

Industrial Evolution

Pittsburgh has long been known for its sports teams, french fries on sandwiches and—perhaps most iconically—the great steel mills that once kept the city shrouded in smoke and grime. But it's no longer an industrial behemoth, instead shifting to become a leader in sustainability. Now the city's tasked with telling a new chapter in its story.

By Sarah Steimer

POINT, PITTSBURGH, PA.





T

Three new buildings sit nestled against a hillside, centered around a small lagoon and surrounded by plants. One building, the Center for Sustainable Landscapes, is considered one of the greenest on Earth, awarded four of the highest green building certifications and producing its own renewable energy on-site. The second, the Exhibit Staging Center, is a former public works building, which now prioritizes the health and well-being of its staff and features photovoltaic solar panels on its roof. The third building, the Nature Lab, is a children's learning facility constructed from

non-toxic materials that hints at the green possibilities for modular structures.

They make an impressive trio, as eye-pleasing as they are eco-friendly. They appear not on the California coast, but tucked into the Pittsburgh landscape, emblematic of an ongoing rebranding of a city once described by American author James Parton as "hell with the lid taken off."

Today the former steel capital of America has become a leader in sustainability. It's not a surprise to Pittsburghers, though, who kayak its rivers and work in its LEED-certified buildings.

But for those outside of the city, this new image hasn't always been as obvious. Pittsburgh has been a success story among Rust Belt cities that struggled after the industrial decline of the 1980s, as it now touts its prowess in technology, education and medicine. Yet how can a city rebrand itself as a green metropolis when one of its most beloved icons, the Pittsburgh Steelers, harkens directly to its gritty past? The answer isn't to launch a massive campaign, but to tell a story that resonates with locals and impresses outsiders.

"There is a sort of common sense of place, which is wonderful," says Bill Flanagan, a broadcast journalist and chief corporate relations officer at the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. "There's enough collaboration ... that we seem to be staying on message and marketing. A big part of that is just delivering a message that resonates."

Urban branding is an opportunity to convey the city's image to the world, giving it a competitive advantage regionally and internationally. A study published in May in the *Housing and Building National Research Center Journal* found that "without a brand, cities will be less able to shape the powerful image that leads to sustainable urban development."



PHOTOS: PAUL G. WIEGMAN, JOSEPH REED





PHOTO: PAUL G. WIEGMAN

Clockwise from top: The Phipps Conservatory Welcome Center; Center for Sustainable Landscapes at Phipps; solar panels at the Phipps campus.

Pittsburgh isn't trying to change its history, but it is trying to help the audience see its sustainable future. The three buildings previously mentioned are part of Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, an institution that opened in 1893 and has helped bond the city's past and future. The new, ultra-green facilities sit behind the original building, were designed and built primarily by Pittsburghers and other Pennsylvanians and are worthy of the world's attention.

Perhaps the most internationally recognized example of Pittsburgh's new story came in 2017, after President Donald Trump, in reference to pulling out of the Paris Agreement climate pact, said, "I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris." Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto responded: "As the mayor of Pittsburgh, I can assure you that we will follow the guidelines of the Paris Agreement for our people, our economy and future."

Yet Pittsburgh's rebrand—its storytelling strategy—has been more focused on inclusion than retorts. City stakeholders are working to reach beyond the young people lured in by tech jobs and captured by its livability, to include longtime residents who feel pushed out or to outlying suburbanites who rely on jobs in the fossil fuels industry. But Pittsburgh is no stranger to competing forces: While it was once a leader in steel production, the region was also home to conservationist Rachel Carson, author of the landmark environmental science book *Silent Spring*. There's room for both stories in its history books.

The city's enthusiasm to rebrand by telling an inclusive, green story was evident when 10 leaders, representing public and private stakeholders, quickly agreed to participate in an interview with Marketing News. Assembled at Phipps Conservatory, with the trio of internationally recognized green buildings as a backdrop, the group discussed the

progress Pittsburgh has made in its sustainability efforts. What was perhaps more telling was that they spent less time hyping what they've accomplished and more time mulling over how to meet new challenges.

Attracting Visitors

Ten years ago, Pittsburgh played host to world leaders at the 2009 G-20 Summit—but the location choice baffled some. "They literally laughed at the White House press room," recalls Flanagan. The White House cited Pittsburgh's ability to rebound economically from a struggling Rust Belt city and, as Flanagan puts it, the region saw an opportunity to milk its moment in the spotlight.

