

See the Saw Mill River

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Buried beneath Larkin Plaza in Yonkers is the secret reason why Yonkers exists. Since ancient times the geography and the economy dictated how city streets evolved. Most cities had a purpose for their location. Rome was founded where it was the easiest place to cross the Tiber River. Paris was founded where it was the easiest place to cross the Seine. And then there's Yonkers.

Historical accounts place an Amerindian village named Nappeckamuck (rapid water settlement) near the stream called the Neperah. To the Dutch it was known as the Nepperhan River. After mills were built along its banks (river power was the first energy source for industrial America) the river was renamed the "Saw Mill River." I guess that the name "Oily-Smelly River" was too descriptive. Almost one hundred years ago in an attempt to beautify Yonkers, the last half mile of the polluted river was covered up and became that large parking lot called Larkin Plaza.

History is replete with plazas and promenades which were the result of buried architecture. In New York City, Park Avenue is as wide as it is because railroad tracks filled its breadth. When the tracks were buried, the avenue was prettified and became an exclusive address. Back to Rome, the city is festooned with piazzas that echo the foundations of Roman ruins which are so common that many such piazzas are parking lots, like Larkin Plaza. But

even a parking lot is romantic in the eternal city. One might be amazed at the Italian teenagers romancing each other on top of the parked cars in these piazzas. Then one realizes that their cars are too small to do the romancing on the inside.

Back in Yonkers, Larkin Plaza has a chance for a metamorphosis. The industrial polluters are gone and the river is cleaner. In an attempt to beautify Yonkers (sounds familiar?), some people want to dig up the past. Lead by the Saw Mill River Coalition (with developers Struever Fidelco, Capelli, LLC and the study by McLaren Engineering), they make a strong argument for "daylighting" the Saw Mill River. Once uncovered, they envision a blue river and waterfall with greenery, decks and walks surrounding it. It might become a smaller version of San Antonio's famous River Walk.

This is not bad for a little river whose big brother, the Hudson, gets all the attention.