

Elmira's Creation Economy



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Introduction

I present this paper as a contribution, a gift, to the city of Elmira. The publication is not meant to supplement or replace any preexisting development proposal or urban plan currently under review. I hope that its theme and contents will be considered thoughtfully and, when appropriate, applied to the existing processes of revitalization and enhancement. I submit these ideas as catalysts for change and as portals to new insights and understandings about our great city, Elmira, New York.

Additionally, I consider the thoughts contained herein an answer to a question that has possessed the heart of our hometown for over fifty years: "What can Elmira be?" Now, with the current convergence of potential crises and potent plans for a new urban vision, the moment is right for the inclusion of this response at the table of united community conversation and dedicated work.

The answer is by no means mine alone. It is packaged in the experience of Elmira itself. I have been most fortunate as a business owner, artist and community activist to witness how a city can succeed and fail, celebrate and mourn, quake in the face of change and come together to resurrect ruin into renewal. I owe Elmira my life and giving back in this way feels right and necessary.

A critical analysis of Elmira's legacy these past five decades or a listing of Elmira's deficiencies and sour statistics will be of no use here. The energy to move us into a new era of prosperity will require intense study, discussion, collaboration and unified effort. The process must focus on our present condition and the necessary resources, planning and vision that will allow Elmira to evolve and flourish into a time beyond our time.

I present *Elmira's Creation Economy* in a singular voice to combine with the chorus of other voices, equally charged with fulfilling a promise to our city and to ourselves: Now is the moment to create a new Elmira. The ingredients for a thriving, vibrant and life-enhancing city are in our hands. Let's make it.

The Creation Economy

Elmira's Creation Economy lays the groundwork, inspires the action and permanently establishes an ethic of community life that will be embedded in Elmira's economic, social, cultural, artistic and urban fabric now and into the next century.

Elmira's Creation Economy is self-energizing. Each act and contribution, project and event, whether produced by one person, organization, business or in collaborative partnerships, will benefit the whole: the neighborhood, the community, the city. Everyone will be involved and engaged with a creative tempo of regeneration and growth. All sectors of Elmira will take ownership and have standing in the destiny of the city. A Creation Economy is not bound by lack or not having. Personal and collective acts that revitalize individuals, families and neighborhoods will be affirmed and valued.

The driving force of *Elmira's Creation Economy*—its energy source—that will move Elmira to rebirth and restoration is a simple yet profound awareness: *Every person, from infant to elder, is a creator*. The realization of this fact alone gives us great promise and potential. We enter a new time to discover, to experiment, to invent, to innovate, to make, *to create*. This knowledge, unto itself, elevates Elmira to new levels of expression and action. It is a generous civic moment of significant proportions. Once received by the community, this gift of creative power and awareness sets a new course of development for Elmira.

The goals we set towards renewing Elmira will need corresponding opportunities for our city's creators. They are, right now, waiting in the wings to burst forth onto an evolving city stage of creation, innovation and infinite possibility. In the words of urban planner Kevin Lynch:

An environment that cannot change invites its own destruction. We need a city that modifies progressively against a background of valued remains, a place in which one can leave a personal mark alongside the marks of history.

Preserving the urban fabric, weaving together the treasured old and the essential new—these values are at the creative core of genuine revitalization.

As noted, a Creation Economy announces to the entire community and beyond that each person is a creator, a dynamic force of pure human potential. Wherever Elmirans live, work, socialize, learn, play, mature, heal and age, community members will realize this potential. A Creation Economy allows for failure while continuing to feed the chances for accomplishment and a full life. Our community's young men and women, no matter race, gender or lifestyle, will need assurance that we want them to succeed here, in Elmira. *Stay and Succeed* could be a prominent mantra in *Elmira's Creation Economy*. Inequality of income must not mean inequality of opportunity. This awareness wipes away the destructive assumptions of failure and the soul-numbing predictors of generational poverty.

The life-crushing forces of poverty found in Elmira are significant. They engender circumstances of personal, family and neighborhood disintegration and dislocation that produce behaviors of immense consequence at every level of Elmira's social structures. There are no easy solutions. However, the impact of liberating the creative potential in each and every person, facing the extremes of lack and deficiency, will be a powerful force on the path toward community restoration.

A Creation Economy holds high the principles of *Restorative Justice*. If we want to save the lives of our neighborhoods and the lives of those least fortunate who can succumb to bad choices, the force of constant retribution is no remedy. Desperation sometimes leaves no room for right decisions. Our development plans will not achieve their best outcomes if we do not attend to those of us whose only options are self-defeating.

Total reliance on a traditional, market-driven economic model defined by commodities, consumption, competition, extraction and waste would debilitate any long-term efforts for Elmira's innovation and renewal. A Creation Economy amplifies the local. It is sustainable. It benefits the giver and the receiver. It ensures that most of the economic energy supplied by local commerce stays local. Any entity that sucks the vitality and treasure out of Elmira is not a contributor to a Creation Economy.

Investing the destiny of the community on systems over which we have no local control will prove unsustainable, if not fatal. Likewise, continuous over dependence on a stream of support not locally generated is an unstable model for long-term planning and growth. Simply put: *Do we grow an economy based on what we take or an economy based on what we make?*

A Creation Economy recognizes, affirms, encourages and supports the creative and artistic impulses—the quest for invention, innovation and improvisation—as life choices. It supports the productive capacity of children and adults at all levels of learning. As the gifts of their creative energy mature and take form, and new ideas transform into new tools of inventions and innovation, Elmira rises to higher points of shared accomplishment.

