



# Accountability in urban regeneration partnerships: A role for design centers



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## 1. Introduction

Partnerships in urban development reflect the ‘wicked’ nature of regeneration efforts, often requiring attention to a range of investment and programmatic interdependencies. “Taxpayer revolts, tax and expenditure limits, cutbacks in federal grants, a deep recession, and the pervasive pall of public opprobrium for things governmental”, to quote Peterson (1985, p. 34), are some of the challenges that have reinforced this trend. To this end, partnerships have achieved what Hodge and Greve (2007) describe as an ‘iconic status’ in urban administration. Partnerships in the context of the ‘entrepreneurial city’ have been associated with the delivery of large scale schemes, often involving significant attention to the civic design. Investments in waterfronts, streetscapes, and public plazas are some examples. As Goldstein and Mele (2016) have however recently pointed out, a large literature on partnerships focuses on questions of motivations and outcomes, while the ‘inner workings’ of these arrangements are yet to be fully explored. This paper contributes to this scholarship by highlighting the utility of analytic constructs derived from a broader literature on governance, most notably so from the field of public administration. In that literature, the study of approaches to task delegation and performance monitoring defines a research agenda on the relations between principals and their agents, and is particularly insightful of how the question of accountability should be approached in the design of regeneration partnerships.

In a study of the redevelopment of the waterfront at ‘Canalside’ and a former industrial district at ‘Larkinville’ in Buffalo (NY), this paper argues that structuring a role for design centers reinforces social accountability in regeneration partnerships with an emphasis on civic design. The next section presents an overview of partnerships and the question of accountability. Section 3 describes the redevelopment of Canalside and Larkinville, and the role of the Project for Public Spaces

(PPS), and the Urban Design Group (UDP), the design centers. In Section 4, it is argued that a design center's value vis a vis a partnership is two-fold: centers reinforce government's leverage in securing private-sector partner agreement to public realm-improving regeneration schemes, while centers with design capacity reduce risks when governments cede control over the design of public environments through informal delegations. The paper concludes by arguing that the choosing of partners willing to involve a design center with a public mission and a culture of civil society stewardship are important factors in achieving partnership goals.

## 2. Partnerships and accountability revisited

Beauregard (1999) once described partnerships as ‘historical chameleons’, continuously adapting to institutional, funding, and development constraints. As cities prioritize place-making in efforts to promote competitive advantage (Gospodini, 2002), arrangements to regenerate key urban areas have proliferated. In broad strokes, the recourse to partnerships has been at times strategic, as applies to the ‘growth coalitions’ and ‘urban regime’ booster alliances that emerged to reinforce competitive economic positioning (Molotch, 1976; Stone, 1989), or otherwise programmatic, reacting to specific funding and development opportunities. As is evidenced by the history of cooperation spurred by federal government programs, older forms of programmatic partnerships, most notably those pertaining to the era of ‘Urban Renewal’, featured a defining role for government in funding and project definition. Trends have since tended in the direction of more collaborative partnerships characterized by a pooling of resources, more parity in decision-making, and a coordination of activities (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Bovaird, 2004; Schaeffer & Loveridge, 2002).

Partnerships have evolved over decades of policy experimentation.

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After Urban Renewal, the ‘Model Cities’ program popularized the coordination of physical and social development activities. The later ‘Community Development Block Grant’ program encouraged bottom-up sourced projects, while the ‘Urban Development Assistance Grant’ program incentivized resource (and risk) sharing, leading up to a contemporary landscape where dwindling resources and a culture of entrepreneurialism have magnified the recourse to regulatory and fiscal relief. So evolved, collaborative partnerships are distinguished from both general-scope booster alliances and arms-length contracting by capital, capacity, and programmatic resource and risk sharing (Sagalyn, 2007). Keeping to the U.S. context, this is often facilitated by the signing of state-sanctioned ‘development agreements’. Although purely inter-governmental partnerships amongst public agencies have also come to assume larger roles in urban redevelopment, the risks involved in flagship efforts have meant that the involvement of a private-sector partner has become indispensable.

The historical record suggests that funding and scope are important criteria in determining project stewardship. From studies of European practice, we learn that weak local economic conditions may lead to ‘grant coalitions’ with state and national-level partners, often compromising the ability of local actors to exert influence (Bernt, 2009). When funds originate from supra-local sources but the risk is deemed great, adjustments are due. For example, industrial decline has created a market for adaptive reuse, where experienced developers apply their expertise to the challenging task of repackaging derelict sites (Storm, 2008). Private-sector parties that may be interested in legitimating controversial projects may similarly seek to empower a public-sector partner. On the question of scope, Gore (1991) and Stewart and Snape (1995) differentiate between enterprise (or ‘facilitating’) partnerships that ‘catalyze’ development opportunities, and development partnerships that shepherd a physical project through implementation. As with funding, development partnerships tend to have more private-sector stewardship.

