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That might sound like an ad for a "New Urbanist" development (with the exception of the "affordable" bit), but in fact, it's a description of life in many old industrial cities in Massachusetts. Sometimes it's hard to remember that before there was a New Urbanism, there was an Old Urbanism that worked pretty well.

Today, thanks to the efforts of Boston-based think tank MassINC, more people are remembering. In 2007, MassINC teamed up with the Brookings Institution to produce a report on the "Gateway Cities" of Massachusetts — 11 former mill cities: Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester. The report demonstrated that these cities had been left behind while Boston enjoyed unprecedented economic growth, documenting some of the reasons but also some of the opportunities. Since then, a remarkable thing has happened: in less than two years, people have started to think of these cities not as problems, but as solutions. It's the political equivalent of a score on Antiques Roadshow — treasures whose value was largely forgotten are suddenly getting attention.

This is a Massachusetts story, but it's also a story with implications for post-industrial cities everywhere. As we increasingly embrace sustainability as a public value, we cannot afford not to invest in these communities — and in the other smaller cities of Massachusetts that similarly have enormous infrastructure capacity and a rich, if sometimes neglected, building stock. The 19th-century textile and shoe industrialists generated vast family fortunes. We are only now realizing the extent of their vast public legacy, and the extent to which its value has compounded. How many growing industrial cities in other parts of the world will be able to say the same when their time has passed?

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA
Editor
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in Brent Ryan’s ambitious and well written article, “The Once and Future Neighborhood” [Spring 2009], the author is correct in calling for a wider array of neighborhood models than the suburbs have offered to date. Infusing uniform and homogeneous housing tracts with new uses, hybrid building typologies, and higher density can, among other strategies, contribute to creating a more varied urban fabric addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse populace. While design innovation can contribute to addressing the search for a new multifarious urban order, the challenges of realizing this vision are not insignificant, as serious hurdles associated with property rights and outdated zoning regulations need to be overcome.

Yet the current financial crisis highlights the need — and opportunity — for generating new solutions to the “suburban problem,” the focus of many recent articles in the popular press by David Brooks, Paul Krugman, Allison Arieff, and Bruce Katz, among others. As large patches of suburbs from Charlotte, North Carolina to Las Vegas are boarded up and decaying (see “The Next Slum?” by Christopher Leinberger in The Atlantic, March 2008), malls and retail centers are falling at an alarming rate (see www.deadmalls.com). Richard Florida notes in his recent Atlantic article (“How the Crash Will Reshape America,” March 2009) that these symptoms reflect a deeper shift in the country’s spatial-geography resulting from fundamental and historic changes in our nation’s underlying social and economic structure. With over 50 percent of the populace living and working in suburbia, the success of the country very much depends on the suburb’s economic, social, and environmental health. To survive as a country, we need designers to take a leadership role in addressing these issues, as the transformation of suburbia is the design frontier worthy of the most innovative talent.

As Rahm Emanuel recently noted, “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” The stimulus package, with its emphasis on infrastructure, green building, and development of renewable energy sources coupled with design innovation, can help transform this crisis into an opportunity to regenerate a new, more varied and sustainable (sub)urban metropolis.

Your panelists on community-institutional relations [“Them and Us,” Spring 2009] were correct in their belief that a new, more constructive era in “town-gown” relations is possible. This hope is based on an increased appreciation that great institutions exist in stable, diverse neighborhoods, and likewise that residential communities benefit from healthy, engaged institutions.

For our part, Fenway CDC — no stranger to town-gown struggles — has turned the page, making the pursuit of institutional partnerships a centerpiece of our strategy to advance our vision of a diverse, vibrant community where institutional and community interests are balanced and synergistic. But this endeavor is a two-way street. While institutions recognize that they benefit when they exist in stable, pleasant neighborhoods, too often that recognition is trumped by their insatiable appetite for property. Such encroachment undermines the viability of the residential communities and destroys trust between the institution and the community.

Until the institutions and city government, which serves as referee in these interactions, prioritize viable communities and mutually respectful community-institutional relations over unlettered expansion, it’s premature to declare that a new era for town-gown relations has arrived.

In “Them and Us,” Steve Cecil comments that “We have to make sure that the focus is on the neighborhood and what makes a great neighborhood.” Unfortunately, the focus in North Allston and North Brighton for the last decade has emphasized designing a great future campus for Harvard University, and this has often been in direct conflict with having a great and vibrant neighborhood today. Harvard has purchased hundreds of acres, has gone to court to evict a major tenant, and has established a real estate monopoly and an abundance of vacant and under-utilized property far beyond the borders of its 50-year master plan. The Boston Redevelopment Authority and Harvard frequently remind residents about the eventual renaissance of our community, but those vague promises stand in stark contrast to the blighted property that Harvard has mothballed.

Also in that article, Rebecca Barnes stresses the importance of trust and transparency, and Omar Blaik notes that “the administrative structure of most institutions has never been designed to engage with the community.” Harvard’s Allston Development Group is responsible for obtaining zoning permits, but it isn’t clear if anyone at Harvard is dedicated to building a relationship with its neighbors based on common interests. The ingredients of an enlightened town-gown relationship make so much sense, which makes Harvard’s narrow self-interest and the BRA’s acquiescence all the more perplexing for community leaders in Allston and Brighton eager to support a mutually beneficial Harvard expansion.

A recent letter by Mayor Thomas Menino to Harvard President Drew Faust suggests that making a great neighborhood may soon become a priority. My neighbors and I hope that Harvard and the City jointly embrace this notion in a sustained and meaningful way.

Harry Mattison
Allston, Massachusetts

Letters Letters Letters
"Hipsters in the Woods" indeed! David Fixler's article [Spring 2009] provides a good overview of the several communities of Modern houses that went up outside Boston in the immediate post-WWII years. We hardly felt like hipsters, but we were eager to get to work and, endowed with the zeal of the Modern movement, we were terribly eager to imbue everything we touched with our new-found identity.

The stars seemed to be beautifully aligned: land close to town was plentiful, construction costs were reasonable, mortgage rates were low, and there was in the Boston area a market (although limited) of well-informed potential clients (many forming new families and with limited budgets).

Today, land availability and costs of almost everything are drastically different. But one can still ask where is the zeal in the profession and the market for this sort of thing, this "adventure," if you will. The single-family house on its own plot of land, still a potent vision for Americans, may be less viable (at least in the crowded Northeast), but the tenets of Modernism can still be applied in more dense configurations: closer scrutiny on how people want to arrange their lives at home, more sensitivity to the features of a site — privacy, views, and in this latitude, orientation.

There are factors that get in the way of objective planning and design (among Modernism's tenets). When it comes to how they choose to live, Americans are very conservative. And developers (who dominate the market) do not stray very far from this perception. Still there are signs that things could change: life in these times might become more modest, municipalities are becoming more sophisticated in how their land might be developed, and developers are beginning to understand that a more sophisticated market is there to be satisfied.

Walter S. Pierce FAIA
Lexington, Massachusetts

David Fixler's "Hipsters in the Woods" told an inspiring story about citizens who saw the value in putting their energy into creating communities that would improve their quality of life. That there might be a renewed interest in homes that are smaller (and therefore more environmentally sustainable) and better designed than the feature-laden "products" that glut the new-homes market now is heartening. However, I worry about glorifying the model of the single-family home on half-acre lots. Although the houses themselves may make "a minimal touch on the land," the wide sweeping roads that must connect them do not. The miles of utilities that must stretch throughout these rural settings are not an efficient use of our resources.

The word "community" was often used in describing these developments. How a sense of community was provided was not demonstrated. Are there places for the non-driving elderly to meet and socialize? Another trait these developments shared in common was that they served a very distinct slice of society. Knowing that people who live in demographically homogeneous neighborhoods are less tolerant of those who are different from them, can we in good conscience promote a neighborhood development pattern that serves a single economic bracket, a single education level, a single version of the nuclear family? I hope that society does find a renewed appreciation for the thoughtful design of the houses in these developments as well as the attempts that were made to preserve the natural topography, but I hope we can recognize which qualities are unsustainable, which qualities do not contribute to the health and well-being of our communities, and which should not be emulated.

Heather Holub RA, LEED AP
Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts

We want to hear from you. Letters may be e-mailed to epadjen@architects.org or sent to ArchitectureBoston, 52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02109. Letters may be edited for clarity and length, and must include your name, address, and daytime telephone number. Length should not exceed 300 words.
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Vanderwarker's Pantheon: Minds and Matter in Boston

Boston Athenæum
February 11—May 2, 2009

Sometimes the essential is revealed in something as secondary as a subtitle. Juxtaposing his long-time subject — the buildings that give form to Boston — with a new one — the people who are giving form to Boston — architectural photographer Peter Vanderwarker reminds us that extraordinary people create extraordinary places: the "minds and matter" of Boston.

In his current exhibition at the Boston Athenæum, brilliant, large-format images of buildings and people are intermingled and hung at eye-level. A statement by the sitter accompanies each portrait. The adjacency of buildings to humans brings each to greater life than if they were shown apart from one another.

Among the "matter," we find a series of images of the John Hancock tower. Seen in slender profile at different times of day, it's an ode to a building that transcends its architecture. Among the "minds" we find: James Carroll, who looks us in the eye, saying "I am a writer ... to be a servant of the word is an honor." Renata von Tischarner, shown swimming in the Charles River she has worked so hard to restore. John Sears, surrounded by his books, who says, "I have tried to find and promote quality, excellence, and beauty." Vanderwarker invites his human subjects to be fully present, much as he has learned to capture the essence of a building.

In this time of enormous uncertainty, Vanderwarker presents us with a vision of a city, human and built, that can elevate and inspire us to demand the best of architecture and to work for the best as citizens.

Brigid Williams AIA is a principal of Hickox Williams Architects in Boston.

Detour: Architecture and Design along 18 National Tourist Routes in Norway

National Building Museum
Washington, DC
January 28–May 25, 2009

Ah, to be Norwegian. It's a bit like being Swedish, but with scads of North Sea oil money. Those geographically gifted Norse, with their national design policy advocating Modernism, know how to furnish a scenic highway for the 21st century: Think WPA as administered by Sverre Fehn, a remarkable juxtaposition of the rural and the urbane, informed by an overriding love of honest materiality.

This distinctive, diminutive show serves as an ideal palate cleanser between some of the Building Museum's more substantive offerings. Photographs and models document overlooks, bridges, benches, observation decks, and lavatories that contribute minimally and gracefully to their breathtaking surroundings, some more successfully than others, but all in ways that make you wish you were there. That wish becomes an empty-chested longing as you watch, through brass binoculars, the artfully edited introductory film. The terrible beauty of the landscape almost immediately eclipses the architecture. And that's precisely the point.

Jeff Speck AICP, LEED AP is the principal of Speck & Associates in Washington, DC, and the former director of design at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Photo courtesy Todd Saunders/Tommie Wilhelmsen, Vegar Moen, and the National Tourist Routes Project.
Actions: What You Can Do With the City

Canadian Centre for Architecture
Montreal
November 26, 2008–April 19, 2009
www.cca-actions.org

If many Modernist buildings are now literally crumbling, the reputation of Modernism generally has proved less friable. With its splendid hubris, Modernism remains a popular target for architectural polemic. The exhibition Actions: What You Can Do With the City positions itself squarely against — if not architectural Modernism per se — what Modernism has come to represent. The declaration of war comes in the exhibition’s introduction: “We can no longer rely on the canonical tools of ‘Modern’ planning when designing and managing our urban space.” In response to this putative failure, Actions presents “99 actions that instigate positive change in contemporary cities around the world.”

