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On Big Beaver Road: Detroit and the Diversity of American Metropolitan Landscapes

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A century ago each major metropolitan region in the United States had its own distinctive landscape—its unique synthesis of geography and regional building types. From the tenements and brownstones of New York, to the four-flats and bungalows of Chicago, to the wood-framed “painted ladies” of San Francisco, American cities gloried in the small-scale, craft-oriented building industries and localized systems of finance that built their unique identities. At the same time, however, overall regional form was, within the limits of differing geographies, surprisingly uniform, as American metropolitan regions converged around the model of the “centralized industrial metropolis” most clearly expressed in Chicago. Every major metropolitan region possessed (or aspired to possess) a version of Chicago’s Loop or central business district, surrounded by a “factory zone” with worker’s housing, and finally a small but prosperous “suburban ring.” Today, we are in the opposite position: building types are stultifyingly similar nationwide, yet the overall forms of metropolitan regions have become surprisingly diverse.

This new combination of similarity and difference makes it difficult to “read” American metropolitan landscapes today. It is all-too-easy to perceive nothing but undifferentiated sprawl—the coast-to-coast recurrence of Christopher Leinberger’s “nineteen standard real estate product types,” spread over an equally-standardized low-density, fragmented, automobile-dependent landscape.¹ But the very pervasiveness of this sprawl tends to hide vastly differing landscapes at the metropolitan scale. For example, a recent study of average regional densities ranked New York and Los Angeles as our two densest regions—but, of course, for opposite reasons. New York still possesses the older pattern of a sharply falling “density gradient,” whereas Los Angeles has only recently filled in to a relatively constant density over a vast urbanized area.²

Similarly, a recent study of “job sprawl” paired Detroit with Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater as two notable examples of “extremely decentralized employment metros.” But, again, the causes are starkly different. Both earn their designation as “extremely decentralized” by having only 5 percent of their jobs within three miles of the regional core, and more than 75 percent of the jobs ten miles or more from the core. But where Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater was “built decentralized,” with recent explosive job growth spread out through an extended region, Detroit as late as 1950 expressed even more strikingly than Chicago the basic form of the centralized industrial metropolis, with more than three-quarters of the region’s jobs and population tightly concentrated in the

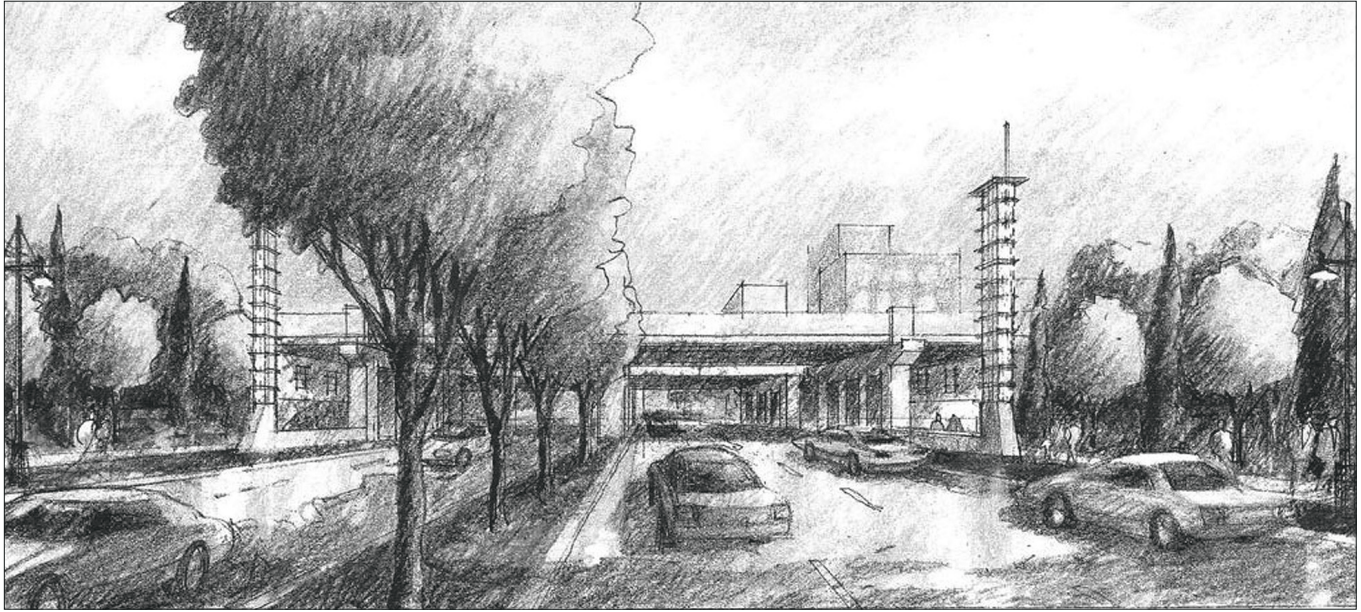
central city. Half a century of “urban crisis,” however, has devastated Detroit’s downtown and depopulated and deindustrialized its vast, once-thriving “factory zone,” so that more than three-quarters of the remaining jobs are now located outside the central city.³

