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Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley

"Imagination is, after all, an intensely practical activity."
(Le Guin 1989, 288)

Imagine Niagara as a very large, green, regional park with vibrant and healthy cities and settlements carved into it. Imagine the Niagara River as a clean strait connecting the Great Lakes as it thunders over the falls, generates power, and provides habitat for multiple forms of life. Imagine a place where inhabitants and tourist marvel at the depth and richness of heritage—the stories of the First Nations, the industrial heritage, the agricultural abundance, the rich cultural life and ecological diversity, and of course, Niagara Falls. Imagine Niagara as a very special place.

Niagara, like all places, is comprised of the physical world, the people who inhabit this world, their activities and the meanings they derive and construct, and the imaginations they share about themselves and their place. Those of us who live in Niagara know that this is a powerful place if only because of the presence of the falls and the magnitude of fresh water that flows through the region, generating settlement, power, and a legacy of rich livelihood. Niagara is also an international boundary between two countries, the United States and Canada, and home to cities and suburbs and small communities filled with people and things and layered with stories, histories, and meanings. It is this complex milieu that comprises our homespace and helps shape who we are as communities and individuals.

The imagination of self and place is grounded in the daily lives of people, especially when we consider the scale of the community or neighbourhood. Regions must rely more on the imagination than on daily practices because inhabitants have less personal experience with the complex vastness of the physical and material world at this scale. A region is built on the stories and representations of the place—constructed by those who came before, by those who live in the region itself, and by outsiders. Niagara certainly has its share of representations: the honeymoon capital of the world, one of the most lucrative gambling sites in North America, the great source of hydro power, the snowbelt

in the US and the southern border in Canada, the rustbelt in the US and the wine country in Canada. Each of these imagined Niagaras sits in uneasy juxtaposition with the others; and each has consequences for the structure of governance, investment, and quality of life for the almost two million regional inhabitants and 17 million yearly visitors.

One of the most interesting imaginations of this place, and the one we'll offer comment on in this piece, is the question of what is included in our "region"? Is Niagara a single yet binational space that shares a history, people, ecology, and a future; or is Niagara an uneasy amalgamation of countries, provinces, counties, cities and towns that, as often as not, compete with each other? Or perhaps are we both, and if so, how can we be more than one thing? As participants in the Niagara project—a project that has many names, including "Rethinking Niagara" or the "Niagara International Peace Park"—we are struggling with those questions. We have been engaging in a dialogue with many in the binational region about the future of our place while we excavate its history, meanings, conflicts, challenges, and possibilities. The goal of this collaborative work is to shift fundamentally the condition of separateness and fragmentation in the region into an imagination of a shared binational space, a city-region in a sense. We are doing this by reminding ourselves of our common heritage, ecology, and economy. The shift in imagination from many into one will facilitate the emergence of a new economic order based on more sustainable practices; changes made to support this reimagining, through co-operative planning, shared events, and mutual agreements, will, in turn, deepen the potential of the Niagaras to be imagined as home to its many inhabitants.

Those of us in the discipline/practice of design and planning readily acknowledge our engagement in imaginal work. Indeed, our placemaking practice rests on imagining alternative futures in every project, whether it is the design of a small park or a plan for an entire city. Our work has to be grounded in the history of each place, in the often-conflicting aspirations of various parties, in its typology (i.e., its patterns and forms), and in basic description and analysis generated through research. In our work, designing helps frame questions for research, and the research imposes opportunities and constraints on possible futures. As academic practitioners, we are both producers and consumers of research; and in the Niagara project, we have consistently used and engaged with empirical, historical, and interpretative studies, such as the research that serves as the content for the *Journal of Canadian Studies* and many other academic vehicles.

It is perhaps easy to see how the imagination is central to the construction and maintenance of places, and even to the placemaking work of designers and



Figure 1: One imagination of Niagara is seen in this green infrastructure map of the binational Niagara Region with the Niagara River in the centre.

