Rust2Green Binghamton (R2GB) is a university-community partnership between Cornell University and partners in Binghamton, NY. R2GB is based on the premise that rustbelt cities like Binghamton and other areas impacted by social, economic, and/or ecological crises are not places defined by decline but reservoirs of creativity, entrepreneurship, adaptation, and resilience; and that collaborative university-community partnerships can augment these assets to build resilient and sustainable futures. R2GB’s Living with Water project leaders are Professor Shorna Allred (Cornell University) and Senior Extension Associate Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman (Cornell University), Bob Murphy (Broome County), Beth Roberts (Cornell Cooperative Extension Broome County), George Homsy (Binghamton University), and Juliet Berling and Sean McGee (City of Binghamton). The leadership team has been working to understand and advance the ways in which residents of Binghamton, NY, a rustbelt city at the confluence of two rivers that experienced catastrophic flooding in 2006 and 2011, are moving beyond rust to a resilient green future. The focus of the Living with Water project is on understanding opportunities to capitalize on the rivers as a local asset to strengthen community and economic development moving from recovery to revitalization via resiliency.

Please read on for a brief timeline of R2GB’s history and work over the years.
2013
FOUNDING OF RUST2GREEN BINGHAMTON

In 2013, with R2G Utica’s model in mind and with the goal of starting up a similar initiative in Binghamton, a sustained period of dialogue and meetings took place between Cornell and Binghamton. Faculty and staff from Cornell’s R2G and Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) met with representatives from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County, the City of Binghamton, Broome County, SUNY Binghamton, Broome Community College and the local business community, to name a few. With the assistance of CaRDI Director, Rod Howe (retired), we founded R2GB in 2013 with partners in Binghamton City government, Cooperative Extension, and Binghamton University.

In 2015, as a result of this dialogue, Rust2Green Binghamton (R2GB) was formally inaugurated as a program area of Cornell Cooperative Extension Broome County with core local leadership provided by CCE Broome (Beth Roberts), Binghamton City Hall (Robert Murphy) and SUNY Binghamton (Professor George Homsy). Like R2G Utica, R2G Binghamton is a dynamic place-based university-community partnership fostering sustainable community development and resilience in the Binghamton area.

Over the past 7 years, R2GB faculty and students have worked with diverse community partners in Binghamton (NY) on actionable community development projects and research. R2GB faculty, staff, and students have brought their research-based knowledge to the communities, where - combined with the local knowledge of Binghamton’s diverse citizenry and organizations, and insights from R2G Utica’s work - it has catalyzed constructive local action, helping propel Binghamton on a uniquely tailored pathway from rust toward greener futures and restored prosperity.

2014-2015
THE "LIVING WITH WATER" PROJECT LAUNCHES

Rust2Green Binghamton’s first project was Living with Water, which was funded by a USDA Hatch and Smith-Lever Grant and focused specifically on community flood resilience and social capital assets that enable greater resilience: dialogue, communication, decision-making, and policies. Scientists predict that climate change will change the frequency and timing of heavy rainstorms, leading to more impacts such as flooding. Flooding impacts are affecting communities across New York State and there is a need to close the gap between public flood awareness and preparedness and action.

Through narrative storytelling, Living with Water focused on working with those that have experienced flooding to tell and share their stories for the purpose of increasing post-flood learning and adaptive capacity for the future. In collaboration with Amy Somchanhmavong (Cornell University’s Public Service Center), and with the help of eleven student interns from Cornell and exchange students from Mahidol University in Bangkok, twenty-two narrative interviews with Binghamton City residents were completed. Together with other research and Extension projects, these interviews laid the groundwork for building the capacity of local government and communities to develop resilience to flooding in Binghamton.
R2GB marked the 5th and 10th anniversaries of the 2006 and 2011 floods in Binghamton with the 2016 “Living with Water” Resiliency Summit, bringing renewed attention to enhancing community flood resilience. Over 100 people representing NGO’s, local, state & federal government, local businesses, and students attended conference sessions focused on flood prediction, mitigation, response, and adaptation. The summit also included emergency preparedness training, a rivers-related arts walk, tours of a model flood-resilient school building, and a play. With thanks to financial support in the form of an Undergraduate Engaged Research Grant from Cornell’s Office of Engagement Initiatives, students were heavily involved in the summit and research shared during it. R2G Civic Fellows, Lily Moran and Dana Schmidt played a key role in organizing the summit, while R2G Civic Fellows Sam Morrison and Jacob Kuhn created a story map, drawing on R2G story circle research, and featuring video recordings of Binghamton residents talking about their flood experiences. We also published an August 2016 CaRDI Research and Policy Brief about our work, entitled, Living with Water: Integrating Community Sustainability and Resilience.

