

**Hope for Queen City:
Immigration and Neighborhood Development in the
West Side of Buffalo**

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**Fordham University
Urban Studies Thesis
Spring 2009
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CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
II.	One Hundred Years of Buffalo: The Pan-American Exposition of 1901 – Present Day	3
III.	West Side Story	9
IV.	Newcomers & Neighborhood Change	19
V.	Community Organizations & Neighborhood Associations	26
VI.	Cultural Diversity & Community Movements: Combined Forces	37
VII.	Conclusion	43

I. Introduction

Surely the inhabitants of Buffalo think that Buffalo is the most beautiful city in America- Let alone the world. That's what all Americans think of their hometown.

-Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*

In the upstate region of New York State once stood a proud and prosperous city on the edge of Lake Erie. Since its first golden age, Buffalo has experienced, time and time again, setbacks and failures that are often nationally noted, only adding to the city's image as a Rust Belt dump.

Maybe you know Buffalo for its hopeless athletic endeavors (like the "Wide Right" or the "No Goal"). The Buffalo Bills went to the Superbowl in 1991, '92, '93, and '94, and have the dubious distinction of being the only professional sports team to lose four consecutive championships. The Buffalo Sabres, year by year, toy with the emotions of the thousands of dedicated fans in the city (we live on the Canadian border and still don't have a Stanley Cup). Maybe you know it for its chronic snowstorms and blizzards, which can occur anytime between the Buffalo winter season from October to May. Surely you've heard of Niagara Falls, which was just recently removed from the list of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. You've definitely met someone from Buffalo, and can tell by our long A's, nasally accents, and our location-specific misnomers.

On a more serious note, as it turns out, Buffalo faces much more significant crises than the ones listed above. We are home to the second highest poverty rates in the nation and the third highest rate of housing abandonment. We have a huge amount of brown space, often occupied and stubbornly sat upon by the city government. We have unhealthy air and water quality, sky-high rates of asthma and lead poisoning, and are considered to have the eighth worst residential segregation in the United States.

Still, though, I ask that you give the city an honest chance. Buffalo, also referred to as "Queen City," "Nickel City," or the "City of Good Neighbors" truly does

have a lot to offer, even if one must look a little closer. Queen City is home to some of the most beautiful American architecture in the country, with major projects designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, Frank Law Olmsted, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Buffalo is also known for its achievements in the arts; it is a national cultural destination as home to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, and the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. The city sits on the Niagara River and the Great Lakes, has marvelous landscapes and preserves. With an immense amount of hometown pride, Buffalo has yet to give up. Exciting things are happening in Queen City.

A new energy is coming from one of Buffalo's most impoverished neighborhoods in the form of revitalization. The West Side of Buffalo has great potential; it has a diverse population, including refugees and immigrants from around the world, historic housing stock, and close proximity to downtown, the waterfront, and a thriving retail corridor. It also has a new generation of community groups with a shared vision of a sustainable city. These organizations work together and alongside residents to tackle some of the city's deepest problems. Together, these groups offer a dynamic combination of direct services, community organizing, policy research, and advocacy for systems change.

Is Buffalo's Renaissance beginning with the West Side? This thesis explores the past life, the present conditions, and the potential future of the combination of cultural diversity and community cooperation in order to revitalize a neighborhood, and perhaps the entirety of a city.

II. One Hundred Years of Buffalo: The Pan-American Exposition of 1901 – Present Day

*A new city is springing up;
It is the new Buffalo of which so much has been heard...
There have been many mythical beginnings for the new Buffalo,
but the real, the genuine, is here.*

- *Commercial Advertiser*, Lackawanna Steel Factory Scrapbook
February 1902.

The nearby Niagara Falls was once considered one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World. Hydroelectric power harnessed by the falls made Buffalo the first American city to have widespread electric lighting, which coined its nickname, the City of Light. The electric lighting created a magical vista for the world fair, the Pan-American Exposition, which took place in 1901 in the city of Buffalo.

President William McKinley was in office at the time, and as a result of America's victory in the Spanish-American War and the territorial acquisitions that followed, McKinley "held a vast appeal, particularly in Buffalo, a city whose international exposition embodied and glorified the goals of the president's expansionist foreign policy... and now, as hundreds of thousands of Americans descended on Buffalo to pay homage to Pan-Americanism, the city became the national symbol of the country's pride. Never had American power been more apparent."¹ It seemed that at once Buffalo shone its bright lights upon itself, and the world was only so happy to watch.

Meanwhile, Buffalo's Lackawanna Steel Company had opened a large plant on the shores of Lake Erie just south of Buffalo. Those that came for the Pan-American Exposition were caught up in by the city's apparent glory. The crowds were record breaking, the streets were flooded, the restaurants and coffeehouses packed, and the city was full of action. Buffalo was a model of pride, industry, progress, and culture.

¹ Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*. Prometheus Books: Buffalo, 2007. Pg 14.

The glory took a turn for the worse when President McKinley was severely injured in the Temple of Music while waiting a performance to begin on September 6, 1901. Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist who had concealed a tiny handgun with a handkerchief, shot McKinley in the abdomen, and on September 14 he was declared dead. The Pan-American Exposition closed its doors in November, and for those months that followed the devastating news, there were mishaps and grand failures to follow.

The Lackawanna Steel Company that had promised such greatness for Buffalo's future also declined within some years of opening its first factories. Yet despite concerns, Buffalo's industrial sector would continue to grow throughout the first half of the twentieth century and shape the economy for years to come.

From 1860 to 1910, Buffalo's population had rapidly been growing, yet the local economy remained vulnerable, concentrated in commerce and in need of diversification to protect against economic downturns.² Elite leaders, following the closing of the Pan-American Exposition and the decline of the new steel company, made great efforts diversify the city's economy. Midwestern raw materials, such as iron ore for steel, grain for milling, and lumber for building, were shipped to Buffalo in order to broaden industry. These new industries developed which produced the steel for the nation's first automobiles, railroad cars and rails, and military equipment.

New industries created an environment conducive to new immigration. Irish, Italian, German, and Polish laborers and their families flooded into Buffalo, creating different ethnic neighborhoods throughout the city. Neighborhood patterns were shaped by the local industry as much as they were by patterns of ethnicity; factory work was spread out in small buildings and warehouses throughout the city, making the commute easy for ethnic laborers. Ethnic niches and social networking became a lifestyle for these new groups.

World War I, beginning in 1914, created a massive market for the industries of Buffalo, as they sat right on a major waterway that could supply armies across the

² Dillaway, Diana. *Power Failure: Politics, Patronage, and the Economic Future of Buffalo*, New York. Prometheus Books: Buffalo, 2006. Pg 27.

sea with military equipment. While the wartime efforts heightened the productivity, and thus the profit of Buffalo industry, World War I had a devastating impact on immigration. After the war, a new wave of immigrants arrived, yet they were slowed down by United States immigration quotas passed that severely limited the number of newcomers to America.

At the same time, a significant number of African Americans from the South came to Buffalo, mostly settling on the East Side. This community expanded throughout the 1920s, creating the basis for a significant number of black-owned enterprises and commercial districts. African Americans hosted their own cultural institutions and neighborhood associations, just as the Irish, Italian, Polish, and Germans had done in their respective neighborhoods.

The 1920s also saw the growth of three new major industries- airplanes, automobiles, and chemicals, all which benefited wartime efforts. The strength of Buffalo's economy at this time could be summed up in one word: diversity. In 1925, *Buffalo Business*, a local monthly publication, broke down the dynamics of the industrial sector in the city. At this time, there were fifteen thousand people working in twelve automobile factories, thirteen thousand people in machine and foundry shops, two thousand in furniture, three thousand in packing and slaughtering, and three thousand in soap factories. The transportation system employed two thousand switchmen. Buffalo also maintained a vital small-scale locally owned economy that employed large numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers. Waterfront jobs remained essential, and domestic and personal service jobs were available for men and for women.³ Local ownership began to erode, yet at the same time mergers and consolidations strengthened the several local banks in the area.

After the stock market crash in 1929 Buffalo felt the effects of the Great Depression. The economy was in a predicament, and New Deal public sector jobs replaced many of the diverse private economy jobs that the city had once boasted. New Deal benefits came slowly, but once they finally arrived, more than forty-five

³ Goldman, Mark. Pg 85.

million dollars was spent on public works and permanent projects in the city of Buffalo. There was concern, however, that too many Buffalo families were now dependent on the public funds. Indeed, they were.

It was also during the Great Depression that significant progress in the arts took place in Buffalo. Modernism was largely inspired by Seymour Knox, Jr., an active member on the board of the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo. It was Knox's lifelong enthusiasm and support for modern art in all forms that enabled Buffalo to become one of the world's great centers of modern art.⁴

As the rest of American cities had, Buffalo had adopted the automobile as a means of transportation. Yet, as congestion in the downtown area heightened, people spread out to suburbs and spent less time in the city. The people of Buffalo, like most people in the Northeast, began to see downtown as a less desirable destination for work and entertainment. Grand plans were brought about by numerous city planners in order to fix the congestion and parking problems. Chunks of history were bulldozed in an effort to make room for parking downtown, hence the beginning of the city's decline.

