RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of the project is to examine the reuse of former industrial sites as community arts and cultural centers. The primary research question is, how can local instances of industrial site restoration into art and community centers be used as an example for others around the world?

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The Lehigh Valley is a community that has been devastated by the loss of its industrial economy over the last half century. More than many areas in the country, the Lehigh Valley has an abundance of sites that used to function as factories and mills but now sit idle as memories of the past. These sites have tremendous potential to be redeveloped in a way that positively impacts the community instead of contributing to a loss of local cultural heritage. In instances such as this, the arts are often proposed as a solution to the question of what to do with these sites. While it makes logical sense to create an arts center as the backbone of the community, there are counter arguments that believe that this is not the best way to redevelop. The project looks at ways in which other areas have redeveloped their industrial sites and how these projects relate to the ones that are ongoing locally. I looked at the value of redeveloping these local sites, such as the Simon Silk Mill, and the possible impact that they could have on the community.

The Simon Silk Mill is the former site of the largest individual silk ribbon and velvet manufacturer in the world, R&H Simon. In 1883, the city of Easton and its newly formed economic development initiative convince the R&H Simon company to move from its site in New Jersey to the city and build several mill buildings. The site sits on 13th street along the banks of the Bushkill Creek. The Silk Mill was a model establishment of its time and continued to produce textiles through the 1970s. Since then, it has had several transient tenants but has fallen into disrepair and continues to slowly crumble. In 2006 the redevelopment authority of Easton purchased the Silk Mill site and began to study its potential as a center for art and culture within the city. The city conducted a market study and determined that the facility and the city of Easton offers a unique opportunity to developing a project related to creative industries. The current plan includes artist live/work space, a community arts center, hotel, and retail & commercial space. The Silk Mill site offers an excellent opportunity to examine the redevelopment of former industrial sites into arts and cultural centers.

These types of projects and sites are important to examine because of the power that they have in rebuilding a community. While the community members are often those with the final say in these projects, it is often difficult for them to see the value in restoring their industrial past with arts centers because of the initial costs and the lack of value seen in the arts. The project helps people see through this issue by showing the value of these arts centers and using a local example to show what is necessary for a successful project. Arts centers and artists are the perfect tenants for these spaces because industrial spaces appeal to them and the arts are a proven economic driver. A great example of this has been in New York where some of the wealthiest areas were former industrial sites occupied by artists just a few decades ago.

METHODS

I have had the opportunity to meet and discuss local restoration projects with various people in the Easton community as well as review scholarly papers that include case studies of similar projects. At Lafayette I have met with several art professors who have been involved in the Silk Mill project along with art history professor Robert Mattison who directed me towards many of the right people
to speak with. I met with local architect and Lafayette professor Paul Felder to discuss trends in industrial redevelopment in the Lehigh Valley and beyond. I also met with art professor Ed Kerns to discuss the Silk Mill project and the college’s involvement in the development of the site. Art professor Jim Toia was able to provide me with a background on the arts in Easton along with the value of redeveloping the Silk Mill site as an arts center. I also spoke with Anne Gadwa Nicodemus of Metris Arts Consulting who provided me with a background on national trends in the field of arts and community development. This project has acted as an excellent showcase for the interdisciplinary nature of the engineering studies major because it included the engineering, art, and cultural aspects that all come into play when redeveloping an abandoned industrial site into an arts center.

My final project consists of a poster which provides visual representations of the Silk Mill along with a summary of what I have found to be important in developing a former industrial site into an art and cultural center. The poster is designed to put the Silk Mill project in the context of other similar completed projects and will cite some examples of these projects. The poster will include several photographs that I have produced of the Silk Mill. I had the opportunity to access the Silk Mill site on a couple of occasions in order to take these photographs with the help of Jim Toia, Lafayette professor of visual art. The goal of including these photographs in the project is to showcase the interdisciplinary nature of the engineering studies major along with my personal academic history as an engineering studies and art double major. The poster will provide Lafayette students with an opportunity to learn about an important issue and project that is not often discussed within the Lafayette student community.

My work consisted of developing the essential background knowledge that has been useful in connecting the local projects to those around the world. I have read scholarly papers and popular articles on projects in locations in Europe and the United States. The European cases are extremely useful because Europe as a whole is slightly ahead of the United States in moving towards a post-industrial economy and, therefore has many cities that have already rebuilt themselves out of their industrial past. These cases, such as those in Poland and cities in Spain, have already shown some clear aspects that a project must have to be successful. From this research, I have determined how essential it is for the community to be heavily involved in these projects. Having the goal of a site as a community center is essential to the success and the community must be willing to go forward with the project and see the end goal together. Before sites such as former factories were abandoned they acted as the center of the community because a majority of the people who lived in the town also worked together in the factory. The goal of the revitalization of these sites should be to recreate this community atmosphere by creating a space for everybody to be involved in. This goal should help make the community stronger and this makes the project more successful because it will be used more in the long run. This is just one example of a commonality that I have found in my research and an aspect which is useful in the Lehigh Valley as well. Although the Lehigh Valley has maintained its population, the people have moved beyond the city centers where these factories existed and redeveloping them as a community centers will bring people back to the cities and back together as a whole.

