

The four proposed interventions that follow are all imagined as being accomplished in the longer term. In planning vocabulary, “long term” generally refers to ten to twenty years. Twenty years may seem like an eternity, but those of us who have been planners for that long—and who have had the pleasure of witnessing projects planned twenty years ago come to fruition—understand that the most important projects can never be accomplished quickly. Indeed, plans that do not look beyond the immediate future do not truly qualify as planning at all, since immediate concerns and temporary impediments will always make bold changes seem impossible.

While some of these transformations may be accomplished more quickly, most lack funding or an economic incentive to happen immediately. Some, like the enlargement of the JFK Civic Center, should not occur until the City’s facilities needs dictate. These interventions are put forth here not because they can be done, but because they should be done, and they will not happen later unless they are planned now.

The eight short-term interventions are:

1. Ladd and Whitney Monument Square
2. The Hall/Perkins Neighborhood
3. The Promontory
4. The Davidson Block



11.1 Ladd and Whitney Monument Square



Low and set back from the street, the current JFK Civic Center does little to shape the space around it.

The civic center of Lowell is literally and figuratively located at the important intersection of Merrimack, Dutton, and Arcand Streets, surrounding the historic Ladd and Whitney Monument. It is telling that this public space currently lacks a popular name; we will refer to it as the Ladd and Whitney Monument Square.

As already discussed, this site was redesigned a generation ago with the intent of speeding traffic flows in and out of town, unintentionally creating an environment that feels unsafe for pedestrians. At this time, the delicate intersection of Moody Street was eliminated to create a superblock for the JFK Civic Center, a squat building that pulls back from the street around a now damaged fountain plaza.

While modifications to the street network, discussed in Chapter 3, will help improve walkability in this important location, more change is needed if pedestrians are to once again feel welcome in Lowell's civic heart. While the surface treatments of both the Monument Square and the Civic Center Plaza are clearly in need of improvement, the greatest challenge lies in the vertical plane, where no buildings correspond to the shape of the Square. As a result, it lacks spatial definition and thus fails to function as an urban living room. While the off-angle insertion of Arcand Drive has made fixing this problem difficult, several opportunities exist to improve this intersection.

First is the JFK Civic Center and Plaza itself.

One of the great questions of this study has been whether to keep it or tear it down. Certainly no large group of Lowellians could be mustered to its defense, as the building is generally felt to be a historically insignificant example of one of the least loved architectural styles of all time, "brutalism." That said, there are efforts around the country to protect a number of buildings just like this one, which is why the term Lowellian is used above. Conversations around town suggest that most defenders would be driving in from Cambridge.

But tearing down buildings because we don't like them is a frivolous and wasteful proposition. Particularly as this structure is about to undergo a significant investment in its mechanical systems, it would be profligate to just throw it away. That does not mean, however, that it cannot be modified in a dramatic fashion, one which also address-

es the issue of the Plaza.

While once graced by a functioning and popular fountain, the Plaza is now unused and also unnecessary, as the deep setback of City Hall and the former trajectory of Moody Street provide ample space for gathering. This is fortunate, as various City departments have been discussing eventual expansions, and growing the Civic Center onto its Plaza allows us to solve two problems at once.

Interestingly, there is a hidden geometry in the shape of the Civic Center building that implies a symmetrical diamond pointing towards the Monument Square. Completing this diamond creates a building surrounding a pentagonal courtyard, one that can be left open or covered as a winter garden, if budget allows. The substantial new wing, which presents a strong corner to the Square, should be at least three stories tall, and can be integrated into a lightweight third-story addition to the existing building.

This design requires the removal of some fairly mature honeylocusts, which should be transplanted along the Moody Street axis to better shape that space. It also suggests a slight change to the Monument Square itself where, to improve pedestrian activity, its more recent northern appendage is resurfaced in stone and opened to pedestrians, as suggested by City Planning staff.

Ladd and Whitney Monument Square

The other disappointing aspect of this public space is its use as the site for a large gasoline station. While cities need gas stations, these do not need to be located in zones that are intended for heavy pedestrian use, and certainly shouldn't be located among civic buildings and squares. Unfortunately, the decision to place this station here, on the site of the historic Merrimack House hotel, is now very expensive to fix, as gas stations are profitable and usually require environmental mitigation.