Diana Dillaway attributes the decline of Buffalo during the twenty-first century to transportation, the steel industry, and absentee management. Buffalo's once glorified transportation route, the Erie Canal, took its first hit in 1910 with the opening of the Panama Canal, which was a less expensive water route that connected eastern and western markets. Then, in 1959, the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway skipped over Buffalo, utilizing the Welland Canal instead. The flour industry shrank, followed by the steel, auto and chemical industries laying off fifty percent of their workers. The products of America's aging steel industry were in less demand, as foreigners created showcase factories with new technologies and without the cost of shipping. Steel factories across the board were closing, and by 1984, Buffalo had lost nearly seventy thousand jobs in the steel industry alone.⁵ As less industry was locally owned in the Buffalo area, the city relied on multinational corporations with headquarters elsewhere to manage their economy.

⁴ Goldman, Mark. Pg 105.

⁵ Dillaway, Diana. Pg 27-33.

In the meantime, urban renewal plans across the board were destroying old historic neighborhoods in order to make room for automobiles. The Urban Development Corporation was created and appointed Edward J. Logue, “a master planner in the tradition of Robert Moses” to create what is now a “barren, concrete development in the heart of the city where once there had been a thriving neighborhood.”⁶ Demolition efforts, particularly on the East Side and the Lower West Side, destroyed good neighborhoods. A new system of highways connecting the suburbs to downtown and across town cut the city into separate sections, fashioning racial and ethnic tensions that were previously hardly as conspicuous.

The fine arts continued to thrive during the tumultuous times in Buffalo. Under the careful watch of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., an unsurpassed cultural force in city throughout its hardest times, Buffalo was able to call itself home to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, a world-renowned public gallery for contemporary art. The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra flourished during the second half of the twenty-first century. The Rockefeller Foundation encouraged the growth of the University at Buffalo, which developed a Center of Creative and Performing Arts.

Famous architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Frederick Law Olmsted created the “grandest early visions of the democratic American city” in Buffalo.⁷ This architecture still stands today and serve as landmarks for the city. *Time* magazine boasted in 1986, “Most people think of Buffalo, when they think of it at all, as a sooty industrial port on a blustery bluff overlooking on Lake Erie. They ought to try shuffling off to Buffalo sometime. Buffalo... has taken giant strides towards becoming a vociferously militant acropolis of the avant-garde arts.”⁸

While the arts of Buffalo thus soared, it was no remedy for the grave downturn of the economy that would continue to almost regularly worsen into the next century. Extreme loss in population, high unemployment and poverty rates,

⁶ Goldman, Mark. Pg 205-6.

⁷ Ouroussoff, Nicolai. “Saving Buffalo’s Untold Beauty.” The New York Times. November 14, 2008.

⁸ *Time Magazine*, 1968. Congressman Thaddeus Dulski introduced this clipping into the *Congressional Record*, which is now filed in the “Second Buffalo Festival of the Arts” vertical file, Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

segregation, and poor leadership and budgeting would plague the city until the present day.



Aerial View of Downtown Buffalo & Niagara River. David J. Bertuca. University at Buffalo Libraries. Updated 04/15/2009.

III. West Side Story

Back on Busti and Carolina, Mister Alphonso the elder, a good and honest man, without a vice, sold fish packed in ice. He pushed a cart while his youngest son Charlie thrilled us with his song. The Virginia Street Pastry Shop, the Why Not Café, Nick's Lounge and Izzy Termini's Italian Marching Band. The Turf Club and Scotty's Clam Bar. Angelo the Barber. 326 Busti here Mr. LaCort cigarettes he made. Ravioli, the best in the world, made right here at Herman Abbarno's Subway Grill. The Marlowe Theatre, Baffo's La Cantina. Marranca's, your car he fixed.

-From *Bread and Onions*, an unpublished play by Joseph G. Giambra
Private collection of the author

Perhaps one of the most damaged neighborhoods in Buffalo's decline was located along the Niagara River, coined the West Side. The West Side is an area adjacent to the Erie Canal, and therefore during the early nineteenth century thrived in transportation and shipping. Diverse industries spread out along the streets and lots of the West Side. During the 1850s, residential development of the area began to occur. In a city now often noted for its racial and ethnic segregation, it was one of the only areas in Buffalo in which the rich and the poor lived together; the poor worked in the factories and along the canal, while the rich were merchants and factory owners.

The West Side became the first American home for Irish immigrants escaping the famine in the early eighteenth century. They were followed closely by the Italians who were looking to escape from high taxes and crop failure in their home across the Atlantic. The Lower West Side was thus traditionally known for its Italian heritage. Italians came in search of a better living standard, and the area became one of the most highly populated areas in the city. The Italians worked mainly in the grain industry as farmers, finding the work similar to their agrarian lifestyles back home. The dense populations of the laborers and their families in the West Side led to close living quarters and poor living conditions, and it was not rare to find three generations of families living in a overcrowded small house.

The new immigrants thus became a vital cultural force in the West Side, creating numerous religious institutions, schools, and small enterprises that made the West Side a home to all who followed and that would lay the foundations of the neighborhood. “The Italian immigrants came from all over Italy, but particularly from the dozens of towns and villages that dotted the gorgeous mountains and valleys of southern Italy and Sicily... These migrations of whole families, clans, and even villages provided strength, security, and islands of refuge. Family, faith, home, and memory sustained these immigrants in an uncertain new world, creating both community in the new and continuity with the old.”⁹

Strong cultural values and networks were prevalent amongst the nearby shipping docks by the waterfront and cramped quarters of the area. The Italians banded together at a parish level, and by 1922 there were fifty benevolent societies that operated out of local churches.¹⁰ These establishments were founded in response to the dire poverty that faced Italians as newcomers in the United States, and funds were contributed in order to ensure that upon death, these devout Catholics would receive a proper burial. Some of the famous churches, or houses of spiritual fulfillment for the immigrants, were St. Anthony’s, Annunciation Roman Catholic Church, and Holy Angels Roman Catholic Church, which still serve as cultural institutions today.

The next notable wave of migration was Hispanic, mostly from Puerto Rico but also from Cuba, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America. What was once considered Italian by nature in the Lower West Side is now considered a Hispanic community. At first, Puerto Ricans migrated in the 1940s from the island to work in defense industries. They originally settled in the East Side, but would eventually move west due to the growth of the black population in that area.

Urban renewal plans throughout the city had devastated the area. Democratic Mayor Frank Sedita’s campaign in 1957 supported urban renewal to

⁹ Goldman, Mark. Pg 43.

¹⁰ Napora, James. *History of the West Side, Buffalo, NY*. An excerpt from *Houses of Worship: A Guide to the Religious Architecture of Buffalo, New York*. Master of Architecture Thesis. Pg 173-174. Buffalo Central Library.

uproot the city's growing slums. With his victory, support for redevelopment among a majority of the city's elected officials was solidified.¹¹ Many other projects were carried out, often displacing minorities and undermining their neighborhoods. Blacks, Jews, and Italians were some of the victims. During the 1960s, the construction of a major thruway cut off the Lower West Side from the Waterfront, isolating the neighborhood from its economic base. Homes were bulldozed and left to deteriorate, streets were vacant and destroyed, and the people of the neighborhood seemed to be the only ones who cared, yet they lacked power or political force. Many Italian-American families who had lived there for years began moving away to North Buffalo and to the suburbs.

Yet the West Side would not be left empty, as amid the leftovers of decades of failed urban renewal policies, the Puerto Ricans began to move along Niagara Street and the Lower West Side, and they recognized a possibility of creating a new community of their own. Several years later, the "full impact of these several plans to renew the city's neighborhoods and its downtown were realized, nothing- not the neighborhoods, not downtown, not the streets, homes, or businesses, and not the long-cherished buildings that had for so long distinguished the character and fabric of the city- was immune from its devastating hand."¹² The Lower West Side had fallen victim to these urban renewal plans, leaving behind a decrepit and unsuitable wasteland where once a good neighborhood had been. "For about twenty years, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, newspaper dispatches on the area were suffused with the clichés of renewal: neglect, blight, change, and the surety that 'you cannot build until you destroy.'"¹³

Meanwhile, since the arguably informal arrival of the Hispanic population in Buffalo, established leadership and community groups and organizations have created a more sustainable foundation for the neighborhood. Many individuals and societies have contributed their knowledge and resources to assist newcomers to

¹¹ Kraus, Neil. *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934-1997*. State University of New York Press. 2000. Pg 97.

¹² Goldman, Mark. Pg 260.

