

Welcome to Coe Place!



Please note, This section is taken from Chris Hawley's larger work:
["Midtown - Poised for Renaissance"](#)

Coe Place

Observations, Conditions, Opportunities

Coe Place is the most historically and urbanistically significant street in the Midtown neighborhood. At one time a brick pedestrian pathway, converted to a residential street by a quixotic nineteenth-century skating rink operator, Coe Place is a charming, very narrow street, originally no more than fifteen feet wide, lined with a collection of close-knit Queen Anne-style houses whose singular attributes are unmatched anywhere else in Buffalo.

Described by residents as a family, not merely a street, Coe Place has its own sense of place, its own composite image that makes it truly special in the broad panoply of residential streets in Buffalo. Having its origin in circumstances unusual to a city where the layout of streets was generally coordinated by a central authority, such as the Holland Land Company or the city's planning function, Coe Place was a private street organized around very slender and shallow lots atypical of the prevailing 30x100 lot sizes common to Buffalo. The houses, all constructed by a single builder, contain almost no lawns to the benefit of a compact building arrangement remarkably conducive to reinforcing the social togetherness now observed on the street. People live very close to many other people, on a street whose design encourages social interaction. It is too narrow for aggressive traffic but wide enough for children's play and adult relaxation, lined with houses with spacious porches that prompt neighbors to talk to one another on a regular basis. Coe Place is a microcosm of the classic urban village, where urban density and small town comfort coalesce.

The gorgeous Queen Anne's of Coe Place, some built flush to the street in a striking urban typography, are gems in the rough awaiting rediscovery. Originally nineteen houses in all over a 2.5-acre site, they were built in a speculative venture from 1890 to 1891 by skating rink operator George Chadeayne. Interviewed by Buffalo Times reporter Sybil Reppert in 1930, Chadeayne was said to have reasoned that "people needed houses worse than they needed places to skate," leading him to raze his skating rink on the site to create a residential neighborhood in its place. Chadeayne actually recycled the salvaged lumber from the rink to construct the houses on the south side side of the street, completed in the winter of 1891. The seven houses of north side of the street were the first to be built, however, being the smallest and most intricately trimmed, on lots no more than 28x45 feet in dimension. Of nineteen houses constructed between Main and Ellicott streets, fourteen remain extant, with the few vacant lots narrow enough to be rather inconspicuous as quaint side yards.

Named after William S. Coe, Chadeayne's father-in-law and a prominent Buffalo transit entrepreneur, Coe Place was made a public street by an act of the Common Council in 1928, after which its original bricks were replaced with concrete paving. Its unique property divisions remain, however, a remnant of civil engineer William White's attempt to create a lot pattern that allowed Chadeayne to avoid creating a new street and to maximize the area devoted to residential development. Each lot is connected to Main or Ellicott streets by an extremely narrow strip of land under the alignment of the Coe Place footpath. The divisions of land beneath the street are still recognized by deeds as belonging to individual homeowners on the block.

Today, the fourteen remaining Queen Anne houses represent one of the best examples of any stylistically consistent body of architecture in the city. The unified form and design of the houses

is unique to Coe Place, each one containing subtle differences in materials and detail, some altered by modifications made gradually over the past hundred years. Porches contain styling motifs as varied as Gingerbread, Greek Revival and Adirondack Rustic. Queen Anne-style shingles come in an assortment of decorative patterns, including fishscale, zigzag, hexagon and a few others. One particular feature of several houses stands out as particularly unusual to Buffalo residential architecture: thumb molding, so named because its profile resembles a particular view of the thumb, found along many gables and eaves. Houses like 30 Coe also contain so-called "Yankee gutters," usually installed in conjunction with thumb molding and generally known to be inadequate in preventing roof leakage in a Buffalo climate.

Today, Coe Place's potential is vast. At virtually a stone's throw from the Sarabeth Building, it is likely attract the most investor attention once Artspace is situated in the neighborhood. The housing conditions of the street are quite distressed, however, containing perhaps a larger proportion of abandoned and underkempt houses than any other block in the study area. Many of the houses, such as 33 Coe and 38 Coe, appear to be in steady processes of renovation.

Coe Place is a street undergoing a self-initiated, grassroots restoration process, but the progress is too slow. Four houses on the block remain in totally abandoned states of upkeep. Residents report that a tree grows through the living room floor of 28 Coe, a charming and highly salvageable house in discouraging shape. Other houses, like 19 Coe, are poorly sealed and are regularly broken into by people seeking a venue for criminal activity. Almost no houses are in immaculate condition, with the notable exception of houses like 41 Coe and especially 1050 Ellicott, a shingle-clad cottage on the corner that is certainly one of best houses in Midtown.

Up until recently, the city's neglect of the public right-of-way probably reinforced a climate of disinvestment in the block. The City had reportedly never made any major repairs to the street's infrastructure since 1928, when it was converted to a public street. Up until mid-2005, its sidewalks had all but crumbled away into gravel and fine powder. The vehicle lane remains in deplorable condition, an unsightly patchwork of makeshift repairs.

The City did commence a street repaving effort in 2005 that was thankfully halted mid-way. New sidewalks installed, the street almost took on the look of a widened suburban drive. Granite curbs, an essential division between pedestrian and vehicle zones, were removed and replaced with curbs-and-gutters typical to suburban subdivisions, robbing the street of its historic charm as well as the built-in safety of a defined barrier. The vehicle lane repaving was halted as planning was underway to reconstruct the street in its original brick.

