

## Lofty vision for Lower Highlands

### MIT students offer bold ideas to upgrade diverse neighborhood

By Jennifer Myers, [jmyers@lowellsun.com](mailto:jmyers@lowellsun.com)

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Part of an occasional series on Lowell's neighborhoods.

LOWELL -- It is mountains of sweetly sour pomelos mounded on the sidewalk in front of the Bangkok Market, and the Southeast Asian women selling papaya salad and eggrolls at Clemente Park.

It is children of every race and ethnicity filing past the Abraham Lincoln monument.

It is the pagoda-style architecture of Pailin Plaza.

It is the historic mill buildings that housed one of the last remaining textile factories in the Mill City.

It is the Lower Highlands -- the neighborhood just on the other side of the Lord Overpass from the city's downtown, across the Pawtucket Canal from the Acre neighborhood.

Earlier this month, in a session at the Morey Elementary School, a group of graduate students from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning presented their vision for an improved neighborhood, with more green space, increased pedestrian safety, the reuse of underutilized buildings, and the acknowledgment of the enclave's cultural uniqueness.

The Lower Highlands plan marks the fourth time that MIT professor Terry Szold has brought a group of graduate students here. In 2005, they completed a master plan for Centralville. In 2007, they returned to take on the Acre. Last year, it was the Back Central and Sacred Heart neighborhoods.

According to Lowell Chief Planner George Proakis, an MIT alumnus, the cost of the city putting together a comparable plan through the use of

hired consultants would be upwards of \$100,000.

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Built in the early 1990s, Pailin Plaza on Middlesex Street has become the commercial center for the city's large Cambodian population, the second-largest in the country behind Long Beach, Calif.

Many of the signs for businesses along Middlesex and Chelmsford streets are written in Khmer.

Proakis calls the area around Pailin Plaza "the Cambodian Main Street of Lowell," adding that the debate at City Hall is how to brand that area, making the most of the culture and creating a destination comparable to the Chinatowns of other cities, without alienating other ethnic groups.

The challenges of maintaining neighborhood character from a zoning perspective, he added, is finding a way to let the zoning reflect the neighborhood, letting small businesses be more creative than what current regulations allow.

"The strength of this neighborhood is the people," said Taya Dixon Mullane, president of the Lower Highlands Neighborhood Group. "This is one of the most unique and culturally diverse neighborhoods in the state."

But she added that the biggest problem faced by the neighborhood group is the language and cultural barrier with the Southeast Asian community.

One area in which that disconnect is apparent is in the custom of many Lower Highlands homeowners of paving over their grassy front yards, a trend the City Council has been working to control.

"Lowell is almost entirely paved over," MIT graduate student Christina Markel said.

"When you are Asian, the first thing you do when you buy a house is pave the yard," said Liberty Street resident Sophean Lim, explaining that it cuts down on yard work and produces additional parking spaces for parties.

Markel said permeable paving options are available that allow for better drainage as well as a more natural look.

The MIT plan calls for improved crosswalks, added plantings and textured pavement between Pailin Plaza and Clemente Park, which lies on Middlesex Street just past where Branch Street branches off.

Clemente Park was built in the late 1800s as George Washington Park, then renamed in the 1970s after the death in a plane crash of Hall of Fame baseball star Roberto Clemente, a Puerto Rican who died while delivering humanitarian aid to hurricane victims.

Today, it has become a haven for the neighborhood's Southeast Asian men to play volleyball and chess.

MIT graduate student Karin Brandt said the park would benefit from a tree-lined walking path along the Pawtucket Canal and a pedestrian bridge over the canal connecting the Lower Highlands to the Acre.

Running parallel to Middlesex is Westford Street. The students said they found Cuppies Square, where Pine Street spills onto Westford, very confusing, suggesting the reconfiguration of that intersection to a more traditional right-angle intersection with expanded sidewalks and crosswalks.

Graduate student Angelica Weiner said the area, zoned for neighborhood business, would benefit from being tagged as an overlay district, giving the city greater flexibility in developing existing and vacant structures.

Across the street from the Lincoln Elementary school on Chelmsford Street sits the seven-acre, underutilized Nottingham Mill Complex, which includes 135,000 square feet of vacant building space.

The complex was built in phases from 1880 to 1907 by Benjamin Franklin Shaw to house the Shaw Stocking Company, which employed 600 workers and produced 8,400 pairs of stockings daily on 273 knitting frames.

The mill closed during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Later, the main mill building housed Louis Stoloff's New Knit Manufacturing Company, which produced bathing suits and sweaters from 1955 to 1978.

Markel said the complex is zoned as light industrial, one of the few such areas left in the city. The zoning designation prohibits using the parcel for residential or live/work units, as well as health-care facilities or libraries.

She suggested that the parcel be designated as a Priority Development District, a label that would open doors for state funding and expedited permitting, much in the same way the Hamilton Canal District project got off the ground.

On the edge of the Lower Highlands neighborhood lies the lifeline to Boston -- the Gallagher Terminal, the MBTA's fifth-busiest commuter-rail station, logging 1,600 train boardings daily.

The problem is that there is very limited access to the terminal for neighborhood residents who want to walk there to commute to work or head into Boston for fun.

Graduate student Anthony Rizzo suggested improvements to the small park on the hill adjacent to the overpass located behind the green LRTA display trolley, as well as more locational signs at the terminal directing visitors to attractions in the city's most diverse neighborhood -- the Lower Highlands.

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