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The Revitalization of Economically Depressed Cities: Engaging Youth in Urban Agriculture and Vacant Lot Beautification

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**The Revitalization of Economically Depressed Cities: Engaging Youth in Urban
Agriculture and Vacant Lot Beautification**

by

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INTRODUCTION

The income gap in the United States is severe. Large urban areas across the country have fallen deep into poverty while the surrounding ring of suburban areas continues to prosper. Vacant houses and lots, few shops and restaurants, and poverty-stricken residents are predominant features in major cities. But what can be done to improve life in these economically depressed areas? Focusing on youth is crucial; urban-based civic engagement programs designed specifically for youth can have the dichotomous effects of providing young people with new interests while showing them the possibilities of their actions. Not only can actively engaging youth in their communities attempt to break the cycle of poverty by inspiring them to achieve, but it can improve blighted cities as well.

Creating youth-centered programs will impart youth with the knowledge to improve their own communities while also striving to improve their own lives. One of the biggest obstacles in creating these types of programs will be funding. Non-profit organizations, both secular and faith-based, can serve as mechanisms for developing sustainable youth programs by providing initial funding or assisting in the raising of funds.

In order to being to fix large-scale urban problems, small-scale community initiatives, particularly those led by youth, can have the biggest impact in low-income areas. Community projects, such as vacant lot beautification and urban agriculture programs, can drastically change declining urban landscapes. If adult residents see young people actively beautifying desolate and lifeless vacant lots and bringing them to life through urban gardens, they might also be inspired to action.

LITERATURE REVIEW: A Narrative of Decline

At the start of the 1980s, a shift took place within many cities throughout the country. This shift, considered a “move from the ‘Keynesian’ city to the ‘entrepreneurial’ city,” helped usher in new “neoliberal” political-economic practices (Cope & Latcham 151). Cope and Latcham (2009) contend that neoliberalism transformed the landscape of urban governance, resulting in a reorientation of policy objectives; economic competitiveness and gaining the advantage was stressed over social welfare and shared responsibility. Furthermore, neoliberalism rationalized aspects of urban life, such as racial segregation, poverty, infrastructure deterioration, and persistent crime, as an amalgamation of theoretical market forces and individual shortcomings (Cope & Latcham 151-152).

Cope and Latcham critique the ways in which neoliberalism has saturated cities’ collective narratives of past decline and potential restoration by presenting a case-study of Buffalo, New York. The term “narrative” refers to Buffalo’s social, political, and economic stories that have been formed and sustained, both on a local and nation level, regarding the city’s history, geography, and demographics (Cope & Latcham 150). In order to determine Buffalo’s narrative of decline, Cope and Latcham scoured various sources over several years, including: local media reports, scholarly work on Buffalo and western New York, personal interviews with local social service directors and local politicians, meetings with community activists, and a participatory research component with fifty young people. These multiple views converged around several common themes, most notably the loss of Buffalo’s prosperity, concern over the state of the local economy, and a search for solutions (Cope & Latcham 152). The central vein running through Cope and Latcham’s article suggests that Buffalo’s narrative of

decline over the last half-century has been, to a certain degree, a racially-based as well as racial-biased chronicle.

Buffalo's narrative of decline began shortly after World War II. Many rust belt cities, having relied on manufacturing to produce goods for the war effort, started scaling back production, ultimately leading to the discontinuation and consolidation of many factories. From the 1950s through the 1980s, Buffalo faced escalating job loss as well as population decline (Cope & Latcham 151). As globalization and other such forces paved the way for the development of the entrepreneurial city, the local story of Buffalo's struggling economy becomes clear: the focus of concerns shifted to the self over the collective. If emphasis is placed on personal responsibility rather than the capacity to make progressive social change, then unemployed and uneducated city residents have no one to blame but themselves (Cope & Latcham 152).

Cope and Latcham argue that the narrative of decline in Buffalo ignores potentially worthy investment sites within urban areas, opting instead for capital plans for revitalization. For example, Buffalo politicians tried to persuade Bass Pro shops, a national sporting goods chain, to build a world store within city limits. For over seven years, politicians tried to finagle a deal that would cost the city more than \$14 million. Referred to as the "alchemy of urban renaissance," many cities fall victim to this shinny portrayal of entrepreneurial capitalism. By pumping capital into such popular establishments as casinos, destination retailing, waterfront development, or signature bridges, cities can provide outsiders with a fancy and safe urban experience without witnessing the problems actually faced by city residents (Cope & Latcham 154). Rochester, too, is guilty of falling into this trap. Over \$1 million was put into the new and improved I-490 bridge over the Genesee River. Right beneath the bridge is a slew of vibrant

restaurants along the river in a chic plaza called Corn Hill Landing. Not to mention the inner loop, the best way to completely circumvent the inner poverty-stricken city to get from one place in Rochester to the next. These examples, both in Buffalo and Rochester, are invoked as part of the neoliberal city, a long-noted transition from industrial production toward entertainment and services that further diverges a city and isolates certain populations (Cope & Latham 154).

The foundational markers of urban decline are negative economic and population changes. Buffalo has seen manufacturing jobs decline by 61% between 1954 and 1997, with a dramatic 46% drop between 1972 and 1997; only Pittsburgh has had a steeper decline in jobs over the same period. Population loss in Buffalo is often linked to its job loss, both past and present. The population of whites has dropped substantially since 1950. However, the population of African Americans and Hispanics has almost doubled (Cope & Latham 155). Thus, in the larger context of net population loss, people are still technically moving into the city. For Cope and Latham, this begs the question: “why the alarm around the loss of whites?” They provide a shallow answer: because these groups are disproportionately poor. In Buffalo, 43% of Hispanics, 33% of African Americans, and 17% of whites live in poverty. As a result, the growing minority presence serves as a “racially discursive symbol of the city’s full and final demise” (Cope & Latham 156).

Politicians kept these statistics in mind when the budget crisis for the 2004-2005 fiscal year struck Erie County (the county in which Buffalo is located). In order to close a nearly \$100 million budget gap and balance the budget, county legislators had to impose rigorous spending cuts. These included the usual public assistance targets, with the Erie County Department of Social Services taking the brunt of the hits. Due to the relatively large size of the city compared to the rest of Erie County as well as city residents’ heavy dependence on social services, poor

urban families were severely affected by the fiscal squeeze (Cope & Latcham 158). Cope and Latcham assert that the city's low income children are essentially bearing the costs, not only through a loss of services and programs resulting from budget cuts, but through successive rounds of disinvestment in poor neighborhoods infrastructure, schools, recreation facilities, and community programs. Young people in Buffalo are in a paradoxical position: they are lauded as the future of the community, supposedly worthy of investment, yet disparaged for their apparent antisocial and raucous behavior (Cope & Latcham 159).

As declining cities are searching for a solution to population loss and capital disinvestment, they are also propagating their own "sense of powerlessness and inevitability of decline... [by] invoking those very ideologies that punish cities for their mere existence" (Cope & Latcham 159). Cope and Latcham provide their own solutions to these seemingly incessant problems. They state that Buffalo's narrative could have been a revisionist one, where those in charge revamp the city as a vibrant and welcoming multicultural place with entrepreneurial spirit (Cope & Latcham 156). They believe economic fortunes within cities should be shifted from "a place for capital" to valuing "the capital that place makes" (Cope & Latcham 160). There is no need to change Buffalo, because it already has intrinsic value for just being Buffalo.

How Crack Found a Niche

A drug addiction can be a destructive and deadly disease. Physiologically, addiction occurs when a drug interacts with neurotransmitters in certain sections of the brain that facilitates an individual's sense of reward. Repeated exposure to these types of drugs can alter brain function and structure to the point where the user experiences intense cravings to continue use.

Due to the neurological restructurings, addiction can be a difficult disease to treat successfully. Neuroscience, however, does not solely untangle the mystery of addiction (Acker 71).

Acker (2010) assess the social impact of addiction in an attempt to understand uneven concentrations of severe drug addictions in certain population groups (Acker 74). Past episodes of clustered drug abuse allows for distinctions in levels of severity. Accounting for these distinctions, consequently, suggests that the severity of epidemics is a function of social context (Acker 76). Acker discusses three episodes in American history in order to exemplify this point. The three episodes are: morphine use in the late 19th century, powder cocaine use in the 1970s, and crack cocaine use in the 1980s and beyond.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the hypodermic syringe was invented, offering a powerful new method for the administration of morphine. As a result of the ease of administration, it began to be overprescribed and overused. High usage rates were concentrated among the white middle class, specifically middle-aged women. Physicians tended to prescribe morphine as a “cure-all” for such ailments as hysteria and issues that arise from child-birth or menstruation. As the drug became more prevalent in society, many women began self-medicating. By the turn of the twentieth century, concern about addiction began to enter both the medical field and public consciousness. Physicians altered diagnostic practices and prescription attitudes away from opiates, particularly in regards to their use and administration of morphine. Morphine became to symbolize antiquated and ineffectual medical techniques. The rise of treatment institutions and supposed morphine addiction cures entered the public realm. Acker states that this epidemic was brought under control by a “range of forces that could be characterized as a process of social learning” (Acker 77). Since most of the morphine addictions occurred in the middle class, their socioeconomic status afforded them the means and resources to fight the addiction.

Following the drug experimentation heydays of the 1960s, a large segment of the young white middle class became comfortable with sampling new drugs. By the 1970s, cocaine use was considered chic due to its prevalence among a wide cross-section of society, from rock stars to stock brokers. However, when users began to experience high rates of dependence, they helped usher an expansion of both public and private intuitions that focused on chemical dependency treatment throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s (Acker 77). Also, as cocaine addiction began to become evident, it fueled a reevaluation of the term “addiction.” Instead of classifying addiction by the heightened tolerance to a drug and obvious withdrawal symptoms that followed, addiction became associated with an out-of-control and compulsive need for a drug that continued in spite of the negative consequences (Acker 77-78). As seen almost a century earlier, this group of drug addicts were part of the middle class. Thus, they were able to deploy certain levels of monetary assets to assist themselves in absolving their addictions.

Acker finds a myriad of similarities in the two preceding drug epidemics. First, although each epidemic involved significant drug problems, the rates of use in the overall population remained low. Second, observers did not demonize nor portray the users as threats to the fabric of society. Third, treatment facilities and resources were adapted to meet the needs of the users. Finally, the usage rates dropped as people witnessed or experienced adverse consequences of use (Acker 78). In contrast, when a population already suffering from multiple chronic stressors adopts a new drug behavior, particularly one characterized by a “steep dose-response curve,” the individuals are at a greater risk for developing an out-of-control drug dependence. Additionally, these populations are more likely to be demonized in society as a result of their “depraved drug use” (Acker 78).

In the 1980s, new crack markets emerged from existing markets for powder cocaine. Due to crack's affordability (at the time, a reasonably-sized rock could be purchased for \$5-\$10), markets opened up in poor urban neighborhoods. Because of cocaine's high price, it usually just flowed right through the cities into the more affluent neighborhoods and suburbs (Acker 79). Crack entered neighborhoods where education and job opportunities were low but social isolation was high; people living in these neighborhoods faced multiple set-backs. Acker states that in order to understand the impact of crack in America's poverty-stricken neighborhoods, it is necessary to understand the history of these neighborhoods and its residents.