In addition to six galleries, the exhibition comprises a multimedia website and a catalogue. The gallery space attempts to organize the Wunderkammer diversity of the “actions” into eight quixotic categories: Choose, Clue, Friction, Go, Guerilla, Plan Smarter, Share, and Low Effort. The exhibition deploys an impressive array of media, including videos, drawings, photographs, sound recordings, and objects; each “action” is accompanied by a brochure resembling an underground newspaper. The website allows visitors to participate by submitting their own “actions.” The catalogue offers a number of interpretive essays. As a group, the essays offer unflagging optimism, but no original insights into the political dimension of architecture; they also show an unfortunate inclination toward the tendentious and self-congratulatory.

Notwithstanding the attempt to frame the exhibition as a report from the front of design’s guerilla war against Modernism, the “actions” themselves exude a spirit of exuberant whimsy rather than earnest idealism. It is difficult to see, for example, how wearing or using a “Roller Suit” (basically a plastic-and-steel exoskeleton covered with roller-skate wheels) will “instigate positive change” in the sense implied. Still, in turning all hard urban surfaces into runways, the suit provides elan for any imagination willing to see possibility rather than imprisonment in our Modern concrete jungles. Actions showcases the power of design to unleash imaginaion, thereby revealing the profound truth that our cities contain untapped potential for play, work, and justice. Despite the curators’ activist rhetoric and emphasis on planning, the exhibition itself suggests that our Modern cities may be fine as they are — it may be our own habits of thought that most urgently need reinvention.

Jonathan Powers is a PhD candidate in the history and theory of architecture at McGill University.
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Taking Care of Buildings

The cleaner: Rodrigo, who moved here from El Salvador in 1990 and works for a cleaning and snow-removal company. He works five days a week, plays the guitar on weekends in a band at his church, lives with a roommate, and sends money home to his family.

5:55 A winter morning, still dark. Silhouettes of men and women who have alighted at the bus stop, bundled against the cold and carrying their lunches, making their way along the icy sidewalks to work.

6:00 The back hallway of the cleaning company is full of men waiting to go out on jobs. Everyone is speaking Spanish. Handshakes, high-fives, some embraces. Behind a door at the end of the hall are the executive and administrative offices, which Rodrigo cleans every morning. He begins by laying out supplies: spray cleaner, a duster, cloths, and latex gloves.

6:04 Dragging a garbage can, Rodrigo makes an initial circuit of the empty office—a labyrinth of waist-high cubicles—emptying trash and relining wastebaskets. He picks up a couple of paper cups half full of cold coffee and empties them in the bathroom sink before throwing them away.

6:14 Rodrigo goes from desk to desk, dusting and cleaning surfaces. He straightens a little but is careful not to move papers around too much and not to throw anything away.

6:29 He dismantles and cleans the coffee maker, and wipes the countertop of yesterday’s grains of sugar and coffee drips.

6:37 In the ladies’ room, Rodrigo pours cleanser into the toilet and scrubs it with a brush. He cleans the toilet’s surfaces with a cloth, and wraps it in another cloth so he won’t accidentally use it again.

6:45 After vacuuming, Rodrigo pushes a button that raises the metal shutters on the front windows. In a couple of minutes the first accountants and administrators will show up for work. He does a quick mental checklist and then runs to wipe down the conference table.

7:01 The back hallway. The men have all left. The floor is wet with melted ice, muddy with sand. Rodrigo begins sweeping the mud into piles. Two other cleaners walk through, figuring out their schedule for the day. “You coming out with me?”

“Sure.”

“Because I had someone else coming out, but he just canceled.”

“I’m with you.”

Posted on the wall is a notice in Spanish and English: “Horario de nieve,” explaining that if you work for this company, where the work is not just cleaning but also snow removal, you need to come to work when it snows. “NO HAY EXCEPCION A ESTA NORMA.”

7:07 Rodrigo cleans the men’s room.

7:20 He’s standing on a chair replacing a light bulb when the boss asks him to help with an emergency: a truck carrying the company’s ice melt is stuck in the street, blocking traffic. The request is calm and cordial, but the problem is actually huge, as is the truck, a long flatbed that jackknifed coming out of a driveway and is now surrounded by police cars, blue lights blinking. Rodrigo joins a group of about 16 men, recalled from today’s jobs, unloading the truck in the hope that lightening it will allow the driver to move it. Quickly, almost silently, the men are pulling the 50-pound sacks off the truck and carrying them on their shoulders back to the storage shed. It’s going to take a while: there are 36 tons of ice melt to be moved.

7:40 With the truck partially unloaded, the driver is trying, unsuccessfully, to move it. Rodrigo reminds his boss, who’s also outside carrying ice melt, that he has to clean another building before 8. “Right, OK,” the boss agrees.

7:44 Back at the cleaning company, Rodrigo grabs a vacuum, a bucket, some cloths, and spray cleaner, and then runs down the sidewalk to the small office building next door. He whips through, emptying trash and turning on lights. Everything looks good. Tuesday is his big cleaning day here, and this is Friday.

7:59 Ladies’ room. Replaces toilet paper, relines trashcan, checks paper towels.
8:01 Same thing in men's room.

8:03 Spray-cleans sinks, faucets, mirrors, soap dispensers in ladies' and men's rooms.

8:06 Quickly cleans both toilets.

8:08 Checks that the lights are working in the dance studio at the end of the hallway. He runs into the day's first arrival, a young woman who works in one of the offices. Rodrigo greets her calmly, wishes her a good weekend, and quickly vacuums the carpeted hall and vestibule.

8:10 On his way out, he picks up a thumbtack from the vestibule floor and puts it back in the bulletin board. "OK." He takes good care of this building and cleans it daily, so everything looks spotless even though he's had to rush through today.

8:12 Back at the cleaning company, Rodrigo sweeps the hall again: it's a smeary mess of dirt and grit from the boots of the men called back to help with the truck. Now, as he begins to mop, more men assemble in the hall. He mops, they mill around, and the dirt comes back as quickly as he can remove it.

8:35 Finally, after checking with the boss, Rodrigo empties the bucket, refills it with hot soapy water, and leaves it standing in a corner. After the men have left, someone else will quickly re-mop the floor.

8:40 He takes the bus over to the side-by-side apartment buildings he cares for. There's a supermarket near the bus stop; he picks up a salad for lunch, and stops to talk to some women standing in front of an abortion clinic. They give him literature in Spanish about shelters and adoption, which he will pass along to women in his church.

9:23 In the basement of one of the buildings, Rodrigo assembles supplies from neatly organized shelves, cleans the toilet in the small bathroom he uses, and changes his heavy boots for sneakers — he'll be running a lot over the next few hours, and the sneakers make him feel like he's flying.

9:40 Makes a quick circuit of the two buildings' basements, checking light bulbs, turning on outside lights, dusting, wiping off laundry machines.

9:46 Outside he checks that the lights have all come on. Inside each of the building's seven entryways, he checks the floors, which are carpeted, with marble borders; they're essentially still clean from yesterday's attentions, but flecked with ice melt from people's boots. Passes through the inner door, checks the hallway carpet, and peers up the stairwell to make sure all the lights are working, three floors up. Spray-cleans and wipes inner and outer glass surfaces of inner and outer doors.

10:05 Makes the rounds of the building's seven basement entrances, sweeping, checking light bulbs, and emptying and relining garbage cans. In some cases he stores liners at the bottom of the can, but some cans are habitually smelly and he keeps the liners nearby in boxes. He runs up several staircases where he knows that old ladies prefer to leave their trash in small knotted supermarket bags outside their

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back doors. Outside, he tests lighting fixtures, slinging rags over their photo cells to fool them into thinking it's dark.

10:22 The second building has five front entryways. He checks each and cleans the doors, which takes longer here because they’re Plexiglas, harder to clean, and they have lots of panes. The tile floors are gritty and salty; he’ll come back to mop later.

10:50 After he finishes the second building’s five basement entryways, he uses a dolly to haul the trash to the dumpster. In the first building, where he’s already emptied the communal basement cans, he now picks up the bags. In the second, residents put trash in cans on back porches outside their apartments. In each of the five back stairways, Rodrigo runs up four flights, and works his way down, emptying and relining cans.

Reaching the dumpster, he smiles with relief: the weekly trash pickup has already happened so there’s plenty of room, unlike some Fridays when it’s overflowing.

11:46 On one of his many dumpster trips, the dolly loaded with trash bags, a car pulls up and a woman gets out. The path is well salted, but she notices an icy patch.

“Where’s the sand and salt?”

“I’m going to put a little,” Rodrigo says.

“Oh.”

“I’ll do it now,” he says, and runs.

12:30 Lunch. He eats, checks messages, listens to music.

1:00 Gathers supplies. The building has a rhythm: in addition to the daily spot-check and light cleaning, Monday is the big trash day, after the weekend’s accumulation; Tuesday is a thorough vacuuming; Wednesday a thorough mopping; Thursday brass polishing. Friday is Rodrigo’s day to give extra attention wherever it’s needed: today, with the icy weather, it’s the brass door handles and kick plates, which have gotten dull and smudgy even since yesterday’s cleaning.

1:05 Pushing a wheeled bucket of steaming, soapy water, Rodrigo cleans the two buildings’ 12 vestibules: sweeping, mopping, tidying any mail and packages that have accumulated since his morning check.

1:45 Back in the basement, he drinks water — he’s hot, even though the day is freezing. But he doesn’t feel tired. In El Salvador, he was used to farm work and lumber work, both of which were much more grueling and paid only five dollars a day.

1:50 Crouches on the marble steps to start polishing the kick plate outside the first building’s first door. As he circles the buildings, he also puts down more ice melt.

2:28 Finishes the second building’s last door.

2:31 On his way back to the basement to store his supplies before returning home, he passes the dumpster. “See you Monday,” he tells it.

Joan Wickersham’s memoir, The Suicide Index (Harcourt), was a 2008 National Book Award finalist.
PARTICIPANTS

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John Aubin AIA is an architect and the developer of Open Square in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a mill complex with 685,000 gross square feet on an 8.5-acre site. Currently occupied by 50 commercial tenants, 15 percent of the complex has already been redeveloped as a net-zero-energy project. Open Square received a 2007 Smart Growth Award of Excellence for Mixed-Use Development. He was previously an architect in practice in New York City.

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Tim McGourthy is the director of economic development for the City of Worcester. He was previously the director of policy at Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Elizabeth Padjen FAIA is the editor of ArchitectureBoston.

Elizabeth Padjen: The Massachusetts Gateway Cities initiative is relatively new. It started in 2007 with a report produced by MassINC and the Brookings Institution and has gained traction since then. People are looking at these 11 mill cities as a key to smart growth but also for lessons on how we grow as a post-industrial society. But what has this initiative meant for the Gateway Cities themselves?

Tim McGourthy: It brought us together— partly in support of the message that these cities have value, partly to put the common challenges on the table and brainstorm solutions. We had a number of meetings that led to the Gateway Cities Compact, signed by all the mayors, which called upon the Commonwealth to work with us. For us, it was a real rallying cry, an opportunity to connect across municipal and regional borders and to put forward a unified approach and platform, which rarely occurs in Massachusetts. A legislative caucus has been formed, and the cities’ economic development directors meet regularly.

*The Gateway Cities: Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke,
Mill cities offer a case study in the connections between real estate development and economic development.

Elizabeth Padjen: Has the Gateway Cities “brand” achieved recognition at the state level?

Richard Henderson: The state is beginning to see these cities as places that can accommodate growth and help to shift us away from past patterns of pushing into greenfields. The biggest change is in perception: people are thinking of the Gateway Cities less as problems to be solved and more as opportunities. They’re starting to ask how we can leverage the fantastic architecture, the great access, the amenities like rivers and waterfronts, into being the next great places in the Commonwealth in which to live and work.

