

The final intervention proposed in this plan is as expensive and complicated as it is unnecessary, but holds within it the potential to fundamentally transform Lowell into a city of the first rank, both as a tourist destination and as a location for business. It surrounds Lowell's Lower Locks which, even in their current condition, make a profound impression on first-time visitors and seem to hold great potential to all but the most jaded Lowellians.

An Underutilized Asset

Lowell is distinguished from almost every other American city by two assets that it possesses in great quantity. The first is the handsome mill buildings, which form a dramatic part of the cityscape and which have been preserved and redeveloped to the great benefit of the community. The second is the vast collection of canals that once caused Lowell to be known as America's Venice, and which have yet to be fully put to use for their contribution to the city's built environment.

There are a number of reasons for this situation. First, many of the canals are located behind mill buildings, out of view, since mills benefited from that configuration. Second, many of the canal spaces are too narrow to convey any character as urban places. Third and perhaps most significantly, the ownership of the canals, their embankments, and the surrounding spaces is so fractured and complex that few have been willing to take on the challenge of transforming them. Certainly the Park Service continues to do a fine job of maintaining and sprucing up the areas under their control, but they are one party out of many. The greatest complication comes from the ownership of the canals' generation capacity by Enel, an Italian

company, who at any time could theoretically alter the water level dramatically based on its system technical requirements.

More discussion of the ownership challenge will follow. But there exists in the heart of the downtown one place where the first two challenges—exposure and breadth—are amply overcome, and that is at the Lower Locks. Here, visible from Central Street, Merrimack Street, the MCC Campus, and across the Concord River, the canal system splits to form a dramatic and well-shaped public space, holding a broad body of water and interlaced with a pedestrian circuit of just the right length for a pleasant stroll.



The Lower Locks is the downtown canal location with the greatest potential to become a transformative public space.

Clearly, this location possesses many of the fundamentals of a great urban attraction—including a trolley stop. It has, as they say, “good bones.” But visitors to this site equipped with the experience of other urban

waterfronts can't help but consider the Lower Locks as a missed opportunity, a mere shadow of what it is poised to become. Its potential can be found in places like Providence and San Antonio, where public and private investment in urban riverwalks have contributed dramatically to the remaking of the cities around them.

Useful Precedent



Providence uncovered a portion of its downtown river to create a powerful new centerpiece for the city.

These two examples are quite different from each other, but are similar in the qualities that they possess which the Lower Locks lack. Providence's Riverwalk, one of the great new-urban design projects of the 1990s, consists of a broad river flanked primarily by public streets and the fronts of buildings. San Antonio's Riverwalk, a flood control project completed by the Works Progress Administration in the 1940s, is best known for its more intimate spaces, in which

The Lower Locks

pedestrian paths and the rears of buildings surround a narrow largely waterway hidden from public streets. Both of these projects are tourist destinations, not just because they contain water, but due to the high quality of their public realm, which can be characterized as urban and civic. Large quantities of stone and heavy decorative ironwork lend a dignity to outdoor spaces properly furnished with handsome lighting, benches, and public art—a collection of details only available in fully evolved urban places.



San Antonio's Riverwalk is more intimate and commercial, but remains urban and civic in its materials and details.

In contrast to this urban experience, large areas of the Lower Locks could still be characterized as fundamentally rural in their conception. Instead of stone, iron, and sculpture, we get wood, crabgrass, and asphalt. Lighting is low and inconsistent, and many balusters and other features seem merely expedient rather than designed. Defunct steam pipes in peeling insulation

mar the water's edge, and awkward ramps—and even a small parking lot—occupy spaces that are better suited to be public plazas.



Low wooden lights (mostly broken), grass, and asphalt surfaces contribute to the rural quality of this environment.

Impediments

Some of these details are temporary, awaiting a Park Service refurbishment, but most are planned to remain, due first to budget constraints, second to a preservation ethic that is wisely wary of change, and finally to the lack of a unified proposal for transforming this moribund lagoon into the great civic destination that it has every chance to become. Each of these warrants discussion.

Money

It has become abundantly clear that Lowell is a city that “gets things done,” and is—at least historically—

extremely skilled at raising federal funds in support of local projects. While little money currently exists for embarking upon a transformation like the one proposed here, such money cannot be pursued unless a strong proposal exists. As was the case with the National Park, the Tsongas Center, and other projects in the city, the dream must always predate the funding.