In a Creation Economy, our grades K through 12 school systems and local college institutions collaboratively will construct and implement a unified *Cradle to Career Curriculum* for all residents. This ethic incorporates into all stages of Elmira education a set of corresponding scales of opportunity both in and outside the classroom. Talents are not, by default, treated as hobbies or avocations, but, rather, as career opportunities. A *Creation Syllabus*, locally produced and directed, can allow for these features to be consistent and continuous. This project will affirm the *Artistic Mind* as a potential occupation and sustainable career. Creative play, gaming, theatre, poetry, writing, acting, dance, comedy, music production, digital media, the culinary arts, fashion and painting—such academic choices will accompany with equal standing the fields of engineering, industrial design, law, science, technology, business, finance and agriculture. All trades are equally endowed with innovative possibility, and are forcefully present in Elmira's local creation industries such as Hilliard Corporation, Hardinge Inc., Kennedy Valve and F.M. Howell and Company.

The practice and position of our city's social entrepreneurs are of high value in a Creation Economy. Their endeavors produce ideas, programs, services, events, innovations and art that serve the welfare, prosperity and sustainability of the whole community. A cycle of creative spirit is generated that flows from the doer, the actor and the maker to the city and back again. The energy originates in the local, feeds the local and moves out to the greater region. A Creation Economy celebrates the distribution of our local abundance. It avoids the spiral of cynicism and defeatism that accompanies the limitations of scarcity. From our history as a struggling city, one thing is certain: Human beings are not motivated by bad news.

Elmira's Creation Economy holds all of our community members—urban to rural—in equity and dignity. To identify a sampling of our residents is important to knowing who we are as Elmira: single parents, children, employed workers, unemployed workers, service workers, retirees and the

homebound. We are multitudes of character, condition and experience. The face of Elmira is distinct and diverse. It is tied to the flow of our willingness to create, to heal and to save a *local global village*. To recognize and to embrace the gifts of humanity in every citizen strengthen our giving and our receiving.

The affirmation, support and development of people who contribute their creative energy is a natural component to a Creation Economy: makers, inventors, innovators, builders, designers, composers, actors, writers, performers, volunteers, healers, ministers, gardeners, farmers, sustainers, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, philosophers, environmentalists, artists, educators, historians, naturalists, architects, vision applicators—all are highly valued as mentors and primary drivers of our local livelihood. For example, Elmira is fertile ground for a rich and innovative *farm to table* local food industry. The land, the farmers, the distributors and the markets are in place now to infuse this creative “locavore” dimension into our common health and longevity.

Elmira's Creation Economy is *emergence in action*. It is a transformative urban template that unifies the current development plans and urban visions now in process, and can be experienced in the current evolution of our neighborhood libraries. Local libraries are becoming *Creation Places* where people can turn a life that seeks purpose into a life with promising goals. Our libraries challenge the perception that hardship and loss can extinguish a city's creative potential and learning power. Their offerings include education, literacy, employment training, maker spaces, poetry clubs, cinema, audio labs, tech labs, tinker labs, 3D printers, concert series, book reviews and infant storytelling. Most vital of all, the library is a place for all citizens to find meaning in a book, a conversation, a helping hand. To participate in these experiences, no credentials are needed: just open the door and walk in. The *Chemung County Library District (CCLD)* provides a model for a new understanding about public space as a place for *active recognition* of our common humanity.

Elmira's Creation Economy will enhance our key *Livability* features that have a direct relationship to sustaining a healthy community. The discussion of *what makes a city livable* is currently on the civic agendas of many cities with similar circumstances to Elmira. From Elmira's recent local plans and vision session, certain primary features for a livable city have become apparent: strong local leadership directly involved in community well being

and destiny, active public/private partnerships working together for the common good, a vibrant urban core surrounded by active neighborhoods and districts, a multi-dimensional arts culture, creative public schools with a “license to innovate,” a strong higher education network, a community centered library and a positive civic story that people know and can hear.

As we move forward, conversation and shared perspectives on the story of our city need to be prominent and public. What is Elmira's civic story? What are the positive ways we can talk about Elmira? A shared theme and purpose for Elmira will be essential. The connectivity of our common purpose and identity enables community confidence with a shared mission. A Creation Economy gives direction toward this goal.

The instructions of *Livability* give guidance to improving the quality of life for every resident: creating healthy environments, encouraging healthy lifestyles, ensuring decent housing, safe and vital neighborhoods and green spaces and providing for vibrant social interaction, artistic expression and healthy recreation. Any policy, activity, program or event that enhances the human condition needs expression in a livable community.

Sustainability requires that we seek to improve the long-term social and ecological health of our city and enhance the connections between our residents and their natural world. We will need to build creative processes that deliver greater resource efficiency, environmental quality, social equity and an enlivened civic culture. Equally present will be a corresponding movement away from automobile dependency and non-renewable resources. In tandem with the stewardship of our physical world is the consistent effort to conserve our cultural identity. This ethic further reveals itself in our efforts to escape the burden of past misfortune, mistakes and disasters while we attend to the restoration and regeneration of Elmira's human potential. The honor, dignity and care we bestow on Elmira are the local manifestations of our commitment to preserving and sustaining the earth itself.

The components of our sustainable city can motivate all sectors of a Creation Economy toward innovation and resource enhancement. Locally produced solar and wind power can generate excess energy profits that are transferred back into the community to support essential human services and infrastructure. In this renewable economic environment, we move from *the management of scarcity to the distribution of abundance*. A Creation

Economy is centered on endeavors that broadcast and multiply the actions of *Social Entrepreneurship*: the transformation of ideas into actions that benefit and sustain the individual creator *and* the whole community.

