

# Rethinking the Niagara Frontier



## A report on the November Roundtable

November 20, 2000

### Focus on heritage

To develop the great bi-national region that spans the Niagara River, we should concentrate on our “common ground” — on the potential in preserving, developing, and promoting our shared natural and cultural heritage.

#### Thanks

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The bi-national roundtable was organized by the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto, Ontario, and the Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo School of Architecture and

More than seventy participants in the on-going bi-national collaboration known as *Rethinking Niagara* met in Lewiston, NY on November 20th 2000 to sharpen the focus on what we might do together to help our region meet the complex challenges of our common future.

The focus, they agreed, should be on working to improve quality of life for all by preserving, repairing, enhancing, and interpreting the things we have received from the past, both natural and of human creation. We should celebrate our heritage and develop heritage tourism as one of the cornerstones of regional economic development plans.

The November Roundtable — Buffalo residents will remember it as the day of a sudden and powerful blizzard — was the latest step in a bi-national collaboration coordinated by the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto and The Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo (SUNY).

By now, representatives of more than a hundred organizations — corporations, authorities, municipalities, environmental advocates, business groups, community based organizations, uni-



Niagara Region  
Source: UB Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth



American Falls  
Source: New York Power Authority

versities, philanthropic institutions, and administrative agencies at every level of government on both sides of the border — have participated in *Rethinking Niagara*.

The first bi-national forum in this series occurred in March 2000. It addressed a range of opportunities including, improving the built and natural environment, repairing and re-using old industrial sites, investing in trade and transportation, and growing knowledge-based industries.

The November Roundtable confirmed that natural and cultural tourism — sometimes known as “heritage development” — as an initiative where significant “value added” can be realized by working together. Later this year *Rethinking Niagara* will reconvene another major bi-national forum to continue the discussion, report on work in progress, and unveil new initiatives.



## Lessons from Europe

### Regeneration in the Ruhr Region

The experience of other communities can stimulate new ideas and connect us to a diverse network. Participants in the November Roundtable had an opportunity to gain insight into lessons from European communities that have faced challenges similar to ours.

Planner Michael Schwarze-Rodrian told a story of regeneration in the Ruhr area, Germany's former coal-mining and steel-making region — an area similar in some respects to Western New York where economic restructuring and environmental rehabilitation are top priorities.

They used the German tradition of a "building exhibition" sponsored by state and regional government as a vehicle for combining environmental repair, preservation of industrial landmarks, restructuring of the urban landscape, and more conventional forms of community and economic development.



Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park  
Source: Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet

municipalities, including the cities of Dortmund and Essen. The association serves 2.2 million inhabitants in an area of 350 square miles — one not dissimilar in size to the area five miles on either side of the Niagara River.

Projects supported by the 10-year building exhibition program created new infrastructure, built and renovated housing, cleaned up waterways, and conducted other conventional tasks of regeneration. Information and marketing initiatives that helped residents and visitors alike to see the region in new ways, were also undertaken.

They transformed landscapes with plantings and public art; celebrated the region's unique heritage by preserving mills and mines as industrial monuments; opened the region to new eyes by converting 160 miles of old railroad to bike paths; and filled old buildings with new uses.

Emblematic of this approach

was construction of the Tetrahedron, a large metal tetrahedron perched on the pinnacle of a slag heap in Essen. Its main function, Schwarze-Rodrian said, is to be seen as a landmark, and to provide a lookout on the regional landscape. The tetrahedron has become an important symbol of change in the Ruhr — and has proven wildly popular.

The initial impulse of the building exhibition was not to develop tourism. It was to repair the land and water of the region, to rescue its decaying industrial heritage, and to build the economy. It so happened, Schwarze-Rodrian said, that all of this work of regeneration has laid the foundation for redevelopment of a comprehensive heritage tourism strategy.

Now there are exhibits sponsored by old-time railway enthusiasts, a canal boat museum, and an elaborate industrial heritage route. The Ruhr area is now ready to build tourism exactly because of all the things they have done — through communication, cooperation, and competition — to improve the quality of life for its citizens, and to offer interesting experiences for visitors.



