

## Talking Proud: Telling Buffalo's Stories

A Partnership for the Public Good Innovation Lab Report  
For Open Buffalo



### TALKING PROUD

In 1978, the directors of the Buffalo Area Chamber of Commerce met in a workshop to create a five year action plan to improve the region's economic climate – in particular, to increase the number of private sector jobs. The Chamber decided that their prime strategy would be to upgrade Buffalo's image, both among its own residents and nationally. Eventually, they created a "Buffalo Image Campaign," valued at three to five million dollars, with radio, television, and print advertising.

Part of the campaign was designed to highlight Buffalo's assets, which, according to the campaign, included low cost of living, low crime rates, schools "among the best," a "gentle prevailing wind off our lake," "some of the best pollution-free air around," short commutes, cheap parking, a "unique nightlife," and "neighborhoods that pull together, stay together and are being restored and renewed together." The campaign portrayed Buffalo as America's #1



sports town, but also boasted of its 500 parks and playgrounds, 17 colleges and universities, world-renowned child heart surgery and cancer research, and low costs for housing and industrial land.

But the heart of the Buffalo Image Campaign was a slogan, “Talking Proud,” and a song by the same name. Although the lyrics were bland (“The good life that we share / With great people who care”), the melody was catchy, and when Buffalo’s sport teams began playing it at their games, it became an authentically popular local phenomenon. Residents may have laughed at the cheesy TV ad, featuring a woman high-stepping it through the city and singing the song, but they all knew the chorus and seemed to enjoy it: “Buffalo’s got the spirit – talking proud, talking proud. Listen up, and you’ll hear it – talking proud, talking proud.”

In one sense, the Talking Proud campaign was a success, a hit. People liked the song, and no doubt it did stir feelings of pride. Improving civic morale, even in ways that are hard to measure, is no mean feat. But it seems doubtful that the campaign attained its primary goals of improving Buffalo’s image in other parts of the nation and attracting new private sector jobs to Buffalo.

Even at the time, some elements of the campaign seemed laughable, including the boasts about Buffalo’s low crime, fine schools, and “pollution-free” air, and the overly defensive claims such as “We’re not having riots” and “We’re not going bankrupt.” There were unintentional ironies, too, such as the fact that an early leader of the campaign was the general manager of the Bethlehem Steel plant, which was about to lay off all of its workers and abandon its Buffalo-area plant. The “Talking Proud” song included a line about the city “growing mile by mile,” a dubious distinction. The city was sprawling mile by mile geographically, but, especially given the fact that the region’s population was starting to fall, that sprawl should have been a source of grave concern, not pride. It was not true growth, but merely suburbanization and white flight: abandoning the urban core to replace it on former farms and forests outside the city.

When artists, as opposed to advertising agencies, confront Buffalo, they tell a quite different story. Ani DiFranco grew up in Buffalo and has often written about the city in her songs. Her song, “Subdivision,” captures some of Buffalo’s most urgent problems. “White people are so scared of black people,” DiFranco writes, “they bulldoze out to the country, and put up houses on little loop-d-loop streets.” Left behind are the “boarded-up stores and the broken-down houses,” and people “lying on the cold street,” to which the city’s response is to court willful blindness and to hang colorful banners from the street lights. What will it take, DiFranco asks, “for our city to rise?” She answers, “First we admit our mistakes and then we open our eyes.” But DiFranco also makes it clear that Buffalo’s problems are not unique. In the nation as a whole, “the old farmroad’s a four-lane that leads to the mall,” and all of us, not just Buffalonians, must admit our mistakes and open our eyes before “nature succumbs to one last dumb decision / And America the beautiful is just one big subdivision.”



Carl Dennis is a Pulitzer Prize winning poet who has lived in Buffalo for many years and who often reflects on the life of the city in his poems. His poem, “Smaller,” offers a less obviously political viewpoint than DiFranco’s song, but it focuses on one of the central facts about Buffalo – that “our city is only half as populous / As it used to be . . .” Surprisingly, Dennis presents some of the advantages of living in a depopulated city, including the absence of crowds and noise, but also, most importantly, the possibility of a certain humility, a democratic openness, the chance that “You’ll be more willing to listen / Now that your city has fallen from what it was.”

Not coincidentally, DiFranco and Dennis, while achieving national recognition for their art, have also been actively engaged in battles to preserve Buffalo’s cultural heritage, including DiFranco’s multi-million dollar renovation of a downtown church facing the wrecking ball into a performance space and avant-garde art center. Their songs and poems are informed by lives spent trying to make Buffalo better and hence have a certain hard-won authenticity.

DiFranco and Dennis do not shy away from the hard truths about Buffalo’s fate, and so the stories they tell ring true. Because of their skill and passion, their stories are memorable; they seep into the local and national consciousness, shape our views, and become intellectual resources for people thinking about Buffalo and other cities. Although they are the farthest thing from boosters, in the end, DiFranco and Dennis offer reasons (including their own achievements) to take pride in Buffalo in ways more substantial than the “Talking Proud” jingle could muster.

Which stories – including songs, poems, jingles, anecdotes, and jokes – we tell about Buffalo and other cities matters a great deal. As any skilled politician knows, our worldviews are not composed of raw, individual facts, but of the stories we use to organize facts, opinions, prejudices, hazy ideas, and values into usable parts. And while telling true, value-laden, and emotive stories does not, in itself, change public policy, it is an indispensable part of any movement to win systemic change.

#### THE NATIONAL TAKE

The nation as a whole tells few stories about Buffalo – probably because the Buffalo region is relatively small, the 49<sup>th</sup> largest metropolitan area in the country. To some extent, that is a blessing. Despite its extreme levels of urban poverty and vacant housing, Buffalo has not become, like Detroit, an icon of poverty and blight. Despite high levels of segregation, Buffalo has never become famous for race riots or hate crimes. Buffalo avoided Cleveland’s stigmatic nickname, “Mistake on the Lake,” despite the fact that Buffalo, too, had a river so polluted that it once caught fire, and Buffalo, too, had local governments that the state has placed into a kind of receivership.