Source: The Urban Design Project, University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

planners, but does the imagination play a role in the ongoing research of academic fields such as history, cultural studies, and sociology? If research serves the role of confronting and problematizing commonly accepted interpretations of events, places, people, and culture, and of deepening our knowledge regarding the world around us, then it must as well employ an imaginative practice to frame questions. When we seek to reframe an agreed-upon knowing, to find gaps in current understandings, to uncover previously obscure relationships between conditions, stories, events and people, or to raise questions about how something *is* or *came to be*, we are using an imaginal strategy that recognizes that *what is* could have been different. All of our research questions in some sense seek alternative futures by reimagining the past, present, or future. As such, all our research engages the power of imaginative thought to frame, execute, and interpret what and how we know.

As Le Guin says, the imagination is a practical activity, and when employed consciously in a collaborative and dialogic project, it has the power to transform the construction of our places, our communities, and ourselves. It is within this framework that the rather unbounded Niagara project has emerged to consciously seek to reimagine—again—Niagara.

The Shifting Niagaras

Archaeological and empirical records of history, our naturalist and ecological narratives of place, and our storytelling all have the power to evoke imaginations critical to the transformations that occur in attempts to keep places vital and sustainable. The Haudenosaunee tell of the Peacemaker and Peace Queen who, before European incursions into the Great Lakes region, led six warring nations to a single nation in peace—a powerful reimagination of possibility by tribal leadership. Earliest accounts of the wildness and power of Niagara Falls helped establish not only the region but the entire “new world ” in the minds of Europeans. Nicola Tesla’s invention of alternating current, and thus hydro-electricity generated at Niagara Falls, fuelled the technological utopian dream of power that greatly expanded industrialization already evident in the Erie and Welland Canals, and built a dense network of factories in Buffalo, Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, and Hamilton. At the same time, a desire to protect the power and beauty of the Niagara River led to the Canadian Niagara Parks Commission along the Niagara River and the restoration of Goat Island and the falls on the American side with the creation of the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Niagara Reservation in 1883, the first state park in the United States. Although apparently conflicting,



Figure 2: The Niagara was considered a single region as early as the 1800s. This map was developed to describe Tourist attractions along the Niagara Frontier 1818-1819.
Source: by Johann George Kohl, 1923—from the Toronto Metropolitan Reference Library.

these two imaginations—industrial riches and natural heritage—guided investment, city building, and livelihood on both sides of the border between the War of 1812 and the Second World War.

By the mid-twentieth century, both the technological dream of “better living through chemistry” and the dream of a preserved natural environment were under duress. The forces of globalization were moving factories and jobs overseas while at the same time the depth of contamination left by the formerly successful plants became evident at Love Canal and many other sites, leaving the Niagara River, the Buffalo River, and Hamilton Harbour as three of the 42 toxic hot spots on the Great Lakes. The image of the region as a successful, prosperous, and healthy place dissolved. We had a new story, but not a story that sustained us, that fostered pride of place.

By the early 1980s, there were conscious efforts to rework the imagination of the region, to acknowledge that the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century visions could not be restored. Some of these efforts were exclusively Canadian, others exclusively American, and still others are joint Canada/US projects. All of these efforts reveal much about how both sides of our binational region continue to struggle with their public identity and how dependent each is on differentiating itself from its neighbours even as it fully engages them.

A major international effort within the region has been the cleanup of the Great Lakes, spearheaded by the International Joint Commission and the Remedial Action Plans for the Niagara and Buffalo Rivers and Hamilton Harbour, plans that were developed independently by Canada and the US. In the early 1990s, the Niagara Toxic Management Agreement between the two nations greatly facilitated efforts to remediate hazardous waste sites. The Niagara Parks Commission in 1988 generated a plan for their future development, and as early as 1982, the City of Buffalo in conjunction with New York State agencies began planning for a very different kind of waterfront to replace the old, dying industrial infrastructure. All of these efforts and many more on both sides of the border contributed to the conversation about what we might be and developed constituencies who have been consistently articulate and demanding in their desire for green space, for public access to the water, for a healthy environment, and for sustainable economic growth.