¹³ Wypejewksi, Joann. *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*. WW Norton, 1994.

the American lifestyle, providing assistance in basic needs such as affordable housing and job opportunities. Their most prevalent victory was in their opposition to the Lower West Side Arterial project, an expressway that would cut right across the Lower West Side, displacing a majority of the Puerto Rican families that had settled there. The Puerto Rican-Chicano Coordinating Committee, founded by Francisco Perez and Jose Pizzaro, led the neighborhood in its rejection of the plan. Sure enough, by the early 1970s, the plan had not been implemented, and "Little San Juan" had developed along Virginia Street. After this triumph, everything came together there, group after grassroots group, with politics heavily on their minds - the Puerto Rican-Chicano Coordinating Committee, Allianza, the Spanish Speaking Political Caucus, the Buffalo Hispanic Association - together and separately, they wrestled with the problems of community building.¹⁴

Raul, a Puerto Rican who came to the Lower West Side with his parents in 1964, remembers:

"Now that I think about it, what happened back then shows how ignorant we were, that we didn't fight [urban renewal]. Because there we were talking 'Puerto Rican! Puerto Rican!' and boom! They destroyed our neighborhood. With the knowledge that I have now I don't think I'd let that happen again. In the '70s when they wanted to connect the Thruway to the Expressway across Virginia Street, then the Puerto Ricans got together and stopped it. Because that would have cut the neighborhood completely in half; it would have destroyed the West Side... now the Hispanic people are thinking differently."¹⁵

Initial large migrations of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other people of Latin American origin to the West Side were supported by a fairly reliable job markets in the rural areas and in the urban industrialized centers. New immigrants worked as farmers in the wheat fields outside of the city or in factories along the riverbanks while they were still operating.

¹⁴ Goldman, Mark. Pg 263.

¹⁵ Wypejewski, Joann. *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*. WW Norton, 1994. Pg 9

Cubans, Dominicans, and Central American immigrants are the more recent Hispanic populations in Buffalo, as they began to migrate in the 1960s.¹⁶ Since the defeat of the arterial project, however, the situation of Hispanics in the Lower West Side has hardly improved. By 2000, 7.5% of the Buffalo population was made up of people of Hispanic or Latino origin, and this population was concentrated mainly in the Lower West Side.¹⁷

Without decent job opportunities for unskilled workers in the city, Hispanic migrants and their families have found themselves in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. While poverty hit the whole of Buffalo, it perhaps was hurting the most in the East and West Side neighborhoods, urban nooks unknown to the community at large, especially the six hundred thousand people living in the Buffalo suburbs. Furthermore, immigrants and refugees would continue to come to Buffalo and settle in the West Side.

Buffalo's West Side is considered one of the most international neighborhoods in all of Western New York, which is notorious for racial and ethnic segregation. Roughly bordered to the North by the Scajacauda Expressway, to the West by the Niagara River, to the East by Elmwood Avenue, and to the South by City Hall and downtown, the West Side is home to some of Buffalo's most astounding architecture. While the area is comprised of many different nationalities, backgrounds, languages and cultures, a large number of West Siders are aging, poor, or both. The poverty in the West Side is the result of many factors, and it is manifested in high crime rates, along with drug and gang activity.

After the urban renewal failures and the decline of jobs available to the new Puerto Ricans on the West Side, a lucrative heroin and cocaine drug industry developed, inspiring the creation of gangs that represented individual streets and blocks. While this industry promised income to the participants, it also ensued violent crime, hate, and corruption in the West Side streets. Millie remembers,

¹⁶ Cardinale, Anthony. "Ethnic Heritage Enriches Buffalo." *The Buffalo News*. October 12, 1980.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. 2000.

"In the '60s it was acid, it was reefer; but then in '70s heroin hit the town... I got arrested for prostitution twice... They had me handcuffed at my legs and handcuffed with my hands back here, with an orange jumper. And there I was in the welfare building, going to get a V.D. test, and all my friends and everybody's there and people I knew in the community, friends of my mother, and I'm walking in chains and they're taking me for a venereal test, and everybody just knew that I got busted for prostitution. And I wanted to die."¹⁸

This activity recently caught the eye of the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens Nation, more widely known as the "Latin Kings." In 2006, the Latin Kings moved into the West Side, recruiting over fifty young people in a neighborhood plagued by poverty and unemployment. An extremely organized and diligent gang, the Latin Kings are heavily involved in hard drug trafficking, extreme violence, and gun crimes. At their weekly meetings, the gang members boast "While history has put Kings and Queens above the people, we The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, proudly wear our crowns as servants of the people. Though we strive for peace, may we always find strength to keep our swords sharp and our shields shiny."¹⁹ A new gang, "MS-13," which stands for Mara Salvatruchas and thirteen being a number chosen to pay homage to the Mexican mafia, has recently moved into the Lower West Side as well, starting turf wars with other gangs, including the Latin Kings.²⁰

While this gang activity might be lucrative to leaders and top members, young children and teenagers remain in poverty, out of school, and in danger of being arrested, injured, or murdered. As involvement in gang activity is far too often the plight of inner-city youth, in the West Side, "Everybody is afraid of losing their kids to the street. Both sides are competing for the child's identity."²¹

¹⁸ Wypijewski, Joann. *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*. WW Norton: 1994.

¹⁹ Herbeck, Dan. "Highly-organized national street gang a major presence on Buffalo's West Side." The Buffalo News: September 3, 2008.

²⁰ Schumacher, Rachel. "A New Gang in Buffalo..." *living out visions*. Blog posting March 27, 2008. <http://auro-borea-rs.blogspot.com/2008/03/new-gang-in-buffalo.html>

²¹ Quote by Paula Rosner in Joann's Wypijewski's *Triptychs*.

Community groups and youth programs try to create alternatives for young people in the West Side; yet the area is still plagued by dangerous drug and gang activity.

At the same time, the West Side is home to many historical, religious, and cultural institutions and landmarks. Within the West Side there are many churches, some built by the Irish and revived by the Sicilian and Italian settlers, along with the houses of worship that have developed since. Kleinhans Music Hall, designed by F.J. and W.A. Kidd and Eliel and Eero Saarinen, which sits on the beautiful Symphony Circle, is home to the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, a mighty fine arts force in the city and across the nation.²² The Peace Bridge, which connects our country to Canada, lies on the West Side. Two Buffalo colleges, Buffalo State and D'Youville College lie in the West Side. Both of these colleges have grown significantly since their openings, and have contributed to research, enrichment, and development in the West Side neighborhoods.

The Buffalo Psychiatric Center, designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, is a city landmark surrounded by green space designed by the famous Frederick Law Olmsted. Current plans for this unique complex are a major hope for a Buffalo Renaissance. Olmsted also designed Bidwell Parkway, an interesting transportation pattern that survived the thruway construction, which is two hundred feet wide and runs via Massachusetts Avenue and Porter Avenue to one of Olmsted's favorite projects, Front Park. In 1871, when the waterfront was used primarily for industry, Olmsted "chose Front Park to be Buffalo's 'public face,' as it was the first glimpse many would have of the city."²³ It remains the closest park to downtown Buffalo and the Niagara River.

The commercial spine of the Lower West Side lies mainly along Niagara Street, where restaurants, markets, and bakeries display the neighborhood's ethnic diversity. While the majority of restaurants are Italian, most of the markets are Asian, generally Thai- or Vietnamese- oriented. Puerto Rican bakeries and restaurants are found along Niagara Street as well. On the Upper West Side, the Grant-Ferry Commercial District is thriving with small businesses, ranging from

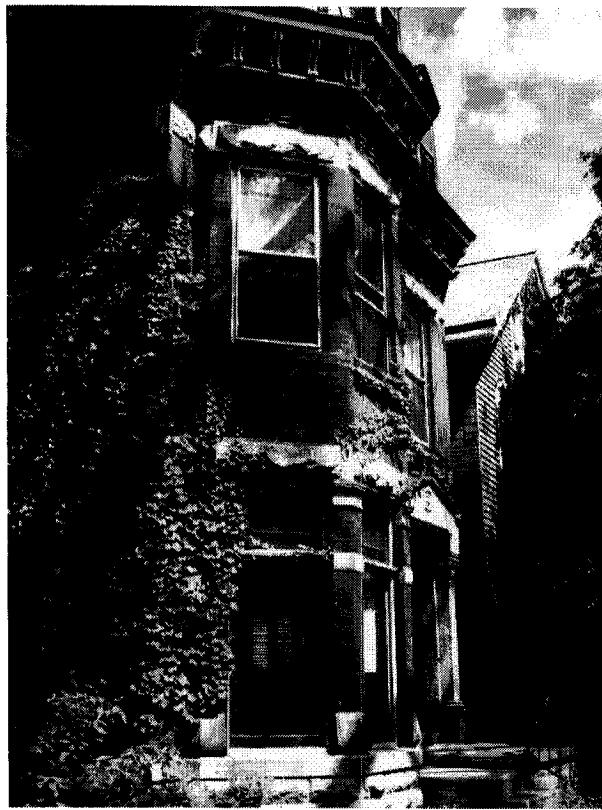
²² Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra website.

