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DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services

Kimberley Kinder

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DIY Detroit KIMBERLEY KINDER



MAKING DO IN A CITY WITHOUT SERVICES



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Kimberley Kinder : DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City without Services:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. When the city can't provide, you might as well do it yourself. By B. Wolinsky Kimberley Kinder's book argues that in cash-strapped cities, residents have two options; either they handle their civil needs on their own, or they suffer from the lack of it. Detroit is her main example of a city where the residents are on their own to pick up garbage, maintain abandoned properties, and even to perform law-enforcement duties. The idea of local residents having to handle everything on their own is nothing new. In parts of Vermont, you

have to take your trash to the depot yourself, because there's no trash pickup. In order to have public trash collection, the property taxes would have to be raised, which nobody wants. However, Vermont is full of pig farms, and the trash can be fed to pigs, so that offsets the cost. It would not work in a city like New York or Chicago. While services like ambulances and fire departments can be staffed by volunteers, as they are in small towns, it would not be feasible in a large urban area. The chapter "Seeking New Neighbors" has the residents padlocking vacant houses and finding buyers themselves, rather than risk having the place sit empty. The empty house phenomena is one of Detroit's biggest blights, because they obviously attract drug-using squatters. Some banks are open to this, because it saves them having to constantly replace stolen pipes and boilers. Others are not open to this idea, and the houses become an eyesore. Though not mentioned in this book, there is a concept called "attractive nuisance," where a property owner can be penalized if his property attracts trespassers. For instance, let's say you own a house with a pool, but yours is away for a week at a time, and teens keep sneaking in to use it. The Sheriff can call this an attractive nuisance because of the hassle it causes him, but the property taxes pay for him to keep it safe. Detroit, however, lost its tax revenue, so the police can do nothing. It's up to the neighbors. Further chapters deal with urban farms, neighborhood watch, street lighting, and land use. With the city government practically non-functional, volunteering is vital. However, it's not entirely sympathetic to everything in this book, starting with the handling of the empty house problem. Volunteering to maintain a property is great, but why aren't the residents lobbying to have them demolished? So few people are moving into the city, so why would anyone think the houses will sell. The "Seeking New Neighbors" chapters discuss the foreclosures, and how residents walk away from \$50,000 mortgages and pay \$10,000 cash for the home next door. The residents could easily seek out an area with better police service, offer a pittance for a county-foreclosed home, promise to start paying the taxes, and there you go. Blocks of foreclosed homes could then be torn down and turned into farms. Some of the problems here were discussed in an earlier book called *The Metropolitan Revolution*. It cites Detroit as an example of the "fractured municipality," where the mayor and the selectmen can't agree on what to do. Public works end up stalling, and the community decays. The role of the politicians is mostly avoided in *DIY Detroit*, and I don't fault the author for it. I doubt they're of much help, especially not after Mayor Kilpatrick spent the city's money on his girlfriends.

For ten years James Robertson walked the twenty-one-mile round-trip from his Detroit home to his factory job; when his story went viral, it brought him an outpouring of attention and support. But what of Robertson's Detroit neighbors, likewise stuck in a blighted city without services as basic as a bus line? What they're left with, after decades of disinvestment and decline, is DIY urbanism—sweeping their own streets, maintaining public parks, planting community gardens, boarding up empty buildings, even acting as real estate agents and landlords for abandoned homes. *DIY Detroit* describes a phenomenon that, in our times of austerity measures and market-based governance, has become woefully routine as inhabitants of deteriorating cities "domesticate" public services in order to get by. The voices that animate this book humanize Detroit's troubles—from a middle-class African American civic activist drawn back by a crisis of conscience; to a young Latina stay-at-home mom who has never left the city and whose husband works in construction; to a European woman with a mixed-race adopted family and a passion for social reform, who introduces a chicken coop, goat shed, and market garden into the neighborhood. These people show firsthand how living with disinvestment means getting organized to manage public works on a neighborhood scale, helping friends and family members solve logistical problems, and promoting creativity, compassion, and self-direction as an alternative to broken dreams and passive lifestyles. Kimberley Kinder reveals how the efforts of these Detroiters and others like them create new urban logics and transform the expectations residents have about their environments. At the same time she cautions against romanticizing such acts, which are, after all, short-term solutions to a deep and spreading social injustice that demands comprehensive change.

"Kimberley Kinder's *DIY Detroit* is a clever, beautifully written account of everyday life in the wake of conventional market collapse and decades of austerity. It describes the ways that Detroiters have adapted, often defensively, always informally, sometimes illegally, to life without conventional markets and routine municipal services."—Jason Hackworth, author of *Neoliberal City*