



The Last Undiscovered Place

David K. Leff

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With warmth and a keen eye for the nuances of history and place, David K. Leff offers this affectionate, insightful portrait of his adopted home of Collinsville, Connecticut, a village that looked perfectly ordinary until he fell prey to its rhythms and charm. The town taught him a new way of seeing his environment, and through this process he discovered what many Americans long for amid the suburban sprawl decried in James H. Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* and many other recent books: a sense of community.

When Leff began to look for a suitable place to raise a family, his criteria were familiar: an affordable fixer-upper with some historical character, pleasant neighbors, good schools, walkable streets, and attractive natural surroundings. The suburbs around Hartford were uninviting, so he settled sixteen miles away in Collinsville, a small village that grew up around—indeed was largely built by—The Collins Company, once the world's leading maker of edge tools.

Collins, which supplied the pikes for John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, went out of business in 1966, and Collinsville settled into the familiar decrepitude of many New England mill towns. In spite of its half-alive state, Leff found in its battered factory buildings and struggling main street an extraordinary place. Built before the restrictive zoning codes that today keep most Americans in their cars for hours on end, Collinsville's mixed-use center has been preserved by industrious residents and a hilly topography marked by the presence of the Farmington River, which once drove the mill. The landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. lived here at a time when Samuel Collins, the socially minded founder of the company, was laying out his ideal village for workers and managers.

Leff feels Olmsted's presence as he walks the village's uneven streets, often in the company of his children, musing on its history, politics, and architecture. Living at the center of Collins's creation years later, Leff has come to believe, like Olmsted, that human beings are deeply affected by their experience of landscape, and that local interaction—between parents and teachers, store owners and customers, bar regulars and volunteer firefighters—matters. *The Last Undiscovered Place* argues quietly but forcefully for looking at our landscapes more carefully, as Leff strives for a metaphorical Collinsville that can serve as a way to rediscover other places, those that already exist and those that are still on the drawing boards of developers and planners.

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