One of the most important factors in pursuing a project that will turn a former industrial site into an arts and cultural center is the economic return of the project. There are many ways that these projects can have a positive economic impact on a community and this factor is what many decision makers are looking for when making decisions on projects. These projects generate economic returns by keeping more expenditures in the community instead of residents going elsewhere for entertainment and cultural activities. A mixed use site, such as the Silk Mill, generates additional jobs and income as retailers are attracted to the site because of the anchor that the arts have created. Along with positively impacting the economy, arts projects have a significant impact on the quality of life for the community and this factor is much more difficult to value but ultimately just as important.
CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES

Overall, the city of Easton and the Silk Mill act as a great example for other projects in the future. While all projects are different, many can learn from the Silk Mill project and produce a site that will work well for its own community. The Silk Mill project can act as an example of a project that took what the community had and utilized those resources. I believe that this should be the takeaway example for other projects, use the resources and strengths of your community to the best of your ability when developing your industrial site and realize how the unique surrounding community can be an asset.

There are four ways in which Easton has done just this when pursuing the redevelopment of the former Silk Mill site as an arts center. The first is that Easton has already developed an identity as an arts town along with having a critical mass of artists living within the community. Karl Stirner moving to Easton can be credited with this and the Arts Community of Easton currently has over 100 artist members. This is essential because it is important to have a good arts base to support the project instead of basing your project on artists who you hope will move to the community with the development of the project. The second factor that Easton takes advantage of is its proximity to desirable arts centers such as New York and Philadelphia. Artists can have large spaces that are much more affordable that living in the city while still being able to easily get to the location where their art can be shown. This is an important factor for other communities to look into but they do not need to be close to New York to make this happen. Other sites must take advantage of their location and what is around, whether that be a local arts college or an area that is known for a particular type of art. The next factor is the community support that the Silk Mill project has seen beyond the local artists. In Easton, the community has understood the economic value of the arts and looks forward to seeing the benefits of the redeveloped Silk Mill. An important factor that has led to community support has been the desire to produce a mixed use space that would be open to everybody in the community, not just the artists who live there and this is essential for other areas that require community support. The mixed use site also provides an economic upside that allows members of the community to fully see the positive economic impact a project such as this can have. Having a mixed use site would be beneficial to most other communities and would allow them to more easily connect with the residents. The final factor that Easton is able to take advantage of and that other sites should take into account is the special site that they have to work with and the opportunities that the site offers. The Silk Mill site consists of several buildings that are assembled in a way that makes the area walkable and almost like its own town. The central courtyard provides excellent space for community events and open air markets while the proximity to the Bushkill Creek creates a connection to nature. Other communities should evaluate whether their buildings can be used in a way that promotes the arts and take full advantage of what their site has to offer.

All in all, Easton offers a wonderful example of a city using its strengths to attempt to produce an arts center that fits within the fabric of the community. Other communities looking to begin a project such as this should look to Easton as an example of a city that used what it had and created something amazing. Those communities should look at themselves and to see how they can use their local artists, surrounding towns, economic strengths, and former industrial sites in a way that will produce a positive outcome for all parties.

RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

Through this project I hope that students will become aware of the Silk Mill development and other projects, possibly in their hometown, and be inspired to learn more and explore the value of
redeveloping former industrial sites. Because the development of the Silk Mill is only in its initial stages, it will be important to note the future success or failure of the project and whether the factors outlined here contributed to the outcome. I would like this project to be an initial step towards students using the Silk Mill site and other abandoned industrial sites in our area as a classroom outside of the Lafayette College campus. I also believe that this project could be useful for students in seeing the goals of the development of the Silk Mill and noting if these goals change and how that changes the outcome of the project.

On a greater scale, I believe that many more of these projects will be undertaken in the coming years. With more of these sites being looked at for redevelopment and the value of arts centers becoming better understood, I hope that the Silk Mill will be looked at as an example of success. This project, which helped to outline how the Silk Mill could be this example, could be looked at as a guideline and path to further resources in this field. All in all, this project will help raise awareness of the issues of industrial site redevelopment while also providing a guide for future projects.
REFERENCES


This article uses ten case studies of brownfield redevelopment into green spaces in the city of Toronto. The article discusses how cities often treat the redevelopment of these sites as an opportunity to raise funds through tax dollars and upstart the economy with new business. The author offers an alternative of developing the sites into green spaces which have their own ecological and social benefits. The article concludes that the greening of former brownfield sites has extensive benefits but also comes with expenses that the community must be willing to commit to. The case studies from this article will be useful because they offer an alternative solution to the type of industrial site development that is being investigated in my project.


