

4-1-1991

Epilogue: Moving Towards Groundbreaking

Michael H. Frisch
University at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview>



Part of the [Law and Economics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael H. Frisch, *Epilogue: Moving Towards Groundbreaking*, 39 Buff. L. Rev. 607 (1991).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/buffalolawreview/vol39/iss2/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Law Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

Epilogue: Moving Towards Groundbreaking

MICHAEL H. FRISCH*

THE title of this conference places the terms change and community in tandem, but leaves unposed and unanswered the implicit next question: “Change and community: what about them?” This open-endedness was not accidental: the conference did not intend to focus on particular changes or precise prescriptions for Buffalo or for cities more generally. Rather, the conference hoped to begin building the understandings on which communities in cities like Buffalo—and the city itself as a complex of communities—can come to see change as something they can participate in shaping and directing, rather than as something that happens “to” them and to which they can then only react and respond.

Most participants seem to have judged the conference successful: it produced a consensus on the urgent need for new approaches; some intense discussion of the problems making for this urgency—problems in the city, and in the way policy has approached improving it; and a diversity of voices and perspectives calling for inclusion in the fashioning of new understandings. But most would also admit a certain frustration despite (or perhaps because of) the excitement of open communication: the conference encountered several preliminary obstacles making it unrealistic to expect we could move easily from identifying problems to imagining the new approaches or processes through which change could be generated and directed. These stumbling blocks are worth some discussion as a way to frame this epilogue: I will argue that they can in turn help us appreciate aspects of the conference papers and discussions that, implicitly and retrospectively perhaps more than in the midst of the event itself, provide resources useful for taking more tangible steps toward the conference’s goal of reconstructing the relationship of change and community.

As literary theory tells us, reconstruction must be preceded by deconstruction. Fashionable academic jargon aside, the conference demonstrated the truth of this simple notion: one of the major stumbling blocks was a kind of foundation story about urban-industrial America and Buffalo in particular, a story not necessarily untrue so much as too

* Professor of History and American Studies, UB.

narrowly framed and understood—a story that, in this narrowness, controls most contemporary journalism, much public policy, and a good deal of scholarship as well. In effect, this story now dominates a crucial kind of imaginative space we need to reclaim as a base for whatever different approaches we might want to build.

The story I have in mind is the now-familiar decline, transformation, and incipient resurrection of the urban industrial heartland, of rust-belt cities like Buffalo: once-mighty industrial giants tumble from power and glory to ignominious dependency, the plaything of large corporations, financial manipulation, and the international movement of capital, leaving behind abandoned cities, disintegrating communities, and a displaced, de-valued industrial work force. As the industrial base evaporates its place is taken, inadequately, by a rising service economy. After the worst of the plant closings and the consequent deindustrialization have taken their toll, this service economy provides a base for possible recovery and revitalization, at least for some and albeit at a vastly lower wage level. And in the happier cases, of which Buffalo recently has seemed to many to be one, a new city begins to emerge, with such things as the reconstruction of downtown and the waterfront, the impact of the Canadian free trade pact, and the World University Games serving both as propelling agents and as leading indicators of a new urban vitality with open-ended prospects.

The problem with this story is not so much with the truth of its parts—every statement in the paragraph above is supportable in some respect—so much as with the sense of inevitability and unidirectional quality these take on when woven into a whole: it is a story that seems historically structured and determined, inevitable in its form and processes, which therefore leaves to policy and community response only the challenge of adjustment and innovation within this frame.

If this is true, then forging dramatic new approaches requires that we accept the real parts but show how different stories can be made out of them: in a sense, the major obstacle is to escape the power of the growth-decline-resurrection metaphor itself, one central to the story and, as the terms themselves suggest, almost too-satisfyingly mythic in nature. In thinking about the need to resist controlling metaphors, I am reminded of the comment made by a Buffalo former steel-worker whom I interviewed recently as part of an oral history project on deindustrialization. We were discussing whether or not the decline of heavy industry and the rise of a service economy was part of a natural cycle, however painful, to which the city and its people simply had to adjust. Was the

city's losing the steel mills, I asked conversationally, something like accepting the fact that you could be a hockey player at twenty, but didn't expect to be skating around the rink at sixty? "No, I don't believe that," he said emphatically. "No, because the idea is, being a hockey player and steel industry are two different things." Then he laughed a big laugh, and went on to explain why he thought restoring heavy industry could and should be made the focus of attention. Would that we could get past the trap of deceptive and unhelpful metaphors that easily. The conference began and largely ended with the constrictive story of deindustrialization and service-based, policy-assisted, business-led revitalization powerfully intact. But the proceedings did begin at least to suggest how it might be broken down and then reassembled in a different place, so to speak, thus making available to us the space we desperately need for imagining new community-based relationships and approaches to change.

The papers published in these proceedings, not all of them presented formally at the conference, offer powerful assistance in this direction. Many of the papers, in many places, shatter comfortable assumptions and the metaphors that enact them. Through the simple mechanism of simply describing in new ways what we think we already comfortably understand about how things are now, they open us to newly imaginable futures and the mechanisms for achieving them.