But if the nation has not focused too much attention on Buffalo's problems, it has focused even less on Buffalo's assets, including architecture by Wright and Sullivan; world-class modern art collections; abundant water resources; proximity to Canada; and a high concentration of colleges and universities. None of these, it seems, is splashy enough to draw national notice. Buffalo does not have the tallest building, the largest mall, the most gargantuan theme park, or any other super-sized assets except for Niagara Falls, which, although part of the same metro region, does not stick to the national consciousness as a "Buffalo" attraction. To the extent that Buffalo has a national profile, it centers on the city's snowfall, chicken wings, and sports teams.

A more nuanced story is, of course, hard to tell in the mainstream media. When Ani DiFranco was asked to perform on the David Letterman show, she proposed singing "Subdivision." The producers balked, asking her to perform something more "upbeat." When she declined, her performance was canceled (Miers).

#### BUFFALO TALKS ABOUT BUFFALO

When Buffalonians talk about their city, they do not have the option of a triumphalist narrative. It is too obvious that something went wrong in the city's development. Nor do they feel free to simply tell their own stories, whatever those might be. Such is the power of the national media culture that Buffalonians, even among themselves, often start by responding to the stereotypes, talking about snow ("it's really not that bad; we get much less than Rochester") or sports ("we were robbed!").

After responding to stereotypes, Buffalonians tell a diverse set of stories, shaped by their class, race, neighborhood, background, and values. But for several decades, one negative story achieved dominance – both in the sense that it dominated the discourse, and in the sense that it reflected the views of dominant groups. It went something like this: Buffalo is a dysfunctional mess. Its main problem is a lack of growth, or economic development, measured mainly by two factors: population loss, and a lack of visible new businesses, buildings and infrastructure. People and businesses are leaving the area like a sinking ship.

The lead villain in this myth is government – in particular, state and local government. Government has stifled growth with high taxes, union-friendly policies, burdensome regulations, and red tape. Taxes are high because government is bloated, corrupt, and inefficient, because unionized government workers receive too much pay and "lavish" benefits, and because government spends too much on welfare for the undeserving poor.

The hero is business, and the quest is to "unshackle" business (the lead campaign of the local business association was called "Unshackle Upstate"). Unshackling business means making government less union-friendly, less regulatory, smaller, and run more like a business. The



negative myth is particularly contemptuous of local elected leaders, who are viewed as childish and in need of “adult supervision” by state-appointed control boards – often led by successful businessmen.

In cruder versions of the story, there is a second villain: the “underclass,” a stereotype of the urban, low-income person of color, portrayed as criminal, lazy and uneducated. Government is resented as too partial to, or partially controlled by, the underclass, and the underclass is resented as an expensive ward of the state. Depending on who is telling the story, the solution to the problem of the underclass is punishment (get tough on crime), morality (restore the guiding role of religion in public life) or education (fix our “broken” public schools – generally by breaking the power of the teacher’s union).

In the twenty-first century, this story may seem hackneyed. It is certainly not new. Back in 1972, the president of Bethlehem Steel took out a half-page ad in the local paper to explain why he had laid off half his work force and might be closing the plant: he said the plant was “sick;” the illness was “oppressive taxes,” “unrealistic environmental control laws,” and an “uncooperative labor force” (Goldman, 293).

Today, as we will discuss, this mythology is losing its potency and being replaced by more positive stories. But it continues to resonate with a large portion of the population and to have real impacts on public policy. It has the advantage of blaming those nearest at hand. It captures the very real frustrations of dealing with local governments and paying taxes, and the fear and anger many residents feel toward people unlike them. It is simple and easy to understand. Unfortunately, it is also false and destructive.

## GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

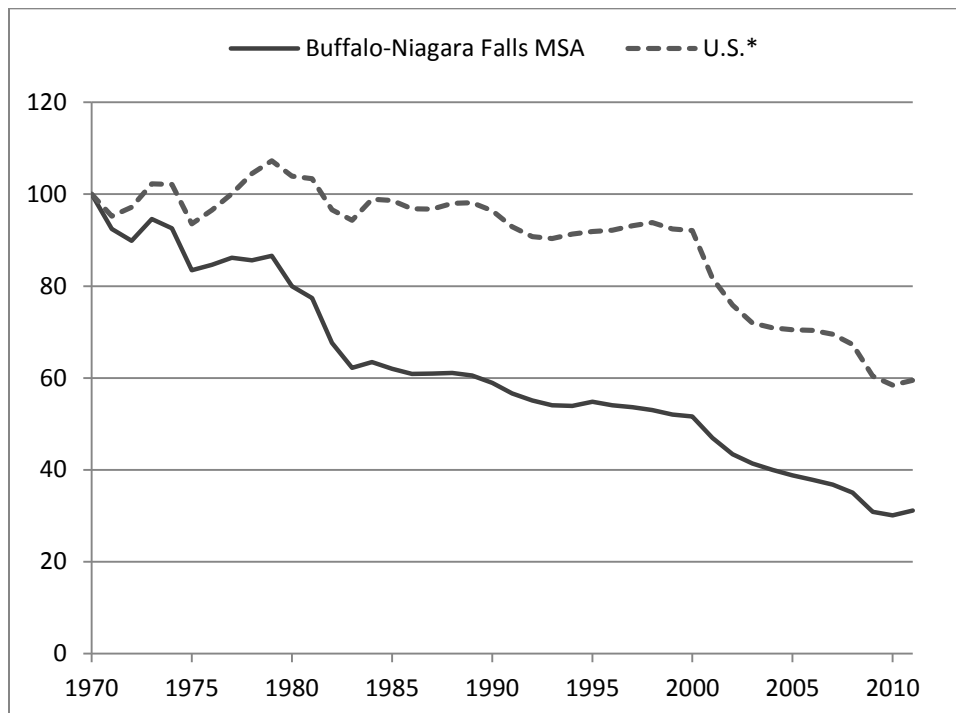
For a more accurate picture, we need to start with the historical and geographical forces that have shaped Buffalo’s fate, starting with its location. Buffalo sits at the westernmost tip of New York, where Lake Erie empties into the Niagara River. Buffalo first grew because it was the “Queen of the Lakes,” the easternmost port city of the Great Lakes, and it then boomed because of the completion in 1825 of one of the most successful public works projects in the nation’s history, the Erie Canal.



As the century wore on, however, Buffalo’s location lost its advantage. First, water and rail transportation lost dominance to trucks, cars and planes. Then, the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, giving ships a better route from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic, sounded the death knell for the commercial use of the Erie Canal.

