Activating Historic Spaces
CITY of NIGHT and the Impact of Placemaking

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When you find yourself standing in front of a floodgate and suddenly see a torrent rushing toward you, the smartest thing to do is crank open the gate and stand aside. You are but a facilitator, allowing the water to flow where it wants. It took me a few years to learn how to crank open the gate, frantically turning while the water rose around my ankles, then knees, then waist ... And then, as if in a dream, I was standing on a bridge, looking out over a powerful river. It seemed to come from nowhere, but the energy to activate a place like Silo City—the current that connects its past to its potential—had been building all along.

This was my experience creating CITY of NIGHT, a one-night site-specific art festival at Buffalo’s historic Silo City grain elevators. In September 2011 I toured the site with my arts group, Emerging Leaders in the Arts Buffalo (ELAB), and fell in love with the story it told. The silence of the massive industrial site was perhaps the most powerful aspect of it. Without words the grain elevators, malt house, and warehouses bore witness to experiences, people, industries.

Quieted by years of staggering loss, Silo City was much like the city of Buffalo—and the region. Our event came at a time when hope was just starting to spring up.

CITY of NIGHT transformed Silo City, a stagnating industrial site, into a place for innovative artwork, live performances, and celebration. Making this isolated area accessible and alive with activity has permanently changed its public perception.

PHOTO BY LESLIE FINEBERG
THE WATERFRONT ENDURES

Industry has abutted the Buffalo River and Lake Erie waterfront for more than two centuries. The Seneca, who used the area as a hunting ground, rarely settled here—except for Farmer’s Brother. At the turn of the 19th century, he built his cabin on a spit of land that today looks out across the river at the hulking Lake and Rail grain elevator—a wall of concrete; steel marine legs; and docks where the oldest remaining steam vessel in America, the SS Columbia, is currently anchored. The Holland Land Company purchased most of the land in the region in 1800, extinguishing much of the Native American title to the area (save for a few reservations), and settlers from the East Coast began to move in. The period between 1837 and the Civil War was incredibly dynamic, with new industries and inventions coming to life here. Eventually German, Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants found their way to Buffalo, where they either found work in the industries that earlier settlers had established or created their own.

One of the jobs from this era that has taken on mythic proportions for present-day Buffalonians is that of grain scooper. It was backbreaking toil, shoveling wheat or barley from the holds of lake steamers into the grain elevators for seasonal storage and eventual use in East Coast markets. The industry grew during the Civil War, when movement of goods throughout Union-controlled territory largely shifted to the Erie Canal.
St. Lawrence Seaway opened, however, Buffalo lost its role as the hub of Great Lakes–to–East Coast trans-shipment. This caused many grain storage, milling, and malting operations to move elsewhere and a number of related industries to close.

Despite the business stagnation, though, Buffalo’s art scene persisted. Musicians, poets, painters, and new media creators were drawn to this place, in part because it had a reputation for a certain workaday creativity—as a place where innovation in a composition or painting were just as common as steam-powered elevators, lumber mills, or lead paint manufactories had once been. The 1960s and 70s were particularly fertile for creative collaborations that brought together the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra (BPO), University at Buffalo, and Albright-Knox Art Gallery for original events, while new organizations like Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center and Squeaky Wheel Media Arts Center launched the careers of now-iconic arts leaders, including artists Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman as well as renowned composer and BPO conductor Lukas Foss.

In spite of this vibrant culture, “desperate” best described the mindset of the local government and citizens by the early 1980s—not just in Western New York but in every legacy city facing similar job hemorrhages. The time of opportunity seemed to have passed and, with it, the moment to retain a generation of young people who wanted a chance at a good life. They left en masse, migrating to larger centers like New York, the West Coast, and some overseas destinations, believing that the situation was so dire they’d never return.

When the region began to experience a comeback in the early aughts, many were surprised. My own arrival in Buffalo coincided with the worst financial crisis the country has experienced since the Great Depression, and yet I was still able to find a network of creative people who had been working hard for decades to slowly rebuild the momentum. In a Buffalo that had lost access to many resources, our choices were collaborate or flounder.

The “Wild West” atmosphere in Buffalo (mirrored in other legacy cities) allowed for a kind of improvisation not seen before. This included cross-disciplinary work—artists and architects, for
example—and experimental events in abandoned places, like Artists & Models. A do-it-yourself scene that would influence a generation of Buffalo creatives was taking hold.