The Divided Metropolis

In this kaleidoscope of metropolitan landscapes, Detroit has the melancholy distinction of faithfully following into the twenty-first century the “urban crisis” trajectory that seemed the fate of all older American cities in the 1960s and 1970s. In spite of continuous large-scale private/public investment downtown—ranging from a John Portman-designed massive hotel/office complex called the Renaissance Center (1978), to a constantly expanding convention center, to new baseball and football stadiums, to four new gambling casinos—the Detroit downtown remains largely derelict, a landscape of abandonment that led photographer Camilo Vergara to call for preserving it intact as a “national ruins park.”⁴ Even worse is the surrounding factory zone, where the brownfield landscape is unparalleled nationwide in its size and devastation.

These zones of abandonment stretch almost uninterrupted from downtown to the city line, making the famous “8 Mile Road” a more salient border for the region than the nearby international boundary between the United States and Canada. What this border expresses most clearly is that Detroit is the most segregated of American metropolitan regions: crossing 8 Mile means going from a central city that is 87 percent black to neighboring white working-class suburbs that are less than 2 percent minority.⁵ Prosperity also suddenly appears—both the well-maintained tract houses of highly paid automobile workers (the “blue-collar aristocracy”) in Macomb County, and the more substantial affluence of neighboring Oakland County, where such suburbs as Birmingham, Troy, and Bloomfield Hills are among the wealthiest in the nation. Although the city of Detroit has declined from a peak population of nearly 2 million in 1950 to 850,000 today, the region as a whole has never shrunk, and is now home to more than 4 million people. Yet no other metropolitan region in the developed world perhaps shows so stark a pattern of concentrated poverty and concentrated affluence.⁶

Although there is no single explanation for the hyperintensity of Detroit’s divided metropolis, I would identify at least two elements that distinguish it even from other Rustbelt regions. Detroit’s sudden rise from a secondary city in the late nineteenth century to world leadership only thirty years later as “the Motor City” meant that its



role as a manufacturing center grew out of proportion to the role of its downtown as a financial-services center. Indeed, until General Motors moved to the Renaissance Center in 2002, the Big Three automakers never had their headquarters downtown, which also lacked the nationally prominent banks and insurance companies that distinguished other downtowns. In retailing, a single dominant department store (Hudson's) kept out competition, only to move aggressively to the suburbs after 1950. And unlike Cleveland, for example, Detroit never had a network of rapid-transit lines centering on downtown. Instead, an unusually tight ring of postwar expressways cut off downtown from the rest of the city with massive interchanges that destroyed the adjacent "loft districts" and older neighborhoods whose conversion began the process of gentrification in many other downtowns. Detroit therefore possessed a relatively weak "downtown coalition" that could not overcome the competing power of suburban municipalities to promote transit and other measures needed to allow its rebuilding.

