Along with this year’s event co-host, DePaul’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development, CNU Illinois and the Illinois Chapter of the Students for the New Urbanism hosted the second annual Pop-up Urban Design Studio enabling planning and design students from DePaul, Judson and the University of Illinois-Chicago to come together in intercollegiate teams for a two-hour, peer-led charrette. The event allowed students to meet, share their knowledge, and learn from each other. This year’s charrette developed strategies for the Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant facility brownfield site in Blue Island, Illinois. Information about the charrette site was generously provided by the City of Blue Island and Chicago’s Center for Neighborhood Technology.

The Libby, McNeill & Libby Canning Plant, located at 13636 South Western Avenue, is a multi-story concrete and masonry industrial plant that was constructed between 1917 and 1919 to serve as the main Midwest processing plant for the Libby, McNeill & Libby Company, one of the world’s leading producers of canned foods. By 1919, when the Blue Island plant was completed, Libby, McNeill & Libby was the second-largest producer of canned foods in the country. Despite the continued demand for Libby products, the company made the decision to stop packaging foods at the plant in 1968. As urban and industrial sprawl replaced the area farms that had once supplied the plant, the company was forced to transport produce from other areas. In a December 31, 1967 Chicago Tribune article, company Vice President Richard Griffith cited “the high cost of transportation of farm products” as the primary reason for the shutdown.

The building, designed by Philip Larson, general superintendent for the Libby Company, is locally significant as an excellent and well-preserved example of a large-scale industrial manufacturing.
The Libby Canning facility is located just south of Blue Island’s central district which is approximately sixteen miles south of the Chicago Loop. The City of Blue Island is a hub for Metra commuter trains that includes six stations. The Libby Canning Plant is closest to two stations (the Rock Island - Vermont and the Rock Island - Robbins) but they are not within walkable distance. The City is bisected by Western Avenue which has high traffic volume running adjacent to the Libby Canning Plant.

Blue Island’s history dates back to the 1830s as a commercial center in the southern Cook County region and became a worldwide brick-making capitol in the 1850s as the Calumet Sag Channel was completed. Recent census data shows Blue Island having a population of 23,706 comprised of 51% female and 49% male. The median age is 31.3 years with the largest population aged between 0 and 19 years at 32.9% with the second largest group aged between 20 and 39 years at 29.3% of the population.

Blue Island’s labor force is made up of 11,522 citizens which makes up 66.9% of the population. Of those eligible for the labor force, 92% are employed. The majority work in education services, health care, social assistance, arts, entertainment, food services, manufacturing, and retail trade. The median household income is $42,721 with the largest percent of the population (20.5%) earning $50,000-$74,999. The number of people over the age of 25 with at least a high school diploma make up 66% of the population and 11.8% hold at least a bachelor’s degree.
One of the current issues with the area is the lack of accessibility to the possible proposed development of the brownfield. We really wanted to focus on an accessible mixed-use development on this site which included renovation of the existing factory site, new buildings surrounding the existing factory site, the addition of a Metra station and Pace Bus Stop, and ample amounts of green space.

Our proposal for this structure called for it to be a multi-use building that consisted of loft apartments, a museum which would pay homage the Libby Plant, and incubator space geared toward artists and other creative class types. We felt that it was important that this structure not be demolished, however renovated, and serve as the focal point and central anchor of the site.

New Builds: The Libby Plant currently is fronted with a parking lot that is largely unused. In order to create a more walkable and vibrant area, we proposed that a new structure be built in front of the plant that would include a small pedestrian plaza between the two buildings. The pedestrian plaza strip would connect to two larger plaza areas at both ends. We as a group agreed that the Libby Plant should not be hidden by the new proposed building which would be constructed in front of the factory; therefore the structure would only be two stories, purposed for retail.

The proposed redevelopment of the factory site will result in a substantial increase in traffic; therefore adequate

Accessibility may have been the most important component when designing this plan. Whether it was through mass transit, automobile, biking, or walking, we wanted to create a development that was accessible for all.
parking is imperative for both residents and visitors. The southeast corner of the lot calls for a parking garage that includes retail and residential units, the anchor is to be a grocery store. The garage will connect to the new Metra Station. The idea behind this is for those exiting the train station to have an easy stop to get some grocery shopping done before they head to their residential units on the site.

Green Space: Green space was another important amenity that was prioritized to implement into the plan. The largest piece of green space will be placed between the Existing Libby building and the new mixed use parking garage. Other small areas of space will be scattered throughout the site.

Accessibility: Accessibility may have been the most important component when designing this plan. Whether it was through mass transit, automobile, biking, or walking, we wanted to create a development that was accessible for all. Allowing for a truly walkable area it was important to eliminate the parking lot that fronted the Libby building and replace it with a mixed use parking garage that was strategically placed near the new train station. This is also why the proposed two-story structure was designed with a zero setback. This allows a much more enjoyable and safer experience for the pedestrian. A new access road off of Western Avenue for travelers traveling from surrounding neighborhoods will be constructed to go around the property connecting to the parking garage.

