

Preservation Design Studio 2
ARCH 6720
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Introduction

During the Spring 2007 term, the RPI Building Conservation Studio Project focused on the upper Congress Street corridor in Troy, New York, between Christie Street and Pawling Avenue. The Congress Street corridor has a long history as an important thoroughfare between downtown Troy and rural communities located in the heartland of Rensselaer County. The corridor skirts prominent natural features such as Mount Ida and the Poesten Kill Gorge. In the 19th century, the tremendous energy of the Poesten Kill contributed to Troy's prominence during the American Industrial Revolution. A diverse base of industries, powered by the foaming waters, gave rise to a thriving urban factory village, known as the Mount Ida Neighborhood.

During the 20th century, the character of this neighborhood saw significant change and decline. Despite the decline, this neighborhood continues to hold much potential and now presents a wide range of new opportunities in the areas of historic preservation, natural resource appreciation, and business development. Information compiled in the website created by the RPI students can be used by neighborhood residents and business owners to further bring into focus a vision for revitalizing this area. The ideas presented in this report can also be folded into ongoing roadway improvement and economic development projects that are slated to occur in the upper Congress Street corridor.

Project Boundary

Overall, the Congress Street corridor spans a distance of about 1¼ miles from the Hudson River to Pawling Avenue and Brunswick Road (Route 2). Previous studies have divided this highly variable corridor into smaller sections for the sake of organization and manageability. Similarly, we have identified project boundaries to include both the Congress Street and Mt. Ida neighborhoods (**hot link to map**). Consistent with previous studies such as the *Congress Street Corridor Study* (Laberge, 2001), the eastern boundary near the intersection of Brunswick Road and Pawling Avenue "... is expressly recognized as the primary southeastern gateway into the Congress Street corridor..." Christie Street was selected as the western boundary for this project in order to logically include the entrance to Prospect Park, which is a large and important feature of the corridor. The southern project boundary incorporates the Poesten Kill industrial heritage area as well as the small neighborhood enclave between Cypress and Birch Streets. The northern project boundary roughly corresponds with a line-of-sight from Congress Street.

Main Street Approach

Elements of this project were designed to mesh with the National Trust's Main Street program. Created by an act of Congress in 1949, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (<http://www.nationaltrust.org/about>) is "a private, non-profit organization dedicated to saving historic places and revitalizing America's communities." In the late 1970s, the National Trust created their Main Street program, which has served as a template for revitalization of more than 1,200 towns and cities in 42 states. The program has a proven track record of success for helping residents, business owners and local officials in a community to work together to spur economic development. As discussed in the Main Street's website (<http://www.mainstreet.org>), "the Main Street Approach advocates a return to community self-reliance, local empowerment, and rebuilding of traditional commercial districts based on their unique assets: distinctive architecture, a pedestrian-friendly environment, personal service, local ownership, and a sense of community." As the student website shows, the Mount Ida neighborhood includes these attributes and

more. The upper Congress Street corridor has an abundance of historic architecture. The planned Department of Transportation project will restore a pedestrian-friendly environment and strengthen ties with the RPI campus community. New businesses have started recently, enhancing the economic diversity in the neighborhood. It is clear that the Mount Ida neighborhood has already begun to turn around, but further effort is needed to ensure that the momentum continues to build.

The Main Street Four-Point Approach™ is a comprehensive strategy that integrates efforts in four topics, including: (1) Organization, (2) Design, (3) Economic Restructuring, and (4) Promotion. Underlying these four topics is a series of eight guiding principles: comprehensive, incremental, self-help, partnerships, identifying and capitalizing on existing assets, quality, change, and implementation.

Organization is something that the Mount Ida neighborhood lacks. Effective organization serves as the cornerstone for economic development and community well-being. Anecdotal evidence shows that local residents and business owners would welcome ideas and guidance in forging effective and cooperative relationships. For example, a number of residents and business owners supported this student project by actively participating in two public neighborhood meetings and contributing ideas. Additionally, several people supported interviews conducted by various students. This display of interest and community involvement reflects the beginnings of a renewed sense of neighborhood spirit. Continued dialogue is needed to further develop and implement plans for neighborhood improvement. It is recommended and hoped that Mount Ida residents and businesses will continue to network with each other with a goal of creating a more formal neighborhood organization. Other neighborhoods in the city, including the Pottery District, Little Italy, and Beman Park, can be used as models.

The Design aspect of the Main Street Approach aims to identify and capitalize on the physical attributes of an area. Oftentimes, such assets become underappreciated due to a number of factors including socio-economic changes, unsympathetic modifications, general lack of maintenance and neglect. Information contained throughout this Mount Ida website serves to identify key assets, reminding stakeholders what they have and pointing out what is available to other interested parties. In addition, suggestions and recommendations are contained within various sections of this website such as:

- natural resources;
- strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; and
- design guidelines.

Most of the suggestions encourage building upon what already exists within the neighborhood. Ultimately, the property owners need to decide whether to pursue these suggestions. Based on Main Street experience, in the near-term, the quality of implementation is more important than quantity. Success, no matter how small, breeds success; quantity comes with time.

Strengthening the design aspects of the neighborhood fits in with economic restructuring and promotion. Although new businesses have started recently, the neighborhood would benefit from additional services such as a grocery store and pharmacy. The neighborhood still contains a number of vacant storefronts and buildings that provide excellent opportunities for economic reuse. As the history section shows, at one time, the Mount Ida neighborhood was a largely self sufficient community. It could become so again.

The corridor improvements to be implemented by NYS Department of Transportation in 2008 will create an environment and opportunity for further economic development in the neighborhood. The neighborhood's proximity to the RPI campus and Downtown Troy is an additional advantage. The economic development activity in these areas including new residential development can help stimulate new business creation and expansion in Mount Ida.

The neighborhood's unique location, history and natural assets provide significant opportunities for promotion. As noted above, Mount Ida will ideally create a formal neighborhood organization to promote revitalization efforts including business development, increased homeownership, enhancement of recreation and open space opportunities at Prospect Park and Poesten Kill Gorge and streetscape improvements along the Congress Street corridor.

Due to the breadth of the Main Street approach, success in revitalizing is neither quick nor guaranteed. The effort requires dedicated leadership and long-term support of many people, a number of whom will be volunteers. It is the hope of the 2007 RPI Building Conservation students that information contained in this website can be used to continue the improvements that have already begun. Positive results will not only strengthen the Mount Ida neighborhood, but will also benefit the surrounding neighborhoods including downtown Troy, Hillside, East Side and Albia/Heights.