²³ Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy Website.

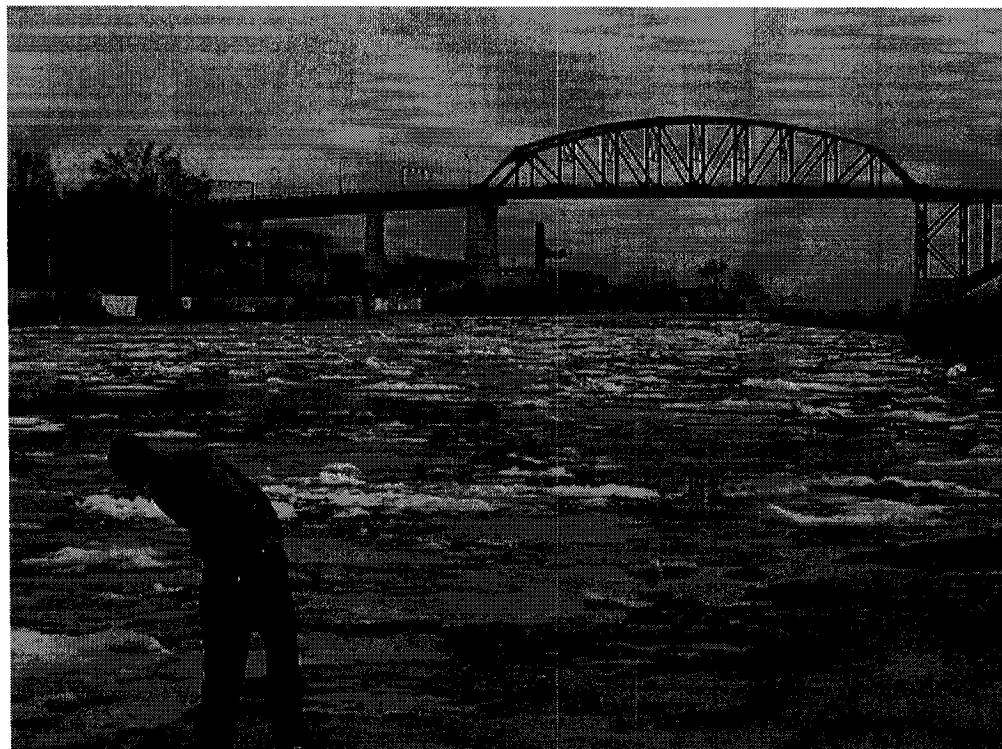
markets to restaurants to shops. The Grant-Ferry Association has helped in creating such a success story along this strip. LaNova Pizzeria and Guercio and Sons Grocery Stores are some of the most famous businesses in Buffalo and originated in the Grant-Ferry district.

It being so culturally diverse, the West Side is a perfect place to hold festivals and fairs in order to promote new and old businesses in the city. The Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation has played an active role. Joe Tomasulo, an active member, has it heart set on rebuilding the “international marketplace” that is the West Side. “To rebuild an area in trouble, you need to help the whole neighborhood,” Tomasulo boasts about the success stories on Niagara, Grant, and Ferry Streets.²⁴ With more people moving in, perhaps his vision is correct, that a West Side renaissance is approaching.

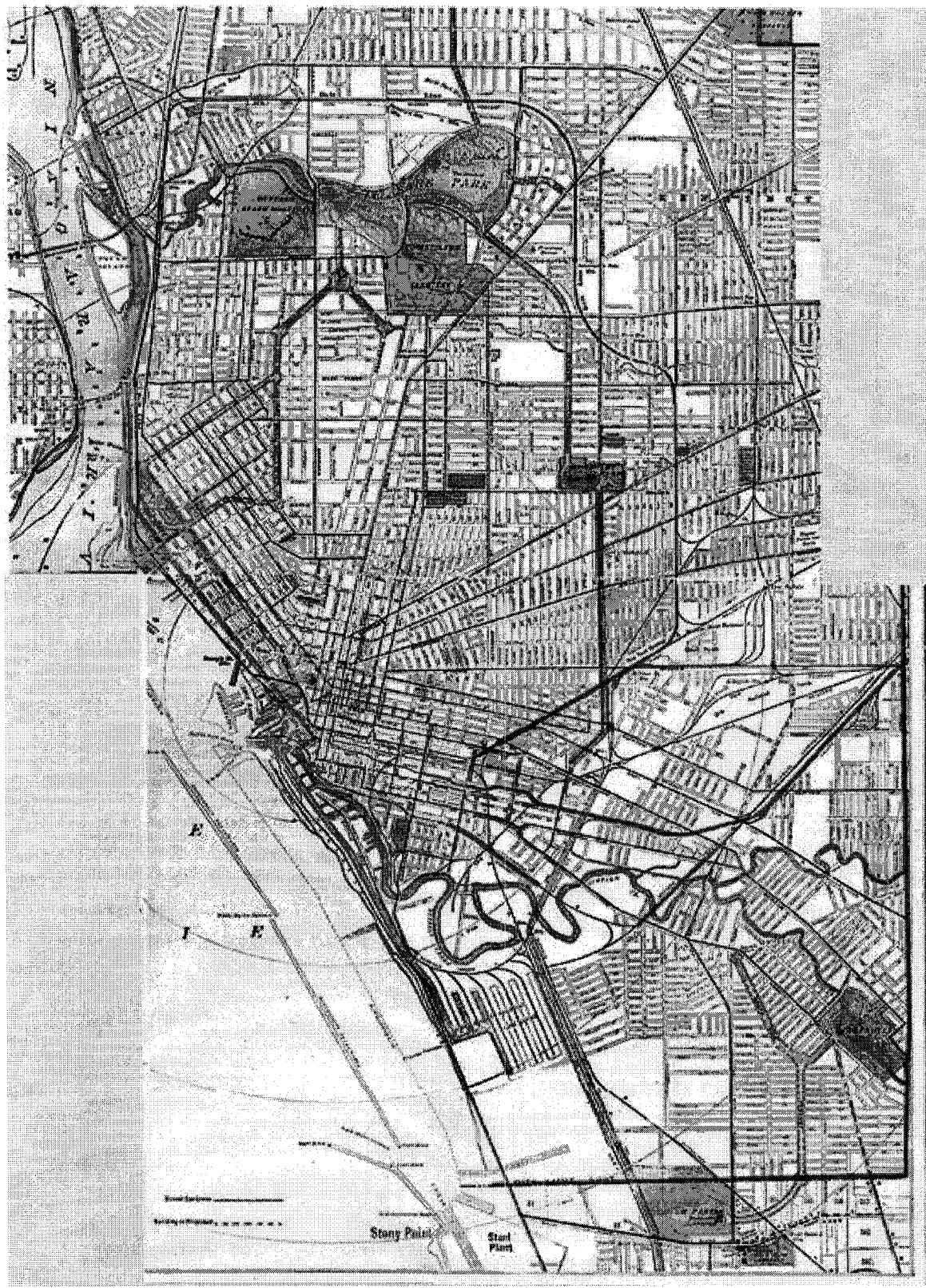
²⁴ Buscarino, Elena Cala. “Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation on Grant Street.” *Buffalo Rising Magazine*. City Section. 4 February 2009.



"brownstone: buffalo, ny." Photo property of
Zachary Burns/.14/06/2003.



"peace bridge." Buffalo Daily Photo. April 20, 2008.



"Olmsted Parks and Parkways of 1914." David J. Bertuca, University at Buffalo Libraries.
07/01/2009.

IV. Newcomers & Neighborhood Change

In many aging cities, recent working-class immigrants have helped to reactivate and revitalize gateway neighborhoods, filling houses that might otherwise sit vacant and spurring investment... in long-neglected properties.

-Policy Brief, *Upstate's Recent Arrivals*
Regional Institute at the University at Buffalo
January 2008

Between 2003 and 2006, over twenty-seven thousand immigrants settled in Upstate New York, with approximately six and a half thousand in Buffalo. These immigrants have come from a wide range of countries – from Canada to Ukraine, Yemen to India, and Asia to Africa. Of these immigrant groups, studies show that the majority of them put down their roots in the city's gateway neighborhoods; that is to say, they live in neighborhoods close to downtown areas, often where other members of their country have established a social network.²⁵

In the Lower West Side neighborhood of Buffalo, now a predominately Puerto Rican area, immigrants find new homes and attempt to assimilate to an American way of life; they find affordable but often deteriorated housing, they get jobs, and they enroll their children into the Buffalo public school system. The newcomers to the West Side are made up of many ethnicities, yet the bulk of families are traveling across borders from Vietnam or are refugees from the war-torn East Africa, mainly Somalian and Sudanese. Other new groups come from Burma, Angola, Chad, Liberia, Ethiopia, Cuba, and Thailand.