Art in the Emscher Park landscape. Source: Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet

The process relied on a combination of strong regional planning authority, existing public funding sources, local collaborative efforts, design competitions, and an array of innovative approaches to redevelopment.

Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet — a regional municipal association — encompasses 17 separate



Tetrahedron, Emscher Park  
Source: Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet

**Participants:** "Rethinking Niagara II": Karl Alvarsz, US Environmental Protection Agency; Darcy Baker, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority; Lisa Basil, Conax Corporation; Beth Benson, Waterfront Regeneration Trust; Helen M. Booth, Jordan Historical Museum; Ian Bromley, Ministry of Economic Development & Trade; Gary Bruno, Fort Erie Economic Development Corporation; Gary Burroughs, Mayor, Niagara-on-the-Lake; David Carter, Waterfront Regeneration Trust; Anne Conable, UB Urban Design Project; David Crombie, Waterfront Regeneration Trust; Ron DeLand, IPAFA; Tom DeSantis, City of Niagara Falls (NY) Planning Department; Tracey Desjardins, Economic Development & Tourism Services, St. Catharines; Michele Doncaster, Waterfront Regeneration Trust; Irene Ella, Mayor, Niagara Falls (NY); Robert L. Emerson, Old Fort Niagara; John Fell, Empire State Development Corporation; Ken Forgeron, Regional Municipality of Niagara; Dennis Galucki (Buffalo); Kate Gardner, Town of Fort Erie; Tom Gwilt, Office of Assemblyman



Kursthaus Bregenz, Source: Bodensee-Alpenrhein Tourismus

## Cooperative marketing in the Alps

While Schwarze-Rodrian shared a story of working to create a regional tourist destination, Christian Schuetzinger told one of reaching across international boundaries to cooperatively market and manage a destination where the "offer" was already compelling — perhaps a bit like Niagara Falls.

Schuetzinger is manager of the Bodensee Alpen Tourismus Verband, part of a four-nation effort to promote visitation to Lake Constance and vicinity. This beautiful lake forms part of the boundary shared by Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, with tiny

Liechtenstein also part of the region.

Lake Constance encompasses literally hundreds of individual destinations. Although the hotels, resorts, spas, arts festivals, cruise operations and other attractions had sometimes regarded one another as competitors, they began to realize that their true competitors were other regional destinations around the world. Thus the idea of a cooperative approach began to emerge.

With spectacular natural scenery and world-renowned cultural attractions, the Lake Constance region is a big draw. Three million visitors spend a total of twelve million nights there annually. A million people a year take cruises on the lake. Another 1.3 million ride cable cars into the Alps. Nearly a quarter million attend the Bregenz Festival each year for opera on the world's largest floating stage.

The marketing and management strategy has focused on making Lake Constance function like a unified destination without sacrificing the sense of cultural diversity that international borders provide. They strive to ensure that the frontier remains visible but not inconvenient.

Schuetzinger noted that there is a standard and coordinated information package providing maps, directions, and price lists for hotels, restaurants, transportation and attractions all around the lake, regardless of location or nation. They also have a one-stop reservation service.

Then there is "das alles inklusive Ausflugsangebot," the "Bodensee Erlebniskarte" — offering visitors one price for entry to now more than 120 attractions around the Lake. Ten of the most popular venues led the way and smaller attractions followed. Revenues for the card are split proportionately with a three percent handling fee paid to the firm that manages the program.

The "Inclusive Card" — has proved to be very popular among visitors, with over 77,000 cards sold the first year.

Meanwhile, the main goal remains the same, Schuetzinger said: "a perfectly organized chain of services for the holiday of your choice."