In the early 1980s, The Spirit of the City conference consciously engaged over 300 Buffalo citizens in a process of reimagination (Schneekloth and Wooster 1994). The conference was organized as a series of storytelling sessions by local residents about their lives in Western New York at the border of Canada. Labour leaders and workers recounted stories of the glory and decline of steel production,

grain transshipment, and heavy industry in the region, stories that demonstrated the quality of community revealed through economic adversity. There were reflections on the trauma and community spirit that emerged during and in the aftermath of the Blizzard of '77, stories of the *Courier Express*, where Mark Twain had worked, and stories about the relationship between First Nations and the region; this relationship was re-enacted by all of us through a ceremony wherein we asked the spirit of the city for permission to speak of it. There were remembrances of when Buffalo was the metropolitan centre of the region for music and the arts—the place where Toronto and southern Ontario citizens came for culture and recreation before the Greater Toronto Area's emergence as the fourth fastest-growing metropolitan region in North America. The reporting on all these events and circumstances, for those in attendance and perhaps for those reading the stories, added depth and meaning to the activities of daily life in the midst of a seriously distressed region in Western New York, adjusting the popular imagination of who we were, how large our community might be, and where we lived.

The reality of all these events, the planning efforts within each country, and the international co-operation on trade, transportation, and environmental quality are all a part of the binational construction of our place. All the actions have reciprocal dependencies and implications across the geopolitical border of the Niagara River; all of these efforts have served as the ancestors of the binational effort of Rethinking Niagara, and all of them lead to possible alternative futures of our shared region.

Rethinking Niagara

From our base at the Urban Design Project at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York, we began our partnership in 1998 with Canadian colleagues at the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto through an engagement with the pervasive problem of contaminated landscapes, a remnant of the industrial imagination that had gripped urban centres in both countries in the last 150 years. The authors developed a graduate design and planning studio to work with the International Brownfields Exchange sponsored by both Environment Canada and the US Environmental Protection Agency. The studio, The Park of the Twenty-First Century, operated under the premise that the Niagara Region on both sides of the border could imagine supplementing the existing green infrastructure of regions by putting its cities in a binational park of revitalized brownfields in lieu of imagining communities that should continue to provide

parks in cities. This particular project worked on the reuse of sites in South Buffalo, the Niagara Falls waterfront, and the Toronto waterfront. Exchange visits with colleagues in Europe who were also struggling with the reuse of former contaminated sites in Germany and the Netherlands broadened our regional perspective of what was possible. The results of the brownfields work were published in newsletters distributed in both the US and Canada.

One of the long-range results of the Brownfields Exchange was further collaborative work between the Waterfront Regeneration Trust and the Urban Design Project at the University at Buffalo on projects seeking to frame the nature of the new cross border economy, which would create a place for citizens on both sides of the river that were experiencing the distress of structural shifts in the regional economy. Some of this collaborative work was later incorporated into the City of Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan, *The Queen City in the Twenty-First Century* (Buffalo 2004) and *Queen City Hub: A Regional Action Plan for Downtown Buffalo* (2003). As the Waterfront Regeneration Trust and the Urban Design Project continued to work in the region, we often built on each other's projects in Niagara Falls and at the international Peace Bridge.¹

In parallel with the development of these planning documents for specific towns and cities, we also began to develop a series of cross-border conversations on the possibilities inherent in rethinking or reimagining our region as one place of shared history, culture, ecology, and economy. Like many others, we had come to believe that the region might be better served if we more fully understood the nature of interdependencies and the promise of collaboration when competition as a strategy was failing for both countries.

