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The Money Point Sustainable Revitalization Plan—Chesapeake, VA

Crisman+Petrus; UVA School of Architecture

Money Point is a 330-acre peninsula on the Elizabeth River in Virginia that acquired its name as a result of jobs and wealth created during its heyday as a site of shipping terminals, factories, and wood-treatment plants. In 1963, however, a catastrophic fire released a vast quantity of creosote into the river, and industrial runoff over subsequent decades has added to the toxins in the soil, groundwater, and river sediment. For years, the quality of the local environment was essentially written off, despite the continued presence of a small, largely African-American residential community and the industrial workers whose jobs still brought them to the area's remaining scrap, cement, and petroleum businesses.

After years of neglect by local, state and federal agencies, a nonprofit environmental group, the Elizabeth River Project, undertook the revitalization of Money Point in 2005. The group convened a task force that joined with the award-winning consultant team to engage in a two-year public process to envision an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable future for Money Point.

The result is a ten-year action plan, unveiled in October 2006. As its descriptive subtitle (“Intertwined Human + Environmental Ecologies”) suggests, this job will require attention to both human and natural needs. It identifies five goals and corresponding implementation strategies: clean up the river at Money Point, prevent new releases of pollution there, enhance the quality of life for its remaining residents, establish an ethic of environmental stewardship among remaining industries, and restore and conserve the area's natural resources.

Most impressive about this planning effort, the jury agreed, was its linking of environmental restoration to renewed concern for Money Point's remaining residents. They also praised its ability to engage government and industry in the process. Individuals have been designated “keepers of the vision,” and the plan identifies milestones and the agencies responsible for reaching them.

The jury also praised the design of a “learning barge” by architecture students at the University of Virginia under the direction of architecture professor Phoebe Crisman. The barge will allow schoolchildren to experience the river ecosystem up close and at small scale, and it will also raise

public awareness of the Elizabeth River Project's restoration efforts at Money Point and elsewhere.

A Grassroots Campaign

Home to 1.6 million people, the Norfolk-Chesapeake-Portsmouth area grew up largely around the navigable, three-forked estuary of the Elizabeth River. Native Americans had long occupied its fertile wetlands before English colonists arrived, in 1607, at nearby Jamestown. Its strategic location, at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, eventually led to its becoming the site of a major Navy base and one of the oldest and largest shipyards in the U.S.

During the twentieth century, towns in the area grew together, and many of the wetlands were filled in for military facilities, shipping terminals, and industrial plants. As a result, the Elizabeth River is now one of the most polluted waterways on the Eastern Seaboard, earning it a place in the Environmental Protection Agency's Urban Rivers Program. And along the river's southern branch, Money Point is one of the most contaminated stretches of river anywhere in the U.S.

In 1992, the Elizabeth River Project set out to change this legacy of industrialization and restore the biological health of the Elizabeth River watershed.¹ The organization's goal was to work “one creek at a time” to build a constituency for change. It mobilized local communities through such activities as planting new oyster beds, cleaning up trash, and restoring growths of *Spartan alterniflora*, a native marsh grass.

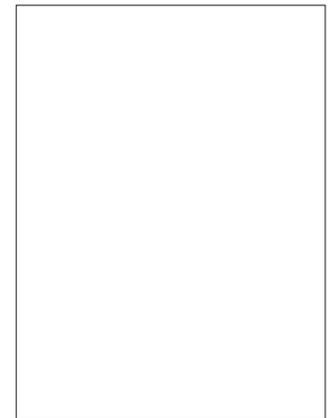
In a politically conservative region, the strategy also entailed working with industry and seeking voluntary compliance with environmental regulations. The group's board includes leaders of industry, scientists, government officials, and military officers as well as engaged citizens and environmental activists.

According to Crisman, such a “willingness to sit down with the enemy” has led to criticism from other environmental groups that the Elizabeth River Project has not taken a hard enough line against polluters. But raising awareness and instilling a sense of stewardship may be the best long-term tactic for the region. “The whole economy is based on the Navy and shipping. I don't know if you can achieve anything if you don't work with them,” she says.

The executive director of the Elizabeth River Project, Marjorie Jackson, a former journalist, has a reputation for being “a dynamo” when it comes to bringing people together, Crisman says. The task force behind the plan includes politicians, residents, business owners, design professionals, members of nonprofit and academic organizations, and federal, state, and local government officials.

Opposite top: Panorama of Money Point. Photo courtesy of Crisman+Petrus Architects and the Elizabeth River Project.

Opposite bottom: *Virginia Pilot* newspaper photo of the 1963 fire at Eppinger and Russel. Maps of the lower Chesapeake Bay and the Elizabeth River estuary showing the location of Money Point. Images courtesy of Crisman+Petrus Architects and the Elizabeth River Project.



