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EPA recognizes Larkin master plan developed by architecture school



Larkin Square, in the heart of the Larkin District, is a multi-purpose public space featuring indoor and outdoor dining, seating areas, retail market stalls, public sculpture and a free concert series.

Published December 12, 2012

The Larkin District and its development and planning team, including the School of Architecture and Planning, won an honorable mention at the prestigious National Award for Smart Growth Achievement ceremony held earlier this month in Washington, D.C.

The Larkin District was one of seven projects across the U.S.—and one of only two in the Main Street or Corridor Revitalization category—that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) award program recognized this year. The EPA recognition highlights the project's creative approach to building strong, sustainable communities while protecting human health and the environment.

Over the past decade, the Larkin District, located about a mile east of downtown Buffalo, has evolved from a largely abandoned industrial district with decaying infrastructure and contaminated sites into a thriving urban village and live/work/play community.

Anchored by the Larkin at Exchange Building—a former Larkin Soap Co. warehouse that the Larkin Development Group (LDG) restored in 2002 into one of Buffalo's most sought-after commercial addresses—the district today includes several other mixed-used projects in renovated historic buildings, green space, improved streetscapes, brownfield restoration and now residential development.

"The 2012 winners of the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement are taking innovative steps to realize a vision of American communities that are clean, healthy, environmentally responsible and economically resilient," says EPA Administrator Lisa P. Jackson.

Howard Zemsky, managing partner of LDG, which had no tenants lined up when it started the Larkin at Exchange project, notes that "what started out as an improbable vision has turned into the reality of a revitalized and reborn urban neighborhood. Our confidence rested largely on the principles of smart growth and a commitment to restore the district's historic building infrastructure, celebrate its legacy as a center of industrial innovation and extend the economic, social and

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 306 Clemens, North
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"The 2012 winners of the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement are taking innovative steps to realize a vision of American communities that are clean, healthy, environmentally responsible and economically resilient"

Lisa P. Jackson,
 Administrator
 EPA



environmental vibrancy of these developments into the surrounding neighborhood and city.”

Zemsky adds that the Larkin District’s success is tied closely to the project’s diverse partnerships across the public, private and nonprofit sectors, from First Niagara Bank to the New York State Brownfields Cleanup Program to the Old First Ward Community Association.

Laying out the master plan for the Larkin District was the Urban Design Project (UDP) in the School of Architecture and Planning.

UB’s involvement began in 2004, when Zemsky approached the UDP, a research center devoted to the critical practice of urban design, to develop a master plan for an urban neighborhood that would build on the success of the Larkin at Exchange project, with historically sensitive development, vibrant streets and public spaces, integration with the surrounding neighborhood and accessibility via multi-modal public transportation.

The resulting “Larkin District Plan” set the foundation for a series of investments, including two mixed-use developments—the Schaefer Building and the U Building—that have added commercial, retail and residential space to the district, mostly through the adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

“Our goal was to create a historically context-sensitive plan at the neighborhood, corridor and city-wide scales,” says Robert G. Shibley, dean of the School of Architecture and Planning and director of the UDP, which partnered with the architectural firm Kevin Connors Associates and led a team of planners and students in carrying out the project. UDP team members included project manager Elizabeth Cheteney and architecture and planning graduate students Sean Brodfuehrer, Jajean Rose-Burney, William Smith and Steven Watchorn.

Adds Shibley: “With smart growth principles at the core of his vision, Howard Zemsky and his community partners have gradually fit together this place-making puzzle in a way that preserves and celebrates the district’s history, and creates new spaces and amenities for a thriving commercial center and urban neighborhood.”

LDG has acquired 30 properties for future residential development based on the master plan’s recommendations for multi-use buildings along Seneca and Emslie streets. Such developments will include the expansion of first-floor retail and rental housing units on upper floors. Vacant properties in the central district are under design for a concentration of new cottage houses.

Recent investments in the Larkin District also include improvements to deteriorated streetscapes in the surrounding area to increase accessibility and establish critical gateways, a core tenet of the Larkin District Plan. These include \$2 million in new sidewalks, street furniture, lighting, trees and plantings, crosswalks, bike lanes, signage and bus shelters—a project largely funded by Larkin at Exchange anchor tenant First Niagara Bank.

Additional elements of the plan that are being put into place include a network of green spaces in support of a pedestrian-friendly environment and stronger connections to the surrounding neighborhood.

This past summer, Larkin Square—a 34,000-square-foot gathering space for workers, residents and visitors—opened in the heart of the Larkin District. The multi-purpose public space features indoor and outdoor dining, seating areas, retail market stalls, public sculpture and a free concert series. Envisioned in the master plan, the project was developed by LDG working with The Neighborhood Workshop LLC and its principal, Tim Tielman.

“Our design challenge was to transform a railroad-era industrial superblock into humanized, smaller, multi-use blocks that were knit together by pedestrian-priority circulation paths,” says Tielman. “The paths and future development sites were placed according to principles of human geography and wayfinding. All paths lead to Larkin Square, which itself connects into the city grid. The space was designed to attract office workers, visitors and local residents by evoking mystery, adventure and pleasure. The concept is ‘Take space. Attract people. Stir.’”

Zemsky will continue to implement key elements of the master plan as the boundaries of the district expand. For instance, LDG has begun pushing for a traffic circle that would complement Buffalo’s designed—but never fully completed



—Frederick Law Olmsted Parkway System.

A land-use and transportation-planning solution, the traffic circle at Seneca, Fillmore and Smith Streets would link the northern and southern sections of the park/parkway system, calm traffic and establish a historic, interpretive gateway into the revitalized Larkin District.

LDG now has commissioned the Urban Design Project and its recently aligned research center, the UB Regional Institute, as well as Kevin Connors of Eco Logic Studio, to carry out a second phase of the master plan. This effort will consider the edge of the district and its connections to the neighborhood, enhance the district's transportation planning and offer recommendations for additional mixed-use neighborhood and commercial development.

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