

## **Making the Work of Anchor Institutions Stick: Building Coalitions and Collective Expertise**

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### **Abstract**

As more colleges and universities commit to a public mission, it is critical that our work as anchor institutions have a sustainable and positive impact, and that we collaborate fully with the diverse voices and expertise beyond our campuses—the most valuable assets of our multicultural cities. Taking Syracuse, New York, as a microcosm, the authors examine how Syracuse University physically and metaphorically has become an embedded and trusted anchor institution by building “civil infrastructure” to enable lasting “social infrastructure.” We joined with numerous partners in one of the city’s poorest but most promising neighborhoods to design “green homes,” repurpose old warehouses, and greatly expand educational opportunities for all children. As we did, art, technology, and literacy began to rewrite the story of the neighborhood. Scholars, students, and residents forged “communities of experts” to fulfill the central promise of an anchor institution: to make a sustainable difference in our community.

### **Introduction**

It has taken time and the blundering wisdom and anarchic greed of our ancestry to construct the modern city of consolidated institutions. It is a great historically amassed communal creation. If you fly above it at night, it is a jeweled wonder of the universe, floating like a giant liner on the sea of darkness. It is smart, accomplished, sophisticated, and breathtakingly beautiful. And it glimmers and sparkles, as all things breakable glimmer and sparkle. (*Doctorow, 2000, p. 271*)

### **Macro Issues, Metro Areas**

**W**e live in a world that is relentlessly urbanizing. The United Nations (2010) reported that the proportion of the global population living in urban areas passed 50% in 2009. Indeed, the U.N. projects that these areas will continue to grow from within while they also siphon off rural inhabitants, accounting for all of the world’s population growth by 2050, when

it is projected that 69% of the world's 9.1 billion people will be urban dwellers. These trends are particularly acute in the United States, where more than 80% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, a proportion that the U.N. projects will reach 90% by mid-century. With this inexorable growth, the challenges facing our metropolitan (metro) areas surely will dominate our national and global agendas increasingly. Yet even now, many of our metros are broken, their luster dimmed by decades of disinvestment in their urban cores, deep-seated social divisions, and unsustainable suburban sprawl.

As the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program (2010) has documented, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, growth within U.S. metropolitan areas was three times greater at their fringes than at their urban cores. This pervasive pattern of suburban flight has been both a cause and an effect of economic stagnation, environmental degradation, deteriorating and under-resourced schools, and class and race divisions in American city centers. Many of these ills reflect misguided public policies aimed at decentralization that have abetted rather than assuaged decline at the core. As the sagacious, late scholar of urbanity, Jane Jacobs (1961), observed four decades ago:

in the schools of planning and architecture, and in Congress, state legislatures and city halls too, the Decentrists' ideas were gradually accepted as basic guides for dealing constructively with big cities. . . . This is the most amazing event in the whole sorry tale: that finally people who sincerely wanted to strengthen great cities should adopt recipes frankly devised for undermining their economies and killing them. (p. 21)

Not the least of the problems that have festered in the face of these policies and efforts at "renewal" is the cycle of despair among those who historically have not had a seat at the table when the fate of their own communities was being decided. Instead, urban renewal projects undertaken to revive cities over the past half century often had exactly the opposite effect, alienating masses of citizens in the process. It is a despair captured by Jacobs (1961) in the unvarnished assessment of an East Harlem resident, who voiced his community's palpable frustration:

Nobody cared about what we wanted when they built this place. They threw our houses down and pushed us

here and pushed our friends somewhere else. We don't have a place around here to get a cup of coffee or a newspaper even. . . . Nobody cared what we need. (p. 15)

### **Civic Agency: Moving Beyond a Cult of the Expert**

Too often, universities contributed to exacerbating the troubles of our urban communities. For a long time, many urban universities managed to amass enough contiguous property to essentially co-exist side by side with, rather than connected to, those cores. Even with the best of intentions to engage, we often failed to recognize and cultivate the voices of the diverse talent who are among the most valuable assets of our urban cores.

Echoes of the voice of that East Harlem resident can still be heard loud and clear in cities across the United States, including Syracuse, New York, where Syracuse University dedicated the 2004–2005 academic year under the theme “University as Public Good: Exploring the Soul of Syracuse” (*Syracuse University, 2005*). Designed to leverage the change in institutional leadership that year to engage the university's many stakeholders in dialogue, collaborative activities took place throughout that inaugural year aimed at envisioning the university's course for the future, explicitly starting from the assumption that the university, even as a private institution, had a public mission, and that its map of academic excellence, from public affairs and public communications to information studies and architecture, among many other fields, drew sustenance from scholarly engagement in the world—and the world certainly included Syracuse University's home region. In this way, the university entered in earnest a growing national movement among higher education institutions re-emphasizing their public mission that stretches back at least to the 1998–1999 national conferences that yielded the landmark Wingspread Declaration authored by Harry Boyte and Elizabeth Hollander (*Boyte & Hollander, 1999*).

To initiate dialogue aimed at leveraging the university's strengths while breaking down the barriers between university and community, we invited all who considered themselves our stakeholders to share their thoughts on past successes and failures—faculty and staff members; students; alumni; friends of the university; and, crucially for the present context, members of the local and regional community. This listening exercise yielded expansive appreciations for the university's achievements, but also expressions of profound disappointment that so many of our past engagements with the community had been one-off, short-term projects that also were primarily one-way in character. Like other

higher education institutions of the time, Syracuse University tended to define the problems to be addressed and pursue solutions without ascribing sufficient value to the knowledge and expertise of community members (Boyte, 2009; Ellison & Eatman, 2008; Thomas, 2011). Boyte characterizes this unidirectional approach as the “cult of the expert” and discusses productive alternative approaches by which academic researchers may engage their communities reciprocally. Nancy Thomas (2011) and Julie Ellison and Tim Eatman (2008) concentrate on the latter.

It is critical to understand this legacy, at Syracuse University and elsewhere. Universities are what Alice Rivlin and Carol O’Cleireacain (2001) termed “anchor institutions,” place-based organizations that persist in communities over generations, serving as social glue, economic engines, or both. An essential first step in making the work of universities as anchor institutions stick is creating a model of reciprocal, participatory engagement. As intellectual historian Scott Peters (*personal communication, September 7, 2011*) suggests, we require a far more collaborative model than the customary one—exactly opposite, in fact, to the slogan that Peters recently saw at an airport: “Community Problems, University Solutions.” When we work in communities, we must also work *with* communities, acknowledging that we are indeed part of the community, and that all involved share in the production of problems and in their solutions.

