



The Nature of Possibility

CITY OF NIAGARA FALLS, NY, DESIGN WORKSHOP



The City of Niagara Falls, NY is a popular tourist destination known for the natural wonder that is its namesake. It is also a city of contrast and contradiction. Once a hub of chemical manufacturing, steel production and other industries fueled by access to ample supplies of water and hydroelectric power, the city has lost about two-thirds of its industrial jobs over the past forty years as a result of world-wide market changes and technological advances.

There are no tracts of undeveloped "greenfields" remaining for development within the boundaries of Niagara Falls. Redevelopment of the City's 386 acres (156 hectares) of brownfield properties is therefore essential for job creation, new housing and environmental restoration.



A Citizens' Vision for Revitalization

The people of Niagara Falls are preparing to meet the challenge of transforming its economy, its public spaces and cultural centers in ways that create vibrant and livable communities. This transformation must begin with a strong vision articulated by the community that deals with ecological, economic and social issues - a new vision and image of what is possible.

On November 2nd 1999, the International Brownfield Exchange brought together a team of planners and architects from Germany and The Netherlands with local architects, residents, students, City officials and business leaders to test ideas for transforming the industrial image of the City of Niagara Falls and to consider the best options for revitalization. The opportunity was received enthusiastically by the City and the results provided a valuable contribution to the community development initiatives now underway in Niagara Falls.

This international workshop was organized as a "charette", an intensive working session to exchange information with a diverse group, to brainstorm possibilities and finally to set out practical suggestions for implementation. Participants were divided into small groups to focus attention on three different brownfield sites:

- Buffalo Avenue Industrial Shoreline;
- Highland Avenue Redevelopment Plan;
- The Browning Ferris Industries Niagara Recycling Landfill.

Each group was encouraged to suggest ideas that would re-connect and integrate the property or area into the surrounding neighborhood. In addition, each group was asked to make suggestions for design concepts that would help achieve that new image. Students at Kalfas Elementary School were also invited to consider what their neighborhoods might look like in the future. A selection of their artwork was displayed at the charette.



November 2nd, 1999

We thank our European participants:

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Workshop Guidelines

Participants were asked to test ideas for sustainable redevelopment that focused on built form, landscape design and land use in order to:

- Improve physical connections;
- Highlight existing natural features and create a linked system of green infrastructure;
- Identify opportunities to celebrate cultural heritage;
- Create a place where people want to live, work and visit.

Buffalo Avenue Industrial Shoreline

The industrial development and land use pattern established at the close of the 19th century by the New York Power Authority can still be seen today in the Buffalo Avenue Industrial District and the associated shoreline. The industrial shoreline area includes the Robert Moses Parkway right-of-way, skirting along the man-made shore of the Niagara River and a distinct adjacent industrial zone. The Industrial Shoreline has a rich industrial heritage. Historical sites include the Fort Schlosser site, Little Fort Niagara, and the Historic Chimney. The Adams Power Plant Building, located on Buffalo Avenue near Portage Road, is the last remaining rusticated stone building of the former Adams Power Plant complex designed by McKim, Mead, & White, and built at the turn-of-the-century.

It was logical that the rich industrial heritage of this shoreline emerged as a key element to celebrate and emphasize. The idea of "industrial tourism" as an overarching theme for rebirth of the area was strongly supported.

In one proposal the South Bridge entrance to the city was symbolically marked with large circular concrete piers that would be lit at night. Set in a new developed park setting, outdoor recreation play fields for soccer, softball, basketball or football fields were located to the west of the bridge. To the east, outdoor cultural areas such as performance spaces would be introduced on land and both sides of the bridge would be connected by a new waterfront trail.

New boat docks with a club house and floating dock house would also animate the water's edge. The waterfront trail would be a continuous pedestrian path with intermittent fishing access along the entire stretch of the riverfront. Further west of the new parkland, a new commercial area on Buffalo Avenue was proposed.

Two proposals were put forward to create a node celebrating the cultural heritage of the City near Gill Creek. This node would extend Hyde Park Boulevard to meet the Niagara River. At the River, industrial artifacts and monuments, public art, an interpretive heritage center would all be clustered. Native vegetation restoration would be highlighted in the vicinity of the Old Fort and further west near the mouth of Gill Creek.

