community
Image
valuing our public spaces

Onondaga
Citizens
League

MISSION STATEMENT

The Onondaga Citizens League fosters informed public discourse by identifying and studying critical community issues affecting Central New York, developing recommendations for action, and communicating study findings to interested and affected groups.

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our community Image

valuing our public spaces

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2011 Study • Report No. 31

PREFACE

When the "Community Image" Study began, the Study Committee's intention was to some-how quantify the economic and social impacts of the physical environment, with the hope that we could convince the community to redirect energy and resources into making a more physically "beautiful" place. We saw a need to dedicate resources to "create a better first impression" with our public spaces - particularly gateways and commercial centers — for res-idents, visitors, investors, business owners, and potential employees and students.

The Committee soon realized that we first needed a better understanding of what creates a positive community image in the first place. Beyond a lack of litter or better roadside maintenance, what is it that we like about places, what makes us feel comfortable, take pride in public spaces, and take care of them? As the Study Committee explored and learned more about urban design and the physical environment of the city, we wanted to share that appreciation with others. For that reason, this OCL report provides an overview of a diversity of topics explored and examples of what other communities have done to address this very idea. The report closes with a number of "action initiatives" that we hope will make a positive impact on the community, and serve as an example and a catalyst to further community action.

Special thanks are due to the Study Committee and its co-chairs, Merike Treier and Tony Malavenda. Colleen Karl-Howe kept the Study Committee nourished with pizza and choco-late at its many noontime meetings. We are also grateful to the OCL Board, all the members of OCL, listed elsewhere in this report, who support the work of the League through their membership dues and financial contributions, and to University College of Syracuse University, which provides the administrative and organizational support without which the Citizens League could not function.

For nearly 35 years, the Onondaga Citizens League has represented an outstanding example of citizen participation in public affairs. Founded in 1978, OCL is an independent, not-for-profit organization that encourages civic education and involvement in public issues. The OCL's annual study on a topic of community-wide relevance culminates in a report designed to help citizens comprehend the issue and its implications, and give decision makers recom-mendations for action.

The Onondaga Citizens League is open to any individual or organization in Central New York. While some join to become involved in the study process, many become members to support the concept and practice of citizen involvement in public policy issues.

Sandra Barrett
Executive Vice President
December 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WHY COMMUNITY IMAGE IS IMPORTANT

How do we feel about Syracuse? When OCL selected "Community Image" as its study topic, the question of how we, as Central New York residents, feel about our community was not at the top of our list. The study's original subtitle, "Creating a Better First Impression," reflected our initial focus on the image we project to outsiders, to visitors coming into or passing through our community. Litter on the interstates and highway ramps and neglect of gateways to the city were a constant sore spot, brought up time and again by *Post-Standard* columnist Sean Kirst and others. How could we influence public policy and once and for all create a mechanism to clean up, beautify, and maintain important entryways to Syracuse?

As the Study Committee met to discuss the issue, however, we quickly came to the realization that the questions we needed to answer were more basic. How do we create a sense of community and a feeling of ownership among our residents? How do we foster a sense of belonging and civic pride? How do we get from having the streets cleaned of litter, to having streets that people don't want to litter?

What we discovered over and over is that to have a positive, sustainable community image, we have to create places where there is a sense of identity and belonging, and that thoughtful design and attention to detail can make the difference between a place that is seen as having no meaning or importance to anyone and a place that attracts people, generates activity and is treasured and cared for by its citizens.

Looking at our community and others like ours, what makes us as citizens feel engaged in our community? What makes us proud of our public spaces, our streets, our neighborhoods? What is it that we like about places, what is it about the places that we like that makes us feel comfortable in them, makes us want to be there, take care of them?

There have been numerous studies that show the quality of our physical environment has real psychological and emotional impacts on us. There is a close relationship between the way our public places look and how much we value them. And there is a strong link between the design of a place and the extent to which it is cherished by its residents. Yet too often we think of design as an "extra" or the icing on the cake, rather than a functional and important part of how we build and use our environment.

For citizens to have a connection to their community, they have to "feel good" about the experiences they have there, whether it's the sense of being at home when walking community streets or sense of pleasure spending an afternoon in a local park. The way residents feel about their community has everything to do with community image. When citizens feel good about their communities, they want to have a stake in what happens there and will work to improve its image. But they need to see and appreciate the things that are unique to their community in order to invest in their community.

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT & ECONOMIC GROWTH

We aren't the only ones who have asked what attaches people to their communities. What makes a community a desirable place to live? What draws people to stake their future in it? Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation launched their Soul of the Community project in 2008 with these questions in mind. Their three-year study of 26 U.S. cities found, surprisingly, that opportunities for socializing, openness and beauty are far more important than peoples' perceptions of the economy, jobs or basic services in creating a lasting emotional bond between people and their community. In addition, they found that peoples' love and passion for their community may be a leading indicator for local economic growth. The cities in the survey with the highest levels of residents' attachment to their community also had the highest rates of economic growth over time. They consistently beat out other possible drivers such as perceptions of the local economy, community leadership and public safety. "Our theory is that when a community's residents are highly attached, they will spend more time there, spend more money, they're more productive and tend to be more entrepreneurial," the study's authors said.

It makes sense that if people value something, they will be inclined to maintain it and feel ownership in it. But if people do not value places, they become degraded, and eventually fail. Visitors embrace places with a "good" image, returning time and again. More importantly, a "good" image strengthens community identity and instills a sense of civic pride in the citizenry.

If we want to enhance community attachment—to bolster community pride and sense of belonging and in turn create economic development—we need to pay attention to the places within our community that give people the opportunity to interact with others, and feel welcome in their community. Those places are our public spaces. Our streets. Our parks. Our public squares and commercial districts. When those spaces are "physically beautiful,"—and equally important perhaps, comfortable to be in, they create incredible draws within an urban area. Whether it is the leisurely stroll through Onondaga Park or along a tree-lined street that mingles interesting buildings and

munity cannot form in the absence of communal space, without places for people to get together and talk. Just as it is difficult to imagine the concept of family independent of home, it is near impossible to imagine *community* independent of the town square or the local pub. In the absence of walkable public places—streets, squares, and parks, the public realm—people of diverse ages, races, and beliefs are unlikely to meet and talk."[1] Even in this age of social media, this classic argument put forth by planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, for preserving our public spaces reflects the reality that community demands physical spaces as well as virtual ones.

> "*What design can do is create* streets, spaces, and neighbourhoods that attract people. Everybody knows you pay more money to be in nice places and that almost everybody wants to be in beautiful environments. Beautiful environments and cities create desirability. This desirability creates value. People invest both economically and emotionally. The DESIGN and functionality of a city cannot and should not be seen as separate factors. Design does function on many levels. Without it, one cannot really create a liveable city and cannot compete in a globalized world."
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> Interview with Martha Schwartz, professor of landscape architecture practice at Harvard University Graduate School of Design and president of Martha Schwartz Partners, in The Dirt, ASLA newsletter, 11/15/2011.

people, attractive urban environments have driven renewal of neighborhoods and whole cities in recent decades, and in turn enhanced the economic success of the regions that surround them.

Public spaces that bring people together and create a sense of belonging have a long history of helping to weave together community fabric, but the decline of these spaces has also been viewed by some as contributing to a declining sense of community. "Com-

Ultimately, our public spaces are a measure of how much we care about ourselves as a community, much as a well cut, well cared-for suit says something about the wearer. We must take care of the things that we value. And just as pleasant appearance on the part of an individual is determined by a myriad of small details, the environment of a successful public space comes together in well-planned details—details that we will examine in depth within this report.

