

# Recommended Short-Term Interventions

The eight proposed interventions that follow can all be accomplished in the short term if significant will is brought to bear. In planning vocabulary, “short term” generally refers to five years or less, which in the chronology of the city is a blink of the eye. However, some of these projects could be completed within a year or two if begun quickly.

The eight short-term interventions are:

1. The Missing Tooth on Merrimack & Middle
2. The Tsongas Center Area: Riverplace Center
3. The Suffolk Street Canalway
4. The Moody/Merrimack Connection
5. MCC Quad



## 9.1 The Missing Tooth on Merrimack & Middle



*One large empty lot interrupts the healthy urban fabric of the historic core.*

Lowell is blessed with a remarkably intact historic downtown core centered upon Merrimack and Market streets. This core only has one significant “missing tooth,” and it is in a key location on the path from Kearney Square to City Hall. A decorated wooden fence makes the most of this unfortunate situation, but fails to give activity or interest to the sidewalk. Similarly, the opposite edge of this block, occupied by a surface parking lot, provides a weak edge to an otherwise well-shaped Middle Street.

Owned by the National Park Service and adjacent to Enterprise Bank’s offices in Old City Hall, this site is desired by the Bank for a contemplated expansion, and conversations have already begun on how to make its redevelopment possible. The simplest approach may involve the National Park Service selling the site to the Bank, which, as they say, would take an act of Congress—literally. But such an act is achievable over time and—if deemed the most expeditious path—needs to be initiated as quickly as possible. This effort could potentially comprise part of an omnibus bill that allows NPS to also divest of key properties that are needed for the ongoing Hamilton

Canal Project to be completed as well.

Enterprise Bank’s immediate needs for the site are limited: a large new building and guest parking for short-term visitors. There is interest in recreating along Merrimack Street the high quality urbanism of the original 19th-century development, which placed three party-wall

buildings to the west of the Bank’s building, the former Lowell City Hall. A small passageway originally traversed the block in the same location where one exists today.

The intervention proposed for this site places a single large building against Merrimack Street, with a façade that can be articulated as three smaller buildings if



*The proposed building lines Merrimack Street, while a reconfigured parking lot allows trees and a decorative wall along Middle Street.*

## The Missing Tooth on Merrimack & Middle

desired. This new structure would be an ideally-located home for new Enterprise Bank offices and, barring federal red tape, could be imagined as being built quite soon. This new building would place the majority of its parking in the nearby Roy Garage on Market Street, which has 300 spaces available most days.

A solution is also needed for Middle Street, where the sidewalk is interrupted by several curb cuts into the



*In this drawing of historic conditions, the three center buildings are the ones that have been lost.*



*Proposed three-part massing on Merrimack echoes the block's original architecture, while a decorative wall provides a much-needed edge to Middle Street.*

surface parking lot, and where an essentially transparent fence fails to shield the parking lot from the sidewalk. In the long term, this parking lot is available as a building site, but since there is no likely tenant at this time, it should be reconfigured to continue the existing pedestrian path through the block while eliminating one of the two curb cuts on Middle Street.

The parking lot's thin fence should be replaced by a wall, ideally 4' to 5' tall. At this height, it would largely obscure the lot from the street while still allowing it to be supervised from the sidewalk for safety. With an artful design—and perhaps with the participation of a local sculptor or metalwork artist—this wall could even add some character to the street. Ideally it would also contain planters, with draped greenery along the sidewalk.

This reconfiguration of the parking lot allows it to pull back slightly from Middle Street in order to insert a row of trees overhanging the treeless sidewalk. This design also places trees along the mid-block alley, for a more humane parking lot experience.

In the long run, if no use for this site persists for many years, the site's owners may wish to consider construction of a thin lot-liner building along Middle Street, of the type described ahead in intervention 9.3.

