

Down a green path

An alternative vision for a section of east Detroit takes shape.

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Cropland will abound if Adamah's vision is realized.



A recycling center could be transformed into a farmer's market.



Windmills and an ethanol plant are two energy sources being considered for project Adamah.



Greenhouses and communal gardens are part of the vision.



An "unearthed" creek will become a canal providing irrigation to fields and recreation.

By [Curt Guyette](#)

On Detroit's east side, in neighborhoods where vacant lots and burned-out shells of former homes dominate the landscape, a radical vision is emerging. It is a futuristic view of urban redevelopment that draws heavily upon the past.

It goes by the name Adamah (*Ah-da-ma*).

The word has a biblical connotation, and in Hebrew means "of the earth," but forget about the Old Testament. This project, an intricate master plan for more than 3,000 acres, is pure New Age.

Created over the course of four months by six architecture students and their advisers at University of Detroit Mercy, the project envisions creating an alternative community that begins a half-mile from downtown on the city's near-east side, stretching from the river north to I-94.

Bounded by I-75 on the west and East Grand Boulevard on the east, the project offers up a new way to look at development in a city that accommodated nearly 2 million people at its peak in the 1950s but now has fewer than half that many inhabitants. Because of that tremendous exodus, Detroit, perhaps more than any other major city in America, has an abundance of vacant land and abandoned property.

Instead of trying to return Detroit to its industrial glory days, Adamah's creators and a small group of community activists promoting it see the east side's empty lots and forsaken buildings as a chance to set the stage for development in the "post-industrial" age.

As such, the project leans heavily on agriculture. Plans include greenhouses for tulips and vegetables, grazing land and a dairy, a tree farm and lumber mill, community gardens and a shrimp farm.

The plans also include windmills to generate electricity, ivy-covered freeway buffers to help clean the air, a canal for both irrigation and recreation, even [co-housing](#), which can include shared dining and common areas to provide a greater sense of community. It calls for creation of living and work spaces in such old industrial buildings as the former Packard auto plant.

Looking at the colorful, bucolic plans for Adamah, the temptation is to call this a utopian concept, but that wouldn't be quite right. Utopia, by definition, is unattainable, and the people who conceived Adamah did so with every intention of seeing some version of their plan implemented.

"When you first look at this, people say it's wild and crazy," says Stephen Vogel, dean of University of Detroit Mercy's school of architecture. "But when you look at it closer, it's not so wild and crazy at all. What we are talking about doing are all very pragmatic things."

There are tremendous obstacles to overcome. Even when pressed, Vogel is hard put to place a price tag on this sort of massive development. But, to give some idea, he estimates that just

creating the canal that forms a crucial part of the project would cost at least \$200 million. And then there's the issue of trying to generate a green future for an area still dealing with the toxic burden of its industrial past.

Most daunting of all, perhaps, is that fact that even though many of the individual pieces being proposed have been pioneered elsewhere, no one has ever tried to put them all together on a scale approaching the one being talked about here.

Considering all that, the obvious question is: Can Adamah's proponents make the great leap needed to take the project from concept to reality?

A creek's rebirth

Like most collaborative efforts, the Adamah project is a tapestry formed from many threads. One of those fibers stretches back more than 20 years.

In 1979, Stephen Vogel's firm, Schervish Vogel Consulting Architects, was performing site analysis work for a string of parks along Detroit's riverfront when he learned of a storm drain called Bloody Run. He conducted some research and found it was named for a creek that had been covered over and absorbed into the city's sewer system around the turn of the century.

Vogel began toying with the idea of "unearthing" the former creek, but the idea languished.

As odd as it seems, the history of Bloody Run Creek and the fallout from Detroit's crack epidemic would eventually merge.

In 1987, a year after 46 children in the city were gunned down and another 345 were wounded from the crossfire of battling drug gangs, some Detroit residents began taking to the streets, marching on drug houses with bullhorns blaring. Among the leaders of the movement known as Save Our Sons And Daughters were a pair of longtime activists, Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs.

At the same time, Jimmy Boggs was crusading to block Mayor Coleman Young's efforts to bring casino gambling to Detroit. When Young challenged his opponents to be more than naysayers, Boggs responded with an alternative vision.

"We have to begin thinking of creating small enterprises which produce food, goods and services for the local market, that is, for our communities and for our city," contended Boggs in a 1988 speech. "In order to create these new enterprises, we need a view of our city which takes into consideration both the natural resources of our area and the existing and potential skills and talents of Detroiters."

