

DESIGN CONNECT

a decade in the
making...

Project Sponsored by

Clarence Stein Institute
AAP Art Architecture & Planning
Cornell University

2010-2020

impact report

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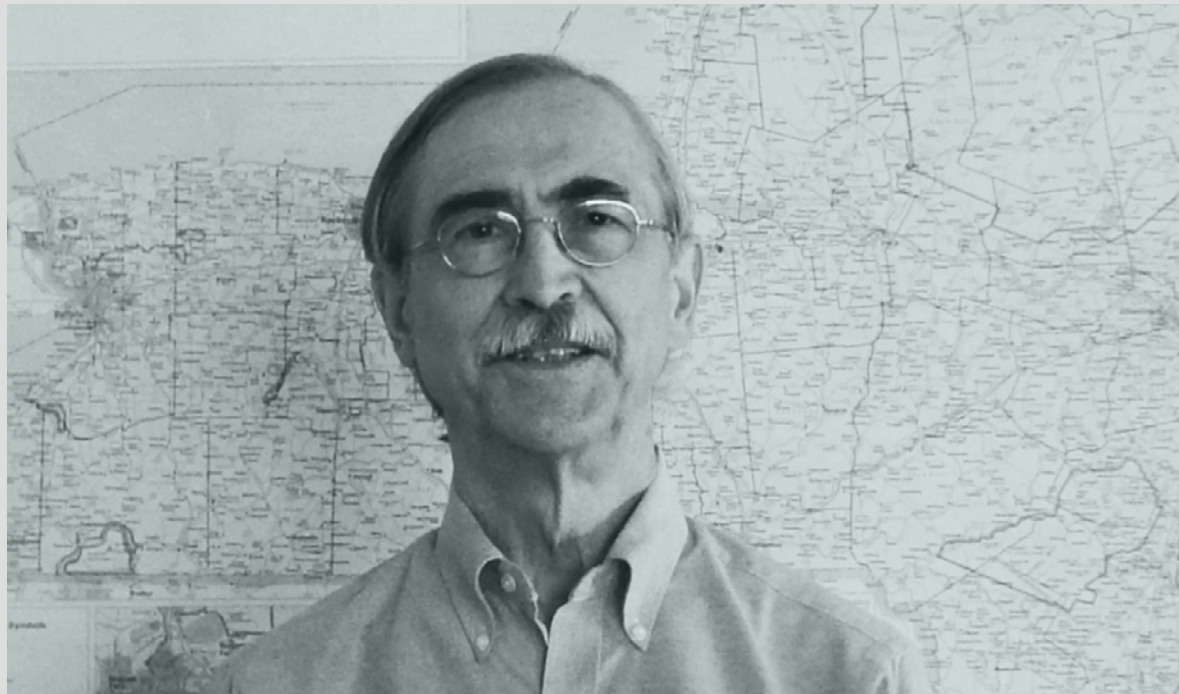
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This report is independently published with the support of Cornell University’s Department of **City and Regional Planning**, and the **Clarence S. Stein Institute for Urban and Landscape Studies**, supporting the research, teaching, and community service of students and faculty who have demonstrated an interest in the ideas of Clarence Stein.



this report is dedicated to...

Dr. Michael A. Tomlan for his many years of guidance
and the founders of Design Connect **Jennifer Ng** and
Chris Hardy.



Dr. Michael Tomlan

Professor and Director of Historic Preservation Planning
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FOREWORD

Growing up in upstate New York, it was always apparent to me that the people who had expertise and access to money for community projects were unequally distributed. This is made all the more obvious in Ithaca, where bright young people who want to help communities gather to pursue their education. At Cornell, the resources seem to be ever in reach.

In Design Connect, students with various backgrounds from around the world, pursuing different degree programs, come together to learn about commonplace problems being faced by residents in locations in the region. These problems are defined by the communities that apply to the organization looking for assistance. For the students, what begins with curiosity, compassion, and a willingness to become involved in community activities leads to a set of conversations and investigations where Design Connect teams collect information, analyze options, and work with the community to design appropriate solutions.

Imaginative, creative solutions must involve the community members because, as students soon realize, their time assisting the residents is very limited. Through the engagement, however, the community gains some insight into alternatives that it may not realize exist, with outside people and resources that could change its future. The intellectual beauty of Design Connect is that a student can return and learn a different skill by taking another role in the teams each semester. This allows everyone an opportunity to continue to gain more experience and understanding. Meanwhile, by participating in Design Connect, the residents can imagine yet another student group taking an interest in the next project. This has led to the completion of several initiatives of which everyone involved can be proud. We invite your participation.



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FOREWORD

During the events of 2020, Design Connect's mission took on a new relevance. The COVID-19 pandemic and public health crisis affirmed the importance and necessity of the work Design Connect has advanced over the last ten years in partnership with New York State communities. Public spaces and safe streets have become crucial components in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, 2020 highlighted the vast inequalities in justice, health outcomes, economic opportunities, and access to food that have long existed in America.

Since Spring 2020, Design Connect student teams have been pioneering strategies for conducting effective community meetings remotely, designing collaboratively without ever meeting in the same room, and soliciting input from communities, in some cases in areas with limited home internet access. Suddenly, the question Design Connect participants often grapple with: "how can we engage meaningfully with a community from a distance?" has taken on a more literal meaning than any of us ever imagined. There is no doubt that recent participants will be uniquely qualified as resourceful and innovative practitioners of community engagement, planning, and design.

Design Connect has provided over a decade of experiential learning for Cornell students across disciplines and celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2018. In hopes to preserve and reflect upon the organization's institutional knowledge, we have compiled a chronicle of snapshots and case studies of Design Connect engagement in six individual communities over the past five years. Each profile or snapshot illustrates how Design Connect actions have been of service to multiple New York state communities and aided them to move forward on their visions.

This report gives continuity to a previous report on the first five years of the organization and is directed to students, faculty and communities alike who share interest in collaborative, democratic and resilient development for the communities of New York State.

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DESIGN CONNECT

PROJECT CONSTELLATION



01.

INTRODUCTION

Design Connect is a multidisciplinary, student-run, community design organization located in AAP's department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University in Upstate New York.

Design Connect: An Introduction p.16

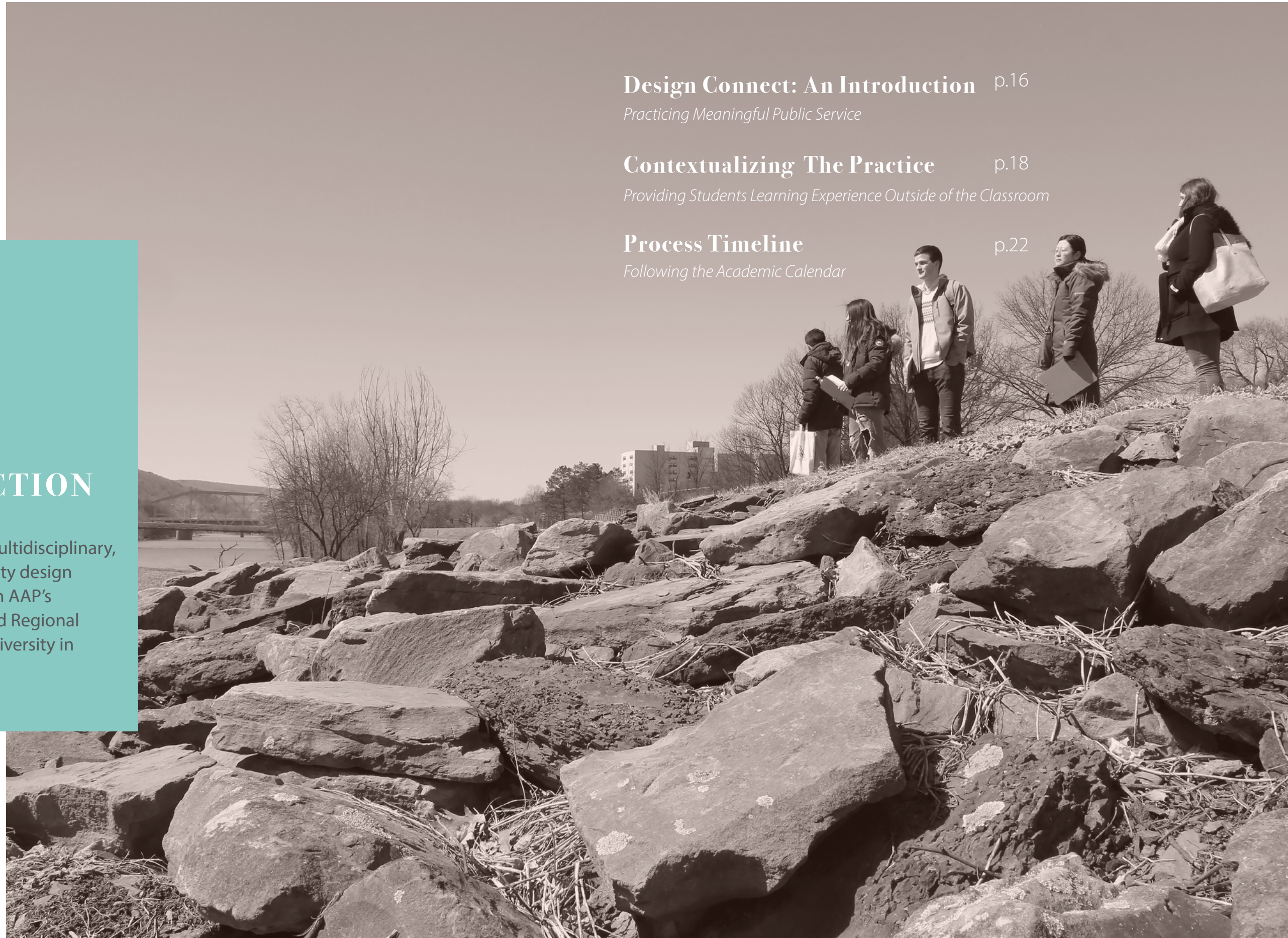
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Following the Academic Calendar



Images Left to Right: On the left, Design Connect team member and Cornell Professor Shorna Allred at a community outreach event at Broome County Library; on the right, Design Connect team members looking out to the Susquehanna River from Exchange St. Pedestrian Bridge, both by William Staffeld, Binghamton, Spring 2019.