## 9.2 The Tsongas Center Area: Riverplace Center



*River Place provides prominent access to the Riverwalk, but it is flanked by two unattractive parking lots.*

As will be discussed in point 10.1 ahead, one of the more promising opportunities downtown is the transformation of Cox Circle from a traffic rotary into a lively urban place. A key site on this Circle, just across Tsongas Way from the arena, is the block referred to as the Police Lot, which was renamed Riverplace Center in the 2001 Downtown Plan. The University is currently reaching out to private developers for proposals to redevelop this block, which has the potential to dramatically improve the surrounding public spaces of Cox Circle, River Place, and the riverwalk.

First, along Cox Circle, it is essential that a building of significant height—perhaps five stories—line the curving sidewalk edge, giving shape to the Circle. A hotel has been discussed for this site, and it is hard to imagine a better location, on a significant public space next to the Tsongas Center. Next, as development

heads further north on this block, it has the opportunity to also improve the unsatisfactory condition of River Place as it approaches the Riverwalk.

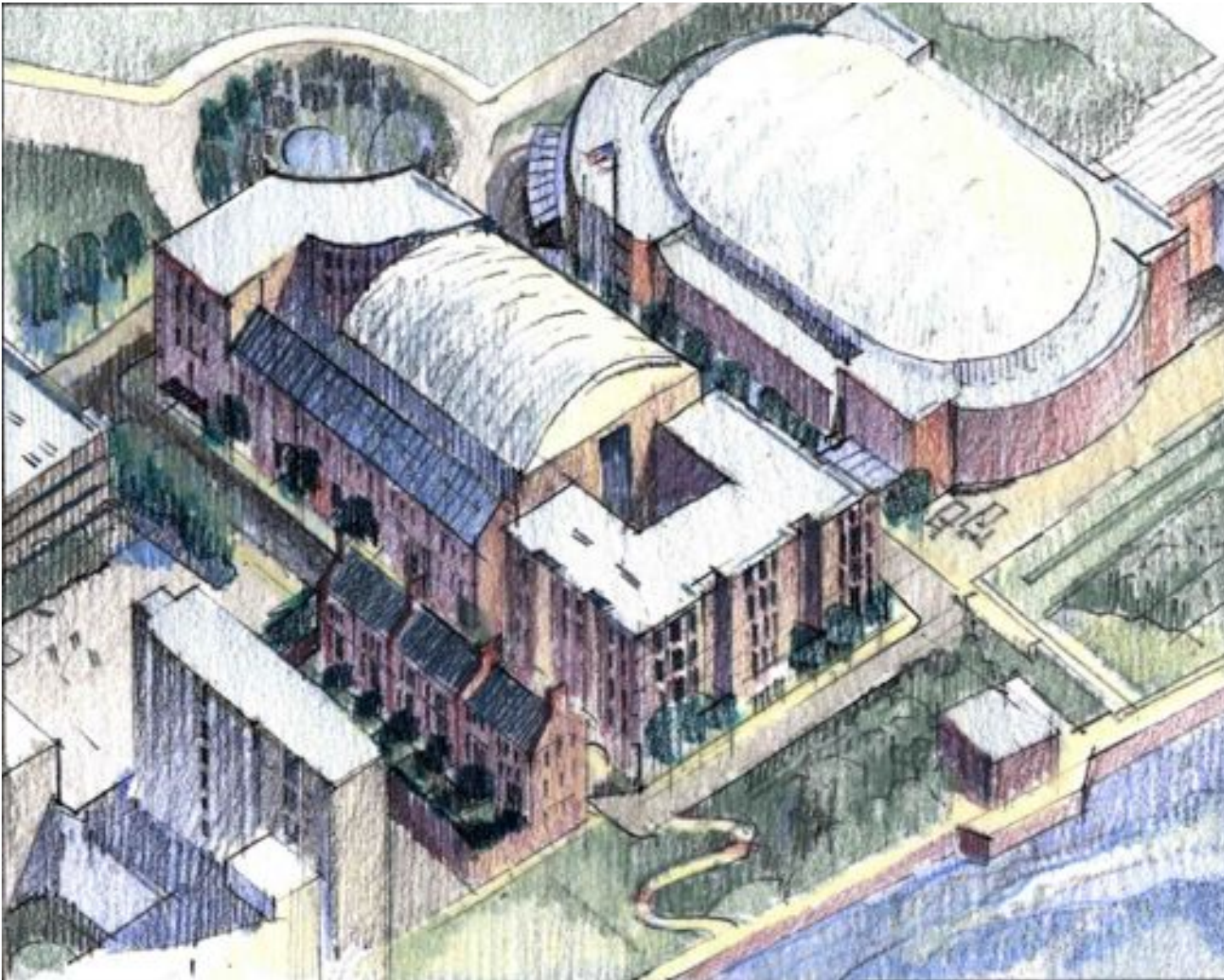
Located between this block and the River Place Towers parking lot, this street terminates on a lovely little park granting access to the riverfront. Unfortunately, both sides of the street present surface parking lots that contribute to an uninviting walk. This circumstance is fairly easily remedied, by lining those sidewalks with building faces. Finally, the introduction of a new drive connecting River Place to Tsongas Way creates an opportunity to expand the existing park, creating a prominent waterfront address and a short riverfront drive.

