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The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature Project

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The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature Project (2000-2005)

The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project was directed by artists/researchers Tim Collins and Reiko Goto. The project addressed the meaning, form, and function of public space and nature in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. This is the region that encompasses the former steel industry capital of the United States, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. 3 Rivers 2nd Nature focused upon the three major rivers; the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio Rivers, as well as the streams and sub-watersheds. This five-year project revisited questions of nature and post-industrial public space, first addressed on the Nine Mile Run Greenway Project. The focus of the work is research to benefit the public realm, applied as strategic knowledge with accompanying outreach programs intended to enable creative public advocacy and change.

The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature conducted integrative analysis and instrumental planning based upon the rigorous field studies that began in the year 2000. The work effort focused upon partnerships to accomplish interdisciplinary analysis, spatial mapping, and concept design within and among specific communities. The work culminated with an ecological design plan and a water quality policy report that analyzed alternatives for ongoing water quality sampling. Finally, the project team has organized the "Monongahela Conferences" and the subsequent 2005 "Groundworks" exhibition (October 2005) to examine the artist's role in social and environmental change.

The work of the team is informed by three questions.

- Can artists working as cultural agents affect the public policies and private economic programs, which mark and define urban places and ecosystems?
- Given the issues of scale, the power of private interests and the state both invested in the development/growth model, can the artist develop a public realm advocacy that expands the creative act beyond the authorship of the artist?
- Finally, can (and should) artists seek to create verifiable social change?

The Project Scope: Three major rivers and 53 streams that flow into and through the edges of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania define the five-year project's scope. The project examined water quality and urban riverbanks, the blue and green infrastructure of our recovering landscape.

The Problem: The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project was designed to address two of the significant problems in our region. First, what do we know about surface water quality and what does it mean in terms of current policy, regulation, and public access and use? Secondly, what do we know about the ecology of our riparian waterfront lands and what does this mean in terms of current land use and development? To answer these questions, the project has spent four years studying these areas developing an extensive geographically referenced database on each topic area in the process.

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The Need: Prior to developing the protocol for the project, the team did an exhaustive study of existing information. We found a void where information about water quality and riverbank edge conditions should exist. The Allegheny Conference report, "Investing in Clean Water," and the U.S. National Research Council report on wet weather problems in Western Pennsylvania confirm this understanding of the void in water quality data. The void in terrestrial data is less well documented, but equally poor. Although the condition of current knowledge is not surprising in a region where broad leaf trees struggled for life under smoky skies no less than thirty years ago. We are in a time of significant natural recovery; a passive no cost constructive material phenomenon in unequal competition with development ideas that are potentially destructive. Projects that are all under current consideration in the region today, include the development of forested steep slope lands, the filling of stream valleys, hydraulic improvement of streams through channels and box culverts, and the mining of residual coal from city hills.

The goal of the 3R2N project was to conduct an analysis of the green infrastructure that provides social, aesthetic, ecological, and economic benefit to the Three Rivers Region. The project team would argue that the most significant impact of the industrial era of modern culture is its impact on nature. Post industrial culture can be defined in terms of an emergent awareness of lost ecological integrity through legacy pollutants that affect, air, water, soil, food, the human body, and global climate. One of the key points of critical intervention is to address the local experience and conceptualization of nature; the aesthetic perception of nature and its valuation as a public realm benefit. The air, the soil and the water belongs to all of us.

Objectives

- Conduct a green infrastructure analysis. Current water quality, ecology, hydrology, habitat values, and public access were compared to historic information and databases. Baseline studies were established where possible.
- Identify opportunities for ecological restoration. Targeted ecological-restoration extends and unifies disparate green infrastructure systems.
- Understand the history and the basis for cultural restoration. Cultural restoration is an integrative change in the way a community thinks about infrastructure and ecosystems – the relationships between humans, land and water.
- Conduct public dialogue about the potential for all of the above.

3R2N Programs

1. Aquatic Systems and Water Quality
2. Riverbanks and Watersheds
3. River Dialogues and the Monongahela Conference.



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Aquatic Systems and Water Quality

The 3R2N water quality initiative defines water quality in terms of:

- physical chemistry the ability to support life,
- bio-assessment indications of life.
- pathogen indicators impacts of development
- Toxicant impacts of land use and development

Fieldwork takes on two forms: dry weather studies and wet weather studies.