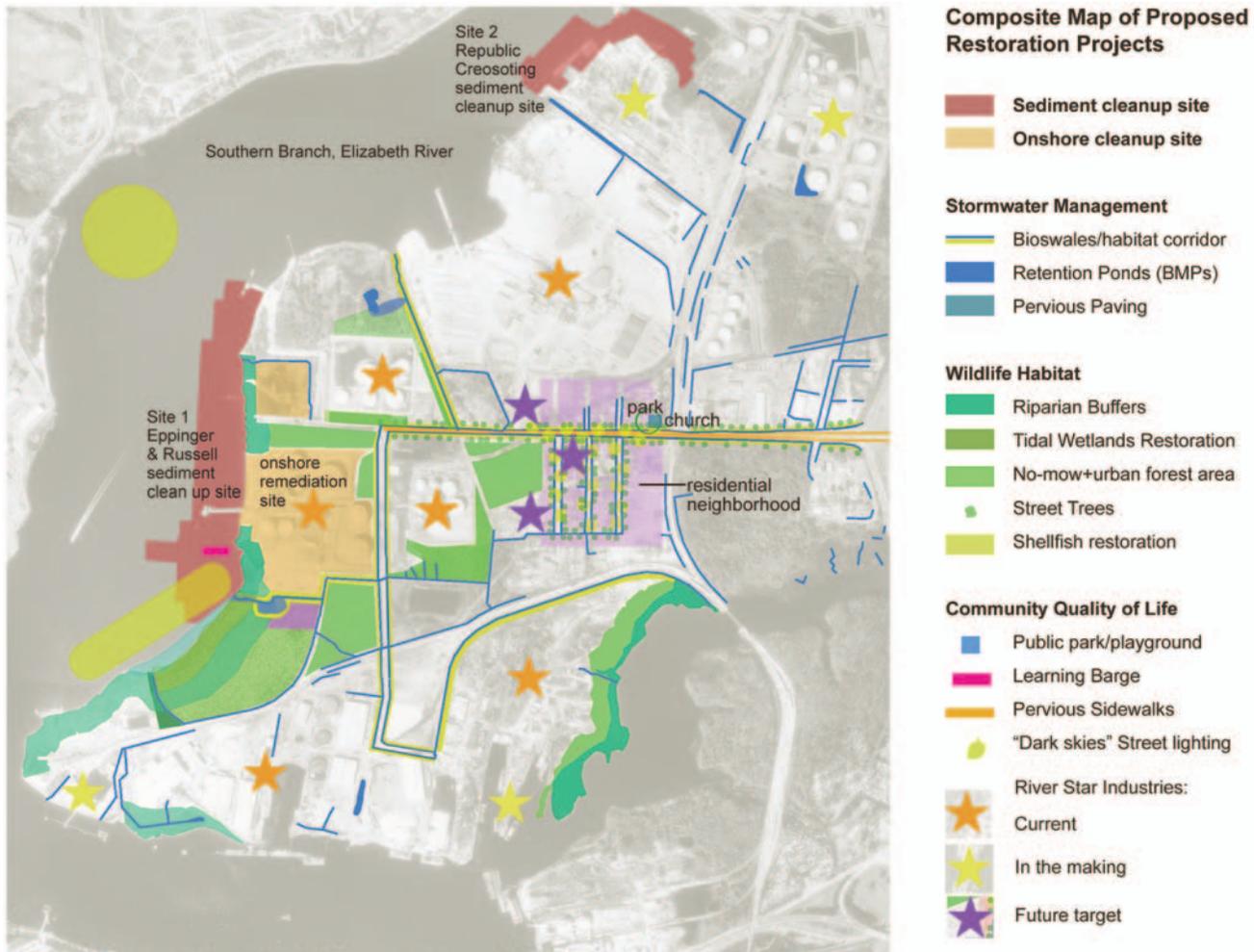
The Process Begins

According to the revitalization plan, the fire at the now dismantled Eppinger and Russel wood treatment plant, in 1963, transformed the nearby river bottom into a “35-acre biological dead zone.” Everybody knew the damage had been severe; one had only to look at the diseased and dying fish. But, amazingly, nothing was done about it. In a perverse way, Crisman says, the spill even confirmed the prevailing view that Money Point was a “nonplace.”

A plan to remedy this condition finally began to take shape in 2005, when \$5 million became available through the Living River Restoration Trust, a fund set up to disburse money collected as fines from polluters and impact

assessments for new industrial development. With this money, the Elizabeth River Project realized it could begin the cleanup of the river at Money Point. But as a small nonprofit, it lacked the skills to bring all aspects of this vision to fruition. Therefore, the connection to Crisman and her firm, Crisman+Petrus and students at the University of Virginia’s School of architecture was vital.

