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Mary Van's home, seen through an upstairs window of 569 Mount Vernon Street, which was abandoned almost a decade ago.

Detroiters' Good Intentions Are Tested by Blight

By JOHN ELIGON

DETROIT — In and around the abandoned houses on Mount Vernon Street, brawls and shootings have erupted, a dogfighting ring has been established, stolen cars were traded and drug deals consummated. So when Michelle Van-Tardy, who has lived on the block for years, saw a disheveled woman in her 50s slip into the abandoned house at 569 Mount Vernon Street, she pounced.

"What are you doing in there?" Ms. Van-Tardy barked. "That's not your home."

"Mind your own business," the woman fired back. "It's not your house."

"You know what," Ms. Van-Tardy, 45, persisted, "you go on, keep going in there. I have some metal for you," a reference to bullets.

"No, that's all right," the woman said and left in a hurry.

Ms. Van-Tardy's house is two lots down from the home of Mary Van, her mother. The family, who have lived here for a half-century, paved the vacant lot in between as a driveway and built a fence around the adjoining homes and parcels they own, creating an urban compound of sorts. With teenage nieces living there and young relatives regularly coming to visit, the Vans are on edge about prowlers.

"They could take them in the house, kill them, rape them, anything like that," Ms. Van-Tardy's

RUIN AND REVIVAL

Demolition in the North End

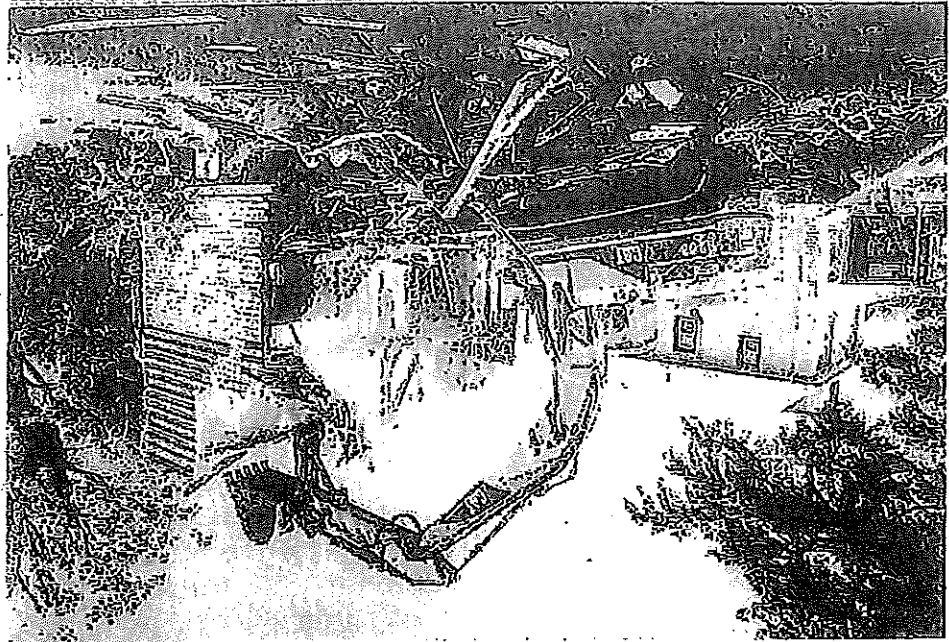
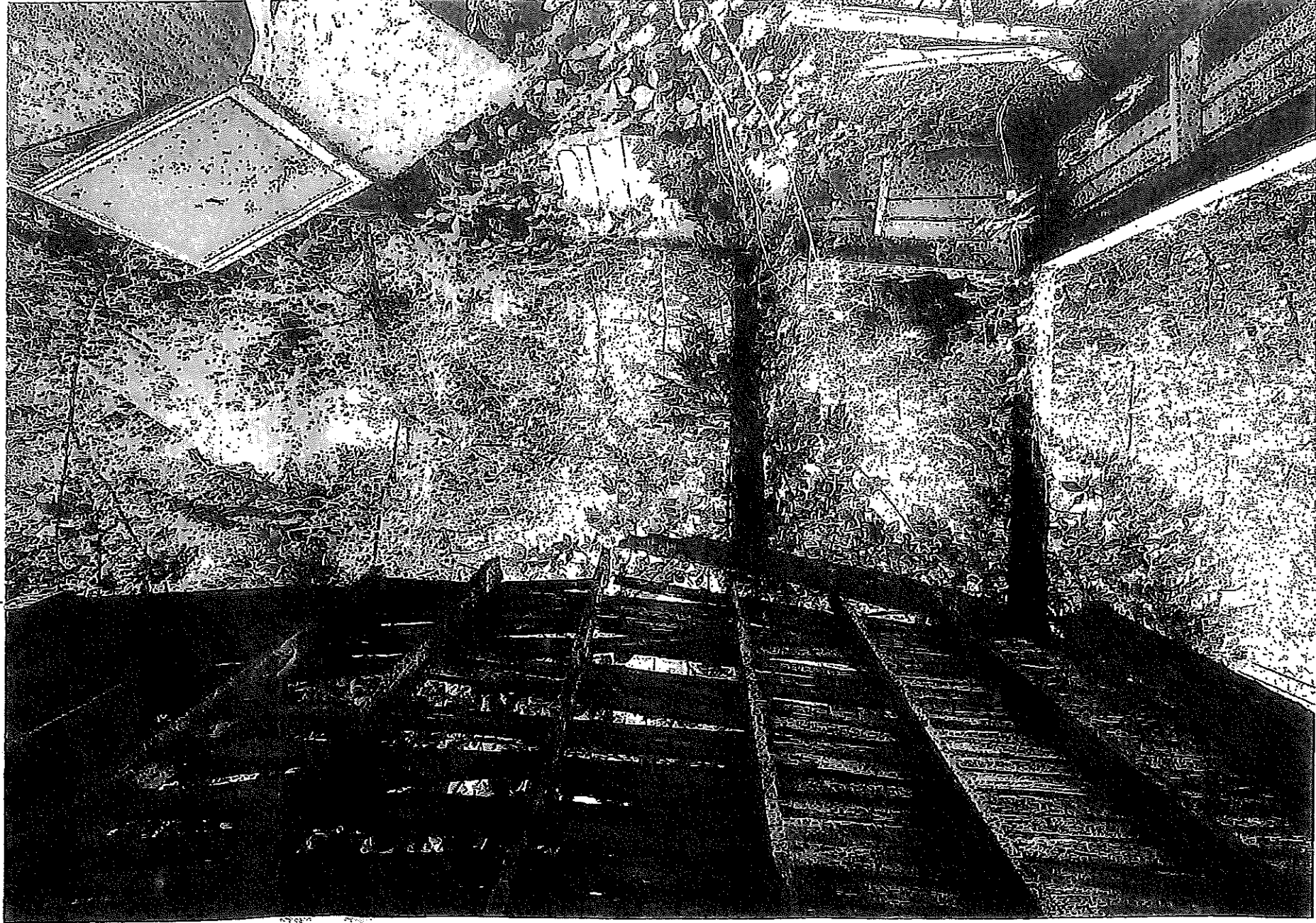
husband, Eldridge Tardy, said of the nearby abandoned houses.