While no doubt profitable, the Hess Station provides a weak and unattractive edge to the Square.



An expanded Civic Center turns JFK Plaza into an interior courtyard while providing a stronger backdrop to City Hall and Ladd and Whitney Monument Square.

Ladd and Whitney Monument Square



It is for that reason that this proposal finds itself in the Long Term category. At some point in the near or distant future, it will become economically viable to put another use on this site, and the proposed intervention shows the footprint of a new building that gives a proper southern edge to the Monument Square. It also replaces the Goodyear tire store—another auto-zone land use that requires too many curb cuts to be located in a civic area—thus providing a better edge to Worthen Street.

With an expanded Civic Center and a replaced Hess Station, the Ladd Whitney Square area would be more welcoming to pedestrians.

Ladd and Whitney Monument Square

A final reason that this proposal is considered Long Term is the proposed parking ratio, which implies either a new parking structure nearby—see point 9.3—or a reduced dependence on parking due to a future streetcar.



The former occupant of the Hess Station site.



An ideal redevelopment of the block would place a significant building mass along its entire northern edge.

11.2 The Hall/Perkins Neighborhood



The typical pedestrian view in this neighborhood is of parking lots.

It has already been discussed how more people would consider walking to games at LeLacheur Park if the neighborhood along Hall and Perkins streets were more pedestrian-friendly. That concern, coupled with UMass Lowell's large land ownership in this area, has motivated a more comprehensive proposal for the neighborhood's ideal long-term build-out. This study is provided not because it will happen quickly, but because it might happen eventually, and therefore it is essential to illustrate what a successful build-out would look like.

The proposed plan makes use of the same strategy that has been behind every intervention described thus far. With the goal of creating friendly building edges against public sidewalks, new buildings or building expansions are placed where they hide parking lots and ugly building edges from the street. Starting with the M2D2 Building to the west, the



The proposed infill properties shield parking lots and industrial buildings from the street.

first 60' of its front parking lot is developed into a building that meets Aiken Street, directly across from the University's new Recreation Center. Its industrial-quality side flanks are also designated to receive expansions, ideally two to three stories tall, creating a better sidewalk edge. For this new development to be adequately parked, the University must acquire the large Notini block to the south, to be discussed

momentarily.

Moving east past the Lowell Day Nursery, the plan incorporates a new building that is already proposed and ideally sited to hide the new Perkins Lofts parking structure from Cabot Street. Next, the low white brick building that houses UMass research facilities receives additions to its north and south—ideally

The Hall Perkins Neighborhood

two stories—hiding those unattractive flanks. While the front of this building is also unpopular, it faces a green containing some spectacular trees, whose preservation trumps development on this part of the site.

Finally, there is the site belonging to the Notini & Sons distribution center. This block is conveniently large enough to hold a parking lot at its center, surrounded by buildings against the street. As planned, one can imagine two stages of development on this site. First, to improve the walk along Hall Street and the view from the Brewery Exchange, the northern and eastern edges of the block would be developed, hiding a surface parking lot that serves both this new construction and the redesigned M2D2 site across the street. Then, to achieve full build-out, a central parking structure would be introduced, allowing the south and west flanks of the block to be developed, completing the donut.

As part of this development, the southern parking drive along the canal, currently barricaded against Cabot Street, would once again become a waterfront street. The new buildings against Aiken Street would be sure to leave room for preservation of the majestic trees that line the roadway. Although not shown at the scale of these drawings, consistently-spaced street trees would form a part of any reconstructed sidewalk.

Readers will note that the above discussion makes no mention of the uses to be placed on the Notini site, but rather simply designates building locations and acknowledges their need for parking. The design is not dependent on land use, and can flexibly incorporate any combination of academic buildings, student housing, spinoff industrial operations, or other



Eventual acquisition of the large Notini distribution warehouse would allow ample parking for a large collection of new buildings.

residential or business activity. What matters is that, whatever uses might land on these building footprints, they face the street edge in order to contribute to the livability and success of the surrounding neighborhood.

11.3 The Promontory



Next to River Place Towers, two levels of parking occupy what may be downtown's best opportunity to reconnect to its riverfront.