The importance of Hyde Park Blvd. was repeated in all the ideas put forward. There was a consensus on the need to create a new civic boulevard with strong urban design features and a new bold green connection to Gill Creek Park and Hyde Park.

"I saw something about my city I never saw before. It is good to have outsiders look at how much potential there is here."

Larry Krizan, Former
Community Development
Director, City of Niagara Falls.



Linkages

Four strategies demonstrated how to improve linkages:

1. Improve physical connections (e.g. pedestrian and cycle trail system, improved public transit and train links to Toronto).
2. Develop interpretive signage and eco-tourism programs that celebrate natural

heritage.

3. Develop an industrial heritage and interpretive program "Industry as Living Museums".
4. Improve recreation amenities building on the regional trail system.

In all of the design proposals, the Robert Moses Parkway was shown as consolidated into a two-way transit route at the current

westbound area. The vacated shoreline area would be transformed into the "Niagara River Waterfront Trail" with improved public access and restored natural areas connecting to the waters' edge. To the north of the relocated Parkway denser tree canopy would be created along with a vegetated berm buffer.



Highland Avenue Redevelopment Area

The Tract II property comprises about 20 acres (8 hectares) located at the intersection of Highland and Beech Avenue.

The Highland Avenue Redevelopment Area has a rich heritage and the industries that used to flourish in this area had supported a large and vibrant community. Workers, mainly of African descent, relocated from southern states to secure work here and settled in this neighborhood. Many families remain and carry the collective memory of a once thriving neighborhood. The challenge was to identify the catalyst that would unlock the potential of this part of the Highland Avenue community. Several common ideas emerged, including:

- A civic monument or public art at the northeast intersection of Highland Ave. and Beech Ave.;

- Reuse of the Power City warehouse with mixed uses that integrate "green" industry, cultural amenities and commercial ventures;
- A central public open space for local festivities and celebrations.

South Fields

One group developed a proposal they called the South Fields, recalling the fact that many of the first workers in the growing industrial enterprises came from the south. This proposal has four main components:

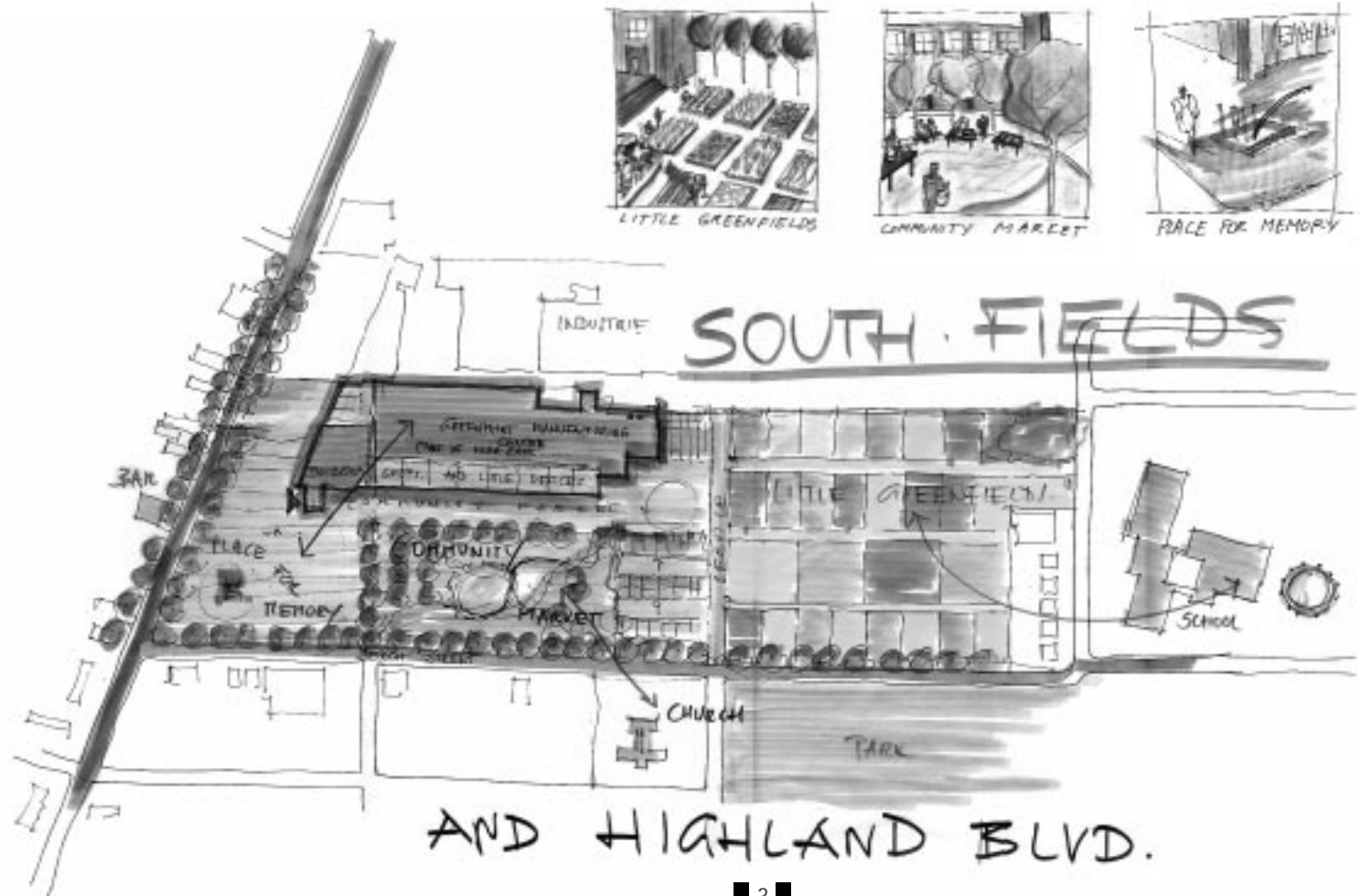
1. Reuse and revitalization of the abandoned Power City warehouse into a new "Greenpoint Manufacturing", an incubator facility for hydroponics and urban agriculture.
2. A community market across from the local Mt. Zion Church, on the foundations of the former Moore Business Products factory and warehouse, of which the lower level