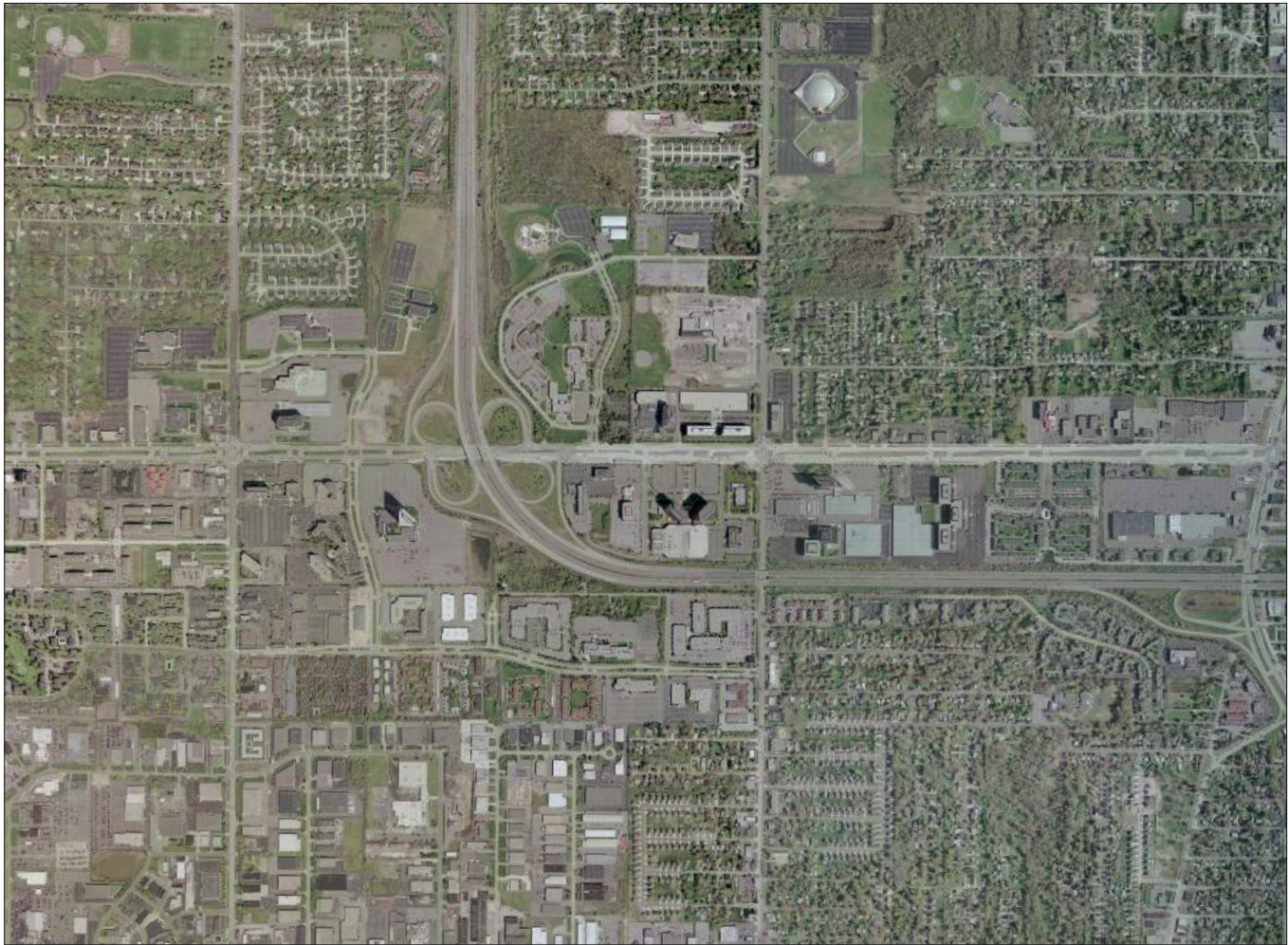
Equally important, Detroit's prowess in automobile manufacturing meant that both the Big Three and their (white) workers had the necessary resources to ruthlessly abandon older factories and homes in the central city. As early as the 1920s, the major automobile manufacturers and parts suppliers began to leave their multistory factories clustered near the downtown for single-level plants (often on sites of 250 acres or more) lining the major rail

lines leading out of the city. The result was that by the 1950s production in "the Motor City" had shifted decisively to its suburbs.⁷

Moreover, following the great black migration from the South from 1940 to 1970, the city's prospering white working class could also afford to flee Detroit's massive "bungalow belt," built before World War II, and follow (or sometimes precede) the factories to the suburbs. But this "white flight deluxe" produced patterns of extremely rapid growth and extreme racial polarization in the city's principal suburbs. By the time of the 1970 census, the three largest working-class suburbs—Dearborn, Livonia, and Warren—had a combined population of more than 100,000 people, of whom a total of 86 were black.⁸

These factors taken together gave a special intensity to decentralization in the Detroit region, an intensity that was soon reflected in the built environment. In this (overall) highly prosperous region, the devastation at the core soon led to an equally extreme "urbanization of the suburbs"—not simply a proliferation of shopping malls and office parks—but a *replacement* of the old downtown with a *linear city* sixteen miles away with the colorful name of Big Beaver Road.