It’s an important question for the whole state. Even with the recent reduction in housing prices, Greater Boston is still a very expensive place in which to live. There have been studies about the Massachusetts brain drain; it’s essential to our future that we keep our educated young people in the state. Some kids getting out of college are willing to live in a hovel in Boston or Cambridge, but a lot of them instead go to Providence or Portland or leave the New England region entirely. The Gateway Cities can provide affordable, exciting urban places where young people can live in a sustainable, walkable environment.

Maggie Super Church: But there are also many young people who have grown up in the Gateway Cities who feel that they need to leave in order to find opportunity. We’re losing a lot of our best and brightest from our own neighborhoods.

Lawrence has been growing in population since the 1990s, and 43 percent of the population is under the age of 24, which most communities consider a great signal. I was at a conference in Germany where people said, “We’d love to have so many young people, because they provide energy and talent.” But for many generations, people in Lawrence dreamed of moving somewhere else as soon as they started to get ahead. So we really have to focus on brand identity, creating a sense that these are terrific places in which to stay and invest and grow.

Tim McGourthy: For a long time, these cities were defined by an aging population that had worked in manufacturing. But that’s changing, and the work force is changing. Of Worcester’s population between the ages of 25 and 34, approximately 42 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher. That is higher than Providence, Hartford, Manchester, or Portland, but it’s a story that doesn’t often get told. And unless that story is told, many businesses here in Massachusetts will look to Colorado, South Carolina, or North Carolina for their relocation, as opposed to Worcester, which is just 40 minutes down the Pike.

Richard Henderson: Let me tell you a story about Meditech — it’s a medical software company with facilities scattered around Route 128. It was trying to hire young people just out of college, pay them a decent but not huge salary and was having a lot of trouble competing with financial-services firms in downtown Boston. Young people couldn’t afford to live in the suburbs where its offices were. Meditech’s president happened to drive through Fall River past a site we had redeveloped, and instantly realized it was the perfect place for his business to grow. Even though the statistics show that the overall college-educated rate is very low in New Bedford and Fall River, he knew the area well enough to know that he could tap into people coming out of UMass Dartmouth and the community colleges — he knew that the labor force was there. Meditech now has about 300 people working in Fall River and has had no problem finding young people who want to live on the South Coast. It’s a beautiful area and it’s affordable.

Bob Ansin: These cities are man-made ecosystems that are once again in the right place at the right time in terms of the environment, immigration, the economy, and demographics. A recent story in The New York Times quoted Jeffrey Otto, a housing expert, who said the typical buyer of the future will be childless — he noted that Generation Y is turning 30 at the rate of 11,000 per
People are starting to ask how we can leverage the fantastic architecture, the great access, the amenities like rivers and waterfronts, into being the next great places in the Commonwealth in which to live and work.

Richard Henderson

day, and baby boomers are retiring at the rate of 10,000 per day. That’s why I feel confident that I’ll get a return on my investment in places like Fitchburg and Lawrence — they’re the right place at the right time. When we were selling condos in Lawrence, two-thirds of our buyers were empty nesters from the Andover area and one-third were young professionals who didn’t have kids.

Elizabeth Padjen: The other side of the demographic picture in many of the Gateway Cities is growing immigrant populations.

Arthur Jemison: It varies quite a lot. Springfield, Holyoke, and Lawrence have seen large growth, particularly in Caribbean Latino — especially Puerto Rican and Dominican — and Southeast Asian households. There’s a growing embrace of those households, and we’re seeing the increasing strength of these new immigrant groups as they assume leadership positions. It’s one of the things that will distinguish the future of these communities.

Bob Ansin: The writer Thomas Friedman had a wonderful idea, one that could particularly benefit the Gateway Cities: pass a law so that anybody who comes here from another country who completes a four-year degree gets a green card stapled to the diploma. Right now, we’re creating incentives for people to come here, get educated, then return to wherever they came from. It’s crazy. Have you heard the statistic that at least a third of all new patents are going to immigrants? Some of our best and brightest people come from overseas, wanting to live the American Dream. We’ve lost population in Massachusetts and, without immigration, we would have lost a lot more.

Maggie Super Church: But as we look at these kinds of statistics, we need to remember that it’s dangerous to peg all of our cities to a single demographic; it’s better to recognize that great cities accommodate a range of people and needs. Nobody would say Paris is great because it’s terrific just for empty nesters. People also raise families in Paris. Cities that function well have the physical and emotional space for all of those things to happen.

And that’s something the Gateway Cities can offer. There’s room in these cities for all types of projects. We need places for empty nesters. We need places for young professionals. We need places for families. We need places for businesses. And despite the affordability, we still need better affordable housing — a lot of it is in terrible condition. And there’s an enormous amount of “place.” The square footage of Bob’s building is probably larger than the largest office park on Route 128, with 1.23 million square feet. It’s hard for people who are familiar with Greater Boston to wrap their head around the scale of these cities and the scale of opportunity. We’re not going to run out of space in the Gateway Cities anytime in the next few years.

Elizabeth Padjen: John, your Open Square mill project in Holyoke includes both housing and commercial space. Who are your tenants? Are they people who are already in Holyoke, upgrading to fancier digs?

John Aubin: We haven’t started the housing component yet, but we know there is a strong market for housing. The commercial part, though, is up and running. Right now, approximately 15 percent of our tenants are start-up businesses. The others are businesses that were already existing in Holyoke, upgrading to fancier digs.

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Elizabeth Padjen: I would have thought that the easier sale would be to people who are already there.

Arthur Jemison: Maggie alluded to this, too. I grew up in the Pioneer Valley. Holyoke is sometimes its own worst enemy; Springfield, too. But people from New York City see an inexpensive, interesting urban environment that’s enriched by all the colleges and universities in the area.
Bob Ansin: It’s an important point, and I’ve experienced it in Lawrence. It’s part of the social history of these cities—people were taught that Grandma and Grandpa worked hard so they could move up the ladder. But it’s part of the physical history, too. People who grew up in these cities look at mills that were built for the textile industry, and do a kind of calculation: If textiles are an obsolete industry, then the buildings must be obsolete, and by extension, the whole area must be obsolete.

Maggie Super Church: But I would argue that mill buildings are among the most adaptable and durable structures we’ve ever built. What are we going to do with all the K-Marts 100 years from now? We joke that people get “mill-struck.” The first time they come to Lawrence, their reaction is always the same: “Oh my God, these buildings, somebody should do something with that mill!” As if no one else has noticed. Anybody who has even a hint of an interest in architecture or planning can’t help feeling amazed.

Richard Henderson: And it’s not just the mills, it’s a lot of the neighborhoods — gorgeous Victorian houses that were built for millionaires in their day that are selling for $250,000.

Elizabeth Padjen: Tim, in your role as director of economic development in Worcester, you probably spend your days courting people. How do you go about attracting jobs, business, industry? What is your competition?

Tim McGourthy: We like to say our competition is Boston, Providence, Hartford, and Manchester, but in reality our competition is Shrewsbury and Westborough and the surrounding towns. Worcester is one city among 39 towns in Worcester County. So you have an island of urban-dwellers in a sea of people who want to be in a bucolic countryside setting. It’s simple: Worcester is urban and they prefer rural. So our challenge is to get the message beyond the city borders and beyond the immediate region.

What we have found is that most of the major commercial brokerage companies focus on Greater Boston and end their coverage at Shrewsbury, the town next to Worcester. It’s frustrating when you have four million square feet of office space on the other side of that line that doesn’t show up on their maps of available office space. When pharmaceutical executives are sitting in Germany looking at a map for sites for their company, Worcester makes total sense. But when they come meet the brokers and are shown a map of Greater Boston and Worcester is off that map, their understanding of the region changes completely. So for us, the first challenge is to get into the mindset of the people who are actually out there talking to companies and to their representatives.

Elizabeth Padjen: Let’s take it to the next step. How do you then sell Worcester?

Tim McGourthy: First and foremost, it’s access to education. We have 10 colleges and universities within the city, 30,000 college students. And we have a huge, talented work force. We have over six million people within an hour’s drive of Worcester. Remember that half of Boston is against the water, while Worcester has Boston on one side, Hartford on another, Providence on another. We’re easily accessible, so we have a huge pool to draw from. With that comes the fact that our costs are lower; you can find great space for lower cost. Again, it depends on who we’re competing against. If we’re competing for that downtown office user, that’s one thing. If we’re competing against a greenfield site, we usually can’t provide the acreage.

Elizabeth Padjen: What has been the experience of MassDevelopment with potential employers who might be thinking about these cities?

Richard Henderson: Many times, it’s a case of trying to overcome perceptions about geography. We were talking to a major employer in downtown Boston, a financial institution, a few years ago. The company representative insisted Springfield was much too far away. “It’s three hours away,” he kept saying. “We cannot have our staff three hours away from the home base.” “It’s only an hour and a half away. Albany is three hours away.” “No, no, no, I know it’s three hours away.” So one of the things we’re trying to do is to bring the development community and brokers out to these cities. MassDevelopment has sponsored a series of developers’ conferences, one in Springfield, one in New Bedford, one in Lawrence. Worcester is next. You have to get people to come and kick the tires and see that there is tremendous opportunity there.

We also have to overcome perceptions about the labor force; people think they can’t get the kind of talent that is available in the Boston area. There are perceptions of crime and decline. These things are starting to change, but it’s a slow process.

Elizabeth Padjen: One interesting aspect of the Gateway Cities is
that almost all of them are home to public or private institutions of higher education.

Bob Ansin: Several have community colleges, which I think are the wave of the future, especially in terms of workforce development. The reason is that many of the next-generation employers are in specialized industries. Community colleges go to these employers and ask what they need; they provide direct training. A best example I can give is the win-win-win partnership forged between Springfield Technical Community College and the City of Springfield and the pre-eminent telecommunications companies of the world.

John Aubin: The Knowledge Corridor concept has been powerful—it refers to the region around the Connecticut River Valley that is now home to 26 colleges and universities—an approximately 110,000 students—including some of the best in the country. Holyoke and Springfield are right in the middle of this amazing resource. But students graduate and leave because there are no jobs. And yet I’ve talked to technology companies that love western Massachusetts because employees tend to be more loyal—people like the atmosphere, the quality of the life, the access to major cities and major ski areas. If you move a typical Boston business out to western Massachusetts or some of the other Gateway Cities, you’re automatically giving your staff a 30 percent raise because of the lower cost of living.

But one of the biggest problems is that people don’t believe it. I’m really happy to hear that MassDevelopment is trying to change that, because half the battle is attitude: if people don’t believe it, it’s not going to happen.

Elizabeth Padjen: The Knowledge Corridor is a reminder of how we limit ourselves by the maps we draw—that’s an economic and cultural region that has a cohesion that transcends state boundaries. Can the Gateway Cities compete with the larger New England-New York region?

Richard Henderson: Absolutely. We’re working right now with a company that has some operations in New York, to help them grow its operations in Pittsfield. The Holyoke-Springfield corridor really relates more to Hartford, Connecticut than to Boston. There’s been a real push for the Knowledge Corridor in recent years, even extending the concept down to New Haven and up to Amherst. It’s a market of well over a million people and includes a major international airport. Marketing both states together means I can build almost anything as of right without worrying about getting permission. A lot of programs inadvertently send the message that permitting is a problem, that we have a new tool, the Growth District initiative.

Richard Henderson: Growth Districts are focused on areas where the state sees potential for growth and would like to encourage it. The intention is to coordinate a lot of the state’s funding mechanisms—for example, matching a PWED [Public Works Economic Development grant] with a CDAG [Community Development Action Grant], a Growth District grant, and maybe a job-training program—and put them to work on a relatively discrete area within a city.