The proposed plan shows this new waterfront drive, and its use as a location



*Complete development of this UMass block puts rowhouses on both sides of River Place, and new apartments face an expanded park.*

## The Tsongas Center Area: Riverplace Center



for an apartment building or offices surrounding a square courtyard. This building's parking load can be handled in a new structure located at the center of the block, which also provides parking for the block's other uses, including new rowhouses that hide the parking lot from River Place. As suggested in the 2001 Downtown Master Plan, a garage in this location could put on its roof a practice ice rink, making the Tsongas Center a more versatile venue.

Finally, across River Place, eight new rowhouses face the sidewalk behind the existing evergreens, displacing about fifty parking spaces, which can be relocated either in the new lot or in the Ayotte Garage nearby. A limited number of residents would be asked to trade surface parking spaces for sheltered parking spaces, something that would seem easy enough to negotiate with City assistance.

One of the hidden gems of this area is the lovely terraced park located behind the Tsongas Center. Expanding the existing River Place green to the west would connect it to this asset in a continuous waterfront park. An existing wastewater pump station, if hidden behind evergreens, would not detract from this powerful amenity.

*A midblock parking deck supports the second sheet of ice that UMass needs for the Tsongas Center.*

## 9.3 The Suffolk Street Canalway



*A high wall separates Suffolk Street from its Canalway, while a parking lot provides a weak opposite edge.*

As the National Park Service continues its renovation of downtown Lowell's canal and Canalway system, it is becoming increasingly evident how the canals provide an attractive alternative path through the city, and how they might over time begin to serve greater numbers of pedestrians. One key canal-side route is along the Western Canal from the Acre to the Merrimack River, where it connects a large population center to the amenities of the Riverwalk, the Tsongas Center, and LeLacheur Park. Unfortunately, this route loses its walkable character in the stretch between Father Morrisette Boulevard and Hall Street, where it sits unsupervised, sandwiched between a tall brick wall and a massive parking lot.

Each of these conditions is easy to fix. The wall can inexpensively be lowered to 2' to 3' in height, where

it will no longer cut off the Canalway from the Wannalancit Mills. This move, in one fell swoop, would give the canal a much-needed active western edge, and turn the eastern mill buildings into a waterfront location.

The parking lot edge requires a slightly more skillful intervention if the number of parking spaces is to remain the same. That intervention is called a Lot-Liner Building, and it consists of a thin row of apartments that sit atop parking, much in the manner of a row of garage-top granny-flats.