I am thinking, for instance, of how David Perry and Beverly McLean demonstrate the deceptiveness of the very concept of the service sector. This might better be described in Buffalo's context, they show, as the public sector—and one with a largely feminized labor force at that. Thinking of Buffalo's revitalization as based on the public sector leads in very different directions, some creative and some quite frightening given the accelerating collapse of the public-sector economy, matters discussed as well in Catherine Armitage's paper. But the recast focus leads us to describe a more complex and in many ways more flexibly shapable environment than the narrow industrial/service transition model usually suggests.

Similarly powerful, and more encouraging, is Henry Taylor's demonstration of how poorly Buffalo's black community fits William J. Wilson's model of the large-city post-industrial urban wasteland, with an increasingly homogenous black underclass frozen out of the workforce and locked in a prison of poverty by a fleeing black middle class—and hence how much latitude there may be, here, to imagine different ways of mobilizing a distinct social structure with some substantial economic resources capable of being developed. As these essays suggest, then, a great

deal turns simply on how we describe and understand what is here, and the terms in which we work with what it may mean.

Instructive in a broader sense is the powerful irony Perry and McLean note: that the factors at the heart of the image of decline—loss of jobs, abandoned facilities, and racial division—are identical, spruced up by new clothes, to the usually proffered icons of recovery: an attractive skilled and low wage workforce, cheap facilities and infrastructure, and easily developed land. Their demonstration of the power of labels to shape images and of images to drive reality, in this case creating an arguably superficial revitalization strategy that tends to cosmeticize, rather than address, the very real structural problems at hand—such insights invite us to take control of the images as a first step to their reconstruction.

This work of conceptual or metaphorical liberation is extended in many of the other papers, which provide more substantive examples of how, beyond labelling, weaknesses can be seen and utilized as strengths. I was struck, for example, by the implications of the simple point demonstrated by Sam Cole and Blake Strack: that the local and regional economy is substantially less defense-spending-driven than most of the more prosperous metropolitan areas it is trying in so many ways to emulate. While this might seem to doom such hopes to fantasy, the difference is actually encouraging in that it opens the way to a building on possibilities here for a kind regional integration usually not associated, and arguably inconsistent with, defense-dependency. Similarly interesting is Douglas Koritz's argument that the frequently lamented fragmentation and dilution of Buffalo's corporate leadership, in inevitable contrast to the more successfully resurgent Pittsburgh under the benign stewardship of the Mellons, et. al., actually makes for a leadership structure far more open to diversification and creativity—that amidst the current romance of the free market, we are closer here, at least potentially, to freeing up the market for new ideas and the leadership necessary to give them live and moment.

But only potentially. This is because the conference revealed more tangible and formidable obstacles to change: massive deposits of distrust and division buried deep in the very ground on which new community-based structures of change might be built. Many of the presentations and discussions revealed that conference speculation can produce little unless we come to grips with the way that the poisons of division—racism, most particularly—have become so imbedded in both "community" and "change" as to make even talk of new construction seem an aggressive

act of collective denial. This is why so many of the discussants resisted speculating on the future: instead, in a variety of ways, Councilman Jim Pitts, editor Barbara Banks, actress and director Lorna Hill, and others insisted on the priority of identifying and mapping the toxic wastes of racism so imperfectly buried in institutions of all kinds. Indeed, they focused on exposing our community's not-much-diminished capacity to continue to foul our civic environment with these social pollutants.

One of the less-evident successes of the conference was the general recognition that this testimony and documentation was necessary, even though it meant deferring some of the more speculative dimensions of the agenda. It was also recognized as fundamentally constructive: once accepted as a priority, an environmental cleanup of our political culture might begin to suggest broader transformations in how we understand the nature of community and the possibilities of change.

To this end, a number of the papers and discussions offered some interesting clues as to what some approaches and mechanisms for effecting such transformations might be, either in Buffalo or as a more general matter. It might be useful to draw some of these out by way of conclusion. The most promising seem to me to involve how we understand processes and resources.

As to processes, perhaps the most relevant insight came in the presentation the most remote to the issues at hand: John Mohawk's reflections on Native American economic development. The connection, largely implicit but drawn out at the very end of John's paper and in the discussion that followed, was in his provocative argument that economic development was literally impossible by definition for many native communities—without control of "the primary ingredients which make development possible", in this case the most basic rights of ownership and the "authority and ability to mobilize capital and labor," there simply could not be any strategy that would result in real development of that community. Conversely, this argues, changes in political structure and culture must be integral to strategies for directing change. Recent movements in Indian country have, indeed, begun to create just such a base, and are producing just such changes as a consequence. And many of the most interesting changes have been rooted in the revival of precisely the dimension of Indian tradition that had for so long rendered these communities outside the framework of American institutions and assumptions: the traditional group nature of community, and the assumptions about the ownership of property, about capital, and about labor that flow from this.

