



Pittsburgh: A City of Steps

By Tim Beatley

On a Saturday in early November of 2022, the Garden Club of Allegheny organized a day-long symposium to highlight the City of Pittsburgh’s unique network of city steps that connect many neighborhoods in this hilly city. There are more than 800 sets of steps in the city, though there is some disagreement about the precise number, and even how best to count them. Many are in disrepair, and the symposium was, in part, about brainstorming about the future of these steps. I was able to attend the symposium but also was able to visit and film a number of the steps the following day leading to a production of a

[short documentary film about the steps.](#)

Having so many outdoor steps and stairs is an understandable result of the challenging topography of Pittsburgh. Many workers used these steps as essential routes for walking to their jobs in the factories and steel mills situated along the banks of the city’s rivers. Today, they still provide essential pedestrian connections for many steep neighborhoods and taken together amount to a remarkable set of assets that contribute mightily to this city’s sense of place and (especially from my perspective) for providing access

to outdoor nature.

Angie Martinez, Assistant Director of the city’s Department of Mobility & Infrastructure (DOMI), opened the symposium with an overview of the city steps, how important they are in the city, and efforts to plan for their maintenance and improvement. In 2018, the city undertook a comprehensive [Steps Assessment](#) that gave every set of steps an overall step score that took into account a walkshed component (proximity to shops, employment) as well as a social equity component. The result was a priority list of some 58 steps needing upgrades at a cost of

\$15 million. Of these, the city has already moved forward on 12. As Martinez and others during the day made clear, these steps are both cultural assets and an important part of the pedestrian and mobility network of the city. The diversity of step designs and different kinds of steps is impressive. Some follow an adjacent road, essentially serving as a kind of alternative form of steep sidewalk (referred to as “jumper walks”). Others are simple straight structures while others are elaborate switch-back designs, some quite complex and often rising many feet off the ground. Some of the steps end up serving a single home, delivering a walker to the back yard or to the side door of a home. Most of the steps are concrete and metal, but some are made of wood.

mosaic design to be affixed to the steps and risers. She led a group of volunteers in making and installing the art, with much of it paid for through a go-fund-me campaign. The result is a beautiful piece of vertical public art. To fully see and enjoy the creation requires walking up the steps.

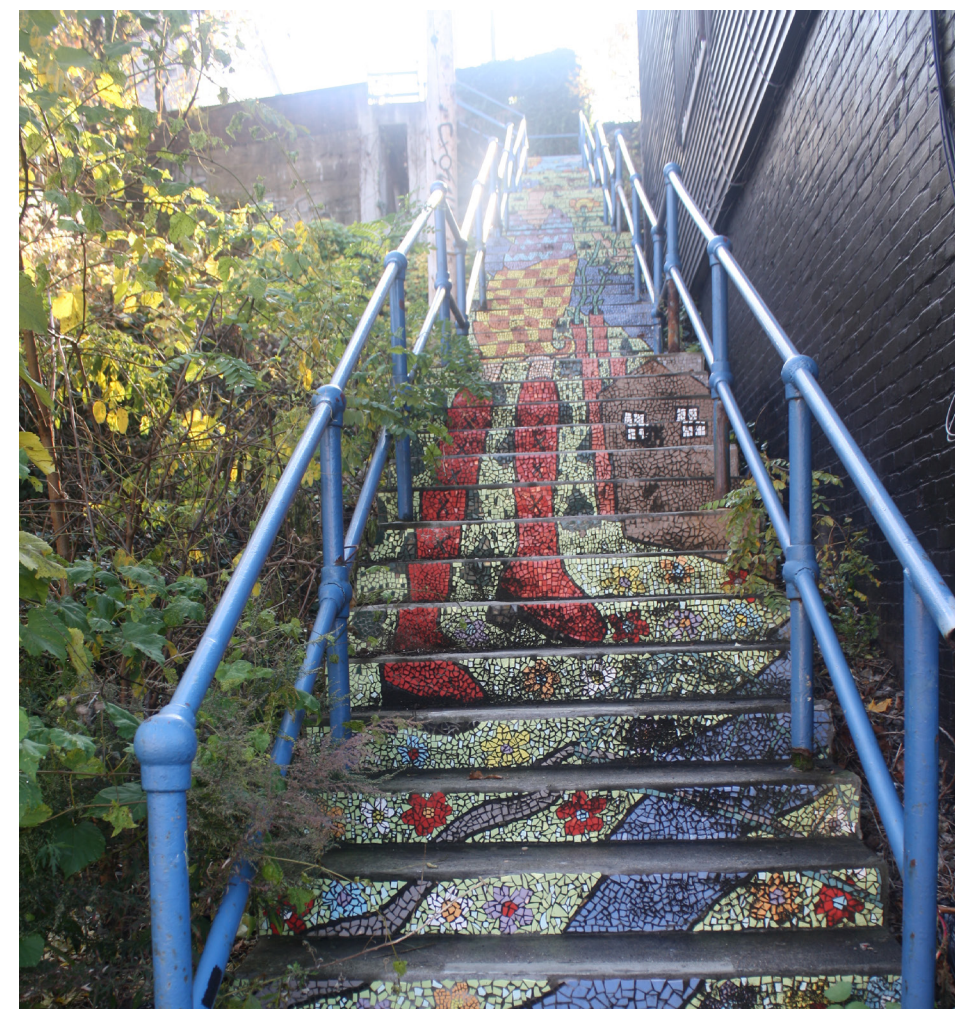
On an overcast Sunday, the three co-chairs of the Garden Club city steps initiative – Eliza Brown, Christina Schmidlapp, and Sarah Drake – led me on a wonderful multi-hour tour, accompanied by a filmmaker colleague who had flown in from Colorado the night before. Over the course of the day, we visited and filmed steps in several different neighborhoods.

