Projections • 14. New Uses for Old Rivers: Rediscovering Urban Waterways

“A river runs through it”: Using small urban rivers as catalysts for revitalization in post-industrial New England cities

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ABSTRACT

Although the revitalization of urban rivers in large cities in the Global North has received much scholarly attention, the role of streams in small cities (with populations less than 100,000 people) has been much less studied. This chapter uses two case studies to examine the potential of streams in small post-industrial cities to serve as catalysts for urban regeneration in the new services-based economy. Faced with an aging infrastructure, decades of disinvestment, competition for scarce financial resources for physical improvements, and often, expensive and time-consuming cleanups of industrial wastes, stakeholders in small cities face unique challenges in making the most of these assets. A study of the dynamics of urban redevelopment in Amesbury, MA (Powwow River) and Peabody, MA (North River), both of which had used their downtown rivers to serve industrial production in the 19th and early 20th centuries, illustrates the diverse opportunities and challenges endemic in re-imagining these rivers. Analysis of the two cases presented here suggests empirically that successful strategies for using small urban rivers as part of an urban revitalization strategy include at least three factors. First, a transformative new vision for river landscapes (often articulated by outsiders rather than endogenously) must be created. This vision may reference historical industrial contexts, but must also find ways to resonate with current inhabitants, who may not be aware of the community's industrial history. Second, key actors must be committed to the strategies for the long term, and must promote the strategies to their professional networks across multiple scales of government and business. Last, synergistic, creative financial support from multiple scales of government is necessary to move urban revitalization forward.

Introduction

Many recent revitalization projects in large post-industrial cities have focused on the ways in which derelict industrial riverfronts can be repurposed as focal points for new landscapes of leisure, consumption, and capital accumulation (Brownhill 2011; Castonguay and Evenden 2012; Desfor and Jorgensen 2004; Heikkila 2011; Landers 2007; Robert 2012; Sandercock and Dovey 2002). These projects reveal two significant shifts in urban policy. First, since the 1980s, urban governments have shifted their scope of operations from the managerial to the entrepreneurial (Harvey 1989; Hall and Hubbard 1996; Hubbard and Hall 1998; Leitner and Sheppard 1998; Lovering 1995). Entrepreneurial strategies include public-private partnerships, public provision of infrastructure to attract private investment, place marketing, branding and place-promotion efforts, and efforts to beautify the built environment to appeal to middle- and upper-class residents and visitors (Leitner and Sheppard 1998). However, most scholars have studied large, globally connected cities. In this sense, we know relatively little about the degree to which entrepreneurial strategies can be observed in much smaller cities. This chapter explores entrepreneurial strategies in smaller cities (populations less than 100,000) in order to explore the degree to which similarities to larger cities can be identified. In short, how does scale matter (Colton 2012)?

Second, since the 1990s, ecological issues and problems have increasingly occupied discursive space in the urban policy-making arena (Keil and Desfor 2003). Keil and Desfor (2003) argue that “green capitalism” (e.g., market-driven controls on pollution, focus on expanding green industries, increasing the number of green jobs) is poised to supplant both “top-down command and control approaches to pollution control and radical green alternatives” (29) as a new form of capitalist hegemony that privileges economic efficiency and private-sector profits. In this new economy, “[r]elationships between nature and society are primarily defined from the point of view of the survival of the economy, while the survival of the natural world becomes a residual product of industrial and social processes” (32). Further, Dierwechter and Wessells (2013) point out that “greening” rivers can serve as a means of competitive advantage for cities.

Nevertheless, the discursive space produced by green capitalism still allows room for contesting this hegemony, enabling environmental and social justice activists to weigh in, as demonstrated by Keil and Desfor’s (2003) description of the debates over the future of the Los Angeles and Don (Toronto) Rivers, and Holifield and Schuelke’s (2015) case study of stream restoration in Milwaukee. The theoretical frameworks of these studies suggest two important, related questions. First, to what degree is the future of urban river ecosystems decided not only by urban elites, but also by diverse groups of urban stakeholders? Second, to what degree are urban elites in these small cities willing to encourage and embrace diverse community perspectives in charting future directions for river-based revitalization projects?

In this chapter, case studies of two small Massachusetts cities are used in order to investigate the dynamics between new visions for rivers, the commitment and persistence of key stakeholders, new (or shifting) arrangements in urban governance, and the challenges of accessing enough private and public capital to provide a “tipping point” that makes revitalization visible and viable. Millions of Americans live in small cities within the watersheds of such rivers. What strategies have such cities found to be successful for river revitalization projects? What challenges do they face that are different than those of their larger counterparts? How do institutional arrangements, access to influence and capital, and participation by non-state actors shape the form or even the possibility of such redevelopments (Dierwechter and Wessells)?

Success in urban revitalization has historically been measured using economic parameters. First is the increase in the local tax base due to capital investment. Second is the creation or retention of jobs. Third is the attraction (or retention) of firms considered suitable for the community. Although issues of social justice began to be considered in the 1960s and 1970s, a return to neoliberalism since 1980 has eroded attention to these concerns, at least for urban elites (Fitzgerald and Leigh 2002). Likewise, amelioration of environmental or ecological problems has historically, by itself, not been a primary criterion for measuring the success of river-based urban revitalization, although of course it has sometimes been part of the “toolkit” of revitalization strategies.