### 2.1. The question of accountability

Accountability remains an important policy challenge in partnership design (Pongsiri, 2002; Grossi & Thomasson, 2015). In these arrangements, public bodies such as planning departments and redevelopment agencies ideally assume the burden of ensuring that developers promote and realize a broad civic mission. As Stewart (2005, p. 162) however succinctly states, “joint action and co-funding cloud the responsibilities and obligations of participant organizations in partnership.” In the European studies cited above, we are cautioned about agenda-setting power ‘drawn away from the local scale’ (Bernt), the ‘lack of involvement of local agents’ in developer-lead initiatives (Storm), and questions about the ‘role of community projects vis a vis commercial property’ (Gore). It is here useful to invoke the distinction between vertical, horizontal, and societal accountability mechanisms. While traditional ‘vertical’ approaches feature answering to legislative bodies (and ultimately, the citizenry) through chains of authority, partnerships pose unique challenges. ‘Chains of agency’ may reflect a delegate’s ‘drift’ from their principal (Miller, 2005). In lessons from the U.S., Erie, Kogan, and MacKenzie (2010) for example found that it is precisely this distance that has diluted accountability in their study of the performance of a redevelopment agency in downtown San Diego.

Horizontal approaches structure a role for governmental agencies, tasked with monitoring or auditing actions and performance. In partnerships, these arrangements may be constraining (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Because of this and since private entities might also be weary of exposing their business practices to public entities (McFarlane, 2007), tracking performance in ‘critical’ dimensions and structuring a role for the public in ‘informal’ monitoring have been suggested (Carter, 2000). However, monitoring may also be impractical if partnerships are designed to have an evolving mandate (Kort & Klijn, 2011). In response, approaches to insuring the alignment of interests between principal and

agent that are made at the formation stages hold promise. These may include initial decisions on personnel, the delimitation of the private partners’ jurisdiction, and more pertinently, the initial structuring of the partnership (Calvert, McCubbins, & Weingast, 1989; Crowder, 2007).

This question of alternative approaches has spurred a scholarship on ‘social accountability’, an approach which centers on the involvement of civil society actors. This is often critical where funding or scope considerations result in stewardship by distant actors (e.g. a central state) or when those actors with sectoral but no representative capacity (e.g. developers) obtain asymmetric leverage. Specifically, offering societal stakeholders avenues for meaningful participation is a particularly successful approach to effectuating social accountability (Grimes, 2013; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). For example, Forrer, Kee, Newcomer, and Boyer (2010) deem an arrangement successful if it positively addresses the question: “Have all affected stakeholders and parties been involved in the decision-making process?” (ibid, pp. 480). The applied literature corroborates this link between social accountability and community participation. Where participation is meaningful, collaborative processes are more likely to meet project goals (Mayo & Taylor, 2001; Stewart, 2005). Mason (2007) highlights this finding in a study of a Vancouver partnership with a structured role for the City Community Development Project, a stakeholder advocacy group.

Historically, accountability deficits in urban regeneration have roots in the misalignment of the goals of the planning bureaucracy and local communities, especially after the technocratic turn of the modernist era. Alternatively, others have noted that projects were more successful when residents offered local insights into design solutions. In this ‘pre-partnership’ sense, societal accountability had been legitimated by both procedural and substantive considerations (Al-Kodmany, 2001). Recently, Velotti, Botti, and Vesci (2012) have described the benefits of a ‘laboratory’ model that allowed Italian urban regions to structure public engagement in partnerships for strategic visioning. Kort and Klijn (2011) have similarly found that urban partnerships whose primary mission is developing visioning-type plans were successful when they provided opportunities for meaningful participation amongst a wide array of stakeholders.

This qualitative study further explores this question of social accountability in the context of regeneration partnerships with a civic design component. Two regeneration partnerships featuring the involvement of design centers from Buffalo, NY, are taken as case studies. Though the ‘Canalside’ partnership is organized under state law and ‘Larkinville’ is more informal, both are collaborative partnerships that feature coordinated funding and decision-making between the city, private developers, and state entities. In studying the impact of design centers on social accountability in district visioning and plan-making, the qualitative study synthesizes findings from information collected through interviews with key civic actors, public-record partnership and audit reports, and project-specific reporting and commentary published in local newspapers and online media outlets. The study tracks district design over a 10-year span of the projects (2006–2016). In this, it has features of a quasi-experimental design that tracks events before and after the involvement of the centers.