Future Development: The plan has earmarked the land just east of the redevelopment site for future development, possibly a phase two. Please note that a pedestrian bridge has been implemented into the plan to connect these developments.
Team 2: Blue Island Farms
Ute Brantsch, Ryan Forst, Kevin Graham-McHugh, Justin Kohls
Summary by Ute Brantsch

The Former Libby Canning Facility site is bordered on two sides by active freight rail lines, which isolate it from the surrounding community. We were interested in finding uses that engage, benefit and connect to the community of Blue Island. After conducting a short, non-scientific survey (we asked ourselves if we wanted to live there) we concluded that residential development of the site was inappropriate. Active freight lines are dangerous, noisy and are areas with a higher concentration of pollutants.

We recommend buffering the area around track with trees suited to the environmental conditions.

The team recommends adaptive re-use of the building and retaining historic features (taking advantage of historic tax credits) while customizing interiors to suit tenants. In keeping with the site's history, we recommend that development of the building and the surrounding land focus on various food enterprises such as growing food, specialty manufacturing of food (i.e. jams, jellies, cheese, brewing and baked goods), farm-to-table restaurants and retail markets. Specifically, the former office areas at the front and center of the structure could host restaurants and a brewpub. The main floor of the factory, facing Western Avenue, could house businesses open to the public—to the north a year round indoor farmers market and to the south a brewery. On the floors above, and in the wings at the back, hydroponic vegetable farms, fish farms, bakeries, artisanal/gourmet foods manufacturing would be appropriate businesses.

Indoor car and bicycle parking would be at the southern end of the building, closest to the creek. Public open space would be located on this side of the site as well as community gardens. Access would be from Western on a permeable shared driveway. Bike racks would also be located in front of the market area.

Sustainability should be a factor in all aspects of development. A green roof or solar panels should be considered.
The area around the building appears to be an impermeable concrete surface used for parking. The team recommends it be replaced with pervious surfaces as appropriate. The site plan calls for the following changes:

- An appropriately timed stop light and pedestrian island should be installed at 136th Street to make it easier for pedestrians from the nearby neighborhoods to cross Western Avenue.

- A plaza (permeable pavers) at 136th would front the office section of the building, providing a connection to Western Avenue and an area for outdoor dining.

- An area for outdoor farmers’ markets would be located on the northeast side facing Western Avenue.

- Sustainable parking (shade trees, trenches for storm water) would be available south of the plaza (facing Western Avenue).

- The area along the creek (south side of the site) would be converted to park/open space, creating opportunities for passive recreation/wildlife habitats.

- Community gardens would be located here.

- To the north of the structure, a service road would allow access to loading docks behind the factory.

- All remaining land would be used for organic urban farming/orchards. Zoning changes might also accommodate a barn for goats (milk and cheese production), and/or chickens.

- A petting zoo at the barn could engage community children on weekends.

Partnerships with area schools are also possible. A local high school has an agriculture program and nearby Richard J. Daley College (7500 South Pulaski - in conjunction with Windy City Harvest and the Chicago Botanical Society) offers a Certificate program in sustainable urban horticulture.

Since the site was formerly used for manufacturing food, we are assuming (for purposes of this plan) that it is not contaminated and will not require extensive remediation. Blue Island Farms would have a positive impact on the area by creating jobs (farming, manufacturing and retail), increasing area dining and shopping options, contributing to area educational programs and improving storm water management.
Our team proposes transforming Blue Island’s former Libby, McNeill and Libby canning facility into a modern vertical farm, park, and community space.

The terraced roof of the current structure would become a multilevel indoor urban farm with the addition of a new, sloping glass enclosure facing the south. Abundant natural light and modern hydroponics systems would extend the growing season year-round and help to provide essential produce that would otherwise be shipped from thousands of miles away. The massive size of the building would allow industrial-scale farming that could serve regional needs and employ hundreds of local workers.
The massive size of the building would allow industrial-scale farming that could serve regional needs and employ hundreds of local workers.

The building’s east-west axis would become a central market, where the building’s industrial tenants and other local farmers could sell their produce. This would help provide healthy food options in a neighborhood that currently lacks a grocery store. Other portions of the site’s interior would be repurposed into community spaces, recreational facilities, and a museum dedicated to the history of Libby and Blue Island.

The vast exterior of the site, formerly used for freight rail and trucking connections, would be repurposed into a community park. A large central open space would allow for festivals and events, while a community garden at the southwest would allow neighbors to grow and sell their own food.

The signature design features of the park would showcase the site’s industrial history. Distinct pavers would mark the paths of rail spurs that formerly entered the building, and a stepped tower structure at the northwest corner would provide a remarkable vantage point over Blue Island Crossing, where four matched rail bridges still carry hundreds of freight trains each day.

“Growing What We Can” would grow industry, community, and identity in a space that has been vacant since 1985. Instead of shipping canned meats all over the world, the new Libby facility would bring healthy food to Blue Island and the greater Chicago region. In the process, it would transform a massive industrial eyesore into a new sustainable enterprise that enriches the surrounding community.
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