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1 Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press: 2000) p.60.

COMMUNITY CONFIDENCE & A POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE

Part of building a better community image is building community self-confidence. That's something that former Auburn mayor Melina Carnicelli emphasizes when talking about the redevelopment of the city of Auburn over the last decade. At the heart of Auburn's "renaissance" is project after project, pushed forward by planners and developers, over a sustained period of time. But the framework of that redevelopment had everything to do with confidence-building in a time when confidence was shaky.

Carnicelli says people called her a cheerleader for Auburn—and she was. She described the decision-making process during her time as mayor, when the city adopted the slogan "The best small city in New York State." (Auburn has since re-evaluated and become "History's Hometown.")

But at the time "Best Small City in New York State" became a vision for what the community wanted to be, Carnicelli says. It became a "filter for decision making. If we went route A or route B, which would sustain us in that image? It became part our logo, our letterhead… I was interested in having a rallying point for the community, each citizen, group and business."

Oklahoma City, where Mayor Mike Cornett helped convince voters to extend an existing 1-cent sales tax in order to fund a remaking of that city into a place full of amenities for walking, biking and a variety of outdoor play, is a stellar example of group psychology at work.

Cornett found his inspiration for city transformation in a weight loss plan. If the city's rising obesity rates were due to a fast-food "drive through" mentality, then Cornett would put the city on a diet and exercise plan, starting with himself.

"I decided what we really needed to do was to get a conversation going. I came up with this stunt of 'putting the city on a diet.' So I went to the zoo, stood in front of the elephants and said 'We're going to lose a million pounds. We launched a website using private-sector donations, and 43,000 people have now signed up and have lost over 600,000 pounds," Cornett told an editor at governing.com.[2]

Sometimes it is a publicity stunt or a marketing campaign that "starts the conversation" and gets people to change their mindset. With Cornett's "cheerleading," citizens passed a $777 million redevelopment plan that includes jogging trails and biking lanes on city streets, senior wellness centers,

a major downtown park, and a street-car system—driving the city away from "car culture."

That tax payers were willing to pass the measure in 2009, during times of economic hardship speaks to a sense of unity (developed through the painful era following the Oklahoma City bombing) and a belief that investing in the community will bring results.

That was not always the case according to Cornett.

"For the first time, we have a generation of people who would invite their family and friends from around the country to come see their city. You would never have done that when I was growing up… People want to feel good about where they live. It's like we give them talking points. They're really proud of what they've created. They take ownership, it's theirs."[3]

If they can do it, we can too. Syracuse has assets that might be similarly appreciated if regularly cheered about. Like our own 2011 Public Official of the Year, County Executive Joanie Mahoney and the award-winning "Save the Rain" program that is greening the city (and cleaning Onondaga Lake). How about the recently completed Creek Walk? Or public art across the city and our
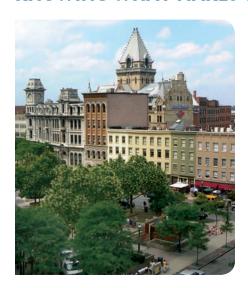
2 Zach Patton, "2010 Public Officials of the Year," 2011, http://www.governing.com/poy/mick-cornett. html?p=interview (Accessed May 11 2011)

3 Zach Patton, "2010 Public Officials of the Year," 2011, http://www.governing.com/poy/mick-cornett. html?p=interview (Accessed May 11 2011)

first "Public Artist in Residence." How about the festivals and programming all around town, from floating parades to music and theater? And we're exporting "Syracuse culture" too, from the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que's in other cities to a local public broadcasting station – WCNY – producing programs for markets statewide.

Believing in our city is the first step in helping turn it into the city we want it to be. That is something we have to remind ourselves of regularly.

KNOWING WHAT MAKES THE CITY WORK

Our communities change over time, but that change should be built upon an understanding of the community and how its inhabitants relate to it.

"The rebuilding of North American cities since the 1950s demonstrates how much city planning is affected by changing fashions. One decade favors modernity and pulls down old buildings in the name of progress; the next decade discovers its heritage and promotes historic preservation."[4] So says Witold Rybczynski in his book, *City Life.*

Developing a vision is about more than following the latest fads in architecture or urban design. It is about really coming to understand the community, to know its streets, commercial centers and parks and the way they function, what they could be at their very best, and the day-to-day ways we support or undermine their functioning. Walking the streets of our city, and thinking about what has been accomplished here, and what can still be accomplished is an interesting process, and it gets us out and using our public spaces.

4 Witold Rybczynski, *City Life* (New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon and Schuster: 1995), pp.28-29.

AUBURN – "THE BEST SMALL CITY"

Mid 20th century Auburn, NY, faced the same ravages from economic downturn and poor planning policies as other areas of Central New York. The loss of jobs and businesses, of a hometown where "you could lose a job on a Friday and get a new one on a Monday," where you could take pride as you strode through a historic and prosperous downtown, took a toll on physical and psychological well-being. But in recent years Auburn has been able to re-imagine itself. What are the tools Auburn has used to rebuild its downtown, to reconstruct parks, roads and gateways and to renew people's pride in the community? And how do those lessons apply—or not apply—to other communities in Central New York?

"It is much easier to renew a place the scale of Auburn than it is to renew East Los Angeles," says Steve Lynch, Planning Director for Cayuga County. "We've been able to make small changes that have a big impact." A remarkable ninety percent of the projects in Auburn's 1991 comprehensive plan have been completed.

Those small projects pushed forward by the city's planning department and entrepreneurial developers, have been supported by both grant-based and private funding, *over a sustained period of time.* And that ongoing drive has been coupled with a forceful effort to reawaken positive community image says Melina Carnicelli, a former mayor of Auburn. During Carnicelli's tenure, Auburn was known as "The Best Small City in New York State." Today it's termed "History's Hometown." Both slogans promote Auburn to the outside world— but also tap into a remember-to-pat-ourselves-on-the-back style of self-image building.

Carnicelli says she used "The Best Small City" statement during her tenure as mayor as a kind of filter for all government decision making. "If we went route A or route B, which decision would sustain us in that image?" Carnicelli says of the very careful and deliberate attempt Auburn lawmakers have made to see each planning decision in terms of the larger picture.

At an OCL Public Session, Cayuga County Planning Director Lynch and Planning Director for the City of Auburn, Jenny Haines, outlined what makes Auburn both similar and different from other Central New York communities, and how those factors—which could have worked for or against Auburn's redevelopment—were employed as strengths.

1) **Sense of place**: Auburn is politically a city but functions more like a town or village. It has a compact downtown, surrounded by older, traditional walkable neighborhoods—a historic example of a community form that New Urbanism has embraced. Auburn is small enough to be a laboratory of change. The compact form and the traditional layout of Auburn lent itself to change.

2) **Shared knowledge, history and a collective memory of the community**: Auburn has a sense of itself. That small town quality is evident in the way Auburn natives interact and

In his classic book, *The Image of the City,* city planner Kevin Lynch taught how we all have mental maps of our cities, and those maps will have far more "precision and detail" if "we live in places that offer us richly detailed and well-defined experiences." (In his famous example, a typical mental map of Boston was an intricate diagram and a typical mental map of Jersey City was practically a blank.)[5]

To really appreciate our community we are obligated to explore it—to get to know a district or a neighborhood we have just passed through in an automobile; to put aside fears of the unknown and eat or play or walk somewhere we have not gone before.

If we better understand what facets make the city work well, we can foster them to improve community image.

And once we understand what can make our city better, there are hundreds of ways to turn vision into reality.