As the crack houses began to close, the community, seeing the results of grassroots activism, became even more energized.

Their efforts gained added momentum beginning in 1992, with the formation of [Detroit Summer](#). A sort of activist training ground for people aged 13 to 25, the program imports volunteers who

join with Detroit kids to participate in revitalization projects, including the planting of community gardens.

Those Detroit Summer gardens became part of a patchwork of similar projects nurtured by the late Gerald Hairston, who helped create scores of community gardens throughout the city.

By the mid-'90s, with the assistance of the Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan and Michigan Integrated Food & Farming Systems, people from those gardens joined forces to create the Detroit Agriculture Network, which promotes urban agriculture.

Kyong Park, an internationally known architect who frequently served as a visiting lecturer at University of Detroit Mercy, became part of this mix. Park moved to Detroit in 1998, buying a house on the east side and setting up the nonprofit [International Center for Urban Ecology](#) (ICUE).

The threads of Adamah were beginning to weave together.

A bottom-up approach

“Because he lived in this community, Kyong Park could feel the pulse of what was happening here,” observed Jim Embry, director of the [Boggs Center](#), which was founded in 1995, two years after Jimmy Boggs’ death.

Just as Boggs envisioned in his 1988 speech, Park sees Detroit as the culmination of the industrial revolution. The city that showed the world how to mass-produce automobiles, that served as democracy’s arsenal during World War II, that rode a wave of labor activism to middle-class affluence and model race relations, had fallen farther and hit bottom harder than any other major U.S. city

“In terms of urban industrialization, mass production, the working class, and labor history, (Detroit) is the largest factory town ever built,” observed Park in an interview last year. “Because of the urban destruction it has gone through and which is still visibly with us, Detroit also represents the biggest failure of the modernist city.”

Dean Vogel talked with Park about Bloody Run Creek, and how, if unearthed, it could provide a lifeline of water to a community seeking self-sufficiency. Park, as he explains on the ICUE Web site, wanted to “regenerate” the near-east side of Detroit into “a new model for community development.” Both knew that any successful plan would require community input.

Therefore, in 1999, as Vogel and Park began organizing students to conduct a block-by-block survey of the future Adamah project site, they had the students begin by meeting with Boggs and other activists.

“We didn’t want to create this grand vision in an ivory tower,” explained Vogel. “That won’t work. There are real things going on in the community.”

For redevelopment to work, it must be an extension of what's already happening.

That sort of thinking stands the traditional approach to city planning on its head. But the traditional approach, say proponents of project Adamah, isn't working.

Which is why Grace Boggs and others say they haven't even considered approaching the city with their vision at this point. The way they see it, bureaucrats and politicians would never take the lead in pursuing a concept as unorthodox as this one. The only way to make it happen, they say, is to build community support, then start implementing their plan by taking small steps.

Billions of dollars have been invested in Detroit over the past dozen years, said Vogel, "and the population is still going down."

During the '90s, while the U.S. economy was experiencing unprecedented growth, Detroit capitalized on the surge by directing much of its resources into big-ticket items such as a pair of new sports stadiums and downtown development projects such as casinos.

Such an approach is not bad if it is part of a diversified plan, says Vogel. "But you can have all the stadiums you want. If you don't have housing, if you don't have (livable) neighborhoods, you are not going to have a revitalized city.

"It's great that you have a company like Compuware coming in here. But you should be devoting equal time to making sure that my neighborhood is not declining. And that's not happening. Small businesses are continuing to leave, and that's tragic."

Grace Lee Boggs is even more emphatic in her denouncement of the city's approach to development.

"A lot of folks in the bureaucracy know that the approach we've been taking up until now has failed," she says. "The city can't be rebuilt from the top down by politicians reacting to crises or by developers seizing opportunities to make megaprofits."

According to mayoral spokesman Greg Bowens, the city is open to exploring innovative developments such as Adamah, but even pieces of it will go nowhere without the basic component supporters are now trying to generate: broad community support.

"To carry you through the political land mines that can emerge, you have to do an enormous amount of outreach," says Bowens. "Even something that seems as benign as a massive tree farm can be fraught with peril. Where's it going to be? Who will pay for it? How will it be maintained? Who will make sure it doesn't become a dumping ground?"