"We're going to have thousands of reporters in town—do we just try to spin it and tell this wonderful story about Pittsburgh?" Flanagan says. "We made a conscious decision very early on in the process: We are going to just be completely honest. We're going to

talk about the things we do well and [that] we're proud of, and we're going to talk about all the work we have left to do."

The bet was that being honest would give the city more credibility. Flanagan says they tracked about 7,000 stories written about Pittsburgh after the G-20, most of which were positive and articulated the city's transformation.

The city tries to be authentic by showing rather than telling. VisitPITTSBURGH CMO Tom Loftus points to 2005 as one of the first times the rest of the world, or at least the nation, started to take note of Pittsburgh as a green locale. That summer, the city hosted the CITGO Bassmaster Classic, placing its rivers in front of television audiences.

"It really launched Pittsburgh as a green and friendly city and got that image out of people's minds of the smoky industrial city that it used to be," Loftus says. "ESPN was showing people fishing on the rivers in Pittsburgh and pulling up big bass. That's something that you can't put in a brochure or put in a video and try to promote."

The city continues to ride a media wave of acknowledgements. In addition to the international focus from the 2009 G-20 Summit and President Trump's comments, The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Pittsburgh as the second-most livable city in the U.S. in 2018, behind

Honolulu, per its criteria of healthcare, culture and environment, education, infrastructure and stability. Glassdoor recognized the city as one of the nation's best for jobs in 2017 and 2018.

But Pittsburgh has also had to battle less savory rankings, such as receiving all F's on the American Lung Association's annual air quality report card.

"We have so many shoulders to stand on and so much to celebrate; at the same time, we're not there yet," says Scott Bricker, executive director of BikePGH. "We still have some pretty bad air quality and some things that are wrong. I think the story is more about [how] we're trying and we're making the right investments and we're leaning into this effort to change the story, to make the region more green or the city more green and sustainable. ... It's not, 'Come here and experience the most green city on Earth.' We can't do that because it wouldn't resonate with people."

Although there's room for improvement, the city appeals to sustainability-seeking visitors with its existing buildings and activities. For instance, the David L. Lawrence Convention Center became the largest LEED Gold Certified convention center in the world when completed in 2003. It's now the highest-rated LEED Platinum Certified convention center in the U.S. Or take the Pittsburgh Passport, a series of events

and activities for the approximately 2,000 interns from 35 states and 25 countries based in the city during the summer. It's part of an effort led by the Allegheny Conference to convince the interns to stay and make Pittsburgh their home, and many of the activities are designed to showcase the quality of the region, including its outdoor spaces.

"People are taking note of Pittsburgh," Loftus says. "From a marketing standpoint, we adopted the branding 'Pittsburgh. Mighty. Beautiful.' to keep on letting people know that you'll be surprised by our beauty as soon as you come through the Fort Pitt Tunnels or come across Mount Washington. You're not going to believe how beautiful it is. And it's not just us, it's people that are visiting that are telling us that."

Bill Campbell, vice president of marketing and communications at Chatham University, says that for a city of Pittsburgh's size—its metropolitan population of 2.3 million makes it 27th-largest in the U.S.—it has an outsized number of cultural, educational and environmental qualities and amenities at its disposal. His own university is a pioneer in the green educational space with the Falk School of Sustainability & Environment. Campbell says a visitor coming through the city and immediately encountering facilities like the convention center and Phipps



PHOTOS: KAYAK PITTSBURGH/VISITPITTSBURGH, MELISSA MCMASTERS/VISITPITTSBURGH

We have so many shoulders to stand on and so much to celebrate; at the same time, we're not there yet.



PHOTO: JP DIROLL

Conservatory is presented with a very green picture of Pittsburgh. “These things illustrate what matters to the city,” he says.

Another piece of marketing collateral that hyped the city to outsiders came from the city’s pitch to become home to Amazon’s second headquarters. The video looked at Pittsburgh’s past and present, and the narrator acknowledged, “You’ve probably heard something about Pittsburgh,” before the scenes of steel mills gave way to images of green spaces and self-driving cars. It was a nod to the better-known titans of the city—steel, the three rivers, Fred Rogers—and a nudge to consider what else it has to offer.

