

*“ . . . walk down the hillside, towards the quiet streets and houses of Galloway’s suburbs—you will hear the river’s ever-soughing rush—and pass beneath the leafy trees, the street-lamps, along the grass yards and the dark porches, the wooden fences. Somewhere at the end of the street there’s a light, and intersections leading to the three bridges of Galloway that bring you into the heart of the town itself and to the shadow of the mill walls. Follow along to the center of town, the Square, where at noon everybody knows everybody else.”*

Aside from the name Galloway, Jack Kerouac does little to disguise his native Lowell in his largely autobiographical debut novel, *The Town and the City*. Yet, reading its pages, one can’t help but reflect upon how much the city has changed from the time of Kerouac’s youth, when “at ten o’clock, the women [came] in armies, with shopping bags, their children trailing alongside,” to a downtown holding “the five-and-ten, the two or three department stores, the groceries and soda fountains and drug stores, the bars, the movie theaters. . .”

In many ways, the story of Lowell’s transformation from a bustling mill-town to something quite different parallels the evolution of American early industrial cities through the second half of the 20th Century. Yet, visiting these places, it becomes clear that Lowell has fared far better than most. Today, first time visitors to the downtown remark upon the impressive collection of well-preserved historic buildings—not only mills—the unique canal system, and the healthy diversity of downtown activity and population. For the first time in perhaps fifty years, Lowell does not feel like a city that has seen better times.

Yet Lowell’s downtown is still a work in progress. Sitcom-worthy coffee houses thrive next door to near-condemnable junk storage. Impeccably restored gilded-age buildings lack upstairs tenants. A first-rate sports arena sits on an empty traffic circle. Canals and rivers meet at an historic basin flanked by blank walls and parking lots. Like a polished stone, the downtown has achieved enough of a luster for the surface flaws to be visible.

Correcting these flaws, and allowing the result to reach its full potential, is the purpose of this document. It is called an Evolution Plan because so much



*Merrimack Street in Jack Kerouac’s Day*

has already been accomplished, and so much care already lavished on this important urban landmark, that there is no need to start afresh. Yet, as will become clear, there is much to be done, from addressing the fundamentals of traffic circulation, to mitigating the errors of urban renewal, to finding uses for key “missing teeth,” to building more complete neighborhoods at the downtown’s edge. Some of these opportunities can be seized immediately, while others will take years or even decades to achieve. As with the creation of the

Lowell National Historic Park, the most transformative proposals take time. That is why we plan.

This document is intended to shape the short- and long-term future of downtown Lowell by bringing national city-planning best practices into contact with the unique landscape, history, and culture that have contributed immeasurably to the city’s more recent success. It is presented with confidence that Lowell can become even more vital and cosmopolitan while remaining a place where “at noon everybody knows everybody else.”

## The Process

Cities are the largest, most complex things that humans make. Planning them properly is necessarily a tremendously complicated task, one that requires both an outsider’s objectivity and a local’s knowledge of facts on the ground. In an attempt to meet both of these mutually exclusive criteria, the consultant team made use of an experimental process in which the lead planner moved to Lowell with his family for a full month of “urban immersion” within the study area. Living in a converted mill building with an expecting wife, a toddler, and no car, Jeff Speck did his best to develop a first-hand knowledge of the conditions facing Lowell’s growing number of downtown residents. His constant presence also facilitated an ongoing schedule of not only meetings and site visits, but also coffees, dinners, and drinks with local homeowners, businesspeople, and community advocates.

This immersion process took place in April of 2010, in the early stages of a nine-month planning effort that included regular Steering Committee meetings and ongoing interface with key City officials and

# Introduction



*Field study at Arthur's Paradise Diner.*

planning staff. Public input was collected after an open lecture and subsequently on the City Manager's blog, where dozens of downtown residents and workers left thoughtful comments. It is hoped that the plan presented here adequately communicates the great degree to which it was influenced by Lowellians. Many of its best ideas are homegrown.

## Past Efforts

This Plan is built atop a foundation of skillful planning efforts that have already taken place in Lowell, including (but not limited to) the following five key documents:

- Hamilton Canal District Master Plan (2008)
- City of Lowell Comprehensive Master Plan (2003)
- ULI Advisory Services Panel Report (2003)
- Lowell Downtown Plan (2001)
- Lowell Historic Preservation Committee Preservation Plan (1980)

A number of the proposals presented ahead grow directly out of ideas found in those documents, especially the 2001 Downtown Plan. Several other proposals come from local "plans" that were never written down, but which have achieved a certain momentum based on their own irrepressible logic or—one hopes—sheer inevitability.