Acker focuses on Pittsburgh's Hill District as an example of a 1980s urban neighborhood characterized by: chronic poverty, low high school graduation rates, high unemployment, lack of legitimate businesses, social isolation, and flourishing drug markets. Also, the Hill District was, and still is, predominantly African American. During the Great Migration of the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans flooded northern cities, such as Pittsburgh. Having had few education opportunities in the South, African Americans found employment in the burgeoning factories and steel businesses. Since much of their work revolved around working long and grueling hours for little pay, many sought relaxation during their down time, consequently formed the base clientele for bars, poolrooms, and brothels (Acker 79-80).

African American residents of the Hill District lived in poor and overcrowded neighborhoods in a city that typified racial segregation in housing and jobs. When the end of World War II and the steep decline of manufacturing jobs combined with the impractical urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, the Hill District was transformed into an area where problems remained but legitimate business left, creating the perfect environment for drug markets to thrive (Acker 80-81). The Hill District was devastated not only by the loss of jobs

and the ensuing population decline, but by the social marginalization the neighborhood continued to face. These factors added to the increased power and significance of the underground drug economy as sources of income for many residents (Acker 81).

Throughout the 1980s, the media saturated the public with depictions of violent crack dealers and sexually promiscuous female crack whores, which played to the stereotypes of the underclass that many mainstream Americans undoubtedly harbored. Subsequently, young men in particular were alienated by the mainstream America. Most were only qualified for menial and low paying jobs, but in an era dominated by finance and real estate careers, many found their options emasculating. By selling drugs, they were able to make large amounts of money while adopting a masculine identity grounded in aggression and violence (Acker 81-82).

During President Ronald Reagan's eight years in office, he waged numerous battles with the low-income segments of society. The "war on drugs," and subsequent increases in prison terms for drug possessions, severely threatened the African American community. The sentencing disparities for possession of crack versus powder cocaine resulted in disproportionate amounts of African Americans incarcerated for drug convictions (Acker 83).

In addition to the war on drugs, Reagan fought against funding social programs with taxpayer dollars. In order to justify cuts in social services, he "invoked the image of a Cadillac-driving black woman" smoking crack, having crack-addicted babies, and cheating the welfare system. These crack-exposed babies posed a serious threat to society of successive generations cycling through the welfare system. To the majority of mainstream white America, these images seemed all too plausible and horrifyingly real. Americans, overwhelmed with the complex economic and social problems that plagued inner cities, used this self-destructive drug abuser

image as a scapegoat. As a result, many Americans supported and agreed with Reagan's funding cuts to social programs (Acker 83).

Acker concludes her research by highlighting the importance of examining not only the conditions that surround drug users and their cycle of abuse, but also how individuals in society respond to those drug users. When addiction ravages large proportions of the disadvantaged, it must be seen as a "reflection of the forces that keep certain population groups poor, unemployed, and poorly educated" (Acker 82). Until demonizing attitudes change, marginalization and exclusion will continue to create conditions for future drug epidemics (Acker 84).

From Blight to Revitalization

For the past half century, members of the middle class have fled American cities in search of less impoverished and crime-ridden suburban neighborhoods. This pattern of decaying central cities surrounded by affluent suburbs has been described by some city planners as the "hole in the donut" when cities should in fact be the heart of metropolitan regions. Cities have a historic intrinsic value, such as access to waterways, harbors, and railway lines, which suburbs could never replicate. Yet cities across the country are decaying at a rapid rate while suburbs are booming and thriving (Clark).

Over the past several decades, efforts have been made to improve cities, with a good deal of improvements falling under the umbrella term of "regionalism." By improving the downtowns within cities through the addition of museums, pedestrian-friendly walking areas, shops and restaurants, and other popular destinations, officials hope to spread tax revenue throughout the city. Additionally, city planners following the regionalism model encourage

metropolitan-wide planning with a two-pronged goal: to counter unbalanced growth, or “urban sprawl,” and to distribute growth more methodically within a city and the surrounding suburbs (Clark).

Clark (1995) states that revitalizing struggling cities pivots on one crucial question: “do cities and suburbs need each other?” In some areas, central-city decay has spread to neighborhoods that were once fresh suburbs; defenders of cities point to this as a practical reason as to why a city’s plight is everyone’s concern. If the city fails and goes under, the entire metropolitan area will be affected. However, not everyone agrees with this viewpoint. Suburbanites claim that suburbs have their own economies, businesses, and problems to worry about (Clark).

Clark argues that current attempts at urban revitalization should be viewed in a historical context. These include analyzing the massive federal efforts to save cities that have been unsuccessful at rebounding from population and job loss, and the declining federal aid money set aside for urban revitalization projects (Clark).

In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson developed the “Great Society,” which included a series of urban renewal programs that sought to establish “model cities” in some of the poorest and roughest areas. Although he dedicated federal money to the renewal programs, the middle class continued to leave cities in droves for the immaculately designed suburbs, with rows of perfect houses and white-picket fences. By the end of the 1960s, unrest continued to mount as the urban renewal programs were deemed unsuccessful at resolving wide-scale city problems. As a result, riots began to shake many urban neighborhoods. At the start of the 1970s, many

areas began to experiment with regional planning and revenue sharing. It successfully redeveloped several city neighborhoods, but decay was still widespread (Clark).

By the start of the 1980s, recently elected President Reagan began to transfer certain powers from the federal government back to the states in order to restore the autonomy and power that he believed was lost as a result of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" and Johnson's "Great Society." Referred to as "New Federalism," Reagan began cutting aid to cities, including the Urban Block Grants, and eventually cut roughly \$7 billion. By the national census in 1990, the population of suburbs outnumbered the population of cities for the first time in history (Clark).

Former rust belt cities, such as those found in Ohio and Michigan, continue to face the highest declines in population and neighborhood blight. Within the past decade, a controversial solution called the "Shrinking Cities" strategy was developed by some city planners. The strategy centers on razing abandoned and condemned houses and structures in order to curb crime and visible poverty; the locations would be converted to open green space. Some forms of the Shrinking Cities strategy also includes providing incentives to city residents of these dying cities to move to healthier ones. Although critics say demolishing cities will not fix the larger issue of urban decline, progress is slow in cities that are attempting to revitalize themselves (Billitteri).

Billitteri (2010) looks to Detroit as an example of a failing city that is playing with the creative yet contentious demolishing strategy. Detroit has arguably been the hardest hit by globalization and the outsourcing of factory jobs. The population has shrunk by nearly a million people over the last sixty years. Staggering unemployment, an ineffectual education system,

massive foreclosures, and crime has left huge areas of the once vibrant and bustling Motor City decrepit and abandoned. Over 33,000 homes have been left abandoned and almost 90,000 lots have been left vacant. In order to reconcile Detroit's 139 square foot city limit with the less than 900,000 people that still reside there, the mayor wants to take drastic steps. He has devised a plan to shrink Detroit's developed footprint by ripping up streets and concrete foundations and converting it to open space and urban farmland. The city would no longer need to provide such services as road maintenance and trash pickup in unsustainable neighborhoods, which would save the city a great deal of money. However, a prominent civil rights leader referred to this as a form of "ethnic cleansing... [or] 'poor cleansing.'" (Billitteri)

Billitteri weighs the pros and cons of whether shrinking a city is a reasonable solution to urban decline. On the one hand, demolishing abandoned houses and structures would decrease crime and poverty. Abandoned homes serve no purpose to the city as a whole and most are often a haven for drug use. However, just leveling blighted neighborhoods will not solve existing urban problems; it will merely erase the visual aspects of poverty. Moreover, many blighted and economically devastated neighborhoods have been revitalized over the past thirty and forty years into some of the most exclusive in the United States. These include New York City's Greenwich Village, Washington DC's Georgetown area, and New Orleans' French Quarter. If those areas were just razed instead of invested in and redeveloped, the country would have lost beautiful neighborhoods (Billitteri).

In recent years, many cities have revamped their downtowns into attractive places to visit, with trendy shops and restaurants, and upscale places to live. This has conveniently coincided with the upsurge in popularity of industrial lofts, allowing many downtown areas to convert their rundown and abandoned factory buildings into habitable spaces. This has turned

many urban centers into popular destinations. However, downtown revitalization is only a small bright spot in overall city growth, and represents a very small proportion of growth when compared to the growth in suburbs. Additionally, skeptics fear that this type of downtown renaissance is not sustainable and rests only on hip trends that are in-vogue now, but might not be in the future (Greenblatt).

Much of the recent downtown revitalization has been due, in part, to tax breaks. Cities will excuse a percentage of property taxes that developers would normally have to pay in order to encourage the construction of attractive properties. Nevertheless, as fancy and expensive condos and lofts are built, critics fear it will price lower-income residents out of the neighborhoods that they have lived in for years (Greenblatt).

Strengthening Struggling Neighborhoods

In many major cities, there is a bleak unraveling of social ties and community life. Morrison et al. (2007) argue that weak economies and changes in employment patterns have created socially isolated neighborhoods and a profound loss of community. In addition, families living in these cities have limited support in coping with the everyday stressors of life, resulting in severely disorganized family structures. This disorganization has had a devastating effect on youth. Fragile communities advance the survival of gangs, presence of drug use and abuse, teen pregnancies, and school failures. Youth living in these types of atmospheres experience what is referred to as “rotten outcomes,” which is young people’s unrealized worth and potential (Morrison et al. 527).

Morrison et al. discuss a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of low-income multicultural communities. By creating a neighborhood network that emphasizes the importance of clear community standards, expectations, and structure, the developmental needs of youth can be better met. A successful neighborhood network would also promote social capital, such as relationships and organizational skills, to an equal level of importance as human capital, such as education and job skills. Neighborhoods that are restructured into an interconnected network would be better able to positively support families and youth in a sustainable way (Morrison et al. 528).

The City of Aurora, Illinois is documented as an example of a successful implementation of a neighborhood network. Aurora, which is located roughly forty miles from Chicago, was a nineteenth industrial river city that, along with other rust belt cities, has been on the decline in recent years. The east side of the city is exceptionally rough, with a myriad of gang and drug problems (Morrison et al. 528-529). Instead of creating redevelopment proposals on behalf of the city, a collaboration between the Aurora University School of Social Work (AUSSW), the Aurora Police Department, and other local services and agencies was established to conduct needs assessment surveys in order to determine what the residents of the community wanted. The surveys, which took almost a decade to complete, culminated in a list of community-desired programs. The collaboration was also able to raise over \$35,000, which was to be used to implement the programs. Although the collaboration was able to implement numerous community programs, a few were particularly successful, and were accordingly highlighted (Morrison et al. 529).

The most ambitious project the collaboration undertook was the development of a community-middle school consortium. The consortium consisted of agencies around the middle

school that would provide support for and meet the daily challenges faced by students, parents, and the community. Prior to the consortium, the middle school was failing, with a projected 36% graduation rate for the at-risk youth that attended the school. Additionally, the school was unable to meet the needs of students and parents through the existing services (Morrison et al. 529). Research conducted by the AUSSW indicated that an effective community-middle school consortium would need to go into neighborhoods and reach out to families, because children needed to be viewed as part of a family and the family needed to be viewed as part of the community. After a year of services through the consortium, positive outcomes were seen. Since services surrounded students and their families instead of providing services at a distance, trusting relationships with you and their families were able to be built (Morrison et al. 529-530).