As the philosopher John Dewey (1916) points out, “From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness” (p. 44), and genuine independence from one another is “an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone—an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world” (p. 44). Indeed, being embedded within the community, one part of a complex matrix of interdependence, is inherent in the notion of a place-based anchor institution. This concept should extend to how engaged scholarship is done as well.

### **Anchor Institutions: Merging Innovation and Full Participation**

A starting place, therefore, for sustainable anchor institution work is to move beyond the one-way flow of intellectual capital (and technology transfer) independently generated within the ivory tower and given to (or perhaps foisted upon) communities. Instead, universities need to create “communities of experts” (Scobey, 2002), with coalitions from within and outside the academy that draw on diverse collective expertise to make a difference. If universities want to take on the economic, environmental,

educational, social, and health challenges of metropolitan America, and revive the nation's urban cores, they must merge *innovation* and *full participation* as linked means to a more prosperous and just end.

Our conversations among constituents on and off campus during “Exploring the Soul of Syracuse” clearly showed that Syracuse University’s expertise in art, architecture, and design, in inclusive urban education, in entrepreneurship, and in environmental sustainability, among other fields, was well suited to address the pressing issues of our city and its neighborhoods. However, we were not the only experts who needed to be at the table. Our city needed collaborative re-investment. As an anchor institution pursuing a vision emphasizing the need to partner with others outside academe to increase the impact of our scholarship on the pressing problems of the world—a vision we call “Scholarship in Action”—we needed to engage with communities of experts as complex as the challenges we face today. Therefore, along with our own experts from multiple disciplines, we have drawn in partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, including residents of the city’s vibrant but beleaguered neighborhoods. These engagements, although reciprocal by nature, are also strategic for the university, selected for their potential to advance priority areas of scholarly distinction while enabling the faculty to create learning environments on and off campus where students can experience the evolution and refinement of theory in practice by encountering the world’s challenges in all their messiness.

### **Community Assets, University Collaborations**

Viewed this way, the prospect of engaged scholarship conducted with partners shines a different light on anchor institution work. Even the most challenged cities become places full of assets instead of perceived liabilities (*Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993*)—and this is all the more true for urban universities, which are situated amid diverse, multicultural populations and neighborhoods ready for re-investment, as demonstrated by the robust literature that has developed over the past 20 years focused on the wisdom and means of identifying and leveraging community assets in revitalization efforts. Indeed, Jacobs saw this even earlier (*1961*), arguing forcefully that the thriving diversity of spaces, places, institutions, and people—but especially people—already within cities generates and regenerates their vibrancy.

Does anyone suppose that, in real life, answers to any of the great questions that worry us today are going

to come out of homogeneous settlements? . . . lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves. (p. 448)

Building coalitions, mobilizing multidisciplinary and multi-sector talent, and empowering “home-grown” voices, provides a platform for attacking the key levers to prosperity: educational attainment, sustainable environments, and economic opportunity, as the national nonprofit CEOs for Cities (*Cortright, 2008*) suggests with its City Dividends formulation.

Urban universities are crucial institutional participants in, and promulgators of, this diversity. We are among the anchor institutions, including hospitals, nonprofit organizations, religious and cultural institutions, community-based organizations, and public agencies, that persist across generations as sources of stability as well as innovation, providing jobs, stimulating cultural life, and contributing new ideas that drive economic development. It is the interplay of strengths among anchor institutions in collaboration with the empowered voices of citizens and the availability of dense infrastructure that makes imaginative re-envisioning of the urban landscape possible.

### **Syracuse: A Rust Belt City Ready for Change**

This readiness for collaborative action is evident in Syracuse. Although the city’s recent history has been much like that of many of the older industrial cities of the U.S. Great Lakes region and upper Midwest—the so-called Rust Belt—its assets containing the seeds of regeneration are, in fact, plentiful. The city has an abundance of natural resources, including parks, urban flora, and waterways—as well as access to plenty of potable water. Generations have taken care of many of the city’s architecturally distinguished buildings, which often enough continue to exist in districts rather than as stand-alone icons. Although the city’s place in the U.S. industrial landscape has faded from prominence, it strategically seeks to cultivate clusters of emerging industries that are growing and gaining momentum, especially those in the “green” and “clean” technology sectors, which place a high priority on products and processes that are environmentally sustainable. Significantly, the region has a distinguished history of social innovation stretching from its place as the seat of the pioneering democracy of the native Haudenosaunee Nations (commonly, and inaptly, known as the Iroquois Nations) to its role as a cradle of movements from abolitionism to women’s rights to disability rights. Awareness among the community of

this conspicuous historical thread of leadership in social progress is alive and growing, thanks in no small part to the city's long-standing and extensive network of cultural institutions. And despite decades of flight to the suburbs, the urban core of Syracuse has a truly resilient, diverse population of families, ranging from those that have been in the region for generations to those entering refugee resettlement programs, as well as an increasing number of new city-dwellers associated with a high concentration of educational institutions and medical centers—or “eds and meds”—that anchor growth in the region (*Bifulco & Rubenstein, 2011; CenterState CEO, 2011*).

The breadth and depth of these inherent assets are widely appreciated locally, and they have been affirmed periodically over the years as a foundation for regional economic development plans. In recent years, such planning initiatives have been informed by the work of the Brookings Institution (a nonprofit public policy organization) and CEOs for Cities, including a current planning initiative being completed by the state-appointed Central New York Regional Economic Development Council (the Council). The Council is striving to build upon the region's high concentration of eds and meds, high rankings as a place to raise a family (*CNNMoney.com, 2008; Forbes, 2010*), recognition for its “green” economy (*Svoboda, 2008*), and high concentration of green jobs in the metropolitan Syracuse area's urban core (*Muro, Rothwell, & Saha, 2011*). It is focusing on rethinking policies that promote harmful decentralization; repurposing existing urban infrastructure to position the core for renewed growth; and retraining the region's workforce, especially by expanding access to higher education. Pivotal to the latter effort is aiming for “full participation,” the notion that for a society to achieve its full potential, it must tap the potential of all of its people from all backgrounds and of all abilities.