The two case studies presented here suggest that successful strategies for using small urban rivers as part of an urban revitalization strategy depend on at least three factors. First, a transformative new vision for river landscapes must be generated. This is often articulated by outside observers, consultants, or people new to the

scene, rather than insiders. Second, key principals must sustain their commitment and creativity and use their professional networks across scales. Last synergistic, creative financial support from multiple levels of government is needed, from the local, to the state, to the national.

One challenge that small cities face is that their rivers are very localized; they are often hidden from view; and many residents may even be unaware of their existence. Building a revitalization strategy on river presence therefore also requires educating the public about the resource. To raise awareness about the value of rivers and other unique amenities, “branding,” logos, and slogans – and the politics that surround them – have become key (albeit contested) components in urban revitalization strategies (Gold and Ward 1994; Kearns and Philo 1993; Kotler, Haider, and Rein 1993; Short and Kim 1998). Of particular interest to critical urban geographers are the ways in which local elites have appropriated names, symbols, and other aspects of local heritage in order to attract and retain businesses and increase consumer consumption (Masuda and Bookman 2018). In the case studies below, I describe some of the efforts that these two communities have made to identify and disseminate a “brand” based on perceptions of local identity. The questions are: *whose* local identity is being promoted? And to what extent does it resonate with local residents and visitors?

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. The next section discusses the ways in which economic development has been foregrounded over ecological restoration. Following that, the study methodology and cases are described. Next, the factors that drove industrial growth and eventual decline in both places are described. Then, the following section describes the ongoing revitalization efforts in both cities. The last section draws out the implications of the case studies and teases out some lessons learned from the struggles to re-use and integrate the environments and local identity of these post-industrial cities, with a brief discussion of how urban revitalization in these small cities is at once similar to, but also different than, the dynamics in global cities.

Economic and Ecological Priorities

Explicit desires for ecological restoration of the river corridors do not play much of a role in revitalization discourses in these communities, except as vague planning goals, such as “preserve and enhance the ecology of the river corridor” (Spurr 2012). Since both river corridors have been extensively altered by industrial use (e.g., channelization, filling, damming, dumping of waste, construction of raceways), it is perhaps not surprising that the ecological value of the rivers has been subordinated to their economic use value.

In fact, the relationship between humans and urban rivers has long been constructed around considerations of the use value of rivers, focusing on water as a commodity. Environmental historians have conceptualized human use of urban rivers in three successive eras characterized by distinctly different socio-economic contexts.¹ First was a pre-industrial, agricultural, and artisanal phase in which humans lived sustainably with rivers.² Second, with the Industrial Age, settlements were built along rivers where water power enabled machines to use mass production techniques, thereby fueling early economic growth and thus, population

growth. Diversion of flows to boost power, competition between water users for an increasingly scarce resource, channelization of rivers for improved transportation, and use of rivers for waste disposal resulted in heavily altered river ecosystems and concomitant ecological problems (see especially Steinberg (1991) and the case studies in Castonguay and Evenden (2012)). Nevertheless, pollution was seen as a necessary consequence of economic growth. As Steinberg has written, “...New Englanders demonstrated a growing faith in their ability to manipulate and exploit the environment. The control of nature was beginning to harden into custom and convention.... This unquestioned attitude of dominance toward nature is among the most powerful legacies of industrialization” (1991, 271).

To what extent have urban-dwellers reversed that hardened custom and moved to a third phase of human-river relationships, that of a sustainable relationship between nature and society? Heikkila (2011, Table 1) posits the existence of an ongoing post-industrial phase in which urban rivers are valued not only for their aesthetic contributions to civic life, leisure, and recreation, but also their ecological functions (see also Castonguay and Evenden 2012). While certainly ecologically responsible river restoration projects have happened and are happening in many cities (Baschak and Brown 1995; Deason et al. 2010; Iannuzzi and Ludwig 2005), I aim to show in these two case studies that ecological considerations remain secondary to a new phase of commodification centered on consumer consumption.

Methodology and Cases

The case study method is used here to enable a multi-dimensional understanding of community dynamics. I examined historical reports and ephemera from the 1940s to the present. I read news reports and planning documents from the 1970s to the present. I carried out field work in summer 2018. From May to July of 2018 I conducted six semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 30 to 90 minutes with stakeholders selected to be representative of the various interests in the two cities.

The two communities in this study were chosen because they are representative of many small New England communities: their downtown rivers were central to industrial development, serving as a source of water power in one and as a source of process water and a destination for waste disposal in the other. Both cities were settled in the early 17th century, and both grew and thrived in industrial production in the 19th and early 20th centuries before suffering de-industrialization and disinvestment. Both now are attempting to use the presence of the river and the physical remains of industry and commerce (mill buildings and 19th century central business districts) as the building blocks for market-driven urban revitalization supported by public investments in infrastructure. Both struggle (albeit for different reasons) to articulate a compelling, unique identity that will attract private investment and public funding.