parking would require remediation for this new use.

3. New community teaching garden plots to be used by the students of the Kalfas Elementary School across the street.
4. A "Place of Memory" at the intersection of Highland Ave. and Beech Ave. This would be a commemorative public art installation to recall and celebrate the historic links between this community and economy of Niagara Falls.

***"We have memories,
we have a lot of time,
we have the children.
This could be a place
for history."***

Iris Reuther, Buro fur Urbane Projekte, Leipzig, Germany.



Highland Avenue / Gateways

A second proposal focused on the intensification of the Highland Avenue Corridor as an infill mixed-use development with street level storefronts and apartment residences on a second level. The quality of space is meant to echo traditional "Main Street" form. The idea of an open public market named "Huff Square", was repeated in this scheme, locating it on the west side of Highland Ave. in

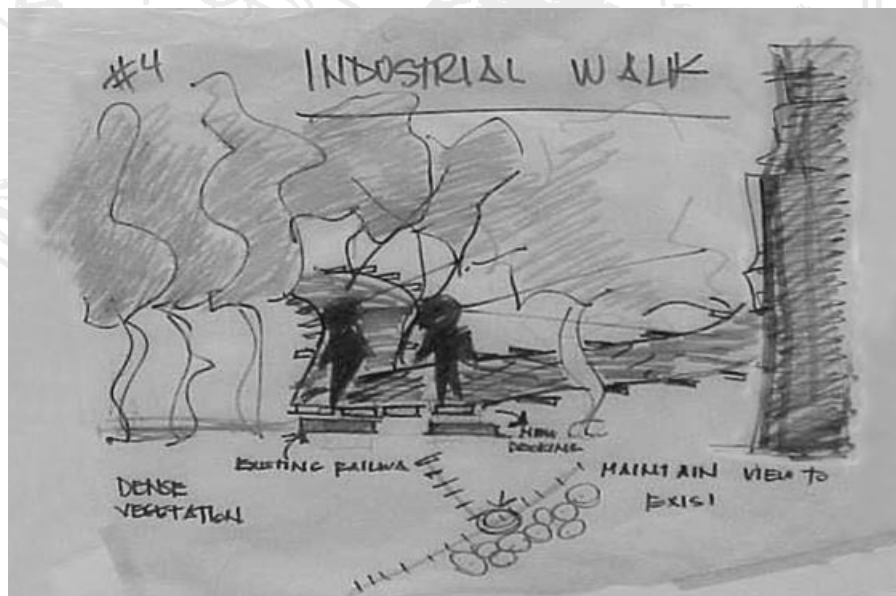
front the existing Family Resource Center. In this proposal the Moore Business Products factory and warehouse is replaced with a series of new high tech industries and related vocational training facilities further to the east.