### 3. Two partnerships in Buffalo, NY

Buffalo (NY) is a midsize city (240 thousand residents city) in eastern New York State. Historically, the growth of Buffalo was catalyzed by its location at the terminus of the Erie Canal linking Lake Erie (and the Midwest) to the Atlantic, which transformed it into a center notable for its brewing, steel, chemicals, and auto industries. If the inauguration of the St. Lawrence Seaway eliminated Buffalo’s logistical advantage, the economic shocks of the 1970s accelerated its decline. While extensive suburbanization could be traced to well before the freeway era, it was the loss of city industrial jobs that finally disarticulated the metropolitan economy (Goldman, 1990). By 2010,



Fig. 1. Canalside and Larkinville are both close to downtown Buffalo.

nearly a third of the population was living in poverty. The question of how to lure suburban residents back to the city continues to be an enduring theme.

Leveraging the city's civic and architectural heritage has been one dominant approach. While the radial-boulevard Ellicott plan of 1802 remains a defining substrate, decline has resulted in the loss of much of the core through Urban Renewal, including the historic Ellicott and the lower west side districts. That effort produced some unremarkable buildings, including Victor Gruen's 'Main Street Plaza' mall, and most grandiose plans (e.g. Wallace McHarg's modernist utopia) proved unrealistic. If early 20th Century groups such as the Historic Society and the Civic Planning Association organized efforts to commission a 'City Beautiful'-inspired Union Station and riverfront 'Riviera', adaptive reuse became central to the efforts of post-war preservationists and cultural entrepreneurs (Goldman, 2007). In adapting to new realities, private entities have in recent years assumed larger roles in development initiatives through partnerships with city and state agencies, including in Canalside and Larkinville, two flagship efforts (Fig. 1).

### 3.1. Canalside and Larkinville

The Buffalo waterfront, at the western terminus of the Erie Canal, was once one of the country's busiest industrial centers, its wharf and commercial slip incubating a bustling district of warehouses, saloons, shops, residences, and hotels. The area, northwest of Main Street between the Niagara River and the Buffalo River, has historically been a major focus of civic design initiatives. If a City Beautiful plan from 1904 featuring a railroad terminus, and another from the 1930s featuring garden housing would both not be implemented, the isolation of the site

from the rest of the city by Highway 192 in the early 1960s further depressed regeneration efforts (ECHDC, 2012). 'Canalside' constitutes 'phase 3' of an effort dating to 1999, when a master plan was approved. A 2004 lawsuit by the Preservation Coalition of Erie County forced amendments that aligned the plan with the historical heritage of the area, including reconfiguring a planned public plaza and greater emphasis on canal interpretation (ESDC, 1998).

Since 2005, the effort has been coordinated by a then purposely-constituted Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC) (Hawley, 2011). As a subsidiary of the state's urban development corporation, the entity brings together the city, the state, and private developers. In courting Bass Pro (a retailer of outdoors equipment) to assume the role of major private partner and anchor tenant, a 2008 agreement would have enabled the corporation and its allied developer to proceed with a 'big box' vision for the waterfront. After much community resistance, Bass Pro terminated involvement in 2010. While plans for historic cobblestone waterfront streets, as well as a maritime museum and waterfront park were taking shape, pressure for a revised vision mounted. The intervention of the New York-based PPS, a design center, was pivotal. The PPS advised on a community-driven approach featuring social amenities and programmatic interventions (Campaign for Greater Buffalo, 2010), including an ice rink, a reconstituted slip, and smaller-scale commercial development (Table 1).

'Larkinville', on the other hand, is emerging in a once-derelict district a mile or so east of the southernmost stretch of Main Street, the focal point of downtown Buffalo, and just north of highway 192. A former industrial neighborhood hollowed out in successive waves of abandonment, the 'Hydraulics' once housed sawmills, hat factories, and breweries powered by a local canal. After John D. Larkin started his

**Table 1**  
Project timelines.

Canalside		Larkinville	
2005	ECHDC starts work	2002	LDG renovates Terminal building
2008	Bass-Pro plans revealed	2006	UDP involved, district plan revealed
2009	controversial streetscape completed	2011	Seneca St. renovation completed
2010	PPS involved, modified plan revealed	2011	Larkin U building renovated
2012	slip, community amenities completed	2013	Larkin Square completed
2016	Outer harbor plans underway	2016	Buffalo Distilling Co opens

soap manufacturing business in 1876, the enterprise would catalyze the development of large-floorplan manufacturing and warehouse buildings along Seneca St., which by WW1 housed more than one hundred businesses, including the Terminal Warehouse building. Enough of the historic building stock survived, including the recently renovated Duchmann building home to the Buffalo Distilling Co., that developing a modern day mixed-use district was feasible (Larkin Development Group, 2016).