The cities also differ in important respects. The two cities were involved in different sorts of industrial production with slightly different development trajectories (details to follow). They are embedded in different sets of geographical and planning networks (Dierwechter and Wessells 2013): Amesbury is the smallest of the

manufacturing cities along the lower Merrimack River and has always had close economic, transportation, and social connections with the others, including Newburyport downstream, and Haverhill, Lowell, and Lawrence further upstream. Amesbury is a member of the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, one of the twelve quasi-governmental regional planning agencies in MA and one of the smallest of them.

Peabody, conversely, is part of a constellation of small industrial cities in the North Coastal basin north of Boston, and the second largest of them. These include Salem (the county seat), Beverly, and Lynn. All four were heavily engaged in leather and shoe production in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and had close economic ties with each other and with Boston, where the “front offices” of the major shoe machinery and leather producers were located during the industry’s heyday. Peabody is one of the 101 members of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, the Boston-area regional planning agency, and unlike Amesbury, has much stronger transportation and economic ties to the capital city.

Last, the cities began the process of urban revitalization at different times. This matters, because of the shrinking of federal resources directed to local projects after 1980. Amesbury’s revitalization began earlier than Peabody’s, availing it of federal funding sources that were subsequently eliminated. Table 1 summarizes some key demographic, economic, and historical features of the two communities.

Table 1: Selected community indicators

Community	Population (2016)	Non-white population (2017 ACS)	Median household income, ACS 2010-14	Major industries	Industrial heyday
Amesbury	17,430	7.1%	\$76,453	Carriages, hats, auto bodies, textiles	1812-1929
Peabody	52,491	16.7%	\$62,234	Leather, textiles	1850s-1950s

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, author’s compiled histories.

The Industrial Age: Growth and Decline in Amesbury and Peabody

In Amesbury, industrial production in the 17th and 18th centuries was powered by the Powwow River. The river elevation drops 90 feet in a very short distance (Amesbury Recreation and Open Space Plan 2012) adjacent to Main Street, and early entrepreneurs constructed a series of raceways and return channels to allow swiftly flowing water to power mechanical equipment. The first settlers located along the river in 1639, and by 1641 a sawmill had been constructed to take advantage of the falls (Pettingell 1946). By 1793, the river

powered a variety of industrial enterprises to serve local residents, including an iron forge, sawmills, and gristmills (Pettingell 1946).

In 1812 the first textile mill was established upstream of Main Street (Figure 1), in an area later called the Upper Millyard (Pettingell 1946).³ Other textile mills followed on the lower side of Main Street (the Lower Millyard). Although textile production continued until the outbreak of World War I, the industry had already peaked by around 1850 (Doubleday 2006). Gradually, as mill buildings became vacant, a new industry, the building of carriages, took advantage of cheap, high-quality manufacturing space.⁴ By this time, manufacturing was independent of direct water power, as can be seen in Figure 1. By the 1880s, carriage manufacturers were producing 20,000 carriages per year, and Amesbury was on a par with New Haven, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis in its carriage production capacity. At the industry’s peak in 1890, there were more than 80 firms in Amesbury producing carriages or related products (Harrold 2017a), an excellent example of an agglomeration economy (Hayter and Patchell 2011).

Fig. 1: Industrial buildings in Amesbury along the Powwow River. Textile mills in pink; carriage factories in green. Courtesy of the Amesbury Carriage Museum, Michael Harrold, creator.

With the invention of the automobile, local manufacturers retrofitted their plants to produce high-end auto bodies for firms such as Rolls Royce, Packard, and Buick (Doubleday 2006). But by the 1930s, auto

manufacturing had become much more vertically integrated (Harrold 2017a) and most of the local firms had either been acquired by Midwestern firms or had themselves relocated to the Midwest (Doubleday 2006). The contracting of the labor force through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s was accompanied by loss of population, and the town entered into a sort of economic slumber (Sullivan 2005). Thus the post-war residential suburbanization boom largely passed Amesbury by: it remained a community with a dense commercial and residential center surrounded by farms, forests, and lakes. The mill buildings in the old industrial center of town stood empty or were used for light industry and warehousing.

Fig. 2: City of Peabody Assessors' Map showing spatial relationships between the commercial district on Main Street and leather industry on Walnut Street. The North River is mislabeled "Proctor Brook."

Peabody's leather tanning industry followed a similar historical trajectory. Small tannery operations along the various streams throughout the town eventually coalesced into a manufacturing district on Walnut Street parallel to the North River. As shown in Figure 2, the river effectively is in the backyard of properties along the Main Street commercial corridor and the Walnut Street historic industrial corridor. Although originally the North River was a broad stream interspersed with small ponds and surrounded by tidal wetlands, since 1850 (when a rail line was built on its banks (Spurr 2012)) it has been confined to a narrow channel between granite block walls (Figure 3). And unlike the Powwow River (Figure 4), water was not used for power, but for process water (leather tanning is very water-intensive) and for disposal of waste water.

Fig. 3: North River between Caller and Howley Streets (Peabody Riverwalk and Historic Trail Master Plan 2001).

Fig. 4: Powwow River at Upper Millyard, Amesbury. Photo by author.