What makes for a great public space? What draws people to a particular park,

> "*Contrary to what is often said*, the built environment is not all a matter of taste. Some solutions to a design problem work better than others. Each pattern is a way to solve an environmental problem in making the world comfortable… let's pick out those things that please us and then design our land-use codes around those pleasing models. Let's… copy what works and not reinvent the wheel with each new building…"
>
> David Sucher , City Comforts (revised edition) (Seattle: City Comforts Inc: 2003) pp 8-9.

leads them back to a favorite city streetscape, or makes them spend time and money in a particular neighborhood or district? The ineffable magic that seems to make certain locales so appealing is less magic and more calculation than many imagine.

In order to help us understand how certain streets and public spaces work, or do not work well, we looked at them in relationship to the elements of *placemaking* – a multi-faceted and detail oriented approach to planning, designing and managing public places that takes into account the needs and desires of people who live, work and visit there.

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5 Tony Hiss, The Experience of Place: A New Way of Looking at and Dealing With Our Radically Changing Cities and Countryside (New York: Vintage Books: 1990), pp.80-81.

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know their history. Earlier change brought a loss of icons and community cultural spaces. Auburn lost opera houses, theaters and a large retail base. Auburn had lost numerous manufacturing facilities and businesses, and lost 4,000 jobs. That loss of blue collar labor, which made it possible to sustain families, mom-and-pop shops and whole neighborhoods, was crushing. The population shift and population decline brought increased housing vacancies. Home ownership went into decline. There was a transition from predominantly owner-occupied houses in the city to almost 51 percent rental-occupied as large homes were cut up into smaller units. These shifts in community dynamics led to a loss of confidence in community sustainability. There was a longing to return to an idealized former state of being. Auburn had to go through a grieving process. There was a reluctance to trust elected officials (and especially planners) and reluctance to, again, embrace change. Leaders and planners were aware of that, so they worked particularly hard to articulate what they were trying to do and why.

3) **A shared sense of potential**: The people of Auburn had the ability to overcome things that were happening, a resiliency. There is a history of progressive leadership, and a sense in the community that Auburn is a very special place. People are very passionate about it. The community has a legacy of manufacturing, a productive workforce, positive attitudes, and an adaptive small business-based economy. There is a strong philanthropic community with both older and newer foundations, coupled with a sense of giving back to Auburn. Foundations work together with local government to bridge the public-private divide. Such important historical sites as the Harriet Tubman Home and the Seward House have led to the city branding as "History's Hometown."

Looking Ahead Auburn's 2010 Comprehensive Plan embraces arts and culture, and looks to tourism as an economic driver. With an eye to Syracuse University's Connective Corridor, Auburn has established a "Creative Corridor," which will run between downtown Auburn and Cayuga Community College. "We are watching and learning from Syracuse," says Planning Director Jenny Haines.

A building acquired by the city in 1995 will be torn down to build a theater which will be part of a larger five-venue musical theater festival running from Memorial Day through Labor Day. And a brand-new Hilton Garden Inn will be going up just down the street from the theater. The tourism office, as well as many private and non-profit partners, have worked together to make this happen. Meanwhile, good restaurants are flourishing, and a market has been established for high-end rental apartments.

As projects started years ago come to fruition, there is a palpable excitement. But the success of planning efforts has gone hand in hand with "image building and sustaining," Carnicelli says. "There must be active work in collecting the thinking and the emotion. That is the buy-in."

Elements of Placemaking

Anyone who has ever enjoyed being in an urban environment can tell you about the "feeling" they experienced there. They can relate the pleasure of sitting in a sidewalk café, as strangers passed just feet away. They can talk about the calm of sitting on a wide grassy lawn, watching cyclists, strollers, children at play; all the while aware that the cars, the buzz and noise, are just a few feet away. The experience is different than a comparable one in the country or suburb. It is exciting. It is full of people.

Urban planning theorist Jane Jacobs described what stimulates that experience of urban pleasure:

"A good city street neighborhood achieves a marvel of balance between its people's determination to have essential privacy and their simultaneous wishes for differing types of contact, enjoyment or help from the people around. This balance is largely made up of small sensitively managed details, practiced and accepted so casually that they are normally taken for granted."[6]

It is that balance between privacy and contact—that charged air, caused by the spark passing between strangers, that enlivens.

The city experience is created in the "details," so sensitively managed that we don't see them, Jacobs tells us. We have an opportunity to "plan" in order to spark the human encounters which are the life blood of the city. The goal of this planning is to make an environment that entices pedestrians to use an urban space. What we need to do is to pay attention to the details, to understand the basic rules of the "plans" that make these things happen. It's not unlike working with blocks of different shapes and understanding how they fit together—or don't fit together—to make solid or rickety structures.

Why do people always hang out in the kitchen at a party? And why are they often drawn to a particular streetscape in the city? Both situations have to do with how the

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6   Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House: 1961), p. 59.

spaces around us influence our relationships with others. To understand the elements that create an inviting urban square or park, think of the elements that create a room, walls, floors, ceilings and furnishings, and how those elements work together. Urban squares and parks are like rooms within the city. The floor is pavement or grass underfoot. The walls most often are the buildings that form the edges of the room; their consistency or variations in height create scale, and a sense of scale influences "the feeling" we have in any particular location. (Think of the differences between being in a cozy attic room with sloping walls, or a majestic great room with soaring walls and a cathedral ceiling.) The ceiling typically is the sky overhead. Are the buildings/walls too high to allow in much sun? Blocking sun is much like choosing to put a drab paint color on the walls of the "room." Is seating flexible enough to allow one group a sense of desirable distance from an adjacent party, a distance that both reinforces a sense of intermingling and allows for privacy when needed? Creating flexible seating is comparable to arranging sofas, tables and ottomans to enhance conversation at a gathering.

This analogy is also useful in thinking about local public spaces in the heart of urban Syracuse. How have the "details" been sensitively managed to allow for both privacy and social interaction?

ARMORY SQUARE

Let's start out in Armory Square Park. On a summer day here, sunlight comes flooding in and even in winter or when the sky is overcast, the nearby buildings don't block occasional glimpses of sun. Take a seat on a park bench or inside Starbucks on one of the ledges that cozies up to the window. Now look up. The tops of the buildings are in easy view and allow for passage of sun into the park. Similarly the streets are comfortably narrow—wide enough for cars to travel but not wide enough for them to speed. Comfortable is the word for this streetscape, not too high, not too wide, not too fast. Armory Square was built in the 19th century, to the scale of the 19th century, and because of choices made during its revitalization in the 1980s, it remains a place that feels comfortable.

Ultimately, the success of this space comes down to the relationships it creates: relationships between driver and stroller; between shopkeeper and customer; between resident and visitor.

Because of the narrow streets, drivers can't move too quickly, so they often have eye contact with pedestrians. But because drivers who enter the Armory Square district often do so in order to become pedestrians, and enjoy the streetscape on foot, they are not typically frustrated by the need to slow

FRANKLIN SQUARE:
PUBLIC INVESTMENT SENDS A POWERFUL MESSAGE

In OCL's 2006 study report, *Leveraging Better Outcomes for Downtown,* the study committee pointed out the need for "strategic public investments that would yield many multiples of private investment that would not otherwise take place." We acknowledged that while "(O)btaining the necessary public funding will be a challenge… history shows that Syracuse and Central New York are generally successful in securing substantial resources when the purpose is sound and the reasons are compelling. Past examples include the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative ($46 million), the Inner Harbor development ($20 million) and the Connective Corridor ($10 million)." The report went on to note that "(i)f the community is to convince developers to invest in downtown, then the community itself must show its willingness to invest. Well-maintained, attractive streetscapes, parks, public buildings and walkways encourage existing downtown property owners to better maintain their own properties, and it sends a signal to prospective developers that the downtown is worth their investment. One notable local example of this dynamic: In Franklin Square, some $12 million in public investment helped leverage more than $100 million in private development activity."

