

Vision and Vitality: Bethlehem after The Steel:

A vision of community development based on adaptive re-use of historic portions of Bethlehem Steel Corporation's industrial plant

The Mid Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) and Historic Bethlehem Partnership convened a day long workshop on March 27, 2004 in Bethlehem, inviting a wide range of stakeholders to formulate a shared plan for the adaptive re-use of 160 acres of the old Bethlehem Steel plant site. As a result of our deliberations, the group agreed on four goals.

1. The workshop group constitutes the first core of a multi-organizational coalition dedicated to seeing the successful community-based redevelopment of the site. One of our first tasks is to broaden the coalition to include more groups and organizations that have a significant stake in the outcomes.
2. A strengthened public role in deciding the future of the 160-acre historic area should be assured so that the re-use of the site meets Bethlehem's community development goals.
3. Interpretation of the industrial heritage of Bethlehem can begin at once, even before the site's future is secured. Interpretation should address the fullness of industrial history, involve residents, visitors and local institutions in interpretive activities, and take place throughout Bethlehem and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor as well as on the plant site.
4. The interpretive project can be pursued by multiple partners in stages over time, with all activity guided by a shared approach toward the collective vision. The organizing principles of the shared approach include building on the authenticity of place, including regional and national interpretive content, developing socially-oriented education at all levels, and promoting pervasive community involvement. Existing resources for interpretation, signage, programming, and education currently held by various members of the coalition, including the NMIH (in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution), should be used to the extent that they address the project's organizing principles.

The renewal of the plant site is a celebration of this community's future, built upon the honoring of its past. Bethlehem can continue to build a sustainable economy and offer satisfying lives to its citizens through a rational, future-oriented embrace of adaptive re-use. Adaptive reuse has proven itself over and over, and we can demonstrate its effectiveness with peculiar power in Bethlehem's high-visibility setting. By embracing the centrality of industrial history to the city and region and adopting a strategic approach to adaptive reuse of the site, Bethlehem can multiply its sources of economic and cultural enterprise, strengthen its schools and neighborhoods, embrace its diverse population, and preserve its unique identity. Community development based upon adaptive reuse will replace the vulnerability of depending on a single major employer (whether a mill or a mall) with an innovative, resilient, educated community of enterprise.

Goal 1: Group Structure

The diverse coalition of groups promoting this vision of the future of the site can fill several functions. As a group, we can advise public officials on the evolving vision, including but not limited to having a presence at the planned charrette. We can also advocate for the project with political and philanthropic leaders and keep relevant issues before the press and the wider public. Individually, members of the coalition offer significant existing resources in curriculum, programming, collections, membership, and organizational strength. Coalition members have distinct interests and strengths relevant to particular parts of the overall plan, which they will pursue directly in specific partnerships with other groups in or beyond the coalition. The coalition as a whole will stay informed about separate projects through regular internal communication and provide information to the media and others through a special interactive Bethlehem project page on the website (www.march.rutgers.edu) hosted and maintained by MARCH.

We encourage every member of the coalition to articulate its own vision of how the Steel plant site can help further its mission. MARCH's specific responsibility within the coalition will be to continue, as we did for the workshop itself, to tap the best resources in the region on behalf of the shared effort.

Goal 2: Strengthening the public's role in shaping the site's future

A. The coalition, with support from the city of Bethlehem, seek to secure a strengthened public role in shaping the future of the site, in order to **assure that the re-use of the site meets Bethlehem's community development goals**. Public influence on the site's future can be achieved through direct negotiations, public facilitation of development options through tax incentives or subsidies, appropriate easements, or in other ways.

Success in securing public influence depends upon:

- making a compelling case for the site's importance to the future of both city and region,
- exploring available options for public control, perhaps through the economic and community development offices of city government, and
- mobilizing local political leadership and the region's state and federal congressional delegations as part of the lobbying effort.

The coalition can help develop the case for the site and provide access to elected officials throughout the Lehigh and Delaware Valleys to build a strong political voice.

B. The coalition seeks, over time, to convert every remaining building on the old Bethlehem Steel site, and the open spaces as well, to community development uses.

The five blast furnaces are and should be iconic for the city and central to adaptive reuse strategies, but the scale and arrangement of the entire complex speaks volumes both about the United States as an industrial power and about the industrial work experiences of the thousands of men and women who labored there and the families who depended upon them.

The site is big enough to house museums, office and residential development, industrial arts or production facilities, business incubators, educational uses, arts and recreation, and historic preservation. The coalition's approach challenges the cultural institutions of Bethlehem to go beyond traditional museum practices and create interpretation that thrives outside museum walls. It challenges the business community to innovate 21st-century industrial uses that can be built on the foundations laid by three previous centuries of Lehigh Valley industry.

As on-going redevelopment proceeds, some portions of the site will, at any given moment, not yet be restored or adapted. These should be understood as positive resources, places that can speak eloquently to the experiences of deindustrialization and the fear, pain and anger it produces. Indeed, some portions of the site might best be simply stabilized and left permanently un-polished, as settings for that chapter of the community's history.