The creative human capital present in *Elmira's Creation Economy* simultaneously will serve as the catalyst for growth, while also evolving into the results of that growth. This reality dispels patterns of planning and urban development that overly depend on outside forces promising the “next big thing” to stabilize and revive the city. Anticipating a “saving project” or development as the cure for our urban ills disempowers community activists, alienates stakeholders and bewilders those committed to the contributions, aspirations and needs of Elmira.

Elmira's Creation Economy will engage citizens from all neighborhoods and streets; people from all origins and directions—Northside, Southside, Eastside and Westside. Divisions, banishment and isolation have no place or function in a city of cooperation, mutual assistance, recognition and respect. A Creation Economy uplifts and enhances individuals in an urban culture that is defined by the “we” and works by the “together.”

The encouragement and practice of more personal and collective interaction among people of diverse backgrounds, emphasizing culture, education, heritage and art, is basic to our Creation Economy. We must work to establish an open and continuous civic place where all citizens can exchange ideas, creative work, resources and gifts. Such an energized city calls for all members to have the tools and resources necessary for freedom, safety and participation in their own destiny while ensuring the health and prosperity of the places they call home. Parks, social gathering places, neighborhood centers, art and entertainment venues, accessible transportation, healthy food—all are essential for lives of participation and dignity that will construct the continuous creation of Elmira, New York.

Place

The subject of *Place* and the philosophy and activity behind *Placemaking* are primary factors in the quest for a livable and sustainable city. Saying that Elmira (or any other city) is “a great place to live” does not signify the purpose and use of placemaking as it applies to the principles of *New Urbanism* now being incorporated into our current *Comprehensive Plan* for

Elmira. Since life can sometimes be the best teacher, a brief history of my own experience with place and urban design might prove worthy.

In 1946, my father began our family business, *Cappy's*, on the corner of Clinton Street and Park Place. On the direct North corner, occupying the entire block, rose the magnificent *St. Patrick's Church*. Built in the 1870s, it was constructed with a mixed style of bricks that were collected by Irish immigrants and piled in the apple orchard where *St. Patrick's* now stands. On the Northwest corner was *Arnot Park*, across from *Catholic High* (later *St. Patrick's School*). These four places defined the time of my youth. This late 1950s Elmira neighborhood contained my early rights of passage as a growing Catholic-Italian boy.

Next to *Cappy's* on Clinton was *David's Glass and Shoe Repair*. To the south was *Peterson's Furniture*. Further down was *Johnny's Esso Station*. Across the street on Main heading north was *Jeannie's Main Street* (for adult entertainment), *Crossroad's Tavern*, facing *Jessie Green Furriers*, *Savino's Shoe Store*, *The Other Room Coffee House*, *Schmidt's* (meats and grocery), *Karl's Bakery* (the best glazed donuts anywhere, ever), where in a few years the Cleary brothers would open the first *Pudgies Pizza*, and on the corner was *Roy Russell's Diner*. Across from *St. Pat's* was *Moore Business Forms*, a beautiful row of brownstones and rising above residences north and east was the *Erie-Lackawanna Railroad and Station*.

Cappy's and the other shops and businesses had *upper-floor apartments*, were built *close to the sidewalk* and *the streets were narrow and walker friendly*. The *corridors* of Main Street and Park Place were bright and busy. The *edge districts* at Elmira College and Erie Station held their own distinct flavor. The *landmark* of *St. Pat's* could be seen from all sections of downtown. It was a *gateway* to north and south with Clinton Street as the *connector*. This "place of many places" was a thrilling *hub* of civic activity in Elmira.

This was the *neighborhood*. Designed during an era when most people walked, biked or bused, there was no need for huge swaths of tar to park automobiles. There was never a conversation that included the statement, "Hey, this neighborhood is really *walkable*!" Its six blocks covered the exact center of the city and it had a unique shape and curve, although at the time no one ever thought to call it *The Flat Iron District*. To understand the

changes that have occurred here over the past 50 years—the changes that *Cappy's* adapted to—is helpful in describing the importance of placemaking.

The business opened as *Caparulo's Variety Store*. The name says it all. It was a traditional small “Five and Dime” with other amenities thrown in: a Post Office (*Sub Station #9*), Kodak film drop off, TV-tube testing, key making and sundries of all kinds. One day, an Erie train engineer burst into the store and announced that a complete soda fountain headed to Chicago had to be returned to New York. Dad bought it right off the freight car. *The Park – Clinton Soda Bar and Luncheonette* was born. The lunch time and after school business grew. For the next three decades, *Cappy's* was bustling from 8am to 10pm, seven days a week.

When downtown grocers like *A&P* and *P&C* closed and moved from the city's core, my parents introduced a small grocery section to the store. With the appearance of convenience stores like *7 / 11*, they removed the groceries and added small gift items. Then, when the first *McDonald's* golden arches broke the skyline in the 1970s, Dad, sensing the inevitable, sold the soda bar. Soon after, he added an expansive greeting card section that grew into the space once occupied by the lunch counter. When I bought the business in the mid 1980s, I introduced local artisan gifts, indigenous crafts, jewelry and clothing, coffee, and more alternative greeting cards and stationery.

As the neighborhood crumbled, foot traffic diminished and *Cappy's* became more of a destination for original gifts. It still kept its atmosphere of social connection and community conversation, as a neighborhood oasis and a place for a less homogenous shopping experience. We marketed *Cappy's* as *The Mallternative*. This period of urban conviviality lasted until the recent, all-pervasive force of big box retailing and online shopping proved too burdensome for *Cappy's* to continue. The small gift shop at the corner of Park and Clinton closed in 2015.