The leather tanning industry grew rapidly and by 1855 there were 27 tanneries, as well as dozens of firms in related businesses (Peabody Riverwalk and Historic Trail Master Plan 2001). At its peak in the 1920s, when

Peabody was styled “The Leather Capital of the World,” there were 91 tanneries or related businesses. However, the Great Depression, labor disputes, and by the 1970s, more stringent environmental regulations, all combined to force firms to move or go out of business. By the 1970s only a handful of firms remained, mostly involved in specialty products of some sort (Peabody History 2018). Former tanneries burned down or were occupied by warehouses and other low-rent uses. The commercial district on Main Street also suffered economically, with the opening of two regional shopping malls within a few miles of the downtown commercial corridor in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although the foregoing descriptions are industry-specific to these case studies, the general progression is common to most small New England industrial cities. Locational advantages (abundant streams, raw materials, and river access to downstream markets) enabled early local industries to prosper, building a labor force with good technical skills and the capacity to innovate. Early industrialization built on these attributes and scaled up outputs through mechanization, mass production techniques, steam power, and then electrical power. In the mid-twentieth century, however, myriad forces combined to put small firms out of business or force relocation to the American South or overseas. These forces included consolidation of manufacturing into fewer, but larger firms; vertical integration of manufacturing processes; environmental regulations to protect air, land and water; and a shift to single-floor buildings that could better accommodate mass production in areas well-served by the interstate highway system (Castonguay and Evenden 2012; Levy 2013; Macionis and Parrillo 2004).

Downtown Revitalization in Amesbury and Peabody

In both communities, the rivers are perceived as a visual amenity (or potential amenity, in Peabody’s case) to draw people (consumers) to the downtown commercial districts and therefore to create jobs and to promote private-sector expansion of the tax base and enhanced viability of local businesses. Hence, urban entrepreneurialism is predicated on the “remaking of urban environments and ecologies” (White, Jonas and Gibbs 2004). In Amesbury, property owners, the local chamber of commerce, city officials, and private non-profit organizations have informally banded together to celebrate the Powwow River and create green spaces along the watercourse, restoring the surrounding Victorian-era mill buildings for residential, office, and artists’ use. A network of pedestrian walkways and bridges winds through the three-acre millyard; a concrete amphitheater in the center provides a setting for movies, concerts, and other cultural events. The downtown commercial district has attracted small restaurants with a regional draw as well as new businesses serving a local population. However, the adaptive re-use of mill buildings and the restoration of other sections of the river corridor has not extended far beyond Main Street, allowing pockets of marginal land uses to remain and vacant mill buildings to further decay in the Lower Millyard and on Carriage Hill.

In Peabody, a vigorous program of downtown revitalization in Peabody Square and along Main Street in the 1980s and 1990s stalled out in the first decade of the 21st century. An ambitious plan to remake the North River canal into a new linear park supporting commercial, recreational, and cultural activities is now nearly 30 years old, but still remains largely in the conceptual planning stage. A persistent flooding problem along the

canal has made some property owners leery of additional investment in their buildings. However, renewed stakeholder desires for a thriving downtown have sparked several new collaborative projects; some flood mitigation projects have been completed; and the city has recently been awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funding to make the riverwalk a reality.

The key finding of this study indicates that at least three conditions are necessary for successful revitalization projects centered on urban rivers: a transformative vision for the river corridor; a well-placed person or persons with a professional stake in the project and access to key local elites (decision-makers and funders); and the financial wherewithal to bring signature projects to completion. Below, I describe the cases with respect to these three factors.

Transformative visions

Both of these case studies illustrate the importance of re-imagining industrial rivers as blue and green corridors for leisure and as places for communities to come together. Part of that re-imagining is necessarily finding ways to communicate that vision to others. It is important to note that in these cases, the transformative vision was not the outcome of collaborative or participatory planning processes. Rather, it was a “eureka moment” sparked in planning meetings and then communicated to various elite decision-makers in order for them to “sell” the vision to a broader collection of stakeholders.

In Amesbury, one of the most important actors was John Fahey, the long-time economic development director. Fahey was hired in 1979 to “do something” about the struggling downtown.⁵ The town had already completed a study for the re-use of the Upper Millyard buildings,⁶ taking no account of the river. Fahey felt that his first job was to get the community to see the river in a different light, or even to see the river at all: “Ironically the Main Street buildings had their backs to the river. It was blocked from view; there were remnants of the crib dam, but so overgrown you couldn’t see it or get to it. But once I saw it, saw the river, I knew there was something there.” (Fahey, pers. comm., July 30, 2018). In an interview, he described his vision: “[Amesbury] was in a state of decline. But it had good bones. There were certain things that I saw about it. There are certain communities that would kill to have a river running through the downtown, with the waterfall and all of that. It hadn’t truly been ravaged by developers. It had good structure and good potential to it and I was young enough that I didn’t get caught up in all the obstacles and could see the opportunities” (Sullivan 2014).