In 1987 the Pyramid Companies had approached the city about a redevelopment scheme for a cluster of historically significant, largely abandoned factory buildings south of Carousel Center for housing and commercial uses, later to become Franklin Square. A public-private partnership was formed, and using a sort of tax-increment financing approach, Pyramid advanced the City $12 million for public infrastructure improvements, which was repaid over several years with PILOT revenues from Carousel Center and early Franklin Square projects. This public investment in high quality infrastructure improvements was critical to the viability of the development, and requisite to the private investment by Pyramid, and also several other private companies located in the area. As the Downtown study committee concluded, the Franklin Square project "…offer(s) valuable lessons on how innovative public-private partnerships can overcome hurdles and achieve valuable, high quality, neighborhood-building investment in the urban core."

down. This creates a balance between driver and pedestrian.

Picture a driver taking the curve around the front of the former Armory, now the M.O.S.T., to approach Armory Square Park from the east on West Jefferson Street. Why doesn't that driver seem to bear down on pedestrians? Careful planning during Armory Square's revival delineates street and sidewalk. The pedestrian feels sheltered approaching the park. There is a row of windowed shops with artfully arranged

displays to the right, and a brick-lined zone that runs from sidewalk to curb to the left. The brick area, which flows parallel to the sidewalk and provides strong visual contrast with both sidewalk and street has the effect of creating a visual "moat" or protective divider. From the brick zone rises a row of trees, establishing a perceived wall, or screen, between pedestrian and car. Additionally, on-street parking spaces,

almost always in use, provide a secondary buffer from road traffic. For the apartment dwellers living above these shops, and for diners in the first floor restaurants, the trees pleasantly filter the view of the street and Armory. When the Bartlett Pear trees and Honey Locusts that populate Armory Square were planted 15 years ago, they were carefully chosen for their ability to withstand urban conditions, and for the heights they might achieve at maturity. Halfway through their 25 to 30 year life spans, these trees now stand as they were imagined then. The experience of the corridor, the pedestrian's sense of easy meandering, was planned for and continues to be fostered by those who remain heavily invested in creating the experience of Armory Square. There is always someone paying close attention to important details such as the repainting of the street lamps— originally chosen to replicate actual sturdy 19th century lamps, rather than to reflect the close-but-not-quite-right antique reproduction approach. Because of such details, Armory Square is authentic rather than an imitation like Main Street in Disney World.

Stroll back into Armory Square Park and look through the windows of Starbucks—the private side of the

public realm. The relationship between private and public space in Armory Square is in harmony. The large windows through which Starbucks meets the park, full of light and human traffic at night, create an "extension" of the park that seemingly keeps the place populated, even long after dark, and in the dead of winter, times when few people take to the park benches. Originally, a larger park was envisioned, one that not would have allowed for the construction of the building that houses the café. But ultimately it was decided that the spatial intimacy of a small park would better echo the existing intimate streetscapes of Armory Square; a park approaching the vastness of Clinton Square, would have worked against the underlying original aesthetic: the turns, twists and shadowed places that make Armory Square a place inviting exploration. A mixed-use building was erected where a park might have been—a building that by echoing it enhances the character of Armory Square and is now a focal point in the district.

Armory Square demonstrates that good public spaces require good adjacent private development. That relationship is essential. Developers need to respect and enhance existing public space. That is what the developer of Center Armory did. By a concession to the use of traditional materials and colors, the developer here helped foster an overall sense of unity. Brick was chosen because it is an essential material here, and the architectural style paid gentle homage to the historic surroundings. The crucial element of visual unity is preserved in the district. Visual unity, whether it is presented in a row of Victorians down Main Street or the complementary façades of a well-designed commercial district, has a powerful calming effect. We know what to expect. We are not jarred by disparate structures that seem to have no relationship to one another. When unity is fostered, the even more visually appealing state of *variety within unity*, can blossom.

PLACEMAKING

One of the first people to research how people used public spaces was **William Whyte**. Whyte's observations of human behavior in city parks and plazas were outlined in his groundbreaking work "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces." The design principles that flowed from those observations were so influential that they were ultimately incorporated into the New York City zoning code.

Best Practices:

1. **Places to sit:** Whether solo or in a group, people like to "arrange" for their own seating. Ledges and steps that are "deep" enough to sit on can provide that flexibility, as do movable chairs. Based on his observations of optimum usage, Whyte specified one linear foot of seating for each 30 square feet of open space.
2. **Relationship between space, street, and sidewalk:** Even during a private conversation, people tended to stay in the heart of the human flow. "The street is the river of life of the city," Whyte said, and urban spaces need a close linkage with that movement. For that reason, urban spaces should be no more than three feet above or below street level.
3. **Shops, windows, and doors should similarly be at street level:** Sight lines are important. If people are able to see into a place they are more likely to use it.

Key to a plaza's success are:

4. **Sun:** People like to sit in the sun but want an option of shade when the temperature rises.
5. **Water:** Let people touch it.
6. **Trees and other plant materials:** While people like to sit under the trees, they don't want to be far from the flow. Plant trees close to street/plaza life.
7. **Food and vendors/outside cafes** can enliven a space.

William Whyte, The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (The Conservation Foundation: 1980) has been reprinted and is available at http://www.pps.org/store/books/the-social-life-of-small-urban-spaces

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Step out of Armory Square Park and make a right on Walton Street and the appeal of *variety within unity* is apparent. Except for the Bentley-Settle building (home to the Empire Brewery) in the middle of this block almost all the buildings are roughly the same height. Built in the same era and using the same building technology, they echo each other in structure and architectural detail. It's that similarity that creates *unity.* If a series of awnings above the windows is *unity*, the awnings' diverse colors-- purple, green, black, stripes, green again—add *variety.* A series of A-frame sidewalk signs

provide a unified advertising framework in which proprietors can be creative: sign color and design provide *variety.* Try to picture how the streetscape would change if the signs were different sizes and shapes, at varying heights and of different materials. Overstimulation is a likely response to such a jumble of signage. Now try to picture how this block would look if a fast food restaurant had opened, placing suburban-style large, graphic signage in the midst of the Armory Square District. There is a fast food restaurant here—Subway—but its design with understated signage and awning, fits easily into the neighborhood. The district's image is strong enough—and the advocates of that image outspoken enough—that corporate rules bend to accommodate. Elsewhere in the city, where image is fuzzier and advocacy less prevalent, chain businesses maintain their suburban motifs, often to the detriment of the "sense of place" in neighborhoods where they become established.

Walking east along Walton Street you come to two private "alleyways" that function as public thoroughfares.

Across the street, on the left, is Walton Courts, which cuts a narrow courtyard between buildings. Once carts used this path to reach the building's loading docks—the marks where cart wheels cut into the brick are still visible in the walls. Today, it provides building access and a place for outdoor dining. Across Walton Street, the pedestrian way that runs between Walton Street and West Jefferson Street, was planned during the design of Center Armory in the early 1990s. It provides a thoroughfare that encourages pedestrian circulation on a long block. (Jane Jacobs observed how long blocks keep people "on their own street"—stifling the chance encounter and limiting access to shops on parallel streets.) There are things to observe along this path, like shop and restaurant windows. Follow the path and you emerge into a space that is wide open, the area in front of the M.O.S.T., providing an exciting contrast with places that are smaller and enclosed. Both these pedestrian corridors work with the interlocking streets of the district to create a sense of spaces to be explored and discovered. This contrast, the relationship between different types of

spaces in Armory Square, is part of what creates the excitement of the urban experience there—an experience that was carefully planned in every detail.