Tim McGourthy: Worcester recently established the state’s first Growth District. It is a good tool for highlighting opportunities within the cities.

The larger problem, though, is that our tools don’t match our public goals very well. For example, land development, business development, residential development, and retail development are all very different. Yet our tool set is constrained. The municipality has control over one funding source, and that’s property taxes, so a city can only provide incentives related to land development. If we’re trying to encourage a business to move into one portion of an existing building, we have nothing to put on the table unless we change the property taxes for that entire building and everyone within it.

The state, on the other hand, doesn’t control land taxes. It controls income taxes. So the state can’t really encourage land development except indirectly by providing incentives for business development. What that means is there is no predictability; we can’t guarantee an incentive package. The burden is on the developer to try to pull it all together. Our hope is that the Growth District concept will offer a little more predictability.

John Aubin: One of the problems of incentives is they become politicized, even if unintentionally. The single thing that any developer-builder appreciates and wants most is an “as of right” designation. In fact, I wouldn’t have done the Open Square Project if it weren’t for its “industrial-general” zoning designation, which means I can build almost anything as of right without worrying about getting permission. A lot of programs inadvertently send the message that this is a political process. One example is the new 43D program, which offers expedited pre-permitting in the Growth Districts. The existence of a special program that guarantees reasonable permitting sends the message that permitting is a problem in this state.

Tim McGourthy: It’s true that an incentive program is inherently a far more political process than a zoning program, at least in most communities. In a zoning discussion, you’re working with a formal written code. With an incentive, it comes down to whether individuals feel like doing something or not—there are no regulatory standards or requirements.

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Bob Ansin
Bob Ansin: As a private developer, I look at the building commissioner before I even look at the permitting process, because the discretion that a local building official has is tremendous. Chapter 34 of the Massachusetts Building Code is devoted to existing buildings. Some communities have building commissioners who understand it, and understand that they need to be creative. But I probably wouldn’t go to some Gateway communities, because I don’t have the sense that their building officials are really working for the city, so much as protecting their own fiefdom. Developers know these things, because we have to weigh risk. And if I can’t get building permits, then I can’t get a return on my investment.

Tim McGourthy: That’s another kind of creativity that the Gateway Cities need — from the architectural community. Chapter 34 is only part of it. We’re seeing projects designed by engineers without architects, projects that often fail to address quality-of-life issues or don’t relate to their context or fail to set standards and expectations for high-quality design. These communities need architects to help them become the kind of thriving, vibrant, pedestrian-oriented communities that they could be.

Arthur Jemison: That underscores the importance of strong local leadership in imagining new futures for these communities. We have had success and a good experience where we have worked, but I think it’s fair to say that, in the past, the Gateway Cities have mixed political leadership. As these cities start to think differently about the assets they have, it’s going to be really important that they have the best planning, development, and building professionals as well as thoughtful, transparent political leadership.

Maggie Super Church: Lawrence is fortunate in that respect. But the more that we can end up with as-of-right permitting, the more we can end up with transparent scoring for grant programs. Whether you’re a nonprofit or for-profit developer, big or small, you want predictability. Anybody who’s putting money at risk wants to know when you’re going to get there, how you’re going to get there, how quickly you’re going to get there, and what it’s going to look like for the time that everybody’s money is in the project. The thing that stops people cold is the sense that it might be a great return, but they might lose their shirts. And they are not going to go anywhere where that’s even a possibility.

John Aubin: In many cases, the solutions are not that complicated — although the implementation might be. For example, Holyoke has the highest commercial property tax rate in the state, partly because the assessed values of older buildings are so low. We would be better off doubling the values of older existing buildings and halving the tax rate. I’d be paying the same amount, and I’d be happy to. The low values create problems for people like me when we talk to financial institutions. Even worse for the city, the system discourages new developers from coming in and building or buying property because it puts them at a competitive disadvantage — they have a disproportionately high tax bill that they have to add to their rents or their operating expenses.

Elizabeth Padjen: Returning to the Law of Unintended Consequences, it seems that affordable-housing programs, which typically include deed restrictions to prevent flipping and ensure future affordability, have some downsides in Gateway Cities, where the housing markets are very different from Greater Boston.

Arthur Jemison: In some of the Gateway communities, market rents are very close to the rents that are established for Section 8 vouchers and 60-percent tax credits — in effect, the market rents are already what is considered “affordable.” So developers who want to build affordable housing have no incentive to build a market-rate building when they can build the same project for the same rents and get a tax credit for doing it.

If you build moderate- or low-income for-sale housing, the deed restrictions limit equity growth for the person who buys, and those deed restrictions hurt value. And then, over time, neighborhoods get locked into those uses and depressed values. Good-quality, well-managed, and well-maintained affordable housing is an asset, but restricting the value of, say, 80 percent of the housing in a neighborhood is not a good mix.

Tim McGourthy: Worcester’s downtown is primarily commercial. We’re trying to encourage more residential, 24-hour activity. Right
now, the housing that will get built will be subsidized housing, and most of it will be affordable, deed-restricted units. Because of that, many retailers we hope to bring in will look at the income levels of that area and say that downtown Worcester is not the right place for them. It's a Catch-22 of trying to make an active downtown area: if you bring in the housing, you lose the retailers, and if you keep the retailers you can’t do the housing because the market right now won’t support the kind of housing that those retailers are looking for.

**Maggie Super Church:** One of the challenges we’re seeing is the huge demand for middle-income housing — defined as income that is between 80 and 120 percent of the area median income. The markets are not strong enough to support it with only private capital, and the incentive programs don’t, for the most part, address it. So you end up in a situation where you can make projects work for lower incomes, and the private market takes care of the higher end. And a lot of people feel caught in the middle. They don’t make enough to get what they really want and need. They make a little too much to qualify for an affordable unit, and in any case, the deed restrictions are very problematic because of the inability to benefit from any appreciation in equity. And so they leave.

**John Aubin:** The whole affordable-housing component is one that no one wants to talk about and it probably needs to be talked about the most. My vision for Holyoke is quite simple. I think there’s a huge market for mixed-use urban areas, but cultural and economic diversity are a part of that. And I think the middle income is the biggest market.

But a lot of Gateway communities are sending the message that they don’t want market-rate housing, that they want lower-income housing. Is that a sustainable economy? Is that the best solution? In some ways, we’ve created a market that has set up two groups: one that fights only for the high end and one that...
fights only for the low end. Part of that is policy-driven. No one talks about this, and as a result, our policies don't address it.

Tim McGourthy: We all follow the funding. Housing programs require affordability, and each new funding source layers on additional requirements for affordable housing. So cities like Worcester, which would like market-rate housing downtown, have no tools to support that. You're trapped by state and national policies that don't necessarily address the needs of individual communities.

Maggie Super Church: We have not begun to really understand how to do housing policy well. People get nervous about housing policy, because it starts to feel like meddling with markets. How much do we let markets make decisions? We haven't begun to sort all of that out, and in the meantime, the Gateway Cities are left battling for the resources that do exist.

Elizabeth Padjen: If the Development Genie appeared right now and said you get one wish for one tool that's really going to make a difference in the Gateway Cities, what would you say?

Maggie Super Church: Uncap the historic tax credit program. There's legislation pending to take off the limits on the amount of tax credits. The state of Maryland has already done this and the impacts have been unbelievable. It's versatile, and it would affect all sectors — housing, schools, commercial, retail, for-profit,
nonprofit. The current limits make the program enormously political and unpredictable. And for the Gateway Cities, which have a tremendous historic building stock, lifting the limits would make a huge difference.

John Aubin: I’d love to see the historic tax break, but the residential tax break for me is more important because it’s so broad-based.
Cities like Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, and Cleveland have all used a temporary owner-occupied housing tax abatement program, or Residential Tax Abatement to bring much-needed investments to struggling areas. The RTA works by allowing mortgage borrowers to make their money go farther. This extra buying power is a critical "carrot" encouraging folks to invest in Gateway Cities. Unlike a TIF [tax increment financing district], this benefit goes to the end user, the resident, not the developer. A proposal to introduce the RTA to Massachusetts is working its way through the legislative process.

Because the tax abatement is on incremental improvements, any existing taxes will continue to be paid. Therefore, there is no cost to the city. In fact, infusing Gateway Cities with a middle-class residential population will result in an increase in commercial taxes as the live-work economy downtown grows to serve new downtown residents, as happened in Grand Rapids and Philadelphia.

Bob Ansin: I would ask my genie to allow the state and federal historic tax credits to be used not just on income-producing property, which is what the program currently allows, but also on home-ownership opportunities. Right now, incentives work against home ownership in historic buildings.

Tim McGourthy: These are all good requests. Just to add a little variety, I would ask for an improved transportation infrastructure — not just the spoke-and-wheel system around Boston but throughout the Commonwealth.

Arthur Jemison: I second all these ideas. But here's another one. I would ask to bring the Harlem Children's Zone strategy to the Gateway Cities. It's a neighborhood-based program developed by Geoffrey Canada that focuses on education and parenting programs. It has used charter schools, family social support, and longer school years with remarkable success: kids are outperforming their peers in New York City schools in math.

The physical-development side of these cities is easy; people like us can figure out how to make the dollars work. But turning around the social and educational structure of these neighborhoods — that's what could really make markets. You have to commit to it. If you had a Harlem Children's Zone in even one neighborhood in every one of these Gateway Cities, 10 years from now you'd be able to say that turning around those neighborhoods, combined with the physical improvements, new jobs, and infrastructure, made all the difference.

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Maggie Super Church
Left out of Boston's prosperity, these industrial cities have joined forces to forge a new future.
Although I did not know it at the time, I was born and raised in a Gateway City. The Pittsfield, Massachusetts, of my youth was a thriving and prosperous city of just under 60,000. Up until the early 1970s, Pittsfield had a lot going for it. Downtown was a retail hub with a couple of department stores and many specialty shops and restaurants. The schools were good, and there were enough students to support three junior high schools, two public high schools, and a Catholic high school — which of course made sports rivalries both competitive and legendary. Four Little Leagues (I played in the East league) and numerous youth leagues in other sports created the talent pool that fueled the city’s sports obsession. Pittsfield had a literary and cultural heritage, too. Melville wrote *Moby Dick* while living at Arrowhead, his Pittsfield farm. The Shakers established a prosperous community just over the city’s western border. Many famous writers and artists settled in the Berkshires — “America’s premier cultural resort” — and Pittsfield was, and still is, the center of it all.

But what made Pittsfield really prosperous and wealthy were jobs, and those jobs were at General Electric. GE’s plastics, transformers, and ordnance plants were in the city, and they employed thousands. My dad was one of them. He came to Pittsfield in 1955 to work in the ordnance plant and soon married, started a family, bought a house, and then bought another (where he still lives), successfully pursuing the American Dream. I never knew exactly what my father did for a living, other than it involved submarines and the nation’s defense during the Cold War, but it was a good job that paid good wages, and that’s all that mattered to a growing family of seven. In short, Pittsfield had everything needed for blue- and white-collar families to feel good about themselves and their community, and for merchants and the professional classes to live the good life as well.

And then GE closed or relocated its local operations, leaving behind only one unit, which was sold in 2007 to a Saudi conglomerate that today employs fewer than 300 people in town.
What is a Gateway City? Although they share attributes with many mid-size, post-industrial cities, the Gateway Cities are defined as 11 formerly prosperous mill cities in Massachusetts: Brockton, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield, and Worcester. What distinguishes them from other former industrial cities in the region is their size — between 35,000 and 175,000 — and the fact that they lie outside the immediate economic influence of Boston.

