

*“One might say that while a site represents the constituent physical properties of place—its mass, space, light, duration, location, and material processes—a place represents the practical, social, cultural, ceremonial, ethnic, economic, political and historical dimensions of a site. Places are what fill them out and make them work.”*

—Jeff Kelley quoted in Mapping the Terrain, Lacy, S., ed. (1995)

## **Project Philosophy**

"Ample Opportunity: A Community Dialogue" is an experiment in public discourse. A post-industrial brownfield property (which is under consideration for development) is the subject of the conversation. As we monitored the discussion, we observed that while a significant team of private housing specialists was focused upon housing development, no one was paying attention to the recommended open space component. No funds were being expended to assess, test, model or plan the open space. The context is a 360 acre tract of slag-filled valley bisected by the remnants of an urban stream flowing from a major city park, to its mouth on the Monongahela River. It was clear to us, however, that Nine Mile Run would provide an opportunity to consider the meaning and function of post-industrial public space. The primary goal of this year's efforts is to explore the potential for an issues-based public discussion that would produce a motivated and informed constituency prepared to participate in public decision-making about open space opportunities at Nine Mile Run.

The question we are asked time and time again is how artists became involved in a research program focusing on the reclamation of post-industrial brownfield properties. Brownfields are a subject area which some individuals regard as better suited to engineers, economists, and public policy analysts who have been on the forefront



Looking at aquatic organisms with  
Dr. Mary Kostalos, Chatham College

of solving the brownfields problem. We came to this project with an awareness of the interdisciplinary complexity of our endeavor. We also came to it aware of what was missing from the discussion—an analysis of the open space opportunity. Kirk Savage's paper, "Art, Science and Ecological Inquiry: The Case of 19th-Century American Landscape Painting" (which follows) provides the historic context of artists considering landscapes, using the tools and concepts of science and ecology to inform their inquiry. The Nine Mile Run Greenway Project (NMR-GP) team is also considering landscape; our concept of reclamation is informed by some of the current ideas in systems/restoration ecology. Our program method is informed by theoretical ideas in the arts and philosophy, as well as by some practical examples from early brownfields reclamation. We will outline some of the precedents for our approach in the following paragraphs as an introduction to this report.

The unifying theory of the NMR-GP is reclamation as an integrated ecosystem restoration that embraces the complex goal of "nature" in the context of contemporary urban culture. The latest issue of *Society for Ecological Restoration* reflects this interdisciplinary complexity, "restoration practices which hold firm to ecological fidelity and embrace social and cultural goals are much more likely to prosper and endure."<sup>1</sup> A.D. Bradshaw, a restoration biologist involved in the reclamation of the Sudbury region of Canada comments, "The primary goal of restoration is an aesthetic one—to restore the visible environmental quality of the area."<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw also outlines specific scientific methods for ecological restoration: soil-chemical balance, initial vegetative stability and long-term biodiversity. It is quite clear from the preceding statements that these scientific methods are operating within a set of cultural options. Do we identify the "original condition" and return our brownfields to that standard? At Nine Mile Run, the question of original condition is answered by millions of tons of slag dumped upon a broad floodplain. We need to work within the community to identify a socially acceptable solution that is economic, aesthetically rich, and ecologically sound. We must define what nature means within the context of our urban community. The immediately adjacent model is Frick Park. The NMR-GP would suggest that the baseline for our work is circumscribed in the flora, fauna, soils, and the remnant natural hydrology we see in Frick Park. The starting point and comparative bio-data can be found in the variation of plant succession that is occurring on the slag and shale slopes of the property today.

The integration of the reclamation into the social fabric of the community is essential. The previously mentioned Sudbury project is an interesting model to examine in this respect. The topography and soils of the damaged property were judged unsuitable for mechanical reclamation. At the same time, the community was devastated by the social and economic factors of post-industrial life. Working with a technical committee of industry, academia, non-profits, and municipal government, the Sudbury community was able to outline a program for reclamation, revegetation, and test sites were begun. Meanwhile, funds were obtained to hire a significant portion of the unemployed populace in the reclamation program. The program ultimately employed three thousand individuals over a 15-year period. In the process they reclaimed 480 square miles, planting grasses and 1,692,000 trees.<sup>3</sup>

How do we reclaim portions of our brownfield sites to restore the

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<sup>1</sup>Higgs, E., (1997) "What is Good Ecological Restoration?", excerpts from an article originally published in the *Journal of Conservation Biology*. Society for Ecological Restoration News, Vol. 10 No. 2-1997.

<sup>2</sup>Bradshaw, A.D., (1995) "Goals of Restoration", published in "Restoration and Recovery of an Industrial Region" Ed., Gunn, J.M., Springer-Verlag N.Y. Inc.