"Filling critical gaps in urban neighborhoods and key economic sectors, and contributing to the region's global outlook, their importance to the region will likely grow as the native population ages, requiring coordinated efforts to accommodating newcomers and link them to regional revitalization strategies."²⁶ Newcomers bring vitality to the West Side; many different languages are spoken, many different

²⁵ Policy Brief. *Upstate's Recent Arrivals*. Regional Institute at the University at Buffalo. January 2008.

²⁶ *Upstate's Recent Arrivals*. The Regional Institute at the University at Buffalo. January 2008.

religious beliefs are practiced, and many cultural values are both upheld and compromised by the new ethnic groups in Buffalo's West Side. Multiple community organizations have been established in the West Side that dedicate their service to resettlement programs for newcomers; furthermore, there are often social and religious networks that help the foreign families with the assimilation process.

Catholic Charities of Buffalo, the International Institute of Buffalo, and Journey's End Refugee Services offer three of the most notable resettlement programs. These resettlement programs have common goals in assisting refugee and immigrant families to establish a new life in the city, most often in the West Side neighborhoods.

Catholic Charities of Buffalo incorporates an Immigration and Refugee Assistance Program, which offers a wide variety of services to Buffalo newcomers. Services include housing assistance, classes in English as a second language, case management, job development, employment placement, and assistance with immigration and citizenship applications. The program also serves as a gateway, introducing new immigrants to multiple neighborhood associations, parishes, and social groups that can further assist new families with acculturation.

English classes for foreigners are a most interesting experience; often led by one instructor and accompanied by multiple English-speaking volunteers. While sitting in, I spoke with multiple immigrants that have settled in Buffalo in the past few years, and I learned about their assimilation process. I spoke with one man, a Cambodian, who came to the United States with his family some years ago. In Cambodia, he was a well-known doctor and had multiple degrees that distinguished him in his home country. In the United States, however, the government did not accept his educational background and experience, and he now works as a janitor in order to support his family. Refugees from many countries are dealt with in the same way, being forced to give up on their past and start from scratch to build a new future, often compromising all that they know and have.

The International Institute's mission is to assist immigrants, refugees, their families, and others who face linguistic and cultural barriers to become productive

members of the Buffalo community and to increase global understanding and international connections in the Buffalo region. The International Institute works under the auspices of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Their resettlement program, along with assisting in basic needs such as housing and healthcare, focuses on the self-sufficiency and active participation in the community as quickly as possible. Services include employment skills assessment, workplace orientation, American culture workshops, orientation to the transportation system, and citizenship classes.

Although statistics are not available on numbers of refugees and immigrants who do not receive proper services, frequent interactions of the Institution with immigrants reveal that they often cannot find or do not receive the care that they need. Inadequate services and language and cultural barriers, therefore, are a major issue. In 2008 the International Institute of Buffalo received a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo for a year-long project entitled *Building Linguistically and Culturally Competent Systems of Care in Western New York*, in order to improve immigrant and refugee access to medical, social, educational, legal, and employment services.²⁷ The project attempts to break down systematic and individual barriers to access by empowering providers to create meaningful changes in services to clients, patients, and students with limited English proficiency. Also the project educates immigrants and refugees about their rights and responsibilities when seeking care or assistance. By improving access to services for immigrants and refugees, the project has increased economic self-sufficiency for low-income persons and has reduced racial and social disparities in access to health and human services.

Finally, let's look at Journey's End Refugee Services, awarded by Buffalo Spree Magazine in 2008 for being the Best Nonprofit Organization in Western New York: "They provide safe space for political refugees, and they've done it for years."²⁸

²⁷ Information about the grant received found in the "Grant Request Summary 2007: The International Institute of Buffalo." The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo Records.

²⁸ "Best of WNY 2008." *Buffalo Spree Magazine*. September 2008.

A creation of Jericho Road Ministries, Journey's End is a Christian community-based organization that welcomes refugees to Western New York and assists them in becoming healthy, independent, contributing members of the community. Serving three hundred to four hundred refugee families annually, the organization focuses on the basic needs of newcomers to Buffalo, while also offering friendship, counseling, and spiritual resources.

In a recent documentary, *Refugees: Buffalo's New Generation*, the educational efforts of Journey's End are investigated.²⁹ The documentary illustrates the Refugee School Impact Program, a department of Journey's End Refugee Services that works towards easing the transition of refugee children into the Buffalo Public School System. The team of the Refugee School Impact Program estimates that there are currently one thousand and five hundred refugee students in Buffalo Public Schools that face cultural and linguistic issues in the immersion process. The team is made up of three academic coaches that speak twelve different languages, including Vietnamese, Thai, Arabic, Ibrahim, Burmese, Korean, and more. These coaches regularly assist in classrooms in the Buffalo schools in order to help students and teachers with the language barriers and transitions, and then also work with the parents of the students in order to ensure that they understand the schooling process in the Buffalo school system.

The success of these organizations often depend on the cooperation and assistance of multiple other establishments and institutions to carry out their work, including health clinics, religious institutions, or the education system. Furthermore, these organizations note that without generous donations from community foundations and the dedicated work from volunteers city-wide, their goals would not be possible; after all, the federal government offers minimal aid to the newcomers.

Since 2000, Buffalo's population has decreased by nearly twenty thousand residents.³⁰ In an area dwindling in population, Buffalo welcomes approximately

²⁹ *Refugees: Buffalo's New Generation*. Chance Encounter Productions. 2008.

³⁰ *Refugees: Buffalo's New Generation*.

one thousand refugees and several thousand additional immigrants each year.³¹ These newcomers thus shape Buffalo's region economically, culturally, and socially, as they are arguably "the most productive or turn out investment that we can make with public or charitable dollars because they are not caught in that intergenerational cycle of poverty, they don't know their new culture, they don't know the new system, and they... are in hot pursuit of the American dream."³²

East African refugees and immigrants from Vietnam typically resettle in the Puerto Rican-influenced Lower West Side. The various resettlement programs encourage housing in this neighborhood for multiple reasons. The Lower West Side has easy access to downtown and to the limited public transportation systems that the city offers. Furthermore, by placing people in neighborhoods with residents that share similar languages and culture, these newcomers can develop social and networking skills with other members of their backgrounds. Also, this neighborhood allows easy access to the agencies and organizations that aid them the most.

On the other hand, housing is also cheaper in the Lower West Side, as most of the neighborhood homes are deteriorated and often abandoned. Due to the urban renewal efforts during the 1940s and 1950s, the neighborhood was left isolated and bare. Puerto Rican settlers brought life to the neighborhood, but unavailability of jobs for semi-skilled or unskilled workers in the city created an environment of poverty, crime, and drug and gang activity. A lucrative yet dangerous heroin and cocaine trade inspired gang formations, mostly divided by streets. Drug-related crime warned off outsiders and thus got the neighborhood a reputation as unsafe.

Obstacles facing the new populations and the resettlement programs alike will perhaps always remain challenges in development. Minimal funding and cultural barriers, however, can be overcome. Time and again, "when we invest in

³¹ "Grant Request Summary 2007: The International Institute of Buffalo." The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo Records.

³² Quote from Clotilde Dedecker, President of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. Personal Interview on February 13, 2009.

immigrants, we invest in the community. While they do experience difficulties, they are not the same as the social cycle barriers that exist for low-income communities that our residents deal with because of the culture in which they exist... They know that they need to embrace a new culture in order to get in the right direction.”³³ New immigrants bring a new energy to low-income communities that results in a higher rate of productivity.

Some success stories of West Side immigrants and refugees include establishing small business, especially ethnic shops and restaurants, religious and spiritual involvement and growth, and community involvement and neighborhood associations. Immigrants and refugees have the ability to benefit from their new established lives in Buffalo and often serve as role models for moving out of poverty in the community. As newcomers continue to settle in the West Side, then, it is vital to Buffalo’s renaissance that we make the transition a successful one.

³³ Quote from Clotilde Dedecker, President of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. Personal Interview on February 13, 2009.



Hispanic community gathers at meeting at International Institute. "Friends Helping Friends Meeting, 1950s." Courtesy of the Buffalo and Erie County



Courtesy of Milton Rogovin. From his "Lower West Side" Series. 1972-1977.

V. Community Organizations & Neighborhood Associations

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead

It is no secret that there is some urgency to fix some of Buffalo's most major and complicated programs; unfortunately, limited funding and resources make this a difficult process. As previously stated, the city of Buffalo is the second poorest city in the nation and has the third highest rate of housing abandonment. There are over fifty "brownfields," or vacant, once-green lots that are owned by the city. Buffalo suffers from poor air and water quality that contributed to health issues throughout the city and its greater region. Yet, a generation of small, grassroots community organizations have faith in the city of Buffalo, and with the West Side as an example, believe that the city can serve as a national model for sustainable revitalization.