In 2007, MassINC, a nonpartisan think tank that focuses on the goal of promoting the growth and vitality of the American Dream in Massachusetts, worked with the Brookings Institution to study the needs and challenges of these cities, which had been left out of the growing prosperity of the Greater Boston region. The “gateway” name was selected, not only to suggest the opportunity that these cities represent and their role as regional centers, but also to reflect the fact that most of these communities are home to many recent immigrants.

The resulting report, Reconnecting Massachusetts Gateway Cities: Lessons Learned and Agenda for Renewal, documented job losses, rising poverty, and weakening educational attainment — the results were not surprising. But in a state like Massachusetts, a national leader in per-capita income and educational attainment rates, what was shocking was the increasing concentration of poverty in the Gateway Cities. Representing just 15 percent of the state’s population, these 11 cities are home to 30 percent of the state’s poor. As Greater Boston was booming, the rest of Massachusetts was having a hard time connecting to the source of our wealth: the knowledge economy. Between 1970 and 2005, while Greater Boston added 467,000 jobs, the Gateway Cities as a group lost more than 11,000 jobs. Since the 1960s, the Gateway Cities have lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs, one-third of the state’s total decline in such jobs.

At the same time, the Gateway Cities have received a disproportionately low share of state-level support. Year after year, Massachusetts has invested more than half a billion dollars in a variety of incentives to attract and retain businesses, but less than 5 percent of those dollars has gone to programs that draw companies to economically distressed areas like the Gateway Cities. Tax credits intended for “Economic Opportunity Areas” in distressed areas have been diverted to EOAs in “distressed” communities such as Lexington and Bedford.

And yet, these 11 cities offer extraordinary opportunities for smart growth, affordable housing, and the workforce — three significant challenges facing Massachusetts. Built during eras of prosperity, they feature walkable downtowns and attractive housing, as well as transportation and cultural infrastructure.

Since the report was published, several significant new initiatives have already been launched to help the Gateway Cities compete by attracting more private-sector investment and reforming state policy. The chief executives of all 11 cities signed a compact in May 2008, agreeing to work together on economic and community development; the 11 economic development directors meet regularly as part of an economic development “roundtable.” UMass Dartmouth has established the Urban Initiative Center to expand the university’s involvement in the economic and social development of Gateway Cities. MassINC itself has embarked on focused initiatives with individual cities, such as the Springfield Growth Strategy — a plan for the long-term economic growth of the city.

Other efforts address legislative and policy concerns. The Gateway Cities Legislative Caucus, which includes legislators from districts in each of the 11 cities, has filed a bill entitled “An Act to Promote Economic Development in Gateway Cities,” which would expand the state’s Historic Tax Credit Program, provide resources for market-rate housing development, and enhance the state’s Economic Development Incentive Program. Governor Patrick’s administration has established two grant programs for the Gateway Cities, one for housing and one for urban parks.
And the Gateway Cities “brand” is sticking, at least partly because of the opportunity that the term suggests. The Gateway Cities represent an industrial heritage that helped to make Massachusetts prosperous, but they also symbolize a legacy of opportunity — the chance that, through hard work and some luck, the American Dream is accessible.

Each of the Gateway Cities is home to families with stories like mine. After I graduated from Pittsfield High School in 1975, I moved to Boston, then to Chicago and on to Haverhill, before finally settling down and buying a house in Lowell.

Today I live in an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood; some people might call me an “urban pioneer.” My home is a modest, 1920s four-square. Across the street is a family that represents the best of what this country is all about. Refugees from the Cambodian genocide, they settled in Lowell after barely escaping with their lives. Over time, they bought a house, with several generations living together to save some money so other family members could also buy a house. The kids went to school and learned English, becoming new Americans while holding onto their family’s cultural heritage. Some are now graduating from the city’s community college, and some are getting married (often in the traditional Cambodian way, which includes three days of celebration). They all work, often at more than one job, and they pool their resources to get ahead. It is no accident that this family, and many like them across Massachusetts, live in a Gateway City.

I have a soft spot for scrappy places that won’t quit. Lowell is like that — but so is Pittsfield, and so are the rest of the Gateway Cities. We ignore them at our own peril. These cities won’t quit and we should not quit on them. We know what we need to do. Do we have the will to do it? ■

JOBS
Many Gateway Cities are holding on to manufacturing jobs. In 2003, more than 25 percent of private-sector jobs in Fall River, Lawrence, and New Bedford were still in the manufacturing sector. In the 1980s, the number of manufacturing jobs in the Boston Metro area (as a percentage of private-sector jobs) dipped below 25 percent.

IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS
Some of the Gateway Cities have long been home to large immigrant populations, although their countries of origin have varied widely.

Today, approximately 70 percent of Lawrence’s immigrant population is from the Dominican Republic, while approximately 70 percent of New Bedford’s immigrants are from Portugal. Brockton and Fall River’s immigrant populations both comprise approximately one-third from Cape Verde and one-fifth from Haiti.

Lowell’s immigrant community is even more heterogeneous: Cambodia (24 percent); Portugal (10 percent), India (9 percent), Brazil (9 percent), Vietnam (6 percent), Colombia and Thailand (5 percent each), Dominican Republic and Laos (4 percent each).

POVERTY
There is a high level of concentrated poverty in some of the Gateway Cities. 34 percent of Springfield’s and 51 percent of Holyoke’s poor live in “high poverty” neighborhoods. By comparison, New Orleans had a concentrated poverty rate of 38 percent on the eve of Hurricane Katrina.

POPULATION GROWTH
Population growth and decline has been uneven in the Gateway Cities. Between 1960 and 2000, Lowell grew by 14 percent, while Brockton’s population grew by 30 percent and Haverhill by 31. During the same period, Pittsfield and Holyoke lost 21 and 24 percent of their residents respectively. (Boston experienced a 15 percent decline in population.)

GATEWAY PLUS
In addition to the 11 Gateway Cities, 12 communities that share similar concerns and that also play roles in the state’s smart-growth strategies have been designated “Gateway Plus” Cities by Governor Deval Patrick: Barnstable, Chelsea, Chicopee, Everett, Leominster, Lynn, Malden, Methuen, Revere, Salem, Taunton, and Westfield.

Source: MassINC.
"You can't decide ahead of time what activities you want to see. Economic life is full of surprises, and if you decide what you're going to base your economy on — what do you have to think about? Things that already exist. You're ruling out innovation right away, and yet innovation is of the essence for a live and prospering economy." — Jane Jacobs

It is easy to believe that we live in an enlightened era of urban planning. The arrogances of 20th-century Modernism are behind us, the suburb has become everyone's favorite whipping boy, and the cityscapes on our drawing boards are humane and engaging. We have developed a remarkable array of resources to promote and safeguard the urban condition. From historic-district protections to smart-growth policies, architectural review boards to community-development block grants, Main Street Programs to affordable-housing regulations, and the Gateway Cities Program to whatever comes next, there seems little reason to doubt that we are on our way to realizing the rich urbanism in our mind's eye. We have come a long way from towers-in-a-park to this.

And yet our sophistication may be leading us away from asking some essential questions about the urban problem. Such as, why are we beholden to so many costly programs and regulatory procedures when nothing of the kind was needed to build our favorite urban centers in the first place? (The Main Streets that the Main Street Program emulates, for example, were not products of a Main Street Program.) Why are new projects built in our downtowns nearly always inferior to their predecessors — over-scaled, under-inspired, and easily written off with what-else-can-we-do resignation? And why can't Mom and Pop find a meaningful place in the new mixed-use city?

The answers are not flattering, for they suggest an urban planning establishment that has become invested in a dysfunctional process that forbids mixed-use urbanism from emerging organically, begetting the need for top-down, professional intervention. This has perhaps done a lot to advance urban planning, but it has done very little to advance urbanism.

Urbanism, interrupted

At the intersection of Washington and High Streets in Haverhill, Massachusetts, lies an important clue as to what went wrong with American urbanism decades ago. Here, as in many neighborhoods in New England, a not-quite-realized urbanism has been preserved in a state of arrested development for nearly a century. The landscape is familiar: unprepossessing one-, two-, and three-family houses, scattered apartment blocks, walkable if not fully hospitable streets, and the occasional corner store. At Washington and High, the Kwike Market and Benedetti's Deli, located on the ground floors of two houses, provide the commercial punctuation marks.

Because the mixed uses here are so modestly developed, their unglamorous origin is apparent: some local citizens opened businesses in houses. The originator of the Kwike Market perhaps first opened a tobacco shop in his living room; later, he added comestibles and took over the entire floor. Maybe the owner of the two-family house opposite couldn't find a renter, so his brother-in-law opened a food business in the first-floor apartment. Decades later, both establishments continue to thrive.
Whatever the particulars, the lesson is near-universal: mixed-use urbanism naturally arises when citizens turn living rooms into stores, dining rooms into hair salons, kitchens into taquerias, and garages into cabinet shops. Historically, as home-based businesses have pushed toward the sidewalk with additions and display windows, mixed-use streets and even downtowns have emerged. This ad-hoc model allowed citizens of even quite modest means and difficult life circumstances a natural path to economic success and self-actualization. A frustrated desk clerk could get a rent-free shot at owning a secondhand bookstore in his garage. A woman laid off from the factory could hang out a sign and sell muffins and coffee to her neighbors the next day. A high-school dropout could generate income by mending clothing for her neighbors in the family basement while caring for her newborn daughter.

Around the turn of the 20th century, emerging health, building, and zoning codes began to change this landscape. Few would-be entrepreneurs could afford to adapt their homes to the new codes, which grew increasingly stringent, or to rent separate commercial spaces; and zoning laws forbidding new businesses in or near residences made many such efforts moot. Mom and Pop have been sitting on their hands ever since, waiting for the professionals to make urbanism happen. Meanwhile, with fewer new small businesses arising, commercial growth has tended to find its outlet through cataclysmically large projects — on the suburban periphery and sporadically in otherwise dormant city neighborhoods.

Urbanism is in the details
Planners and policymakers rightly desire to close the prosperity gap between the region's smaller cities and Boston. But to the extent the problem is framed this way, we risk pushing our small cities to become more like Boston. Anyone who has observed Boston urbanism of late — badly scaled buildings going up everywhere, independent businesses succumbing to chain stores, Newbury Street growing bland and cloying, an enormous strip mall being inserted into South Bay, poor and middle-class residents being priced out of their neighborhoods — has to wonder how this can be a good direction to pursue.

What is needed in our cities is a strategy that is authentic, that is rooted in the particulars already present in them. Our choice is simple: We can continue to funnel growth toward oversized projects conceived by strangers and visited upon us in spasmodic bursts, or we can once again allow incremental commerce to be initiated in our neighborhoods by people we know. We can continue pretending that megadevelopments are unavoidable and that architectural review boards are needed to assure compatibility, or we can begin the harder but more rewarding work of making a human-scaled culture, out of which human-scaled buildings will emerge naturally.

The seeds of this new culture lie where they always have — in the home. Its cultivator remains the home-based entrepreneur. It is perhaps hard to believe that answers to the enormous problems we face lie in so modest a place. It can be easy to dismiss home business as a mere detail in the complex urban system. But this is like saying that DNA is a mere detail of biology, when it is its essence. Home business is not simply a detail of urban culture; it is its DNA.

Urbanism, resumed
The changes needed to rediscover incremental urbanism are, perhaps ironically, considerable. Zoning districts should be reorganized by intensity rather than use. Similar intensities such as small stores, hair salons, repair shops, offices, daycare facilities, and even some forms of light assembly should be freely combinable with residences, by right. Residential-only districts should be the exception.

