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Riverfront Planning Initiatives in Upstate New York: The Cases of Kingston, Albany and Schenectady

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Introduction

Waterfront locations have traditionally been perceived as possessing special qualities from real estate, urbanity and tourism perspectives. Many cities have developed on waterfronts and some of their most notable urban fabrics face waterbodies – rivers, canals, creeks, lakes or seas. Some small and medium-sized riverfront cities have been able to conserve or adapt their industrial era cultural heritage to new uses. In many cases, tourism has taken advantage of those locations for recreation, sports and community-oriented open-air events on the land-water interface (Bray, 1993; Kostopoulou, 2013). This paper provides a brief analysis of how three cities in upstate New York – Kingston, Albany and Schenectady – have attempted to promote more active uses of their riverfronts.

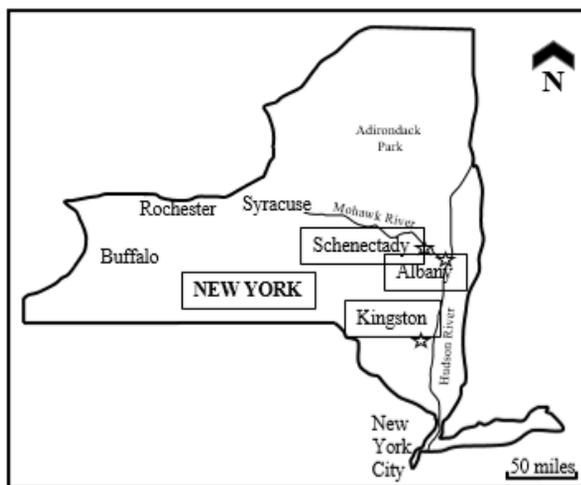


Figure 1. Case Studies' Locations

These three cities are relatively well positioned to continue to benefit from waterfront planning (Kotval & Mullin, 2001). Kingston's cultural heritage was a direct consequence of the city being New York's first state capital. Albany, New York's state capital, has had a convoluted relationship with the Hudson River, which provides a direct navigable connection to the Atlantic Ocean. Upstate New York was a bastion during the industrial revolution with Troy, Cohoes, Schenectady and Amsterdam commanding leading manufacturing

plants. Schenectady was even known as “*the City that Lights and Hauls the World.*” This economic progress led to impressive cultural developments, such as banks, theaters, public buildings, and residences. Water resources have partially enabled the flourishing of these cities. Kingston benefited from the Delaware and Hudson (D&H) Canal and both Albany and Schenectady experienced a sudden surge in trade due to the construction of the Erie Canal (Stradling, 2010).



Figure 2. Hudson Riverfront Park in Albany

The scales, locations and *genius loci* of these cities have created distinct relationships between river banks and the water. Increasing interest in culture, tourism and recreation has led to a renewed attention to riverfront opportunities. The natural interface between land and water propitiates the use of greenway thinking to reconnect what was once seen as a minor relationship. Multiuse trails and riverwalk promenades have been created. In certain cases, land cleared from dilapidated industrial structures has given place to tourism developments (Rich, 2007). The research question is whether distinct waterfront revitalization models can help leverage considerable environmental and urban quality of life improvements for their host cities.

The research is based on preliminary work conducted mostly since summer 2014. It included mixed methods combining literature reviews on waterfront revitalization, tourism and heritage preservation, greenway planning in contexts of climate change, and community economic development, with selected data analysis and the assessment of policy priorities.

Background

Many cities developed on waterfronts. Such locational relationship has enabled many cities to grow and flourish. Water use facilitated transportation of people and goods. Water was also utilized in productive industrial uses and waterbodies received water runoff and discharged effluents from human activities. The variety of activities on those waterfronts is quite diverse (Timur, 2013). Small and medium sized cities may have more localized relationships than large ones. The English literature on waterfront processes and recent attempts at revitalizing land-water interfaces in large cities is vast and relatively accessible to international audiences. On the other hand, literature on small and medium sized cities, especially in the Northeast (USA), is modest and mostly restricted to analysis environmental accounts, technical processes, and watershed management (Eisenman et al., 2010; Stradling, 2010; Scarce, 2015).

This section reviews three strands of literature on waterfront revitalization: (1) historic preservation and conservation, (2) riverfront greenways, and (3) waterfront redevelopments. This continuum ranges from the existence of urban assets, such as buildings, piers, wharves and discharge infrastructure, to waterfront locations set aside mostly for roadway and railway infrastructure and limited leisure oriented amenities, and to low-laying margins utilized for a multitude of purposes. Culture, utility and environmental values differ considerably in these three strands. Localized developmental processes, public policies, the relative number of urban and natural assets, the (in)existence of interest groups and their commitment to preserving historic and natural resources, and the natural and weather conditions of a region, all influence the degree of waterfront utilization.