DESIGN CONNECT: AN INTRODUCTION

Design Connect is rooted in collaborative, democratic, and sustainable principles for the advancement of towns in Upstate New York. Every semester, the organization provides practical experience to students through cooperation with local municipalities and non-profit organizations by providing design and planning services for these groups that may not have the resources to hire professionals.

Mission - Design Connect empowers students and citizens by advancing collaborative, democratic, and sustainable design and planning projects in local communities.

Vision - Design Connect strives to empower Cornell students to become top contributing professionals in their fields by exercising public service to Upstate New York communities in need.

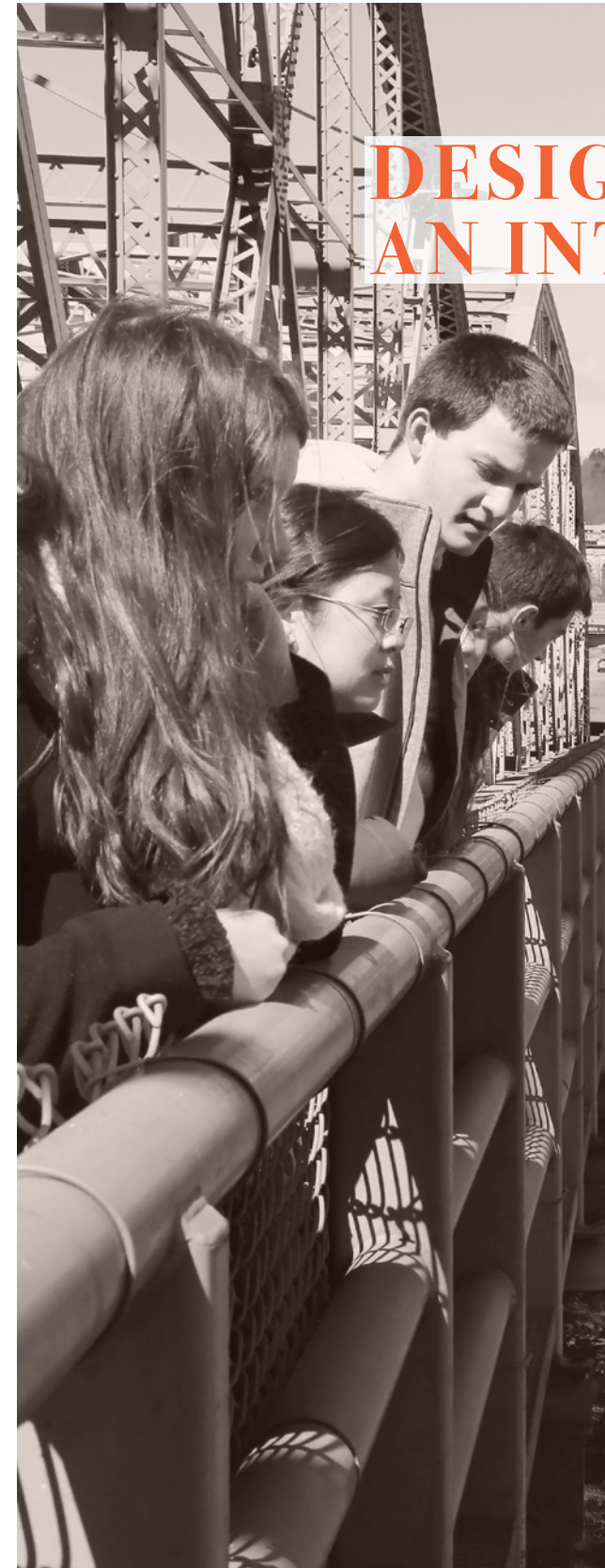


Image: Community members attending a community outreach event, Elmira, Spring 2017.



PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES IN DESIGN & URBAN PLANNING

Design Connect partners with local communities on civic projects, helping to conduct research, build consensus, generate ideas, and identify opportunities to move projects forward.

Design Connect is guided by a set of values that inspires a participatory and collaborative approach towards its partnerships with local communities.

01 . Collaboration

Design Connect provides students with opportunities to engage in multidisciplinary project teams that collaborate with partner communities utilizing the support of Cornell faculty and staff.

02 . Service

The Design Connect experience is based on volunteerism. Student teams share Cornell's wealth of resources with Upstate communities in the spirit of Cornell's land grant mission.

03 . Practical Experience

Participation in Design Connect engages students in the experience of professional practice while exposing them to the inherent realities and challenges of public process and teamwork.

04 . Democracy

Design Connect projects aim to build a collaborative and participatory process in which constituents, community groups, local governments, and other stakeholders are able to participate.

05 . Education

Design Connect works to provide a rigorous academic experience through open faculty critique sessions, faculty advisors for each team, and ongoing collaborative review among student teams.

06 . Sustainability

Design Connect works to build community ownership over projects, ensuring that the momentum generated will be sustained and the project can continue to move forward independently.

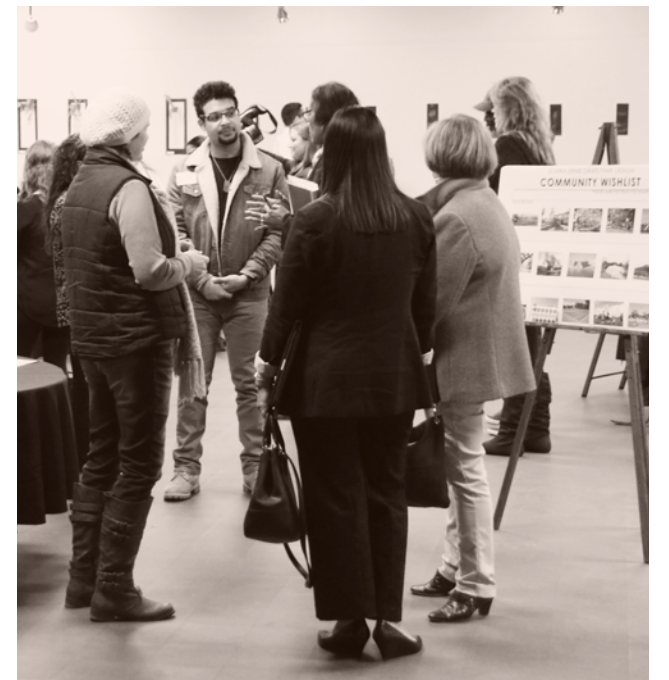
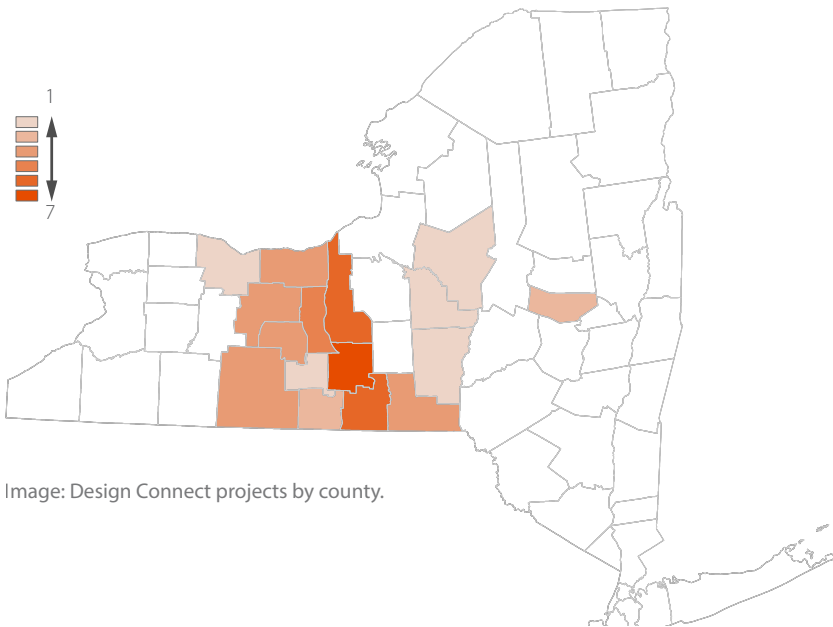


Image: Community members attending a community outreach event, Elmira, Spring 2017.

CONTEXTUALIZING DESIGN CONNECT IN UPSTATE NY

Enhancing the heritage of the Erie Canal

We've helped communities envision their role in state initiatives such as the Empire State Trail and Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor and receive funding from DOS Environmental Protection Fund Grant Program for Parks, Preservation and Heritage.