In addition to these changes in transport, Buffalo lost manufacturing jobs for the same reasons as other Rust Belt cities: mechanization, increased competition from abroad, the transition to a more service-based economy, and the movement of manufacturers to the south and abroad. Buffalo’s manufacturing sector was hit particularly hard because it was heavily focused on heavy manufacturing such as automobiles and steel – the industries that were facing the greatest challenges from new producers and processes. While larger metros known for manufacturing, like Cleveland and Pittsburgh, were also regional service centers, with a considerable share of jobs in other sectors such as information and business services, Buffalo (roughly half their size) had, until recently, a much less diverse economy.

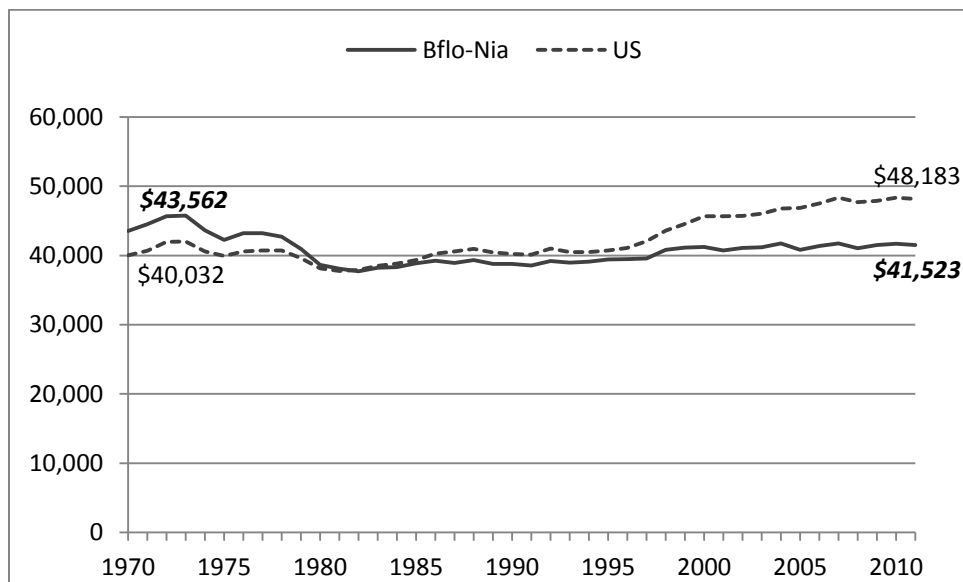
Index of **Manufacturing Employment, Buffalo-Niagara Falls MSA and the U.S.\***, 1970-2011



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Information System; Open Buffalo’s calculations.  
\* Metropolitan portion only.

As Buffalo shed manufacturing jobs from the 1970s onward, it gained jobs in the service sector. But these jobs, more often than not, were in service industries such as education and healthcare and tended to pay much less than the largely unionized manufacturing jobs they were replacing. This restructuring of the region's economy has had a severe impact on wages. In 1970, the Buffalo-Niagara metro's average wage (total wages divided by the number of workers) was \$43,562 when adjusted for inflation, about 8% higher than that of the nation as a whole. By 2011, the region's average wage had actually declined to \$41,523, which was 16% lower than the nation's average wage.

**Real Average Wage per Job,\* Buffalo-Niagara Falls MSA and the U.S., 1970-2011**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Information System; Open Buffalo's calculations.  
\*Wages are in inflation adjusted 2011 dollars.

Buffalo's past as a center for heavy industry haunts it in other ways, as well. Industrial businesses have left the regions with scores of brownfields and toxic dumps. In most cases, the big companies have failed to pay for these environmental costs and left the public to pick up the tab. While abandoned factories and train terminals can have a strange beauty, captured by many Buffalo artists, old industrial sites and infrastructure can also be ugly eyesores that dominate much of the waterfront and impede redevelopment and recreation.

Weather, too, played a big role in Buffalo's depopulation, as electrification and air-conditioning made the sunny, hot states more appealing, and an increasingly mobile population took flight. Most cold weather cities in the nation have struggled. Those that have fared better than Buffalo



have advantages that help offset the climate. For some cities, like Chicago and New York, sheer size gives them a role as regional, national, and international centers for finance and commerce. Others, like St. Paul and Boston, benefit from being state capitals, as well as from being the only large metro regions in their states. In some cold weather cities, prestigious universities generate jobs directly and indirectly and stimulate cultural vibrancy. While SUNY Buffalo is a good state school, it competes with other state schools such as Binghamton, Geneseo, and Stony Brook. Moreover, perhaps because of its many private universities, New York State has never supported public universities the way states like Minnesota and Wisconsin have.

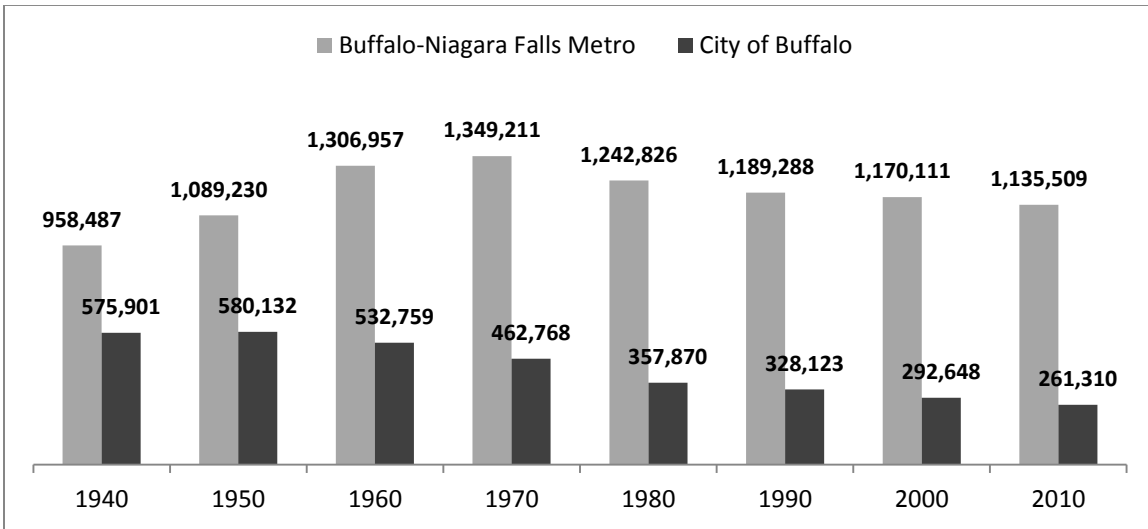


Due to their size and historical circumstances, Rust Belt cities like Cleveland and Pittsburgh have an advantage over Buffalo in corporate headquarters. Buffalo has always been more of a branch town; currently, the metro area is headquarters for only six billion dollar companies. Headquarters spawn well-paying jobs in support industries such as advertising and legal services. Just as importantly, being the home of big companies helps ensure their loyalty and keeps more of their profits in the region. When a decision is made about what plant to close, or which city to support with corporate giving, Buffalo tends to get the short end of the stick.