A Leader in Sustainability

As Pittsburgh has worked to rebrand as a sustainable region, it’s sought to position itself as a leader in the field. This includes individuals like Richard Piacentini, president and CEO of Phipps Conservatory, who has led the award-winning green efforts at the center—although he was sure to note that the commendations aren’t

the point: “If we think it’s right, we’re going to do it even if it doesn’t get us points.”

Piacentini can rattle off the efficient qualities of the various facilities at Phipps: how natural light is bounced in the offices to reduce the need for artificial lighting; what a challenge it is to locate carpet free of so-called Red List building materials; how all water is captured, treated and reused on-site.

One of Pittsburgh’s more successful rebrands has been as a leader in education, which has also helped the city up its sustainability game. Piacentini says local universities—namely the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University—were included in designing the Center for Sustainable Landscapes. “[A] lot of times, people build green buildings and nobody knows if they work,” Piacentini says. “We offered that building to both universities to say, ‘We’ll let you put sensors all throughout the building and you can use it as a lab for your students.’ They’ve both written, I think, six research papers based on that building.”

University involvement can provide unbiased messaging to the

public, removing any presumed spin that could leak to news from the government or other organizations. A Politico roundtable of city mayors, policy and funding experts suggested that the seal of approval from respected third-party, non-governmental organizations such as universities can boost the credibility of a project, particularly when trust in government and politicians is low.

“The more people you have at the table—organizations, government, foundations—that’s actually what creates the believability and credibility,” Campbell says. “As an external or internal marketer, you want to point to that because it says this is a group effort.”

Mayor Peduto has also worked to be a leader in city-led sustainability efforts. In 2018, he announced the creation of OnePGH, a strategic plan to address city challenges through initiatives for clean air and water, livable housing and economic opportunity. The plan was developed in conjunction with the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities initiative, whose member cities make up a global network intended to offer help and educational resources



PHOTO: KEVIN OAKE/VISITPITTSBURGH

You can't tell
 someone in
 Pittsburgh, 'You
 can't do that.'
 They're going to
 find a way.

to others. The city also released its Climate Action Plan 3.0 in 2018, which includes a goal of 80% greenhouse gas reductions from 2003 levels by 2050. The Natural Resources Defense Council called it a “bold, comprehensive strategy for change.”

The city has been particularly drawn to positioning itself as a leader among cities with a similar size and shared past: mid-sized, post-industrial towns.

“We’ve been intentional about who we play with,” says Grant Ervin, the city’s chief resilience officer. “Just yesterday, we signed an agreement with the city of Aarhus, Denmark. ... We create this relationship with people who are challenged with the same things that we are, which is a post-industrial economy.” Ervin rattles off a list of Pittsburgh’s collaborative cities: Glasgow, Scotland; Dortmund, Germany; and Gelsenkirchen, Germany. This network of cities with backgrounds similar to Pittsburgh are working on issues related to climate change, equity, energy and mobility. “We’re more comfortable with St. Louis, Tulsa [Oklahoma] and Cincinnati because they’re dealing with the same size, scale and challenges that we have, so the lessons that we can learn are transferable and scalable,” he says.

Bringing Residents into the Story

In an interview with The Place Brand Observer, a web resource on place branding, researcher Dalila Brosto said cities are successful in their branding when their residents find it believable. Brosto, a knowledge and innovation adviser at the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, researched city branding to promote sustainable development, finding that the best outcomes depend on cooperation between the residents and governments.

“We need to make sure that the conversation includes everybody, that there is a pathway for everybody to see themselves as part of the story,” says Joylette Portlock, executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh.

Part of the story of Pittsburgh’s modern renaissance is that plans for inclusion didn’t always keep pace with change. The result has been some negative press for the region, tripping up its progressive brand story. A City Lab article from April, “A New Plan to Correct a Historic Mistake in Pittsburgh,” focused on the Lower Hill District, a region of the city that once saw the construction of a highway and the now-demolished

Civic Arena displace about 8,000 people—mostly low-income black renters. New redevelopment plans for the Lower Hill aim to be green and more inclusive, but the affordable housing crisis in the city continues. In recent years, Pittsburgh has seen an influx of tech companies, whose young employees have priced out longtime residents in some neighborhoods.

