Here in Detroit: Transcending the Narrow Viewpoint of Property and Reviving the Soils

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When I taught introductory soil science classes, one of my favorite exam questions was to ask students to distinguish among “soil,” “land,” and “property.” My personal conviction is that neither “land” nor “soil” should be “property.” But however they differentiated “soil” and “land,” students tacitly assumed that both/either could be “property.”

I “landed” in New Hampshire in 1987—my first academic job—on the cusp of a real estate boom/crash in northern New England. Expensive housing built on speculation remained unpurchased. Developers were in a panic, going under financially, increasingly reneging on promises regarding the street, building, and construction warranties that had lured the home buyers. Ghastly, ghostly partial subdivisions were now abundant in areas that had previously been forests or meadows surrounding ponds and lakes.

Around that same time, wetland classification became an issue and was strenuously opposed by property owners who would assert that their property had just been arbitrarily devalued because of government interference. But, of course, there is no intrinsic value to any “class” or classification scheme, until it is applied to “property.”

In the 1990s, many soil scientists, myself included, had a great deal of fun playing anthro-taxonomy. We were attempting to fit urban- and human-influenced (except by agriculture because that was considered the “natural” purpose of soil) soils into yet another iteration of classification. The language of taxonomy, moving exotic syllables around on a very specialized kind of chess board, made a great base for a pedological parlor game. We could concoct names like Ferruginous Sulfispolanth and debate the distinctions between an Aquic and a Typic Udiformanthy. There was also considerable debate as to how strictly the classification of urban soils should be based solely on observed properties and to what extent landscape position and history of human use could be recognized explicitly. Since we were very interested in seeing ourselves as “objective scientists,” we cavalierly dismissed—and fancied ourselves free from—subjectivity. And then once the statisticians took over, it was DONE, and we could prove it quantitatively!

Licensing then became the prize; people were licensed to confer those classifications in a legally binding fashion. And, at last, there is true property: the license itself because it is entirely created by humans. And thus, the wetland certification business began to boom, and still prospers in some areas, “training the trainer” and classifying the classifier.

In Detroit, the urbo-tragedy is playing out with mixed results. The Detroit Vacant Property Campaign has produced a document titled (rather eponymously) Vacant Properties Toolbox (Complete Guidebook). The goals of the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign are:

- Educating homebuyers about mortgage, property tax, and foreclosure processes to keep homeowners in their homes and avoid additional vacancies
- Developing a well-organized vacant property strategy, which includes inventory and assessment of vacant homes
- Determining property ownership in order to hold owners accountable for the condition of their properties
- Preventing damage to vacant properties to retain home values
- Obtaining control of vacant properties for access to make repairs and market them
- Getting vacant properties reoccupied