## Purpose of this Plan

This document was created for no less ambitious a purpose than to bring the downtown to its full potential and, in so doing, to lift Lowell into the top rank of American cities known for their livability and tourist draw. This goal is achieved through a variety of measures that can be categorized as first ameliorative, second strategic, third physical, and ultimately visionary.

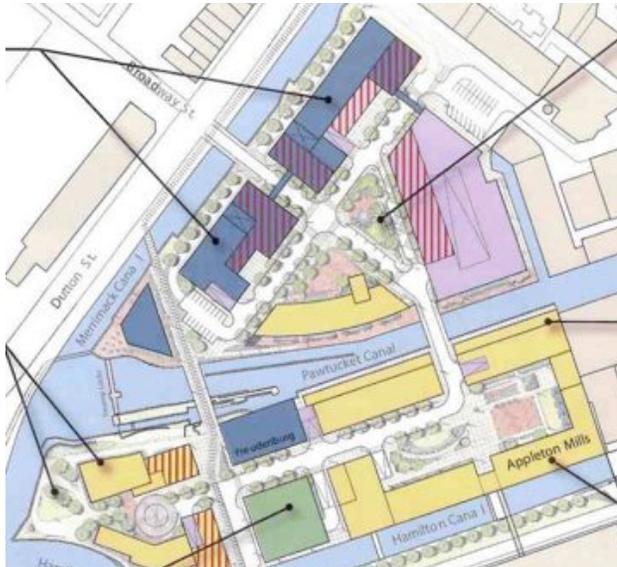
The ameliorative measures are about fixing problems, principally the downtown's confusing one-way street network, which frustrates drivers, shuns bicyclists, and

often endangers pedestrians. Other challenges in need of attention include an inadequate downtown High School facility and an unnecessary feeling of disconnection among key downtown anchors including the Tsongas Center and LeLacheur Park.

The strategic opportunities focus on past or future investments that can be put to better use in service of the downtown. These include, most obviously, the opportunity for a comprehensive downtown streetcar and, more subtly, the vast untapped development potential that still exists in the guise of the City's five downtown parking structures.

The physical proposals pertain to certain key properties that are unused, underutilized, or currently designed in a way that they detract from the livability of the downtown. Some of these sites can be developed quickly, while others must wait until a current structure outlasts its productive life. In either case, it is essential to have a plan in place—ideally permitted as-of-right—that shows the proper reuse of each property. This effort was inspired by the Hamilton Canal District Plan, in which an entire sector of the city was given a complete plan, to be accomplished over many years, but fully zoned today. If an abandoned brown-field can benefit from such a regime of pre-planning and permitting, why shouldn't the same process be completed for the most important empty sites in the heart of the downtown?

Finally, this plan's visionary proposals are also aimed at underutilized sites, but they intentionally step beyond the currently achievable to propose the sort of transformative developments that can fundamentally alter the experience of a city as well as its reputation. These proposals are typically expensive and politically



*The plan for the Hamilton Canal District pre-permits buildings of a designated footprint and height. The same process can be accomplished for individual sites downtown.*

challenging but, like the creation of Lowell’s National Park, they cannot ever happen unless they are first planned. For this reason, this Plan does not stop short of making several proposals—most elaborately for the Lower Locks area—that are as promising as they are unlikely.

## Organization of this Plan

The Table of Contents describes a Plan organization that moves from the mundane to the exotic, and from the present to the future. First, because planning addresses not only design but also land use, **Chapter 1** considers all of the principal activities in the downtown, and makes suggestions about how each can be optimized to the benefit of the whole. Because cities live and die by their transportation systems, **Chapters 2 through 7** address the downtown’s streets, transit, parking, pedestrian and bicycling facilities, with specific proposals for improving the current street system.

**Chapter 8** describes the “urban triage” process by which the downtown’s “network of walkability” is determined based upon its current viability and the need to connect important anchors. It is the gaps within this network that then become the proposed design interventions discussed in **Chapters 9 through 13**. These are separated, somewhat artificially, into Short-Term, Mid-Term and Long-Term Interventions. Then two discussions demand enough attention to merit their own chapters: Lowell High School, and the proposal for the Lower Locks. **A final chapter** on implementation describes next steps.

# Introduction

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This effort was directed by the Downtown Evolution Plan Steering Committee, created for this purpose, which donated many hours of thoughtful attention and leadership to the project. The Steering Committee membership was as follows:

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## Introduction

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**Frank Thoms**, downtown Lowell resident

**Kendall Wallace**, Chairman of the Board, The SUN

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