These buildings are inexpensive—stick-built, and give an occupied edge (and supervision) to public spaces that would otherwise lack spatial definition and activity. They are not likely a big money-maker for their developer, but with limited City assistance—perhaps in association with an attainable housing program—they can be built in a way that rental revenues cover the mortgage. It is recommended that the City issue an RFP for a developer to build these structures, to whom it would cede (through



*A removed or shortened wall integrates these spaces, while thin Lot-Liner buildings hold the eastern edge.*

# The Suffolk Street Canalway

a 99-year lease) the air rights and limited ground area necessary to construct Lot Liners on this important Canalway edge.

Finally, it should be noted that the axis of Suffolk Street terminates at the vacant Lawrence Manufacturing Counting House. The owner of this building would like to see it sold, and UMass Lowell is considering its acquisition, perhaps for renovation into the University's faculty club. It certainly seems to be an ideal building in an ideal location for such a use, with waterfalls, spectacular views, and adjacency to the Tsongas Center and its park. This development should be encouraged.



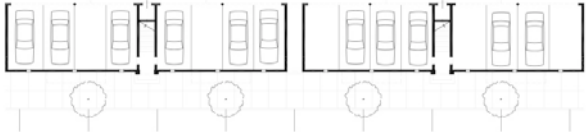
*The former Lawrence Manufacturing Counting House terminates views down Suffolk street and is ideally situated for an institutional use.*



FRONT ELEVATION



SECOND FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

*A typical lot-liner building places apartments above cars without significantly reducing parking supply. (Design by Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co.)*