In Peabody, the idea of using the North River as a catalyst for revitalization and redevelopment first surfaced in the city’s 1990 Master Plan. The planning consulting firm working on the planning project recommended that the river channel be re-imagined “as the centerpiece of a new urban park, acting as the spine for economic growth” (Otto 1993). Such a linear, riverside pedestrian path would create new public frontage and visibility for underused building spaces in the “back yards” of commercial properties along Main Street and industrial properties along Walnut Street. In order to raise public awareness, build public support, and paint a picture of what the river park could be, the Master Plan recommended a design competition. A jury of eight, including

Boston-area design professionals and local civic leaders, evaluated nineteen entries during a competition process in 1993, and chose as the first-place winner a simple, understated scheme that used the design vocabulary of the streetscape along Main Street for design features along the linear park. The competition drawings were exhibited in various venues around downtown, and the competition process received excellent local press coverage, but no funds were immediately committed to realize any of the competition designs, nor was there any participatory process to involve a wider group of stakeholders in further planning.

Since that time, the city has constructed small fragments of the riverwalk on North River tributaries when opportunities arose. In the 1990s, two sections of pedestrian pathways were constructed on the Goldthwaite Brook, adjacent to a new condominium development and a reconstructed municipal parking lot. A third project day-lighted a segment of Proctor Brook as the centerpiece of a new urban park. But despite a number of planning studies promoting the Riverwalk, historic preservation and heritage, and commercial revitalization (Peabody North River Neighborhood Plan 1993; Downtown 2005 Action Plan 1999; Peabody Riverwalk and Historic Trail Master Plan 2001), design and construction of the full Riverwalk has not yet advanced.

Vision and Identity

Both Amesbury and Peabody have struggled with how to connect a new river-based vision for their downtowns to focused messages about community identity that support economic development through place promotion. An extensive body of critical literature documents the processes of and strategies for place promotion (Gold and Ward 1994; Kearns and Philo 1993; Kotler, Haider, and Rein 1993; Short and Kim 1998). In practice, techniques for branding, including developing tag lines, logos, and other advertising images, have become *de rigueur* for economic development planners.

In Amesbury, townspeople seem to struggle with the town’s present and future identity. A local blogger described a “downtown that struggled and vacillated between its old self (full of townie bars, an ancient hobby shop whose owners seemed to detest children) and its new self (the brief lifespans of a book shop and a soda fountain)” (Courchesne 2014). Part of the difficulty seems to be that there is no clear consensus on whether the commercial district should mainly serve local residents or strive to attract tourists too; all of my interviewees struggled to answer questions about who the target audience should be.

Interviewees also mused aloud how to define Amesbury’s “brand”; most seemed to agree that narratives based on the heritage of the carriage industry were not enough to draw visitors.⁷ Indeed, because of the changing demographics of the population,⁸ some community leaders opined that the original focus on the heritage of carriage-building industry would not even resonate with new residents, and that efforts should be made to broaden the themes and ideas used to brand the community. In fact, this is already in process: the new tagline of the Amesbury Carriage Museum is “community stories start here.” The museum director emphasized that his main objective is “to give people a deeper sense of place by enabling them to connect to the community and understand the city as an artifact, totally shaped by people” (J. Mayer, pers. comm., July 26, 2018). This

objective is much more inclusive, as everyone in the community can be challenged to think about how they, too, will be shapers of their city.

In Peabody, a similar disconnect between old-timers and newer residents is playing out. Long-time residents are proud of their leather tanning heritage: local school sports teams are the “Tanners”; the letterheads of various municipal departments feature a drawing of a stylized cow hide; and a small museum was opened in 2009 to preserve equipment and other remnants of the industry and educate the public about this heritage. However, branding a community on leather tanning history is a tough sell; it has none of the macabre Goth-glamor of the witch industry next door in Salem nor Salem’s maritime or literary history. Leather tanning is dirty and smelly work; it uses toxic chemicals; and it forces one to directly confront the reality of leather as a product of animal bodies. Also worth noting in this context is the fact that neighboring communities like Salem and Lynn also had substantial numbers of tanning establishments (Otto, unpublished data compiled from *Shoe and Leather Reporter Annual*, 1906-1956), and that the headquarters of the largest firms were not in Peabody, but in Boston’s Leather District. Thus Peabody cannot lay unique claim to this heritage even if it wants to. Most important, the legacy of leather tanning no longer resonates with most residents, least of all newcomers with no family ties to the industry.

Peabody is also pursuing branding and promotion strategies that are independent of the river project. These are led by a new downtown non-profit group, Peabody Main Streets, which is organized on the principles of the national Main Streets program (Peabody Main Streets). This group works to attract and support local businesses through event planning and tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia 2015). Recent events have included a farmers’ market with live music; concerts on the downtown common; a pop-up pub; and a pop-up community dinner party with a DJ. Tactical urbanism strategies include a pop-up parklet in on-street parking spaces; participatory street art (yarn bombing; mini-murals on utility boxes); and outdoor pianos at strategic locations. The tagline associated with many of these activities is the (ambiguous) “Live Peabody,” which, in contrast to the other strategies enumerated here, also is associated with an active social media presence.

Amesbury is also pursuing place-making strategies, but in contrast to Peabody, they are focused in and around the Upper Millyard. In 2017, a consultant from the Project for Public Spaces worked with the Amesbury Chamber of Commerce to develop place-making activities, including open air pianos, festival-style lighting of the river, and event programming like “Yoga in the Yard” (K. Gove, pers. comm., July 25, 2018). Such programming extended the downtown management “toolkit” that Amesbury had already been deploying, including street banners, hanging flower baskets, parklets in otherwise vacant corners, and ample (and free) parking. Several of my interviewees remarked, unsolicited, that there was a lot more activity happening downtown than there had been previously; obviously these efforts at programming have borne fruit.