Community policing was another highlighted program. The collaboration determined that a grassroots approach to policing would earn more positive results in both the reduction of crime and the public opinion of police, which is usually low in urban areas. When the needs assessment was conducted, many residents felt isolated within their own homes because of escalating gang violence and rampant drug use. The collaboration felt community policing could diminish these problems. It involved forming a partnership between the police department and the community at large. Police officers volunteered as sports coaches and mentors while also working at local schools and parks. If police could become active members in society, then they could develop a healthier rapport with the community and seem more accessible. A follow-up survey with community residents was conducted a year after the implementation of the community police. Many felt the added police presence in daily aspects of life provided increase safety (Morrison et al. 530).

Nearly all of the programs initiated by the collaboration had favorable outcomes after the year evaluation. Morrison et al. believed it was due to the community's readiness for change. If residents of an economically struggling and increasingly violent community do not fight for change, no one can bring it to them; the community needs to want change. They also deemed the community input on the "package" of programs attributed to the first year's success (Morrison et al. 531). Urban problems, such as poverty and poor educational systems, will not be resolved with a single solution. Services and programs need to be intertwined in order to begin to chip away at the problems.

New Orleans is taking the concept of neighborhood networks one step further. Even before Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005, the public schools in New Orleans were in disarray. After the hurricane, rebuilding the schools in the vibrant Louisiana city is even more important now. Bingler, Bank, and Berg (2008) state that schools should be places where the public and community-based organizations act as partners with schools to bridge the eroding gaps between teachers, students, and families. The goal in New Orleans is to create schools that are centers of community by ascribing to a simple premise: "strong communities require strong schools," and vice-versa. By building new school facilities that can bring together schools and communities, the focus can not only be placed on academics, but on providing enriching opportunities for students while designing services that remove barriers to learning (Bingler, Bank, & Berg 25). Bingler et al. assert that the community schools approach improves learning and increases parental involvement by making schools open to everyone in the community, creating a truly unifying environment (Bingler et al. 25-26).

The public school system in Cincinnati, Ohio serves as New Orleans' model. In 2002, nearly the entire urban school infrastructure in Cincinnati was deteriorating and literally

crumbling. Ohio dedicated funds to create community schools and, in the ensuing decade, over twenty community schools have been or are under construction. The community schools are more than just schools. They serve as meeting places and community recreation areas, provide library services, and can double as natural disaster and refugee shelters (Bingler et al. 26-27). Several local agencies also became financially involved in the redeveloped Cincinnati school system, including the police, YMCA, and public health organizations. Accordingly, these financially involved services were given designated spaces at each center, increasing their ability to serve the community (Bingler et al. 27).

The Role of Local History in Revitalization

Local public history can be an influential device when gathering support for urban revitalization projects. Communities that embrace their local history can be afforded both economic and social stability. Adopting celebrations of local history, such as historic house tours, history trails, and oral history projects, can provide a community with a way to bring in revenue. Rochester takes advantage of the wealth of history found within Mount Hope Cemetery by providing guided walking tours (Hurley 19-20).

Involving struggling communities in the discovery and reconstruction of their local history can have tremendous social outcomes. If ordinary urban residents can make a connection to their specific community, they will be more likely to acquire a greater stake in the improvement in the area in which they live (Hurley 21). This can be compared to the necessity of making relevant connections to students when teaching history; in order for them to be engaged in the subject, they need to possess some type of present-day link to the past. Not only

will residents feel a greater sense of community, but uncovering local history can also bring people of diverse backgrounds together to create a stronger sense of social unity. Developing shared experiences are especially important in fragmented urban areas (Hurley 21).

A central and constant asset many cities have is their waterfronts. Historically, towns and cities developed around rivers and along coastlines to have easy access to transportation and trade routes. Consequently, many urban waterfronts are sites where the evolution of public history can be traced. However, countless older port facilities and warehouses became archaic after World War II. As a result, many cities have pursued renewal strategies that aim to transform decaying waterfronts into vibrant economic and social hubs. A prime example is the South Street Seaport in New York City. Within the last decade, it has been rehabilitated into a lively area containing permanently-docked historic ships as well as restaurant and shops; it has become a destination that draws tourists and locals alike (Hurley 22).

In recent years, though, alternative waterfront renewal strategies have been developed, oriented less toward tourism and more toward the needs of the local communities. Population movement to the suburbs and the subsequent urban fragmentation has created a lack of civic identity. This makes revitalization efforts that create a sense of place and an area for social engagement critical for residents living in declining cities (Hurley 22-23).

Involving Youth in Urban Revitalization

At the start of the 1980s, the steel industry closed numerous plants and laid-off thousands of workers. The hardest hit was, undoubtedly, the rust belt cities found in the North and Midwest. Aliquippa, Pennsylvania suffered a huge population loss after the massive steel

layoffs, leading to a sharp decline in the local economy that left many residents unable to rebound. Although the population began to stabilize in the late 1990s, funding cuts to local social services and schools left the city in economic and social disillusion. Especially hit hard by the struggles in Aliquippa was the African American community, which experienced high poverty and unemployment rates, increasing teen pregnancies, and low high school graduation rates (Twiss & Cooper).

Twiss and Cooper (2000) provide a case study of the youth-lead revitalization attempts in Aliquippa. With the help of the nonprofit The Aliquippa Alliance for Unity and Development (AAUD), youth have been actively engaging in revitalizing Aliquippa's Main Street, which has been littered with graffiti, trash and debris in the street, boarded up structures, and a staggering 60% vacancy rate. AAUD began in the 1980s as a grassroots effort that aimed to unify the community, provide needed services, and encourage the development of employment and economic solutions to the city's problems. By the beginning of the 1990s, AAUD began to focus on engaging youth in programs that would benefit the entire community, such as public art, school-to-work transitioning, and environmental projects. The organization believed, and still does, that youth are society's most indispensable natural resources. Their talent, creativity, and physical energy are unmatched and can be utilized through community projects, while their cognitive abilities and social skills could be accentuated through tutoring and mentoring programs (Twiss & Cooper).

AAUD developed several programs that proved to be successful in Aliquippa. The after-school program allowed youth to develop their social integration and communication skills, learn the basics about employment, and receive help with their homework. During the summer, an arts camp was created that provided youth with safe and supervised recreation while building their art

skills. Yet AAUD considered the urban gardening program their most successful. The program trained youth conscientious community citizens through neighborhood development and beautification. It also taught youth the importance of the environment and the significant role gardening, agriculture, and green spaces can play in meeting the unmet needs of communities (Twiss & Cooper).

Twiss and Cooper evaluated the effects of AAUD youth programs. Although the long-term outcomes are still unknown, they were able to get an accurate picture of the short-term effects. Youth participants reported positive comments about their experiences and increased pride in their neighborhoods. Many youth in the programs were labeled “at-risk” because of their social and economic disadvantages. Nevertheless, few youth dropped out of AAUD programs (Twiss & Cooper).

New York City’s South Bronx has developed a revitalization strategy that also focuses on youth. It has the unfortunate distinction of being the poorest congressional district in the country, with nearly half of South Bronx children living in poverty. The Youth Ministries for Justice and Peace (YMJP) has been a strong antipoverty force within the community. Although YMJP is a Catholic-based youth empowerment program, it allows all kinds of youth to join. The YMJP did a needs assessment survey in the South Bronx in 1997 and determined that access to park space, along with education, employment, and policing, were the community’s top concerns. Keeping the results of the needs assessment in mind, YMJP began doing environmental justice work in the area (Sweas 23).

Arguably one of the biggest environmental concerns faced by major cities is the lack of green space. Congested neighborhoods and densely-packed streets provide little space for grass-

laden backyards and trees or other greenery. Consequently, urban areas face greater instances of air and water pollution as well as a general lack of access to food or nature. A copious amount of community-serving organizations have been focusing on these environmental issues and ways to transcend them.

Sweas (2011) states that stronger connections between urban children and nature are necessary, because outdoor activities can improve children's mental and physical development. Although much attention is paid to environmental hazards in low-income areas, such as the Bronx, little is paid to the lack of access to nature and environmental amenities. With small to non-existent backyards and few parks, the South Bronx does not have much in the way of green space. However, one of its greatest yet most underappreciated natural resources is the Bronx River. In a more affluent area a few miles upstream, the Bronx River is a treasured asset, but the only access to it in the South Bronx is through an abandoned factory (Sweas 24).

As YMPJ continued their environmental justice work, they began to focus their attention on the Bronx River. They hoped to gain the property rights to the abandoned factory and the surrounding concrete area in order to build a park that would allow the community access to the river. YMPJ began holding public demonstrations and collaborating with different community groups and members of city council. Eventually, after ten years of work, YMPJ was finally granted the property rights to the abandoned factory. In the late 2000s, YMPJ began instillation of the park. Less than a year later, the Concrete Plant Park was complete in the South Bronx, giving children and families the opportunity to enjoy an open green park and the natural beauty of a flowing river. YMPJ decided to keep some of the old factory structures, as a nod to what the park used to be, but chose to paint and transform the structures into public art (Sweas 24-25).

After their success with the Concrete Plant Park, YMPJ continues to focus on other environmental justice issues, such as air pollution, water quality, and low-income families' access to fresh and healthy foods (Sweas 25).

LITERATURE REVIEW SYNOPSIS

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of major cities throughout the United States fell victim to an economic “bust” that often follows a dramatic and prosperous economic “boom.” The economic boom began during the high production years of World War II. Beginning in the 1970s, however, competition from an increasingly globalized society put pressure on industries across the country. If the means of production could be shipped overseas where the cost of living was lower, workers' pay could thereby be lowered, thus increasing the profit margins for the companies. The outsourcing of jobs overseas exploded in the 1980s, leaving vast amounts of unemployment and poverty in its wake.

This typical account was found in most rust belt and blue collar cities. Having relied heavily on steel and other types of manufacturing jobs for years, the cities were unable to compete with globalization. The fiscal squeeze felt in these cities was further accelerated by the loss of tax revenues and the expanding demands for social services. Adding fuel to the urban decline fire was the spiraling deterioration of infrastructure, such as roads, housing, schools, and other public spaces. These combinations led to a large portion of residents to leave; the population of these cities greatly decreased while the demographic changes veered toward more economically and socially disadvantaged groups (Cope & Latcham 152).

A myriad of opinions exist around a singular question: What is to be done with these struggling and declining cities? A resulting dichotomous tension is placed on cities; should they be places to live, or should they be units of capital production? It is important to look to scholarly research and synthesize past actions and their outcomes in order to determine what was successful and what was not.

Nearly all American cities were founded in a specific place for a specific reason. Whether it was for waterway access, such as Buffalo, or for its proximity to mass public transportation, they were incorporated because of certain favorable features. People often lose sight of the intrinsic value of cities and, instead of embracing it, attempt to make shiny new additions to the urban landscapes that will bring in money but create no lasting effect for the residents. And even when tax revenue from trendy restaurants and shops boosts cities' financial standings, social programs and other services that benefit lower income individuals are always the first to get cut in cities' budgets.

