

Stronger Than Steel: Forging a Rust Belt Renaissance Review for JAMLS

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The American city of Bethlehem, in eastern Pennsylvania, provides multiple decades of evidence of how to develop a new urban cultural policy. Since the 1980s, old and new cultural institutions have held a seminal role in the transformation of the city from the dominating effect of a single enormous employer and landowner, Bethlehem Steel Corporation. The company stopped making steel in 1995, but its decades-long slide into oblivion began in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, Jeffrey Parks, a local attorney and civic booster, was recruited by Bethlehem's Chamber of Commerce to organize a summertime event that would attract tourists by showcasing the 18th and 19th century history of the area. Parks threw himself into the task, launching a new entrepreneurial career that resulted in the development of not only a summer festival (now among the largest in the U.S.), but also the programs and capital facilities for new visual arts and performing arts centers that became strong regional attractions. In doing so, they helped drive a clear revival of the city's fortune.

Stronger Than Steel is Parks' memoir of three decades of work in cultural entrepreneurship and creative placemaking activities that the organization he founded were undertaking before those terms achieved currency in cultural policy discourse. In his recent book, his entrepreneurial instincts, interests in policy and the policy processes, and devotion to Bethlehem's distinctive cultural heritage offerings are on full display.

Bethlehem's colonial history provided part of the setting for the cultural reimagining in the 1980s and later. The city was founded in 1741 by Moravians, German-speaking settlers from eastern Germany and western Bohemia. Bethlehem's downtown retained a number of the 18th century Moravian buildings. Steel was made in a different district south of the Lehigh River. In the late 19th century, Bethlehem was a center in America of the revival of J.S. Bach's music. Parks' travels to cultural districts in Europe and the U.S. gave him design, experiential, and social perspectives on both heritage and art as elements of cultural tourism. That junction of heritage, need, and opportunity led him to see music as the central opportunity for the new festival, while Bethlehem struggled to recover from the major loss of the eponymous steel company.

Started in 1984, Musikfest was a nine-day, six-venue, noon-to-midnight event in the historic downtown with hundreds of performances, most of them free to the audience. Initially projected to bring 100,000 visitors, the first festival had total attendance almost twice was expected. In the intervening years, Musikfest grew to ten

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days, and in the 2010s routinely attracted close to one million visitors each year. I had a direct experience of the festival as a director from 1984 to 1987, and Park's memoir describes some of my work in its early chapters.

Parks recounts how that festival was the first of five major cultural projects from 1984 to 2015, each of which deployed a different mix of programmatic activities and capital facilities. In describing those projects, Parks adds policy-related details that enhance the book's utility for researchers and students. He notes the series of consultants' reports in the 1970s advocating various redevelopment plans for Bethlehem's historic areas and downtown. He describes the formation of a nonprofit to run the festival, and the diverse stakeholders involved. Wooing corporate sponsors was an innovation in the 1980s and had to be built up as a financing and marketing relationship between nonprofits and businesses. A critical focus was a cooperative relationship with the municipal government, including how the mayor's executive assistant persuaded the mayor to support the festival despite fearful department heads, and negotiations with city council to lease areas for the festival. He describes the political maneuvers needed to have a special interest law passed by the Pennsylvania legislature so that beer and wine could be sold. Parks also describes his own early political activism, work that informed his mobilization of the hundreds of volunteers who staffed the festival. These "under the hood" machinations convey some of the complexities of cultural management.

The success of Musikfest brought expansion and new events. In 1993 "Christkindlmarkt" was launched a winter-time craft and art-goods market, similar to those he had seen in Germany. In the early 1990s, the organization that began as "Bethlehem Musikfest Association" became "Artsquest," reflecting a broader strategy of programming. By then, Parks had relinquished his law practice to be its full-time leader. Both Musikfest and Christkindlmarkt were seasonal and outdoor. In 1998, the first brick-and-mortar facility for year-round arts programming opened in a converted abandoned warehouse into a visual arts center, the Banana Factory, inspired in part by the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, VA.

The Banana Factory moved Artsquest onto Bethlehem's South Side, near the now-cold steel mills. In the early 2000s, the Pennsylvania legislature allowed casino gambling, and one license went to a casino in the former mill site. Parks describes the public-private partnerships, zoning, and tax financing strategies used to redevelop

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what was one of the largest brownfield sites in the U.S. One part was for Artsquest to finance and create a performing arts center, Steelstacks, which opened in 2011 in the immediate shadow of the blast furnaces. Using the industrial setting to highlight the arts again stemmed from seeing abandoned steel mills creatively reimagined in various cities in Germany, where he had taken groups of stakeholders. Other capital developments included the elevated Hoover-Mason Trestle, from where pedestrians could see the blast furnaces, and an outdoor stage that hosts thousands for mostly free concerts. The successful casino reinforced the South Side district as a Northeast region destination.

Throughout the decades, Musikfest itself remained central to the community's identity and annual calendar. It adapted to Bethlehem's increasingly Hispanic population, the declining interest in German-themed music, and other 21st century arts preferences. The site expanded from the downtown to the Southside Steelstacks complex. Hosting a million visitors in a small downtown led to other stakeholder challenges, as did weather. Parks retired in 2014.

Stronger Than Steel closes with evidence of Bethlehem's strong competitive performance on a range of indicators. Parks' memoir spans tumultuous and dynamic periods in Bethlehem, set in the broader macro changes of those decades – the maturation of the baby boomer generations, evolving entrepreneurship and professionalism of the arts, the delicate balance of capital and programming in the strategies of arts organizations, and the struggle to match programs to community needs and interests. These themes are accompanied by anecdotes of colleagues, actors, and processes.

The book is rich in evidence of the functional work of arts management: strategies for customer service and corporate sponsorship, artistic programming, volunteer relations, inter-organizational collaboration, and nonprofit governance. Parks reflects on access, the arts as mechanism for social capital, the impact of branding, and the important relationships between residents and visitors. The book fulfills its offer of demonstrating how the arts can boost community revitalization. Navigating between broad societal trends and micro-level strategies, it tells a story that can interest scholars, students, arts managers, sponsorship directors, urban

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planners, and others. Its longitudinal examination of Bethlehem and the growth of Artsquest can inform those with interests in urban cultural policy, cultural districts, creative placemaking, the arts in community development, and the fulfilling entrepreneurial careers they can provide.