LEARNING A SPACE

I have lived in Buffalo since 2008, and I’ve learned from some brilliant urban planning, preservation, arts, business innovation, and sustainability thinkers. I have read everything I could get my hands on about Buffalo’s history and attended art events galore, meeting the leaders and staff of nearly all the creative organizations here. I made it my business to know people, quickly building my network and helping forge some cross-disciplinary connections of my own.

When I heard about the formation of a new arts group, I was curious and attended the first meeting. In a short time, I was secretary of ELAB, a chapter of Americans for the Arts. Shortly thereafter, I began to dip my toe into the waters of event planning.

We threw studio parties, hosted monthly ArtLab critique sessions, and then in February 2012 we planned Speakeasy—an Art Deco–themed event with live music, film projections, and food and drink in a vacant downtown Buffalo storefront. With fewer than 200 attendees and about $500 earned for ELAB, we considered it a huge success. Little did we imagine the flood that was to come.

When people ask me the secret to CITY of NIGHT’s success, a few thoughts come to mind. It was the right time and the right place. Silo City had been seen only by the most intrepid urban
explorers, photographers, and preservationists, after being opened up by the owner, Rick Smith, to occasional private tours (with plenty of trespassing too). Cross-disciplinary collaboration brought in enough partners and participants that we had a built-in audience.

Through CITY of NIGHT we activate the history and future of such spaces, bringing site-specific sculpture, installations, light projections, dance, and music. The team of curators, promoters, and managers has launched places like Silo City into the popular consciousness of the region and now the country. There was a reason we chose the key themes of art, history, culture, and sustainability—we didn’t have the capital to redevelop property ourselves, but we could inspire thinking about the future of these buildings by sharing our group’s vision with the public. My contribution is often pointing out the obvious. My work could be billed as a complicated combination of creative placemaking, artistic practice, and event planning, but the truth is it’s very simple. I help people see. And what I see here are a wealth of historic assets just sitting there, waiting to be reimagined.

**ACTIVATING A SPACE**

We began with a basic concept—allow artists and others to tour the site, as we had done the previous year, to get inspiration and information. I shared the history of the grain elevators while the curator gave the artists ideas for what kind of art might work and where. We then stepped back and allowed their creativity to flourish, asking for proposals that outlined their general concepts with a few drawings and a description. The curator, Marissa Lehner, trusted that the ideas would flesh out once the artists got on-site to install the works, and she was right.

Regional artists, many of whom we knew personally, had been invited to submit proposals, and they gave it their

**Alma Jiminez’s Love video installation at CITY of NIGHT 2012.**

PHOTO BY CATHALEEN CURTISS
all. Fotini Galanes worked inside one of the cavernous elevators, drawing her signature graphite swirls, organic and complex, while attendees drifted by her work table, dramatically lit in the darkness by a single lamp. Alma Jiminez installed a video-mapped projection piece that offered shifting images in four quadrants of the word “LOVE.” Kelly Tomasello installed a mossy tree emerging from the base of a rusted-out grain hopper that had once been used to deliver wheat to a ground-level conveyor belt.

That first-year event also included a curated, grain elevator-themed photography show organized by Christina Laing, as well as “Shutterbug Tours” for curious photographers led by local historian and urban planner Chris Hawley. A unique art fair in the malt house gave regional artists a marketplace and access to attendees. Food trucks gathered around the central courtyard where live bands and DJs played throughout the event. Roving dancers and performers delighted the audience.

And we found quite an audience. We were amazed at the scale of public response to CITY of NIGHT. Our first year, we expected around 1,000 people, but the event became a social media sensation with attendees calling and texting their friends, rousing them from bed at 11:30 p.m., saying, “You’ve got to get down here!” In the end, we estimate that there were 3,500 people on-site. The buzz led to a huge explosion of attendance in the following years: 12,000 in 2013 and a staggering 17,000 in 2014, our final year at Silo City.

We changed hearts and minds at these events, spreading the message of creative potential and civic pride to ever-broader circles. This was concurrent with a strong preservation activist movement throughout the region following the National Preservation Conference held in Buffalo in 2011. The conference was well attended and featured many field sessions, bringing focus to local projects, districts, and issues—including the fight to save the Bethlehem Steel administration building. The visibility of grassroots art and heritage were growing side by side, and our success in making Silo City accessible and alive with art, artist, and audience left it permanently transformed.
STEERING THE SHIP

An undertaking like CITY of NIGHT would hardly be possible without many passionate collaborators—executing such an event demands a broad range of dedicated individuals with diverse skills. Traditional experts in curating visual arts are as vital as one might imagine, but so too are specialists in other art forms, in marketing and communications, and in finance, to name just a few. Their strength lies in their many distinct skillsets collectively leveraged toward a common goal.