Regulatory codes need to be reformed to allow graduated
compliance. A new home business could be given perhaps five years to provide ADA-compatible ramps and toilet facilities. A home restaurant under a specified size could forgo costly, code-standard appliances if reasonable health practices are demonstrated. Old buildings — particularly those that are owner-occupied — could be forgiven expensive earthquake code upgrades if their nonconforming status is openly advertised.

The biggest adjustments will be psychological. Many will find it difficult to live in neighborhoods that will be constantly evolving. Confrontations will arise, even among those who stand to benefit. But one day, a sea change will indeed occur. A resident of a struggling city will stand up at a community meeting to object to a neighbor seeking to open a bicycle shop or taco stand in her home. And that resident will be hooted down for what he or she is: one who stands against the community, who wishes to send local money away, who prefers that her neighborhood remain creatively and entrepreneurially stagnant.

Fear of change will — and does — permeate the profession, too. Many planners and policymakers see no need for change, and claim that a boom in home businesses is already underway. Yet the “live-work” model with which so many are fascinated is directed at clean-hands enterprises — web design, business consulting, and the like — which are invisible to the street. Such is not an urban notion of business, nor is it one that accommodates citizens living outside the boundaries of privilege.

Others believe that a “creative economy” is already transforming our urban centers with a genteel gallery culture. But this co-opting of “creative” insults the would-be shop owners and laborers and workers denied their own opportunities to create. As for the “real” economy, unimaginative policymakers will continue to define economic development as the attracting of chain stores, even though any chain store that turns a profit by definition removes more money from a locality than it returns to it, regardless of what it pays in salaries and local taxes.

Learning to let urbanism happen naturally once again will be the hardest part. The desire to control, to manage, to predict outcomes on a grand scale will be taken from us. This means that a lot of people will need to put egos aside and stop being impressed with big plans to solve the urban problem in our lifetime. We need to invest in the long road, in a process that will go on long after us. And isn’t this — the possibility of permanence, the opportunity to participate in something that transcends us — the reason we are drawn to the urban endeavor in the first place? •

Matthew Frederick RA is the principal of Frederick Design Studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A registered architect and an urban designer, he is the author of 101 Things I Learned in Architecture School (MIT Press, 2007) and is working on a new book, Radical Urbanism.
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Greetings from Our Holyoke

YOU'VE SEEN THEM — the ubiquitous, glossy rectangles tucked into spinning racks at tourist sites and convenience stores across the globe: the Important Monument, the Historical Site, the Beautiful Park, the Famous Building. Postcards provide the images that depict a sense of place. Or do they?

When cities are represented as a collection of glossy images, much is left out. Day-to-day experiences and places that shape regular lives are overlooked. And yet, as photographs, postcards are also a uniquely accessible public-art form. But they're rarely intellectualized or critiqued, and often for good reason.

The intersection of these two observations generated the ongoing public-art project called “Greetings from MY City,” which celebrates the diversity of a city’s unique people and places through a series of new postcard designs. In an effort to engage the communities at the heart of this exploration, young students are given disposable cameras to create photo essays that depict the spirit of their communities. Whether defined by racial identity, architectural style, urban density, landscape, class, or culture, the home neighborhoods of these students include places rarely, if ever, seen in conventional tour guides or postcards; often these neighborhoods are entirely left off the map.

The students learn about cameras, composition, and careful observation. They learn about their city through mapping exercises. They discuss their own special places, and the public’s perception of those places, as projected in the media and reflected in community services. Only then do they venture out to document their neighborhoods. Afterward, through a guided process, they select photographs to be printed as postcards, honing their graphic skills and exploring how ideas are conveyed through visual media. Their selections are then curated by the project directors, who also design the message area of each card to include a full city map and a caption identifying the student photographer.

What results is a series of real postcards, sold in stores throughout the city. More profound is the resulting sense of ownership and pride in the community’s uniqueness — a pride shared by the student photographers and by the residents who view and use these cards.

The images included here reflect the most recent workshop with a sixth-grade social-studies class at John J. Lynch Middle School in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Additional projects have been undertaken in Boston and are in development in Springfield, Massachusetts; San Francisco; and Washington, DC.

Gretchen Schneider AIA and Erika Zekos, Assoc. AIA are the founders and directors of the “Greetings from MY City” project. The project has been funded by grants from the Boston Foundation for Architecture, the Kahn Institute at Smith College, and the American Institute of Architects Blueprint for America Project through Western Mass/AIA; it has also benefited from collaboration with Citizen Schools and the South Boston Fourth Presbyterian Church Music and Art Program.
Color photographs, clockwise from top left: Veronica; Amber; Veronica.
The Nest of Delicious
HOT DOGS • POP CORN
HOME BAKED BEANS

Color photographs, clockwise from top left: Jordyn; Bianca; Alexandria.
The Real Deal
Re-Inventing the Post-Industrial City

Adam Baacke talks with Jeff Stein AIA

Adam Baacke is the assistant city manager of the City of Lowell, where he also serves as director of the Division of Planning and Development. He received a BA from Cornell in American History and, after serving in AmeriCorps, he received an MS in Public Affairs from University of Massachusetts Boston.

Jeff Stein AIA is head of the School of Architecture and dean of the Boston Architectural College and is the architecture critic for Banker & Tradesman.

Jeff Stein: Lowell is a city that is thriving because it is an industrial-history museum, but at the same time, it seems to be trying to escape that history and become part of the new post-industrial economy. It's as though there is Lowell the museum place, and then there's Lowell the real place.

Adam Baacke: It's actually not a museum place. It's a real place that happens to highlight and celebrate its history and heritage. But there is no doubt that the city has benefitted greatly from the investment that has come since the Lowell National Historical Park was established in 1978 — not only in terms of hard dollars, but also in terms of intellectual capital and a new way of thinking about the city.

Richard Florida and others have written about the creative class as the resource that drives economic activity today. One of the things that the creative class is attracted to is an authentic urban experience — a wonderful built environment, but also the kind of activity that comes with an urban setting. Today, in many parts of the country, you see people trying to replicate the very environment that Lowell was able to preserve. So in a sense, the national park gave us an extraordinary resource for attaining success in a new economy that is completely different from the economy that the city was originally built for.

Jeff Stein: One difference is that this new post-industrial economy doesn't have roots here; it started elsewhere and presumably could find a home almost anywhere.

Adam Baacke: There is some truth to that, but what's going on here today is actually more organic than what occurred when Lowell was first founded. Lowell is a city only because of capital investment by private investors who decided that this was a good place for a city. And it all traces back to a natural feature: a sizeable drop in the river at a bend where they could harness the water power for the mills. They created a city around that, in order to provide the labor force to run and operate those mills. It was 100 percent a planned city.

Jeff Stein: And now you have to retool that city for a new economic environment.

Adam Baacke: Right. If communities like Lowell don't plan and have a meaningful strategy to respond to current realities and potentials, they face the threat of obsolescence.

Jeff Stein: So what is your strategy?

Adam Baacke: We're trying to build on the demographic realities in America today, which include an expected substantial growth in the number of households over the next couple of decades. The traditional nuclear household will likely not grow at all. The growth areas are expected to be retiring baby-boomers; younger echo-boomers, who are the people just starting out now as singles or couples; and immigrants. Those three groups have traditionally had an interest in urban settings. As a result, there is an extraordinary opportunity for places like Lowell that have urban authenticity.

If we're attractive to just 10 percent of the people in each of those demographics, we have a recipe for the continued growth of the city. And in this economy, which is driven by the skills and capacity of the workforce, that also means we are...
cultivating a key resource, in much the same way that in the early 20th century, water power was the resource that drove decisions on locating businesses and economic development.

Jeff Stein: Do you have indications that this strategy will be successful?

Adam Baacke: The best standard I can think of for measuring the success of urban revitalization is looking at the transformation of vacant property into productive use. Since 2000, Lowell has brought 2.6 million square feet of formerly vacant buildings back into active, productive use, just in our downtown alone. And that effort continues; we have projects like our Hamilton Canal District project, which will redevelop another 300,000 to 400,000 square feet and complement that with another 1.6 million square feet of new construction downtown.

Jeff Stein: What effect has the recent economic downturn had on that?

Adam Baacke: We are fortunate with respect to the Hamilton Canal project. First of all, it’s a long-term, 10-year project, so what’s going on in the economy this year isn’t what will be going on in year 10. The developer is still very bullish on the long-term trends. The biggest challenge for doing development right now appears to be attracting debt financing. And fortunately, for the first phase of this project, which is the restoration and reuse of the historic mill property, historic-preservation tax credits as well as low-income housing tax credits are the dominant components of the financing package. While it becomes harder to sell the tax credits — the idea is that you turn around and sell them to parties who have income that they want to write off on their taxes — it’s actually easier to obtain them than it is to obtain debt financing right now.

Jeff Stein: I would guess that one of the challenges you face is getting properties on the tax rolls that generate property-tax revenues. Lowell has a state university, a community college, the usual religious institutions, and a federal national park — that’s a lot of acreage that is not generating revenue.
Jeff Stein: I noticed that the public schools here look pretty good. Several of them are new or have been renovated in the last decade or so.

Adam Baacke: We appreciate that you’ve noticed! Lowell’s school department started a very aggressive school-building program in the late 1980s that continues today. Cities are only as healthy as their neighborhoods, and when you think about the role of city government in neighborhoods, there are three things that are most important. One is educating children: providing high-quality facilities and education. Another is public safety. The third is providing parks and public amenities. And over the last couple of decades, the city has put a lot of emphasis on all three. We have literally rebuilt almost every school in the city and have been restoring and enhancing our parks, leveraging state grant money in both cases.

One of the things that hindered Lowell in the early 1990s was a real and perceived crime problem. But between 1994 and 2004, with the implementation of a very aggressive community policing program, the city actually experienced the largest drop in crime of any city of its size in America. And we’ve been able to maintain the very low levels of crime that we reached in 2004. That’s created a sense of safety and security in our neighborhoods that ultimately makes them more attractive and livable places.

Jeff Stein: Lowell is one of Massachusetts’ 11 “Gateway Cities,” so defined in a study by MassINC and the Brookings Institution “because they are at once gateways to the next era of the state’s economic success and key portals for their diverse, often foreign-born residents’ ongoing pursuit of the American Dream.” Is that something that is high on the radar of planning and community development here now?

Adam Baacke: We look at it in two respects. One is the role that Lowell played in its industrial heyday, and continues to play, of being a gateway to immigrant populations coming into the country, giving them a place to establish a foothold. During the last century, the Irish, Greek, and Portuguese immigrants created ethnic neighborhoods where the entrepreneurs among them established businesses that catered to their populations, enabling them to achieve a sense of the American Dream. The same thing is happening today with the Cambodian, Brazilian, and African immigrant populations here. We’re seeing the same kind of communities form, which create and strengthen their own entrepreneurs within them. Lowell is very much the kind of place where that can happen. It’s a place where you allow for the mix of land uses and the mix of activity and the mix of people, the kind of dynamic that only can happen in urban places, that allows that type of entrepreneurship to bubble up.

It’s also an accessibly priced community, so for people who are just starting out, whether that means starting a family or starting out in this country, this is a place to find housing they can afford. What’s important is that while many do move to other places as they attain levels of success, many others who become successful stay in Lowell, are committed to the community, and become civic leaders. One of the tenets of our master plan is to foster that sense of the lifetime city.

Jeff Stein: What do you mean by “lifetime city”?

