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Conversations in the Rust Belt

Set in the context of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, the former steel capital of the United States, this paper explores the potential for a renewed civic or democratic dialogue on a specific brownfield development site. This case study, illustrates a three-part philosophy of discursive democracy, restoration ecology and reconstructive post-modernism and its experimental application by an interdisciplinary group of artists and academics working from a research facility in the college of fine arts at Carnegie Mellon University. The project goal was to create a program of community engagement in the research, design and development of a new greenway, on an abandoned slag heap. The project team intent was to transcend the role of primary authorship, instead initiating a citizen discourse, and a creative engagement in the definition, form and function of post-industrial public space. The paper outlines the process and its means of empowerment. It then concludes with an exploration of diversity, as a synthesizing value essential to the discussion of post-modern nature, culture and the public space of cities.

We are artists. We are inquiry based practitioners. We act as agents of change, rather than primary authors.

With the end of the industrial era, cities and their citizens are becoming aware of the vast estates of empty lands (abandoned by industry) known as brownfields. Many of these properties have lain vacant for 30 years or more, and are commonly perceived (from a distance) as a dilapidated mix of industrial-culture detritus and “junk” nature. They function as a symbolic monument to what was lost, the nature of their opportunity, missing unless we change the way we see them. If we can change our point of view, this negative perception, these abandoned landscapes become the spatial impetus for a renewed urban-public life, with important spatial and discursive components.

The question of a renewed public life is directly connected to an emerging tension between expert knowledge and common or community knowledge in the context of democratic society. Recently, authors as diverse as sociologist Daniel Yankelovich (1999) and biologist Michael
Soule (1998) have pointed out the differences between the way experts and citizens learn and decide the major questions of the day. Each author argues that the experts marshal vast quantities of information prior to a careful, often quantitative analysis. The citizen process is more dialogic, based on prior history, personal ethics, and readily available information discussed within the context of family, friends and acquaintances. The expert relies on facts and inductive or deductive reasoning to make a decision. The public on the other hand “takes into account the facts as they understand them and process these within a framework of personal goals, moral values, and their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves.”

In the context of these preceding observations, I would like to present a brief outline of the fundamental guidelines which emerged as a team of artists, a lawyer, scientists, and designers set out to develop an experiment in post-industrial public space. As our project team honed their philosophy, process and skills, it became clear that there was a set of basics which would guide our experiment in public dialogue, and its broader intent of renewing post-industrial public life. The philosophy of our approach is pulled from philosophers, Habermas, Benhabib and artists and theorists, Beuys, Lacy, and Gablik. They emerged in discussions with the author, theorist and historian Kirk Savage:

- Create images and stories, reveal both the cause and effect of the industrial legacy.
- Create works that illuminate and explicate conflict and points of dynamic change.
- Produce new forms of critical discourse, provide access, voice and context.

In the following pages, I will outline the three-point philosophy of the project, provide an overview of the three-year program, then in conclusion discuss diversity as an aesthetic value, and the potential of brownfields to transform culture.

Perhaps the most striking opportunity noted for a large park is the valley of Nine Mile Run. Its long meadows of varying width would make ideal playfields; the stream, when it is freed from sewage, will be an attractive and interesting element in