Another concept created a series of gateways marking the north and south entrances. Both gateways would be connected by a bike/pedestrian greenway/boardwalk that would follow the existing abandoned railway. These urban design gestures establish a sense of place for the neighborhood. The Beech/Highland Industrial Gateway at Witmer Road (Route 31) would lead to an industrial interpretation center and a possible third entrance to the City of Niagara Falls at College Ave. This concept also introduces a new open-air pavilion on the foundations of the former Moore Business Products. Additional gateways would be located at the Whirlpool Bridge.

"It gives us an idea of what we can do if we make an attempt to do it. With that creativity we can turn a wasteland into a promised land..."

We have outsiders coming in here and saying "Take what you have and make it work for you."

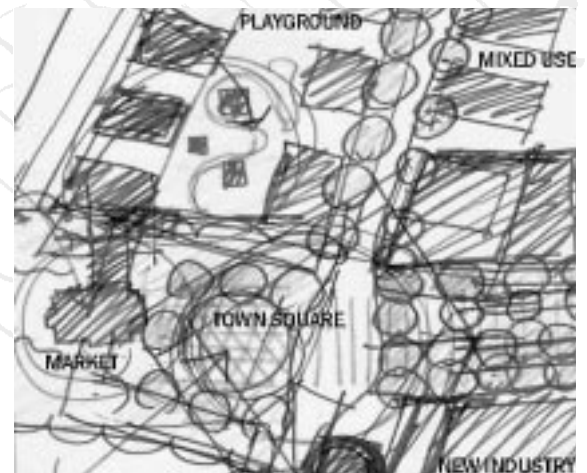
Rev. Micah D. Chandler,
St. John African Methodist
Episcopal Church.



New Directions

Workshop participants described the Highland Ave. Neighborhood area as a place with much potential in the following strategic areas:

- New economic opportunity through brownfield conversion e.g. computer manufacturing, industrial park, office campus;
- Creation of green infrastructure using the existing urban fabric to connect with the rest of the City;
- Encourage mixed-uses and diversity of incomes and built form;
- Job creation in service, manufacturing and specialty areas;
- Accommodate new recreational activities specifically for children (sports, arts & crafts);
- Capitalize on the area's proximity to both the Whirlpool Bridge and Canada;
- Create vocational training centers which can take advantage of available local labor.



We thank all participants and invite you to stay in touch.

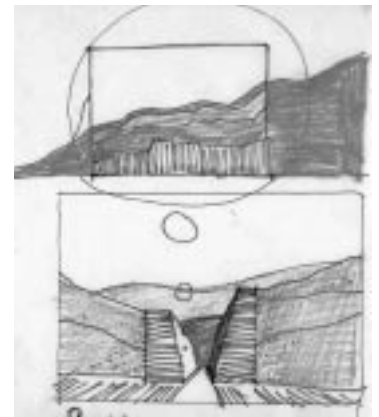
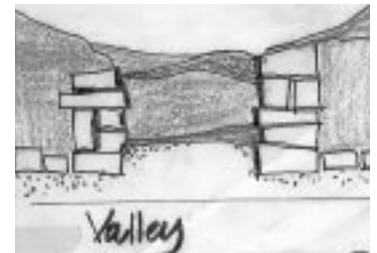
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Jonathan Schultz
Gabriele Seelemann
Robert Shibley
Martin Stein
Rachel Stein
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Gail Wittwer
Leslie Woo
Jack Wysocki



BFI / Niagara Recycling Landfill

The BFI-Niagara Recycling Landfill has been receiving waste since the turn of the century and is permitted to accept 118,800 tons/quarter of industrial waste, sludges, contaminated soils, incinerator ash, construction debris, asbestos and non-putrescible municipal solid waste and has sufficient capacity to operate for over 15 more years. Capped sections of the landfill have been covered with topsoil and grass cover. The landfill's highest elevation is one hundred feet (30 metres), rising on a three-to-one slope. The 385 acre (156 hectares) site is highly visible from the interstate highway.

