

Three Creative Reuses of Aging Infrastructure

By Sarah Jo Peterson

October 30, 2014



ULI members tour the High Line in New York City as part of the Fall Meeting.

Just outside the Javits Center in New York City, attendees of the 2014 ULI Fall Meeting walked the recently opened final leg of the High Line, which wraps like a veranda around the massive Hudson Yards development site. Inside Javits, speakers at a concurrent session on the creative reuse of aging infrastructure added three case studies to the growing list of success stories proving that development opportunities can still be found in the spaces created by transportation infrastructure.

For Chicago's MetraMarket, the private sector transformed rail infrastructure dating back to the early 20th century. New residents totaling 50,000 and 110,000 rail commuters from Chicago's northern and western suburbs formed a ready base of customers for retail development in the city's burgeoning West Loop district. But, as Michael Tobin, managing director, CBRE/U.S. Equities Realty, declared, even when the real estate fundamentals are strong, projects that repurpose infrastructure are still "labors of love."

Metra, Chicago's commuter rail agency, sought to make its Ogilvie Transportation Center a more pleasant experience for commuters. After a decade of negotiations, CBRE/U.S. Equities Realty entered into a 90-year ground lease with Metra for the unused areas under the elevated tracks. The blond-brick walls, which encapsulated the unused areas, added period character to the site but deadened the streets. CBRE/U.S. Equities Realty's solution was a French Market, Chicago's only indoor market of local food vendors, restaurants, and soft goods. An enormous public success, according to Tobin, the French Market has become a local and regional attraction while also activating the streets.

The Erie Canal put Buffalo on the map in the 19th century; today, waterfront investments at Canalside are bringing in 1 million visitors a year. The state of New York led public investments to re-create the canal in its historic location, repurposed as four public spaces featuring parks, promenades, water recreation, and lighting installations on the towering grain elevators. The varied entertainment options include the popular play *The Story of Buffalo*, staged in a venue created out of the foundations of buildings.

Successful place making, as best practices now show, requires thoughtful and frequent programming. For Benjamin Donsky, project manager for Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corporation, potential visitors need to know that there is "always something going down at Canalside." Ramping up from zero events in 2009, this year Canalside will host 1,000 events, most conducted as partnerships with third parties.

The public investments and place making in Canalside seem to be working. The private sector has arrived; two of eight adjacent development sites sold at fair market value and now contain a hotel and a mixed-use complex featuring ice hockey rinks and retail.

Historic character is offered by old railroads and canals, but freeways? Freeway parks also have burst onto the scene; studies by the Trust for Public Land find dozens that turn noisy air rights into green space amenities. Citing as a precedent [2014 ULI Urban Open Space Award Winner Klyde Warren Park](#) in Dallas, Michael LoGrande of the city of Los Angeles's department of planning unveiled an ambitious plan to cap a one-mile (1.6 km) stretch of the Hollywood Freeway. Running through downtown, the freeway split a historic neighborhood. Today, the area is transit rich and of surprisingly high density, but green space poor.

The cost of a "Hollywood Park" built in freeway air rights crosses over into the billion-dollar range, but LoGrande reasoned that the most appropriate comparison is the cost of buying this much land in the densest heart of the city. Viewed this way, the cost is no less daunting, but the value becomes more apparent. Private donations have already materialized to cover the environmental studies, and federal, state, and local governments have expressed interest in the concept. The High Line and Chicago's Millennium Park offer lessons on how to leverage value capture, although LoGrande acknowledged that balancing development opportunities with the needs of the existing, vulnerable neighborhoods will be very important.

Developments that compete only on the newness of the buildings will always be beaten by the next new building, Tobin reminded the audience. He continued, "You have to create a reason why the public wants to be there to create long-term success." The spaces created by infrastructure—obsolete and still in use—offer development opportunities of lasting value. But they demand infusing the creative impulse throughout, to take advantage of their unique character and locational advantages while maintaining a strong commitment to place making.