Compare the before and after photos of Armory Square. When we forget that the feel of Armory Square was carefully planned, it is easy to throw up our hands and say that other areas of the city are not redeemable. Armory Square, in its former neglected state, reminds us how untrue that is.

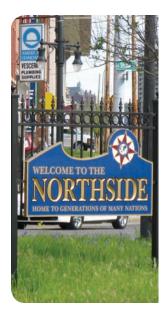There is another relationship in Armory Square that is central to its success: the relationship between those who live and work in the district and those who come to visit it. Because of the neighborhood's strong "sense of place," there is a constant reinvestment in community image. Local store owners care for plantings in the park. When design changes are made that neighborhood advocates don't like, they care enough to complain. Tourists may not be aware they are visiting part of a Business Improvement District (BID), and that local business owners pay an extra tax to achieve an increased level of maintenance, but they do realize they are in a clean, well-cared for neighborhood. Where are people most likely to litter in Syracuse? In places where they don't have access to trash cans, they think they won't be recognized as littering—and often from their cars. In Armory Square, pedestrians have access to trash receptacles and visitors are frequently in view of shopkeepers, restaurant goers and shop patrons. Additionally, because of services provided by the BID's Downtown Committee of Syracuse, litter is more likely to disappear quickly. Observe if Armory Square is cleaner than areas outsidethe Central Business District despite being highly trafficked—and if that makes it feel like a more inviting place to visit. This culture of cleanliness requires a high level of maintenance and a stake in community image. And local business owners understand that people often come to their shops because they are drawn to the "community image" of Armory Square.

NORTH SALINA STREET

In contrast, the equally historic North Salina Street corridor is an area in transition, much as Armory Square was in the early years. While Armory Square is a puzzle of interlocking streets and pedestrian corridors, North Salina Street is linear—meaning that the district is primarily experienced by driving or strolling the length of one main avenue. But North Salina Street possesses many of the same qualities that make Armory Square so loved. Historic buildings and home-grown shops and restaurants are among the pleasures of North Salina Street.

While the Armory Square warehouse district was largely abandoned in the 1930's, making it easier for a brand new set of stakeholders to redefine it, North Salina Street has been home to a succession of stakeholders. Home to German and Italian immigrant populations over a century ago—large, colorful street banners in the corridor proclaim it as Syracuse's Little Italy—it is still a place where immigrant culture flourishes. Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement center sits in the heart of the 500 block of N. Salina Street, and on any particular day immigrants from nations such as Burma, Iraq and Eritrea can be seen coming and going through its doors, some in traditional dress, others in jeans and T-shirts. A few doors down are restored historic buildings that house businesses such as Francesca's Cucina, an Italian restaurant that sports a string of stylish striped awnings, and the Evan Michaels Salon with its well-dressed windows. On the upper floors, apartments provide housing to people enjoying the pedestrian-friendly amenities of the neighborhood.

Though designed for pedestrian appeal and lined with historic 19th-century buildings of a height similar to those in Armory Square, the scale here is markedly different from that district. Observe the width of street and sidewalk, far greater than the streets that crisscross Armory Square. How does the ratio between building height and street width alter perception of place? The comfort of enclosure found in Armory Square is lessened here. Additionally, wider streets typically mean faster traffic, further decreasing the pedestrian's comfort level.

A decade ago, there was an attempt to counter this. The streetscape was altered here to bring a four lane roadway with a lane for parking on each side down to two lanes. The pedestrian zone was widened to include a buffer zone of stone pavers stretching from curb to sidewalk. This area houses the street furnishings: parking meters, trash cans, lighting, and keeps the sidewalk free. This traffic-calming measure gave strollers a wider buffer from cars—enhancing their sense of safety—and helping to create a unique "look" for the district. Among the other distinctive elements on North Salina Street are the tall, decorative light fixtures and striking "Little Italy" banners. These details help establish image.

It's not just scale of buildings to street width that influences that important sense of enclosure on North Salina Street. There are gaps; the "wall" of buildings breaks, a parking lot has replaced a torn-down building. The effect is unconscious but jarring. Recall the room analogy and it is evident that part of the urban room's "wall" is missing. The feeling of "eyes on the street," that safety-enhancing sense of being watched from the storefront windows (whether or not any actual watching is going on), disappears. Look across the street, at the historic Triangle Building. There are boards over the windows. No "eyes on the street" from that direction

either. Each of these perceptions registers on a minor scale—but taken together they create a sense of discomfort, even wariness. On an early fall day, there are Black-eyed Susans and lilies blooming in the recently mulched garden just north of the Triangle Building. And just north of the parking lot is the restored brick building at 575 North Salina Street but these positive signals about community image may not completely offset the unconscious message reinforced by vacant lots and deteriorating buildings.

The empty lots on North Salina Street, the missing wall pieces, detract from its image. The fact that the lots have been carefully separated from the sidewalk, often with attractive fences, suggests some degree of enclosure. But only the infill of these lots, with buildings that literally fill the void and provide the potential for "eyes on the street" watchfulness, will create the kind of pedestrian comfort experienced in Armory Square.

Approach Ash Street, the only curve in linear North Salina Street, and the Open Hand Theater castle, with its giant puppet mask façade, comes into full view. Much as the M.O.S.T is a landmark that defines identity in Armory Square; the castle is a landmark for North Salina Street, coupling a sense of quirkiness and creativity with the corridor's past. Additionally, it is a reminder that North Salina Street is not just a neighborhood catering to locals, but draws visitors regionally, and even farther afield. Despite the gaps created by missing buildings, North Salina Street has many of the key factors that go into defining a strong "sense of place" and positive community image.

Although construction of new buildings will occur over time, there must be long-term commitment to ensuring each development compliments the character of North Salina Street and, in particular, promotes a pedestrian-friendly environment. A good example is the recent proposal to construct a new building to house a Dunkin Donuts franchise on the vacant lot at the corner of North Salina and Division Streets. Initial plans, while an improvement over the usual cookie-cutter design, called for both site and building design common along high-traffic, regional commercial strips rather than a densely built-up city neighborhood street. Plans for substantial parking and a drive-thru promised serious conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians, while the single-story building was out of sync with the character of the corridor's historic buildings. But concerns voiced by neighbors and planning and design professionals, including the City Planning Commission, convinced the developer and corporation to revise the plans. The result, while not ideal, far better compliments the image of North Salina Street, as well as better serves those who stroll along its sidewalks.

When community image is strong enough, as in Armory Square and along North Salina Street, corporate offices can see the benefit of "fitting in." Private development becomes a means of enhancing public spaces.

BUTTERNUT-LODI-CATHERINE

One place in Syracuse where private development is at odds with better public space is at the intersection of Butternut, Lodi and Catherine streets. Once the center of a traditional city neighborhood, the intersection had at each corner, two- and three- story buildings with storefronts below and apartment living above. It was the type of place where ladies walked to the market to shop and share neighborhood gossip; where men could kiss their children good night and then slip out to the corner tavern for a drink—where the social interaction of a neighborhood took place between those who came and went on foot. Only one of the corners still stands as it was. Lombardi's is a two story brick building with large glass windows. It still features Italian specialties such as prosciutto and fresh ravioli. It's a reminder of what the neighborhood used to be. On the other corners are the parking lot "lakes" that make "islands" of suburban-style box stores that now house identical pharmacies and dollar stores all over America. These buildings could be in any city or state; they undermine a "sense of place." Stand at any corner of the intersection and there is no sense of enclosure, no feeling of being separated from fast-moving street traffic. The few trees placed at irregular intervals along the curb and the vast expanses of asphalt offer no real or perceived buffer from cars. There is however a strong sense that a driver could swerve into the parking lot momentarily, knocking down anyone in the car's path. It's not a great spot to be a pedestrian.