Above: This rendering of a proposed gateway to Big Beaver Road is representative of efforts to transform it into a "world-class boulevard." Drawing courtesy of author.



The New Linear Downtown

The special qualities of Big Beaver are at first difficult to grasp. From any single vantage point along its two-mile stretch of six-lane arterial boulevard, it looks like any other American “Edge City.” Its characteristic building type is the midrise, mirrored-glass office building set back from the road behind a large parking lot. Only when one drives the length of Big Beaver—or, better yet, consults a satellite image—does one begin to grasp its scale. For example, one of the nation’s largest shopping malls, grandly named The Somerset Collection, which could be an Edge City in itself, is only one node along Big Beaver.

Above: Satellite images begin to show the diversity of uses along the Big Beaver Road corridor and hint at its scale. Photo courtesy of author.

Big Beaver embodies in exaggerated form a characteristic common to every metropolitan region: the movement of upscale retailing and office employment not just to “the suburbs,” but to the wealthiest suburbs. The decentralization of downtown retailing and office employment began in the Detroit region in the mid-1950s with the opening of Victor Gruen’s Northgate Shopping Center. By 1960 it had achieved more than double the retail sales of any other shopping center in the nation.⁹ But Northgate and its related office developments were just beyond the Detroit city line—too close to the central city. The future lay eight miles further away.

Running east-west through Troy, Michigan, Big Beaver connects the super-affluent (but development-averse) suburb of Bloomfield Hills with the region’s main north-south highway, I-75. Still undeveloped as late as the mid-

1960s, Big Beaver suddenly became a “location” when Saks Fifth Avenue opened a store there in 1967. As it turned out, Big Beaver was conveniently close to its best customers, and conveniently far from the Detroit riots that broke out in the same year.

When Kresge (later K-Mart) moved its executive offices from Detroit to a site near Saks in 1969, Big Beaver also became the premier suburban site for Class-A office parks and towers. Through the 1970s and 1980s such developments fed off the steep decline in white-collar employment in the central city, until by the 1990s almost 14 million square feet of office space had been built along Big Beaver, interspersed with hotels and conference centers.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Saks store had become the nucleus of The Somerset Collection, now grown to include four anchor stores (Saks, Nieman-Marcus, Nordstrom’s and Macy’s) along with virtually every nationally franchised luxury boutique from Tiffany and Cartier to Burberry and Gucci.¹¹

Since no master plan or dominant developer guided Big Beaver’s growth, it is tempting to regard this development as an unconscious replication of Detroit’s revolutionary “linear manufacturing cities” from earlier in the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s Detroit was the first metropolitan region to make a decisive break with the older pattern of clustering manufacturing plants in a “factory zone” around the downtown. Because such clusters produced inefficient congestion, its plants moved to new locations along its rail corridors, especially where these ran parallel to arterial highways. Thus, the Mound Road “linear manufacturing city” extended out from the city between Mound Road and the Michigan Central tracks, with automobile assembly plants occupying 250 acres or more between the rail sidings and the road. These single-story plants were serviced both by a rail line connecting to production facilities throughout the Midwest, and by road for truck freight from around the region, in a way that could be brought together in a linear assembly line within the plant itself. It was a system of unequalled efficiency and power.¹²

The linearity of Big Beaver serves a very different purpose, but the underlying logic of replacing a clustered form (either the pedestrian cluster of the traditional downtown or the clustering of a single office park or shopping center) remains the same. In creating this new landscape for administration, research and consumption, the city of Troy intervened only to set the ground rules. In order for cars to move easily, curb-cuts on Big Beaver would be limited to major office or retail structures. This meant that gas stations, strip malls, fast food, and other “convenience” uses would be relegated to side streets. On Big Beaver, all

movement requires an automobile, even between adjacent office buildings, but ample parking, frequent turning lanes, and other traffic engineering mean that trips to different destinations can be accomplished rapidly. Despite its two-mile length, this linear city compares well in door-to-door access time with a clustered pedestrian downtown.

