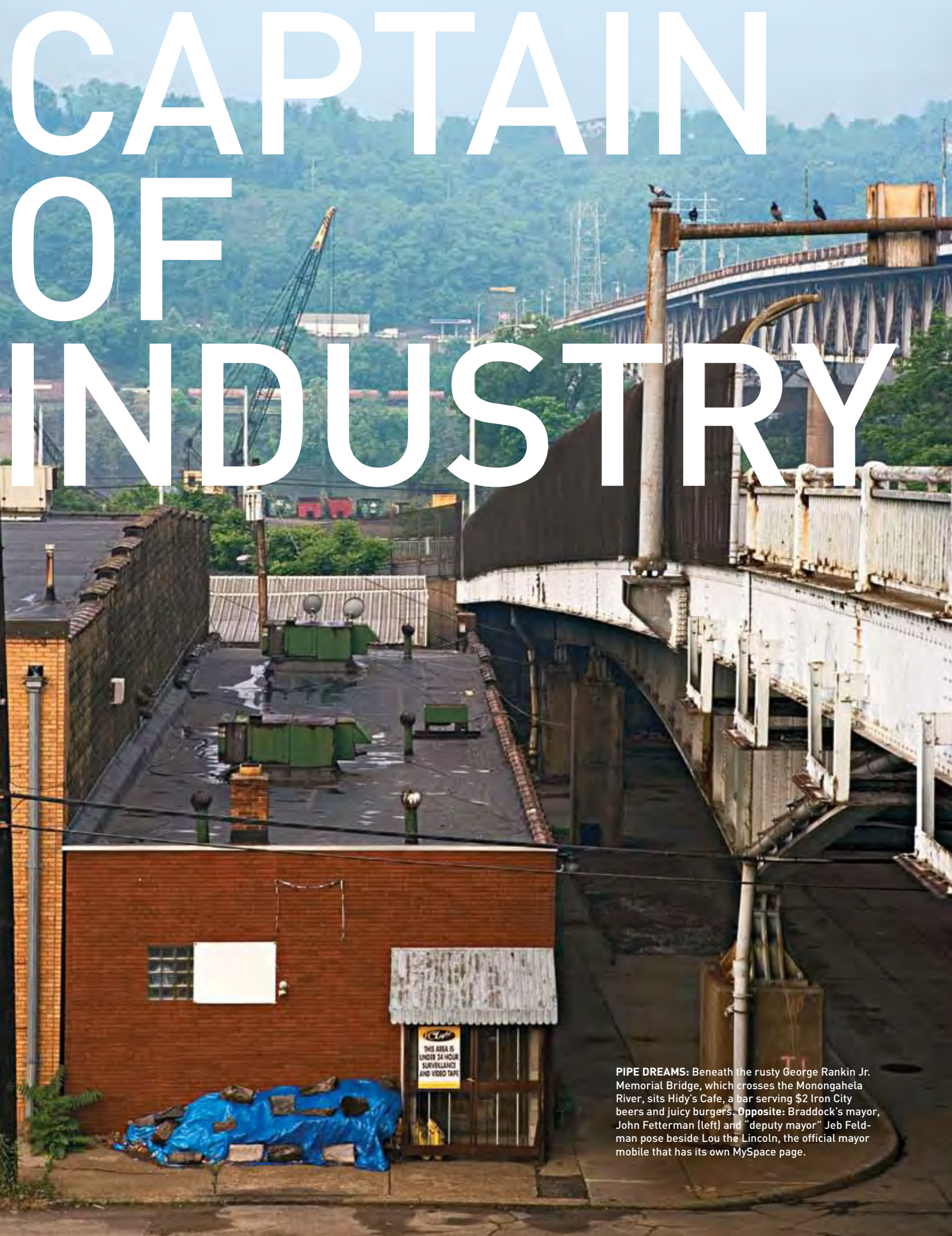


CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY

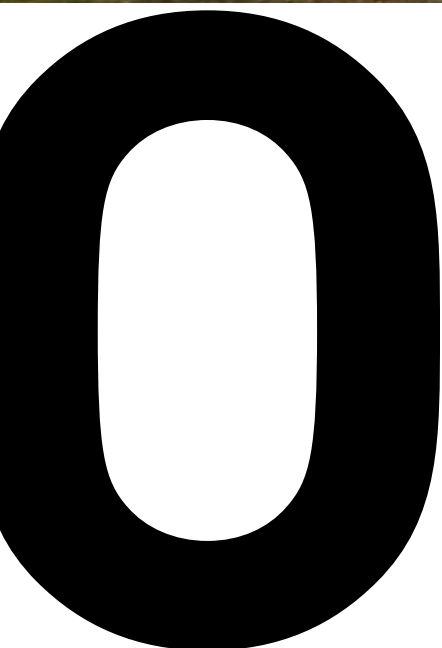


PIPE DREAMS: Beneath the rusty George Rankin Jr. Memorial Bridge, which crosses the Monongahela River, sits Hidy's Cafe, a bar serving \$2 Iron City beers and juicy burgers. **Opposite:** Braddock's mayor, John Fetterman (left) and "deputy mayor" Jeb Feldman pose beside Lou the Lincoln, the official mayor mobile that has its own MySpace page.