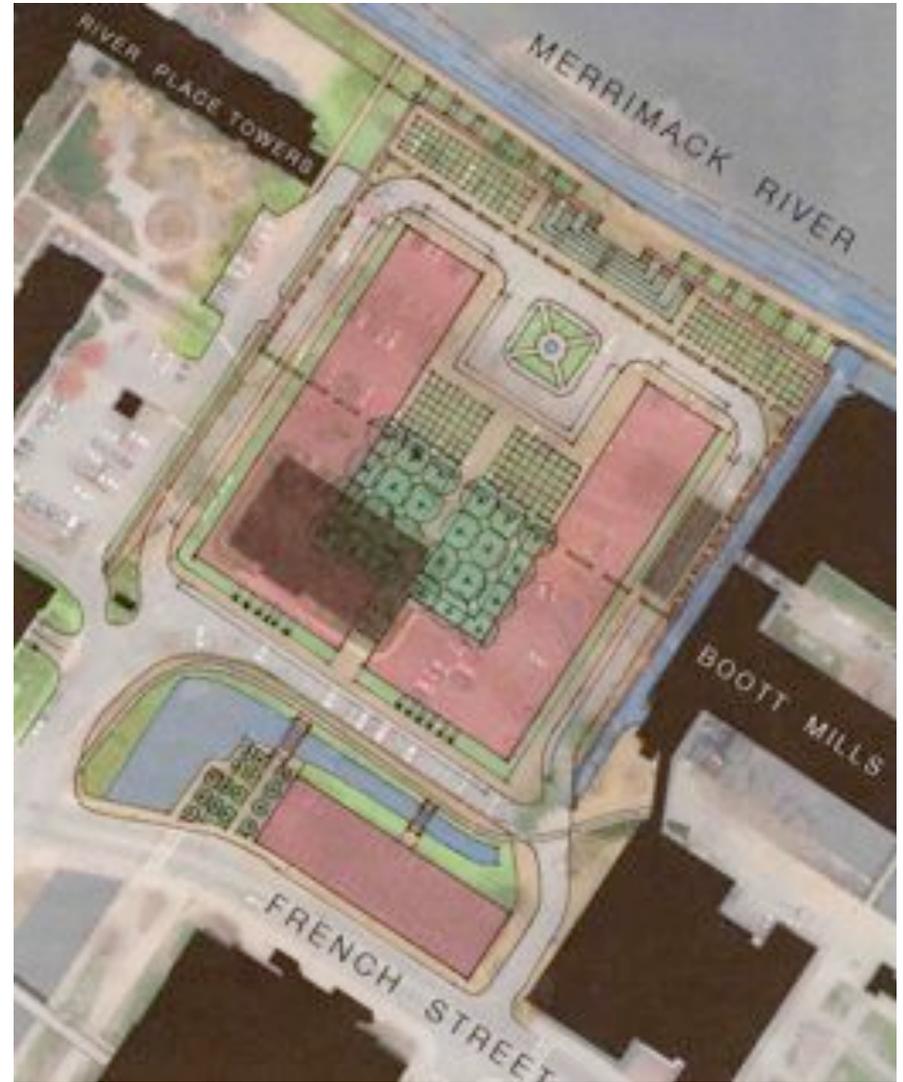
Downtown Lowell is located prominently along the banks of the mighty Merrimack River, a fact that is difficult to discern until one leaves; rarely can one glimpse the River from the heart of downtown. This circumstance is the natural outcome of the expedience of placing long mill buildings against the water's edge, where most remain to this day. Only a few opportunities exist for connecting the city back to its waterfront, and the most promising of these is the site that currently houses Lowell Five's headquarters and a parking lot for River Place Towers.

This long-term proposal requires that the Bank relocate its offices, at least temporarily, so that the site can be put to more intensive use. Like earlier concepts for this site, it imagines large mixed-use buildings reaching all the way from Father Morrisette Boulevard to the Riverwalk. Unlike previ-

ous proposals, it imagines a continuous public drive surrounding this development, so that its edges, in addition to being public, would also feel public, and would thus be used.