The university’s Institute for Environmental Negotiation, which was working with the Elizabeth River Project on Money Point, had a grant to help communities in transition. The institute’s director, Frank Dukes, suggested that Crisman take the lead in providing design and planning services. She agreed, and also enlisted the support of



her students at the University of Virginia’s Department of Architecture.

What Crisman and her team brought was a sense for the spatial issues involved, the skill to produce maps and other

Above: Ten-year integrated plan of action to revitalize Money Point. Graphic by Crisman+Petrus Architects.

visualization tools, and an ability to organize strategic vision. For example, the task force didn’t initially grasp that to clean up the river at Money Point the land that adjoined it also had to be cleaned up, Crisman says. This was a “big leap,” because it meant restoring the view of Money Point as a “place” and confronting its legacy of social as well as environmental neglect.

The residential community at Money Point had once

Sample Juror Comments—Money Point

Ann Forsyth: This is an incredible story, involving a really disenfranchised area with incredible environmental clean-up problems, and how multiple groups of people got together to work on a plan to clean up and improve it.

Roberta Feldman: All the buy-ins blew me away. There should be an award just based on that.

Buzz Yudell: I also thought that the way they communicated felt quite site specific. A lot of the things

you look at, even the ones that are good, are very generic.

Anne Whiston Spinn: What really captured my imagination was this learning barge. It’s a floating classroom for sixty people that includes a constructed wetlands that recycles river water and demonstrates how the marsh, the wetland community, pollutants and sediments interact. It will travel up and down the river.

Ann Forsyth: It’s an environmental-education project designed by university students. It’s a combination

of disenfranchised groups, incredible environmental problems, and corporate, government and civic groups and universities getting together to make a difference, and raising all this funding. How many of our other groups have \$15 million worth of funding?

Anne Whiston Spinn: I think the brochure is also cleverly put together. “The Keepers of the Vision.” You go on down to Hess Corporation, the mayors, the cities, the U.S. Congressmen...to the pastor of the First



been known as Buell and even had its own post office. Prior to the vehicular age, people living there had walked to work at nearby industries. But in the 1960s the area was cut off from the rest of the City of Chesapeake by an elevated highway, and in the years that followed, the community was virtually ignored. Hoping that it would just die off, the city even rezoned the area for waterfront industrial use, rendering its remaining houses virtually worthless as real estate, Crisman says.

But the community did not die. To an outsider, large areas of it appear to be a no man's land, without streetlights or sidewalks or storm drainage. And the levels of contamination are so bad that people probably shouldn't live there, Crisman says. But they do anyway. Their resilience is symbolized by the First Baptist Church of Money Point, to which many former residents return on Sundays to retain a sense of connection.

Diverse Funding Sources

The Money Point plan is moving forward. Although the cost of the actual cleanup of river sediment will be higher than the \$5 million initially allocated, that work will begin next summer, Crisman says.

But that grant represents only one third of the funding the plan is expected to generate. For example, the EPA has already spent \$1 million to clean up old creosote tanks, and a memo has been signed for an additional \$5 million for construction of a system of bioswales, riparian buffers,

Above left to right: Existing transportation and industrial infrastructure, including extensive impervious areas; proposed integrated biological network of stormwater management and habitat corridors; coexistence plan integrating the existing industrial and restored biological infrastructure. Graphics by Crisman+Petrus Architects.

Baptist Church of Money Point. And the revitalization task force is even a longer list. They also have a series of milestones, and for each action step there are key implementers and where the resources are coming from. It is a reminder to all these people that they are keepers of making sure the milestones are met.

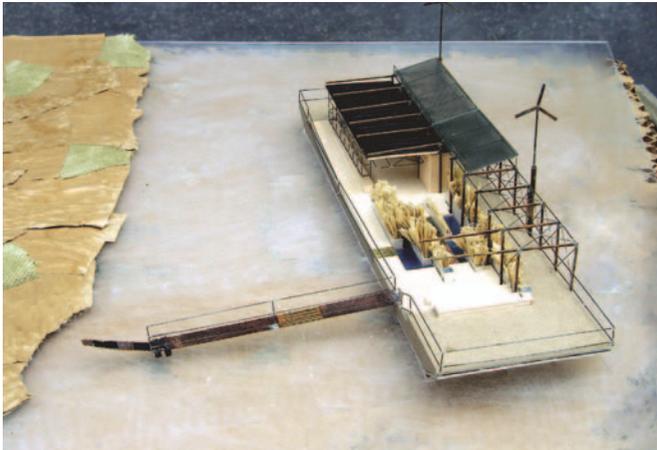
Buzz Yudell: I think the way the milestones are described also takes it from dry planner language to something which really connects to the community.

There is an effort throughout to have a narrative that is powerful, to go from thoughtful expert planning to something that really has flesh.