Philanthropic foundations also tend to be based where corporate headquarters are or were located. In Pittsburgh in 2011, the Richard King Mellon Foundation awarded \$91 million in grants; the Heinz Endowments \$66 million, and the McCune Foundation \$21 million, for a total of \$178 million. By contrast, in Buffalo that same year, the largest three foundations gave a total of only \$39 million.

In addition to its Rust Belt woes, Buffalo has suffered from problems common to almost all U.S. cities, especially suburbanization. The city of Buffalo began losing population in the early 1950s, after reaching roughly 600,000. For several decades, the metro region continued to grow, but after peaking in 1971 at 1.35 million people, the region began to shrink, falling to 1.14 million in 2010. Buffalo and Pittsburgh were the only two large metro regions in the country to lose population in the 1990s. Suburbanization is particularly troublesome in a region that is losing population: it means sprawl without growth. It means that land remains very cheap in the suburbs and exurbs, with little demographic or market pressure to keep people living in the city. As a result, the depopulation of the city is rapid and extreme.

**Total Population, Buffalo-Niagara Falls MSA and the City of Buffalo, 1940-2010**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 1940-2010

Thus, from 1950 to 2010, the city of Buffalo’s population declined by 318,822, a 55% drop, while the county population outside Buffalo increased by 365,101, or 72%. While the regional population grew by only 4.2%, the urbanized area more than tripled, from 123 square miles to 380 square miles. Buffalo’s urban population loss is extreme, but hardly unique. Between 1950 and 2010, Cleveland shrank by 57% from 914,808 to 396,816, and Pittsburgh shrank by 55% from 676,806 to 305,702. Like Buffalo, the Cleveland and Pittsburgh metros have continued to consume large tracts of land while experiencing little or no population growth. This sprawl is not just a waste of resources; it is an ecological nightmare. Research by Matthew Kahn indicates that suburban households drive 31% more miles per year than urban households of the same size and income. All the driving caused by sprawl is one of the major reasons that Erie County,

despite its depopulation and de-industrialization, suffers from poor air quality and high rates of asthma.

As the city's population plunged and poverty rates increased, vacancy and blight became highly visible and set up a vicious spiral of disinvestment and housing abandonment. From 1990 to 2010, Buffalo went from the 55<sup>th</sup> highest vacancy rate in the nation (10.2%) to ninth highest (15.7%) (Census 1990 and 2010). Like many other regions, Buffalo also suffers from severe racial inequality and segregation, ranking as the sixth most segregated metro area in the nation in 2010 (Frey). Eighty-six percent of the region's African-Americans are concentrated in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls (Census 2010). As Li Yin has reported, even within the City of Buffalo, segregation remains strong, with 85% of African-Americans living east of Main Street. While only 9% of the region's whites live in poverty, 26% of Native Americans, 26% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, 35% of African-Americans, and 40% of Hispanics live in poverty (Pastor, 48).



The Buffalo metro area still has significant wealth. The Bureau of Economic Analysis listed the region's total personal income (TPI) – all the money earned by residents in a given year – as \$45.5 billion in 2011. This TPI ranked the metro area 50<sup>th</sup> in the United States, an appropriate spot for the 49<sup>th</sup> largest metro area. However, the distribution of the region's income has grown increasingly unequal. Despite the economic turmoil of the past decade, the Buffalo metro's *per capita* personal income actually grew by 13.6% from 1999 to 2010. But, over that same period, the region's median household income shrank by 9.1%, indicating that the gains in personal income were almost exclusively at the top of the income scale (Current Population Survey). Of



course, the rise in economic inequality is a national story, not just a local one, but when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, it compounds the disadvantages of cities like Buffalo because they are home to fewer of the rich and more of the poor.

The dismantling of New York's progressive tax structure has exacerbated the inequality. Whereas in 1972, New York had 14 income tax brackets, with tax rates ranging from 2% to 15%, the state now has only five brackets, ranging from 4% to 6.85% (Mauro). In cutting the income taxes of the wealthiest, New York has pushed the tax burden onto the middle and lower classes and forced local governments to raise property and sales taxes, which are particularly regressive. The effective tax rate for New Yorkers with incomes under \$15,000 is 12.6%; for those with incomes over \$1.6 million, it is 6.5% (Deutsch).

A city like Buffalo, with high rates of poverty, disinvestment, and segregation was also particularly vulnerable to the surge in predatory practices unleashed by the de-regulation of the financial sector. Rent-to-own stores, subprime lenders, check-cashing operations, pawn shops, tax refund anticipation lenders, credit card companies and other entities involved in transferring money from the poor to the rich through abusive lending have found fertile ground in Buffalo's blighted neighborhoods (Watson and Epstein).

To summarize, Buffalo has the problems of American cities, compounded by the problems of cold-weather cities, compounded by the problems of cities that relied heavily on manufacturing, compounded by several unique historical factors, such as the obsolescence of the Erie Canal and New York State's failure to develop a premiere public university system. The role of state government in causing Buffalo's problems is relatively small, and the role of city and county government is even smaller.

But in discussing Buffalo's problems, very rarely does anyone address the impact of federal policies or the role of big business in changing the ground rules of the economy. Rarely are useful comparisons made among peer cities such as Cleveland, Toledo, Akron, Columbus, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Newark, Gary, or, even closer to home, Rochester, Syracuse, Binghamton, and Albany. Instead, a demoralizing mythology sets in: there is something uniquely wrong with Buffalo, some miasma or curse, and it adheres to our local leaders, who must be driven out, and our local governments, which must be "slashed."