Societal shifts in transportation from streetcars and buses to private cars have made walking to and from work, shopping and entertainment a lost experience for older generations and a foreign one for younger generations. The economy and expediency of corporate buying power shifted retail business away from the individualism of neighborhood mom and pop corner stores to non-descript, go-anywhere boxes. And although we strive to recapture the walkable nature of city neighborhoods, development decisions made during the last quarter century have left us with car-oriented places like the Butternut and Lodi intersection.

Yet beyond the sterile wasteland at this intersection, the original fabric of the neighborhood can be found further along Butternut. Stand-alone houses and mixed-use buildings like Lombardi's line the narrow, intimate sidewalks along the street. Some aren't readily apparent because of poor conditions, others because of unsightly signage or building additions; but they are there and they provide the backbone upon which street character can be revived. In a similar way, existing parking and vacant lots that do not meet zoning requirements should be changed to include required screening and other amenities. These features and similar ones in the public right-of-way will improve the sense of place on Butternut.
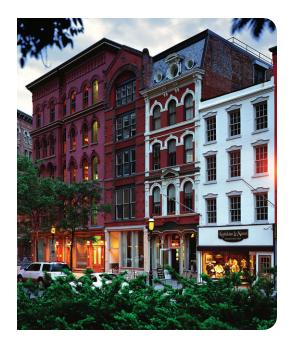
It is important to note that streetscape improvements have been made along the Butternut corridor in recent years—but they have not added real value. A small zone which runs between sidewalk and curb to house "street furniture" such as light poles, as well as recently planted trees seems almost to blend with the sidewalk, offering little divide from street traffic. Trees planted here might never grow to assail National Grid's power lines, but they also won't achieve enough height to screen the street. Hopefully future streetscape improvement will be given the same careful consideration that is seen in Armory Square or on North Salina Street. In a similar way, attention must be given to proposed new

uses along the corridor just as it is in other city districts. The many neighborhood businesses interspersed with homes along the Butternut Street corridor once created "opportunities for socializing" and a sense of "openness to all people," foundations of what creates community attachment. With advocacy and attention to detail, the Butternut corridor could one day reclaim the community image it has lost.

The title of author David Sucher's book on planning good city spaces is *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village.* Despite aging infrastructure and deteriorating housing, the Butternut corridor once was and still could be an urban village, a place where interesting things happen, of strolls, window shopping and chance encounters. Sucher sees the term urban village as "a shorthand way of describing the feel we want from our cities." In Sucher's words, "we can't build urban villages in one fell swoop; we watch them evolve out of a multitude of individual actions over a long period of time."[7]

7   David Sucher, *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village* (Seattle: City Comforts Press, 1995), p. 14.

Envisioning a Sustainable Future

What do we want our city and county to be? A comprehensive survey by the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency and the SMTC was designed to help set priorities in creating a new County Sustainable Development Plan. The goal of the survey was to understand community sentiment on values and goals related to current and future settlement patterns and investment priorities. The values expressed in the study show residents' desire to control sprawl, concentrate new development in already developed areas, protect outlying areas from development, and enhance density. The County Plan helps to set the stage for the future of our community and what we want it to be. We as a community are already thinking about these issues.

In 2006, the American Institute of Architects sent a team to Syracuse to collaborate with local stakeholders in the city and county in developing sustainable planning policies. The key point of the resulting Sustainable Design Assessment Team (SDAT) report is that in spite of a variety of impediments to setting a prioritized agenda for Syracuse, if those difficulties "serve as an excuse to accept the status quo, Syracuse's challenges will continue to erode its core assets and retard its potential to successfully reinvent itself."

> *"When subsidizing projects a key question should be,* 'What benefit is produced beyond the project itself?' Examples might include a renovation that results in the preservation of a prominent historic building creates a key benefit—historic preservation—that endures even if the original project changes form or fails to materialize, a project that includes a public amenity such as a waterfront park, that provides broader benefits to improve the livability, hence competitiveness, of the entire community…"[8]

If our overall community goal is to improve quality of life, in order to increase residents' connection to the community and stimulate investment, we must implement policies and fund projects that further that goal. For instance, the SDAT report points out that while creating jobs and expanding the tax base are often the stated goals of using public funds for private development subsidies, too often these goals are not met: projects fail, companies leave the area and real estate values fall, say the writers of the SDAT report. Their recommendation? "Use public dollars to create public benefits."

The argument for expenditures of public funds to better public spaces is clear. Improvements to public spaces have value for all.

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[8] Ken Bowers, Chris Giattina, Anindita Mitra, Erin Simmons and Deana Swetlik, "Syracuse SDAT: Communities Making Connections at the Cross Roads of Upstate New York" (AIA Center for Community by Design Report, American Institute of Architects, 2006).pp. 21-22

CARE AND MAINTENANCE

Putting capital funds into building better public spaces isn't enough. Consistent and well-funded maintenance must be built into every capital investment. Many of our public spaces lose appeal because they are infrequently mowed, plantings are untended, and litter is not carefully picked up.

When it comes to spending on and maintaining public spaces, our parks and tree planting budgets have fallen short, although volunteer park associations assist in the general care and maintenance of neighborhood parks and other open spaces, and the County's Save the Rain program will result in 8,500 street trees planted over the life of the program to curb stormwater runoff in the city. Additionally, the focus of the budget has shifted away from aesthetics. Many years ago, there were four landscape architects on staff. Today, for over 1,000 acres of park and 35,000 trees on 450 miles of city streets, there is one arborist, shared with Onondaga County.

With seemingly competing needs, it may seem difficult for governments to commit resources to creating or maintaining parks and public spaces. It is too easy to let maintenance slip to the bottom of the priority list. But without it, as citizens, we lose self-esteem. We treat our city more and more poorly. For citizens to invest themselves in their environments, they must see a city that will meet them halfway.

Gateway maintenance has seen a decrease in funding much as parks have—and gateways additionally suffer from the disadvantage that no single authority accepts ultimate responsibility for landscaping and clean-up. It is too easy to assign responsibility elsewhere. Interchange sites throughout the city—the key spots where tourists first encounter Syracuse and where local commuters regularly transition to their work day—are the places the city needs "to put its best foot forward." If the first impression made by the city is a litter-strewn interchange, the next impression, which might be a well-maintained streetscape, creates a disjointed and confusing sense of what the city is.

Yet interchanges are caught in the limbo of joint custody between a state transportation department that decreased funding for litter removal and maintenance, and a city grudgingly forced to use city funds to pick up the slack on land which is state responsibility. Sadly, interchanges end up looking like the neglected children they are.

Up until three years ago, the New York State Department of Transportation was able to provide funds for limited litter pick up and sweeping (twice a summer) and mowing (four times a summer.) But funding is no longer available through the avenue previously used to secure maintenance funds, and current NYSDOT projects must fall under the umbrella of "federally funded" or "safety related." According to Pete O'Connor, Syracuse Department of Public Works Commissioner, when the state monies that had funded interchange mainte-

ENVISIONING OUR FUTURE:
COMMUNITY PLANNING AND TRANSPORTATION RESIDENT SURVEY

In 2010, the Syracuse Onondaga County Planning Agency (SOCPA) worked with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) to survey a randomly selected set of 3,900 households in Onondaga County regarding land development and transportation preferences.

