

Orange, New Jersey

Making a Place

Margaux Simmons and Jamy Lasell

Editor's Note

The 2013 Planners Network conference coincided with Placemaking 5, led by the University of Orange. Rain poured down but spirits were high. Two articles—“Orange, New Jersey: Making a Place” and “Placemaking with the University of Orange”—describe this innovative community development strategy.

THE SMALL CITY OF ORANGE in the state of New Jersey has a free university. It's an old idea, in an older U.S. city. The University of Orange is not particularly famous yet, being only six years old, but it's helping define the revitalization of a shop worn town, famous for the original factory of Thomas Edison, presidential Bush ancestors, the Colgates, and present day, a solid working class. As is demonstrated by this list of residents, a city is as much a collection of people and activities, as it is the buildings and infrastructure that make them function, which is why Orange now has a university, the University of Orange. Formed

as part of a comprehensive community development strategy, the university helps link people to place and provides important lessons for other places struggling to maintain and support strong community involvement.

Orange gained its population as an upland suburb of the city of Newark; once the railroads came through in the early 1800s, it became, by extension, a suburb of the city of New York. Orange has a neighborhood known as the Valley, originally a wrinkle at the bottom of the next step of hills, carved by the East Branch of the Raritan River. The river became the drainage ditch for a busy tannery business in the early 1800s, probably based on the local dairy herds feeding NYC. In the mid-1800s a hat industry was rising in the Valley using the leathers produced locally, and eventually the actual locations of the old tanneries. At its height, most of the hats made in the United States were made in the Valley with over 30 companies participating. Multi-story hat factories for Stetson and No-name (its real name!) still dominate the low landscape. The businesses are long gone, the factories sit vacant waiting for market conditions to warrant condo conversion, surrounded by



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closely packed worker housing. The mansions of the owners sprawl across the surrounding hillsides. Artists are slowly filtering into the old and new industrial spaces.

Over time, other industries used the facilities; Monroe made calculators, printers and sign makers filled cheap space after Edison and Stetson moved on. But the housing stock remained and got older. People raised families, lived, loved and died. Taxes went up, services declined, and the city slowly slipped into a downward spiral. There was no tech boom, no strong new source of local money and the housing stock suffered. As homeowners were replaced by landlords, less attention was paid to the fabric of the city.

HANDS and the University

In 1986, HANDS, a community action agency, was formed by local

churches and community groups, to combat the problem of derelict housing. HANDS bought houses, rebuilt them, found and trained local buyers as homeowners and slowly whittled down the empty inventory. Using innovative tactics they have been very successful in an effort to fight the tide. Looking at the housing stock as an indicator of the health of the city, and working on the premise that people living in the city had to make the effort to keep the city up, there was a realization that the social and educational life of the population was as important as financing in the battle for revitalization. So was born the University of Orange.

“I proposed calling it the Center for Life-Long Learning,” said Patrick Morrissey, head of HANDS, “but luckily Mindy Thompson Fullilove had a better idea.” HANDS is interested in the whole city despite focusing its efforts in the Valley

Arts District. Branding the university with the city name helps define the place being built, the urban village of the 21st century, a just and beautiful city. That there is a university in the city helps say where the city is headed. It is a school dedicated to enriching the lives of local residents. People who work and play in the city, but live elsewhere, are participating too.

The great thing is it's free to anyone willing to do the work of studying. Teachers don't get paid, sharing their knowledge with people willing to learn. All ages participate although one of the requirements for graduation is voting in elections. Students aged under 18 vote in their school elections. Sixty- and seventy-year-olds are quite common in classes, which range from playwriting and music, to building an outdoor pizza oven at the young artists' collective, and beer making. The pizza oven



Photo: Ann Forsyth

Placemaking 5 tour in Orange, New Jersey, one of the Planners Network conference workshops.

came first, which was useful in teaching the beer-making course.

Teachers seem to find the University and offer their services. Sometimes the classes start large and get down to a core group that really wants to know, but often are small groups that study intently or complete a project. Graduation happens once a year and you can graduate as many years as you want to. Requirements include taking two courses, voting in local elections, having fun with your neighbors (a formal requirement), and attending at least one city meeting, i.e., getting involved in the local political process. While it sounds like an easy course load, graduation can be difficult for working families. But there is a sizable group that makes it every year. Molly Rose is the distributor of Passports that mark the milestones of courses completed at the U of O. "It's a self-service university, you carry your own records with you, in your Orange Passport." "We have a strong urbanism department, that has spawned projects like the bench building course originally designed for the Orange Station of the NJ Transit rail system which has few places to wait," said Molly Rose Kaufman, provost and one of two paid staff of the University this year. Staff positions are funded through a combination of private donations and grants, a major one from the State of New Jersey through HANDS.

