



Fellows in Focus: The Mon Wharf Landing

The purpose of the Fellows in Focus series is to cover project milestones or policy issues of principal importance to CED's partner organizations that at the same time provide instructive examples for Heinz students interested in careers in economic development.

On a cold grey Monday morning in November, Congressman Mike Doyle, Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato, Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers, PennDOT, and Point State Park University joined Riverlife's Executive Director Lisa Schroeder for a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the grand opening of the newly renovated Mon Wharf Landing. The event, attended by a hundred spectators (an eclectic mix of local public officials, community development professionals, Bike Pittsburgh members, and the media) marked the transformation of a row of parking spaces into an attractive park along the water's edge - a major milestone in Riverlife's ongoing mission to release the full potential of Pittsburgh's shorelines from history's grip.

From the rise of "Big Steel" in the 19th Century, until its collapse in the 80s, the rivers and shorelines of Pittsburgh and the Mon Valley served an increasingly narrow set of industrial functions. A growing of network of mills, plants, and rail lines physically cut off city residents from easy access to river, and discouraged the development of riverfront land for other uses. This was just as well, since in addition to serving as a means of transporting industrial goods, Pittsburgh's rivers also served as a preferred method of disposing of industrial and residential waste.

This pattern of use and abuse was partially disrupted by the early efforts of Renaissance I, Pittsburgh's first period of broad public private cooperation, which reclaimed the land where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet from Pittsburgh's central business district for what is now Point State Park, took steps to control the flooding of riverfront property, and improved the collection and treatment of sewage. While these steps were positive, Renaissance's I efforts to expand office space in the Golden Triangle also resulted in the placement of highways and parking along the shorelines. These barriers also severed downtown life from the water, reserving some of the city's best views of the river for "empty cars in vast parking lots".

Industry's creeping occupation of the riverfront came to a halt with the collapse of the steel industry in the 80s. Within a decade ten plants and industrial complexes shut down, including sites along the river in Hazelwood, the Southside, Rankin, Duquesne, and Homestead. Instead of hosting economic drivers, Pittsburgh's shores were now saddled with silent industrial hulks that had outlived their economic purpose, but remained no less effective in separating residents from rivers. Finding the next best use for these brownfields became a major focus of Pittsburgh's efforts to rise from the collapse. By the 90s Jones and Laughlin's Pittsburgh Works along the north shore of the Mon was cleared, remediated, and transformed into Pittsburgh Technology Center, an office park that now houses high tech firms, university research centers, and business incubators such as the Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse. By 1999, U.S. Steel's Homestead Works was replaced by the Waterfront, a major open air mall. By 2002, the Jones and Laughlin site was transformed into the South Side Works, a major mixed use development combining open air retail, entertainment, office space, and a residential complex. While millions of public and private dollars were invested in repurposing these industrial sites, early on the potential of the rest of Pittsburgh's shorelines, although generally recognized, were comparatively neglected.

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Jones and Laughlin steel mills on each side of the Monongahela River c1951. The shore on the left is now a technology park, while the right shore is now the home of the South Side Works.
Source: Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

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A broad discussion of “what to do about the riverfront” first bubbled up in the early 80s and eventually led to a series of reports in the late 80s and early 90s, including the City’s first riverfront plan; however these did not immediately lead to much in the way of systematic change. This was perhaps best exemplified by the decision in to locate the new jail along the river near the Bluffs, turning over a spectacular view of the river over to Allegheny County’s Most Wanted. The Friends of the Riverfront, an influential civic group, were among

the first in the 90s to move from words to action, initially by organizing river clean up events, and eventually by advocating and securing funding for the planning and development of a riverfront trail system. Then with the election of Tom Murphy in 1993, riverfront development finally became a primary concern of the mayor’s office.

