

PLACEMAKING NETWORK  
COLLINSVILLE CONNECTICUT – THE PRESERVATION OF PLACE  
Seminar by David K. Leff  
September 26, 2011  
Notes by Peter Papesch, AIA and Natasha Rocca Devine

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Robert Tullis, AIA is co-chair w/ Christina Lanzl.  
David Leff, speaker.

**Introduction of Collinsville by Rob Tullis, co-chair of Placemaking Network with Christina Lanzl**

Collinsville was founded in 1826 by the Collins Company, manufacturer of axes and other edge tools  
Collins factories closed in 1966. The village maintains its quintessential New England character.

This is the first of a two-part series of seminars using Collinsville as a case study in the examination of what elements are essential to the making of such a distinctive place; and what physical and community features must be preserved, be enhanced, or be allowed to change in order to maintain its social and economic viability.

Second part will be given by Mary Engvall, October 24<sup>th</sup>. Mary will discuss a citizen's group's smart growth approach and activity-based, community-building, and placemaking initiatives like the Farmers Market she organizes.

Tullis showed urban plan analysis slides showing forces that shaped Collinsville's plan, including: the river and bridge and dam-power, the mill and factory, the town built above the mill on the hill, the railroad brought in between the town and mill, the street pattern, and commercial and residential use patterns.

Speaker today is David K. Leff, former deputy commissioner of CT Dept. of Environmental Protection and author of *The Last Undiscovered Place*. Leff is also author of *Deep Travel: In Thoreau's Wake on the Concord and Merrimack*, as well as two volumes of poetry. Another nonfiction book about place, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, will be published by Wesleyan University Press this coming spring. [www.davidkleff.com](http://www.davidkleff.com)

**David Leff's presentation**

Collinsville is where he lives. Generally, we take for granted the places where we live. Leff wrote 'The Last Undiscovered Place' to chronicle a new way of seeing his environment. Leff read from his poem 'The Falls' to describe his concept. We should attempt to see familiar places as if we were a visiting tourist.

Collinsville is small village in the township of Canton, CT. 17 miles W of Hartford, right on the Farmington River. Population: 2,000 people approximately.

Collinsville occupies a geological pinchpoint between the river and a hard rock hill. Perfect location for harnessing water power. There are similar mill towns throughout Connecticut; eastern Connecticut- textiles, western Connecticut- metal works. 1830-1930 was main building period. Many multi-family buildings built for factory workers. Eventually residential 200 units were owned by the company.

Mass-producing axes was an innovation, especially fully-sharpened ones, since most axes were created by blacksmiths, unsharpened, and the buyer had to sharpen the axe himself! Company was successful in spite of hard times: willing to innovate, and very responsive to customer needs. In 1840, machetes were produced for S. American trade. Some tools for harvesting bananas. Anything that a client needed could be produced - the company had huge numbers of molds for many different tools. They made plows, adzes, shovels, and other farming tools plus bayonets and swords for Civil War. There is a Collins Axe in the first US Nuclear Sub. Collins Axes helped build the Trans-Siberian Railroad. They manufactured the pikes that abolitionist John Brown used in his raid on Harpers Ferry. "It was the Iran-Contra scandal of its time for the Collins Company."

There was little infrastructure at the outset when two Collins brothers and their cousin William Weld each put up \$5k. The company subsequently built houses for their workers, plus the Congregationalist Church. Donated property for the hotel, other buildings. Sam Collins wanted to create and shape society. "Owning was zoning." He hoped to help men leave better off than when they came. Deed restrictions limited liquor sales. Deed to Leff's house has deed restrictions against creating alcoholic beverages. Company ultimately would sponsor sports teams. In the 1930s it converted a building into a multi-use community center with a reading room and adjacent shooting gallery!

The health of the factory and the health of the village were the same ... until the 1930s. A flood in the 1950s that heavily damaged the mills might have been a good excuse to innovate while re-building, but the Collins Company did not. By 1966 the leadership was ossified. A Hartford Courant article reported on the dilapidated state of the run-down industrial slum. An urban renewal proposal espoused the concept of knocking down 10 acres in center of the town. The proposal lost by less than a handful of votes.