Too many young people are living in these economically depressed neighborhoods. Involving youth in community engagement projects, especially something creative that they have input with, gives them not only a boost in self-esteem and self-worth, but empower them to become active citizens in their neighborhoods. Though a variety of youth revitalization projects have been implemented in urban areas, there is little consensus on the long-term effects the projects have had on both the community and the youth themselves. Nearly all projects have had positive short-term effects, both in the community and on the involved youth. Although more research needs to be done, they still seem to be worthwhile options to help improve blighted cities.

THE REVITALIZATION OF ROCHESTER: Engaging Residents and Youth

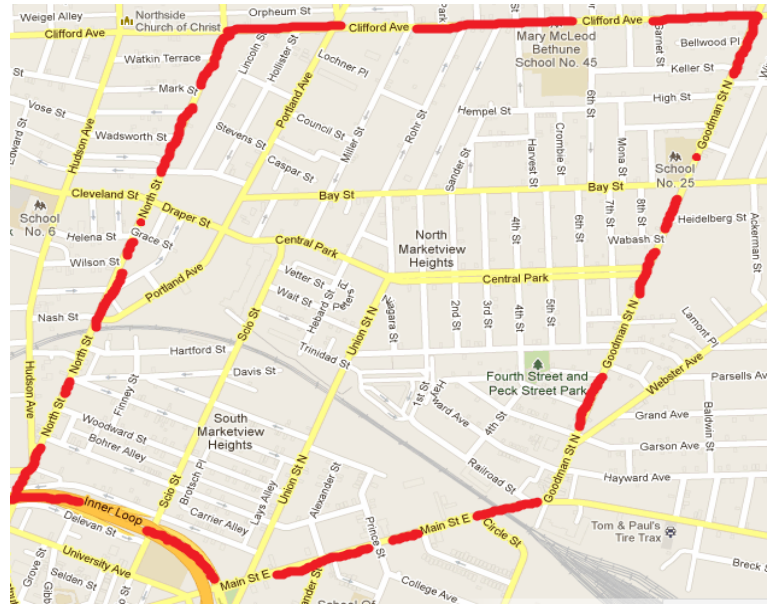
Involving youth in civic engagement projects, especially something creative that they have input with, gives them not only a boost in self-esteem and self-worth, but empowers them to become active citizens in their neighborhoods. Working productively in the community also has the added positive effect of giving youth constructive outlets for their energy and talents. Though a variety of youth revitalization projects have been implemented in urban areas, there is little consensus on the long-term effects the projects have had on both the community and the youth themselves. However, nearly all projects have had positive short-term effects, both in the community and on the youth directly involved.

Rochester, New York exhibits common symptoms of blighted inner cities: abandoned buildings and vacant lots abound, poverty is widespread, and a low standard of living exists. The Marketview Collective Action Project, a resident-lead initiative that aims to improve the neighborhood, and the Field to Table Project, a youth civic engagement program that focuses on urban agriculture, are designed to simultaneously address these major issues through their focus on actively engaging residents and youth in their community while providing the means to improve the quality of community members' lives.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD: Marketview Heights

The neighborhood at the center of this study will be Rochester's Marketview Heights neighborhood. As indicated by the red outline on the map (located on the next page), the neighborhood is bounded by Clifford Avenue and the Inner Loop/East Main Street at the north and south, respectively, and North Street and North Goodman Street at the west and east,

respectively. The shining gem of this neighborhood, and its most renowned feature, is the Public Market, which has been located between North Union Street and Railroad Street for decades.



Map of Marketview Heights in Rochester, New York

The history of Marketview Heights is incredibly diverse. The area saw its first residents in the early nineteenth century. During the thirties, Irish and German immigrants came to the area in droves. Many of these immigrants constructed their own simple wooden homes on small tracts of land. Most were laborers who worked in garment or shoe factories, while others helped build infrastructure, such as the Rochester and Auburn Railroad. As the area kept expanding throughout the century, trolley lines were installed to aid in residents' abilities to travel easily to and from work. (McKelvey 2-5).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the population of Marketview Heights was approaching a saturation point, prompting many old residents to move to more palatial homes and larger tracts of land on the outskirts of the city. This allowed for the next wave of immigrants, Sicilian and Eastern European Jews, to move in. As the old groups moved out and

the new groups moved in, the newbies began to establish religious gathering spaces and social halls to fit their needs. They also took over many of the factory and labor jobs once held by the Irish and Germans. Although these newcomers were looked down upon by the original residents, the turn of twentieth century saw thriving Italian and Jewish bakeries and flourishing immigrant-owned and operated shops. (McKelvey 5-7)

As the twentieth century rolled on, little new investment occurred in the area. Since zoning laws were not in place when houses and buildings were constructed, edifices were built closer together on narrow streets. Furthermore, many of these structures became dilapidated and hazardous as time went on. The City of Rochester, however, was slow to recognize these dangers. The late teens and early twenties saw some interest by public health officials in amending the structural concerns, but a housing shortage spurred home-building in areas that could support it, namely the suburbs. Fixing decaying homes in urban areas was put on the back burner (McKelvey 11-12).

The depression of the thirties brought renewed congestion to the area with an influx of economically challenged individuals and a disbursement of former residents to the newly built houses in the suburbs. This influx continued during and directly after World War Two, while many underprivileged African Americans moved into the poorer sections of Marketview Heights. As the number of the city's "non-whites more than doubled" during the forties, their numbers quadrupled in the neighborhood, nearly reaching fifty percent. African American population density was the "greatest in the census tracts previously identified as structurally deteriorated" (McKelvey 12-13).

As the influx continued into the early sixties, the search for satisfactory jobs as well as for adequate housing became more difficult. Although Rochester's unemployment percentage was decreasing readily, the number of unemployed African Americans was increasing. Unlike their predecessors, many of these new residents came without knowledge and skills that were applicable to current jobs. Their inability to find jobs coupled with poor living conditions led to violence, riots, and a severe uptick in crime. Marketview Heights and similar inner city neighborhoods became a haven for joblessness, homelessness, welfare dependence, crime and violence, abandoned and vacant buildings and land, gangs, and drugs. Any remaining old guard residents most certainly left the neighborhood amidst these circumstances. (McKelvey 18-19)

This turbulence continued to ravage the neighborhood throughout the rest of the twentieth century. Furthermore, it has served as the source behind the overwhelmingly negative images of inner city neighborhood; those of deficient, problematic, and needy neighborhoods populated by problematic and needy people. However, these negative images often only convey partial truths about the actual conditions of these troubled communities. Of course, they are considered the whole truth. Through public, private, and non-profit monetary support, deficiency-oriented policies and programs have been put in place that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower income urban residents came to believe that their well-being depended upon being a recipient; "they become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers" (Kretzmann & McKnight). This, of course, is dangerous for two major reasons. Firstly, it perpetuates a culture of entitlement where residents in a community need not lift a finger to see improvements. Secondly, the residents have neither claim nor interest in what is being done to their neighborhood, as it does not involve them, which can result in the unsustainability of

improvements. The more maintainable and long-lasting way of improving a neighborhood includes determining its needs and involving the residents in the solutions. This model is being employed in Marketview Heights.

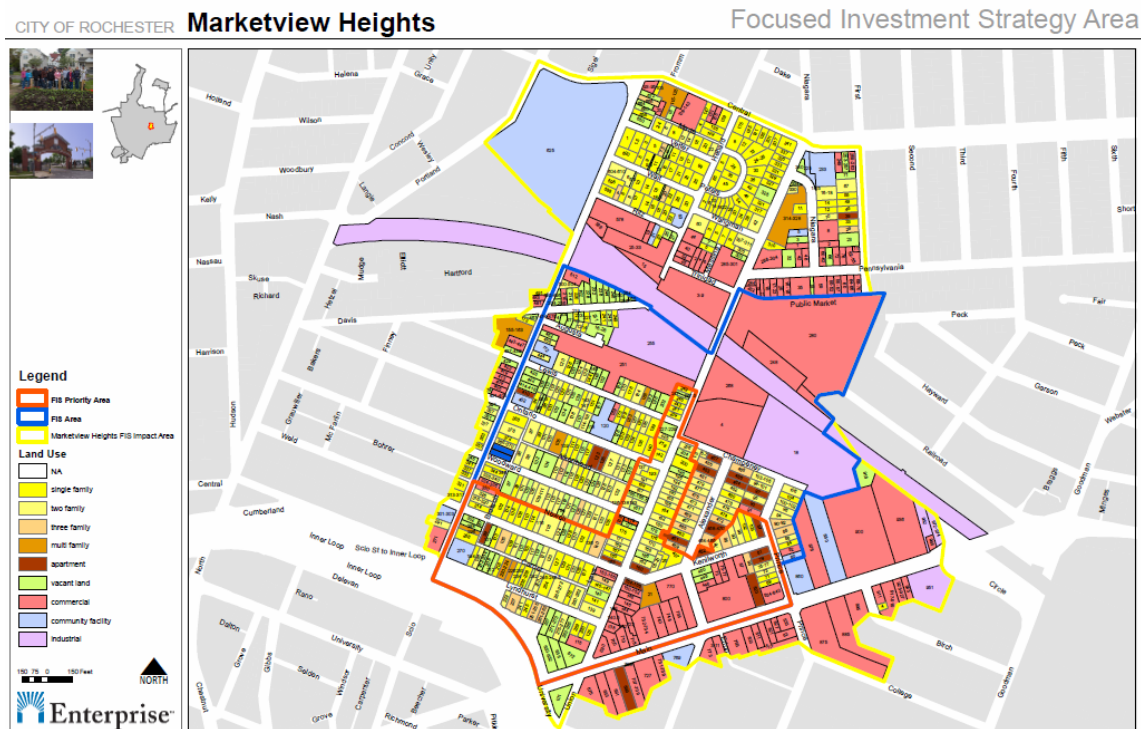
NEEDS OF MARKETVIEW HEIGHTS

Marketview Heights was still struggling at the start of the twenty-first century, and the needs of the neighborhood and its residents were seemingly insurmountable. However, non-profit groups and even the City itself stepped in to assess the needs.

Beautification Needs

In the fall of 2008, the City of Rochester developed the Focused Investment Strategy, an initiative aimed at revitalizing blighted neighborhoods in Rochester.¹ The main objective of FIS was to significantly improve neighborhoods in the City within a three to five year time span by utilizing federal grants, such as the Community Development Block Grant, and other available monetary sources. Marketview Heights, along with three other City neighborhoods, was selected as an FIS targeted neighborhood. In order to determine what areas of each neighborhood were to receive funding, complex and comprehensive maps were drawn up detailing the different types of properties, lots, and structural conditions.