Lowell's key opportunity for a south-facing waterfront is now a parking lot for eight cars. A blank wall awaits artwork.

Preservation Ethic

Being respectful of its history has served Lowell well. There can be no doubt that, without its exemplary preservation practice, Lowell wouldn't be the appealing place that it is today. But part of that success has been allowing modifications to historic buildings, holes cut in mills, creative reconstructions, and other undertakings in which a happy compromise was forged between leaving the original artifact untouched and creating an environment that serves contemporary needs. The Lower Locks is one of many places in Lowell where a healthy tension necessarily exists between the impulse to preserve and the impulse to improve. Because these canals were historically used to move goods, provide power, and dump waste, they do not possess the urban quality that will allow them to thrive as public places. This proposal begins with the premise that a sensitive transformation of historic landscapes can be justified by the vitality that results.

A Unified Proposal

First, it must be noted that the foreign ownership of the canals' generation capacity is no excuse to avoid investing in this location. Only on rare occasions does the water briefly drop to unattractive levels. Second, like any large planning scheme for a city with people in it, this proposal necessitates a limited amount of government intervention—and perhaps even a touch of eminent domain—to make changes to a variety of properties under multiple ownerships. No historically significant transformative plan has ever avoided this practice. The most inconvenient change would probably be the proposed repurposing of the small parking lot and the lower two stories of the building that flanks it. But there can be little doubt that a massive investment of the type imagined here will only improve the values of all surrounding properties. Such

an undertaking, if ultimately deemed meritorious, will demand a commitment of City leadership both to seeing it through and to ensuring that all affected parties are treated fairly and given the opportunity to share in the eventual benefits.

Two Levels of Proposals

This plan includes both a physical proposal for the Lower Locks and a programmatic one. It can be said with some confidence that a merely physical transformation to this dramatic landscape has the power, if done properly, to turn it into a tourist-worthy destination that will contribute mightily to the future success of the city. However, the impact of that physical investment can be greatly increased—indeed multiplied—if the spaces are also programmed with unique uses that give people a specific reason to visit them. The distinction between the two proposals is important to make, because a strong physical proposal should not sink or swim based upon the viability of the programmatic one. It could be that a better opportunity exists for programming these spaces and, if so, it could be coupled with a similar physical proposal to the one offered here.

We will now briefly describe each of the proposals on its own before showing how they merge into a complete conception.

The Physical Proposal

The physical proposal contains several levels of intervention. The first level is intended to correct flaws in the current scheme—narrow stairs, awkward ramps, parking lots, encroaching building additions—and to bring the entire public space up to the highest



The stone pavements used against the sites of the MCC and ICC buildings should be applied to the entirety of the Lower Locks basin.

level of civic materials and detailing, including stone, ironwork, and well-designed urban furniture. The second level involves a number of specific urban and architectural interventions including: the redesign of the back of the Prescott Street building against the aforementioned parking lot; the creation of a plaza against Prescott Street in place of the former Lowell Sun Printing Press building; the introduction of one new and one replaced footbridge; the reconstruction of the back of the Inn & Conference Center where it meets the Lower Locks; and the addition of a new building embracing the Lowell Hair Academy. Each of these will be shown ahead in detail.

The Programmatic Proposal

In discussions about the ideal use of the Lower Locks area, a wide range of different concepts was floated. By far the most compelling grew from Lowell's unique

The Lower Locks



The awkward ramp against the lower locks wastes a valuable public space. Replacing private hotel rooms with a public function room would better capitalize on the view.

status as an urban National Park, and the opportunities that locals and visitors have to interact with the city's history in a meaningful way.

Many people who visit Lowell, or who live in Lowell, aren't the type to set foot in a museum. They may come to see the mills or the canals, but their interface with the city's industrial past is something that they prefer to experience while out and about, rather than in a controlled environment. Lowell's National Park has been groundbreaking in its creation of a "City as Park," and the many opportunities that visitors have to experience our nation's industrial heritage simply by moving through the downtown are remarkable. Whether on a trolley, in a boat, or just on foot along the Canalway, visitors can't help but come to understand the city and this country better.