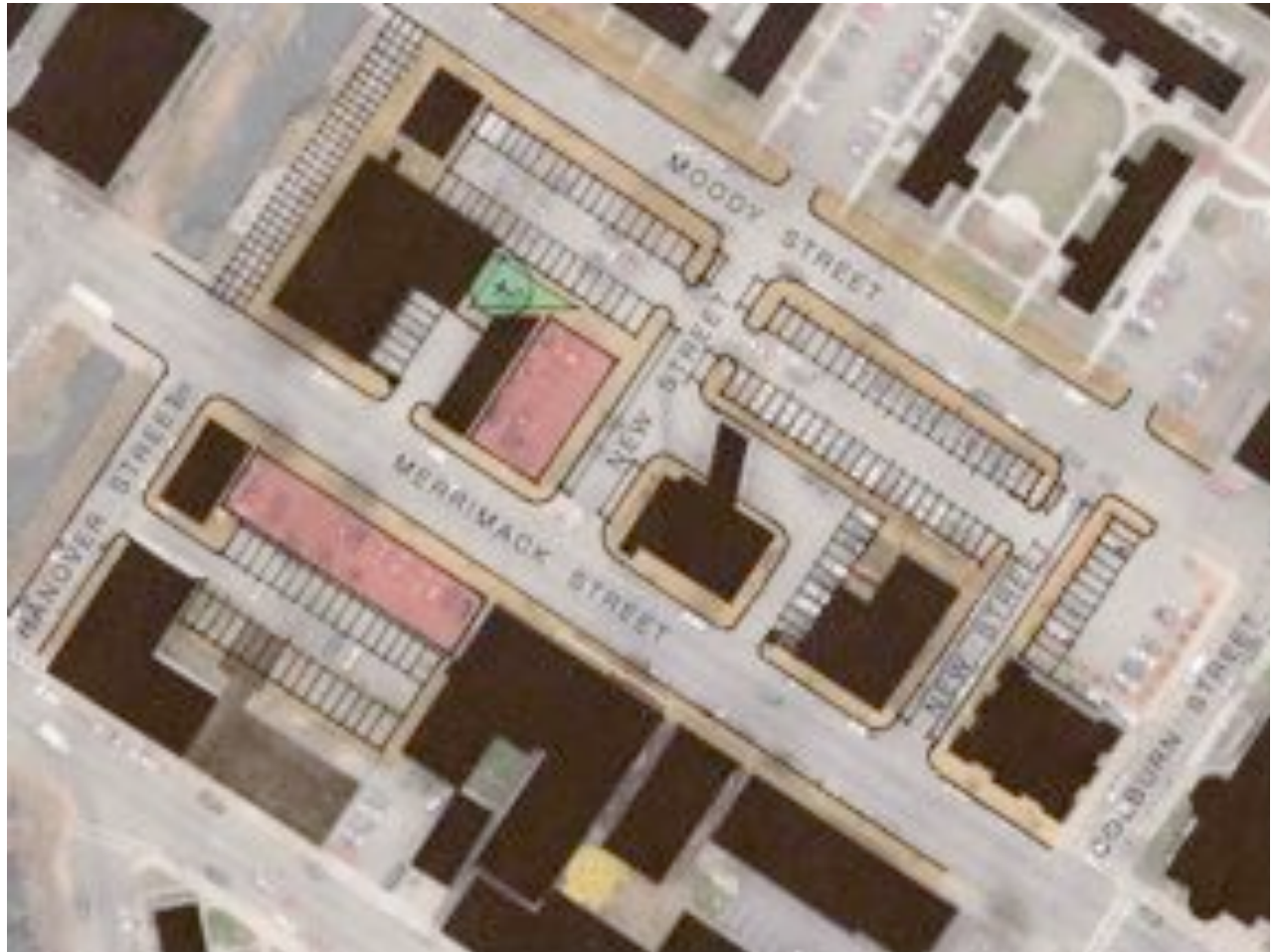
## 9.4 The Moody/Merrimack Connection



*Few cities have a downtown block as long as the one between Moody, Merrimack, Cabot, and Colburn.*

One powerful indicator of—and contributor to—walkability is small blocks. Generally speaking, the most pedestrian-friendly cities, like Portland and New Orleans, have smaller blocks, while the least walkable ones, like Salt Lake City and Scottsdale, have larger blocks. Within older cities with once-intimate street networks, one typically finds the least pedestrians in those places where streets have been snipped to create mega-blocks. Ironically, many of these street closures were done for pedestrian convenience, in ignorance of the fact that most pedestrians don't feel safe without cars moving slowly by.

In other words, cars are still the lifeblood of the city, and the streets are its veins and arteries. When the urban renewal team—a.k.a. highway planners—turned their attention in the 1960s to Lowell's civic center,



*This minor intervention improves neighborhood connectivity and designates priority building sites on Merrimack.*

they created a number of such mega-blocks, only one of which seems currently fixable: the very long rectangle bounded by Merrimack, Moody, Cabot and Colburn Streets. This block is even more of a no-flow lagoon than the map would suggest, as Colburn Street

is one-way-out from Moody, further limiting access.

A number of small interventions can quickly improve the activity in this area. First, just west of Colburn Street is a parking lot entrance that would become the



## The Moody/Merrimack Connection

second half of a one-way street pair if it were allowed to continue through to Moody. Experienced visitors currently use it in this way, but are forced to snake through a parking lot. Second, another cross street can be inserted through the parking lots just west of Sovereign Bank, turning that bank's better side façade into a front. This second street may take longer to accomplish—and thus should not delay the execution of the first street—but it would significantly improve the function of this neighborhood. The proposal be-



*Before the super-blocking of the JFK Plaza, Moody and Merrimack Streets originally met at the triangle in front of City Hall.*

low shows both of these new streets, and also rationalizes the parking lots through the length of the block. Although not shown at the scale of the drawing, all new streets should be planted with trees, as consistently spaced as possible.

Interestingly, these lots could potentially hold a future parking structure which, being only one-bay deep, would require a spiral end ramp. Such a structure

would need to sit above an occupied ground floor, and allow the new mid-block street to pass through it. Of course, whether future parking structures are desirable remains in question.