Of the many small groups that have emerged to address multiple issues within the West Side that ultimately reflect on the whole city, this paper focuses on some key organizations that are well-known and successful in the city. Concentrating on issues such as affordable and sustainable housing, nutrition and health among the poor, economic opportunity for the unskilled or semi-skilled, and the city's natural landscape and ecology, these organizations reflect a city-wide sentiment of what small groups can tackle. In the West Side, "new alliances are being created, and that is when the synergy of a community can really grow."³⁴

People United for Sustainable Housing Inc., (PUSH Buffalo) is a grassroots, multi-issue community organization working to rebuild the West Side. PUSH organizes residents to reform institutions that perpetuate poverty in the

³⁴ Quote by Blythe Merrill. Gaasch, Cynnie. "Catalyst for Change: John R. Oishei Foundation." *Buffalo Rising* magazine. November 30, 2007.

West Side and works with low-income residents to create and implement an action plan for improving the housing and employment conditions in the neighborhood.

PUSH envisions Buffalo's neighborhoods as places where diversity and difference are celebrated and where innovative models of development based on principles of equity, sustainability, and creativity are advanced.³⁵

Founded by Harvard Law graduate Aaron Bartley in 2005, PUSH Buffalo has achieved remarkable results in an eco-friendly, sustainable, and just manner. In the beginning, the group organized a large community forum with residents of the neighborhood in order to prioritize goals and identify neighborhood leaders. At this point, PUSH has been investigating housing issues throughout the West Side and has completed rehabilitations on abandoned housing, reversing the epidemic of neighborhood decline. This rehabilitation also employs at-risk residents to build and plan the rehabilitations, thus addressing the serious poverty issue in the community. Leadership training is also a target interest for PUSH.

The major accomplishments for PUSH thus far began with the reform of the New York State Housing Agencies. In the city of Buffalo, the New York State Housing Agency had fifteen hundred abandoned or derelict properties in its portfolio; yet, after a PUSH public media campaign, New York state relinquished control of the properties to the City of Buffalo in 2007. In response to the campaign, the State also established a four million dollar "Block by Block" reinvestment fund for Buffalo's low-income neighborhoods.

The PUSH Community Cooperative then was established in order to renovate these vacant properties and provide quality affordable apartments for those seeking homeownership. The properties were renovated by at-risk residents working under the direction of local contractors and training organizations throughout the city. Apartments and homes continue to be renovated for low-income families.

The Leadership Development Program is a crucial element of PUSH's overall effort to revitalize the West Side, as it trains residents of the community to speak about neighborhood issues in consistent media appearances and in meetings with

³⁵ Mission & Vision. PUSH Buffalo.

public and private leaders at the regional, state, and national levels. The success has multiplied the amount of active community members and has organized residents in a cohesive and unified way.

The importance of this unity at a neighborhood level is vital to the revitalization of the West Side because if the community cares, the members can provide long-term stability. Says Blythe Merrill of the John R. Oishei Foundation, a private philanthropic organization, “everyone has a vision for their community, they just have to be asked.”³⁶ It is too often in low-income communities that others can take advantage of their situation; in organizing at a neighborhood level, each person has the opportunity to voice their concerns for their own households and those of their neighbors. Therefore, the decision is not that of the urban planner or of the developer, it is of the community itself.

Another popular and multi-faceted community movement is the Massachusetts Avenue Project. Nationally recognized as an innovative model for building community food systems and youth development, the Massachusetts Avenue Project is Western New York’s regional leader in urban agriculture, youth leadership, and food-based micro-enterprise. Based in the West Side, the Mass. Ave. Project (MAP) was established in 1992 in response to the lack of opportunity in the neighborhood. The mission is to nurture the growth of a diverse and equitable community food system and promote local economic opportunities, access to affordable, nutritious food, and social-change education.³⁷

The West Side is an area where diabetes, obesity, heart disease and other illnesses caused in part or wholly by poor nutrition and no access to healthy food. MAP contracted in the fall of 2003 with the University at Buffalo’s School of Architecture and Planning in order to create a study led by graduate students on the assessment of the West Side’s food security system and how it could be improved. *Food for Growth: a Community Food Security Assessment and Plan for Buffalo’s West Side* identified some major health issues in the neighborhood. Eleven graduate

³⁶ Quote by Blythe Merrill. Personal interview. February 12, 2009.

³⁷ Mission Statement. Massachusetts Avenue Project.

students, under the lead of Samina Raja, studied residents' nutritional needs, requirements of their ethnic diets, their incomes, access to food stores, and the quality of the food offered in them.

For instance, the students found that "it takes seventy-eight minutes one-way via public transportation for the average West Side resident to get to the closest large grocery store... [that] 'may' have produce that is fresh."³⁸ Furthermore, even Mom and Pop stores, which do not necessarily carry fresh produce but do attempt to keep prices down, were scarce, and convenience stores and delis overprice their pre-packaged, trans-fatty foods. This assessment inspired MAP to carry on its mission in bringing locally grown, healthy and organic produce to the West Side, from the West Side.

Two of MAP's current programs are *Food Ventures* and *Growing Green*. *Food Ventures* is an entrepreneurial program that helps people start their own food-based businesses, thus creating opportunities for self-employment and business ownership for West Side community members. Through the use of a Shared-Use Commercial Kitchen, business owners are able to make their own local, nutritious food. Also included in this program are business training workshops, one-on-one technical assistance, and access to markets. Since its inception, *Food Ventures* has launched over forty new local businesses and roughly one hundred new jobs.

Growing Green, the other major program of the Massachusetts Ave. Project, is an urban agricultural and job training program that develops life-skills and provides meaningful work to low-income, at-risk youth in Buffalo's inner city. Established in 2002, *Growing Green* works with local youth on the urban farm, located on the West Side, teaching them to grow food organically and build community connections. Furthermore, a Peer Education Team of these youth visit local public schools and coordinates after school workshops about sustainable urban agriculture, healthy cooking, and environmental stewardship. *Growing Green Works*, the youth enterprise, began selling organic and local food products, such as their "Amazing

³⁸ Donovan, Patricia. "Assessing the quality of the West Side's food supply." *UB Reporter*. February 12, 2004.

“Chili Starter” and their “Super Duper Salsa” at several local venues; thus teaching business skills to youth as well.

MAP is a dynamic organization, addressing issues such as poverty, health and nutrition, and youth development. In a low-income, resource-poor area like the West Side of Buffalo, an organization like MAP inspires community involvement, health advocacy, and the recognition on a local, state, and national level.

Another vital issue in the City of Buffalo is housing abandonment. Housing abandonment in the city of Buffalo has broken records in the recent past. In poor neighborhoods, abandoned houses become danger zones; they are open to perilous sex and drug crimes, violence, and take away from the general safety of the neighborhood.

Buffalo ReUse Inc., a new group, invests its time in sustainable deconstruction of these homes. Buffalo ReUse provides an economic and community development program that implements building deconstruction to divert reusable materials from the landfill, train and employ young adults, and eliminate blight through a variety of neighborhood improvement programs. The organization operates the ReSource, a retail outlet that sells high quality, low-cost building materials, offers education and outreach opportunities, and is a destination for community engagement.

Buffalo ReUse has introduced the region to an eco-friendly, economical demolition plan, recycling materials for improvements on the existing housing stock of the neighborhood. Furthermore, Buffalo ReUse is dedicated to greening Buffalo’s neighborhoods through their *Buffalo Action for Revitalization Program* (BAR). BAR has thus far planted hundreds of trees along city streets and created and maintained numerous community gardens. Buffalo ReUse also collaborates with existing neighborhood organizations in order to board up abandoned houses, expand mural art projects, maintain community art parks, and beautify vacant lots.

The organization focuses on employing local, unemployed, and out-of-school young adults from target low-income neighborhoods. Buffalo ReUse Inc. offers a two-year training and mentoring program that surrounds these young adults with

supportive mentors, engages them in work that improves their own communities, supports them in obtaining a minimum of a GED certification, and provides guidance for establishing their individual goals. This unique pre-apprenticeship invites these at-risk youth to become a part of the cutting edge industries such as building deconstruction and salvage, green space maintenance and development, green rehabilitation, alternative energy systems, and weatherization.

As for the future of Buffalo ReUse Inc., and thus the future of the city, the group has an organized and structured plan that covers multiple bases, from youth development to greening the city. Through the combined efforts of volunteers, community members, and the young adult workforce, Buffalo ReUse plans to lead projects that improve twenty vacant lots in 2009, forty in 2010, and eighty in 2011, while maintaining hundreds of other projects that have already begun. Further, they have pledges to plant three hundred trees each year for the next three years on the West and East Sides of Buffalo.

In response to the poor water and air quality in Buffalo and its greater region, the Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper was established on the West Side along the Niagara River in order to research and aid in the revitalization of the natural landscape of the city. Since its startup in the 1980s, Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper has grown into the region's most powerful and effective environmental organization, achieving important and nationally known victories for water quality and green space preservation.