## THE TRUTH ABOUT TAXES, GOVERNMENT, AND UNIONS

One keystone to the negative mythology is the frequently repeated claim is that Buffalo has among the highest property taxes in the nation. But a closer examination proves this to be false. Based on a three-year average from 2007-2009, the average household in Erie County paid about \$2,885 in property taxes per year. Compared to other counties in New York, this put Erie



on the low side of average – above Allegheny County (\$1,778), but dramatically below Westchester County (\$8,474). Compared to other counties around the nation, Erie ranked 155th in amount paid – higher than average, but hardly among the highest. The anti-tax advocates obfuscate this fact, however, by constantly citing a different, much less relevant ranking: tax as a percent of home value, in which Erie ranks 13<sup>th</sup>, because of the unusually low home values in the region (Tax Foundation).

Another important myth is that companies flee Buffalo and refuse to locate here because of the taxes. In fact, however, state and local taxes are too small a portion of a company’s costs – compared with labor, transportation, utilities, and land/rent – to drive many decisions about location. A prominent consultant who helps manufacturers choose locations uses a formula for cost factors in which taxes are 5%, utilities 17%, transport 35%, and labor 36%. This five percent figure makes sense, as corporations tend to pay only about 5% of their profits in state and local taxes (LeRoy, 52).

The negative myth states that taxes are high because city and county governments are bloated and inefficient. In fact, the City of Buffalo’s payroll shrank from 6,665 in 1972 to under 3,000 in 2003, and Buffalo and Erie County spend less per capita on government than Rochester, Syracuse and their counties (Magavern, 2003). And in the Buffalo metro as a whole, figures from the New York State Department of Labor show shrinking, not growing employment at all levels of government between 2002 and 2012.

**Government Employment, Buffalo-Niagara MSA, 2002-2012**

	2002	2012	% Change 2002-2012
Local	56,774	56,021	-1.3%
State	20,831	20,470	-1.7%
Federal	10,477	9,737	-7.1%
Total	88,082	86,288	-2.0%

Source: New York State Department of Labor



While pockets of wasteful spending still exist, they are relatively small. The City of Buffalo's budget for 2012-2013 was only \$483 million. Most of the money is spent paying the salaries and benefits of police officers, firefighters, and public works employees. The Erie County budget is about \$1 billion. Ninety percent of it is spent delivering federally and state-mandated services such as Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Child Care assistance.

Some commentators still cite the old canard that unions drive away business, in spite of evidence to the contrary in Buffalo's history. In fact, unions have proven their power to retain high quality local jobs in globally competitive industries: the world's largest General Motors engine factory is in Buffalo, as is a leading Ford Motor Company stamping plant and world class advanced manufacturing operations from metals to medical devices. A 2000 study found that unionized workplaces promoted workforce quality and productivity, high-performance workplace systems, and workforce training and development (Fleron). Local examples of labor-management cooperation have won national awards, and even played an important part in saving the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. Social unionism of the 1990s and 2000s planted seeds for the renaissance of the regional economy from the grassroots up.

Evidence has also shown that unions are a minor factor in business decisions about location. In 2012, the private sector union membership rate in the Buffalo metro, while higher than that of many areas, was only about 13.1% (Hirsch). Moreover, local labor costs are below, not above, the national average, so to the extent that Buffalo is losing jobs to places with lower labor costs, it seems likely that most of those places are overseas.

## INTERESTS, VALUES, AND PREJUDICES

Despite its inaccuracy, the negative mythology of Buffalo thrived and still persists in many quarters, largely because it suits the interests, values, and prejudices of those who control much of the conversation about Buffalo – in short, because it favors owners over workers, suburbanites over urbanites, white people over people of color. But in many cases, Buffalonians accept this story even when it is contrary to their economic self-interest. As many sociologists have noted, people tend to identify up, not down; people with moderate incomes, for example, identify more with the wealthy than with the poor. Also, many people grow to accept the mythology simply because they hear it so often and from such “mainstream” sources. The counter-narratives may not be heard at all, or may appear too “fringe” to be true.



A central value embedded in the negative myth is that success equals growth – in population, number of businesses, and highly visible new developments: subdivisions, skyscrapers, highways, and sports stadiums. As each year passes, however, growth seems a worse and worse proxy for success. Growth can be healthy, as in the growth of a tree, or unhealthy, as in the growth of a tumor. Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and other Nobel-winning economists have concluded that the growth of a nation’s gross domestic product makes a very poor measure of the quality of life that it is delivering.

In *Deep Economy*, Bill McKibben argues persuasively that if growth ever correlated directly with health, it does not anymore. He notes that in recent decades, the benefits of economic growth have gone to a small percent of the people, while the incomes of the majority have been stagnant or declining. Furthermore, the last two centuries of explosive growth have been premised on burning cheap fossil fuels – a kind of growth that now threaten us with planetary disaster. “Bigger” cities – especially in terms of geographic sprawl – are not necessarily better cities. Las Vegas boomed while Buffalo shrank; but that does not make Las Vegas a better city. Most of its growth resulted from economic cannibalism and displaced costs (i.e., casino gambling), not from any real innovation, efficiency, or improvement.

Instead of measuring cities by growth – how many people or businesses choose to locate there – we need to measure them by how good they are. A good city is one that enables good lives for its residents, and a good life is defined not simply by prosperity, but by a full range of values,



including beauty, equality, and justice. How happy are a city's residents? How healthy? How free from fear? How much access do they have to natural and cultural beauty? How justly are opportunities presented to them?

The notion that people "vote with their feet" about a city's quality is simplistic. A Buffalonian may move to Las Vegas to take a job in construction without feeling that Las Vegas is a better city. Relatively few people have the luxury to choose a city by how *good* it is – by how well it embodies their values or how high a quality of life it offers.

For businesses, the choice is similarly multi-faceted and complex, but it mostly focuses not on how good a region is, but on how much it can contribute to raising profits. Many Buffalo businesses, including Fisher Price and Trico, moved operations to the Brownsville-Matamoros border area of Texas and Mexico to take advantage of cheap labor, lax environmental and worker protection regulations, and other benefits, but few observers have ever argued that the "maquila" zone is a good place to live or work or that its cities are somehow better than Buffalo.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The negative mythology is not just wrong; it is harmful. By constantly exaggerating the local tax burden, it feeds the desire for irresponsible tax cuts that may necessitate the sudden slashing of government services. Erie County experienced a disastrous episode of this nature in the early 2000s, when the County sharply lowered property taxes and then used a series of cost shifts and gimmicks to balance its budget. When the gimmicks ran out, the County lacked the political will to raise property taxes, and the result was a wild, hastily devised series of service cuts, including the closing of 15 out of 52 public libraries.