The result was two projects, *Rethinking Niagara* (2001) and *Revealing Niagara* (2002), that involved hundreds of participants from both the US and Canada. These conversations and analytical work are recorded in two newsletters and two publications of findings (Shibley and Hovey 2001, 2002). As part of the project, we commissioned a history of life as lived in the Niagaras, as well as international precedents of collaborations among government and non-governmental organizations working jointly on shared regions. *Revealing Niagara* specifically aimed to identify and map the heritage and culture themes that are best served by storytelling that spans the border. Here we identified stories that, in fact, could not be fully told without reference to counterpart action in neighbouring Canada or the US. For example, the history of wealth in the region is grounded partly in the canals of both countries, which were built with joint US and Canadian investments. The development, production, and ownership of hydro power generated by the falls occurred physically on both sides of the border, and different contributions regarding technology and governance

emerged from each side. The emancipation of the African Americans suffering under the yoke of slavery started prior to the US Civil War with an incremental loosening of laws pertaining to freedom seekers arriving in Canada on the Underground Railroad.

Even more directly, the ecology and geography of the area does not divide along national borders. The Niagara Escarpment does not end at the Niagara River; the rich soils north of the escarpment supporting an emerging wine industry in Southern Ontario are similar to those in Western New York. The same is true for the quality of water in the Great Lakes Watershed that flows into the Niagara River and over the falls on the way to Lake Ontario. By mapping the region with the Niagara River in the centre, we were able to shift the line of separation into a space of shared inhabitation. By incorporating research on the natural conditions on both sides, we were able to map the environmental resources that we have in common, highlighting our bioregional connections.

More intense binational co-operation was an idea whose time had come, and we were able to take advantage of the openness on both sides of the border to a reimagining of our respective locations in Canada and the United States as a shared homespace. This reconception was one of many vectors that spurred a flurry of new planning and projects built upon shared resources, stories, and mutual dependencies such as the Joint Ontario and New York Economic Roundtable, its continuing Binational Leadership Forum, and an emerging Binational Tourism Alliance. The agreement for shared border management at the Peace Bridge and continued joint meetings concerning trade and transportation have been greatly assisted by the Canadian Consulate, as have regular meetings among concerned environmental agencies and non-profit groups. These efforts have contributed significantly to building an increasingly popular vision of our shared interests and potential; each contributes to our ability to tell the stories that can only be told accurately if told jointly. All of these efforts imagine both sides of the border receiving the benefits of the rapid growth of the Greater Toronto Area, even as both sides are threatened by that same growth if it occurs without powerful safeguards for the environment and quality of life in both Southern Ontario and Western New York.

Within Regional Niagara,² significant efforts have been achieved with the *Blueprint for an Even Better, Smart Niagara*, the Greenbelt Task Force's *Toward a Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt* (2004), the Niagara Water Quality Protection Strategy, the recent planning by the Niagara Parks Commission and other efforts. On the US side, regional planning has emerged through the Erie and Niagara County Framework for Regional Growth, and the recently legislated Niagara Greenway. A focus on tourism is evident in the Erie and Niagara County Cultural Tourism Initiative, the advancement of a Niagara Heritage Area by the US Department of



Figure 3: *North of the escarpment, vineyards cover the landscape in the Niagara Region, Canada.* Source: The Urban Design Project, University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

Interior, and the emerging development of a Niagara Experience Centre interpreting the binational region for the millions of visitors to Niagara Falls on both sides of the border. Regional planning internal to each country will in the long run greatly facilitate the cross-border agreements required to embed the imagination of *Niagara* as an international region into the work and life of the bordering nations.