Creative, invested, influential stakeholders

Implementing the transformative visions described above requires sustained commitment from stakeholders who have the political power (real or rhetorical) to see projects through even if they take decades to materialize, and who have the ability to face problems and find creative solutions. Here the two communities have had mixed success.

In Amesbury, Joe Fahey’s long tenure as economic developer director (he retired in 2014), and his commitment to river restoration have helped to provide continuity to ongoing urban revitalization projects. He worked to find forward-thinking developers to buy and restore properties in the mill yards, and mobilized volunteers to build bridges and plant trees and flowers in publicly owned areas. Former state representative and first mayor⁹ Nicolas Costello remarked that, “I think Joe can look around at many, many things in town and see his fingerprints on them. Nothing really happened in Amesbury since Joe took the job that he hasn’t had a part in” (Sullivan 2014). More recently, new staff at the Chamber of Commerce and Amesbury Carriage Museum have worked to boost the program of activities downtown and to spotlight the community’s heritage. It is clear from interviews that civic boosters work well together and support each other’s contributions to downtown revitalization.

On the other hand, changes in municipal leadership have shifted attention away from downtown revitalization, as Amesbury’s executive team pursues larger-scale developments away from the downtown area.¹⁰ In addition, the current city administration has shifted urban policy from a hands-on, interventionist model to a more market-driven model, the former administration having been characterized by interviewees as “if we build it [infrastructure] they will come.” This shift has resulted in a slowdown in revitalization of adjacent areas including the Lower Millyard and Carriage Hill. Moreover, Amesbury does not have any formal umbrella organization to coordinate downtown revitalization, and the regional planning agency is not regarded locally as an important or useful stakeholder.

In Peabody, the stakeholder dynamics are more complicated. The Riverwalk project and the various master plans that have advanced it have been overseen by a series of professional planners in the municipal Community Development and Planning Department, which generally has had a good working relationship with the mayor and city council. However, interest in and urgency about the riverwalk project has fluctuated over the decades depending on staffing and workloads. Nevertheless, planning staff has drawn upon long-standing professional contacts at the state level to align local plans with state-level priorities for economic development in lower-income communities across the state. The planning staff thus has both the agency and the means to propel the riverwalk project forward.

In the last seven years, wider attention has been paid to the riverwalk and the downtown corridor on several fronts. In 2012, the regional planning agency commissioned Spurr, a planning and engineering firm, to produce a Riverwalk Visioning Plan for the cities of Salem and Peabody (Spurr 2012). (The collaborative nature of the

plan also increased the likelihood of external funding, as funders could please more than one “constituent” with the award of a grant.) In 2016 the Mass Development Agency commissioned Sasaki Associates, an internationally known design and planning firm, to prepare a district master plan through its Transformative Districts Initiative program (Sasaki 2016). This plan has hardly any text; its purpose was to produce seductive graphics that would help to “sell” the riverwalk concept to stakeholders, especially property owners. These plans were presented at public meetings for comment, but has so often been the case with plans for the riverwalk, stakeholders were placed in the position of reacting to a well-formed plan, rather than being the stakeholders who would generate it. Moreover, outreach for the meetings was limited to those who have been involved with the project or have been active in downtown civic affairs over many years.

Lastly and most importantly, a new non-profit organization has been created to oversee multiple dimensions of downtown revitalization. Named the Peabody Downtown Action Team (later, Peabody Main Streets) to symbolize its commitment to visible, positive change, the all-volunteer organization has become a Main Streets member group organized around four pillars: organization, design, promotion, and economic vitality (Main Street America). Technical support is provided by the municipal government, and the organization is financed with revenues from grants and events such as the pop-ups described above (Peabody Main Streets). Membership was by invitation, in order to reach as broad a constituent range as possible, but also to encourage participation by those with particular expertise (finance or historic preservation, for example), or those with significant stakes in the community (such as landowners with major holdings downtown and the local chamber of commerce). At present, the energy and enthusiasm of the group seems high, and the events they sponsor have had excellent turnout.

While the stakeholder cohort has grown over time in order to represent a wider range of constituencies, an important point in the stakeholder analysis is that the group to some extent is self-selecting, and composed of the “usual suspects.”

Access to Capital

Both cities have applied a synergistic, multi-scalar approach to funding public infrastructure projects in order to leverage funding sources. Public funding sources include Community Development Block Grant funds (federal, but administered through a competitive process organized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts); state Department of Transportation funding (various funds); federal Urban Systems Grants; and US Environmental Protection Agency funding. Projects include façade loan programs, street and sidewalk reconstruction (utilities, paving, street trees and lighting), sign buy-back programs (to incentivize the removal of deteriorated or inappropriate signs), bike trails, public parks, and remediation of toxic materials. A conservative estimate of the contributions of these public funds is about \$15 million for the two cities combined (author’s aggregated data). Clearly, both cities are constrained financially in providing infrastructure and public amenities to serve economic development ends. Moreover, state and federal funding is contingent on the priorities of the individual agencies, which may change as their perception of needs changes. For

example, a proposed canoe and kayak launching area in Amesbury’s Lower Millyard that was to be funded by the state and would have attracted active recreation, has been abandoned because the agency has changed its funding priorities.