From Ocean Drive in Miami to Venice Beach, California, the best urban waterfronts have cars on them, moving slowly, bringing constant activity and making retail possible. In this case, the waterfront drive is achieved by placing a deck above the lower River Place Towers parking lot, creating a promontory above the river. This new ground plane could fit another entire level of parking beneath it, supporting the development of the site to a mid-rise density.

Since it is only a block long, the riverside drive created by this scheme would not invite many cruisers in the manner of an Ocean Drive. But the vehicular access is essential as one component out of many designed to bring as much life to the water's edge as possible.

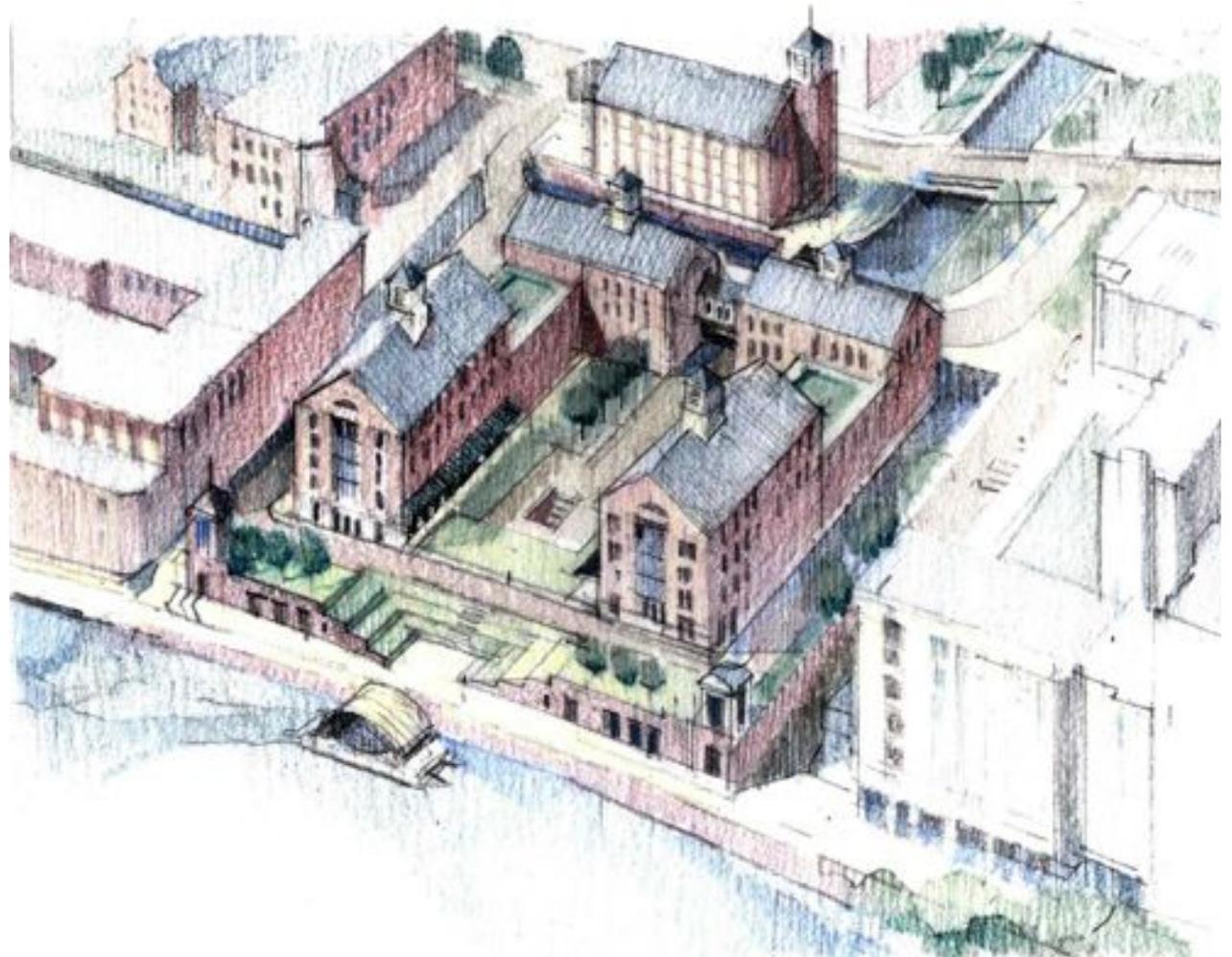


A public ring road atop parking turns this site in to a new city block, with an overlook that steps down to the Riverwalk. The dashed line indicates the extent of the parking deck.