¹ All "beautification" data and maps were obtained from the Focused Investment Strategy section on the City of Rochester website, <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/fis/>



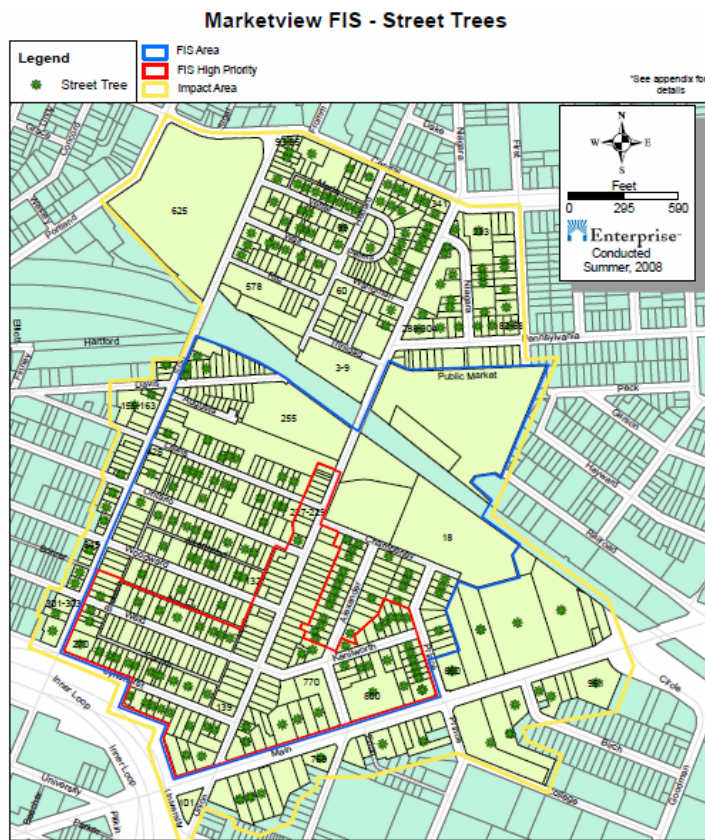
FIS Marketview Heights Property Map

There are approximately 650 properties in Marketview Heights. Fifty-five percent of properties in the area are residential. Of those, less than half are owner-occupied; the rest are rentals. These are important numbers when considering beautification needs. If individuals own their homes, they have a greater investment in the appearance and aesthetic quality of their property. Individuals renting, conversely, have little stock in their dwellings. Additionally, thirteen percent of all properties have some type of code violation, which range from lead paint or asbestos to actual structural integrity issues. Even though the City has lead and asbestos abatement programs, including financial assistance, it is still challenging for residents and landlords in low-income neighborhoods to keep their homes up to code.

The rest of the properties in Marketview Heights can be divided among three categories: nineteen percent are commercial, eighteen percent are vacant lots, and six percent are abandoned buildings. For a neighborhood entrenched in poverty such as this, the commercial property

percentage is promising. Although much of the commercial space in the neighborhood is due to the Public Market, and the cafes and restaurants directly bordering the market, the commercial businesses give the neighborhood hope and are by far its greatest asset.

The most troubling aspect about the property percentages is the vacant lot and abandoned building numbers, which constitute nearly one-quarter of the property in the neighborhood. These properties are not only a haven for criminal activity, but are an eyesore and detract from the neighborhood’s visual appeal. However, since eleven percent of vacant lots are city-owned, it is difficult for organizations or residents to either acquire or get permission to use the lots. This, in turn, can impede any type of grass-roots beautification effort due to the “red-tape” when working with the City.



One of the more unassuming beautification needs in the neighborhood is the lack of greenery. Roughly one in three properties have a tree in the front yard (as seen in the map, left). While this may seem abnormal and foreign to those that do not live in a low-income neighborhood, it is all too common for inner city residents. Something as simple as a plant in the front yard can

bring life to a blighted neighborhood.

Crime

Crime is a major problem in nearly all low-income inner city neighborhoods, and Marketview Heights is no different. A better understanding of criminal activity in Marketview Heights can be gleaned by looking at the number of serious crimes reported on Act Rochester.² In 2009, there were fifteen shootings, six assaults, eleven robberies, and three unspecified arrests. The next year, there were twenty-one shootings, seven assaults, eleven robberies, and three unspecified arrests. In 2011, there were twelve shootings, nine assaults, thirteen robberies, and one unspecified arrest. And so far this year, there have been six shootings, eighteen assaults, and seventeen robberies. The crime statistics from the past three years show a significant pattern; shootings went up then consistently down for two years while assaults and robberies steadily increased. The assault and robbery numbers are somewhat alarming, but there are positive signs with the decrease in shootings.

Perhaps the reason behind the increases in assaults and robberies lies in something as obvious as illumination. According to FIS maps, only twenty-one percent of lots have street lights directly in front of their properties. Without street lights, the amount of dangerous or criminal activity can be substantial, as it is much easier to assault individuals as well as steal from homes and cars in the dark of night.

² Act Rochester (<http://www.actrochester.org>) is a partnership of the Rochester Area Community Foundation and the United Way of Greater Rochester; it measures data and trends in the quality of life for the Greater Rochester Region, including crime statistics for the past several years.

Positive Outlets for Youth

According to Act Rochester, the 2010-2011 school year had more than 8,000 students enrolled in the Rochester City School District's Extended Day Program, which equates to approximately a quarter of all District students. This figure is up from the 2007-2008 school year, which only had 1,700 participating students. The Extended Day Program is typically seen in high schools, although the district has expanded the program to include elementary grades within recent years. The program allows high school students to take additional classes that will allow them to either get ahead in their coursework or recover course credit from a previous failure.

Outside of the City School District programs and sports, a relatively small number of children in Monroe County are served by after-school programs, according to two local reports. A 2008 report by the Center for Governmental Research found at Act Rochester determined that about twelve percent of all children ages five to fourteen participated in programs. Looking at the number of children with two working parents or a single parent, the Center found that seventeen percent were participating in after-school programs. A 2010 report by the Greater Rochester After-School Alliance and the Children's Agenda, also from Act Rochester, found that only six percent of children ages five to seventeen were participating in after-school programs.

It is essential that young people in any urban area find positive ways to spend their afternoons and evenings. Too many are being taken down criminal paths, and it is evident that more needs to be done to reach out. Although many city and non-profit agencies are attempting to do so, they tend to only look at the big picture when they should be looking at the small one. It is important to make these outlets easily accessible to youth while keeping services local in

order to better meet their needs. In Marketview Heights, there are three main locations for after-school programs: the Community Place of Greater Rochester, the North Street Recreation Center and the Rochester After-School Academy.

The Community Place of Greater Rochester provides neighborhood-based programs, services, and resources to youth under the age of twenty-one living in the Northeast Quadrant of Rochester. According to their website,³ the Community Place provides a “foundation for growth, empowerment and stability.” The Community Place offers a wide-range of social, developmental, and educational after-school programs. On the more physically active side, the North Street Recreation Center provides youth with after-school homework help, teen sports and activities, and a large open green space outside and a new water sprinkler facility. It is noteworthy to point out that densely-populated urban areas often have little green space available; Marketview Heights is ahead of the curve in this respect.

Rochester After-School Academy is a program available to seventh to twelfth grade students at Dr. Freddie Thomas High School. Students receive homework assistance each day and tutoring in all subjects by certified teachers three days a week. In addition, students have the opportunity to develop computer skills, as well as receive instruction in arts, crafts, and cooking. Students’ leadership skills are further developed through service learning and community service projects. Wednesdays are devoted to field trips and project-based activities, allowing children to get out into the community and experience

Although these three programs seem all-encompassing, each program can only house a small portion of Marketview Heights youth, mainly due to lack of staffing and the small size of

³ The Community Place of Greater Rochester website: <http://www.communityplace.org/>

the indoor facilities. More engaging programs are necessary in order to adequately meet the needs of youth in the community.

Access to Essential Services

As with any inner city neighborhood, certain institutions are usually not found within its borders. For example, within the perimeter of Marketview Heights, there is no public library, twenty-four hour pharmacy, or grocery store. These are some of the most essential service providers in any neighborhood and can dramatically improve the standard of living. Public libraries can provide children with access to hundreds of books and help improve or maintain their reading abilities. Twenty-four hour pharmacies obviously can provide medications. When high-risk groups, such as children, pregnant women, and the elderly, are ill, immediate access to medicine can be critical. However, grocery stores are arguably the most important and needed institution in inner city neighborhoods. Residents in these neighborhoods have limited access to fresh and healthy foods, which has become a severe problem primarily seen in the steadily growing obesity and diabetes rates.

When grocery stores are not in the contiguous neighborhood, it makes access to nutritious food quite challenging. Many low-income residents do not have cars, forcing them to rely on public transportation, taxis or friends to travel to grocery stores. This limits the frequency of their trips and thus their opportunities to purchase fresh produce and other nutritious perishable foods. At the same time that grocery store access has become increasingly arduous for urban residents, many corner “grocery” stores, which used to sell meat, dairy, and produce, typically sell alcohol, cigarettes, and unhealthy convenience food. A shift in the nature of these stores

most likely occurred because non-perishable foods have a longer shelf life than perishable foods, and with a smaller customer base at corner stores, their stock turnover rate is probably relatively low than a larger grocery store (Kretzmann & McKnight).

In the Rochester area, there is a plethora of grocery store options, including Wegmans, Tops Friendly Markets, and PriceRite. However, few of these grocery store options are available within City limits. Wegmans is, of course, Rochester's most beloved local institution. It began in Rochester in 1916 as a "neighborhood supermarket" and has since catapulted to legend status. Although Wegmans has few criticisms, the biggest one relates to the fact that only one store exists within City limits, which is located on East Avenue in the wealthiest area of Rochester. When the second-to-last City store closed on Mount Hope Avenue in 2003, detractors argued it was because Wegmans switched to a model that exclusively sought to maximize profits, thereby eliminating any chance of it coming to low-income neighborhoods (Rohde). Although Wegmans does not exist in lower income areas, three Tops stores do, with locations on Lake Avenue, West Avenue, and Upper Falls Boulevard.⁴ Even though these stores exist in under-serviced areas, the locations are not ideally located to serve the needs of all City residents.

Turning attention back to Marketview Heights, neighborhood access to fresh produce is paradoxical. The Public Market is located in the center of the neighborhood and provides some of the freshest and most reasonably priced produce. Additionally, the Market instituted a token a few years ago that allows individuals with food stamps to trade in one dollar of food stamp money for a two dollar token that can be used at numerous Market vendors. However, typical Market patrons come from the surrounding Rochester suburbs with few local residents taking

⁴ There is a Tops as well as a PriceRite near the East Avenue Wegmans store, on North Winton Road and University Avenue, respectively, but that neighborhood is not low-income.

advantage of the healthy food available at the Market. In order for the Public Market to go back to being “public,” it should increase its outreach to local residents and shed its view as a place for outsiders.