Committed to defending the Niagara River region, ensuring clean water, healthy environments, and public access to those waters, Riverkeeper utilizes legal, scientific, and policy tools to promote green living in the Buffalo region. Multiple programs mobilize citizens, volunteers, schools, other organizations, and businesses to act environmentally conscious.

Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper has a vision of Buffalo as a sustainable city. Its work with local issues are visible on a national and international level. The Great Lakes are the largest group of freshwater lakes on Earth, containing roughly 22% of the world's fresh surface water. They make up 4.2% of the drinking water in the

United States.³⁹ It is thus vital that the water of the Niagara River and Niagara Falls is restored and kept clean in order to protect both the natural ecology of the environment and the health of the people who utilize it.

Finally, the West Side Community Collaborative (WSCC) has an ambitious and broad vision for Buffalo, particularly on the West Side. WSCC focuses on building relationships amongst individuals and West Side organizations in order to implement plans for a revitalized community. It encompasses a slice of the middle-west Side, intended to be small enough to make a noticeable difference and large enough to be comprehensive. Founded by Harvey Garrett, one of Buffalo's most respected community organizers, the WSCC has outlined its goals in separate categories that are all, eventually, dependent on each other.

Communication and Partnerships is one of these divisions which focuses on personal and professional links among residents and organizations. It celebrates the neighborhood's ethnic diversity by organizing multicultural forums and events on the West Side while also focusing on external messaging, keeping the entire city aware of what is occurring on the West Side. The Economic Development faction implements projects that ensure economic opportunity for all residents and businesses. Its first step, creating a printed business directory for the neighborhood, extended community connections and improved small business life on the West Side. With the help of WSCC, new businesses are being developed in old, responsibly redeveloped buildings and houses. The WSCC Housing Group promotes a variety of programs and initiatives that are helping move toward the Collaborative's goal of reduced vacancy and increased homeownership. Working with multiple housing organizations, the Housing Group has rescued numerous homes from demolition, educated and empowered homeowners, and provided affordable and safe options to renters and homeowners alike.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is partner to the West Side Community Collaborative. LISC is a national organization with a community focus

³⁹ Statistics of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

that works in partnership with local organizations in order to deliver the most appropriate support to meet specific needs of communities. LISC believes that the West Side Community Collaborative is “an innovative initiative bringing about resident-led change in Buffalo, New York.”⁴⁰

The organizations discussed are only a handful of the many dedicated groups working towards revitalization in the West Side. They address numerous issues that affect low-income neighborhoods and the people living in them, while using creativity in promoting the city’s future. Of course, in order to make a not-for-profit organization work, multiple resources are necessary: funding and people are an important two.

In order to receive financial support, these organizations have to outline their goals and plans for multiple members of the community that have funding control. Buffalo, a very philanthropic city, has multiple groups that channel money to their selection of not-for-profits in Buffalo. Public charities, private foundations, and state and city budgets make up the majority of support the good-doings of these organizations.

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo is a public charity holding more than eight hundred different charitable funds in Western New York. Created in 1919, the first philanthropic foundation in New York State, the Foundation has been a leading organization in allocating charitable funds and endowments from individuals, families, and businesses to appropriate projects and not-for-profits. It is imperative that the Foundation has a great deal of knowledge on an organization before donating its money to it, so the staff is very active in the community.

The mission of the Foundation focus around four areas: increasing self-sufficiency for low-income individuals and families, reducing racial and social disparities, enhancing significant natural, historic, and architectural resources, and strengthening the region as a thriving center for arts and culture. Many West Side

⁴⁰ “The West Side Community Collaborative.” LISC Buffalo Newsletter. 2008.

organizations receive grants from the Foundation, as it has the resources that a neighborhood can benefit from, but it needs strategic planning and organization in order to succeed.

The John R. Oishei Foundation, founded in 1940, is Buffalo's largest private foundation with over three hundred million dollars in assets. The Oishei Foundation has a strong belief in interdependency amongst individuals, businesses, and organizations in the community. Along with grant-making, the Foundation encourages community ties and collaboration among not-for-profits in order to achieve the greatest results.

Similar to the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, the Oishei Foundation outlines its mission in six interrelated issue areas in which they are concerned: promoting stable neighborhoods, increasing self-sufficiency of low-income residents, raising academic performance, improving health, supporting the medical research industry, and promoting Buffalo's arts and culture in higher education.

Finally, funding from the government is allocated to multiple organizations by Assemblymen Sam Hoyt, who has been in office since 1992 representing west and northwest Buffalo. For years Hoyt has been involved in smart community growth, bringing together not-for-profit organizations to provide a community-driven approach to rebuilding neighborhoods. He helps in creating and implementing policy that allows these organizations to operate efficiently. Hoyt has introduced several pieces of legislation that promote affordable housing, neighborhood revitalization, and the responsible deconstruction of vacant buildings.

Harvey Garret's message is that, "The West Side is coming back. We're taking it back, and it's fun to watch."⁴¹ Along with the financial support coming from foundations, charities, and government, the community organizations on the West Side are operated by dedicated staff and optimistic volunteers from around the city.

⁴¹ Pendergast, Megan. "Harvey Garrett." *Buffalo Rising Magazine*. October 18, 2008.

Hundreds of residents often attend the meetings hosted by PUSH Buffalo, MAP, the West Side Community Collaborative, and other community-based movements.

The unique aspect of the West Side revitalization is that it is taking a community-driven approach. “Silver bullet” plans are not the answer to rebuilding the city; rather, it is vital that the residents work together towards revitalizing a neighborhood that is part of their vision. Thus it is important that the activities and strategies that take place involve the community at large, and the West Siders are eager in their responses. Many of the organizations have youth groups and volunteer opportunities that keep young people involved in remaking their neighborhoods. Even people that do not live in the West Side volunteer for organizations on the West Side.

The two colleges that are in the West Side, Buffalo State College and D’Youville College, are also active members in the neighborhood. Buffalo State, in the Upper West Side, promotes the growth of the West Side through coverage of the occurrences in the neighborhood, keeping students up-to-date on the happenings of their community and also offering opportunities for students to do outreach and volunteer work. The Volunteer and Service-Learning Program at Buffalo State continues to grow and gain recognition for its altruistic action in the West Side and the city as a whole. The Catholic religious tradition of D’Youville College, run by the Grey Nuns, or the Sisters of Charity, inspires service in the West Side community as well. Involved in various types of service work, D’Youville continues to diversify along with the West Side.

That being said, the West Side community-based organizations have made great strides in the neighborhood, opening doors for a sustainable future for the city of Buffalo. They have progressively gained recognition and popularity among residents and the city as a whole, becoming models for other movements that address the issues of the modern American city.



Urban Farm of Massachusetts Avenue Project.
Found at MAP's website, www.mass-ave.org



"Empty Houses," Buffalo. The New York Times.

VI. Cultural Diversity & Community Movements: Combined Forces

*The West Side is coming back. We're taking it back.
And it's fun to watch.*

- Harvey Garrett

This paper has thus far introduced the West Side neighborhood of the city of Buffalo. A somewhat battered but also strong history has led to the present situation. Buffalo has seen two phases so far. It was once an American gem, a booming industrial city, and economic decline and other setbacks called it part of America's Rust Belt. Yet there is a new phase occurring in Queen City, and it is a path to revitalization, more affectionately and locally known as the Buffalo Renaissance.

Currently, there are some mighty forces that make the West Side a potential site for urban revitalization in Buffalo. The resources at hand have the power to change the neighborhood and eventually the entire city. In a city declining in population, the West Side has taken unique steps in taking it all back. The cultural diversity in the neighborhood and the new generation of community-based organizations create a strong foundation for the changes occurring in the city, but that is not to say that with this potential comes some obstacles.

With thousands of dedicated residents, businesses, and volunteers, and multiple opportunities for funding, community organizations in the West Side have a confident outlook on the future of the neighborhood and the city of Buffalo. Yet there still are numerous obstacles in the revitalization of the West Side that these groups have to face. The city administration, safety challenges, general local nonprofit turf battles, and year-to-year funding issues often create hurdles in the path to revitalization.

Even with avid support and representation of the West Side such as Assemblyman Sam Hoyt and Common Council Member David Rivera, the political

process in Buffalo has traditionally been a complicated one. Technicalities and other setbacks often hinder the plans of these nonprofit groups and projects can take years to be implemented, if they are implemented at all. "Administration is slow to make change," says Blythe Merrill, and the administration is a grave frustration for progress in the City of Buffalo.⁴²

Currently City Hall owns thirteen thousand vacant properties and they have been stubborn about not allowing not-for-profit development within them. A staff member of the Massachusetts Avenue Project explained in a presentation about the organization that the vacant lots on the West Side provide the perfect amounts of space for community vegetable gardens, but City Hall is hesitant to donate any land in case there will be business profit for them in selling the land in the future. MAP recently lost its headquartered building and community kitchen in a fire incident and has made efforts to relocate from their temporary location, yet the city has not donated a permanent lot or a building; therefore, some of the programs offered by MAP have been put on hold. These vacant lots and decrepit buildings, which are now safety hazards that bring down neighborhood property value, would be the perfect opportunity for green space and sustainable reconstruction. But far too often in Buffalo politics, a hope for profit is the dominant goal.