Ongoing regeneration efforts date to the early 2000s, when developer Howard Zemsky's Larkin Development Group (LDG) christened the 'Larkin at Exchange', the former Terminal building. The partnership, more informal, included the city, First Niagara Bank, an anchor tenant which received state incentives to relocate, the state's brownfields cleanup program, which provided funds, and the Old First Ward Community Association, a local group. Early on, the University at Buffalo-affiliated UDP, a design center, was involved in creating a master plan for the district, completed in 2006. The master plan featured local parks, streetscape improvements, and public transit linkages. Also planned were an interpretative trail and a district museum (Hawley, 2011; Urban Design Project, 2006). An important component of the LDG's vision for the area was the investment in Seneca Street, a spine at the heart of the district (Epstein, 2011; First Niagara Financial Group Press Staff, 2009). The plans also called for a 'Larkin Square', which was recently completed (Urban Design Project, 2006).

### 3.2. Design centers and social accountability

In broad strokes, bending the arc of regeneration in the direction of a local vision reflected the synergetic efforts of civil society actors, including city-wide boosters, activist urbanists, and community economic development lobbyists. If boosters like the Buffalo News paper,

progressive politicians like Congressman Brian Higgins, and local entrepreneurs like Newell Nussbaumer (of 'Buffalo Rising') trumpeted the cause of distinctive development, activists followed up with concrete action. While eminent local historian Mark Goldman provided strategic vision, preservationist Tim Tielman (of the 'Campaign for Greater Buffalo') and others (like Richard Lippes) developed rival development plans, and they were shadowed by attorneys like Art Giacalone who were instrumental in designing key legal challenges. Community organizers, such as Aaron Bartle (of housing group 'PUSH Buffalo'), Micaela Shapiro-Shellaby (of jobs group 'The Coalition for Economic Justice'), and Kathy Phillips (of 'The Old First Ward Association'), organized for representation and employment. As the evidence suggests, design centers however played critical roles in channeling the voices of these civic activists.

In Canalside, the path to social accountability was paved through legal action, resistance, and mobilization. Pursuant to the preservationist lawsuit, a recobbled historic Lloyd Street, reconstructed train tracks, and a museum of maritime history are some of the interpretive devices incorporated in a civic vision of heritage-based development. As the partnership courted Bass Pro, much of this vision was compromised. Nominally, the plan-making process featured a role for a design committee acting with further approval of the city planning board (ESDC, 2009). The opaque process leading to the selection of other private parties, including Benderson, the developer of choice, however compounded fears (Heaney, 2011). Ultimately, neither the committee or the board were offered genuine opportunity for input on the radical alteration of the plans for the waterfront cobblestone streets, 'modernized' to appeal to big box logistics (ECHDC, 2010). The prevailing sense was that in the context of private partner – stewardship, the professed commitment to social accountability was nominal (Fig. 2).

While residents rallied to protest the plans, the reaction of state representatives on the ECDHC was initially negative. Perhaps most dismissive was the declared intention to override local land use regulations, seen as an effort to appease the preferred developer (ECHDC, 2007). When a local coalition of community groups lobbied for a community benefits agreement, the ECHDC threatened to proceed without city parcels (Shapiro-Shellaby, 2012). In this worsening climate and as the New York Power Authority (NYPA) agreed to contribute funds to the project, activists found opportunity for another legal challenge (Sommer, 2010). With funds and land at stake, the partnership was nudged to be more transparent. Benderson, for example, agreed to extend the role of the design committee (Hata, 2012). However, and even as redevelopment parcels were released in favor of its preferred developer (Public Accountability Initiative, 2011), Bass Pro ultimately terminated involvement in 2010. In this fork in the road,



**Fig. 2.** The 'mall'ification of the Buffalo waterfront in the earlier Canalside scheme featuring Bass Pro.

activists, led by Mark Goldman, invited the PPS to organize community workshops for a new vision for the waterfront (Hata, 2012; Nussbaumer, 2012).