In turn, Syracuse University's overarching strategy on a regional level is to catalyze the formation of reciprocal, multi-sector partnerships with other anchor institutions and with residents, bringing to bear its signature strengths in broad, multidisciplinary areas such as environmental sustainability, entrepreneurship, inclusive education reform, and art, technology, and design. Most important, we have in place a collaborative infrastructure in these key substantive areas, ranging from the New York State–designated Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems to an ambitious district-wide school improvement collaboration led by the Say Yes to Education Foundation (a nonprofit organization working to increase high school and college graduation rates). Broad and deep engagement with these existing networks

and partnerships makes it possible to collaborate in turning around the fortunes of distinct neighborhoods in Syracuse; this collaborative, embedded anchor institution work is described in the sections below.

First, however, it is important to note that for Syracuse University, as for many urban institutions, some critical preliminary work was necessary to pave the way and bridge the chasms of university and community, haves and have-nots in Syracuse. The university approaches this metaphorically and literally from University Hill, high above the city center. The campus is only a 15-minute walk from downtown, but a vestige of the early years of “urban renewal,” Interstate 81, effectively sections the university off from downtown, dividing neighborhoods and neighbors. To live up to our role as a collaborator, as an anchor institution ready to work with and in our community, we had to jump that highway, physically and psychologically.

### **Embedding an Anchor Institution in the Community**

The landing point of that initial leap was a windowless, old furniture warehouse across town that had become a somber marker of disinvestment in downtown. Syracuse University renovated the building with a design by a distinguished alumnus of the School of Architecture, Richard Gluckman, that transformed the introverted hulk into an engaging landmark. Making it a part of the campus instantaneously brought hundreds of students and their faculty downtown day and night. This new academic hub—dubbed simply “The Warehouse”—has become a beautiful home for the university’s design programs, arts journalism, and the School of Architecture’s UPSTATE Center (an interdisciplinary center for design, research, and real estate), with ample additional space for community activities, an art gallery, and a café.

Before the Warehouse was completed, Syracuse University and the city also began collaborating with a wide range of community groups, state and federal agencies, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and arts organizations to create a Connective Corridor (the Corridor)—an arts and business district that runs in both directions from the campus hill area to the Warehouse, served by a newly created bus route. Still a work in progress, the Corridor links the university with theaters, museums, galleries, shops, restaurants, and parks. Following a path to several important downtown neighborhoods, it re-establishes its mile-and-a-half route as an inviting public space for interaction. Indeed, at the downtown end of the



Corridor sit both the Warehouse and one of Syracuse's most historic but, until recently, ignored neighborhoods, the Near Westside.

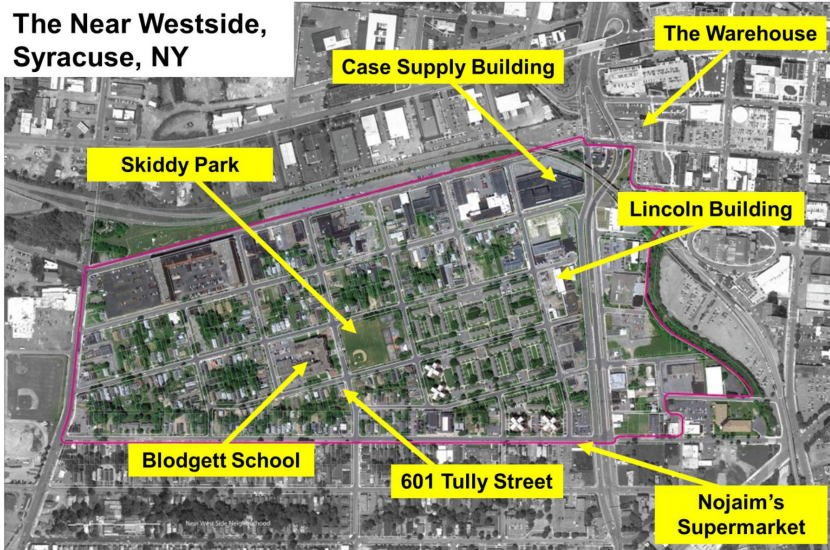
## **Looking Across “the Berlin Wall”; Building Coalitions to Stick**

Looking out from the re-opened windows of the Warehouse at the Near Westside, it became obvious that there was both a need and an opportunity for comprehensive, organized, and consolidated collaborations and coalitions to bring Syracuse University's engagement to scale in a whole neighborhood. Across West Street, the broad arterial highway that runs beside the Warehouse, one could see an array of empty warehouses and ugly railroad bridges, a physical and social Berlin Wall. Indeed, it had been labeled as such by the residents of the Near Westside, the battered neighborhood of vacant lots, homes, and factories on the other side. It was a community with much potential, few supporters, and residents full of skepticism about the interests of outsiders in “fixing” the neighborhood. As long-time resident Carole Horan put it to a reporter: “Different groups have come and gone and I've been involved in them on different levels, but they never really stuck” (*Sykes, 2011, p. C1*). Making it stick on the Near Westside, however, is no small order.

The Near Westside neighborhood was once a hotbed of industrial innovation that gave the world the first air-cooled automobile engine (from the H.H. Franklin Manufacturing Company), multiple advancements in indoor climate control (from Carrier Corporation), some of the first “visible” print typewriters (from the L.C. Smith & Brothers Typewriter Company), specially hardened steel plows for farming (from the Syracuse Chilled Plow Company), and pioneering gears that drove productivity in the world's factories, homes, and streets (from the Brown-Lipe Gear Company). Indeed, Syracuse's Near Westside truly was a mecca for industrial ingenuity, drawing innovators such as Henry Ford to work through manufacturing challenges with experts in residence in this neighborhood (*Connors, 2009*).

But this thriving district of manufacturing, railway yards, and housing was hit hard during the city's long industrial decline after the Second World War (*Marc, 2010*). Today, the Near Westside includes the ninth-poorest census tract in the nation. Half of its 3,300 residents live below the poverty level, 40% are unemployed, and 17% consider themselves to have one or more disabilities. Home ownership there shrank to 15%. In 1998, it was devastated by

a *derecho*, a storm that might be described as a sideways tornado. It punched in the roof of the high school, tore the steeple off St. Lucy's Church at the heart of the community, and destroyed 80% of the neighborhood's trees, giant maples and oaks, which caused so much damage as they fell that many long-time residents said they never wanted to plant another tree.



