

Production Demolition Comes to Detroit



Although it's generally easier to tear a house down than build one, things get complicated when tear-downs number in the tens of thousands. That's the way things stand in Detroit, which faces a reverse housing crisis of epic proportions: With a dwindling population — just 700,000 residents live there today, compared with nearly two million in the boom years after WWII — abandoned and derelict houses have depressed property values, provided refuge for criminals, and fueled thousands of arson fires each year. City officials have tried to pick away at the backlog, but managed to tear down only about 7,200 homes in the past three years, leaving more than 30,000 slated for demolition.

In February, however, the city got some unexpected help from a new nonprofit agency called the Detroit Blight Authority. Demolition contractors hired by the DBA — with funding from the Kresge Foundation — completely cleared 288 lots in a 10-block area of the city's Eastern Market District in a mere 10 days.

The DBA is the brainchild of Bill Pulte, a Michigan native and CEO of a private equity firm in nearby Bloomfield Hills. If his name is familiar, it should be: Pulte's grandfather, also known as Bill Pulte, is the founder of Pulte Homes, one of the nation's largest home builders.

According to the younger Pulte, the DBA intends to do for demolition what an earlier generation did for production building. "It's all about division of labor," he says. "When you're building a house, the cabinet guy doesn't do the drywall too." Neighborhood-wide blight clearance, he explains, proceeds in four distinct stages. The

With one successful urban land-clearance project already under its belt (shown), the nonprofit Detroit Blight Authority has embarked on a second, in the city's Brightmoor neighborhood. The first week's work in Brightmoor — a 500-lot area containing about 70 vacant structures — yielded 700,000 pounds of trash, 200 discarded tires, 14 abandoned boats, and, sadly enough, one unidentified body.

first involves removing trash and debris and cutting back long-neglected trees and bushes, which have left parts of the city a tangled and dangerous urban forest. Once brushed-out areas are safely accessible, utility crews can cut off the water and power, and cap the sewer lines. After that comes remediation of asbestos wraps on pipes and boilers, followed by structural demolition.

That broadband approach to blight clearance is notably more efficient than tearing down individual houses scattered throughout the city. It's also cheaper, Pulte says. According to him, the cost per demolished structure has dropped from \$9,500 — which is what the city had been spending — to as little as \$5,000 with DBA on board.

Challenges remain, however. Obtaining demolition permits has proven tedious, and a dispute is simmering with state officials over whether basement excavations can be partially filled with broken or ground-up masonry — the DBA's preferred approach — or must be filled with clean dirt. Still, the organization is pressing ahead with its eventual goal of demolishing 13,000 houses per year, and plans to tackle a larger 15-acre site at a yet-to-be disclosed location later this year. — *Jon Vara*