Founded by Fred Kent in the mid-1970s, the PPS had developed famed urbanist William Whyte's principles on the social life of urban places into a framework for consulting on place-making, with clients in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. As former student of Whyte's, Kent oriented the center's activities around his principled dedication to inclusion and capacity-building. The PPS is particularly notable for their work with neighborhood groups, such as in the much-noted revitalization of Bryant Park in New York City. The attendance of the first workshop by members of the ECHDC (including its then chairman, Jonathan Levy) marked an inflection point. That vision emphasized high-impact, low-cost, community-oriented investments such as public spaces, restaurant rows, and family attractions (including an ice skating rink). Driven by David Colligan, a progressive member of the board, the ECHDC gradually embraced the more community-oriented ethos. The recreation of a historic canal exemplified a 'unique to Buffalo', PPS-inspired approach (Esmonde, 2015). Community-oriented subcommittees steered the creation of a new cultural masterplan featuring a visitor's center, children's museum, and marketplace (ECDC et al., 2011; CEJ, 2010).

The journey to social accountability in Larkinville, alternatively, was decidedly less circuitous, a fact that can be attributed to the early involvement of a design center. Founded in 1990 by Robert Shibley, a faculty member at University at Buffalo, the UDP was conceived as a self-supporting urban design and planning policy thinktank and university-community outreach unit. The center has since consulted with local non-profits, municipal authorities, and developers on place-making initiatives at various scales, including on the production of a planning vision for a post-industrial Buffalo, the 'Queen City' plan, through an agenda-setting summit for downtown neighborhoods and the waterfront. In this, it continues a tradition of university-community engagement, exemplified by a downtown city planning station set up in the late 30s, and efforts in the 70s culminating in the incubation of the downtown Theater District.

In addition to setting priorities, the UDP organized activist and community involvement initiatives to ground the Larkinville plan in the history of F.L. Olmsted's planned parkway and the Larkin Company's civic legacy. To this effect, the parties worked closely with local activists, including noted preservationist Tim Tielman. Zemsky and the UDP realized the plans by cultivating diverse partnerships across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, including the aforementioned First Niagara Bank, the New York State Brownfields Cleanup Program, and the local non-profits. To incorporate community input, the Old First Ward Community Association and other local groups communicated residents' priorities. Where the debate on the plans was extensive and participatory, the conditions for swift public endorsement were met (Connors, 2012).

The developer's public-spirited stewardship, exemplified by the retention of the UDP, was a notable feature of this effort. This is also evinced in the LDG's later proactive efforts to develop further donor interest in the project, culminating in additional state funds and revitalization grants (Epstein, 2015). To manage the fund set up to revitalize Seneca Street properties, the LDG partnered with a local community organization. The formal arrangement put decision-making in the hands of a group with a track record of transparent grant disbursement and project management. Consequently, participation in the plan-making process was broad and well-received (Hawley, 2011). In recognition of their efforts, the project was a beneficiary of a Department of Housing and Urban Development renewal community tax credit which encouraged partnerships with employers and community groups (Charles Schumer Press Staff, 2011). For this later phase of the work, the LDG contracted with Connors, a local planning consultancy, to manage outreach and help generate design scenarios (Fig. 3).

#### 4. Discussion

The cases highlight lessons on the contribution of design centers to social accountability in partnerships. In this role, the two outfits share a lineage with the design centers that flourished in the 1960s and 70s. Design centers have historically addressed challenges of community-responsive planning and locally-sensitive solutions. Many centers, which gained ground through the turmoil of 60s, aimed to reassert the central role of community engagement in regeneration efforts. In this, design centers have often realized Paul Davidoff's call for an 'advocacy planning' furthering community goals. Alternatively, and especially so after the retrenchment of the federal government, the early experience of grassroots organizing would compel many centers to assume design responsibilities, with more 'entrepreneurial' centers taking manageable, and highly visible projects through implementation (Comerio, 1984; Sanoff, 1979). In the context of interdependent decision-making in regeneration partnerships with a civic design agenda, the cases illustrate how the involvement of design centers can compensate for two specific challenges: institutionally weakened leverage and depleted professional capacity (Fig. 4).

##### 4.1. The public realm and weakened leverage

Institutional positioning is often consequential for safeguarding social accountability in urban partnerships. Negotiations over infrastructure investments, affordable housing, and in this case, the public realm, shape a partnership's success in defining civic goals. Absent principled bargaining otherwise enabled by arms-length negotiation, the public however invariably has less clarity as to whether the public-realm enhancing concessions (vis a vis developable property) extracted in exchange for entitlements are all that could have been achieved otherwise. It is not unforeseeable that pressures of expediency, or even inadvertent normative drift precipitated by asymmetrical investment and capacity would cause the public partner to compromise on an otherwise tenable civic agenda.