WAYS TO MEET MARKETVIEW HEIGHTS NEEDS

Community Involvement

Undoubtedly the largest presence in Marketview Heights is PathStone Corporation, a local non-profit that provides affordable housing to low-income families in seven states and Puerto Rico. It began in Rochester over sixty years ago and, within the last decade, has been increasing its outreach effort to Rochester residents, specifically residents of Marketview Heights. PathStone sponsors the Marketview Heights Collective Action Project, in existence for nearly a decade, which is a group of neighborhood residents, small business owners, and other stakeholders who are committed to improving the neighborhood. They focus on: issues facing the neighborhood, such as housing development and improvement, increasing safety and security, and beautification initiatives; organizing clean-up efforts; and developing a plan to revitalize the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, the North Union Street corridor. Through the help of a dedicated community project administrator (employed by PathStone), the Collective Action Project has been able to map out their desired blueprint for change and have had success in creating an organizational structure in order to implement permanent improvements in the area.⁵

⁵ Collective Action Project information gathered from the Community Revitalization section on the PathStone website: <http://www.pathstone.org/services/community-revitalization/>

In 2009, PathStone was able to acquire five vacant lots (one individual and two double lots) that were owned by the City of Rochester. That summer, the Collective Action Project transformed one lot into a flourishing flower garden and one double lot into a vegetable garden; the other double lot remained vacant. Since the community project administrator had been trying to determine ways the Collective Action Project could incorporate youth perspective into their revitalization efforts, they saw the extra vacant lot as a jumping off point. They believed that youth would not only provide a new vigor and sense of hope for the community's future, but that a partnership between youth and adult residents would allow neighborhood projects to thrive as well.

Youth Involvement

In mid-2009, PathStone Corporation applied for a Rochester Youth Year Fellow to help build a youth component for the Marketview Heights Collective Action Project. Rochester Youth Year is an AmeriCorps*VISTA sponsored program that places highly talented recent college graduates in community-based organizations for one year in order to establish or develop programs that address the various challenges facing youth and families in Rochester. In addition to gaining this college student, PathStone also partnered with the Rochester Institute of Technology's University/Community Partnerships in order create a staff that would oversee a youth civic engagement group.

By the start of 2010, the community project administrator, two RIT Urban and Community Studies professors, two AmeriCorps*VISTAs, and four RIT college students began to develop a youth civic engagement program that would focus on beautifying the neighborhood

by installing a vegetable garden in the empty lot. Out of this collaboration came the Field to Table Project, a program that allows Marketview Heights children, between the ages of four to fourteen, to learn first-hand how their food goes from the field to their kitchen tables. The youth civic engagement component involves six to eight Marketview Heights youth, ages fifteen to eighteen, becoming youth leaders. These youth leaders in conjunction with the college students plan and coordinate an experiential program which utilizes the urban garden and be based in the educational curriculum from Cornell University's Garden Mosaics and resources from Cornell Cooperative Extension.



Vacant lot at 127 First Street; May 2010

The Field to Table Project took off in May 2010. The college students developed a youth leader application, outreach materials, and interview process. Outreach materials, including signs and handouts, were distributed to the Community Place as well as all apartments in the Marketview Heights PathStone properties. About fifteen applications were received and ten interviews were conducted. Of those interviewed, eight were selected to continue on as youth leaders. However, after the mandatory parent information meeting, only seven actually became youth leaders.⁶ The college students and youth leaders met every Saturday throughout the month of June in order to begin planning the program and preparing the lot for vegetable plants. The vegetables included: tomatoes, eggplant, squash, zucchini, corn, collard greens, pole beans, peppers, and lettuce.



Corn



Collard Greens



Peppers



Eggplant

The summer phase of Field to Table was a six-week long program that brought in children from the neighborhood to participate in a wide variety of healthy and educational activities. The youth leaders and college students did most of the planting, weeding, and watering in the morning; the children came in the afternoon to learn about vegetables, nutrition, and healthy lifestyles as well as to participate in different types of physical games, exercise, and

⁶ An attempt was made to reschedule with the parent; however, that meeting was missed as well.

garden art projects. Once a week, the children harvested vegetables from the garden and participated in cooking demonstrations led by a volunteer from Cornell Cooperative Extension, making such healthy food dishes as zucchini soup, chocolate-chip zucchini bread, and salsa.



Most of the children and youth leaders had never touched fresh produce before nor eaten some of the vegetables they were cooking with. And although some were hesitant to eat the green vegetables, the children and youth leaders could not get enough of the food once they tasted their creations.

Funding for the Field to Table Project came from PathStone, RIT, the Community Foundation, and the United Way of Greater Rochester. The City of Rochester Department of Recreation and Youth Services opened the First Street Recreation Center (across the street from the garden) and allowed the youth leaders and children access to the small indoor gym and the surround soccer/baseball field.



**HAVE
MARKETVIEW**

HEIGHTS NEEDS BEEN MET?

The Marketview Heights Collective Action Project has had several successful endeavors. In 2008, they sought out to solve the lack of access to fresh produce and other perishable food items. After doing research, they partnered with Fastrac Markets, a central New York gas station chain that sells food staples like milk, eggs, and cheese as well as fresh sandwiches and salads. The Project developed a petition to get Fastrac to come to the neighborhood at the corner of East Main Street and North Union Street, where overgrown weeds flourished in a giant vacant lot. A little over a year later, the Collective Action Project obtained enough resident and city council member signatures that the regional owner and the City signed off on an agreement to build a Fastrac Market on the desired corner. This huge victory not only brought much needed food items to the neighborhood, but it also brought several jobs as well as the ability to keep gas prices in the area competitive.

The Collective Action Project also has had some success regarding safety and security. After months of inviting Police Chief James Shepard to the Collective Action Project meetings, he finally attended one in early 2010. At the meeting, the residents discussed their concerns regarding crime in the neighborhood, particularly drug dealing at a corner store at North Union and Weld Streets and a myriad of illegal activities taking place on Lewis Street. Police Chief Shepard agreed to place a blue light camera at the corner of North Union and Weld Streets and promised to look into getting a mobile police unit van on Lewis Street. Although the blue light camera was installed weeks later, the van did not come as quickly. Almost two years later, a mobile unit finally came to the area and parks on several streets in the neighborhood a few times a week.

Pictures from the 2012 Field to Table Project



The Field to Table Project has grown dramatically in the two years since its inception. This past year, the Field to Table Project received its biggest donor yet: Wegmans. They not only donated funds but also donated several chefs that came to the garden once a week to cook. The recipes also got more advanced, and the youth leaders and community children were able to make homemade raspberry vinaigrette salad dressing, flatbread vegetable pizzas, and fruit and vegetable kebabs.

When visiting the garden in the summer of 2012, it is evident that the young people participating in this program genuinely enjoyed what they were doing. They were excited to talk

about the improvements they had made in the garden, which included painting murals on the inside fence surrounding the garden and installing raised beds with clean dirt to grow vegetables. They were also eager to harvest the huge vegetables and help the Wegmans chefs cook lunch. Watching them devour a rainbow of produce was heart-warming and inspiring, because it showed how children can eat healthy if they are given the tools.

REVITALIZATION OF ROCHESTER SUMMATION

Non-profit organizations are an essential piece to the revitalization puzzle and can serve as great mechanisms for developing sustainable neighborhood improvement programs by providing initial funding or assisting in the raising of funds. One of the biggest lessons learned from Marketview Heights is that residents need to fight for change if they want it for their community. Outside forces bringing revitalization ideas in cannot possibly know what residents need or want. Furthermore, youth need to be reached in order to improve many of these blighted and low-income inner city neighborhoods. They can add a sense of creativity and life that adults cannot imagine. The addition of young people's voices in the Marketview Heights revitalization effort brings a sense of optimism for the future.

Through the continued dedication of the Collective Action Project, the Marketview Heights neighborhood has been steadily making improvements. The addition of Fastrac Markets and other successful petition efforts has proven their ability to enact change. One of the most critical challenges still facing the neighborhood is the high crime rate. Within recent years, the number of shootings has decreased, perhaps due to the increase police presence. But assaults

and robberies, which are crimes that do not need weapons, are on the rise. Hopefully, with their continued diligence, they can continue making strides.

The Field to Table Project has also enjoyed success and has grown vastly in the three years since its inception. Although the long-range effects of this youth civic engagement program are unclear, it is definitely having a positive effect on their lives and their neighborhood in the short-run. Young people living in economically depressed areas often cannot conceptualize what is possible; they live and breathe their streets and blocks. Providing them the opportunities to increase their knowledge and improve their standard of living can begin to break the cycle of poverty.

CONNECTION TO TEACHING

Creating youth-centered civic engagement programs in blighted urban neighborhoods will impart youth with the knowledge to improve their own communities while also striving to improve their own lives. Additionally, it is important for youth to learn the history behind urban decline as well as the efforts cities, particularly their own, are making to beautify these areas. It is essential for them to develop a well-rounded picture in their minds of what has happened, what is happening, and what will continue to happen so as to inform their awareness and comprehension of the community in which they live.

The most effective way to transmit this type of content to students is through teaching methods compiled by Robert Marzano in his book *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (2013). Marzano's instructional strategies

are supported by an overwhelming number of research studies and will improve student achievement.

Identifying Similarities and Differences

In order for students to comprehend and decipher complex concepts, it is necessary for students to examine them in a simpler way. According to Marzano, this can be done by breaking down problems into “similar and dissimilar characteristics.” By organizing information in this manner, students will be able to have a deeper understanding of the material. Research has shown that an extremely successful way to represent similarities and differences is through various types of graphic organizers. For example, a Venn diagram would be useful when comparing historical data of Rochester’s socioeconomic and population data to current data in hopes that students notice trends. Similarly, a cause and effect web would be helpful in uncovering reasons behind a city’s shift from bustling to blight.

When introducing the new content to students, there are two different approaches teachers can use. The first approach involves teachers presenting the information in a straightforward manner to students through class discussions or some type of guided inquiry. In this approach, students could categorize a given list of similarities and differences of urban areas onto a graphic organizer. The second approach involves students developing their own list of similarities and differences through individual investigations, which could be done by using an article, a book, or photographs from different urban areas. Each approach is valid; the teacher would select the approach most appropriate for the students. Teacher-lead instruction would focus students’ learning on classifying fixed similarities and differences while student-led

investigation would allow them to widen their knowledge by encouraging them to think outside of the box.

Summarizing and Note Taking

Giving students the opportunity to summarize and take notes allows them to increase their comprehension by utilizing analytical skills. For both summary and note taking activities, students must synthesize information into essential components and rewrite it in their own words.

As per research, Marzano states that summarizing is a particularly useful skill and requires substituting, eliminating, and keeping certain information. Using social media,⁷ would be an exceptionally fun and current way for students to hone their summarization skills. Twitter, for example, requires its users to “tweet” statements containing one hundred forty words or less. For ongoing assignments, students could be required to set up a Twitter account and “tweet” summaries of articles or reading assignments pertaining to the history that has caused rust-belt cities to deteriorate. The Twitter word limit would force students to be succinct with their summaries, thereby eliminating much of the unnecessary information and verbiage students often put into summaries. Another way social media could be used as a means for students to practice their summarization skills is by writing captions for pictures on an online photo sharing website, such as Instagram or Flickr. Students could take pictures of either beautification efforts or blighted areas in their neighborhoods and upload them, writing a concise caption to accompany

⁷ Social media is a type of internet communication where people interact with others by creating, sharing, and exchanging information and ideas in virtual communities.

the photograph. Students could also find pictures online and write their own personal take on the aspects within the photographs.