For years, 569 Mount Vernon had topped the list of the ramshackle properties that most concerned the Vans. And to them, the remedy was straightforward: Tear it down. Once that was accomplished, they would try to buy the lot. But as history in this mismanaged municipality has proved, neither was a simple task.

When Mayor Mike Duggan took office in January, about 30 percent of the buildings in Detroit were in disrepair. Overhauling how the city handles blight has been a top priority. He has pushed for a more efficient demolition system, to get tenants into vacant homes that can be salvaged and to seize neglected properties.

If the city has its way, those efforts will rid its salvageable neighborhoods of ugliness and danger and halt the spread of blight. They will entice private developers to start investing in

Continued on Page A13



The abandoned house that stood at 569 Mount Vernon Street in Detroit was demolished in August. Nature had overrun the back porch, and the last resident's clothes still hung in an upstairs closet.

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From Page A1

neighborhoods that were long ignored in Detroit, whose decline led to the largest municipal bankruptcy in the nation.

Now, having formally emerged this week from nearly 17 months under court protection, the city is moving ahead with its revival plans. The North End is the rare neighborhood in the city with significant blight and vacant land that planners tap as a place for rebuilding rather than conversion to mostly green space. The area's proximity to the city's social and cultural heart of Midtown and Downtown has given officials hope that if they smooth the neighborhood's rough edges, developers will follow.

As of the beginning of November, the city had knocked down nearly 200 homes in the North End this year; nearly a third of the neighborhood's homes were in fair or poor condition, or worse, when the year started.

Yet significant hurdles lie ahead. Foremost: money.

The Detroit Land Bank Authority, which Mr. Duggan has asked to lead the fight against deterioration, is currently funding its efforts with \$52 million in federal money that will expire next year. The bankruptcy resolution set aside \$440 million for removing blight in the coming years, yet a task force report said that cleaning up the city would cost as much as \$850 million, and as much as \$1 billion more to remedy industrial blight, such as old factories.

And the current administration must gently manage a population, including the Vans, that has grown impatient, occasionally taking things into their own hands.

The Vans have mowed the lawns of abandoned houses around them and fastened doors shut with twine. Over the past decade, Ms. Van-Tardy has called the police, the mayor's office, the city ombudsman and the owner of a vacant house to fend off crime and disturbances. Little changed.