Survey results generally reflected strong support for regional planning that focuses on existing infrastructure and community assets, protection of natural and scenic areas, focused growth in existing centers and a desire to explore more and different transportation options:

- More than three-quarters of respondents thought new development should take place in already developed communities with available buildings or unused land.
- A strong majority of respondents (77%) felt that housing and buildings should be closely spaced, with sidewalks leading to nearby shops and parks, even if it means having smaller homes and less space for parking.

- A sizable percentage of respondents (37%) believed that infrastructure should not be expanded at all until the region experiences population growth, and very few (9%) thought local governments should expand infrastructure anytime to support growth.
- Protecting environmental assets, protecting farms and scenic resources, and reducing energy usage were of highest importance to respondents.
- Only 16% of respondents thought that the best long-term solution for reducing traffic congestion was to build new roads; instead, they supported improving transit options and creating denser communities.
- The survey found strong support for such transportation options as regional and local train, expanded and express bus service, carpooling, walking and bicycling. Half of respondents indicated that they would drive less if other travel types were more convenient and accessible.
- The types of development most desired by respondents were small shops and businesses, farms, and manufacturing/warehouses. Fewer respondents favored new housing and large stores and office buildings.

From: http://future.ongov.net/?page_id=26

nance disappeared and maintenance went downhill, complaints came in to City Hall and the cost of gateway maintenance was shifted to Syracuse taxpayers. The "whose responsibility is this?" quality of complaint-driven, underfunded maintenance is unfortunate. Gateway maintenance needs to be perceived as a worthy goal, an opportunity for building good image; and the goal ought to be to rise to a standard higher than that set when state funding did provide intermittent relief from the eyesores of litter and overgrown grass. Here in Syracuse, where City DPW crews are the world champions at snow removal, a renewed level of focus, dedication and funding must be applied to interchange maintenance. Similar maintenance focus should be applied to non-highway gateways: Designated "entry point" stretches along roadways commonly used to enter the city.

One way to find new funding is through public-private partnerships. What if private companies or organizations were willing to sponsor an interchange, taking on the costs of litter pick up and landscaping in exchange for signage, as in the Adopt-a-Highway program? Litter removal at inter-

changes and along highways can be dangerous, and requires the use of professional staff and equipment. Thus organizations willing to offer their own labor to improve gateways are better designated to improving Syracuse gateways that are not at interchanges. But if a group were willing to finance interchange maintenance in exchange for signage recognizing their contribution, the mechanism for doing so should be straightforward. Currently that is not the case. Several years ago, just such a program was tried. When the sponsoring businesses attempted to hire companies that could make landscaping improvements at the interchange sites, governmental red tape became a roadblock. Improvements were never made and the companies pulled out of the sponsorship plan.

In a city strapped for cash, making The Connective Corridor an appealing route means a commitment of funds to ongoing maintenance. "There is a huge fear about maintenance," says Marilyn Higgins, Syracuse University Vice President for Community Engagement and Economic Development, responsible for The Connective Corridor. "We did three things to get past it."

1) State grants of $500,000 were allocated, but solely for capital funds. If an item such as a lighting feature is used on the streetscape, there will already be replacement features, purchased with the capital funds and placed in storage, so maintenance is easily accomplished when the need arises. Additionally the funds can be used to purchase larger items, such as a sidewalk plow for snow removal.

2) A former chief of the New York City Parks Department analyzed the route to assess the level of maintenance needed. A committee presented his findings to the city to determine what the city is able to do with available resources—and what maintenance resources must be provided from other sources.

3) A team from the County, Syracuse University, and the Business Improvement Districts will determine how the remaining maintenance tasks will be handled. After the first year there will be a better understanding of how overall maintenance can be accomplished.

DESIGN REVIEW AS A TOOL

In many cities, design guidelines are a part of the zoning ordinance. In Syracuse that is not the case, and the appearance of the city suffers from this.

A proposed building (only if it is commercial in use or a residential building

of over four units) does have to go through a process called Project Site Review. Only the plan of the proposed building's exterior is reviewed. The applicant/builder takes pictures of the surrounding neighborhood and the

building plan is examined together with the photos to determine if such basic features as building height, setback, materials and window placements are in keeping with the general character of the surrounding buildings.

The process, an administrative review, is generally handled in-house through the Zoning Administration Department, sometimes going to the Planning Commission. The process is designed to ensure that new buildings are not completely out of character with the surrounding neighborhood. (As was the case of the Family Dollar Store on South Salina Street that inspired the implementation of the process about a decade ago.) The goal is to make sure that a new building does not detract from the appearance of a neighborhood. Ideally, design principles, employed through a zoning ordinance, should be utilized to help make a neighborhood look better.

Design review does have a role to play in Syracuse, but currently only through historic preservation. The Landmark Preservation Board (LPB) reviews changes to local protected sites as well as properties within preservation districts. Residents of historic neighborhoods may apply to the LPB for local designation or to the State Historic Preservation Office for designation as a state or federal preservation district. The understanding is that by imposing design review on all of the residents, the overall neighborhood will be maintained; the status quo will be preserved into the future. National studies have shown that in communities of comparable character, a neighborhood that has been designated as a preservation

district shows a greater increase in real property value. Evidence of that locally can be seen in the Sedgewick neighborhood of Syracuse.

MODERNIZING CODE ENFORCEMENT

One of the challenges to commercial districts is deterioration of neglected properties, too often to the point where the only option is to tear them down, creating gaping holes in the streetscape. It is important to remember how empty lots become the "missing teeth" of the streetscape, removing "eyes on the street" and the sense of enclosure that so appeal to pedestrians. Residential tracts face similar defacement; a single deteriorating property can change the nature of the neighborhood.

For many years there has been a substantial gap between the issuing of code citations and actual enforcement of those citations, but that is slowly changing, says Corey Driscoll, City of Syracuse Deputy Director of Code Enforcement. Driscoll notes that while the division is called Code Enforcement, the agency she supervises is solely involved in inspections of properties. It is the city's law department that is active on the enforcement side.

Often owners don't respond to citations. And there is a struggle to keep up with property turnovers—the current set up doesn't lend itself to easily monitoring those kinds of changes. Also, city attorneys need to make valid

threats or property owners will not respond. And they now are doing so, says Driscoll. The city is taking liens on properties even if those property owners are in another country; they are working on restraining orders so that owners must forfeit rents to the city when there is a lack of compliance. Driscoll has identified issues that impede the department's functioning and is in the process of updating wherever possible.

Currently:

• Inspectors go out on calls without computers in hand; they hand write comments on printouts of complaints. They don't have computers in the office either. If an inspector wants information, such as who owns a property, he or she must ask a clerk. Because an inspector has no access to a computer while on site, he or she has no way to check who owns the property or if there has been a prior complaint. Inspectors haven't been given the tools they need to do their jobs effectively.

In the near future:

• Software and equipment will be updated. State-of-the-art programs

will be put in place, and inspectors will be trained to use the new system. Citation information will be available online so that the public is aware of what progress has been made regarding complaints.

• A strategy will be developed to deal with vacant properties. The city is looking at steps being taken in other cities including Cleveland and Buffalo.

• IBM Smarter Cities Challenge staff will be working with the department to help develop a proactive technology-based approach to vacant properties. They will help develop a prediction system for which properties are on the verge of vacancy so that resources can be used appropriately—to place properties in receivership or to prevent vacancies if possible.

The push to update is good news, but it points to the fact that the city, through past administrations, has not made code enforcement a priority. The department must be funded and modernized quickly to counteract a historically poor precedent—a change that now seems to be underway.