Adam Baacke: Regardless of your stage of life or your income level, you can find a neighborhood, a type of housing, and the amenities associated with your lifestyle that will be satisfying and compelling somewhere here in the city. We are not fooling ourselves into believing that everyone will follow that path, but we do believe that no matter where you are in life, if you are interested in being in an urban environment, you can find a place here in Lowell. That kind of diversity is part of what’s important in the overall sustainability of the city. Similarly, we are striving for economic diversity and are not focused on any one industry—that may be great for a while but it can also decline precipitously, as we saw with the textile mills. We also feel it’s important that we do not become merely a bedroom community or merely an attractive retirement city, because something could change in demographic or economic factors that would make us vulnerable again.

Jeff Stein: Tell me about the Hamilton Canal project. It’s something of a latecomer to the Lowell renaissance — why is that?

Adam Baacke: There are several reasons. First off, until recently, two major industrial users were still operating in that area. The nature of their operations, combined with the canal system, turned their sites into a physical barrier between the core of the downtown and the rest of the city. The Hamilton Canal District is a 15-acre parcel right in the middle of the city that tens of thousands of people drive by every single day. But people barely even knew it was there. The other impediment was that the balance of the district was owned by some land-owners who had exhibited little effort to do any sort of redevelopment; much of it was characterized by decades-long vacancy and severe under-utilization.

Jeff Stein: How did you manage to change the minds of those land-owners?

Adam Baacke: In some cases, we were able to negotiate sales; in those cases, the land-owners recognized that this was probably the best opportunity for them to make some money on their property. But in many cases, we had to use the power of eminent domain. The project was catalyzed when the Freudenberg Nonwovens
Company announced that it was closing its operations here and moving them to North Carolina and China. Freudenberg officials approached the city, saying that they had always prided themselves on being good corporate citizens and wanted to know what they could do to continue that even as they were closing. We realized fairly quickly that the best thing they could do was to sell us their property. And they agreed to do that at a discount below its assessed value, and to also take responsibility for some of the necessary environmental clean-up. That created the opportunity for us to combine that site with surrounding land that we either already owned or had the power of eminent domain to assemble.

Hamilton Canal is designed to be a model public-private partnership. People throw that phrase around a lot, but in this case, we asked a simple question: If we want to see revitalization in this part of the city, what are the things that the public sector can do better than the private sector? And vice versa.

Jeff Stein: And one of the things you could do well was amass the land at a lower cost than a private developer might be able to do.

Adam Baacke: I'm not sure that, in the absence of the eminent domain authority, any private developer could have assembled the land, at any price. So land assembly was a huge piece. The second piece was addressing both the real and the perceived threat of environmental contamination, which could scuttle the possibility of redevelopment. We've actually done a fair amount of clean-up already, and worked out a deal with the developer to discount the purchase price by whatever the real costs of environmental clean-up turn out to be.

The third piece that the public sector could take on was the issue of permitting. Typically, a developer designs something and brings it to the community and the community says, "OK, but here are all the steps you have to go through so we can evaluate whether we like the project or not." And that is fundamentally backwards. With the Hamilton Canal project, we decided to try flipping that mechanism around and said, "Let's begin by bringing the developer in and jointly, with the public at large, creating a vision for what this district is going to be."

We now have a true consensus master plan that everybody feels is the right plan for the district. What we did in exchange, which is the promise we made to the developers that made them willing and interested in undertaking this 13-month process, was to zone this with a form-based code that will allow them to build by right, as long as they build to this master plan.

Jeff Stein: What does it mean for Lowell to have a form-based code?

Adam Baacke: Traditional zoning, at least in this country, is primarily use-based. You begin by drawing boxes on a map and designating allowed uses for each of them — industrial here, residential there, some commercial in the middle, maybe a few mixed-use zones if you're really progressive. After that, you might add some requirements for, say, parking, setbacks, and minimum lot size.

A form-based code turns that on its head and acknowledges that what is really important is creating a sense of urbanity. And urbanity has a lot more to do with creating a physical public realm than it does with separating all the uses. In fact, bringing the uses together actually helps to create urban vibrancy.

So our form-based code outlines a very broad range of allowed uses; we're willing to let the market figure that out. What we do regulate is the relationship between the privately developed buildings and the public realm of the streets and the parks and the sidewalks. The actual architectural design is not regulated by the code, and we don't think that it should be. Because it's in the

Lowell is a "lifetime city" — regardless of your stage in life, you can find a neighborhood, housing, and amenities that will be satisfying.

Adam Baacke
A form-based code like Lowell's turns traditional zoning on its head and acknowledges that what is really important is creating a sense of urbanity.

Adam Baacke

national park area, we do have a historical board that is interested in architecture from the point of view of its consistency with the overall historic character of the national park. But we're not dictating what the architectural style needs to be.

Jeff Stein: So, for example, the code might say the building should be within so many feet of the sidewalk line.

Adam Baacke: We go even further. We say it must be right on the sidewalk line, because that's the line that creates the sort of street wall that contributes to the urban form. There are three components of the form-based code that help to ensure that you get that urban scale and form. The first is that every parcel has a minimum lot coverage, so you can't build a small building in the corner of a lot surrounded by a sea of parking, which is a very suburban approach. The second is height. We ensure both a minimum and a maximum height, so you can't build a single-story building. We want buildings that are consistent with the typical heights of the historic urban downtown in Lowell, which are in the four- to six-story range. And then there are the build-to lines. Traditional zoning codes include setbacks, which say you have to be at least this far from the property line or this far from the sidewalk, but you can be even further away if you want. That does not contribute to a vital public realm.

Jeff Stein: Some people have argued that the trend toward mega-projects by single developers has also deadened our cities, as we
move away from the previous pattern of more incremental development. Have you given thought to that issue?

Adam Baacke: Yes. The Hamilton Canal District has a master developer, Trinity Financial, working with a design team led by ICON Architecture. The city will convey land to Trinity at each phase, retaining ownership of parcels that are not ready for development as an extra hedge against any problems with the project; we'll still have that resource of the land and the ability to move ahead in the future. But Trinity has the right to either develop the parcels itself or convey the parcels to other developers. And in fact, that may happen with one of the two properties in phase one. By allowing different developers, there will be many different design eyes applied to this project over the next 10 years. And as a result, we hope to end up with a more organic development pattern and aesthetic.

Jeff Stein: In the last 20 years, we've seen an unevenness in the Massachusetts economy: Greater Boston gained more than 400,000 new jobs, while the rest of the state actually lost jobs. In the same period, we developed 90,000 acres of untouched land around Greater Boston alone. In order for the state as a whole to thrive, places like Lowell have to thrive.

Adam Baacke: That pattern of sprawl development is not sustainable. And that simple fact creates a fantastic opportunity for places like Lowell, which already have the physical infrastructure from their history as employment centers as well as residential centers. As we see dwindling energy supplies and increasing costs, people are going to be forced to make some different decisions about how we grow. And places that are already centers of mixed-use activity served well by transit are likely to be the beneficiaries of that changing dynamic.

Jeff Stein: So when planners talk about smart growth, they're really talking about Lowell. There isn't any kind of growth that can happen in this town that isn't smart, is there?

Adam Baacke: Smart growth means many things to many people. Lowell welcomes development that is beneficial to the city in terms of strengthening the economy of the city, strengthening the sense of urban vitality, and enhancing the established character of the city and its neighborhoods. We strive to achieve all three of those things — and in Lowell, that's smart growth.

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Covering the Issues

Recession, Depression, "Restructuring"...
Whatever we’re in, Richard Florida describes how “The Crash Will Reshape America” in The Atlantic (March 2009). In this latest development of his “creative class” ideas, Florida argues that “place still matters.” He suggests that the crisis today is akin to the Long Depression of 1873-1896, through which the New England mill towns of Lowell, Lawrence, and Springfield eventually gave way to the giant factory cities of Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit. Now, Florida foresees idea-driven “city-regions” — such as the Boston-New York corridor — fueled by creative talent and ambition, which will feed off each other and spur ever-faster growth. Density will be good for long-term success. Likewise, he argues, sprawl has reached its limit. Florida writes that “Suburbanization was the spatial fix for the industrial age — the geographic expression of mass production and the credit economy.” Some regions will now need to shrink, and that’s part of this evolution.

Happy Birthday, TOH...
Just 30 years ago, during a different housing crisis, WGBH launched a TV show that explained to viewers that they didn’t need to buy new homes to be happy, and that renovating an old house could be pretty darn entertaining. WGBH also believed that a population of informed home renovators could only be a good thing. Though Julia Child had set the scene for do-it-yourself programming, the first Home Depot was still a few months from opening in Atlanta. Pre-HGTV, pre-Home Improvement, pre-MTV Cribs, pre-Extreme Makeover Home Edition — can you imagine? In Boston magazine (February 2009), Francis Storrs presents an engaging oral history of how This Old House tiptoed into new territory in February 1979, and changed the renovation world forever.

Stressed Out?... “Who Says Stress is Bad for You?” challenges Mary Carmichael in Newsweek (February 23, 2009). Believe it or not, some stress — even difficult stress — “properly handled” can provide long-term benefits. Dr. Anthony Komaroff offers a companion piece on the “oversold” link between stress and disease, while Ben Sherwood explains the intense special training of elite military forces, and why they thrive under stress better than the rest of us. With a stalled construction industry, layoffs, and a downright dismal architectural climate, this all may simply add to your anxiety. Then again, this series of articles might provide a different outlook — or at least a positive distraction.

Home Sweet Home...
Sometimes the problem isn’t financing; sometimes it’s what you can get for that financing. Case in point: Rural Studio — Auburn University’s renowned design/build program in Hale County, Alabama — which runs an outreach program. Pam Dorr was an outreach student, trying to help elderly widows fix homes that were beyond repair, baffled that these women couldn’t get loans for new ones. In fact, she discovered they had indeed qualified; the issue was that they only qualified for $20,000, and “everyone knows that there’s no such thing as a $20,000 house.” In “The 20K House” in Metropolitan Home (March 2009), Karrie Jacobs chronicles how Dorr and Rural Studio went about changing that. Ranging in size from 300-600 square feet, of varying architectural styles, these $20K homes are elegant examples of what design should do.

Ready, set... Is investing large sums in infrastructure a boon or boondoggle? With shovels across the country at the ready, the editors of Invention & Technology (Winter 2009) explored that question, looking back over two centuries of large, federally funded public works projects. Starting with the 1811 National Road (funded in Thomas Jefferson’s administration) and continuing through railroads, dams, tunnels, bridges, interstates, air traffic control, and the Internet, Tom Huntington’s cover story presents “America’s Top 10 Public Works Projects.” The historical approach provides an important context for considering today’s investment. That said, much is frustratingly brief, and the Big Dig is treated in a particularly cursory manner as the Bad Boy Poster Child. For the Big Dig — like the Obama stimulus — history is still to be written.

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BEYOND THE RUINS: THE MEANINGS OF DEINDUSTRIALIZATION
Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds.
Foreword by Barry Bluestone
Cornell University Press, 2003

Marx’s famous dictum that “all that is solid melts into air” was intended to characterize the experience of capitalism at the apex of industrialization. Yet, as the authors of this collected volume demonstrate, his passage also aptly depicts the process of deindustrialization that began in the second half of the 20th century. As manufacturers moved abroad or to the South in search of lower production costs, thousands of Americans lost their jobs and faced a daunting future. The contributors to this book argue that the ordeal of these workers marked not simply a shift in employment but rather a “fundamental change in the social fabric on a par with industrialization itself.”

The nadir of deindustrialization came in the 1970s and 1980s, when a decline in production led many manufacturers in the United States to export or relocate their factories. This trend began to reverse after 1996 as production increased but, by then, the needs of industry had shifted from concrete goods like automobiles to information technology and biotechnology. As manufacturers moved abroad or to the South in search of lower production costs, thousands of Americans lost their jobs and faced a daunting future. The contributors to this book argue that the ordeal of these workers marked not simply a shift in employment but rather a “fundamental change in the social fabric on a par with industrialization itself.”