These changes delicately introduce a more intimate street network to the area. The proposal also shows the missing teeth that need to be filled to create a consistent street-wall along the important westward axis of Merrimack Street. Improving these frontages will help draw pedestrians west into the adjoining neighborhood, which includes the important potential redevelopment site of Lowell Community Health Center, just across the Western Canal.

The reconfiguration of these parking lots and the construction of these buildings will require a small amount of horse trading among the various property owners and the City, which should expedite the process by pre-permitting the outcome shown here and brokering any exchange.

A final note: this study area abuts a largely unheralded jewel in downtown Lowell, the Smith Baker Center on Merrimack Street. It is a unique asset, and plans for its redevelopment should receive special attention and support.

## 9.5 MCC Quad



*A surface parking provides a weak edge to East Merrimack Street and presents a less than ideal setting for Middlesex Community College.*

A final short-term opportunity of great promise lies in the hands of Middlesex Community College. This opportunity was created when MCC acquired the Federal Building across the street from its current campus center in the former Wang training facility. These two buildings together occupy what is essentially an island in the heart of downtown, an island that can now be re-imagined—and indeed re-branded—as a full-fledged college campus.

This campus is located in a key area for downtown walkability, along the path connecting dinner in the historic center to events at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium, a path that many now choose to drive rather than walk. They make this choice in part due to MCC's exposed parking lot in front of the Wang building, which also interrupts the walk from the Lower Locks Garage to downtown.

This parking lot, like all parking lots, is useful. But it is

also unnecessary, with the Lower Locks Garage close at hand, and ample opportunities for visitor drop-off at the curb and also behind the federal building. Those few college employees lucky enough to hold reserved spaces in this lot—an administrative *Who's Who*—are the ones who have the most to gain from its transformation into a dignified campus green befitting a civic institution.

The College has already applied to the State of Massachusetts for funds to make this parking lot safer for pedestrians, and it can be said unequivocally that no other strategy holds more promise in this regard than removing the cars. But, perhaps more significantly, a properly designed campus green in this location, enfronting the two principal MCC buildings, would give the College a presence in the city that it currently lacks, improving student quality of life and creating a brand that could be used to attract higher enrollments.