**Figure 1. The Near Westside, Syracuse, NY**

- Poorest neighborhood in Syracuse & ninth poorest in the country
- 3,310 residents: 31% White, 41% African American, 24% Hispanic
- 52% living in poverty (*double the city's rate*)
- 40% unemployment
- 37% with disabilities
- Violent crime rate 5 times the county rate
- 1,244 housing units, 20% vacancy rate (*double the state's rate*)
- Owner-occupancy rate of 15% within the 0.33 square mile area (215 acres)

Given Syracuse University's history of arms-length and uni-directional engagement with the community, it was far from a foregone conclusion that Near Westside residents would welcome university overtures to help tackle the neighborhood's many challenges. The road to building trust started one evening in 2006 in the rectory of St. Lucy's Church—home territory for community leaders—where the church's pastor, Father Jim Mathews, chaired an exploratory meeting with neighborhood residents that included leaders of area businesses and nonprofit organizations. The message from the community was unambiguous: "Here's what we don't

want to have happen to us again,” followed by a litany of things that had been done to the neighborhood rather than with the neighborhood over a number of years. They advised the well-intentioned coalition of outsiders that if they wanted buy-in from residents, they would need to start doing things that showed results and to start small. That was how the St. Lucy’s CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) basketball team got its first jerseys, courtesy of the Gifford Foundation, a local community nonprofit organization deeply engaged in the city and represented at that initial meeting.

Momentum built from there. Soon community members joined with the university, foundations, businesses, nonprofit organizations, the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County governments, and other institutions of higher education in 2006 to create a nonprofit organization—the Near Westside Initiative. This highly democratic body became the vehicle through which residents ranging from Father Jim to grandmothers with deep wisdom and memories of the past to the youth who ultimately will save this neighborhood came together to begin rebuilding and reclaiming its legacy. A pivotal goal has been to create “third spaces” of interaction, where established and often unequal relationships of power and expertise can be shifted to acknowledge what each member of the partnership brings to the table.

Instead of setting up a “command and control” model, the Near Westside Initiative adopted a collaborative model, asking participants to meet for consultation and discussion and move toward a common goal. This mode of operation is challenging and hard because it has not been done this way before—at least not in Syracuse, New York. The vision of turning the tables on power relations sometimes happens quite literally: It can lead to the president of the tenants’ association for the neighborhood’s public housing project arguing over lunch with the dean of Syracuse University’s School of Architecture, or a local Syracuse University trustee emeritus collaborating with a third-generation owner of a neighborhood grocery on building redevelopment. Talking across difference is what makes this partnership so powerful.

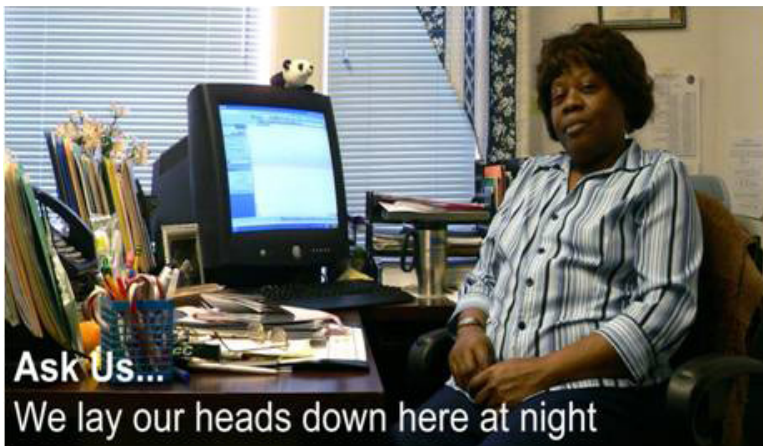
### **Collective Expertise in Action**

That is no less true for Syracuse University faculty than it is for the Near Westside’s residents. Engineers such as Ed Bogucz, director of the university’s New York State Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems (SyracuseCoE), an experimental test-bed that Syracuse University built on an old brownfield

site reclaimed along the Connective Corridor, find that their research and teaching are informed invaluable through such table turning. Bogucz said he developed a passion for the Near Westside Initiative because the re-vitalization of the neighborhood—and others like it—is a “grand challenge.” He said

If you look at the sustainability of the neighborhood—its environmental sustainability, the economics, the social justice issues—I think it’s fair to say that this neighborhood and many other neighborhoods in cities across the country were essentially thrown away. And humanity simply can’t throw away neighborhoods and hope to survive on the planet. (*E. Bogucz, personal communication, 2010*)

Indeed, since the Near Westside Initiative’s founding in 2006, SyracuseCoE and Syracuse University’s School of Architecture have collaborated with numerous neighborhood residents, local industries, and partners from the public and nonprofit sectors to catalyze projects aiming not just for survival, but transformation. Listening has been a pivotal aspect of this collaboration, as exemplified by a locally focused studio course offered by architecture professor Julia Czerniak, in which students interviewed Near Westside residents as part of their research in creating design solutions for neighborhood sites; among the products of their research was a series of posters featuring residents with phrases that captured their thoughts about life in the neighborhood.



**Figure 2.** One of the posters produced by Syracuse University students enrolled in architecture professor Julia Czerniak’s locally focused studio course. Pictured is resident Mary Alice Smothers, who also directs the neighborhood office of local nonprofit People’s Equal Action and Community Effort (PEACE), Inc.

Coalitions such as these have, among many other projects, conducted 34 home energy audits to help residents identify energy-efficiency strategies for their homes and then find financing to implement them; built a green infrastructure residential demonstration site including porous pavement, rain barrels, a rain garden, and a green roof; and financed training, labor, and consulting for residential and commercial deconstruction projects.

At the epicenter of the Near Westside Initiative's plans for the neighborhood is the Syracuse Art, Literacy, and Technology (SALT) District. The acronym SALT recalls the city's origin as a regional center for the salt trade among Native Americans, as well as the Near Westside's earliest industry of salt harvesting by evaporation of brine from springs that dotted the area in the early days of the American republic. The Near Westside Initiative has been working in the SALT District to embed the arts, technology, and design with other fields (architecture, entrepreneurship, law, education, environmental engineering, public health, and public communication) as catalysts for innovation and transformation. This vision has helped the Near Westside Initiative generate more than \$70 million worth of public and private development in the neighborhood.

More than 60 artists already are living and working in loft spaces and studios in the neighborhood, and the Near Westside Initiative's residential housing efforts (e.g., construction, renovation, financing, home-buyer education), led by Home Headquarters (a local nonprofit organization that works to revitalize neighborhoods) have begun to undo the decades-long history of abandonment by landlords that left the neighborhood with 152 vacant parcels and 83 vacant structures. Since 2006, Home Headquarters has acquired 103 residential parcels within the target area, and is building new homes, rehabilitating others, and selling some derelict houses for \$1 to homeowners who commit to restore them. The Christopher Community (a nonprofit development company) and Habitat for Humanity (a nonprofit housing organization) are also deeply involved, having built 60 new affordable rental properties and 11 new homes, respectively, in the neighborhood. To avoid the damage that has been inflicted in some cities by gentrification, the Near Westside Initiative has deliberately sought to make it possible for current residents to stay in the neighborhood, where 85% are now renters. Of the new housing units built under the leadership of the Near Westside Initiative, 70% have gone to existing residents.