The historic preservation of waterfront resources augments the urbanity potential of an area (Bunnell, 1977). Urban relics from working harbors, many transformed by containerization, transshipment canals, loading and unloading docks, piers, warehouses, storage silos, repair docks, moving cranes, and stevedoring paraphernalia have given place to recreational and tourism related activities, such as bars, restaurants, shopping malls, museums and art galleries (Kostopoulou, 2013). Easily accessible waterfronts are well connected to various parts of the city, including downtowns and other mostly commercial and formerly industrial neighborhoods.

The second strand of literature pertains to the use of linear or canal spaces along waterbodies, rivers, lakes and oceans. Their almost uninterrupted continuity and low levels of topographic barriers enables land transport

systems to be built and maintained quite easily, and in certain cases also expanded. Their location on flood-prone areas is a liability occasionally overseen by those in charge of operating those systems. The building of multi-use trails along waterbodies presents fewer risks and guarantees enjoyable greenway amenities for residents and visitors alike (McHarg, 1992).

The third strand encompasses works on the active redevelopment of waterfront sites. If decades ago riverfront locations presented risks which tended to lower the urban development potential of a neighborhood, nowadays we observe attempts at utilizing proximity to the water not only as an economic locational advantage, but also as a redevelopment strategy sought after by entrepreneurs catering to the needs of a more environmentally conscious population (Wilson, 2004). Lucrative real estate developments charge a premium for scenic vistas of water and ecologically sensitive landscapes as well as proximity, and, in many cases, direct access to those resources (Beatley, 2004).

Industrial processes and lack of an appropriate regulatory environment led to the contamination and pollution of some waterbodies. The deindustrialization of the economy in the Northeast and the promulgation of multipronged legislative frameworks covering land, water, air and sound as well as the requirement to conduct environmental impact studies, and to devise and implement climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies has drastically changed how stakeholders perceive and relate to waterfronts. Cleaner and greatly decontaminated waterbodies are used for a myriad of aquatic sports.

In the Northeast, there are emblematic examples of these three strands with slightly different degrees of success. Boston's Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Manhattan's South Street Seaport are specific examples of the first strand. The Charles River Parkway, a central element of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Neckless park system, and Cleveland's Lakefront constitute examples of the second strand. The redevelopment of Providence's Waterplace Park is a paradigmatic example of a river daylighting initiative and associated coalition attempting to capitalize on the city's locational, environmental, cultural and institutional resources.

Waterfront Planning in Upstate New York

New York's coast lines are quite unique and the state's water resources are mostly concentrated on the Atlantic Ocean, Lake Erie and in three important river watersheds, the Saint Lawrence, the Mohawk and the Hudson, and also in a high number of inland lakes and ponds, such as Lake Placid in upstate NY and the Finger Lakes in the western part of the state. The Adirondack Park separates the St. Lawrence from both the Mohawk and the Hudson Rivers.

New York City, a global city of more than 8 million people, developed on the Hudson River estuary. The city's proximity to the ocean constituted a major locational advantage for commerce and the flourishing of industry, services and entertainment. The city's role in the northeastern Boston-Washington 54 million people megalopolis is paramount from economic, cultural and political viewpoints. NYC's territorial development has impacted land use and transportation options in the Lower Hudson. The Hudson River valley is home to approximately 3.5 million people. The pattern of development in the middle and upper sections is marked by small and medium sized towns and cities, interspersed mostly by farms and industrial age structures. Concerns about urban sprawl are real and have led to major institutional attempts at preserving the scenic and environmental integrity of the region (Knudson, 2011; Scarce, 2015).

Such characteristic was celebrated early on by a group of 19th Century Painters which identified themselves with the Hudson River School because of their relatively similar art work on portraying the unspoiled beauty of the region, prior to the industrial revolution. New York City's agglomeration and territorial influence – with bridges and tunnels spanning regional development north and westwards – has influenced land use patterns, which extend sprawl developments from the city's outer boroughs like Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens to Yonkers, for instance. Farther north, many small cities, towns and villages have been impacted by growth and declining forces. Poughkeepsie and Kingston are examples of the former, and Peekskill and Hudson, once desolated and in the midst of shrinking tendencies, are now being rediscovered due to their small town ambiance, relative low cost of living, and proximity to other regional assets and amenities.