Alternative Futures

Places by their nature have a certain *gravitas* or inertia to change, a stability that enables them to hold memories and meanings for their inhabitants; yet they are constantly changing as well—sometimes incrementally and sometimes suddenly. Our binational planning efforts seek to reinforce both of these characteristics of place: keeping and maintaining the threads of stories, events, and landscape that have made us who we are, yet changing the imagination of place to include a sensibility of one shared homespace. The kind of change we are proposing, a change in how we imagine a place, is resisted by some who have an investment in the status quo. A reimagination is challenging to others because they may be apathetic to new possibilities or too engaged in their everyday lives to care. More problematic are those who have simply given in to a sense of hopelessness, believing that nothing will ever change anyway. This is especially true in light of 9/11 and the increased border security and suspicion generated by the terrorist attacks in the United States. It is possible that all of our work at region-building will be for naught. Each nation and each municipality could continue to pursue what it believes is its own best interest independent of its neighbours. This is one scenario; yet it seems unlikely in the face of the interest and energy that has been generated in the last 10 years in our binational regional discussions.

It is more likely that the collaborative structures put in place will continue to grow and expand, project by project, initiative by initiative, as it becomes economically and institutionally more rewarding to work together. This incremental process could be enhanced by a more focussed structure in much the same way as the Rethinking and Revealing projects moved the reimagination and embedded joint efforts forward. In other areas of the world where they have developed cross-border regions as imaginably single destinations, there has been a loose and often non-governmental agency to structure and manage the activities, producing a synergism by incorporating existing and emerging individual projects. Most of these efforts involved universities and researchers who provided scholarly insight and had a special institutional role to play in convening and maintaining the dialogue from a relatively neutral political position, albeit a focussed imaginal one.

Using these international insights regarding the establishment of a binational and more integrated Niagara, we are suggesting two possible related projects in the near future: first, the development of a multinational strategy of UN or other designation to protect, enhance, interpret, and promote the sites of global significance in our region; and second, the creation of a binational regional plan.

