

MARCH Conference Talk

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Where are we today with preservation, interpretation, development?

There is a desire to find meaning in the collapse of America's industrial era, and for this region in particular, the end of the steel industry, which once seemed so indestructible that its disappearance was unimaginable. You need only turn on CNN or open the local newspaper to find strong feelings voiced by many over the loss of industrial jobs and the often painful transition to a new post-industrial economy.

The massive steel plant which dominates the landscape of Bethlehem, once alive with activity and purpose, stands forlorn and silent—a sad monument to the city's industrial past. Post-industrial communities across this nation have had to wrestle with similar situations. As industry moves overseas, empty factories leave communities searching for creative ways to restore economic vitality.

Many find part of the solution in the growing business of heritage tourism. The growth of the tourism business, in a post-industrial economy, has moved away from an earlier focus on scenic tourism to one of experience-based tourism. People wish to do more than passively view and see, but now want to participate in and experience art, history and breath-taking geography. Studies have shown that visitors wish to choose a destination offering a variety of activities in which to participate (historic, art and cultural venues, sporting events, recreational and natural attractions, shopping and restaurants).

Tourists look for novelty in a landscape—what is not back at home—whereas local residents may see the same landscape and see a web of memories and social interactions. Such is the case here in Bethlehem. Many residents both locally and now far flung have a strong desire to memorialize the web of memories found in the remaining structures at the former Bethlehem steel site. At the same time, economic imperatives demand viable redevelopment take place at the site and return it to the community as a vital site of economic, social and cultural activity.

While a good portion of the former steel site is being restored to economic health, the western end of the site remains contested because it lacks a clear owner and also holds the most potent historical components with relevance for not just local history but also international, national, and regional history as well. For heritage tourism to thrive on this site, preservation is key.

As Americans we have a penchant for tossing aside the past to focus like a laser beam on the future. We are forever future-minded—it's a specifically American cultural trait. And while this tendency to look ahead rather than behind has great value—it can also lead us to make decisions based on expediency and

not necessarily value. We prefer the quick fix over the long haul and because of this we can lose what can never be replaced.

Have you ever seen pictures of Mount Vernon prior to its restoration? It was literally falling down: a virtual eyesore. Imagine if no one had stepped in to save it? Or Ellis Island? I worked there when it was a ruin on the verge of restoration. Many naysayers said it could not be restored. So many ideas were floated over a ten-plus year period. With preservice and a good fundraising strategy it was restored and the meaning it provides to our country's history is invaluable.

Most Americans visiting Ellis Island (as there are numerous foreign visitors) did not actually pass through as immigrants or are even immigrants themselves, but find a connection there to their immigrant roots and find great meaning in the stories told there.

Just as here in Bethlehem, most people who will eventually come to this site, if it is developed with a strong heritage tourism component, will not have actually worked here or be connected to anyone who worked here. Rather it is important to remember that 90% of Americans can trace their ancestry not to the nostalgic family farm but rather the urban factory. People across this nation will identify with the stories to be told here even if they spent not a second of their lives in a steel mill or connected to anyone who actually did.

It's an important point to remember as factories across our nation's landscape disappear. This integrated steel mill is the only one remaining in this country today. The only one!! Its very scale embodies more than any other industrial site the might of America's industrial heyday. Imagine if we tore it all down.

Some may ask, "Why is an historical interpretative component necessary for this site if we have a good mix of retail, restaurants, arts venues and recreational opportunities for future visitors?"

It is necessary because visitors will come to the site and wish to understand its past. An interpretative component imagines the former life of the site into being and assists visitors in interacting with the past. It is essential and without this component you might as well bake a cake without flour. It just won't work, or at the very least taste good.

I have been asked to review with you this morning where we are today with preservation, interpretation, and development. But as a good historian I must begin with a history lesson, as I strongly believe we can not hope to understand our present or imagine our future if we do not have a thorough understanding of our past. So here is an overview of the redevelopment of the former steel site beginning in 1994.

By this time BSC had slated steelmaking operations in the city for elimination. A preservationist and consultant to BSC with a strong interest in the history of Bethlehem made a proposal to the CEO at that time to save the most historically significant structures and devise a solution for their reuse. Among the possible options for redevelopment discussed at this time was a high-tech theme park tied to the history of iron & steelmaking. It was reasoned this type of attraction serving as an anchor to the site would bring in retail, entertainment and recreational investment.

At the highest levels of BSC it was agreed to explore all options for reuse of the site including preserving components for educational purposes. As demolition at the site proceeded, select buildings were preserved for a possible mixed use entertainment/educational venue.

By 1995, Disney was approached to try to gain their interest in the site. At this time they were trying to develop a history theme park called Disney's America in Manassas, Virginia and were meeting stiff resistance from a grassroots movement of local residents and numerous scholars and preservationists. The concept for the park was to take American history and distill its story to the public via themed attractions and rides. Eventually this plan was defeated and Disney withdrew from the Manassas site. They made it perfectly clear to BSC they had no interest to pursuing another American history venture.

The Disney imagineers working on the Manassas project soon left Disney to form their own design firm. BSC quickly retained this design firm to come up to Bethlehem to take a look at the western 160 acres of the Beth steel site and develop a conceptual design plan for redevelopment.

The designers dubbed the complex Bethlehem Works. It was a mixed use plan with the interpretative component of the site: a Disney-type theme park focused not on industry in general but rather the contributions of iron and steelmaking to the development of the country. Much of what has been discussed in the press and presented at public forums is this same plan with some modifications along the way.

By 1996, with the failure of luring Disney and the desire of BSC to obtain an organization with high name recognition value to the site, the SI was approached. At this time and due to a culmination of events that were affecting the SI they took an interest in moving the SI name outside of Washington DC and decided to send a high level curator up to Bethlehem to take a look at the site.