As time passed, the Near Westside Initiative's actively engaged board hired a director, Maarten Jacobs, to coordinate and oversee

its daily progress. A young, committed, and tireless master of social work graduate with a passion for public art, Jacobs led a project in 2010 with residents commissioning renowned graffiti artist Steve Powers to transform the dilapidated old Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western railroad trestles along the Berlin Wall into giant canvases. Powers came to Syracuse, spent many weeks speaking with Near Westside residents, then giving voice to their aspirations by painting the railway trestles in Technicolor, which lit up the neighborhood and turned foreboding barriers into inspirational gateways. He titled the six works on three trestles *A Love Letter to Syracuse*. Powers (2010) sees the works as drawing on the past and present to envision a way forward. For example, he says, “these painted bridges represent what I believe is the future of Syracuse; Taking what has value and remaking it for the future, in a way that respects tradition and innovation.” He goes on to say,

*A Love Letter to Syracuse* is meant to be from Syracuse to Syracuse. We found as we were painting it, it is also to industry, to the trains that pass over the bridges, to the act of painting hot steel in the summer, to collaboration, to polite drivers, and especially to improvisation (Powers, 2010).



**Figure 3.** One of the six murals painted on old train trestles in Syracuse's Near Westside neighborhood by celebrated graffiti artist Steve Powers that have turned perceived barriers into gateways.

Syracuse University students and faculty are partners, planners, activists, and designers in realizing that vision of the future. Marion Wilson, a sculptor and director of community initiatives in the visual arts in the School of Education, teaches an ongoing series of classes through which art, design, and architecture students have transformed 601 Tully Street in Syracuse, a former crack house situated at the heart of the neighborhood, across the street from an elementary school. That symbolic location is now a multi-purpose community incubator for the arts, humanities, and entrepreneurship, complete with its own coffee shop and a community garden.

House by house, trestle by trestle, the Near Westside Initiative's broad coalition of partners is making progress in addressing the neighborhood's challenges. That is the essence of the Near Westside Initiative's strategy for attacking the grand challenges that are the grim residue of decades of urban disinvestment: scaling down the perception of these challenges to their specific, local manifestations. Likewise, the solutions arising out of this work are ripe for scaling up. As Jane Jacobs (1961) suggests, urban regeneration is best cultivated block by block. If intensely local transformations can gather sufficient momentum to tip the scales back in favor of sensible and sustainable urbanization on the scale of a neighborhood, they can do so for an entire city.

In 2008, with these dynamics in mind, Syracuse University School of Architecture dean Mark Robbins and UPSTATE director Julia Czerniak, in partnership with the SyracuseCoE, conducted an international competition for cutting-edge, green, single-family homes to be designed and built on specific sites in the Near Westside neighborhood. Starting with the three prize-winners, this has yielded 11 green homes built in 4 years. One of them is so well insulated that it can be heated with the energy it takes to run a hair dryer—no small feat in a climate that brings Syracuse more than 120 inches of snowfall annually. One might wonder about neighbors' reception of this sudden sprinkling of architecturally world-class residential designs among the Near Westside's housing stock of predominantly modest 19<sup>th</sup> century styles. But neighborhood residents on the prize selection committee argued strenuously in favor of pushing the envelope on innovative design, presaging the appreciation that the finished homes enjoy and underlining the power of well-conceived architecture to inspire.



**Figure 4. Renderings of the three winning designs from the international “From the Ground Up” competition conducted by Syracuse University’s UPSTATE:A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate and the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems. From left to right they were designed by Cook+Fox and Terrapin Bright Green; Architectural Research Office and Della Valle Bernheimer; and Onion Flats.**

In this way, the Near Westside and Syracuse are no different from challenged neighborhoods in cities of much larger scale. As *The New York Times*’ Michael Kimmelman (2011) observed in analyzing the impact of fresh, new architectural standards being employed in the renovation of the main public library in New York City’s neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens:

It’s a big change from decades ago, when city bureaucrats considered good design a costly frill. The quality of construction was allowed to suffer to serve the bottom line. This message of official indifference contributed to a climate of public skepticism about government and the city that, in turn, dimmed expectations for urban improvements, large or small. . . . It’s a reminder that humane cities don’t reserve quality architecture just for rich people, that small urban improvements help everyone because city neighborhoods are interdependent. (p. C3)

It is precisely this interdependence of neighborhoods that allows the transformation of the Near Westside, a relatively small area with only 3,300 residents, to send such a powerful message of rebirth across the City of Syracuse.

### **Three Dividends on the Near Westside of Syracuse**

Scale and interdependence are also linchpin concepts for CEOs for Cities, which sees the accumulation of small improvements as the route to urban transformation. It has come as no surprise, then,



that as collaborative and deeply reciprocal projects have unfolded on Syracuse's Near Westside, the dividends CEOs for Cities forecast for investments in metropolitan cores—a green dividend, a talent dividend, and an opportunity dividend—all have begun to appear.

## A Green Dividend

As the Brookings Institution detailed in a path-breaking study, the “green,” “clean,” or “low-carbon” economy offers more opportunities and better pay for low- and middle-skilled workers than the national economy as a whole. Defined as the economic sector that produces goods and services with an environmental benefit, it now employs 2.7 million workers—more than the fossil fuel industry—and 84% of these jobs are in major U.S. metropolitan areas, where three fourths of the nation's clean economy jobs were created between 2003 and 2010. Nationally, jobs in the clean economy are expanding at an annual rate of 3.4%, and the promise of renewable energy has ignited a “race to clean” in regions and cities across the United States and around the globe (*Muro et al., 2011, pp. 4, 24*).

In spite of being poor and obscure—and because its residents are eager for renewal—the Near Westside community has joined this “race to clean” in a way the Near Westside Initiative hopes can be a template for other urban partnerships, as it undertakes cutting-edge research, community and economic development, teaching, entrepreneurship, and workforce development. Central New York's five-county region ranks eighth among the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas in the concentration of private jobs in the clean economy (*Bogucz, Brown, & Kelleher, 2011*).