Creating welcoming spaces for newcomers

Design Connect has worked with refugees and recent immigrants in municipalities that have received funding from the Downtown Revitalization Initiative.

Developing recreation and tourism assets in Finger Lakes communities

We have helped communities receive funding from DOS Local Waterfront Revitalization Program.

Revitalizing urban public spaces in the Southern Tier

We have assisted communities on their next steps after receiving funding from HUD Community Development Block Grants.

Linking communities to Cornell and its resources

Our projects often happen in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension, Engaged Cornell, Rust2Green Cornell and Design Connect alumni who now work in the region!

PRE-PROJECT



Image: Design Connect team member facilitating a community outreach event at Broome County Public Library, William Staffeld, Binghamton, Spring 2019.

Sourcing and Scoping Local Design Connect Projects

Design Connect sources and scope projects twice annually: once in the Fall and another in the Spring.

01. _____

RFP & PROJECT PROPOSAL REVIEW

The Board issues a Request For Proposal (RFP) to local communities and a few prospective projects are picked based on the organization's selection criteria and availability of project managers.

02. _____

SITE VISITS & PARTNER INTERVIEW

Site interviews are conducted with shortlisted communities, in which DC board members meet the potential client in person and on site to gain a better understanding of the project's scope and to answer any questions the client may have regarding collaborating with DC. If necessary, refinements to the project scope to align it with student capabilities and limitations are discussed at this time.

03. _____

PROJECT SCOPE & PROJECT MANAGER

In tandem with project selection, DC recruits students with prior DC experience and demonstrated interest in group leadership and project management to become project managers. The selection process of project managers occurs concurrently with project selection to ensure that the team leader possesses relevant skills to achieve the project's core themes and goals.

PROJECT SEMESTER



Image: Design Connect team member carrying out surveys near Rockbottom Dam, William Staffeld, Binghamton, Spring 2019.

Collaborating and Engaging with Local Design Connect Community Partners

Design Connect participants work in multidisciplinary student teams to produce deliverables that help communities move design and planning projects forward.

04. _____

RECRUITMENT OF TEAM MEMBERS

Selected projects are presented to students during the first week of the semester and students submit applications to join DC. The Board reviews applications and builds teams based on skills needed for each project, aiming to build diverse teams with strong collective capacity.

05. _____

TEAM RESEARCH & PRESENTATIONS

Teams conduct background research, field research, community outreach, analysis, community engagement, group work, and production on deliverables. During this time, the Board hosts workshops and invites speakers to provide teams with relevant assistance at critical points during the semester, in addition to mid-term reviews that provide feedback and peer review.

06. _____

COMMUNITY DELIVERY & FEEDBACK LOOPS

Teams present work at a final review for feedback before presenting to their communities, while the Board documents all work produced. The Board holds feedback sessions with all teams and its advisory board, and determines if any changes should be made to the structure of the organization.

Image: Design Connect team member and stakeholders on site, Amsterdam, Fall 2019.

02.

DESIGN ACTIVISM

Design Connect leverages methods of participatory design to create positive change in traditionally underserved communities. By doing so, all participants become active agents of change reinvigorating community engagement within planning and design professions.

Profile | Project Manager p.30

Sasha Anemone

Case Study | Amsterdam, NY p.32

Addressing a Food Desert

Snapshot | Elmira, NY p.38

Recovering a Neighborhood's History



[PROFILE PROJECT MANAGER]



“Working on a real project helped connect interests and values important to me, such as **social justice**, as well as connect theory to practice.”

Sasha Anemone

Anemone recognized that Design Connect offered an opportunity to “fill a void that was not present in other work. Grad school was a transition from the real world to the hypothetical.”

“The city of Amsterdam hopes that the community garden [we conceived] will act as a catalyst for a more robust food system in the neighborhood.”

Sasha is 2020 graduate of the Master of Landscape Architecture program.

SPRING 2019

Motivated by personal interests in environmental justice work and design activism, Sasha first engaged with a Design Connect project in the Spring semester of 2019. The partnership with Amsterdam was initiated by the Community and Economic Development Office of Amsterdam and Centro Civico, a Latinx community center in the East End, to propose strategies for addressing the East End food desert.

A key consideration of the project was the desire to have culturally significant foods available in the East End, and a need for better coordination with area farmers who might be able to produce these crops. The team considered how building and strengthening existing community partnerships was a necessary “design” element of the garden, as it would help ensure the garden’s viability and lay the groundwork for future food systems work in the neighborhood.

FALL 2019

As project manager Sasha Anemone undertook a proactive recruitment strategy to build an interdisciplinary and bilingual team, in English and Spanish, that brought together students from City and Regional Planning, Landscape Architecture, and the Masters of Public Health program, among others to address the project’s challenges.

CASE STUDY AMSTERDAM, NY

Amsterdam, a city 37 miles from Albany, is Design Connect's most geographically distant client to date. The East End neighborhood of Amsterdam has been characterized as a food desert, defined by the US Department of Agriculture as an area where at least 33% of the population "resides more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store." A mall, constructed in the 1980s, isolated the neighborhood from the rest of the downtown, resulting in neighborhood decline.

With few businesses selling groceries in the immediate area and many residents lacking personal transportation, the residents of the East End struggle to gain access to fresh food. In recent years, the neighborhood has seen an influx of new residents, many of them Puerto Ricans fleeing the ravages of Hurricane Maria.



Centro Civico

COMMUNITY GARDEN

THE EAST END

“We know there are a lot of people cooking in their homes. Why aren’t they setting up a weekend [food] truck, restaurant, small business in the area? Maybe they just need the resources and knowledge to create something. We want to increase access to fresh food, as well as get people more invested in the community.”

-Amanda Bearcroft, Director of Community and Economic Development for the City of Amsterdam, explaining the origins of the Design Connect project.

ADDRESSING FOOD SECURITY



INCREASING ACCESS TO FRESH FOOD IN AMSTERDAM

In 2018, the city of Amsterdam received a \$10 million Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant from New York State and identified a new community center in the East End as a priority project for that funding. They wanted to incorporate a pilot food access project into those plans, so in early 2019, Design Connect partnered with the city’s Community and Economic Development Office and Centro Civico, a Latino community center in the East End, to propose strategies for addressing the East End food desert.

The initial project proved to be fruitful for the community, and resulted in a second Design Connect project in Fall 2019 that continued to advance food justice work in the neighborhood.

Images Left to Right: On the right, Design Connect team members and stakeholder on site; on the left, Design Connect team members facilitating a community outreach event, both in Amsterdam, Fall 2019.

THE COMMUNITY GARDEN AS A DESIGN APPROACH

The team considered how building and strengthening existing community partnerships was a necessary “design” element of the garden, as it would help ensure the garden’s viability and lay the groundwork for future food systems work in the neighborhood.

Beyond the physical design of the garden, the team identified programming and curriculum possibilities, hearing from stakeholders that children’s activities were an effective way to educate and engage families. Another critical issue was identifying stakeholders willing to maintain this shared collaborative space. **“Though the objective is the design of a community garden, the work is more about building partnerships and giving local collaborators a place to meet and network,”** said Anemone.

Image to the Right: Design Connect Team presenting outcomes of their project in Fall 2019.



SPRING 2019

Six methods for improving food access, called “food models,” were explored by Design Connect: virtual supermarkets, incubator kitchens, fixed-site and mobile farmer’s markets, community gardens, and improving existing stores’ selection of fresh foods. This was achieved through community engagement via bilingual interviews, surveys and community outreach events.

SUMMER 2019

The City of Amsterdam invited Design Connect to continue developing their ideas in the fall, specifically the “community garden” food model, asking Design Connect to design an educational community garden on an empty East End lot that shares ownership between Centro Civico and the City of Amsterdam. This intervention had the lowest cost and easiest implementation of the six “food models”.

SPRING 2020

“This was a wonderful process,” said Amanda Bearcroft. “It was a huge plus that Design Connect was invested to come out for phase one, and then planning the [possible] implementation in phase two really made the project come full-circle. I really don’t think it would have happened without them.” Groundbreaking of the Design-Build project was planned for a community build in spring 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily stalled those plans.

THE GARDEN

The site design features four raised beds and four gardening tables for users who have difficulty bending or kneeling, or who use wheelchairs. The garden beds are intended to be used by organizations for educational programming, rather than reserved by individuals, as is often the case in community gardens. A bandstand, composting area, picnic tables, pollinator garden, and fruit trees fill out the remainder of the space, allowing the site to function as a community park with a variety of educational and food-related uses. ■



The project received a donation from The David Wasserman Foundation Inc.



Twenty Cornell students were involved across the two semesters of involvement.



The project earned an Engaged Cornell Grant for Design Build Project and Montgomery County Soil and Water.

Elmira

PROJECT BRIEF

In Spring 2017, the City of Elmira applied to Design Connect to create a master plan for a redesign of Ernie Davis Park. The park is named after Ernie Davis (1939-1963), the first African-American to win the Heisman Trophy, college football's highest honor. Ernie Davis grew up playing sports at the park and is beloved and dearly remembered by the community. Ernie Davis Park is an essential gathering place for the neighborhood, hosting events such as the region's largest Juneteenth celebration every year.

Source: Background aerial imagery from Google Earth, 2020.

OUTCOME

The report drafted by Design Connect continues to be used to successfully attract funding for park improvements. An inclusive, natural-play playground and a community stage that were suggested by Design Connect as park elements are slated to be implemented. The City has hired the playground design firm Play By Design to involve the community in the building of the playground in Summer 2020.

Funding has also been procured to build the community stage/pavilion. The City had tentatively scheduled a women's build day for Mother's Day in May 2020 to implement the project, though the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily postponed these plans.

ERNIE DAVIS PARK

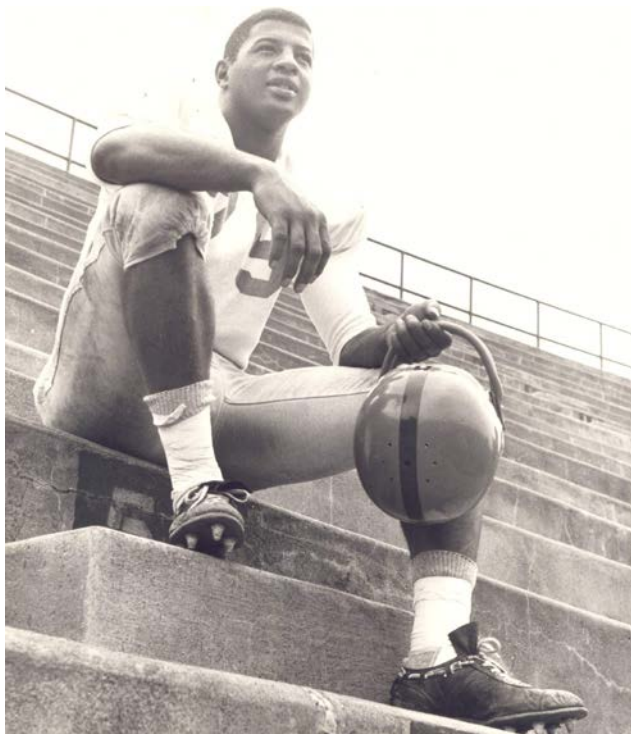


Image: Ernie Davis, image received from Jack Moore.

THE SITE

The 3-acre park is located about 0.4 miles north of Elmira's central downtown. It is located adjacent to Lake Street, which was identified in Elmira's Comprehensive Master Plan as a Cultural Corridor due to its historic and architectural assets, as well as a priority for Complete Streets projects. The site is adjacent to a community center, elementary school, several churches, and a newly renovated apartment complex.

In addition to its connection to Ernie Davis, the park is historically significant for its location within the boundaries of the former neighborhood of Slabtown, an African-American neighborhood founded in the 1840s by people escaping slavery arriving from the South on the Underground Railroad. The neighborhood was completely razed in the era of urban renewal, and only a small historic marker acknowledges the site's history.

THE PROCESS

On their site visit, the team observed that the park's playground equipment, benches, and picnic shelters were aging and deteriorated. The group connected with the park's many stakeholders through community meetings, phone interviews, and surveys distributed at the adjacent elementary school to hear about desired improvements for the park. Besides desiring new park amenities, such as a playground and a covered venue for Juneteenth celebrations, stakeholders expressed an interest in making the park's history and ties to Ernie Davis more evident. One member of the Design Connect team interviewed Jack Moore, Ernie Davis's friend and co-captain, about ways the park could best honor Ernie Davis's life and values. History and memory were evident in the Design Connect team's final proposal: the vernacular architecture of Slabtown was incorporated into a multi-functional stage and pavilion, a statue of Ernie Davis was proposed, and the design encourages visitors to "Exercise with Ernie" through the proposed improved athletic and recreational elements. ■

HIGHLIGHTS

- \$300,000 +** in funding and in-kind donations
- 25** design charette participants
- 85** survey responses
- 15** students engaged

PROJECT MANAGER

Elizabeth Fabis (MLA'19)



Image: Design Connect team members facilitating a community outreach event, Elmira, Spring 2017.

“This was a game-changing project for me. I encountered what it's like to work on a project that holds a powerful meaning for the community. It made me think about how I can really put my values into action.”

- Elizabeth Fabis, MLA '19

Image: View of Champlin Beach Park, Hammondsport, Fall 2016.

03.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Design Connect projects recognize that creating new physical connections between places strengthens access to recreational opportunities as well as communities' relationships with each other.

Profile | Client Profile

p.40

David Oliver

Case Study | Hammondsport, NY

p.42

Creating a Connected Trail System

Snapshot | Dryden, NY

p.48

Converting Rails to Trails



[PROFILE CLIENT PROFILE]



“The information
Design Connect
had on the cost for
Rails to Trails
was really helpful.”

David Oliver

David Oliver, Former Town Assessor of Urbana, and founder of the Friends of Hammondsport Area Trails and Parks, had a vision for enhancing the recreational assets of the Village of Hammondsport for locals and visitors alike. The village’s application was selected for a collaboration with Design Connect. The partnership resulted in a comprehensive scope and cost estimate for the project. The final report and graphics produced helped Oliver gain public support for the project. Oliver credits a successful grant application package to the Design Connect team and “many minds approaching the situation.”

SPRING 2014

In 2014, Oliver founds the Friends of Hammondsport Area Trails and Parks to help achieve his vision of a more connected trail network in the region.

FALL 2015

In 2015, Oliver contacts Design Connect to plan a rails to trails conversion of the old Bath and Hammondsport railroad. The group surveyed the site conditions and analyzed precedent projects, which allowed them to develop a detailed cost estimate for the client.

FALL 2016

Satisfied by the first collaboration, Oliver applies for a second Design Connect project to continue connecting Hammondsport area trails and parks: a redesign of a portion of the Hammondsport waterfront spanning from Champlin Beach to Glenn H. Curtiss Park.

FALL 2017

Though the rails to trails conversion has stalled, Oliver remains undeterred. In late 2017, Hammondsport received a \$683,603 grant from the New York Department of State Local Waterfront Revitalization Program to construct an ADA accessible kayak launch and the trail, boardwalk, and bridge at Champlin Beach. Since then, engineers have begun designing the Keuka inlet bridge.

CASE STUDY

HAMMONDSPORT, NY

The Village of Hammondsport, located on the southern tip of Keuka Lake, is surrounded by natural beauty, but its trails and recreational assets were scattered and disconnected from one another.



PLANNED RAIL TRAIL

EXISTING TRAIL
NETWORK

CURTISS PARK

CHAMPLIN BEACH

Design Connect’s task was to design a trail and bridge connecting the two parks: Champlin Beach and Glenn H. Curtiss Park. This connection was the “missing puzzle piece,” that if completed, would create a continuous circuit between the existing trail network, the rail trail, and downtown. In addition, Design Connect was asked to propose a design for Champlin Beach that could restructure the disorganized parking lot and provide an attractive recreational area for residents and visitors to take in spectacular views of Keuka Lake.

“Though three waterfront plans had been proposed for the Village of Hammondsport, they had gained little forward momentum, and it was David Oliver’s hope that Design Connect’s assistance would again be successful in moving the project forward.”

-Kate Flaherty, Design Connect Impact Report Writer following an interview with David Oliver.

Images Left to Right: On the left, looking out to Keuka Lake at Champlin Beach Park; on the right, image of the shores of Champlin Beach Park; the Village of Hammondsport and Town of Urbana, Fall 2016.

FOR TOURISTS & FOR LOCALS

PROMOTING RECREATIONAL ASSETS



IMPROVING
WATERFRONT
ACCESS IN
HAMMONDSPORT

Champlin Beach is an established waterfront park. Visitors are most likely to have visited the site for its access to the swimming beach at the adjacent Town of Urbana property, but Champlin Beach also encompasses woods, wetlands, and trails that meander north behind the neighboring high school. These trails currently dead-end at a creek inlet to Keuka Lake. On the other side of the inlet is Glenn Curtiss Park, a newly created low-impact waterfront park that is another project being moved forward by Oliver. From Glenn Curtiss Park, it is just a short walk to both Hammondsport’s downtown and the planned rail trail.

The team toured the site, its neighboring parks, and downtown. Back on campus, they learned about Hammondsport’s history, and about Glenn Curtiss, Hammondsport native and inventor of the seaplane. The community meeting was well attended, and the team heard from residents and small-business owners eager for more water access, a formal parking lot, and possible landscaping methods to discourage the large Canada goose population at Champlin Beach.



TRAIL SYSTEM DESIGN CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

The project manager, Tess Ruswick (MLA'18), said that her team “stepped outside their comfort zone” to work in a cross-disciplinary manner. During the design process, the team split into three micro-teams to address the client’s concerns: Parking, Circulation, and Waterfront. Planning students learned AutoCAD and Adobe Photoshop – two programs not typically taught within the planning curriculum – to draft the site program and create renderings of the design proposal. The team proposed a bridge crossing the inlet creek, footpaths, a raised boardwalk to cross wetland areas, and a boardwalk observation platform. In addition, they proposed reorganizing the parking lot, installing an ADA-accessible kayak launch, and replacing the existing turf with strips of wildflower meadow to discourage the Canada geese, among other improvements.

Image to the Right: Design Connect Team facilitating a community outreach event in Fall 2016.



The Waterfront as a Pivotal Community Space

The Village of Hammondsport, and the encompassing Town of Urbana, are located at the southern tip of Keuka Lake, and in the larger Finger Lakes Region. Hammondsport is nestled in the crux of a glacial-formed hanging-valley. As such, it shares similar characteristics to other Finger Lakes towns: dramatic views, water access, and rocky soils that support viticulture. These conditions, in addition to its strong linkage with aviation in the past, help support its tourism.

The community of Hammondsport-Urbana maintains a strong and active connection to the water. Many of the events hosted in the community are located in close proximity to the lake: Smoke on the Water BBQ, Seaplane Homecoming, Once Upon a Lake Storytelling Festival, Little League Games, and the 4th of July Fireman’s Carnival. The waterfront is a pivotal community space.

The Design Connect team gained key insights from community members, including a desire to maintain the integrity of Hammondsport’s abundant natural beauty, maximize the utility of the waterfront, and solidify the informal trails that cross through the wetland. These insights allowed Design Connect to integrate into the programming plans and ensure that the desires of the local community and the Village of Hammondsport were addressed.

LOCAL INSIGHTS

Ruswick credits Oliver as the driving force behind the success of the project: “Dave is such a congenial, warm person who manages to strategize how to get things done. Just the way he’s managed to grow the trail network is incredible.” For Ruswick, an Ithaca native, the success of the Design Connect project has a special meaning: “Knowing that I can go and visit this place is especially rewarding. There’s a certain kind of aesthetic to the ends of the Finger Lakes – the horizon of steep hills and lakes. The waterfront is such an important part of a Finger Lakes community.”



Design Connect develops a continuing partnership with the Village of Hammondsport over two semesters of student engagement



A significant number of students across disciplines were able to participate in engaged learning and gain practical skills



Village of Hammondsport receives grant from the New York Department of State Local Waterfront Revitalization Program

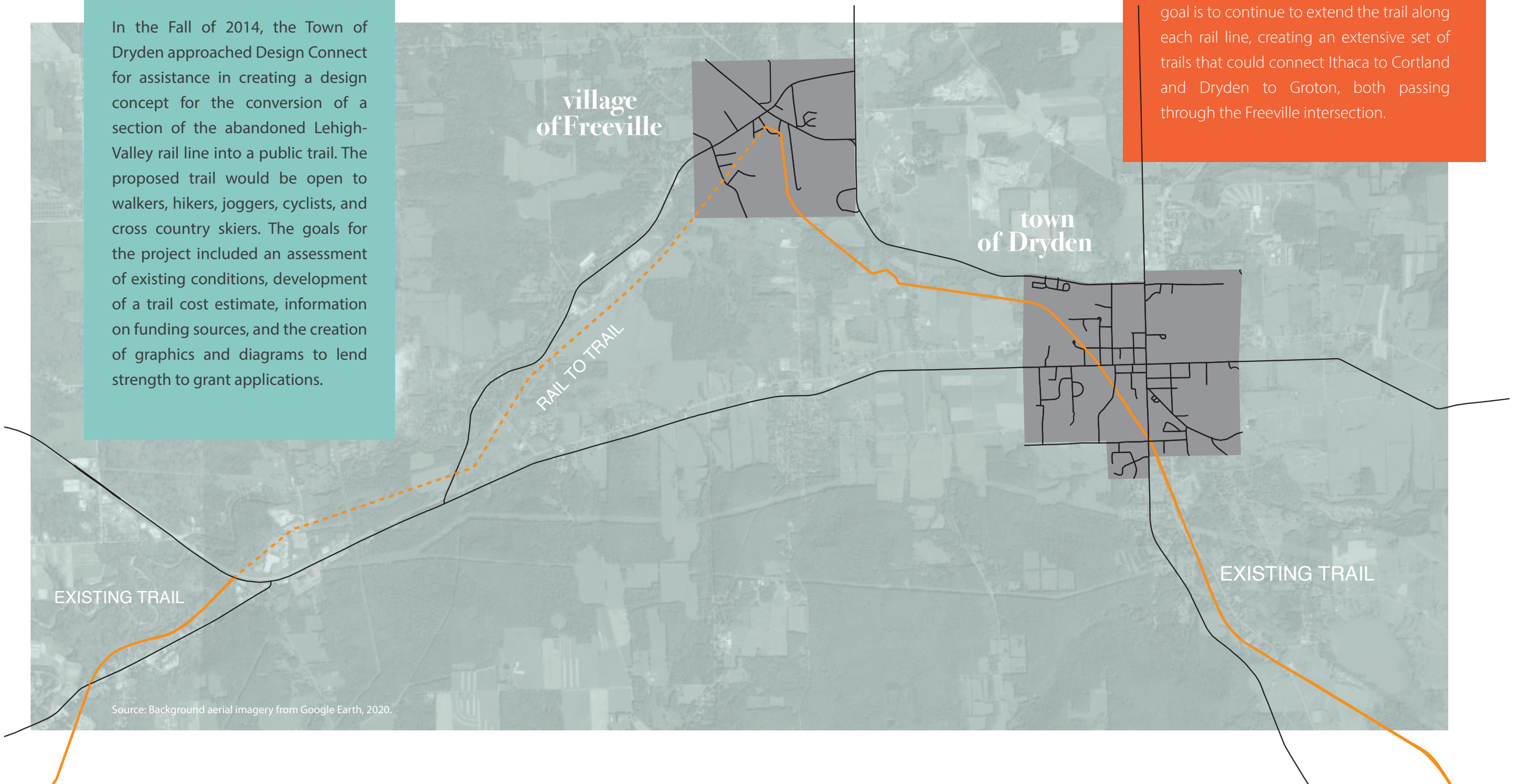
Dryden

PROJECT BRIEF

In the Fall of 2014, the Town of Dryden approached Design Connect for assistance in creating a design concept for the conversion of a section of the abandoned Lehigh-Valley rail line into a public trail. The proposed trail would be open to walkers, hikers, joggers, cyclists, and cross country skiers. The goals for the project included an assessment of existing conditions, development of a trail cost estimate, information on funding sources, and the creation of graphics and diagrams to lend strength to grant applications.

OUTCOME

The Dryden Rail Trail has become a key conservation and sustainability strategy for the Town of Dryden and surrounding areas. The trail currently connects two intersecting abandoned rail lines. The Town's long-term goal is to continue to extend the trail along each rail line, creating an extensive set of trails that could connect Ithaca to Cortland and Dryden to Groton, both passing through the Freeville intersection.



THE SITE

The idea to turn the abandoned rail line into a public trail goes back to at least the 1970s and the initiative had been brought forward several times unsuccessfully. When local resident and Cornell alumnus, Bob Beck, became the chair of the Town of Dryden's Conservation Commission, he and other proponents pushed the project forward with broader support. The decommissioned Lehigh Valley Railroad is made up of over 20 miles of rail beds that once linked Ithaca to Dryden via Freeville. Abandoned in 1976, these rail beds traverse land with multiple owners and a variety of uses. The current conversion project, 10.4 miles in length, runs from the Village of Dryden to Ithaca, while passing through the Village of Freeville and the hamlets of Etna and Varna. Working from both ends towards the middle, a first celebration was held for the 3-mile Dryden to Freeville section (the east end linking directly to the popular 4-mile Jim Schug trail) with official opening in Spring 2019. At the western end of the project, the trail traverses a property of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, where it is currently under construction, and from there it will connect the network to the East Ithaca Recreation Way.

THE PROCESS

Members of Design Connect met with town supervisor Mary Ann Sumner and the Conservation Board to discuss aspirations, expectations, challenges, as well as the history of the trail. The Design Connect team then assessed the trail network and site conditions. They also researched precedent sites, compliance, and regulations standards to better inform their designs and recommendations. The team then organized outreach, brought the community together for public meetings, specifically targeting landowners, and gathered support through participatory design activities. Using insight gained from public feedback, the Design

Connect Team created design guidelines, layouts, and features for the trail in their final report. This helped the town successfully apply for grant funding, then served as a guide for the project's implementation.

THE OUTCOME

Design Connect's report for the project was published in 2015; in 2016 the town board agreed to form a Rail Trail task force, putting Bob Beck in charge. The task force, comprised of volunteer grant writers, a graphic artist, event coordinators and an experienced builder, has continued outreach and pursued work on the rail to trail conversion, using Design Connect's report to apply for grants to further the work. To date, the project has received funding from the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the AARP, Cornell University, the Triad Foundation and the Tompkins County Planning Department and County Tourism Program. In Spring 2019, the Town of Dryden was awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the NYS Department of Transportation to help build a critical pedestrian bridge crossing at NYS Route 13, near the intersection of Route 366. This section links with the nearby Cayuga Trail and the trails in the Cornell Botanic Gardens' Monkey Run Natural Area. ■

HIGHLIGHTS

- \$1,772,540** awarded via grants
- 6.25 miles** (Varna-Freeville trail)
- 2** public outreach meetings
- 40** public event attendees

PROJECT MANAGER

- Eileen Munch** (MRP'16)
- Kyle Sitzman** (MLA'17)

“It was great to work with these wonderful students. Design Connect really helped convince the town government, public, and landowners that the rail trail was a project worth supporting.”

- Bob Beck, Chair of Rail Trail Task Force,
Town of Dryden (NY)

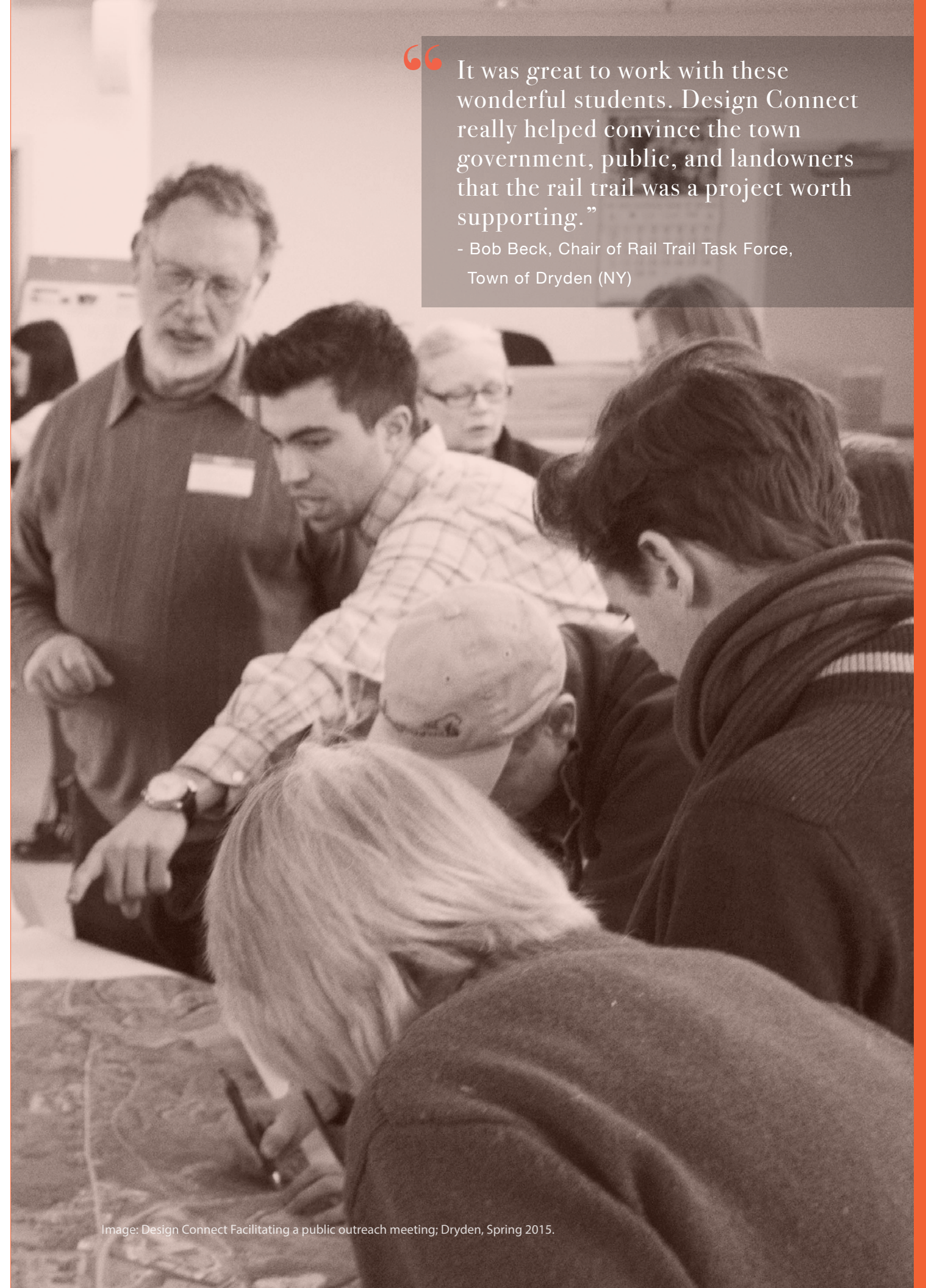


Image: Design Connect Facilitating a public outreach meeting; Dryden, Spring 2015.

04.

CIVIC SPACES & EQUITY

Design Connect recognizes that public spaces are fundamentally civic spaces: venues where people can imbue a physical space with shared values about what it means to exist in a community. By engaging community members in a democratic design process, past planning decisions that created barriers and inequities can be transformed.



Profile | Community Member
Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman p.54

Case Study | Binghamton, NY
Designing a Resilient Waterfront Park p.56

Snapshot | Candor, NY
Shaping a Green Gateway p.62

[PROFILE COMMUNITY MEMBER]



“We had over 40 people at the community outreach meeting. It gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling that people were excited to be participating citizens and interested in the possibilities for the site. This is something that Design Connect really helps support.”

Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman

Heidi is a Senior Extension Associate with the Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) in the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell University. She works with communities and regions, typically in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), to provide technical assistance and collaboratively develop research, trainings, tools, and resources for community and economic development. Her areas of work include the Rust to Green Binghamton Project, a university-community partnership co-led by Dr. Shorna Allred and CaRDI, designed to better understand the experience of flooding and community resiliency, via participatory action research.

SPRING 2014

Since 2013, Heidi has worked to develop meaningful, engaged educational experiences and courses for Cornell students through internship placements, practicums, and applied research opportunities.

FALL 2017

Since Fall 2017, Heidi has been involved with a research effort designed to understand and strengthen impact assessment of local and regional food systems initiatives.

SPRING 2019

As part of Rust2Green Binghamton, Heidi partnered with Design Connect to take an engaged approach towards Rock Bottom Dam Park.

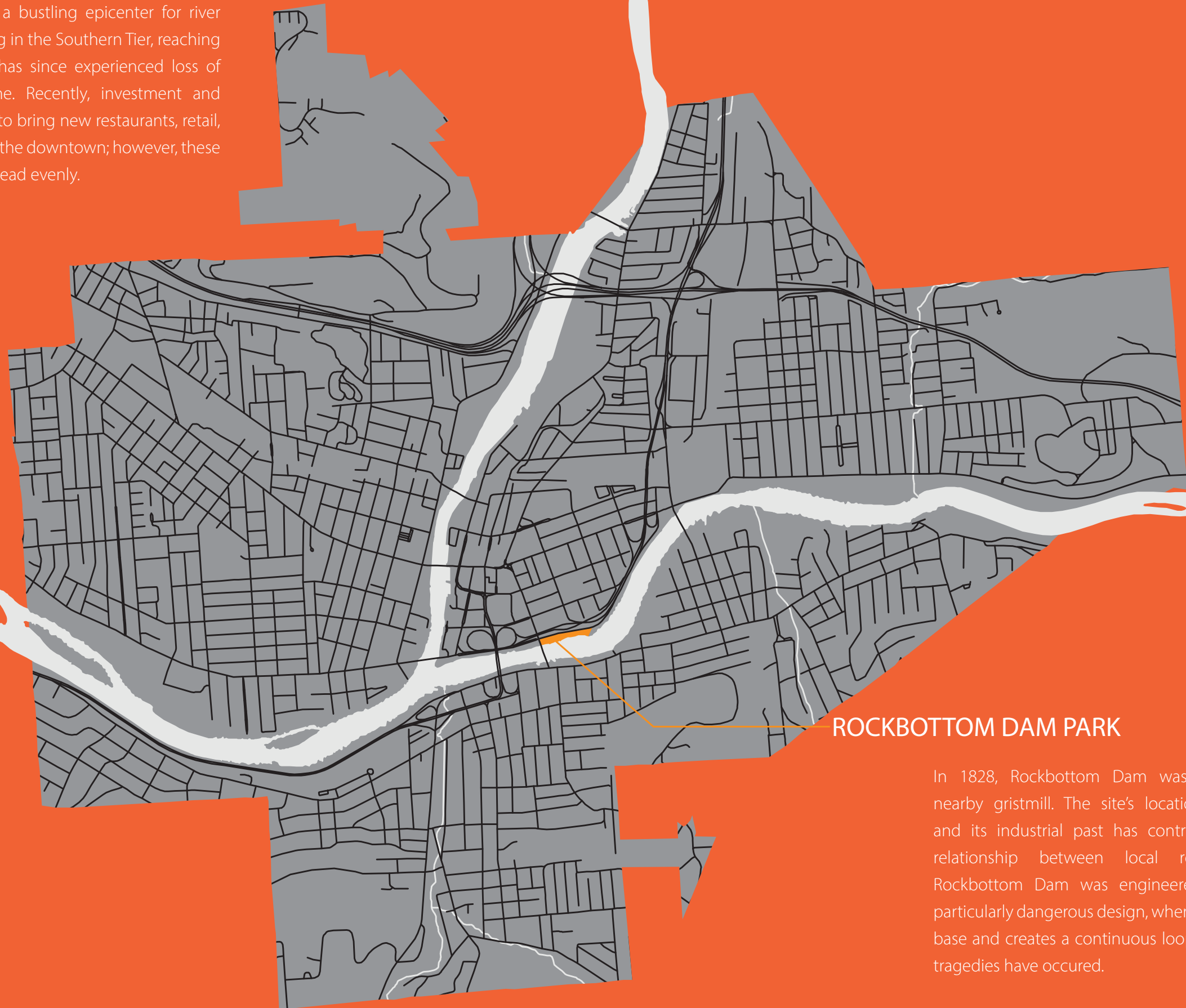
SPRING 2020

Heidi is increasingly interested in and starting to pursue a research agenda focused on understanding strategies communities can use to cultivate a commitment to understanding and nurturing community among citizens, particularly young people. The broader context for her interest is a belief that the ability to nurture community is critical to the long-term sustainability of humans, the planet, and the species with which we share it.

CASE STUDY

BINGHAMTON, NY

Though Binghamton was once a bustling epicenter for river transportation and manufacturing in the Southern Tier, reaching its population peak in 1950, it has since experienced loss of industry and population decline. Recently, investment and revitalization efforts have begun to bring new restaurants, retail, and pedestrian-friendly streets to the downtown; however, these improvements have not been spread evenly.



ROCKBOTTOM DAM PARK

In 1828, Rockbottom Dam was constructed to power a nearby gristmill. The site's location in a flood hazard area and its industrial past has contributed to a disharmonious relationship between local residents and the river. Rockbottom Dam was engineered as a low-head dam, a particularly dangerous design, where the current is created at the base and creates a continuous loop in which several drowning tragedies have occurred.

Many factors have shaped the City of Binghamton and the Downtown neighborhood adjacent to Rockbottom Dam, but the area has been especially impacted by major flood events going back to the early years of the 20th century. Though floodwalls and levees were constructed on the city's edge in an attempt to contain the Chenango and Susquehanna Rivers, devastating floods, most recently in 2006 and 2011, have spurred an interest in city officials to envision how a new relationship between the city and its rivers could catalyze an economic renaissance for Binghamton.

Images Left to Right: Design Connect Team Member facilitating a community outreach event, Susquehanna River at Rockbottom Dam; William Staffeld, Binghamton, Spring 2019.

TOWARDS A MORE RESILIENT COMMUNITY

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES



ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN BINGHAMTON

Although the water of the Susquehanna river had been deemed clean for recreational purposes, Design Connect team members found themselves combating the popular assumption that the river was contaminated due to its industrial past. The team determined that the site was in need of a resilient design strategy that considers the site's restrictions, as well as its potential to mitigate flood damage. The Design Connect team began by delving into publicly accessible data to explore the site's conditions, including Binghamton's Comprehensive Plan, its 2018 Downtown Revitalization Initiative application, policy briefs, and census data. The team then met with Robert Murphy, Director of Economic Development with the City of Binghamton, and George Homsy, assistant professor, College of Community and Public Affairs, Binghamton University, to tour the site. They also planned a community outreach event and conducted spontaneous and formal interviews with local residents, which provided local knowledge of the site.

DESIGNING A RESILIENT PUBLIC RECREATION SPACE

The Design Connect project offered the chance for some students, including Design Connect Project Manager, Jihany Hassun (MLA'20), to give continuity to ongoing projects. Hassun had taken a Landscape Architecture studio in the Fall of 2018 in which she had proposed a redesign of the Rockbottom Dam site as part of a larger coastal resiliency scheme, and was intrigued by the prospect of leading a community-engaged approach to the redesign of the site. This project also involved two Cornell students from Binghamton, Joseph Neil Reigle (B.URS'21) and Amanda Gayle Curtis (B.ESS/DSOC'19), who contributed to its success by bringing important local insights to the team. "Our Design Connect team was exceptionally large; it engaged with 12 students of diverse backgrounds. The interdisciplinary nature of the team allowed us to address a complex socio-ecological challenge faced by this community in innovative ways. The product of the partnership was a more holistic approach to the site's design. Research instruments such as Rockbottom Run board game, designed by the Design Connect team to evaluate flood resiliency in the the riverside community and promote capacity-building practices will be employed and hopefully further developed by local decision makers, researchers and local community members for years to come."

- Jihany Hassun (MLA'21).

Image to the Right: Design Connect team members around Rockbottom Run at a community outreach event, William Staffeld, Spring 2018.



LOCAL INSIGHTS

Design Connect engaged with Binghamton's community to reimagine the potential of the site as a public park and civic space for locals and tourists alike. The design proposal put a particular emphasis on the importance of increased connectivity of the potential Rockbottom Park to existing trail systems, as well as Downtown and Southside Binghamton. "The ultimate goal is to make it an important riverfront destination for the neighboring community and tourists alike, addressing the local desire for access to water recreation and a venue for outdoor cultural events," says Jihany (MLA '21). The team's design emphasized the river and dam as cultural assets.

SPRING 2014

In 2014, Rust 2 Green Binghamton (R2GB), a network of Cornell educators, students, researchers, and community partners, forged a partnership to "identify and design innovative strategies and solutions addressing the unique problems and needs of Binghamton."

FALL 2018

In late 2018 R2GB submitted an application to Design Connect, proposing that Design Connect lead a community-engaged design initiative for a public space on the north shore of Rockbottom Dam based on the communities' visions and ideas. R2GB's extensive interviews with citizens and local leaders about their experiences with flooding in the area created a solid foundation for Design Connect.

At the same time, Mitchell Glass, lecturer of Landscape Architecture and Planning, led a graduate urban design studio in Binghamton.

SPRING 2019

Design Connect's involvement initiated the first of many conversations toward a community-engaged, feasible design for the north shore of Rockbottom Dam.

FALL 2019

Two students involved in Design Connect's work in Binghamton continued to pursue their work through an undergraduate design studio led by Anne Weber, lecturer of Landscape Architecture.

40

community
members

By partnering with an existing organization, Design Connect was able to hold a successful and well-attended community meeting.

12

students
involved across
disciplines

Design Connect's team included people who grew up Binghamton as well as students well-versed in the site from other class projects.

1

board
game

This project is allowed students to test the potential of emerging and innovative community engagement practices in a real-world setting.

Candor

PROJECT BRIEF

In Spring 2015, the Town of Candor approached Design Connect to prepare a proposal for a community pavilion at the Candor Community Park. Candor then applied for a second Design Connect project in 2018 for a master plan to bring landscape and programmatic improvements to the park.

The pavilion was completed in Fall 2020, and more features to enrich the pavilion and site are being planned.

town
of Candor

Source: Background aerial imagery from Google Earth, 2020.

CANDOR COMMUNITY
PARK AND PAVILION

OUTCOME

"The project is being completed by local volunteers and has been a great venue for getting the community involved. All in all, **the pavilion has increased Candor's sense of community and has created networks of doers where none existed before.**"

-David Astorina, member, Candor Parks Committee

THE SITE

Though the Village and Town of Candor (populations 800 and 5,100, respectively) are located in a rural portion of Tioga county, there are limited public spaces for recreation. Residents often walk on the shoulder of a 55 mph highway, Highway 96B, for exercise, even though it is dangerous and lacks sidewalks. The redesign of Candor Community Park, located next to the Candor Town and Village Court and adjacent to Highway 96B, offers an opportunity for residents to safely recreate, play, and walk. The 3.5 acre site, owned by the Town of Candor, is now able to better host community events, including a weekly farmers market, thanks to Design Connect's assistance.

THE PROCESS

For the pavilion, town residents hoped for a space that was inviting, low maintenance, flexible in function, and able to accommodate both current needs - the farmers market - as well as future growth. As the team worked through these goals, they enlisted the advice of design professionals, solicited quotes for construction materials, and built a physical model of the space for stakeholders to better visualize the design. The community had already budgeted for a new pavilion, but the design that best met the community's desires and needs ended up being more expensive than budgeted, so the team researched additional funding sources.

The second Design Connect team learned that residents were looking for a space that could be a gateway to the town as well as a space that could meet the needs of a diversity of residents. The team created several design proposals for the park master plan, each featuring different configurations, aesthetic themes, and elements for a play space, community space, and open space. These designs received

feedback at a second community meeting, which helped the team merge elements from the design proposals into one cohesive plan that complements the open, rural feel of Candor, with a walking loop, nature-based playground, picnic area, and a small stage adjacent to the pavilion. Along with a planting plan, lighting plan, and budget, the team created a fly-through animation of their design that the town hopes will be useful in soliciting funding. ■

HIGHLIGHTS

- 3.5 acres** of park space
- 3** park improvement design iterations
- 2** public outreach meetings
- Fly through** animations as deliverables

PROJECT MANAGERS

Zeynep Goksel (MRP'16/MLA'17)

Katharine Guan (MRP'20/MLA'19)

Image: Candor design charrette, 2015.

“

We are very thankful for our work with Design Connect and could not have started this movement without their help.”

- David Astorina, member,
Candor Parks Committee



05.

CONCLUSION

For over a decade, Design Connect has provided a unique opportunity for impactful, community-engaged experiences on campus.

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Visionary Perspectives

Summary | Project Compilation p.70
A Decade in Numbers

Authors | Biographies p.72
About the Project Team



ENDWORD

After attending the DesignConnect reviews remotely this spring, during the Pandemic quarantine and the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement’s galvanization of public awareness toward police brutality and racial inequity, I’m inspired by how this organization has evolved and adapted to respond to current issues and crisis. Over a decade ago Jen and I pitched the idea of a student organization to bring together communities who couldn’t afford professional consultant services for early-phase design and planning services with interdisciplinary student groups and faculty members. The simple idea was to help communities in Upstate New York bridge the funding gap from ‘idea’ to ‘grant’, and provide students highly desired real-world experience. Over the years we have observed from a distance how each generation of students remakes DesignConnect, addressing current pedagogical needs, values, and opportunities in the surrounding Upstate community. Reflecting on this report, we are struck by the core values of the original constitution are still evident in the project work and research. The original project selection process was guided by these core principles:

Education:

How the project can be valuable for the academic experience of participating students.

Expectations:

How to evaluate projects in accordance to the scope of services achievable by students.

Economics:

Projects need free work in order to move forward.

Social equality:

Projects that actively promote a democracy of space, environmental justice, and improving cultural relations will be favored.

Environment:

Every project must have the potential for the concepts of ‘sustainability,’ energy efficiency, and/or ecology to fit into the program.

And the original academic agenda’s preamble ran:

“The DesignConnect independent study is both a way to provide incentive and accountability for students as well as a means to formalize the pedagogy of experience-based learning. What makes DesignConnect projects different from studio courses is the combination of real-world community practice, interdisciplinary collaboration, and student empowerment. While providing a service to the communities, students are also expected to further their knowledge and reflect on the lessons that they learn from on-the-ground experience, guided by faculty mentors.”