Goal 3: Pervasive interpretation

In order to achieve pervasive interpretation, the coalition felt the need to articulate the stories that unite Bethlehem's history, including the Moravian past, with regional industrial heritage themes. What follows is a set of general guidelines and questions that will be explored through deepening engagement with existing scholarship.

A. The Stories

Industrial production by a multi-cultural community of industrial workers defined Bethlehem's identity as early as the 18th century. As early as the 1740s, many languages could be heard on the streets of Bethlehem. The Moravian community laid the foundations of Lehigh Valley industry with its smithies, tanneries, saw mills, oil mills, grain mills, and carpentry shops. The Moravians laid the foundations of education deep and early of equal education for both boys and girls and they set an exceptionally enlightened standard for crosscultural understanding among Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans. Bethlehem Steel built its works here because the area already boasted a skilled industrial labor force, proximity to coal, iron, and major markets, and the canal and railroad network to carry people and products in and out.

The Mid Atlantic region today hosts a string of industrial history museums, sites, and potential sites, with the Bethlehem Steel works at its heart. **By telling the whole story of the region's industrial growth and decline, Bethlehem can become a major focus of activity, an interpretive beacon that makes the city as central to sharing regional and national industrial history as it was to shaping it.**

Immigrants began arriving in Bethlehem in the nineteenth century. Canals and railroads brought their own service needs and personnel into the community, adding new elements of language and culture, and widening the geographic reach of Bethlehem's industrial life. The growth of the steelworks drew further waves of immigration through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, adding Italians, Poles, Czechs, Russians, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and others to the population. As the population grew larger, so it also grew more densely connected, as families, neighborhoods, churches, and charitable societies emerged to serve the working population.

All the while, steel was reshaping American life. While miners cleared away mountains and forests in search of coal and iron, steel railroad tracks crisscrossed the continent, permitting people, goods and information to travel coast to coast, and bringing American settlers onto the lands of the Plains Indians. Then twentieth century steel-frame skyscrapers rose in New York and elsewhere, held up by Bethlehem's famous I-beams. Steel shipyards all over the United States built faster and bigger steamships, freighters, tankers, and ocean liners, and eventually several classes of warships, including destroyers, transports, and aircraft carriers. Cars and trucks traveled over roadways and highways strengthened by beams of steel, while bridges from San Francisco's Golden Gate to New York's George Washington and Philadelphia's Walt Whitman proclaimed the strength of steel to knit the nation together.

The modern industrial corporation also created a whole new class of white collar workers, as the management class burgeoned after World War I. Labor unions struggled to establish safe working conditions and living wages for legions of industrial workers. Women went to work in the mill during World War II. Especially after World War II, union strength meant steady wages, pensions, homeownership, and community stability in America's industrial cities.

As postwar competition from rebuilt Asian and European economies pressured American industrial giants, corporations fell behind in reinvestment, relying more and more on the ingenuity of production line workers to wrest production from aging machines. The decline and ultimate loss of industrial employment created anger and suffering in whole communities of workers, managers, families, and their local institutions. Now the postindustrial community seeks to work together again to expand, diversify and strengthen its economic base for the future.

B. Delivering the stories

Interpretation and education will involve the community most effectively if it makes visible connections between industry and daily life all over the community, in neighborhoods, along highways, in schools, churches, hotels, etc. Building a community-based approach to interpretation of industrial history should involve the chamber of commerce, especially, in order to set up encounters with history that link the downtown with the Steel site, that surprise people who might not come looking for a museum, and that help with job retraining and placement for displaced workers.

Signage that promotes and connects sites, supplemented perhaps by a looping radio broadcast in both Spanish and English could connect the history visible in Bethlehem with travelers on the region's highways and interstates. Illuminating the furnaces at night would restore, in a transformed way, Bethlehem's 'round the clock connection to the

working furnaces. Eye-catching coordinated industrial heritage signage throughout the region, along with lighting the furnaces, would make the connected texture of industrial history in the Mid Atlantic visible even to people only passing through along the freeways.

Education about regional industrial history could proceed most effectively at all levels from primary school to trade school to graduate programs throughout the region. It can begin at once and operate alongside efforts to acquire and adapt the Steel plant site. Spreading a coherent educational message through the schools, universities, historical societies, oral historians, libraries, websites, and other parts of the coalition, will expand the community of people who understand and treasure the gritty authentic majesty of the site itself. The driving purpose of the educational and programmatic efforts is to make tangible and moving the dense fabric of practical, cultural, economic, and personal connections that weave together communities here and many miles or many years distant from industrial Bethlehem. As the adaptive reuse of the site moves forward, the site will become increasingly the theatre for these activities, a place where people find both practical and cultural ways to relate Bethlehem's industrial history to their own lives.