*"Avoid 'preservation paralysis', heritage is important but it must not lead to the kind of preservation that simply maintains old ways."*

Michael Schwarze-Rodrian, Director in Planning of Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet, Germany



Paul Tokasz; Chris Hayward, Niagara Region Conservation Authority; William F. Hinkle, NY Power Authority; Bradshaw Hovey, UB Urban Design Project; David Lacki, Greater Buffalo Convention & Visitors Bureau; Amanda Mason, Western Erie Canal Heritage Area Commission; Tom McCormack, Strategic Projections; Alec McGillivray, Ministry for Economic Development & Trade; Mary Means, Mary Means & Associates; Dale Medearis, US Environmental Protection Agency; Sue Morrison, Ministry of Citizenship, Culture & Recreation; Rino Mostacci, Town of Fort Erie; David Oakes, City of St. Catharines; April Petrie, Niagara Parks Commission; Linda L. Rix, Regional Municipality of Niagara; Renato Romanin, Niagara Economic & Tourism Corporation; Robert M. Rubin, Lewiston Economic & Community Development Office; Edward Rutkowski, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation; Eva Salter, Ministry of Citizenship, Culture & Recreation; Lynda Schneekloth, UB Urban Design Project; Christian Schuetzinger, Bodensee-Alpenrhein Tourismus; Michael Schwarze-Rodrian, Projekt Ruhr GmbH; Robert G. Shibley,

## More lessons from North America

### Heritage Connections

There are important lessons to learn about heritage development in other communities in the United States. Mary Means, a national leader in heritage development planning, and a guest speaker at the March 2000 bi-national forum, returned in November to offer more insights into the process.



Source: Blackstone River Heritage Corridor

Mary Means emphasized the balance of values in heritage development — between visitor and resident, economy and environment, preservation and renewal, money and meaning — as well as about the value of the heritage corridor concept as a platform for collaborative planning and development.

Still, telling stories remains the central focus, Means said. Stories explain to people what places mean and why they are important. The same stories provide the motivation for people to visit in the first place. But when the stories don't ring true or aren't comprehensible they won't have the same power.

Such was the case in York and Lancaster Counties in Eastern Pennsylvania. The region's well-known old order Amish popula-

tion had given it "branded" appeal, but the attraction had been rendered inauthentic through exploitation. Just as bad, the Amish "brand" had obscured many of the other important stories the region had to tell.

What they developed, Means said, was a set of interpretive themes to organize the attractions of York and Lancaster Counties in the same way a closet organizer sorts clothes and shoes. It doesn't make less stuff or more space. It just makes it all easier to think about.

So, they collected all the sites and stories about the Revolution and the Underground Railroad under a theme titled "The Quest for Freedom." Interpretations of the region's rich agricultural heritage were organized under the

rubric of "Foodways - Farm to Table." Stories of industry and craft were grouped under a heading of "Innovation, Invention and Tradition."

There are many tasks involved in heritage development, Means said, but making the stories of a place accessible and comprehensible is one of the more important ones. Certainly, along the Niagara, where stories of Native American inhabitation, war, the flight to freedom, industry, electric power, prohibition, and the River and Falls themselves, it is a primary task.

*"The border crossing should be treated as a service industry, not as something to defend."*

Christian Schuerzinger,  
Manager, Bodensee  
Alpenheim  
Tourismus Verband,  
Austria



Schoellkopf Power Plant, Source: Foil-Albert Associates

UB Urban Design Project; Terry Smith, Ministry of Tourism; Richard F. Soluri, Mayor, Village of Lewiston; Edmond Sullivan, Niagara County Planning & Development Department; Sylvia Sweeney, Portal Entertainment; Douglas G. Swift, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy; Mary Brennan-Taylor, Office of Congressman John LaFalce; Deborah Trimble, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy; Mark Turgeon, Proprietor, Riverside Inn; Leah Wallace, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Planning & Development Services; Jim Ward, Office of State Senator George Maziarz; Marisa Wegryzn, Erie County Environment & Planning; Arlene White, Ministry of Tourism, Economic Development & Trade; Joanne Willmott, NY Power Authority; Jacek Wysocki, Niagara Falls (NY) Redevelopment Corporation.

# Ongoing work in the Niagara Region

## Heritage Development in Western New York

It would be a mistake, however, to say that the process of heritage development has yet to begin here.

As Bradshaw Hovey of UB's Urban Design Project outlined, there are initiatives in environmental repair, historic preservation, infrastructure investment, economic development, and cultural interpretation ongoing from one end of the region to the other.