Just as its resident manufacturing ingenuity made the Near Westside an outsized presence during the U.S. industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, ingenuity in green infrastructure development is putting the neighborhood back on the map in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, SyracuseCoE's Ed Bogucz and UPSTATE's Julia Czerniak spearheaded Syracuse University's efforts with a broad coalition of partners led by Raimi+Associates (an urban planning company) with Home Headquarters, the City of Syracuse, the Agora Group (an environmental services firm), Northeast Green Building Consulting, and Opticos Design (an urban design and architecture firm) that secured designation for the neighborhood as the nation's first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Neighborhood Development Project from the U.S. Green Building Council (a nonprofit trade organization). As such, it is committed to compact re-development, with green and mixed-use buildings, pedestrian-friendly streets, public

transportation, community policing, neighborhood shops and businesses, and a centralized school and park.

## **A Talent Dividend**

Issues of sustainability play not just to physical development, but also to workforce development, another dividend cited by CEOs for Cities. With help from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (a nonprofit organization that fosters public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports to more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families), the Near Westside Initiative has trained 75 men and women in general construction and green infrastructure, and 85% of them now have full-time jobs, with plans to continue enrolling new residents annually.

## **An Opportunity Dividend**

Creating wealth rooted in the community is a key to reaping the opportunity dividend. To this end, two resident-owned cooperatives are being launched with support from Syracuse University's Community Development Law Clinic: a high-tech hydroponic greenhouse, to grow and sell fresh vegetables, and a green property management company, to maintain the mixed-use properties owned and operated by the Near Westside Initiative, now nearly 300,000 square feet in all. Two of these properties were large, abandoned warehouses on West Street's Berlin Wall, which are being collaboratively redeveloped under the Near Westside Initiative's leadership. The 100-year-old Lincoln Supply Building has been given a completely green renovation and now houses two floors of apartments and two floors of office space. Significantly, it is the home for La Casita, a Latino cultural center created by Syracuse University faculty members in partnership with La Liga (the Spanish Action League of Onondaga County), and for the headquarters of Say Yes to Education Syracuse (the district-wide urban school reform collaboration). La Casita includes an art gallery, performance space, a bilingual library, a classroom, and a community kitchen (*Johnson, 2011*). Next door is a small building rehabilitated by the Near Westside Initiative as a home and studio for the well-known Puerto Rican artist Juan Cruz, who also teaches art there to children from the neighborhood.

Renovation of the second warehouse, Case Supply, will be nearly complete in 2013. Once the home of the Syracuse Chilled Plow Company, which supplied farming implements and machinery worldwide in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it already houses the world's largest

literacy organization, ProLiteracy International, and soon will house WCNY, the region's public television affiliate—two organizations whose missions in communications and education speak directly to the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge and promise of tapping the vast pool of talent in neighborhoods such as the Near Westside. Other businesses that have relocated to the neighborhood or started there since 2006 include an architecture firm, a recording studio, a coffee shop, a fitness center, and a bakery. To support continued development and growth of the 140 businesses already in the neighborhood, the Near Westside Initiative has helped organize a business association.



**Figure 5.** Photo portraits created by schoolchildren of Syracuse's Near Westside signal change in the making, covering one side of the long-vacant Case Supply Warehouse, which the nonprofit Near Westside Initiative is renovating to house regional public television station WCNY and ProLiteracy, the world's largest literacy organization, which is based in Syracuse.

The symbolic value of disassembling the warehouses of the “Berlin Wall” also must not be underestimated. To understand why, one need look no further than the Warehouse a few blocks away, where first-rate architectural design played a pivotal role in changing public attitudes about that little corner of the city and spurred economic development. The Lincoln Building, transformed by Brininstool, Kerwin and Lynch architects, and Case Supply, by King + King Architects with Koning Eizenberg Architecture, likewise are intended to leverage inspirational design to help spur neighborhood revitalization.

## From Civil Infrastructure to Social Infrastructure

Perhaps design plays such an important role in communicating and cultivating expectations in a neighborhood like the Near Westside because it is a visible manifestation of commitment—whether by the public, private, or nonprofit sector, or some combination thereof—to the neighborhood’s future. Constructing or renovating a building is a highly visible—one might even say concrete—demonstration of willingness to invest in its location at that moment, but the permanence of buildings speaks to future intentions, as well. The commitment and intentions are amplified by the evident care invested additionally in thoughtful design.

The Warehouse, for example, with its academic programs and community reach, has been far more than an investment in the university’s infrastructure. It has leveraged the symbolism of “civil infrastructure” to generate “social infrastructure” between Syracuse University and the community. Thus, even though the Warehouse is owned by the university, it implicitly has become an integral part of the city’s civil *and* social infrastructure. It has reintroduced vibrant community space on a block where there was none, and by establishing a hub of activity in the city’s fabric where people can now be found any time of day, it has made that corner of downtown a place people want to be, bolstering the existing adjacent district of restaurants, shops, and loft apartments and spurring new development—including the attraction of downtown’s first new national retailer in 40 years and the relocation of New York State’s oldest architectural firm—King + King Architects—from the suburbs back to the Near Westside.

At the heart of Syracuse University’s work at the Warehouse, in the Connective Corridor, and along the Berlin Wall stands the ability, through imaginative, collaborative design, to re-orient structures as steadfast as roads and buildings to become collectively a stake in the ground for a long-term presence—an embedding of anchor institutions in the community—simultaneously inviting all kinds of dynamic partnerships to emerge. In our case, the leap across I-81 and the literal and metaphorical two-way street of the Corridor were prerequisites to establishing Syracuse University as a committed partner in reciprocal relationship to Syracuse’s future.

In addition to signaling Syracuse University’s long-term commitment, these “civil infrastructure” projects served as platforms to increase visibility of the numerous collaborative projects of the university’s artists, educators, designers, art historians, communications scholars, and more, multiplying the effects of their work.

When Syracuse University photographer Steve Mahan taught courses on literacy through photography, bringing together school-children (in classes that varied from elementary to high school) with Syracuse University students to tell their stories through photographs they take themselves, those compelling portraits lined the walls of the Warehouse, as did the posters created by Julia Czerniak's architecture students after interviews with Near Westside residents. Not only did these dramatic narratives give the university new eyes for its community, their exhibition in the Warehouse encouraged a feeling of joint ownership in that space, creating new social infrastructure.