We in Buffalo are lucky to have a legacy of creativity so strong that all we need to do is spread the word of a new arts event and ask for participation. We are frequently overwhelmed by responses. One of the most important contributors to our event’s growth was Curator/Community Art Chair Marissa Lehner, thanks to her ability to shepherd the artists into a space that made sense for their work and to teach them to meet the technical needs of their pieces at the site. Her guidance was essential for building the artists’ confidence and ensuring the success of the artworks.

Tara Sasiadek, now the president (then vice president) of ELAB, has been our storyteller. She understands and interprets our group’s philosophy, recording our events and experiences, and sharing the meaning of our work with the public. She has engaged photographers and videographers, narrated videos, and even designed the group’s logo at one of the first meetings—a beaker, representing our experimental nature. On top of this, she has also created immersive art installations for CITY of NIGHT.

Our resident gallerist, Marcus Wise, who served as president during ELAB’S first few years, led the social media promotion and fine art fair aspect of the event. He recognized an opportunity to showcase local artists who either created work not suited to full-on installation in the grain elevators or couldn’t commit the necessary time and materials. The fair also gave attendees a place to purchase local art and walk away with a memento.

Leslie Fineberg joined us as the multidisciplinary chair, with a background in belly dance and a network of many artists whose work broke the two-dimensional boundaries. She brought us dancers, DJs, poets, and fire performers.
Of course, what is a huge event without a money manager? Candice Pack, an accomplished painter (and accountant), became ELAB’s treasurer shortly after moving to Buffalo. When a large foundation offered us a significant donation, she led ELAB through the process of becoming a 501(c)3 nonprofit. One year, while exhibiting in the art fair, she also had the unglamorous job of managing money drops from the various bars, merchandise booth, and other locations around the five-acre site.

Architect Kisha Patterson got involved with ELAB by first participating in CITY of NIGHT as an artist. Her installation was whimsical yet profound, moving blue and white balloons throughout the vast vertical space of a silo and inviting attendees to participate by tossing the balloons up into space that had once been occupied by tons of grain, now airy enough for a few fans to lift the balloons ever higher.

**ACTIVATING ACROSS THE RIVER**

After three years of growth, CITY of NIGHT was still run by an all-volunteer team that was happy with what we’d created but overextended and burned out. We loved the change we’d inspired but were seeking a shift. Silo City was becoming well known, hosting many events (including weddings). Drawing on our experience of activating place, we sought a new place to highlight and celebrate at a scale that was more realistic for our small organization to manage.

The Old First Ward, across the Buffalo River, was the neighborhood where grain scoopers, steelworkers, and lumbermen had once lived, their small worker cottages built in the shadow of great industry. The neighborhood welcomed us with open arms, and we began to work with the community center, the local tavern, the church,
and a few warehouses and factories still in the area. We planned a new variation on City of Night that focused on the meaning of a city’s development over time—its architecture, heritage, and people. We also wanted to ensure safety and calm for current residents and so took pains to scale back on noisy music and discourage drunkenness. We significantly increased our security presence and fenced in the beer areas for the first time.

There were plenty of art installations: inside a five-car “train” made of rented shipping containers covered in murals; next door in a historic cooperage slated to become a distillery; and inside the church in the form of projections and performances. There were smaller stages around the neighborhood and roving performers throughout. The subtlety and relative tranquility of this event caught some attendees completely off guard, while others—our “true believers”—were willing to follow along and take a close look at what we were there to show them. We are proud of this iteration, which left the Old First Ward with a beautiful mural titled “The Worker,” celebrating the neighborhood’s blue-collar roots.

With many visions of what could come next, ELAB is taking this year to step back and work on strategic planning. Most of us are original founders of the group (now six years old) and very good friends. We’ve gained a great deal of knowledge and experience and have learned what it means to get our hands dirty and to mature together.

We stand together on the bridge, over the river that we—in part—made and look toward a future Buffalo that we’ve helped to shape. FJ

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