Note taking is another indispensable skill for students to master that will allow them to better understand the content. Research has shown that, when teachers give review and revision time during in-class notes, students will have the necessary processing period that is useful when learning new material. However, studying blighted neighborhoods and revitalization attempts should involve more “expeditionary” learning as opposed to heavy in-class lessons. Expeditionary learning has more of a project-based focus, where students engage in multifaceted study of a wide range of topics. An example of an expeditionary excursion would be learning about urban gardening in the classroom then taking walking tours of community gardens and other beautification efforts. Teachers could easily adapt Marzano’s note taking strategy and have students take column notes during the walking tours, with one half of the page contain descriptions of things they have seen and what they have learned while the other half reserved for unanswered questions. This would also allow for more complex class discussions after the tour is over.

Homework and Practice

Homework affords students with the chance to further develop upon in-class learning outside of the classroom. Nevertheless, Marzano recommends that the quantity of assigned homework be adjusted based on the grade level of the students. In order for students to be prepared to study urban decline and revitalization, there is terminology that would serve as a necessary foundation, and assigning vocabulary review as homework would allow students appropriate time to

practice. Interactive homework, such as flashcards either online or in physical form, can serve as an effective way for students to master new words. Online sites such as Quia and Quizlet allow teachers to make a user name and create different word games, flashcards, and quizzes to strengthen and test students' grasp of content terminology. However, if students do not have access to a computer with an internet hook-up, physical flashcards will also allow students the same level of practice.

Nonlinguistic Representations

The research Marzano presents has shown knowledge to be more multifaceted than previously thought. In the brain, knowledge can be stored in both linguistic and visual forms. If teachers can appeal to both forms instead of just one, students will have a greater opportunity to succeed. Furthermore, research as recently indicated that when linguistic exercises are replaced with visual representations, students' brain activity has increased. As a result, it is important for teachers to utilize both types of knowledge in lessons.

There are many ways to incorporate nonlinguistic lessons into a classroom. For the content of this paper, assignments and projects with a visual focus are almost necessary. Photography projects were mentioned earlier; students would be able to document both assets and deficits of their neighborhood through their own photography, and upload the pictures onto a photo sharing website. However, if students did not have access to a camera or this type of project were not feasible for some other reason, students could also research pictures online from a city with similar features. This type of assignment could be altered to meet the needs of a

variety of classrooms and student abilities. Teachers could take their own pictures, or find some online, and present them to the class as a more structured lesson.

Cooperative Learning

Students often learn the most from their peers; this can be seen in everyday social interactions.

Although many people would agree with that statement, research has also substantiated this theory. Marzano affirms that dividing students into cooperative learning groups produces a positive effect on their ability to comprehend material. He does caution that group size will affect the overall learning, and to overcome this he suggests keeping groups small. In addition, it is important to use this strategy judiciously, as overuse can dampen its positive effects.

Furthermore, cooperative learning groups can serve as an excellent tool for integrating various ability levels within a classroom. Students can be assigned rolls and responsibilities to further facilitate group collaboration.

Cooperative learning groups is yet another easily adaptable strategy to use with the current content. Students could do group research projects on different rustbelt cities that have faced urban decline. Or, students could be placed in groups based on which neighborhoods they lived in and could conduct “field” research on what is going on in their own backyards. For either assignment, group members could create their own webpage to document their findings using a simple to navigate site such as Google Sites. Each student would have access to the website and could upload his/her own portion of work.

Setting Clear Objectives and Providing Feedback

For any teacher, it is critical to set clear objectives and provide constructive feedback on students' work. When teachers set objectives for students, it can give their learning a clear direction. The objectives, however, should not be too specific and should allow for potential future adjustments. Constructive feedback will also help shape students' learning. Research shows that it will usually produce positive outcomes.

Rubrics are probably the most effective way to combine both objectives and feedback into a singular form. Prior to an assignment, a rubric lays out what is expected of each student. After the assignment is completed, the rubric will serve as feedback in the form of a grade. There are many online rubric generators that are reasonably thorough, such as RubiStar, but it is up to the teacher to make sure the rubric is concise and straightforward.

Generating and Testing Hypotheses

Students delve deeper into content when they are attempting to solve problems. According to research, students should develop, explain, and test hypotheses in order to better grasp certain material. Marzano states that both deductive and inductive approaches are useful when students are generating hypotheses. A deductive approach transitions from a large amount of general information to something more specific. Students would start with a broad concept and narrow it down to form a hypothesis, then further narrow to test and figure out what works best. An inductive approach is the opposite, with students starting with a specific thought or idea and developing a hypothesis, then adding more information as the hypothesis is tested.

When students create and clearly explain their hypotheses and conclusions, they are using important processing skills that will allow them a richer understanding of the content. As students are introduced to the topic of urban decline, a first assignment could be to develop hypotheses regarding what caused urban cities to transform from bustling epicenters to blighted and abandoned areas. The assignment could be finished after a day or so, with students testing their hypotheses and learning the history behind urban decline. Or, this assignment could more ongoing, with students testing and defending their hypotheses as the acclimate knowledge. Conversely, if the teacher preferred more of a deductive approach, as opposed to the aforementioned inductive approach, students could be given information on the history behind urban decline, and go through the steps of questioning the theories, generating a few hypotheses, and whittling it down to one sound premise. Either way, this would serve as an apt starting point for a curriculum; students would be entrenched deep into the topic and acquire a tremendous amount of familiarity with it.

Cues, Questions, and Advanced Organizers

Cues, questions, and advanced organizers are instructional tools that allow students to expand on what they already know to augment further learning. According to research, these tools should be analytical and encourage inferences, have a clearly defined focus and purpose, and should be presented at the beginning of a lesson. Posing essential questions at the start of class not only sets the tone for the subsequent lesson, but gives students the entire lesson to critically think about the question and how best to answer it. Advanced organizers, such as telling a story or skimming a text, are good ways to expose students to information before they “learn” it.

Marzano says that this is significant because it allows students to have more of a background on the topic when one did not previously exist.

“URBAN DECLINE AND BEAUTIFICATION” COURSE

As discussed at length throughout this paper, it is incredibly important to involve youth in urban-based civic engagements programs. Many youth living in blighted urban neighborhoods see destruction and ugliness on a daily basis. Encouraging youth to problem solve, plan, and even carry out beautification projects not only gives them positive outlets in their communities, but it also shows them what is possible when they focus and work hard. Furthermore, inspiring youth to improve declining areas can attempt to break the cycle of poverty for themselves and every other resident.

Over the past decade, a variety of youth revitalization projects have been implemented in numerous urban areas across the country. However, research shows that there is little understanding on the long-term effects the projects have had on both the community and the youth themselves. Even so, nearly all projects have had positive short-term effects, both in the community and on the youth directly involved.

Although adults could see these promising results studying urban decline and beautification would have on both the community and youth, it might be difficult to get teenagers to volunteer in their communities. The most efficient way to reach out to youth would be through a course in middle or high school. The course could be taught as a semester-long social studies elective in high school, perhaps in conjunction with a participation in government or civics class. Or, the lessons could be split up and offered as an addendum to social studies

curriculum, either as stand-alone lessons or as independent extra assignments. Whichever method were chosen, the youth would benefit greatly from learning about urban decline and beautification, especially with a focus on their neighborhoods.

Since social studies teachers are already overwhelmed planning and prepping for lessons under the new common core standards, a set of adaptable lessons on urban decline and beautification would be a great way to inspire teachers to add it to their curriculum. As a result, a course portfolio would be the best way to transmit these lesson ideas.

In *Divided We Stand: Teaching about Conflict in U.S. History*, James Percoco provides a fantastic and extensive portfolio of lessons and materials teachers could use in order to teach a myriad of conflict and controversial topics in American history, such as race and gender issues. His resources are easily adjustable and could be used in any high school classroom to make history more alive, interactive, and tangible. Using Percoco's portfolio model, an urban decline and beautification course portfolio of sample lesson ideas and resources will follow.

“URBAN DECLINE AND BEAUTIFICATION” PORTFOLIO

The lessons contained in this urban decline and beautification portfolio are intended for youth living or attending school in blighted urban areas. Although the curriculum could be used in any school, it would make the biggest personal impact if the students were studying and learning about their neighborhood or ones similar. As stated earlier, this course could be taught as a semester-long social studies elective in high school or the lessons could be judiciously chosen to augment an existing social studies curriculum. If the latter option, it would make the most sense to have these lessons taught to high school students in a participation in government or civics

class.⁸ If the class were middle school students, the lessons could be added whenever the teacher thought it was suitable.

Most students probably have little experience studying urban problems, even if they are living in areas faced by them. As a result, it is necessary to lay a foundation for students of what urban decline really means. Newspaper and magazine articles, photographic essays, and other short written or visual pieces would create a suitable background for students. These types of works tend to be less dense than textbooks and books, and might appeal more to students since they are coming from familiar sources. Spending about ten minutes searching the internet results in several recent newspaper and magazine pieces relating to the decline of rust belt cities, which can function as a starting-off point for this course. Examples include Paul Krugman's *New York Time* article comparing employment in Pittsburg and Detroit in "A Tale of Two Rust-Belt Cities"⁹ and a visual tour of 1954 Chicago from LIFE Magazine (courtesy of Time Magazine).¹⁰ Another great online resource is Ohio History Central, which is a website rich with information and pictures on rust belt cities in Ohio.¹¹

Over the course a couple days, students can work in groups or individually investigating urban decline by searching the internet for things such as "rust belt city history" or "urban blight." They can record their findings on graphic organizers and present them to the class, or

⁸ It does not seem necessary to add these lessons to global studies or American History classes, since the required knowledge for students is already so intense; of course, this decision should be at the discretion of the teacher.

⁹ Krugman, P. "A tale of two rust-belt cities." *The New York Times*. 21 July 2013. <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/a-tale-of-two-rust-belt-cities/?r=0>

¹⁰ "City at a crossroads: Chicago confronts urban blight, 1954." <http://life.time.com/history/city-at-a-crossroads-chicago-confronts-urban-blight-1954/#ixzz2cGJ2SFOa>

¹¹ *Ohio History Central*. <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Rustbelt?rec=1721>

the teacher can make a large Venn diagram or other organizer on the board and have students fill in their research. If the class needs more structure, the teacher could provide articles, such as the ones mention above, for students to read and answer questions.

In these beginning days, it is also necessary to give a well-rounded picture to students and discuss the revitalization and beautification efforts many of the cities are undertaking. The City of Rochester website has some useful information about “green” initiatives and other beautification projects.¹² Additionally, *The Atlantic* has a fantastic series called “Cities: Place Matters” about different revitalization attempts of rust belt cities and features Rochester as one of their chosen cities.¹³ Moving away from Rochester, *The New York Times* has an article about a creek restoration effort in Cincinnati.¹⁴ Students could do similar activities as with the previous assignment: students would search for or use these articles and document their findings in graphic organizers.

Once an informational foundation has been laid, students could do more analytical work and begin to develop hypotheses and conclusions. Using the information they gathered, students could begin to form hypotheses regarding what caused Rochester to transform from a city with bustling areas to one with blighted and abandoned areas. There are numerous speculations on the internet for the decline of different rust belt cities, but none really touch upon Rochester. As a result, students could deduce their own hypotheses on Rochester from their earlier research.