“We’re still grappling with a lot of issues that we need to overcome to get to a more sustainable place,” Portlock says. “It’s important for people to understand that sustainability—we’re not just talking about eco-friendliness. In order to think about a society that can sustain itself, it’s not enough to just think about how we use natural resources, although that is a very important piece. It’s also about, how do we care for each other and how do we generate economic prosperity for all? The sustainable solutions for Pittsburgh, for this region, are going to come from looking at the intersection of those things and not making the trade-offs that may have led to some of our social and economic issues in the past.”

One way the city has worked to communicate its commitment to all residents—not some—has been through deliberative forums. These

public meetings differ from more traditional New England-style town halls and aim to engage differences in the community as positive resources. These forums consist of small group discussions, rather than main speakers with audience respondents. The city has also begun to provide food and childcare at the community forums, as well as language services.

“It has been really important, the work that the city’s done and others to pull out that inequities are still a problem here,” Portlock says. “But that is also part of this story of the transition, that we’re not there yet. Part of where that story is now is a much more intentional approach ... to figure out how to make sure the tables are inclusive.”

Many of the city’s green updates are particularly appealing to younger generations looking to ditch their cars in favor of bikes or otherwise reduce their energy footprints. This newer, greener story can feel at odds with the rest of the region, though: Of the 2.3 million people who live in the metro area, only about 300,000 reside in the city itself. Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is located, is made up of 130 municipalities. Getting everyone on board with a new, sustainable vision can be tricky.

“People outside the immediate city or maybe the immediate urban core of Allegheny County, to see themselves in this narrative also is a challenge,” BikePGH’s Bricker says. “They can’t see themselves in this story. They come to the city potentially on weekends or for work and they don’t understand these investments and they have a very visceral, negative reaction to it. We’re challenged with [determining] how to reach these folks who have an outsized effect on the change that we are trying to create here, even though they really don’t live in the city.”

It may not always be that if you build it, they will come. Instead, Pittsburgh has tried to stretch its sustainable practices outward. For example, Chatham’s Eden Hall

campus, home of its Falk School of Sustainability, is about a 35-minute drive from its main campus in the city.

“We found that the partners that are there at first were skeptical,” Chatham’s Campbell says. “But as time has gone on, [they] have become big supporters and partners and now we have great relationships with the township. The township has a sustainability officer that they’ve put in place. The good of Pittsburgh going out where it’s applicable in other areas is important, because to just sit there and say it from the city defeats the purpose.”

The Ongoing Story

It’s impossible to talk about the story of Pittsburgh without also mentioning one of its greatest challenges: population loss. The city lost a sizeable chunk of its population, which once stood at 676,000 in 1950, when the Rust Belt lost its manufacturing prowess. Population figures have continued to slide, but recent U.S. Census estimates suggest the number is beginning to stabilize. Somehow, even these losses are viewed as an opportunity by city stakeholders to further Pittsburgh’s story. With fewer people in the region, the residents have taken up the mantle to get things done themselves.

“There are a lot of cities where you can’t see the fruits of your labor,” says Anna Siefken, executive director of the Wilton E. Scott Institute for Energy Innovation at Carnegie Mellon University. Herself a recent transplant to the city, she’s been impressed with residents’ willingness to roll up their sleeves and involve themselves in the city’s narrative. “In Pittsburgh, you have a very direct connection to something that you can work on. You see a problem and it’s very entrepreneurial, which is a part of the DNA.”

Piacentini agrees: “Pittsburgh is all about innovation. Something that I’ve noticed since I’ve been here is you can’t tell someone in Pittsburgh, ‘You

can’t do that.’ They’re going to find a way.”

The industries in the city have changed, and it’s certainly become greener, but the working spirit has continued to be part of the city’s story—one that’s still being told and aims to be inclusive of everyone who helped and continues to build it.

“One of the reasons that we have such a strong sense of place is because the people who live here and are happiest here are invested, are integrated into their communities in a way that you don’t see in a lot of other places,” Portlock says. “That’s a strength. But it makes it harder in some ways to tell the story, because for those who are already integrated it’s obvious—you don’t need to explain it. But for people coming here, that’s a story that we need to get better at telling.” **m**



PHOTO: FRIENDS OF THE RIVERFRONT