About five years ago, the Vans saw a man wheeling a stove on a shopping cart out of a house across the street. Around the same time, Ms. Van-Tardy called the police about the same house, suspecting that squatters were manufacturing drugs inside because she saw bright fluorescent lights, but they did not act, she said. Then one evening in January 2009 a pair of veteran officers saw a man carrying a bloody dog outside the house. They chased him into the backyard and discovered a dog-fighting ring and marijuana plants inside.

The Vans' block — in fact, 569 Mount Vernon itself — once was a place where black families could reap the benefits of hard work. After years of driving a forklift and working as a dock foreman at a cold-storage facility, Eddie Darget and his wife, Barbara, fulfilled a dream when they bought their first house, the white wood-frame, four-bedroom dwelling at 569 Mount Vernon, for about \$25,000 in 1970.

Ms. Darget died from lung cancer in 1993. Her husband could not bear to stay there, so he moved out a few years later and handed the keys to his three children. The house, built in 1909, slowly deteriorated.

An electrical fire burned the attic in 1999, and dealing with contractors to get it fixed became an ordeal. With the neighborhood sinking, Yolonda R. Jackson, one of the Dargets' daughters, moved to the suburbs; her younger sister, who was the home's primary caretaker, followed.

"Everything just seemed too hard," Ms. Jackson said. "Because you go, 'It's a great community,' but people are like,

Ruin and Revival

Articles in this series are tracking efforts to revive Detroit's North End neighborhood.

ONLINE: Video, more photographs, and past New York Times coverage of Detroit.

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Michelle Van-Tardy and her godson, Marcus Spearman. The green house at rear is 569 Mount Vernon.

'Can I come there after dark? Can I park my car on the street?'

Ms. Jackson's brother, Terrance Jackson, tried to take over, but the property taxes on the house were delinquent, and he had stopped working because of an illness. He lived there for a time without lights, water or gas. By 2005, he had abandoned the house for good.

And so it sat, yielding to the unruly bush around it. Scrappers began to pick at it, stealing a piece of avocado green aluminum siding here, a gutter there. The clatter of rummagers echoed down the street.

In 2010, foreclosure was official. Wayne County put up the home for auction, but no one bid on it, and the county transferred ownership to the city. Nothing was done to stem its decline.

The city in April 2012, responding to a complaint, sent an inspector, who ruled the house vacant and open. That ruling triggered a process that could have ended with the demolition of the house. The mayor at the time, Dave Bing, was in the midst of a highly publicized push to demolish 10,000 abandoned homes. The dilapidated house seemed the ideal candidate.

But that never happened, and current city records provide no clear explanation.

For neighbors like the Vans, this meant more unease. In the summer of 2013, several law enforcement agents swooped in on the house, Ms. Van-Tardy recalled. They were looking for a fugitive. The search did not yield the suspect, but the authorities did find drug paraphernalia.

At the time, 569 Mount Vernon seemed trapped in a bureaucratic purgatory. What the Vans and even city officials could not see was that steps toward tearing it down had begun in an entirely different place.

Angling for Demolition

In the throes of the nation's economic crisis, President Obama in 2010 began a multibillion-dollar effort that his administration hoped would lift up communities hit hard by foreclosures. Named the Hardest Hit Fund, the program directed \$7.6 billion in federal bailout money to 18 states. Michigan, which was fifth in the country in total foreclosures at the time, received \$500 million.

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority used part of the money for mortgage assistance, but a troubling trend emerged: Some of the homeowners the program was helping walked away from the homes because they could not deal with the blight around them.

So Michigan became the first state to

Alain Delaqu erie contributed reporting from New York.

Mount Vernon visible from where she sat on Ms. Van's porch, Ms. Van-Tardy was irritated one afternoon this summer.

"The city has good intentions," she said. "But then the actions are like a snail."

New Expectations

Many Detroiters, like the Vans, are also wary of the city's motives for demolition.

"I think it's to make the city look better, not for the citizens, but for the people that they're expecting to come in," Ms. Van-Tardy said, referring to white people.

Action can be an antidote to skepticism, however, and on an overcast morning in the first week of August, when Ms. Van-Tardy awoke before the crow of the ring-necked pheasants that have taken refuge in this overgrown urbanescape, she found reason to smile. She shuffled onto her porch wearing black capri pants and a Michigan State University T-shirt. A construction worker was on her block with a white pickup truck. Was it actually happening? ...

Seeing, here, is believing, so it was not until hours later that Ms. Van-Tardy could truly breathe a sigh of joy. Shortly before noon, an 18-wheeler pulled onto her street towing a bulky yellow excavator on its trailer.

