

Youngstown: A Place for Families

Kelly Koss

In the summer of 2007, the University of Michigan Master of Urban Design students were invited by Youngstown State University (YSU) and The Community Improvement Corporation (CIC) to help re-imagine downtown Youngstown, Ohio in the 21st century. The Introductory Studio project was completed in a period of four weeks.



Location Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

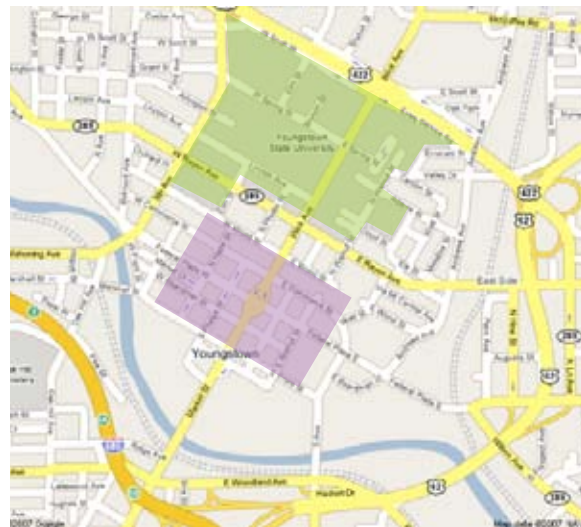
Background

Youngstown, Ohio, a former steel-manufacturing powerhouse, suffered dramatic population loss and economic and physical deterioration over the past 30 years as the U.S. economic structure shifted from an industrial manufacturing base to a knowledge based economy. Recently, the government of Youngstown and its constituents created a new plan to guide the city's redevelopment called Youngstown 2010. City plans from the 1950s anticipated that Youngstown's population would grow to 200,000 to 250,000 people; however, due to post-industrial decline, the city's population is now expected to stabilize at 80,000 people (Youngstown 2010 website). The innovative Youngstown 2010 plan acknowledges and embraces Youngstown's status as a "shrinking city," and outlines how the city will work toward becoming a successful and vibrant shrinking city.

Overall Concept

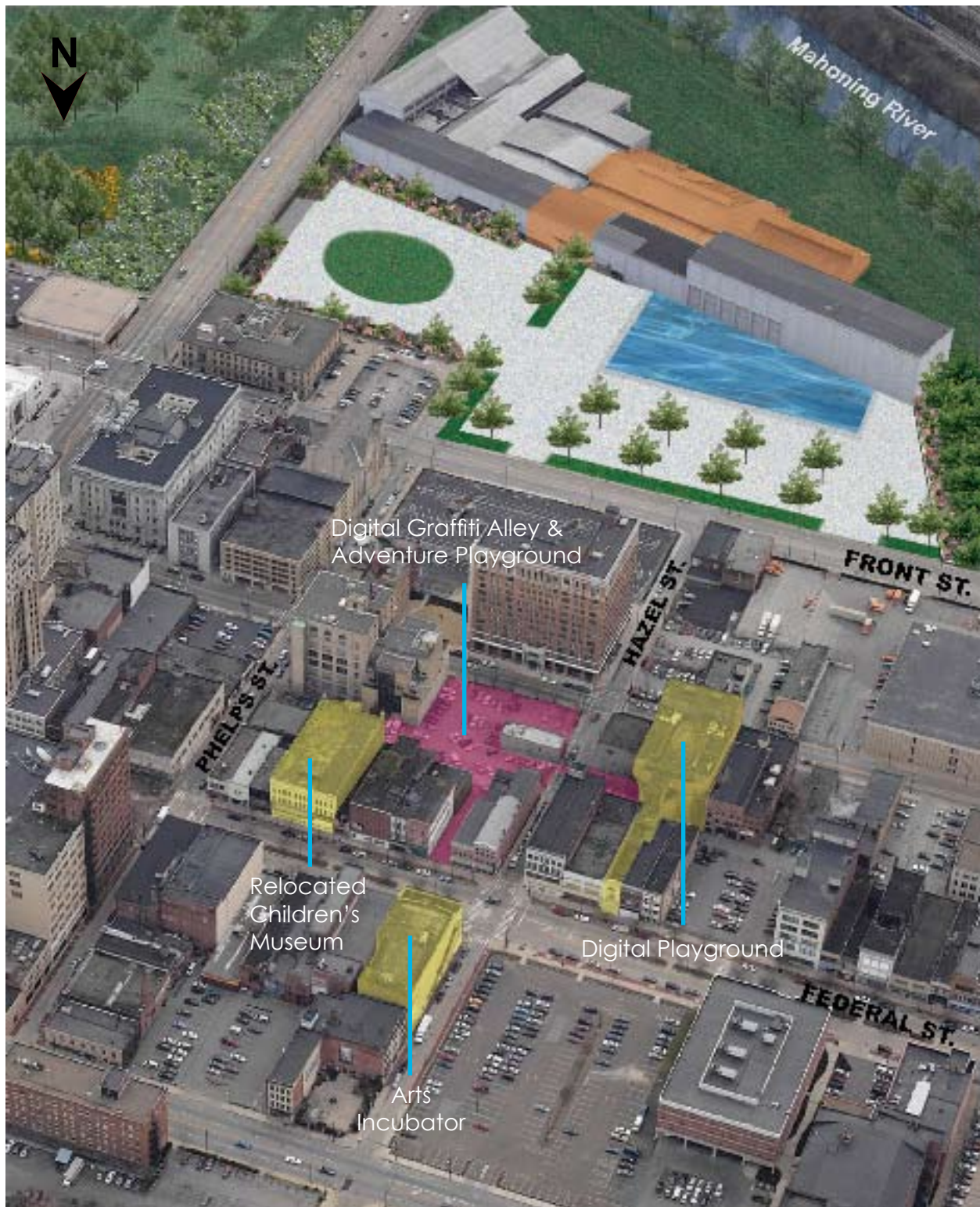
While visiting Youngstown for three days in July, it was obvious that downtown Youngstown suffers from high rates of abandonment and needs conceptual solutions to help re-energize itself. Initially, we were asked to explore how we could help bring students from Youngstown State University down the hill and into downtown to re-energize the streets. We were introduced to many local residents and business owners and learned a lot about downtown Youngstown's past, its present status, and its hopes and expectations for the downtown's future.