<sup>3</sup>Lautenbach, W.E., Miller, J., Beckett, J., Negusanti, J.J., Winterhalder, K., (1995) "Municipal Land Restoration Program: The Regreening Process", published in "Restoration and Recovery of an Industrial Region" Ed., Gunn, J.M., Springer-Verlag N.Y. Inc.

<sup>4</sup>McDonough, W., (1992) "The Hannover Principles", published electronically at, [http://minerva.acc.Virginia.EDU/~arch/pub/hannover\\_list.html](http://minerva.acc.Virginia.EDU/~arch/pub/hannover_list.html)

ecological function to our cities? How do we "build in" a sustainability that will allow these natural interventions in the urban landscape to endure the changes in politics, economics, and adjacent environments? How do we manufacture land stewardship in a community that was weaned on the extraction of resources? How do we learn to "recognize the interdependence of humanity and nature, to treat nature as a model and mentor, rather than an inconvenience to be used, evaded or controlled?"<sup>4</sup> These questions begin to circumscribe our challenge and the evolving meaning of nature in an urban setting.

Another important theoretical foundation can be found in our artistic intent which is informed by evolving contemporary ideas of socially based art practice and the last 30 years of reclamation art. Our process is rooted in ideas of reconstructive postmodern practice. The attempt is to move the dominant model of humans in opposition to nature toward a more integrated aesthetic of interconnectedness, social responsibility, and ecological attunement.<sup>5</sup> This paradigm shift is also described in the context of evolving artist media and expanding public practice, as new genre-public art. Suzanne Lacy clarifies this approach, "new genre-public art-visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives—is based on engagement."<sup>6</sup> The history of this work is rooted in some of the early ideas of "social sculpture" developed by the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). "He sets out from the premise that although great and definitive signals have emerged from the traditional concept of art, the great majority of human beings have remained untouched by this signal quality." Social art, or social sculpture, Beuys believed, is art that sets out to encompass more than just physical material. "We need a foundation of social art, on which every individual experiences and recognizes himself as a creative being and as a participant in shaping and defining the world. Everyone is an artist."<sup>7</sup>

Reclamation Art, is a term used in an electronic document examining "artworks proposed or constructed by contemporary artists as a means to reclaim landscapes that have been damaged by human activities."<sup>8</sup> This type of artwork goes back as far as the '60s when a significant number of artists moved outside their studios and galleries in a movement known as Earthwork. Initial work in the field, relative to reclamation art practice, was done by Robert Smithson who actively searched out industrial land users for collaboration on his projects which explored formal/sculptural reclamation solutions to strip mine sites, slag piles, etc.<sup>9</sup> Another important artist with a more ecologically integrated approach would be Allan Sonfist, who actively "reclaimed" the native vegetation of New York City in a public park/art work begun in 1965. This "Time Landscape," as it is known, is still flourishing at Houston and La Guardia Place in New York City.<sup>10</sup> Numerous artists have followed this path of contemporary practice. Common names in the field include: Helen and Newton Harrison, Agnes Denes, Donna Henes and Buster Simpson.

Municipalities have also recognized the value of reclamation artists. In 1979, the city of Kent, Washington brought in a team of artists to consider various quarry and dumping sites, resulting in two celebrated works. Robert Morris created an elegy to the industrial use, while Herbert Bayer created a "sculpted" park which is more integrated into the community. In 1990, the meaning of reclamation art was debated at



The Nine Mile Run team participated in *Art and Nature*, an international overview of ecological artwork curated by Patricia Watts, at the Rico Gallery in Santa Monica, California in January 1998.

Exhibition design by: Bob Bingham, Tim Collins and Reiko Goto.

<sup>5</sup>Gabelik, S., (1991) "The Reenchantment of Art." Thames and Hudson, 500 Fifth Avenue, NY, NY.

<sup>6</sup>Lacy, S., (1995) "Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art." Bay Press, Seattle, WA.

<sup>7</sup>Stachelhaus, H., (1987) "Joseph Beuys." Abbeville Press, 488 Madison Avenue. NY, NY.

<sup>8</sup>Frost-Kumpf, H.A., (1995) "Reclamation Art: Restoring and Commemorating Blighted Landscapes" Published electronically on the Pennsylvania State University, Geography Department server. <http://www.geog.psu.edu/Frost/Frost/HTML/FrostTop.html>

<sup>9</sup>Hobbs, R., with contributions by: Alloway, L., Coplans, J., Lippard, L., (1981) "Robert Smithson: Sculpture." Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, London, England.

<sup>10</sup>Oakes, B., (1995) "Sculpting with the Environment." Van Nostrand Reinhold, NY, NY.