Building the education components together with the educational institutions and business leaders also means mobilizing the skills in the community to create educational materials. As we accumulate the story of steelworkers, for instance, interviewees could have the chance to learn interviewing and recording skills, which would both create new employment opportunities and a workforce large enough to complete the task of interviewing the thousands of former steelworkers and steelworking families in the area. Signs and posted placards might be made by new job printing businesses or metal workers located on the Steel site. Radio broadcasts that tell the stories of industrial history could be narrated by steelworkers, staffed by college and high school interns, researched by faculty and graduate students, etc. so that each encounter not only evokes the past but also actively stimulates the recovery of the community and enhances its prospects for the future. One interesting model is Bethlehem Works' use of old gears to decorate the walkways on the site.

Goal 4: Project Partnerships

The workshop group discussed the following approaches, to be pursued separately as they become possible by the members of the coalition most directly interested in the specific outcomes. Any and all of these activities enhance and strengthen the project as a whole and move the coalition's shared goals forward.

Political mobilization:

Secure relevant legal information and **assess willingness and ability** of city and state entities to help citizens shape development.

Contact and recruit state and federal elected officials to support adaptive re-use of the site, including with appropriations through ISTEA, Urban Development Grants, steel subsidies, etc.

Secure permission and funding (in line with ArtsQuest plan) to **light the blast furnaces at night**, to make them more visible on the night sky. Vary color for seasons etc. to emphasize furnaces as iconic.

Create multi-constituency **advisory board** for this effort.

Funding:

NEH is interested in encouraging teaching about industrial boom, decline, and readjustment nationally. Might be a source of funding through Historic Bethlehem Partnership to develop educational and interpretive programs and outreach. Also could seek Teaching America's History grants for schools and curriculum development and Summer Institutes from NEH to spread the message of the new curriculum around the Lehigh Valley.

Contact NHPRC as possible funding source for archival projects.

Seek opportunities to present the project to broadly interested constituencies, like the American Institute of Architects based on the impact of structural steel on architecture, WWII veterans, especially naval veterans, whose ships and gunnery were provided by Bethlehem Steel, ethnic history societies and electrical workers and machinists unions, as well as USW. Assemble **specific projects or identify buildings specifically related to these interests** and seek multiple small donations to support developing programs.

Seek support from companies that had profitable business-to-business relationships with Bethlehem Steel Corporation.

Contact and begin cultivating foundations and donors for the effort, regionally and nationally.

Explore securing Federal ISTEAs, enterprise zone, or community development funds to support the city in undertaking the management of economic development on the site.

Examine efficacy of TIFs, earmarks, and easements to generate consistent funds to support group's work.

Community involvement:

Secure permission for **hard-hat tours of the site**, with appropriate safety precautions. Eastern State Penitentiary is model here. Charge enough to generate useful revenue for projects and compensate tour guides. Hire **steelworkers as tour guides**. Market regionally.

Reach out to Bethlehem **Spanish-speaking communities** and solicit their ideas about the future of the site, curriculum focus, educational and job training needs, etc. Have

the plan translated into Spanish and submit for publication in Spanish-language newspaper. Partner here could be South Bethlehem Historical Society and Spanish-language newspaper.

Create **radio piece or radio show** to talk about life at the Steel. Broadcast English and Spanish versions. Advertise on signs encouraging passers-through to tune in and hear the history of the sights they are seeing. Partners here could be South Bethlehem Historical Society again and the university/college radio stations.

Exploring **delivering message in an arts medium**. Existing resources include ArtsQuest—artists in residence. Touchstone Theatre program, **Many ways to deliver the story**. Uses organizing principle of layering of the interpretation. Partner here could be ArtsQuest and Touchstone Theatre group, along with historical societies, the Steelworker’s Archives project, and the SaveOurSteel Foundation

Education:

The site should include a place for the **Smithsonian industrial artifacts**, which could either be a setting like the one planned for NMIH or, with Smithsonian approval, one based on a newly-conceived approach. The museum should be developed as one resource of the overall education plan.

Integrate signage in Moravian areas, Delaware and Lehigh Corridor signage design, and Bethlehem Steel site themes to **create integrated mobile and diffused industrial history signage** throughout D & L corridor. Possible tie in to walking tours led by steelworkers, a project now under discussion between HBP and South Bethlehem Historical Society. The Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor Commission and PHMC would be central to a collaborative integrated signage initiative.

Integrate Lehigh University website, Steelworker’s Archives speaker’s bureau programs in schools and senior centers, and HBP pre-K through college hands-on school programs into core of **pervasive curriculum**. Add college and high school internships in site and program projects. Having education as an organizing principle does not mean just linking together good beginnings. Building on models used at the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, the goal would be that **every year, every student, in every discipline, should come into contact with the plan**. Serving all the superintendents up and down the corridor, as well as the colleges, the hospitality programs at the community colleges and similar educational service groups would also build allies for the site and project.

Developed March 27, 2004 at a workshop sponsored jointly by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) at Rutgers University/Camden, and the Historic Bethlehem Partnership (HBP), affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution. In addition to the sponsoring partners, participating organizations included: the City of Bethlehem, SaveOurSteel Foundation, Steelworkers’ Archives Project, South Bethlehem Historical Society, the National Museum of Industrial History project, Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, National Canal Museum, South Street Seaport Museum, and Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark.