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Parkway: Road to paradise?

By Bill Bradberry

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*“Walkin' down the street, smoggy eyed
Looking at the sky, stary eyed
Searchin' for the place, weary eyed
Crying in the night, teary eyed
Don't you know that it's true
That for me and for you
The world is a ghetto?”*

— War, *“The World is a Ghetto”* (1972)

The first time I saw the 1970s funk-rock group War perform live at Artpark back in 2008, I wondered if lead vocalist Lonnie Jordan had taken the not-so-scenic route along the mostly vacant, boarded up ghetto stricken Main Street in the Falls to get to the main stage set next to the charming, small town, historic village of Lewiston. “He must have,” I thought; how else could he have written and sung the words to that song so passionately?

Of course, I knew better, like nearly one hundred percent of the people at the concert, he and the rest of the band probably traveled around Main Street to get to Lewiston.

More than likely, a good number of the concert attendees arrived by way of Lewiston Road, Hyde Park Boulevard, and the I-190, but, no doubt, a few got there by traversing the decrepit, under-used 6 1/2 mile long 1950's Robert Moses Parkway, a planning disaster rightfully named after Moses, which now serves as a constant reminder to most Niagarans of how to effectively choke the life out of a city by cutting it off from its own heartbeat, our waterfront while, at the same time, providing a convenient, minutes shaving shortcut to and from Lewiston with quick drive-by peeks at the gorge below.

When I moved back to Niagara Falls seven years ago, it was after an eye-opening visit a few years earlier when I discovered just how hard the city had been hit by massive changes in the world economy.

Gone were the fundamental reasons for the city's rise to dominance as the King of Power, Queen of Beauty — cheap power, cheap skilled labor, unlimited water, convenient rail access and high demand for some of the most elementary chemical and material building blocks that fueled the war economies and the burgeoning automobile industries.

All gone!

And left behind ... abandoned factories and their spoils, abandoned workers, their skills no longer in demand, failed knee jerk, poorly planned Urban Renewal projects and a city with nearly no control of its fate, bounded on one end by a disjointed state park, on another by a sovereign nation, beleaguered by land ruined by toxic chemical contamination making it unfit for development and habitation, high taxes, a violently shrinking

population less than half its peak, beset by political corruption and a clinically depressed populace with absolutely no self esteem.

It was hard to watch, impossible to ignore and at the same time, intriguing. Niagara Falls, I believed, and still do, even more so today, can rise again. So, initially with a two-year commitment to myself, and the community, I decided to try my best to help resurrect my hometown; I relocated from posh Palm Beach County, where I had witnessed, though barely participated in some degree of positive economic growth, back to the exact opposite in Niagara Falls.

I'm no genius, far from it, but it struck me right away that a few relatively small attitudinal adjustments and significant gestures could go a long way toward reversing what has become the seemingly perpetual downward spiral that has afflicted the city for so long.

First, let's remember who and what we are. We are Niagarans, descendant from long lines of indigenous peoples, international explorers, immigrants whether by choice, or by force, we are inventors, skilled craftsmen; warriors, soldiers who have fought in every war, died for every just cause, builders of massive world changing machines; writers, artists, performers of every sort, singers, dancers, lovers, and stewards of the Great Lakes!

Second, let's admit our mistakes. Without casting blame and pointing fingers at each other, we have to admit, we've made some doozies. Looking back, it's easy to see how short sighted we've been especially when it comes to our waterfront and the best way to use it, for example. Maybe selling it as a great place to build factories where they could dump their waste was not the brightest idea we ever came up with, but at the time, who knew? Now we know.

Third, let's address our mistakes instead of accommodating them and covering them up. That means thinking outside of the proverbial "box", having the courage to dream big, plan bigger, and work harder than ever toward a vision that we may not live long enough to experience ourselves, but, if we get started right now, our children and theirs will.

There it is, a simple one, two, three step approach toward moving forward, and it all begins with attitude, but, of course, it doesn't end there; we need to manifest the attitude shift by physically doing something that can set the stage for the rest of the process of implementing achievable, tangible change.

Let me be so bold as to suggest that one way to get started is to take the easiest route; remove the Robert Moses Parkway now!

Certainly not my idea alone as thousands of people and organizations including the City of Niagara Falls itself have signed on to the concept; taking back our waterfront, reconnecting to our heartbeat is probably the most important first step we should take in our mutual best interests.

As my friend and colleague, Robert H. Borgatti of Lewiston wrote in a letter published nearly 10 years ago in the Buffalo News, and still posted on the Niagara Heritage Partnerships website www.niagaraheritage.org:

"The Robert Moses Parkway must go. It is a barrier to our beautiful gorge and waterfront as well as a barrier to our potential for an unprecedented regional renaissance. Yes, for some people in Lewiston and Youngstown, the Parkway is a convenience, a nice pleasant drive that shaves a few minutes off travel time and avoids some of the

unpleasant realities of a struggling Niagara Falls. But in the big picture, the road has outlived its usefulness. Today, it stands mainly as a monument to a failed 1950s vision of a future that never came to be. The time has come to embrace a new vision.”

I could not agree more.

As cities around the world, such as Toronto and Baltimore, Sydney, Australia, and London, England, Grand Haven, Michigan, or Boston’s Charlestown Navy Yard, Harbor Point, Rowe’s Wharf, and South Seaport District and countless small towns as well as big cities like Frankfurt, all recognized as among the most successful waterfront developments in North America, have learned, reclaiming waterfronts can ignite revitalization and regenerate entire regions.

Why not ours?