This more flexible understanding about the relationship between viewer and object can also be found nationally a new type of "museum" that, rather than keeping the subject matter locked up behind closed doors, integrates the exhibits thoroughly into a public space, so that all the benefits of museum-going can be shared even with those who do not go to museums. These public spaces benefit from the display of artifacts, but the depth of participation of the visitor is a matter of personal choice. Seattle's recently completed Olympic Sculpture Park is a fine example of the type.



New public parks like this one in Seattle allow a less formal interaction between visitors and objects on display.

Taking the current Park Service visitor experience as inspiration, this Plan proposes that the Lower Locks area could be successfully reprogrammed as an Outdoor Museum of Water Power, at which a collection of durable industrial machinery could be displayed on pedestals throughout the public spaces. There would be no price of admission and no security guards, just

a public space full of large, remarkable contraptions explained by simple plaques. They could be organized chronologically in a circuit around the lower Locks, starting and ending at Central Street, and thoroughly integrated into all of the area's other uses. Visitors could study them, enjoy them, or ignore them as they see fit, but these artifacts would be experienced by a much larger public than they would ever find indoors.

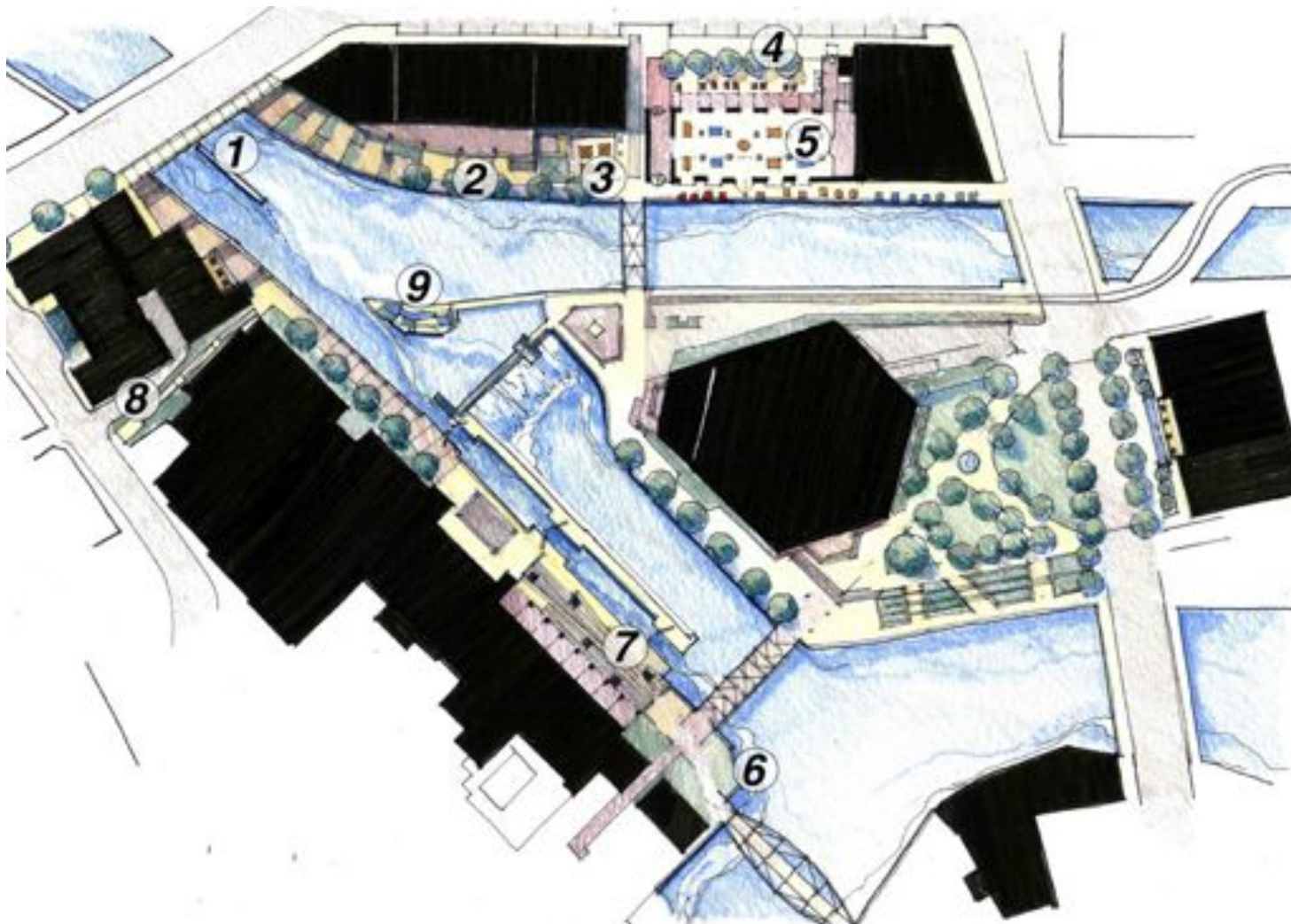


For many people—especially children—industrial objects like this one can be more attractive and compelling than the most imaginative work of modern art.

This proposal has not been studied in depth, and may not be the best use of the Lower Locks site. But it seems compelling and, for that reason, the renderings that follow show a physical proposal that has been supplemented by the inclusion of just such an outdoor museum.

Walking Through the Plan

Our tour of the Lower Locks begins and ends at Central Street, proceeding clockwise through the site. Each stop in the tour is marked in the plan.



The Lower Locks



Artisans' Walk leads to Lower Locks Plaza, decorated with industrial sculpture and a bold wall mural.

1. The Western Cascade

Entry into the Lower Locks from Central Street is now accomplished via a narrow sideways stair, with little integration between the sidewalk above and the Canalway below. This proposal peels back the bridge rail to the width of the waterway, and creates a tilted plaza that turns the Central Street sidewalk and both sides of the canal into a single public space. Stone stairs, platforms, planters, and display pedestals run gently downhill from the street, taking a full 90 feet to land at waters edge. This dramatic change to the canal edge would be