**Figure 6. Syracuse University photographer Steve Mahan bolsters literacy through photography, here training local high school students to use camera equipment in his classroom at the Warehouse in downtown Syracuse.**

Similarly, when design faculty and students created the Urban Video Project to project video installations as public art on the sides of buildings, cultural institutions along the Connective Corridor, including the Everson Museum, the Syracuse Stage, and the Onondaga Historical Association, were obvious sites, and partnerships developed to curate the Urban Video Project as “community-owned.” The visibility of the work of the Community Folk Art Center, a collaboration of over 40 years between Syracuse University’s African American Studies faculty and African American residents of Syracuse, similarly increased with the façade re-design for buildings along the Corridor, as did the collaborative work between the university’s public memory scholars and one of

the oldest African American churches, Grace Episcopal, also on the Corridor. In that same vein, architecture students are working with local officials and businesses to adopt underutilized spaces along the Corridor—from rundown storefronts to vacant lots to parking garage façades, even parking spaces—as sites for experimenting with temporal, green designs such as “pop-up art galleries” and “flash parks” through a nascent business they call “The Front.” In each of these cases, the extraordinary human and cultural assets represented by the mingling of long-standing institutions and diverse community members, spotlighted in these relatively “new” or at least “newly imagined” spaces, did wonders for breaking barriers to full participation in the innovation that will re-envision the City of Syracuse.

### **Of Roots and Multipliers**

The university’s physical infrastructure investments also have had a “multiplier effect” on the social infrastructure already rooted in the community. The Warehouse, for example, has become a hub not just for the university, but also for the community. It is the meeting site for more than 45 local organizations annually, including the Near Westside Initiative, the administration of which is based there. In a sense, the building is helping generate new “social glue” that is fusing the efforts of existing organizations—some long-standing—to strengthen the neighborhood.

In the absence of investment in the neighborhood in previous decades, residents and local groups built social support networks through grassroots organizations such as the People’s Equal Action and Community Effort (PEACE), Inc. and La Liga. Formed in Syracuse, PEACE, Inc. is a nonprofit, community-based organization dedicated to working with poor individuals and families across the life cycle. Since its founding in 1968, it has developed an extensive array of programs and services geared toward promoting self-sufficiency and delivered through offices across the city. Its Near Westside office is located in the heart of the neighborhood.

Similarly, in 1969, La Liga formed on the Near Westside as a nonprofit focused on the particular social, cultural, linguistic, economic, and educational barriers faced by the city’s Latino community. Over time, these two organizations grew to serve largely distinct clienteles. Now, the Near Westside Initiative has begun acting as a mechanism for collaboration between them, leveraging the strengths of each. The leaders of both organizations serve on the Near Westside Initiative’s board of directors, and the three organizations have become co-sponsors of the neighborhood’s single

largest social event of the year—the Westside Multicultural Block Party—along with La Casita and ProLiteracy. The 2012 block party was attended by more than 1,500 people, a number equal to about a third of the neighborhood’s population.

A new twist on the symbiosis of civil and social infrastructure is the Little Free Libraries Project. Inspired by a similar effort in Wisconsin that has grown into a national nonprofit organization, Little Free Libraries, Ltd., the Near Westside version was suggested by a local entrepreneur and is being spearheaded by a doctoral student in the Syracuse University School of Information Studies (iSchool) with its library science program. The Little Free Libraries are exactly what they sound like: tiny buildings dotting the urban landscape that house community-based lending libraries of books on specific themes of interest in their particular location, making books readily available to borrow for free at outposts across the community. A 20-member collaborative, cross-disciplinary team of librarians, designers, and Near Westside Initiative community group representatives and residents began meeting in fall 2011 to launch the project. At the first meeting, five tentative sites for the customized, weatherproof micro-structures were identified, and residents began the process of determining themes for the book repositories that all hope will promote literacy and social engagement among neighbors. Syracuse University design students began soliciting design requirements, and library science students began assembling lists of books for each little library, including bilingual materials, for the starter collections.

### **It Takes a Neighborhood**

If there is an icon of the convergence of civil and social infrastructure, however, it is the neighborhood school. For neighborhoods across the country, the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s knowledge economy boil down to the grandest challenge of all: leveraging the talent dividend to transform urban schools from failure factories to intellectual elevators that enable full participation in the nation’s prosperity, particularly for groups that by and large historically have been left out of it.

The locus of this challenge on the Near Westside is Blodgett School, the neighborhood’s most grand structure, occupying its most prominent location, facing what is effectively the village green, Skiddy Park. The K-8 (kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade) building has become an icon of everything that is wrong with urban schools in the United States. Physically battered, the school became

notorious in Syracuse for youth violence and such poor academic performance that it was placed on state “watch” lists. Of course, the bulk of the failures correlate with the poverty-stricken condition of the neighborhood in the ninth-poorest census tract in the nation. The profound effects of that kind of poverty on educational attainment are well-documented, especially as they relate to the social mobility associated with college attendance. In the zip code encompassing the Near Westside, for example, only 12.7% of residents attained a bachelor’s degree, which is about half the national average (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2010*). Further, national data show that only 51% of students in households with incomes of \$25,000 or less were expected by their parents to finish college, compared to 83% of students in households with incomes of \$75,000 or more (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2008, p. 10*). That captures the circumstances in the Near Westside’s zip code, where the median household income is just more than \$22,000 (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2000*).

Challenges of this magnitude demand solutions to match, and today, Blodgett School is part of an urban school reform experiment on a scale not seen before—at least in this Rust Belt city. Syracuse University has joined, along with the Syracuse Teachers Association, the city, the county, and the American Institutes for Research, in a major city-wide collaboration led by the Say Yes to Education Foundation and the Syracuse City School District. Say Yes to Education Syracuse takes the foundation’s proven model of success in turning around the fortunes of individual schools in some of the nation’s most challenged urban districts—including Philadelphia and Hartford—and scales it up for the first time to the level of an entire school district.

With 21,000 students, Syracuse has a district whose scale is well-suited for modeling comprehensive change: large enough to be significant but not so large as to be unmanageable. It is by no means among the largest in the United States, but the challenges faced in this urban district are no less daunting than those of the largest cities. The city’s poverty rate of about a third is amplified among the district’s students, 84% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. That poverty is felt disproportionately by African Americans and Latinos, who constitute 65% of the district’s children (*Syracuse City School District, 2011*). When Say Yes to Education Syracuse started in 2008, less than 50% of the city’s kindergartners were graduating from high school 13 years later, and only 65% of ninth graders were finishing high school.