What happened to this Elmira district also happened to many other locations covering the city's vast terrain. These areas are now ready and waiting for a new urban revitalization effort of which placemaking is a key part. The priorities of place must always center on the activity of people. If our designs for Elmira center on the automobile, we will have wide streets, parking lots and automobiles. If we design for people we will get *people*—using and occupying vibrant places that speak to our heritage, culture, passions and creative work. Equally essential, we will have walkable

districts, more varied and improvised forms of public transportation and streets (“less tar, more trees”) designed for the safe, complementary travel of people, bicycles *and* cars.

The intent of placemaking work is to remove barriers that inhibit and discourage urban and residential vitality, to awaken the collaborative spirit among city stakeholders, to unite citizens with common goals and interests and to unearth the true character and voice of neighborhoods and districts. In particular, there are many once vibrant Elmira neighborhoods that are currently plagued with poverty, isolation and abandoned streets with severe blight and deterioration. Fear, anger, retaliation, violence and cyclical criminal and self-destructive behavior run rampant. Slumlords breed drug lords. There are, concurrent with these social pathologies, concerned and civic-minded neighborhood residents that want more livable conditions for themselves and their neighbors.

The engagement with districts that contain neighborhoods and residences in decline and that have high rates of poverty-related behaviors and conditions must be a priority of the highest level for Elmira. Community dialogues convened by neighborhood leaders and long-term residents, planning and visioning sessions similar to *Comprehensive Plan* meeting models and coordination between Elmira leadership at all levels and the leadership of our besieged areas must happen now. If done with equity, patience and openness, this process will create possibility for the reemergence of these lost sections of Elmira and return them to our city's social fabric.

Removing Elmira from the grip of forces that are indifferent to our quality of life is an essential component of placemaking. Neighborhood associations and community organizations that move the destiny of our neighborhoods into the hands of local residents and local advocates will play a tremendous role in transforming our city. *Development without Displacement* is a strong guiding principle to true neighborhood transformation. The factors that divide and segregate our citizens from the totality of Elmira's character and culture must be addressed, diminished and vanquished. The standards of new urban designs also must complement and raise our standards of social justice.

Elmira's Creation Economy calls for the regeneration of our disenfranchised citizens and an uplifting of our civic family members who are victims of generational disempowerment. When we change a neighborhood, we

change the outcomes for the people who live there. The actions of stakeholder placemaking can be a valuable tool in moving forward towards this goal. Ensuring children, youth and families access to their own gathering, convening and recreation places, to consistent involvement in art and entertainment venues and to access to healthy food via more local markets, urban farms and community gardens, to green spaces, parks, public transit and child and elder care will change the face of our residential districts. Further, our local cultures and traditions need acknowledgement and respect. Most importantly, the capacity of neighborhood residents themselves to give voice in how these and other essential pieces of a livable place can exist and be preserved must be honored.

There is an important correlation between how attached people feel to where they live and the health of our local economy. We retain and grow our population according to how connected we are to Elmira's environment. People are attracted to places that are creative, engaging, friendly and affirming. Placemaking enables us to become better where we are now—Elmira—instead of considering somewhere else. This process is not about the “big project” but, in most cases, is about the basic and scalable additions that make our urban landscape more accessible, useable, walkable and livable. Sidewalk and street repair, bike lanes and bike stations, tree planting, safer lighting, bench placing, accommodating transit stops, landscaping over tarred lots—these are simple yet essential amenities that will keep and attract urban dwellers to the apartments, houses, businesses and streets of Elmira.

In 1974, social theorist William Whyte commented on the importance of vital urban living:

The rich street life is no frill. It is an expression of the most ancient function of a city—a place for people to come together, face to face. There is far more life, vitality and expression on the street than on the bland shopping centers being touted as the new downtown.

Yes, over forty years ago, the Main Street life of Elmira and other small post-industrial cities was expanding—like an exploding universe—outward into a landscape of tract housing and retail malls. Now, we are experiencing a moment when citizens and civic leaders everywhere again are working toward the creation of new, city-centric places and regions. The elements of activity that seemed forever planted in an outer ring of consumption and

commerce is now found to be desperately lacking in the essential human necessities of community, relationships, creative expression and local identity. As this model loses its grip, Elmira, once again, becomes the place where “a theatre of social action” can thrive and change lives.

Memorable streets draw pedestrians from near and far. Social spots, brew pubs, cafés, galleries, art experiences, open spaces for public readings, experimental performances, sculpture and installations—our streets can be as alive and vibrant as we dare to make them. Converting underused street space into temporary street fairs and festivals or pop-up events makes improvisational urban placemaking a vibrant approach to create new environments with little cost or disruption. Elmira's *River Fest*, *Elmira Promenade Summer Concerts*, *Wisner Market* and *Street Painting Festival* are vivid examples of such conversion. Placing similar arts and cultural events outside the downtown core will engender recognition of Elmira's more isolated neighborhoods.

Place is a key ingredient to *Elmira's Creation Economy*, which calls out for the repurposing of older structures—churches, mills, firehouses, factories and warehouses—and the transformation of unused commercial buildings into flexibly-designed *places* for residences, markets, artist lofts and maker labs. True revitalization will involve the continuous renewal and repurposing of such forgotten and discarded *spaces*, once the heart of Elmira's *Industrial Age*.

Additionally, a new appreciation of our cultural heritage will flourish. A reigniting of our history through the stories, rituals and creative output of the Irish, Polish, Italian, Jewish, African American, Latino, Native American and other local generational narratives will shower Elmira's identity with a greater appreciation of where we originated and a celebration of who we are as a community. The creation of Elmira itself is centered in our treasured legacy of immigrant contributions and sacrifice. Our origin stories are invaluable to renewing our sense of place.