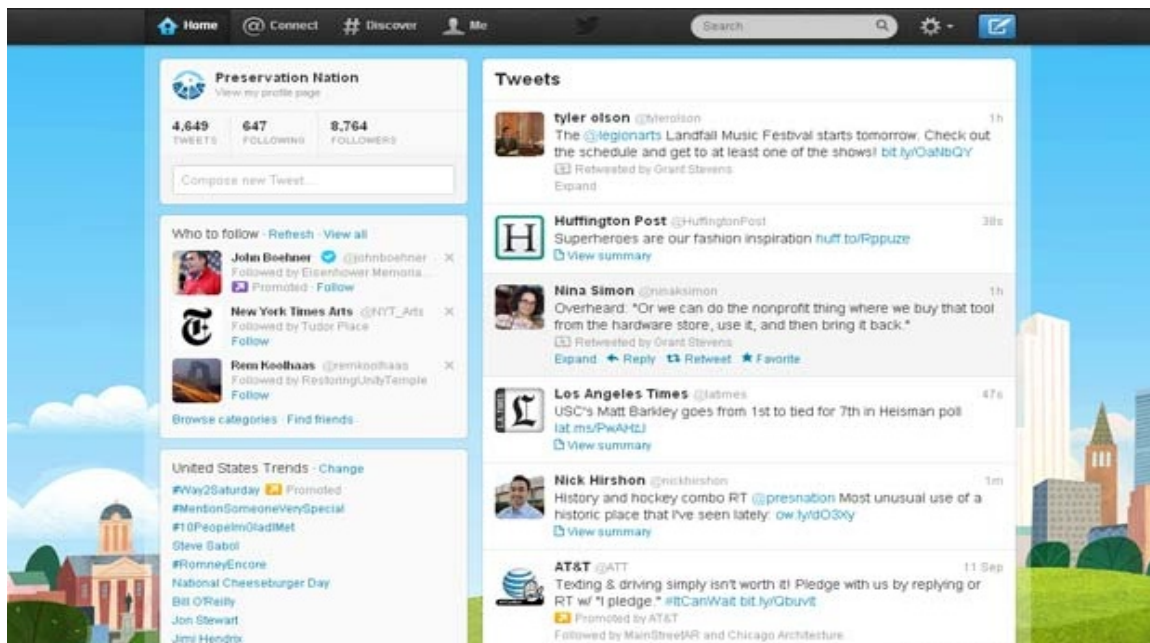
¹² “Project green.” *City of Rochester*. <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/article.aspx?id=8589941695>

¹³ Brandes Gratz, R.A. “Rochester’s unique place in the rustbelt revival.” *The Atlantic*. 15 June 2012. <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/jobs-and-economy/2012/06/rochesters-unique-place-rustbelt-revival/2287/>

¹⁴ Peterka, A. “Creek restoration keys cincinnati’s battle against urban blight, stormwater.” *The New York Times*. 22 August 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/gwire/2011/08/22/22greenwire-creek-restoration-keys-cincinnati-battle-agai-17408.html?pagewanted=all>

With these hypotheses, students could either get into groups and compare and contrast the reasoning that led them to their specific hypothesis, or they could save their hypotheses and revisit them at the end of the course.

Since urban decline and revitalization is such a current topic, the study of it in classrooms necessitates more “modern” lessons. Using social media fits the bill; it is an exceptionally contemporary way for students to actively engage in their community and classroom environments. Social media also allows for more ongoing assignments and large-scale projects that students can constantly add to as their knowledge increases over time. Twitter, for example,



Example of tweets on a Twitter account

could be a great way for students to be more heavily involved in their reading assignments. Students could create a Twitter account and “tweet” homework or in-class assignments. Their responses to reading assignments would not be overly detailed due to Twitter’s one hundred forty word limit. Students would be able to practice being concise with answers, and they might even be more apt to do these reflections since their writing would have to be short.

Social media could also be used as a basis for a photography assignment. This assignment can serve as a visual essay for the course, and is an interesting way to incorporate nonlinguistic components so as to appeal to all types of learners. Students would make an online photo sharing account on Instagram or Flickr and take pictures of either blighted areas or beautification efforts in their neighborhoods. This serves a dual purpose: making students more aware of their surroundings while giving them personal connections to a class assignment. Once they have taken pictures, they would then upload them onto their accounts and write brief captions to accompany the pictures, briefly describing how they feel or what they saw before and after the picture was taken. However, if students do not have access to cameras or if the areas where they live are not conducive to the assignment, students could also find pictures online of



Examples of urban decline from Instagram (found online through a Google search)



various urban cities facing urban decline and revitalization, upload them into their accounts and write their personal take on the aspects within the photographs. If needed, this assignment could be altered to meet the needs of a variety of classrooms and student abilities. Teachers could take their own pictures or find some online, and present them to the class as a more structured lesson. Students could write captions on their feelings, what they think is happening, or the positive and negative aspects found within the pictures.

The ideal culmination of this course would involve an expeditionary component to get students outside in their communities. There are several different options available to teachers, but each one is dependent on different levels of resources. It would be phenomenal if students could get their hands dirty and use their knowledge about urban decline and beautification to transform a parcel of vacant land; perhaps the city has a vacant lot near the school that could be donated, or maybe the school itself has a small portion of land that could be used. Teachers could find various articles on urban gardening or art instillation projects and use some of the aforementioned lessons, such as the Twitter lesson, to gage student comprehension. Students would then work as a collective group to beautify the land by installing a small garden and/or an art element.



Rochester, NY



Lowell, MA



San Francisco, CA

Since the completion of an actual beautification project might not be a feasible project for all teachers, the assignment could be altered to a walking tour of neighborhoods surrounding the school. While on the tour, students could point out assets and deficits to the area, like houses and yards that are well-kept and ones that are not. To make this more of a learning experience, students could be split up into groups and take “field notes” of what they observed. Back at school, each team could create a PowerPoint or even a website to document their findings and discuss what is being done right in the neighborhood, what could be improved, and how they would implement these improvements.

IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

The urban decline and beautification lessons in this portfolio are designed to be accessible to any teacher in any classroom with whatever resources he/she has available. Ideally, teachers in urban areas will find connections between the assignments and their student population. However, before a teacher decides to implement any portion of this portfolio, it is important to address the impact on student learning.

For this course, most of the reading texts for students come in the form of newspaper and magazine articles. These were specifically chosen in order to make the topic more relatable to the students. Using something as common as an article from a newspaper shows students how the information is current and relevant. Morin (2013) writing in the *History Teacher* agrees. She, however, took the concept of teaching with newspaper articles one step further and designed an entire history course around the *New York Times Historical* database. Every day, she begins her lectures with PowerPoint slides showing *New York Times* newspaper headlines from the time period of history the class will be studying. Morin finds that newspaper articles are “more accessible and less-intimidating means for students to explore history.” Everyone has seen and held a newspaper at some point; it is an everyday document that chronologically records social, political, and cultural trends. Newspapers are a quintessential primary source that all students should have practice reading and decoding. As a result, it is a centerpiece of this course and can, as well as should, be a part of all social studies classes.

The internet is ubiquitous in everyday life, and it is young people who often know more about how to use it than adults. One of the biggest internet developments within the last several years has been the surge in popularity of social media. Certain social media websites,

particularly Facebook, have become pervasive in their use by young people. Thus, it is valuable to harness these popular forms of internet communication in the classroom so as to keep students interested and willing to learn. According to the article “Blogging” (2012), social media can serve as a useful tool in helping students with certain literacy skills. Blogging refers to a series of posts (or entries) published online in reverse chronological order. These posts can be authored by one person or by more than one person, and the topics of posts can run the gamut of anything. “Blogging” discusses a third grade teacher’s adoption of a classroom blog and the effect it had on her students’ literacy skills. The teacher indicated that students became focused on the quality of their writing; the entire world could potentially see the blog so it motivated the students to be conscientious about their work. In addition, many students used their own free time at home to add more contributions, as many enjoyed seeing their work online and were proud. Integrating social media into the classroom can have positive effects on students’ ability and desire to do work. For students, it can be seen as something fun and interesting while for teachers, it can actually improve students’ critical reading and writing skills. Furthermore, teachers can be creative in the ways social media is added to lessons, allowing for a more appealing learning environment.

A critical component of this portfolio is the use of pictures and images. This is almost expected in a course about urban decline and beautification due to the fact that the topic contains such visual elements. Rowsell, McLean, and Hamilton (2012) discuss the importance of what they call “visual literacy.” This type of literacy refers to the “ability to make meaning from information in the form of the image.” Today’s culture has a deep reliance on visual images, with the prevalence of television, movies, and even smartphones. This has greatly influenced the way students make meaning. Therefore, it is almost necessary to include visual elements into

lessons, and students should practice their ability to infer, assess, and denote the meaning of visual images. Rowsell et. all discuss different ways to improve students' visual literacy. They exemplify how to apply a critical lens to visual images in order for students to understand and interpret themes and main ideas from texts. These images present tangible details that make them instantly accessible to students in a different way from written texts. As a result, it is crucial to incorporate visual elements into everyday lessons.

Expeditionary learning is a type of classroom philosophy based on the educational beliefs of German teacher Kurt Hahn. Expeditionary learning has a project-based emphasis, where students engage in in-depth group study of various topics. Just looking at the title of Black's (2005) article, "Adventures in Learning," one could surmise the author's viewpoint. In her article, Black discusses the learning benefits of taking students on "expeditions." She claims that an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse school in Maine consistently scores high in standardized tests because of the school's approach to learning expeditions. Throughout the year, students partake in "thoughtful investigations that lead to deep understanding of important concepts." Instead of sitting in classrooms, reading textbooks, and listening to lectures, seventh and eighth grade students at this school delve deep into learning ecology and the plight of endangered animals to prepare for trips to estuaries and tide pools. Their expertise in local wildlife was apparent during a tour from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife expert, who commented on their wealth of knowledge. As evident by this article, learning can come alive for students when they can use their knowledge in real world applications, and when it allows them to learn about their own backyards.

TEACHING CONNECTION CONCLUSION

It is crucial to inform young people about what is really going on in their economically depressed and blighted neighborhoods. An effective way to transmit this type of information to young people is through school. This material is so important for them to learn, though, because it involves the communities they call home. Thus, it imperative to ground the teaching methods in solid research to make sure these students are successful. Robert Marzano and his research-based strategies offer insightful and overwhelmingly effective instructional approaches that can serve as a strong basis for students to learn about urban decline and beautification.

The portfolio for the urban decline and beautification course includes a variety of lesson resources, ideas, and alternate application methods. Many involve contemporary activities and assignments that meld well with the immediateness of the topic. The assignments also aim at engaging students and encouraging them to read, think, and learn critically. The predominant activity of the course involves students getting out into their communities, either by beautifying a vacant lot based on the research they did, or by developing a comprehensive list of possible beautification ideas for the future.

The lessons included in the portfolio were based in research as well. Many of the activities, such as using newspapers in place of textbooks and the burgeoning role of social media in education, have proven successful in actual application. Consequently, this portfolio would serve as a worth-while addition to any social studies curriculum.

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