R2GB’s Fall 2016 Flood Resiliency Summit provided a venue for greater dialogue and for presenting Living with Water’s relevant research findings to date as well updates, from community partners, on progress related to flood preparedness, mitigation, and resiliency. During Summit weekend and staged for the first time, was a community play derived from Living with Water’s narrative interviews and story circles. The play, developed by a regional theater group, Civic Ensemble, highlighted the inherent tensions and complexity of issues needing addressing in pursuit of Binghamton’s flood resilience goals. R2GB’s Living with Water project grew to engage an enlarged group of actors - from academia and community - coming together out of shared interests in flood resiliency and addressing the larger constellation of issues, challenges and opportunities facing Binghamton and Upstate NY’s Rust Belt cities.
2016 was also significant because R2GB utilized theater as a way to both share important research findings and simultaneously build community, with the development of a play titled “Living with Water: Stories of the Flood”. Through the voices of characters representing members of the greater Binghamton community (including youth and elders, local government officials, emergency preparedness personnel and others), our research findings about flood experiences, including lessons learned, were shared through two readings of the play. The readings were presented as part of the Resiliency Summit and followed by discussions with the audience. An evaluation showed that the play reading helped those attending it better understand how the flood was experienced by others in their community, making the play an important venue for increasing understanding in a context that was at times contentious.
Working with R2GB core team members and Binghamton residents, 2017 R2GB CivicFellows conducted research designed to understand how Binghamton residents and visitors perceive and relate to the City’s rivers, and examine ways the rivers could play an increasingly positive role in community well-being. They also created a video entitled “Rust 2 Green: Binghamton and its Rivers” highlighting the history of Binghamton’s relationships with its rivers. In Fall 2017, the results of our research were presented during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Binghamton City Council, and a special community meeting designed to strengthen and enhance the ways Binghamton’s rivers contribute to community and economic vitality. R2G Civic Fellows also developed case studies of other communities that are living with water, conducted interviews with community members, and created a second video. By collaboratively developing and implementing a community-based survey R2GB Civic Fellows helped to support a uniquely tailored pathway from rust toward greener futures and restored prosperity in Binghamton.
2018
R2G COLLABORATIVE EVALUATION PROJECT LAUNCH

Campus and community partners affiliated with Rust2Green Binghamton, Rust2Green Utica, Cornell's Office of Engagement Initiatives and Cornell's Office for Research on Evaluation received an Engaged Cornell Grant for Faculty Research on Engagement and launched the Rust2Green Collaborative Evaluation Project, including work with 2018 R2G Civic Fellows, to examine how R2G projects in Binghamton and Utica have impacted community members and students. Shorna Allred and Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman presented via webinar to the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE). R2G project partners Bob Murphy, Beth Roberts, and Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman, traveled to Cleveland and Detroit to present about R2G at conferences of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals and the Community Development Society. "Rivers and Resiliency: How Rivers Shape Place Character and Contribute to Community Development" (August 2018) was published as part of the CaRDl Research and Policy Brief series, sharing results of R2G research on relating to sense of place in the context of flooding and community resiliency. R2G partners responded to Cornell's Design Connect request for proposals to bring the student design team to Binghamton to develop renderings for a Haudenosaunee River Trail Park.

2019
DESIGN CONNECT HAUDENOSAUNEE RIVER TRAIL PARK

The R2G project was chosen as one of Design Connect's Spring 2019 projects and Cornell students partnered with R2G core team members and Binghamton residents, via a survey, interviews, and two community outreach events, to design a park centered around Rock Bottom Dam. R2G's use of story circles and theater as a way to conduct and convey research to increase understanding of flooding and resiliency was featured as an innovative Extension model at a convening of Cornell Extension faculty and staff. The R2G Collaborative Evaluation Project continued, moving into its data collection phase. Working with Cornell instructors, Mitch Glass (City & Regional Planning) and Anne Weber (Landscape Architecture) R2G partners also provided feedback on student designs for Binghamton's water- and road-ways. One project focused on riverfront revitalization along the Susquehanna River and another on re-routing Route 363 in ways that support neighborhood revitalization and enhance riverfront access.