Another obstacle is the lack of communication among some of the organizations. While some focus efforts on working together towards final goals, petty bureaucracy has gotten the better of some of the community movements. This results in turf battles among organization for funding. It has been noted that sometimes groups with similar goals are working within a certain area, and while their visions could be compromised and become joint efforts, lack of communication between the organizations results in chaos and inconsistency.

Still, some of the largest complications come in funding issues. While charities and foundations are willing to support these organizations, applying for grants on a year-to-year basis often produces less than desirable results. Compassion and dedication is persistent, but unfortunately, the cash flow is not. In

⁴² Quote by Blythe Merrill. Personal Interview. February 12, 2009.

difficult economic times, some of the West Side organizations have been forced to cut resources and staff, resulting in less-efficient and more confusing situations.

The struggles that come with being an immigrant in a new country also hinder the potential of the West Side revitalization. While there are many groups that reach out to new families upon arrival, there are many tensions that new families must overcome. With multiple language and cultural barriers, and often lack of money or income within the first few months, new immigrants of course come across many struggles in their path to establishing themselves as members of this new community.

Being aware of these difficulties, however, is the first step to addressing them. While it is never an easy task to convince city legislators or to help new immigrants immerse themselves into society, the fact is that people are trying and are finding themselves on the right path in the West Side.

Buffalo's West Siders have truly come together in this respect, working alongside each other to improve their neighborhood. Safety, quality of life, health, and development are concerns of a majority of residents. People who live in the West Side are now advocates for their own neighborhoods, getting involved and using their voice and opinions to propose what should be done. The victories are adding up in all aspects of life, and the community has become popular throughout the city as a model of repair.

In the most recent past, community groups and involved citizens have truly improved quality of life in the West Side, and it shows. The neighborhood has become home to many events that draw thousands of people to the West Side in order to celebrate its diversity. The International Street Festival, the Taste of Diversity, and the regular Multicultural Forums have become popular hits among the West Side and its neighbors. Events such as these draw positive attention to the diversity of the neighborhood, rather than pre-conceived fear and hesitation.

Retail has begun coming back into the neighborhood as well. With help from active community members and organizations, multiple new businesses have been started and supported by the neighborhood. Urban Roots Community Garden

Center, for instance, it a cooperative retail business that sells plants, gardening tools, supplies and ornamentation. Over four hundred households on the West Side have contributed money to become member-owners of the business, demonstrating the collaboration of efforts of the community as a whole. Restaurants and shops that are slowly opening reflect the neighborhood ethnicities and cater to diverse needs. A new daycare center and a community house were created out of vacant buildings in order to aid people in their daily life.

An increase in homeownership throughout the West Side is also a positive step, as investing in the neighborhood and housing stock benefits the entirety of the community. Education classes are available to all by different organizations on the rights and responsibilities of homeownership. Affordable rents also influence the growth of the West Side as foreign newcomers come to settle.

The multiple youth groups established in the community bring young people together in order to be advocates for their neighborhoods. This gathering of young people also improves communication amongst teenagers of all backgrounds and ethnicities, often breaking social or cultural boundaries and eliminating prejudices against different ethnic groups.

Finally, it has been noted that the neighborhood is becoming a safer place to live. Community groups took action in creating block-by-block safety guidelines and programs that have been recognized throughout the region and have received grants from the State in order to continue its valiant efforts and positive results. Community members are engaged and empowered in being watchdogs of their neighborhoods. A crackdown on dangerous drug activity by the police and housing courts has notably decreased crime rates throughout the neighborhood. Nineteenth Street, one of the highest crime streets in the city marked by drug traffic and violent crime, became a target area for safety improvements in 2002. After just two years, emergency phone calls reporting dangerous crime and police action necessary in the area dropped eighty percent, and now the area is a prospect for another sustainable redevelopment plan.

The immigrant population has taken on a large part of this revitalization. They see these grassroots movements as a form of not only community building, but as a chance to take the initiative in bettering their lives, a path which they have already begun. When new families move into these neighborhoods and are often checked in on by the various agencies dedicated to immigration and refugee services, they draw attention to the issues of their neighborhood; often there are aspects that are unsafe or inhumane, but prior to this residents either did not get attention or did not realize the problem.

This is why poor neighborhoods stay poor; for years on the West Side this intergenerational cycle of poverty left an ambience of despair and hopelessness. New life in the neighborhood, however, is bringing new changes to both immigrants and the poor people who have lived there all their lives. While a large number of families or individuals in the West Side are below the poverty line (almost forty percent in 2000)⁴³, immigrant families do not receive welfare from the State; a meager five hundred dollars to help them to start their lives initiates urgency to find work and build a life.⁴⁴

More than this, immigrants bring with them strong cultural values that can often be rundown by Americans living in poverty. Many of the parishes on the West Side, for instance, were forced to close down their churches and combine. One, however, called Coronation, was saved by the Vietnamese Catholic population. The mass is spoken in Vietnamese and the parish dresses in their traditional garb. At the same time, they perform all of the landscaping and maintenance duties on their own, creating a true image of community building and cultural preservation.⁴⁵

In a community plagued by poverty and abandonment, this is just the push that the neighborhood needs. If new immigrants, with their barriers and burdens, can make a successful and active life for themselves in the West Side, then it is feasible that the community can embrace their ambition and practice it themselves.

⁴³ US Census Bureau Statistics: 2000.

⁴⁴ Estimate from Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker. Personal Interview. February 13, 2009.

⁴⁵ Hayden, Bryan. "Vietnamese immigrants help save West Side parish." The Buffalo News. April 23, 2008.

The cultural diversity and the grassroots movements have created a new energy in the West Side, and the energy is vibrant and essential to its revitalization.

VII. Conclusion

The pre-cast concrete of the low buildings, arranged in sharp-edged groups like a playing-card village, changes its aspect up close –no longer gray but a profusion of pretty multicolored pebbles bound together in cement.

The children gambol on grassy fields that once contained the mementos of ancestors and look out past a distant slice of highway, past the rooftops of condos for the newly rich, and onto the blue-gray breadth of Lake Erie, the tape recorder of their memories running.

- Joann Wypijewski, *Triptychs: Buffalo's Lower West Side Revisited*

For decades now, Buffalo has sat in the shadows of other American cities, wallowing in regrets and mistakes of the past. Proposals have come from every angle in how to “fix” the city, many of them involving a large budget and a controversial silver-bullet style plan. Just in my short lifetime, I can think of many different proposals that promised to bring Buffalo out of its depression – multiple plans for the development of the waterfront, constructing a casino, the possibilities of new downtown condominiums, even a BASS store – yet the West Side, I believe, offers the most unique and conducive planning of all. Essentially, Buffalo has taken many steps in many different directions. These paths were too often ill-considered and misconstrued, as tax dollars were used to begin projects that would never be completed.

It is far too often that planners and city leaders think with the phrase “out with the old and in with the new.” Yet Buffalo already has a rich and unique foreground for what the city can be in the future. A medley of astounding American architecture and a reputation as an international cultural destination attribute to its age and experience. Strong community ties and the general philanthropic nature of the city make it a pleasant place to live. A plethora of vacant space, affordable housing, and the growth of the immigrant population offer opportunities for the future.

A city like Buffalo is a large community, and like a community, a city is not built around a single development or a fancy installation. A community is made up

of the people that live there, their values, and their efforts to protect and promote those values. In a neighborhood like the West Side, the diversity of the people, the values, and the compassion have created an eyelet of hope in the city of Buffalo, and with the added support of a new generation of dedicated community groups, greatness is possible. The revitalization of the West Side of Buffalo has a great deal to offer to the city as a whole. It utilizes the neighborhood's past as a foundation for the future by restoring old homes and buildings for new business and families. It addresses social and environmental issues on a local level, taking into account the obstacles that both newcomers and the present population face. It focuses on good communication, building relationships, and the resulting collaborative growth. It is environmentally and health-conscious. It is educating the future generations. It is dedicated to a better life for all that live there.

With population rates at a severe low, Buffalo has the chance now to make itself advantageous to new immigrant populations, thus increasing diversity and opportunity for the city. The West Side has taken this initiative and works towards improving the quality of life for newcomers all of the time, expanding the forces of their new energy in a positive way. Its victories are progressing and echo to other parts of the city, creating models for addressing serious social issues on a local level. With the values of good neighborhoods and progress on the minds of residents and organizations alike, the West Side is building on its existent resources in order to revitalize the community and to take back Queen City.