"Just because something is unique doesn't always mean it is good. Particularly in regards to land use, you have to make sure you have buy-in from the people who live in the area."

That much, at least, Grace Lee Boggs agrees with. In her view, for development to be sustainable, it must come from the grassroots, and be horizontal instead of vertical. She likens

the evolution of Adamah to a spider web, emerging a strand at a time, from Gerald Hairston's community gardens, to Stephen Vogel's affinity for Bloody Run Creek to Kyong Park's ICUE, which, according to its [Web site](#), was created to help "draw artists, architects and students from around the world" to Detroit to work "side by side with entrepreneurs and organizations in this community."

Urban farmers

In a paper she co-wrote last year for the Journal of the American Planning Association, Wayne State University's Kami Pothukuchi, contended that the time has come for planners — who have traditionally paid scant attention to the "food system" — to begin including it in their urban designs.

But the spider web Grace Boggs sees forming in Detroit is spreading through urban areas across the world.

"It's a fast-growing global phenomenon," the Christian Science Monitor reported in January. "Nearly 20 percent of the world's food now comes from city-based farms. Averaging anywhere from one to 20 acres in the U.S., these tiny urban farms say they offer local consumers higher quality produce, at many times the yield per acre of bigger, industrial farms."

Michael Abelman, founder of the Center for Urban Agriculture, made a similar observation last year in Earth Island Journal: "There is a quiet revolution stirring in our food system. It is not happening as much on the distant farms that still provide us with the majority of our food: it is happening in cities, neighborhoods and towns."

Although Pothukuchi hadn't heard of the Adamah project, she was enthusiastic when Metro Times asked her about the feasibility of such a large-scale urban development. "I think they have the basis for something very real, something very powerful," Pothukuchi said. "There have been these elements of responsible architecture and planning since the '60s."

She noted that the environmental and civil rights movements spurred thinking about new approaches to urban planning that were built around the concept of "sustainability," but they seldom got the attention they deserved.

"The argument has always been that developers were building large suburban houses because that's what the market wants," she said. "But I don't think that's right. I think the problem has been that people aren't being offered enough choices."

But that's changing. Dozens of alternative, ecologically minded communities have sprung up across the country in recent years. From Ann Arbor to Ithaca, N.Y., to rural areas of Virginia to Missouri and Oregon and California, people are creating the types of cooperative "co-housing" communities envisioned for parts of the Adamah project.

Likewise, agriculture has sprung up in blighted areas of some of the nation's largest cities. In Philadelphia, Greensgrow Farm produces flowers and specialty crops for upscale restaurants at a

site that once housed a galvanized steel plant. In the Watts section of Los Angeles, a three-acre plot produces 100 kinds of organic fruits and vegetables.

At Chicago's notorious Cabrini-Green housing project, schoolchildren raise escarole for gourmet restaurants and organic markets. They also tend a small herd of goats, and plan to use their milk to start making cheese. And on the city's South Side, children are raising earthworms and nursing tilapia fingerlings at an indoor aquaculture operation.

There is, obviously, a giant chasm between these relatively small operations and the vision for Detroit offered up by the Adamah project. No one, however, expects the project to emerge full-blown. Everyone involved sees it as a process.

"We're not looking for one quick fix," explained Dan Pitera, an Adamah adviser who is head of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, a nonprofit architecture firm affiliated with University of Detroit Mercy. "This is something that will have to be done a piece at a time."

Building momentum

In fact, even the pieces of Adamah are, for the most part, plans drawn in sand. From the perspective of people like Jason Fligger, that's a good thing.

As the urban agriculture coordinator for the Hunger Action Coalition, Fligger knows firsthand how difficult it is to sustain even small operations. When he viewed a video outlining plans for Adamah, he came away with several concerns. For example, the plan envisions a plant that would turn corn into ethanol for fuel.

Fligger, who has researched the issue, questions how "sustainable" that is, because corn demands heavy applications of fertilizer to maintain high yields year after year. When you factor in the energy it takes to create fertilizer, along with the depletion of soil nutrients, and the energy required to create the ethanol and then truck it to market, says Fligger, you're probably better off just growing food to eat.

Likewise, something as apparently eco-friendly as fish farming can cause environmental problems. If not properly filtered, effluents can cause oxygen depletion in surrounding waters and exacerbation of toxic algae blooms, according to a recent Environmental Defense Fund report.