The lessons here involve the general imperative to engage the fundamental assumptions of political culture, and the more particular possibilities of generating group and community-based definitions as a base for such reconstruction, a base not without its own grounding in the complex, pluralist traditions of community in urban America. This is resonant, for instance, with Larry Flood's call, in his paper, for organized labor to adopt a very different community-based approach to coalition building—deliberately “blurring the boundaries” between notions of workplace and community in order to retrieve a more sharply focused voice for workers in the processes of community and change.

The clues to resources are more particular, in a variety of the papers and presentations, and together these add up to the impression that the ground of Buffalo is virtually littered with possibilities for innovation. But to see these possibilities, much less seize them, requires freeing ourselves from the lockstep imitation of development patterns in other cities and from the orthodox assumptions of conventional political, business, and planning elites. Susan Turner's paper documents many of these assumptions, and the frequently self-deceptive or contradictory kinds of progress they have generated by virtue of arbitrarily imposed models and insufficient appreciation for the particular nature and needs of our setting.

It is not easy or even natural, in a regime of decline, to make imaginative use of our own best resources. Some of our best opportunities we have only stumbled into seizing: for example, as I noted in a discussion at the conference session on futures, what seems to me most interesting about the spectacular success of Buffalo's new downtown baseball facility, Pilot Field—success locally and in terms of enormous, positive national recognition—has less to do with debates about the role of sports, or downtown versus the suburbs, and more to do with the simple fact that owing to various constraints and contingencies Buffalo simply could not successfully play follow the leader in approaches to sports stadium construction. After notable failures at this, the city was backed into developing its own smaller-scale, low-tech approach, one that ended up proving remarkably well suited to this community's structure, taste, and needs—and a dramatic innovation nationally in terms of new approaches to urban baseball facilities, exactly the right idea at the right time and place and in the right way. The result is that in this one dimension, at least, Buffalo is now seen as an innovative leader which other cities can only follow.

More characteristically, however, it has seemed hard to notice as

opportunities those aspects of life in this city not conventionally associated with development and change strategies. I think, for instance, of the really remarkable vitality of minority community and multi-cultural arts in Buffalo—in theater, dance, and music. This could be grasped as the core of a truly cosmopolitan yet community-based development strategy focused on Buffalo's vastly underutilized capacity—with our stock of affordable housing and relatively low-priced venues for cultural production and consumption—to nurture cultural expression and cross-community dialogue. This would offer opportunities desperately needed by artists of all backgrounds and communities who are realizing the impossibility of economic and creative survival, indeed of survival itself, in places like New York City. But though we hear much talk about the Theater District, as if that stretch of Main Street were a faint echo of Broadway, there is little discussion of any broader arts-based strategy, much less one grounded in Buffalo's unique communities, as involving resources useful for addressing the multi-cultural crisis of our society far more constructively than could many larger and more desperate cities, and creating an open-ended base for growth in the process.

A related example: two years ago, Buffalo was the site of the remarkable First International Women Playwright's Festival. This was developed through a unique collaboration of university and community artists here; its participants and outreach ended up spanning the globe. The Festival was a true original, and an enormous success—it received extensive and uniformly favorable international press coverage, including successive major stories in the *New York Times*. Yet for all the local obsession with improving Buffalo's image to the world, with the symbols that might help us escape the perceived stigmata of snow and steel in the minds of variously imagined influentials, I have, subsequent to the flurry of news coverage when it happened, rarely seen this event even mentioned, much less recalled and appreciated as a contribution to and an expression of a particularly important core of vitality in this community. Barely noticed and barely supported, the initiative nevertheless succeeded in birthing an on-going Festival, and International Women Playwrights resource, production, and translation center to be located here in Buffalo, and just taking concrete shape now. But civic attention in the policy community, meanwhile, focuses on plans for a waterfront aquarium as just what is needed to give Buffalo a visible national identity, or on the more substantial but still narrowly grounded World University Games as a project capable of producing development momentum beyond its own economic input.

More imaginative and locally grounded approaches seem to be beginning to emerge as of this writing. One good example is in work being led by Henry Taylor, among others, that extends the thrust of the paper he presented at this conference: it involves the development of a new Office of Urban Initiatives, an outgrowth of a Common Council commission. This project is launching a unique policy community/minority community consortium to address problems of systemic urban poverty in a new way—through a strategy aimed at subverting the existing dichotomy, in official circles, that renders so distant and unconnected the “problems” of systemic East Side poverty and the “opportunities” of new developments like the Canadian Free Trade pact or downtown and waterfront development.

But it will take many such examples, and a far richer, more diverse, and more imaginative inventory of resources. This really means that we need more diverse and sustained community generation of alternative imaginations. And there is no way in which this can occur without devising more innovative ways for change and community to be linked—ways far beyond the stimulus/response model in which so much recent planning politics has been rooted.

If this is what we need to be building, then this conference has accomplished some important preliminary work. As the ground continues to be cleared of some of the controlling narratives discussed at the start of these remarks, and with the substructures of racism excavated enough to be removed, piece by piece, Buffalo, and perhaps other cities as well, may become ready to build on that reclaimed space some new approaches to linking community and change, approaches generated in good measure by and through the communities that have the most immediate stake in the process and surprisingly rich resources to bring to it.