In the Canalside of the Bass Pro era, the project was to consist of more than a million square feet of development, anchored by the retailer. The most significant episode from the time was the debate on the 2007–2010 plans. Public discussions were popularly seen as having been 'tokenistic', and the three alternatives presented were widely dismissed as 'variations on a theme' of commercial development (Campaign for Greater Buffalo, 2010). The Bass Pro/Benderson plan, developed to the interests of a 'big box' business and a 'strip mall' developer, was criticized for its underwhelming vision, described as an unimaginative 'mall-ification' of the waterfront. The public realm components of the plan were a flashpoint of heated debate, and especially so the connections to the reconstituted slip, which were dedicated for use by the retailer as commercial demonstration grounds. The 'big box' vision exacerbated the pedestrian-unfriendliness of the site (EEK, 2009; ECHDC, 2010; Hata, 2012).

The intervention of the PPS shifted the debate to a vision that reflected the pedestrian-scaled environment envisioned by residents through the community workshops. Empowered by the turn of events, progressive members of the ECHDC pushed for a plan anchored by a 'canal side hall' (later, marketplace), conceived as a food court/congregation space, replacing the earlier plans for a mall-scaled attraction (PPS, 2014). Although the development parcels retained commercial uses, the PPS-inspired plan pushed for small-scale ground level retail, reflecting the vision for a resident-centered environment (ECHDC, 2010, 2012). Designs for buildings on city blocks, finalized in 2014, were exemplary for the involvement of the design committee in insuring civic priorities were met (Kulyk, 2014). The transformed relationships between the corporation and the developers are also exemplified in the development of 'HarborPlace,' completed in 2013. Funded by an industrial agreement with the WNYPA, the project, though inclusive of an arena for the Buffalo Sabres, is mixed-use and



**Fig. 3.** Re-watered commercial slip featuring family-friendly activities.

Credit: Newell Nussbaumer



**Fig. 4.** Food truck Tuesdays at Larkin Plaza, Larkinville, with adaptively reused buildings in the background.

Credit: Michele Goldfarb

modest is scale.

In Larkinville, the UDP's involvement insured that the idea of reuse would be tied to a broader agenda, reclaiming the district's industrial heritage as a vision for the 21st Century. In a negotiated process described as one of 'hard-nosed faceoffs' (Shibley, 2011), the LDG was eventually converted to the district-wide preservationist and mixed-use vision advocated by the UDP. Zemsky would later speak supportively of the process leading to the creation of the "cool, old, mixed-use urban neighborhood" (Esmonde, 2010). The 2008 plan highlighted noteworthy historical episodes, and was exemplary in its conversation with the city's Olmstedian and industrial heritage (Connors, 2012). Its impact on the preservationist strategies is evidenced by the development of 701 Seneca, a 10-building complex fully restored to historic character. The Square at Larkinville, another signature project, adaptively reused a historic structure, as did the more recent AP lofts, a reuse of a 9-story warehouse. Recently, breweries, distilleries, restaurants and other entertainment venues have occupied once abandoned storefronts (Didomizio, 2015; Epstein, 2015). This illustrates how a broad vision set by a design center can strengthen leverage applied to extract public-realm enhancing benefits in the context of a partnership.

#### 4.2. Public spaces and depleted capacity

Even in the context of interdependent decision-making, governments retain a domain of exclusive jurisdiction over 'public' components of any project. If it is typical that plans for public spaces be shepherded by the public partner, these agreements assume a capacity to oversee outreach, design, and management. When public-sector entities are resource-starved, they may relegate decision-making on these components to their partners. In formally recognized delegations and in the context of explicit guidance, these arrangements may qualify as 'outsourcings'. In partnerships, it is however often infeasible to distinguish between outsourcing and offloading. In other words, it is not very clear where the line is drawn between activities intentionally effectuated through interdependent decision-making, and those a city wanted to retain for itself but was unable to.

In Canalside, the ECHDC had originally resolved to be "responsible for the development of public amenities and public spaces" (ECHDC, 2007). 'Phase 2', which was completed in 2009, featured a re-watered navigable commercial slip, reconstructed walkways (then christened as 'Central Wharf Green' and 'Skyway Plaza'), truss bridges, uncovered

ruins, reconstructed cobblestone streets, and a transitional greenway, complemented by a wooden wharf and a naval exhibit building (ECHDC, 2016). The question of public oversight and in whose interest these plans were executed, has however been contentious. The flawed reconstruction of the cobblestone streets is illustrative. Historic Lloyd St., for example, was executed at 100 ft. to accommodate two-way traffic, while the plan to recreate the train tracks on Prime Street was abandoned (Campaign for Greater Buffalo, 2010). Curbstones were constructed of granite instead of sandstone, and cobblestones were laid on a bed of mortar (Hawley, 2011). As Michael Toleman (a historic preservation specialist at Cornell University) documented, the prime motivation was to conform to the preferred retailer's demands for a street system that would be accommodating of its logistics (Campaign for Greater Buffalo, 2010; Lindstedt, 2003, 2005).

