

Situated at the western terminus of the Erie Canal, a stones throw from where the mouth of the mighty Niagara River begins to roil under the immense vacuum of Niagara Falls; the great American city of Buffalo, New York has maintained a tenuous relationship with the environment since the turn of the 20th century.

Harnessing the tremendous hydroelectric potential of Niagara Falls set Buffalo apart in its ability to attract captains of industry. Once the dynamos were running, it didn't take long for manufacturing and heavy industry to carve out a foothold in the regional economy. By 1950, Buffalo ranked as the 15th most populous city in the United States, boasting a population over 580,000. At the height of their power, Buffalo's industrial titans by the names of Bethlehem Steel and Hooker Chemical employed tens of thousands of residents, bringing fantastic economic prosperity to the region.

Unfortunately, by the 1980's, coincident with globalization of the world economy, Buffalo was plagued by contracting industries and dwindling job opportunities. Vibrant working-class neighborhoods were scarred by vacant lots and abandoned factories. When the wave of economy behind heavy industry finally crashed, the community was left to contend with the burdensome environmental legacy.

However, after a decades long decline, the City of Buffalo has found new life. Retooling the foundation of the local economy around education, health care, and clean energy; Buffalo is once again on the rise. Remarkable efforts to reclaim blighted resources have reestablished Buffalo as a regional hub of business enterprise.

The story of Buffalo, New York is not unique, and the common themes are shared across countless communities throughout the world. Buffalo exemplifies the unfortunate and latent repercussions associated with the evolution of a society; that in the wake of our collective advancement, there is often an environmental burden. Significant time and resources can be allocated to impart responsibility for this tragedy of the commons, and sometimes it is warranted. More frequently, however, the best path forward is to acknowledge that we are the solution to our own problems. It seems every week, the City of Buffalo is redeveloping a brownfield, repurposing a derelict warehouse, or restoring a historical piece of architecture.

Growing up in Buffalo provided me a unique opportunity to witness the negative impacts that environmental disregard can impart on a community. Relocating to Colorado over ten years ago, I can't help but find similarities in the ways in which the communities have been challenged with confronting their industrial past, finding ways to honor their history, while providing a safer, healthier, and more functional environment. It is critical that we continue to remediate the natural resources diminished by human activities, but it is equally important that we rely upon our collective knowledge to inform a prosperous and sustainable future. I believe that as a community of scientists and engineers, we can surmount the most daunting environmental challenges and I look forward to approaching them in my career as an Environmental Engineer.