president of RMNN. Then Flores said people would honk as they drove by. “Year four, people would stop by the garden and hang out.”

The group now has 16 formerly Detroit Land Bank-owned vacant lots they maintain as habitats for pollinators and educational gardens.

Ligon is focused on the leadership development aspect of the work: programming and activities are aimed to give youth an opportunity to connect with the land, creating an attachment to place and to each other, while fostering a willingness to help other youth coming up behind them.

Of the 573 properties in the area around Derby Street where RMNN works, more than 300 are held in public ownership. Despite the close proximity of massive investments at the former Michigan State Fairgrounds, this residential area of Detroit—bound to the west by the former fairgrounds and to the north by Eight Mile Road—has been more transformed by the 100 trees planted by RMNN than by any sort of more formal economic development.

Derby street was hit particularly hard by the mortgage lending crisis. In the neighborhood, which is formally named Nolan by the City of Detroit, recent demolitions have accelerated the local sense of vacancy—and opportunity.

Intrigued by the concept of Shirini-Yoku, or Japanese forest bathing, RMNN is currently fundraising to build a therapy forest on some of that recently vacant land. Flores sees the therapy forest as a way to bring visitors into the neighborhood. The organization is not particularly worried about their improvements driving up the value of land or spurring gentrification. Instead, it is focused on improving the landscape for pollinators and providing an amenity that will be restorative for longtime residents.



Andrew "Birch" Kemp founded Arboretum Detroit in 2019 in part as a response to the expansion of the Wolverine Packing Plant, which opened officially that winter. *Photo credit: Nick Hagen*

Botanical fortress

Seven miles south of Derby Street and just a little to the east, Andrew "Birch" Kemp, a 52-year-old former DPSCD high school teacher, pointed to piles of brush cleared from an existing neighborhood forest patch and said, "This was a seriously traumatized landscape."

Drive around neighborhoods where the city is not actively reinvesting, and you will see an unpredictable lineup of street trees. Street trees are trees planted between the street and private property, usually along a narrow strip of grass between the sidewalk and the curb. Just east of City Airport you can find blocks of neighborhoods full of spectacular street trees and very few remaining houses.

Just north of East Vernor Highway near West Village, long rows of dense single-family housing sit naked and bare, sometimes with one lone street tree on the block. During warm seasons, especially in neighborhoods like where Ligon and Kemp live, you will consistently see long and sprawling formations of trees crowded to the back of existing vacant lots. Hemmed in by alleys, these, in essence, are backyards gone wild. Some of these trees were not planted, but grew up of their own self-determination.

Traditional ecologists would not assign much value to these unsolicited plants. And yet, they are a significant portion of Detroit's urban forest. Amid these landscape dynamics, you will see residents caring in their own ways for the places they most immediately use and cherish.

'Fall in love with a forest'

Kemp is now attempting to add to those areas with a cultivated forest on 12 formerly residential parcels just south of East Grand Boulevard. The organization he founded, Arboretum Detroit, is working in partnership with Singing Tree, Detroit Audubon, Detroit Future City, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Fungi Freights.

Called the Circle Forest, it is part native landscape restoration and part large-scale tree planting. Kemp lights up when describing what this forest might offer to visitors and to the neighborhood.

"This project is about giving people a place to fall in love with a forest," he said.

Kemp founded Arboretum Detroit in 2019 in part as a response to the expansion of the Wolverine Packing Plant, which opened that winter.

The plant “really opened my eyes to the threat of encroachment into the neighborhood,” he said.

Wolverine’s expansion north out of the core of Eastern Market was a bit of a controversy in part because the Duggan administration **offered Forest Park**—a city park—as the grounds for expansion. As part of the development agreement, Wolverine invested in creating a more amenity-rich park, directly adjacent to the new facility and occupying about one-fourth of the footprint previously designated as parkland.

In an area that has not seen much in the way of traditional capital investment or market activity, the Wolverine Expansion was a glitter bomb of capitalism—and is only about a mile from where Kemp’s Circle Forest grows.

Called Farnsworth/Poletown East, this area exudes the spirit of intentional community: a quilted mix of inventive and expressive land uses. There is something crunchy—and white—about this place. A handful of mature fruit orchards add zest to the neighborhood, also home to Rising Pheasant and Black Dog Farms. Arboretum manages 19 parcels in the neighborhood—all purchased from the DLBA.

Despite this ambiance, “in the beginning there was some suspicion or mistrust,” said Kemp, between longtime residents and his tree planting plans.

“Some people feel threatened by trees. Maybe a tree backed up someone’s sewer,” said Kemp, who is genuine in his love of trees, which he has planted all his adult life.

Kemp has lived in the neighborhood for 20 years, grounded in the realities of living within a resource-constrained city. “In the beginning, the work was about ‘how many trees can I plant?’ Now I’m interested in how I can help others plant trees,” he said.

One of the early ideas about Circle Forest was to provide an outdoor amenity and area of respite for nearby residents of Mission Point Health and Rehabilitation Center, a long-term care and hospice care facility.

The green complement

I am struck by the similarities between these two organizations, RMNN and Arboretum Detroit. Both are working under a clear mission with an environmental agenda. Both are tethered and committed to a specific place. Both are focused on building intergenerational trust and momentum through visible, physical transformation. Both thrive on the empowerment that comes from being part of the change.

"I've broken two dozen shovels digging holes to plant trees—a good metaphor for my body," Kemp said.

Detroit is a city of people-powered landscapes. But what happens when an individual charismatic leader runs out of steam? Ideally, a more robust system would be in place that does not rely on isolated, somewhat heroic acts.

For the last decade, the strategy among pro-tree groups has been (smartly) to make the case for trees as *part* of an economic development strategy. Oft-quoted studies add credibility to these arguments, correlating improvements in tree cover with increased property values and per-square-foot sales along leafy green commercial corridors.

Unprecedented levels of effort are underway to coordinate City of Detroit policies, public-private partnerships and fundraising around the goals of securing and creating **affordable housing for Detroiters**. Is there a way for tree planting to follow this as part of a complementary strategy?

Ultimately, the convergence of patience, urgency and optimism is required for tree planting. In 2022, RMNN is focused on expanding native habitats for pollinators. Ligon describes the ultimate goal of this work to create a place where residents of his neighborhood can come together. A neighborhood full of connected neighbors sounds like a great place to live—trees or not.

*Landscape architect Erin Kelly stumbles around Detroit for this week's issue, with her eyes on trees as a part of Detroit's future. Get in touch at contact.erin.kelly@gmail.com. This article appears in **today's issue of The Dig**, Outlier Media's weekly newsletter on housing and real estate. Click **here** to sign up to receive it.*