At the edge of this drive, a public overlook could give way to an amphitheatre-shaped series of steps that work their way down to the Riverwalk, providing a dramatic integration between levels. Wide sidewalks against the northern building ends would make an ideal setting for a café and/or bar, which could bring food and drink to the overlook during pleasant weather. These buildings are imagined as luxury apartments, justified by the beautiful views and perhaps mandated by the infrastructure costs.

Against the edge of the Riverwalk below, the two-story parking deck could be shielded from view by a dozen unique rowhouses boasting the rare commodity of a Riverwalk address. These “eyes on the street,” including front doors, would give much needed supervision to the riverwalk.

One can imagine a bandstand barge pulling up to the river’s edge to serenade the amphitheatre on a summer night. To the south of this complex, across the canal, the unused parking lot against Father Morrisette Boulevard has also been put to use, as will be discussed further in Chapter 12.



The significant infrastructure investment suggests luxury housing as an ideal use for this unique property.

11.4 The Davidson Block



A park against a parking lot does not feel like much of a park.

The fourth long-term proposal is perhaps the least likely to happen, but it is worth suggesting for the benefits that it would provide to the downtown. It involves the Davidson Block, which sits just across the Concord River from the Lower Locks, and across the street from the Lowell Civic Auditorium, where it connects the downtown into the almost-completed 200-mile Bay Circuit Trail. This site has already received some park investment along its riverfront, but it feels disconnected from the rest of the downtown, even though it effectively forms the eastern boundary of the Lower Locks basin.

Much like the Wang building property, this site's front parking deters walking along East Merrimack Street, and its weak parking-lot corner does not welcome pedestrians to the water's edge. Its principal building mass sits in the center of the lot, where it does nothing to shape surrounding street spaces. This property is fur-



When it is no longer of use, the mid-block building (shadowed in gray) should be replaced by a building that fronts Merrimack Street and the waterfront park.

ther limited by floodplain restrictions that require any future development to be matched by enough clearance to keep the site's stormwater storage capacity intact.

For this reason, this intervention is considered long-

term, since redevelopment would require an economic justification for replacing an existing functioning building with another of similar footprint size. This justification could include the obsolescence of the current building, the capacity to build a taller structure

(with reduced on-site parking requirement per square foot), or the perceived higher value of a building taking advantage of the waterfront park—or some combination of the above.

As part of this reconstruction, an expansion to MCC’s “Cybercafé” building should replace the parking at the East Merrimack Street corner and welcome people into Davidson Street, which should be reconfigured as a real street as it curves through to Howe Street. A break in the middle of the new construction would serve as a passageway to the large parking lot, which would no longer be visible from the Lower Locks.

This intervention has received this much attention because of its prominent location against the Lower Locks, where tremendous future investment is anticipated—see Chapter 13. It is a great spot for viewing the Locks, and feels like part of the same public space. As the natural completion of a Lower Locks walking loop, it would ideally be connected to the plaza across the Concord River by a dramatic pedestrian foot-bridge. Also, visible in the extreme left of the plan, a new building has been proposed for the leftover lawn against the Lower Locks Garage, which would give life and a better edge to the moribund little plaza.

The new plaza against Davidson Street is shaped to embrace the view of the Locks, and serves as a frontpiece for a sunset-view restaurant, which could populate it with tables. A final suggestion for this site, which might help to justify its development, would be placed in the Concord River: the white-water rapids that were proposed in Lowell as part of the Boston Olympic bid. While that bid failed, this powerful amenity can still be built in conjunction with the eventual rebuilding of the Middlesex Dam.



A new bridge across the Concord River allows the Davidson Block to complete the Lower Locks waterfront.

Such downtown whitewater kayaking parks, which have been built in Reno and elsewhere, can contribute significantly to local economies. In this case, such a park would be one more activity to bring critical mass to a revitalized Lower Locks area in the heart of Downtown.