*A new campus green creates a safer and suitably academic environment.*

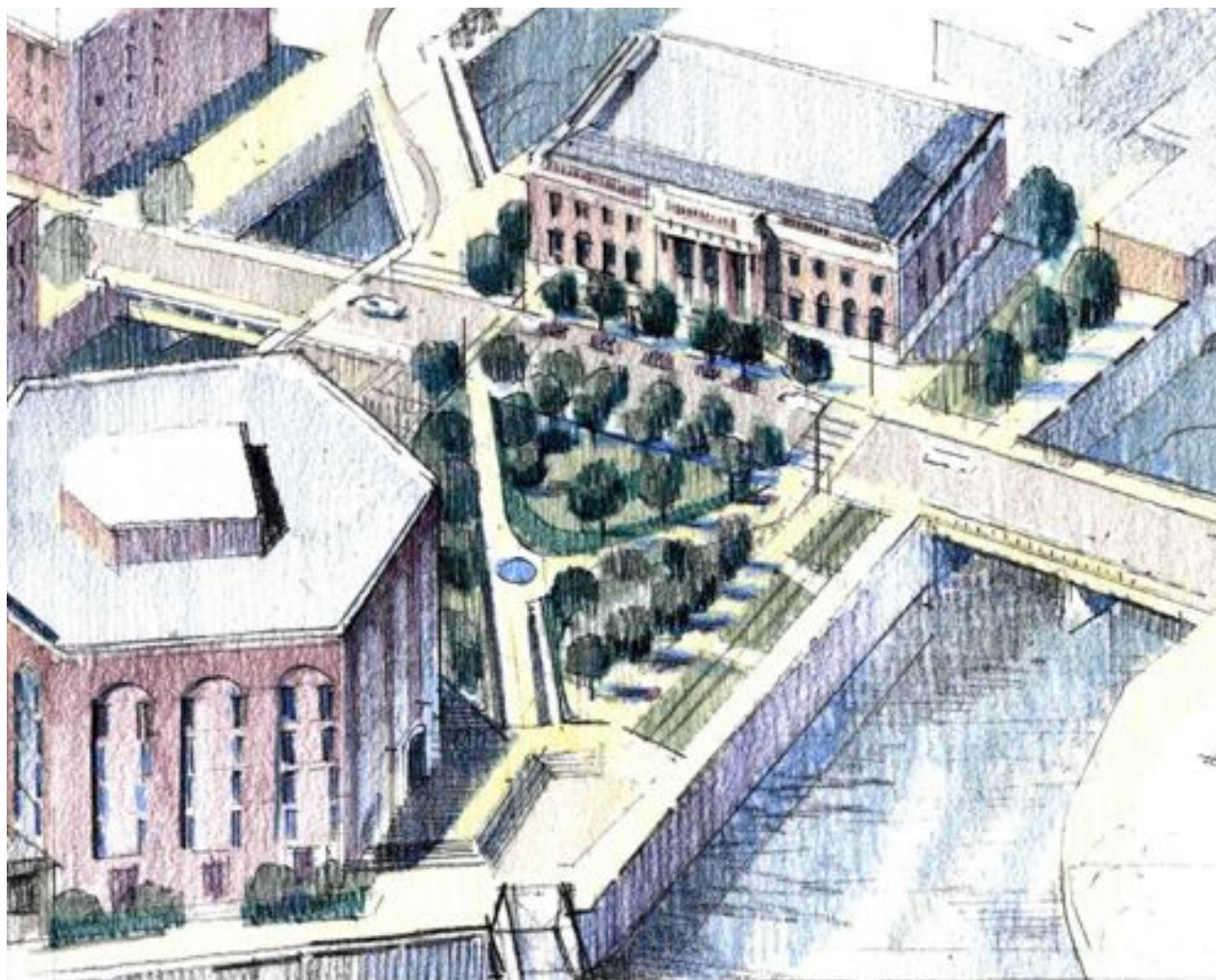
As designed here, the green accomplishes several objectives. It centers symmetrically on the lovely south-facing façade of the Federal Building, allowing it to take center stage away from its less attractive partner across the street. It creates a central gathering space with a fountain and benches. It shields the Wang building loading dock and mechanical equipment behind walls and evergreens, and provides a terraced green overlook to the Concord River. It connects pedestrian desire-lines along the site, notably continuing the axis of the Lower Locks bridge straight to Merrimack Street.

Perhaps most importantly, it continues its plaza across East Merrimack Street with a raised brick speed table, to calm traffic and claim that territory for the College. While such speed tables—with no curbs or striping, just patterned bricks to indicate movement zones—seem potentially dangerous, they are actually much safer. As described by David Owen in *Green Metropolis*:

*“this sounds to many people like a formula for disaster, but the clear experience in the (mainly) European cities that have tried it is that increasing the ambiguity of urban road spaces actually lowers car speeds, reduces accident rates, and improves the lives of pedestrians: drivers proceed more warily when they aren’t completely certain what’s going on.”*

As redesigned in Chapter 3, this roadway would now hold bicycle lanes in both directions, and a single parking lane to the south that would here be reserved for drop-offs. Sidewalk areas would be protected by trees, and bollards could also be added in the unlikely event that they are deemed necessary.

As with other recommended interventions, this one



*A limited investment gives pride of place to an important institution.*

would require a partnership between two actors, in this case MCC and the City, who would spearhead the roadway improvements as MCC invested in its campus green. Unlike the ICC Square discussed in point 10.4,

this one does not depend upon the roadway reconfiguration to be worthwhile, but that reconfiguration makes it a better and safer plan.