A consensus quickly emerged that the landfill is a significant landform and presents an important opportunity to create a new image and point of attraction. As such, many of the proposals for this site celebrated and emphasized the landform with landscape art concepts that exaggerate the elevation of the site and utilize color in the plant materials to transform the surface of the site into an artist's palette. In one proposal the coloring would swirl along the perimeter of the site and cascade onto the perimeter streets. In another proposal, the site would be carved into a series of truncated pyramidal forms along the site perimeter, also utilizing seasonal color in plant material to create a dynamic attraction for residents and visitors alike.



The Chute

This proposal extended the landfill site and suggested a connection to the surrounding area with a landform called "The Chute". This structure created a link to the roadway and connected the existing mall on the east and bridging the new park-like setting and the adjacent retail mall. Vehicular traffic would continue below while pedestrians and cyclists could walk from the mall into a new regenerated park site. It was suggested that the highpoint of the site could include a lookout point of observation area, affording great views of the rest of the city.





Conclusion

For each of the three sites examined, workshop participants re-interpreted existing features, and through the introduction of several innovative design elements, transformed empty lots and barren land into vibrant

and productive places. Consistent with the premise that new eyes can see the old in ways that show a path to the future, the results set out some important principles to guide redevelopment in Niagara Falls.

One of the more pressing priorities that emerged with all the sites was physical connectivity. Several proposals suggested ways of utilizing green infrastructure, land specific landscape and urban design features to improve the streetscape of major connectors like Highland Avenue. The transformation of these streets was recognized as necessary to encourage transformation of the whole area. All of the proposals included landscaping and/or landscape art as important connective elements. Most proposals also sought to reconnect neighborhoods to new natural features, or existing natural features along the waterfront.

In addition to ideas to improve connections, workshop participants concluded that the history and stories

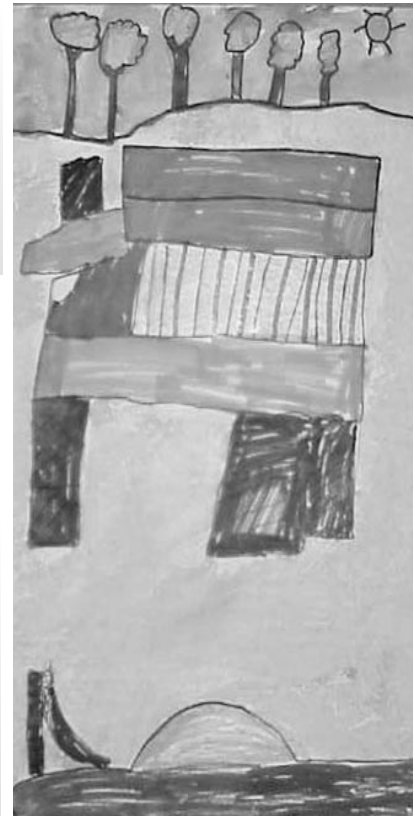
of Niagara Falls residents in these communities had been lost to some extent but that it was possible to recapture this heritage in setting new direction for development. Old areas of abandoned industry were seen as opportunity rather than as a constraint. The natural and industrial heritage of Niagara Falls was revealed by participants and perhaps for the first time in a long time, these areas were seen as a unique and fascinating places.

"Niagara Falls is a place with an inescapable environmental legacy yet it continues to be a place of abundant natural resources, scenic beauty, and possibilities. There was a real sense that Niagara's rebirth lay in celebrating this heritage."

The design charette process and the results of the workshop not only demonstrate the local potential for revitalization but a clear direction for tapping that potential to build livable communities.

Three fundamental strategies emerged to guide reinvestment - improve environmental quality and landscape design where residents work and live, emphasize access over mobility and cultural heritage over indiscriminate development; and expand upon existing natural assets to create a linked system of green infrastructure.

Given the current social, environmental, and economic circumstances facing the City of Niagara Falls it is this principle that landscapes, places, and people must be connected in order to regain health and value is perhaps the most relevant. Efforts to connect landscapes, places and people were given new strength and participants concluded that new partnerships and an emphasis on collaboration will be key in the next steps.



Waterfront Regeneration Trust thanks our partners

City of Niagara Falls
Niagara Falls Chamber of Commerce
The Urban Design Project,
University of Buffalo, School of
Architecture and Planning
Environment Canada
US Environmental Protection Agency
The German Marshall Fund of the
United States
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