detailed in a way to clearly distinguish it from the historic ground plane, so that memory of the original configuration would not be lost. That said, it would profoundly alter the nature of this space, and its anticipated benefits must be weighed against the desire to maintain a more historically authentic environment.

2. Artisans' Walk

While existing trees would be kept, the parking lot would be completely transformed into a stone public space, with owners' cars relocated to the nearby

Lower Locks Garage. Customer parking for Tutto Bene and other businesses would now be available at curbside, thanks to the redesign of Prescott Street (See Chapter 3). The half-story-up/half-story-down configuration of the enfronting building would allow for a reconfiguration in which a large row of porches sit above a sunken courtyard receiving southern sun. It is recommended that these lower two stories be acquired, so that the basement can be repurposed as a colony for the industrial arts and the first floor as a gallery row. In good weather, artists can work in the lower courtyard on pieces that are sold on the porches above. As in the entirety of this scheme, pedestals displaying industrial objects would march along this circuit, probably in chronologically order of manufacture.

3. Lower Locks Plaza

Directly behind Tutto Bene, the porch and trees end, and the space opens up into a nicely sized plaza, ideal for outdoor dining. The huge blank wall of the adjacent building receives a clearly contemporary graphic mural that "brands" the space and can be used in an international tourism marketing campaign.

4. Prescott Plaza

Currently, Prescott Street feels entirely cut off from the Lower Locks, which can be reached only through a dark tunnel adjacent to Tutto Bene. The narrow street also suffers from an unrelieved "canyon" feel, exacerbated by the harsh façade of the former Lowell Sun Printing Press. This now empty building was built in front of an industrial-era mill that it now hides from the street. The two buildings together create an extremely thick structure that has proven extremely hard to rent. All of

these problems can be solved at once by removing the newer building to create a plaza against Prescott Street. This expensive proposal, while not essential to the scheme, would make a significant contribution to the downtown experience, and would eliminate the Tutto Bene tunnel, easing access to the Lower Locks from the heart of downtown. A plaza

in this location makes the most sense if built in conjunction with item 5, the *International Market*, for which it would serve as a frontispiece and outdoor expansion zone. Removing the printing press building would also result in a market of the proper thinness to allow for clear views between Prescott street and the Lower Locks.



A new plaza along Prescott Street replaces the former Lowell Sun Printing Press and eases access to the Lower Locks. The first floor of the remaining canal-side building is repurposed as an International Market.