A narrow planting strip was also eliminated during the sidewalk reconstruction, depriving the street of what little green was able to sprout along a very narrow right-of-way. The few street

lamps extant on the street, now precariously aligned along an uneven and sloping sidewalk, are not properly fitted for the installation of flower baskets to recompense for a loss of greenspace. The curbs-and-gutters also effectively expanded the usable lane width for vehicles, widening the street from its historic 15-foot width to nearly 19 feet. Vehicle speeds are likely to increase as a result, as well as the tendency of drivers to park on sidewalks, exposing porches, especially on the north side where there are zero setbacks, to damage from swinging car doors or outright collision. The livability of Coe Place will continue to be impaired by this essentially auto-focused design formula, emphasizing speed over calm, and cars over people.

Recommendations, Strategies, Suggested Improvements

Repave street in brick

Coe Place should be repaved in brick in a unique and inviting pattern, such as diagonal herringbone, to emphasize the street's charming and historic character, to slow traffic, and to provide a needed aesthetic boost to the block. Originally a brick pedestrian footpath, Coe Place would be restored to its original, pre-1928 status. Enhancing safety as well as beauty, brick tends to act as a natural, built-in rumble strip, prompting drivers to travel at low speeds.

Through-traffic would be discouraged, while walking and biking would be encouraged. A brick walkway would encourage nontraditional wayfinding, whereby pedestrians feel invited to walk or bike down a street in unplanned and spontaneous circumstances, drawn further inward by its arresting or unusual qualities. Dramatically calming traffic, a brick street could also reclaim it as a safe zone for relaxation and children's play, a pastime documented by historical photographs from the period before the street was repaved.

This plan wants Coe Place to be "discovered" after many decades of having been hidden from the eyes of the city. What would be the first street to be repaved in brick in many years in Buffalo, its reconstruction would act as an invitation in two ways: alluring outsiders to explore the street from Main, and luring more Coe Place residents to take lawn chairs out onto the street on sunny days.

Reestablish granite curbs, narrow street to original 15-foot width

This plan is agnostic on the height at which new granite curbs should be established. Two alternatives are within scope: a low-lying curb that delineates between pedestrian and vehicle zones but effectively redesigns the street a Dutch-style Woonerf, like a pedestrian mall but vehicle-accessible; or a six-inch high curb evoking the one that existed prior to the installation of the suburban-style curb-and-gutter, retaining Coe's design as a traditional American street with vehicle and pedestrian zones placed at different elevations. There are advantages and

disadvantages to both arrangements, but it was determined that the current curb-and-gutter installed in 2005 should be removed and replaced, notwithstanding. This would require a reversal of a very recent public investment, but would also acknowledge that where mistakes are made, they should be reversed. Moreover, the haphazard installation of the curb-and-gutter makes its own case for replacement, especially at both ends of the street where its fusion with existing raised curbs on Ellicott and Main streets is sloppy, at best. The reestablishment of a curb would allow the street's re-narrowing to its historic 15-foot width, slowing vehicle speeds and reemphasizing the street's cozy, close-knit character. Whether tall or flat curbs, they would redefine the proper territory for vehicle traffic and reclaim it as a pedestrian space, its original purpose in 1889.

Establish granite markers at corners with Ellicott and Main that announce street name

Two street-width granite markers, installed at the entryways to Coe from Ellicott and Main Streets, could announce the name of Coe Place at either end of the street. A creative approach to street identification, a granite street name marker would supplement street signs, and would accomplish their task in much more place-defining and place-enhancing ways.

Designate Coe Place a local and national historic district

Coe Place is a unique urbanscape whose aesthetic, architectural and historical significance is without dispute. It should receive permanent protection from demolition, insensitive alternations and incompatible new construction. Adding it to the National Register of Historic Places would also make available needed income tax credits made available by the federal government for renovation of historic properties. Historic district protection would add certainty to the block's future, assuring home investors that complementary renovations nearby would only enhance their own, compounding the assurance that beautiful nearby homes could not legally be demolished and replaced with a blight of vacant lots, still a possibility in Coe Place's near-term future.

Target housing grants and code enforcement activities to at-risk houses

The City will aggressively focus housing assistance programs like the 50/50 Program to houses on Coe Place in poor and fair condition, currently making up roughly half the houses on the block. Abandoned homes like 19 Coe, once the home of former state attorney general Hamilton Ward, are prime candidates for substantial renovation. As the houses of Coe Place are hardly secure from the threat of demolition, it will be critical that every portion of the built environment is rescued from continued decay. Aggressive code enforcement may be required, wherever these actions do not result in recommendation for demolition.

Reclaim 40 Coe for an entryway into Artspace

40 Coe Place, a vacant parcel now used as a gravel parking space, is located strategically in a site that could be reclaimed as a stairway entrance into the rear portion of the Artspace area, where a grouping of rowhouse-style live/work units are planned. The lot serves a purpose per se, as private parking for a house on Coe Place, but will be less than its most ideal use once the Artspace project is completed. Either Artspace or the City should look into acquiring the privately-owned space so linkages can be enhanced between Artspace and the near-East Side. The potential of Artspace to positively impact Midtown will be enhanced if pedestrian traffic is diffused onto all sides of the project area, rather than only at its entrances onto Main and Northampton streets, as currently planned. A "backdoor" effect can be avoided if the lot is taken for this purpose, establishing needed connections to Coe Place where a strong and direct impact is needed.

Replace existing streetlamps and add new ones

The streetlamps of Coe Place are appropriate. They're not excessively tall and are scaled for the benefit of pedestrians, not merely automobiles that have their headlights of their own. The installation of lights like these should be encouraged all over Midtown where cobrahead lamps are more prevalent. For Coe Place, however, their number is too few and they may not be distinctive or interesting enough for a street that deserves special treatment. Public Works is encouraged to find more aesthetically-distinguished pedestrian lamps that can be installed in larger numbers on the street, ideally as many as ten over the 100-foot right-of-way. They should be capable of carrying hanging flower baskets, adding needed color to a street now devoid of a planting strip.