This article discusses a study on the visual preferences of workers at rehabilitated industrial sites and how the landscape relates to their productivity. The study finds that much of the negative perception of a redeveloped abandoned industrial site stems from the belief that it is “messy”. The study concludes that these apprehensions can be quelled when the landscaping of the site increases in diversity of color and when signs of human influence on the landscape are present. The study also concludes that worker performance levels remain consistent as from the time the landscape is implemented through to maturity. This article is published in the journal of Landscape and Urban Planning and the technical aspects of the article reflect the professionals that the writing is aimed at. This article is extremely useful because it provides aspects that help make a project successful in the eyes of its inhabitants.


This article focuses on the positive economic impacts that the regeneration of former industrial sites can have on a community. The author cites examples in England to show specific examples of the economic impact of the redevelopment of a former industrial site. The difficulty in realizing the economic impact of these redevelopment projects is that the developers need a complete understanding of local conditions in order to produce a proper development project. This article is useful for putting an economic value on the redevelopment of a former industrial site. The article is limited because it is over fifteen years old and economic factors tend to fluctuate in changing economic environments.

This article documents the process of preserving the former Bethlehem Steel site as it is transformed for use for other purposes. The article is from the point of view of a historian and discusses the position that a public historian should take in the process of developing historical sites. The article focuses on the complex process of convincing all involved in the project that it is valuable to save the historic sites. The author argues that public historians who are working with developers should take “interpretive independence” in the project and seek to control the historical aspects. This source is extremely helpful for insight into the process that takes place when historic sites are being restored from the point of view of a historian. The article may be limited because it is six years old and a lot has happened on the former Bethlehem Steel site since the article was written.


This article gives a history of the Bethlehem Steel site while also talking in depth about the future development options for the various buildings on the site. The author reports about the various issues that local and state governments have dealt with during the process of redeveloping the Bethlehem Steel site. The author also gives a first hand account of the site at the time of the article telling of the emptiness of buildings that were once bustling with steel production. This article is useful because it goes into detail about the process that was undertaken to redevelop the site and the various issues that arose. The article acts as a case study for this specific site and will be useful when comparing local issues to those across the world.


This article looks into the influential transformation of Vancouver from an industrial city to successful medium density residential landscape. The city went through this transformation with post-industrial and post-modern theories of land use heavily influencing urban development. The article talks about how urban policy decisions shaped the social and urban development of the city of Vancouver. The author mentions that Vancouver’s relatively quick departure from its industrial past is due to the city’s focus on the future and prioritizing development over preservation. This article is useful because of its focus on an entire city and how a city can best move forward from and industrial past into a new economy. The article may be of limited use because of its focus on broad theories of urban development.


This article focuses on a town in Wisconsin that contains two former industrial sites and how these brownfield sites effect local property values. The study uses a defined neighborhood and creates a model to investigate the responsiveness of housing prices to brownfield sites and green space development. The study found that remediation and implementation of green spaces at these brownfield sites would increase neighborhood property values $2.4-$7.01 million. This article is useful for
investigating motivations and incentives for redevelopment and remediation of a former industrial site for a community.


This article talks about the variety of factors that influence successful brownfield development. The main argument of the authors is that there are many more factors that simply environmental concerns that impact brownfield development. The authors use a variety of statistical analyses to test the influence of certain factors that ranged from development costs to the support of politicians in the process. This article is useful for the project because of it’s look at a wide range of factors that influence the development of former industrial sites and the success of incentives in addressing each of the factors. The article is also a widely cited source which will be useful in connecting the project to a larger scholarly argument.


This article focuses on the value that former industrial sites have in the development of contemporary cities. The author argues that former industrial buildings and properties deserve to be revitalized and utilized in the context of the city’s new economy. The article looks at several sites in Poland and discusses the overall European policy for brownfields. The author also discusses how these former industrial sites can often be lost when a city is shifting industries and the sites are seen to have no value at the time. This article will be useful in creating the argument that former industrial buildings deserve to be restored and actually have a place in a city that has moved on from its industrial past. The focus on European sites may help make a stronger argument and connect this to a worldwide issue.


This article focuses on on revitalizing urban areas through creative initiatives that spark economic development. The article goes into several case studies of development projects that focus on the arts and the positive economic impact that they can generate. The article also goes into several non financial factors such as livability, quality of live and cultural identity that can arise from creative development projects. This paper is extremely useful because of its focus on how the development of arts centers can spur economic development for a community.


This article, along with others in this magazine’s issue, give a first hand account of Bethlehem Steel and the legacy that it left behind. The interesting aspect of this article is that these first hand accounts are from archaeologists who grew up in
Bethlehem and had first hand accounts of the steel mill. These first hand accounts are able to discuss the impact of the steel mill at its peak and the legacy that it has left. The author discusses the site and how it acts as an archaeological piece of history. This article will be useful for connecting local issues to a broader discussion and also creating an opportunity for a discussion of the cultural impact that former industrial sites have had.