The New Jersey War of Independence Center in New Brunswick: Engaging History in the Urban Landscape
**Project Statement:**

Rutgers Department of Landscape Architecture was approached with the following design project within the framework of ongoing research to ascertain the feasibility of a New Jersey War of Independence center in Middlesex County. The design solution that followed took a pragmatic approach geared toward commerce that includes the site plan for a visitor’s center capable of handling roughly one million annual visitors in downtown New Brunswick, the multi-faceted urban analysis and redesign potentials, and a regional design with analysis to tie the center into its county and statewide context.

**Project Narrative:**

Carl Steinitz speaks of design as a methodology for testing analysis. To this end, our design work was the final theoretical step towards confirming or disproving the conclusions of a broad regional analysis investigating the potential for New Jersey and specifically Middlesex county to support a major ‘War of Independence’ museum/visitor’s center conducted by a larger groups of professionals and students including, but not limited to, that of the Rutgers University Department of Geomatics, and the 2009 class of the Department of Landscape Architecture.

Approached by a wide range of voices, some with conflicting visions about the future of this project, this design group attempted to first analyze the true intent of the clientele and to assemble a reasonable framework through which such a project would become both commercially feasible, yet culturally and historically relevant. The goals as set forth by several parties, including The Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce and Cultural Resource Consulting group spearheaded by Peter Primavera, indicated that the design project should aim at expanding commerce throughout Middlesex County, but also contribute significantly to a further public understanding of New Jersey’s significance in the War of Independence.

We listened well to the goals, but considered that the breath of such a design had both immense potentials to ameliorate standing conditions within the region, especially within urban areas, along with the pitfalls having such an ambiguous intent as to be impotent. From an earlier round of analysis we were convinced that to truly explore the clients professed intent, that an urban based center and network of potential sub-centers would be the key to unlocking a wider range of commercial prospects. Thus we undertook to simultaneously act as Historical Preservationists, Urban Planners, Regional Planners, and site designers.

Given that the project as stated would need to be in Middlesex, New Jersey we moved forward on completing a state and county wide analysis, in which several facts both supporting and refuting the client’s intent became apparent. Middlesex county, and moreover New Jersey, contains a remarkable number of historic events during the time of the revolution. This prompted us towards a highly quantitative analytical approach that emphasized density of historic sites and landmarks versus weighted approach that would give each event its own due relevance. The logic of this decision was twofold, one that New Jersey’s quantity and therefore density of relevant skirmishes and battles was higher than that of any of the 12 other original colonies, and two that this thinking would extend itself to Middlesex county which includes a greater number of these events than any of the other New Jersey counties.

Taken that Middlesex would be the appropriate county in which to site the epicenter of this broader project we conducted further inventory and analysis on the county and primary urban areas, New Brunswick and Perth Amboy, both rich in revolutionary history, to support our claims that such a center
would need to function within an urban setting to maximize the project’s economic potential. The county, generally speaking contains a highly integrated transportation network that includes the North East and Jersey Shore corridor rail lines, four major interstate roads, Route 18, a direct link between the New Jersey Turnpike and the city’s core, and route 27, the present incarnation of “The King’s Highway” one of the earliest and historically preeminent routes through the state, connecting York to Trenton and Philadelphia during pre-revolutionary times.

Early on in the design process it became evident that New Brunswick was the appropriate city in which to focus our inventory and analysis as it was (a) the central hub of the aforementioned transportation network within the county, (b) the city of highest past historic significance and present day historic sites, and (c) the city already offering the greatest potential for commercial development. Our personal inventory of New Brunswick’s urban core noted that the city is presently home to the main campus of the State University, Rutgers, lending any center a certain academic tie-in, as well as the home of the State Theater which already draws over 300,000 annual visitors who could potentially become visitors of our site. Recent development in New Brunswick has also established a large hotel and conference center, the Heldrich, along with an existing Hyatt each capable of supporting a high number of annual visitors.

Conversely, New Brunswick, being well connected to New York and Philadelphia through the corridor line which stops in downtown New Brunswick and the Turnpike which borders the city’s eastern edge, places the city high as a potential candidate for large scale urban redevelopment, being severely underutilized for residence and commerce within its urban core. Large surface parking lots, potential land banks, surround the downtown, being ideal sites for commercial and residential development.

In selecting the specific site for the New Jersey War of Independence center we were very quick to seize the John F. Ferren Mall and Parking deck along with the surrounding block for the following reasons (a) it is directly adjacent to the New Brunswick train station and North East corridor line, making it both highly visible for the large number of passerby’s that commute on the line along with highly accessible means of public transportation. (b) The city is currently discussing the demolition of the mall for its underutilization, lack of aesthetic appeal, prime location, and poor visual impression that it poses for the city. (c) It would pin the north end of the George Street commercial corridor whereas the State Theater would be the southern end.

The proposed center takes on a curvilinear form intended to guide views into the core of downtown and anchor the northern end of the site. With almost a one acre footprint, the center takes on multiple levels, touching on historic aspects of the American Revolution as well as programmed spaces which lay within. In the exterior plaza, we would be removing aged and damaged structures in order to acquire a substantial amount of space for this public area which we see as the doorway to the city. Much excavation is proposed throughout the site, and using different landforms and topography will create an urban oasis. Layers of geology would be exposed as a metaphor to support our inspiration, exposing the layers of history.