By harping on the childishness of local governments, the negative myth also paved the way for the takeover of their finances by the State through unelected, unaccountable "control boards." In reality, the alleged fiscal "crisis" that justified putting Buffalo under a control board was caused by the State's financial problems (stemming in part from 9/11) and its abrupt decision to freeze aid to the City, not by fiscal mismanagement at the City level.

More broadly, the negative myth erodes the very notion of the public good. The public sector becomes synonymous with ineptitude and constraint, while the private sector stands for efficiency and freedom. In this atmosphere, it becomes harder to win support for investment in public goods: infrastructure, education, arts, public health, and historic preservation – those things that make the community better for all. Demoralization sets in, and when people do not take pride in a city or believe in its future, they do not care for it and invest in it.





The biggest factor in Buffalo's original economic development was a massive public works project, the Erie Canal. Currently, we face urgent needs for new public works in areas such as sewers, energy efficiency, and renewable energy, and the crumbling streets, sidewalks, and abandoned buildings of our urban core, as well as public investment in health, education, and welfare of our residents. But those types of public investment are harder to come by in an anti-government, anti-tax atmosphere.

Of course, public projects are no panacea. In many cases, instead of being economic equalizers, they favor dominant groups. In Buffalo, as in many cities, big highway projects have aided suburban commuters while tearing apart old urban neighborhoods. Route 33 cut an African-American neighborhood on the East Side apart and destroyed a historic Frederick Law Olmsted parkway, while Route 190 blighted the immigrant neighborhood on the West Side and isolated it from the Niagara River.

Public projects require a vigorous, active democracy to make sure they do not get captured by private interests. But the dominant story does not just make public projects harder to fund, it also makes them easier for private interest to capture, by promoting the trend to assign public projects to independent, public-private authorities. New York has what the state comptroller has labeled a "secret" government: over 640 authorities and subsidiaries accounting for over 93% of the state's debt and doing much of the state's business.

The negative myth tends to scorn public projects, and even attempts by government to steer development in socially beneficial directions. What it endorses as "economic development" is, by and large, the system that New York State currently practices: using independent authorities to give billions of dollars in tax subsidies, exemptions, and other benefits to individual businesses with little or no requirement that the public benefit, beyond largely unenforceable and unexamined claims of "jobs."

Many of these subsidies flow through the state's 115 Industrial Development Agencies, or IDAs. As Greg LeRoy and Allison Lack document in "Sprawling by the Lake," in Western New York these subsidies reward the most prosperous suburbs of Buffalo and promote sprawl, rather than focusing investment in the urban core. The cannibalistic nature of IDA-style economic development is illustrated starkly in Erie County, which, in addition to the Erie County IDA, has five town-based IDAs competing to lure developers and businesses with the largest subsidy packages. The most active is the IDA of the Town of Amherst – one of the wealthiest towns in the nation – which has used state and county tax dollars to subsidize speculative office parks, doctor's offices, and other forms of "development" which do nothing for the region as a whole. The Amherst IDA orchestrated what could be considered the poster child for questionable subsidies when it awarded Premier Wine and Spirits almost \$600,000 in tax breaks to move some three miles to Amherst from the adjacent Town of Tonawanda.



Thus, the dominant model of economic development turns out to be the worst kind of crony capitalism. A far cry from limited government and free markets, it spawns unaccountable governmental and quasi-governmental authorities and bureaucracies which employ countless people to give a small number of well-favored companies tax revenues that could otherwise be used to provide public goods.

## THE HIGH ROAD: TELLING DIFFERENT STORIES

Luckily, there are many other stories about Buffalo, stories in which the community has taken, or can still take, a different, higher road; and in recent years, those stories have begun to triumph over and displace the once dominant negative myth. High road economic development means making the community better – not merely, or not necessarily, bigger. Given the popularity of warm, sunny weather, and the obsolescence of the Erie Canal, perhaps Buffalo will not soon, nor ever, grow bigger, and that may be a good thing. Environmentally speaking, neither population growth nor geographic growth is desirable. But, if not bigger, Buffalo could certainly be better: less impoverished, more just, more democratic, and more sustainable.

As many Buffalonians have noted, in recent years community-based efforts to improve the city seem to have reached a new level, often spurred by new leaders who seem less tied to older, more defeatist narratives about the city. Here are just a few examples of high road success stories drawn from different sectors.

## NEIGHBORHOOD RENEWAL

A central question in cities like Buffalo is how neighborhoods can remain viable after severe disinvestment. Buffalo, like many cities, has neglected its residential neighborhoods while pursuing projects with maximum size, visibility, and utility to commuters, tourists, and businesses. Buffalo has concentrated its resources on waterfront restoration, downtown office buildings, malls, and apartments, a convention center, multiple hotels, and three sports stadiums. But in recent years residents and non-profits have succeeded in shifting some of the focus to neighborhoods. The parishioners of True Bethel church confronted a large, toxic brownfield directly across the street from their church on Buffalo's east side. Joining a dedicated cadre of neighborhood activists and environmental justice advocates, the church helped force a clean-up of the brownfield, which is now the site for affordable housing.



Meanwhile, on the city's west side, PUSH Buffalo organized residents to confront the glut of abandoned houses in their neighborhood: first by forcing a state agency that controlled many of them to relinquish control, and second by creating a Green Development Zone, in which the community has created a comprehensive plan to renew every vacant building and lot in a 25 block area in a highly sustainable manner. Already, PUSH and collaborating community groups have completed gut rehabs of 33 units in 21 buildings, with nine more units underway and recently awarded funding to rehabilitate seven more buildings and build nine new ones in the Zone. More than 20 vacant lots have been greened and turned into community gardens, rain gardens, and other amenities.