A mixture of citizens, academics, professionals, state representatives and children attended the tours.

the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The NEA awarded, rescinded, and then reinstated funding for "Revival Fields." Artist Mel Chin, had developed the project proposal in collaboration with USDA agronomist, Rufus L. Chaney. This is an art-science work that explores how plants can safely remove metals and materials from contaminated soils. Chin sees his work in two forms: as a formal planting on the landscape and as a complex series of "systemic sculptures" that occur as the plants and roots act on the contaminants in the soil. An interesting component of the "Revival Field" is that it has traveled to a variety of highly contaminated sites around the country and recently to Europe. The integrated work has been used as a tool to acquaint new populations with the relationships and concepts of bio-remediation aesthetics.

The final theoretical approach is defined as "Community Dialogue." Our process is based on the philosophy and ideals of democratic empowerment through discourse. We are a culture that has fractured the complex experiences and understanding of life into specific disciplines and independent specialties. (In other words, the quantitative evaluation of experts has taken precedence over the layman's ability to use experience and general qualitative analysis as a method of making decisions.) We have learned to leave our decisions in the hands of experts, yet at the same time we have learned to mistrust those experts depending on who is paying for their opinion. The NMR-GP team would argue that brownfield sites provide an ideal environment to "reclaim" the individual's role in the discursive public sphere. We need to reclaim our relationship to complex public issues. The enormous potential for significant changes in thinking about urban development, public space, ecology, and sustainability make brownfield properties ideal subjects for democratic discourse. The real and perceived contamination issues surrounding most brownfield sites suggests that informed public discourse is a prerequisite for brownfield development. Recent brownfield literature identifies community involvement as an essential component of brownfield development.<sup>11</sup> The NMR-GP *Ample Opportunity* program has used academic, municipal, and private resources to enable and inform the public discussion.

Jurgen Habermas, author of a groundbreaking work on the historic evolution of the public sphere,<sup>12</sup> suggests the autonomous self emerges and democracy is enabled by participation in the discursive context (public discussion). "Participation develops an individual's capacities for practical reasoning, as well as the kind of mutual respect ...entailed in the very possibility of discourse."<sup>13</sup> This notion of autonomous self or "public man" has been suggested by some theorists to be a psychological function of humanity increasingly lost to modern culture.<sup>14</sup> We attempted to devise a program that would provide context, method, and opportunity to explore the function of public discourse in relationship to Nine Mile Run. We see this public discussion as an important precursor to the spatial development of a greenway and its goal of sustainable stewardship. To accomplish this, we needed to re-orient the position of the expert in relationship to the community. Our process was to enable interdisciplinary discussion, by which we clarified the issues and language that permeate the "expert" discipline specific discussions. With this new public language (freed of

<sup>11</sup>Pepper, E., (1997) "Lessons From the Field, Unlocking Economic Potential with an Environmental Key" Northeast-Midwest Institute, Washington D.C.

<sup>12</sup>Habermas, J., (1962) "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" Translated by Burger, H. (1989) MIT Press, Cambridge Mass.

<sup>13</sup>Warren, M. "The Self in Discursive Democracy", published in; "The Cambridge Companion to Habermas", White, S.K., ed.. Cambridge University Press, N.Y., N.Y.

<sup>14</sup>Sennett, R., (1972) "The Fall of Public Man" W.W. Norton and Co. 500 Fifth Avenue, N.Y., N.Y.

jargon) we then devised a series of workshops, tours, and public discussions in which we manipulated the normal client-expert relationship. We tried to provide the information tools to help the public understand the complexity of the issues and then devised events where the experts and the public could interact on a basis of shared interests. The reclamation of urban, post-industrial or brownfield sites provides an enormous cultural challenge and opportunity. The industrial revolution was an economic, cultural, and environmental revolution, a revolution of both the public and private realm. Privately: fortunes were made, families had jobs, and made a living. Publicly: museums, libraries and schools were built, parks were donated, unions struggled with the industrialists, the environment suffered and public access to our rivers was lost.

We have the chance to reconsider the forces that created post-industrial brownfield properties and how we can better integrate production goals with environmental health and quality. We have the chance to reconsider the role of public space and waterfront access. We have the opportunity to reconsider the split between nature and culture, how the city has come to mean "no nature" and how the perception of natural places is defined by a lack of human culture. In the words of William McDonough, "Imagine a world full of hope and promise, where we measure our positive progress and celebrate the fecundity of our creative imaginations. In a world perceived to be reaching its critical limits we are now asking not how few songbirds we will leave in the world for our children to enjoy, but how many."



Fourth and fifth grade children from Homewood Montessori School came to Nine Mile Run for a tour.