Other barriers, both financial and regulatory, also constrain visions for revitalization. Many potential development sites in both cities probably are contaminated with hazardous materials from their prior industrial use, and the buildings may not generate enough income to make private cleanups economically feasible. Public funding for brownfield remediation is extremely competitive, and sites that do not present a clear, urgent public health danger are much less competitive.

A second barrier is regulatory; in many cases, sites in floodplains cannot be built upon. The Lower Millyard in Amesbury and all of the North River corridor in Peabody are in floodplains. Buildings in floodplains are worrisome for prospective purchasers and tenants because of the uncertainty of future flooding and damage. For example, a building in the Lower Millyard that the Chamber of Commerce and Amesbury Carriage Museum purchased cannot be occupied because the cost of the necessary flood-proofing of the first floor is unaffordable for the two non-profits. In Peabody, where a spectacular flood in 2006 made national headlines, the Peabody Main Streets website proactively (if defensively) addresses the issue head-on. Under the heading of “Flooding: Perception vs. Reality” the site reads:

Yes, we said it. We mentioned the F word. There is the perception and there is the reality. Most people assume our downtown is under several feet of water each time we have heavy rainfall. The reality is, we have not experienced a major occurrence in 10 years due to a concerted effort towards flood mitigation.... The City of Peabody continues to make a commitment to incorporate water maintenance in all future development. Today, only a handful of businesses are occasionally impacted and typically not for longer than 6 hours (Peabody Main Streets).

In summary, the incremental nature of public funding, combined with flooding and contamination issues, has not allowed Peabody to build enough of the riverwalk to allow it to serve as a “tipping point” to accelerate redevelopment in the industrial corridor. Amesbury had early, if shoestring success with the Upper Millyard, but that success has not been replicated as successfully in the Lower Millyard.

Comparative Analysis

What are the strategies for using rivers for urban revitalization that are most successful? And conversely, what obstacles are most difficult to overcome? A comparison of strategies in Amesbury and Peabody suggests that the most important element in using an urban river as an integral part of a revitalization strategy is a single person (or small group of persons) who is personally invested in river restoration, passionately committed to its successful outcome, and on the job long enough to see the project through to fruition. Amesbury was fortunate to have a person with such a long tenure in the economic development position; turnover every few years or so is much more common in the professional planning field.

Further, urban rivers projects must start with a spark: someone, an “outsider” probably, who sees a neglected river corridor with fresh eyes and can imagine what can be rather than what is. In Amesbury this was the newly appointed economic development director; in Peabody it was an outside planning consulting firm. Both saw what locals did not and could not.

In addition to a “point person” who is intimately involved in the details of moving projects forward, river projects require support and attention from the top levels of local government. Amesbury’s Lower Millyard project has lost momentum, as local leaders have shifted their focus to new economic development opportunities in other parts of town. In Peabody, other municipal challenges and the fallout from the 2006 flood occupied local officials for nearly two decades. In short, changes in elected leadership often mean that projects that were the top priority for one administration do not have the same urgency in the next; initiatives falter or are revived based on the inclinations of elected officials.

A second element necessary for river-based urban revitalization is a clear overall vision that resonates with different sets of stakeholders. All the project managers I interviewed emphasized that the project vision must be focused. Yet it must also have “hooks” that different constituencies can relate to. For example, property owners adjacent to the river corridor whose buildings are of interest for rehabilitation and reuse must understand what they stand to gain from supporting river projects. Frequent, cordial, clear lines of communication with stakeholder groups are essential to building good relationships. Good graphics also help to clarify projects for non-specialists; Mass Development commissioned the graphics of the North River Neighborhood District Master Plan (Sasaki 2016) to help funders and stakeholders understand the scope of the project and the visual quality of the spaces proposed to be constructed for the riverwalk.

The scale at which constituency is perceived and the spatial boundaries in which it operates are also important for building active support for river-based urban revitalization. For example, Amesbury has been working with the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission to help manage suburban development in the upper (New Hampshire) watershed area in order to protect water quality in the Amesbury segment (Amesbury Recreation and Open Space Plan 2012). But Amesbury must depend on the cooperation and goodwill of different groups and agencies in town, as there is no formal structure to coordinate downtown projects and make sure that all groups are working toward shared goals. Peabody has finally moved forward with securing grant monies for land acquisition for the Riverwalk because of its extra-local planning collaborations and warm professional ties with the Mass Development Agency. In both cities, extra-local support, through reaching out to a broader set of stakeholders, has helped river projects move forward.

Third, the physical environment – the raw materials of revitalization – matters. Amesbury has a large stock of well-built brick buildings that were constructed to last and that were adaptable first to other industrial uses and then to 21st century uses like residential and office space. By contrast, Peabody, although it has some attractive and well-designed buildings on Main Street, does not have the same useful inventory of mills in the Walnut Street industrial corridor. The tannery buildings are, at best, architecturally undistinguished. They are built of

wood, concrete block, or in a few instances brick (now painted) with haphazard window and door placements and often, a series of ramshackle ell and additions tacked on. Nevertheless, planners see the opportunity for more of a funky, industrial-chic vibe (Sasaki 2016) rather than design that complements the historical architectural styles found on Main Street.