Buffalo has a passion for gardens and farms. Garden Walk Buffalo, a free annual tour of more than 350 gardens, draws some 50,000 visitors a year, making it the largest garden tour in the United States. Urban Roots, located in the resurgent West Side, is the only cooperatively owned garden store in the country. Grassroots Gardens supports over 70 community gardens across the city, occupying over 130 formerly vacant lots. Buffalo now has a very active urban farming movement, including the innovative Massachusetts Avenue Project farm, which consists of 13 reclaimed vacant lots where youth work together to grow, market and distribute organic

produce. The farm features: a 1000 gallon rain water catchment system, floral and perennial garden beds, two greenhouses, urban chickens, a vermiculture composting system, and multiple aquaponic systems raising fish and plants in a symbiotic system with over 20,000 tilapia fish.



## INFRASTRUCTURE AND PRESERVATION

Gradually Buffalo is realizing that – in a region with declining population in a world threatened by climate change – preserving and renovating our existing buildings and infrastructure is more sustainable than demolishing them and building new structures in former farmlands outside the city. One still underappreciated effort was the \$1.3 billion project to reconstruct virtually every public school in the city from 2000 to 2013, paid for almost entirely through state bonds and energy performance contracts. The brainchild of local architect David Stieglitz, this project was a gigantic achievement of historic preservation that also resulted in dramatically better learning environments for children and restored assets for neighborhoods. It also created very large number of well paying, unionized construction jobs.

Other significant victories include the preservation and restorations of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Darwin Martin House and Graycliff; Louis Sullivan’s Guaranty Building; the Lafayette Hotel, and



the H.H. Richardson psychiatric center. The Hydraulic District has been revived through a partnership between developers and preservationists, creating a new urban commercial community at Larkinville. Particularly notable, too, is the ongoing restoration of Buffalo's historic Olmsted Parks by the non-profit Olmsted Parks Conservancy. Under the Conservancy's guidance, these six historic parks now look and function better than they have in decades, and they are helping to prompt a renewed appreciation of the role of parks in civic life.

## ARTS AND CULTURE

Because Buffalo's arts and culture infrastructure developed at a time when the city was larger and more prosperous, Buffalo is a city that hits above its weight when it comes to the arts, with world class institutions like the Albright Knox Art Gallery and the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, which, in contrast to many of their peers in other cities, have found ways to weather hard times. The BPO has been recognized for its innovative and collaborative labor-management relations at a time when many cities face lock outs and strikes. The Burchfield Penny Art Center, which specializes in artists connected to Western New York, recently built a beautiful new LEED-Silver certified museum.

Equally important, though, are the countless smaller arts organizations that thrive in Buffalo, whether specializing in African-American theater (Ujima Company), free outdoor Shakespeare performances (Shakespeare in Delaware Park), or avant-garde visual and performance art (Hallwalls). Recognizing their role in public life, Buffalo's arts organizations have formed two new organizations, the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, and the Arts Services Initiative of Western New York, to advocate for the arts with shared strength.

## IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

The history of Buffalo is in large part a history of immigrants and migrants, including large influxes of Irish, Polish, Italian, African-American, Arab, and Puerto-Rican residents in search of opportunity. Buffalo's population loss in recent decades stems in large part from its failure to attract first and second-generation immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Asia. In recent years, however, two things have happened. Older groups have made great strides in preserving and celebrating their heritage, while refugees have added new diversity and hope to the City. Successes in preserving the stories of the past include the work of the Hispanic Heritage Council; the African American archives at the Merriweather Library and the museums at the Nash House and Colored Musicians Club; the play *Bread and Onions* by Joey Giambra about Italian-American experience, and the book *Against the Grain* by Timothy Bohlen, telling the history of the Irish Old First Ward.

Meanwhile, while the overall influx of immigrants has remained low, Buffalo has been one of the nation's main centers for refugee resettlement, including large numbers from Burma, Somali, Nepal, and many other nations. While facing dire poverty and extreme challenges, the refugees have brought astonishing vigor and energy to many parts of the region, especially the city's west side. Emblematic is the recent opening of the West Side Bazaar, a small business incubator featuring food, crafts, and apparel from around the world, including Rwanda, Peru, South Sudan, and Indonesia.



## SUSTAINABILITY

An iconic success in sustainability is the Steel Winds wind turbine project on the former Bethlehem Steel site, showcasing the transition to a greener economy. But Buffalo is home to many more grassroots victories as well. Two examples from the world of transit are the work of GOBike Buffalo to have the city pass and implement a complete streets ordinance leading to streets that are better and safer for bicyclists and pedestrians, and the start-up non-profit Buffalo CarShare, which has quickly grown to over 600 members, many of them people with low incomes. Car sharing has been shown to dramatically reduce pollution and to facilitate more use of public transit, biking and walking.

Small community groups have won outsized results in fighting current and past pollution. Vigorous community organizing and advocacy by the Clean Air Coalition led to something very rare in the history of the Clean Air Act: a criminal prosecution of Tonawanda Coke for spewing benzene and other carcinogens into the already polluted air of this working class suburb. The Clean Air Coalition also convinced the government that the fines levied against Tonawanda Coke

should be returned to the community and conducted a participatory budgeting effort with the community to determine how those funds should be used.



Meanwhile, Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper has grown into the region’s largest environmental group, winning many important water quality victories, including its work as the lead agency in the clean-up of the Buffalo River, which is being converted from one of the most polluted rivers in the nation into a great amenity. Riverkeeper has also persuaded the Buffalo Sewer Authority and the City of Buffalo to embrace a “green infrastructure” approach to the problem of combined sewer overflows; the City is now piloting programs to divert stormwater from the sewer system and into native plantings.

## EQUALITY

In Buffalo, as in over 150 municipalities around the country, one of the prime examples of high road economic development is the living wage movement. Buffalo’s living wage ordinance, first passed in 1999, has raised the wages of hundreds of workers employed by the City or companies contracting with the City – thanks to constant advocacy, including everything from tent-ins to litigation, to make sure the law was implemented and enforced. When advocates with the Coalition for Economic Justice learned that some 70 of the City’s sanitation workers were not



being paid a living wage, they helped to organize them. A number of workers courageously stepped forward to tell their stories and demand justice, and they won a living wage.

Grassroots advocates have also organized around the treatment of inmates and ex-offenders. When local storyteller Karima Amin began telling folk tales to inmates in local jails and prisons, she was shocked at the inhumane conditions she observed, and she founded Prisoners are People Too to educate the public, demand better conditions, and provide support to inmates and their families. Joining with allies such as Reverend Eugene Pierce, a former prison deputy superintendent and now co-chair of the Erie County Prisoners Rights Coalition, Prisoners are People Too won the creation of a Community Corrections Advisory Board to investigate conditions and gain reforms at the Erie County Holding Center.