After a 2010 modified plan was rushed despite of a lack of concrete plans (ECHDC, 2010), and given the public disillusionment with the execution of 'phase 2' works, community activists were emboldened in pressing for the involvement of the PPS (Nussbaumer, 2012). After the community workshops, much of the reformed agenda reflected the PPS's accent on a public-amenities oriented approach (PPS, 2016). Language in a later plan, described as reflecting "comment received by ECHDC from various public hearings and forums", heralds this new direction (ECHDC, 2010). Substantive improvements include a historically accurate canal system, including one interpreted as a public gathering space, and pedestrian boardwalks. In later improvements, these elements would be designed as 'environments', where water features, towpaths, and bridges evoked the 19th century site (ECHDC, 2012).

In Larkinville, the involvement of the design center contributed to steering a public space vision, including a new streetscape, transit enhancements, a multistory garage structure, and a small community park. Crucially, the UDP-prepared plan sought to redevelop Seneca St. as a spine in the district. Completed in 2011, the new street featured street furniture, period light fixtures, and brick pavers. Additionally, façade improvements and a way-finding system were implemented (Shibley, 2011). These measures, which included the reintroduction of a cycling lane in a vision to pedestrianize the street, served to attract the first businesses to the corridor in decades. Pursuant to the plan, the developers eventually contributed to the creation of public places, including Larkin Square in 2013, a plaza first entertained in 1929 (Lindstedt, 2007).

#### 4.3. Institutional design and accountability revisited

Questions of accountability raised by urban regeneration partnerships have proven difficult to address (Landon & Ebdon, 2012). In his study of urban regeneration partnerships in Manchester, England, Diamond (2002, p. 35) finds that credible processes featured program leadership by an independent party which can "ensure that the power differences which do exist are counterbalanced by a process which is actively enabling the participants to remind themselves of the core aims of the project". An institutional design, this study suggests, is more likely to further social accountability in regeneration partnerships with a focus on civic design if a design center is involved. Such a process would in ideal terms result in the nominating of a representative and impartial center, mandating its involvement, and making its vision binding. In practical terms, cities however must often seek creative solutions that address challenges posed by each of these three considerations.

While the involvement of centers can be mandated, they are often invited to participate. In Canalside, that was only achieved after considerable local mobilization, and only after the ECHDC became more sympathetic to city goals. If the UDP was more heavily involved in plan-making, this reflected the fact that it was invited early in the process by the LDG's Howard Zemsky. Chris Hawley, urban planner and local historian, explains that Zemsky's 2002 purchase of the vacant Larkin

Terminal Warehouse was met with skepticism, as there was little evidence that a return on the investment could be made. Zemsky's partners in the LDG were acquainted with the UDP through the 'Buffalo2002!' initiative, and shared an interest in civic revival of the area (Connors, 2012). That said, the civic vision underlined by the UDP's plans, which underscored the success of Larkinville, can be attributed to the developer's progressive stance (Hawley, 2011). If the success of partnerships is attributed to the synergies between like-minded parties (Lowndes, Nanton, McCabe, & Skelcher, 1997), then this evidence suggests that cities, as a matter of principal, should seek partners that share their values, and in this case, willing to involve design centers. This illustrates a 'selection mechanisms' approach to accountability through decisions taken at the 'appointment' stage (Robertson & Tang, 1995).

Secondly, the design centers were particularly successful because they offered alternatives to a 'silver bullet' approach to redevelopment, where high profile singular interventions failed to catalyze regeneration. In offering a 'vision', smaller projects could be conceived as conditions allow. But binding parties to a center-mediated vision also can be challenging. In Canalside, the ECHDC for example continues to hesitate on using prime blocks for 'permanent' community-oriented schemes, such as the 'public market' envisioned in the 2013 plan. Although Seneca St. and the Larkin Square in Larkinville have been developed as per the plan, the realization of other amenities has languished. To this end, active civil society stewardship after the disengagement of the center seems pivotal. For example, when it seemed that the city would brand proposals for the outer harbor as community amenities, Tim Tielman, the ever-active local preservationist, submitted proposals which were effective in shifting the discourse (Place Advantage, 2016). His role in realizing Larkin Square in the spirit of the UDP plan is also noteworthy.