The location for the outdoor bench making classroom at the Station was nixed by the permitting function of the city planner who is alleged to have noted that the political powers didn't want people expressing their desires for use of that space.

In the meantime, a large crowded high-rise has been announced to fill the adjacent parking lots, a typical NJ outcome when local populations have no say and public places get privatized. The benches got built on the library lawn.

Other courses have included researching the history of your own house, an activity that tends to ground the homeowner in place, knowing who lived there, and what the neighborhoods have been like, how design decisions have changed the way things look and work. There is an annual walk through neighborhoods. The fifth walk took place this spring and included discussion of various aspects of urban planning. It is the contention of Columbia Professor, Mindy Fullilove, who leads the walk, that everything you ever wanted to know about urban planning can be learned in Orange, from the Interstate highway flowing like a river through the heart of the town, to the various generations of public housing, to the repurposed Reingold brewery.

The athletic department has sponsored tournaments in three of its focus sports: ultimate Frisbee, bocce, and rock-paper-scissors. Low cost athletic facilities come in the form of public parks and streets, acquainting the participants with the limitations and opportunities of public play.

Art Curriculum

Maybe the strongest and most visible part of the university is the art curriculum. Actually, there is no formal curriculum, rather the artists organize themselves. Started

by a group of high school students who wanted studio space, they designed a course and a process that now occupies a space called Ironworks, deriving from the sign on the front of the building from a previous business. In accordance with the goals of the university, Ironworks is youth led and user driven. The excitement is palpable.

They have created three studio spaces. A painting studio is filled with color and graphic artists from after school until the wee hours of the morning. Computers bump up against easels and sheets of plywood for the street painters. A fashion studio in the back and a music-recording studio in the way back, keep pumping out products. The other front room with its roll up glass garage doors is a gallery with a steady stream of shows. It is also used on occasion as a sculpture studio, as when an 8-foot top hat, celebrating the first annual Hat City Streets Festival, was constructed there. "It was the only place with big enough doors," said the builders. There is a sculpture garden in a side yard, filled with quirky rusting pieces; first attempts that tend to get left behind when the creators move on. Beside the garden is a hydroponic greenhouse supplying salad greens to local restaurants, one of the new businesses being started in the Valley.

"When I told one Internet friend that my new goal was to graduate from the University of Orange," said one high school dropout, "she did some research and wrote me back acidly, 'You know it's not accredited.' But that's why I like it; you can take courses that

excite you, not what someone else thinks you need to know.”

Molly Rose Kaufman is herself a graduate of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, an area known for its uniquely designed emphasis on community-based education, the Five College Consortium. Hampshire College is a part of the Consortium that connects the towns of Amherst, Northampton and South Hadley in Western Massachusetts’ Pioneer valley. The Five College Consortium essentially creates a larger community connected by five learning centers: four private colleges and a state university.

One can’t help but think of the sapling U. of Orange as an addition to this short list of American educational centers that focus on peer group education that takes a primary role in the community de-

velopment of its environment, and imbues its students with a sense of responsibility to community, environment and humanity. Hampshire College, Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and only a handful of others come to mind. Horace Mann, the first president of Antioch College, is quoted as saying, “Be ashamed to die until you’ve won some victory for humanity.” “To know is not enough,” the motto of Hampshire College, embodies the responsibility of community service and direct application of principles learned. The University of Orange is a vehicle for achieving those goals and puts them into practice.

Molly’s grandparents lived in Orange, fighting for better schools. Both she and her mother have returned to the town to participate in its renaissance. “Orange is a cool place and the University of Orange showcases what’s here.” She cites

the expense of education and the new dynamic of information exchange as factors in the creation of U. of Orange. “Anyone can teach and anyone can learn,” is her belief, borne out in the success of the graduates in taking lessons and formats learned in class into other organizations in the community.

Education can be an industry in itself. The university could grow from its present modest roots, taking on certificate programs, maybe continuing education opportunities for architects. There are lots of ideas and new ones pop up regularly. ESL and basic reading courses are some needs identified; teachers could be trained if instructors stepped forward.

Challenges exist for the University of Orange. Inventing the paradigm of a new structure that fills voids left by existing behemoths can be difficult. There are growing pains. The understanding that each student and teacher has to take responsibility for his or her own participation and learning in such an open and unstructured “curriculum” is an ongoing structural difference from a conventional institution. There is even more need for this aspect to be emphasized because there is no tuition required or traditional educational structures in place. Without the conventional accreditation system, and being community based, there is the ever-present issue of funding for space and facilities necessary to keep the U. of Orange going. But as each year grows this seedling, the challenges are met, in an enjoyable way that makes Orange a better place to live, volunteer and be satisfied with life. **P²**



Photo: Jarmy Lasell

Advertising for the Hat City Streets Festival