These fundamental structures and values seem still relevant to each project team, but applied and adapted in ways we couldn’t foresee. In reflecting on this summary of ten years of work, we can say in confidence that we look forward to the next decade’s work, and eagerly await seeing how students continue to critically engage local communities, provide fresh and inspiring ideas, and re-invent how DesignConnect and Cornell University achieve both service and learning.

Jennifer Ng & Chris Hardy

Co-Founders

Design Connect

DESIGN CONNECT PROJECTS OVER THE YEARS

Design Connect aims to fill a critical gap in higher education by providing opportunities for experiential learning.

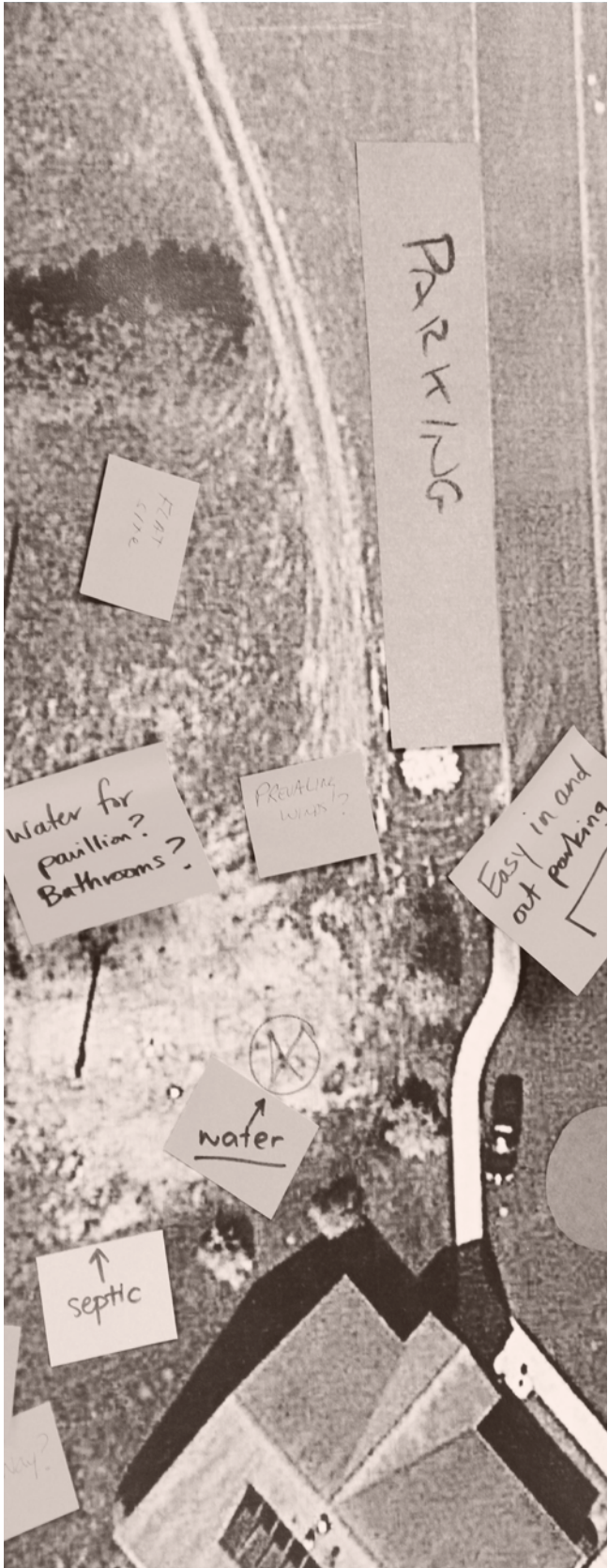
A few metrics highlighting Design Connect’s achievements in the last five years:

60+
community
outreach
events

7+
returning
community
partners

10
semesters
of engaged
learning

Image to the Right: Participatory mapping exercise at a Design Connect community outreach event, Town of Candor, March 2015.



45 projects | 37 communities | 18 counties of engaged learning and participatory design

Project Name	Semester	Project Typology
Candor Pavilion and Plaza Design	Spring 2015	Community Space Design
Dryden Rails to Trails Project	Spring 2015	Rails to Trails Conversion
Town of Geneva Transportation Analysis	Spring 2015	Transportation Planning
Town of Lodi Re-Envisioning Plan	Spring 2015	Downtown Revitalization Planning
Aurora Fitness Trail Signage Design	Fall 2015	Trail Signage Design
Hammondsport Rail Trail Design	Fall 2015	Rails to Trails Conversion
Lodi Library Landscape Design	Fall 2015	Community Space Design
Savannah Community Recreation Plan	Fall 2015	Recreation Plan
Geneva Main Street Public Space Design	Spring 2016	Downtown Revitalization Planning
Hanover Square Alley Reuse Plan	Spring 2016	Tactical Placemaking
Lansing Form-Based Codes	Spring 2016	Code Revision
Seneca Army Depot Master Plan	Spring 2016	Adaptive Reuse Planning
Watkins Glen Wastewater Treatment Plant Reuse Plan	Spring 2016	Adaptive Reuse Planning
Cascade Mills at the Keuka Outlet Trail Design	Fall 2016	Adaptive Reuse Planning
Centerport Aqueduct Park Redesign	Fall 2016	Historical Park Design
Corning Gaffer District Northside Plan	Fall 2016	Downtown Revitalization Planning
Richford Graded School Community Center Design	Fall 2016	Community Space Design
Hammondsport-Urbana Waterfront Trail	Fall 2016	Trail Design & Park Design
Ernie Davis Park Redesign	Spring 2017	Community Park Design
Geneva Public Library Redesign	Spring 2017	Community Space Design
Sterling Nature Center Redesign	Spring 2017	Nature Center Design
Town of Berkshire Recreation Plan	Spring 2017	Recreation Plan
Trumansburg Community Recreation Project	Fall 2017	Recreation Plan
Tompkins County Tactical Placemaking Toolkit	Fall 2017	Tactical Placemaking
Seneca County Wellness Trail Design	Fall 2017	Trail Design
Groundswell Incubator Farm Redesign	Fall 2017	Food Security & Sustainable Agriculture
Eddy Gate Tactical Placemaking	Spring 2018	Tactical Placemaking
Hamilton Towpath Signage Design	Spring 2018	Trail Signage Design
Midtown Utica Community Center Masterplan	Spring 2018	Community Space Design
Penn Yan Parks and Recreation Master Plan	Spring 2018	Recreation Plan
Candor Community Park Master Plan	Fall 2018	Community Park Design
Clyde Heritage Park & Trail Design	Fall 2018	Historical Park Design
Keuka Outlet Trailhead Design	Fall 2018	Trailhead Design
Newark Vision of Downtown	Fall 2018	Downtown Revitalization Planning
Ross Park Adaptive Reuse Plan	Fall 2018	Adaptive Reuse Planning
Amsterdam Food Security and Food Justice Plan	Spring 2019	Food Security & Sustainable Agriculture
Binghamton Rockbottom Dam Park Design	Spring 2019	Waterfront Park Design
Jacksonville Community Park Redesign	Spring 2019	Community Park Design
Amsterdam Cooperative Garden	Fall 2019	Food Security & Sustainable Agriculture
Brighton Complete Streets Redesign	Fall 2019	Transportation Planning
Montezuma Heritage Park Trailhead Development	Fall 2019	Trailhead Design
Camp Columbus Restoration Development Plan	Spring 2020	Adaptive Reuse Planning
Chenango County Historical Society and Museum	Spring 2020	Historical Museum Planning & Design
Owego North Avenue Art Park Design	Spring 2020	Art Park Design
Vestal Front Street Revitalization Plan	Spring 2020	Downtown Revitalization Planning

Note: Records for Design Connect Projects prior to 2015 were not archived systematically and project leads were not able to compile them in the summary.

Project Team

Elizabeth Fabis

Elizabeth Fabis is a 2019 graduate of Cornell’s Master of Landscape Architecture program. During her time at Cornell, she served as team member, project manager, and chair of Design Connect. Liz holds a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies from Oberlin College. After several years of nonprofit and government work in Washington, DC, she studied landscape design at George Washington University before commencing her studies in landscape architecture at Cornell. Liz currently works as a landscape designer and environmental planner.

Jihany Hassun

Jihany Hassun is a 2021 graduate of Cornell’s Master of Landscape Architecture program. During her time at Cornell, she served as team member and project manager of Design Connect. Jihany was also graduate president of Cornell’s chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) and a graduate fellow of the Latin American Studies Program (LASP). Jihany holds a bachelors in Economics from the University of British Columbia and a professional bachelor’s of Landscape Architecture from the University of Montréal. Jihany’s design thesis investigates climate adapted agroecological practices in rural communities of northeastern Brazil.

Kate Flaherty

Kate Flaherty is a current masters student in both City & Regional Planning and Landscape Architecture. She was the 2020 co-social chair for the Organization of Cornell Planners (OCP) and served as a project manager for Design Connect in Fall 2020. Kate holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from Wheaton College. Prior to beginning her studies at Cornell, she worked in the non-profit and clean-tech fields.

WHETHER YOU ARE A

*student,
faculty member,
community representative,
local resident,*

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