Say Yes to Education Syracuse provides a comprehensive system of academic, socio-emotional, health, and legal supports for



all Syracuse public school students and their families. Throughout, it seeks to build the culture of aspiring to attend college. A key element is eliminating the barrier of cost, so the program includes a Higher Education Compact guaranteeing that any qualified graduate of a Syracuse public high school can get the money to attend college. Two dozen private institutions, including Syracuse University and the entire SUNY (State University of New York) and CUNY (City University of New York) systems, participate in the compact. As of summer 2012, Say Yes to Education Syracuse has sent approximately 2,000 students to college.

Educating families about the educational process, including college prospects, also is essential. For this reason, Syracuse University has conducted a parents' university with workshops on topics such as how to talk with your child's teacher and how immigrant families can negotiate the culture of American schools. Syracuse University also conducted eighth grade "universities" to give middle school students a taste of college classes for a day and to familiarize their teachers with admissions requirements their students will need to know well in advance of applying to college. Syracuse University also is running an Early College High School that scaled up from 85 students in 2010 to 450 in 2012 (balanced on race/ethnicity, ESL [English as a Second Language], and inclusion) in one city high school, with support from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation (a nonprofit organization focused on education). This includes an integrated academic program that allows students to earn one to two years of transferable college credits to promote high school graduation and college completion.

Across the district, Say Yes to Education Syracuse is building both academic and social supports, including 355 trained tutors, about half of them Syracuse University students (and role models) paid with federal work-study funds. Each of the city's elementary schools has a Say Yes to Education Syracuse site director to help programs run smoothly during and after the school day, building the kind of support network and enrichment experiences that suburban families often take for granted. Working with community-based organizations, Say Yes to Education Syracuse runs free after-school programs for all of the city's elementary schools and a free summer camp for children 5 to 10 years old. In summer 2012, 2,000 city children attended the camp. The program has reduced significantly the caseload ratios for school social workers—from 1:550 to 1:200—and has changed their job descriptions to include flexible work hours and regular home visits.



**Figure 7.** A member of the Syracuse University student poetry group “Verbal Blend” leads a writing exercise in an after-school program under the auspices of Say Yes to Education Syracuse, a precedent-setting, district-wide urban school reform project collaboratively conducted by Syracuse University, the Syracuse City School District, and the Say Yes to Education Foundation.

In four schools and three community locations, Say Yes to Education Syracuse is operating free legal clinics where lawyers give families pro bono advice, service, and referrals in such areas as housing, immigration, and debtor rights. Collectively, Say Yes to Education Syracuse and community partners are working to ensure that children take advantage of available medical insurance programs, enrolling 90% of the students in 18 schools, and setting up physical and mental health clinics in 20 schools.

Early indicators of the impact of Say Yes to Education Syracuse are encouraging. Enrollment in the city schools increased for the first time in a decade—by 300 in fall 2011 (*Bifulco & Rubenstein, 2011*)—which indicates that parents are choosing to move or keep their children in city schools. Median home sale values increased by 3.5%, even with a persistently sluggish real estate market. And the dropout rate for 9<sup>th</sup> graders fell between 2009 and 2012.

### **Scaling Up and Moving Forward**

It is at the micro level of the lived experience of community residents that the impact of a program like Say Yes to Education Syracuse is most palpable. Test scores rebounded. The way students are beginning to believe in the school—and themselves—again is

reminiscent of days remembered by Blodgett alumna Monica Johns (*Messenger*, 2011) in writing to support a renovation plan for the school:

In my day, it was a junior high school. That unique environment nurtured many of us and bridged a critical gap between elementary and senior high. I have fond memories of racing from art class to the fourth floor French lesson, and learning the algebra teacher's novel method for remembering the Pythagorean Theorem. I thrived in that environment.

That same inspirational love of learning is returning to the Near Westside in myriad ways, one of which is Learning Lots, a program funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It leverages the social infrastructure of Say Yes to Education Syracuse, as well as the neighborhood's increasingly green civil infrastructure, to provide high school students with hands-on opportunities to pursue their passions and explore future careers in signature fields of the Near Westside Initiative. Ten students are working under the mentorship of professional artist-educators who are giving them space, quite literally, to hone their creative sensibilities. Last summer, they spent four days a week working in a newly renovated studio advancing their skills and presentation techniques while developing portfolios that will be essential elements in their applications to college art programs. Each student designed a public art installation to transform a vacant lot into an outdoor gallery, while also working collaboratively on a mural now installed in the neighborhood's Lipe Art Park. Another group of students worked side by side with adults enrolled in the local Green Train program and, together, they learned green infrastructure design, installation, and management skills by converting other vacant lots in the neighborhood into demonstration sites for sustainable residential neighborhood development. Hope is returning and expectations are rising as residents work together and with the Near Westside Initiative's array of partners to transform their neighborhood, lot by lot, block by block, and, most important, student by student.

At the same time, Syracuse University professors are seeing the diverse next generation grow up right before their eyes into aspiring professionals and academics. They are also experiencing transformation themselves as neighborhood engagement challenges them to see new intellectual connections, push the boundaries of their disciplinary knowledge, and hone their pedagogy, all of which

better enable them to educate active citizens and public scholars in ways that cultivate democratic values and interactions. As the social theorist and activist Harry Boyte (2011) observed, “We need scholarship which not only analyzes and criticizes but also stimulates conversations, expands the sense of the possible and activates civic energies.”

### **Conclusion: Anchor Institution Work that Sticks**

Successful anchor institution work, as we believe is occurring in Syracuse’s Near Westside (and across the city and school district), does precisely what Boyte is calling for: It stimulates conversations among a wide-ranging and trusting community of experts, empowers local voices, and educates the diverse next generation of students—those who really will hold our future in their hands. In our case, to make our work really stick, we needed to start with the commitment, both symbolic and real, of civil infrastructure—downtown, off the campus’ hill—and move from there to the kinds of rich collaborative social infrastructure that can change the face and the fate of a long-abandoned neighborhood like the Near Westside. As Jane Jacobs knew so well, the magic of good architecture, especially (as we now know) when built to be “green,” quickly spreads and gives birth to innovations that are social as well as structural. Good ideas flow from all corners, and no individual person, organization, or sector owns the solutions, just as everyone “owns” having had a hand in creating the problems to be tackled. Doctorow (2000) had it right when he described the modern city as one of consolidated institutions, and anchor institutions are striving to restore the glimmer to cities and the hope to the next generation born in them. Collaborative work by universities and communities not only revives our cities, it reclaims the shared experience of civic agency so central to prosperous and just communities.

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