The initiatives that we advance toward “Great Good Places” will, in turn, result in related benefits that feed and charge our creation efforts: a sense of belonging, dignified housing, safety, innovative education, access to fresh food, greater social inclusion, pedestrian and bicycle centrism, more jobs, businesses, entrepreneurs and revenue, local ownership/local value, the encouragement of creativity, diversity and intergenerational collaboration.

Elmira will bloom into a showcase of urban life that honors its historic character while ensuring a livable and sustainable city for future generations.

The Arts

A Creation Economy is most profoundly expressed and experienced through the artistic enterprise. Artists fuel creativity, beautify our city and improve our quality of life. All residents who care about the economic direction and condition of Elmira should feel confident about encouraging and supporting Elmira artists, their work and the countless venues associated with the arts.

Civic leaders, local stakeholders, developers and funders who are pouring immense amount of time, energy and resources into designing a future for Elmira need to integrate into their deliberations one proven fact: *The Arts Mean Business*. The arts industry generates \$22.3 billion in revenue for local, state and federal governments every year. From museums, community arts centers, galleries, theatre, dance, performers, visual arts, architecture, design, art education, history, heritage and tourism, the *arts industry* employs over three million people nationwide.

In a Creation Economy the scope of art activity is more expansive and inclusive of creative endeavors that involve the locally made and produced: Innovation businesses and manufacturing, experimental industry, virtual reality compositions, technology incubators, sound and visual production studios, maker spaces, creation labs, sustainable design schools and artist commission projects. The diverse and life-enhancing dimensions that such an art-inspired economy can give to Elmira will have profound implications for the city's emergence as a place to live, work and prosper.

Arts and cultural organizations exemplify solid, sustainable social entrepreneurial systems. They employ locally and purchase goods and services locally. Artists and art venues are rooted here and continually evolve their mission and outreach to local needs and opportunity. Performances, exhibitions, and festivals draw audiences from Elmira, the region and beyond. When visiting patrons attend art events, they generate an exponential increase in economic energy via tourism and local purchases. Our regional non-profit arts and cultural organizations make Elmira a more desirable place to live and work. The arts are a primary force in creating a healthy, vibrant and equitable city. In *Elmira's Creation Economy*, the arts

take center stage as a primary economic driver. In addition to their economic impact, the arts are indispensable to social well being and, as such, the healing arts need to become a central component in our urban policy and *healthy places* planning discussions.

The arts combine with placemaking actions to make creative public places, using arts and culture as the catalyst. Transforming vacant and blighted properties into *Creation Homes*, venues for civic and cultural programs and artist residences can give identity and purpose to neighborhoods. Filling Elmira storefronts with pop-up vendors and art installations can facilitate the seeding of new art districts and downtown destinations. Creative place development brings artists, artistic organizations and art activities into the stream of community planning and opens up the city to more adaptive ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing where we live, how we work and what we dream.

Elmira can be strengthened by the arts through processes of expression and reception—through creators and their audience. The downtown space opened by recent demolition projects could be the sight for a *Creation Park*: a central area to combine aspects of the Greek “agora” with other community activities. Features such as installation art, performance art, artist cottages, market kiosks, an ice rink, a tai-chi/dance space, a walking labyrinth and amphitheatre settings could enable *flexible usage* and deliver year-round vibrancy to the urban core.

Beyond the focus on urban, cultural and economic needs, art can alter the ways we understand and empathize with our most isolated and forgotten community members. For decades, Elmira has suffered from a perception that damages our image, our character and our collective mission as a caring and healing community. The power of art to transform our connection and relationship with the incarcerated men and women in our city would have a profound impact on our civic identity and the label of Elmira as a “prison town.” *Radical Inclusion* art programs and events could establish linkages between artists, art organizations and prisons and begin a dialogue about how art and creative activity might help prisoners, prison families and guards to grapple with and possibly transcend the affects of prison culture. Remembering and interpreting through artistic expression—poetry, painting, music, theatre—other qualities and dimensions of life experience could produce transformative interaction and experiences for inmates and “the outside.”

This would be an introductory step towards a more expansive effort to make Elmira a center for prison education, prison history and prison reform. The city would become a destination for academic seminars, historical expositions and scholarly retreats on the nature of prisons and the evolution of more productive ways to prevent and respond to criminal behavior, incarceration, rehabilitation and crime abatement.

Complementing this vision are current local projects of value and relevance: the completion of the *John W. Jones Museum* and the development of the *Civil War Prison Camp Museum*. Opening up Elmira's rich history of abolition with involvement in the *Underground Railroad* and expanding the awareness of Elmira's history with confederate war prisoners, beyond the label "Hellmira," will promote our city and advocate for historical clarity and advancement. The *Chemung County Historical Society's Civil War Lecture Series* and the *Economic Opportunity Program's Juneteenth* celebrations are significant contributions to this process.

Such exposure and educational awareness to these places and events of Elmira's past will transform a negative label into a brand of national interest. Instead of a constant curse on our public image, the presence of two prison facilities and our deep connection to the central event in American History would turn Elmira's national profile toward the regenerative and the restorative. It would ignite a more enlightened understanding of Elmira's place in our national culture. A Civil War prison camp and the abolitionist movement in Elmira would be equally announced as the significant historical events that they are and become a primary source for education, cultural awareness, and, yes, civic pride.

Artistic enterprises can transform the economic, educational, cultural and physical landscape of Elmira. The arts ignite change: change in neighborhoods, in education, in civic health, in opportunity and change in Elmira's potential to be a leader in urban transformation. These words are not empty. The vision is real and can be exemplified strikingly by an arts and culture center on Elmira's eastside.