One memorable stop was the Vista Street steps (photo on page 45), in the East Allegheny neighborhood, newly reconstructed and with another impressive mosaic. Assistant Director Martinez met us there and we filmed an interview walking up the steps. She explained for the camera the historical elements of the mosaic, including the 16th street bridge, a social club, and a trolley (though the trolley is now gone, the trolley tracks are still visible in the streets). Martinez described how important city steps, like this one, are to her personally, and the “urban hiking” the steps allow and encourage.

The city steps can also themselves be destinations and

Other cities have steps and stairs, to be sure, but not as many as Pittsburgh. They are found throughout the city, in just about every neighborhood. They are also in many cases remarkable engineering and construction feats, as Angie Martinez told us in her presentation. It is common in other cities to build steps on grade, but in Pittsburgh they are often up in the air, perched on elaborate vertical pilings.

The city steps are also a venue for public art and are themselves a form of public art. Several of the steps incorporate beautiful and quite elaborate mosaic creations. One of the best examples is the Oakley Street Steps (photo at right) in the South Side Slopes neighborhood. Here local artist Laura Jean McLaughlin created a remarkable



can serve as important gathering spaces for a neighborhood. On our Sunday filming tour, we found one family picnicking on the flat section of a step. On my scouting walk the day before, I discovered a small, leveled space adjacent to the steps, with a bench available to sit on and catch one's breath or to contemplate the elevation. The attraction of sitting on this bench highlights another benefit of climbing the steps: the unusual and often dramatic vantage point provided there. The views of the city are quite spectacular and the panoramic points of view are otherwise difficult to find in other places. Perhaps it is important to provide spots in a city where residents

can see all or most of the city, as a way to see one's city in a more holistic way. They also provide moments of discovery and surprise. When seeing such expansive and enveloping views, "wow" is a common utterance when reaching the top.

There has been abundant and quite creative programming for the steps in the last few years. The city has funded much of this through its ["Steps We Take" event series](#), which is a collaboration between Bikes Pittsburgh and the Office of Public Art. In the Polish Hill neighborhood alone, these inventive efforts have included "vertical block parties" (at least one involving a local

marching band), self-guided tours, a vertical pierogi party (a pierogi is a kind of Polish boiled dumpling), and even the design and construction of specialized furniture to fit the city steps. These efforts have collectively helped to promote the idea of the steps as destinations, as stages for performances, and as neighborhood gathering spaces.