5. *The International Market*

Aside from the mills and canals, Lowell is also distinguished from the surrounding region by its remarkably diverse population. Continuing traditions from centuries past, the city remains an immigrant magnet and sports an extremely wide variety of world cultures, including the second largest Cambodian population in America. Yet, aside from a few bakeries and restaurants—and the presence of high-schoolers—that diversity is little felt downtown. It is reported that most would-be merchants from recently immigrated families need a lower price of entry—ideally \$0—if they are to sell goods downtown. While again not central to the larger scheme, the location of an International Market in the single large ground-floor space connecting Prescott Plaza to the Lower Locks offers an opportunity to create a new attraction downtown that proudly celebrates and benefits the immigrant community. Also, placing such a hub of activity in the Lower Locks would help the redevelopment achieve critical mass; the more reasons to visit, the better. If Seattle’s sculpture garden were located next to Pike Place Market, it would be that much more of a draw.

6. *The Concord River Plaza and Footbridge*

As discussed in the Chapter 11, the public space of the Lower Locks really ends across the Concord River at the Davidson Block, where another long-term intervention is proposed. Both investments would be more likely to bear fruit if they were directly connected to each other by a bridge. Given its prominence, this structure would be best designed through an international artists competition, and could become a landmark in its own right. This connection would also give more purpose to

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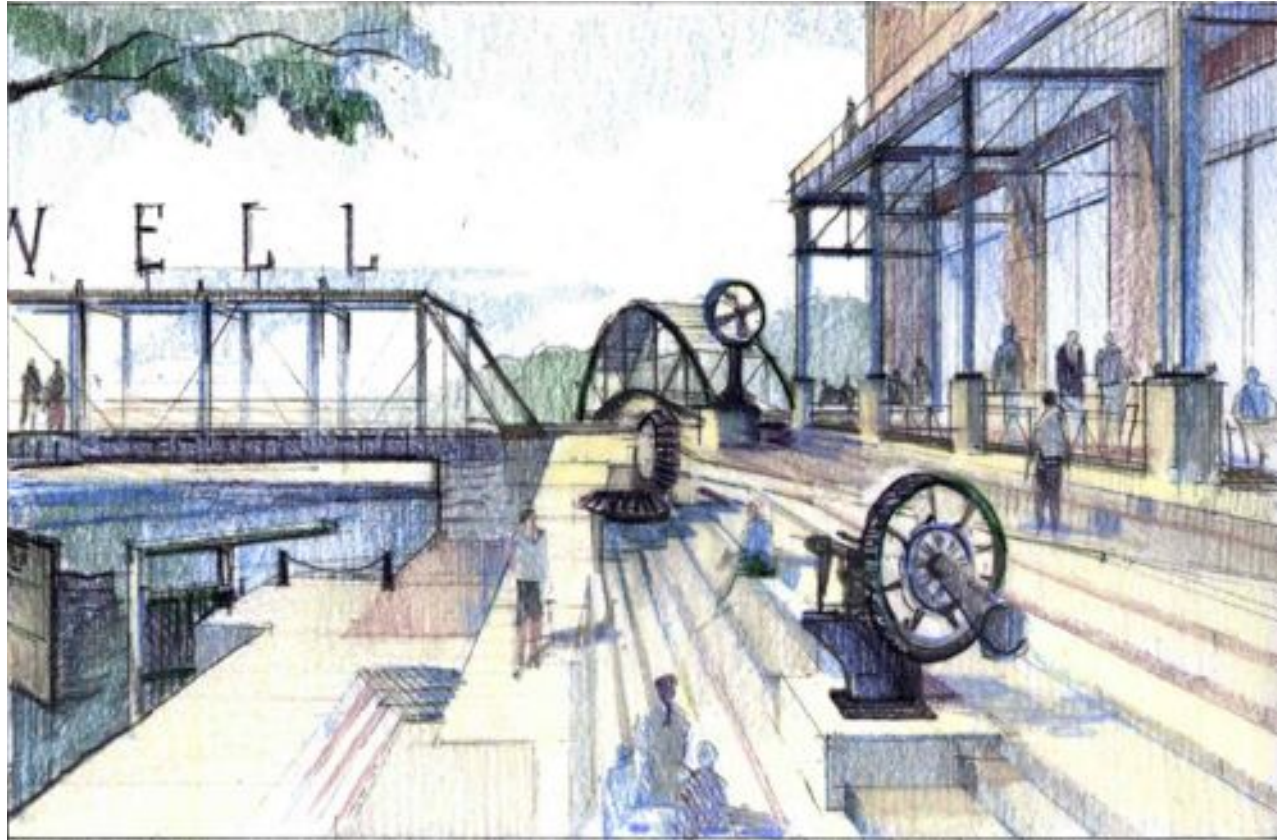


