

Lafayette Square, then and now



Potential of restoring historic Lafayette Square. Left photo: 1910 and right photo: current

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25.11.18.

Spring 2026 Downtown Urban Design Studio

Post-COVID Downtown Buffalo: A Vision Plan for Lafayette Square

Faculty: Hiro Hata + Studio Advisor: Robert Shibley with QCHR Consortium

Client: *Queen City Hub Revisited Consortium* (a coalition of 10 organizations from public and private sectors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including Buffalo Place, BUDC, DOWNTOWN 2030, and more.

A Studio Brief:

On behalf of Professor Robert Shibley, SUNY distinguished professor and former Dean of school, I am excited to share this briefing of the spring 2026 Urban Design Studio. While I will be your faculty daily, Professor Shibley will be a frequent visitor/critic throughout the semester. The CORVID-19 left huge impact on downtown population: present daily population is half of the pre-CORVID era resulting in vacant office spaces. Developers and owners of these buildings are looking for new opportunities to turn them into housing and other vibrant uses. To address the serious issues, a new Consortium headed by UB's Rudy Bruner Center for Urban Excellence launched Queen City Hub Revisit in 2024*. The studio has been recruited to address/work on the ongoing challenges to bring down workers, visitors back to downtown, and adding more new residents to live/work/eat in downtown.

The Consortium comprised of about 10 various public and private organizations will serve as the studio's client.

The studio will bring a real-world problem into classroom for you to learn best practice on a large-scale project in downtown Buffalo. The studio will be taught as an urban design studio integrating a wide-ranging disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, planning, transportation/infrastructure, real estate development, climate change, social science and equity. We use multi-scalar studies from 1/16" -- 1/32" -- 1/64" -- 1/200-500". Students will not only use computer modeling, physical model making but also free-hand sketching to develop the project.

The project's intent is to develop three contiguous sites centered around Lafayette Square (see Exhibit 2):

- Site 1: a new landscape design of the square with consideration for its historic restoration
 - Site 2: a new forecourt for the Buffalo/Erie County Library
 - Site 3: the vacant site on Washington and Broadway
- [In addition, the studio may recommend the city to consider traffic-diet on portions of William Street and Broadway].

After an Introduction phase, you will be asked to form up to four teams of 3-4 teams. Each team will propose its urban design master plan for the three-combine site. You will work collaboratively throughout the semester, resulting in the production of 3-4 alternative urban design master plan for the three sites. At the end of the semester, all the teams will prepare and present each of master plan to Consortium and will publish a single-volume comprehensive report summarizing highlights of research and the alternative plans for the sites.

The studio will mount up to 5-6 in-house seminars/lectures hosted by members of Consortium and faculty. We will read key books/articles on the public spaces and urban design history, knowledge, and principles. We plan to take a field trip to New York City during the spring break to visit some notable squares, parks, and places (students will make sketches on a notebook(s) for submission.

Appendix:

Lafayette Square is Buffalo's oldest civic public space built at the end of the 19th century.

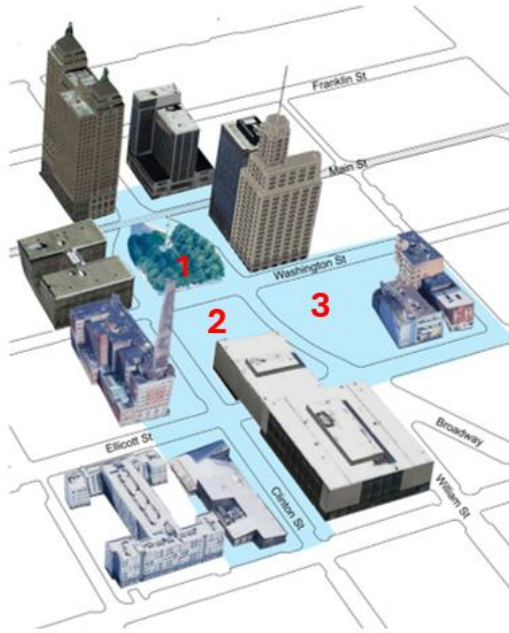
The square had been an oasis for downtown workers and shoppers for many decades. It served as a downtown retail hub and transit hub until 1980s when most of merchants moved to suburban malls abandoning downtown nearly empty. The landscape design of

the square had changed from an oasis at the beginning - to a traffic circle - and back to the current conditions. While a grove of mature maple trees created a shady place during summer, trees are showing signs of stress of aging and pollution. It is time to consider a new landscape for the square.

The Queen City's original plan drawn by Joseph Ellicott in 1804 is a classic baroque plan consisting of the radials and the grids. The perfect alignment of the Sailors-Soldiers monument on Lafayette Square and the McKinley monument on Niagara Square has created a viewshed that is much admired by Ada Louise Huxtable, the former New York Times' architecture critic, (one of) the America's most significant viewsheds outside of Washington, D.C. (see Exhibit 1)

* Queen City Hub Revisit launched in 2024 was preceded by Queen City Hub of 2003. The latter has been the official Comprehensive Plan for downtown revitalization. It has produced the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and Canalside Development serving as the bookends of on Main Street.

Project Sites and Boundaries



Develop Planning/Design Alternatives for Revitalizing Lafayette Square

1. Lafayette Square

- Creating an oasis for downtown
- Restoring to its historical conditions



2. Buffalo & Erie County Public Library Forecourt

- Creating a missing front entrance to the library
- Activating all street edges



3. The vacant lot on Broadway at Washington Street

- A new mixed-use development including high-density housing
- Creating a new gateway to Lafayette Square/downtown



Exhibit 1: Project Sites and Boundaries

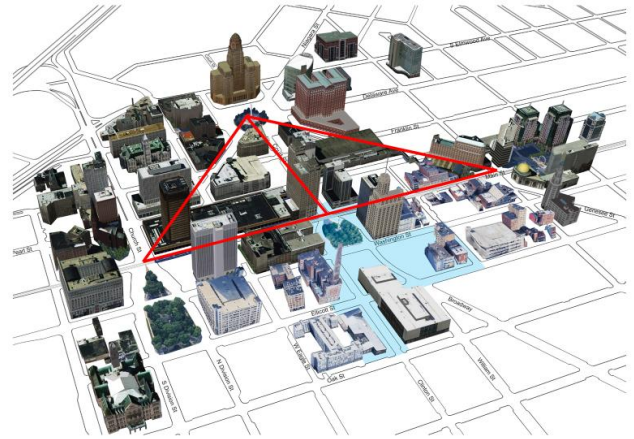
What is the studio about and what will it achieve?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had great impact reducing downtown day-time population into half.

Following success of Queen City Hub 2003, Queen City Hub Revisited was launched in 2024 to revitalize downtown. Strategies aim at:

- bringing people and activities back to downtown
- creating more event spaces
- transforming downtown into a residential hub
- leveraging historic, cultural, and natural resources
- strengthening connectivity and gateways
- transforming the public realm into beautiful spaces

By focusing on Lafayette Square, the studio will explore alternative design/planning strategies for redeveloping the downtown's key sites



Ellicott triangle: ¼ mile = 5-6 minutes on foot
Lafayette Square -- Niagara Square
Lafayette Square -- Fountain Plaza
Lafayette Square -- Shelton Square

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Exhibit 2: a diagram showing the Ellicott Triangle forming the core morphology and linkage of downtown. As noted from the distance from Lafayette Square to Niagara Square- Fountain Plaza-Shelton Square are all equal 1/4mile: equivalent of 5+ minute on foot.