Ms. Van-Tardy, who has a plump, round face and speaks with gentle excitement, bounced her godson on her lap. She panted her sister, who had left for work, and proclaimed, "The wrecker is here! The wrecker is here!"

A short time later, the wide carriage sitting atop conveyor-belt-like tracks crept toward the front of 569 Mount Vernon. Its long arm with a thick iron bucket resembling a claw sliced in between two trees and hovered over the porch roof. And in an instant, the claw dug into it. Aluminum and wood shards crumbled, letting out a loud crackle like firecrackers.

Terrance Jackson, the last person to live in the house, was on his way to get his car fixed and just happened to drive past the demolition in progress.

As the excavator tore off the front of the house, Mr. Jackson looked up at the second floor. He saw his old room. In the closet, relics from his past dangled from hangers: a red winter vest, a navy blue coat and a few short-sleeve button-down shirts.

"It hurts me now to watch it get torn down," Mr. Jackson said, sipping red Gatorade.

In a matter of hours, the house was reduced to a muddy pit of concrete rubble and wooden shards. Gnats rose from the wreckage. The contractors still needed weeks to clean up the lot, fill it in and plant grass on it, but Mary Van could not contain her grin as she leaned on her cane that afternoon and surveyed the aftermath from her porch.

"Oh, what a difference a day makes," she said.

That day, the Vans already were discussing their eagerness to purchase the empty lot as part of the city's side-lot program. But months later, they found themselves again mired in city bureaucracy.

When they called the Land Bank, Ms. Van-Tardy said, someone told them to keep checking the website to see when the lot became available, and once that happened, they could buy it. But they kept checking and calling, and it still was not ready, even though the hole had long been filled and grass planted.

The property has a lien on it that the Land Bank is still trying to get removed before it can sell the lot, an official said.

That is little comfort for Ms. Van-Tardy, who said she became outraged when a woman working for the Land Bank told her they might not be able to buy the lot. Because their home was not adjacent to 569 Mount Vernon (even though they owned the lot next to it), they would not be eligible, Ms. Van-Tardy said she was told.

But in a later call, someone else at the Land Bank assured her that they would be able to buy it once the red tape cleared. And so the Vans find themselves again partaking in a familiar Detroit ritual: waiting.

the Land Bank, said she worried at the time about things that had hampered demolitions in the past, like whether there were enough contractors and enough dirt to fill the holes after homes were torn down.

This March, seven months after the City Council approved the transfer of 569 Mount Vernon to the Land Bank, the agency finally received the deed and demolition was in sight.

The Land Bank had already overhauled its demolition procedure, and received an additional 16,000 homes from the city in April. After demolitions, the agency began offering to sell the newly vacant lots to adjacent neighbors for \$100. In areas where there are no neighbors, it is considering allowing residents to lease the land for as little as \$25 a year. But to residents like the Vans, without a behind-the-scenes view of the system, the process dragged.

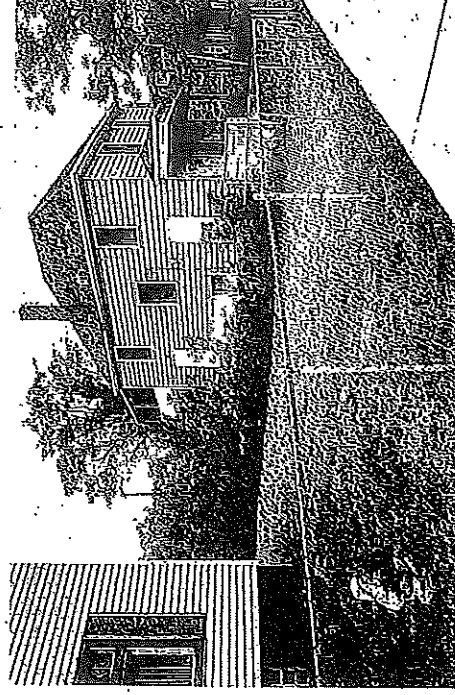
While the Land Bank was running through its checklist for demolishing the decrepit structure — asbestos survey completed, contractor assigned, utilities disconnected — the Vans were becoming perplexed and irked by what they were seeing.

In the spring, utility workers came twice, and it was unclear to the Vans whether they were turning the power on or off.

In June, some men removed the windows from the house, but the Vans could not tell if they were officials or thieves. Nothing happened for weeks, and the empty window frames seemed an invitation for prowlers.

In early July, a niece reported seeing young boys playing on the back porch of the house. Ms. Van-Tardy called the Land Bank, which sent an inspector, who noted that the home already was set for demolition.

With a second-floor toilet in 569



The abandoned house had topped the list of the ramshackle properties on their block that most concerned Ms. Van-Tardy's family.