In 1999 Murphy convened a group of community leaders, business owners, environmentalists, and designers into the Riverlife Taskforce, and charged it with the creation of a vision and master plan for the city’s rivers and shorelines. The taskforce evolved into an independent non-profit (now named Riverlife) in 2000, and in

2001 released “A Vision Plan for Pittsburgh’s Riverfronts.” At the centerpiece of this plan was Three Rivers Park, a concept for a grand, urban-scale riverfront park in the heart of Pittsburgh to be completed piece by piece. Since the publication of “A Vision Plan”, Riverlife has sought to bring Three Rivers Park into a reality by developing and driving projects such as the recent renovations of Point State Park, and supporting other efforts sponsored by its public and private partners, including capital and trail enhancement projects for the Convention Center riverfront park, the North and South Shore riverfront parks, and Station Square Landing. Riverlife has also become an advocate for environmental preservation and high quality design in riverfront development, as demonstrated by its vocal opposition to the initial design of a ten story parking garage for the Rivers Casino on the North Side.

Flash forward to the Mon Wharf Landing, a three million dollar project spearheaded by Riverlife, and made possible in part through funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, PennDOT, The K. Mabis McKenna Foundation, The Heinz Endowments and The Richard King Mellon Foundation. Designed by LaQuatra Bonci Associates with construction overseen by Clearwater Associates, the new park features a promenade suitable for pedestrians and cyclists along two thousand feet of shoreline. The design includes new lighting fixtures, benches, and steps suitable for kayakers and other boaters, and a landscaped berm that features native trees and plants selected to provide “a splash of color” throughout the seasons. The landing also houses water connections for high powered hoses to wash away silt and debris from the inevitable occasional flooding. A walk along the promenade now treats one to a new and striking view of Mt. Washington and Station Square, even while the landing itself brightens the already spectacular views of the city as seen from such points as Station Square, or Grandview Avenue on Mt. Washington. It’s an impressive start, but Riverlife has more in store for the landing, including a switchback to connect it to the Smithfield Street Bridge and Eliza Furnace Trail, and eventually a cantilevered over water connection to Point State Park to finally connect the park to the Landing, the Three Rivers Heritage Trail System, and the Great Allegheny Passage, a major goal of the “Vision Plan.”



Concept drawing for renovation of Point State Park

A walk along the promenade now treats one to a new and striking view of Mt. Washington and Station Square... It’s an impressive start.



The Landing Takes Shape
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Lisa Schroeder helped shape that plan as the assistant director of the original taskforce, and as executive director of Riverlife she, her staff, and her public and private partners are helping to turn Three Rivers Park into a reality. Last fall she joined the Heinz College's Center for Economic Development as a Fellow, and recently sat down with CED's Greg Lagana to talk about riverfront development.



Lisa Schroeder

Greg Lagana: So, if I were a student interested in economic development, riverfront development would definitely pique my interest. It seems to be a really dynamic area because it can cut across so many "types" of development, can involve multiple administrative authorities, and (if done right) can confer such a nice variety of economic and social benefits. Just off the top of my head it seems like any given project might involve recreational amenities, scenic amenities, residential development (ex: Herr's Island), commercial development, tourism, historic landmarks, entertainment districts, sports stadiums, environmental preservation, brownfields reclamation, flood control, storm water management, maritime management, fish and wildlife management – am I forgetting anything?

Lisa Schroeder: Nicely done! You've done a great job pointing out how riverfront reclamation ties into so many different aspects of life for a river city like Pittsburgh. Quality riverfronts equal a high quality of life for the people who enjoy them. At Riverlife we emphasize not only the environmental benefits of responsible riverfront development, but also the economic and recreational benefits to the city and our visitors. Because the rivers affect so many people in so many different ways, it really does take a holistic approach to address all the various factors. We're very proud of the public process that shaped Riverlife's vision, and the input and hard work of countless community leaders, experts, engineers and everyday citizens.

GL: And yet each project is different...

LS: Absolutely. The needs of a mixed retail/residential project like SouthSide Works are going to be different than the needs of a riverfront state green space like Point State Park. We are sensitive to how people use each space differently. However, we also recognize that there are universal principles for each riverfront parcel that will maximize usage, aesthetics, environmental mitigation and more. That's why Riverlife developed the Design Handbook for Three Rivers Park. We're pleased to be the keepers of the vision for an integrated riverfront park that is unlike anything else in the world.

GL: So in theory, this seems extremely exciting! How about in practice?