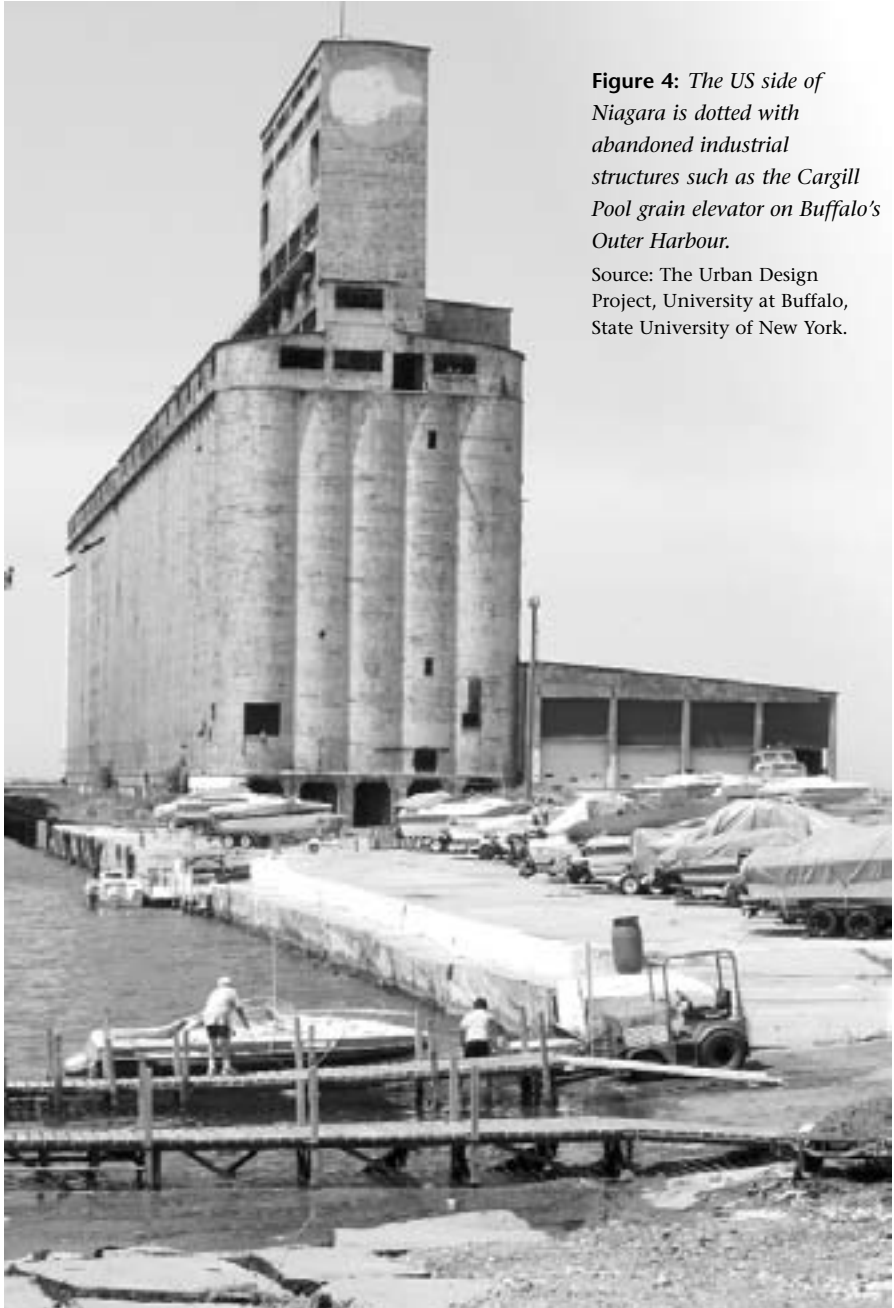


Figure 4: *The US side of Niagara is dotted with abandoned industrial structures such as the Cargill Pool grain elevator on Buffalo's Outer Harbour.*

Source: The Urban Design Project, University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

Both of these projects will require significant research from multiple disciplines that do not constrain their interests according to geopolitical borders. Both of these projects promise to add substantially to the economy, ecology, and quality of life in Southern Ontario and Western New York.

International Strategy

Since 2003 and as one response to the final Rethinking Niagara Conference, we have worked with the Canadian Consulate on the idea of an International Niagara Peace Park. A Peace Park designation is assigned to a Transborder Protected Area by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), a United Nations affiliate that awards places that have long histories of peace or are striving to achieve peaceful relationships. The Niagara region seems appropriate, given the kind of interdependency in economy, culture, and history facilitated by the long-standing peace between the US and Canada, and before that, between the Neutrals and the Haudenosaunee under the Great Law of Peace that ended years of bloodshed in *Nyah'-ga'rah*/Niagara. There are other possibilities of international designations from the United Nations to include a World Heritage Site or World Biosphere Reserve that builds on the current designation of the Niagara Escarpment in Canada and the international Important Bird Area on the Niagara River. Niagara Falls is one of the most well-known sites in the world, and it is certainly worthy of international recognition. A formal recognition of its uniqueness can only affirm the importance of its natural and cultural heritage.

A major advantage of working towards some form of international recognition lies in the preparation of documents and the co-ordination of efforts among many scholars, officials, and citizens to gather and cohere information, and present the region for consideration. As part of that application, regions must articulate how they will work towards a sustainable future, through:

1. conservation of natural and culture heritage—landscapes, ecosystems, monuments and stories;
2. development that is innovative, vibrant, and socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable;
3. co-operative structures and relationships among communities, agencies, and nations;
4. scientific and cultural research and monitoring, including strong educational efforts and information exchange on local, national, and global issues.

Any region would benefit from an organized and broadly based conversation about how it might achieve these goals and manage itself over time to ensure the balance among the three “Es”—ecology, economy, and equity.

As an example, the Czech Republic has acquired the UNESCO World Biosphere status for its Sumava National Forest, and Germany has acquired the same status for the Bavarian National Forest just across the border. Ecologically it is the same forest, and the joint designations bring multinational attention and binational co-operation to their management. A happy by-product of the scientific and management exchanges between the countries related to the shared heritage is the emergence of the area as a major tourist destination supporting the local populations. What was once the no-persons-land of the Iron Curtain is now a jointly managed and programmed forest preserve and the site of many binational cultural and recreational events adding to the quality of life for visitors and residents. Western New York and Southern Ontario have several comparable opportunities to share in the documentation, protection, interpretation, management, and related sustainable development of the region, based on our natural and human heritage, ecologies, and economies, and on our shared cultures at the border.