The authors therefore demonstrate that deindustrialization is not only an economic problem but also a social and political phenomenon. By describing the plight of numerous communities across the United States, they point to some of the obstacles to redeveloping deindustrialized areas, especially the stigmatization of former manufacturing towns. As Barry Bluestone and others have elsewhere pointed out, these disadvantages often become “deal breakers” for potential business investors. The challenge is to transform these obstacles into strengths by finding creative ways of making the past an engine to a brighter economic future.

Jeanne Haffner PhD is an urban scholar and a fellow at Harvard University. Her forthcoming book (MIT Press) studies the role of visual technologies in the evolution of the “new urbanism” in postwar France.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS IN THE MILL CITY
Tuyet-Lan Pho, Jeffrey N. Gerson and Sylvia R. Cowan, eds.
University of Vermont Press, 2007

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants, but never more so than today: the foreign-born American population has risen from 5 to 13 percent since 1970. But this statistic cloaks an even larger reality. For most developed economies, population growth has stopped. The bad news for national budgets from Italy to Japan is that fewer workers pay into the system supporting more retirees. America has largely postponed its demographic crisis by attracting a young immigrant workforce, accounting for two-thirds, and soon all, of our population growth. Immigrant communities also invigorate cities, one of the greatest forces counteracting sprawl.

The 12 essays in this book portray the Southeast Asian immigrant community’s role in revitalizing Lowell, Massachusetts. After the fall of Saigon and the genocide of roughly one quarter of the Cambodian people, government and citizen groups cooperated to resettle 1.3 million refugees in the US by 1980—600 in Lowell. But most of Lowell’s foreign-born residents came in a vast secondary migration to fill good jobs in computer-assembly plants and to benefit from the critical mass of fellow expatriates. By 1990, Southeast Asian
immigrants numbered 25,000 of Lowell's 115,000 residents, including the world's third largest population of Cambodians after Phnom Penh and Long Beach.

The book highlights the complex social networks thriving in Lowell's new soil. Informal rotating credit associations propel an enviable micro-venture capital system that remade Lowell's boarded-up storefronts into a bustling commercial streetscape. Lowell's "Destination City" campaign comes under fire for squandering opportunities to support the dynamism of local social, cultural, and religious life in favor of corporate giveaways.

Distinct national subcultures experienced differing degrees of violent displacement. Old conflicts transferred intact "from the Mekong to the Merrimack" materialize in new forms in the immigrant landscape of Lowell. The American-trained anti-communist Lao refugees are split from later Lao immigrants over which Lao flag to fly. The "upstairs" and "downstairs" monks of the Trairatnaram Temple are split over how best to reconstitute Cambodian Buddhism after the genocide.

But cultural immersion also reveals solutions. Though constituting only one in five Lowell residents, Southeast Asians account for almost half of high schoolers, a majority of dropouts, and most gang activity. In response, the Trairatanaram Temple launched Operation Middle Path to initiate at-risk youth as Buddhist monks. The lessons of Lowell's immigrant experience point to the potential of social capital mobilized through local informal relationships to resolve problems untouched by government programs.

With the cancellation of travel studios, architecture schools might consider offering a local travel studio. The physical infrastructure of new American cultural communities from Lowell to Lewiston, Maine is arguably a more critical landscape for relevant architectural engagement.

Robert Cowherd PhD, Assoc. AIA is associate professor of architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. He is the author of *Cultural Construction of Jakarta* (forthcoming), based on five years of work and research in Java and Bali.

David Macaulay is a steady friend to architects, teaching future clients — and the current clients who rear them — to appreciate buildings from the inside out, and as artifacts of the social and economic systems that create them. Like an
anthropologist, he explains buildings not as simple aesthetic objects, but as the crystallized shells of society's ebb and flow.

Who better to tell the story of the hulking mills of New England and, through them, the story of their era? The author of Cathedral, as well as City and many other illustrated books, Macaulay narrates the PBS video Mill Times, a documentary interspersed with a Disney-inspired animated narrative. Focusing on America's first mill — the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island — it is derived loosely from Macaulay's book Mill, albeit more as a companion piece than a video incarnation.

The story unfolds engagingly, the good explained clearly and the bad gently handled for young viewers. It's a story of discovery, adventure, change, and the risks that accompany change; progress and material comfort are celebrated and counter-weighted by reminders of social and environmental consequences.

These labor-saving monsters must have inspired awe, and adult viewers may find themselves reflecting on labor relations, social experimentation, and the surprisingly benign relationship of river and mill — a reminder that prosperity and environmental degradation are not inexorably linked.

Many New England mills were owned and run by local families, who were held accountable for employees' well-being by conscience and community. Success attracted investment in the form of the now-familiar corporate structure, and accountability thus diffused in a sea of faceless investors and executives. This anonymity seems to have made the deepest inhumanities of industrialization possible: responding to laborers' appeal to conscience, the corporately owned mill's executive sneers, "The investors prefer to remain discreet."

Corporate anonymity wasn't the sole social innovation of mill times — the unique experience of the Lowell Girls is possibly the best known of many boarding arrangements that flirted with social engineering and bring Charles Fourier's utopian "phalanx" communities to mind. Architects, who wrestle buildings' energy consumption daily, may be surprised at the relative harmony between New England's first mills and the natural environment. These giant mechanical assemblages disrupted rivers, but that's about it: no plumes of smoke, no sooty Dickensian worker housing. Those would come with steam engines and fossil fuels. A river mill was a clean thing. One has to wonder if it couldn't be put to some hydroelectric purpose.

Early complicity in the slave economy is dealt with gingerly; the nightmarish filth and abuse of the late-era mills' response to intensifying competition isn't addressed at all. Given the attention-span constraints of video, however, Mill Times presents a comprehensive overview of an era with an impact on our region that is deep and still unfolding.

Conor MacDonald is a writer in Boston and a member of the Common Boston Steering Committee.
GATEWAY CITIES
http://gateways.massinc.org
The go-to site for background on the Gateway Cities initiative, including profiles of the 11 Gateway communities. While you're there, rummage around the rest of the MassINC site and check out the "Commonwealth Unbound" blog for commentary on the state's political and civic landscape.

GATEWAY CITIES COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
www.gatewaycog.org
The other Gateway Cities are 27 cities in Southeast Los Angeles County and Los Angeles County. These California communities have also joined forces to stimulate economic development, although mill buildings don't seem to be on the agenda.

LOWELL CITY MANAGER'S BLOG
http://lowellma.wordpress.com
If you're going to be a vibrant 21st-century city, it helps to communicate like one. Lowell City Manager Bernie Lynch talks to his constituents, providing real information and, even better, explanations for what's going on — worthwhile reading for anyone interested in city government.

HARLEM CHILDREN'S ZONE
www.hcz.org
If you've heard of President Obama's "Promise Zone" proposal for urban neighborhoods, you've heard of HCZ — a successful, innovative, neighborhood-based program founded on the belief that educational success depends upon strong families and strong communities. Click on "programs" to see the scale of HCZ efforts, starting with Baby College (for parents).

AMERICAN LIFE HISTORIES: MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT
http://memory.loc.gov/wprint
In the 1930s, WPA writers documented the lives of Americans across the country; those manuscripts are now available online. Massachusetts texts include accounts of life in the mills, labor strikes, and immigrant experiences.

LIZZIE ANDREW BORDEN VIRTUAL MUSEUM
www.lizzieandrewborden.com
Lowell has Kerouac, New Bedford and Pittsfield have Melville, but Fall River has Lizzie. Maintained by PearTree Press, this site is a mostly serious (there is the "Mondo Lizzie" blog) presentation of the life and Victorian times of the city's most famous orphan.

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Fitchburg

Here are some of the things I know about Fitchburg: where to find the prime parking spots; the names of the flat roads in this hilly city; the fact that the new fire station has excellent bathrooms with showers.

Perhaps you weren’t aware that when it comes to bicycle races, Fitchburg is a world-class city. Every July for the last 50 years, the city has hosted a race attracting hundreds of amateurs and professionals, including Lance Armstrong and Greg Lemond. Racing the Fitchburg Longsjo Classic nine times, I have come to know the city in ways distinct from the ways in which I know other places.

Named for native son Art Longsjo, an Olympic cyclist and speed skater, the race has evolved from a simple looped course through downtown Fitchburg into a four-day “stage race,” with each day’s event in a different venue.

Day One brings a time trial, in which racers ride individually against the clock. The route climbs 6.2 miles from above the Fitchburg Civic Center on a cracked rural road up to a lake. Technologically savvy racers build computer models of the course in order to replicate its physiological demands and to evaluate which equipment combination will maximize their speed with the right mix of aerodynamics, bicycle weight, and riding position.

Day Two is epic — usually broiling hot and humid, always long, hilly, and decisive. The 11-mile loop, repeated six to nine times for the pro races, starts at the Wachusett ski area just outside the city and tours the wooded roads of Princeton, up a long, sun-exposed hill. The 50-plus-mile-per-hour descent used to be notorious for cracks and frost-heaves, which nearly caused the death of an Australian pro a few years ago; we all sighed in relief when it was repaved. The race finishes with a two-mile climb up Mount Wachusett, often amid startled hikers and dog-walkers unprepared for the buzz.

On Day Three, we race through a working-class neighborhood near Fitchburg State College, on a three-mile circuit featuring a steep climb out of a sharp corner. Residents, long accustomed to the annoyance of road closures, gather in lawn chairs along the course; kids wander around eating popsicles as the announcers call the race. It’s usually sweltering and racers take hand-ups of water bottles for drinking and dousing from support crews sitting on the sidewalks and on coolers.

By the final day, the overall race is usually determined, and the “criterium” — a short course through the downtown — brings a carnival atmosphere, especially when it coincides with the Fourth of July. Food and equipment vendors line the streets, grandstands are set up at the finish line, and crowds mingle and set up chairs: friends and families of racers, locals and volunteers, and Boston cyclists who have ridden over to watch and cheer.

This is where competitors acquire a new level of intimacy with the city. We know that the uphill drag is usually into headwind. We know where to glance at the bank clock with the thermometer that justifies why we feel so hot (104 degrees one year). We anticipate the sweeping u-turn at the roundabout planted with a garden, the gradual descent below the parking garage near the river, and the pair of 90-degree left-hand corners. The speed, technical corners, and proximity to everyone else telescope awareness to the immediate conditions of wind, thirst, potholes and grates, crosswalk paint and manhole covers that are slippery in rain, changes in momentum that signal an attack, bells indicating a sprint for cash, and the clatter of pedals on pavement that indicates an impending crash. Faces and noise outside of this are peripheral, a montage out of which you occasionally hear your name.

Here is what else I know about Fitchburg:

Hundreds of volunteers put on the race, registering athletes, marshalling courses, and hosting spaghetti dinners. The local bike shop offers free repairs to racers. Families pack their houses with pro cycling teams for the week, surrendering their garages to dozens of bicycles, throwing huge picnics, and exchanging stories of life in Fitchburg for accounts of Auckland, Boulder, and Santa Rosa. Local kids wear the jerseys of the hosted teams, scavenge discarded team water bottles as souvenirs, and listen intently when teams visit the schools to talk about racing, health, and helmet safety.

And this: I know how deeply so many of Fitchburg’s residents care about this mill city and how eager they are to have a maligned city understood and restored.

Anna Milkowski is a graduate student in environmental policy and public health at Yale University and the author of Mountain Biking the Berkshires (Falcon, 2001).

Note: The 50th Annual Fitchburg Longsjo Classic will be held July 2–5, 2009.
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