The location of the river in relation to other economic activities also matters. Although some have observed that Amesbury’s Main Street seemed to turn its back on the Powwow River, in actuality the sound of the rushing falls reminds passersby of what is behind the buildings. Certainly more could be done with the stream bank in the Lower Millyard to highlight the presence of the river (brush and weeds obscure the view during the summer months), but the potential is still there to create an edge which encourages pedestrians to draw closer and engage with the river. By contrast, the North River in Peabody is tucked away in the back yards of adjacent properties on both banks, and acquisition or public use easements that connect all the way through the blocks are essential to fully realize the potential of the river to serve as an amenity.

Conclusion

Riverside projects that support revitalization in post-industrial cities must be understood in context of the networks of economic activity, regulatory constraints, local culture, and place-making that constitute downtown areas. In essence, riverfront projects are the “front of house,” or public face, of a complex set of legal, institutional, political and economic relationships. These two case studies of urban rivers in Amesbury and Peabody illustrate some of the ways in which creative thinking about a post-industrial role for rivers intersects with local political objectives, strategies for finding the appropriate business mix (and then attracting it), and meeting the requirements of multiple funding agencies while still being true to the project goals.

A final word about scale: are the dynamics of river-centered urban revitalization different in small cities than in the globalized cities referenced in the beginning of the chapter? There are at least three commonalities. First, the work of formulating and implementing a revitalization plan is still mainly the province of elites and technocrats (urban planners, lawyers, executive boards of chambers of commerce, elected officials) rather than of grass-roots, bottoms-up, civic participation from a range of stakeholders. Second, revitalization plans in both kinds of places primarily support capitalist mechanisms like wealth creation and accumulation in the interest of increasing the tax base, rather than goals for increasing social equity¹¹ or foregrounding ecological restoration. Third, revitalization plans in both kinds of places show an entrepreneurial spirit: municipalities and the planners in them are not merely providing public goods and services, but also effecting change in order to serve capitalist interests (Beauregard 2003).

All that said, there are some important differences. First, in small cities, land ownership tends to be more fragmented, with many landowners controlling small parcels. With more stakeholders in the mix, coordinating plans around common goals requires local governments to be collaborative in order to build local support (rather than using heavy-handed tactics like eminent domain). Relatedly, the development and maintenance of

personal connections is necessary to build trust and enable transactions. Second, project development tends to be privately-led and incremental, rather than focused around a single, large signature project such as an upscale shopping mall or sports arena. Third, the discourses of revitalization in smaller cities center around “building a sense of community” for existing residents, rather than trying to attract new consumers from afar. Community-building may involve event programming (as described above) or the use of markers of heritage to reinforce a sense of shared history. Thus, while revitalization still occurs within the structures and processes of capitalist accumulation, improvements to quality of life for residents are very much part of the agenda.

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Footnotes

1. Keil and Desfor (2003) usefully review alternative theoretical perspectives on the relationships between economy, society and nature. [↵](#)
2. It may well be that this perception of the harmonious coexistence of humans and riverine ecology owes more to the small scale of pre-industrial settlements than an explicitly respectful understanding of ecological functions (see case studies in Castonguay and Evenden (2012)). However, many pre-industrial communities depended in practical ways on sustainable resource use (Campbell 1996). Moreover, some pre-industrial societies also imbued local rivers with a spiritual presence that transcended utilitarian concerns; see for example Heikkila (2011). [↵](#)
3. One of the men involved was Paul Moody, who later helped to establish the mills in Waltham and subsequently the well-known mills in the new town of Lowell, MA. [↵](#)
4. Sources vary on the year at which the carriage industry began production; the most reliable seems to be 1853, given by Harrold (2017b). [↵](#)
5. Amesbury town leaders had been observing the comprehensive, federally funded urban renewal project in Newburyport, the rival city across the river, and were envious. [↵](#)
6. The study was funded through CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, which provided funds to the states to place low income and unemployed people in public and non-profit agencies in order to develop marketable skills. This program was phased out early in the Reagan Administration. [↵](#)

7. This despite the fact that downtown street signs all carry the “carriage logo” developed as part of a marketing campaign. [↵](#)
8. As of 2015, approximately 50% of Amesbury’s residents had lived there five years or less (Fahey, pers. comm., July 30, 2018). [↵](#)
9. The Town of Amesbury voted to adopt a city form of government in 1997. [↵](#)
10. Amesbury is a state-designated Economic Target Area and an Economically Distressed Area, and has a Priority Development Site designation allowing expedited local and state permitting for the so-called Golden Triangle, a 50-acre site bounded by Interstates 495 and 95 and State Route 110 (Merrimack Valley Planning Commission 2018; Amesbury Office of Community and Economic Development 2016). A \$40 million ice-skating rink complex is also in the permitting stages (Sullivan 2018). [↵](#)
11. For example, although several housing projects have been completed in downtown Peabody in the last 15 years, revitalization plans are notably silent on providing affordable housing, and one private plan to create affordable housing under the Massachusetts Anti-Snob Zoning Act was fiercely opposed by the local government. [↵](#)