Community Arts of Elmira (CAE) began as a grassroots organization in 2005. Through the generosity of a former Elmiran and current benefactor, it took ownership of an empty and abandoned Second Empire, Italianate mansion at 413 Lake Street in 2007. Soon after, CAE became incorporated as a 501(c)(3) and secured listings on the *National Register of Historic*

Places and the National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

Its evolution into an educational, innovative, cultural arts center is happening with the help and contributions of city volunteers who see the need for a community arts center in Elmira and the region. From *Kiwanis Club* members who leveled walls and ceilings to the Arnot Medical doctors who performed at *Open Media Forums*, to the thousands of volunteer hours dedicated by individuals from all sectors of city life, the repurposing of CAE has been and continues to be the result of a community spirit that holds the arts and art making as essential elements in the life of Elmira. In 2013, *Historic Elmira* awarded CAE an *Historic Preservation Advocate Award* for its conscientious adaptive repurposing of an historic site for contemporary public use. The award affirmed CAE as a model for collaborative placemaking as a response to community needs. Today, CAE continues to build the site for community access to arts education and expression, as a catalyst for neighborhood redevelopment and for innovative grassroots endeavors.

In the process, CAE has established itself as a premiere art exhibition, education, performance and incubation place. Recently, it completed first floor occupancy requirements. Renovations are scheduled for the second floor beginning in 2017 with the addition of an all-access elevator. Continuing expansion will increase building usage to 14,000 square feet.

CAE's success has engendered further neighborhood growth and revitalization. The lots that it now owns are targeted for upgrades in landscaping, parking and biking facilities, a community garden and outdoor art installations that will host education seminars, musical concerts, dance performances and community festivals. The CAE building continues the historic and cultural story present at the southern end of Lake Street beginning with the *Chemung County Historical Society* and continuing north to include the *County Court House*, *Arnot Art Museum*, *Elmira City Club*, *City Hall*, the former *Steele Memorial Library* and *Lake Street Presbyterian Church*. These and other Elmira-centric sites eventually will comprise the *Elmira Landmark Trail* and host the *Community Mural Initiative*.

Future Creation Economy initiatives pursued by CAE center on an *Innovation Zone* footprint including other community-invested properties and enterprises bordered by East Second Street, Madison Avenue,

Washington Avenue and the Clemens Center Parkway: the *Economic Opportunity Program*, *Finn Academy* and the newly-relocated *Meals on Wheels*, which is renovating the former *Artistic Greeting* plant into a multi use facility that will expand its mission of service to its homebound constituents and the neighborhood. Additionally, CAE is advocating for the renovation of the former *Jones Court* into neighborhood apartments with healthy living components and the repurposing of the older industrial warehouse structures on the Parkway into an *Innovation Enterprise Consortium* for artists, inventors and makers, with the possible development of an *Elmira Arts Institute*.

This *Innovation Zone* footprint will define one section of a much broader CAE vision of placemaking named *The Creative Corridor*: a cityscape swath of sites and activity stretching from the *Brand Park District* to *Eldridge Park* to the *John Jones Museum*, to *Woodlawn Cemetery* and the *Elmira Correctional Facility*. The open and abandoned spaces within the *Creative Corridor* are prime areas for *Land Bank* incorporation, as well as for workforce/neighborhood development. The *Creative Corridor* holds abundant entrepreneurial opportunities.

The trajectory of *Community Arts of Elmira* as a catalyst for change in the development of Elmira has significant meaning. An historic landmark is saved and restored. It is rebuilt and repurposed, revealing and celebrating what was always there. An all-volunteer group offers this space to the city for venues and experiences that enhance the creative needs of artists—many of whom are students or emerging, displaying their work for the first time. Elmira has a new and vibrant facility for artistic realization, innovation, exhibition, performance and social connection. The neighborhood is uplifted. Lives are changed.

Community Arts of Elmira exists in response to a need: to unleash the creative aspirations and innovative ideas held in the hearts and minds of our diverse city and to channel them into a vibrant, cultural and artistic place. With a mission that deeply honors education, social access and engagement, *Community Arts of Elmira* joins with the plans and the planners of Elmira to encourage and support the revitalization of our city.

The Brand

Knowing what we want to be and becoming what we know are the beginning steps in Elmira's evolution as a Creation Economy. What follows this progression is essential in completing the cycle. Becoming a place where people want to live, work and play—an *attractor city*—will require *announcing*. With this essential ingredient, *Elmira's Creation Economy* will become known, understood and utilized by our local community, the region and the world.

Elmira needs to move forward in this process with strong, confident messaging that is powerful in its theme, simple in its communication, translation and unified in content through every medium. We should approach this as a campaign of *invitation, action and destiny*. The process should focus on Elmira as place to live a life of quality, comfort, creativity and reward, a place that has an urban atmosphere of accommodation, coolness, openness, opportunity, innovation and possibility. Elmira will be a city to build and create livelihoods, lifestyles and careers, and to energize creative passions.

There are many gifts from Elmira's great history that still imbue our city with distinction and shared esteem. Mark Twain wrote what is considered to be one of the seminal works of world literature: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He wrote this story here, in Elmira. And there it is: A creation sown from the spirit of our grand heritage and *made* by our renowned author.

The power of *Elmira's Creation Economy* will be the overlaying theme of a new civic emblem: a welcoming sign to anyone who wants to start working, making and building for themselves and for their community. Such a message would read:

Elmira, New York You Can *Make It* Here

Simple, direct, exciting and inviting: a new message for the world to see, hear and share about our city. The action phrase *Make It* opens up the message to possibilities for individual creation *and* a full life of comfort and vitality.