ADOPT-A-PLACE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Many cities have Adopt-A-Street programs similar to the familiar Adopt-A-Highway program. They enable interested groups to adopt a section of the city's streets. In return for conducting scheduled clean-ups of that stretch of street four times a year, the sponsors are recognized with signage located along their designated street sections. Other cities have various "Adopt-a-Place in Your Neighborhood" efforts that allow neighborhoods and communities to work together to take ownership of public space and to maintain it. Projects range from "adopt-a-flower-bed" to "adopt-a-boulevard" depending on the level of commitment of the group. The programs enable community and civic organizations, private businesses, schools and churches to participate directly in enhancing the overall appearance of the city.

In Corvallis, Oregon, an advisory Commission on Beautification and Urban Forestry (CBUF) was created to advise the City Council on matters related to landscape beautification and the planting, preservation and removal of trees on City land and in the community. The Commission, consisting of nine members appointed by the Mayor, advises and supports the City Arborist. As part of its work, the CBUF also reviews public proposals for civic beautification projects, supports a variety of beautification projects through a small grant fund, and recognizes residents and businesses with Civic

Beautification Awards for projects undertaken throughout the city.

Chicago's streets play an important role in the livability, vitality, and character of its neighborhoods and commercial areas. Many improvements in the public way are installed by private developments as part of the requirement for new buildings and major rehabilitation projects, and the responsibility for maintenance remains with the developers and subsequent property owners. As streetscapes in urban environments are subject to heavy use and adverse environmental conditions, they require consistent maintenance to remain appealing.

Syracuse has a number of excellent volunteer-led efforts, including the Syracuse Parks Conservancy. The idea for the SPC came about in 2008 when members of various TNT groups and Park Associations throughout the city began discussing the need for a citizen-based organization to raise funds for needed projects, repairs and improvements, recruit volunteers for events and act as a liaison with city government. Founded in 2009, the SPC aims to carry out a complex and varied mission, but at its heart it is an organization dedicated to parks advocacy —primarily focused on better maintenance. Current programs include participation in the Growing Together Tree Project, and the Guardian Awards. In 2011 awards were presented to a

middle school student who has planted a number of white pine saplings in Sunnycrest Park, and to a retired high school teacher instrumental in planting and maintaining flower beds on the endcaps along Meadowbrook Drive.

The Downtown Committee coordinated the Hanging Flower Basket program, with streetscape funds from the New York Main Street grant program to cover the cost of capital items, including brackets and baskets. The City of Syracuse Department of Public Works attached the brackets to the light poles to prepare for installation of the baskets. Additional funding for the flowers was provided by the Downtown TNT (Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today) organization. The Downtown Committee's maintenance staff tends the baskets throughout the season, with the Cathedral Square Neighborhood Association supplementing the maintenance costs. There are plans to extend this beautification program to other areas of downtown Syracuse, including Hanover Square and Salina Street areas next year, using the Cathedral Square Neighborhood Association partnership as a model.

Findings & Action Steps

Traditionally, OCL reports end with a series of findings based upon the Study Committee's interpretation of the facts and opinions heard during the study process, followed by a set of recommendations for policy changes or action steps to be taken by other organizations, and by local governments to address the issues studied.

As the Study Committee contemplated the many facets of the community image issue – streets and public spaces, parks and neighborhoods, highways and gateways, zoning and design standards – a list of suggestions emerged for new programs, ordinances, processes, and coordination mechanisms to increase the amount of attention and resources directed to improvement and maintenance of public spaces.

As we began to detail each recommendation, however, the study committee came back to the realization that unless there is wider community appreciation of the importance of an attractive and well-maintained public realm, a better understanding of how successful public spaces create a sense of belonging and feeling of community ownership, and awareness of the elements that create that sense of place, recommendations for actions by government agencies would have difficulty attracting sufficient attention or interest.

"*Residents in Syracuse understand* the seriousness of their situation and have ideas of how to fix their pet issues; there is no dearth of ideas, causes, committees, organizations, foci, hard workers, or intelligence. Rather, they are missing a strategic, disciplined, and focused prioritization of the issues they most solve in order to become a vital and sustainable community".
From the American Institute of Architects 2006 SDAT report, p 49.

While that does not diminish our conviction in the need for increased State funding for maintenance of State routes and highway ramps, or a master plan for tree plantings and park improvements, for example, we know that with stiff competition for public funds, a stronger case has to be made for the importance of funding such efforts. We believe that Design Guidelines for commercial buildings, for instance, and tthe appointment of a municipal "Beautification Coordinator" to oversee the public realm, facilitate volunteer efforts, and monitor the impact of various projects on public spaces, would go a long way toward making the city a more beautiful and livable place.

Instead of the usual focus on recommendations, the Citizens League will plan and implement three initiatives in 2012 intended to further public understanding, to increase the knowledge of public officials and to instill an appreciation of efforts to improve community image.

OCL COMMUNITY IMAGE ACTION INITIATIVES

The Onondaga Citizens League plans to implement three initiatives related to improving Community Image, in order to increase the knowledge of public officials in the areas of placemaking and urban design, further public awareness of the importance of quality public spaces, and acknowledge public appreciation of efforts to improve community image. We hope that each of these OCL projects, which will be undertaken in 2012, will be continued and expanded in future years by other community organizations and local governments.

1. CONFERENCE "GO" GRANTS

The purpose of the grants is to increase knowledge, inspire, and motivate good urban design, planning and placemaking at the municipal level. Applications for the two $500 Go Grants will be accepted from city and/or county planners for attendance at a 2012 conference. The applications must specify:

- The nature of the applicant's work and how it relates to planning, design or placemaking.
- A description of the conference, what the applicant hopes to gain by attending, and how it will benefit the community.
- Travel budget and indication of support for remaining expenses.

2. URBAN DESIGN 101

Land use codes and zoning ordinances are for the most part designed to prevent bad things from happening to the built environment. Urban Design 101 is focused on examining the details of what is pleasing in the urban environment, and understanding how that knowledge can be used to improve community image in streetscapes, parks and public spaces.

Study Committee members George Curry and Christine Capella Peters have volunteered to lead a series of discussions and complimentary 'field trips' or walking tours in spring 2012 to help inform and engage citizens in how urban design relates to community image and why it is important.

3. CITYSCAPES AWARDS

The purpose of the awards is to encourage volunteer efforts to create projects that improve the physical and psychological landscape of the city, to showcase efforts of volunteer groups, to increase civic pride and ownership, and to stimulate additional investment in the community.

A. Grant Program: OCL will provide grants to three (3) neighborhood groups for selected beautification projects on public property. Examples of eligible activities include tree and shrub plantings, flower beds, flower baskets, seating, and artwork. Grants of $100 to $500 can cover all or part of the cost of materials. The funds should be used to leverage other resources and projects may include partnerships between private, government, and community groups.

In order to qualify, projects must meet the following criteria:

- The project must be on public property or on private property that is publically accessible, be an asset to the community, and enhance community image.
- Before a grant is awarded, the project must obtain written approval of the owner of the property.

- The project applicant agrees to provide long-term maintenance.
- Appropriateness of the site, budget, and plant/material selection.
- Potential for success and sustainability.
- Work will commence in the current year.

B. Civic Beautification Awards: To encourage and recognize individuals, organizations and businesses that sponsor and/or carry out beautification projects that enhance community image, OCL will present the awards at the annual meeting. Winners will receive a certificate and public recognition.

Nominees must be landscapes or plantings that enhance community image and reflect:

- Aesthetics – Pleasing colors, textures, form and shapes
- Function – Enhance a view, define and create space or seating area, filter stormwater.

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our community
Image

creating a lasting impression

Onondaga
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