A photograph of a man in a dark short-sleeved shirt and blue jeans leaning against the rear of a white classic Chevrolet Camaro. The car has a Pennsylvania license plate that reads "15104" and "AVENUE MOTOR CO." below it. In the background, another man in a green shirt and baseball cap leans on the roof of the car. They are in front of a dark brick building with two windows that have broken glass and a door with graffiti. The building is partially covered in ivy.

ONE MAN'S MISSION TO SAVE BRADDOCK, PENNSYLVANIA

BY JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN
PHOTOS BRYAN GOULART



On a bright spring morning, finding John Fetterman, the six-foot-eight, 300-pound mayor of Braddock, Pennsylvania, is surprisingly tricky. Calling his office or swinging by his cinder-block home will prove fruitless. Instead, the elusive mayor is standing knee-deep in black roof shingles ripped from a home he's remodeling.

"If I'm not getting dirty, I'm not doing my job. Wearing a suit and tie doesn't work for me," says the 37-year-old Fetterman,

whose cue-ball skull, bristly goatee, and left-forearm tattoo of Braddock's zip code, 15104, look better suited to the World Wrestling Federation than elected office. That is, elected office anywhere but Braddock.

In the 1920s, this Pennsylvania town located 20 minutes outside Pittsburgh was a booming steel-making hamlet of 20,000 crammed into a square half-mile. Braddock was more densely populated than modern-day Brooklyn. Its riches included Andrew Carnegie's first steel factory and free library, and lively Braddock Avenue was a shop-

ping destination where couples caught dinner and a movie. "I wish I could go back in time to see how bustling this town once was," Fetterman says wistfully.

When the steel industry collapsed in the 1970s, it caused a chain reaction: Longtime residents employed by the mills skipped town in search of work, causing other businesses to falter. In came gangs like the Crips, who unofficially renamed Braddock Braddocc in graffiti around town. Today, fewer than 3,000 people live here. Braddock Avenue looks tornado-battered, with its charred, windowless, half-collapsed storefronts and the odd pawn shop, bar, or doughnut luncheonette barely clinging to solvency. More than 300 buildings are slated for demolition, and when structures aren't disappearing, people are: 2005 saw 16 murders in Braddock and neighboring North Braddock.

"It's hard to find a town that has tanked as severely and completely," says Fetterman, who became mayor in 2005—winning by one vote. He beat the incumbent despite never having held public office. Because Braddock is a borough, his powers are limited (managing police, mostly) and

CITY OF DREAMS: Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill (above), the Edgar Thomson Steel Works, has operated since 1875. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Fetterman and his crew of family and friends in a house they're renovating; the main room of the First Presbyterian Church, which Fetterman turned into an art gallery and event space; Fetterman's cinder-block art gallery and home is an exercise in reuse, topped with two shipping containers; the Hotel Puhala bar, one of the few establishments remaining open on Braddock's main drag.





his pay a pauper's wage (about \$150 monthly). Nonetheless, Fetterman's ambition and optimism are limitless.

Where some see another terminally ill industrial city, Fetterman envisions a stage for experimental urbanism, a concept that emphasizes communal living, urban gardens, and an active arts scene, all glued together with do-it-yourself sweat equity.

"Destruction breeds creation; create amidst destruction," says the mayor, gazing at the smokestacks of Edgar Thomson Steel Works, whose 40-foot flames periodically lick the night sky. "We're in the Wild West here."

Fetterman came to Braddock in 2001 to launch a program helping disenfranchised kids get their GEDs—"the very people who eventually voted me [in as] mayor," says Fetterman, who graduated from Harvard with a master's degree in public policy and economics. Enamored of the town's "malignant beauty," which sees ivy crawling up crumbling buildings splashed with vibrant graffiti, he relocated permanently in 2004.

Planting his flag on centrally located Library Street—lent its name by the still-operating Carnegie Library—Fetterman bought the empty, stained glass-decorated First Presbyterian Church "for what storage closets cost in Manhattan": \$50,000. He squatted in the icy basement for eight months before moving into an adjacent warehouse (which he topped with two 50-foot shipping containers for extra living space). The lofty quarters are outfitted with stainless-steel countertops, salvaged-tin ceilings, and black-and-white pictures of dilapidated Braddock buildings that have been demolished. The first floor is home to Dorothy 6, an art gallery named after a famous steel factory's blast furnace. (Street artist Swoon held an exhibit here last spring, and her ethereal paper cutouts remain wheat-pasted around town.)