Fligger also points out that much of the soil in Detroit is contaminated with pollutants such as lead, and the obstacles that can pose for anyone looking to grow food here.

What's good about these sorts of issues being raised, say supporters, is that people are taking the project seriously enough to give it careful thought.

And that, they say, was the initial goal.

The intent was not to produce a final blueprint right out of the box, explains Pitera, but to set the stage for debate and offer a direction in which to move.

Proponents describe Adamah in its current form not as a destination, but as a catalyst. What's important, they say, is to consider the possibilities.

There's already a plot at an abandoned school site near Mt. Elliot and Canfield streets where six acres of alfalfa grows. That, in turn, is being used to feed small animals as part of an agriculture program at the Ferguson Academy, a school on the city's west side.

"We have extremely good soil here," says Kristine Hahn, a consumer horticulture agent for Michigan State University's cooperative extension service in Wayne County. "As long as you do some fairly decent investigations to make sure there's nothing toxic present, there's no reason you couldn't grow just about anything."

And even if there are toxins, notes Hahn, research suggests that certain plants can naturally detoxify soil over a few years, greatly reducing the expense usually associated with environmental cleanup.

"We may not have all the answers right now," admits Pitera. "but architects are used to working through many layers of information. Components of this plan will be discarded and others will be put in their place. There won't necessarily be a fish farm or urban forestry. What we've done is create a plan that leads in the direction of sustainability."

As they show the video created to generate interest in the Adamah project, Vogel, Boggs and others, such as Jim Embry, director of the Boggs Center, say the response has been impressive.

"Where we've shown it, people have been profoundly affected," said Embry, who recently returned from a trip to the Appalachia region of Kentucky.

In some cases, such as in Kentucky, the video inspired people to re-examine the potential for economic development in their own communities

"At other times," adds Boggs, "people see the video and say they want to come to Detroit to help make it happen."

As for Wayne State University's Pothukuchi, she was ready to contact Vogel and offer her assistance.

"Proposals like this really help in creating arenas to engage in dialogue," she said. "People are looking for ways to better live their lives.

Pothukuchi also points out that there is grant money floating around for a variety of projects similar to those being proposed by Adamah. Seed money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture could provide as much as \$250,000 for certain pilot projects, she said. The

Environmental Protection Agency could be interested in providing start-up money, and private foundations she is familiar with could be mined for as much as \$1 million in some cases.

“I don’t think this is a pipe dream, I don’t think it’s pie in the sky. There are definitely parts of this that are very practical, parts of it that can be put in place,” Pothukuchi said.”

For Pitera, that sort of response is both encouraging and a bit daunting.

“We never expected this to take on such momentum so quickly,” he said. “What we need to do now is work on the specifics. If we don’t, this is going to fall flat.”

Community input

Chris Pomodoro, one of six students who helped create the Adamah plan over a four-month period in the spring of 2000, says the experience has changed his life.

“When we went out into the community and talked to people about the project, it was exciting,” he recalled. “You could see that their own ideas were being sparked, that you could not only do this, but that you could also do this and this and this. It was a way of helping empower the people who live there, a way of providing a more powerful way of approaching city planning. I wasn’t like some corporation coming in and saying, ‘We want to build a factory here.’”

Pomodoro grew up in Farmington Hills observing Detroit from a distance, so the survey provided a fresh view of the city.

“It was surreal,” he says. “You’d be standing in these vacant lots, with fields of grass growing, and see pheasants go running by, and in the distance you would see the skyline with the RenCen standing there.

“There’d be a lot of junk from dumping, and all sorts of bad things in the area. But I also saw it as a beautiful thing. When you look at all this vacant land and abandoned housing, Detroit is like the land of opportunity. I could never afford to buy a building in New York or Chicago or San Francisco.”

Now a graduate with degrees in architecture and civil engineering, Pomodoro is working at the Design Center and shopping for property on the east side.

“It’s possible to buy a building here, and turn it into a community for artists and designers.”

It’s also an opportunity to remain a part of the project he helped start.

“This is a continuing thing,” he said. “If it starts moving to the point where projects are being done, it needs to be as inclusive as possible, with a continuing dialogue among people in the community. Hopefully, I’ll be one of those people soon.”

To learn more about the Adamah project, phone the Boggs Center at 313-923-0797, or visit its Web site at www.boggscenter.org.

Curt Guyette is *Metro Times* news editor. Contact him at 313-202-8004 or cguyette@metrotimes.com.