Buffalo still has some of the sharpest racial and spatial inequalities in the nation. While the poverty rate in the metropolitan region in 2010 was 13.8% – below the national average – in the city itself, the rate was a shocking 29.6%. In other words, while the suburbs are doing better than their counterparts around the nation, the city – where African-Americans, Hispanics, immigrants and refugees, and people with disabilities are concentrated – is faring much worse. While the metropolitan average unemployment rate for whites from 2006-2010 was 5% (less than the national average for whites, which was 6%), the average unemployment rate for African-Americans in the region was 13% (compared to a national average of 11%), and for Hispanics it was 10%, compared to a national average of 8% (Pastor, 42). But while savage inequalities remain, it is clear that racial attitudes are slowly changing. An African-American group, Grassroots, has become one of the region's most potent political organizations, led by an African-American Mayor, Byron Brown, who has succeeded in capturing a significant share of the city's white vote.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The way that Buffalo talks about economic development has shifted dramatically, and that new narrative is starting to bear fruit in new policies, projects, and plans. Perhaps nowhere is the shift clearer than along Buffalo's waterfront. For decades citizens and grassroots groups have been fighting to preserve and create public access, parks, wildlife areas, and historic sites along the waterfront. Many battles have been won, resulting in amenities such as Tiff Farm, Times Beach, Wilkeson Pointe, and a highly used bicycle path. A particularly dramatic shift occurred in the development of the Inner Harbor. First, preservationists fought a plan that would have obliterated the traces of the old Erie Canal terminus and won the creation of a high-quality, restored site instead. Next, a broad coalition of citizens organized against plans to put a suburban-style mall on the waterfront, to be dominated by a huge big box retail store, Bass Pro. Incredibly, the authority in charge of the site was planning to offer Bass Pro a \$60 million





package to lure them to Buffalo. After years in which the public seemed to accept this fish story, activists succeeded in telling different stories – through rallies, public forums, white papers, legal pleadings, and organizing. The public revolted, and the authority has adopted a set of high road economic development principles including living wages, local hires, green design, and priorities for local businesses.

## OPEN BUFFALO

Building on these successes is a new civic initiative called Open Buffalo, which will continue Buffalo’s progress toward equality, justice, and democracy through grass roots organizing, innovative policy research and development, and arts and cultural ferment. Open Buffalo began when the Open Society Foundations asked four local non-profits (Coalition for Economic Justice, Partnership for the Public Good, PUSH, and VOICE-Buffalo) to collaborate in a nationwide competitive process. Open Buffalo was one of only three cities in the nation to win funding, and it is now underway. In addition to its substantive goals to win reforms in areas such as equal justice, economic development, worker equity, and open government, Open Buffalo aims to build Buffalo’s civic capacity by engaging residents, training leaders, studying best practices, and partnering with arts organizations to change the stories Buffalo tells about equity and about itself.

## HOW ARE HIGH ROAD STORIES TOLD?

Part of the genius of the once-dominant myth about Buffalo is the way it disguises dominance. Because it is “anti-government,” it manages to portray itself as rebellious and anti-status-quo. Business asks to be “unshackled” from government as if it were enslaved, despite the fact that it exerts impressive control over government through campaign donations, informal networks of power, public-private authorities, and media ownership and influence. As the establishment line promoted by the local business organization and daily newspaper, and yet also the anti-establishment line promoted by angry talk show hosts and callers, the negative mythology was able to crowd out alternatives.

And yet high road stories survive and even thrive. Churches, by spreading messages like the social gospel and by building their own community development corporations and other forms of social infrastructure, help keep a focus on justice and equality, rather than just “growth.” The labor movement, however diminished in some sectors, remains vibrant in others and a prime transmitter of alternative histories of work and economic development. The alternative press plays a key role in Buffalo, particularly since, as in so many cities, Buffalo now has only one daily paper, owned by an out-of-town company. Neighborhood-focused papers, culturally focused



papers such as the Challenger, the Criterion, and Panorama Hispano, alternative weeklies like Artvoice, and blogs and other media offer crucial avenues for high road stories to get told and debated. Talking Leaves, a long-standing independent bookstore, features progressive books, hosts author readings, showcases local authors, and serves as an invaluable cultural and informational resource. A new non-profit, Investigative Post, offers the type of detailed investigative reporting that has shrunk in The Buffalo News.

Academics have the freedom and resources to write about high road economic development and to tell alternative stories. The main audience for their publications, however, is the faculty at other universities – the editors of scholarly journals and university presses – rather than the communities in which they are based. Furthermore, most academics live in a region where they did not grow up, and universities often do a poor job connecting their faculty with local communities and community groups. But in Buffalo, many academics have found ways to engage in locally based research, writing, service, and advocacy, and their efforts have often proved transformative.

Founded in 2008, the Partnership for the Public Good has tapped a hunger among Buffalonians for the chance to hear and tell stories that offer hard truths – Buffalo is one of the most unequal regions in the nation – and real hope – Buffalo has found high road strategies that make a dramatic impact. Within a few years, over 170 organizations have signed on as PPG partners, ranging from small block clubs on Buffalo's East Side to large non-profits like Catholic Charities, from arts groups like Ujima Theater to environmental groups like Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper. These groups do not agree on everything, but they see the power in unity, and each year they vote on a Community Agenda, forming their top ten policy priorities for the coming year. Working with faculty and students from local universities and Cornell University ILR School, PPG has generated hundreds of reports, policy briefs, and fact sheets to advance those Community Agendas and to analyze and document Buffalo's battle for the High Road.

But perhaps most enduring of all are the stories told by artists. In Buffalo, photographs by Milton Rogovin, plays by Manny Fried, poems by Carl Dennis, raps by Billy Drease Williams, installations by Jacqueline Tarry and Brad McCullough, and songs by Ani DiFranco are an indispensable part of the high road saga. While, to be artistically successful, these stories must avoid didacticism and embrace mystery, complexity, and ambiguity, for that very reason they are essential in any effort to truly – which means tentatively, provisionally, and democratically – understand a city and its people.



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