Tourists go out of their way to visit Amsterdam's new Python Bridge.

the usually deserted corner plaza, which also needs a new small building between it and the Lower Locks Garage—and repairs to its water sculpture. Please note that this scheme also replaces the unattractive and view-obscuring footbridge across the Lower Locks with a more fitting industrial-style structure, visible at right.

7. The UMass Steps

As shown several pages back, another underutilized space is located at the rear of the Inn and Conference Center, directly above the lowest of the Lower Locks, a truly formidable piece of 18th-century engineering. Here, one of the most interesting spaces in Lowell is chopped up into an ungainly switchback ramp and enfronted with the private patios of a dozen hotel rooms. This potentially popular access point for canal and river tours could also serve as a dramatic frontispiece to a new grand public room within the ICC. UMass leadership has expressed an interest in eventually making better



A repurposed ICC edge sits atop a stepped plaza reaching down to the boarding area at the lowest lock.

use of this space, and placing a public front porch against a stepped sculpture garden would certainly create an unsurpassed venue for fundraising.

8. An Ideal Hotel Site

The surprising lack of a four-star hotel downtown has been much discussed, and one hopes to see a remedy underway before this plan's ink is dry. Whether or not that happens, the transformation

of the Lower Locks into an international-quality destination will give new value to adjacent properties, particularly for hotel use. The most promising property in that regard is the Lowell Hair Academy, which, with the adjoining vacant parcel, presents an ample opportunity for a skillful hotelier. The proposed plan shows the historical 4-story and 2-story buildings shedding their nonconforming one-story addition, and then being wrapped by a building

The Lower Locks



Steps cascade past a renovated Lowell Hair Academy, ideally repurposed as a hotel.

that occupies the parking lot and reaches down to the canal edge with a new entrance. Between this new wing and the ICC, a new handicap ramp would allow the reconfiguration of the southern stairway to Central Street in the manner discussed in point 1. The hotel is shown with a porte-cochere along Warren Street, so that Valet Service could easily make use of the Lower Locks Garage. It would ideally place its café/restaurant against Central Street, reaching back along the stair cascade to an outdoor dining porch against its two-story wing.

9. The Central Fountain

This final proposal takes advantage of a current sore spot, the scruffy grass island that sits awkwardly in the middle of the canal basin, awaiting some form of

tidying-up, if not reconstruction. This central location is the perfect spot for a large sculptural fountain. The character of this installation could range from the proudly civic to the noisily celebratory. On one end of that spectrum, a geometric granite earthwork in the manner of Andy Goldsworthy could surround a single plume of water. At the other extreme, a giant kinetic sculpture could use water power to create a festival of motion, light, and sound. If large enough, this industrial artwork would draw crowds to its on-the-clock choreography of spinning, spraying, splashing activity.

The proper choice along this spectrum can be made only by the people of Lowell. Any such solution would represent a large financial investment, but one that a wise philanthropist might wish to bequeath as

the ultimate tool for bringing Lowell and the Lower Locks resoundingly into the present day.

As *Lowell Sun* columnist Kendall Wallace noted earlier this year, “It’s time for Lowell to dream again.” This comprehensive proposal for remaking the Lower Locks is planning of the dreaming sort. It is so ambitious that it should perhaps be presented as its own plan, separate from the rest of this document, which is much more focused on the art of the possible. But this proposal is indeed possible, just not probable. It will become likely only when the people of Lowell embrace it not as a planner’s wish, but as a dream of their own.

In Lowell, this has happened before.



Cumulatively, all of the above changes would transform the Lower Locks into a destination worthy of its historical significance.

