2022 WINNER
Place Art

Black Bottom Street View
Emily Kutil*

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Black Bottom Archives

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We the People of Detroit

Pedal to Porch Project Team:
Pedal to Porch
Mogo Detroit
Black Bottom Archives
Black Bottom Street View
Marsha Music / Salon De’troit
Bert’s Warehouse Theater
Pirahnahead

With Support From:
The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Metabolic Studio
Detroit Public Library Foundation
University of Detroit Mercy

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Black Bottom Street View is a commendable and timely experiment that discovers innovative means of eliciting community voice and makes the systemic forces operating behind seemingly void and evidently neglected sites in Detroit more tangible to diverse publics. The project also aptly demonstrates the potential of place-based interventions that are temporal, iterative and flexible.

The Black Bottom Street View team has conceived of a means for place sensitive redeployment and reconfiguration of its design elements across disparate sites, thus expanding its potential to connect to distinct publics and diverse communities.

The project conceptually manifests as a design intervention which at once responds to discrete site situations while also revealing the physical evidence of systems operating across space and time. The project also grapples with the absences that haunt places in ways that galvanize memories and otherwise amplifies community perspectives. Taken together Black Bottom Street View unpacks histories and legacies of urban renewal and eminent domain, exposing racism and discriminatory practices intertwined across discourses of design, urbanism and public policy.

Black Bottom Street View begins with an all-too-common project - that of reconstructing a part of Black history erased through anti-Black spatial and archival violence. Former residents and descendants of a Black neighborhood in Detroit razed by white planners in the 1950s are reconstructing the place using photographic, spatial, and oral information. The project’s innovation, however, is in how it makes this project itself a portable spatial one, creating opportunities for gathering at multiple scales. Walkable maps and reconstructed stoops spur memory and catalyze social interactions. An effort to remember the past becomes a platform for making a new present.
In order to be able to install an exhibit of this scale in a wide range of spaces, the exhibit structures needed to be freestanding, modular, and easy to transport and assemble. The panorama blocks are supported by plywood portals, each cut from a single sheet of plywood. The portal mitered doorways proportions and echo the varied trim details that topped Black Bottom’s windows and doors.
Panoramas are printed in two pieces, folded at internal corners, and attached to the plywood structures with velcro. The panoramas wrap tightly around the frames to prevent sagging, uninterrupted views of each city block.

Plywood structures are notched to fit together easily, then bolted with steel brackets.

The struts are held in tension and compression with galvanized conduit rods and steel cables. This fabric-covered fabric panesl fast and provides some rigidity to the whole row of structures, as the struts can be moved and adjusted as a single unit.

Creative seating is embedded within a system of interconnected plywood structures, with the struts as a continuation of the seating grid.