One of the most impressive set of steps we filmed that day was in the Spring Garden neighborhood. Here the steps, with several elevated switchbacks, took pedestrians up and over the rocky face of a large hill. This forested cliff edge to me seemed a remarkable remnant of what

the nature and geology of Pittsburgh must have been like in an earlier time. The steps were a striking bit of neighborhood-scale engineering. While filming about halfway up these stairs, we encountered a pedestrian on her way to a Sunday brunch, carrying a bag of fresh bagels. She didn't mind being interviewed and spoke glowingly of the value of the city steps. She explained that the steps were a shortcut for her, a way of getting some exercise but also a bit of a challenge. I asked about the value of the city steps and the benefits of experiencing nature. "I think it's a chance to have a little bit of an excursion into nature without committing to a full-on hike," she

explained. "It's kind of this in-between little gift the city ends up providing."

The nature of Pittsburgh, again due mostly to its topography, is highly fragmented. Even as one is spending time even in the center of the city, it is possible to see trees and forested hilltops and hillsides. The steps are one unique way to access this nature, and many of the steps offer an experience of walking up or down while surrounded by trees and greenery. The spaces around the steps, while usually not large, are nonetheless significant natural areas, though in many places nonnative plants and invasive vegetation have

taken over. How to control these invasives, while growing back a native forest, is a challenge but also an exciting opportunity. It's an opportunity to involve and engage residents but also to explore new approaches, such as the use of goats. Friends of the South Side Park recently hired a local company called Allegheny Goatscape to eat away at the invasives, which they do quite effectively (the company employs four teams of goats throughout the city complete with a "guard donkey" to protect the herds from coyotes)!

Interestingly, the natureful elements I find so appealing are also points of concern for





some residents. In a survey administered as part of the city's planning effort, step users cited overgrown vegetation as one thing that they were worried about and might impede use of the steps. There is also a fair amount of garbage to be found around some of the steps and dumping on these sites does take place. Cleaning up and controlling the trash problem is another aspect of what will make the steps attractive and beneficial. As one astute symposium attendee noted, it is

hard for a visitor to experience a feeling of awe or wonder or connection to nature when there are piles of trash in sight.

Another key challenge for the city is how to maintain the network while planning and undertaking repairs to keep the steps safe for pedestrians. When there is broken concrete or missing steps the city is quick to close the steps. A number of the steps are in some level of disrepair. Renovating or rebuilding city steps is not inexpensive and

limited funding remains an obstacle in Pittsburgh as it does in every city. Some recent projects have cost as much as \$1 million. Figuring out the long-term funding solution remains a challenge and some have suggested the creation of a steps entity perhaps modeled after the successful nonprofit Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy (which is funded in part through a parks tax but also through private philanthropy).

Towards the end of the day, the symposium discussion turned to the longer-term vision for the steps. What do residents want to see it become? Moving from individual steps that serve a single neighborhood to a connected network is one important idea that attendees embraced. Other open questions include how to respect the expressions of the uniqueness of neighborhoods in their steps while also working towards a more coherent citywide system of steps. There could be some common signage or logo, for instance such as developed in cities like Montreal's green streets or "Allées Vertes". There could be pre-established routes through the city, perhaps depending on what kinds of experiences one wants to have and how far one wants to hike. The steps could be the basis for new forms of tourism in the city, as is the case in San Francisco, a city with a similar steep topography and network of public stairs.

My garden club hosts deserve much credit for generating new interest and enthusiasm around

the steps. Their initiative is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate about their future as well as providing further strong support for their preservation and improvement. Their initiative will continue its work, with plans to organize a design charrette in 2023, and to produce a kind of field guide to the steps. "What we bring to the mix is the notion of a citywide green pedestrian network that incorporates as many of these steps as possible," Eliza Brown tells me. "That notion of a system that spreads through the city is something that hasn't been talked about." Understanding the city steps as an integrated

network, as a unique way to explore the city and to fully experience its special nature, definitely helps Pittsburgh realize its potential as a partner in the Biophilic Cities Network. Investing in these unique steps is a tremendous gift, as that Spring Hill "step-climber" (somehow a more fitting word to use than pedestrian) so rightly observed.

Resources

Biophilic Cities. "Pittsburgh City Steps." [film]. <https://www.biophiliccities.org/pittsburgh-city-steps>.

City of Pittsburgh. "Pittsburgh Citywide Steps Assessment". <https://pittsburghpa.gov/citysteps>.

Bike PGH! Steps We Take. Pittsburgh City Steps Events Series. <https://bikepgh.org/sites/steps-we-take>.