In planning terms, the home rule approach to community affairs has been quite prevalent and is usually responsible for the boons and ills of a place. Many cities and towns in the Hudson River valley have comprehensive plans, zoning regulations, and a panoply of volunteering boards, including planning and zoning boards of appeals. The region is also covered by supra-local, state and federal regulations. Preeminent among these is the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area designated by Congress

“to recognize, preserve, protect, and interpret the nationally significant cultural and natural resources of the Hudson River Valley for the benefit of the nation” (HRVNHA, 1996).

In terms of waterfront planning, the NY Department of State runs a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP) aimed at supplying communities

with the necessary expertise, technical and financial resources to plan, improve and conserve their waterfront areas. Since its inception in 1982, this program has helped New Yorkers to create waterfront revitalization plans and to generate planning processes conducive to the conservation of waterfront assets and new alternative utilizations.

Case Studies' Overview

The case studies briefly discussed in this paper illustrate the waterfront models identified in the literature review. They are not exhaustive of a wide range of cities located in upstate New York. However, their *sui generis* characteristics and historic evolution serve to analyze their current development efforts and programs.

Kingston's Roundout Creek waterfront district is just one of four historic districts in a city with 23,893 people in 2010. The city's settlement structure, collection of historic buildings and the monuments in public spaces uncovers the prosperity resultant from having served as the state's capital. Although the urban agglomeration is located uphill from the riverfront, the small historic district has benefited from continued attention, pro-active and incremental planning, and participated collaborations between several public and private entities (Eisenman et al., 2010).

On the other hand, Albany's waterfront is separated from the city by roads and highways. Albany, the state capital of New York, was a city of 97,856 people in 2010 and the core of a four-county metropolitan area of almost one million people. The city developed on the riverfront and soon grew uphill to occupy the adjacent plateau. Broadway and Pearl Streets run parallel to the Hudson River and used to constitute the city's CBD (Pipkin, 2008). Albany appears to have turned its back on the riverfront a long time ago. The D&H Building, Union Station and several other exemplary public and private structures located mostly along these two streets are encircled by highways, access ramps, and fast moving roadways. This traffic pattern is not very conducive to human-scale fruition of waterfront amenities and it even constitutes a barrier, in addition to the built environment, only transposed through a walk-only bridge and lateral vehicular tunnels.

Schenectady was a city of 66,135 people in 2010. A paradigmatic example of a northeastern city that prospered from industrial development and now is in the process of adjusting to a new economic trajectory centered on services, tourism, and soon also entertainment, as its new economic engines. The city itself is located near the confluence of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. The waterfront is 2.5-mile long and besides the Stockade neighborhood, a college

and a small park, it did not have much of a relationship with the Mohawk River. The current investment on the waterfront is expected to create jobs and to attract visitors to the city, which indirectly will also have a positive impact on the local economy.

Table 1. Comparative Case Study Analysis (Sources: census.gov (2010); Eisenman et al. (2010))

	Kingston	Albany	Schenectady
Location	Hudson River & Roundout Creek	Hudson River	Mohawk River
Riverfront model	Historic preservation and conservation	Riverfront greenway	Waterfront redevelopment
Example of land resources	Urban fabric, warehouses and businesses	Roads, trails, bridges and a city preserve	Stockade districts, college, small park and land parcels
Selected public policy instruments	1992 LWRP, 2002 Kingston Waterfront Development Implementation Plan, design standards, zoning	1987 Urban Cultural Park, 2012 Albany2030 Comprehensive Plan, 2015 Rezone Albany	2008 Schenectady Comprehensive Plan, 2010 Mohawk River Waterfront Revitalization County Plan
Current status and results	An attractive, culturally vibrant district, conversion of industrial sites, 1 to 8 USD public to private leverage inv. ratio	Public space improvements, preliminary corridor study to either remove or redesign highway I-787	Hotel, casino and marina under construction

Conclusion

Waterfronts are invaluable assets to neighboring cities. Recent waterfront initiatives in upstate New York were reviewed in terms of their recent initiatives and planning implications. The key finding is that regional contexts, a critical mass of cultural offerings, environmental amenities, and pro-active leadership can impact the evolution of waterfront community economic redevelopment opportunities in riverfront locations. Avoiding technical panaceas while understanding local and regional contexts and socio-economic evolutions, in addition to nurturing informed and well participated

interventions are, perhaps, the most important lessons for waterfront communities, especially in European communities undergoing change due to globalizing phenomena.

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