Rapid access is especially important to small firms seeking connectivity as well as identity and visibility. To be sure, none of the Big Three automakers is located there: Daimler-Chrysler is nearby in its own baronial office park; Ford remains in Dearborn; and, as mentioned, GM is headquartered in the downtown Renaissance Center. On the other hand, until GM moved to the Renaissance Center in 2001, none of the Big Three had ever had their headquarters downtown. Indeed, the American downtown has never been about major corporate headquarters—which tend to be places unto themselves—but about creating a critical mass of smaller firms. Furthermore, as the Big Three hollow out after years of cutbacks, the real “headquarters” of the world automotive industry is arguably in the hundreds of office suites and technical facilities along Big Beaver Road. There one can find the specialized engineering, design, procurement, marketing, public-relations, advertising, finance, accounting and law firms that comprise the collective “brain” of the industry.¹³

Like the traditional downtown, Big Beaver also provides the essential “third spaces” of sociability where contacts can be made, personal networks reinforced, and deals struck. Interspersed with the office parks are a secondary network of hotels, conference centers, and upscale chain restaurants that specialize in expensive red meat.¹⁴ This network of sociability then extends to the massive atriums of The Somerset Collection, and ultimately to the fairways, bars and restaurants of many nearby private golf clubs. There is even one relatively intense “pedestrian moment”—not on the street, but above it. The Somerset Collection now consists of two enclosed malls that face each other across Big Beaver, and the two are connected by a narrow bridge spanning the road so that none of the shoppers need set foot on an actual sidewalk. Instead, shoppers laden with bags emblazoned with prestigious brands are sped past each other on airport-style moving sidewalks.

Control of Opportunity

Big Beaver accomplishes in its own way so many of the tasks of the traditional downtown that one must ask what difference its specific landscape—the linear form and position at the edge of the metropolis—makes to its region in comparison with older downtowns. Here one must observe

that, for all its inhuman crowding and other faults, the “centralized industrial metropolis” of a century ago was at least a “landscape of opportunity,” locating the immigrant poor between downtown and the job-rich factory zone, both of which were accessible by transit. It was the prosperous suburbanites who had to travel furthest to reach jobs and other urban attractions. Today in the Detroit metropolitan region, however, it is the wealthy who enjoy a convenient proximity to the region’s most concentrated center of jobs and high-end consumption facilities, while the poorest are correspondingly the most isolated.

I know of no other American metropolitan region that is better organized than Detroit to suit the tastes and convenience of its “executive class.” The “power couples” who can afford the half-million to million-dollar homes in suburbs close to Big Beaver possess not only the landscaped beauty of their suburban setting but also an easy commute to the best jobs. They also benefit from excellent schools and other municipal services, the region’s best leisure and shopping centers, and an open road to weekend and vacation homes on the Great Lakes. Only occasionally do such affluent suburbanites need to brave traffic to visit downtown Detroit’s sports stadiums, casinos, or theaters and museums.

By contrast, the region’s poor live in relative proximity to its cultural centers (which they cannot in any case afford to visit), but they are almost completely isolated from 75 percent of the region’s jobs, which, as we have already seen, are ten miles or more from the core. Covering that distance is especially difficult because after thirty years of negotiation the city and suburban municipalities have yet to succeed in unifying their bus systems. After a slow trip through Detroit to 8 Mile, a Big Beaver-bound bus rider must transfer, and endure an even slower ride to cover the remaining eight miles.¹⁵ Even the automobile-owning lower middle class who live in the suburbs bordering Detroit—suburbs that are now rapidly losing their remaining automobile jobs—must fight their way along perpetually congested roads to reach Big Beaver.