What revived Collinsville? In 1967, Tom Perry bought the factory for \$64,000. He thought of the premises as an incubator plant, and leased portions of it to an innovative packaging-maker, developer of plastic-compounds for polishing, etc. By 1972 innovation was in the air. Rents, modestly-priced, soon attracted all sorts of different, sometimes artistic endeavors. Activities from the mill spilled over into the town. In the 1980s storefronts on Main St. got going again ... even though that lasted only a short while. The factory's brick shipping center was turned into an antiques store. The Farmington River was and is famous for good fishing, and its presence led to establishment of a local canoe and kayak business. By mid-'90s Collinsville had become a Norman Rockwell-type of place. But in a major blow to the community, the local hardware store closed - Eaton Hardware.

In late '90, developer Rusty Tinley bought the factory to create "@Collinsville," a mixed-use complex featuring housing and retail. "He was like the Music Man – but the trombones never arrived." Tinley was unwilling to continue short-term leases with the mill's occupants, but also could not get his proposed redevelopment off the ground. The factory buildings are now mostly empty and decaying. Nobody knows what will happen to the dilapidated buildings.

What remains is a town that has become a bit of a tourist destination. Collinsville has a historical museum, rail trail and hiking, fishing and canoeing. It also has a group of energetic and visionary people. Planned events include a wonderful Memorial Day parade with antique cars and high school bands, a seasonal farmer's market, a community unity day (arts & music festival), a town-wide Sam Collins Day, and the annual Halloween Parade, mid-way between traditional and kitch. In Autumn and Winter: classical music performances, with world-renowned artists visiting. A Flentrop organ at the Congregational Church is sometimes used for these. All the events depend on the energy and ideas of volunteers (the subject of Mary Engvall's seminar on October 24<sup>th</sup>). "When people are engaged, they create interesting places no matter the physical environment."

Leff advocates that we explore our own communities with a traveler's fresh eyes; we'll find them more intriguing than we first knew. Truly seeing demands concentrated and conscious looking; what Leff calls "deep travel". Most places exist in time as well as in space, i.e. in 4 dimensions. The more we see ourselves as part of the continuum, the more committed we become.

The more we appreciate and then love the places we live in, the more we are committed to make the place we live in special. When we pour our talent and energy and time into this, the commitment enlivens the entire community. "Time is the stuff life is made of" - Ben Franklin. People don't just dwell in a place, they have a relationship with the place. People in Collinsville are as contentious or fractious as any other community, but they make the town come alive. What is the "magic hidden in plain sight?" When people care about a place, they will put in energy.

In new building and planning work, Leff advises also focusing on creating a sense of community. Engagement of the people in the community creates "Place" regardless of the architecture, motivates people to tie into the architecture. How to solve a sterile physical situation? Only time and people can do that. That's also the good news. Imperfections of a place are a great breeding-ground for innovation.

Quirky imperfections intrigue us. Emerson- “There is a crack in everything God has made.” Collinsville is distinctive because it grew partly planned, partly haphazardously. Developing a sense of place isn’t a task to be accomplished, but a process. Any stasis is an anomaly. Change has to occur within the context of what is already there, change in season as well as history.

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Notetaker’s comments: the physical and historical attributes of Collinsville appear in process of being squandered by inhabitants who are too averse to the advantages of community planning. Stewardship of the town’s inheritance seems not to be viewed as important. Planning is anathema to the New Englander (and others), resulting either in the tragedy of the commons (overuse of a community asset) or lack of stewardship of an inherited treasure.

The partly-planned (via the Collins’ paternalistic self-interest), partly haphazard growth of the small community of some 2,000 inhabitants could be fertile ground for innovation on two ends of the place-making or urban design spectrum. Its physical variety, its walkable core, its outdated factory structures ripe for innovative renovation are all potential “urban humus” (notetaker’s term) that could sprout new life forms. Urban humus is the combination of using the long-term inherited assets (good, bad, planned and unplanned) with an actively-supported (by local government) plan for identifying, then optimizing all the opportunities of physical and economic innovation by individuals.

For Collinsville, the opportunity exists for random individual improvements that are guided by a common public objective to provide for varied, surprising, sometimes ugly, sometimes beautiful additions to a very rich existing and dense urban canvas. Using the local physical and socio-cultural assets to encourage individual “tinkering”, individual experimentation within a well-planned framework could result in a renewed town that is unique precisely because it builds on the inherited character of Collinsville, a place to be proud of.