Spin-off messaging would magnify and reinforce this core brand. A series of images depicting products and inventions made in Elmira throughout its history to the present would accompany the phrase: *Made in Elmira, New York*.

Examples:

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain
Made in Elmira, New York

Hilco Filtration Systems
Made in Elmira, New York

These Elmira brand messages would cover countless products, innovations and artistic creations made in Elmira over the past 150 years: Ceramics by Colleen McCall, *Fly Guy* by Tedd Arnold, Fire Engines by American LaFrance . . . all *Made in Elmira, New York*.

The Creation Economy brand continually will remake itself in the form of messages and images that display the creative force of Elmira's past, present and future.

Other types of branding could accompany the development plans of building new places and restoring historic properties and houses. These could tie into a *Spaces to Places* campaign.

Possible messages:

Elmira, New York
Renewed, Restored and Ready

Elmira, New York
We Have the Space
MAKE IT Your Place

A possible message to highlight the creation influence of our local education system could be:

Elmira, New York ***Stay and Succeed***

Smaller, “***Make It Here***” logos could be a component of building, manufacturing, business, galleries, art studios and maker space promotions.

These are but a sampling of how the Creation Economy theme can fit into an effective marketing campaign for Elmira's new era. Elmira's creation image will need a united effort with all local media. This will be crucial for Elmira to promote a new face, a new identity, to the world.

An attendant factor that needs to be addressed is the propensity of local media to broadcast an over-abundance of negative stories and statistics about Elmira. Drug arrests, robberies, domestic disputes, profiles of desperate lives and abusive behavior: this type of reportage can, at times, diminish our community's sense of hope and possibility. Regarding Elmira's potential for change, a more sustained effort at reporting on the area's prospects for advancement will enhance Elmira's profile as a city of success and prosperity.

There should be a new collaborative partnership with media, civic leaders and community groups to unite in our messages with progressive ideas on how to present the face of our city to the world. Of course, television, radio, newspaper and online services have a responsibility to report the news as it happens. We can't avoid reality to make people feel better. There must, however, be a movement to promote and emphasize the social, economic and human progress taking place in urban and rural Elmira. Reporting more on the positive assets of Elmira and the daily work being done to increase those assets will be a necessary complement to *Elmira's Creation Economy* message. There will not be a simple, one-dimensional resolution to this dilemma, but we need to begin the effort.

Lessons and Celebrations

How will any of this happen? When we consider Elmira's recent past in confronting ways to develop itself out of an ever-deepening hole of urban and economic decline, the question seems almost desperate. Cynicism continues to bark at the door of our current vision and planning groups. The evidence of past missteps and lost resources on resurrecting Elmira looms before us. What is different now? How will we respond to the past?

The Flood of '72 permanently transformed our urban landscape. Its torrential destruction made certain changes to Elmira inevitable. The most significant damage, however, was the result of direct human agency. Demolition became an all too accessible substitute for progressive urban planning and design. What happened to Elmira *before* and *after* Agnes can be found in the words of the great urban activist, Jane Jacobs who, in her confrontation with New York City master builder Robert Moses said:

We seem to have no way of extricating ourselves from development traps because, by now, so many people, so many enterprises, so many governments and so many once vigorous cities have come to depend on incomes contrived through city killing policies and transactions.

These are tough and compelling words that describe what has contributed to Elmira's and other great cities' urban collapse. In moving forward, it is important that we recognize them, learn from our own experience and continue to work together towards building the city we want, the city we need, the city we deserve. This action would embody sentiments from Jane Jacobs that are more encouraging, more empowering:

Cities have the capabilities of providing something for everybody only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

This statement defines why we are now on the right *evolutionary road*. It is why we will make Elmira the place to be, to live, to succeed. *We are creating together*. The tables of community collaboration and connection can never be too many. More voices from our neighborhoods and local constituents need to be heard. Youth, seniors, educators, political leaders, law enforcement, financiers, artists, health providers, social workers,

ministers—all will have a seat and a microphone to express and add to the vision, the doing. Additionally, Elmira is a supremely giving city. Volunteers of all vocations enable local nonprofits, service organizations, schools, health care providers and other groups confidently to execute their missions. The spirit, influence and voice of community volunteers that have kept Elmira going and giving are paramount for any Creation Economy endeavors to succeed.

The key to urban revitalization—one that we are adapting to now—is *process*. Elmira needs incremental change, not instant transformation. It needs a continual stream of local, private investment, not just a single massive infusion of one-time dollars. The process of evolving our city must be gradual and open-ended. Our success cannot be hung on the appearance or outcome of one, single project. Local industry and finance institutions will be key participants in this process. At times it will seem too overwhelming a task. The need for money will always push against optimism. It has been said that a vision without financing is just a dream. Actually, a vision is important unto itself. A project without vision is a waste of time and money. Our will and vision to achieve and make real a new chapter in the story of our city is going to happen. We will *make it* so.

Equally essential for true community transformation will be a unified effort among all groups, agencies and development participants. The composition of community planning work will involve learning about and supporting a variety of civic projects whose mission is singular and strong: *to advance the cause, purpose and message of Elmira, New York*. The collaboration of arts organizations and creators is especially vital. They will add their knowledge, resources and craft to a huge collective of Elmira's needs, aspirations and goals. Duplication of effort and replication of ideas is draining and will lead to unsustainable outcomes. Echoing the wisdom of Jane Jacobs, our monumental work cannot be done by one person or one group. It cannot be done on a pedestal or in a silo. It is all about honoring the local and working together. The city that is being reimagined and recreated must be present in the process itself.