In Buffalo, work is proceeding on the redevelopment of South Buffalo "brownfields"; aggressive implementation of Buffalo's downtown strategic plan through Downtown 2021; restoration of Erie Canal remnants; redevelopment of the city's Peace Bridge gateway; and organizing cultural institutions in the Olmsted Crescent of Delaware Park.

In Niagara Falls, momentum is building for new investments in waterfront access and greening; development at the park-city edge in downtown; and mitigation of the Robert Moses Parkway.

On a broader scale, work is going forward on regional marketing through Buffalo Niagara Enterprise; a tourism marketing and investment study is in the



Bethlehem Steel Plant  
Source: Patricia Layman Bazelon

works; and a cultural tourism committee has been formed. Now is the time, Hovey suggested, to pull the pieces together and go farther.

### Development case study in Fort Erie

Recent investments on the Canadian side of the border, meanwhile, are better known. At the March 2000 bi-national forum, planner Robert C. O'Dell outlined up to six billion dollars in recent, pending, or anticipated development on the Ontario side of Niagara.

In November, by contrast, O'Dell presented a case study about how such investments might be targeted on a much

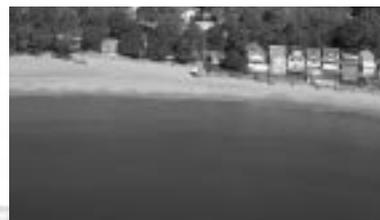
smaller scale and at a finer grain. He highlighted the case of Fort Erie, one of the smaller communities in the region, but one that rightfully lays claim to the title of "gateway to Canada."

What Fort Erie has done is relatively simple. They have matched local assets with economic trends and community goals to identify discrete areas of desired investment. The list of potential initiatives is targeted to investing in: an urban entertainment center focused on themes of archaeology and aboriginal inhabitation; expansion in waterfront investments in Crystal Beach and elsewhere; expansion of the Niagara Park marina for maritime uses and; extension of a system of green trails.

Like other heritage-oriented initiatives, however, this work also focuses on the stories that link the places — stories of archaeological remains, native settlement, community history, nature, ecology, food and more.



Erie Canal Depot, Source: Western New York Heritage Institute



Crystal Beach  
Source: Town of Fort Erie Planning Department



Rail Trail  
Source: Town of Fort Erie Planning Department

Douglas G. Swift, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy; Mary Brennan-Taylor, Office of Congressman John LaFalce; Deborah Trimble, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy; Mark Turgeon, Proprietor, Riverside Inn; Leah Wallace, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Planning & Development Services; Jim Ward, Office of State Senator George Maziarz; Marisa Wegrzyn, Erie County Environment & Planning; Arlene White, Ministry of Tourism, Economic Development & Trade; Joanne Willmott, NY Power Authority; Jacek Wysocki, Niagara Falls (NY) Redevelopment Corporation.

## Next Steps

The November Roundtable concluded with a lively discussion of the prospects for bi-national cooperation around issues of natural and cultural tourism and heritage development. There is no shortage of assets or stories, and there is great opportunity we can seize by working together.

Some identified the need to broaden and deepen grassroots involvement, while others zeroed in on the necessity of engaging leadership at higher levels of government and business. There was a great deal of discussion about how to work together, even what to name this enterprise of bi-national collaboration.

Since November, a number of initiatives have moved forward. For example arts organizations on both sides of the border have talked about establishing a two-nation tourist pass akin to Bodensee Alpenrhein's "Inclusive Card." An initiative to create a unified bi-national map of the region has been undertaken.

And, Niagara Falls, NY has been in the news, as it needs to be. Federal, State, and local politicians at all levels are calling for action in the City

*"Heritage is about people's sense of place, it is a starting point for people to connect."*

Mary Means,  
Planner, Mary Means  
& Associates, Inc.



Niagara Gorge  
Source: Waterfront Regeneration Trust

of Niagara Falls and the Park system. All have pledged to cooperate in multi-jurisdictional work.

Finally, planning for another Rethinking Niagara event in 2001 is continuing with the intention of advancing the discussion, reporting on work in progress, and announcing important new initiatives.

**Keep in touch.**



Niagara Falls, Source: New York Power Authority

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