Throughout the downtown area as a whole, we are creating significantly more urban green space. This urban green space would not only enhance the character of the city, but in collaboration with a streetscape, would allow for the city to become more pedestrian friendly. Converting single story commercial structures into high rise multi-use buildings would attract more residents in order to create a more evident community.

One green space in particular is the anchor at the southern end of the site. This urban park would not only be a place of leisure and relaxation, but would serve the expanding community as an underground parking structure. Again incorporating topography into the design, our intent is to have the
southern-most tip of the park rise to the hiatus of the mixed-use structure allowing for excellent views of the Raritan River as well as the newly redeveloped New Brunswick downtown area.

From our standpoint, the work in New Brunswick required outward integration to potentially elicit State and federal funding and additionally define a richer regional experience of New Jersey’s historic sites and cities. Reaching outward along route 27, the primary axis of our regional design, which in culmination with I-440 and route 206 covers the better part of the King’s Highway Historic Route, can bring visitors from Perth Amboy and New York, to the center in New Brunswick, onward to Princeton and Trenton. All prior analysis and reading indicated that these four cities are the most significant, revolutionarily speaking, in New Jersey thus connecting them with a relevant route making their connection stronger. Potential sub center sites in Perth Amboy and Trenton have also been designated as part of our regional planning process.

Physically speaking there is a redesign element on the ‘connective tissue’ of route 27 itself. High traffic and a generally shoddy appearance between New Brunswick and Kingston would prevent potential visitors from understanding its true importance. Thus we undertook a typological redesign for strip malls along the corridor that would focus them inward toward the communities they service, making travel along route 27 to these destinations unnecessary for local residents, while simultaneously enhancing the aesthetic appearance and ecological function of the corridor. Within planning we also took a hard look at existing ecological and farm areas along the corridor to explore them for potentials, for preservation, and ecological restoration. Our selection included, but is not limited to, Stony Brook and Lake Carnegie, both in Princeton Township, along with the Two, Three, Six and Nine Mile Run streams that intersect Route 27 roughly perpendicularly. Route 27 also offers the opportunity for visitors to engage the Delaware and Raritan canal park system at two points.

The high density of historic sites, towns and cities along the 27/206 corridor offers a concise experience of New Jersey’s most appropriate sites within a manageable region, yet we felt that the immense history of the state was not being fully represented leading us finally to a master set of commercially and historically active cities and municipalities that could be looked at as hubs or starting points for 8 regional experiences that would effectively integrate the larger New Jersey Revolutionary war experience including from north to south (a) Morristown, Highlands and Piedmont Region (b) Jersey City, Hudson Valley Region (c) New Brunswick, Central New Jersey Region (d) Englishtown, North Jersey Shore Region (e) Trenton, Upper Delaware River Region (f) Haddonfield, Lower Delaware River Region (g) Colts Neck, Pine Barrens Region (h) Cape May, South Jersey Shore Region.
"The present century has been largely one of transition that extends from the great industrial cities of the past to the global information network to which the older urban centers must now adjust... [the] museum is, among other things, a school that trains us to live with uncertainty in creative ways."

Why Downtown New Brunswick? Existing Attributes

Queens College

Significant Historic Sites

Christ Episcopal Church

Presbyterian and Baptist Graveyard

Rutgers University

Attraction and Tourist Based Infrastructure

Hyatt Hotel and Conference Center

Queens College

Heldrich Hotel

Theater District

Major Transportation Routes

Route 27

Christ Church

Theater District
Exploring Downtown New Brunswick: Opportunities to Improve

- Poorly Designed Public Spaces
- Surface Parking
- Single Story Structures in Urban Core
- Lacking Street Trees
The New Jersey War of Independence Center: Engaging the Layers of History
View towards George Street from Albany Street
View of museum and Albany Street from George Street
City Wide Implications: Combining Multiple Uses
View along George Street
The King’s Highway Historic Corridor: Bridging New Jersey’s Core
New Brunswick to Princeton: **Establishing the Primary Axon**
Adapting Route 27: Strip Malls

**Existing**
- 600' x 300' Parking Lot
- 300 Car Capacity
- Road connecting mall to local neighborhood, parking is moved around back for new residents and shoppers

**Proposed**
- Existing Development Housing
- Structure converted to mixed town homes and light commercial
- New shops and stores
- Residential town homes or apartments
- Thick foresting creates facade along 27 corridor and connects ecological areas
- Bio-swail captures road runoff
- Front parking lot removed, reduces impervious surfaces and improves visual experience

New facade placed on back of mall
The King’s Highway Historical Corridor: Pinning the Ends
Dividing Experiences: Regional Zones

Regional Historic Divisions

- Highlands and Piedmont Region
- Hudson Valley Region
- Central Jersey Region
- Upper Delaware Region
- Lower Delaware Region
- Pine Barrens Region
- South Jersey Shore Region

Significant Sites:
- Commercial Attractions
- Historic Sites and Battlefields
- Skirmishes
Establishing Historic Claims: Connecting New Jersey’s Cities with their History

Primary Connections between New Brunswick and Regional Epicenters

Secondary Connections between Epicenter cities and Sites of Historical Interest
The New Jersey War of Independence Center in New Brunswick: Engaging History in the Urban Landscape