While the poor may be the worst victims of Detroit’s metropolitan form, there is another ill-served group, whose eventual disaffection might be crucial to the region’s future—Richard Florida’s “creative class.” Although developers in some of the suburbs near Big Beaver have begun building what they proudly call “loft apartments,” Detroit is sadly lacking in precisely that urban lifestyle which is the principal attraction of “reurbanizing” areas from Brooklyn to Oakland. The city of Detroit has a few pockets of new and rehabbed apartments, ranging from the Detroit riverfront to the downtown to the area around Wayne State

University dubbed “Midtown,” but no area yet supports even one reasonably safe and lively “24-7” street. The continuous “brain drain” of college-educated young people has led Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm to start a “Cool Cities” program. But it currently languishes among the state’s many underfunded and underdesigned pro-urban policies.¹⁶

An echo of the “Cool Cities” message, however, has reached Big Beaver Road. After the 2002 bankruptcy of K-Mart and the closing of its Big Beaver headquarters, the Troy “Downtown Development Authority”—the business improvement district for Big Beaver—sponsored a “Big Beaver Corridor Study” aimed at turning the road into a “world-class boulevard.”¹⁷ A team of planners and other consultants determined that a “world-class boulevard is “NOT suburban” and “NOT automobile dominant.” They therefore recommended not only mixed-use development (especially new housing), extensive tree-planting, and other landscaping, but also “development defined at a human scale, clearly defined pedestrian spaces, street-level community interaction and commerce, and building community along a consistent edge.”

The problem with these admirable goals is that they contradict the basic automobile-driven form of Big Beaver; so, aside from planting many more trees, it is difficult to see how they will be realized. The K-Mart site might well be redeveloped for housing, even housing brought close to the street to provide the “consistent edge” the planners recommend. But the new units are likely to be luxury condominiums with more appeal to “empty nesters” than a new “creative class.”¹⁸ Although the report recommends what it calls “public transit (of some sort),” that sort is likely to be ineffectual so long as the regional bus systems remain divided. And the issue of affordable housing along Big Beaver was not raised at all.

A New Obsolescence

Detroit’s history of extreme racial division, radical abandonment of its historic core, and radical suburbanization now means that it is burdened with a metropolitan landscape poorly adapted to the innovation and urbanity it desperately needs. Big Beaver was extremely well-adapted to a now-vanished “autopia.” In this world, automobile companies promised lifetime employment and relatively high salaries to workers and executives alike, married couples with children constituted the overwhelming bulk of American households, and the view from suburban locales like Big Beaver constituted the best perspective from which to assess the future. But today Big Beaver is an unlikely

setting for either new start-up industries or a radical rethinking of automobility. Toyota, for example, has tried to tap Detroit's still-impressive range of expertise by keeping its automotive research and design center within the metropolitan area. But it has done so by moving to the outskirts of Ann Arbor, a university town forty miles from Big Beaver and presumably more congenial to the creative class.¹⁹ Meanwhile, recent decisions by Korea's Kia Motors are probably more indicative of the future; it decided to locate its first American production plant in Kentucky and its new research and design center in Southern California.²⁰

Nevertheless, Big Beaver as a redesigned "world-class boulevard" might avoid the bleak outlook for the rest of its region. Shopping malls in Detroit's working-class suburbs have begun to shrivel and die; but, so long as U.S. national income continues to shift toward the wealthiest households, The Somerset Collection will not lack for customers, and it might even attract upscale residents to nearby condominiums. Similarly, the closure of so many Big Three automobile plants in southeast Michigan and the Midwest could only strengthen Big Beaver's new growth strategies: outsourcing and "creative bankruptcy."

The global knowledge base represented by the hundreds of small firms along the boulevard is already being used to speed the transfer of production from the Midwest to the cheapest sources worldwide. The new mantra of Big Beaver is "the China benchmark"—the Big Three will whittle down prices from their local parts suppliers until they approach what a part would cost to buy from China. And the wave of bankruptcies among suppliers resulting from the "China benchmark" is already making Detroit the new epicenter for the same predatory capitalism that consumed the American steel industry.²¹

But even this predatory prosperity cannot remedy the fundamental weakness of Big Beaver today: this radically new "linear downtown" is now obsolete compared to the "traditional" downtowns of so many other regions. These are thriving with a multitude of genuinely growing industries and retail centers precisely because they retained the older elements that Big Beaver discarded or never possessed: pedestrian scale, lofts and older buildings, narrow streets, transit, and convenient access to a full range of the metropolitan population. In the 1960s Lewis Mumford labeled Le Corbusier's modernist city-in-the-park "yesterday's city of tomorrow."²² Today, Big Beaver Road has become "yesterday's downtown of tomorrow." The future of the American metropolitan landscape lies elsewhere.

Notes

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