Initially it was proposed through BSC that the SI may want to use buildings at the site for collection storage or a conservation center for large-scale artifacts. Steve Lubar, chair and curator of the NMAH div of the history of technology came to Bethlehem and was very impressed with the buildings and the high-level priority given this project by BSC executives. Something that was unprecedented for dying industrial sites. The usual scenario was a group of local activists and former employees pushed for preservation of a former

industrial site. The site's owner was almost never interested in preserving the history of the site. Lubar reasoned that with BSC influence there was a good possibility that something significant could happen at the site.

After leaving Bethlehem Lubar proposed that this could finally be the place where the story of America's industrialization could be told.

The involvement of the SI shifted the focus of a planned museum considerably. What had once been a Disney-like museum focused on the story of iron and steel in building America would now be devoted to the broad spectrum of industry and how it affected the development of the nation. The original Disney concept would be retained in what would now be called the iron and steel showcase. This theme-park-like attraction would simulate the making of iron and steel using special effects but the added bonus would be the original setting.

The si argued it was critical to retain the iron & steel theme park attraction on the site in order to attract the level of attendance necessary to sustain a very large museum in a modestly sized city.

Discussions now focused on the site to house the proposed museum. Lubar of the SI preferred one of the oldest structures on the site near the blast furnaces. BSC argued for a more sizable structure, preferring No. 2 machine shop, one of the most historically significant structures on the site.

By the end of 1996 Enterprise Development Co. was retained by BSC to manage the commercial redevelopment of the site.

Between 1997 and 1998, the SI and the now named national museum of industrial history formalized their affiliation partnership. The SI affiliation program was born and plan to have NMIH as the first partner were announced to the nation.

A capital campaign started for the preview center, which was view primarily as a fundraising tool for the larger museum. It was reasoned that by building a smaller center quickly momentum for the larger venture could be sustained.

A business plan and case statement were drafted and exhibit plans for the preview center sketched out.

In 1999, the 1876 centennial artifacts were moved from Washington DC to Bethlehem. NMIH now had a significant collection of industrial artifacts on loan from the SI. In December of that year Gov. Ridge presented NMIH with a 4.5 mil check with construction set to begin on the preview center in 2000. Gov

Ridge's land recycling program, also referred to as the Brownfield Initiative, helped to make possible the conversion of industrial sites to productive use.

Since the announcement of the Bethlehem Works plan in 1997, \$13 million in state, federal and local grants have gone into lighting and roads to improve access to the site. In addition, the city of Bethlehem rezoned the Beth Steel complex from heavy industry to an industrial redevelopment district. A TIF district or tax incremental financing district was set up for the Bethlehem Works property so a portion of tax revenue from the site would go towards future infrastructure development for a specified period of time.

By 2000, the year planned for starting construction on the preview center, the economy stalled and soon thereafter BSC filed for bankruptcy. Fundraising for NMIH and Bethlehem Works redevelopment efforts slowed to a crawl as it faced an uncertain future.

With redevelopment stalled grassroots efforts to preserve the historical integrity of the site picked up.

SBHS directed their efforts to promote NMIH and make historic preservation of the site a major initiative for the society. The same year the steelworkers archives formed to preserve the history of steelworkers through archival registration. Both entities extended their hand to preservation efforts on the site, and HBP continued to support NMIH by lending professional support by overseeing the care of the SI collection.

By 2003 most of Bethlehem Steel was sold to international steel group or ISG the current owner of the Bethlehem Works site. BSC ceased to exist on New Year's Eve 2003.

ISG have continued discussions with Delaware Valley Real Estate Investment Fund (DVG) to become the new developer for the site. These discussions continue and DVG continues to express an interest in the Bethlehem works site.

More recently, NMIH has concentrated their efforts on opening the \$16 million preview center, now called Exposition Hall. Nationally recognized fundraisers, Arther and Catherine Taylor are working with NMIH to raise the \$2 million needed to begin construction on the museum. NMIH recently announced the formation of a leadership council with over 25 members from the surrounding community committed to raising the funds necessary to open Exposition Hall in the former electrical shop.

A bright spot for development on the site was the opening a few months ago of the Flyers Skate Zone and now there is talk of a possible ball park at the site.

Preservation efforts more recently have seen the Bethlehem Steel site nomination form for national historic landmark status sent to DC. Also, the site has been nominated to “America’s 11 most endangered sites’ list.

Over the last 6 months or more the volume has risen in this community and beyond on what will become of the former steel site. Though much of the property is in development on the eastern end of the site. The most historic component remains murky. Numerous articles, opinion pieces and editorials have been published in newspapers.

Public meetings have been held on the future of the site. A new grassroots group called Save Our Steel or SOS was formed. Preservationists Michael Kramer and Amy Senape have launched a website as a kind of one-stop-shopping to get the latest news on preservation efforts for the site and encourage citizen action through letter writing to elected officials.

In the last few months the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities took an interest in the site and has worked to pull various elements in the community together to develop an interpretative component that would have the site retain its historical integrity thereby paving the way for it to become a regional center for industrial heritage, providing jobs, tax revenue, and a unique identity for Bethlehem while anchoring a network of regional industrial heritage sites.

So here we are today. The story of how we arrived at this point is instructive. It informs us about decisions made early in the planning process and what forces influenced these decisions. This information allows us to ask questions about whether decisions made at an earlier time still apply to present day circumstances. It is helpful to pull from all of these tremendous efforts what will propel the preservation of the site forward and put aside what will hold it back.

Our common goal is to preserve the heart and soul of the site which lies in its rich and powerful history embodied in its most historically significant structures. Preservation efforts and commercial development of the site need to be viewed as complementary partners. One needs the other in order for the whole to survive. Each on its own will not permit this site to truly flourish.