Anne Whiston Spirn: In that sense it has some commonalities with the Los Angeles River project. It is strategically conceived; it knows who its audience is. The milestones are within the control of each of the Keepers of the Vision. One of the milestones is that the church is listed on the historical register. That's within

the power of the congregation—the pastor can do it. On the other hand, the EPA does such and such. So it takes the larger vision and brings it down not only to the tangible design proposal, but also the very specifics of who's going to be responsible for what.

Buzz Yudell: The classic critique of a lot of planning studies is that they sit on shelves, get updated every eight to ten years, and then sit on the shelves some more. This project and the L.A. River study both find



retention ponds, and new wetlands to slow, filter and collect stormwater. Such work is essential, because without it, toxic residues will continue to leach out of the soil and run off during storms.

In addition, the City of Chesapeake has pledged \$340,000 to design and seek funding for a stormwater system. The City will also target street improvements to known hazardous areas for pedestrians, and for the trucks that rumble through, many transporting petroleum products.

Steps have also been taken to achieve other goals of the plan. A history of Money Point has been produced by students at the university, and efforts are under way to list the First Baptist Church as a historic structure. The Hess Corporation, which owns a major portion of the Eppinger and Russel site, has agreed to a voluntary program of contaminant isolation and phytoremediation through tree planting. Major industries that line the shoreline are being recruited into the Elizabeth River Project’s “River Star” program for

environmental stewardship. And, as a prelude to more extensive efforts, four acres of tidal wetlands are being restored as habitat on property belonging to Elizabeth River Terminals.

Finally, through a grant from the EPA, Crisman is creating model sustainable urban design guidelines for use along other polluted rivers and estuaries throughout the country.

A Floating Schoolroom

Crisman and her students designed the learning barge, which is now being built.² When it is finished, in 2008, it will be owned by the Elizabeth River Project and primarily moored off Money Point, though it will travel to other locations along the river.

Crisman explains that the barge will be totally off the grid. Electricity will be generated with solar panels, and rainwater will be collected for use by visitors. As a green architecture project, the barge will provide a public viewing platform for ongoing environmental restoration

Sample Juror Comments—Money Point

ways of being about action and vision.

Roberta Feldman: What also is remarkable is the range of partnerships, not only to get the work done, but to sustain the human activity necessary to keep the project going. You go from a low-income community all the way up to the polluters. You look at the educational projects, the art projects, the preservation project for a church....

Anne Whiston Spirn: It gives everybody a role.

Roberta Feldman: And it is very respectful of a community plagued by environmental racism. It involves them in a remarkable way through education, because those folks...who knows what kinds of health problems they might have? They could have been ignored.

Buzz Yudell: But then it could have been set up almost as an adversarial situation, given the histories.

Roberta Feldman: Correct. It is remarkable that they

have engaged everyone. I just think it is fantastic. I want to see what happens in ten years.

Buzz Yudell: Also, in terms of structure, communication and reporting, there are five goals. They are highlighted and very succinct. The graphics are very acceptable. The whole thing is done in twenty pages. We are used, in the professional world, to the more pages, the more you’ve earned your keep. It just seems like a great model.



work. But it will also serve as a classroom, simulating the natural processes around it.

In one simulation, graywater resulting from use of the barge will be cycled through fresh-water plant beds to clean it before it is released to the river. In another, polluted brackish water will be pumped from the river and run through a second circuit of biofiltration. Tests before and after the water enters the system will reveal how healthy plants and natural processes can restore the river's chemistry. An EPA grant Crisman received through the university is allowing development of a curriculum in which the barge will be used to teach middle-school students about the river's ecology.

The barge will provide a conspicuous symbol of the Elizabeth River project, Crisman said. Currently, the group has little public presence, but as the barge moves up and down the river, it will help dramatize the group's efforts to restore the watershed.

Not the End

On the one hand, the case of Money Point highlights the dangers of government fragmentation and lack of accountability, both to the environment and to marginalized populations. On the other, it indicates how a web of nonprofit groups, research organizations, and dedicated professionals galvanized by a common vision can achieve wonders.

The tie between the University of Virginia and the Elizabeth River Project has been particularly fruitful in this regard, Crisman says. Access by university researchers to grants has been leveraged into initiatives that have inspired industry and government to fund this restoration. And their findings are now being made available to groups elsewhere in the country.

The plan demonstrates that for environmental cleanup to be sustainable it must be supported by as broad a coalition as possible. This effort involves linking wild nature to human nature.

—David Moffat

Notes

1. The organization and its activities are more fully described at www.elizabethriver.org.
2. More on the barge can be found at www.arch.virginia.edu/learningbarge.

Opposite left: Learning Barge model with solar and wind energy systems, planted filtration basins, and classroom.

Opposite right: Storytelling steps make a place for gathering. Images by the Learning Barge studio.

Above: Ongoing wildflower meadow restoration on CITGO's Money Point site. The company is a River Star industry. Photo courtesy of Crisman+Petrus Architects and the Elizabeth River Project.