In due time, Fetterman snagged and fixed up several more homes. "The opportunity to reclaim old spaces is like a drug for me," he says. Houses can

going to be renovating this house,' and I have my permit," says Fetterman.

During this hot May day, he and Feldman, along with Fetterman's sister, Kristin, and her carpenter boyfriend, are renovating a brick home near the steel plant that has wood floors and ornate molding. Everyone's chipping in, hoisting large sheets of plywood onto the roof. Their goal is to create a communal space for creative types (or anyone, really), who will pay dues of about \$50 a month and tend to a backyard vegetable garden. Kristin and her boyfriend will be tenants.

"We're amazed by how far John has come—and we wanted to be a part of it," says Kristin, an artist who was priced out of Portland, Oregon.

But you can't build a town on family alone. Only an influx of new business can create an economic base. To that end, Fetterman is pitching Braddock as an ideal location for startups. Fossil Free Fuels, which outfits cars with vegetable-oil energy systems, recently moved into a former electronics store. Co-owners Colin Huwyler and David Rosenstraus were drawn to Braddock's big-city proximity, cheap rent (\$890 per month), and Fetterman's added-value sell. "John went above and beyond to get us to Braddock," says Huwyler of the mayor, who offered the twosome rent-free lodgings for a year.

Locals are more cautiously optimistic about Fetterman's plans for Braddock. "It's difficult to change people's minds about what the town can be, that it can be something again," says Vicki Vargo, executive director of the Carnegie Library.

Mark Mattis, who has tended bar at local dive Hotel Puhala for nearly 20 years, wishes Fetterman well, but echoes Vargo's skepticism. "He's got a long, hard road to bring Braddock back."

Fetterman, for all his efforts, knows he can't spruce up every home on his own dime. In the long-term, his municipal uplift will require outside creative and economic capital. So, along with hands-on projects, the


mayor's days are spent as Braddock's ambassador. "We need to get people excited about living in Braddock again," he says. "For DIY-ers, this town is a dream." On a typical day, he'll meet clothing

designers and museum honchos interested in what Braddock has to offer. The attention is mostly regional, spurred by articles in local newspapers, the town's informative website, and Feldman's outreach lectures.

Fetterman is loath to call such efforts a "gentrification initiative," though. He encourages new business, sure, but he also hosts dance parties and family reunions, plants gardens and trees, and has watched crime drop from 16 to four homicides since he assumed office. Though he doesn't take credit for the decrease, the date of each murder is tattooed on his right forearm. Despite Fetterman's commitment to community building, he still butts heads with the Borough Council. The six-person governing body, which wields Braddock's governmental power, appreciates what he's accomplished yet would rather he concentrate on mayoral duties and attend monthly council meetings. They accuse Fetterman of being "aloof" and "in a world of his own."

"We're not bowling buddies," the mayor allows.

With no previous civics experience, Fetterman has no hard-and-fast rules for Braddock's future, or even a master plan. He knows the city will never again be an industrial powerhouse, but he hopes it will continue forth as an ever-evolving test case.

"Braddock is big enough to matter, but small enough where we can see our initiatives' outcomes. If they don't work, we'll try something else," he says. "I'm nothing but a third-rate mayor, but I'm doing everything a third-rate mayor can for Braddock." 

"WE NEED TO GET PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT LIVING IN BRADDOCK AGAIN. FOR DIY-ERS THIS TOWN IS A DREAM."

be bought for \$10,000, a trifle compared with the average \$160,000 for a three-bedroom home in Pittsburgh. It's fortunate the mayor is interested, because "nobody else wants to live here," jokes Jeb Feldman, Fetterman's honorific "deputy mayor" and right-hand man.

But how can Feldman and Fetterman entice a new generation to this crumbling city? Space and cheap rent, for one—irresistible lures for artists who often can't afford to live in better-appointed urban enclaves. The mayor has already provided free studios in an empty, eight-story furniture warehouse to photographers and painters (the building was unused, and the owner allowed Fetterman to donate the space). The church became a free-to-all community center, recently holding avant-garde events, art shows, and all-night dance parties attracting partygoers from throughout the Pittsburgh region.

"I control the police department, so people don't need to navigate a Byzantine maze of red tape to throw events," says Fetterman with a laugh. Securing building permits is also a snap. "I just call up my guy and say, 'Hey, I'm

FIXER-UPPER: Clockwise, from top left: Part of a site-specific installation the street artist Swoon created for Dorothy 6, Fetterman's art gallery; Fossil Free Fuel, which converts diesel engines into biodiesel burners, is one of the first new businesses Fetterman lured to Braddock; the Braddock Carnegie Library—which was built by the philanthropist in 1889 and once contained a bowling alley, swimming pool, and music hall—was slated for demolition until a librarian formed a do-gooder committee that bought the building for \$1; the library's soaring gymnasium was recently restored.