Fieldwork occurs in two settings: in regional streams and on the rivers.

Our policy study, recommends an ongoing strategic water quality program that is framed by:

- A knowledge of the regulatory framework and its points of action and inaction.
- Understanding of the scientific issues of protocol, data quality control, and lab standards
- Case studies from successful water quality testing programs from around the country.
- Analysis of the use of water data within citizen, municipal, and regulatory contexts.

Riverbanks and Watersheds

The 3R2N riverbank initiative examined and recorded riverbank conditions at 1/10-mile intervals along all three rivers. The watershed initiative uses contemporary landscape ecology theory to inform the analysis of existing forest cover in Allegheny County.

- Botanists examined woody plant communities and invasive species along the rivers.
- Geologists examined slope and material content of the riverbanks and floodplains.
- Planners examined the current scope and scale of forest cover as well as its value in terms of interconnected interior forests and corridors.

The final riverbanks and watershed plan identifies the scope and scale of natural systems recovery and illustrates its need for stewardship and restoration. Goals of the plan include:

- Expand existing planning documentation so they refer to natural systems recovery.
- Develop concept designs and an action plan for restorative redevelopment.

River Dialogues and the Monongahela Conference.

The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature Outreach effort is primarily defined by "River Dialogue" events. These are citizen-expert programs where ideas and the concepts about rivers and their recreational uses are discussed during tours, then recorded during charrettes. These programs have resulted in a "River Trail" report, a concept plan that provides the first steps, the ideas that will nurture the development of a regional water trail. The next step in that development will be for citizens to work with the local environmental organizations, communities, and decision makers who have taken an interest in this process; criticizing, clarifying and making these concepts clearer. Then, with funding, a design team can be assembled to create a plan that can help establish recreational use and its advocacy as a major element of our regional rivers. This is a project that was taken on in partnership with Friends of the Riverfront and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council.



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The Monongahela Conferences (I – 2003, II – 2004, and III – 2005) were developed as an evolving public-realm counterpoint to the Allegheny Conference. Where the Allegheny Conference focuses on growth in the regions economy, the Monongahela Conference has focused on the regions public realm and its attendant ecosystems through art. These programs were intended to reveal the artists/designers role in the restoration and celebration of nature in shared places. The program evolved from an initial conference (October 2003) with 24 international attendees discussing the role of artists in a post-industrial setting to a month-long residency program in 2004 that will result in projects and an exhibition in 2005. The work of the first conference is documented at <<http://moncon.greenmuseum.org/>>.

The second program (June 2004) was a month long series of residencies and public programs entitled "The Monongahela Conference II, on Post-Industrial Community Development: Art, Ecology and Planning with People Influencing Public Places We Care About." We identified seven outside artists and brought them into the region to work alongside five artists that live in Western PA. The artists chosen were known for their social and environmental practices and the ability to work within constraints. they all had an interest and ability to work in a discursive planning manner and had previously produced a range of effective products. This program functioned at two levels. First it was an assembly of like-minded art professionals who have sought an opportunity for serious discourse about theory and practice. Secondly, it placed sophisticated social-sculpture and ecological-art practitioners in relationship to the neediest and most intransigent urban centers in Western Pennsylvania, with a charge to initiate change. As of spring 2005 the results are still evolving, a foundation has contacted one group for further work and a non-profit activist group has adopted another, providing support for conference presentations and the possibility of further funding.

The final program (fall 2005) is entitled "GROUNDWORKS – Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art." The exhibition is scheduled for October 14 to November 11, 2005 in the Regina Gouger Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University. The exhibition will include a catalog and (the third) Monongahela Conference. The exhibition will present the work of the 3 Rivers 2nd Nature team alongside the colleagues from the June 2004 residencies as well as practitioners from Austria, England, Germany, India, and Japan who are working on environmental issues in cities at a planning scale. The exhibition is curated and developed by Grant Kester of the University of San Diego, working with Jenny Strayer, Director of the Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon University.

The 3 Rivers 2nd Nature project comes to a close in 2005.

For more information on current or future projects contact:

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For Information on the GROUNDWORKS Exhibition

and its touring prospectus see: <http://3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu/groundworks>

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