



## **Buffalo, New York**

### Remaking Buffalo Niagra

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Cranes are in the air in Buffalo, more than anyone can remember for a long time, and the national media are warming up to write comeback stories about a city that has experienced nearly half a century of bad news. But to focus on current construction activity alone would be to misunderstand what has happened in Buffalo and why.

A recent story in the *New York Times* (“Once Just a Punchline, Buffalo Fights Back,” July 30, 2013) quotes city planning director Brendan Mehaffy trying to put Buffalo’s urban resurgence into context: “There’s been a decade of focused work here to redevelop the city,” Mehaffy said. “You can see the results now really coming out of the ground.”

True, and the process of recovery from the decline of Buffalo’s Fordist industrial economy, the growth of the “sunbelt,” and the ravages of post-war sprawl has also required more than three decades of work. It is crucial for future planning, policy-making and action that we understand clearly just how and why we are succeeding.

Current projects were not the making of any superstar mayor, potent urban regime, or other white knight. There was no turning point, no watershed moment, or cliff-hanging rescue. Instead, there was year after year of hard work, struggles, setbacks, and incremental achievements by citizen activists, planners, politicians, philanthropists, developers, academics, business people and others.

There was a lot of public controversy and plenty of whining. But the controversy and whining were actually part of the context—social, cultural, and political—that made progress in Buffalo Niagara possible. They were part of the series of powerful civic discourses—stories about ourselves, who we are, and what we want our city to be—that focused our attention on strategic areas of development and drove the work of remaking the Buffalo Niagara region.

These stories are continuously produced and reproduced—across kitchen tables, in taverns and coffee shops; in meetings of governments, not-for-profits, and companies; in the published plans, print media, and on-line venues; in university classrooms, studios, and think tanks; and in the frequent public forums constructed to inform a recursive practice of planning and action.

These stories often dwell on what went wrong and mistakes we made. And they also focus on what we want to be and achieve. They are repetitive, insistent, even hectoring, but ultimately they are persuasive and powerful. They constitute the atmosphere in which anyone here takes action.

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These stories tell us we need to:

- Transform our economy from one that was largely dependent on manufacturing to one with a more diverse array of good jobs for the future. Current data tell us to continue with manufacturing, build on our health care base, and on tourism as core strategies likely to generate new jobs, increase the salary base, and grow the number of businesses in the city. Other categories with promising projections for market sector growth in the region include higher education, professional services, agriculture, bi-national location/logistics, energy, and professional services.
  - Recover our waterfronts from their industrial past, cleaning our water and land, preparing them for contemporary uses and connecting them to our neighborhoods and the region at-large.
  - Repair and reuse the land and buildings that our industrial past bequeathed us, redeveloping “brownfields” and adapting old industrial architecture to new purposes.
  - Preserve and reuse our physical heritage, particularly our architecture, not only to save buildings of significance and quality, but to create great places to live, and to celebrate our history and culture.
- Continue efforts to control our sprawling pattern of development increase our energy efficiency and address the crisis of climate change. It’s not sustainable to build new houses, shopping centers, roads and utilities on the periphery when we are abandoning the same at the center.
  - Make Buffalo’s downtown a great place, which can only happen if there are people living there – something that seemed impossible 25 years ago but is a growing reality today.
  - Protect, restore, and build new “green infrastructure” attending to our Olmsted parks, the diversity of other landscape types and agricultural lands, not only because they give pleasure to citizens and give our cities their particular shape and feel, but also because of the resulting ecology that reduces the economic and environmental impacts of urban infrastructure.
  - Cultivate a kind of urban living throughout the region that is embedded in towns, villages and neighborhoods where houses are close together and shopping not far away, neighbors can see and be seen, and the physical fabric of things is closely cultivated.

We achieve these ends, in part, by:

- Encouraging our place-based institutions – schools, hospitals, colleges and universities – to develop and work in ways that help struggling urban neighborhoods while they meet their own mission-based needs.
- Evolving new forms of public and private partnerships, inter governmental coordination at the federal, state and local level, and styles of civic life with “DIY” grassroots action. All these forms give space for community narratives to develop, where people can give voice to their aspirations and make them visible to each other, document them and embed them in community institutions.

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Each one of these headlines describes a thick but not an exhaustive history of speaking, organizing, researching, planning, resisting when necessary, and acting together. There are significant accomplishments to be attached to each one of them and things are far better across the board than they were 30 years ago.

Our economy is healthier and far more diverse. Sustainability and resiliency is on the regional agenda. Place-based institutions are active in urban development. “Brownfields” are being redeveloped. A downtown housing market thrives today which didn’t exist at all in 1988.

We have saved enough historic treasures to make architectural tourism an important part of our regional tourism strategy. Our parks are better cared for and in better hands. Our waterfronts are cleaner and more accessible. Urban neighborhoods are coming back. Grassroots action is spreading. There is new institutional capacity to make these stories come true. And there is a new optimism, a new sense of hope grounded, not only in these achievements, but in the sense that our emerging civic culture might actually be working.

There is much more to be done. Buffalo city schools are in crisis. We have a huge overhang of vacant housing and land in Buffalo, Niagara Falls and elsewhere. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation persist. Our regional planning entities lack the “teeth” to manage growth. Electoral politics are seen by some to disconnect citizen energy from public capacity. Transportation options continue to be very limited.

Still, there are the cranes downtown – building a University at Buffalo medical school, a medical office building, and a third hospital on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. Add to that a casino, a hotel, another office building, an entertainment complex, and a heritage site in other strategic investment areas. Each project comes with its own story, is reinforced by previous investments and rests on the foundation of a broader community-wide story driven by vision, speech, and action.