LS: As you can imagine, reclaiming riverfront parcels for these types of projects can be complicated. It's often a marathon rather than a sprint—there's been a long-held perception that we should use our riverfronts for industry; that we should stay away from them because they're dirty or unsafe. Those perceptions are changing, and riverfront stakeholders are realizing what an asset our rivers are. That awareness is helping Riverlife make significant progress in the completion of Three Rivers Park, which is what we call the 13 mile stretch of interconnected riverfront spaces along the Golden Triangle downtown. It's amazing to think that over a relatively short ten years, Three Rivers Park is almost 70% completed when virtually none of it existed in 1999. So yes, it is extremely exciting in practice, and it's exciting to see property owners, city officials and developers embrace the overall concept.

GL: Pittsburgh has a good track record of successful public private partnerships going back to Renaissance I. For the uninitiated, what exactly does forging cooperation around riverfront projects entail? For example, what were some of the challenges with the Mon Wharf?

LS: The Mon Wharf has been a fascinating case study of how public private partnerships can create something wonderful. One of Riverlife's specialties is bringing together the right partners for these types of projects. In this case, we worked closely with the City and the Pittsburgh Parking Authority to assess the opportunities at the Wharf. As you know, that parcel of land had been used as a parking lot for many, many years. We needed to be sensitive to the needs of the commuters while also advancing a flood-resistant park and trail that would change the face of that particular stretch of land. We worked with LaQuatra Bonci and Clearwater Associates to design a solution that would provide the much-needed riverfront trail and park while minimizing the loss of parking spaces.

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“This year we celebrate our 10th anniversary, and it’s a wonderful opportunity to look back at the transformation of Pittsburgh’s riverfronts while also discussing the next ten years.”

On the funding side, we brought together some really great partners while also lending our own expertise and support to the project. The \$3 million Mon Wharf transformation is a reality because of the leadership of many different funders—public support, foundational support, and leadership from champions like U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle. It’s truly a Pittsburgh type of effort when everyone comes together to make something like this happen. Riverlife is proud to be a matchmaker of sorts with efforts like these.

GL: What drew you into this field?

LS: Growing up in Baltimore, I developed a deep love for cities. The transformation of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor was inspirational, and I saw first-hand how riverfront reclamation could lead to marvelous possibilities. Since then I’ve been fascinated with working to improve quality of life through downtown urban planning, historic preservation and environmental conservation.

GL: If I were a student interested in this area, what courses, skills, or topics would be good to learn about?

LS: This area covers so many different disciplines and there are many ways that students can enter into the field. Urban planning, design, architecture, environmental science—those are all valuable disciplines for this line of work. But nonprofit organizers, community development leaders, active neighbors and other similar folks also do a lot in advancing this type of work. We’re talking about quality of life issues here, so anyone who has an interest in making their city or town a better place is on the right track.

GL: What’s next for Riverlife?

LS: This year we celebrate our 10th anniversary, and it’s a wonderful opportunity to look back at the transformation of Pittsburgh’s riverfronts while also discussing the next ten years. There are several large projects along the Allegheny and Ohio coming online soon which will move Three Rivers Park even closer to completion. That’s very exciting. We also want to continue the conversation about environmental mitigation in regards to water quality and stormwater management. Western Pennsylvania could easily be called “the water belt” because water is one of our richest natural resources. However, we have to be more aware of how we deal with stormwater runoff and how it affects our rivers and overtaxed sewers. As we celebrate our progress as a city, we also need to be very clear eyed about the environmental challenges that still face our region. It’s a difficult battle but we are making significant progress in raising awareness and finding solutions.

GL: Thanks for the interview, and thanks also for coming out to engage our students last fall, they appreciated it!

LS: Thank you, Greg. It’s been a pleasure to be involved with your students. I predict we’ll see the next generation of riverfront leaders among their ranks!

Next year new articles for the Fellows in Focus series will be authored by second year Heinz College students. Interested students should contact Greg Lagana at glagana@andrew.cmu.edu.

Sources

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Images

Design drawings of the Mon Wharf Landing and Point State Park courtesy of Riverlife.

Photo of Mon Wharf Landing construction by Darrell Sapp, Pittsburgh Post Gazette, Nov 17, 2009, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09321/1014019-155.stm>. Used with permission of the Post-Gazette.

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