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.”

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 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 Udiharbanth. 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!

Vacant Property in Detroit

Here 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
- Getting vacant properties reoccupied
• Demolishing vacant properties to protect home values
• Managing vacant lots
• Building neighborhood capacity
• Retaining residents

This is the verbatim list, in order, from the document Executive Summary (p. 5).

Immediately we are in the “property” mode of an analogous trilogy: “property,” “house,” and “home”; to pair with “property,” “land,” and “soil.” Neither “home” nor “soil” can ever be “vacant” because their very essences are to be filled with liveliness.

Chapter 2 is titled “Preventing Vacancy” and has three parts: mortgage foreclosure, tax foreclosure, and empowering residents to remain in their homes during the foreclosure process. Any questions about WHY they are vacant or WHY there are so many vacant properties here in Detroit right now are considered far too subjective. But mostly we ignore these questions because they would push us to acknowledge that these are not mere “properties,” but expressions of lives, wrongly deposed. And so it is with soil when we mistake it for “property.”

The Vacant Properties Toolbox also includes a chapter on “Managing Vacant Lots” (Chapter 9). Section 9.1 is Preventing Dumping in Vacant Lots, and 9.2 is Acquiring Vacant Lots. In section 9.3 (which is not listed in the table of contents), the language shifts considerably and allows life: Greening Land and Creating Urban Gardens. The Urban Agriculture Ordinances recently added to Detroit’s zoning laws were enacted essentially to officially legalize existing practices and operations. The urban garden community here in Detroit is very soil conscious, transcending the narrow viewpoint of property, looking instead at what’s alive here and how it lives, literally reviving the “soil.” And we know each other, sharing information frequently and gladly (e.g., see www.greeningofdetroit.com).

Here in Detroit we have Feedom Freedom, The Georgia Street Collective, Faith and Spirit Farms, Diversity Garden, D-Town Farm, and lots and lots of gardeners who are committed to nourishing their neighbors and their soils simultaneously through informal and dedicated community gardens and guerilla gardening on vacant lots. Not just using space, but becoming educated about organic gardening, community gardens, seed saving, perennial food plants, permaculture, bioremediation, restoration agriculture, guerilla gardening, natural farming, and composting.

Here in Detroit we also have FoodPLUS Detroit (www.foodplusdetroit.org) whose primary role is to enable projects through collective, collaborative engagement and resource and knowledge sharing. For example, our Waste to Resources program goal is to develop a commercial community-based compost facility network. The prospective composters need to understand important ingredients and methods, but we will also develop workshops on soil science so that they have a more complete understanding of the interactions among the biogeochemical entities. It’s very important that our programs be “community based” because we want them to not only enrich our communities and promote justice, but also arise as initiatives from our own neighborhoods.

Here in Detroit, I live in the only occupied house on my block, which means that I effectively have several vacant lots around my house, mostly furnished with Lenawee soils: fine, mixed, semiactive, nonacidic Mesic Mollic Epiaquept. Lenawee soils have no problems with fertility, but the clay content is very high, so they’re pretty messy when soggy and very tough digging when dry. So I get to think about building/growing/caring for this soil, and people actually WANT to talk about it! People will say, “You’re a soil scientist, really? Shut UP!!!” Not quite rock star status, but it sure surprised me the first few times! So I get to be a soil scientist AND a member of the community. I’m not just the scientist from the university or from Washington or Lansing, but “Miss Chris,” the white woman who stays in the little yellow house on 16th St.