People repeatedly said that "Youngstown is a place for families" which continued to resonate in my head when we returned to Ann Arbor to begin designing. The idea of Youngstown as a place for families drives the concept for this proposal. This concept re-uses some of the buildings already owned by the Community Improvement Corporation, and publicly owned park land as tools to spark downtown's redevelopment. I recommend that the city invests money in creating public spaces that could be enjoyed by children and twentysomethings alike to make downtown a vibrant destination for residents and visitors.



The area in green is the YSU Campus and the area in purple shows downtown Youngstown. The blue represents the Mahoning River. The CIC wants to increase connectivity between YSU and Downtown.

Overall Concept Plan



The overarching concept for this plan focuses on clustering “kid-friendly” spaces by redeveloping properties adjacent to Federal Street, Youngstown’s “Main Street.” Additionally, this proposal seeks to better integrate the Mahoning River into the city by establishing a large public plaza and riverfront park on the edge of downtown.

Key Components of the Concept

Establish an Arts Incubator on Federal Street in the old Paramount Theater building that will help reinforce this area's strength as a cultural district in downtown Youngstown. Creating work space and gallery space in the building would provide a place for YSU students and community members to mingle. The Arts Incubator can also double as a small movie theater showing independent films in the evenings.



Vacant Paramount Theater in July 2007.
Photo Courtesy of Tyson Stevens

Relocate The Children's Museum of the Valley from its current location on Boardman to the Kress Building on Federal Street. Relocating the Children's Museum will be catalytic in clustering 'kid friendly' activity spots together to reinvigorate Federal Street.



Abandoned Kress Building in July 2007.
Photo Courtesy of Heather Smirl



Image of South Street Seaport Playground in Lower Manhattan, NY.
Designed by: David Rockwell
Source: http://nymag.com/intel/2007/01/fancy_new_seaport_playground_n_1.html

Change the police station parking lot into an Adventure Playground located near the Arts Incubator, Digital Playground, Digital Graffiti Alley, and Children's Museum. Adventure Playgrounds are popular in Europe. They consist of elements that children can manipulate and encourage imaginative play. It is a flexible playspace allowing children to engage in developmentally appropriate activities.

Construct a Digital Playground on Federal Street at the old State Theater location. Elements of the Digital Playground include: a movie studio, international communications and networking hub, 3D design lab, sound lab, projected games, digital design center, a technology classroom, and virtual reality gaming. The creation of this space will capitalize on the city's strength as a place for technological innovation and serve as a regional destination.

Youngstown's nationally renowned business/technology incubator can use the Digital Playground as a place to showcase its latest inventions in the community. During the day this spot can serve as an exciting educational environment for children and by night it become a social hub for twentysomethings.

Create a Digital Graffiti Alley where children's drawings are projected onto the walls of buildings in the alley. This alley would help link these kid-friendly spaces together.



View of proposed Digital Graffiti Alley



View of proposed Digital Playground

Creating a lively public plaza between the edge of downtown and the Ohio Alloy Building will help draw people towards the riverfront and create an impromptu kids' space and gathering place for people of all ages (similar to Jamison Square in Portland, Oregon).

Establish Mahoning Riverfront Park to connect downtown Youngstown to the Mahoning River by creating a large park and integrating it into the larger regional green network. Mahoning Riverfront Park will provide for a variety of both passive and programmed recreational and educational activities in a natural environment.