A Biregional Plan

Shifts in the global economy are increasingly empowering regions as centres of strong economic growth and cultural vibrancy; good governance and sustainable economic growth may no longer be achieved only within existing political boundaries and institutions. The Niagara Region is a part of the Golden Horseshoe—a large area influenced by the growing Toronto that reaches as far as Buffalo and Rochester in the United States and incorporates all of Regional Niagara in Canada. In this context, Niagara could become an ex-urban extension of Toronto that loses its own sense of place. The Niagara River and its environs on both sides, however, constitute a unique place that warrants special attention within the Greater Toronto Area/Golden Horseshoe region. Already in Canada, the work of Regional Niagara on transportation, greenbelt conservation, smart growth, and water protection recognizes the importance of framing an identity unique to the region while protecting local resources and the quality of life.

It is with this sensibility that we aspire to the creation of a collaboratively generated regional plan, not as a new level of government, but as a framework and blueprint for our individual and collective efforts in the binational region.³ There are many precedents for this kind of a plan. In Canada, recent planning for metropolitan regions in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal have suggested that different levels of government and non-profit organizations are required

for different activities and that co-operation is absolutely essential to larger issues such as transportation systems and environmental protection. In the US, the Tennessee Valley Authority was an early model, as has been the ongoing work of the Regional Plan Association, that in 1996 put out the third regional plan for the Tri-State New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Metropolitan Area. In Germany through an International Building Exhibition program, the Ruhr Valley has worked with 17 municipalities to create Emscher Landscape Park, an integrated region to remediate years of pollution and celebrate the industrial heritage of the region through connected waterways, trails, and interpretative sites (Schneekloth 2001). Internationally, nations have collaborated to construct regions for economic and environmental reasons, a delicate situation where national and provincial/state sovereignties must be respected, where institutional governance must be maintained, but nevertheless where regions may be imagined, institutionally layered with co-operative agreements and mutual accords for collaborative actions.

The work of international designation and binational plan construction is knowledge-based work. It requires the imagination of alternative futures and the due diligence of sound research on the implications of such futures. Both projects draw on the same base of research and both call for active experimentation on the nature of the region we are to become. This is tricky business and it is presumptuous to suggest that a small centre at a university might take on the task of generating either a regional plan or the foundation for a multinational designation; but it is something we would not, and could not, do alone. We do believe that collaboration among binational universities and colleges and their faculties might be the way to start both a planning and international designation effort—an effort dependent on the emerging imagination of Niagara as a common homespace.

Lewis Mumford, as early as the 1930s, spoke of the importance of region: “The re-animation and re-building of regions, as deliberate works of collective art is the grand task of politics for the opening generation” (Mumford 1938, 348). In the early twenty-first century, we take the task of “politics” to mean constructing the capacity “to do” and hence to be involved in issues of governance more than government. Mumford’s insight into region-building suggests that those who accept his challenge are in the business of deliberately “re-animating” a collective work of art, or in the language we have been using, doing imaginal placemaking work. If our conception of research and practice resonates as deeply imaginal, then it is clear that we, who have the privilege and space to engage in scholarship and teaching at institutions of higher education, have much to offer to the health and well-being of our regions wherever we live. Imagine Niagara.

Notes

1. For information on planning efforts on the US side, see The Urban Design Project's website at www.urbandesignproject.org.
2. See the Niagara Region website for information about planning, development, and water quality protection at www.regional.niagara.on.ca.
3. Both sides of the border at Niagara have recently done excellent planning work. The point of this binational planning effort would be to find shared goals and objectives and to develop joint implementation projects.

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