The talent and resources now pouring into Elmira's revitalization are uplifting beyond measure. Never before in the history of the city have so many plans, processes and people been in motion towards achieving a city of promise, prosperity and possibility. The efforts toward consolidation and shared services between Chemung County and Elmira are one step on the

road to a sustainable future. A new theme for continuing this much-needed process could be: *Consolidate & Collaborate*. The conjunction of city and county planning documents with the new Elmira Comprehensive Plan, *Plan Elmira*, with emphasis on *The New Urbanism* and *Purpose Built Communities*, is extremely opportune. These foundations of activity, the deliberation and determination of cooperating stakeholders and leaders, are a true breakthrough in how we manage and organize change for Elmira.

With the success of such endeavors, Elmira will become a major creation center of the region. A creative and cultural synergy involving Binghamton, Corning, Watkins Glen, Ithaca and Elmira will explode in a cross pollination of our diverse strengths and resources. Everything cannot happen in the same place. The awareness and utilization of *regionalism* is basic to our creation trajectory. *Connectivity* and *Asset Linkage* will be primary drivers. Advanced systems for innovative passenger rail service to our regional hubs must be vigorously pursued. Each city mentioned has historical influences and geographic, economic and cultural assets that define the totality of their urban character. This regional approach can be expanded to include the entire eight-county *I-86 Corridor Eastern Anchor*. The need for the region to share and promote their assets will be essential for the thematic confluence of *Creation, Innovation, Destination*. It is sustainable and it is smart.

An exhaustive listing of all Elmira current planning endeavors, and those in preparatory stages, would be impossible, but to include some of them on a page together is, in itself, energizing:

- *Upstate Revitalization Initiative "Southern Tier Soars"*
- *I-86 Innovation Corridor*
- *Downtown Revitalization Initiative (Elmira Refresh)*
- *Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM)*
- *Southern Tier (Optic Fiber) Network Installation*
- *Downtown Commercial Historic District*
- *Poverty Reduction Initiative*
- *2016 Elmira Comprehensive Plan: Plan Elmira*
- *So. Tier Regional Sustainable Plan: Cleaner/Greener Communities*
- *Creating Healthy Places*
- *Age Friendly Community Action Plan*
- *Chemung Crossing Neighborhood Revitalization*

- *Community Land Trust (Land Bank)*

The conjunction of these and other initiatives presents an exhilarating time for the fortunes of our city and region. *Elmira's Creation Economy* finds resonance and synergy with several of their missions, philosophies and strategies. *Elmira Refresh*, *Plan Elmira*, the *Poverty Reduction Initiative* and the *I-86 Innovation Corridor* development plans have the dynamic essentials to be an infrastructure template for Creation Economy actions and offerings. However the collaborations proceed, the compilation of ideas expressed here is meant to assist and serve the overall mission of our combined efforts. The content and purpose of *Elmira's Creation Economy* is good for the city *and* the region.

Conclusion

I heard someone say recently that the funding and development plans now being discussed and pursued are “the last best chance for Elmira.” This is bad thinking. Elmira's value constantly presents itself in our everyday work, our gifts, our gatherings, our sacrifices and our life efforts to make the futures for the least of us more secure and the destiny of Elmira one of unending vitality and creation. City and County planning forces are focused and united around work that aims to create a more livable city. Extraordinary times lie ahead for Elmira. Modest accomplishments will build and grow. The Creation Economy is composed of building blocks containing the hopes and history of Elmira: Small mosaics, in many forms and shapes, with voices high and low, vibrant cultures, lifestyles and dreams. No, we are not a one-shot, solitary moment or single chance. We are not one building. We are not one view. We are Elmira, together. Our celebrations will be daily. Each block raised and stabilized, a new beginning.

As I view the *Flat Iron District* today, the time of my youth seems so distant, of a different world. *Cappy's* is closed and dark, the rest of the block hauntingly abandoned. The grand *Hilliard Corporation* has mindfully landscaped most of the surrounding eastward district and boldly preserved the old *Erie Station*, now emanating some of its former grandeur. *Savino's* still stands as a liquor store, *Evergreen* serves take out Chinese at the point. The former *St. Patrick's School* is now apartments owned by a man who, as

a kid, sipped cherry phosphates on a *Cappy's* soda stool. The green field of *Arnot Park* is rather lifeless except for an occasional EC softball game.

Still standing prominently is Elmira's great cathedral, *St. Patrick's*. The grandeur of her architecture will likely be on full display soon as plans for removing the buildings once holding *Cappy's*, *David's Glass and Shoe Repair* and *Peterson's Furniture* get underway. A new corridor of connection between *Elmira College* and downtown will advance. A roundabout and green space will replace the existing expanse of tar that centers the intersection of Third Street, Main Street and Park Place. When traveling north, crossing the peak of the Main Street Bridge, a new view will appear: *St. Patrick's* will stand completely revealed. A piazza, perhaps, will unfold before its huge granite steps, with the cathedral's two majestic steeples rising atop the city's skyline.

Elmira's appearance and purpose continues to change. I advise that we not succumb to critical comparison about what was, what is or what will be. *Know that everything Elmira has given to us will never be lost and know that Elmira will continue to give.* Elmira is showing its aches and pains, but we are here, now, to mend, to heal and renew. We know what needs to be done and we have the wisdom to do it. This will happen. It will happen for the people who live here, for the people who return here, and for the people who discover our city for the first time. We see Elmira now with new eyes, with deeper understanding and with gratitude. We celebrate our city. We embrace our city. We get to work. With Elmira, for Elmira, we are present, at the creation.

Joe Caparulo
May 2016 ©

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