Finally, and returning to the all-important first question of involving a representative center, the evidence suggests an effort well-received. Broadly speaking, the PPS's vision was 'programmable spaces', while the UDP's was 'history', both rooted in the entities' philosophies. Their involvement enabled a community vision (in this case, centered around amenities and authenticity) to be legitimated. Questions could however be raised as to whether community goals might be compromised by a center's overbearing design philosophy. For example, the PPS's 'Lighter Quicker Cheaper' philosophy has proven less easily reconciled to how amenities can be integrated to prime development parcels. Harbor Center, completed with public funds, is arguably a typical retail/entertainment complex (Giacolone, 2015). Plans by Benderson for office buildings have also been criticized for design mediocrity (Buffalo Rising, 2014). Recently, concerns have been raised that the evolving plan is not 'dense enough' to achieve a sense of place (Buffalo Rising, 2016). Likewise in Larkinville, the theme of 'heritage' doesn't offer much guidance for the development of the many empty parcels.

Questions can also be raised about the implications of the centers' focus on physical design. Invariably, this may limit the range of stakeholders that are involved, with consequences for the broader socio-economic context. In this case, both districts are home to relatively small populations, reflecting the history of abandonment and urban renewal (Table 2). Larkinville is still home to a sizable African American community, surviving years of displacement. While Canalside has more housing units, these are in mainly renter-occupied public housing,

**Table 2**  
Project area socio-demographics.  
Source: U.S. Census 2010

	Population	% African American	Total housing	Renter-occupied
Larkinville	643	31%	369	49%
Canalside	1639	21%	1000	68%
Buffalo	271,233	38%	133,444	60%

especially on Marine Drive. The balance is however rapidly shifting, as Larkinville adds more apartment and loft housing. PUSH, a local housing advocacy group, has made some statements about the sustained affordability of the Marine Drive public housing project north of Canalside, but none of those project an eminent threat. In an yet underdeveloped inner city, concerns of gentrification, typical in other contexts, remain muted.

The broad support for the agreement, echoed by other organizations such as the Partnership for the Public Good and the Buffalo Urban League, reflects the urgency with which local groups have reacted to the need for economic development. An umbrella group, the Coalition for Economic Justice, has been pivotal in securing priority consideration for locally-sourced labor and local businesses “to ensure that public money truly does benefit the public good” (CEJ, 2013). But more recently, the centers' role in reimagining the inner harbor and the Larkin area as distinct, contained places has been institutionalized in the Buffalo ‘Green Code’, the city’s zoning code update. While investment in the districts has been largely welcome, groups such as the ‘anti-racism coalition’ and ‘Black Lives Matter – Buffalo’ have protested what they describe as a concurrent disinvestment in other minority-majority areas. How public funds are equitably earmarked, and whether design centers, perhaps ones driven by a more explicitly pronounced social mission, can use their leverage in forcing a consideration of broader issues of environmental justice remain pertinent questions.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetization of place and the elevation of commercial concerns are hallmarks of a ‘neo-liberal turn’ in urban development, and contribute to a list of grievances about present-day civic design initiatives delivered through regeneration partnerships. In an era where public-private partnerships have been ‘naturalized’, these developments echo the concerns of critics who have chronicled disturbing trends in the channeling of public powers for private pursuits (Hackworth, 2007). This, naturally, could not have occurred if accountability mechanisms were not concurrently compromised. The investigation of institutional arrangements that strengthen social accountability in regeneration partnerships with a civic design component is therefore timely. In practice, the risks to social accountability are often compounded when cities are hamstrung by resource constraints. As is evidenced in this study of two major redevelopment efforts (‘Canalside’ and ‘Larkinville’ in Buffalo, NY), the involvement of design centers (the New York City-based Project for Public Spaces and the University at Buffalo-associated Urban Design Project, respectively) in civic visioning and plan-making can be a critical factor in furthering social accountability.

In the context of partnerships, design centers are uniquely positioned for this task when they help deliver responsive, and locally-sensitive civic visioning. In both cases, engaged efforts to focus the projects on the celebration of local history and community uses have been widely lauded (Coalition for Economic Justice, 2010; Hata, 2012; Nussbaumer, 2012). As the evidence suggests, design centers in resource-challenged Buffalo were able to address challenges of leverage in negotiating public-realm-enhancing exactions, as well as challenges pertaining to informal outsourcings of the public space components of the plan. This has contributed to the all-important task of creating realistic local expectations of outcomes. The lessons should incentivize local jurisdictions to discriminate in favor of development partners who are accepting of the involvement of non-partisan research, policy, and design outfits.

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